

## The MacDermott Lectures Series #1

*Between the Colonial and the Postcolonial:  
Writing and the Creation of a Third-Space Identity*

**M.G. Sanchez**

Novelist

[www.mgsanchez.net](http://www.mgsanchez.net)

Special Issue edited by Isabel Alonso-Breto

Copyright©2022 Mark G. Sanchez. This text may be archived and redistributed both in electronic form and in hard copy, provided that the author and series are properly cited and no fee is charged.

### I.

Imagine coming from a territory where there are no writers. Imagine living in a place without its own novels and short stories. Yes, a few pamphlets on the local flora and fauna have been published and one or two books on military history have been written – but that’s about it: little of real literary value exists out there. This was the depressing situation that I faced growing up in Gibraltar, a British overseas territory that almost everybody in the world has heard about, but which few people really understand. But it gets even worse than that. Because even though no novels or short stories had ever been written by native Gibraltarians, the little that was being said about the place was *exaggerated and misleading*.

Let me start by sharing with you a rather blurry screenshot. It is taken from a series called



*Gibraltar: Britain in the Sun* which was aired on British television some years ago. Throughout the series you see people waving Union Jacks and parading up and down the streets dressed as British nineteenth-century redcoats. The narrator, the renowned British actor Timothy Spall, describes the Rock as “a little bit of Blighty in the Mediterranean Sun ... which juts proudly out of the Southern tip of Spain”; later he says “that for over three hundred

years [the territory] has enjoyed life as a pint-sized piece of Britain.” This is an example of

how Gibraltar is frequently portrayed in the British media – as a bastion of Britishness, a stronghold of Anglo-Saxon values standing defiantly in a corner of the Western Mediterranean. But in my opinion this view doesn't do any real justice to the nuanced and multi-layered reality of the place. Gibraltar is a complex town, a city that resists easy definition. It is not as British as Spall and other commentators claim, neither is it as Spanish as right-leaning papers in Spain suggest. In reality, it is a hybrid, a cultural, linguistic and racial melting pot. It has been like this for nearly three hundred years – thanks to successive waves of migration from places like Menorca (1740-1840), Genoa (1770-1810), Malta (1888-1920), India (1920-1960) and Morocco (1970-1980).

Time constraints do not permit me to discuss these different influxes of people and how they have helped to shape the character of the modern-day Gibraltarian, though there is a great deal to be said. Instead I'd like to focus for a moment on the first of these migration waves – the one coming from the Island of Menorca. Why did so many *menorquines* come to Gibraltar during the 18th century, you will be wondering. What is the connection between the Balearic Island and the Rock? The answer is that, under Article XI of the Treaty of Utrecht of 1713, Menorca, like Gibraltar, passed from Spanish to British hands. The treaty stipulated that Catholics could continue settling on the Rock after 1713. The British upheld this regulation, but soon realised that many of the local Catholics were loyal to the nearby diocese and Bishopric of Cádiz rather than the British Crown. So, from around 1740 onwards, they began to encourage Catholic subjects from the British territory of Menorca to come and settle in Gibraltar – thus helping to dilute the local Catholic population's ties of loyalty to the dreaded "diocese and Bishopric of Cádiz." This policy was so successful that, according to the Catalan author Martí Crespo, by the start of the nineteenth century over 10% of Gibraltar's Catholic population was of Menorcan origin!<sup>1</sup> In fact, I myself have Menorcan ancestors on both my mother's (Vicens) and father's side (Seguí).

The 'Menorcan rush' was the first of various migrant waves to reach Gibraltar after the British conquest of 1704. Migrants began to arrive from Britain, from Portugal, from Genoa, from Malta, from Northern Spain and other places – attracted by the high rates of pay and good working conditions found in the British colony. If you look at the 1774 population census, the first official census undertaken by the British authorities in Gibraltar, you will find Genoese, Portuguese and British names interspersed with Spanish surnames like Sánchez, Jiménez, Gómez, Rodríguez and García. In fact, not only do you find all these names listed side by side in the census; we also encounter individuals bearing the most fascinatingly hybrid names: Gerónima Allow, Cosmo Gordon, Gasparo Brandy, Septimus Croxe, Theodor Gavaron, Pantaleón Davies and – my personal favourite – Hamlet Codali.

If you need further proof of Gibraltarian hybridity, then all you need to do is look at individual family trees. Consider my own. So far, I have come across Genoese names (Ferrari, Durante), Spanish names (Villanera, Castillo, Luisa, Duo, Sánchez, Popa, Prieto), Menorcan names (Vicens, Seguí, Vilches, Miró), British names (Brown, Whitelock, Jones), Maltese names (Schembri, Borg, Caccia) and Portuguese names (Duarte, De Silva).

The cosmopolitan origins of the Gibraltarian population are also reflected in how we use language. In Gibraltar we speak *llanito* – a form of Andalusian Spanish heavily laced with

---

<sup>1</sup> Martí Crespo, *Els 'minorkeens' de Gibraltar*, p. 107.

words from English and other languages, such as Ligurian and Maltese. Traditionally, Spanish has been the dominant language in *llanito*, but over the years we have come to a position where English and Spanish are used interchangeably, with plenty of code-switching thrown in just to confuse the issue even further. According to Dale Buttigieg, a Gibraltarian linguist with a suitably hybrid name, *llanito* “incorporates ... different aspects ... from ... languages around the Mediterranean.... [This] makes it difficult and incomprehensible to ... people of ... Hispanic or Anglophone backgrounds.”<sup>2</sup>

So how does *llanito* actually sound? Well, if you google *llanito* I am sure you will find plenty of examples of people speaking with each other in our highly idiosyncratic dialect, but today I want to read an extract from *Gooseman*, my latest novel, published just five days ago on 9 December 2020. *Gooseman* is a novel about a young man who emigrates from Gibraltar to the UK and suffers all sorts of tragicomic misadventures. The “Gooseman” in the title refers to the way most English people mispronounce his Spanish surname (Guzmán). I am going to read a short section from the opening of the novel, when the four-year-old “Gooseman” is about to start his first day at school in Gibraltar. His mother, who is standing outside the school gates, notices that all the other kids are ignoring her son and – like an overprotective Latin mama – calls over the teacher on playground duty:

‘Excuse me, *plis*, miss. That’s my Johann *en medio del* playground. *Mira lo solo que ehtá, el pobrecito*. Why do you think the other kids are not going anywhere near him, miss? Do you have any idea?’

The teacher scrutinised my mum from behind the iron bars. ‘Don’t worry, *señora mía*,’ she said with a faint sneer, ‘it’s always like this on their first day of school. He’ll start making friends soon.’

‘*Pero míralo*, miss,’ my mother cried. ‘*Míralo!* It’s like they’re all scared of going up to him or something. That can’t be right, *no?*’

The teacher twisted around and contemplated the object of concern – standing there with his shoulders hunched in the middle of the playground. ‘Listen, Mrs....’

‘Guzman, miss,’ my mum replied, already wiping a tear from her cheek. ‘Marla Guzman.’

‘Listen, Mrs Guzman, all kids go through a phase like this on their first day at school. That’s just how things are. He’ll be okay in a little while, I promise.’

‘Okay, miss. If you say so, miss.... But please take care of him, miss. He’s my only child, my Johann is. *Y eh muy delicao*. Got bad problems *con el ehtómago*. Finds it hard to go to *el toilet*. It’s something to do with his sigmund or sigman colon, or whatever it’s called. It’s all knobly and twisted, *me dijo* Dr Girasol, *como uno de esoh* twiglets *que venden en* Liptons.’

‘Don’t worry, Marla. I’ll make sure he’s okay, you have my word.’

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sOZWHsVbI24>, 20 April, 2020.

‘Thank you, miss. You’re really nice, miss. You really are. *De verda que sí.*’<sup>3</sup>

## II.

Having established that Gibraltar is a fairly complex place which resists simple definitions, I will now provide you with a few quick facts about myself and why I chose to embark upon my path as a Gibraltarian writer. I was born in Gibraltar in 1968. My father was a civil servant and my mother a primary school teacher. From an early age I was interested in writing and literature, but it was not until 1995, at the age of 26, that I was able to properly pursue a course of academic study. I studied at the University of Leeds, where I took BA, MA and PhD degrees in English Literature. My plan was to finish the doctorate and become an academic, but the more I learned about books, the more I realised that I needed to start writing Gibraltarian stories. In reaching this conclusion, I was influenced by postcolonial writers and thinkers like Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka and their quest to reclaim their forgotten or at least deliberately sidelined heritage. Gibraltar enjoys a high level of self-government and cannot in all fairness be described as a colony, that much is true – but it is striking nonetheless how we – the Gibraltarians – are strangely absent from the pages of most history books written about the Rock. David Lambert, one of the few contemporary British scholars to have looked at the subject of modern Gibraltarian identity, recognises as much in an article published in 2005:

Another consequence of Empire in Gibraltar has been that the non-military population has been marginalized consistently, hidden by the looming shadow of the Rock.... The effacement of the indigenous populations is a common feature of imperial discourse.... Similarly, the reduction of Gibraltar to ‘the Rock’ effaces its human geographies and histories, aside from the endeavours of transient soldiers.<sup>4</sup>

From the very beginning my purpose as a writer has been to reclaim these *human geographies and histories*, to bring the Gibraltarian experience away from the periphery and into the spotlight. But how does one go about writing stories in a Gibraltarian manner? Well, as obvious as it sounds, the first thing that you should do is to look closely around you, to actively engage with Gibraltar’s hybrid, cosmopolitan reality. Go to Gibraltar’s old town, for instance, and look at the wonderful panoply of street names – Lynch’s Lane, Pezzi’s Steps, Fraser’s Ramp, Arengo’s Palace Lane, Baca’s Passage, Abecasis’s Passage – English names, Genoese names, Scottish names, Menorcan names, Spanish names, Sephardic names – often arranged side by side. Or else sit on a bus and listen to how casually local kids switch from Spanish to English and into Spanish again. Or notice the juxtapositions that you encounter as you saunter up Main Street. Tobacconists selling Ducados and Benson & Hedges. Red phone boxes beside subtropical palm trees. Kids wearing both Manchester United and Barcelona FC football shirts. Lawyers – fully robed and wigged – striding out of the law courts joking in Spanish. Above all, the most important thing that you can do, I think, is to focus on the people around you – for they are the living embodiments of this hybridity. Here, for instance, is a passage from my 2015 book *Past: a Memoir*:

---

<sup>3</sup> M. G. Sanchez, *Gooseman*, pp. 1-2.

<sup>4</sup> David Lambert, ‘As solid as the Rock? Place, belonging and the local appropriation of imperial discourse in Gibraltar,’ *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 30: 2, 2005, p. 212.

This is a picture of my father's father, Joseph Sanchez. He was a handsome and imposing man, broad-shouldered and piercingly blue-eyed, unusually tall, too, for a Gibraltarian at just under six feet. He had the names of his wife and children inked on his right forearm,



and on each hand, on the fleshy mound of muscle between thumb and forefinger known as the *opponens pollicis*, he bore a series of faded, violet-coloured squiggles which were supposed to represent flying seagulls and which his brother-in-law, a budding artist, had once tattooed with a knitting needle and a bottle of what my grandfather used to call 'tinta china.' He had inherited his fair looks from his maternal grandfather, a Mancunian called Joseph Brown who spent a few years posted in Gibraltar with the King's Royal Rifle Corps in the mid-1880s. In 1888 or 1889 Private Brown waved goodbye to the military in order to marry Sebastiana Villanera, a locally employed seamstress from Cortes de la Frontera in Spain. Throughout Gibraltar's colonial history

there have been countless Protestant-Catholic nuptials of this type. The template hardly varied. English soldier meets Spanish/Gibraltarian woman. Quits the military. Gets married. Finds a job on the Rock. Becomes a father. Allows his children to be brought up as Catholics so that they can integrate better with the local community. This was more or less what came to pass in Sebastiana's and Joseph's case – except that for some reason (probably Joseph's pig-headedness) their children came to be baptised as Anglicans rather than Catholics. There were five of them altogether: Charles, Florence, Isabel, Joseph and Maria Luisa. I'm not sure whether the first four continued this tradition when they themselves came to have children, but I do know that when Maria Luisa gave birth to my grandfather while domiciled with her Gibraltarian husband Oscar Sanchez in La Línea she wasted no time in having him baptised as an Anglican. Thus, my grandfather Joseph (who throughout his life remained completely uninterested in political or religious matters) can in some ways be seen as the embodiment of one of those befuddling Gibraltarian paradoxes: a man who was born in Spain and whose surname was Sanchez... and yet who looked as light-skinned and blue-eyed as a Cockney costermonger and who was taught as a child to believe that the Pope was only the plain old Bishop of Rome.<sup>5</sup>

The second thing which I think is important is for a writer to engage linguistically with one's surroundings. As Gloria Anzaldúa writes in her essay *How to Tame a Wild Tongue*, "Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity – I am my language"<sup>6</sup> – and I think that one cannot debunk the stereotypes that are told about Gibraltar without bringing to the fore the hybrid linguistic reality that is lived and felt in our streets. Ideally, the best way for a writer to reflect this reality is by thinking and writing in *llanito* – but in practice this is complicated. Firstly, *llanito* has not been standardised and codified by scholars. Second, if I were to write exclusively in *llanito* my already small readership would get even smaller – down to a hundred readers or even fewer than that. This, as you can imagine, would be disastrous for a writer. As a result, there has to be a certain amount of compromise in manufacturing a Gibraltarian text. In my case I try to write my books in standard English, with a few touches of *llanito* thrown in here and there. Just enough, in other words, for the Gibraltarian reader to recognise the book as Gibraltarian, but not so many as to completely alienate an anglophone reader. I suppose you could describe it as a balancing act. But it is a balancing act that is not so unusual either; this

<sup>5</sup> M. G Sanchez, *Past: A Memoir*, pp. 103-104.

<sup>6</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, p. 39.

kind of thing happens all over the postcolonial world. Let's say, for example, you are an aspiring Nigerian writer. Do you write your book in Yoruba or Igbo, thereby limiting your readership to people in specific parts of Nigeria, or do you write it in English, which would potentially open up your book to a readership of millions? Here is a passage from my 2015 novel *Jonathan Gallardo* which demonstrates what I am talking about:

Every Sunday afternoon [Jonathan and Little Paulie] walk down to Fish Market Road and catch a bus to the frontier. There they spend about an hour strolling up and down the Gibraltarian side of the fence, watching families that were divided back in 1969 communicate across the empty hundred-metre stretch separating them. In hoarse and emotional voices, often trying to make themselves heard above the shrieking westerly wind, the families exchange news in Spanish about betrothals and *maleh de salú*, job interviews and sudden deaths, marital break-ups and school exams, all of it drifting past the lone Guardia Civil who stands there just outside his wooden sentry hut looking bored and resentful, his clunky FR 8 *fusil* propped up heavily over his right shoulder, his already swarthy features made even swarthier by the long hours he spends under the unforgiving glare of the Mediterranean sun. Little Paulie finds it all very amusing and often mimics the cross-frontier dialogue, putting on a bumbling, high-pitched voice for the women and a gruff masculine one for the men. He declares that if he had any relatives over on the Spanish side he'd rather not see them at all than discuss family problems in this way – *a berríooh limpio*. Jonathan says that he'd be the same, but privately wonders what it must be like to have somebody who cares for you stuck on the other side, so close and yet so far away, so perfectly visible and yet so detached. *No puede seh fácil*, he concludes, shoving his hands deep into his trouser pockets.<sup>7</sup>

I have chosen this passage not only because it gives an idea of how I “Gibraltarianise” my writing, but also because it illustrates how writing can reclaim, or at least give priority to, elements of one's social history (in this case the experience of living in Gibraltar through the ‘closed frontier years’) that for some reason haven't been given the prominence they deserve. Throughout Gibraltar's history, you see, there have been various pivotal moments which have helped to shape our present-day reality. There were the migration waves mentioned earlier. There was the Cholera epidemic of 1865 which killed off a significant percentage of the population. There was the large influx of Republican refugees during and just after the Spanish Civil War. There was the evacuation of 1940, when the entire civilian population was transplanted to London, Madeira and other places to make way for military troops. All these events have been debated and analysed in history books written by outsiders, but you'll find almost nothing written from the perspective of the people who went through them. This for me has always been a source of great frustration. It seemed to me that, wherever I looked, there was always *an absence*, a lack of written testimony, what could be termed a *self-representational deficit*.

---

<sup>7</sup> M. G. Sanchez, *Jonathan Gallardo*, pp. 40-41

Possibly the most frustrating of these deficits could be seen in the way that, until recently, we remembered the closure of the border and the closed border years. In 1969, General Franco decided to close the border between Gibraltar and Spain in an attempt to drain the lifeblood out of the British territory. The gates remained shut until 1982, causing all sorts of problems – from food and medicine shortages to the separation of families living on either side of the frontier. Everybody in Gibraltar agrees that the closure was one of the most traumatic episodes in our recent history – *una herida abierta* (to once again quote Anzaldúa) whose lingering effects are felt to this day – and yet, when I started gathering and writing Gibraltarian stories in the early 2000s, I discovered that almost nobody had captured in prose what it meant to be alive at the time of the closure. Sure, there were the usual references in British history books and one or two articles about food shortages and the rise among Gibraltarians of a so-called “siege mentality” – but I never came across anything which had direct human testimonial value. All I could find instead were photographs. Photographs of families huddled by the frontier gates. Photographs of young babies held aloft so that they could be seen by their relatives on the other side. Photographs of people staring forlornly across the hundred-and-fifty-metre divide. Photographs of children playing innocently by the barb-wire fence. Here, for instance, is a photo taken next to the border gates around 1981. In it you can see a boy and a girl dressed in the traditional Catholic first communion outfit. The fact that they are at the border and that there are well-dressed adults with them (notice the man wearing a suit on the right, and the lady with high heels on the left) suggests that the children were taken there on the day of their first communion to be seen by relatives on the other side. But who were the children in the pic? What was their story? After a lot of frustrating dead-ends, I was able to track down the girl in the photo and learn that her name was Catherine Mor. She told me that her Spanish mother Manuela had decided to stay with her Gibraltarian husband when the border closed in 1969.



Manuela’s elderly parents, however, had remained in the Spanish town of La Línea, and every now and then Manuela would take her children down to the frontier so that their grandparents could see them from the Spanish side. “I do remember seeing Mum in tears ... and Dad consoling her,” Catherine told me about these family visits to the frontier. “Mum’s elderly parents were so near but yet so far, and the fact that she couldn’t embrace them or get close to them was very painful and distressing for her, and for those of us who witnessed this.”

I think it is important to gather and incorporate testimonies like Catherine’s in novels and memoirs. If we don’t, future generations will find themselves in the position that I found myself eighteen or nineteen years ago, when I couldn’t locate any first-hand accounts describing the closure of the border and its impact on the Gibraltarian psyche. In the last few years, the authorities in Gibraltar have initiated an oral history project called *Bordering on Britishness* which seeks to preserve in print and on tape the memories of people who have lived through some of these events, as it were, in their own flesh – but, as laudable as this is, I don’t think that placing a microphone in front of someone and asking them to divulge their memories is enough. We need to give these memories literary form, to somehow bring them alive in the shape of readable narratives. To quote the Jamaican poet Olive Senior:

Writers over the ages have found ways of talking about issues – like politics – without seeming to talk about them. The function is not to present the world as it is, but to present it in a new light through the narrative power of art. Literature does not ask “What is it about?” It asks “How do we tell it to make it real?”<sup>8</sup>

This is what it is all about: communicating lived reality, making our life experiences more present and real. Last year, for example, I brought out a book called *Border Control and other Autobiographical Pieces*. In many ways this book is an attempt to explain what it means to be Gibraltar – misunderstood by both the British and the Spanish as we are – but it is also an extended philosophical meditation on the border that both separates us from and unites us with Spain. For instance, though the border is now open and families are no longer split up, the area still exhibits many typical borderland characteristics. In fact, I always tell people that there are three parts to the border – Gibraltar, Spain, and a sort of Tarkovskian ‘middle zone’ between them incorporating a bit of Gibraltar and a bit of Spain. In *Border Control and other Autobiographical Pieces*, I reflect on the men and women who gather in this liminal borderland zone:

Out of the corner of my eye, I spot an elderly Spanish couple hiding behind the bus shelter next to Mr Parody’s kiosk. The woman is half-naked and holding a money belt stuffed with cigarette packets next to her flabby abdomen. The man has a lone cigarette tucked behind his ear and is patiently winding some brown parcel tape around his wife’s midriff, whatever he is saying drowned out by the tearing, high-pitched sound made by the tape as it unwinds from the reel. This is the kind of cross-border contraband that goes on in 2016: pitifully amateurish and small-scale, its meagre profits helping to keep afloat La Línea’s neediest and most wretched classes, making a mockery of the oft-repeated Spanish nationalist claim that Gibraltar is ‘*un nido de delincuentes y contrabandistas*.’ Looking at this particular pair of geriatric *estraperlistas*, I find myself thinking of spinning dervishes and the paintings of Velázquez, of the bandage-wrapped Lazarus emerging from his cracked open tomb. Most of all, though, they make me think of the Chicano writer Gloria Anzaldúa and her work of non-fiction *Borderlands/La Frontera*. In this splendidly eclectic and hard-edged biographical essay, Anzaldúa writes that borders are like ‘*heridas abiertas*’, where two worlds grate against each other and then bleed. Borderlands are the crusted scab that forms over the original wound, problematic interstitial spaces that lie suspended between the solid existential certainties on either side, their very moral indeterminacy attracting those whom Anzaldúa calls *los atravesados*: ‘the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulatto, the half-breed, the half-dead; in short, those who cross over and pass over, or go through the confines of the “normal.”’ Though Anzaldúa was thinking about the border between the US and Mexico when she wrote these powerful words, they could very well apply to the elderly *matuteras*, *varillas*, tissue-sellers and other luckless chancers associated with our own frontier, a human grotesquerie that congregates mainly on the Spanish flank of *la frontera*, but sometimes spills over onto the Gibraltar side, continually reminding us of the unnaturalness of all dividing lines.<sup>9</sup>

While on the subject of borders, another feature which the Gibraltar border shares with other border zones is that you never know what to expect while crossing it. As the novelist Janette

---

<sup>8</sup> Olive Senior, 'Literature is political because we are political animals', *Online Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/apr/29/olive-senior-literature-political>, 17 November 2020.

<sup>9</sup> M. G. Sanchez, *Border Control and another Biographical Pieces*, pp. 25-26.

Turner Hospital says in her 1985 novel *Borderline*, “at borders, as at death and in dreams, no amount of prior planning will necessarily avail.... Control is not in the hands of the traveller.”<sup>10</sup> A direct consequence of this unpredictability for us are the traffic queues which occasionally build up at the border area and stretch back for miles around the Rock itself, causing mayhem on our roads. When this happens, ambulances cannot attend emergencies; police cars are stranded at the police station; and Spaniards who work in Gibraltar and reside in La Línea find themselves queuing for hours at the border on their way to and from work. In *Border Control and other Biographical Pieces*, I describe what it is like to be stuck in one of these dreaded four- or five-hour-long queues:

I look at my partner beside me and then gaze down at the back of my interlaced hands. A lone horn is blaring up ahead, and someone is cursing in either Danish or Swedish. Near the front of the queue, a Gibraltarian copper has removed his peaked cap and is wiping the sweat from his forehead. The poor guy looks tired, visibly stressed. If the beeping continues for much longer, other horns will join in and then, before you know it, the sound of shrill metallic honking will be ricocheting up and down the queue, spreading from car to car like some airborne virus. It's what I most hate about this damned queue – this sense of edginess, of continually simmering frustration. Only twenty minutes ago, my father was telling me about a German tourist who got so stressed while stuck in the queue that he simply climbed out of his Mercedes and walked off in the direction of the airport terminal, leaving the vehicle stranded in the middle of the four-lane 'loop.' 'No vea el follón que formo el alemán,' my father said, looking at me via the rear-view mirror. 'I can imagine,' I responded with a weary smile, secretly empathising with the harassed German.<sup>11</sup>

### III.

I have been looking at how I write and what I write about. Now, for the last part of this talk, I want to focus on how my Gibraltarian writings have been received. As I mentioned before, I started writing while I was finishing my PhD. For the first few years there was hardly any interest in what I was doing – either in Gibraltar or overseas. This was a very demoralising time for me, as I was working very hard but didn't seem to be getting anywhere. My lowest point probably came in 2007, shortly after the publication of my *Diary of a Victorian Colonial*, my fictional attempt to imagine what it must have been like to live in a working-class street in nineteenth-century Gibraltar. I put a lot of effort into this short novel – spending hours looking at archival material and trying to recreate the sights and sounds of fin-de-siècle colonial life as accurately as possible. Once again, the idea was to reclaim part of our lost history, to come up with a text that would counter a representational absence. The objective was not to glamorise or prettify aspects of Gibraltar's working-class past – the objective was to paint it as it was, or at least as my research indicated that it might have been. In fact, you could say that *A Diary of a Victorian Colonial* was an attempt to recreate that first-person nineteenth-century memoir that I had been looking for in my own private research for so long, but never found. Imagine my surprise, then, when, a couple of days after a short press release on the book was published in one of the local papers, a letter appeared in the same newspaper accusing me and my book of having performed – and I'm quoting now – a “huge disservice to our noble city and honourable ancestors.” The letter-writer admitted that he had not yet read the book – yes, that's

---

<sup>10</sup> Janette Turner Hospital, *Borderline*, p. 1.

<sup>11</sup> M. G. Sanchez, *Border Control and another Biographical Pieces*, pp. 3-4.

how bizarre the whole thing gets! – but claimed that the extracts in the press release were so “negative and unedifying” that they denigrated Gibraltar and “insulted the memory of our noble city and ancestors.”<sup>12</sup>

It was, like I said, one of the lowest points in my writing career. ‘What’s the point in doing this?’ I asked myself. ‘Why bother with it all? I try to bring to life the difficulties faced by nineteenth-century Gibraltarians and I end up antagonising those who are determined to see the past through rose-tinted spectacles.’

But eventually something stirred in me and I realised that I couldn’t give in because of what one person thought. I had to carry on. I almost had no choice in the matter. Somebody had to be writing stories from a Gibraltarian perspective, and I couldn’t allow myself to be derailed by an individual who hadn’t even read the book he was criticising!

So I bit the bullet, as we say in English, and continued writing. In fact, over the next five or six years I wrote all manner of books. I wrote novels, short stories, essay collections, autobiographical memoirs. I even wrote a three-hundred-page travelogue about India, in which I explored the parallels as well as the differences between tiny, not-quite-colonial but not-quite-independent Gibraltar and gigantic postcolonial India. I wrote all these texts without expecting much in return, driven only by the desire to see words in print that were faithful to the complex, multi-layered reality found in Gibraltar’s streets.

But here’s the surprising thing: slowly but surely people started taking an interest. First, it was an interview in a postcolonial journal, then an article about my work in another journal, then an invitation to speak at the University of Salamanca, then an invitation to take part in a colloquium in Basel in Switzerland, then a commission for the BBC World Service. Things quickly snowballed from there and almost before I knew it I found myself in the position where I am today, having spoken about my books at universities all over Europe and having had a number of scholarly articles published on my work. There have been several exciting moments along this journey, but one of the most thrilling came when I was contacted out of the blue last year by a professor from the University of California. In his email he explained that he had recently run a course entitled “*El mosaico ibérico*”. The object of this course, he told me, was to introduce Californian students to the high degree of geographic, linguistic, and political diversity found in the Iberian Peninsula, and he had used some of my works to exemplify this diversity. Hearing that young men and women in far-off California were reading my books, of course, was very flattering. But what really, really excited me was learning that many of these undergraduates were identifying parallels between the Mexican-American borderlands and our own border with Spain. As Dr Robert Newcomb himself put it to me: “The students, the majority of whom are second-generation Mexican Americans, made several interesting comparisons between the situation of Gibraltar and the US-Mexican context, which is similarly defined by border politics, cultural hybridity [and] linguistic code-switching.... Various students commented on the relevance of your stories to their own experiences. The students’ interest in Gibraltar was reflected in their selection of final paper topics – Gibraltar was one of the most popular parts of the peninsula to write about, punching far above its weight if you take population into account!”

---

<sup>12</sup> ‘Disservice to Our City’, *Gibraltar Chronicle*, 3/8/2010, p. 6.

Since our first email exchange last year, Dr Newcomb and I have corresponded several times and he is now planning to one day bring out a book-length study of Gibraltarian forms of self-expression – something which, as you can imagine, makes me very, very happy.

So what conclusions can we draw from this personal odyssey of mine? Well, I feel that there is still a lot of work to be done before it can be said that Gibraltar has a literary tradition of its own, but I believe that we are finally moving in the right direction.

But I think my story also carries a wider message embedded within it, and that is that you should never give up on your intellectual projects and aspirations.

I know that some of you are postgraduate students who may be thinking about following careers in academia. My advice to you is this. If you have a subject which you believe in, stick with it, nurture it, make it your passion. Carry on believing in it when nobody else does. Don't be demoralised by those who tell you that you shouldn't be doing what you are doing just because nobody has done it before. If I can get people thinking and writing about a subject as neglected and disregarded as Gibraltar's hybrid identity, then you can also get people interested in your field of speciality. Thank you.

## **Works Cited**

Anzaldúa, Gloria. 1987. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Aunt Lute Books.

Buttigieg, Dale. 2020. 'A linguistic perspective on Gibraltar's Llanito language', [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sOZWHsVbI24&ab\\_channel=GarrettGibbons](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sOZWHsVbI24&ab_channel=GarrettGibbons), 20 April 2020.

Crespo, Martí. 2018. *Els 'minorkeens' de Gibraltar*. Publicacions de l'Abadia de Montserrat.

Lambert, David. 2005. 'As solid as the Rock? Place, belonging and the local appropriation of imperial discourse in Gibraltar.' *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 30: 2: 206-220.

Lombard, Anthony. 2010. 'Disservice to Our City', *Gibraltar Chronicle*, 3 August 2010.

Turner Hospital, Janette. 1985. *Borderline*. Dutton.

Sanchez, M. G. 2020. *Gooseman*. Dabuti Collective.

---. 2019. *Border Control and another Biographical Pieces*. Dabuti Collective.

---. 2015. *Jonathan Gallardo*. Createspace.

---. 2015. *Past: A Memoir*. Createspace.

Senior, Olive. 2020. 'Literature is political because we are political animals', *Online Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/apr/29/olive-senior-literature-political>, 17 Nov 2020.