

INTERVIEWING SANDRA CISNEROS: LIVING ON THE FRONTERA*

Pilar Godayol Nogué

Sandra Cisneros is the most powerful representative of the group of young Chicana writers who emerged in the 1980s. Her social and political involvement is considerably different from that of Anaya and Hinojosa, the first generation of Chicano writers writing in English. She has a great ability to capture a multitude of voices in her fiction. Although she was trained as a poet, her greatest talents lie in storytelling when she becomes a writer of fiction.

Sandra Cisneros was born in Chicago in 1954. Her first book of fiction, *The House on Mango Street* (1984), is about growing up in a Latino neighbourhood in Chicago. Her second book of short stories, *Woman Hollering Creek* (1991), confirms her stature as a writer of great talent. She has also published two books of poetry, *My Wicked Wicked Ways* (1987) and *Loose Woman* (1994).

My interest in her work sprang from her mixing two languages, sometimes using the syntax of one language with the vocabulary of another, at other times translating literally Spanish phrases or words into English, or even including Spanish words in the English text. This fudging of the roles of writer and translator reflects the world she describes in her novels where basic questions of identity and reality are explored.

Pilar Godayol. Your work includes mixed-language use. How do you choose when to write a particular word in English or Spanish?

Sandra Cisneros. I'm always aware when I write something in English, if it sounds *chistoso*. I'm aware when someone is saying something in English, or when I am saying something, of how interesting it sounds if I translate it. I was listening yesterday to the news, on Galavisión and they were

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interviewing *los ambulantes en el D.F.*, asking them what time they went home: "*Hasta que se cierra el cielo*", and I thought that's beautiful, very poetic, if you translate it in English, he is saying "until the sky closes" and that's so beautiful! No one would say that in English. They might say the Spanish, I don't know if it's poetic or common in Spanish but in English it's startling -very much a poet's choice of words, of using words in a new way. So I made a mental note "until the sky closes", I knew that that would be something I would use... somewhere in my life; in the future you will see it. That came from listening to a man on television, but that happens to me all the time. People will say something to me, or I'll just be thinking about expressions that I use that sound interesting in English; when you translate them back to Spanish they are no longer defamiliarised..., you're not getting the *chiste* when you change them back to Spanish, but in English they're funny!. I have these characters in my new book *Uncle Fat Face* and *Auntie Light Skin*. In English their names are very funny. My Spanish speaking readers know what I'm talking about. The English ones know that I'm using a phrase that must come from the Spanish; they are aware from the oddness of the word choice, of the syntax, that it's Spanish. However, once Lilita Valenzuela gets a hold of that phrase and puts it back into its original, it loses something. So, I'm always aware, as a bilingual speaker, of what a Spanish phrase will sound like translated into English. If I'm writing a story in which I'm trying to make my reader aware that the speaker is speaking Spanish, then I'm going to translate a phrase into a literal English, so that the English speaker will be startled, and the bilingual reader will recognize it as familiar.

P.G. In your second novel *Woman Hollering Creek* you seem to take this linguistic mixture further. Why?

S.C. Yes. That's because I am much more conscious of mixing the language now that I am living in the southwest, as opposed to when I wrote *The House on Mango Street* when I was living in the midwest. *The House on Mango Street* is from my twenties whereas most of *Woman Hollering Creek's* stories were written in my thirties and that was after my move to Texas, so I was much more conscious of playing with two languages. I think moving to the southwest made me more conscious of what made me unique as a Spanish speaking writer. I think writers are always looking for that thing that makes them different from other writers with every book. Moving to the southwest made me conscious of, "Oh, look at this! If I translate this phrase into English then my reader will know it's a Spanish speaker."

P.G. And in what direction do you see yourself moving?

S.C. Well, I'm still playing with the two-languages. I'm using a lot of *dichos* for the titles of my chapters because they're so funny when translated into

English. Sometimes I have the titles in Spanish, sometimes I have half of it in English, like *It Is No Disgrace to Be Poor* is the name of one chapter, and then I have a subtitle *But It Is Very Inconvenient*. They're funny in English and familiar in Spanish, but, if you chop them in half, or if you present them only in Spanish, or only in English, sometimes there's a lovely little play with the context of the chapter. For example, in *Cada quien en su oficio es rey*, the chapter of that title is very significant because the character's name is *Feyes*. His mother always told him that he was destined to be a king and that chapter is how he becomes an upholsterer, so there's always a little joke. I think I play with languages more now, with my humour.

P.G. Could you see yourself writing in Spanish?

S.C. Well, the more I listen to everyone else's Spanish, the rustier mine seems. My own Spanish has become inundated with *tejanismos* living on the *frontera*, I'm always amused by the mistakes we make. The mistakes are funny to me, both in English and Spanish, because we live in a part of the country where some of the Spanish we use has been very much influenced by the English, and the English we use has been influenced by the Spanish, and we don't know the speech very well of either, so a lot of malapropisms occur. However, to me, rather than that being a deficit, I always think, "Oh, how can I use this?" (Laughter) "Can this be used for humorous effect in my work?."

P.G. In "Mericans", for instance, there is a kind of grey area where this language challenges the established cultures on each side of the border. What is your intention in doing this?

S.C. Well, I guess my intention is to be *chistosa*. It was a true story that I told. I really was trying to make a political commentary through humour. I always start with something that's a good story; for me, it's a good story because it's funny, and it makes a good political jab, a political *comentario* on each side. What I think is so wonderful about being born on any borderline, be it the border between France and Spain, or the border of México and Tejas is that if you live on the border you can see the opposite country in a way the opposite country cannot see itself, and I think for those of us who are living in those borderlines it's just an incredible time in history because we are presenting mirrors to each country, to ourselves, and to all the citizens of the world, that have never been held up before. So, we have a particular ear, and a particular vision. I can hear things and see things that most citizens cannot see themselves unless you happen to be on the border. That for me is, I suppose, part of my job as a translator, to hold up that mirror, that tape recorder, and to let each side see themselves in the way the others see them, in a way that they do not see themselves, and by seeing themselves in

that light I think there's communication, and I hope compassion for the misunderstandings that have grown up. I like the work that I'm doing in the story "Mericans". It's so important for the Mexicans to understand how Americans view them; it's an incredible commentary for U.S. readers to see how they view Mexicans as opposed to how they view Mexican-Americans, the real jokes of both sides; that's something I was most excited about the Mexican translation of my work. I'm most excited about *Women Hollering Creek* going into Mexican Spanish because my work deals so much with México, and I'm anxious to see how the Mexicans are going to react.

P.G. I know your work has been translated into European Spanish. Are there other translations?

S.C. Yes. It has been translated into Italian, French, Norwegian, German, Dutch, Danish and Japanese. I think a story has been translated into Swedish, another story into Danish. A long time ago some of my poems were translated into Bengali and I know that some of my stories from *The House on Mango Street* have been translated into Zapotec by a friend of my father's.

P.G. One of my interests in interviewing you is the difficulty of translating your work into different languages. Do you think a translation into one language can convey the wealth of the cultural and linguistic dichotomy you express in your works?

S.C. Every language has its own charm in describing one thing or another, so I don't think that any one language could do it. However, I think that certain languages might work better with one sensibility than another, and that a very good translator can find parallels. My work is especially a challenge to Spanish language translators because sometimes I'm taking an original phrase or syntax of the original Spanish, translating it into English, and they've got to put it right back. I think that every language has something unique that it can express. I don't feel it's impossible; you're not going to get an identical lyricism, but you can get a different kind of lyricism. I'm very much influenced by poetry and I was trained as a poet, so sometimes there are phrases and redundancies in a translation and I'll have to ask the translator, "Please cut that phrase down, the reason it's repeated in English was for the rhythm but now in this language there's no alliteration so you'll have to cut it because it's redundant." I can do that when I'm working with the translator because I'm the author; however, it's not always possible with translators that are working alone. In Elena Poniatowska's and Lilita Valenzuela's case, there was close cooperation, so when a line got too clumsy I'd say, "That was only that way in the English to support the alliteration, but it loses it in translation so please clip that and throw that

sentence out." That would be horrific for the translator to do without the author's approval. I understood why it was there, why it was there in the first place. Many times when I write something it's for sound, effect and not just meaning. That's why if you hold up Elena's to the original, you'll see that there are places where sentences or an ending are clipped. The ending was so important to *The House on Mango Street* for the story to have the reverberation of a poem, and if it were too literally close to the original, it didn't work, that's where we had to get the scissors and cut. Yes, I think it can be done, I think you just have to have a very creative mind, and if you can, a very close analysis and understanding of why something was written in the original so you can find a parallel.

P.G. Carol Maier in *The Oxford Companion to Women's Writing in the United States* writes: "Gloria Anzaldúa, Sandra Cisneros and Jessica Hagedorn could be said to trigger translation for their readers by writing in two languages or incorporating non-English words in their texts." What do you think about this?

Well, what I try to do is to use all the words around me that I have available, and if I have twice as many, then I use as many as I can. To trigger translation? Sometimes I'm very conscious of trying to imitate communities. In my case, living in the south-west, I'm putting the Spanish because I'm trying to approximate the Spanish speaker, although if I was trying to capture something that had the verisimilitude of the true speaker, the Spanish speaker, there would be much more Spanish and less English. It would be the reverse of what you see if I was truly trying to capture the way the Tejano speaks. Now what I'm doing is creating a facsimile of that, so that the English speaker can kind of hobble his way through; and the way I do that is doing the reverse. I put parts of the all-English in Spanish, so what I'm only trying to do is recreate what I hear around me. However, as I'm conscious that I'm doing it and some readers may not know a word of Spanish like the Japanese, I try and do it in such a way so that they will learn a little bit of the expressions of the border. I'm really conscious of trying to teach, but I don't want to make my texts sound as if I'm writing for the non-Spanish speakers. The central person that is sitting across from me is going to be someone from the Texas border area, but I also am conscious that people who don't speak Spanish are eavesdropping. I really try to teach them a little bit of how people in the area speak without losing them completely. I try to structure it in such a way that they can capture the essence even if they don't know a syllable of Spanish.

P.G. So you are conscious of your readers...

S.C. I am conscious that I'm writing to a girlfriend like myself. She is the main character. She's not in the margin. She's in the centre of the page, and there standing in the doorway are other people of other cultures who are eavesdropping; and in order that they continue to listen, I try to write it in such a way that I don't lose them and I try to structure the Spanish expressions in such a way that they learn Spanish. Besides, I'm very conscious of looking at English texts where other languages are included and trying to learn from them in a way that I did not when I was younger. So I'm looking at Asian American authors such as Maxine Hong Kingston and Gish Jen and how they mix in Chinese or use English with Chinese syntax to educate the reader so that when I finish my text, like the book I'm writing now, I hope the reader will understand.

P.G. And understand the bilingual situation of your work...

S.C. Yes. I really don't try to do it to lose the reader or to make the text more complex or to trigger people's translating skills. I don't know if I understand your question but I'm always trying to approximate the speaker I hear in my environment. And to do it in such a way that someone who comes from a different environment can get the gist of what they're saying and learn a little more about them.

P.G. Do you consider your work a way of exploring translation as an opportunity to question and refuse the dichotomies traditionally associated with translation and communication in the west?

S.C. I don't think about those things, I just write. You know, I have no idea about if my work is challenging things. I know that when I started writing I was definitely trying to throw rocks at everything I had grown up with. When I was in graduate school I certainly was trying to, by using working-class stories, working-class English, slang and low-class English, trying to challenge the established literature, the established society even though I wasn't aware of this, I couldn't have articulated it that way. I was definitely being rebellious. Now, am I trying to continue to be rebellious? I suppose not in the way I was 20 years ago. I'm rebellious in another way. I think that I'm trying to—not so much throw rocks as to build bridges. You see, when I was younger it was about throwing rocks and now it's about building bridges. If I wanted to throw rocks then my texts would be practically all Spanish. The reason why I'm using English and divulging secrets to the English speakers is because I so much want them to see themselves in the way that they are spoken about when they are not in the room. So I suppose in a sense I'm working with a very different tactic now at 41. My tactic now is more conscious of the two languages, of using them not only for the effect, but in a startling way that will charm and keep my reader listening. I want my reader, foremost, to listen.

P.G. You know there has been an increased visibility and autonomy on the part of the translator which is bound to effect the relationship between authors and translators. How far do you think author and translator should collaborate actively?

S.C. I like to collaborate with my translators when I can. I'm usually not able to because I don't speak the language. But I like when they send me questions. For example, the German translators were very thorough, and sent me sheets of questions and I was really delighted. I found the questions so amusing. The Japanese translator, for example, she would ask me the most amusing questions. But if I can, for example, work in the way I work with Elena and Liliana, it's a lot of work, but afterwards the end product is worth it. And if I can work with the translator, to the degree that I can, I think it's better for both parties, for the translator and for the writer. Sometimes the translator misreads a sentence or the intent of why a character is saying something or what's being said, and the author can say, "Listen, this is being said; there's no subject here but the verb should be in this way because the author's referring back to... etc". And as translator you don't always catch every mistake, whereas the author knows the text and it helps. It's been wonderfully illuminating for me to work with Liliana. She will refer to some of the problems she's had, or some of the things she notices about my work, or idiosyncrasies in my writing; and I really have to look at the stories and see what is problematic, what I'm doing in a text. It just dissects my work in such a way that we both learn more about my writing; it's like going to see an analyst! I'm fascinated, sometimes when I go back with a translator and work on things and we talk about the text, I think, "Oh my God, I wrote that! How did I write that?" and *me da ánimo* for the novel I'm working on now. Now that I'm working on a very difficult novel, it's so wonderful to see what I was capable of writing in the past. *Me da un poco de ánimo* when I see that I wrote a complex story a couple of years ago. I remember how hard those stories were to write, so I think, "Well, there will be a day when my novel will be done, and I will be able to look at it and admire it."

P.G. Many women writers prefer to be translated by women translators. What's your opinion?

S.C. I hadn't really thought about it, to tell you the truth. I don't know. I really don't have an opinion at this point. I certainly have enjoyed working with the women I have worked with but I've enjoyed working with the men as well. Ideally, it would be perfect to have both. The more people, the more genders, the more different areas, the more diverse it is the better. A team of translators with different sexualities, from different regions and with different styles, different ideas makes for the translation to come out richer.

P.G. Women translators are increasingly aware that the re-creation of a text in another language involves more than the transferal of words, and that each facet of translation contributes integrally to their practice. Do you consider your writing especially relevant for Women's Studies on the one hand and Translation Studies on the other?

S.C. Oh yes, I think my books fall into that category, and I think it's especially fascinating with translation, considering the way that I'm working. So much of what gives my English its peculiar flavour, even if I don't use any Spanish, is Spanish. I'm aware of that. I wasn't aware of it when I wrote *The House on Mango Street*. I did it unconsciously, and now that I am older I can see how my father's Spanish influenced my work. The syntax, the sensibility, the diminutives of the very tender English in *The House on Mango Street* and the way of looking at inanimate objects as if they were animate—that's Spanish. I had no idea until after I'd finished the book. When I became conscious of that I had already handed in the manuscript. It came to me when I was writing a letter to my friend's mother in Spanish and I realised, "This sounds like *The House on Mango Street*". I started translating the letter in my head, and I said, "This is *The House on Mango Street*. This is where the voice comes from". I realised then that *The House on Mango Street* had been influenced so much by my father's Spanish and I didn't even know it.

P.G. Thank you.