

The was shuttled  
back and forth  
between



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

## **The Impact of Negative Cultural Stereotypes on Interracial Marriages**

In 1954 author Sandra Cisneros was born into a low income family of seven children, based in Chicago, Illinois. Her mother was Mexican American and her father a full Mexican. Cisneros grew up the only girl among six brothers, and has described this experience as “ being similar to having seven fathers” (Yudin & Kanoza 2001). As a child Cisneros was shuttled back and forth between a sequence of dingy apartments in Chicago and her grandmother’s homestead located in Mexico City; this experience, the “ concept of home or the lack of one,” tends to factor continually in Sandra Cisneros’s works of fiction (Yudin & Kanoza 2001). The combined effect of a nomadic lifestyle, plus the social isolation of a constantly revolving cycle of friends, schools, “ her brothers’ unwillingness to let a girl join in their play” naturally turned the young Cisneros to an inner life populated by books. It was this solitary reflective time that generated Cisneros’ “ observant, creative voice” (Yudin & Kanoza 2001) In 1974 Cisneros took a creative writing class in Chicago at the Loyola University campus where she later completed her bachelor of arts undergraduate degree in English (Yudin & Kanoza 2001).

She then went on to the University of Iowa’s Writers’ Workshop and a masters in fine arts degree, followed by the 1991 publication of short stories *Woman Hollering Creek, and Other Stories* that is the subject of this review (Yudin & Kanoza 2001). When Random House accepted Cisneros’s second book of short fiction, *Woman Hollering Creek, and Other Stories*, for publication, this represented “ the first work by and about Chicanas — that is, Mexican American women — to receive a contract with a major publishing

house” (Yudin & Kanoza 2001). Sandra Cisneros has also received numerous writing awards for her fiction, including the Before Columbus American Book Award and the PEN Center West Award for *The House on Mango Street*, a collection of short stories (Yudin & Kanoza 2001), Cisneros also received two National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship for Creative Writers, a Dobie-Paisano Fellowship, and a MacArthur Fellowship (Yudin & Kanoza 2001). *Woman Hollering Creek, and Other Stories*, according to Cisneros, contains a “single, unifying thread of vision and experience that runs throughout the collection of twenty-two narratives” (Yudin & Kanoza 2001). This vision provides a decidedly female perspective on sex, culture and racism. *Woman Hollering Creek* features Mexican American female characters that all live in or near the border town of San Antonio, Texas (Cisneros 1991). On the whole the stories concern women of divided loyalty – they have successfully “assimilated into American culture,” yet feel an oblique longing for their home country of Mexico (Palmisano 2004). Cisneros’s women exist in an in-between state.

The third section of the book is the largest and investigates the trials and tribulations of adult Hispanic females attempting to find their place amid “familial and cultural pressures as well as traditional gender roles” (Yudin & Kanoza 2001). The protagonist of the title story is Cleofilas, a Mexican bride unfortunately wed to a brutish and violent man who lives over the border in Texas (Cisneros 1991). Cleofilas, a soap opera addict, pines away fantasizing about the passion she witnesses in the television soap operas she and her girlfriend’s watch, and understands her fantasy has finally been fulfilled with the arrival of Juan Pedro, who wishes to marry immediately “without a long

engagement since he can't take off too much time from work" (Cisneros 1991). Juan Pedro sweeps Cleofilas away to the border town of Seguin, Texas, a town "built so that you have to depend on husbands" (Cisneros 1991). Cleofilas still understands her life in terms of the soap opera fantasy, "only now the episodes got sadder and sadder.

And there were no commercials in between for comic relief" (Cisneros 1991). When Cleofilas finally escapes the marriage after countless beatings, Juan Pedro's unmitigated unfaithfulness, and disgraceful treatment at his hands, she goes back to her father's house in Mexico, where she simply exchanges one domineering male force for another – her father (Cisneros 1991). On her way back to her father's home, however, Cleofilas catches a faint glimmer of what it is to be a free woman, beholden to none, when they travel across the Woman Hollering Creek and her female driver lets out a bellow that makes her and her son jump (Cisneros 1991). Cisneros's experience growing up in a house full of men appears to have colored her opinion of them – the men in Woman Hollering Creek, and Other Stories are all of a certain ilk: brutal, overbearing, insensitive, riddled with machismo, highly sexual and incapable of marital fidelity. The use of sex to soothe, control and escape is a common theme that runs throughout the collection and finds its home in the story "Never Marry a Mexican", which concerns a young Hispanic woman named Clemencia (Cisneros 1991). As a protagonist Clemencia is simultaneously entertaining and disturbing: a union of opposites. She spurns marriage and men, and says "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 in 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" (Cisneros 1991).

Cisneros appears to be aware of and in essence encourage Clemencia's sexual autonomy, yet the action of the story tells the reader that Cisneros views the power as somewhat cheap, in that it " rises from a misuse of sexuality and is a dangerous result of women recapitulating the mistakes of men" (Thomson 1994). Clemencia expresses nothing more than contempt for her American boyfriend, though the reader senses that her negative feelings " are fueled by her emerging sense of inadequacy and guilt resulting from her inability to speak Spanish" (Palmisano 2004). Like many of women in *Woman Hollering Creek, and Other Stories*, Clemencia personifies the Mexican American quandary, the cultural no man's land afforded " Chicanas who must confront daily the triple bind of not being considered Mexican, not being considered American, and not being male" (Yudin & Kanoza 2001). In Clemencia's case, though her voice appears rebellious, her actions are ultimately self destructive.

" Never Marry a Mexican," refers to some advice Clemencia received from her mother when she was young girl (Cisneros 1991). Her mother openly regretted marrying her father, and her attempt to shield her daughter from her own mistakes " ultimately consign Clemencia to cultural and social marginality" (Yudin & Kanoza 2001). Clemencia refuses to date the low income Latinos she comes into contact with in her daily life, preferring the companionship of married white men (Cisneros 1991).

Ironically, the white men whom she has sex with received the same advice from their mothers – they will gladly bed a Mexican American woman in a clandestine manner, behind closed doors, but they will never legitimize their relationship by marrying her, for the simple fact that a wife must be of the same race (Cisneros 1991). Clemencia “ does allow herself to fall into relationship after relationship with unavailable men – always married, and always white” (Fitts 2002). Her choice in men betrays the lack of self worth at her core. Sandwiched between two cultures, neither of which will claim her, Clemencia turns resentful (Cisneros 1991). Like the males she despises and yet envies, Clemencia “ takes lovers easily and leaves them quickly; she uses sex as power, as a weapon. She goes to bed with a man while his wife is giving birth to their child and then, years later, sleeps with that same child. Her sexual conquests, like those of her stereotypical Don Juan counterparts, are attempts at control: she wants dominion over her lovers without giving up any of her own authority” (Thomson 1994).

As a protagonist, Clemencia’s struggle to find happiness, peace and love hits home, and registers the loneliness and isolation that echoes Cisneros experienced growing up between homes, between cultures, and endlessly rejected by men. Though Clemencia boasts that she is happily free and unattached, “ her pain and loneliness are palpable” (Yudin & Kanoza 2001). She exacts a bizarre form of revenge on a married lover when she sleeps with his son (Cisneros 1991). For Clemencia, the sexual relationship with the younger generation “ links her to his father and mother’s marital relations, of which he is the product, and her lover’s relative youth allows her to mother him” (Yudin & Kanoza 2001). The disturbing logic driving the relationship

simultaneously defames and yet honors what Clemencia denies herself - "marriage and motherhood" (Yudin & Kanoza 2001; Mullen 1996).

Misinterpreting sexual power as personal power, Clemencia justifies her existence thus: "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" (Cisneros 1991).

But Clemencia's "world is formed around an emptiness, a vacant space she can never quite fill, and she believes all others must share this vacancy.

Guitars make music only because they are hollow" (Thomson 1994). Via this delusional and tragic woman, Cisneros "uses the behavior of men as a

catalyst that propels her women into a search deep within themselves for the love that men have failed to give them" (Campbell 1991). According to

Rosenfeld's 2002 study *Measures of Assimilation in the Marriage Market:*

*Mexican Americans 1970-1990*, "Mexican immigrants have extremely high levels of national origin endogamy (as do immigrants from most other parts of the world), but Mexican immigrants also face substantial social barriers in

their interactions with native Whites. Mexican immigrants are far from generalized assimilation or specific assimilation with any native group"

(Rosenfeld 2002). Critics such as Palmisano have named some of the main themes of *Woman Hollering Creek* as "poverty and cultural suppression, the search for self-identity, and the role of women in Mexican American culture"

Palmisano 2004).

Other critics such as Fitts (2002) claim that Cisneros's "characters engage in a continual process of cultural mediation, as they struggle to reconcile their Mexican past with their American present" (Fitts 2002). Similarly, Wyatt

<https://assignbuster.com/the-was-shuttled-back-and-forth-between/>

(1995) understands that Cisneros's women traverse the "the ambiguous space between cultures" and that...Never Marry a Mexican complicates the notion of subverting feminine gender roles by borrowing from masculinity" (Wyatt 1995). Silverstein and Chen's (1999) research into the cultural impact of assimilation on Mexican American families led them to assert that "any social and economic benefit that might accrue to younger generations of Mexican Americans due to assimilation must be balanced against the possibility that such success comes with psychic costs associated with reduced social and emotional integration with older family members," as well as the Mexican culture as a whole, as often imbued by the older generation (Silverstein & Chen 1999). However, Cisneros's stories, especially Never Marry a Mexican, speak more to Rosenfeld's theory that the fractious relationship between Mexicans and Americans breeds a schism within Mexican immigrants themselves, wherein they fail to locate a home within themselves, and so their physical home remains elusive.

Woman Hollering Cree, and Other Stories presents a world of Mexican women stuck between cultures yes, but also stuck between conflicting ideas about themselves, their sexuality, and their purpose (Cisneros 1991). The reader witnesses Cisneros's female characters as they "realize the soul-deadening restrictions of familial and cultural expectations [and] struggle toward self-definition and control over their own destinies" (Palmisano 2004). Many of these women attempt to acquire self definition and control through manipulating men, sexually or otherwise, somehow expecting that their happiness and personal fulfillment can be found from some form of exterior power not emanating from their own self worth. Cisneros's women reflect the



Mexican immigrant's struggle to assimilate the parts of themselves that negative cultural stereotypes have taught them to hate.

## References

Campbell, B. M.

(1991, May 26). Crossing borders. *The New York Times Book Review*, 6.

Cisneros, S. (1991).

*Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*. New York: Vintage, 43-56 Fitts, A. (2002).

Sandra Cisneros's modern malinche: A reconsideration of feminine archetypes in *Woman Hollering Creek*. *International Fiction Review*, 11-22.

Mullen, H. (1996). A silence between us like a language: The untranslatability of experience in Sandra Cisneros's *Woman Hollering Creek*. *MELUS*, 21, (2), 3-20. Palmisano, J.

(2004). *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*. *Short Story Criticism*, 72.

n. p. Rosenfeld, M. J. (2002) *Measures of Assimilation in the Marriage Market: Mexican Americans 1970-1990*.

*Journal of Marriage and Family*, 64 (1), 152-162. Silverstein, M. & Chen, X.

(1999) *The Impact of Acculturation in Mexican American Families on the Quality of Adult Grandchild-Grandparent Relationships*. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 61 (1), 188-198. Thomson, J. (1994).

*What is called heaven: Identity in Sandra Cisneros's Woman Hollering Creek*. *Studies in Short Fiction*, 31 (3), 415-424. Wyatt, J. (1995). *On not being la*  
<https://assignbuster.com/the-was-shuttled-back-and-forth-between/>

malinche: Border negotiations of gender in Sandra Cisneros's ' Never Marry a Mexican' and ' Woman Hollering Creek. *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 14 (2), 243-272. Yudin, M.

F. & Kanoza, T. (2001). *Sandra Cisneros. Critical Survey of Short Fiction, Second Revised Edition.*

Pasadena, CA: Salem Press. 1-5.