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East of Downtown and Beyond Interview with Helena Maria Viramontes



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# East of Downtown and Beyond
# Interview with Helena María Viramontes

A native of East Los Angeles, Helena María Viramontes has participated in many journals, literary contests, and community activities. She is best known for her internationally acclaimed *The Moths and Other Stories* published in 1985 by Arte Público Press. This collection of short stories brings to light the importance of the urban woman's voice, concerns, and perspectives within Chicano/Latino culture. Viramontes calls attention to the themes of sexuality in "Growing" and "Birthday," changing cultural/sexual roles in "The Broken Web," the relationships among women in "The Moths," and the immigrant experience in "Cariboo Café."

In *Chicana Creativity and Criticism: Charting New Frontiers in American Literature* (1987), Viramontes and María Herrera-Sobek coedited a collection of critical articles, fiction, poetry, and essays on Chicana literature, a project that was inspired by a conference held at U.C. Irvine. The book proved to be very popular and recently sold out. The University of New Mexico Press will reissue the book in an expanded edition. In this collection, the short story "Miss Clairol" by Viramontes shows a new direction in the representation of the urban female factory worker in Chicano/Latino literature according to Herrera-Sobek. In "Nopalitos" (*Breaking Boundaries: Writings by Latinas* 1989), Viramontes cultivates the testimonial genre by giving us an autobiographical account of the importance of the oral tradition in her work.

Viramontes has been literary editor for *Xhismearte* and a coordinator for the Latino Writers Association. In 1990 she cofounded the nonprofit group, Latino Writers and Filmmakers, Inc. She has recently signed a contract for two novels and a book of short stories with New American Library Series/Dutton Publishers. She is presently working on a novel, *Under the Feet of Jesus*, to be published in 1995 with the support of the National Endowment for the Arts. Viramontes has also accepted a ladder-rank position as Assistant Professor of Creative Writing in the Department of English at Cornell University.

As one of the participants at the conference "Writing the Immigrant Experience" at the renovated public library in downtown Los Angeles, Viramontes reflected on the significance of the public library in her literary formation. Later on that afternoon, we met with Viramontes to discuss her role as a writer and a

community activist.

**Viramontes elaborated on the importance of her involvement with the public library. We asked her why this place means so much to her.**

Helena: I'm a big advocate of public libraries because I grew up in a bookless home. I come from a family of eleven. It wasn't until my older brothers and sisters started going to school that there were books in the house. My father had bought us a set of *World Book Encyclopedias* that we were forbidden to touch because they hadn't been paid. Also my older sister had a *Bible* she guarded like her big jar of *Noxzema*. I was amazed by the pictures in this book and the temptation was too much for me to bear. For the longest time I thought that the encyclopedias contained all the information I needed to know in the world, and that the *Bible* had all the truth. What more could a hungry child want? That's all I really needed. It wasn't until very recently that I realized that this isn't altogether true. But that's where I developed my respect for the printed word. In any event, I was always really excited about books.

The library was my space. I would take two buses to come here to the Central Library. It was very much unlike the way it is now. You would walk into this huge domelike room and in it were rows and rows of catalogue card drawers and all those cards represented books ready to be accessed by the tip of my fingers. You're constantly moving, but you have to make contacts and connections. I like that thought because in many ways that's the way it was at the public library. I met all kinds of different people and worlds in this library.

Juanita: **What do you remember about the library as a child**?

H.: First of all, it was a place of warmth, great warmth. Someone always kept the heat just right. And nobody bothered you. And then to see the big huge boxes with catalogue cards in them and jot the numbers and go to the stacks and say *¡Ay! como tenían tantos libros* and then just pile them up. These many books [she extends her hands]. To go and sit down with them. There was always a homeless person or two or three or five or ten, either sleeping, reading or looking at odd things. I remember seeing some old lady reading page after page of old *T.V. Guides*, while another time, I saw some *viejito* reading a foreign book, but he was holding it backwards. I thought all this was so fascinating. It's always been my quiet, tripping out space, the library.

Silvia: **What did you read**?

H.: I liked reading about people's lives, biographies. I would read fiction and magazines but it was mostly biographies I remember. At that time I was very much struck by people's lives. I also read about California history. They had a California room where I would read sections of history books. More than anything else, I just

enjoyed the freedom to be able to have access to these things, to pick a book on Harriet Tubman or Marilyn Monroe or whatever my heart desired. Nobody bothered me. It was incredible. That is basically what writers seek, you know: a little space. A little non-distractive time to be able to think or feel whatever you want.

J.: **What kinds of community services have you done with the public library?**

H.: Last year, for example, they started closing down public libraries. There was one public library in particular that I adopted. It was called *Friendly Stop Library* in the City of Orange. It's a barrio library. It's a trailer that pretty much served the small barrio there. I loved the work that they were doing. The librarian who worked there was a Chicano. One day I visited the library at about 3:30 in the afternoon. It was packed. All sorts of kids were there, reading, looking at magazines. I mean it was a place where the community came together, almost like a teen post, but the kids were reading or doing homework.
The librarian was able to disseminate the books that were relevant to the kids' cultures and concerns. It was a wonderful, wonderful place that belonged to them. Well sure enough they were going to close it up. I just couldn't believe this so I wrote this letter to all my friends. I said, "Listen, here *compas*. I mean we need to do something here. Don't you remember how important the libraries were to a lot of us because we just did not have enough books available to us?" And so on. I must have made about 75 copies of the letter and sent them out to all my friends who sent them out to their friends. Well, sure enough, the response was so big that the library was awarded another grant. All I did was write a letter and it worked. A lot of the writers, especially the Latino writers, responded. That was really, really very nice. It was wonderful to see that everybody took the time to write letters to say "Don't do this. This is really important. This is my own personal experience at the public library." Libraries have always been very close to my heart.
When you grow up in a family of eleven in a three bedroom house in East L.A. where do you study? I mean where can you go to study? *En la cocina*. Yeah, *bueno* after you wash the dishes. You know what I mean? The library also provided me with a place to exercise my imagination. I could sit for hours, read, sleep, and nobody bothered me. Plus I had access to the information that I wanted to have access to. It was really great.

S.: **When did you start to write?**

H.: I started writing seriously after college. Actually I did write a play in my drama class in high school. The play even had an underlying feminism that was subconscious. It dealt with the lives of five prostitutes. I mean what can I say? I was a high school student at the time. Ms. Duran, our Chicana drama teacher, said, "We are not going to censor here. You write whatever you want to write. And if you want to use curse words, you could use curse words." *¡Ay! Bueno*. You should have seen all the

pieces that the students did. It was not so much the permission to use bad words, but the freedom to write unrestrictively. Mine was one that was selected to be read.

S.: **What were your college years like? Did you write then?**

H.: In 1971, I got accepted to this small, four-year, liberal arts college called Immaculate Heart College in Hollywood. People like Diane Keaton's sister for example and Mary Tyler Moore graduated from there. It was small, but very, very radical. The first year I attended, Tom Hayden came to teach there. What a controversy that was! *Las mujeres*, a lot of them called themselves nuns, had their own communities of sisters. It was my understanding that some of them were excommunicated from the Church for their radicalism. Nonetheless, they defined themselves, created their own communities of spirituality and although the school closed its doors, the community of women still offered a graduate course in feminist spirituality. Very interesting women.
As a student, I was hungry for the information they had to share. But going there I realized in many ways how the system had failed me in terms of not being prepared. There were five Chicanas and three Black women and we hung out like this, man. We were like this [a sign of unity]. In fact, Eloise Klein Healy, who was one of my teachers back then, came up to me after class once and asked: "God, we want to know what you guys are thinking about." We felt so intimidated, unprepared, and we always sat in the back really tight-lipped. But I have to hand it to Eloise; years later I thanked her. She was the first white woman who asked me what I thought. It was a terrifying experience coming into this white upper middle-class university because all of us came from very different backgrounds. It was an incredible experience.

J.: **How did your family react when you decided to continue your education** ?

H.: I explained a little about my background in terms of the workload I had at the house. I remember getting up at five and helping my mother with the lunches, getting ready for school, going to school, coming home. She only let me take drama once a week the last year of high school. We weren't allowed to have after school activities. I had to come home, help with the dinner and then wash dishes. After eight or nine o'clock, I did my homework until about midnight. Then I'd go to sleep. I always remember saying a prayer, "Oh God, thank you for this day. Sleep is the best thing until five o'clock." I knew then that if I was going to go to a college or a university I would not be able to do it at the house because there was no space. That's when I realized, I needed to move into a dorm. At Immaculate Heart College, they gave me a room at the dorms. I was seventeen years old, and needed signed permission. My father, of course, said I would move out over his dead body. So I turned to my mother, who hardly went against my father. However, I used a different strategy. I asked her, "*Mamá*, do you want me to marry a doctor or lawyer?" How

could a caring mother not respond affirmatively. "*¡Pues, sí!*" she said. Then I posed to her, "How can I meet these doctors and lawyers if I don't go to where they are studying?" All I had to do next is show my mother where to sign.

My roommate, this woman from Pacific Palisades, reminded me of Janis Joplin. She was a very rebellious wild person and that's why she fell in love with me because she said, "Come on over here. We're probably the same thing." So I ended up rooming with her. Two weeks later my parents come to check everything out. All my mother kept saying was "*¿Onde están las monjitas, onde están las monjitas?*" She was waiting for the nuns to come out and greet her. "*Pues allá están*, Mom, *es que están estudiando*," I said. God, it was crazy, crazy. Yeah, I remember those days. I always remember those days.

S.: **Why are those days significant?**

H.: It was hilarious because in many ways they were the most critical days of intellectualism that I had. When I talk to students especially, I tell them that this is an opportunity for them to get the information that they are going to need for the rest of their lives. When I was visiting Harvard and Yale, the first thing I did was check out the libraries. I'm thinking, hey, we need to have that too. This belongs to us too. We need to have access to this information.

J.: **Could you talk about your role as literary editor in *XhismeArte*, the Latino literary and art magazine of Los Angeles? How did you contribute?**

H.: Sure. I was involved from 1978 to 1981. Through informal literary workshops, about 25 writers met and shared their fiction works. I worked with the Pulitzer Prize winning journalist, Víctor Manuel Valle. We worked together submitting grants and receiving money to hold these literary workshops.

In 1981, I coordinated a special issue dedicated to *La Mujer* in an attempt to recognize and bring into perspective our creative force. I was the only woman on the editorial staff who brought forth particular gender issues. I can now say that this issue was a valuable and historical contribution to the Chicano/Latino literary tradition. The issue *La Mujer* was a publication designed for a special anthology, *Homenaje a la Ciudad de Los Angeles 1781-1981*. In this issue, we wanted to emphasize the other side of literary history that noticed *La Mujer* as an organizer as well as a worker in the fields and factories, a planner of revolutions, a generator of ideas, traditions, cultures, beliefs as well as propagator of her race. The one-dimensional depiction of *La Mujer* in the arts and literature did not do justice to her. While the Anglo described her as dark and lustful with a sexual appetite, the Chicano/Latino painted her as strong, but sexless, or sensual but intellectually sterile. *La Mujer* knows better. Both Barbara Carrasco, who was the art editor, and myself agreed to collaborate on this issue that celebrated *La Mujer*.

A writer voices the lives and future of Chicanas/Latinas. In a society that represents

inferiority by race and intelligence by sex, she must struggle endlessly to create forms and ideas against those negative images that portray her. We are powerful warriors because we can teach. In order to continue to develop our art, we must be connected to other women *artistas*. In a similar fashion, we must keep in touch with the men of our culture, educating them about the condition of *La Mujer* so that we can form a collective voice, a literary and artistic consciousness for the good of all. Some of the contributors of *La Mujer* issue, who were relatively unknown at the time, included Rosa Elvira Alvarez, Alma Villanueva, Lin Romero, Gina Valdés, and myself. The works we presented capture a reality often perceived as harsh and bitter, but honest. The art included wonderful work by Carrasco, Yreina Cervantes and Linda Vallejo.

J.: **How did the Latino Writers Association form?**

H.: This collectivity of writers grew out of the workshops we held for *Xhismearte* and speared by Valle. More than anything, its purpose was to provide critical and moral support so necessary for the development of *artistas*. It was a stimulating environment where an exchange of ideas, constructive criticism, and exploration of intellectual conversations took place. We had a grand vision. Víctor Manuel Valle, others and I met every Thursday religiously for about three years. At times it was frustrating because I was the only *mujer* in this community of writers. That is how we came up with the idea of *La Mujer* issue for *Xhismearte*.

J.: **Focusing more on your own development, who did you read?**

H.: When I was in college I was reading a lot of African-American writers like Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright. Anglo women writers like Doris Lessing and Virginia Woolf. And, of course, the regulars of American literature. African-American women writers like Toni Morrison and Alice Walker came a little bit later. Angela Davis had an impact on me as well. I was very impressed by that kind of radical atmosphere of writing your roots and yourself and the urban city plight.
What also struck me at the time was the Latin American writers and their works: *One Hundred Years of Solitude, Pedro Páramo.* I had been reading a lot but this was so different than anything that I had ever read. It was so enjoyable. It was the type of reading that just drew me in. I just forgot about the hours. I was no longer reading but in the world of these writers, experiencing the sights and scents. Words no longer got in the way of the stories, you know what I mean? Oh! What a wonderful thing! I can't even describe it, to be in another world completely and not let anybody distract you from it until you are out of it. That's what I got from a lot of these Latin American writers. Now it's interesting that I probably would have started writing a lot sooner had I been exposed to Latin American women writers. But by and large I was exposed to the male writers because it was they who were being translated. I was very fascinated by their technique, by their storytelling, by the way they

narrated, by their information. Yet I still didn't think of writing on my own.

J.: **What was the impact of reading *Pedro Páramo* ?**

H.: Once I finished *Pedro Paramo*, that's when I wrote my first short story, "Requiem for the Poor," which is about Chicanos and their parents, the cultural conflicts, and crossing the border from Tijuana. At the time, I took a creative writing course at Cal State L.A. where I wrote this short narrative. That's a little story in which I tried to do a Juan Rulfoesque kind of atmosphere. My professor said, "Submit it to the magazine." Sure, you know I'll submit it. And then I got a first place fiction award.
In *Pedro Páramo*, I admired the ghostlike consciousness he created and the blurry line between reality and phantoms. The form of the narrative and the art of telling a story amazed me most of all. As a reader, I enjoyed putting the pieces of the puzzle together. It was a mystery to me. There is a fine line between realism and magic. I am talking about the magic in curiosity and awareness of the reader's eye who learns to trust.

S.: **When was that?**

H.: This was in 1975 or 76. Still in his class, the professor asked us to write about something that felt personal to me. So I opened up my journal and I picked out a thing that happened to me. And in fact it was almost like a two or three day long monologue, which turned out to be "Birthday." In this story, I experimented with stream of consciousness. I combine the cosmic and the personal. As a writer, I tried to concern myself with how to tell a story as well as the subject matter of abortion and women's bodies. After I submitted this piece, my professor said to me, "You know you have such a unique vision. I have never read anything like this before." I began thinking, well, let me try my hand at writing.

J.: **Speaking of the printed word, I find this rebellious spirit in many of your female characters. How does this relate to your writing process?**

H.: The rebellion in my soul is not apparent to me until I see it in my characters. You know it's interesting because when I was writing *Under the Feet of Jesus* I wrote to Sandra [Cisneros]: "You know, Sandra, I am a grateful woman for many things. But one thing I'm very thankful for are these characters. Though one thinks I gave them life, it is they who have given me life." That's the way I feel. Writing is so basic and so part of my own development as a human being that this is what I want to offer my readers too.

J.: **How did you come up with the idea to do "The Moths" , one of your most famous stories which is published in numerous anthologies?**

H.: The emotion comes from a very famous black and white *Life* magazine photo of a Japanese woman bathing her deformed child. I was overpowered by the love I saw between this mother and her child. While the child looks into space, the mother shows such love and compassion in bathing the child. I felt the strength of bonding, love and trust between the two. I wanted to capture this feeling in the relationship between the grandmother and her grandchild in *The Moths*. I chose the grandmother figure instead of the mother figure because she has more time to take care of the spirituality of the children. The mother figure is too close a generation to relate to her rebellious daughter. This story is a tribute to grandparents and the role they play in our lives. I also show that these people have real lives with complexities. There are no easy solutions.

J.: **This composite of characters in difficult situations is apparent in most of your works. In "The Broken Web," how did you develop these intense characters?**

H.: I was always fascinated by women's stories. The idea for "The Broken Web" was given to me by this woman I knew. I went to the court and investigated her court records. It was an incredible story. Her experience reminded me of the movie, *Dance with a Stranger*. It's an interesting movie because it deals with this woman who works at a bar. She is also very confident about her sexuality. She is a single parent and she is doing well. But then she just falls in love with the wrong guy. They become obsessed with each other. They terrorize each other but then they can't live without each other. They are always drawn back to each other for one reason or another. In our lives, at least in the women that I've talked to, there's always been that occasion at one point in somebody's life, where you have this relationship in which you become obsessed with this person, including myself. Getting back to the story, she ended up killing the guy by shooting him so that she could be released emotionally. But the fascinating part is that she wrote a letter. She was the first woman in England tobe hung, by the way. That's why they wrote a movie about it. But the fascinating part of the letter was that she wrote to his mother to say she loved him, but he just couldn't keep his pants on. He always kept wanting relationships with other women. Very interesting movie.
I see the parallel in "The Broken Web," though I didn't see this woman until years and years later. This woman's husband terrorized her by doing horrible things to her and her children. That's when she just got the rifle not more than ten feet away and pulled the trigger once, twice and then reloaded. Did it again. Then she was tried. She was tried first for homicide but then the story began to unravel the torment. She got secondary manslaughter. She had written a *testimonio* in her *pocho* English of how much she loved her husband, but why she had to do what she did. I was so fascinated by that. I thought, "Oh, shoot! I want to write this in her voice. *Y no lo podía hacer*. I could not do it. Maybe I still will. Because it was so fascinating to have

that kind of voice.

S.: **Why did you choose the daughter's voice**?

H.: Well the daughter is the one who told me about her mother. After I interviewed her mother I got the court transcripts. Because in a way, I felt a certain amount of responsibility to tell about this past nobody knew about. But when the daughter confessed it to me, she had to be very discrete. Then I asked her, "Do you think your Mom would talk to me about this so I could write something on it?" And she said, "Yeah, I think so. Let's talk to her." So I talked to that person. I got the court case first and then I returned to talk to that woman. But even then it was a very delicate balance that I had to take because I was really transgressing a lot of intimate information. But these women were very good about this mixed report. They even told me about some of the things that this man did. Even then the daughter instead of the mother would tell me about some of the things that she could not talk about.

J.: **Was it difficult to find a publisher for *The Moths and Other Stories* at this time considering there were not many established Chicana/Latina writers**?

H.: Why do you think we had such magazines as *XhismeArte*, and *Con Safos*? We just took publications into our own hands. Remember we had a group of Latino writers here in the association. We had people like Luis Rodríguez, *Always Running*, Luis. Luis was able to develop a panel of Latino writers to participate in an American Writers Congress which was held in New York. That was the first major conference with a Latino panel in years by American writers. Luis asked me to participate in the panel with Nick Kanellos whom I was just beginning to know through some of the books by Arte Público.

At the panel, I met Nick Kanellos for the first time. He was screaming and yelling. It's funny because when I share this story with everybody, they all say they have stories of Nick Kanellos. He was very upset because there were not many Latino writers invited, just a handful, a speck such as Rudolfo Anaya, myself, and a few others.

In any event, as we sat together, I leaned over and said "I have all these stories that I've written over the years. Maybe I can put them in a collection." He said, "Yeah, yeah, go ahead. Mail them to me." That was back in 1981. It didn't get published until 1985. It took a long time. At that time it took about two or three years to get a book out. I got the book on the very same day I brought my son Francisco home from the hospital. *Y me habló* Nick's public relation agent to set up a reading. I said that I couldn't because I had just come home from the hospital. "Are you okay?" she asked. "Yeah, I just had a baby." Shortly afterwards Denise's [Chávez] book *The Last of the Menu Girls* came. Denise and I actually did our tour together around Texas. That's how Denise and I got hooked up together.

While they [Cisneros and Chávez] continued to write, my writing still went up and

down, sporadic in many ways. I have always written but I've just done it in short terms. Shortly before the book *The Moths* was published, "The Cariboo Cafe" was not even going to be included. I put it in as a last minute entry because another story, a love story about these two Chicano teachers at Garfield High School, was a weak link in the book.

**J.: "Cariboo Café" is another significant landmark in expressing the concerns of the Latino immigrant experience. How did this idea come about?**

H.: I was living in Vancouver at the time and I had just had Pilar. I became very obsessively involved with the politics of Central America. The *New York Times* did not provide sufficient information concerning Central America. I read a lot more through the Canadian papers. I was thinking, "My God, don't people in the U.S. know what's going on?" I kept a journal, mostly notes. On a personal level, my motherly instinct to protect my child became inherently stronger as well as my rage. For "The Cariboo Cafe" I did background reading. One day I started with this voice, a man's voice and the way he sees these particular people. The story is divided into three sections. I wrote the second section first, the third section second, and then the first section last. Not only was I developing the voice of the man, but I was also creating the story. I wanted readers to become part of the story, to stand there and witness what was going on. I managed to bring the readers in; they are the bystanders at the end of the story looking into the *café* in silence. At the same time, I wanted them to experience the pain of this woman in losing a child senselessly, a fact that was happening left and right in Central America.

That story took me a long time to do, because the story line was very difficult and very painful. At times, I cried as I was writing it. Other times, I even had nightmares about it. I remember one night when I woke up screaming because I saw this man take my child and run away. I was running. I was touching her fingertips. She was reaching out to me. I was running faster. It scared the hell out of me. I got up screaming. I did not know the power of the story or what I was doing but I felt that I needed to do something. I needed to do something fast to recognize the suffering of these women who were very much silenced because people were not covering this type of material in their articles.

I finished the piece in San Francisco. In fact, I had written the piece when Pilar would sleep and then I would get up and work for an hour and then suddenly she would wake up. The pattern would repeat itself. I remember the time I finished it. It was three o'clock in the morning. I was supposed to take a plane at seven o'clock that same morning to go to Long Beach because they had invited me to this Women Writers Conference. I wanted to finish the piece because I had not done anything new in a long time. While Pilar was sitting in my backpack, I was typing away. She eventually fell asleep at about four thirty. I put her back to bed, packed my stuff, and then I was off. I didn't have time to consider the impact that the story had on me until I got to the place where I was supposed to read it.

This was in 1984. There were two hundred women and then we each divided into groups. I did not know at the time that Tillie Olsen was in my audience. As I began reading the story, I literally fell apart. I began sobbing and sobbing because the pain was so close to my heart. It was an incredible experience. I kept crying and couldn't stop. When I finished the story, I felt like such a fool until I looked up. Everyone in the room was crying. People had tears rolling down their eyes. I just could not believe it.

I did not know who Tillie Olsen was physically, but I knew and admired her as a writer. She came up to me, took my hand and said "I'm so glad you're writing this. Nobody has ever written this kind of work. This is so special." So I said, "Thank you, thank you. What's your name?" She said, "Tillie Olsen." Later on that day, in her keynote speech she said, "I have just been to an incredible reading of a story. I think this is what we have to be writing about, the important aspects of life that we have to put down on paper." I decided to send this story to Nick telling him to pull out the other story and put this one in. So that's how "The Cariboo Cafe" got into this book. I'm glad that it did because it's a good story. It's also one that I could never read out publicly. I tried other times but I decided that I better not do it.

J.: **In "Nopalitos," you experiment with another genre, the *testimonio*. It's really moving. What motivated this change?**

H.: Let me tell you. During those crazy times, when I was not actually writing, I was keeping journals. I was reading, basically keeping a time of silence. Those years that passed were really hard for me. When somebody contacted me and asked, "Why don't you write a *testimonio*?" I could not even come up with the time to do it. I was sorry that they wanted me to do it.

During that time I got a call from the Chicano Literary Prize, which I had won a few years back at Irvine. They asked me if I had wanted to be the keynote speaker along with Tomás Rivera. "Are you talking to me?" I asked. "Aren't you Helena María Viramontes?" they asked. I was vacuuming at the time. It was hilarious. I immediately put some thoughts together because I did not have that much time to prepare. I would write sentences on postits, to put here and to put there. Then I just typed it up in four hours. It's good that I did that because that was the basis of "Nopalitos."

This incident is interesting because I did the presentation on Wednesday with Tomás Rivera. By Sunday, he died of a heart attack. It was incredible. The spirits have a way of pointing me out to people and being where I should be. It was so strange that I should be there with him and that we should talk and a few days later he's gone. It was very sad because we were making a date to meet in a couple of weeks.

From taking those notes that I did for "Nopalitos," María [Herrera-Sobek] said that they were very good. But I was pissed off that I did not have enough time to sit down and write.

One day Nancy Sternbach called me to say that she really wanted me to do the *testimonio* for this anthology. I said OK that I would sit down that afternoon, type it up, and work from my notes. While my husband watched the kids, it took me about four hours to put everything together and send it out. The next day I regretted it completely. I said, "Oh! How could I have possibly sent her this! Oh! This is terribly written! What can I say? What can I do?" A couple of days later she calls me back. She says, "Helena, we loved it. We loved it." That was the product of just a few hours work, but it wasn't really. The thoughts and ideas had already been there. There were minimal changes done. I like it a lot. It gives tribute to my mother, that's what it does and the importance of growing up hearing stories.

S.: **Are you working more on "Miss Clairol"? I loved that story. The sympathy you have for that character, Arlene.**

H.: The series of Paris Rats? I would like to continue. I really respect Arlene. It is interesting because I received a lot of flack especially from the outer circles. "*Ay!* Look at the way you are portraying a Chicana! Look, she's stealing lipstick in front of her kids!" I asked "Don't you understand? *No tiene dinero.* Geez. Don't you understand that she is a young woman *también que trabaja* like you would not believe. Yeah, she wants to go out. Yeah, she wants to have a good time. A life!" Anyway, yeah, I have to get back to the series. There's a couple of stories that need to be reworked and there is a couple that need to be written.

S.: **Have you tried experimenting with other genres, theater for example?**

H.: I see myself writing film. I am very interested in developing a script that I did at the Sundance Institute. It deals with a *mexicana* who is known as the first convicted felon in Orange County. *Pobre mujer.* I feel that I have to vindicate her. Her name was Modesta Avila. The only existing picture we have of her is the photo that was taken at San Quentin. This woman owned a little patch of land in 1884, *algo así.* The railroads were invading very fast, Huntington being one of the big railroad magnates. They wanted to draw a straight line, a boundary through California. They wanted to cross her land. At first, she said, "No!" But then she changed her mind and said, "OK, but give me some money." They said, "No!" She ended up going to the courts complaining that they were building on her land and not giving her any kind of compensation. The courts did not pay any attention to her. The story has it (which captured my imagination) that she hung a laundry line across the railroad tracks though the court records say otherwise. She had *calzones* telling them "Fuckers! I'm going to dry my laundry." The courts got so pissed off that they arrested her. They tried her and then she was acquitted. Because she was acquitted, she was tried again until they found her guilty of obstruction of the railroad. She was given three years in San Quentin. She was pregnant at the time. Of course, she died up there. Who knows what happened to her child? I was able to get her picture from a

wonderful woman who did some research on her. I blew it up and she's staring at me everyday. Waiting with such mournful eyes.
So I wrote this piece for the Sundance Institute that I plan to develop and make it into a real great story. It really needs to be told. I am told that some of her family still live. The descendants of the Avila don't talk about her. They say that she is not part of the family or that she is another string of Avila or whatever because she is a convicted criminal. *Pobrecita*, you should see her. She is so *triste*. It was really the railroad magnates who just wanted to get their way. Then it was Orange County that had developed its own county away from Los Angeles and wanted to show that they were good, law abiding citizens. The people in town treated her terribly. They said that she was famous with the "Santa Ana boys all over town," this kind of b.s. Yeah, of course. Basically they were representing her like a lying slut. This woman had a lot of guts, a lot of spunk. So I see myself doing this in film, but there are so many stories that I could develop.

J.: **How did you become involved with the Sundance Institute?**

H.: As you may know, Gabo [Gabriel García Márquez] is a supporter of the Havana Film School. Robert Redford, an admirer of Gabo, was successful in getting him a visa to stay in the USA for this workshop he was putting together in 1989. Gabo agreed to come as long as he could work with five U.S. Latino writers. This was also part of the Latin American exchange program he had set up. That was the first stipulation. So then a big national pool of Latino writers submitted their best works. I did not think I would be nominated because I was not really a film, but a fiction writer and I also knew I was competing against major people. When I was finally accepted, I had to decline the offer at first. They gave me the business about my lacking a "proper" Spanish. Well, I gave them a history about the Chicano Movement and the condition of the working-class Latinos in the U.S. At the time, I was also living in Nuevo México with my kids and I could not just get up and go to the Sundance Institute in Utah. Gabo was so accommodating that it was hilarious. He said that I could bring my kids along and that I could speak in English if I wanted. So now I had no more excuses.
It was an incredible experience. Everyday from 9 am to 1 pm, Gabo instructed us to come in with a storyline that we discussed, pulling and challenging our imagination. Again I was in that literary environment where we exchanged ideas and I became familiar with the literary traditions and concerns of other Latino writers, Cubans, Nuyoricans. I also learned that Gabo was a very loving and sweet man. On the last day, he said that he was so sentimental that he did not know how to say good-bye and he left us with tears in his eyes and a wave of his hand. I was very moved.

S.: **What project are you working on now?**

H.: This novel, for example, is very small. But I leave it open for the characters who are so incredibly rich, so incredibly powerful that it calls for other stories. It is called *Under the Feet of Jesus*. It has taken me a little bit over a year to work on a consistent basis. That is why I'm a bit tired. I still have some expansion. In this work, I wanted to give a tribute to the *Mujer*. I wanted to make her fucking tough. And it works! I've received very, very wonderful responses. An editor at Dutton, a woman from New York told me, "I read this and I read it again. It gave me the sense of being a classic." I was in awe. I would not go that far, but if you want to consider it a classic that's OK with me. I told her that when I write I really have to take care of my characters. These are characters that some people have complete stereotypes about or are completely invisible. They have a right to come unto themselves. They have a right to exist, to show people that they love, to show people that they are strong, to show people that they are responsible, to show that they are responsible for the salad on the plates, for instance. Think about it. This woman, this young little Chicanita, comes out so strong. She is incredible. Her name is Estrella. So I feel really good about it.

J.: **By the way, how did you meet Sandra Cisneros?**

H.: Let me tell you. It was destined that Sandra and I should meet and become really good friends. A friend of mine in East L.A. said, "I just picked up this book *The House on Mango Street*. You got to read it, Helena. I thought of you. You got to read it." So then he sends it to me. I read it in one sitting. And I just think, "God, this is fabulous!" And then I am going to read it a second sitting, when another Chicana friend comes along and I said, "Listen, you got to read this book!" So then she takes it along, right. We start talking, we were already talking about "look how interesting she got the folk tales and she turned them into this and really made them real to us. . ." And that's when my friend says, "Well, let me borrow it because I need to use it for my class."

That very day I go home. I go to my mother's house in East L. A. It's late afternoon. As I am walking in, I see that my mother's mailbox door is open, so I get the mail for her. All of a sudden, there's a letter to Helena María Viramontes. The ribbon was all messed up so half of my name came but on the top it had Cisneros, S. Cisneros on it with an address, San Antonio, The Guadalupe Cultural Center. I looked and I said, "I wonder if this is Sandra Cisneros, the person who wrote *The House on Mango Street*." So then I open it and it was Sandra. She said, " I picked up *Cuentos: Stories by Latinas* edited by Cherríe Moraga. I read your two stories. I think they're wonderful. I want to invite you down to The Guadalupe Cultural Center." So I called her and I said, "You know it's quite ironic. I just finished your book." I did not get the sense at the time of the real importance of the book, which is incredible. It has already sold tons of copies. It's used in fourth grade classes right now all the way up to adult literacy programs and graduate level courses in literature, cultural, women, and sociology courses because it is so textured. It is so leveled in many,

many ways that there is something for everybody. It will be a timeless piece. Pilar at that time was about seven months old. When we went down to San Antonio, Sandra and I hit it off real fast, *hablando, hablando, hablando*. In fact, she gave me a draft of "One Holy Night" [a story in *Woman Hollering Creek*]. After I read it I knew that she was such an incredible writer.

From then on each time that she would be around California, whether I was living up in San Francisco or back in Irvine, she would call me to make sure that we could meet and spend time together. It was always so nice. She would come over to the house in San Francisco and pull me out. "Come with me! So and so invited me over to go have some *pupusas* at this restaurant. Come with me, Helena." And it was funny because I was pregnant in San Francisco with my second son. Then she came to visit me. She had won the Before Columbus Book Award for *The House on Mango Street*. I always remember. I am in the kitchen about to vomit and she would say, "Hey, listen I met so and so at Stanford. He's going to take me to a jazz club. Come with me. Come on. Come on." And I'm like, "Yeah Sandra, right."

For a number of years, Sandra always kept me connected to writers and the aspect of writing. She would always call me. She would always write to me. Even in the long stretch of time when I was just going crazy with the kids, the evaluation of my life and trying to get it all together, she always reminded me that my writing was important. It should be a big priority for me to address. For a time, I actually felt myself in a black hole, and if it wasn't for Sandra who kept me afloat, literally, I would have died in my own frustration. She is one, if not the biggest, supporter of Chicana writers.

J.: **In 1989, I took a course called "Chicana Writers" with Professor Norma Alarcón at U.C. Berkeley. I was amazed because it was the first time I read any fiction by Chicana writers and that's how I was introduced to *The Moths and Other Stories*. Do you consider yourself part of a Chicana literary movement?**

H.: Yes, yes I do. I would also include Sandra Cisneros, Cherríe Moraga, Lorna Dee Cervantes and many others still. What this literary body has in common is that we all come from a specific social situation, a working-class background. We have a social consciousness of the sixties, the Chicano Movement, the Black Movement and the impact that those radical days had on us. We are connected with a concrete historical past.

J.: **In what direction do you see Chicana/Latina writers going?**

H.: We are doing some very, very wonderful work. We are providing a source of new breath in literature. We are giving life to people who have never been in literature before. That was one of the things that the editor had told me. She said, "I had never seen characters just like this. Never." Look at the voice of *The House on Mango Street*. Look at the Don Quijote kind of novel that Ana Castillo wrote. You know

what I mean? We are not just writing stories. It is like we are redefining what literature is to us in many ways. One of the reasons I think we writers have to write essays is that we need to translate our own work. Give it the historical context by which the product was produced. It's all so very new. There is still discussion whether *The House on Mango Street* is a novel, a collection of vignettes, or short stories. There is still that type of problematics with the texts we have created. We have the women creating the works and right behind them you have the literary critics, by and large Chicanas, who are trying to contextualize it. I think the critics complement the writers. They give a bigger understanding to show people the importance of this work. It is not only stories. This is something more, a lot more to the movement.

In terms of historical and literary importance, there is a great need for this. That's where I see it. I think we are doing very exciting work. Now the bigger publishing houses are beginning to open up to us but that means little. We still need the control of our own presses to guarantee that our work will be published, popular or not, profitable or not. And time. We will have more time, space and compensation to work on the stories that keep us alive and well.

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