



***My Purple House -- Color is a Language and a History***  
**by Sandra Cisneros**

(Introduction) In the 1690s, Spain settled the area that is now known as Texas. In 1718, San Antonio was established as a midway point to the missions of east Texas. In 1749, Spain settled the area we now call the Rio Grande Valley. Thus was born the Tejano – a Texan of Mexican heritage.

1. My life is such a telenovela! One day I painted my house tejano colors; the next day, my house is in all the news, cars swarming by, families having their photos taken in front of my purple casita as if it were the Alamo. The neighbors put up an iced-tea stand and made 10 dollars!

2. All this happened because I chose to live where I do. I live in San Antonio because I'm not a minority here. I live in the King William neighborhood because I love old houses. Since my neighborhood is historic, certain code restrictions apply. Any house alteration plans must be approved by the Historic Design and Review Committee. This is to preserve the neighborhood's historic character, and that's fine by me.

3. Because I thought I had permission, I gave the go-ahead to have my house painted colors I considered regional -- but as it turns out, they hadn't been approved. However, I was given the chance to prove them historically appropriate. So I did my research, and what I found is this: We don't exist.

4. My history is made up of a community whose homes were so poor and unimportant as to be considered unworthy of historic preservation. No famous architect designed the houses of the tejanos, and there are no books in the San Antonio Conservation Society library about houses of the working-class community, no photos romanticizing their poverty, no ladies' auxiliary working toward preserving their presence. Their homes are gone; their history is invisible. The few historic homes that survived have access cut off by freeways because city planners did not judge them important.

5. Our history is in the neighborhoods like the famous Laredito barrio, heart of the old tejano community and just a block from City Hall; it proved so "historically valuable," it was demolished and converted into a jail, parking lot and downtown police station, with only the casa of tejano statesman Jose Angel Navarro as evidence Laredito was ever there. Our past is present only in churches or missions glorifying a Spanish colonial past. But I'm not talking about the Spaniards here. My question is, where is the visual record of the tejanos?

6. The issue is bigger than my house. The issue is about historical inclusion. I want to paint my house a traditional color. But I don't think it unreasonable to include the traditions of los tejanos who had a great deal to do with creating the city of San Antonio we know today. Frankly, I don't understand what all the fuss is about. I thought I had painted my house a historic color. Purple is historic to us. It goes back a thousand years or so to the pyramids. It is present in the Nahua codices, book of the Aztecs, as is turquoise. the color I used for my house trim; the former color signifying royalty, the latter, water and rain.

7. But we are a people "sin documentos." We don't have papers. Our books were burned in the conquest, and ever since, we have learned to keep quiet, to keep our history to ourselves, to keep it alive generation to generation by word of mouth, perhaps because we feared it would be taken away from us again. Too late -- it has been taken away. In San Antonio when we say "historic preservation," we don't mean everyone's history, even though the Historic Review office is paid for by everybody's taxes. When they ask me to prove my colors historically appropriate to King William, they don't mean tejano colors. But I am certain tejanos lived in this neighborhood, too.

8. Color is a language. In essence, I am being asked to translate this language. For some who enter my home, these colors need no translation. However, why am I translating to the historical professionals? If they're not visually bilingual, what are they doing holding a historical post in a city with San Antonio's demographics?

9. Color is a story. It tells the history of a people. We don't have beautiful showcase houses that tell the story of the class of people I come from. But our inheritance is our sense of color. It has withstood conquests, plagues, genocide, hatred, defeat. Our colors have survived. That's why you all love fiestas so much, because we know how to have a good time. We know how to laugh. We know a color like bougainvillea pink is important because it will lift your spirits and make your heart pirouette.

10. We have a tradition of bright colors. Dr. Daniel Arreola of Texas A&M University has written that in a survey of 1,065 houses in a Mexican-American district in San Antonio, 50 percent showed evidence of brightly painted exteriors, even if only evidenced in the bright trim. From the Arab influence of elaborate paint exteriors carried over to the Iberian peninsula, as well as to the use of intense pigment in the pre-Colombian structures, our people have always decorated their exterior walls brightly.

11. In some pre-Colombian centers there is not only evidence of a love of color, but a love of vivid visual effects; in Teotihuacan, it is the drama of red contrasted with blue. That passion for color is seen even now in our buildings on both sides of the border. Mango yellow, papaya orange, Frida Kahlo cobalt, Rufino Tamayo periwinkle, rosa mexicana and, yes, even enchilada red. King William architecture has been influenced by European, Greek Revival, Victorian and Neoclassical styles. Why is it so difficult to concede a Mexican influence, especially when so many people of Mexican descent lived in the city? This issue is not about personal taste, but about historical context. It belongs not only to the architecturally elite, but also to los tejanos, as well as the Irish, French, Native American and yes, even the poor. History belongs to us all.

12. My purple house colors are not deemed historically appropriate because "there is no evidence or documentation these colors were ever used in King William." But if the HDRC is true to its word, oral testimonies should count as evidence. I am inviting the community to assist me. I invite Brackenridge High School, especially, which, I'm told, adopted my purple house because it's their school color. So why not an oral history project they could get credit for? Why not a documentation of our ancestors? It's about time we had our history count on paper.

## **“My Purple House” – Comprehension Questions**

1. What is the meaning of “tejano?”
2. What was the importance of San Antonio in 1716?
3. What did Sandra Cisneros do to get her house in the news?
4. Sandra Cisneros was born in Chicago, but she chose to live in San Antonio. Why?
5. Does Sandra prefer new or old houses?
6. When she tried to prove that the color of her house was historically correct, what did she find out?
7. What history did Sandra use to prove that her house was painted a “traditional color?”
8. What did Sandra say the inheritance of the Tejanos is in paragraph 10?

### **Discussion Questions (class discussion)**

9. Do you think Sandra was treated unfairly by the housing group?
10. Do you think organizations have the right to tell people what colors to paint their houses?
11. If you were painting your house, what color would it be and why?

## SANDRA CISNEROS – BIOGRAPHY

Born December 20, 1954 in Chicago, **Sandra Cisneros** is an American novelist, short-story writer, essayist, and poet. Cisneros is one of the first Hispanic-American writers who has achieved commercial success. She is lauded by literary scholars and critics for works which help bring the perspective of Chicana (Mexican-American) women into the mainstream of literary feminism.

Cisneros received her B.A. from Loyola University in 1976 and her M.F.A from the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop in 1978. This workshop marks an important turning point in her career as a writer. Cisneros had periodically written poems and stories while growing up, but it was the frustrations she encountered at the Writer's Workshop that inspired Cisneros' realization that her experiences as a Latina woman were unique and outside the realm of dominant American culture. Thus, Cisneros decided to write about conflicts directly related to her upbringing, including divided cultural loyalties, feelings of alienation, and degradation associated with poverty. These specific cultural and social concerns, coupled with Cisneros' feelings of alienation as a Latina writer, came to life five years later in The House on Mango Street (1983).

In addition to writing, Cisneros has taught at the Latino Youth Alternative High School in Chicago and has been a college recruiter and counselor for minority students at Loyola University of Chicago. She served as literature director for the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center in San Antonio, Texas, and was an artist in residence at the Foundation Michael Karolyi in Vence, France. She has been a guest professor at

California State University, University of California, Berkeley, University of California, Irvine, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor and the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque. Cisneros is also a member of PEN and Mujeres por la Paz, a women's peace group which helps organize.

Cisneros was the only daughter among seven children, and her brothers' attempts to make her assume a traditional female role is reflected in the feminist strains of her writing, glorifying heroines who dream of economic independence and celebrating the "wicked" sexuality of women. The family frequently moved between the United States and Mexico because of her father's homesickness for his native country and his devotion to his mother who lived there. Consequently, Cisneros often felt homeless and displaced. She began to read extensively, finding comfort in such works as Virginia Lee Burton's *The Little House* and Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Today, Cisneros' works give both solace and realistic lessons about feelings which, as a child, she felt were uniquely hers, namely cultural division, loneliness and shame.

A prime example of how Cisneros' writing speak to the experiences of the forgotten or invisible of American society is *The House on Mango Street*. In this work, widely celebrated by critics, teachers, adults and adolescents alike, Cisneros introduces the reader to Esperanza- a poor, Latina adolescent who longs for a room of her own and a house of which she can be proud. Although Cisneros is noted primarily for her fiction, her poetry has also garnered attention. In *My Wicked, Wicked Ways* (1987), Cisneros writes about her native Chicago, her travels in Europe, and, as reflected in the title, sexual guilt resulting from her strict Catholic upbringing. A collection of sixty poems, each of which resemble a short story, the work exemplifies one of Cisneros' acclaimed knack for combining and crossing the boundaries of genre.

Cisneros' other works include *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* (1991), and the poetry collections *Bad Boys* and *Loose Woman* (1994). She has also written a book for juveniles, *Pelitos* (1994). Cisneros has also contributed to numerous periodicals, including *Imagine*, *Contact II*, *Glamour*, *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Village Voice* and *Revista Chicano-Riquena*. These works, short in titles but great in fresh literary ideas and cultural resonance, have garnered Sandra Cisneros wide critical acclaim as well as popular success. By reaching deep into her Chicana-Mexican heritage and articulating sensations of displacement and longing, Sandra Cisneros has created a lasting tribute to those who must conquer similar battles as she, and has thereby left a lasting friend for all who have let their imaginations build a house all their own.