

# THE TEJANO SOUL OF SAN ANTONIO

I'M A MIDWESTERNER, Chicago born and bred. So what am I doing living in Texas long after circumstance and necessity brought me here? Even my family can't understand why I wear pointy boots and a suede cowboy hat. It's not a cowboy hat, it's northern Mexican, but who's listening.

Maybe it's the sense of history here—the sense of story. Maybe it's los Tejanos—the Texans of Mexican descent. Their sense of knowing they belong to the land, no matter what the textbooks say. The sense of belonging, of contributing to this history. Something I never felt in Illinois.

In Texas I just want to sing like Lucha Villa,<sup>1</sup> drive my pickup down I-35 beneath a brilliant sky, clouds big and loose as pajamas. Because believe it or not, I'm home. Closer than I've ever been. Open my lungs and belt out to the prickly pear, "Ay mi querido publico, como les quiero."<sup>2</sup> And cry a little. Every good ranchera singer must cry.

Somewhere between New Braunfels and San Antonio, the landscape and the language change, the hills give out to flat lands, little by little, mile by mile—dust, pecan trees, mesquite, nopalitos. Then Nogalitos. Picoso. Dolorosa. Soledad. Culebra. Zarzamora. The names of San Antonio streets like the names of herbs. Because this is another country. This is the borderland. The beginning of Latin America. A place where two cultures collide, spark,

1. **Lucha Villa:** popular female mariachi singer.  
2. "Ay mi querido publico . . .": "Ah, my beloved public, how I love you all."

spar, bleed, and sometimes create something wonderful.

A nice thing to live in a town where people know how to pronounce your name. Where you can walk down the street and you're not the minority. Where 55.6 percent of a population of 935,933 has a Spanish-language surname. Say what you will, I don't care if it was designated an "All American City," San Antonio is the most Mexican city this side of the Rio Grande. It's the Mexican culture that gives San Antonio its unique flavor. It's not called Saint Anthony, you know. . . .

San Antonio. Beneath the sky that doesn't wear a hat. Urracas—grackles—rowdy and raucous each evening. Chicharras—cicadas—buzzing in the heat. Thunk-thunk of pecans falling dusty from trees. A landscape that matches the one inside me, one foot in this country, one in that. Graceful two-step, howl of an accordion, little gem and jewel, a little sad, a little joyous, that has made me whole. A place where two languages coexist, two cultures side by side. Not simply on street signs and condominiums. Not simply on menus and bags of corn chips. But in the public and private, sacred and profane, common and extraordinary circumstances of that homeland called the heart.

—Sandra Cisneros

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## Vocabulary

**descent** (dē·sent') *n.*: ancestry.

**minority** (mī·nōr'ə·tē) *n.*: small group that differs from the larger, controlling group.

**coexist** (kō'ig·zist') *v.*: live together peacefully.

**profane** (prō·fān') *adj.*: not religious.

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