



VG Interview: Pat Mora

Maria-Antónia Oliver-Rotger (M-A O-R): My first questions have to do with your mentioning Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* right at the very beginning of House of Houses. He refers to spaces as protected spaces of intimacy where memories are stored and preserved in spite of time. Before reading your work I had read a testimonial essay by Sandra Cisneros where she says that Bachelard's metaphor of a house as a space of intimacy could not speak to her at all, because as a child, she actually had never had the intimacy Bachelard was referring to. As I see it, you place more emphasis on positive, spiritual and sensual aspects of the house as an image of privacy and communal life. What influence has Bachelard had on your understanding of space?

Pat Mora (PM): I'm not sure when I first read Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*, such an otherworldly name for me -- Gaston Bachelard. To this woman from the U.S./Mexico border, it sounded like a character in some wonderful French movie. Whenever I did read it, which was probably after 1989 when I moved from El Paso for the first time, I felt a bit swept away, intoxicated by this writer. My husband, Vern Scarborough, is a professor of anthropology and now teaches a course titled "Spatial Archaeology." When I was reading Bachelard and feeling that pitch of pleasure that comes when a writer touches me somehow psychically, I remember thinking that the book might not at all work for Vern, that many readers would be unwilling to fly away with Bachelard and drift a bit on his ideas, but for me the flights were heady and intimate and delicious. This statement is in no way an indictment on those who might be frustrated by the work. What appeals to us as readers is a bit mysterious, and it's many of writings' mysteries that most intrigue me though I'm not interested in solving them but rather in savoring them. It is then, both the physicality of Bachelard, "everything round invites a caress," a sensual physicality; and the psychic movement of the work--an interesting juxtaposition, concrete yet moving—"A tree becomes a nest the moment a great dreamer hides in it," that intrigue me.

1



Interview by:
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VG Interview: Pat Mora

PM (continued): From my husband, I know the name of a few spatial theorists such as Rapoport, Rybczynski and Tuan, but I have not read their work. I'm going to be teaching an undergraduate Honors course at the University of New Mexico. I was able to design the course of my choice and am calling the course "Spirit and Space." Perhaps I will read some spatial theorists in preparing for the course and, of course, I will read Bachelard again. Perhaps like all of us, he's ethnocentric. He assumes houses with garrets, safe houses. He says "asking a child to draw his house is asking him to reveal the deepest dream shelter he has found for his happiness." We know many children world-wide may not have homes at all and that many homes hide violence and abuse. I'm never sure about influences. I don't imagine that I consciously began to think of Bachelard until the revision phase of the book.

M-A O-R: The space of *House of Houses*, as the title and structure of the book suggest to me, is a space made of a lot of spaces and a lot of stories, a space of intimacy, but also a space where there are tensions, conflicts, privacy and communality at the same time. Your narrator defines the house as one full of paradoxes: "green yet in the desert, visible yet private, unique yet organic, old yet new, open yet closed, imagined yet real, a retreat, private yet communal." Do you think you somehow "redefine" Bachelard's idea of space?

PM: I certainly wouldn't think of my work as "redefining Bachelard." My interest is pursuing notions and ideas for books with as little conscious analysis as possible. I try to use my critical faculties for revising the work to come as close as possible to my initial dream for it. I leave the comparisons between my work and that of others to those interested in such exercises. As for paradoxes, I like writing about the complexity of the juxtapositions you were alluding to.

M-A O-R: The structure of your book seems to want to imitate the structure of memory: it is disorderly, not chronological at all; there are leaps back and forth from different times and spaces. On the other hand, you structure your chapters according to the months of the year, the rhythms of nature (highlighted by means of the refrains or proverbs that refer to the seasonal cycles). These rhythms could have some correspondence with people's moods and feelings. Could you expand on what your criteria were for structuring the book with all the materials you had collected about your ancestors?

PM: I began my work on *House of Houses* when I had the good fortune to be living in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and specifically living in a renovated adobe home. The view from my small desk was of a garden. How fortuitous!



VG Interview: Pat Mora

PM (continued): As I sat listening to my relatives on tape and reading and reading some of my aunt's (Ignacia Delgado, "Lobo") notes, I was looking out at a garden and wondering how in the world I was going to organize all the rich material I felt I had. One day the notion of building a house came to me. I've since told audiences that I have to laugh at myself since over and over I'd said to my husband about the material I was entering into my computer, "I feel as if all this great building of material has been dumped at our front door, and every morning I have to walk around it because I don't know what to do with it." Now, you see, I was saying "building material," and in my own mind, I would see stacks of wood and plaster and such, but I didn't hear what I was saying. Another mystery.

M-A O-R: Each title of your chapters is a proverb that refers to seasonal rhythms. Could you comment on that?

PM: I love proverbs. I view them as manifestations of popular wisdom. In this case, I was interested in this kind of sayings because of the structure of the book.

M-A O-R: At the beginning of the book your father says "As the rose is the flower of flowers so this is the house of houses." In *House of Houses* the rose coexists with other flowers in a diverse garden, just as diverse as your "dreamhouse." You also mention other desert plants, herbs with which the Western reader is perhaps not so familiar. Did you intend your father's statement to establish an equivalence between the uniqueness, singularity and special character of the rose as a flower and the particularity and the uniqueness of the imaginary house you are creating or is there anything else you wanted to hint at with this statement?

PM: The quote is not exactly from my father. I saw it in the magazine *Natural History*. One of the joys of being deeply in the writing of a book is that I have a heightened sense of the world, as the U.S. poet Donald Hall has said, "the volume is turned up," but it's the volume of my level of attentiveness, a high state (or I believe the alpha state some call it, or flow). Every detail in the world becomes a possibility for the book: could the name of this flower make a sentence more lush or humorous? Thus, when I saw the rose quote, I thought: ah! ah!. In the same way, when I'm writing, every book I see is a possibility since it might contain some little detail. When I was working on my most recent poetry collection, *Aunt Carmen's Book of Practical Saints*, I had a good excuse for buying every book on the saints that I saw. In writing *House of Houses*, I would browse through books on houses, gardens, deserts.



VG Interview: Pat Mora

Your questions at times assume an intentionality that is not always consciously part of my writing process. For example, did I sit and labor whether to use a rose rather than a lily? Did I ponder the symbolism of each and then make my decision? Not at all! I grew up with roses in the backyard. My father loved them. I grew up Catholic and roses appear often, as you know. Hence, my choice.

M-A O-R: Why did you choose the title?

PM: The title appealed to me because I think that if we're fortunate enough to come from a loving home, it is our "house of houses." I'm now working on a children's book, poems about my family. In one of the poems, I talk about how we each carry our family home with us, under our ribs, so that we can re-enter it when we need it.

M-A O-R: Flowers are fundamental in your particular poetics and here again in this book. You have usually established a cyclic connection between life and death through flowers, and they are symbols of women's budding sexuality, resistance, healing and nurturing powers, as well as of their practical domestic survival abilities. In one of your poems, "Marriage II," the poetic voice calls for a "digging together" into the earth for the "blooms" of the senses, and the "echoes" of the past. In *House of Houses*, you also include a dialogue between yourself as a character and your husband where you entreat him to cultivate the senses because "[he] live[s] in [his] head. " Do you think men and women have a different relationship to natural and gardening spaces? Can they, in your view, "dig together"?

PM: Again, I hadn't consciously thought about it, but perhaps I do associate gardening and cooking with nurturing since usually they are acts of giving to another both sustenance and beauty. I may assume, or want to assume, that men who partake of those activities are nurturing. I hope life doesn't prove me wrong! That would sadden me. Due to socialization, I think men in most societies are freer to be self-centered, and even when they work in what could be nurturing roles--gardening, cooking, childcare, care of the elderly. Perhaps there's a reluctance to be other-centered since that activity isn't valued by others (and maybe particularly by other men). I can cook and garden for display, in other words, or for status, for applause. In my experience, women are better at doing for others. Why? History. We emulate much of what previous generations have done and the experience of motherhood or family nurturing which demands that we set ourselves aside a bit. My hope is that men develop their giving side and that women see the psychological value of bringing their spirit and talents into the world for its betterment while developing the capacity for protecting and nurturing. Selfishness is no virtue.



VG Interview: Pat Mora

M-A O-R: There is a point in which you describe one of your children's astonishment at Lobo's anti-Villa views. Pancho Villa and Zapata have been very romanticized by Chicano activism, especially since the 60s, but they also have become symbols of resistance to capitalism, agribusiness, and unjust expropriations of land, such as the one the Zapatistas in Mexico are denouncing in their land-based movement. How do you explain your daughter Libby's reaction to Lobo's story?

PM: Libby's reaction to Lobo in reference to Pancho Villa is a touch of humor, of course, and it's accurate. This also created the opportunity to illustrate that even close families can have varying political ideologies and that often these can be generational. One of the greatest gifts my parents gave me, and they gave me many, was that they've let me live my own life. They never tried to influence my choices. The dedication is for me the opening of the family arms so that the next generation goes out well-provisioned psychologically we hope, but moves out on their own roads knowing those arms are always there waiting if not physically, emotionally or spiritually.

M-A O-R: How do you think these stories might be useful to present and future generations of people of Mexican and non-Mexican origin that currently live in the United States?

PM: An author never fully understands her motivations. I try to analyze how I want to motivate an audience when I speak, but I don't brood about why I'm writing a particular book. If the subject lures me, I follow and try to have a grand time on the journey. In a recent lecture I said that artists as different as the painter William De Kooning and the Irish poet Eavan Boland agree with Borges' words in his last interview, "What a writer wants to say is the least important thing; the most important is said through him or in spite of him." (Today we might say through him or her.) Among my conscious goals were saving the family stories and doing that as well as I could at that part of my life.

M-A O-R: You have previously defined yourself as a "woman from the border." One of your poetry books is entitled *Borders*. Of course, any space can be a borderland, but I'm interested in your own personal definition of the border, and on how you think this definition has affected your writings.

PM: Of course, we do experience borders of many kinds throughout life, and that experience can be generalized as I'm sure I've done myself in my work. Nevertheless, the border for me, la frontera, is a definite place, the U.S. /Mexico border, that space separated by El Rio Grande, those two tangled countries, the U.S. and Mexico rubbing against one another, the friction of languages, histories, values, economic disparity, attraction and revulsion. That constant tension is the geographical/emotional place from which I come.