

Somewhere between the Colonial and the Postcolonial: An Interview with Gibraltarian Author M. G. Sanchez

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Abstract: Gibraltar, the British territory located at the southernmost tip of the Iberian Peninsula, is frequently in the news but often confuses outsiders with its political and cultural complexity. Is it a colony, or is it self-governing? What is its relationship to its much larger neighbour across the border, Spain? Is there a Gibraltarian way of thinking? In this interview the Gibraltarian writer and novelist M. G. Sanchez—who has spent the last twenty years expounding on the contradictions and idiosyncrasies at the heart of modern-day Gibraltarian identity—discusses borders, Brexit, coloniality, and hybridity, as well as his latest novel, *Gooseman* (2020), and his 2018 travelogue, *Bombay Journal*.

Keywords: Gibraltar, Gibraltarian, M. G. Sanchez, coloniality, hybridity

Gibraltar's best-known writer, M. G. Sanchez, is the author of a dozen books treading different genres. His novel *Jonathan Gallardo* was chosen by the past Booker prize judge Alastair Niven as the outstanding book of 2015, and he was recently granted the Cultural Ambassador Award by the Government of Gibraltar. Gibraltar-born and bred, though based in the United Kingdom for decades, Sanchez is an unwavering explorer of the idiosyncrasies of Gibraltarian identity, and his insights will, I hope, interest readers inhabiting or interested in other border-inflected territories. *Gooseman*, his latest novel, was published in December 2020.

Gibraltar, a seven-square-kilometer sliver of land situated at the southern tip of the Iberian Peninsula, is a territory that resists easy definition. Popularly known as “the Rock,” it was wrested away from the Spanish by the British during the War of the Spanish Succession in 1704 and is currently (in June 2021) separated from the Spanish mainland by a heavily policed, though crossable, border fence. Spaniards see it as a colonial enclave on their doorstep; the British are split between those who regard it as a proud bastion of Britishness and those who see it as an anachronistic encumbrance. The Rock’s residents, the Gibraltarians, take umbrage at the colonial tag but nonetheless continue to display an unwavering devotion to the British “motherland.” Recent reports in the British and Spanish press suggest that the border fence is about to come down, quite possibly dragging the territory away from the British sphere of influence and granting it more autonomy than at any point in the last three hundred years. In this interview, which was carried out via email and WhatsApp exchanges during the COVID-19 confinement in Europe, I discuss with Sanchez coloniality, borders, hybridity, transnationalism, and other issues central to his writing.¹

Mark, thank you for accepting the invitation to be interviewed in spite of the difficulties of the present situation. First of all, the obligatory question: Is Gibraltar a colony or not?

Sanchez: No, to my mind, Gibraltar cannot in all fairness be described as a colony. Gibraltar is economically self-sufficient and sets its own laws, and Gibraltarians are self-governing in all areas apart from foreign policy and defence. Clearly, we are not a sovereign nation, and there are aspects to our thinking which might strike an outsider as colonial, but we are not a colony in the classical sense of the term; we are something in between.

Nevertheless, people on the Rock are very attached to the British Crown and Government, aren't they?

Sanchez: Yes, that is true. People tend to be very pro-British on the Rock. Most folk are sensible about this kind of thing, but there are some who take it to extremes: flying the Union Jack from balconies, toasting

the Queen on her birthday, cheering on Royal Naval warships when they visit the territory—that sort of business.

Why this devotion to all things British in Gibraltar?

Sanchez: Well, let me start by saying that this devotion to Britain is not something new; it has always been there—almost right back to when Gibraltar first became British—and is generated to a large extent by the fact that, living under British rule, Gibraltarians were able to enjoy a much better standard of living than their neighbours just a few miles away in the Spanish hinterland. In fact, one of the things that most strikes the modern reader when looking at nineteenth-century British representations of the Rock is the number of times that British writers mock Gibraltarians for their pro-British affiliations. To give you just one example, there was the Victorian travel writer Lady Emmeline Stuart-Wortley, who in her 1856 book *The Sweet South: Impressions of Spain* makes fun of a “very swarthy youth” from Gibraltar for claiming to be British while speaking a “severely-fractured English, of which accomplishment he seemed very proud” (123). Stuart-Wortley positively revels in describing the darkness of the young man’s skin and “the severe compound fractures” (123) in his speech. But to return to your original question: I’d say that factors like the Spanish dictator General Franco’s anti-Gibraltarian policy through the 1950s and 60s, the Spanish government’s decision to close the Gibraltar-Spain border between 1969 and 1985, as well as recent tensions between the UK and Spain over Gibraltar have made Gibraltarians more devoted to Britain than ever. Gibraltar, let me re-emphasize, has to some extent or other always been pro-British in orientation, but the events of the last fifty or sixty years have triggered a marked escalation in what could be termed patriotic pro-British fervour.

I detect from your last answer that you are not impressed by this increase in patriotic fervour—is that a fair assumption to make?

Sanchez: Well, it’s nothing to do with my being impressed or not; it’s just that I feel that we somehow end up effacing our own uniquely

hybrid Mediterranean identity when we start cheering visiting British warships, wrapping ourselves in Union Jacks, and stridently claiming that we are more British than Marmite or fish and chips. There is much more to Gibraltar than all that patriotic posturing.

This is interesting—the idea of Gibraltar having a hybrid identity. Can you tell us more about it?

Sanchez: Well, as you know people in Gibraltar speak English and Spanish as well as Llanito, a form of Andalusian Spanish infused with borrowings from English and minority Mediterranean languages such as Ligurian and Maltese. Genetically, too, we are a real hotchpotch, our ancestors having come not just from Britain and Spain but also—thanks to different waves of migration—from territories as disparate as Malta, Menorca, Morocco, and India. This hybridity is evident all around you in Gibraltar; it is an inescapable feature of the place. If you take a stroll through Gibraltar's old town, for instance, you will come across locations such as Lynch's Lane, Pezzi's Steps, Fraser's Ramp, Arengo's Palace Lane, Baca's Passage, Abecasis Passage—in other words, places that have been named after English, Genoese, Scottish, Menorcan, Spanish, and Sephardic dignitaries of the past. Similarly, if you take a trip on a local bus, you will invariably hear local kids switching from Spanish to English and back to Spanish again. Even a stroll down Main Street, Gibraltar's principal shopping and commercial avenue, will reveal a gamut of equally striking juxtapositions. Red pillar boxes outside an emblematically Spanish cathedral, for example. Blond-haired, blue-eyed customs officers speaking Spanish. Dark-haired, dark-eyed bobbies conversing in English. Restaurant signs advertising both English dishes (fish and chips) and Spanish ones (*calamares* and *gambas al pil-pil*). This is the Gibraltar that I grew up in and love, a global crossroads where different traditions come together to create a hybrid environment not found anywhere else in the Mediterranean.

I would venture to say you are the most prolific Gibraltarian writer today—and probably also (correct me if I am wrong) of the past. How do you feel

about this? What can you tell us about the literary tradition or traditions that inform your writing?

Sanchez: We've had one or two interesting literary figures in the past, and nowadays we are fortunate in having someone like the poet and short-story writer Humbert Hernandez, but regrettably there has never been what I would describe as a flourishing literary tradition. My influences have always come from abroad—Thomas Bernhard, Knut Hamsun, Joseph Roth, John Fante, Jean Rhys. They were the models who first inspired me to start writing.

I am curious to learn specifically about Gibraltarian writing. What should the world know about it?

Sanchez: Let me answer this question by telling you a little anecdote. In 1966 the well-known British author Anthony Burgess (who had been stationed at Gibraltar during World War II) wrote an article in *The Guardian* in which he poked fun at the Rock's "biscuit-complexioned bobbies" and mocked Gibraltarians' penchant for singing "God Save the Queen" and then speaking to each other in Spanish. In the same article he complained that Gibraltarians knew "nothing of English literature and have not themselves produced either a poet or a novelist." Now, you might think that all this is a bit insulting and derogatory, and yes, you'd be right: that's exactly what it is. But here's the thing: almost without realising, encoded as it is within his diatribe, Burgess inadvertently rehearses *what it means to be Gibraltarian*. Yes, we have "biscuit-complexioned bobbies." And, yes, we have people who might sing songs in English and then start speaking to each other in Spanish. And, yes, we might have red pillar boxes outside Catholic churches, and individuals with English first names and Spanish surnames (and vice versa), and folk who eat fish and chips one day and paella the next, and schoolchildren who baffle outsiders with their code-switching between English and Spanish, and a thousand and one other things that might seem odd to a dyed-in-the-wool Anglo-Saxon reactionary like Burgess but to us are perfectly normal. Gibraltar, you see, is neither a den of

Little Englanders nor a lair of flamenco and bullfighting aficionados. It is a hybrid, an idiosyncratic mix; it's a place that has been cooked up in a cauldron seasoned with different cultural flavours. This, in my opinion, is what makes Gibraltar writing interesting and worth reading—it is the literary equivalent of a box full of surprises.

In the last years, a growing number of international academicians have been engaging with your work, and you have been invited to discuss your books at different European universities. Do you feel that Gibraltarian institutions have granted your work the proper support, given this recognition? How do small places like Gibraltar care for local culture?

Sanchez: International interest in my work has increased steadily over the years, but somehow I've found it difficult to promote my books in Gibraltar itself. I think this is because the Gibraltarian cultural establishment has always been rather ambivalent about local writing. Part of the reason for this, no doubt, is that it is easier to promote and market a rock band or a dancing troupe than something as intangible as a literary corpus, but I think it goes deeper than that. As my friend the Gibraltarian poet Giordano Durante put it in a recent interview, "many people in Gibraltar think that Gibraltarians are incapable of producing anything worthwhile unless it has received some external validation and acknowledgement" (Sanchez and Durante 5). Giordano links this hesitancy to our semi-colonial dependence on Great Britain, which has left us with a deep-seated anxiety about who we are and where we stand in the world. In this respect we are very different, say, from a former British territory like Malta. In Malta they go out of their way to organise workshops and conferences with the express objective of promoting Maltese Anglophone writing abroad. They have, for instance, the Malta Mediterranean Literature Festival, which was specially set up to promote Maltese literature and Maltese writers, both in Malta and abroad. In Gibraltar, by contrast, we sit and wait in the hope that outsiders—specifically, British outsiders—will come and tell us that what we are doing is worthwhile. But this, as Giordano explains, is never going to happen. We should be confident enough to set our own standards, judge

our own output by these standards, and then try to sell our uniqueness to overseas readers.

Would you say that Gibraltarian identity is instantly recognisable? Does it have features (linguistic, sociocultural, or otherwise) that make it differ from what some people might describe as traditional British or Spanish identities?

Sanchez: Absolutely. I can spot a fellow Gibraltarian from almost a mile away! Some time ago, for instance, I was walking down Oxford Street in London when I suddenly heard somebody behind me say, “*Que frio hace, no, Charlie? No dibieron ayé en el televishon que hoy no iva ze tanto frio?*” (“It’s cold, huh, Charlie? Didn’t they say yesterday on television that today was going to be less cold?”) Instantly, without a moment’s hesitation, I knew that the person speaking those words *had* to be a Gibraltarian. The overstretched diphthongs. The voiceless glottal fricatives. The way the English word “television” had been pronounced as “televishon.” Only a fellow Gibraltarian could have come up with such a unique linguistic combination! To quote my friend the American linguist Amanda Gerke, “[t]he choices a speaker makes are a conduit for identity-building[,] . . . and a communal identity is reflected through the language variation itself” (51). I think this applies very well to Gibraltar. And I also think that it is up to Gibraltarian writers and intellectuals to defend these sorts of cultural idiosyncrasies in an increasingly globalized and homogeneous world.

You have authored more than twelve books so far. In which genre do you feel more at ease—short stories? Novels? Autofiction? Diaries?

Sanchez: For me writing has always been a process of exploration and pushing forwards, of looking closely at taboos and breaking down barriers, and part of this comes from experimenting with different genres. I wouldn’t say, though, that I am more comfortable in one genre than another. What I can say is that I am a writer who likes to weave reality (experienced, reported, or even assembled from circumstantial evidence) into the fabric of his writing. I don’t think I could write science fiction,

for instance. I can only work with situations, scenarios, and characters that have at least some connection with the real world. I also, incidentally, feel compelled to write about things that nobody wants to talk about—*poner el dedo en la llaga*, to use the common Spanish expression: look where nobody else wants to look. “What cannot be said must above all not be silenced but written,” Jacques Derrida wrote (194). I’ve tried to follow this dictum as much as possible in my own writing.

I was particularly fascinated by your Bombay Journal, published in 2018. The way you compare gigantic postcolonial India to tiny colonial (or at least semi-colonial) Gibraltar was very interesting. What are your feelings about this diary? What models were you following when composing it?

Sanchez: I wasn’t following any particular model, and actually I have very ambivalent feelings about the journal! In it I talk a lot about the British Empire (its conventions, its use of pageantry and ritual, its forms of architecture) and how the British governed India and their smaller, less important overseas territories. In 2005, when I was thirty-six years old and living in Mumbai, I had what you could describe as a fairly neutral attitude to British imperial history. I believed that a lot of bad things happened under the banner of Empire, yes, but I also thought that the Empire was a force for good in other ways. The trouble is that all these years later I have moved away from this position. Yes, there may have possibly been an altruistic and benevolent side to the British Empire—and, yes, there were men like Francis Younghusband and Richard Francis Burton who were selfless and forward-thinking. But they were just a minor adjunct to the imperial story, not the major counterweights that I thought they were back in 2005. The real truth is that there’s nothing positive or benign about imperialism and colonization. There never has been, and there never will be. Countries control other countries because it is in their own economic interests to do so, not because they are out to do anybody a favour. Yes, the British may have built railways in India, as apologists for colonial rule maintain, but these railways were only built “to transport extracted resources,” as the Indian

politician and journalist Shashi Tharoor has explained, and not for the benefit of the general population. That is why I am not entirely comfortable with some of the sentiments I expressed in my *Bombay Journal*.

It could not be otherwise: we need to broach the issue of language. In an interview in 2016 with the Spanish linguist Elena Seoane, you talked at length about Llanito, the Anglo-Spanish dialect (for want of a better description) spoken in Gibraltar. How do you negotiate Llanito in your writing and what does the inclusion of the dialect say about your intended readership? Are you aiming your texts at a Gibraltarian, British, or wider English-speaking audience?

Sanchez: You have just touched upon one of the greatest challenges I face as a writer! In an ideal world I'd be writing in Llanito, which, as I explained in answer to a previous question, is a form of Andalusian Spanish laced primarily with English words but also including borrowings from other languages such as Maltese and Ligurian. But this is an ideal that is virtually impossible to attain. First, my educational training has been in English. English is the language that I have conducted my studies in and the language I use when expressing myself intellectually. Secondly, Llanito has not been standardised in the way that minority languages like Maltese or Faroese have been standardised. At this moment in time, at least, it is primarily a dialect, a sort of patois. But most importantly of all, a text written purely in Llanito would be understood by very few readers, as there are a limited number of Gibraltarians around and—if that isn't problematic enough—not that many people in Gibraltar *actually read books*. So what does one do under the circumstances? Well, I try to "Gibraltarianise" my texts without making them incomprehensible to the general Anglophone reader—interpolating the odd word or phrase here and there, trying to give them a general Gibraltarian flavour. I suppose the nearest parallel I can think of is a text such as Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*. A knowledge of Spanish would certainly help when reading Anaya's marvellous novel, but it is not strictly necessary either, is it?

The relations between Gibraltar and Spain, as you hinted earlier, have not always been easy: a barbed-wire fence (“La Verja”) separated the two territories for one and a half decades, and, ever since its gates were thrown open to pedestrians in the 1980s, there have been sporadic difficulties for those trying to cross the border. How important is the border to your writing? And what would it mean to you if those reports in the press are correct—and the border fence finally comes down in 2021?

Sanchez: Let me put it this way. Most people’s first memories revolve around something they did with their parents or their siblings. Well, my first memory is standing at the frontier fence with my dad around 1972 or 1973, looking across to the other side and wondering why this rusty fence was there before me. This is how important the border is for me as a writer, and why, at the same time, the border features so strongly in *Solitude House*, *The Escape Artist*, and my other novels. I grew up in the shadow of a closed border; border-consciousness permeated the way I saw, and engaged with, the world. If those reports in the BBC and other news outlets are correct and the border fence will once and for all be torn down, well, it will be just as incredible for me as the removal of the Berlin Wall was for East and West Berliners!

I assume there are different perspectives on either side of the border. Would you like to talk briefly about this? What features would you say have characterized the relationship between the people of Gibraltar and Spain in recent years?

Sanchez: This is a complex question. On one level, Gibraltarians see Spain as Gibraltar’s number one enemy, an overweening goliath across the border waiting to swoop down on them and wrest them away from the British sphere of influence. But at the same time, Spain plays an integral role in our identity-forming process, inasmuch as the very first thing that we tell outsiders is that we are *not* Spanish; in other words, you could argue that we define ourselves almost exclusively in oppositional terms. Also, most Gibraltarians enjoy perfectly fraternal relationships with their neighbours across the border in La Línea de la Concepción, which suggests that their suspicions extend only to the

Spanish government and not to Spaniards themselves. As for how the Spanish see us, my impression is that people either don't care much about Gibraltar or else see it in negative terms, as some sort of thorn in Spain's side. Once or twice over the years I have had Spaniards react very aggressively towards me when they learned that I was from Gibraltar, but the vast majority nonetheless have been fine with me, and I count myself lucky to have good friends in different parts of Spain.

*We are close to the end, yet there is still time to ask you about your latest publication, *Gooseman*, a long novel about which I read in a review: "Gooseman is as compelling a read as it is dark, as dryly humorous as it is shocking in places" (Anderson). Does the novel represent a departure from previous works, or does it build on the themes and ideas explored in your earlier writing?*

Sanchez: *Gooseman* is a novel about many things: it is about growing up in the Gibraltar of the 1980s and 90s; it is about toxic masculinity; it is about physical and imaginary borders; it is about coloniality and the legacies of colonialism; it is about life in contemporary Britain; it is about racism and xenophobia; it is about mental illness; it is about the Brexit mindset; it is about the discrepancy that exists between the mother country that you learn about at school and the mother country that you actually encounter when you go to live in the UK. You could describe it as a Bildungsroman, or, even better, as an inverted Bildungsroman, seeing that in this novel the main character becomes entangled in progressively trickier scrapes. A key moment in the novel comes at around the hundred-page mark when Johann Guzman, the novel's hapless protagonist, realises the extent to which some Gibraltarians struggle with a colonial mindset:

Not long afterwards, I found myself up at Europa Point and looking out over the storm-tossed waters of the Straits. It was raining heavily—one of those violent summer downpours that clog up drains and cause major traffic disruption. A huge marquee had been erected on the grounds of the nearby football

pitch, and its lower extremities were flapping about with the strong easterly wind. Sea-spray was shooting up in frothy columns from the sea, drenching the Datsun's windscreen and leaving big puddles on the middle of the road. I had no idea why the marquee was there, but I got it into my head that it must have been put up for some random British celebrity that nobody outside their hometown had even heard of. This is what we Gibbos are like, I told myself, no longer angry with my dad, but now very agitated on account of my erratic driving. It could be a bit-part player in *EastEnders*, some Geordie lass who reached the quarter-final of *Pop Idol* last year, an ageing hippie who used to play maracas for the Small Faces, a woman who came seventh in the 1986 Commonwealth Games Javelin final. Provided they are British and that they are reasonably well known, we will put them on a pedestal and flatter them to within an inch of their lives. (193)

My last question is about the Brexit process and in particular about its impact on the Gibraltar-Spain border. What are your thoughts on Brexit? How do you think it will affect a territory like Gibraltar? Will it finally make the transition from the colonial to the postcolonial?

Sanchez: Well, Theresa May famously and rather fatuously said in 2017 that “Brexit means Brexit”—didn’t she—but the fact is that nobody knows how Brexit will affect the UK, let alone how it will affect a border territory with a problematic history like Gibraltar. If by a supreme irony of fate, Brexit ends up demolishing that decades-old border fence and endowing Gibraltarians with greater freedom and autonomy, then that can only be good. But we will see. Only time will tell.

Thank you, Mark, for your time and your answers.

Note

- 1 This interview has been revised by Sanchez; additional edits for clarity have been made by *ARIEL*.

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