

THE HOUSE ON MANGO STREET AND CHICANO SPACE

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Being a minority in both caste and class, we moved about anyway on the hem of life, struggling to consolidate our weaknesses and hang on, or to creep singly up into the major folds of the garment.

Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*

«Why don't they write about us?» Nina asked her sister. «Who wants to read about Mexicans? We're not glamorous enough. We just live.» Juanita answered.

Arturo Islas, *The Rain God. A Desert Tale*

From the rat infested apartment in *Native Son* to the rooms «braced in darkness, peopled by roaches and mice» of *The Bluest Eye*,¹ marginality is spatialized as the opposite to the bourgeois representation of home. Marginality starts at home and it seems no coincidence that so called ethnic writers describe marginal spaces in their works. Deprived homes are only one of the aspects of major historical, cultural, and literary dispossessions. Chicanos, like African Americans or Native Americans, occupy that unstable position of those who move around on the hem of life, of the dispossessed and the «nobodyed.» The stages of the Anglo's occupation of Mexican territory are well known: Texans were gradually dispossessed of their lands by the Anglos who migrated illegally into Texas in the 1800s. In 1848 the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo marked the victory of the U. S. over Mexican forces in the U.S.-Mexican War. Mexico gave up what is now Texas, New Mexico, Nevada,

1. Toni Morrison. *The Bluest Eye* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1970), 12.

parts of Colorado, Arizona and Utah. Mexicans were in this way crossed by the border and became what Anzaldúa terms «los atravesados.»² The Anglos celebrated the benevolence of a God who had put an end to «the anarchy and rapine of Mexican misrule» and who had placed these Mexican territories in the hands of the Anglo-American race, which was to redeem «the wilderness of Texas» by its blood and enterprise.³ The fulfilment of this «manifest destiny» contrasted with the dispossession of the Mexicans who were annexed by the conquest, and became a conquered minority in a colonized land. Under American rule they found themselves without land, without a country, and without a voice. Far from being treated as American citizens, they were the subject of racial, political, cultural, and linguistic discrimination. For the Anglos they were «degenerate and degraded Spaniards,» very close to the Africans in their tastes and social instincts.⁴

This estrangement from the land, from culture, history and literature is manifest in contemporary poetry and prose by Chicana writers like Lorna Dee Cervantes (*Emplumada*), Helena María Viramontes («The Cariboo Café»), Pat Mora (*Borders*), Denise Chávez (*Novena Narrativas y Ofrendas Nuevomexicanas*) or Sandra Cisneros (*The House on Mango Street*). The effects of this dispossession appear clearly in the poem «Astro-nomía» by Dee Cervantes, in which the word is broken up to create a translation, «planet not mine,» which is more appropriate to the condition of the characters she presents in her poetry, like streetwise gang members, and, in general, the rejects of society.⁵ The search for this physical, cultural and literary planet-space, this Aztlán or mythic Chicano homeland underlies some works of Chicano literature, as in *Peregrinos de Aztlán*, by Miguel Méndez, *Heart of Aztlán*, by Rudolfo Anaya, and *The Revolt of the Cockroach People*, by Oscar Z. Acosta.⁶ As reinterpreted by Cisneros, this Aztlán or Chicano space is no myth of origins and no ancient homeland of the Aztec people. It is not limited to those territories from Texas to California which were part of Mexico and are now «occupied» by the United States. As critics have suggested, Cisneros' vision of Chicano space comprises the feminist plea for a «room of one's own,» and the creation of an alternative space for the Chicana, not subjected to patriarchal culture, values and boundaries.⁷ Moreover, as we intend to demonstrate, Chicano space in *The House of Mango Street* fashions itself as a *locus* without borders and in constant dialogue with the multiple identities of the Chicano as Anglo-American, Mexican, Spanish and Indian. Far from the deterministic approach

2. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: La Frontera* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 3.

3. William H. Wharton qtd. by Anzaldúa. *Ibid.*, 7.

4. Qtd. in José David Saldívar and Héctor Calderón, eds. *Criticism in the Borderlands: Studies in Chicano Literature, Culture and Ideology*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 168.

5. María Herrera-Sobek, «Introduction.» *Chicana Creativity and Criticism*. Eds. Herrera-Sobek, María & Helena María Viramontes (University of New Mexico Press, 1996), 6.

6. See Alurista, «Myth, Identity and Struggle in Three Chicano Novels.» In *Aztlán: Essays on the Chicano Homeland*. Eds. Rudolfo Anaya and Francisco Lomelí. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989.

7. See Ramón Saldívar, *Chicano Narrative: The Dialectics of Difference* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 183; 186.

of Toni Morrison in *The Bluest Eye*, in which she concludes «this soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit will not bear . . .»⁸ or of Richard Wright in *Native Son*, Sandra Cisneros explores Chicano identity in a bitter-sweet tone to articulate a physical and a literary space which one can claim as his/her own; a site where, as Sherley Ann Williams would say, «one can go and be free.»⁹

Esperanza, the young narrator, sets out the features of this space, as opposed to the bourgeois home and sensibility, at the beginning of the novel: «But the house on Mango Street is not the way they told it at all. It's small and red with tight steps in front and windows so small you'd think they were holding their breath. Bricks are crumbling in places, and the front door is so swollen you have to push hard to get in . . .» (4)¹⁰. Situated in a «bad» barrio Mango Street is, according to this description, no Celebration, no utopian, «minority-free» town designed by Disney. By American –or Disney– standards, the house on Mango Street is no «real» home, just a «realistic» house suitable for a ghetto. There are what Barbara Harlow calls «internal borders» within the barrio: there are isolated women, like Esperanza's great grandmother, Sally or Rafacla, confined by their husbands or fathers to the limits of the house. There are isolated men like Louie's other cousin, who ends up in jail. There are wetbacks and Geraldo, who lived on the margins of American society separated from Chicanos and Americans not only by a linguistic boundary, but by a border of shame. These internal borders are reproduced on a larger scale, as Harlow explains, by the urban planners who «design boundaries within boundaries in an attempt to contain in the ghettos and the barrios their «Third World populations.»¹¹ In this way, the boundary without –the thin line which determines and produces a national subjectivity which defines itself contrastively (the other being what lies beyond the thin line)– is remapped within the country to impose a border line to contain Chicanos.¹² In so doing the U. S. sets up its ideal, finalized and hegemonic self against Mexico; the same self it posits against so called «Third World cultures» within its very limits. Moreover, we could add that the very same planners have made sure that the boundaries –of fear, distrust, and shame– separating the different ghettos are strong enough, as Esperanza says, thus annulling the potentially subversive power of the «third worlds» that inhabit the ghettos: «All brown all around, we are safe. But watch us drive into a neighborhood of another color and our knees go shakity-shake and our car windows get rolled up tight and our eyes look straight» (28). Chicanos, like other so called «minorities,» are contained within the ghetto; their cultures, languages and literatures undergo a similar process of reduction, and are thus ghettoized.

8. Toni Morrison. *The Bluest Eye*. 160.

9. Sherley Ann Williams. *Dessa Rose*. (New York: Berkeley Books, 1986). x.

10. Hereafter all references to Cisneros's novel will be from *The House on Mango Street* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991).

11. Barbara Harlow, «Sites of Struggle: Immigration, Deportation, Prison and Exile.» In *Criticism in the Borderlands*. Eds. Héctor Calderón and José David Saldívar, 161.

12. Cf. Alfred Arteaga. *Chicano Poetics: Heterotexts and Hybridities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 92.

But if these spaces (houses), peoples, languages and literatures are not real for Cisneros' young narrator, what is «real»? What stands for «the real» is the house of the American Dream as made available by T.V.: «And our house would have running water and pipes that worked. And inside it would have real stairs, not hallway stairs, but stairs inside like the houses on T. V.» (4). The «real» is a world of virtual reality, a construction of images designed to create standards of reality. The idea of home goes beyond this description both to indicate the failure of the American Dream-house, and to signify the *locus* of social and economic stability. Cisneros transforms the idea of home, a presumably private sphere, into an ideological, and therefore public space. Far from being a naive image, the bourgeois representation of home is the *locus* of a definite ideology: this American Dream-house is the home of those who are estranged from the community and who have embraced the values, concepts and ideas purveyed by the real mainstream, hegemonic American culture. Behind the delusion of the American Dream-house there is also a major delusion, the United States as the welcoming home without borders which guarantees full citizenship to Mexicans first and Chicanos later.

The discrepancy between what passes for «real» and reality itself makes Esperanza's parents recognize that Mango Street «isn't it» (5); that is, Mango Street is situated in an unstable non-being, or if «it is,» it is only «temporary», as Esperanza's father says. The doubtful ontology of the family's previous apartment on Loomis is confirmed by a nun from Esperanza's school. When she asks emphatically: «You live *there*?» (5), Esperanza confesses she feels like nothing, and has to confirm: «*There*. I live *there*» (5); «*there*,» the adverb, substitutes for the unmentionable «un-apartment.» Although there is some improvement from «*there*» to the house on Mango, this new space, as Barbara Harlow explains, «has failed to actualize the child's aspirations of status and comfort raised by the promise of 'moving,' a promise which is critical to the inherently political ideology of the American Dream.»¹³ This failure of the American Dream is implicit in Cisneros' «Little Miracles, Kept Promises», in which the petitioners' wishes range from «clothes, furniture, shoes, dishes . . . anything that don't eat», «a man who isn't a pain in the nalgas» to a «job with good pay, benefits, and a retirement plan,»¹⁴ and is either dashed or short-lived in a neighborhood in which the statue of Liberty sells cheap (Esperanza buys it for a dime). Perhaps one of the clearest attempts at moving up in American society is the episode of the car of Louie's cousin. The «great big yellow Cadillac» can be seen as a sign of bourgeois status; also as a sign of upward mobility. This easy way out of poverty and marginality proves of no avail, however, as the car crashes into a lamp post when followed by the police, who appear in this narrative as the keepers of social order. Handcuffed, Louie's cousin manages to get out of Mango Street only to end up in another closed space, jail, which awaits Chicanos or Puerto Ricans as an ironic homeland in the United States. «Moving up» in the supposedly dynamic society of the United States translates for

13. Barbara Harlow, «Sites of Struggle ...», 160.

14. Sandra Cisneros. *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 117, 118.

Chicanos as simply «moving» to another location.¹⁵ Deprived of the possibility of moving up in society, Chicanos' basic mobility, like that of African Americans, is «from a smaller ghetto to a larger one»¹⁶ as Martin Luther King, Jr. put it. The absence of finality and fulfilment in the movements of Esperanza's family are further inscribed, as Harlow remarks, within a larger historical pattern, «the longer history of Hispanic immigration, relocation and political displacement in the United States.»¹⁷

The doubtful ontology of the house on Mango Street not only affects the house on the margin but the inhabitants on the margin. Small wonder, then, that in Arturo Islas' *The Rain God* Juanita answers Nina's question «Why don't they write about us?» with the disclaimer «Who wants to read about Mexicans? We're not glamorous enough. We just live.»¹⁸ As expressed by Esperanza «nothings» live in places which are not *it*. Behind this feeling of negation lies a critique of what it means to be an American and to live in America. Those who are not Anglos are immediately reduced to the category of non-being; those houses which do not accommodate to the American Dream-house are simply not *it*. As Chicanos are ghettoized in the U. S. so is their language, literature and culture. Spanish, as it was during the Anglo encroachment in the Southwest, becomes dehistoricized and deliterized. Esperanza's feeling of self-annulment echoes that «peculiar sensation,» as W. E. B. Du Bois would say, of those who always look at themselves through the eyes of others, and measure their souls «by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.»¹⁹ From this feeling of non-being, however, Cisneros, Islas, among many other writers, articulate a sense of being. The psychological conflict or the «dual identity»²⁰ —»double consciousness» in W. E. B. Du Bois' words— of those who cannot fully identify either with Anglo-American values or with Mexican values does not reduce them to nothing, as Gloria Anzaldúa explains: «We are a synergy of two cultures with various degrees of Mexicanness or Angloness. I have so internalized the borderland conflict that sometimes I feel like one cancels out the other and we are zero, nothing, no one. *A veces no soy nada ni nadie. Pero hasta cuando no lo soy, lo soy.*»²¹ In *THMS* Cisneros reveals the meanings of nobodiness and nothingness at the crux of the spatial and cultural borderland. Cisneros explores and presents whatever is negated by the dominant culture to demonstrate that even when Mango Street isn't, *it is*. *THMS* reveals in this way the lives of those who —as seen by the Anglo world— are invisible, have no name, and can claim no space in American life, literature and culture. Those who being neither Mexicans nor Americans are crossed out by the dominant culture

15. See Rodolfo Gonzales, «I have come a long way to nowhere./Unwillingly dragged by that /monstrous, technical/industrial giant called/Progress» in *I Am Joaquín*, and Tomás Rivera's *Y No se lo tragó la tierra* (Texas: Arte Público Press, 1992).

16. «I Have a Dream». In *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King Jr.* Ed. James Melvin Washington (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 218.

17. Barbara Harlow, «Sites of Struggle ...», 161.

18. Arturo Islas. *The Rain God* (Palo Alto: Alexandrian Press), 41.

19. W. E. B. Du Bois. *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Bantam Books, 1989), 3.

20. Gloria Anzaldúa. *Borderlands* 63.

21. Gloria Anzaldúa. *Borderlands*, 63.

and considered «nothing,» are the representatives of a new consciousness, what Anzaldúa terms «the Mestiza consciousness.»²² This Mestiza consciousness breaks down the boundaries of dualistic thinking (i.e. the either Anglo-American or nothing) to explore the creative potential of indeterminacy and hybridity implicit in Chicano identity, language and literature.

In *THMS* hybridity starts with its genre. As Cisneros explains, some of the stories in *THMS* were constructed from poems and hover «in that grey area between two genres.»²³ Half way between the *bildungsroman* and the short story, Cisneros presents to the reader a particular neighborhood and a specific language. The language with which the characters are described is another linguistic borderland in which English is spanicized through the presence of Spanish names and words like *abuelito* or *los espíritus*, and by the «faulty» English grammar of the newcomers such as Lucy's «We come from Texas [. . .] Her was born here, but me I'm Texas» (14) and Mamacita's «*He not here*» and «*No speak English.*» (77)²⁴ Against monolingualism –and the affirmation of a monolingual identity– Cisneros presents an English which, like a master's discourse, is relativized and placed side by side with Spanish, the language of «illegals the United States.»²⁵ Since, as Fanon –among many others– says, «to speak a language is to take on a world, a culture» implied in that language,²⁶ Cisneros transforms English and uses it in a different way in order to make it reflect more accurately the experience of the Chicano. As with colonized subjects, Cisneros needs to coin English in a new way to escape, as Ashcroft (*et al.*) would say, «from the implicit body of assumptions to which English was attached,»²⁷ and allow her to express her sense of «difference.» Against monolingualism, Cisneros –like many other Chicano writers like Arturo Islas, Rolando Hinojosa or Denise Chávez– offers what in Bakhtinian terms can be called a «poliglossia» as she incorporates alternative languages. In this way Cisneros «resists» the Anglo-American suppression of Spanish, the language of the «Third World» within the United States.

One of the signs of this «poliglossia» is Esperanza's name, which, as she explains on the first page, «in English it means hope. In Spanish it means too many words. It means sadness, it means waiting.» Although Esperanza translates as Hope, «hope.» as such lacks the rhythm and cadence implicit in sadness and waiting. Through the coupling of elements within her name, as well as through the name she

22. Gloria Anzaldúa. *Borderlands*, 80.

23. Cisneros qtd. by Julián Olivares. «Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street* and the Poetics of Space.» In *Chicana Creativity and Criticism. New Frontiers in American Literature*. Eds. Helena María Viramontes and María Herrera Sobek (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), 234.

24. See Cisneros and her view of Spanish in «Bien Pretty.» *Woman Hollering Creek* (New York: Vintage, 1991).

25. See Elena María Viramontes, «The Cariboo Cafe.» In *The Moths and Other Stories* (Texas: Arte Público Press, 1995).

26. Frantz Fanon. *Black Skins, White Masks* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1967), 38, 18.

27. Bill Ashcroft, *et al. The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London: Routledge, 1989), 10.

would like to baptize herself under, «Zeze the X.» Esperanza opens a heterogeneous space within her self. Esperanza, as her name suggests, lays no claims to an ideal unified consciousness, and yet, as Renato Rosaldo observes, is going to remain confident of her identity.²⁸ Through the coupling of sadness and waiting and the indeterminacy introduced by the «X» Esperanza hybridizes her own name and speaks with a double voice.

A hybrid language and narrator create a vision of the United States as a failed dream-house, but also Esperanza's «received» Hispanic education and tradition come under scrutiny, especially as symbolized by Esperanza's great grandmother, her namesake. In fact one of Esperanza's major discoveries through the narrative is that there is no space for essentialist heritages. *THMS* offers names which are immediately seized by some of the characters as stable and ideal signifiers. Cathy, «Queen of Cats,» claims to be the great grand cousin of the queen of France. This search for the ancestor in Europe reveals a desperate attempt to leave the borderland and the need to secure a definite and finalized identity –classist and racially pure– in an imaginary France with no place for so called «minorities.» Likewise, Guadalajara, Alicia's homeland, does initially mesmerize Esperanza with the illusion of a stable identity and homeland. GUADALAJARA, stitched on a leather purse, conjures up cultural roots, a point of reference, a homeland to return to far away from the uncertainties of Mango Street. There, the implication runs, the nobodies become somebodies. Without the glamour of Cathy's aristocratic France, Guadalajara implies a way out, an escape from the con-fusion and the hybridity created by the Chicano in the United States. Like «France», «Guadalajara» stands as a fixed signifier, frozen in the stillness of a photograph.

Against such monological options Esperanza finally chooses Mango Street as a home, and a representation of a house which defies the virtual reality of the American Dream-house she described at the beginning of the work. In so doing Esperanza dismantles the optimistic linearity implicit in «moving-up» in U. S. American society. The detailed description of a «real» house Esperanza offers at the beginning of *THMS* turns into a magic realistic and bizarre vision, «a home made of heart» (64), the only house Elenita, the witch, envisions for Esperanza. The idea of a pretty, bourgeois home becomes an elusive, magic-realistic kind of home which defies what is commonly accepted as «the real.» The bourgeois sense of space, with its stark realism dematerializes and becomes a concept with no limits and no borders that undermines the «purist» representations of a home. Esperanza's vision of a home made of heart is communal²⁹ as it incorporates the nobodies. Her ideal space, physical and literary, is inclusive, just as in its very definition it mixes the plausible and the bizarre, as

28. Renato Rosaldo. «Fables of the Fallen Guy.» In *Criticism in the Borderlands: Studies in Chicano Literature, Culture and Ideology*. Eds. Héctor Calderón & José David Saldívar, 85.

29. Ellen McCracken. «Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*: Community-Oriented Introspection and the Demystification of Patriarchal Violence.» *Breaking Boundaries: Latina Writing and Critical Readings*. Eds. A. Horno-Delgado et al. (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1989), 66.

opposed to the exclusive bourgeois house. These houses on hills with trees around them, great big yards and grass growing without fences look inviting, but are made of borders, and those who trespass them are prosecuted, just as those who are lured to the American Dream are rejected and deported. The concept of «border» as a thin line is implicit in their making and it marks the difference between those who live in them and those who stare at them, just as literary boundaries define who is glamorous enough to be written about and who is not; who is writing American literature and who is not. These spaces, physical, cultural and literary, discriminate without the presence of barbed wire as they separate the I from the other, whatever lies beyond their limits. Esperanza's choice of a home shows how *THMS* is not a conversion narrative like Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger of Memory*, which ends up embracing the values implicit in the ideal home: social and economic stability and respectability, and estrangement from his roots.³⁰ Esperanza's choice of a «communal» home shows her resistance against the simulacra which stand for and create what is commonly called the «real.» Her description of the ideal space confirms, moreover, that a home is an ideological space. The home on a hill does not imply freedom, only a quiet acquiescence and commitment to a classist society made of borders.

But if Esperanza reveals the ideological underpinnings of the bourgeois home, she does not do so because she chooses an «ideology-free» home and space. Far from it Esperanza defends her ideology of commitment to the barrio, the only place where in her eyes, one can go and be free. Ideology interlocks with the nature of a home and with the construction of the narrative. If a conversion narrative such as Richard Rodriguez's is based on the rejection of his past (i. e. biological parents, Spanish) and adopts a linear narrative which allows to view the stages of his progress, Cisneros opts for a circular pattern which allows Esperanza to return to Mango Street and the community; in so doing, Cisneros subverts the optimism implicit in the linearity of the American Dream. The novel ends in a circle, not only a literal one, as «Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes» reproduces part of the beginning of the novel, but also because, Esperanza states her will to return: «They will not know I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot out» (110). Her decision to return to Mango Street contrasts sharply with Cathy's desire to go back to an ideal and distant France, and with Marin's return to Mexico. Against these «monologic» decisions to fix an identity elsewhere, Esperanza's choice shows her will to connect herself to a homeland in the process of being created, a borderland with people in constant flux, and a space she can re-create through her stories. In this way Esperanza does not become a solitary observer like Richard Rodriguez in *Hunger of Memory*, but an active participant in the community she helps create and shape. Against assimilation to the glamour of the American Dream and its implied negation of everything that is not Anglo, Esperanza defends the complexity of a hybrid identity, culture and space that elude essentialism and is always in process. Her choice opposes

30. See Raymond A. Paredes, «Autobiography and Ethnic Politics: Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger of Memory*.» In *Multicultural Autobiography: American Lives*. Ed. James Robert Payne. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992, 280-96.

finalization, since finalization, as Alfred Arteaga explains, «terminates dialogue, and dialogue [. . .] is the dominant chicano discursive relation to the world.»³¹ The end of *THMS* rejects finalization as it creates a new temporality for those who, trapped within internal and external boundaries, «cannot out»: the women looking out the window and forbidden to go out, the brazers, her own aunt, Louie's cousin, and those who, in Arturo Islas' words, are not glamorous enough, but just live. All these «discarded» characters find a space as they are inscribed in Esperanza's «house of words.»

But Esperanza dismantles many other boundaries. The home made of heart and words in *THMS* is not circumscribed by either internal or external borders and it does not need to create an «other» in order to define itself. Self and other are present in an inclusive Mestiza consciousness which is spatialized in the urban borderland, the opposite to the bourgeois representation of an exclusive home made of borders. Just as Esperanza deconstructs the bourgeois sense of a home and embraces a space which is inclusive and welcomes the discarded, Cisneros integrates Spanish and English in a discourse that dialogizes both languages to create a linguistic and cultural miscegenation—a real space, physical and literary—, which remains hybrid and heterogeneous. The negations at the beginning of the novel (*Mango Street isn't it*; or Esperanza feeling like nothing), like Anzaldúa's «a veces no soy nada ni nadie,» turn back upon themselves as Esperanza breaks down the polarities implicit in dualistic thinking: the American Dream-house or nothing; Anglo ancestry, culture, language and literature or nothing. In this way, *Mango Street*, with its border culture, its indeterminacy and its «non-being» is reaffirmed.

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31. Alfred Arteaga. *Chicano Poetics*, 99.

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