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**“THE HOUSE I BELONG BUT DO NOT BELONG TO”:
SPACE AND IDENTITY IN SANDRA CISNEROS’ *THE HOUSE ON
MANGO STREET***

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ABSTRACT (English)

Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* (1984) tells the story of Esperanza, a young Latina girl growing up in Chicago, inventing for herself who and what she will become. By means of constructing the notion of "house" and "home", Cisneros will show "how crucial it is for Esperanza to have a physical and metaphorical house of her own dreams" (Betz, 2019, p.32) in order to construct Esperanza's sense of identity and belonging, which will be pivotal for the character's emancipation and empowering. Therefore, this end-of-degree paper focuses on the question of space represented by "house" and "home" in Cisneros' novel, and how the "house" in *The House on Mango Street* is representative of an identity; in other words, how space and identity are dependent upon each other.

Keywords: space, identity, Sandra Cisneros, Chicana literature

RESUM (Català)

The House on Mango Street (1984), la segona obra publicada de Sandra Cisneros, explica la història de l'Esperanza, una jove Latina que creix a la ciutat de Chicago, inventant-se en qui i què es convertirà. Construïnt la noció de "casa" i "llar", Cisneros ens ensenyarà "com de crucial és per l'Esperanza tenir la casa física i metafòrica dels seus somnis"¹ (Betz, 2019, p.32) per tal de construir el sentit d'identitat i pertinença de l'Esperanza, els quals seran essencials per l'emancipació i apoderament de la protagonista. Així, aquest treball se centra en la qüestió de l'espai, representat per la casa i la llar a la novel·la de Cisneros, i en com la "casa" a *The House on Mango Street* és representativa d'una identitat; en altres paraules, com espai i identitat són dependents l'un de l'altre.

Paraules clau: espai, identitat, Sandra Cisneros, literatura Chicana

¹ Traducció del text original de Betz, R. M. (2012). Chicana "Belonging" in Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*. *Rocky Mountain Review*, 66(Special Issue: Border Crossing), 18–33.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Sandra Cisneros

Sandra Cisneros (December 20, 1954) is a writer and artist based in Chicago. The only daughter of a Mexican-American family of seven children, Cisneros wrote her first poem when she was ten years old. Her interest in writing continued through her years in high school, until she graduated with a Bachelor Arts degree in English, and later a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing. She also worked at the Latino Alternative High School, teaching English to students who had dropped out of school. After that, she also worked as a teacher at various universities around the United States, including the University of California Berkeley and the University of New Mexico, among others. *The House on Mango Street*, published in 1984, is Cisneros second published novel of fiction. A year after its publication, the novel was awarded with the American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation. Cisneros is still writing poems, short stories, and novels in both Spanish and English, through which she explores and makes visible Mexican-American culture.

In an interview with Gayle Elliott in 2002, Cisneros talked about the shame she felt when she was in graduate school and was “intimidated when we were talking about houses and I realized I didn’t have a house like my classmates” (p.98). Thankfully, this intimidation she felt did not stop her from writing – on the contrary; it was this particular intimidation what led her to “become angry and write from that place of difference” (Elliott, 2002, p.98). It is here where we find the birth of *The House on Mango Street* (1984). A coming-of-age novel, *The House on Mango Street* tells the story of Esperanza, a Mexican-American girl growing up in Chicago, creating for herself an identity of her own. The concept of the “house” in *The House on Mango Street*, as the title itself suggests, will be of great importance in Cisneros’ novel. By means of constructing the notion of “house” and “home”, Cisneros will show “how crucial it is for Esperanza to have a physical and

metaphorical house of her own dreams” (Betz, 2012, p.32) in order to construct Esperanza’s sense of identity and belonging, which will be pivotal for the character’s process of emancipation and empowering. Therefore, this paper will focus on how a space can be responsible for the construction and development of an identity and it will explore how space and identity are dependent upon each other.

1.2. Chicana Literature

When we use the word “Chicano/a” we understand it as a term making reference to a person of Mexican descent. However, in the 1960’s and 1970’s, the term “Chicano” began to be especially used as a statement by the Mexican-American community in the United States; Mexican-American artists and activists used it as a way of reclaiming and reinventing the history and culture of Mexican-American literature and art (Ferreira, 2011, p. 217). By using the word “Chicano”, they meant to imply a discomfort with the assimilation by the white, heterogeneous, dominant American culture and a purpose and will to embrace their Mexican roots, their heritage and their own cultural identity.

Mexican American feminists played a major role in the coining of the term, that is why the term “Chicano” brought some discomfort to the table, as it this was a concept that erupted in a world that was firmly rooted in a very patriarchal, male-dominated culture. From the beginning of the Chicano movement, feminist activists felt they had to raise their voices and promote a “Chicana” identity; one that defended the Mexican heritage without inherently defending the patriarchal, male-centered culture that characterized the Mexican culture. Gloria Anzaldúa, a name that will be central to this paper, is a referent *of* and *for* Chicana literature. In her hybrid book of

essays and poems written in both English and Spanish, *Borderlands, La Frontera*, she defended a borderland culture. For Anzaldúa, borderlands are spaces where “two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks intimacy” (Anzaldúa, 2007). This borderland culture would later influence many other artists and intellectuals who also found themselves in this same space – Sandra Cisneros among them. Consequently, following Anzaldúa’s line and influenced by her work, Cisneros writes “stories that ignore borders between genres, between written and spoken, between highbrow literature and children’s nursery rhymes, between New York and the imaginary village of Macondo, between the U.S. and Mexico” (Cisneros, 2009, p. xvi-xvii).

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. *Space and Place*

“The way in which space is conceptualized, in intellectual work, in social life, and in political practice, matters” (Massey, 2009) and, as the title indicates, space will indeed matter in *The House on Mango Street* – as well as its conceptualization, which will be crucial to understanding Esperanza’s identity. Space is a product of relations; the connections of our intimate daily lives with the outer world, and the acceptance or refusal of such connections and relations (Massey, 2009). Thus, in the same way that without space there would be no multiplicity of relations and connections, “without multiplicity space itself could not exist” (Massey, 2009, p.17). This multiplicity, inherent to space, is also what gives it malleability; as the product of our on-going world, space is constantly being constructed, changed, made. This malleability relates to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s concepts of striated spaces and smooth spaces. Deleuze and Guattari explain that a striated place is a place of control, with an authoritative voice, it is lineal, it is hierarchical, homogenous, and static. Smooth space, on the other hand, is “indeterminate, movable, insurgent, and inhabited by connections [...], productive of new becomings” (Manzanas & Benito, 2018, p.16). However, Manzanas & Benito (2018) argue that these two spaces cannot be separated; they are “inextricably linked and constantly overlap and mutate” (p.17). Deleuze and Guattari also talk about a nomadic space, a space that “promises the possibility of insurgency, of a life beyond the confines of the law, beyond long-established routes and roots that predetermine mobility” (Manzanas & Benito, 2018, p.6). A nomadic space is a smooth space without patterns or identities; a place where individuals are constantly under construction, being shaped by new experiences. Thus, nomadic space involves “new relays and formations instead of the structure of categories

and boundaries that has dominated mainstream practice” (Bestrom, 2009, p.207). This nomadic space, then, reminds us of Wang’s concept of third space, a space that “represents the relationship between separate entities and the potential for all things to change” (Bestrom, 2009, p.207). Wang’s third space is “ever-changing, open-ended, and unpredictable,” (2007, p.389); it tries to “convey the complexity of intercultural understanding” (Wang, 2007, p.390), containing unity and multiplicity at the same time, and therefore becoming a space working “with dualities but not in any attempt to eliminate conflicting doubles” (Wang, 2007, p.392). Wang’s third space bring us back to Gloria Anzaldúa’s concept of borderlands. For Anzaldúa (2007), borders are those structures “set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them” (p.25). The author explains how between the U.S. and the Mexican territory, there is not only a border; in the “inbetweenness” of these two spaces a third space is created: the borderland. This is a physical and spiritual place, a “vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary” (Anzaldúa, 2007, p.25). In this borderland context, a third space between cultures and social systems is created; a space where “antithetical elements mix, neither to obliterate each other nor to be subsumed by a larger whole, but rather to combine in unique and unexpected ways (Cantú & Hurtado, 2007, p.6).

This hybridity of cultures and social systems, gives perspective to the inhabitants of said space. It transforms them into insiders and outsiders at the same time. This “outsider within” is precisely what gives Chicanas a “sense of self layered complexity” (Cantú & Hurtado, 2007, p.7).

All of the mentioned authors conceptualize space as changing and malleable – which will be crucial for understanding how Cisneros works with the concept of space in *The House on Mango Street*. The concepts of Deleuze’s and Guattari’s nomadic space, Wang’s third space, and Anzaldúa’s borderlands eventually convey the idea of space as a convergence and multiplicity of

relations where different crossroads intertwine and various layers overlap. This is the space where identities can be in a constant state of changing and becoming, and this is the space where Esperanza's identity will be created and developed.

2.2. *House and Home*

To understand the meanings of "house" and "home" in *The House on Mango Street* it is important to look at the various definitions that they might enclose. Examined by many etymologists, the term "home" is one that has shifted its meaning in the course of time. From meaning "village, estate or town" to becoming "the focal point for a form of 'domestic morality' aimed at safeguarding familial property, including estates, women and children" (Mallet, 2004, p.65), "home" becomes a concept far more complex than what it seems to be. Not few are the times when "house" and "home" are used as synonyms. In the late 1970's, the ownership of houses had been increasing for more than two decades, and with the idea of the nuclear family at one of its highs, "home" turned into a marker of not only status but also personal identity. Hence, the concepts of "house" and "home" merged and provided a "sense of place and belonging in an increasingly alienating world" (Mallet, 2004, p.66). For that reason, Mallet (2004) states that dwellings turn into "cultural and historical modes of relating between the people who share spaces" (p.66). Therefore, home turns into a social and spatial system "that represents the fusion of the physical unit or house and the social unit or household" (Mallet, 2004, p.68); a "setting through which basic forms of social relations and social institutions are constituted and reproduced" (Mallet, 2004, p.63). Subsequently, the "home" in *The House on Mango Street* will not only be a spatial but also social system, where the worlds of the physical and the social will fuse. Accordingly, the

complexity of the terms “house” and “home”, and its various layers of meaning, will allow us to conduct a proper study of the binding of space and identity in the novel.

2.3. Identity and Self

As a coming-of-age novel, in *The House on Mango Street* we will follow the development of Esperanza, the narrator and main character of the novel. This development will entail, in turn, the construction of an identity; one that will question the rules and norms of the environment within which it will be forged. Identity can be understood as a “persistent sameness within oneself” and a “persistent sharing of some kind of essential characteristics with others” (Sökerfeld, 1999, p.417). However, in contemporary literature, the concept of identity has undergone a transformation and is no longer characterized by “sameness and unity” but by “difference and plurality” (Sökerfeld, 1999, p.417). As a fluid concept, identity is built, however contradictorily, by various markers. Gender, class, race, culture, religion, sex, and an endless list of categories, are used in our society for categorizing selves and identities – a society in which one has to fit into one category *or* another, but cannot be in two opposed categories at the same time. However, Anzaldúa proposes a space where an identity made out of contradictions and superpositions is possible: this is the space of borderlands. Anzaldúa talks about the concept of borderlands and how a new mestiza consciousness is created in this third space. This mestiza consciousness emerges of a multiple exposure to a wide variety of social structures, worlds, cultures and languages, which leads the new mestiza to develop in a world of ambiguity and contradictions, and to cultivate “the agility to navigate and challenge monocultural and monolingual conceptions of social reality” (Cantú & Hurtado, 2007, p.7). Anzaldúa’s concept will be extremely useful when analyzing and trying to understand Esperanza’s development in *The House on Mango Street*. We will see how

“it is possible to both understand and reject, to love and detest, to be loyal and question, and above all continue to seek enlightenment out of the ambiguity and contradiction of all social existence”
(Cantú & Hurtado, 2007, p.5).

3. SPACE AND IDENTITY IN THE HOUSE ON MANGO STREET

3.1. *The house on and the identity of Mango Street*

The House on Mango Street allows us to follow Esperanza's steps going from being a little girl, scared of the outer world and ashamed of her roots, to being an adult woman ready to face the adversities that the world brings. The novel opens as follows: "We didn't always live on Mango Street." As soon as the first vignette starts, Esperanza tells us that she and her family have lived at least in three different homes: "on Loomis on the third floor", "on Keeler", "Paulina", and before that she can't remember (Cisneros, 2009 p.3). As the text develops, Esperanza describes the precarious conditions in which she and her family have lived all her life. This changing of spaces implicitly sets a context for the reader as it shows the living conditions that "Mexican and other Latin American immigrants have had to face for generations as a result of being subjected to systemic exploitation" (Burcar, 2018, p.30). It can be seen, then, that Esperanza has never had a steady home, which will have a repercussion on her sense and perception of space for the rest of her life. Now that Esperanza and her family have moved to the house on Mango Street, they do not have to "share the yard with the people downstairs, or be careful not to make too much noise, and there isn't a landlord banging on the ceiling with a broom" (Cisneros, 2009, p.3). We can deduce that there has been an improvement in the housing conditions; but even with these improvements, it seems that Esperanza was expecting a different kind of dwelling. Esperanza and her siblings were told that "one day we would move into a house, a real house that would be ours for always so we wouldn't have to move each year" (Cisneros, 2009, p.4); a house that would have "running water", "pipes that worked", "real stairs", "a basement", "three washrooms" (Cisneros, 2009, p.4). This idea of a house that Esperanza has in mind is the image that she and her family have been systemically exposed to: the perfect dream house they have seen so many times on TV.

Esperanza compares this image to the reality of the house on Mango Street; a house “small and red with tight steps in front and windows so small you’d think they were holding their breath. Bricks crumbling in places, and the front door is so swollen you have to push hard to get in” (Cisneros, 2009, p.4). This image of the windows “holding their breath” generates in us a sense of suffocation that will be representative of “Esperanza’s and the rest of the community’s exploitation” (Burcar, 2008, p.31). In the contrast between the “real stairs” and the “ordinary hallway stairs”, the “three washrooms” and the “one washroom”, the “white” house and the “small red” house, the “great big yard” and the “no front yard” and “small yard that looks even smaller between the two buildings on either side”, the “trees around” the house and the “four little elms the city planted by the curb”, in these contrasted descriptions is where the difference between the prototypical white-picketed-fence American dream house that Esperanza has seen so many times on TV and the real-life, crumbling-to-pieces, precarious house on Mango Street becomes obvious. These are, in turn, spaces that can act as representative of an identity, a culture – the American and the Mexican, respectively. Thus, we can clearly see that the physical differences between one house and another, one space and another, are evident. These spaces, representative of the American culture and the Mexican culture respectively, show the major differential gap between one identity and another. It is in this gap, this borderland space and identity, where Esperanza will fight to develop her own identity.

The description of the house on Mango Street is followed by Esperanza’s recalling of an episode she lived when living in Loomis Street, an episode that would mark her for the rest of her life. While Esperanza is playing outside her home, a nun from her school passes by and sees her. Appalled by the precariousness of the building, the nun can’t help but ask “You live *there*?” [...] The way she said it made me feel like nothing. *There*. I lived *there*. I nodded” (Cisneros, 2009,

p.5). Esperanza is so embarrassed by the house where she lives, she cannot even talk. This moment acts as a turning point for Esperanza; this is the moment when she genuinely realizes the precariousness in which she and her family live. From this moment on, Esperanza becomes very conscious of the space she lives in and the connotations of this space; she comprehends that a space can act as a repository for an identity, a physical expression of it. However, the humiliation she felt for the house in Loomis, does not fall far from the one she now feels for the house on Mango Street; an embarrassment, a feeling of suffocation that turns the house on Mango Street and its surroundings into a “nailed, barred, prison-like space” (Burcar, 2018, p.31). The desire to escape this “prison-like”, suffocating space, will be such that, from an early age, Esperanza will show a wish to own a house of her own: “I knew then that I had to have a house. A real house. One I could point to. But this isn’t. The house on Mango Street isn’t” (Cisneros, 2009, p.5). Esperanza longs to escape the space of Mango Street because of the embarrassment that living in a place like this creates in her. According to Betz (2012), this intention to escape Mango Street marks the development of her personal identity (p.28).

One’s name is the most symbolic feature of one’s identity. Esperanza was named after her grandmother, a “wild horse of a woman” (Cisneros, 2009, p. 11) that was forced to marry her husband; a woman that “looked out the window her whole life, the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow” (Cisneros, 2009, p. 11). With these few words, Cisneros already paints a picture of the patriarchal culture in which Esperanza will grow. Esperanza has inherited her grandmothers’ name, but she is certain about one thing: she does not “want to inherit her place by the window” (Cisneros, 2009, p.11). In rejecting her place by the window, a place which, we will see further on, women in her community tend to inherit, she is also rejecting part of her own name, naturally symbolic of her identity. According to Betz (2012), the protagonist attempts to reject

these connections through her disapproval of the Spanish meaning of her name (Cisneros, 2009, p.19). “In English my name means hope. In Spanish it means too many letters. It means sadness, it means waiting” (Cisneros, 2009, p.10). Esperanza contrasts the different connotations of her own name when said in an English-speaking space, as that of school, or when said in a Spanish-speaking space, as that of home. But Esperanza does not like the connotations that it brings in neither of the environments. In English, it means “hope”, but when pronounced, her peers at school say it “funny as if the syllables were made out of tin and hurt the root of your mouth” (Cisneros, 2009, p.11). In Spanish, it means “sadness”, “waiting”, “a muddy color”, “songs like sobbing”, but it is also “made out of a softer material, like silver” (Cisneros, 2009, p.11). This is the first time where Esperanza will clearly experience an inner contradiction with her identity; she finds that her name has some positive and negative connotations in both English and Spanish; however, she does not fully accept her name in neither version of it. In this borderland space where the two cultures and two languages intertwine is where the development of her mestiza consciousness begins. This rejection of the connotations of her Spanish name and the inability to accept the pronunciation of her name in English is what leads Esperanza to create a new name for herself, one that is representative of her own and true identity, “a name more like the real me, the one nobody sees” (Cisneros, 2009, p.11). This creation of a new name is an attempt “to escape poverty and restraint in such as misogynist culture” (Betz, 2012, p.32). Esperanza will develop her identity in this borderland context, the one we can find in the middle of these two merging worlds, these two cultures, these two languages, these two-name pronunciations. And it is precisely this borderland space that will allow Esperanza to “navigate and challenge monocultural and monolingual conceptions of social reality” (Cantú & Hurtado, 2007, p.7).

Before, I defended that the house on Mango Street acts as a repository of an identity, in the same

way in which Esperanza's name is also representative of that same identity. Thus, a parallelism can be drawn between Esperanza's willingness to have a space, a house, of her own and her willingness to invent a new name for herself, her willingness to construct her own identity. In *Mango Street*, Esperanza feels like "A balloon tied to an anchor." (Cisneros, 2009, p.9); she aspires to be set free, but the weight that her community has on her anchors her and entraps her there.

3.2. An intentional escape from a house and an identity

Mango Street figures in the novel as a place representative of an identity, an ambiguous and contradictory space. In this territory, Esperanza will feel protected by her family and community at times, thus linking the meaning of "territory" to that of *terra*; "the land that may sustain and nurture" (Manzanas & Benito, 2018, p.10). However, in most instances, one can see how this same community that "sustains" and "nurtures" her, will also exclude her – her brothers will not talk to her outside the space of the home because "outside they can't be seen talking to girls" (Cisneros, 2009, p.8). Here is where the term "territory" will shift its meaning and adopt the connotation of *terrere*, "the kind of place where terror and violence are routinely exercised" (Manzanas & Benito, 2018, p.10). By means of the language and choice of words that Esperanza uses in the narration of her story, she will shift the smooth space of the home and nurture into a striated space of terror. With this, and as a political statement, Esperanza will create a space of her own, a nonspatial home, a space for her writing, a place free from terror and violence.

In Cisneros' novel, "the image of the house comes to serve primarily as a recurring symbol of women's domestication and entrapment" (Burcar, 2018, p.34). Esperanza learns that in the space where she inhabits, "the Chinese, like the Mexicans, don't like their women strong" (Cisneros, 2009, p.10); she learns that some girls "can't come out" and have to stand "in the

doorway” (Cisneros, 2009, p.23); she learns that “a woman’s place is sleeping so she can wake up early with the tortilla star” (Cisneros, 2009, p.31); that a woman has to “hide behind the sink, beneath the four-clawed tub, under the swollen floorboards nobody fixes, in the corner of your eyes” (Cisneros, 2009, p.31). In all, Esperanza learns that, in Mango Street, the place where a woman belongs is in a passive, hidden, submissive space – “behind”, “beneath”, “under”, “in”. The prepositions used to place women in the space of Mango Street are not chosen in vain; Cisneros shows us the subordination of women to men through the choice of said words. According to Burcar (2018), by confining women to the realm of the domestic, they become constricted and dependent on men, and with this, their freedom and possibility of self-realization become automatically undercut (p.34-35). If, at the beginning, it was the systemic poverty that her family and community were exposed to that lead Esperanza to wish to flee Mango Street, with time it will be the constant oppression and subjugation of women that will make her want to leave this space and create a space of her own elsewhere:

Sally do you sometimes wish you didn’t have to go home? Do you wish your feet would one day keep walking and take you far away from Mango Street, far away and maybe your feet would stop in front of a house, a nice one with flowers and big windows and steps for you to climb up two by two upstairs to where a room is waiting for you. (Cisneros, 2009, p.82)

Esperanza recognizes women’s situation within her community and seeks to move beyond it. It is for this reason that Esperanza takes refuge in her writing; there she can create her own individual, ideal space. She must first observe the paths women in her community took – or were obliged to take – to then distance herself and explore realistic choices to fully establish a promising future for herself. However, in the meantime, Esperanza “achieves a home in the nonhome and the

nonspatial” (Manzanas & Benito, 2018, p.10); in other words, she achieves a home in her imagination, in her writing. By means of telling this story in a safe space of her own, she frees herself from the spatial boundaries that entrap her, she constructs her nonspatial home where she can be safe; a safe haven for her to be and create. Consequently, the moment when her aunt, who listens to her poems, tells her to continue writing acts as a cathartic moment in the novel: “just remember to keep writing, Esperanza. You must keep writing. It will keep you free” (Cisneros, 2009, p.61). This is why she will dream of a room of her own, a house of her own – a space essential for her to develop, because she believes that keeping this image alive is what will set her free from Mango Street. According to Betz (2008), the notions of home and belonging draw Esperanza to identify how crucial it is for her to have a physical and metaphorical house of her own dreams (p.32). Like her writing, this is something that is a matter of utmost urgency; she is left with the imagining of this house as the only way out. In this sense, Esperanza’s utopia – her dream house, her dream space – is born as a way of survival, and “naturally oxymoronic, this utopia needs a new space” (Manzanas & Benito, 2018, p.13), a new house.

Esperanza dreams of a space where she “is no longer weighed down and silenced by the determinants of a patriarchal culture which rests on the negative attitudes and stereotypical behavior of the men in her community towards women” (Burcar, 2018, p.35): “Not a flat. Not an apartment in back. Not a man’s house. Not a daddy’s. A house all my own” (Cisneros, 2009, p.108). This house of her own – a clear reference to Woolf’s room of one’s own – is presented as a “safe haven just by the merit of existing outside the ghetto” (Burcar, 2018, p.35), a place with “Nobody’s garbage to pick after” (Cisneros, 2009, p.108). In aiming to leave Mango Street, Esperanza is making a political statement, interrupting in this way the prevailing social order of her community. Esperanza has become an outsider inside her own community, an outsider of her

own culture; she now plays the role of the “other”. By becoming the other and taking refuge in this otherness, Esperanza has inherently turned into a different self from those of her community. Hence, this moving of spaces, this transition from being an insider to being an outsider, turns into a political statement. As Ferreira (2011) states, “these ways of life acted and enacted between languages, between established ways of life, and between polarities of power serve as practices of liberation” (p.232). In her otherness, in her writing, in her inventing of spaces, she will find the strength to pursue her liberation, leave Mango Street, and construct her own space and identity.

3.3. The acknowledgement of responsibility and the acceptance of not belonging

Regarding the political statement that Esperanza makes in acknowledging her otherness and attempting to leave Mango Street, and given the fact that an allegory can be established between this space and a “state” it can be said that this state, Mango Street, protects her and excludes her at the same time. Manzanas & Benito, argue that:

These instances of relocation illustrate how the state protects at the same time that it excludes and respond to the oxymoronic logic of a dislocating localization. The allegedly smooth spaces mutate into striated spaces that harbor unwanted guests, the raced body that needs to be excluded from the national body. However, nothing is fixed in the anatomy of space, and there may be a constant internal irruption that illustrates the impossibility of closure. (Manzanas & Benito, 2018, p.232)

It is thus, that the allegedly smooth space that would be Esperanza’s home mutates into a striated space when she grows up, observes the injustices committed there and chooses to become different from those in her community. However, “nothing is fixed in the anatomy of space, and there may

be a constant internal irruption that illustrates the impossibility of closure” (Manzanas & Benito, 2018, p.232); in other words, there will not be a closure when it comes to Esperanza and Mango Street, she will not be able to escape this space in the fullest meaning of the word.

Esperanza begins to realize that she will always be entwined with Mango Street when she comes across “the three sisters” – three women who denote some witch-like attitudes: “they came with the wind”, “did not seem to be related to anything but the moon”, “laughter like tin”, “eyes of a cat” (Cisneros, 2009, p.103). These three sisters tell Esperanza that “she’s special” and that “she’ll go very far” (Cisneros, 2009, p.104). They install in Esperanza the strength and the commitment that she will need to both leave and return to Mango Street. “When you leave you must remember to come back for the others. A circle, understand? You will always be Esperanza. You will always be Mango Street. You can’t erase what you know. You can’t forget who you are” (Cisneros, 2009, p.105). Esperanza will not be able to become a full subject until she learns to have some agency and responsibility over her community. In a conversation with her friend Alicia, Esperanza tells her that when she leaves Mango Street, she will not come back “until somebody makes it better” (Cisneros, 2009, p.107) and it is then that she realizes that nobody is going to make it better, because the Chicana community of Mango Street, like so many other poor, segregated, racialized communities in the U.S., is a victim of institutional racialization. Therefore, if the community cannot rely on any institutions to improve their situation and their ways of living, it will be up to those dwelling there to make the community a better place. Esperanza will eventually realize that she needs to be the voice of this community “For the ones who cannot out” (Cisneros, 2009, p.110). According to Manzanas & Benito (2018) “the nomadic hero becomes inexorably engaged in striated spaces, for he [or she] is the representative of the same mapping he is trying to leave behind” (p.7). Thereby, Esperanza, as the nomadic hero of this story and as the

representative of her community, will become inherently engaged in the place she is “trying to leave behind”: Mango Street. It is here when Esperanza will begin to feel responsible for the improvement of her community, and it is in this same acknowledgement and responsibility for her community where she will find her own agency; where she will be able to accept her legacy in order to become a full subject.

“I like to tell stories. I am going to tell you a story about a girl who didn’t want to belong” (Cisneros, 2009, p.109). In Esperanza’s liking of telling stories, the nonspatial place of writing can be found again; as well as the refusal to belong to the patriarchal, submissive space of Mango Street. However, now, instead of remembering “moving a lot” (Cisneros, 2009, p.3) as she does when the story starts, here, in this last and final vignette, what she remembers most is “Mango Street, sad red house, the house I belong but do not belong to” (Cisneros, 2009, p.210). The importance that Esperanza has found in the creative space of writing can be found again: “I put it down on paper and then the ghost does not ache so much. I write it down and Mango says goodbye sometimes. She does not hold me with both arms. She sets me free” (Cisneros, 2009, p.110). Acting as the recipient for her Mexican heritage, the house on Mango Street is female (“she”); now that Esperanza has begun to accept her roots, this space is not something that drags her down or that suffocates her – as seen earlier in the novel – neither is it a place that holds her “with both arms”, but, on the contrary, something that sets her free. Now that she has learned to accept her roots, to accept her culture, to learn from the mistakes that are made in her community, now that she acknowledges where she comes from, and does no longer feel ashamed about it, now that she accepts herself, her culture and identity, now she is ready to leave. She knows that she does not belong there, that her identity cannot be fully developed there, but she is now mentally mature enough to prepare for it and accept it; however, this acceptance does not stop her from attempting

to leave Mango Street: “One day I will pack my bags of books and paper. One day I will say goodbye to Mango. I am too strong for her to keep me here forever. One day I will go away” (Cisneros, 2009, p.110). Esperanza now knows that, in due time, she will leave Mango Street, that she has the strength needed to do so. However, she then also mentions that “They will not know I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot out” (Cisneros, 2009, p.110). Now that she has learned to have agency over her own community, she knows that the development of her community depends on the ones that belong there, even if they do not belong there. According to Cisneros’ words, “we are our ancestors, including the ones we don’t like” (Elliott, 2002, p.104); in the same way, it could be said that we are our ancestors’ places and spaces, including the ones we do not like, or feel that we do not belong to. It is important to know their story, the heritage it brings with them, in order for us to decide whether we belong in said spaces, to learn if we conform with said identities; and if not, to be able to acknowledge and accept them in order for us to develop our own. Therefore, at the end of *The House on Mango Street* we see that Esperanza’s identity will only be fully complete when she learns to accept her roots, her heritage, her culture, all embodied by one house, one community, one space: the house on Mango Street.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Cisneros' vignettes have allowed me to have an insight into the Chicana community of Mango Street, and obviously not only into this specific and fictional community, but also into the many Mexican-American communities that exist in the United States. From the perspective of a little girl, and through her words, Cisneros talks about the gender issues, poverty issues and racial issues that these communities are exposed to on a daily basis and makes the reader slightly understand these topics. Through the construction of space in the novel —the space of the house on Mango Street, the space of the Chicana community, the space of writing Esperanza chooses to take refuge in, the spaces she dreams of fleeing to— Cisneros lets the reader realize how important space is for the construction and development of one's identity. That is why the way spaces are described is so important, because on it depends the development of people's identities.

On a personal note, I would like to add that not until each and every single one of us raise our voices and talk about these topics, the racialization, discrimination and repression that still goes on, not only in the United States, but world widely, the racism, classism and sexism that we as a human race are exposed to daily will not end. I believe that novels like *The House on Mango Street* are important, that to talk about the topics Cisneros chooses to talk about is important. Novels like this, authors like this, let all of us, privileged or non-privileged, have an insight into different lives and communities that we would not see if it were not for these books. Esperanza's story should make us all realize that now more than ever it is urgent that we listen and try to understand, by whatever means, the pain, repression and submission that Mexican-American – and let me also say, although differently and in other ways and levels, African-American – communities still experience today, in 2020, on a daily basis, in the United States. Now more than ever it is important that we talk about these topics, these injustices. The only way out is for all of

us to come together, to try to understand each other, to try and listen, to try and empathize with others. It is imperative that we learn to have responsibility and be open to being educated. It is imperative that we have conversations, with books and authors, friends and family, about said topics, even if it leads to and generates uncomfortable debates and situations. It is imperative that we read and listen to stories and voices that have been muted, silenced and quieted for so long. Because it is in this space of willingness to listen and understand, of willingness to read and acknowledge, where the identity of the empathic person develops. And I believe that not until we, as a human race, are capable of building safe spaces, physically, psychologically and metaphorically, will we be able to develop healthy, open-minded, empathic identities. As Anzaldúa wrote: “*En unas pocas centurias*, the future will belong to the *mestiza*. Because the future depends on the breaking down of paradigms; it depends on the straddling of two or more cultures” (Anzaldúa, 2007, p.102). In a world full of borders, and therefore a world full of borderlands, what we need now, more than ever, is to “live sin fronteras/be a crossroads” (Anzaldúa, 2007, p.217).

5. REFERENCES

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