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Rethinking the Historical Lens: A Case for Relational Identity in  
Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*

by

Annalisa Waite Wiggins

A thesis submitted to the faculty of

Brigham Young University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of English

Brigham Young University

December 2008

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE COMMITTEE APPROVAL

of a thesis submitted by  
Annalisa Waite Wiggins

This thesis has been read by each member of the following graduate committee and by majority vote has been found to be satisfactory.

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As chair of the candidate's graduate committee, I have read the thesis of Annalisa Waite Wiggins in its final form and have found that (1) its format, citations, and bibliographical style are consistent and acceptable and fulfill university and department style requirements; (2) its illustrative materials including figures, tables, and charts are in place; and (3) the final manuscript is satisfactory to the graduate committee and is ready for submission to the university library.

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## ABSTRACT

Rethinking the Historical Lens: A Case for Relational Identity in

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by Annalisa Waite Wiggins

Department of English

Master of Arts

My thesis proposes a theory of relational identity development in Chicana literature. Gloria Anzaldua's *Borderlands/La Frontera* offers an interpretation of Chicana identity that is largely based on historical models and mythology, which many scholars have found useful in interpreting Chicana literature. However, I contend that another text, Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*, not only illustrates the need for an alternative paradigm for considering identity development, but in fact offers such an alternative. I argue that Cisneros shows a model for relational identity development, wherein the individual develops in the context of her community and is not determined solely by elements of myth or genealogy.

In questioning the historical paradigm of identity development, I examine three key aspects associated with Chicana identity development: gender, home, and language.

Employing the theories of Édouard Glissant, I discuss how individual identity development is better understood in terms of relationships and experience rather than historical models. For Chicanas, the roles of women have largely been interpreted as predetermined, set by the mythic figures La Malinche and La Virgen de Guadalupe. However, Cisneros's work shows that this historical tradition is less fruitful in understanding identity than recognizing individuals' experience in context of their relationships. With this communal understanding established, I question the common associations of home and Chicana identity. I argue that Cisneros challenges our very concept of home as she engages and counters the notions of theorist Gaston Bachelard. The idea of a house, for her, is metaphorical, a space of communal belonging rather than a physical structure to separate individuals. Finally, I consider how both spoken and written language contribute to relational identity development. I argue that Cisneros's use of language demonstrates that not only does language provide the means for development within a community, but also the means for creation within that society. The theoretical implications of such a relational identity construct are not only an expansion of what is entailed in Chicana identity, but an invitation for broadening the community of theoretical discussion surrounding Chicana literature.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to the many people who have contributed to my work on this project: several outstanding faculty members at Brigham Young University, for their enlightened discussion of literature and the world; my readers, George Handley and Dennis Cutchins, for their insight and encouragement; and my committee chair, Trent Hickman, for his instruction, guidance, and critique to help me hone my argument. I would also like to thank my family members for encouraging me in this endeavor, particularly my parents, for their unwavering support; my sister, Mindy Waite, for her editorial skills and assistance; and my husband, Brady, for being my principal sounding-board, editor, critic, and support, in spite of his own busy schedule and graduate work.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Abstract .....  | iv  |
| Acknowledgements .....  | vi  |
| Introduction: The Romantic Survivor vs. Relational Identity .....             | 1   |
| Relational Gender Identity: Transcending the Virgin/Whore Dichotomy.....      | 16  |
| The House of Mango Street: Cisneros, Bachelard, and the Community House ..... | 47  |
| Chicana Aesthetics: Language and Writing as a Metaphor for Identity.....      | 71  |
| Conclusion: Dedication and Wailing Rights.....                                | 93  |
| Works Cited .....   | 102 |

## INTRODUCTION:

## THE ROMANTIC SURVIVOR VS. RELATIONAL IDENTITY

*Time* magazine declared the 1980s to be the “Decade of the Hispanic” (quoted in J. González 194). Much of the intense political activism of the previous decades had settled and the Mexican American community was gaining political and social success. Mexican American officials had been elected to office in some parts of the country, and bilingual education was being put into experimental use. The community also boasted literary success, with Mexican American authors such as Richard Rodriguez and Gary Soto achieving notoriety in the mainstream literary market. Such an atmosphere seemed more than welcoming for what Robin Ganz calls “the literary explosion” that took place among female Mexican American writers in the 1980s (19). Previously “excluded from both the mainstream and from ethnic centers of power,” Ganz notes that, “the Chicana had been an outsider twice over” (19). But as the Mexican American community gained stronger footing in the larger American society, women gained more prominence in the Mexican American community. At a time when readers and scholars seemed to become progressively interested in the movement of the other, conditions were ripe for “breaking the silence that had run long and deep”; “the 1980s signaled the emergence of voices of power and pain which many previous decades of racism, poverty and gender marginalization had suppressed” (19). Chicana identity became a subject of interest and discussion in literature.

One notable work coming forward to stake a claim in the Chicana identity movement is Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Published in 1987, the book becomes a sort of standard in what has come to be known as

“borderland theory.” It is in the borderland, Anzaldúa argues, that Chicana identity is developed. This borderland is not as easily decipherable as lines on a map might suggest, though. Whereas “a border is a dividing line” between “safe and unsafe,” existing “to distinguish *us* from *them*,” Anzaldúa’s definition of borderland is more complex. “A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary” (25). This unnatural boundary for Anzaldúa, the U.S./Mexican border, is the result of violent collisions of history and culture, of first world and third world. Anzaldúa begins her project of identity exploration by reviewing the history that led to such a border being constructed, starting with the Aztec migration from the mythic homeland of Aztlán, working her way through the invasion of the conquistadors, past several generations of intermarriage (the beginnings of *la Raza*) and wars, remembering the Alamo, and ending with the modern-day dilemma of the re-migration back to Aztlán, or border crossings into the American Southwest. She revisits the beliefs developed within and imposed upon the culture over the centuries, religiously and otherwise, to show their repressive effect on women: “The dark-skinned woman has been silenced, gagged, caged, bound into servitude [. . .] she has been a slave, a force of cheap labor, colonized by the Spaniard, the Anglo, by her own people” (44-45). Looking at the historical traditions available to women in Mexican and Mexican American cultures (the three options she cites are La Virgen de Guadalupe, La Malinche, or La Llorona), Anzaldúa digs further into her culture’s history to the Aztec serpent goddess *Coatlicue*. From this and other female serpent figures, Anzaldúa forms a re-imagined mythology for herself and her Chicana sisters. It is in this context that she claims and recovers Chicana identity, bringing new light to issues surrounding identity development like language,

sexuality, and artistic expression. She ends her essays with a call and instruction to Chicanas to take their place at the crossroads (her alternative to borders) and rise to the potential their unique position gives them. She foretells, “*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. By creating a new mythos [. . .] *la mestiza* creates a new consciousness” (102). Through this new mythos, *mestizas*—women of mixed blood, of indigenous and European ancestry, including Chicanas—come to claim their identity: “We are the people who leap in the dark, we are the people on the knees of the gods. In our very flesh, (r)evolution works out the clash of cultures” (103).

Anzaldúa isn’t alone in her gaze to the past for liberation. Numerous works of fiction, poetry, and nonfiction essays turn to the re-envisioned history Anzaldúa discusses in her work for both inspiration and subject matter. Cherrie Moraga, Anzaldúa’s coeditor for the revolutionary *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981), actually precedes Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* with her own collection of multi-generic pieces entitled *Loving in the War Years* (1983). Reappropriating the legend of Doña Marina (La Malinche), Moraga argues that repression of women sexually is repression of women politically. Rather than allowing women to be defined by men, as they had been historically, Moraga calls for women to challenge the traditional roles of women in Chicano culture, to stand apart from men. She calls for them to embrace Malinche, not the maligned victim of a sexist history, but the spiritual survivor and guardian of Chicana identity.

Picking up this thread of Chicana feminism is Ana Castillo’s *Massacre of the Dreamers*. Originally written as a collection of essays for her PhD dissertation and later

published in book form in 1994, the work begins with an account of the slaughter of seers (dreamers) as ordered by Moctezuma when they prophesied of the impending destruction of the Aztec empire. For Castillo, contemporary Chicana writers and poets are the dreamers' counterparts, since they provide vision and interpretation in a confused world. Concerned with Xicanisma, a mixture of feminism and mythology, Castillo reconstructs the historical to enlighten her understanding of the present, looking at cultural roots of machismo, religious and mythic traditions of female gender stereotypes, and the subsequent repression of female sexuality. She comments that Xicanisma arises "in the acknowledgement of the historical crossroad where the creative power of woman became deliberately appropriated by male society. And woman in the flesh, thereafter, was subordinated." History weighs heavily on Chicanas because, as Castillo continues, "It is our task as Xicanistas, to not only reclaim our indigenismo—but also to reinsert the forgotten feminism into our consciousness" (12). It is in the revival of "authentic" history that Chicana identity and liberation reside.

This reconfiguration of history is an important move for Chicana writers in developing identity in a Western society. As Rosaura Sánchez explains, "This refashioned *indigenismo* in Anzaldúa [. . .] and in other recent Chicano and Chicana publications becomes the shaping discourse that enables the writers to counter Western rationalism and, more specifically, white Anglo-Saxon Protestant traditions, while at the same time positioning writers as the bearers of authenticity" (358). In other words, the "appropriation and manipulation of myths from an indigenous past" (357) is all part of "an attempt to construct a counterculture to modernity" (358). Chicana writers are able to

find voice and identity through the very means of their former repression—the writing of history.

A concern arises, however, in such a heavy reliance on history for identity construction. As Sánchez also states, “In appropriating and disassociating these myths from the specific history of the indigenous population that led to their production, Chicano/Chicana literary and cultural producers in effect reduce them to exotic discourses of *indigenismo*” (357-58). The importance of history in an individual’s identity cannot be denied. But the tendency to exoticize, as Sánchez notes, can be dangerous. Linked with the exotic, we can see the tendency to romanticize identity. As already noted in Anzaldúa’s description, Chicanas are those “who leap in the dark,” who sit “on the knees of the gods.” Such romantic notions of Chicana identity are difficult to decipher. In what ways does skin “[work] out the clash of cultures” (103)? Of course Anzaldúa is speaking figuratively in these instances. However, drawing realistic notions of identity from such romantically historicized images can be a challenge. The romanticized Chicana left in the wake of Anzaldúa’s work may be less achievable than fans and literary critics have previously believed.

Without denying the importance of history in identity development, it becomes necessary to not only re-examine the dominant scholarship in the Chicana identity conversation, but perhaps reconsider a text previously overlooked for its theoretical contributions. I contend that another voice in the burgeoning dialogue of Chicana identity theory of the 1980s, Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street*, contributes what is perhaps lacking among borderland theorists. Though not grappling with issues of identity politics in as blunt or forceful a way, Cisneros’s deceptively simple text illustrates a

paradigm for Chicana identity that rejects the romanticized, historical models of some of her contemporaries. While the history of the Mexican American people is still relevant to Cisneros's protagonist's development, what becomes more relevant is the community around Esperanza. As we watch her deftly navigate her identity, we see a rejection of the traditional borderland notion of the tragic, romanticized Chicana, and the creation of a relational identity model.

To be fair, I should note that the romanticizing of the re-envisioned Chicana is perhaps less a problem of works such as Anzaldúa's, and more a fault of the scholarship surrounding such works. *Borderlands/La Frontera* is more than a rewrite of history; it is a manifesto on language rights, an exploration of female sexuality, and the elocution of mythic religious worship, among other things. While scholars have discussed other qualities of *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa's reinterpretation of history became the object of scholars' adulation. Upon the book's publication in 1987, Margaret Randall praised the book because it "goes much farther than most in its attempt to merge histories of both physical and spiritual time and place," which becomes Anzaldúa's project as she "comes to terms with herself" as a Chicana (8). In 1992, Antonia Castaneda grouped Anzaldúa with other important female historiographers who "found their historical and cultural origins in indigenous, native worlds that antedated European imperialism, and they began to reclaim those origins which had been devalued and suppressed in Euro-American institutions and society" (505). She further stated that Anzaldúa, "helps to offset the dearth of historical studies about women of color, at least for the twentieth century" (522). In 2000, Erika Aigner-Varoz commended Anzaldúa for "construct[ing] a mestiza consciousness as a dynamic 'new mythos' capable of breaking down dualistic

hegemonic paradigms” (47) by examining history through the lens of female, Indian, Mexican, lesbian, etc. Aigner-Varoz further sets Anzaldúa up as salvation for Chicanas, as her work becomes the “attempt to create an all-inclusive, symbiotic metaphor that initiates redemption” (60). By 2004, the year of Anzaldúa’s death, her place as historian was set. Celebrating *Borderlands/La Frontera*’s accomplishment across “an array of disciplinary demarcations” (596), Cristina Beltran noted Anzaldúa’s “radical move of feminist theorizing” in articulating a “Chicana feminist identity” (596). Beltran applauded Anzaldúa for challenging the myths set by “founding Chicano fathers” by constructing “a set of pre-Cortesian feminist mythic narratives” (597).

While none of the previously mentioned scholars were incorrect in noting Anzaldúa’s revolutionary retelling of history, a concern arises in the trend illustrated above. Rather than looking at history as the tool for articulating her theory of identity, some scholars tend to narrow the scope of Anzaldúa’s work to historical reconfiguration; revised history is not just the *paradigm* of the work, but instead becomes its *objective*. This reduction has led not only to underestimation at times of Anzaldúa’s own project, but the tendency toward white paternalism in the scholarship surrounding it. On concluding her first reading of the book, Randall commented, “I will walk through again and again, discovering with each passage further demands upon my own cultural myopia, racism, conformity” (9) (note here the author’s emphasis on discovering herself, rather coming to understanding the complexity of Chicana identity). Further, the temptation to romanticize Anzaldúa and her historical model of the *mestiza* became difficult to resist, as already noted in Aigner-Varoz’s discussion of Anzaldúa’s metaphorical “redemption.” The inclinations to reduce and romanticize seem to go hand in hand.

Perhaps a single book so regularly narrowed in its interpretation would not be so problematic were it not for the wide application of Anzaldúa's seminal text in study of the Chicana identity. Anzaldúa's metaphor of the borderland is everywhere in Chicana/o literary analysis and criticism. Dean Franco comments, "For Chicanos, the border has recently become the critical trope par excellence" (107), further noting that "border theory is dependent on a nuanced, dialectical reading of history" (119). Surely such a work as Anzaldúa's deserves the attention of scholars, and the study of its theories in relation to other texts is relevant. However, so much emphasis on rewriting history leads to the conclusion that the contemporary Chicana's identity must necessarily be a product of her history, something with which she must "come to terms," and which she must therefore revise and overcome as well. The historical reduction of Anzaldúa's work becomes the theoretical lens through which other Chicana writers, characters, and texts are evaluated.

Indeed, Cisneros's work has often been interpreted through this historic borderland paradigm, even though *The House on Mango Street* pre-dates Anzaldúa's text in publication (it was originally published in 1984) and the book is not even set in the geographical confines Anzaldúa's border metaphors rely upon (it is set in Chicago as opposed to Anzaldúa's American Southwest). Many scholars have looked to Esperanza as the heroic Chicana who has triumphed over history. In one of the earlier published reviews of the book, Andrea Nash praises the didactic elements of the text, saying that it "gives us the opportunity to discuss survival strategies" of immigrant peoples and "their ambivalence about assimilation" (326). Further, the book helps us understand "larger conflicts in Esperanza's life, especially the conflict between her ties to her Chicano

neighborhood and her desire to get out. This is a dilemma that many ESL learners are facing—or if not they themselves, then their children” (327). Here Esperanza is taking on the role of exemplary survivor; she is the one to overcome her past, to survive, and to “get out.” Eventually, Cisneros’s book would hit the mass market and readership would grow to the point that Esperanza’s voice became truly liberated and canonized.

Jacqueline Doyle comments, “Free to tell stories, Esperanza—hope—will speak for herself and her people, in her own voice, from a vividly imagined house of her own” (26).

In addition to Esperanza’s role as survivor, she becomes romanticized to the point of savior: Doyle continues, “she will speak for the speechless [. . .] she will speak for all the women shut in their rooms [. . .] she will speak for the dead [. . .] she will speak for herself [. . .] Esperanza survives to reach her own freedom and release the stories of those around her” (27). We see white paternalism resurface as Esperanza is assigned the role of intercessor for her community to the white world, being voice to the voiceless because she was able to overcome the women of her humble background.

Celebrating Esperanza’s achievement to rise above her meager beginnings and “make it” in the white world not only discredits the community Esperanza comes from, but is a misreading of the text. Approaching *Mango Street* with the assumption that survival results from individualism—a common belief in Western societies—is an imposition of cultural values perhaps not shared by the communities in the text. Laurie Grobman comments that “strictly Western approaches [to literature] ignore culture-specific concerns. It is [. . .] apparent, for example, in a text like Sandra Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street* if studied solely in the Western *Bildungsroman* tradition” (230). Maria Karafilis discusses the novel in terms of its *Bildungsroman* style, noting that, “It is

of crucial significance that we recognize that the endpoint of the maturation of characters like Esperanza [. . .] [is] not merely the development of a coherent selfhood to rival the selfhood of members of the dominant culture” (75). Cisneros’s task in *Mango Street* is not to have Esperanza conquer but rather to have her learn from and be a part of her community. It is from her community that she gains identity. As Karafilis points out, “Scanning the chapter titles (over half of which refer to other characters) shows this emphasis on other members of the community” (66). Further commenting on the form of the book, Karafilis continues, “Instead of striking out by herself, leaving the provinces for the city, as protagonists in traditional *Bildungsromane* do, Esperanza learns of herself and her culture in great part through her connections with other people” (66). It is through her observation of and relationships with the people and places of Mango Street that Esperanza comes to self-actualization. By the end of the book Esperanza becomes aware of this process; Alicia, one of the more educated women (by Western standards) on Mango Street tells her, “Like it or not you are Mango Street” (Cisneros 107). The adolescent protagonist does not fight the people and places of her circumstances, struggle to surmount or survive them, or merely silently accept them. Any of those readings would see her as fighting, surviving, or becoming resigned to herself because she *is* Mango Street. Instead of seeing her culture as a history to be overcome and her geography as an impediment to success in the white world, Esperanza finds her community to be ultimately liberating to her creative identity. Speaking of Mango Street Esperanza comments, “She does not hold me with both arms. She sets me free” (110).

Evidently, Esperanza’s development calls for a new paradigm of Chicana identity construction and analysis. It must account for more than the historical, romanticized

mestiza that has too often been the means of interpretation. While many attempts at re-envisioning the Chicana identity purport to do such work, Cristina Beltran contends that most efforts ultimately fall short: “Rather than risking radical reconception of subjectivity that calls existing categories into question, theorists of *mestizaje* too often reproduce already-existing narratives of romantic identification and exclusion” (596). Adding to Beltran’s call for questioning existing categories, Adrienne Rich gives us more of an idea of what this critical literary paradigm should take into account:

A radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us, how the very act of naming has been till now a male prerogative, and how we can begin to see and name—and therefore live—afresh. (35)

Considering the Chicana identity as created through relationships in the ways Rich suggests, rather than discovered through “already-existing narratives,” our preconceived notions of gender relations, home, and language as they relate to identity are called into question and a new sense of the individual emerges. The roles Chicanas have been allowed—or even forced—to occupy, what an individual’s home has suggested about her status, and how language can restrict access to meaning and understanding are all factors dictated in identity when examined through the lens of history. Looking to relationships instead of history shows us Chicanas not determined by a mythical or genealogical past, but rather largely self-determined through their experiences in relation to their community.

Calling the historical paradigm of identity construction into question and offering an alternative, relational paradigm is my project for chapter one. In Chicana literature, such analysis leads to the most deeply historicized element of mestiza identity—gender. Invariably historical models come into play as characters have been led to imagine themselves and each other in the categorized traditions of either la Virgen de Guadalupe or La Malinche. The legends of these iconic women are pervasive in the cultural consciousness of the Mexican and Mexican American peoples. Without denying the security that the knowledge of one's rich heritage can bring, it seems that ultimately the historically defined female roles are unsatisfactory for Chicana identity development. The confining historical expectations leave little room for unique expression or interpretation. While many contemporary Chicana artists have sought to revise the historical traditions surrounding their two role models, allowing for more complexity in these women and therefore in the roles of their cultural descendants, the identity construction is still based in history and centered on the individual. The danger of totalizing Chicana identity based on a single historical model still lurks. Looking at Esperanza's development in *The House on Mango Street*, we see a focus on development that is less historically-based and more focused on development within a community. Instead of applying a historical paradigm for identity construction for Esperanza's development, I employ Édouard Glissant's theory of the poetics of relation to illustrate how Chicana identity development is better understood in terms of an individual's relationships within a community. Esperanza's perception of her options as a woman, what she can and wants to become, is derived less from of legendary historical precedent and more from the experiences she has in relation to the other women on Mango Street. Esperanza's own history is important in coming to

understand her femininity and sexuality, but it is a history with a root system reaching outward to the community, rather than backward through the centuries. It is in the context of her relationships that she comes into womanhood.

Continuing with this theory of relational Chicana identity development, my next area of inquest is the home. Almost a given, considering the book's title, the notion of home becomes an integral part of identity development in *The House on Mango Street*. Esperanza's response to her home is best understood in terms of her relationship to her community and her creative process, not simply in terms of her ancestral past or already-constructed notions of home. In other words, home is not inherited, but made. Indeed, the house she inhabits is the way in which both the traditional Western and *mestizo* cultures stereotype her, so she reconfigures her construct of home to the realm of the abstract, creating a space of being and community. Cisneros's text does not engage in a discussion of the symbolic significance of what the house has been historically or culturally to her people. Rather, I argue that Cisneros's engagement with the notions of home offered by French theorist Gaston Bachelard lead to a more nuanced understanding of the type of home she, and in turn Esperanza, creates—a home that is her belonging in relationships within a community. Questioning the very concept of what a house is, bringing elements of creation and community into a reconceived definition of “house,” offers insight into those housed by such homes Cisneros describes. As Cisneros moves her protagonist through the conceptual continuum of houses, from the small shamble of a house her family moves to in her childhood (4), to the “home in the heart” (64), to the space “clean as paper before the poem” (108), we begin to understand that the notion of home has less to do with physical space and more to do with creation and community. The exploration

of this new concept of home—how Esperanza lives and how the women on Mango Street have been living—is the subject matter of chapter two of this document.

In chapter three, I take my investigation of relational Chicana identity further by considering how both spoken and written language contribute to relational development. Language serves as an ideal metaphor for relational identity in that it is something one comes to with meaning already inherent from the community, and yet something from which one can derive individual, unique understanding based on relational experience. While *The House on Mango Street* seems an anomaly in the midst of Chicana literary production with hardly any Spanish language present in the text, the book actually serves as a complex model of linguistic development. Author, poet, and critic Alfred Arteaga offers parameters for what constitutes Chicano poetics, which at first might seem to preclude Cisneros's work due to her use of English and Western *Bildungsroman* style. But when we read Arteaga in conjunction with Glissant's call for the necessity of relation in developing language, we can see Cisneros actually forging a new Chicana aesthetic that is quite liberating. Cisneros's use of language, in terms of both communication amongst characters and her own stylistic choices, demonstrates that not only does language provide the means for development within a community, but also the means for creation within that society. Esperanza's relational identity develops in direct connection to her ability to communicate her experience on Mango Street. Her writing, as well as her personal development, becomes very much a social process.

The theoretical implications of Esperanza's relational development extend beyond the scope of Mango Street. While primarily this recognition of Cisneros's relational theoretical development reconfigures our reading of the book and its characters, the

significance of Esperanza becoming a writer and telling not only her own story, but the story of her community, the greater ramifications are how such interpretation alters our approach to Chicana literary identity and theory. By considering a relational model for identity, we recognize a plurality not conceived of by the more deterministic historical paradigm. Because the potential for developing relationships is limitless, so too are the possibilities for development within these relationships. Thus, the notion of *the* Chicana identity is undone, and the discussion surrounding identity development must adjust. As Anzaldúa herself declares, “the future depends on the breaking down of paradigms” (102), which leaves the historical paradigm developed out of her work also subject to scrutiny, breaking, and even replacement. The fact that Cisneros provides an alternative theory implies a broader community for discussion in understanding Chicana identity development. As a relational identity theory suggests that the self is best understood in relation to the larger community, it makes sense that one theoretical discussion would also be better understood in relation to a larger theoretical community. We can see this relational theory as an invitation to build the theoretical community; the infinite possibility of identity development demands a variety of lenses for viewing and interpreting identity. The significance of this project, then, is not merely to rescue Cisneros’s work from perhaps unjust or miscalculated readings, but also to expand the discussion of Chicana literary theory by expanding our notions of what constitutes Chicana identity.

RELATIONAL GENDER IDENTITY:  
TRANSCENDING THE VIRGIN/WHORE DICHOTOMY

No aspect of Chicana identity has been more linked to history than the role of gender. Gloria Anzaldúa writes, “*La gente Chicana tiene tres madres*. All three are mediators: *Guadalupe*, the virgin mother who has not abandoned us, *la Chingada* (*Malinche*), the raped mother whom we have abandoned, and *la Llorona*, the mother who seeks her lost children and is a combination of the other two” (52). In this view of Chicana history, the lot of Chicanas has seemingly been determined by these legendary women centuries ago, as the myths surrounding the three translate into cultural traditions whereby women of Mexican descent are still judged today. As Anzaldúa states, the three historic mothers are mediators, reconciling Mexican and Mexican American women to their roles as women. The tradition becomes almost a self-fulfilling prophecy, with the emphasis on the stereotypes—even in attempts to overcome them—perpetuating the ideas of these roles in cultural consciousness. Many scholars agree with Anzaldúa’s analysis of the legends, believing that the image of these women permeates the Mexican and Mexican American cultural consciousness to the point of female subjugation. Commenting on the cultural phenomenon, Ana Maria Carbonell states,

This *pervasive* denigration of female agency in Mexican culture has created the well-known virgin-versus-whore paradigm, a dualistic structure that attempts to police female behavior by extolling the Virgin’s passivity and selflessness while denigrating figures who take action, such as La Malinche and La Llorona, as selfish, treacherous, and destructive. (56; emphasis added)

Luis Leal extends the discussion of the legendary women from the culture into the literature. He states, “the characterization of women throughout Mexican literature has been profoundly influenced by two archetypes present in the Mexican psyche: that of the woman who has kept her virginity and that of the one who has lost it” (qtd. in Petty 119-20). It seems a natural step that characterizations developed in the cultural psyche would develop in characters in the literature. Thus, these figures become increasingly important to writers of Chicana literature, as well as readers and scholars who wish to better understand the literature. As I have discussed in the introduction, several Chicana writers have examined the mythology surrounding these women in order to better understand their own identities. Aside from the more theoretical works of Anzaldúa, Moraga, and Castillo that I discussed in my introduction, several works of fiction and poetry rely on these archetypes. Denise Chavez’s *The Last of the Menu Girls* (1986) illustrates modern counterparts to the archetypal figures among its developing characters. Alma Luz Villanueva’s lengthy three-part poem entitled *La Chingada* (1985) not only draws upon the character of Malinche for title and narrator, but calls upon her descendents to rectify the wrongs of the past by becoming more loving men and more liberated women through the help of Malinche.

Considering the prominence and influence of these mythic women in contemporary Chicana literature, it is not difficult, and is perhaps even tempting, to use such historical characterizations to view and describe the roles of the women in *The House on Mango Street*. As a case in point, one story early on in the book indicates the harsh duality of Esperanza’s world. Though seemingly simple, the episode entitled “And Some More” clearly points to one of the character’s either/or perception. Esperanza

listens to the discussion of her peers about how Eskimos could have so many different words to describe snow. Lucy decidedly asserts, “There ain’t thirty different kinds of snow [. . .] There are two kinds. The clean kind and the dirty kind, clean and dirty. Only two” (35). Commenting on this vignette, Leslie Petty states that the “debate highlights a conflict that is at the heart of Cisneros’s work: the insistence on culturally defining the world by a rigid set of black/white, good/bad, clean/dirty dualities, versus the reality of individuality, uniqueness, and infinite differentiation” (119). If we transfer this clean/dirty paradigm to people, it is not difficult to start seeing polar opposites everywhere in the book. A brief review of the histories of La Malinche, La Virgen de Guadalupe, and La Llorona offers us easy categorization for characters on Mango Street. However, closer scrutiny of some of Cisneros’s characters leads to the conclusion that such easy historical categorizations are unfair, illogical, and impede development, ignoring the characters’ complexity. While heritage may indeed play an important role in the development of identity in terms of gender, the Chicana’s relationship and experience with those around her constitutes even more crucial grounds for analysis than her relationship with history.

In developing a more nuanced sense of Chicana identity, we must look beyond the traditional virgin/whore paradigm set by Mexican legend. Turning to theorist Édouard Glissant, we find not only the reasons why such a construct has been troublesome for Chicana identity development, but also an alternative to this historically embedded paradigm. Springboarding off the work of fellow philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Glissant borrows the metaphor of the rhizome to illustrate relational identity. Rather than portraying identity as a single unique root, which biologically is “a stock

taking all upon itself and killing all around it” (11), Glissant proposes the structure of the rhizome, a plant with a more intricate system of roots “with no predatory rootstock taking over permanently” (11). The roots in a rhizome plant spread outward, rather than downward, and are interconnected with those of other plants. He continues, “Rhizomatic thought is the principle behind what I call the Poetics of Relation, in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other” (11). Commenting later that the rhizome results in “a multiple relationship with the Other” (16), Glissant suggests the poetics of relation is the result of a more complex, communal understanding of identity rather than the singular relationship history provides with the other. More directly, he states that relational identity is the result of our awareness of our relationships: “We ‘know’ that the Other is within us and affects how we evolve as well as the bulk of our conceptions and the development of our sensibility” (27). Whether applied on the more globalized scale to which Glissant sometimes speaks, or to the more intimate community of Mango Street, this rhizomatic thought gives a more accurate picture to the complexity of identity development. Incorporating Glissant’s philosophy of relational identity into the discussion of Chicana identity, we can see that identity development does not ignore a character’s roots, but the structure of that root system is different than previously conceived; rather than a single tap root to history, the roots of identity are like those of a rhizome that reach outward into the community, as is illustrated by the characters of *The House on Mango Street*.

### The Tap Root

Defining Chicana identity based on the traditions of the legendary women in Mexican culture constitutes what Glissant calls a “root identity.” Differing from a

relational identity in its reliance on history (see Glissant 143-44), the root identity finds its source in tracing bloodlines. Glissant comments, “In the Western world the hidden cause (the consequence) of both Myth and Epic is filiation” (47). He states further that, “The retelling (certifying) of a ‘creation of the world’ in a filiation guarantees that this same filiation—or legitimacy—rigorously ensues simply by describing in reverse the trajectory of the community, from its presence to this act of creation” (47). Thus, linking oneself to historical traditions provides not only a sense of rootedness, but of legitimacy. While some may argue that the Aztecs, from whom the traditions of the iconic Mexican women are derived, do not fit neatly into the Western world of epic and myth described here—a point Glissant concedes—they do have a “tendency toward filiation, reaching back as far as possible through ancient times” (47). Though Glissant suggests the Aztec traditions are not tied to “creation of the world” stories, the Mexican culture has “creation” myths unique to itself. Norma Alarcón states that among the Mexican female icons, “quite often one or the other is recalled as being present at the ‘origins’ of the Mexican community, thereby emphasizing its divine and sacred constitution or, alternately, its damned and secular fall” (60-61). The creation of the Mexican culture is mythologized in ways similar to the creation of the world stories of Christianity; women play important roles in both the fall and redemption of the people. In understanding the women who founded this root identity that legitimizes Mexican culture, we can better understand the problematic application of such identity constructs to the contemporary women of *The House on Mango Street*.

The pre-Cortés life of La Malinche (also known as “Malintzin” or “Doña Marina”) is left to highly speculative theories. Some maintain she was an Aztec princess, perhaps

in efforts to romanticize her relationship with Cortés in the way the U.S. has developed the Pocahontas/John Smith fairytale, or perhaps to emphasize the treacherous nature of her relationship with the conquistador, while others assure us she was “far from royalty” (Petty 121). Several claims have been laid as to where exactly she was born and raised, some trying to declare her as their own, others trying to disown her and connect her to some other place. What is generally agreed upon is that she was sold by her people into slavery, and then later given to Cortés as a gift around 1519 (Mirandé and Enríquez 24–25). Her familiarity with the various cultures and languages of the region made her invaluable to Cortés as an interpreter, earning her the nickname *la lengua*, literally “the tongue,” from Cortés (Alarcón 59). However, any account of the legend also acknowledges that their relationship involved more than just political business; Malinche was also slave and mistress to Cortés. As Malinche succumbs to a relationship with Cortés, she enables the rest of the conquistadors to overpower and thereby demean the indigenous people. The powerful, patriarchal force of Europe deflowers the paradise of the natives. The sexual connotations of the Spanish conquest lend themselves easily to the idea that Malinche not only lost her own purity in her relationship with Cortés, but defiled that of her race as well. Each of the roles Malinche assumes plays into the unfortunate, and perhaps unfair, negative associations connected to her identity.

During the same time period (about 1531) Mexico became host to another iconic woman: the Virgin Mary appeared to Juan Diego. This apparition is generally regarded by Catholics as Mary’s visitation to the Americas, and in this context she is given the title “la Virgen de Guadalupe” (Petty 120–21). This vision gave the native people a claim on what the Spaniards wanted to be their new religion. Quickly, La Virgen became the ideal

of purity and motherhood. With the vision's chronological proximity to Malinche's experience, along with the social upheaval of the newly-conquered natives, it is understandable that the Mexican people might want to set the two stories up as opposing ideals. Though both la Malinche and la Virgen de Guadalupe achieved mythical status, one story gives the people hope, while the other gives them someone to blame for their subjugated status. La Malinche, then, represents the polar opposite of la Virgen. She is the tainted woman, both victim and perpetrator of her own sexual and social demise.

La Llorona's tale mingles pieces of the other two, complicating her status in history somewhat. She is a maternal figure, though whether she was married to or merely seduced by her lover is left to speculation. When the man by whom she has several children abandons her, whether for another woman, for financial reasons, or with no real explanation at all, her response is to murder her children. Most accounts have it that she drowns them, though her motivation isn't always clear. It may be to spare them the shame and suffering of poverty, or out of revenge against the man who abandoned her, or perhaps to seek another lover. She can be viewed as either being protective or malicious. Thus, "Within folkloric literature on the La Llorona legend, La Llorona emerges as *both* a figure of maternal betrayal *and* maternal resistance" (Carbonell 54). However, she does not really provide a middle ground in the historical duality; as the tradition continues, her wails haunt the people as she "seeks to murder other children or women out of envy for her loss and to seduce or kill men out of spite" (54). So La Llorona most typically "has been linked to the highly denigrated *La Malinche*" (55), a character also cast as a vindictive, mournful figure.

And so the dominant paradigm for female identity in Mexican culture is set. In the centuries that followed these women's appearances on the stage of Mexican history, they have set the standard by which Mexican and Mexican American women are judged. Cisneros herself states, "We're raised with a Mexican culture that has two role models: La Malinche y la Virgen de Guadalupe. And you know that's a hard route to go, one or the other, there's no in-betweens" (qtd. in Petty 119). Either option means negating, even scorning the other. The narrow categorizations of womanhood are too restrictive to develop individuality and independence. "Malinche represents deviance, and as a symbol of damned femininity, she has become a cultural burden to subsequent generations of *mexicanas* and Chicanas" (Mirandé and Enríquez 24). The confines of Guadalupe are equally as burdensome, with absolute purity and perfection as prerequisites to sainted motherhood.

On Mango Street, Esperanza becomes acquainted with various characters who seem to fit neatly into this virgin/whore dichotomy. She observes Mamcita crying after her child, losing him to assimilation in America (76), a match for Llorona's wails after her own lost children. She also meets Rosa Vargas, who, as Esperanza describes, "has so many children she doesn't know what to do" (29), Minerva, who, close to Esperanza's own age, already has two children, and her own Auntie Lupe, the frail, sickly namesake of the Virgin. Even Esperanza's own mother could fit into this categorization of idealized womanhood, sacrificing what she could have become [as she informs her daughter that she was once "a smart cookie" (91)] to care for her large family. These are the women who have chosen the honorable life of chastity and motherhood, the counterparts to Guadalupe. On the other extreme there is the exotic Raphaela, who is "too beautiful to

look at” (79). Also in the neighborhood is Sally, a girl close to Esperanza’s own age who has “eyes like Egypt and nylons the color of smoke” (81), and who seems well-versed in the world beyond the women of Mango Street. Even though she is not necessarily Latina (Cisneros is vague with ethnic or racial markers for Sally), she easily falls into to the social expectations of the dominant culture in her neighborhood. And then there is Marin, namesake of Malinche, who, as Esperanza describes, “is older and knows lots of things” (27). These women carry the air of the seductress, the reputation of the whore; they become the descendents of Malinche on Mango Street.

As Esperanza observes each of these women, though, she begins to recognize the cruelty of such simple defining categories. The women who follow the Marianista tradition—the cultural expectations that they will pattern their lives after that of the Virgin Mary and become sainted mothers—find a lack of fulfillment, in the Guadelupian sense of being praised, respected, even worshipped. Rosa is single-handedly trying to raise many children, but the whole neighborhood has written off her efforts and offspring as delinquent. Minerva is rewarded with an absentee, abusive husband. And Lupe is the brunt of neighborhood children’s jokes and mimicry. None of the women who have chosen this sainted lifestyle are receiving the honor and adoration their immortalized counterpart, la Virgen de Guadalupe, receives. Those on the other side of the dichotomy don’t fare much better. Rafaela is literally locked away by her husband because he fears she will be swept off by another man. Even Marin, who, while she may talk big, we suspect may not leave her cousins’ yard very often, is sent back to Puerto Rico because “she’s too much trouble” (27).

Most tragically illustrating how unfair the historical characterizations can be is the beautiful Sally. Though her racial profile is indeterminate, it becomes clear that the expectations of both her family and her society are set by historical precedent. Her possessive, hyper-protective father punishes her for the sins of her predecessors. Noting her beauty—"Her father says to be this beautiful is dangerous" (81)—he presumes promiscuous actions that must accompany her beauty and takes the preventative measures of beating her and then keeping her in the house. At first we don't see what actions Sally commits to incite such treatment, only that her father "remembers his sisters and is sad" (81). We later find out that these sisters he remembers ran away "and made the family ashamed" (92). It is during these bouts of reminiscing that Sally is punished: "Then she can't go out" (81). Based on a memory, a past that Sally had no involvement with or choice in, she is cast into the role of seductress and whore. With the pall of her aunts' memory hanging over her, every action is interpreted as an offense. Something as innocuous as talking to a boy has huge repercussions when her father catches her. Esperanza reports that Sally misses school for days because of her father: "he just forgot he was her father between the buckle and the belt," all the while yelling, "You're not my daughter, you're not my daughter. And then he broke into his hands" (93). Before she has a chance to decide what kind of woman she will be, her father has typed her and begins treating her as if she had already sinned against him. Her community also begins to see her this way, appropriating their own historical, cultural stereotypes onto her actions; another girl, Cheryl, calls her "that name" (82), and the boys at the monkey garden see her as a prime target for their own deviancy and experimentation (96). She seems to take a stand in leaving her father's house to marry at an extremely early age, "before eighth

grade” (101), only to be again stranded in her home “because she is afraid to go outside without his [her husband’s] permission” (102), becoming “imprisoned by the very prince who was to rescue her” (Doyle 17). Witness to Sally’s downward spiral, Esperanza protests the cruelty of the imposed social expectations, “the whole world waiting for you to make a mistake when all you wanted, all you wanted, Sally, was to love and love and love, and no one could call that crazy” (83). A historical paradigm for determining identity seems entirely unfair for these developing characters.

Not only is historical characterization unfair, but it is also illogical in the context of the book. Esperanza’s mother gives her counsel on the subject of what kind of woman she should become. As one of the women in the book who could be characterized as following the Marianista tradition, Mrs. Cordero does not mask the dissatisfaction she sometimes feels with her life. Esperanza recognizes her mother as accomplished: “She can speak two languages. She can sing an opera. She knows how to fix a T.V. [. . .] She used to draw sometimes” (90). But she also notes she has given all this up for the role of sainted mother: “Now she draws with a needle and thread” (90). As her mother now sings her operas at home over her pot of oatmeal, she suddenly blurts out to Esperanza, “I could’ve been somebody, you know?” (91). Interrupting her reverie of *Madame Butterfly* she continues, “That Madame Butterfly was a fool” (91). Pointing to this character who wasted her life in devotion to a man and their child, a thankless servitude, she instructs Esperanza, “Look at my *comadres*. She means Izaura whose husband left and Yolanda whose husband is dead. Got to take care all your own, she says shaking her head” (91). Esperanza’s mother points her away from the course her own life has taken. If she is classified as the sainted (though overlooked) mother/virgin figure, a nearly asexual being,

and if the historical stereotype demands the dichotomy of virgin/whore, then the only other option Mrs. Cordero could be pointing her daughter to under a strict historical reading would be the tainted seductress/whore figure, which she is not. Certainly her mother does point Esperanza to a more liberated role as a woman, telling her, “Shame is a bad thing, you know. It keeps you down” (91). However, given all of the evidence Esperanza supplies of her mother’s sacrifice, all she did give up for her family—despite it being a thankless job—it is difficult to imagine such a devoted mother would encourage her daughter to completely reject her upbringing to take on the treacherous role of la Malinche. Malinche becomes the only option left, though, if we are to extend the argument for historical-based identity to its logical—or perhaps illogical, in this case—conclusion. It becomes apparent that the strict historical reading of femininity is insufficient for Esperanza’s budding sense of gender roles.

Esperanza’s mother does offer more practical advice in her mention of Madame Butterfly and her *comadres*, though; it is not the *women* she tells Esperanza to reject, but rather their dependence on men. Butterfly, Yolanda, and Izura do not come from the same culture and so do not have the same history to rely on for definition. What they have in common is their reliance on men for their identity; they have allowed themselves to be determined by their relationships with the men in their lives. Izaura is the one “whose husband left,” Yolanda is the one “whose husband is dead,” and Butterfly is the one whose lover rejected her and so she kills herself. They are not defined by any other attribute or accomplishment. It is this fate that Esperanza’s mother tells her to avoid.

Some might argue that rejection of the reliance on men could still be seen as a rejection of the Guadalupian tradition for that of la Malinche. Interestingly, though, both

historical options result in a loss of personal identity and require a subservience to and dependence on men for both sustenance and identity. In the end, the women cast in either tradition are trapped in their roles, and their homes become “images of constricting femininity” (Doyle 14). Their identities are restricted to the confines set by men; indeed, “this sense of imprisonment exists whether the female is associated with la Virgen de Guadalupe, whose ‘house’ is supposed to be a shrine, or la Malinche, who is enslaved in the metaphorical ‘house’ of Cortes and the Spanish conquerors” (Petty 128). Esperanza’s search for identity within the Mexican American community seems pointless when considered in this vein; she could never be satisfied with either road, both of which, as illustrated by Sally and Mrs. Cordero, ultimately lead to the same destination.

#### Roots Revisited

Some scholars find it more satisfying to follow the pattern of Anzaldúa and Moraga and revise the traditional roles for women, providing an alternative for Chicana identity construction. If neither option provided by the historical accounts of the legendary women in Mexican culture is suitable, then rethinking the historical roles provides a nice solution. The maligned Malinche gets revisited, and in many respects justly so. Looking at Malinche and Guadalupe in their polar opposite roles has not always served Mexican women of past centuries well, so it would likely be appropriate to consider the characteristics of the women together rather than apart. As Norma Alarcón states, “Guadalupe and Malintzin [or Malinche] have become a function of each other” (61). Their cultural existence is dependent upon one another in many respects, indicating that the dichotomous pairing of the two has made it impossible to think about and define the one without reckoning with the other. So it seems that re-evaluating the duality,

particularly as it is enforced upon Malinche, would offer a more viable option for Chicana identity construction.

While many decry treachery, asserting that Malinche betrayed her *patria*, we must consider her situation. Her race had been disloyal to her, selling her into slavery. She really had no one left to be loyal to; she was *sin patria*, with limited options. Sandra Messinger Cypess questions the traditional account of Malinche's story: "Did she sacrifice her culture and peoples so that the foreign invader would triumph? Why not ask, 'Did she have a choice not to obey the foreign invader?'" (19). In this light, it would appear that Malinche did the best she could with what she had. She was obedient, but she also made a place for her people in their conquered home. She became emissary and intercessor, beginning the racial and cultural tradition that is *mestizaje*, or the mixture, "Malinche's bequest to Mexico," (Lanyon 197). Though perhaps Malinche's downfall came in her sexuality, so, ultimately, her triumph came in it as well. The Malinche/Cortés affair produced a son, the literal embodiment of a new race of people. While Malinche supposedly brought on the demise of the Amerindian people, she is the true matriarch of the Mexican people. It could be argued, then, that rather than selling out her people, Malinche sacrificed herself for them, for the possibility of their perpetuation.

In many ways, then, Malinche can be seen as the epitome of Mexican motherhood. Historian Jesús Figuerona Torres illustrates: "*Doña Marina fue la primera ciudadana, la primera cristiana y la primera mexicana que habló el español, la primera en mezclar su sangre con el conquistador para dar a luz un hijo, elementos que forjaron una patria y una nueva raza*" (qtd. in Cypess 21). In brief, Torres states that Malinche was the first true citizen of Mexico; she was this first to convert to Christianity, to speak Spanish, to

give birth to a son of both European and native blood. All these elements forged a new native country, a new race. Indeed, her role then can be seen as that of the protective mother, a role traditionally ascribed to la Virgen de Guadalupe. Malinche made it possible for her people to coexist with the Spaniards. Granted, the natives were not necessarily treated as equals to the Europeans, but they fared far better than their counterparts to the north. Instead of being continuously annexed, even annihilated, the native people were included in the creation of this new world.

In addition to this preservation, though, she took her people to new places, new ways of being. Her role as translator included more than just interpretation of one language to another. She ultimately became a spokesperson for her people, influencing the politics and the treatment of the native people during the Conquest. Though it was not considered a woman's place to speak publicly, let alone advise in social and political affairs, Malinche clearly asserted herself in this role (Lanyon 72–73). In Malinche's vocal employ, we see her again in the maternal role. She is not only the protective Mexican mother, but the commanding, authoritative Mexican mother. She is prominent and vocal in her arrangement of the affairs of her household.

Such re-examination of the history lends Chicanas a much more admirable, realistic role-model; it seems a happy solution to the dilemma of gender identity on *Mango Street*. Instead of only having the options of unobtainable sainthood or condemned traitor and seductress, the women now have a complex, more human predecessor shown in the intricacy of her historical situation. However, all too often at the service of readers and scholars alike, even in revision Malinche is transformed into the unambiguous heroine, read as the female pattern for strength, independence, and

defiance of the constrictions set upon her. Seeing strength and defiance in Esperanza's character, we could superimpose the characteristics of this revised Malinche onto her and see a much more acceptable role for women, one less dependent on men. In the story "Beautiful and Cruel" she states, "I have begun my own quiet war. Simple. Sure. I am one who leaves the table like a man, without putting back the chair or picking up the plate" (89). While the Malinche tradition would force the reading here of a tendency toward the traitor of her own kind, deserting women by assimilating into the world of men, the revised history gives a kinder interpretation. She is following the advice of her mother, taking care "all her own." This rebellion is not against womanhood itself; Esperanza is working toward creating a new *way* of being a woman. She is trying to find a place for herself, and by extension, other women, wherein her identity does not have to be defined by her relationship with or servitude to men, as is evidenced in the vignette "A House of My Own." Esperanza states that her house will be, "Not a man's house. Not a daddy's. A house all my own. With my porch and my pillow, my pretty purple petunias. My books and my stories. My two shoes waiting beside the bed. Nobody to shake a stick at" (108). Considering the future house that Esperanza creates, we could argue her identity forming much like that of our revised Malinche. Just as Malinche's sexuality is redeemed in her reproductive and protective qualities, so Esperanza finds redemption not only for herself but others in her ability to create. She will serve as both maker and protector to these women, not merely reinventing but in actuality creating a space and new identity option for them. This dream house is doubly significant. First, it is of Esperanza's creation, not of a man's, and is therefore not imprisoning in the way the other houses in the book are. Second, quoting Valdés, Petty states that in some ways,

“‘the house she seeks in reality is her own person’ (58), one that is labeled neither ‘good’ nor ‘bad’ by her society” (128). It *seems* that in the revised tradition Esperanza, along with her Chicana sisters, can at last transcend the brutal dichotomy that haunts them in identity development. However, the tradition is unfortunately still based on a reductive model of womanhood, not accounting for the complexity of context and experience that a more communal approach to identity considers.

As much fruit as this revised history yields for readers and critics alike, granting some insight into Chicana identity development, it still proves problematic to enforce history as a paradigm for Chicana identity development. The imposition of history onto a character can actually impede development. We see problems arise in the lives of Ruthie and Edna, two women on Mango Street who do not fit the strict traditional roles outlined in the Malinche/Marianista tradition. As with Sally, Cisneros is vague in her determination as to whether these women are Latina or not, or if they are perhaps of mixed heritage. What is more significant than which particular ethnic group of this “all brown all around” (28) neighborhood these women belong to is how the dynamic of history affects development, particularly with Ruthie. Edna is a strong, powerful woman on Mango Street, perhaps exhibiting some characteristics of the revised Malinche. She “owns the big building next door, three apartments front and back” (67). We presume she is single as there is no mention of any man in connection to her and she is the owner and manager of her apartment building. Here is a strong, powerful woman not defined by men, who is in control of her world, and who, we get the sense, others fear at least a little. She may not be likable, but she does seem to command respect. Then there is Ruthie, Edna’s simple-minded grown daughter. The children on Mango Street adore her because she

“sees lovely things everywhere” (68) and is “the only grown-up we know who likes to play” (67). Ruthie does not possess the strength and confidence her mother carries, though; Esperanza describes her as petrified in social settings as simple as going shopping (68). Though she has such a strong role model before her, Ruthie cannot seem to function on her own. Esperanza recounts one very telling episode:

Once some friends of Edna’s came to visit and asked Ruthie if she wanted to go with them to play bingo. The car motor was running, and Ruthie stood on the steps wondering whether to go. Should I go, Ma? She asked the gray shadow behind the second-floor screen. I don’t care, says the screen, go if you want. Ruthie looked at the ground. What do you think, Ma? Do what you want, how should I know? Ruthie looked at the ground some more. The car with the motor running waited fifteen minutes and then they left. When we brought out the deck of cards that night, we let Ruthie deal. (68)

Despite the strength of the history preceding her, Ruthie is paralyzed. She looks back for definition and encouragement, but gains no forward momentum. Other chapters in the book surrounding a central character are titled with the character’s name, or the name and a description or action (“Marin,” “Alicia Who Sees Mice,” “Minerva Writes Poems,” and so on). The title of Ruthie’s chapter is telling; it is not “Ruthie,” but “Edna’s Ruthie.” While “There are many things Ruthie could have been if she wanted to” (68), she is not her own. She belongs to Edna, to her mother preceding her. Edna is the “gray shadow” cast over Ruthie’s life, preventing her own development and individual identity. Esperanza reveals that Ruthie “had lots of job offers when she was young, but she never

took them” (69). She also tells us that Ruthie is in fact married and has a house outside Chicago. Rather than moving forward on any of these positive ventures, Ruthie is impeded in the unhealthy relationship with her precedent, “sleeping on a couch in her mother’s living room when she has a real house all her own” (69).

### The Rhizome

Without negating any of the importance of heritage, it seems to be necessary to look beyond the scope of strict historical confines to understand the role of women on Mango Street. As is evident in Ruthie’s case, even a strong history not determined by men is not enough for productive female identity development.

The problem with basing identity on historicized myth rather than on relation, Glissant instructs, is that in the mythology of history “thinking about One is not thinking about All” (49). Focus on history can lead to neglect of contemporary communities. Myths “suggest that the self’s opacity for the other is insurmountable, and, consequently, no matter how opaque the other is for oneself (no myth ever provides for the legitimacy of the other), it will always be a question of reducing the other to the transparency experienced by oneself. Either the other is assimilated, or else it is annihilated” (49). Such assimilation and annihilation was the experience of the native peoples of the Americas during the centuries of European discovery and conquest. They became other, rendered illegitimate by the conquering myths of the white man who by every action asserts “my root is strongest” and that “a person’s worth is determined by his root” (17). It makes sense that the Chicano people would rebut with a challenge to the myths set in place with colonization centuries ago, as “conquered or visited peoples are forced into a long and painful quest after an identity whose first task will be opposition to the

denaturing process introduced by the conqueror” (17). Opposing the foundational myths of the conquerors is an attempt at undoing the process of colonization. However, an identity that is set up as merely opposition is “a limitation from the beginning” (17). Glissant continues, “Decolonization will have done its real work when it goes beyond this limit” (17), overcoming the harsh duality of negating other to establish self.

The re-envisioned mythical tradition of Doña Marina, while perhaps overcoming the strict Malinche/Marianista dichotomy, still does not overcome the pitfalls of a mythically, root-based identity. Glissant describes a root identity as being “founded in the distant past in a vision,” “sanctified by the hidden violence of a filiation,” “ratified by a claim to legitimacy that allows a community to proclaim its entitlement to the possession of a land,” and “preserved by being projected onto other territories [. . .] and through the project of a discursive knowledge” (143-44). Certainly these attributes can be seen in the project of the European conquest in the Americas and the assertion of the Anglos’ God-given right to the land based on interpretation of Judeo-Christian mythology. However, Chicanos’ more recently submitted, revived myths of their indigenous past could also fit Glissant’s characterization. Anzaldúa cites that the goddess Guadalupe, whose Indian name is actually *Coatlalopeuh*, is really “descended from, or is an aspect of earlier Mesoamerican fertility and Earth goddesses,” most notably *Coatlicue* (49). Either Guadalupe or Malinche or both are found at the “‘origins’ of the Mexican community, thereby emphasizing its divine and sacred constitution or, alternatively, its damned and secular fall” (Alarcón 62). These characters place the root in a vision dealing with creation in the distant past. The intermingling of la Llorona and la Malinche into Guadalupe’s story also adds to Guadalupe’s godliness the sanctification of the “hidden

violence of a filiation” in the root history, as some accounts characterize the women as victims of rape, violently forced into their treacherous roles. The revival of the indigenous mythology as legitimate during the latter part of the twentieth century accompanies the Chicano movement in the U.S., a movement with claims of legitimacy, rights, and entitlement to the land called Aztlán, the territory of the American Southwest annexed during the Mexican-American war. This root counter-identity has not necessarily preserved itself through projection onto other lands, with representatives of the movement spreading across the globe, claiming and conquering lands and peoples in the name of their reform. However, it has been successful in legitimizing itself “through the project of a discursive knowledge,” particularly spreading in literary endeavors. In her article “Traddutora, Traditora: A Paradigmatic Figure of Chicana Feminism,” Norma Alarcón traces the predominance of just the Malinche figure in the work of more than a dozen Chicano/a writers, whose views of Malinche range from “the patriarchal view of maternal/feminine as mediator,” to the extreme of those who “have transformed her into the neo-myth of the goddess” (83). She states that “within a culture such as ours, if one should not want to merely break with it, acquiring a ‘voice of one’s own’ requires revision and appropriation of cherished metaphysical beliefs” (63). The demand is that to have identity in the Mexican and Chicano/a culture, then, one has to turn to history. Revised or otherwise, “a person’s worth is [still] determined by his root” (Glissant 17).

Glissant offers an alternative to the root identity with the idea of Relation. The project of a relational identity is not to disregard the importance of heritage in cultural development, but rather to question the superiority of history in determining identity. Returning to the notion of the rhizome, Glissant comments, “That is very much the image

of the rhizome, prompting the knowledge that identity is no longer *completely* in the root but also in Relation” (18; emphasis added). Indeed, a rhizome itself is a root system. The difference is that “The notion of the rhizome maintains [. . .] the idea of rootedness but challenges that of a totalitarian root” (11). One root history is not more important than another; what truly matters is not the history of a people but the relationships among them. Glissant contrasts relation identity with root identity, commenting that instead of focusing on foundational creation visions, relation is concerned with “the conscious and contradictory experience of contacts among cultures.” Rather than the “hidden violence of filiation,” identity “is produced in the chaotic network of Relation.” This identity “does not devise any legitimacy as its guarantee of entitlement, but circulates, newly extended.” Finally, rather than concerning itself with land as territory and project of legitimizing through discursive knowledge, in relation identity land is “a place where one gives-on-and-with rather than grasps” (144). It is these attributes, the focus on experience, the chaotic network, the giving rather than grasping, that more accurately depict the development of Chicana identity in *The House on Mango Street*.

#### The Mango Rhizome

The importance of the relationship with the community is emphasized early on in Esperanza’s narrative. In the chapter titled “My Name,” Esperanza’s focus is less on herself and more on the sad life of her great-grandmother, the woman who shares her name. This first Esperanza, “a wild horse of a woman” (11), avoided the isolation home would be for her in traditional Mexican culture. She refused to marry until finally a man “threw a sack over her head and carried her off. Just like that, as if she were a fancy chandelier. [. . .] And the story goes she never forgave him” (11). The crime for which

our Esperanza's great-grandfather never received forgiveness could be seen as him objectifying of his wife, which certainly he did, or even forcing her from her wild ways into the traditional Marianista role, of which he is also guilty. However, as the young Esperanza continues her narration, we see further ramifications of his violent act. What the first Esperanza lost was her connection to the outside world. Confined in her house, "She looked out the window her whole life, the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow" (11). The deeper tragedy of this great-grandmother was her separation and isolation from her community. The loss of relationship to the world around her resulted in the loss of her own identity. In her contemplative narrative, Esperanza recognizes the loss here, the importance of being part of a community. She comments, "I have inherited her name, but I don't want to inherit her place by the window" (11).

In the remainder of the book following this vignette, scarcely any of Esperanza's development takes place inside the house, behind windows and doors, away from the community. Most of what we get is Esperanza's observation of and interaction with others. Mango Street, not ancient legend, becomes the schooling ground for Esperanza's development into a Mexican-American woman. As Glissant's poetics indicate, her identity forms mostly out of experience with and relation to other women. Stories like "The Family of Little Feet" and "Hips" show Esperanza's development of her femininity as experience with members of her community. When she and her friends Lucy and Rachel inherit pairs of high-heeled shoes from the mother in the family of little feet, they are all Cinderella for a day. As they try on and swap shoes, Lucy has the bright idea of removing their socks, and they discover "yes, it's true. We have legs. Skinny and spotted with satin scars where scabs were picked, but legs, all our own, good to look at, and

long” (40). Together they uncover an emerging aspect of their gendered identities—their sexuality. They practice walking, trying to be grown-up but still incorporating their childhood perceptions with the proper procedure, describing it as running “like double-dutch rope,” and walking “so that the shoes talk back to you with every step” (40). But they become aware of their grown-up status with the shoes as they strut to the corner, “where the men can’t take their eyes off us” (40). Mr. Benny, the grocer, warns the girls they are flirting with trouble by wearing the “dangerous” shoes (41). But it is their own encounter with the hazards of sexuality that teach them caution. Rachel is propositioned by a vagrant on the street: “If I give you a dollar will you kiss me?” (41). All three girls somehow recognize the peril of unmediated sexuality and recoil. The girls had “tried on” their gendered identities for a while, wearing them like costumes, shoes they could slip on and off. Through their experience, they learn that much of what they had thought it meant to be a woman was less some inherited quality and more a performance. They had shown themselves to be women, and their community had responded in both positive and negative ways. Being in the liminal space of early adolescence, the girls are able to withdraw back into childhood. They aren’t compelled to maintain the same relationship with the community that a continual performance of their gendered identity would demand. After their hasty retreat from the vagrant they decide, “We are tired of being beautiful” and hide the shoes away (42). When they are eventually thrown out, “no one complains” (42).

While the girls may not be entirely ready to take on the responsibility of their sexuality yet, they are still faced with coming to terms with the demands adolescence places on gender roles and development. In the story “Hips,” Esperanza declares “One

day you wake up and they are there. Ready and waiting like a new Buick with the keys in the ignition. Ready to take you where?” (49). Again, it is with Lucy and Rachel, along with little sister Nenny, that Esperanza develops in her comprehension of herself as a gendered being. Each girl offers an answer as to where exactly hips take a person, what they are for. Rachel suggests “They’re good for holding a baby when you’re cooking,” and Lucy offers, “You need them to dance” (49). While each of these comments could fit neatly into the Malinche/Marianista paradigm, indicating nurture or seduction, both are apparently observations the girls have made in watching their own mother and other women in the community. Nenny, younger than the other girls, ignorantly adds, “If you don’t get them you may turn into a man” (49). Her observations, however, are primarily superficial and offer little substance to the conversation. Esperanza trumps them all: “But most important, hips are scientific, I say repeating what Alicia already told me” (50). Clearly having had this conversation before with an older woman (someone more educated and with experience having hips), Esperanza becomes the authority. “It’s the bones that let you know which skeleton was a man’s when it was a man and which was a woman’s” (50). Conceding another practical function, she adds, “One day you might decide to have kids, and then where are you going to put them? Got to have room. Bones got to give” (50). Digesting this heavy information, the girls begin to play at having hips. As Esperanza says, “You gotta be able to know what to do with hips when you get them” (50). Their practice of walking with hips turns into a jump-rope game, each making up a song about hips and practicing the correct move, “like half of you wanted to go one way and the other half the other” (50). They sing lyrics like “*Skip, skip, / snake in your hips,*” and “*I don’t care what kind I get. / Just as long as I get hips*” (51), coming to some sort

of understanding in the words and motions together of what this change in their bodies will come to mean. All understand, that is, but Nenny, who sticks to the old childish rhymes on her turn, like “*Engine, engine number nine*” (52). It is not only Nenny’s age that impedes her development here, but her refusal to participate with the rest of the community. As Esperanza watches her younger sister’s oblivious dismissal of her community, she says Nenny is “light-years away. [. . .] in a world we don’t belong to anymore” (52).

Not all of Esperanza’s experiences in developing a relational identity are so innocent. The chapters “The Monkey Garden” and “Red Clowns,” both involving Sally, recount Esperanza’s brutal initiation into the gendered, sexual world. Ramón Saldívar observes that “Esperanza wishes to be like Sally, wishes to learn to flick her hair when she laughs, to ‘paint [her] eyes like Cleopatra’ and to wear black suede shoes and matching nylons as Sally does” (qtd. in Esquibel 653). Following Sally around and observing her do not instruct Esperanza nearly as much as her actual experience with Sally. In “The Monkey Garden” Esperanza extols the garden as the perfect place for her and the neighborhood children’s childhood adventures. But when Sally is cornered by a group of boys in the garden, Esperanza’s perspective changes. Still wanting to play and run “fast as the boys” (96), Esperanza tries to drag Sally away. Sally’s rejection stings: “Play with the kids if you want [. . .] I’m staying here” (96). The boys play keep-away with Sally’s keys, only agreeing to give them back if she kisses them. To Esperanza’s amazement, she agrees; to Esperanza it all seems like a terrible “joke [she] didn’t get” (96). Unable at first to see her friend’s complicity in the situation, perhaps afraid that Sally would want to kiss the boys because Esperanza wants so much to be like Sally in

every other way, Esperanza determines to save her friend. She tries telling the mother of one of the boys, who is ambivalent (97). Desperate, she gathers large sticks and a brick and decided to defend Sally. But Esperanza is horrified when Sally responds to her chivalrous action with “go home” (97). Sent away by Sally and the boys, Esperanza says she “felt stupid,” and that they “made [her] feel ashamed” (97). Her embarrassment arises not out of her childishness, but out of the recognition that she is no longer a child. Sally’s fall in the garden brings about Esperanza’s own loss of innocence. She notes, “I looked at my feet in their white socks and ugly round shoes. They seemed far away. They didn’t seem to be my feet anymore” (98). She traded the high-heeled shoes she played with earlier for the safety of her ugly round shoes. But after her experience with Sally in the garden, they no longer seem appropriate. She sees herself now as a participant in the gendered community.

It is interesting to note that Esperanza’s understanding of her sexuality, her initiation into the gendered world, is brought about through non-Chicana relationships. As already mentioned, Sally is likely not Chicana. Esperanza also mentions “storybooks and movies” (99) as sources for her education on gender roles and sexuality. She describes an alternative of the gender roles prescribed by the Malinche/Marianista tradition as coming from the movies: “In the movies there is always one with red lips who is beautiful and cruel. She is the one who drives the men crazy and laughs them all away. Her power is her own. She will not give it away” (89). While surely she would have had some access to Chicano/a influenced media, it is safe to assume that growing up in Chicago would expose her to Anglo and other culturally influenced media. It is apparent that the community from which Esperanza gleans experience about what it

means to be a woman is much more varied in influence than the simple “all brown all around” (28) description lets on. Esperanza’s development as a Chicana derives from an array of sources, Chicana and non-Chicana alike; the border between what is Chicana and what is not is porous, allowing Esperanza to extend her roots outward into a more complex network of relation. What is significant is that her identity, her sense of a gendered self, is coming through her experiences in this community. She draws insight not from a limited historical paradigm, but from the boundless potential of relation. Her gendered identity is performed in her experience and relationships, for better or worse.

While some of her experiences prove traumatic, trauma Esperanza blames on her community, it is the separation from her community that truly causes Esperanza’s distress. Following “The Monkey Garden” is the harrowing story, “Red Clowns.” Esperanza is sexually assaulted while waiting for Sally at a carnival. Interestingly, Esperanza is more accusatory of Sally than the boy who rapes her, starting the chapter with the words, “Sally, you lied” (99). Catriona Rueda Esquibel comments, “What stands out about both ‘Red Clowns’ and ‘The Monkey Garden’ are the ways in which Esperanza relates to heterosexuality, not through boys, but through Sally” (656). It is Sally Esperanza blames for not being there, it is Sally who Esperanza called out for during the rape, demanding she “make him stop” (100). However, we see that Sally is representative of a larger community. When accusing Sally that sex “wasn’t what you said at all,” she continues with, “The way *they* said it, the way it’s supposed to be” (99; emphasis added). It appears that her betrayal, though immediately by Sally, is by the larger community from which Esperanza gains her sexual awareness. Esperanza’s preconceived notions of sexuality from all the storybooks, movies, and people are shattered by the fateful encounter.

However, it is in her isolation from her community that the moment of peril occurs. In spite of her anger at Sally, and by extension the rest of the community, it is also there that she turns for comfort, answers, and understanding of her experience, unleashing all the torment she feels on Sally.

It would seem that such betrayal by her community might turn Esperanza away from her relationships in the community, pointing her toward isolation and seclusion from them. Such a reading might feel compatible with the book's ending, where Esperanza talks about leaving Mango Street. But as the book draws to a close, she comes to realize that because of the circular nature of relation, she cannot be other than the relationships she develops. She has already developed through her experiences, for good or ill, on Mango Street, and those experiences can't be undone. They will continue to influence her, even as she goes on to have further relationships and experiences. As Glissant notes, "Relation," like a rhizome, is a "chaotic network" (144). As Esperanza has discovered, both positive and negative can result from such chaos, but her choice is ultimately to continue to develop in the society of Mango Street. In the chapter "The Three Sisters," Esperanza meets her muses, three old, mystical aunts who come because Lucy and Rachel's baby sister has died. As members of the community come and go to pay their respects, the sisters stop Esperanza and tell her fortune, murmuring, "She's special," and "Yes, she'll go very far" (104). More importantly, Esperanza's fortune counsels her, "When you leave you must remember to come back for the others. A circle, understand?" (105). Here we see the parallel to Glissant's description that the relational identity "circulates, newly extended" (144). Esperanza is not only to receive her identity through the relationships she builds on Mango Street, but will contribute back to the

population. “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” (105). Mango Street becomes Esperanza’s “place where [she] gives-on-and-with rather than grasps” (Glissant 144).

The very landscape of the street supports this relational development. In the chapter “Four Skinny Trees,” Esperanza sees a manifestation of her own body in the trees that line Mango Street. She talks of “Four skinny trees with skinny necks and pointy elbows like mine. Four who do not belong here but are here” (74). Though the trees do not seem to belong, their symbolism is deeply significant. She says “Their strength is secret. They send ferocious roots beneath the ground. They grow up and grow down and grab the earth with their hairy toes and bite the sky with their violent teeth and never quit their anger. This is how they keep” (74). This vertical stretch in two directions could preclude a communal reading of the trees, pointing to a reach to both history and future, but Maria Karafilis argues that, the trees “extol strength through interdependence and the importance of community and (human) contact” (67). It is in the number of trees that we see this interdependence develop. “The presence of four trees precludes reading the image as anything other than a representation of community and its importance for ethnic Americans” (67). If there had been three trees, some might argue religious connotations, drawing strength from the Holy Trinity. Two would indicate marriage, and one would point to the independence of the individual. But four trees indicate a community. “Cisneros undermines all of these traditional supports (religion, marriage, and bourgeois independence) and leaves the reader with a clear image of the strength and necessity of interdependence” (67). Thus, it is from these trees that Esperanza learns not only strength, but how to obtain that strength. She says, “When I am too sad and too skinny to keep

keeping, when I am a tiny thing against so many bricks, then it is I look at trees. [. . .]

Four who reach and do not forget to reach. Four whose only reason is to be and be” (75).

The constant reaching together is the strength of her communal identity. Each tree is fortified, reminded of its significance, kept alive by the others. One does not grow stronger to escape from the others, nor does any single tree lose its majesty or vigor by contributing to the others.

This emphasis on community in *The House on Mango Street* does not detract from the significance of individual identity. On the contrary, it points to the absolute importance of each member of the community. In looking at the trees on Mango Street Esperanza says, “Let one forget his reason for being, they’d all droop like tulips in a glass, each with their arms around each other” (74-75). If one member lost her identity, her “reason for being,” then everyone in the community would; “they’d all droop.” The individuals are the community, and the relationships in the community make up the individuals. The society of Mango Street, then, becomes the illustration of Glissant’s hope that, “We know ourselves as part *and* as crowd, in an unknown that does not terrify” (9; emphasis added). We see this in Esperanza as her “reason for being” becomes the community itself, building and revitalizing the very relations from which she derived her identity. Even in her eventual departure from Mango Street, she remains tied to the community, purpose-driven in building those who built her: “I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot out” (110).

THE HOUSE OF MANGO STREET:  
CISNEROS, BACHELARD, AND THE COMMUNITY HOUSE

Linked with the historical interpretations of Chicana gender roles is the Chicana's place in the home; the restrictions of the historical roles of femininity are often associated with the confines of the home, with identity and place of residence being viewed as almost one and the same. Early works of Mexican American literature typically looked to the land as a means of identity development, making a strong claim for indigenismo. Works as early as *Squatter and the Don*, published in 1885, to 1972's *Bless Me Ultima* heavily rely on land as a metaphor for personal Chicano/a identity. However, works of the last few decades stray from this trend. "Whereas earlier the natural environment provided inspiration for the symbolic expression of collective identity, now the built environment has assumed that role" (Kaup 363). The house has replaced land in the corresponding relationship between dwelling and identity. As Monika Kaup states, "architecture is a master code for the construction of identity" (361). With this shift, we can reason a shift in our conception of Mexican American identity as "a permanent thing, a natural trait produced through generational succession and long residence in the homeland, to a recognition of it as an artifact" (390). Thus, with the association of identity and home in Mexican American literature we can already note a departure from the idea of identity resulting from historical associations alone. Similar to our discussions of Chicana femininity, it becomes apparent that over the course of time, a purely historical framework for discussing the connections of home and identity is not entirely beneficial. While conversation of a mythical homeland still lingers, it is evident that in all practicality the discussion of home and the Mexican American community is one less of

history and more of contemporary circumstance. As this house-identity connection gains particular prevalence in Mexican American literature, the notion of the home often becomes a means of determining characters' identity as a minority in reaction to the predominant white culture. The type and place of a character's house can inform how much he or she will assimilate or resist the dominant American culture.

Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* stands out as an obvious text choice for inspecting the house-identity connection in Mexican American literature, by virtue of the book's title alone. The symbolism of the little red house is not lost on readers; Esperanza's family had dreamed of a much larger, nicer home:

They [her parents] always told us 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. 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. And we'd have a basement and at least three washrooms so when we took a bath we wouldn't have to tell everybody. Our house would be white with trees around it, a great big yard and grass growing without a fence. [. . .]

But the house on Mango Street is not the way they told it at all. (4)

The family gets a house that is small, made of red brick, and run down. It has no yard, only one bathroom, and everyone shares a bedroom. The construct of the American dream, of assimilating into middle-class white America, was unobtainable to her family. The crumbled dream is aptly represented by the crumbling red brick of the worn-out house, the reflection of a social status that could potentially limit her expression.

However, despite the deplorable state of the house, Esperanza develops an identity that is strong and determined, an identity that seems impossible to link to the physical construct of her house as Mexican American literature is wont to do. A look at how the house and identity have been linked in other Mexican American literature indicates that *Mango Street* calls for a new approach to the traditional house-identity significance. As I explore the theoretical inception of the novel, analyzing how Cisneros's writing speaks directly to theorist Gaston Bachelard, it becomes clear that while rightfully valued in the past, *Mango Street* has perhaps been misinterpreted. Esperanza's story introduces a new, more metaphorical concept of the house, and therefore a new concept of identity—one more creative and relational in its stance—that neither bridges nor accommodates the assimilation or resistance approaches to cultural identity but transcends them altogether. This metaphorical reading of the house creates a communal notion of both home and identity that accounts for Esperanza and others in the context of their relationships.

#### The House in Literature

In other Mexican American literature, the relationship between home and identity is more clearly defined. Richard Rodriguez recounts his metamorphosis from a Mexican child to an American adult in his memoir, *Hunger for Memory*. Rodriguez talks of the house in which he grew up in Sacramento: "Optimism and ambition lead them [his parents] to a house (our home) many blocks from the Mexican south side of town. We lived among *gringos* and only a block from the biggest, whitest houses" (12). Those big, white houses are representative of the ideal, middle-class American life. Rodriguez's mention of his childhood proximity to those houses tells us that he wasn't there yet, but

that he was obviously gravitating toward them. His geographical dislocation from the Mexican part of town would come to be a figurative dislocation from its culture. Ultimately, he would become a part of the white-house culture. He would “closet” his Mexican heritage and take on an assimilated American identity, as indicated by the houses he was drawn toward.

On the other end of the spectrum, John Phillip Santos speaks more of the ancestral home in his memoir, *Places Left Unfinished at the Time of Creation*. The book is more a family chronicle than a personal biography, recounting the settlement of multiple generations of his family in San Antonio. Speaking of his paternal grandparents, Santos tells of them finally feeling at home in their new country. He says, “The Santos and the Garcias remember the house on Burr Road in San Antonio as the first real home for the family since Palaú [Mexico]”—the primary reason given for this comfort being that the house was “big enough to accommodate several families” (110). Santos further recounts how the home life seemed to revolve around food, the aromas and sounds that accompany the feeding of numerous relatives, which was deftly orchestrated by his grandmother (111). The picture that Santos paints may lean toward the chaotic, but it also carries shades of nostalgia and the cozy exuberance of extended family all gathered under one roof. For Santos, the ideal house is set up as the traditional Mexican home with homemade tortillas and lots of relatives around. Such representations champion the stringent preservation of traditional culture in the midst of a new country; identity hinges on heritage.

Coming back to *Mango Street*, though, it is more difficult to find these clear-cut house-identity constructs at play. While the idea of house functioning as a mode of

assimilated identity works for Rodriguez, Esperanza finds this scheme of equating self with the physical construct of one's home more difficult. The difficulty arises not only because of her family's financial inability to get the big white house Rodriguez describes. The problem lies more in the calculation of the house being both symbolic of social status and of personal identity; such an equation commodifies identity, which does not rest well with Esperanza. She learns this early on while living in a third-floor apartment. While playing out front, she is asked by a nun from school where she lives.

There, I said pointing up to the third floor.

You live *there*?

*There.* I had to look to where she pointed—the third floor, the paint peeling, wooden bars Papa had nailed on the windows so we wouldn't fall out. You live *there*? The way she said it made me feel like nothing. *There.*

I lived *there*. (5)

Suddenly, Esperanza sees how home can equal social status, and she is aware of how she is perceived because of her home. She becomes “like nothing” in the eyes of the nun by pointing out her home, where moments before she was *not* nothing. At that moment she recognizes her need for a house to move “up” in American society. But as the book progresses and Esperanza is mentally constructing her dream home, she never mentions it as a place for her to point to and say *There*. It seems she catches on very early to the idea that, “the middle-class house is itself a paradox in that it assures private isolation for its owners to do whatever they want while seeking public approval of its household goods through which the owner seeks visibility and civic and class belonging” (Smith 178). Her ideal home is not a means of getting ahead in society and finding acceptance. I argue that

Esperanza's idea of home centers more in communal belonging than in the commodified identity available in associating place and value with architecture.

It would seem, then, that the more traditional Mexican notion of home might appeal to Esperanza, a home like the one Santos describes. However, this too is problematic for her. Esperanza describes her great-grandmother (the one she is named for) experiencing traditional home life. The scene is not one of the efficient-yet-jubilant home of Santos's family; Esperanza describes her great-grandmother as having been tamed by her marriage and family life. Rather than finding joy in the traditional home, she is melancholy. Esperanza narrates, "She looked out the window her whole life, the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow. I wonder if she made the best with what she got of was she sorry because she couldn't be all the things she wanted to be" (11). In this passage Esperanza begins to question the traditional, ancestral home that Santos glorifies. Throughout the book she sees other women struggle with having a sense of self and fitting into the confines to the traditional Mexican ideal of home. Rosa Vargas is desperate, trying to raise too many children alone; Alicia is expected to fill the maternal role for all her siblings solely by virtue of being the oldest daughter; Rafaela is literally locked up by her jealous husband; Sally is first abused by her father, then repressed by her husband; young Minerva already has two children and an abusive, absentee husband; and Esperanza's own mother quietly acknowledges her own lost potential while serving her large family. In Esperanza's experience, the traditional ideal of home has not been a means of creating a positive identity for women, but rather a means of denying individual identity altogether. The imprisoning aspect of the house deters Esperanza from a desire

for emulation as she states that she does not want to inherit her great-grandmother's "place by the window" (11).

Since neither of the previously discussed house-identity constructs (house as a means of either cultural assimilation or cultural preservation) seem to work for the novel, we have to consider that perhaps the text is doing something else entirely with the association of house and identity. Considering how repugnant the idea of determining one's selfhood through the physical structure of one's home seems to be for Esperanza, it would perhaps be easy to dismiss the association of house and identity altogether. She does not appreciate her identity becoming commodity when associated with the exterior look and location of the house, nor does she want her identity becoming stifled by association with the interior of the house. It would appear that we have no options left for the construct of house as a function of identity. However, we can't escape the title of the book as pointing to the significance of the house. Neither can we ignore Esperanza's continual discussion of her future home as compared to the houses she is exposed to regularly. There has to be some meaning in the symbol of the house, and in my view we must look to the theoretical underpinnings of the book to see how Cisneros uses (or does not use) the symbol of the house in order to reconcile her apparent emphasis on the house with her obvious emphasis on the individual.

#### The House in Theory

Cisneros places the moment of *Mango Street's* origin in the middle of a heated class discussion of the theories of Gaston Bachelard. While pursuing her MFA, she enrolled in a seminar course entitled "Memory and the Imagination." Assigned to read the French theorist's *The Poetics of Space*, Cisneros felt "foreign" in the debate over

Bachelard's suggested meaning of the structure of a house and its significance to memory and the imagination (Ganz 23). Recognizing a distinct disparity between her own experience of home and that of her classmates, Cisneros became aware that,

Suddenly she was homeless, having no such house [as described by Bachelard] in her memory. [. . .] Sitting in that classroom, her face grew hot and she asked herself, "What [do I] know? What could I know? My classmates were from the best schools in the country. They had been bred as fine hot-house flowers. I was a yellow weed among the city's cracks."  
(Ganz 23–24)

It was in that instant, that moment of recognition of her unique situation among the room of would-be writers, that Cisneros says *Mango Street* was born (Ganz 24). But the text does not speak just to the arguing classmates about an experience of home different from their own; *Mango Street* "speaks directly to Bachelard" (Smith 188).

Originally published in 1958, Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* is the explication of the relationship between the structure of a house and the structure of the memory/imagination of its inhabitants. Commenting on the function of the house, Bachelard states, "if I were asked to name the chief benefit of the house, I should say: the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace" (6). Such a lyrical premise seems compatible with the project of Cisneros's book, with Esperanza's combined role of dreamer and observer on Mango Street. However, Bachelard continues in his discussion of the self and being stating, "In order to analyze our being in the hierarchy of an ontology, or to psychoanalyze our unconscious entrenched in primitive abodes, it would be necessary, on the margin of

normal psychoanalysis, to *desocialize* our important memories, and attain the plane of the daydreams that we used to have in the places identified with our solitude” (9; emphasis in original). The importance of the house for Bachelard is the solitary experience wherein, he posits, the identity emerges.

These moments of solitude are not the crux of identity development for Cisneros, though, if only because of their rarity in her own experience. She recalls her own childhood home: “In my home a private space was practically impossible; aside from doors that opened to the street, the only room with a lock was the bathroom, and how could anyone who shared a bathroom with eight other people stay in there for more than a few minutes?” (Cisneros 47). As I already noted, *Mango Street*’s inception and much of its subject matter comes from Cisneros’s own lived experience. If she has very little solitary experience to draw from, then it becomes impossible to “desocialize” the memories as Bachelard suggests for identity analysis and construction. The house, the memories, even the self created in *Mango Street* are all necessarily social, despite Bachelardian insistence they be otherwise. Even with the cursory comparison of the two works, we can see *Mango Street* challenging the theoretical framework of the house.

Digging into the details of Bachelard’s tour-like account of the house and memory, we see a few touch-points between his text and Cisneros’s. One point of emphasis for Bachelard is the stairways of one’s house.

We always *go down* the one that leads to the cellar, and it is this going down that we remember, that characterizes its oneirism. But we go both up and down the stairway that leads to the bedchamber. [. . .] Twelve-year-olds even go up in *ascending scales*, in thirds and fourths, trying to do

fifths, and liking, above all, to take it in strides of four steps at a time.

What joy for the legs to go up four steps at a time! (25-26; emphasis in original)

*Mango Street*'s account of stairways is much more subdued; the family longs for "real stairs, not hallway stairs, but stairs inside like the houses on T.V." They are hoping for the sort of oneiristic state Bachelard says such stairways represent. But the house the family gets has neither the romantic notions of a cellar or attic, nor the lovely staircases Bachelard describes; "there are stairs in our houses, but they're ordinary hallway stairs" (4).

As Esperanza lets go of the family dream of the ideal American house "like the houses on T.V.," she begins to develop her own dream of a future house. She never mentions anything about stairs for this house, though a staircase is implied in the fact that the house will include an attic, another touch-point with Bachelard's writing. Finishing his discussion on stairs, he comments on the attic: "Lastly, we always go *up* the attic stairs, which are steeper and more primitive. For they bear the mark of ascension to a more tranquil solitude. When I return to dream in the attics of yester-year, I never go down again" (26; emphasis in original). Since the attic was obviously an important place in his own solitary development, Bachelard further emphasizes, "How long I have wished for the attic of my boredom when the complications of life made me lose the very germ of all freedom!" (16-17). Having never had an attic, perhaps Esperanza does not know what she is "supposed" to do with one, but she includes one in the house she envisions, with a purpose quite different from Bachelard's:

One day I'll own my own house, but I won't forget who I am or where I came from. Passing bums will ask, Can I come in? I'll offer them the attic, ask them to stay, because I know how it is to be without a house.

Some days after dinner, guests and I will sit in front of a fire. Floorboards will squeak upstairs. The attic grumble.

Rats? they'll ask.

Bums, I'll say, and I'll be happy. (87)

Far from desocializing the space for solitary reflection, Esperanza goes so far as to bring strangers in to her construct of home. She implies that happiness, even completeness comes from the socialization of her house, and by extension, her self. Through Esperanza's attic, Cisneros counters the Bachelardian notion of identity arising in isolation. Instead, identity arises in the context of community. Not only does Esperanza bring guests into her dream house in this passage (a distinct difference from Bachelard), she invites vagrants in as well. Cisneros suggests that even in the ideal, the self cannot be both complete and decontextualized as Bachelard argues.

The idea of a dream house seems to be another touch-point for the two texts, though again a point in which Esperanza will not conform to Bachelard's sense of the house's function within the self. Bachelard declares,

Sometimes the house of the future is better built, lighter and larger than all the houses of the past, so that the image of *the dream house* is opposed to that of the childhood home. [. . .] This dream house may be merely a dream of ownership, the embodiment of everything that is considered convenient, comfortable, healthy, sound, desirable, by other people. It

must therefore satisfy both pride and reason, two irreconcilable terms. (61; emphasis in original)

As I previously discussed, though, Esperanza does not want to assimilate to this model of the house-identity construct. Being judged by the status of the house didn't seem fair to the very young Esperanza early on in the novel, and it still doesn't hold for her by the end of the book. Her reply to this injustice is the construct of her dream house—a place more suitable to represent her identity.

Building a house seems to be a point where Bachelard and Esperanza could agree. He applauds the concept of building one's own home: “with indomitable courage, we continue to say that we are going to do what we have not yet done: we are going to build a house” (61). But his ideas for a woman's ability to do so would stand in Esperanza's way. He charitably grants, “it may be said that we become conscious of a house that is built by women, since men only know how to build a house from the outside” (68). However, as he expands upon this idea, it becomes clear that his notions of a woman's ability to build a house are in her “housewifely” duties (69). Like the literary tradition considered previously, the only options Bachelard proposes for identity in connection to the house are linked with the exterior and the interior; the stereotypical male and female. But we have already established that Esperanza does not see herself in the exterior of the house, and that she certainly does not want to be forced into the interior of the house. We can almost hear the defiant reply to Bachelard, in no uncertain terms, of exactly what a woman-built house would look like: “Not a flat. Not an apartment in back. Not a man's house. Not a daddy's. A house all my own. With my porch and my pillow, my pretty

purple petunias. My books and my stories. My two shoes waiting beside the bed. Nobody to shake a stick at” (108).

Such a declarative sounds harsh and exclusionary. It seems that Esperanza, in her defiance of the model houses like those proposed by Bachelard, has almost come full circle in claiming the possessive solitary life of the house Bachelard describes. But we already know that Esperanza will not live in isolation. Her home will be full of people, both invited and uninvited. Her longing for “a house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem” (108) is not necessarily a demand for physical space or even escape. Rather, it is the untouched characteristic of the dream house that is so alluring. It is something new she can create, not something prefabricated by Western, male-dominated society. Esperanza’s house is “an alternative to male dominated households in both American and Chicano societies” (Karafilis 70). While Bachelard’s theories may work for rousing heated classroom discussion, and even for getting the dialogue started on house and identity, it seems that Bachelard himself “is unable to move outside the Euro-bourgeois construct of home” (Smith 179).

Bachelard’s inability to recognize his own theory as the construct that it is, just as Cisneros’s or any other writer’s depiction of the house’s meaning is a construct, taints his perception of and even communication with the rest of the world. He states, “words—I often imagine this—are little houses, each with its cellar and garret” (147). If language itself is a part of his construct, then the only people who could truly have access to language, an integral part of shaping and communicating one’s identity, would be those who fit (or whose houses fit) within Bachelard’s construct. It is the rigidity and security of such a construct that seem so soothing to Bachelard. He prizes the solitary, stationary

aspects of the structure of a home, as evidenced in his discussion of corners: “The corner is a haven that ensures us one of the things we prize most highly—immobility. It is the sure place, the place next to my immobility” (137). However, as scholar Ruth L. Smith points out, “Bachelard’s assumptions are too culturally specific in their attachment to certain markers of stability as the premier quality of the house” (186). His exclusionary stance and his insistence on the structure of the house leave no room for alternate experiences or identities. It is for this reason that works like Cisneros’s are important, not to offer *the* alternative construct, but *an* alternative construct for identity and house reconciliation. Through Esperanza’s dream home, we are able to see a more fluid, social construct of what a house could be. Her descriptions are not blueprints for a literal structure but rather a metaphorical construction of a place of being and belonging. In describing her dream home, Esperanza is trying to create a space that can comfortably house the identity emerging from her interactions on Mango Street.

#### The House Misconstrued

Though we can see now that *Mango Street* does not neatly fit into Bachelard’s paradigm, some critics still try to find a place for Esperanza inside the house. Jacqueline Doyle heavily emphasizes this idea in her discussion of Cisneros’s expansion of Virginia Woolf’s requirement, a “room of one’s own,” for the development of a young female writer. Doyle points out that Cisneros had a room of her own while growing up, noting the significance in her literary development (9). It is interesting to consider, then, that if this solitary occupation of architectural space was so important in development, why Cisneros did not give her young protagonist her own room? When we imagine the room that Cisneros did have growing up, perhaps we understand more clearly why. She

describes it as “a narrow closet just big enough for my twin bed and an oversized blond dresser we’d bought in the bargain basement of *el Sears*. The dresser was as long as a coffin and blocked the door from shutting completely. I had my own room, but I never had the luxury of shutting the door” (Cisneros 47). So while technically she did have her own room, she did not really have her own space. The “room of one’s own” that is so important and that Doyle cites Cisneros as lauding may in fact have to be metaphorical, thus implying the house could be metaphorical as well. Maria Karafilis comments, “an important aspect of Esperanza’s development is her realization that the house she seeks is not the physical, concrete structure she desires at the beginning of the text, but a symbolic space [. . .] in which she can find fulfillment” (70).

Although Doyle is willing to concede that Bachelard speaks of a space “that is particularly the provenance of the privileged upper-class white male” (11), she still tries to find a way to fit Cisneros into his theory:

The “maternal features of the house” that Bachelard describes are literally exemplified in the felicitous peace of Esperanza’s mother’s body, “when she makes a little room for you on her side of the bed still warm with her skin, and you sleep near her,” “when she is holding you, holding you and you feel safe” (6). Within this shelter, the small girl can begin to dream.  
(Doyle 20)

The problem here is double-sided. First, the features Bachelard discusses cannot be “literally exemplified” in anything other than the structure of a house because that is what his theory requires. Second, forcing Esperanza’s experience into the Bachelardian paradigm goes against the very premise of the book’s inception—the idea of an

alternative house-identity construct. The point of the book cannot be for Esperanza to “escape” the ghetto and to find a “solitary space” away from the people’s lives that have so influenced her own (Doyle 22). As Julián Olivares points out, Esperanza does not escape: “Neither here in the house on Mango Street nor in the ‘fantasy plane of the world’ [. . .] does the protagonist indulge in escapism” (168). An escape would be an attempt to find something more suited to Bachelardian tastes. But Esperanza tells us at the close of the book that her going away from Mango Street is not an abandonment of the houses and people there; she is going away “to come back” (110). If going away were an escape from the society she grew up in, then it is also an abandonment of the identity formed within that society; contrary to Bachelard, for Cisneros identity is not a solitary experience. As Alicia reminds the somewhat reluctant Esperanza, “Like it or not you are Mango Street, and one day you’ll come back too” (107). So Esperanza’s departure from Mango Street will ultimately lead her back to it because it is there that her identity is formed. Whether her return to Mango Street is literal or figurative, she will return to acknowledge the development of herself in that society.

At this point it may be important to concede that perhaps Cisneros does lift a page, or at least a line, from Bachelard’s book, figuratively speaking. We can see his influence in *Mango Street* through his statement, “each one of us, then, should speak of his roads, his crossroads, his roadside benches; each one of us should make a surveyor’s map of his lost fields and meadows” (11). Though Cisneros complicates this literary suggestion by not just illustrating the road, but *life* on it, we can see perhaps some seeds of insight come from Bachelard. True, for Bachelard “oneirically complete houses have cellars, first and second stories, attics, stairs; they are built on, in, and surrounded by nature. Home is only

the home in which one is born and never the city ‘house on the streets’ where dwellers live only as transients” (Smith 186). So perhaps he would never accept Cisneros’s rendering of a house on a street as valid. He certainly did not account for a setting like inner-city Chicago when setting up the spectrum for the house to range between ornate palace and quaint cottage (Bachelard 63), as though the existence of slum or ghetto never crossed his mind. Clearly, then, if Cisneros is drawing at all upon Bachelard in using the street as part of her configuration, it is either to invert or greatly broaden the scope of his theory.

In “speaking of her roads,” Esperanza may seem to deemphasize the importance of the house, something many readers may want to latch onto. Though not the first scholar to recognize the importance of Mango Street to Esperanza’s development, Monika Kaup is keen to give insight into the street’s function in the portrayal of reality in the text: “the design of *The House on Mango Street* is street-oriented. Its episodic structure follows the movement of street life, where events begin and end suddenly. Order is provided by the solid rows of houses facing each other across the street” (390). Indeed, while the house has a heavy presence in the book, most of the book’s episodes take place on the street instead of in Esperanza’s house. Perhaps it is this thought that leads Kaup to comment, “thus, the real subject of Cisneros’s narrative is not so much the solid architecture of the houses (which is often bleak) as the movements and contacts of the many lives that flow in and out of them” (390). If the street moves to the forefront in importance in the text, then it also moves to a position hierarchically above the house in its influence on Esperanza and her development of identity. This is not a hard case to

make, considering how much experience and knowledge we see her gain in her interactions on the street. Truly, Mango Street is Esperanza's schooling ground.

But putting the street in such high priority over the house leads to further complications in the interpretation of the text. There is a tendency among scholars to diminish Cisneros's case for individual identity. Some might reason that by placing the story on the street, "she diminishes the status of the individual and reintroduces the communal perspective—bringing us back to Chicano nationalism's concerns with the collective. Through the street, Cisneros reintroduces a collective Latino public space, the urban equivalent of the homeland" (Kaup 390). However, there are a couple of flaws with Kaup's argument. Though appealing as the thought might be to have the book serve as a treatise for Chicano/a nationalism, this specific approach to community is not in exact alignment with Cisneros's. The term *Chicano* refers specifically to Mexican Americans, at first used as a derogatory term, then readopted by the Mexican Americans themselves as a badge of pride and self-identification. The surge of Chicano/a political activism would perhaps be a nice frame for the setting of *Mango Street*, if we were to overlook the detail that the neighborhood Esperanza is living in may not be, and in fact most likely *is* not, predominantly Mexican American. If we are to presume that Esperanza's neighborhood is based on Cisneros's own growing up (as Cisneros leads us to believe), then many of her neighbors, while also Latino, were probably not of Mexican heritage (Marin is Puerto Rican, for example). Consider Robin Ganz's narration:

[T]he transition from the apartment on Roosevelt Road into the new house in a *Puerto Rican* neighborhood on the North side called Humbolt Park represented an important step in her development as a writer because, "it

placed [her] in a neighborhood, a real one, with plenty of friends and neighbors that would evolve into the eccentric characters of *The House on Mango Street*.” (23; emphasis added)

The notion of the book serving to build community is excellent, but not on the grounds of Chicano/a political merits, and certainly not at the expense of the individual.

Then, too, there is still the problem of the book’s title. While the book highlights the street, the house receives the emphasis in the full title. Cordoning the house off from the rest of the book and only emphasizing the street and its importance in Esperanza’s development would become just as problematic as it has been to try to fit her in the constructs of the house. It would seem that the only remaining option is to get scholars to negotiate and come to a compromise on where the emphasis should or can rest, finding a fine balance between the two forces, or even a hybrid solution that meshes them both. This hybrid solution is an option many scholars are more than eager to comply with, as it would fit neatly into a paradigm of a hybridized American identity. It would be tidy to simply say that since we are dealing with hybrid identity, we can hybridize the idea of house, reconciling the exterior and interior associations in some conglomerate theory of house-identity construct. However, two ideas that are not entirely suitable for sufficiently explaining identity will not necessarily become more sufficient in combination. What is instead called for is another approach altogether to this elusive house and street, one more metaphorical as the text suggests this relationship between home and identity to be.

#### The House as Metaphor

As has already been established, Esperanza’s imaginings of her dream house seem to be less blueprints for a physical structure and more descriptors of a way of being in the

world. So if a house is a way of being and not just a structure, then we have to rethink the conceptual framework we have set for houses. Perhaps the house/street divide is an artifice set more by scholars of the work than by the characters themselves. The concept of *house* may be much broader than even the Bachelard critics may have been willing to expand.

The term *house* generally connotes the physical structure that has so often been the object of analysis when it comes to Cisneros's work. But we can also consider other definitions of the word *house*. *House* can also refer to a household, meaning all the people who belong to a family, perhaps even including non-relatives (e.g., the House of Tudor). Another closely linked definition is the idea of a quorum or assembly, such as a house of legislature. Like a fraternity or sorority house, there is a physical structure to be called the house in this definition, but the idea of house extends far beyond the walls of a building. *House* adopts the connotation of membership and belonging with this definition. The underlying idea of *house* here is community. This concept of house opens up entirely new possibilities to Esperanza in terms of the house-identity construct.

This communal understanding of houses and home seems to correspond with the interpretation that promotes the street as the true focus of the book. While that reading is moving in the right direction, I would contend that the problem arises when the strength of the community comes at the cost of the individual. When scholars such as Kaup argue that Cisneros "diminishes the status of the individual" in order to reintroduce "the communal perspective" (390), the danger of community overwhelming the individual surfaces. If community ultimately becomes another means for totalizing the individual, then it has not served its function as a context for relationships to form, but merely

becomes another way of grouping masses of individuals. But Cisneros does not deemphasize the individual; if anything, the communities depicted in the book highlight individuals and how they manage life. The communities are comprised of individuals who contribute to one another through the experience of their relationships. Like the imagery of the four skinny trees, as discussed in the previous chapter, it is the strength of each individual that lends itself to the strength of the community: “Let one forget his reason for being, they’d all droop” (74). The community does not become a faceless mass all working to the end of producing one mass-less face in Esperanza, the one who can rise above the community. The romantic notion often held by readers and scholars that Esperanza will become a writer so she can speak for these poor, voiceless women on Mango Street also discredits their value to the community. Mango Street does not exist merely for Esperanza’s education so she can go out and give voice to voiceless masses. Olivares points out that she never really leaves Mango Street, but remains housed there in her writing: “she attains release *from her confinement* through her writing. Yet even here she never leaves Mango Street; because, instead of fantasizing, she writes of her reality” (168; emphasis added). In writing of the women on Mango Street, Esperanza finds liberation and connection. “What she writes about [. . .] reinforces her solidarity with the people, the women, of Mango Street” (169). Esperanza’s voice is the one we experience directly since she is our narrator and guide on Mango Street, but it is not the only one developing. The interactions on the street are instances of these women finding voices, developing identities. It is *because* they are finding voices that Esperanza *can* have the education and identity she needs to develop not only to come of age in adolescence, but to come of age as a writer as Cisneros intends.

Perhaps it is because these women are “housed” in a way most readers are not used to considering that we tend to devalue their identities. We try to connect their identities to the dilapidated housing structures they reside in, but do not think of them as being housed in their fellowship with one another. We appreciate the communal atmosphere insofar as it will make Esperanza the sensitive observer that she becomes, but we are certain that she will be the one to get out, to rise above them, implying they are too low to be worth staying with. Such a reading, though, renders the individuals on Mango Street no longer individual. Esperanza is the only person developed and must depart her society if she is to achieve her potential as spokesperson for her people. The other inhabitants of Mango Street are consigned to their place in the social strata. In essence, we as readers colonize them, make them subaltern, a people who have no merit and need someone to speak for them.

However, if house is an essential part of constructing identity, and Esperanza belongs to this house that is the community, this quorum and fellowship of the inhabitants of Mango Street, then it is not in spite of but because of these women that she builds her identity. She is in part Rafaela, who, despite being physically locked in a house, finds a way to participate in the community by leaning out the window, talking with and sending the neighborhood children on errands for her (79). She is part Minerva, who is the living stereotype of the financially struggling single mother, but who is also finding a voice through writing poems (84). There are some women who are isolated from the communal house, by choice (Mamacita) or by force (Sally), who do not have voices. But others are building their sense of identity and finding belonging at the same time Esperanza is doing so. It may be easy for readers to see these women’s lives as

meaningless because they don't conform to a Western sense of happiness and comfort. Rather than seeing Minerva's poems as art and voice, we might see them as pitiful in the midst of her circumstances. Broadening the perspective of the house-identity construct, to do some "rethinking of domestic spaces and the domestic novel not only to scrutinize woman's contested, problematized, and central place in the house but also to 'discover more about the place of the home in the woman'" (Mezei and Briganti 842), allows us to see the contribution of each of the individual lives like those belonging to the house on Mango Street.

Cisneros's work, I contend, does the kind of rethinking Mezei and Briganti call for. Rather than consigning Esperanza to a place in the physical structure of her home, *The House on Mango Street* refuses to conform to either the cultural assimilationist or resistance models of identity so readily deployed in the interpretation of Mexican American literature—models that do try to pin a character's identity to her belonging in a physical space. Instead, Cisneros offers a model for identity that ultimately disregards the assimilation/resistance issue altogether. What seems to matter most is the individual's relationship with others in the immediate community. In this revision of the notions of home, Cisneros alters what successful identity development means. Where many read the text as a realization of the American Dream, Cisneros does not ultimately point toward success in possession, material status, and separation that the distinction of home ownership provides. Rather, fulfillment is shown as development in community; it is not in separation, but in connection that individuals realize identity. The idea of the home-identity connection is less about excluding others and more about experiencing relationships with others. It is in these relationships, not the physical houses, that identity

is truly formed, and the importance of the house-that-is-community is emphasized in each individual member.

## CHICANA AESTHETICS:

## LANGUAGE AND WRITING AS A METAPHOR FOR IDENTITY

Language, like the notions of gender and home, has been a crucial defining element in the recent historical understanding of Chicana identity. Alfred Arteaga writes, “Chicano speech is like the mestiza body and the borderlands home: it simultaneously reflects multiple forces at play and asserts its hybridity” (16). Language, then, is seen as exhibiting the same complexity of mixed influences as these other aspects of identity. Arteaga also states that “language undertakes the act of being Chicano” (6); for him, articulation is a means of identity. When linking language so closely to one’s very sense of self and belonging, it makes sense that the resultant understanding of identity development would necessarily be a linguistic one. Gloria Anzaldúa explains this connection between language and identity further, saying that language *is* identity. She states, “Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I *am* my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself” (81; emphasis added). In the wake of such pronouncements, pride in the varied linguistic abilities of Chicano and Chicana artists has led to a growing literary tradition in the United States.

In *Chicano Poetics* Alfred Arteaga celebrates the success of several artists, with special emphasis on the writings of Alurista and Anzaldúa. He contends that “it is the poets who articulate the homeland” (15). Since “Alurista and Anzaldúa write in a combination of English, Spanish, and Chicano slang, *caló*,” and “Both also introduce bits of the Nahuatl, which supplement the indigenous presence” (16), the homeland these two articulate for the Chicano/a people is a space of convergence of many influences. Interestingly, in Arteaga’s description of these artists’ work, we derive a sort of

prescription for acceptable Chicano/a writing; now not only must the subject matter be viewed through the lens of history, but so too must the language. The insistence on Spanish and Nahuatl points to traditions likely already lost to many in the Chicano community. According to Arteaga, it is the artists' "interlingualism" that creates the true sense of chicanismo, the mixture or hybridity of their status, "and that hybridity is the mode of both Chicano poem and Chicano subject" (10). Such work with language creates what Arteaga terms the "Chicano discourse," the presence of which "resists Anglo-American suppression of heteroglossia, much as the background noise of menials jars a social gathering" (73). Arteaga describes the Chicano/a aesthetic as one that "opposes the canonical literary telos. It conflicts with the authoritative discourse; it is dialogic" (74). Alurista and Anzaldúa's notable experimentation with generic forms and style places them in direct conflict with the dominant literary styles of their day, forcing readers and critics alike to question prevailing trends in literary construction. By asserting the validity of the Chicano/a identity in style and language, Arteaga argues, writers like Alurista and Anzaldúa question the dominance of traditional Anglo discourse and create a space for Chicano/as in the literary canon. Arteaga further elevates the two poets, commenting that, "In the manner that Alurista and Anzaldúa create the Chicano homeland in the consciousness by writing about it, they also create Chicano consciousness by writing in its terms. In other words, they serve the function of the national genius in the content and form of their work" (17). Serving as what Arteaga declares as the national genius for the Chicano/a people, Anzaldúa and Alurista not only model appropriate literary content but set the standard for literary style in Chicano/a literature.

Judging by such linguistic and stylistic standards, Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* hardly fits the Chicano/a literary tradition. The narrative is often classified as a *Bildungsroman*, a coming-of-age account detailing the moral and psychological development of a central character, common in the Western literary tradition. The genre seems more compatible than oppositional to the authoritative, male-dominated discourse. The book is written almost entirely in standard English, with scarcely a handful of italicized Spanish words sprinkled into the text, and completely void of any Nahuatl vocabulary. These are some of the reasons the text has been "regarded as too assimilationist by some Chicano/a critics" (Quintana 73). One such critic, María C. González, claims Cisneros's use of English is an attempt to universalize the text for a broader audience; while Cisneros has an admirable "interest in depicting cultural difference," González says this is "subordinated to [her] interest in 'universal' experience. In standard English, cultural difference becomes less alienating to a U.S. audience" (57). She acknowledges that perhaps some of the characters are speaking in Spanish in the book, with Esperanza translating for readers. However, she is unsatisfied since "the act of translating itself is muted, never fully represented" (56). González seems to prefer other texts that demonstrate the translation act, where the narrator overtly mentions that a character is speaking in Spanish, even though the author is writing it all in English, such as in Lucha Corpi's *Delia's Song* (56-57). Without some marker of the Spanish language in the form or content of the text, González says, "the 'message' is that standard English is an acceptable vehicle for the representation of the experiences of a Mexican-American community" (56). This "message" is problematic only if we continue on the assumption that all Chicanas necessarily speak Spanish. González presumes that

the absence of Spanish is failure to express “‘authentic’ auditory experience,” and thus “moments of difference are played down, mediated, or undercut completely by the use of standard English, ‘universalizing’ the experience for a U.S.-educated reader” (56). What González and other critics with similar allegations do not take into account is that Cisneros herself is U.S.-educated. So is her protagonist. So are many of the characters that young Esperanza interacts with on Mango Street. This is not to say that Cisneros *is* trying to universalize Chicana experience through the language and style of her writing, but “othering” it is not necessarily her goal either.

Alvina E. Quintana questions such assessments of Cisneros’s assimilation, noting that, “Chicano critical evaluations of *Mango Street* emphasize not its innovative approach, but rather its relationship to the Chicano literary canon” (55-56). Citing Terry Eagleton’s idea that critics and scholars are “custodians of a doctrine,” Quintana says that the “primary objective” of Cisneros’s critics “has been to preserve Chicano discourse and acknowledge new writers who have successfully mastered convention” (56), conventions and discourse identified by such custodians as Alfred Arteaga. The irony is that “This kind of authorized control undermines exchange and fails to recognize that the social positioning of Chicana writers often compels them to respond to both European- and Mexican-influenced value systems” (56). Rules of a discourse that authoritatively demand subversion of authoritative discourse become problematic when enforced too strictly. Cisneros uses language and writing (both in her own style and as a means of development for her protagonist) to reveal a delicate balance that neither undermines exchange within the Chicano/a discourse, nor completely abandons the range of linguistic and literary communities in which both author and protagonist participate. As we more

closely read the use of language in the text, the creation of the genre, and Esperanza's own development as a writer, we can see that Cisneros does in fact make the moves necessary to qualify her for placement in the Chicano/a discourse as outlined by Arteaga. However, just as we have seen in her development of the notions of both gender and home, she arrives at this discourse in perhaps less historically conventional ways, focusing on the relational aspects of spoken language, literary style, and writing. Instead of dabbling in political controversy of assimilation or reclusion of language and literary tradition, Cisneros employs language and writing as a metaphor for relational identity development. Language serves as an ideal metaphor for identity development because like all elements of identity, as our previous discussions of gender and home have shown, these linguistic processes come with rules and meaning already inherent, but then are developed more fully in relationship to others. Such an approach to language and writing opens possibilities for a new Chicana aesthetic that is derived less from prescribed cultural and historical parameters and more from one's own experience as interpreted through relation.

#### Cisneros and Language

Although Arteaga outlines a discourse heavily influenced by both Spanish and Spanish slang, how much or how little Spanish a text contains does not appear to be the fairest test for a work's merit in the field of Chicana literature, as English is also influential in Chicana experience. Indeed, "Chicanos, born and raised in the United States, are English dominant" (Raso and Herrera-Sobek 25). Anzaldúa herself says that, like Cisneros, she has fallen prey to charges of language compromise: "*Pocho*, cultural traitor, you're speaking the oppressor's language by speaking English, you're ruining the

Spanish language, ' I have been accused by various Latinos and Latinas" (77). It seems that it is impossible to please everyone on this matter, then. Cisneros responds to the question of her linguistic style thus:

I never write in Spanish, y no es que no quiero sino que I don't have that same palate in Spanish that I do in English. No tengo esa facilidad. I think the only way you get that palate is by living in a culture where you hear it, where the language is not something in a book or in your dreams. It's on the loaf of bread you buy, it's on the radio jingle, it's on the graffiti you see, it's on your ticket stub. It must be all encompassing. (qtd. in Madsen 130-31)

While Cisneros illustrates that she has the ability to use Spanish, she explains that it is not representative of her experience. Perhaps she did grow up hearing Spanish in her home and neighborhood, but it does not appear to have been the "all encompassing" force that permeated her consciousness. Cisneros describes herself as having been a voracious reader as a child, but the books that were available to her were written in English ("Writer's Notebook" 70). From this steady reading habit, she developed her own narrative voice at a young age. She describes an interchange with her own mother that illustrates a fledgling, melodramatic narrative voice in English:

"I want you to go to the store and get me a loaf of bread and a gallon of milk. Bring back all the change and don't let them gyp you like they did last time." In my head my narrator would add: . . . *she said in a voice that was neither reproachful nor tender. Thus clutching the coins in her pocket, our hero was off under a sky so blue and a wind so sweet she wondered it*

*didn't make her dizzy.* This is how I glamorized my life living in the third-floor flats and shabby neighborhoods where the best friend I was waiting for never materialized. (70)

The exchange here clearly takes place in English. Cisneros's mother, herself Chicana, does not offer the command in Spanish, an English/Spanish hybrid, or a stilted, "broken" English, as some would stereotype the home language of Mexican American families. She speaks clearly in English, even using the slang "gyp." What is more significant is that Cisneros's own thoughts following the instructions are also in English. For example, the verb-particle construction in "our hero *was off*" is a structure that would originate in English, not derived from a translation as the phrase "I go," *me voy*, more easily could. As Cisneros herself says, though, it is not enough for a language to be the stuff of books or daydreams to really be influential. But we can imagine that the street signs and graffiti she saw on the street on her way to the store, the radio jingles she may have overheard, the markings on the loaf of bread she bought, and so on, would have been in English. Given so much English in this young Chicana's surroundings, surely it is not inappropriate to use the language to represent the experience of another, albeit fictitious, Chicana.

However, establishing English over Spanish as the language of Chicana literature is not my intent here, nor do I believe is it Cisneros's. Many in the Chicano/a community are suspicious of the English language, and perhaps justifiably so; "American English is commonly perceived as a language of duplicity, the language of treaty violation, the voice of the master" (Madsen 130). While Spanish is the language of the early conquerors of the Mexican people, English is the language that currently dominates those

living inside U.S. borders. Earl Shorris comments, “English is a better language for conquerors than Spanish, for it is so difficult that no man can speak it fluently without changing his soul” (117). Alarmed by trends of assimilation, the departure from tradition, many blame the language, feeling that “English threatens to corrupt Chicana expression just as Anglo-American cultural values corrupt the Mexican American community” (Madsen 130). With the vulnerability that many in the Chicano/a community feel linguistically, it is understandable that a text written entirely in English might appear threatening. *The House on Mango Street*, however, is not a threat to the Chicano/a community, or to Chicana identity construction. Nor is it a threat to the Spanish language. Rather, what I see in the study of Cisneros’s text is an approach to language that is in fact more liberating to Chicanas, with a stronger emphasis on individual experience in relation to the larger community. Despite Cisneros’s appearance of English-only writing in *The House on Mango Street*, the verbal exchanges among characters indicate a more complicated linguistic world that does in fact draw on multiple influences and defies traditional Anglo form, as Arteaga would mandate. Cisneros does not create with her language merely a space of convergence of multiple influences, though, as Arteaga describes the Chicano/a aesthetic to be. Instead of a blank stasis awaiting the addition of outside forces like English, Spanish, caló, or Nahuatl, Cisneros illustrates a more active linguistic process in Esperanza’s identity development. The young girl is metaphorically “thrown” into a world of language, already rife with meaning which she must learn. But as her character develops, language becomes more than meaning to be learned, but also meaning created, developed, and experienced through the relationships of her community.

Through Esperanza's use of language we perceive an option of Chicana articulation that is not determined by outside forces, but created through the experience of relation.

### Rules of Language

Though perhaps much more subtle in the portrayal of linguistic difference than many contemporary Chicana authors, Cisneros does illustrate a multilingual world in her text. That both English and Spanish are common in Esperanza's life is apparent as she explains, "At school they say my name funny as if the syllables were made out of tin and hurt the roof of your mouth. But in Spanish my name is made out of a softer something, like silver" (11). Contending with multiple languages is a constant struggle for Esperanza as she grapples with the very meaning of her own name. She informs us that, "In English my name means hope. In Spanish it means too many letters. It means sadness, it means waiting" (10). It is apparent that she is aware of the fact that these two languages seem at odds with one another in her world, that even within her own name there is a fight for dominance in meaning. The fact that names, words, and by extension identity come with meaning already in place is something Esperanza is also coming to understand. She was christened with a name that has not only linguistic associations of both hope and despair, but also filial references. Relating her great-grandmother's tale, of whom Esperanza is namesake, the young girl seems conscious that there would be some expectation for her to take on some of that meaning for herself. This associated identity is strong enough in the name that Esperanza feels the need to declare her independence of the inheritance, stating that even if she has "inherited her name," she does not want to inherit her great-grandmother's life experience (11). As Esperanza reflects on the linguistic situation she

has been thrown into, she seems resolved to both understand meaning already present and determine her own meaning.

Interactions with her peers and family members illustrate that Esperanza has mastered the rules in the various registers of language in which she must function. Her first meeting with Lucy and Rachel is telling:

We come from Texas, Lucy grins. Her was born here, but me I'm Texas.

You mean *she*, I say.

No, I'm from Texas, [she says,] and doesn't get it. (15)

Correcting her friend's English, Esperanza shows clear understanding of the rules and nuances of standard English, the language of school and public life. Later, a conversation with her father shows her knowledge of Spanish. "Your *abuelito* is dead, Papa says early one morning in my room. *Está muerto*, and then as if he just heard the news himself, crumples like a coat and cries" (56). Whether her father repeats the words in both languages, or says them once with Esperanza's English translation earlier is unclear. What is evident is the familiarity of the language in this intimate moment between father and daughter.

The idea of clear-cut distinction between public and private language is dispelled, though, as we observe interactions with these same characters. Esperanza affectionately tells another story of her father: "My father says when he came to this country he ate hamandeggs for three months. Breakfast, lunch and dinner. Hamandeggs. That was the only word he knew. He doesn't eat hamandeggs anymore" (77). For this story to make sense, her father would have had to relate it in English, indicating that the language was also comfortably spoken at home. Spanish is not simply reserved for the home either, but

is understood in public life. Speaking of her neighbors, Esperanza recounts, “*Mamacita* is the big mama of the man across the street, third-floor front. Rachel says her name ought to be *Mamsota*, but I think that’s mean” (76). Cruel taunting aside (here the *-ota* ending insultingly implies that Mamcita is a rather large woman), it is clear from this passage that the same friends Esperanza was speaking English to before, Lucy and Rachel, understand Spanish well enough to play with the diminutive and augmentative word endings. It seems that all of the girls can maneuver quite easily in whatever language is most convenient.

#### Relational Language

It is in this character of Mamacita that we gain insight into the importance of the community in linguistic, and therefore identity development. While understanding the rules and meaning one is originally thrown into are important, continued participation and development are vital. Esperanza observes this woman who came to the U.S. without knowing any English, and who remains shut away in her third-floor apartment. Esperanza explains, “Somebody said because she’s too fat, somebody because of the three flights of stairs, but I believe she doesn’t come out because she is afraid to speak English, and maybe this is so since she only knows eight words” (77). Though the woman’s reasons for hiding away are left to speculation, her status as a non-English speaker is assured with this continued behavior. Esperanza elaborates, “Whatever her reasons, whether she is fat, or can’t climb the stairs, or is afraid of English, she won’t come down. She sits all day by the window and plays the Spanish radio show and sings all the homesick songs about her country in a voice that sounds like a seagull” (77). Clinging to the meaning she already understands, Mamacita refuses to explore new meaning in her existence by learning the

new language and relating to new people, which her circumstance demands. Her resistance to the changes in her linguistic situation signifies the greater problem of her resistance to the changes in her social situation. She holds to the language of the past, and the memories and places of the past, denying herself relationships within her new community. What is important here is not whether one language is inherently better or more dominant than the other, but the woman's refusal to participate with the community because of language. She limits her potential for development by withdrawing from the meaning—both in terms of language and self-actualization—that is available to her among the women of Mango Street. Holding to a non-existent world of meaning in the past, in her “house in a photograph” (77), Mamacita's mortification when her own baby begins to learn English is overwhelming. “No speak English, she says to the child who is singing in the language that sounds like tin. No speak English, no speak English, and bubbles into tears. No, no, no, as if she can't believe her ears” (78). The child's existence accounts for meaning that she denies.

The purpose of bringing Mamacita down from the third floor to the street would not be to make her experience and language exactly the same as all the other women in the community. Cisneros's text is not an attempt to universalize experience, despite what earlier allegations may assert. Rather, the emphasis on community allows for the individual to understand meaning in context and to develop relationally. Drawing upon theorist Édouard Glissant again, we can understand how linguistic development is a function of relational identity. “Just as Relation is not a pure abstraction to replace the old concept of the universal, it also neither implies nor authorizes any ecumenical detachment. The landscape of your word is the world's landscape. But its frontier is

open” (33). The idea is not to create a new “universal.” However, linguistic relational identity cannot detach itself in the way Mamacita withdraws. While Glissant is always envisioning community in connection to the larger world context (in this instance considering how languages of individual cultures are influenced by their context in the world and relation to other cultures), these ideas are also useful in understanding the influence of community on individual development. The existence of one’s language, “the landscape of your word,” relies upon the language of one’s community, “the world’s landscape.” The connections of meaning between self and language, while at first perhaps drawing from rules already created and preceding an individual, are intimately connected to the meaning that exists within the communal language. Jacqueline M. Martinez comments, “Thus, we understand the process of coming to speak as a Chicana not simply as a decision to do so but rather as a coming to perceive concretely one’s own self-in-relation-to-others and the world as fundamentally different than one had previously” (35). Linguistic development is therefore necessarily relational. This shared landscape of meaning leads to common experience, perhaps, but not necessarily universal. The ways each participant navigates her way to common experience is unique, allowing for individual interpretation and understanding of the meaning and significance of each experience. Thus, while language, and by extension identity, may have shared meaning, “its frontier is open” (Glissant 33).

Observing Esperanza’s linguistic development we see that her coming to the communal language is not an effort to remake herself into the quintessential member of the Mango Street community, but rather it gives her shared experience from which to draw her own meaning. After her first linguistic experience with Lucy and Rachel,

correcting Lucy's grammatical error, Esperanza seems more attuned to the nuances of the language of *Mango Street*, as marked in later conversation: "The Eskimos got thirty different names for snow, I say. I read it in a book" (35). Her non-standard verb usage here flows with the rest of the girls' conversation, which is peppered with other non-standard phrases like "she got," "them are," and "there ain't." No longer correcting the aberrations, Esperanza not only takes the deviations in stride but now uses them herself as part of her normal speech patterns, making her speech more credible to the other girls. Rather than having language expectations imposed from the outside forces of historical cultural traditions, Esperanza comes to understand her language through the experiences she has in relationship to her peers. She learns the shared language of her community through the active process of speaking and listening, not through a study of prescribed linguistic requirements. Her speech is not an attempt at representation of the culture at large, but rather a reflection of her unique language experience. While all the girls in the scene share the language experience exhibited in these particular speech patterns, it becomes apparent that they do not all perceive their language experience in the same way. Esperanza arrived at this experience from a different course than Lucy and Rachel, coming on the scene later than they did. Previously, Esperanza exhibited that she was more fluent in the rules of "standard" English. Her shift in register shows that she is developing an awareness of the multiplicity even a single language can embody. In response to Esperanza's "fact" about snow, Lucy is vehement in her denial, determined that there couldn't be thirty kinds of snow, "only two" (35). The insistence on "only two" shows that Lucy cannot yet see the plurality she herself exhibits. So while the members of the community share the experience of language and various important points of

meaning, it is apparent that individual interpretation and understanding are realized from this shared language. Esperanza's grasp on the plurality of language is consistent in some respects with Arteaga; she does exhibit the "interlingual" quality that he celebrates among other Chicano/a writers. This very plurality, though, would have to allow for the various interpretations and representations of language experience, included among them those of Chicanas who are English dominant, as demonstrated in Cisneros's work.

Throughout this same conversation started by Esperanza's discussion of snow, the girls also confront the concept of naming both people and objects. Rachel mentions a cousin who has "three last names, and let me see, two first names. One in English and one in Spanish" (35). The idea of one being having multiple names seems to contrast Esperanza's attempt at naming the clouds, all of which have only about ten names (36). Nenny is unsatisfied with the labels, though. "No, she says. That there is Nancy, otherwise known as Pig-eye. And over there is her cousin Mildred, and little Joey, Marco, Nerieda and Sue" (36). The remainder of the conversation is interspersed with Nenny individually naming each cloud she sees, likely after people she knows, with names both distinctly Anglo and Spanish. While Nenny sees names as individual markers, Esperanza looks at names as classifications, as categories of belonging.

Given Esperanza's confusion and distress over the linguistic experience of her own name, it is understandable that the shared linguistic experience, naming the clouds, would have different results in the two sisters. Nenny is satisfied with her own name and so seeks to go about naming others. Esperanza evaluates the situation differently, turning her observations and experience with naming more internally. Esperanza's name has been an exclusionary categorization for her. There is no English counterpart for her name, like

a Juan to John translation, nor a comfortable Spanish nickname as there is for her sister, “Magdalena who at least can come home and become Nenny” (11). Instead, she is “always Esperanza” (11), a name that does not comfortably fit. Confined by the linguistic act of naming, Esperanza decides to rechristen herself: “I would like to baptize myself under a new name, a name more like the real me, the one nobody sees. Esperanza as Lisandra or Maritza or Zeze the X. Yes. Something like Zeze the X will do” (11). The name “Esperanza” is loaded with cultural significance for readers and critics who cling to the English translation of “hope.” Often romanticized on the merits of her name alone, Esperanza rejects this cultural collateral. She decides instead to forge a new notion of naming, one that does not privilege any culture or language. Julian Olivares comments on the name Zeze the X, saying, “Esperanza prefers a name not culturally embedded in a dominating, male-centered ideology” (163). The significance of the X, not marked by the dominant Western tradition, nor by any Spanish or Nahuatl cultural and historical associations, is that it is of Esperanza’s own creation. Choosing the name herself, Esperanza recognizes the linguistic significance and context of names—she would not know how to name had she never been named—but also explores the open frontiers of language by opening possibility of what her name can be. She “begin[s] to see and name—and therefore live—afresh” (Rich 35).

#### Cisneros and Creation: Revising Genre

Though Esperanza never does officially adopt the name “Zeze the X,” the sentiment behind the name is carried throughout the book in both content and style. Cisneros constructs a narrative, the “landscape of her word,” that draws upon the literary community of which she is part, the “landscape of her world.” However, the

incorporation of elements from the various communities in which she participates results in an open frontier of literary genre. While the text may be classified in the common category of *Bildungsroman*, the style of the book is certainly uncommon. “We learn of Esperanza (and of life in the Chicano barrio) through snippets, anecdotes, and often naively stated observations, which give the text a high degree of orality, connecting it with the repressed pre-Columbian traditions of Mexico” (Karafilis 67). Gleaning elements of expression from major influences of the Chicana population, both Western and indigenous traditions, Cisneros infuses meaning into the very structure of her text. The text itself becomes a sort of metaphor for Chicana identity, drawing upon linguistic traditions available and bringing them into one. However, the combination is not simple. Just as Chicana identity is not a simple sum of one part Mexican, one part American, the text is not an easy conglomerate of dual traditions, an oral *Bildungsroman*. The open frontier Cisneros accesses through drawing upon the multiple landscapes is not the boundary line between the two identities, but the creation of something new entirely. Cisneros challenges what the traditions she draws upon have been, modifying them for her purposes of expression.

As Arteaga has described the necessity of a work to be “dialogic” with the dominant discourse (74), it would appear that in this regard Cisneros’s style is quite exemplary of this Chicano/a poetic tradition in its very work to test and reshape tradition. However, Cisneros moves beyond Arteaga’s initial requirement of bringing the dominant discourse into dialogue to actually changing the discourse itself, opening new possibilities for genre and Chicana aesthetics. Taking the authoritative form of *Bildungsroman*, Cisneros changes the genre in function and purpose. The style “not only

challenges the traditional, linear writing that valorizes one particular line of progress and stifles the alternative voices and experiences that abound in Cisneros's text, but it also underscores the transient 'insignificant' nature of the immigrant experience in dominant American culture" (Karafilis 68). While a typical coming-of-age novel would focus on the development of a central character, Cisneros emphasizes the development of her protagonist *through* the development of the people in her community. Many of the chapters are not about Esperanza herself. Rather, it is Esperanza's observation of others, her relationship with them, that shapes her into who she ultimately becomes. Some characters appear several times, like Lucy, Rachel, and Sally. Others, only briefly, like the somewhat obscure immigrant "Geraldo No Last Name," who Esperanza never actually meets, but who leaves a deep impression on her when he dies so far away from home without his family's knowledge (65). The emphasis on community influence alters the genre from emphasizing the ideal of "mobility" and from "conjuring the image of forward-moving progress," which a *Bildungsroman* usually does (Karafilis 68). Rather than this emphasis on forward momentum, Cisneros ends the book almost exactly where it begins, with Esperanza's description of her house on Mango Street, "the house I belong but do not belong to" (110). Any movement in this new genre is circular, as Esperanza explains: "I have gone away to come back" (110). Karafilis comments that, "Cisneros reinforces the importance of community and returning to the neighborhood that helped shape her as a Chicana growing up in American society" (68). This emphasis on community shapes the genre Cisneros creates. While she draws upon influences from her own literary community, she opens new possibilities for relational development in the account of community within her writing. Glissant contends that "Relation informs not

simply what is relayed but also the relative and the related. Its always approximate truth is given in narrative” (27). So Cisneros’s narrative style is born out of the necessity of conveying relational development.

### Relational Writing

It is not surprising, then, that Cisneros’s protagonist would also be a writer. For Esperanza to express the development of her relational identity, she would need narrative. Her relational identity “needs words to publish itself, to continue” (Glissant 28). As we watch Esperanza develop as a character and as a writer, we see that just as her language development is relational, so is her linguistic creation of the written word. Most of her discussion of her own writing is in connection to other characters, and it is this social nature of her writing that really leads to the full development of both the artist and the artform. Some of Esperanza’s earliest writing instruction comes from the unlikely source of her bed-ridden aunt who lives a few blocks away. She explains a simple affection for the woman, “We liked my aunt. She listened to our stories” (60). Aunt Lupe fosters a space of safe expression—“She listened to every book, every poem I read to her” (60). It is in this haven that Esperanza braves more personal expression: “One day I read her one of my own. I came very close. I whispered it into the pillow” (60). Her childlike poem follows. “I want to be / like the waves of the sea, / like the clouds in the wind, / but I’m me. / one day I’ll jump / out of my skin. / I’ll shake the sky / like a hundred violins” (60-61). Esperanza’s vulnerability is evident, as she has to whisper the words so closely to her aunt. The personal nature of the poem, not only written by but also about her, leaves her open for rejection of both her writing ability and her developing sense of self. Lupe’s sensitivity here not only encourages Esperanza’s personal development, but her linguistic

creation as well. “That’s nice. That’s very good, she said in her tired voice. You just remember to keep writing, Esperanza. You must keep writing. It will keep you free, and I said yes, but at that time I didn’t know what she meant” (61). Lupe sees the potential not just in the artful form of the language, but in its expressive value as well. She gives Esperanza much-needed validation in her ability to use language as means of communicating not only thoughts, but self and relationships, and the freedom that comes from such comprehension.

As the book progresses, we see Esperanza’s awareness of her creative power grow. She seems to understand more and more how writing can keep a person free as she shares with others in her community. Even someone as unlikely as the character of Minerva finds some sense of self and freedom in writing. Minerva, not much older than Esperanza is already faced with raising two children on her own. Minerva, who “cries because her luck is unlucky. Every night and every day. And prays” (84). What is interesting is where Esperanza describes Minerva finding solace: “But when the kids are asleep after she’s fed them their pancake dinner, she writes poems on little pieces of paper that she folds over and over and holds in her hands a long time, little pieces of paper that smell like a dime” (84). Reading her anxiety in the folds of the poems, Minerva too is completely vulnerable in her self-expression. The two girls, with their age and poetry in common, form a two-person writing circle, sharing their work and their vulnerability. “She lets me read her poems. I let her read mine” (84). Finding a literary peer, Esperanza can see how language can be voice to, and therefore liberation from, the heaviness of life. As she progresses in her development, both as an individual and as a writer, her sense of the liberating effects of her language is heightened. “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” (110). It is through her writing that she can recognize her experiences on Mango Street as liberating, rather than confining. In writing, Esperanza can explicate the relationships that have shaped her.

So closely connected is Esperanza’s relational identity to her writing that even her eventual departure from Mango Street is described in literary terms. Leaving Mango Street means packing “bags of books and paper” (110). She imagines the reaction to her physical separation from the community: “Friends and neighbors will say, What happened to that Esperanza? Where did she go with all those books and paper? Why did she march so far away?” (110). However, she goes on to explain that the departure is only temporary, the separation only physical. In reality, her connection to Mango Street is never really severed. “I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot out” (110). Esperanza comes back to the community in her writing. She does not seek to escape the community and relationships that gave her identity, to somehow rise above them. She seeks to return the linguistic liberation—both spoken and written—she developed through them.

Such a communal approach to writing may seem counter to the development of an individual. Yet, it is the very emphasis on community that allows Esperanza’s individual development and fulfillment. Arteaga himself states that while writing is an intensely personal process, “yet it is just as truly a social matter, and the writing for other people makes just as much sense” (5). This social matter of language and the linguistically creative process of writing becomes the foundation of a new Chicana aesthetic. While Cisneros’s aesthetic still meets the demands set by the custodians of the tradition, namely

that it is multi-lingual and challenges authoritative discourse, her approach to language use, genre, and writing broadens the scope for what such a tradition might entail. Because her text functions as a reflection of relation rather than of cultural or historical tradition, Cisneros's aesthetic invites the possibility of multiple approaches to literary production and tradition. Relation fosters shared experience within a community, but also individual interpretation and understanding of such experiences. Interpretation of relational experience, written in the language of one's community, may vary from one author to the next. So rather than counting an author's English-to-Spanish usage ratio, or attempting to measure the radical nature of a text's literary style, what is more important to consider in judging by this aesthetic is the writing's representation of relation. In this regard language and writing are not only important components of this aesthetic, but combined they become an ideal metaphor for Chicana identity development. They draw upon meaning inherent and meaning developed relationally to forge individual comprehension of experience. Utilizing such a rich literary and linguistic community for her setting, Cisneros employs this metaphor in creating an aesthetic to capture not *the* Chicana identity, but the infinite possibility of identity within relation and community.

## CONCLUSION: DEDICATION AND WAILING RIGHTS

The past three decades have been witness to remarkable production in Chicana literature. Gloria Anzaldúa deserves a great deal of credit for the advances she made not only stylistically, but also in bringing important theoretical issues to light. Although Cisneros has won much critical acclaim for her work, proving a force to be reckoned with in the mainstream literary market with her multiple successes in both poetry and fiction, the theoretical implications of her work have remained regrettably under the critical radar. One of the reasons I have so strenuously objected in this thesis to the overemphasis of Anzaldúa's theories is not because I deem them invalid or devoid of purpose and insight but because so often the scholarship on Cisneros has miscast the nature of her work by viewing it through the historical lens created by Anzaldúa. While the reconfigured history that many scholars glean from Anzaldúa may provide keen insight to some pieces of Chicana literature, it is apparent that Cisneros's work requires a different approach. From the outset of *The House on Mango Street*, Cisneros invites a relational reading of the text. The dedication of the book reads "A las mujeres/ To the women." She does not single out English or Spanish speakers in her dedication, or any particular ethnic or national group; she includes the entire community of women who contribute to the shaping of an individual Chicana's identity. Cisneros thus requires us to consider Chicana identity in terms of contemporary context rather than historical framework.

In bringing historical revision to bear on the articulation of Chicana identity formation, some critics might argue that it is important for Chicanas to recognize who they have been in order to become who they will be; retracing the steps of history to discover that empowerment and independence have been part of Chicana identity all

along could lead to further empowerment and independence among Chicanas.

Recognizing that strength and self-determination are indeed important points, this realization can perhaps more appropriately come relationally, as Cisneros has illustrated in her writing. Relational development of identity proves an even more liberating definitional strategy than historical readings since relation allows for plural representations of experience and understanding. For example, let's consider one of the most basic forms of communication. Anzaldúa states that, "Wailing is the Indian, Mexican and Chicana woman's feeble protest when she has no other recourse" (55). Putting this form of communication in context of historical and relational approaches shows us that relation provides for not only greater empowerment and independence for Chicanas, but also a broader spectrum of possibility for Chicana identity. Anzaldúa arrives at her conclusions about wailing through an examination of the historical basis of the wail: "These collective wailing rites may have been a sign of resistance in a society which glorified the warrior and war and for whom the women of the conquered tribes were booty" (55). While this analysis may be apt for the study of Chicana works that do utilize historical themes and paradigms in construction, alternative approaches provide deeper insight into works that do not.

Cisneros utilizes the idea of wailing in her story "Woman Hollering Creek." Looking to Cisneros's theory of relational identity development, we can see that her sense of the wail's significance derives more from a person's community and experience than from historical interpretation. This theory provides not only greater insight into identity development in the story itself, but further extends implications of plurality and relation into the discussion of Chicana identity and the status of Chicana literary theory as

a whole. “Woman Hollering Creek” is the story of Cleófilas, a young bride brought to San Antonio from Mexico. Traveling with her husband, she first crosses the creek and learns of its peculiar name on her way to her new home. “La Gritona. Such a funny name for such a lovely *arroyo*. But that’s what they called the creek that ran behind the house. Though no one could say whether the woman had hollered from anger or pain” (46). Her response to the creek’s name is significant to those looking for application of Anzaldúa’s reasoning of the wail. Cleófilas assumes that the hollering woman the creek is named for wails out of “pain or rage” (47). Given her surroundings, the significance of the names of her neighbors on either side—Dolores (Spanish for pains or trials) and Soledad (solitude)—it makes sense that “the name Woman Hollering fascinated her” (46). When she struggles in an abusive marriage, such surroundings—pain, loneliness, and the hollering creek—offer little solace. With no escape, the reading of the woman of Mexican descent repressed by her history and culture is not a difficult case to make.

However, Cleófilas’s salvation, even her very survival, does not come in a rewrite of history or a retelling of Mexican or Aztec mythology. When we look at Cleófilas’s development throughout the story we see that it is actually her experience in relation to others that transforms her. When her situation gets too desperate, she finally seeks help; Graciela (grace), a receptionist at a doctor’s office, arranges for a friend, Felice (fortunate or happy), to take Cleófilas and her baby to the bus station so they can escape the abusive Juan Pedro undetected. This drive across the creek is different: “when they drove across the *arroyo*, the driver opened her mouth and let out a yell as loud as any mariachi” (55). Startling her passengers, Felice apologizes and explains, “Every time I cross that bridge I do that. Because of the name, you know. Woman Hollering. *Pues*, I holler” (55). Her

response to the name of the creek is a stark contrast to Cleófilas's: "Pain or rage, perhaps, but not a hoot like the one Felice had just let go" (56). Yet Felice sees her response not only as logical, but one that should be shared: "That's why I like the name of that *arroyo*. Makes you want to holler like Tarzan, right?" (55). Who *wouldn't* have such a reaction to the creek? Cleófilas seems befuddled trying to digest this response. "What kind of talk was that coming from a woman? Cleófilas thought. But then again, Felice was like no woman she'd ever met" (55-56). Here is a woman, practically a stranger, being so open and free with her words and attitude. She drives a pickup—"a pickup, mind you" (55)—and is unabashed about her independence of husband or family. As Cleófilas considers this woman, an entirely new world of possibility opens up to her, and "Then Felice began laughing again, but it wasn't Felice laughing. It was gurgling out of her own throat, a long ribbon of laughter, like water" (56).

Through this brief relationship with Felice, Cleófilas changes. Cisneros demonstrates once again that a relational theory of identity provides important understanding of Chicana identity. The same crucial elements of identity development in *The House on Mango Street*—gender roles, relationship to space, and linguistic expression—come into play in Cleófilas's relational development. Her perception of what a woman can be is altered. Before her options were the grief and abandonment her neighbors experienced, or the glamour and romance of the women on the telenovelas, women "with names like jewels" (53). With Felice, she sees not a pre-determined course but one of her own choosing. Likewise, her understanding of place changes. Previously, the creek had represented the town and home that were so confining: "There is no place to go. Unless one counts the neighbor ladies. [. . .] Or the creek" (51). The creek that runs

behind her house signified separation from freedom. However, after Felice responds to the creek in such a positive, energetic manner, Cleófilas reconsiders it. It was not the physical space that confined her, but her relationship and associations in that space. The creek metaphorically becomes a part of her, “gurgling out of her own throat, a long ribbon of laughter, like water” (56), making the geographical space in fact the metaphorical space of her newfound understanding of herself. And so, ultimately, is the meaning of the wail of La Gritona altered. As Cleófilas comes to see herself and her space differently through her relationship with Felice, her understanding of what a wail communicates changes. Before, the only options were the negative pain and rage; however, Cleófilas now sees potential in expressing excitement, energy, even joy in La Gritona’s cries. Each of these elements of Cleófilas’s identity—her understanding of her potential as a woman, of space and community, and of language and communication—all come through the experience of relation. While some might argue this as a re-examination of history, calling it a rewrite of cultural expectations, what is most crucial in Cleófilas’s development is her relationship with Felice. Historical readings, even re-readings, focus on the individual, keeping identity limited by the boundaries that divide and distinguish individuals in history. Expanding the scope of identity beyond the range of history alone to the larger community of contemporary relationships—a las mujeres, to the women—allows for the interchange of experience across individual borders. Cleófilas takes some of Felice as part of her, just as Esperanza takes some of the women of Mango Street.

From this analysis we can see that the theoretical implications of Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street* extend beyond just the scope of that text. Though the book has

not been discussed as extensively as Anzaldúa's work in terms of its theoretical contributions to the development of the Chicana literary discipline, the book clearly does provide an alternative for interpreting Chicana identity development. Rather than considering Chicana identity through the single lens of Anzaldúa's work, or the perhaps even narrowing the lens to some of the scholarship surrounding her work, Cisneros's work asks us to consider alternative theories. Perhaps we will always look for the repressed woman in Chicana literature, and see hints of icons and myths among the characters and plotlines, but the reality of her experience will be with figures like Lupe, Maren, Lucy, Rachel, Mamacita, and Sally. These are the women we have to contend with in determining Chicana identity—their pasts, their attributes, their relationships. We may see parallels in them to the mythic figures of the past, but these are not the women of legend; romanticizing or mythologizing them detracts from who they actually are and what they contribute to their communities. Each brings unique experience and awareness to the community—their own wail—which, when shared through relation, offers each other participant the opportunity for development self-determined human beings.

Recognition of relational, even co-constitutional identity development demands an acknowledgement of plurality in identity discussion. If identity results from relation, then the possibilities for identity are limitless as the potential for relation is limitless. The discussion of *the* Chicana identity grows increasingly problematic, then, as any two women falling into that category may have experienced drastically different identity development. Esperanza and Cleófilas, for example, are both of Mexican descent, but their various experiences in relation to other characters result in very different identities. They live in different parts of the country, one in a more urban environment, one more

rural, and so come into contact with different communities of people. While their heritage binds them racially and perhaps culturally, giving them some shared experience, much of their experience and relationships will be different from each other's, and therefore result in dissimilar development. Relation demands a more complex understanding of identity development. We can no longer consider the exclusive identity categorizations of virgin or whore, Spanish- or English-speaker, Mexican- or Anglo-influenced. The reality is that these historically defined dualities do not cover the broad range of Chicana identity potential. As Cisneros illustrates through Esperanza's relationships, a Chicana may develop in ways that set her somewhere in the middle of these categories or outside them altogether. Thus, the discussion of Chicana identity must extend beyond the confines of history to account for the plurality already exhibiting itself in the literature.

Expanding the parameters of what a Chicana identity might entail begs the question of the utility of the term "Chicana" in describing identity. Through the historical methods outlined by Anzaldúa, the categorization has become as much mythical as it is genealogical. Such mythical standards render identity already inexact, fluid even. But considered in the framework of relation, we can see that categorizing the concept of Chicana may in fact limit the potential for expression and development. Binding an individual to development within pre-defined parameters of what her identity might consist of does not account for the experiences and relationships not yet conceived of by such definitions. Just as Anzaldúa argues that the border between countries is porous, so too is the boundary line between one culture and another, one community and another, even one identity and another. The Chicana categorization in literature seems less useful, then, as an identity marker and comes to function more as a mode of writing.

Rather than identity, “Chicana” might more appropriately be associated with writings dealing with the experience of the effects of Mexican diaspora. It is less about genealogy and historical tradition and more about which communities these authors and characters in which they form relationships and gain experience. Because experience varies depending on context and relation, we need a broader concept of not only what the experiences might entail, but how we might talk about them.

This plurality in Chicana literary discussion demands a broader range in the theory surrounding Chicana literature. In order to understand the multiplicity of experience and identities arising out of the various contexts and relationships that abound in literature, we need a variety of approaches to interpreting them. It is becoming increasingly apparent that one size does not fit all, even in the seemingly narrow parameters of Chicana literature. Sandra Cisneros provides an alternative to Anzaldúa’s historical paradigm for considering identity development in her development of a relational theoretical framework in *The House on Mango Street*.

As Cisneros’s very approach indicates that community is essential to development, multiple theoretical viewpoints thus become necessary. If we place this relational application in the context of the burgeoning Chicana literary discipline in which Cisneros began her career, we can see a call for broadening the theoretical community to increase the development in understanding the literature. Understanding Chicana literature will happen best in the context of a variety of theories, and so raising more voices, rather than a single wail, to create a community of theories will allow for each to develop more fully. Just as Lucy in *The House on Mango Street* was unaware her own linguistic plurality, insisting on “only two” types of snow (35), so may the field of Chicana literary theory

miss its potential for development in insisting on only one, or even only two modes of interpretation. The very development of Cisneros's theory invites, even demands the development of other new lenses, new ways of understanding what it means to "belong but [. . .] not belong" (110).

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