

The Aztlánian Lens: Migrating Back to *Mango Street*

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Abstract

In studying the post-civil rights canonized works of Latino American literature, it appears their historical and geographical relevance often lacks representation. Unlike the dominate literature, the voice of the Chicano appears as if from nowhere in the historical, textual landscape. Furthermore, with regard to geographical history in the U.S., the subtext of Latino novels asks us to consider an alternate trajectory, one that is not dependent solely on a westward expansion model. As a pre-text to understanding Aztlánian rhetoric and Latino migratory patterns, Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* serves as a lens to show how the "return-to-home" theme pervades many Latino American texts. Consequently, these migratory patterns allow us to understand the return-to-home themes inherent in Sandra Cisneros' fictional *The House on Mango Street*. The construction of Cisneros text reveals the migratory narrative, which reinforces the Aztlánian lens. The story's protagonist takes us through an eco-critical examination of how space constructs identity. Cisneros engages the voice of the narrator in a struggle to escape her barrio neighborhood by utilizing both a physical and emotional migration which ultimately returns her back home. Using narrative theory, this analysis focuses on how migratory themes in this novel, taught in most junior and senior high schools, link Chicano texts with an Aztlánian ideology and a commitment to community.

Latino American Literature is vital to the breadth and complexity of the branch of American literature studied in high schools and universities. Yet, aside from the ethnic/linguistic solidarity of its authors, and the narrative often positioned as a site of struggle, little work has been done to explain what unites Latino literature as a cohesive body. While the

themes of Latino literature aim to express non-hegemonic values, breaking with bourgeoisie and elitist culture, the literature itself lacks analysis beyond the challenges a minority class experiences concerning “how hard” it is to fit in, how brown clashes against white, and how poverty creates a condition of inhumanity. It is vital to approach this literature in the same way in which we approach Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, Anne Bradstreet’s “Queen Elizabeth,” and Thomas Jefferson’s “Notes on the State of Virginia”—with an awareness of its historical context. Literature often represents historical time and space—taught to foreground historical attitudes so we emerge more informed about important ideologies in our country and how they have shaped and altered the dialectic of a nation over time. Sandra Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street*, for example, has multiple layers of meaning. This analysis aims to arm English professors with a fresh approach to the text, considering historical and cultural elements often neglected when discussing Latino literature. This discussion aims to move the dialectic of this genre beyond the “down and out” theme.

In her 1987 work *Borderlands: The New Mestiza*, Gloria Anzaldúa brings such a dialectic to the fore, creating a perspective of the U.S. shaped from a southwest trajectory. Her approach is in direct contrast to the East to West expansion model commonly taught in American history and literature. Weaving a new sort of text by blending historical commentary, critical analysis and creative writing in a bilingual tongue, Anzaldúa seeks to include the Chicano nation in the historical context of the United States. Her work aims at inclusiveness, targeting the physical and psychological borders of divisiveness between two cultures. Anzaldúa writes: “A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary ... a constant state of transition” (25).

This state of transition is utilized as Anzaldúa traces the ancestry of the Mexican people back to the great Aztecs and the site of their original homeland in the Americas, the region known as Aztlán in what is now the U.S. Southwest. Citing the Cochise culture as the parent culture of the Aztecs (the parent culture of Mexicans), Anzaldúa reminds us that the Cochise were the original inhabitants of the Americas some 35,000

years ago. It is estimated that the last of these ancient ancestors left Aztlán around 1,000 A.D., migrating into what is now Mexico and Central America. Juan Cortez and the Spanish invasion of Mexico in 1521 set in motion a retro-migration and resettlement of the Aztlán territory, which began in the early 1600s and continues today. Anzaldúa writes: “We have a tradition of migration, a tradition of long walks. Today we are witnessing la migración de los pueblos mexicanos, the return odyssey to the historical/mythological Aztlán. This time, the traffic is from south to north” (33).

This Aztlánian space, the mythological homeland of the Mexicano, was advanced by the poet Alurista during the 1960s civil rights movement. Alurista claimed Aztlán as a physical space of healing and retro-migration, which Mexicans sought to return to, a space which borders the Mexican past and present. Aztlán today is generally defined in the Chicano consciousness as the former Mexican territories acquired by the U.S. as a result of the 1846 U.S.-Mexican War and the subsequent signing of The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo on February 2, 1948. The area includes California, Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, Utah, and parts of Colorado, Oklahoma and Wyoming.

The newly acquired lands, more than fifty percent of Mexico’s former territory, created a new physical border between the two countries, moving the national line some 1,700 miles southward; however, the residue created unnatural borders between two cultures as 100,000 former Mexican citizens were left on the northern side of the U.S.-Mexico fence—their cultural decedents looking back on Aztlán with nostalgia. This nostalgia is addressed by Catherine Wiley. In her essay “*Teatro Chicano and the Seduction of Nostalgia*,” Wiley tells us “nostalgia shapes characterization, plot, and theme” and that its “temporal aspect, its relation to history, is as significant [as] its spatial aspect Nostalgia tries to recall an old place in a former time . . . either imaginatively, or occasionally, really—returning to that place” (99-100).

This nostalgia is intricately woven in Sandra Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street*. Analyzing *Mango Street* through a nostalgic, Aztlánian lens allows us to read the elements of Latino literature with historical context in mind. Cisneros’ opening paragraph invites the reader into this nostalgia: “what I remember most is Mango Street” (3). Cisneros, like

Anzaldúa, metaphorically wanders back through time, invoking the memory which shapes the plot and propels the narrative. Her novel, first published in 1984 by the Arte Público Press, became an immediate success for its lyricism, unique characterization of barrio neighborhoods, cultural feminist critique, and coming-of-age themes. However, the lens of migration has largely been overlooked with regard to nostalgia and historical memory. In merely approaching *Mango Street* as a *Bildungsroman*, *künstlerroman* or cultural feminist critique, we negate its layers of narrative complexity. It is vital that we understand the dangers of approaching this, or any ethnic literature, from solely hegemonic critical perspectives. Perhaps the best way to understand Latino literature, or any ethnic literature, is by drawing emphasis to its historical context, such as migration. In “Narrative Coyotes: Migration and Narrative Vice in Sandra Cisneros’ *Caramelo*,” Heather Alumbaugh claims that Cisneros smuggles language into American culture by slipping in Spanish words and phrases in a contextual way, which allows the reader to maintain comprehension even without the ability to read Spanish. I maintain that in *The House on Mango Street*, Cisneros utilizes the journey of her protagonist, Esperanza, to contextually smuggle in themes of migration, a culturally and historically relevant trope of Latino tradition. By strictly reading *Mango Street* as Latino feminist critique or *Bildungsroman*, Esperanza’s complex and circular migration narrative is sacrificed to hegemonic theories.

Recent scholarship has focused at length on whether Esperanza’s narrative seeks to distinguish her from or unify her with her Hispanic community. I maintain that in the spirit of the *Bildungsroman*, Esperanza appears to reject her Chicano neighborhood; however, she does not come to an acceptance of its inherent problems as many novel endings in the *Bildungsroman* genre tend to do. Instead, her longing for an Aztlanian or utopian space within the community arms her with an activist stance, providing for communal solidarity. As a young child and adolescent, Esperanza looks to the future to create a perfect personal space. Her development through the novel and cultural insights alert her to spaces which she would rather leave behind; however, far from abandoning her culture, by working through her anxieties we can trace Esperanza’s evolution away from and return to community. If we pay careful

attention to the chronological placement of themes in the text, community over individualism seems to prevail throughout the novel. Place, whether mythological or realized, plays a significant role in the shaping of Cisneros' young protagonist's identity.

Before declaring this a text of communal solidarity, it is first important to distinguish the way Cisneros uses migration, ethnicity, gender, and language as signifiers of cultural identity. Christina Rose Dubb has argued that *Mango Street* traces Esperanza's "move[ments] from the naivety of childhood to the shocking understanding of the injustices of sexual inequality" (220). The critical attention paid to the development of a young female can sacrifice the awareness of Cisneros' dedication to writing a communal character sketch. In her first four chapters, Cisneros expresses a collective, cultural identity alongside a personal one, ultimately establishing that the latter cannot be separated from the former. Leslie S. Gutiérrez-Jones, in "Different Voices: The Re-Bildung of the Barrio in Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*" argues, "The individual focus of writing, and particularly of the genre of the *Bildungsroman*, threatens to betray that aspect of indemnity which most calls out for expression: membership in a community" (296). Esperanza's progression as a writer places the novel into the *künstlerroman* genre, yet, as Gutiérrez-Jones expresses, far from breaking free of her culture, Esperanza's evolution as a writer renders her a community activist as she "commits herself to changing, not accepting, the established order ... through a shift from the individual to the communal perspective ... " (299). Jason Frydman disagrees with Gutiérrez-Jones' claims of community solidarity. He argues that a reading of community "unproductively narrows how the works may be read individually" (16), calling Esperanza's "commitment to the community" ambiguous (20), accusing readers of a "critical desire to celebrate an author's good politics [which] blunts the edge of textual analysis" (21), and insisting Esperanza's neurotic tendencies toward upward mobility sacrifice her communal sympathies. Frydman's reading calls for Esperanza's rejection rather than reconciliation of community solidarity. The fact is, Esperanza identifies herself as part of a group first; personal identity becomes secondary. Stella Bolaki agrees that community is not forsaken at the expense of personal freedom. She

argues that *Mango Street* “exemplifies [a] kind of tension between genres” through the “individualized narrator,” alongside “discourses of gender, ethnicity, and class [which] determine to a greater extent the shape and nature of this dialogue” (15). *Mango Street* has the ability to cross genres, “going beyond ‘unnatural boundaries,’ weaving stories of self and community that create new spaces of ethnic solidarity and communal belonging” (16).

The new spaces which Bolaki speaks of are the created borders between self and community. Bolaki’s argument becomes evident in the very first sentence of the novel. Cisneros utilizes narrative voice to emphasize two important themes, the collective voice of the *we* and the attention to physical space. “We didn’t always live on Mango Street” (3) establishes Esperanza as part of a collection of people, her family in this case, and calls attention to the physical space she and her family inhabit. The first chapter, “The House on Mango Street,” echoes the title of the novel, reinforcing the idea that geography is of importance in this work. Similarly, the opening line reinforces the significance of space—Mango Street situates the reader in a specific location; however, Cisneros’ opening line becomes a geographical paradox for readers. While positioning us in the site of the action, one critical to the formation of identity in a young Hispanic girl’s life, the author simultaneously takes us out of that location. “We didn’t always” pulls us out of Mango Street. It informs the reader that someplace has come before it, thereby establishing in the first line that this is a migration narrative. Migration, defined by the Oxford English Dictionary is “to move about, to move frequently.” Esperanza describes in line two: “Before that we lived on Loomis . . . and before that we lived on Keeler.” Sentence three continues the retro-migration: “Before Keeler it was Paulina, and before that I can’t remember” (3). Cisneros, in the space of three opening sentences, informs the reader that this is a narrative shaped by migration. Her family’s migration acts as a metaphor for the historical migratory patterns of the Mexican people. It is the “we have a history of migration” which Anzaldúa addresses. Esperanza cites the promise of an end to migration in the following lines: “[Our 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” (4). In his essay “Sandra

Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* and the Poetics of Space," Julian Olivares points out that "[Cisneros'] nostalgia for the perfect house was impressed on her at an early age from reading many times Virginia Lee Burton's *The Little House*" (233). While it remains true that *Mango Street* was conceived of through Cisneros' personal experiences of living in low-income neighborhoods, and Cisneros herself declared in a 1990 interview with Pilar E. Rodriguez Aranda that "[a]ll fiction is non-fiction ... based on something that really happened" (Grobman 42), many critics, including Frydman, mistakenly place *Mango Street* in Cisneros' birth town and childhood home of Chicago because of the autobiographical strains found in the text. Yet, nowhere in the novel is Mango Street referenced as a Chicago neighborhood. Cisneros states in the same interview that "it's not autobiography" (42). Situated in the any-town *barrio*, *Mango Street* becomes representative of the nostalgic quest for the perfect home, just as Aztlán represents the nostalgic quest for a Chicano homeland. In this way *Mango Street* is representative of Aztlán and the circuitous migration of a culture, which is represented in the family's journey to a space, a house, of their own.

While the migratory history weaves itself into the background of the family identity, just as migration should be viewed as a historical context of Latino ethnicity, it alone is insufficient to show how transitory spaces become formative of identity. It is what happens in these transitory or bordered spaces which shape identity. Nicholas Sloboda affirms in "A Home in the Heart: Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*" that "a home space plays a major role in shaping life and world experiences" (91). Formation of Esperanza's identity as a component of her physical space becomes evident in the following:

Once when we were living on Loomis, a nun from my school passed by and saw me playing out front...

Where do you live? She asked.

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*.

I knew then I had to have a house. A real house. One I could point to. (4-5)

Cisneros' italicized word "there" stresses a tone of voice which indicates to Esperanza something is inherently wrong with "there." The way the nun says it consequently makes Esperanza feel marginalized. By ascribing a derogatory connotation to the physical space, the nun's words create a sense of shame and otherness in Esperanza. The emphasis places significance not merely on a location associated with the lived space which Esperanza shares with her family, but also on the negative perception held about the space. The perceptions of others, the nun in this case, cause Esperanza to feel ashamed, evidenced by her wish for a house that she can one day "point to" without shame. The way the nun says "you live *there*" causes a shift in Esperanza's perception and psychological response to her own geography, altering her identity by causing her to "feel like nothing." This new perception incites Esperanza's need to one day inhabit a space she can claim with pride. In the same way that perceptive geography links Esperanza to her home, Aztlán links Latino culture to a geographical homeland which it can be proud of, a space that can be "pointed to." Sloboda, speaking of Esperanza's space as a writer, tells us that "she cannot separate her living space from her creative perspective ... affirm[ing] the interconnection between an individual's physical and psychological reality" (103). This intersection of physical and psychological space is what I term "perceptive geography." Perceptive geography molds Esperanza's youthful character, just as Aztlán shapes a Chicano historical identity and restorative future. For Esperanza, Mango Street becomes a bordered space, a home between the apartment of her past and the dream house of her future. By establishing geography and migration as central to the formation of a collective and personal identity, the novel asks us to consider place as a central theme. Given its chronological placement in the text, place becomes a primary motif.

In the same way that Cisneros employs geographical space to define identity in chapter one, chapter two directs us to race as a second tenet of identity. Little criticism has addressed the importance of the chapter titled "Hairs," which describes disparate hair types of Esperanza's family members. The opening line reads: "Everybody in our family has different

hair” (6). Hair is a marker of genetic, more specifically, racial identity. Esperanza tells us that “papa’s hair is like a broom, all up in the air,” while her own hair is “lazy.” Her brother, Carlos’ hair is thick and straight, while Nenny’s hair is slippery and “slides out of your hand.” Kiki, the youngest, has “hair like fur” (6). Differentiating between the distinctive hair types within the family, hair becomes the metonymic emphasis of a blended Mexican culture—the genetic imprinting of a *mestizaje* culture comprised of hundreds of years of interracial procreation among the indigenous, Spanish, and African people. The hair illustrations signify an interracial nod of acknowledgement: the thick and straight hair indicative of Indian background, the silky, curly hair textures often associated with Euro-Spanish ancestry, while Kiki’s hair like fur and papa’s all-up-in-the-air-hair are metaphors for the nappy texture commonly associated with African ancestry. Through describing hair, Esperanza represents a *mestizo* culture within her own family. By placing ethnic considerations in chapter two, the novel suggests spatially that ethnic identity is formative alongside geographic identity. This blended identity also reinforces the communal nature of Cisneros’ work. While extensive scholarship has been focused on Cisneros’ short work of fiction, few scholars have analyzed the significance of this second chapter. It not only invites us into Esperanza’s house as the first chapter did, but introduces the reader to our protagonist’s family members, and even goes so far as to invite us into the family bed, creating an intimate bond between Esperanza and the reader: “When [mama] is holding you ... you feel safe ... [her hair] is the warm smell of bread before you bake it ... the smell when she makes room for you on her side of the bed still warm with her skin, and you sleep near her, the rain outside falling and Papa snoring” (6-7). This passage is significant not only for its references to a *mestizo* biology, but because its intimate nature forms a connection between the reader and the family “when [mama] is holding *you*” (my emphasis). The word “you” addresses the reader and invites us into mama’s embrace. The family bed, and by extension, bread, mama’s hair, papa’s snoring, and the rain become metaphors for safety. We feel safe in this space, in this culture of blended identities and blended “hairs.” The crossing of ethnic borders is traditionally viewed with anxiety; however, in this chapter, Cisneros’ depictions of difference are proximal to those

of comfort, closeness, and familiarity—ethnic diversity within the home is a created space of safety. If Esperanza's narrative left the reader feeling estranged from Mango Street in the first chapter, the second chapter reconciles us to not the physical location of Mango Street but to its people. The spatial significance of this chapter, the way in which it invites us into the family and asks the reader to note its cultural significance insists that the text be read as a collective and not an individual pursuit.

If the text's spatial treatment of themes can be viewed as an indicator of identity markers, and I have established that it is, then gender appears to be a third element of identity. "Boys and Girls" continues in the first person plural narrative *we*; however, it relegates boys to one space and girls to another. It forces a divisiveness created by gendered spaces: "The boys and girls live in separate worlds. The boys in their universe and we in ours" (8). Esperanza does not mean that the boys literally inhabit an alternate physical space; however, the metaphoric description emphasizes the emotional and social spheres which differentiate genders within the family, and hence, Latino culture. Gender factors are significant to personal identity and are portrayed as a divisive force in Mexican culture. The patriarchal system, which much of Latino culture adheres to, is represented in the opening lines of the third chapter: "Carlos and Kiki are each other's best friend . . . not ours" (8). Esperanza and her sister Nenny understand that the men stand united, and the women are relegated to a sphere of their own. This gender consciousness, found often in feminist Latino literature, emphasizes the hierarchy of male-female relationships and women's physical as well as psychological space within society. The hierarchy clearly points to the girls being under the boys in social strata because the brothers "got plenty to say to me and Nenny inside the house. But outside they can't be seen talking to girls," even sisters (8). The brothers having "plenty to say" is implicit of an authoritative hierarchy. We imagine the boys giving orders to the girls. The demarcation line of speech sets a seemingly impermeable boundary between women's and men's spaces. Esperanza's character and her speech become reliant on her ascribed position as a female within Hispanic culture, thus relationships and language become

divided by unnatural borders. Once again, Cisneros notes space, gendered in this case, as formative of the character's communal identity.

This bordered space of speech within her own community becomes even more complex in non-Chicano spaces. In addition to location, ethnicity, and gender, the complicated identity experienced by Esperanza as a result of her cultural migration is defined in the chapter "My Name." Naming represents the individual, and the title of this piece suggests the emphasis has shifted from the communal to the singular. The narrative voice of this piece also transitions from first person plural, which is used throughout the first three chapters, into the first person singular; the storytelling from the "we" point of view is replaced with the voice of "I." These shifts suggest Esperanza's desire to imagine a personal identity. However, Esperanza tells us her name represents, in fact, two selves: "In English my name means hope. In Spanish it means too many letters At school they say my name funny as if the syllables were made out of tin and hurt the roof of your mouth" (10-11). The duality of Esperanza's name creates a dual identity for the character—one in the cultural space of home and her Chicana neighborhood and another in the public or non-Chicana space of school. This is significant because the shift in point of view from the collective to the personal is thwarted. Esperanza's attempt at personal identity away from her cultural space fails. The public space complicates the notion of a purely personal identity because her name, instead of individualizing her, relegates her back to an ethnic composite which lies outside the dominant culture. Names and language become an "otherizing" signifier, placing our protagonist into yet another bordered space.

By examining this bordered geography, ethnicity, gender, and language, it becomes clear how a *mestiza* cultural identity becomes formed. Esperanza's space and autonomy within *Mango Street* borders the dominant culture via these elements. Given their spatial placement in Cisneros' narrative, the text affirms the significance of these four elements in the development of Esperanza's communal character, temporarily sacrificing personal identity in the promotion of cultural identity. Migration, ethnicity, gender considerations and language all become elements of analyzing a collective Latino identity.

Frydman and other critics who claim Esperanza forsakes her community for individual pursuits are no doubt influenced by the more than 100 pages of the narrative devoted to Esperanza's quest to leave Mango Street. The self-empowered ending of communal salvation becomes minimized in light of the heroine's individual pursuits. However, these critics negate authorial intention in Cisneros' writing of the novel. In "Notes to a Young(er) Writer," Cisneros states she had a "need to do something for [her] people There are so few of us writing about the powerless ... " (75-76). And in "Do You Know Me?: I Wrote *The House on Mango Street*," Cisneros affirms that the stories in *Mango Street* are "not consciously critical, nor analytical, nor political. Their intent is to record characters ... " (78). What the critics who would call *Mango Street* a departure from community miss is Esperanza's constant reference to and identification with her family and neighbors. By reading *Mango Street* as a strictly feminist critique or *Bildungsroman*, critics negate this communal identification of Esperanza's character. While she desires a "house that she can point to" beginning on page five, she does not shy away from pointing to the community in which she lives. Despite her wish for a better home, she does not retreat to her bedroom or indoors like others in the novel. Instead, she takes an active, observant role in detailing her community—she takes us on bike rides, joy rides and walking tours as she migrates through her narrative. The experiences of the characters in her neighborhood compose a sort of migration literature of the *barrio*. Esperanza's journey through her neighborhood sketches the characters, men and women, of her community with both pride and protest. Critics might argue that the negative depictions of a community mark the writer's abandonment of her culture; however, ethnic writers like Zora Neal Hurston, who denied to romanticize her African American culture by writing about the wife-beaters and drunks of her neighborhood, actually stand up for a change both from within and from outside. In an interview with Martha Satz, Cisneros said, "My intent was to write stories that don't get told" but "for many writers and women like myself ... [we feel] great guilt betraying [our] culture" (Satz). Indeed, ethnic writers often feel compelled to elevate their culture or be labeled a traitor. Requests for change are viewed as an abandonment of

community and an embrace of the dominant culture's values. However, Esperanza's wish to return to a better community does not insist she abandon her culture, but rather serves to inform her that only people within the community, not outsiders and "[n]ot the mayor" (107) can create positive change. In "Remembering Always to Come Back," Ruben Sanchez tells us that an escape to the pastoral is the character's attempt to find a utopian space free of conflict: "In works by Chicanos, the pastoral is ... the search for the mythical Aztlán, the search for what Aztlán symbolizes" (229). In *Mango Street*, the utopian pastoral is transplanted with Esperanza's quest for a better house and community, not her abandonment of them.

The end of the text echoes the beginning and Esperanza's emotional, empowered return to community through the wisdom of Latino authority. The three sisters, in the chapter of the same name, assist Esperanza in reconciling her longings for a better life and her communal identity. The sisters, "who did not seem to be related to anything but the moon" (103), represent the mysticism in which Latino culture is rooted. The clairvoyants affirm Esperanza's wish to leave Mango Street, stating, "It'll come true," yet one of the sisters also reminds her of her obligation: "When you leave you must remember to come back for the others. A circle, understand?" (105). Esperanza's emotional migration away from Mango Street suddenly reverses and the circle of shame returns: "Then I didn't know what to say. It was as if she could read my mind, as if she knew what I had wished for, and I felt ashamed for having made such a selfish wish ... Yes. Yes, I said ..." (105). Esperanza's shame becomes indicative of her new perceptive geography, realizing that Mango Street and its people have shaped her own identity. Her first shift away from community was caused by the nun, an outsider, while her emotional return to community is invoked by Latino authority.

Shame, this time, transforms and empowers Esperanza, as she closes the novel with a circular ending back to the beginning: "We didn't always live on Mango Street. Before that we lived on Loomis ... and before that we lived on Keeler. Before Keeler it was Paulina, but what I remember most is Mango Street ... the house I belong but do not belong to" (110). Her new perceptive geography allows Esperanza to embrace Mango Street as both a site of struggle and of healing, just as Aztlán is a

historical site of struggle for the Chicano while simultaneously offering restoration. Both become a space of origin, of formation, of migration and return. Esperanza's evolution and maturity, her complex emotions about Mango Street, and her quest for empowerment bring the narrative back to her community: "They will not know I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot out" (110). Far from abandoning her community, Esperanza's circular storytelling, the first person plural narrative, her geographical identity, and communal character sketches affirm her commitment to community.

Communal identity, including her geography, is central to Cisneros' character as Alicia tells Esperanza, "Like it or not, you are Mango Street, and one day you'll come back too" (107). Laurie Grobman declares Mango Street an essential, creative space that the protagonist cannot abandon, "therefore Esperanza as narrator and Cisneros as author return to Mango Street for the 'human and historical' materials of their own creativity" (47). Like the Chicano who dwells in the borderlands of culture, straddling both his Latino roots and the American dream, *The House on Mango Street* is both a reflection of a painful past and a creative, empowered reclaiming of the future. This commitment to the past and to community becomes vital to an accurate presentation of Latino literature in the English classroom. When we merely cite this or other ethnic literatures as the "down and out" story, waiting for an ethnic other to sympathize, we fail to acknowledge it as a collective body which contains its own elements of empowerment by crossing borders to a historical place of identity, and a rejection of outside forces that would shape a culture to their standards. The return-to-home themes in *Mango Street* and many other Latino texts represent the symbolic, nostalgic quest for Aztlán, a utopian space of inclusiveness which allows for the healing of community.

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