

Review

Identity, Ambivalence, and Resistance in Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*

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In most studies of Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*, neither the ambivalence nor the resistance operating in the book have been properly investigated or duly acknowledged. On the contrary, Esperanza's wish to re-baptize herself under a different name and her ardent desire to leave the barrio and live in a house of her own have been interpreted as assimilationist gestures that involve either betrayal of her ethnic community or capitulation to oppressive forces in the dominant American culture, such as the ideology of the American Dream. Employing the insights of postcolonial theory and minority criticism, this article shows that these two gestures on the part of the heroine are deeply ambivalent, involving in fact both a radical sense of hybridity and an act of active resistance. Like the name Esperanza chooses for herself beyond the English and Spanish versions of her inherited name, the architecture and location of her dream house represent a forward thrust for freedom based on a critique of the dominant discourses in both Mexican-American and Anglo-American cultures, such as patriarchy and the ideology of the American Dream. From this perspective, it is not the titular house on Mango Street but Esperanza's dream house outside the barrio that constitutes the ultimate metaphor for her identity – an identity that is at once ambivalent, hybrid, and resistant.

Keywords: Ambivalence, Hybridity, Identity, Resistance, Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*

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INTRODUCTION

"Perhaps there is no identity so perfect, so seamless, so well-fitted to her that she could wear it, be it, perform and live it without resentment, without sadness, without yearning, without guilt, hatred and even violence" (Honig 1993, p. 183).

Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* presents a radical model of hybrid Chicano identity that can be defined, in spite of a deep ambivalence, by its resistance to the antagonistic forces in both Anglo-American and Mexican-American cultures. More

precisely, such a model of identity is able to resist both the ethnic patriarchal forces of Chicano community and the elitist ethnocentrism and class oppression of the dominant bourgeois Anglo culture. However, despite the impressive body of criticism on *The House on Mango Street* and the varied perspectives from which the book has been approached, in most studies of the novel neither the ambivalence nor the resistance operating in Sandra Cisneros's book have been properly investigated or duly acknowledged. On the contrary, some studies have suggested that Cisneros removes resistance altogether from her text. More precisely, Esperanza's musing about her name and her wish to re-baptize herself under a different one, coupled with an ardent

desire to leave the barrio and live in a house of her own, have been interpreted as assimilationist gestures – in other words, as betrayal of her ethnic community and/or capitulation to dominant oppressive forces. Employing the insights of postcolonial theory and minority criticism, this article shows that these two gestures on the part of the heroine are deeply ambivalent. Moreover, Esperanza's ambivalence and fluctuating attitude about her (name)sake and the house of her dreams, involve in fact both a radical sense of hybridity and an effective act of resistance. Like the name she chooses for herself beyond the English and Spanish versions of her inherited name, the architecture and location of Esperanza's dream house represent a forward thrust for freedom based on a critique of the dominant ideologies such as Chicano patriarchy and the American Dream. From this perspective, this article suggests that while the titular house on Mango Street shows Esperanza's oppressive state and fuels her ambitions to be free and independent, it is her dream house outside the barrio that constitutes the ultimate metaphor for her identity – an identity that is ambivalent, hybrid, and resistant.

In one of the earliest reviews of Cisneros's book, the Marxist Chicano critic Juan Rodríguez attacks the author's supposedly "assimilationist" politics and denounces Esperanza's desire for a house of her own as an indication of her, and her author's, bourgeois tastes and internalization of the values and ideals of the dominant Anglo culture such as individualism and upward mobility. As he maintains, "That Esperanza chooses to leave Mango St., chooses to move away from her social/cultural base to become more 'Anglicized,' more individualistic; that she chooses to move from the real to the fantasy plane of the world as the only means of escaping and surviving the limited and limiting social conditions of her barrio becomes problematic to the more serious reader" (quoted in Olivares 1987, p. 168). Although Rodríguez acknowledges the oppressive conditions prevalent in the Chicano community, he insists that the protagonist's "escapist fantasies" through assimilation in Cisneros's "poetically-charged prose sketches" detract from the book's seriousness and value. For it leaves out questions of Anglo political, economic, and sexual oppression and thus fails to foreground the kind of resistance that Rodríguez expects in Chicano texts.

Several other critics have followed Rodríguez in condemning Esperanza's ambivalence about her name and her wish to leave the barrio as signs of betrayal of her ethnic community and internalization of the bourgeois values of the dominant Anglo culture. For example, Julio Cañero Serrano (1999) argues that "What Cisneros' book presents, then, is the traditional ideology that happiness comes with the accomplishment of the 'American Dream.'" Since owning one's house is part of the ideology of the American Dream, Serrano goes on to add that

"The process of 'Americanization,' of becoming 'Anglicized' is epitomized, in Esperanza's case, as having a house of her own, an American house." For Serrano, the Chicano community and Anglo culture are mutually exclusive terms; there is no gray area or middle ground between them. One has to choose the right side – and for Serrano it is the Mexican culture of the impoverished barrio. As such, Esperanza's quest for "individual" liberation, represented by her leaving the barrio, and her "denying her Spanish name" and insisting on its English version "hope," imply her choice of "the 'encouraging' culture of the outer Anglo society" over the Mexican culture, values and people of Mango Street (p. 105).

Like Serrano and Rodríguez, both Beth L. Brunk (2001) and Regina M. Betz (2012) reiterate the Chicano/Anglo binary opposition; though contrary to the former, they see Esperanza's "rejection" of her Spanish heritage and "assimilation" into the dominant culture as positive and enabling. For Brunk (2001), "Esperanza and her friends ... have assimilated as best they can." Part of this effort is Esperanza's refusal to speak Spanish in order to liberate herself from the oppressive cultural package that comes with that language – i.e., her ethnic community's patriarchal ideology and restrictive cultural values. She claims that "Esperanza's silence in this language is symbolic of her ability to break out of this neighborhood and the larger culture that have the power to oppress her" (p. 150). Similarly Regina M. Betz (2012) argues that "Both author and character claim themselves as English in order to flourish as writers and independent women" (p. 18). Betz acknowledges Esperanza's ambivalence and fluctuations between the competing claims of her identity: "young Esperanza's identity is torn between her English tongue – given to her by the Catholic school and the Chicago context – and her traditional roots in the Spanish-speaking domain." Nevertheless, in Betz's opinion, such initial ambivalence is immediately resolved in favor of English, which reflects "the hegemonic influences" of the dominant culture that determine her identity. More precisely, "Esperanza expresses subtle distaste for her Hispanic culture" and "yearns for distance from it" as can be attested by her favoring her English name and denouncing the Spanish meaning to her name" (p. 19).

Arguing from a Marxist perspective, Lilijana Burcar (2017) has recently reaffirmed the "assimilationist" argument of the earlier studies. Burcar goes further, however, in condemning the novel by claiming that Cisneros's narrative of maturation endorses a culturally essentialist perspective. She argues that by making Esperanza's freedom contingent upon leaving the barrio and joining mainstream white America, Cisneros simply promotes the myth that "patriarchy, with its norms and gender subjugation, is inherent only to other cultures and societies" while white America is a place of unlimited freedom and choice for women, that is, as a separate and

progressive space not burdened by patriarchal scripts (p. 127). According to Burcar, however, "The American house of freedom that the novel wholeheartedly endorses is, despite the narrator's proclamation to the contrary, still a house of segregation and strict hierarchical gendered and racialized division of labour" (p. 129). In her quest for a house of her own in white middle class America, Esperanza thus "seeks only small concessions for herself within the capitalist patriarchy without really addressing, let alone doing away with, the structural causes that generate gender differences and demand women's domestication." In sum, Esperanza's American Dream will only come true by acquiescing to the dominant power structures, "participat[ing] in the master's discourse," and thus consolidating and extending Anglo oppression rather than resisting it (p. 132).

Interestingly, other studies which have countered the "assimilationist" readings by overemphasizing Esperanza's ethnic identity and belonging risk becoming the flipside of the "assimilationist" argument by suggesting that Esperanza's true identity is a monolithic membership of the ethnic community. For example, although Maria Elena de Valdes (1992) acknowledges that Esperanza is "culturally a Mexican American," she views her in the final analysis not as a hybrid person, but as one who seeks "self-identity," that is, as someone who must reconcile herself to Mango Street and recognize it as her true identity. Esperanza's ambivalent statement in which she describes the house on Mango Street as "the house I belong to but do not belong to," is viewed by Valdes merely as "semantic impertinence" (Cisneros, 1984, p. 110; Valdes, 1992, p. 68). For Esperanza "belongs to the house on Mango Street and to deny it would be at the expense of herself, of her identity" (Valdes, 1992, pp. 67-8). Similarly, in Maria Karafilis's otherwise illuminating reading of the novel as a hybrid text, the overemphasis on the "crucial" importance of community in Esperanza's maturation process against the ethos of individualism of the dominant culture effectively obliterates the fluidity and multiplicity of Esperanza's identity and reduces it to a single category. What Valdes calls "the breakthrough of self-understanding" in the last vignettes of the narrative is for Karafilis Esperanza's "realizing that she does indeed belong on Mango Street and to her Chicano community after all" (Valdes, 1992, p. 58; Karafilis, 1998, p. 67). In sum, in most of these interpretations of the novel the house on Mango Street is either the house Esperanza hates and eventually leaves for the house promised by the American dream, which confirms her assimilation into the dominant ideology, or it is the house that she eventually comes round to see as the place where she truly belongs. Both perspectives simply ignore Esperanza's profound ambivalence towards Mango Street – an ambivalence that persists to the end of text and is left open without resolution or sublimation. For at

the very close of the narrative, Esperanza continues to vacillate, stating that the house on Mango Street is "The house I belong to but do not belong to" (Cisneros, 1984, p. 110).

Though she does not use terms such as "hybridity" and "ambivalence" in her earlier critical reading of the novel, Jayne E. Marek (1996) recognizes that the model of identity Cisneros's text suggests is essentially "hybrid" and "ambivalent." In other words, Esperanza's identity is not defined by a simple and straightforward opposition to or acceptance of either her ethnic culture or Anglo culture. As Marek states, "The book is far from being a simplistic acceptance of Mexican-American cultural values or a denunciation of Anglo oppression" (p. 179). However, Marek's otherwise insightful interpretation is vitiated by the suggestion that the model of "hybrid" identity that Cisneros's novel advocates should not be viewed from a "resistance" perspective. According to Marek, "the thematic complexity of the work can be seen to problematize and finally to refute the kinds of oppositionality that a traditional reader may expect" (p. 173). In fact, Marek faults postcolonial theory for basing its models of dominant/dominated around the rubric of resistance. She complains that "The expectation of resistance has formed a crucial aspect of postcolonial theory." Against such "homogenizing" thrust, Marek maintains that "minority literatures of the U. S.," for instance, "comprise extremely significant materials that ... cannot be expected necessarily either to show or to react against the styles, symbolism, values, and so forth that characterize canonical writings" (p. 175). Therefore, "Approaching minority literatures with the expectation of finding resistance and anger, rather than approaching with eyes open to variety and individual achievement ... falls far short of preparing readers for all that these literatures contain" (p. 178).

Marek's understandable point is that much criticism of postcolonial and minority literatures has been couched in terms of binary oppositions that essentialize both identity and difference. In such critical readings, the post-colonial minority subject can occupy only one of these two antithetical positions: either a total rejection of Anglo cultural influences and preservation of the essential purity of the ethnic identity, or a total embrace of the ideals and values of Anglo culture, with the concomitant rejection of ethnic identity and traditions. From this perspective, all the critics discussed above have seized upon Esperanza's rebellion against the patriarchy of her community to argue that she gives up her Chicano heritage and embraces, for good and bad, the values and ideals of the dominant American middle class and ardently seeks assimilation into it. A perspective that seeks to express Chicano subjectivity beyond or outside these dominant paradigms to acknowledge Esperanza's ambivalence and the multiple, equally vital elements of her identity is not imagined or allowed. In this sense, the

“expectations of resistance” which Marek denounces involve in fact the question of whether or not a work of fiction falls within or without the “preestablished oppositional politics” of Chicano nationalism or “the preestablished discursive orders” of certain trends in postcolonial theory (Pérez-Torres, 1998, p.170). As we have seen above, it is these “expectations of resistance” which ultimately determine the “seriousness” of the work according to Rodríguez and other Chicano critics. In this sense, these “expectations of resistance” translate ironically enough as “resistance to hybridity,” as Suzanne Rozsak (2016) puts it in a related context (p. 73). According to Rozsak, “resistance to hybridity” reflects the segregationist impulse and ethnic prejudice already prevalent across the various ethnic and racial communities in *The House on Mango Street*. In a statement that might shed light on the faults of many of the readings reviewed above, Rozsak points out that “Whether they are stereotyping a Chicana as ‘Spanish’ or demanding that a Chicana speak in the expected Anglo-American way, these comments exemplify the received cultural wisdom that resists ethnic hybridity by demanding full allegiance to one ethnicity or another” (p. 73).

Nevertheless, one might have one or two reservations about Marek’s otherwise illuminating approach. First, if Cisneros’s text cannot be read as “resistant” on account of its emphasis on hybridity and dismissal of binary oppositions, the corollary of this is that resistance can only be imagined or expected when a text or discourse expresses its thematic concerns in oppositional terms. In other words, Marek makes us believe that hybridity and resistance are mutually exclusive, which is surely a problematic conception that involves a great deal of oversimplification. Moreover, despite Marek’s wholesale denunciation of postcolonial theory for reading postcolonial and minority texts through a “resistance” perspective instead of focusing on “variety and individual achievement,” the work of Homi Bhabha and Gloria Anzaldúa, for example, offers theoretical models of hybridity and ambivalence that address precisely issues of post-colonial and minority identity away from the reductive binary oppositions whether of colonial discourse or anti-colonial nationalism. In these postcolonial models of identity, however, resistance is an essential part of the script of hybridity, not its antithesis. In psychoanalytic terms, ambivalence “describe[s] a continual fluctuation between wanting one thing and its opposite (also ‘simultaneous attraction toward and repulsion from an object, person or action’)” (Young, 1995, p. 153). In his theory of colonial discourse, Bhabha has adapted this psychoanalytical term to describe “the complex mix of attraction and repulsion that characterizes the relationship between colonizer and colonized” (Ashcroft *et al*, 2007, p. 10). In Bill Ashcroft *et al*’s gloss, “The relationship is ambivalent because the colonized subject is never simply and completely opposed to the

colonizer.” This perspective deconstructs the duality of “assimilated” and “resistant” subjects which we have observed above in many critical readings of Cisneros’s text. Instead of “assuming that some colonized subjects are ‘complicit’ and some ‘resistant’, ambivalence suggests that complicity and resistance exist in a fluctuating relation within the colonial subject.” Moreover, colonial discourse is also ambivalent in the sense that “it may be both exploitative and nurturing, or represent itself as nurturing, at the same time” (Ashcroft *et al*, 2007, p. 10). As Marek (1996) points out in the context of American minority literature, neither dominant American culture nor minority cultures are monolithic: “in fact, ‘white American culture’ is far from being unilateral or hegemonic in its manifestations, even as ethnic minority group members are not” (p. 178). The ambivalence of the dominant discourse allows the marginalized minority subject to develop a counter-discursive or deconstructive kind of resistance that both appropriates and subverts the terms, values, and ideals of the dominant culture. Postcolonial conceptions of hybridity therefore reject the resistance rhetoric of anti-colonial nationalism in favour of a post-colonial discourse that uses a different model of resistance, capitalizing on the ambivalence of colonial discourse itself, not on cultural nationalism’s binary oppositions.

To trace these insights and developments in the Chicano conception of identity and resistance, one can observe a paradigmatic shift from Chicano cultural nationalism to the work of Cisneros. The writers of El Movimiento of the 1960s – Corky Gonzalez, Tomas Rivera, Rudolfo Anaya, Oscar Zeta, and Estela Portillo Trambley – might have staged resistance to the systematic Anglo discrimination and exploitation in terms of simple opposition between Chicano identity and dominant Anglo culture, believing that the influence of the latter would threaten the identity and interests of the Chicano community. However, although the younger generation of Chicano writers, such as Ana Castillo and Sandra Cisneros, share the political concerns of the movement writers, they do not valorize the binary models of Chicano identity of the earlier writers. Instead, their texts engage in “discursive resistance against dominant ideologies,” and can be called, in the wake of Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street*, as “contestatory literature or a literature of contestation,” (Mermann-Jozwiak, 2000, p. 101, Rodrigues, 2000, p. 67). A literature of contestation is “counterdiscursive” in the sense that it involves “writ[ing] through and against, not in place of, dominant and dominating discourses” (Pérez-Torres, 1995, p. 34). This counter move allows Chicano works to engage in a “revisionary dialogue” with the older dominant forms of representation, where “a variety of discourses can be negated, supplemented, modified, and repeated” (Alarcón, 1989, p. 99).

In the light of these “postcolonial” insights this article

offers in the following another reading of Esperanza's musings about her name and the "architecture" and location of her dream house in order to trace Esperanza's process of negotiating her identity through the competing forces of Chicano and Anglo cultures. As we shall see, Esperanza's narrative of maturation in *The House on Mango Street* is counterdiscursive and it does, contrary to Marek's assertion, engage in a deconstructive relationship with the dominant models, deconstructing and modifying the styles, symbolism, and values of dominant cultural texts and ideologies. To further illuminate this critical move, the article will focus on Esperanza's dream house as a metaphor for her identity and resistance that involves a critique of the values and ideals of the dominant cultures, especially patriarchy and the ideology of the American dream.

"WHAT IS IN A NAME?:" Esperanza's Hybridity and Resistance

A radical hybrid identity is suggested early in the book when Esperanza explains the meaning of her name and expresses her desire to be baptized under another one. She tells us that "In English my name means hope. In Spanish it means too many letters. It means sadness, it means waiting" (Cisneros, 1084, p. 10). The dangerous connotations of the Spanish version of her name become immediately apparent when she informs us that "Esperanza" was the name of her great-grandmother, a defiant woman who was crushed by patriarchy and had to spend the rest of her life confined to her house sitting by the window like most of the women in Mango Street. Esperanza recognizes that her name in its Spanish version literally interpellates her as a gendered subject within the patriarchal order of the Chicano community (see also Sae-Saue, 2010, p. 275). As such, to accept her namesake is to follow in her great-grandmother's footsteps and accept an identity already scripted by Chicano patriarchal ideology: "I have inherited her name, but I don't want to inherit her place by the window" (Cisneros, 1984, p. 11). Conversely, although the English version of her name means "hope," Esperanza's tone does not suggest that she finds English and the values of the dominant Anglo culture preferable and liberating. This refusal to identify with the dominant culture is subtly suggested by her comparing the cadences of her name in both languages. At her Anglo school her name is difficult and harsh to pronounce: "At school they say my name funny as if the syllables were made out of tin and hurt the roof of your mouth." However, in Spanish, her name sounds like "a softer thing, like silver." Realizing that both versions of her name do not reflect her true identity, she expresses a desire to be baptized under "a new name, a name more like the real me, the one nobody sees," such as "Lisandra or Maritza or Zeze the X" (p. 11).

Esperanza's gesture here does not only negate a full identification with the dominant Anglo language and ideology, but it also annuls the patriarchal expectations of her Chicano community by refusing to be one more victim of patriarchy in Mango Street. Ironically, in her counter move Esperanza assumes the patriarchal privilege of naming and identifying in order to name herself, define her own identity, and foreground her own aspirations.

As this early instance in the book indicates, the major concern of *The House on Mango Street* is Esperanza's search for a cultural identity beyond the restrictive forms of monolithic Anglo or ethnic belonging. Esperanza's suggested name shows her hybridity, ambivalence, and resistance. The fact that she insists on telling us the meanings of her name in both languages only to suggest an ambivalent "third name" or meaning, is at once an acknowledgement of the culturally heterogeneous, antithetical elements that go into the making of her identity and a denial of a specific and full identification with either Mexican or Anglo-American traditions. As Karen W. Martin (2008) points out, "Something like Zeze the X," is rather "a mysterious name evocative of the unknown, the variable, and the fluid" (p. 62). In this sense, Esperanza's self-baptism reminds us of Chicano writer Ilan Stavans's candid revelation that, "We Latinos in the United States have decided to consciously embrace an ambiguous, labyrinthine identity as a cultural signature" (2000, p. 9). As we shall also see later in discussing Esperanza's dream house, it is the variability and fluidity of this hybrid identity that enable Esperanza's resistance to the dominant forces in both Anglo and Mexican cultures, not least by preventing them from pigeonholing her whether as Mexican or Anglo, and so isolating her or limiting her perspective. By refusing to accept a monolithic identity or oppressive role already scripted for her, Esperanza constitutes herself as a "mestiza," in Shane Phelan's memorable description, "an inappropriate/d other," one that "challenges existing categories by her refusal/inability to fit within them" (1997, 75). Esperanza's challenging the established orders shows what Rafael Pérez-Torres (1995) terms "constructively decentered subjectivity: a marginality that is both critical and powerful, multiplicitous and in flux" (141).

The radical implications of Esperanza's self-baptism are best explained through Bhabha's notion of hybridity. According to Bhabha (1994), hybridity generates forms of counter-authority and creates a 'Third Space' that enables both resistance and political change:

Here the transformational value of change lies in the re-articulation, or translation, of elements that are *neither the One* (unitary working class) *nor the Other* (the politics of gender) *but something else besides* which contests the terms and territories of both. (p. 41)

To put it in Bhabha's words, Esperanza's ambivalent and rebellious identity – Zeze the X – is neither exactly and purely Mexican nor exactly and purely Anglo, but something else besides which contests the values, ideals, and territories of both cultures. As such, Esperanza's identity is more radical than a simple synthesis of her ethnic and Anglo American cultures, which is often suggested by some critics. Maria Karafilis (1998), for example, maintains that "when one considers only the English or only the Spanish translation of Esperanza's name, only half of the protagonist's identity is revealed. It is when the two definitions are amalgamated, incorporating both the English and Spanish meanings, that the complete, complex process of development for the protagonist becomes clear" (p. 69). However, Esperanza's hybrid identity is greater and more radical than the sum of the two "halves" of her heritage.

Gloria Anzaldúa's earlier conception of hybridity complements that of Bhabha and perfectly captures the model of Chicano identity that Cisneros suggests. In her book, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Anzaldúa writes,

The new *mestiza* copes by developing a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to be an Indian in Mexican culture, to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view. She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else ... In attempting to work out a synthesis, the self has added a third element which is greater than the sum of its severed parts. That third element is a new consciousness – a mestiza consciousness – and though it is a source of intense pain, its energy comes from continual creative motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of each new paradigm. (1987, pp. 79-80).

The model of hybrid Chicano identity that Cisneros's text espouses is fully commensurate with Anzaldúa's conception of a multiple, fluid, and contradictory subject. As in her self-baptism, Esperanza refuses to occupy a single subject-position, whether as Mexican or Anglo. Her multiple and fluid identity allows her to juggle cultures, in Anzaldúa's power word. This means she can use the progressive values of the Anglo culture to resist the oppressive aspects of her ethnic heritage and annul the expectations of its patriarchy. Conversely, she can resist, as we shall see later, the materialistic, exclusivist and individualistic values of Anglo culture from the perspective of the values of her ethnic community and political commitment. In this sense, she has a plural personality able to tolerate ambivalence and ambiguity. In

the words of Anzaldúa, she learns to be an Anglo in Mexican culture and to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view. This plurality is in fact what allows Esperanza to describe the house on Mango Street ambivalently as "the house I belong to but do not belong to," and to promise at the end of the narrative to "go away to come back" (Cisneros, 1984, p. 110).

In these terms, Esperanza's early signs of radical hybridity and resistance to the oppressive forces of both cultures, as signaled by her self-chosen name "Zeze the X," become in the course of the narrative a fully-fledged dream house. Again in its location and "feminist architecture," to borrow a significant phrase from Anzaldúa (1987, p. 22), Esperanza's ideal house is formulated in terms that differentiate it from both the patriarchal houses on Mango Street and the bourgeois houses of middle class America. The dream house is literally a "third space" that, in its hybridity and ambivalence, resists the oppressive elements and contests the territories of both discourses. Inasmuch as it contests the patriarchy of the Chicano community, it challenges the scripts of the mobility, consumerism, materialism, and rugged individualism of the American dream. To begin with, Esperanza's dream house is

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 by the bed. Nobody to shake a stick at. Nobody's garbage to pick up after. (Cisneros, 1984, p. 108)

Traditionally, possessing a house is a man's privilege (O'Reilly, 1995). Comparable to her self-baptism in which she annuls the patriarchal expectations of her community, Esperanza's desire for a house of her own is motivated by the gender oppression prevalent in her ethnic community and the class and ethnic discrimination she experiences in the Barrio. She initially defines her house in terms of what it is not, in order to show us that her dream home will be an alternative to the male-dominated households in both American and Chicano communities. Then she goes on to define it positively as "A house all my own" – a private space all her own that contains her personal belongings, reflects her personality, and allows her to pursue her reading and writing ambitions. Implicit in this passage is of course Esperanza's rejection elsewhere of values of romantic love and physical beauty: "They all lied. All the books and magazines, everything that told it wrong" (Cisneros, 1994, p. 100). These values – what Toni Morrison calls "Probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought" (2004, p. 111), are pure myths that will only land women in "a man's house," as witness the stories of her friends Sally and Marin and countless other

women in Mango Street who are ultimately imprisoned in their own homes and divested of all significant powers. Only a house in Esperanza's terms will break the cycle of female domesticity which we see in *The House on Mango Street*.

If the critique of Chicano patriarchy is all too obvious in the construction of Esperanza's ideal house, the critique of the values and ideals of Anglo culture is more subtle, though hardly less radical. The dream house seems at a first glance the "Dick and Jane" kind of American bourgeois home – "an internalization of Anglo values," as Marek remarks (p. 1996, p.183). But it is definitely not. For it 'would be white with trees around it, a great big yard and grass growing without a fence' (Cisneros, 1984, p. 4). The dream house is a hybrid construction in which the exclusivity of middle class private homes is undercut by Esperanza's emphasis on the communal values of the traditional Mexican culture. The house would be "white with trees around it," it is true, but it would be "without a fence" and would welcome all in its "big yard." Esperanza's emphasis on the values of community against the bourgeois notions of individualism, exclusivity and ownership becomes all the clearer when she says she will allow passing bums to share the house with her, because "I won't forget who I am or where I came from ... I know how it is to be without a house" (p. 87). Esperanza's promise not to forget where she comes from emphasizes her awareness of the poor housing conditions in the barrio under capitalism. It also shows her other motivations for owning a house: her attempt to redress the humiliation and prejudice she has suffered at her Anglo school when the Sister Superior implied that all Chicanos live in such squalid conditions, and that they probably do not deserve better (Cisneros, 1984, p. 45). As explained above, Cisneros's text is counter discursive, writing through and against, not in place of, the dominant Anglo middle class discourse. Esperanza's construction of the ideal home constitutes a revision of the ideology of the American Dream and its materialist foundations, negating, supplementing, repeating, and modifying the notions of the traditional middle class home as a private space. In the final analysis, Esperanza's ideal house is not the American Dream house, but its very critique and deconstruction.

As such, critical interpretations of Esperanza's hybrid home that view this structure, like her name, as an amalgamation of elements from two different cultures miss the radical and transformative nature of Esperanza's intervention. For instance, June Dwyer (2007) claims that "Cisneros and Esperanza" demonstrate "the positive role that ethnics play in gentrifying the ghetto and spicing up the suburbs" (p. 166). Similarly the Marxist Chicano critic Ramón Saldivar (1990) states: "Incapable of imagining a house without rats in the attic, and naively accepting the derogatory epithet 'bums' for all street people, the child innocently combines the features of a cognac

advertisement with a scene from a shelter for the homeless" (p. 184). Such a perspective is faulty not only because it reformulates Esperanza's relationship with Chicano and Anglo cultures in terms of the discredited oppressive binaries and dualities which she is trying to deconstruct, but it also involves a deep misunderstanding of hybridity. Hybridity is the condition when elements from the culture of the other penetrate the self, rather than just constituting its exotic cultural surrounding. Esperanza's dream house demonstrates the radical and transformative nature of hybridity.

Stella Bolaki (2005) maintains that "the formation of selfhood, a central thematic concern of the *Bildungsroman* (also known as the novel of development), is defined for ethnic Americans by a constant negotiation of belonging in distinct territories, in other words by a kind of border-crossing" (p. 1). In *The House on Mango Street*, the "distinct territories" are spatial divisions (the poor barrio surrounded by the affluent Anglo parts of town) as well as antithetical cultural categories (Anglo and Chicano). That is why Esperanza's "border-crossing" is both literal (leaving the barrio and settling in the heart of white America) and metaphorical (developing a hybrid identity and consciousness). The location and architecture of Esperanza's dream house involves border crossing and a constant process of revision, negotiation, and transformation. In the words of Chicano poet Pat Mora (1984), Esperanza would always be a "Legal Alien:"

an American to Mexicans
a Mexican to Americans
a handy token
sliding back and forth
between the fringes of both worlds. (p. 60)

Contrary to the views of Valdes and Karafilis, if at the end of the narrative Esperanza has acquired a great deal of self-knowledge, this involves the realization that the self is irreducibly hybrid. *Pace* Valdes, Esperanza's ambivalent statement describing the house on Mango Street as "the house I belong to but do not belong to" is not "semantic impertinence," but a literal description of her hybrid condition. Straddling Chicano and Anglo cultures, Esperanza is here *and* there at the same time – she is simultaneously in the heart of white America and in the barrio. She constantly crosses a literal and a cultural border and therefore has the ability to speak simultaneously from both sides of the divide

From another perspective, Esperanza learns in the course of the narrative not only that there is no opposition between hybridity (having multiple selves) and political and ethnic commitment, but also that her hybridity and multiplicity would enhance her agency and resistance to the tremendous oppressive forces operating in her life. Her fluidity and multiplicity would allow her to change her

life and the lives of other people in her community. This is in fact the lesson she learns from the three airy sisters or godmothers whom she meets in the wake of Lucy and Rachel's baby sister. Esperanza, it is recalled, has earlier vehemently rejected the barrio and her house there: "No, this isn't my house ... I don't belong. I don't ever want to come from here" (Cisneros, 1984, p. 106). Having met the godmothers, she felt guilty and ashamed for wishing to leave Mango Street, now believing that such a wish is "selfish," seeking her individual salvation at the expense of her community. However, the three sisters relieve her of her identity crisis and anxiety by assuring her that true identity (self-identity) does not stipulate a monolithic membership in the ethnic community and that there is no opposition between leaving the barrio and maintaining commitment to the community. Esperanza belongs to Mango Street and leaving the barrio will not undo this fact: "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" (p. 105)

Moreover, the three sisters recognize Esperanza's potential as a mestiza in improving her neighbourhood in the future, seeing that her exit from the barrio would empower her and enhance her agency. If the three sisters give their blessing to her freedom-seeking project, they remind her not to forget the others in her community whose exit would not be as easy as hers: "You must remember to come back. For the ones who cannot leave as easily as you" (p. 105). So if the three sisters give Esperanza knowledge of the self, as Valdes maintains (1992, p. 65), then this self is hybrid. Moreover, in her hybridity and multiple selves, she can achieve her goals and help her community more effectively by going there and coming back than by staying in Mango Street. The three sisters are able to see that Esperanza's multiple identity, hybrid consciousness, fluidity and potential as a writer would enhance her agency and give her advantage over the other women in the Street. As Esperanza also clearly sees, these women are either completely unaware of how patriarchy reproduces itself and feeds into a vicious cycle of female domesticity, such as Marin and Sally (Cisneros, 1984, pp. 27, 101), or they lack the courage and resourcefulness to change their lives despite their awareness of patriarchal oppression, such as Minerva and Alicia (pp. 31-2; 84-5). True to the advice and blessings of the three godmothers, at the end of the narrative Esperanza comes to terms with her hybridity and multiplicity. In the last vignette she writes: "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" (p. 110). She has also acquired the moral and political maturity that would enable her to identify and fulfil her personal ambitions and honour her social and political commitments towards her ethnic community. She closes her narrative with a commitment to go away only

"to come back. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot out" (p. 110).

From another perspective, neither the three sisters nor Esperanza have illusions about Mango Street – it is simply a symbol of the externally imposed Anglo racial segregation and economic oppression and the internally imposed patriarchy of the Chicano community. If the latter is all too obvious, Esperanza makes in the course of the narrative a few observations that clearly indict the city's administration for many of the Chicano community's grievances. In addition to the devastating criticism of the lack of adequate housing for the inhabitants of the neighbourhood ("Bums in the Attic," pp. 86-7), there is the implication that the government seems to be complacent about if not complicit with the racial divisions and rampant animosities within the city ("Those Who Don't," p. 28), keep the coloured neighbourhoods ugly, dirty, and underdeveloped ("Four Skinny Trees," p. 74), and prevent the new immigrants from having access to health care and social services ("Geraldo No Last Name," p. 66), etc. Thus, by crossing the borders of her segregated barrio into other parts of the city, Esperanza combats the divisions which shape the architecture of the city and liberates herself from racial prejudice and oppression. From this perspective, to blame her for crossing into the other parts of the city is equivalent to asking her to remain oppressed and to accept her oppression.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the model of Chicano identity that *The House on Mango Street* presents is at once ambivalent, hybrid, and resistant. Such terms are not mutually exclusive but mutually inclusive. Therefore, to foreground Esperanza's resistance should not mean to discount or play down either her ambivalence or hybridity. Conversely, the ambivalence and hybridity of her identity do not by any means signify on her part a lack of resistance to the oppressive forces in her ethnic community or Anglo culture at large. On the contrary, her hybridity and multiplicity – the different subject positions she occupies – enhance her resistance and agency to change her life and those of the people in her community. Her rebellion against the patriarchy of her community and her keen desire to leave the barrio and settle in the heart of white middle-class America are countered by her clearly stated desire to return to her community and help those who are unable to free themselves from the confines of the barrio. Moreover, like her self-baptism, such a move cannot be considered as an assimilationist or essentialist gesture simply because Esperanza's dream house is not exactly the American dream house, but rather its very critique and revision. In a 1990 interview, Cisneros states: "the house in essence

becomes you. You are the house" (73). Esperanza's dream house is in essence a metaphor for her hybrid and ambivalent identity; it is a hybrid space in which part of Esperanza's positive ethnic cultural values penetrate and transform the ideals and values of the dominant American middle-class culture.

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