
Constructing a house of one's own in Sandra Cisneros' *The house on Mango Street*

Construyendo un espacio propio en la novela de Sandra Cisneros
La casa en Mango Street

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RESUMEN: El presente artículo explora la construcción simbólica de la casa, vinculada al proceso creativo de escribir y contar historias, en la novela *La casa en Mango Street* (1983), de la escritora chicana Sandra Cisneros. El mayor desafío de la protagonista, Esperanza Cordero, es superar sus sentimientos de aislamiento y experimentar un sentido de pertenencia, que es otra forma de decir que necesita sentirse "como en casa". Para Esperanza es importante tener un hogar con el cual poder identificarse, como una forma de abrazar un pasado que la haga sentirse orgullosa y al mismo tiempo tener una visión de un hogar en su futuro. Es a través de la escritura y la narración que Esperanza logra *crear* una casa propia. La recreación de la casa está íntimamente ligada a un proceso de empoderamiento y liberación por parte de la protagonista, que se ve manifestado también en la construcción de una nueva identidad. De cierta manera, ella es también la nueva casa. Unido a este proceso de emancipación, Esperanza encuentra en la educación una manera para salir del barrio marginal de su infancia. Parte del marco conceptual utilizado incluye las nociones teóricas de críticos Chicanos como Tey Diana Rebolledo y Gloria Anzaldúa quienes estudian las formas en que las escritoras chicanas exploran la subjetividad y la identidad en su escritura.

PALABRAS CLAVE: casa, chicana, escritura, narración, cultura

ABSTRACT: This article explores the symbolic construction of the house, linked to the creative process of writing and telling stories, in the novel *The house on Mango Street* (1983), by Chicana writer Sandra Cisneros. The main challenge for the protagonist, Esperanza Cordero, is to overcome her feelings of isolation and experience a sense of belonging, which is another way of saying that she needs to feel "at home". For Esperanza, it is important to have a home that she can be identified identify with, as a way of embracing a past that makes her feel proud and at the same time having a vision of a home in her future. It is through writing and storytelling that Esperanza manages to *create* a house of her own. The recreation of the house is closely linked to a process of empowerment and liberation by the protagonist, which is also manifested in the construction of a new identity. In a way, she is also the new house. Together with this process of emancipation, Esperanza finds in education a way to leave the marginal neighborhood of her childhood. Part of the conceptual framework used includes the theoretical notions of Chicano critics Tey Diana Rebolledo and Gloria Anzaldúa who study the ways in which Chicana writers explore subjectivity and identity in their writing.

KEYWORDS: house, Chicana, writing, narration, culture

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Introduction

The present article analyzes Sandra Cisneros' novel *The house on Mango Street* as a reconstruction of the traditional female place, the house, a space for self-assertion and growth. The motif of the house is a constant element in Chicano literature. As Tomás Rivera (1989) says: "La casa is the most beautiful word in the Spanish language. It evokes the constant refuge, the constant father, the constant mother. It contains the father, the mother, and the child. It is also beautiful because it demonstrates the strong connection between an image in the mind and an external form" (p. 23). As the title suggests, the image of the house plays a very important role in the development of the novel. The house located on Mango Street represents Chicanos/as diaspora in the United States and their need to have a "constant refuge". It is connected to their sense of alienation as well as their social, political, and economic marginalization.

Sandra Cisneros is a novelist, poet, short story writer and artist born in the United States, daughter of a Mexican father and a Mexican-American mother. In her works, she experiments with literary forms that explore emerging subject positions, which Cisneros herself attributes to growing up in a context of cultural hybridity and economic inequality that provided her with unique stories to tell. Her literary production includes a chapbook of poetry, *Bad Boys* (1980); two full-length poetry books, *My wicked wicked ways* (1992) and *Loose woman* (1994); a collection of stories, *Woman hollering creek and other stories* (1991); a children's book, *Hairs/Pelitos* (1994); the novels *The house on Mango Street* (1983) and *Caramelo* (2002), and the picture book *Have you seen Marie?* (2012). *A house of my own: stories from my life* (2015) is a collection of personal essays, and *Puro amor* (2018) is a bilingual story that she also illustrated. Forthcoming works include the Spanish and English story *Martita, I remember you/Martita te recuerdo* (Vintage 2021) and a poetry collection, *Mujer sin vergüenza* (2022).

She has received numerous awards including two National Endowment for the Arts Literature Fellowships in poetry and prose, 1982, 1988; an honorary Doctor of Letters from the State University of New York at Purchase, 1993; an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters from Loyola University, Chicago, 2002; and honorary de-

grees from DePaul University in 2014 and from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2016; the Texas Medal of the Arts, 2003. She was also awarded one of 25 new Ford Foundation Art of Change fellowships in 2017 and is regarded as a key figure in Chicana literature.

In *The house on Mango Street*, Cisneros writes a coming-of-age story about a teenager's perception and experience of life and her struggle to construct a sense of identity as a Chicana and as a woman. In this way, the text opens a literary space for Chicanas to speak up and tell their own stories, participating in the representation and construction of a different society. The novel narrates the experience of a Chicana girl who grew up in a poor community in Chicago and struggled to find a place of her own and to forge a better future than her friends and neighbors. The image of the house becomes a signifier of the private space traditionally inhabited by women; a metaphorical crossroads of the protagonist Esperanza Cordero who searches for herself in her personal encounter and experience of the world. Cisneros' work is rooted in issues of ethnicity, gender and resistance by providing coping strategies for the protagonist to develop a sense of belonging in a multiethnic society.

This article explores first Esperanza's use of writing and storytelling to *create* a house of her own and second it examines her choice of education as a powerful mean to achieve economic independence and break free from her marginal barrio. These ways become survival strategies that have a chain-reaction effect within the novel, so they function as as alternative ways for Esperanza to reconstruct a sense of identity in a constraining community.

Justification

Sandra Cisneros graduated from Loyola University of Chicago where she obtained a B. A. in English and She graduated from the writing program at the University of Iowa. She has been a writer in residence at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, the University of California at Irvine and the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. It was the publication of *The house on Mango Street* which provided recognition for her work as a Chicana writer within the Chicano community as well as within the United States

mainstream. In 1985, *The house on Mango Street* was awarded in the “Before Columbus American Award.” Later the same year, Cisneros received the “Dobie-Paisano Fellowship”.

The Cisneros’ idea of writing about a house came during a seminar when the class discussed Gaston Bachelard’s *Poetics of space* and the metaphor of the house. For Bachelard, the house constitutes a space of human stability and happiness. Moreover, it is the place where the imagination and dreaming dwell. It “shelters daydreaming, protects the dreamer, allows one to dream in peace” (Bachelard, 1994, p. 6). During the seminar, Cisneros and her classmates discussed about their houses of their imagination. However, she realized that the metaphor of the house had a totally different meaning for her. Instead of feeling safety in this space, she felt homeless: “There were no attics and cellars and crannies. [She] had no such house in her memory” (Fellner, 1995, p. 127). She remembers: “A house, a house, it hit me. What did I know except third-floor flats... That’s precisely what I chose to write: about third floor flats, and fear of rats and drunk husbands sending rocks through windows, anything as far from the poetic as possible. And this is when I discovered the voice, I’d been suppressing all along without realizing it” (Ghosts and voices, 1987, p. 73). This moment became for her the discovery of an unknown voice inside herself. With this voice, she decided to write about Chicano barrios where houses are usually different from Bachelard’s joyful portrayal. The seminar was an epiphany for Cisneros that revealed a way to express and rediscover herself through literature and the creative power of the imagination.

The richness of Cisneros’ novel has allowed people from different fields of study to use the text for a great variety of purposes. In an article entitled “Do you know me? I wrote *The house on Mango street* (1987), Cisneros herself writes that her novel is “used in universities across the country from Yale to Berkeley, as well as in elementary, junior high and high schools. [It] has been used in everything from Women’s studies, Ethnic studies, English, Creative writing, Sociology, and even Sex education classes” (p. 77).

The house on Mango Street has been widely analyzed by critics such as Margarite Fernandez Olmos, Tey Diana Rebolledo, Renato Rosaldo, Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano, Héctor Calderón, José David Saldivar among others. Most of them agree on the relevance of

Cisneros' work within the Chicana literary tradition who "demonstrates her talent for creating multiple meanings through simple imagery" (Shirley, 1998, p. 157). Cisneros' work portrays recurrent motifs within Chicana narrative. One of them is the exploration of childhood, of growing up Chicana: "many Chicana narrative and lyric voices appear to be those of young girls, as in the work of Gonzales-Berry, Cisneros, Mary Helen Ponce and Helena María Viramontes" (Rebolledo, 1995, p. 108).

Cisneros' novel deals with the complex processes of the construction of a gendered subject in an urban working-class Chicano community. As Ramón Saldivar (1990) affirms, with her novel, Cisneros is "building an instructive alternative to the exclusively phallogocentric subject of contemporary Chicano narrative" (p. 175). Héctor Calderón and José David Saldivar also agree on the importance of this novel within Chicana literary production as a text that deals with the "construction of identity and the politics of culture" (p. 7). Attached to this process of identity construction, the image of the house becomes a vital element in Esperanza's process of growing up.

The consulted critics acknowledge the importance of the metaphor of the house as a motif that unifies the forty-four vignettes which comprise the novel. They also point out the crucial role of the image of the house as a signifier of space in Esperanza's process of constructing an identity. However, they fail to consider the transformation of this space in Cisneros' novel: from a place of entrapment and shame to one of liberation and growth. In fact, most critics focus on the house as the traditional female space rather than on Esperanza's dream to have "a house of her own". Moreover, most critics do not acknowledge Cisneros's contributions in terms of concrete coping strategies to survive and achieve self-empowerment in a patriarchal and ethnocentric society. Therefore, this research contributes with a critical analysis of Cisneros's powerful proposal that changes the traditional notion of the space of the house into one that reconciles community and personal identity construction, as well as past events and future expectations.

Theoretical framework

For the analysis of the proposed topic, elements of Chicano literary criticism, produced by Tey Diana Rebolledo in *Women singing in the snow* (1995) and Gloria Anzaldúa in *Making face* (1990), related to the role of writing and Chicana identity construction will be taken into consideration. In their struggle to redefine themselves, Chicana writers have found in the act of writing a way to fight the multiple levels of domination, rewriting the myths and stereotypes that keep them prisoners of an ethnocentric, male-oriented society. In this way, women who have been “written all over ... carved and tattooed with the sharp needles of experience” (Anzaldúa *Making face*, 1990, XV) will have the opportunity to erase those tattoos and design their own drawings. Chicana writings originate from “the need to survive first, by deconstructing others’ definition of [them], and then by replacing them with their own” (Córdoba, 1993, p.182). In this constant movement through the white page from silence to voice, from fiction to reality and vice versa, “reality” is being constructed and reconstructed, erased and written over. As Gloria Anzaldúa asserts in *Making face* (1990): “we transform the posos, apertures, barrancas, abismos that we are forced to speak from. Only then, we can make a home out of the cracks” (XXV). As a result, writing plays a crucial role for most Chicanas in the process of questioning the status quo and creating different identities from the one prescribed by society.

A woman of color who writes is aware of her race and gender. She cannot overlook those features of her identity which affect her condition as a citizen and a community member. In the creative act of writing, there is an inherent search for the self; an introspective journey towards the inner being which conveys self-analysis. Writing, then, constitutes a kind of trip “a travelogue, a constant journeying across the threshold between event and narration, between authority and dispersal, between repression and representation, between the powerless and power, between the anonymous pre-text and the accredited textual inscription” (Chambers, 1994, p.11). By sending their voices and visions to the world, Chicanas are participating in the reconstruction of society.

In *Women singing in the snow*, Tey Diana Rebolledo (1995) addresses the recurrent theme of growing up Chicana present in Cisneros’ novel:

As we look at works like Cisneros' *Mango Street*, Viramontes' *Growing* and Gonzales-Berry's *Rosebud*, among others, what seems to be simple stories of childhood evolve into complex representations of ethnic social relations. It is often as a result of examining complex situations the young narrators do not understand—situations that often deal with social rejections—that the narrators begin to understand what means to be a woman, or what means to be a Chicana (p. 108).

Esperanza, as the young narrator of her life in the *barrio*, finds herself caught up between her expectations and desires and the dictates of her surroundings. Writing becomes for her a way to articulate the complexities of her struggle for representation and belonging.

Development

As Tey Diana Rebolledo states in *Women singing in the snow* (1995): “Writing, after all, is naming, mapping, and leading, as well as creating. It forms an explanation of the meaning of existence; it can order chaos, introduce reason into ambiguity, recreate loss, call up the past, and create new models and traditions. In sum, it orders existence and create new worlds” (p. 117). It is through the power of fiction, represented by the creative acts of story-writing and narrating, that Esperanza can create order in her life and “build” a house of her own. As Esperanza says: “I like to tell stories. I tell them inside my head. ... I make a story for my life, for each step my brown shoe takes. I say, “And so she trudged up the wooden stairs, her sad brown shoes taking her to the house she never liked” (p. 109). Writing involves both a process of self-exploration and self-empowerment. For Esperanza, it is a process of self-liberation too: “I like to tell stories. I am going to tell you a story about a girl who didn't want to belong ... 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). Through writing, the protagonist finds a way to cope with “the girl” in the story. Cisneros refers to this aspect of writing as a “way to make peace” with one's ghosts. She says: “I used to think that writing was a way to exorcise those ghosts that inhabit the house that is ourselves. But now

I understand that only the little ghosts leave. The big ghosts still live inside you, and what happens with writing [is] that you make peace with those ghosts. You recognize they live there” (qtd. in Rodríguez-Aranda, 1990, p. 67). Similarly, Esperanza finds in writing a liberating form to reconcile her inner contradictions and deal with painful events in her life. In this constant movement through the white page from silence to voice, from chaos to order, Esperanza discovers a way to find herself and her dream house.

Since Esperanza does not have a house of her own, she decides to *write/narrate* one. Esperanza’s life is marked by a state of constant migration which prevents her from developing a sense of belonging. The absence of a permanent residence causes a deep sense of placelessness forcing her to live in a sort of perpetual exile. This experience is connected to her feelings of uprootedness because she feels neither American nor Mexican. The house, in this sense, functions as a metaphor of the concept of nation. For Esperanza, to be homeless is also to be *nationless*. In order to have a nation/house in which she can finally feel at home, Esperanza participates of what Homi Bhabha calls in *Nation and narration* (1995) “the act of writing the nation” (p. 292). It is through the act of writing and narrating that the protagonist “seeks to portray the great power of the idea of the nation in the disclosures of [her] everyday life, in the telling details that emerge as metaphors for national life” (p. 294). In the novel, Esperanza has a dream house which is introduced in the first vignette titled “The house on Mango Street.” In this section, Esperanza has a humiliating encounter with a school nun, who asks her about her house. During this conversation, Esperanza is confronted with a deep sense of homelessness and shame:

There, [Esperanza] said pointing up to the third floor. You live there’
There. I had to look to where [the nun] 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 nodded (p. 5).

Confronted with her marginality, Esperanza says: “I knew then I had to have a house. A real house. One I could point to. But this isn’t it. The house on Mango Street isn’t it. For the time being, Mama says. Temporary, says Papa. But I know how those things go” (p. 5).

This revelation constitutes the beginning of Esperanza's journey towards her dream house, which parallels an introspective voyage towards her inner being: "The house in essence becomes you. You are the house" (Cisneros qtd. in Rodriguez- Aranda, 1990, p. 73). Since Esperanza identifies herself with the house, the act of pointing to it means recognition and acceptance of herself. This new house would not be a source of embarrassment for her. On the contrary, it would have all the commodities Esperanza has never had: "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. ... Our house would be white with trees around, a great big yard and grass growing without a fence" (p. 4). The whiteness, openness and presence of vegetation oppose the marginal apartments Esperanza has inhabited while growing up. By participating in the act of narrating her dream house, she begins the process of creating a symbolic space to house herself as part of her search for self-identity and artistic expression.

In her journey to have her house, Esperanza visits a witch woman to have her wish granted. In "Elenita, cards, palm, water," Esperanza asks the fortune teller: "What about a house ... because that's what I came for" (p. 64). After looking into the cards carefully, Elenita answers: "Ah, yes, a home in the heart. I see a home in the heart" (p. 64). Significantly, the fortune teller refers to a "home." She seems to know the difference between a building and the sense of belonging implicit in the word *home*, which is what Esperanza is really looking for. Even though Esperanza does not understand Elenita's answer at the moment, the fortune teller's prediction is the first strong indication in the novel that Esperanza will eventually create a home for herself.

It is until the end of the novel, in the vignette titled "A house of my own," when Esperanza is finally able to *construct*, through the power of narration, her dream house:

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. Nobody's garbage to pick up after. Only a house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem (p. 108).

When describing her house, Esperanza emphasizes the reappropriation of her space by the repetitive use of the possessive adjective “my”. With this emphasis, she reinforces the sense of ownership of her place, a space inhabited but, above all, possessed by her. The alliteration caused by the repetition of the consonant “p” in the words “porch”, “pillow”, “pretty”, “purple” and “petunias” add strength to the description. Esperanza’s house combines the simple, essential elements that comprise her life, such as her pillow and shoes and, of course, her books and stories because she is a writer at heart. As the protagonist confirms “only a house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go” (p. 108). She emphasizes the whiteness of her house, which is compared to snow and to a piece of clean paper. The reference to paper is directly connected to Esperanza’s desire to express herself and her potential to write. Esperanza’s construction of “a new house, a house made of heart” (p. 64), is part of a process of self-recognition and empowerment present throughout Cisneros’ text.

The process of recreation of the house is interconnected to Esperanza’s reconstruction of herself. This reconstruction implies a *resemanticization* of the house as an alternative space where Esperanza can revise the prevailing concept of womanhood in her society and reinvent herself as a woman writer and as a Chicana: “Resemanticization deals not only with words but with ideas and symbols, that cross borders and languages to take different meanings” (Burciaga, 1995, p. 101). Esperanza resemanticizes the private space of the house by transforming it from a source of shame and uprootedness into a renewed place where growth is possible. This is a crucial step in her process of redefining her position in society since, as Michel Foucault (1993) says: “Space is fundamental in any form of communal life, space is fundamental in any exercise of power” (p. 168). Recreating the private space of the house is, for Esperanza, an act of self-creation which includes her subjectivity, her autonomy, and her creativity.

Paradoxically, Esperanza’s rebuilding of the private space takes place within the domestic sphere of the house itself. When “she sets out to look for an alternative space for her identity, a special house of her own, she appropriates the metaphor of the house for her own specific needs” (Fellner, 1995, p. 129). In regard to this internal transformation, Rafael Pérez-Torres (1995) states in *Move-*

ments in Chicano poetry that “domestic space provides an alternate space by which to define self and from which to assume strategies of survival” (p. 51). Esperanza’s “sad” house, which is a source of humiliation and shame, functions as a catalyst for her imagination and as a powerful source for literary creation. The protagonist can transform her marginalized experience of life into creativity, building a path to leave the oppressive *barrio* behind at the same time.

In the novel, the house and the street function as the signifiers of the public and the private spheres. Esperanza’s life develops between these two ambits, determined, and controlled by masculine figures of authority: fathers, brothers, and husbands. Her narration corresponds to Cisneros’ strategy to create “an alternate space for the Chicana subject, one that is not subjected by the geometrical homogeneity of contemporary patriarchal culture” (Saldivar, 1990, p.186). The *rebuilding* of the house parallels a process of female empowerment by which Esperanza can recreate herself and choose a different way from the one prescribed by her society and followed by most of her female friends in the text. As Cisneros herself states in an interview conducted by Feroza Jussawalla: “you have to learn how to build a room before you build a house” (qtd. in Cahill, 1994, p. 459). The search for the house constitutes, then, a manifestation of the internal process at stake: Esperanza’s re-construction of her internal “room,” the reappropriation of herself.

Furthermore, the recreation of the house is an act of “subversion” within the patriarchal system since Esperanza does not conform to the social expectations of living in a man’s house: “Not a man’s house. Not a daddy’s. A house all my own” (p. 108). Moreover, she openly declares war on patriarchy: “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” (p. 89). Esperanza rebels against a system she considers unjust, which includes her own ethnic heritage as a Chicana. As she narrates in “My name,” she belongs to a patriarchal tradition which does not “like their women strong” (p. 10). Although she is connected to her ethnic background by her name, she can free herself from the place given to her by tradition and firmly states: “I have inherited [my greatgrandmother’s] name, but I don’t want to inherit her place by the window” (p. 11). Unlike her grandmother, who was

dominated by her grandfather, Esperanza decides “not to grow up tame like the others” (p. 88) and to choose a different path.

The protagonist’s internal process of empowerment, expressed by the reconstruction of the space of the house, is also revealed by her desire to change her name. This manifests her need to name/define herself instead of being named/spoken to by others. As Beauvoir (1989) states: “[a woman] is simply what man decrees” (xxii). Naming implies power and control. Renaming herself constitutes for Esperanza an act of self-recognition and an act of speaking out. In *Women singing in the snow*, Tey Diana Rebolledo (1995) refers to Esperanza’s process of renaming herself: “In the narrative speaker’s litany of naming, [Esperanza] considers and discards all the names that ‘don’t fit.’ [She] recognizes the heritage linked to her name ‘Esperanza,’ also her grandmother’s name, but sees it as the female heritage of being the object, not the subject, of cultural discourse” (p. 104). Esperanza’s initial rejection of her house parallels the way she feels about her name. As a matter of fact, she does not like her name. She says: “In English my name means hope. In Spanish it means too many letters. It means sadness, it means waiting” (p. 10). Both in English and in Spanish, her name conveys feelings of discontent and incompleteness for “to hope” and “to wait” signify, above all, the absence of fulfillment. The act of hoping and waiting is also connected to the “eternal feminine,” since these “states” relate to the stereotyped female role of passivity and dependence. Interestingly, Esperanza’s last name, Cordero, which in English means “lamb,” is also related to traditional female features such as gentleness, meekness, and obedience. Moreover, the symbol of the lamb is charged with connotations of sacrifice, purity, innocence, piety and self-denial within Christian religions.. The protagonist’s confrontation with her name implies both an act of subversion against society’s prescriptions and a redefinition of her own concept of womanhood.

The act of naming is an essential element in the process of revision experienced by Esperanza who wishes to baptize herself with a different name. She says: “I would like to baptize myself under a new name, a name more like the real me, the one nobody sees” (p. 11). The use of the verb “baptize” by the narrator is very important because she does not express her desire to *have*, *find* or *get* another name. Instead, she wants to “baptize” herself. This provides the act

of renaming herself with the power implicit in the sacrament of baptism, a religious ritual used to denote the beginning of a human soul. Traditionally, the act of baptism is performed in most churches by a priest or pastor, a masculine figure of authority who functions as a representative of divine power on earth. This symbolic act constitutes an example of men's access and control of the "word". Men are, then, "entitled" to name/define the world, a privilege inherited from God the Father through a patrilineal hierarchy of power. Quoting Tey Diana Rebolledo (1995), "to name something ... is to have power" (p. 103). By baptizing herself, Esperanza is taking into her hands the power to name and recreate herself.

Esperanza's symbolic baptism marks the beginning of her new self: "I would like to baptize myself under a new name.... Esperanza as Lisandra or Maritza or Zeze the X. Yes. Something like Zeze the X will do" (p. 11). In this way, she is reborn under a new name, which is strong, powerful, mysterious, and above all, her own creation. "It is a name that conceals, does not reveal all; yet it implies an active role in life" (Rebolledo, 1995, p. 105). The act of naming is an articulation of the protagonist's voice, a voice of resistance. By choosing the name *Zeze the X*, Esperanza overtakes the patriarchal privilege of naming and identifying. Only then, her name will not represent sacrifice and self-denial but would be transformed in a "good, good name" (p. 104), *la esperanza* of creating realities beyond the official one.

The act of renaming herself also conveys a revision of the protagonist's ethnic background since her Spanish name connects her to an ethnic tradition of male dominance. In fact, it is a name inherited from her greatgrandmother. This "re-vision," as Adrienne Rich calls it, constitutes "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (qtd. in Fetterly, 1993, p. 35). For Rich, this act is "an act of survival" in a patriarchal environment that objectifies women, taking their subjectivity and possibilities of defining themselves beyond male patterns. In an interview conducted by Pilar Rodríguez-Aranda (1990), Sandra Cisneros refers to this act of revision which she herself experienced as a teenager: "I felt as a teenager, that I could not inherit my culture intact without revising some parts of it. We accept our culture, but not without adapting ourselves as women" (p. 67). This process of adaptation is part of what Norma Alarcon

calls “reinventing” the concept of womanhood, which is precisely what Esperanza experiences in her process of constructing an alternative concept of womanhood that will provide her with the necessary space to grow.

Through the power of fiction, expressed by the acts of storytelling and writing, Esperanza can create a house that fulfills her needs as a Chicana and as a woman. By writing, she is able to dwell in a special house, “the house of story-telling” (Fellner, 1995, p. 129). This is connected to Virginia Woolf’s “room of one’s own”, as a space for artistic creation to take place. During this process, she reinvents herself, leaving Esperanza behind to become Zeze the X. With her writing, Esperanza is ordering the pages of her life, which is sustained by experiences and memories as well as by the imagination. Writing/narrating becomes, for her, a powerful means to deconstruct the world, a creative process of inscribing herself in life and participating in its construction. Writing constitutes a strategy of representation, a means of facing reality and making it coherent. The last vignette of the novel titled “Mango says goodbye sometimes” reveals the end of Esperanza’s journey. She is finally ready to leave Mango Street: “One day I will pack my bags of books and paper. One day I will say goodbye to Mango. **I am too strong for her to keep me here forever** [my emphasis]. One day I will go away” (p. 110). Living on Mango Street symbolizes alienation, poverty and oppression. The protagonist’s determination and strength to go away reveals that she is in her way to head *home*.

The second section of this article will concentrate on education as an important means for the protagonist in her process of self-discovery and empowerment. As writer Sandra Cisneros says, “you have to confront your own destiny by getting an education” (qtd. in Rodríguez-Aranda, 1990, p. 69). Together with the power of fiction, formal education constitutes a strategy in Esperanza’s life to leave the paternal house and her marginal *barrio*. To create a house of her own house, Esperanza must find the means to support herself and achieve economic stability and independence. Education is represented in the novel as a powerful way to fight patriarchal female roles and subvert male oppression, a liberating path towards self-assertion.

This liberating potential of education is represented in some

of the vignettes of the novel. In “Alicia who sees mice”, Esperanza refers to her friend Alicia, who is obliged to do the house chores due to her mother’s death. For Alicia’s father, “a woman’s place is sleeping so she can wake up early with the tortilla star, the one that appears early just in time to rise and catch the hind legs hide behind the sink, beneath the four-clawed tub, under the swollen floorboards nobody fixes, in the corner of [her] eyes” (p. 31). For Alicia, the kitchen is a “four-clawed” monster which waits for her every morning. This perception of the kitchen reveals the oppressive destiny she has inherited in a patriarchal society which perpetuates gender roles from mother to daughter. Alicia resembles her mother and has even gotten “her mama’s rolling pin and sleepiness” (p. 31). Above all, Alicia has inherited her mother’s place in the kitchen. This is part of a tradition in which “women belong in the confines of the private sphere, and career and family are incompatible for them (men, of course, are guaranteed both)” (Greene, 1993, p. 189). However, Alicia finds in education a way to free herself from tradition and search for her own place in the world. She is “young and smart and studies for the first time at the university. Two trains and a bus, because she doesn’t want to spend her whole life in a factory or behind a rolling pin” (p. 32). For Alicia, education means breaking away from her mother’s destiny and being able to construct her own. It also implies the opportunity to leave the marginal environment of poverty in which she grew up, opening the possibilities for a different life.

Similarly, Esperanza finds a liberating path in her life in education. Even though she grows up in a male-oriented society where most women stay home and do not attend high school or university, Esperanza decides to study. In “Mango says goodbye sometimes,” she describes the material objects that she will take with her when she finally leaves her *barrio*: “One day I will pack my bags of books and paper... Friends and neighbors will say, What happen to that Esperanza? Where did she go with all those books and paper? Why did she march so far away?” (p. 110). The reference to “books and paper” conveys the importance of education and writing in Esperanza’s life since they empower her to break free from the multiple chains that tie her to poverty and domestication.

Esperanza’s mother is very important in the protagonist’s pro-

cess to educate herself and improve her condition both as a woman and as a Chicana. She acts as a role model, transmitting alternative ways that subvert traditional gender roles and open space for new horizons. Even though there exist patriarchal relations within the Chicano family structure, the mother figure occupies a central position, establishing important bonds with other women. In “A smart cookie”, Esperanza’s mother is portrayed as a traditional housewife who has dedicated her life to raising her children and do the house chores. However, she does not want the same destiny for her daughter: “I could’ve been somebody, you know? Esperanza, you go to school. Study hard. That Madame Butterfly was a fool. She stirs the oatmeal” (p. 91). Esperanza’s mother expresses her frustration by saying that she “could have been somebody,” which reveals that she probably feels like “nobody.” When explaining to her daughter the reason why she quit school, she says “Shame is a bad thing, you know. It keeps you down. You want to know why I quit school? Because I didn’t have nice clothes. No clothes, but I had brains. Yup. she says **disgusted**, [my emphasis] stirring again. I was a smart cookie then” (p. 91). Her words show great sorrow and regret for her decisions in the past, a moment that is now gone.

In the same vignette, Esperanza’s mother refers to her *comadres*, who have been abandoned by their husbands, as examples for Esperanza not to follow: “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” (p. 91). Education is advised to Esperanza to be “somebody” in life, beyond the prescribed roles prevailing in her society. It also implies being economically independent from male support.

Similarly, in an interview directed by Rodríguez-Aranda (1990), Cisneros refers to the great importance and impact education had on her personal life as a way “to escape the trap of the barrio” (p. 69). For her, education constitutes a way to “confront ... [your] own destiny” and is part of a dynamics of constructing one’s place in the world and helping others to get free from poverty and oppression by coming back to the marginal neighborhood with ideas and projects. Like Esperanza’s mother, Cisneros’ main role model and ally when growing up was her own mother: “Rather than raise me in the kitchen, rather than have me take care of my little brothers like all my girlfriends did, rather than keeping me at home all

the time, she'd excuse me from domestic duties because I needed to read" (p. 79). Cisneros' mother, like Esperanza's, contributed a great deal to "the construction of a room of her own" where she could find the peace and privacy to develop her writing abilities: "My mother defended my right to have that space [to write], she defended my right to study" (p. 79). Education, especially higher education, is an important means for the preservation of culture and a catalyst for experimentation and change. "Culture and people persist or change based upon how culture is transmitted or transformed through creative action" (Arvizu, 1993, p. 305). For both Cisneros and Esperanza, education is vital in their process of self-reaffirmation and personal growth.

Unlike many female characters in the novel like Sally or Minerva, Esperanza finds in education and the process of writing powerful tools to empower herself and move away from patriarchal control. They become survival strategies for her to cope with the difficulties of growing up without roots and to have a better future than the one available in her neighborhood. Writing also functions to reconcile on paper the internal and external chaos she encounters in her life. The image of the house connects space and place in an extended metaphor that reveals the human need to have a spatial connection with the world to understand oneself in relation to a collectivity. For both Cisneros and Esperanza, writing/narrating and obtaining an education are the paths to build at last "a new house, a house made of heart" (p. 64).

Conclusion

Mango says goodbye sometimes

The theme of space is fundamental in Sandra Cisneros' *The house on Mango Street*. It is represented by the image of the house. "La casa" as Tomás Rivera (1989) says, "is the most beautiful word in the Spanish language" (p. 22). For Esperanza, it is many houses. It is the homeland she never had. It is the barred windows on her apartment on Mango Street. It is moving constantly with her family and never growing roots. As Esperanza says: "We didn't always live on Mango Street. Before that we lived on Loomis on the third floor, and before that we lived on Keeler. Before Keeler it was

Paulina, and before that I can't remember. But what I remember most is moving a lot" (p. 3). The deep sense of uprootedness experienced by the protagonist is the source of her desire to have a house of her own. As Gaston Bachelard (1994) says: "without the house, [one] would be a dispersed being," a lost child "without the cradle of the house" (p. 7). The notion of space is also connected to Esperanza's dream house and the possibility of transforming marginality into creation. This extends to the recreation of her-self under a new name, a new identity. Through the power of fiction, expressed by the acts of storytelling and narration, she can make sense of her reality and *create* a "house quiet as snow, a space for [herself] to go (p. 108). Writing opens, in this sense, literary space for Chicanos/as to inscribe themselves in the world. In *Retrospace*, Juan Bruce-Novoa (1990) states that: "the existence of Chicano/a literature itself can make writers less concerned for their survival, they now have a space to work in" (p. 166).

Furthermore, Esperanza finds in education a strategy to leave the paternal house. Getting formal education opens horizons for the protagonist to go beyond the boundaries of her marginal barrio and have a better future than most of her female friends. In this way, writing and education are powerful means to fight alienation and poverty in the protagonist's journey towards self-assertion and empowerment. The last vignette entitled "Mango says goodbye sometimes" manifests the end of this journey: "I write it down and Mango says goodbye sometimes. She does not hold me with both arms. She sets me free" (p. 110). The word "goodbye" functions as a narrative device that announces the story's imminent end and its resolution. Esperanza comes to terms with her house, with her identity in process, she is finally ready to leave Mango Street.

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