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Whose House Is It Anyway?: Architects of the 'House' Leitmotif
in the Literature from Mexican America

by

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**Approved by
Supervising Committee:**

Dedication

For my mother and my father – for believing.

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Abstract

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The literature written and being spoken by writers of Mexican origin in the United States continues to reformulate the notion of borders as well as subjects and forms within and beyond the house leitmotif. Writings by Sandra Cisneros, Pat Mora, and Tomás Rivera construct public and private spaces that merit validation in historical, literary, and cultural contexts. As architects, Chicana and Chicano writers challenge the nationalist canon and house.

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Introduction

“My hands are strong, and from within I rule.”

Pat Mora, “The Young Sor Juana,” (Communion 78)

Between 1860 and 1890, United States history and literature addresses the idea of a “house divided and restored,” a memorable phrase from Abraham Lincoln’s “House Divided” speech of 1858 on preserving the Union. The speech further alludes to Biblical scripture: “If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand” (Mark 3:25). Lincoln’s “house” was a nation divided by strife and uncertainty. Does the architecture of such a house presently exist in (re)constructing the American literary heritage? Since the Chicano Literary Renaissance of the 1960s, the ideals of the nationalist house are challenged by writers of Mexican descent as they collectively construct a house, or a “house of houses.”

In defining the nation-state and its embodiment of knowledge, how does the nation-state’s cultural, political, and literary production become its democratic standard? In the essay “Race and Architecture,” Cornel West recognizes the “political legitimacy of architecture” and the labor that awaits cultural historians on the construction of buildings (47). Continuing the critical discourse on architectural motifs, West addresses the challenges and practices facing the critics.

[T]he challenge is to try to understand architectural practices as power-laden cultural practices that are deeply affected by larger historical forces,

for instance, markets, the state, the academy, but also as practices that have their own specificity and social effects. (47)

Although West's discourse reflects how buildings are constructed, the proposed thoughts in the essay reflect the building of houses, and I apply such ideology into literary and spatial constructions. Recent works by Mexican American writers continue to explore the omnipresent motif of the house. Whether it is a house on the fringes of the United States or Mexican America, a house inhabited by extended family members due to socioeconomic and cultural circumstances, a house with the swirls of pastels and other hues, a house in the Latino quarter of a racially-divided city, a house in the rural quiet of the country, or an adobe house in the Chihuahua desert of North America, writers of Mexican descent such as Rudolfo A. Anaya, Sandra Cisneros, Pat Mora, and Tomás Rivera introduce another periphery and pedagogy to American literature, shifting its ethnocentric ideology to an ethnic literary history. Architects of the house leitmotif, these writers create their own sense of "home" by articulating the lives of the inhabitants of private spaces that merit validation in historical and literary contexts. Although this literature has often been marginalized by mainstream theoreticians as ethnic literature, the crescendo of these American voices challenges conventional attitudes and misrepresentations of the periphery in defining our national literature. By directing my attention to the ethnic literary history of Mexican America, I recover and articulate the omnipresent leitmotif of the house as part of American literary history. The reader and critic's role demands active engagement with this body of literature -- a literature that remains in the shadows of canonized texts.

In the same manner that a canon establishes a reading public of its nation, constructing images, symbols, and signifiers, the reader recognizes an equivalent in the Dick-and-Jane reading series, which was introduced in 1927 and survived through the late 1960s.¹ A first-grade primer, the Dick-and-Jane text, which socialized children into mainstream, hegemonic white America, introduces the implication of the status quo objective to define an American family that speaks to an exclusive reality. Constructed by editors Zerna Sharp and William S. Gray, the primer joined the canon of texts to Americanize children by constructing four-letter named children without a last name, since they were “meant to represent Everyboy and Everygirl” (Kismaric and Heiferman 21). The title of the sampler text affirms its societal function: Growing Up with Dick and Jane: Learning and Living the American Dream (1996). Whether it is a primer or a children’s picture book, the text represents and reinforces an all-white world.

What, then, is beauty? What images does society value, reward? How are children socialized into a reality that values a particular beauty and stigmatizes the other, marking their development as social outcasts? How does reading a primer become an embodiment of American values and for what purposes beyond literacy? A recent sampler of the Dick-and-Jane series reminds readers of American space and time in a nostalgic tone:

Dick and Jane reached their peak when America, fresh from winning a war, was secure, safe and flourishing in a burst of prosperity and

¹ The prologue to Toni Morrison’s first novel, The Bluest Eye (1970), includes variations of the Dick-and-Jane primer, serving as a vehicle for representation of the families: the Fishers (the ideal, white American family), the MacTeers (the somewhat disorderly, African American family), and the Breedloves (the African American family on the verge of chaos).

optimism. Dick and Jane stir memories that have lingered for decades because they remind us of our own histories, especially what it was like to grow up when childhood felt like one long summer day. (Kismaric and Heiferman 106)

After reading this passage, the other must ask: Whose selective memory and what flourishing decades interest Zerna Sharp and William S. Gray? The editors of the texts fail to acknowledge the reality of *all* Americans. Instead, the writers choose their interpretations of American life and the pursuit of the American Dream. The framework of spatial and temporal realities fails to capture American childhood from the 1920s to the 1960s, since the editors and writers of the primer series suffer from historical and cultural amnesia. Furthermore, the primer articulates a potential imagined community -- the Dick-and-Jane house.

By 1960, the world of Dick-and-Jane was no longer limited to white America. The new neighbors arrive in the world of Dick-and-Jane, challenging the distortions of white, middle class life. The added neighbors do not follow the patterning of Caucasianism as the sole race that directly gains opportunity. Because of socio-political realities, such as *Brown v. the Board of Education* (1954) among other legislation, the first-grade basal reading program acknowledges the presence of other Americans (Kismaric and Heiferman 96-101). For example, in 1965, the first African-American family moves to Dick-and-Jane's neighborhood. The family includes the Mother (unnamed), the Father named Mike, and the twin daughters, Pam and Penny. However, the addition of "the new neighbors" introduces African Americans as curios of the post-Civil Rights Act of 1964 as they pursue equal justice, including voting rights, school integration, fair housing and employment, and access to public accommodations.

The text begins in a matter-of-fact tone: “They’re here!” The addition of African Americans to the Dick-and-Jane neighborhood reinforces the social construction of the other’s encroachment, which violates the pre-existing order and social constructions.

If the Dick-and-Jane text served a hegemonic purpose, how do marginal literary texts move to a centrality, a mass consumption by the reading public? Can the voice of the Dick-and-Jane text be debunked by other forms of contact such as the voice of the other? What is the relationship of individuals to canonical texts?

In contemporary Mexican America, the house -- both as a nation and as a private space -- is restored as writers raise their collective voice, recovering and redefining literary traditions that have been silenced and marginalized. In Pat Mora’s House of Houses (1997), the house is constructed as a family history and autobiographical memoir of women, men, and children of Mexican descent. The ethnographic voices lend a more authentic rendering of silenced Mexican-origin voices within literary and historical discourses. As an architect, Mora includes both living and dead family members in her constructed adobe “dreamhouse,” an imagined space that is that is brought to life through literary discourse and storytelling. Hence, the houses inhabited by Mexicans and Mexican Americans posit the center for constructing spatial and temporal realities in the American literary history.²

² In the essay “The Space of Chicano Literature Update: 1978,” Bruce-Novoa recognizes Chicano literature as a “response to chaos,” locating the following literary paradigm: “threat of chaotic discontinuity → recuperation of vital images → unity in continuous literary space” (99).

The immediate reality of the author becomes a source for expression, articulating the struggles of a people for survival against numerous challenges and borders. Works by Sandra Cisneros, Pat Mora, and Tomás Rivera reflect such literary production. Indeed, the Mexican-American writer uses the realistic centrality of the house as the formula for the construction of the restored literary house. In a Marxist textual reading, the author is not an inspired, autonomous individual, but rather a member of a particular social class bearing what shall be written and what shall be transmitted to the reader on the page. The writer from Mexican America restores the idea of nation-state as a house solidified through more inclusive representation, so that the metaphor then reflects an addition of rooms to the larger house of canonical texts. Furthermore, these writers offer voice to women's spaces within and beyond the house. At the same time, houses and ethnic groups relegated to the periphery are acknowledged beyond canon standards of representation. Thus, the nature of literature is influenced by the ideology -- social, political, and economic circumstances -- in which it is produced.

Sanctions within the Canon

Literary critic Ramón Saldívar recognizes in Chicano Narrative: The Dialectics of Difference (1990) that what has been termed American literature only reinforces the sanctions of an "ideological consensus," while the "antagonistic resistance literatures," such as those written by Mexican Americans, are never sanctioned in the Eurocentric American literary tradition (218). Thus,

the literature written and being spoken by Mexican Americans formulates a new literary periphery and architecture. The literary production from Mexican America integrates an original dialectic of U.S. literature as Saldívar's study concludes, "placing the masterworks in different frameworks that include the voices to which the master texts were covertly opposed, voices that were and continue to be silenced by the hegemonic culture" (214). Because of these repressive structures, this literature could not be canonized as part of the house of the learned by the presumable, ethnocentric critics and thinkers trained in a Western consciousness. What are the determinants of "canon-building" in regard to form and content? The literary criticism postulated by Harold Bloom reflects much provincialism in "canon-building" such as the most recent list on the "self-interested" Modern Library's 100 best books, which excluded women writers and writers of color (Lauter 1).³ The aforementioned hegemonic architectures confirm West's notion of "power-laden cultural practices" (47). In her essay titled "The Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature" (1989), Toni Morrison declares, "Canon building is Empire building. Canon defense is national defense" (8). As these comments suggest, much is invested in becoming learned in Western ideology.

An ecclesiastical term used during the Middle Ages to define the Church's sacred texts, canon has come to embody the knowledge by which the learned become educated in Western consciousness. In restricting American literature,

³ Most recently, The Heath Anthology of American Literature Newsletter (1999) offered the results of the poll, "The Heath Top 100," which included Rudolfo A. Anaya's Bless Me, Úlima (1972) and Sandra Cisneros's The House on Mango Street (1984) in the list of the most significant twentieth-century books of fiction in English (Lauter 1).

the canon speaks to only a portion of this country's reality. Thus, the house of U.S. literature remains divided in form, content, and space. Most recently, across disciplines, many active learners, educators, writers, critics, and thinkers seek the reading and teaching of *American literatures* -- a larger body of literature that speaks broadly to the citizens of this country and includes the thoughts that have preoccupied U.S. writers through the centuries. Acknowledging the power of naming involved within this nation's literary establishment both within and beyond the academy, Toni Cade Bambara reminds us:

There is no American literature; there are American literatures. There are those who have their roots in the most ancient civilizations -- African, Asian, or Mexican -- and there are those that have the most ancient roots in this place, that mouth-to-ear tradition of the indigenous peoples that were here thousands and thousands of years before it was called America, thousands of years before it was even called Turtle Island. And there is too the literature of the European settlement regime that calls itself American literature. (140)

Orature belongs to the native people's sense of story, their sense of belonging -- no matter what the historical and literary texts articulate through the "American" misnomer. Like the natives of Américas who, in 1992, questioned the use of words such as "discovery," "Old World," and "New World" during the observation of the five-hundredth anniversary of Columbus's encroachment on their space, the appropriated notion of American literature had to be revisited, challenged, and deconstructed. In defining this country's cultural and literary canon, American too often became synonymous with words such as "Western," "civilization," and "whiteness."

As the Anglo colonizer ventured beyond the Mississippi River, to fulfill what some writers, historians and critics such as Leslie Marmon Silko, Howard Zinn, and James W. Loewen call the arrogance and treacherousness of Manifest Destiny, he opened up the virgin landscape and imposed an ethnocentric ideology. In the present-day Southwestern United States' borderlands, the Spanish fulfilled their genocidal practices on native peoples through the cross and sword. As an internal form of control and domination, the hegemonic forces perpetuated a ruling order. In exploring the unquestioned privilege of whiteness in the United States, George Lipsitz's study titled The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics (1998) recognizes,

Whiteness is everywhere in U.S. culture, but it is very hard to see. . . . As the unmarked category against which difference is constructed, whiteness never has to speak its name, never has to acknowledge its role as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations. (1)

Because this fog-like hegemony of power and domination cannot easily be seen, it remains beyond perception, swirling in the back of the brain without articulation. Imperialism and colonialism continue to be perpetuated through various means. Due to multiple conquests, Mexicans became immigrants in their own land -- caught in a middle space, in *nepantla*, a Nahuatl word meaning the "land in the middle." Mora identifies *nepantla* as the U.S.-Mexico border: "that land corridor bordered by the two countries that have most influenced my perception of reality" (*Nepantla* 6). In the Southwestern United States borderlands, the Mexican/Mexican American is a border citizen lost and found in translation.

In a critical study of the Africanist presence in American literature, Toni Morrison's Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination (1992) explores the cultural and historical realities that shape racial ideology in literature; in addition, hierarchies of sexism and class elitism merit articulation. How do racial imperatives inform the subjects and objects in a literary text? Does the reader remain an autonomous individual, unshaped by the texts' direct and indirect observations and revelations? As is known, literature offers symbols that *do* contribute to the "fabrication of racism" (16). Following Morrison's model of the Africanist presence in U.S. literature, specifically canonical texts, I propose the reading of texts for the Mexicanist persona -- the voice of a colonized people, through texts written by Sandra Cisneros, Pat Mora, and Tomás Rivera. The conscious reader, anthropologist, and cultural worker observes that the Mexican subject surfaces in literary and historical texts usually as a stereotypical subject; or, more conveniently for the writer, historian, and chronicler, the Mexican is best left omitted. While actively engaging in the labor of locating a house in the literature from Mexican America, I challenge such misrepresentations and actively formulate the architectural dialectic of a house within "houses" in constructing and remapping the American literary and spatial imagination.

The Vignette as Social Text

Originating from the French, *vigne*, a vine, the term "vignette" came to existence from the vine-like decorations in early books. Hence, the vignette is a small, decorative literary sketch. In the same manner that each leaf shapes the

length and ascent of the ivy vine, each vignette contributes to the novel as a whole. From Tomás Rivera to Sandra Cisneros to Pat Mora, the architecture of the house inhabited by citizens of Mexican descent continues to emerge and evolve. Rivera, himself once a farmworker, spoke to the reality of the farmworker who must rise above harsh circumstances, while Cisneros, a product of a Latino neighborhood of Chicago, writes vignettes about the lives of a people who inhabit a particular urban space. In the introduction to the tenth anniversary edition of The House on Mango Street (1994), Cisneros explains, “I knew I wanted to tell a story made up of a series of stories that would make sense if read alone, or that could be read all together to tell one big story, each story contributing to the whole -- like beads in a necklace” (xvi-xvii). Through a series of vignettes, both Rivera and Cisneros explore the sense of self and place. In a sense, these two writers can be recognized as vignettists, since they reformulated such a literary form within the emerging contemporary literature from Mexican America. Rivera’s . . . y no se lo tragó la tierra (1971) presents portraits of farmworking men, women, and children who become wanderers in search of a harvest, both literally and metaphorically.⁴ Rivera captures the vernacular language of these farmworkers who travel across the country in search of stoop work, picking from the bitter earth. Their contact with wealthy, prejudiced landowners illustrates the plight, turmoil, and discrimination these farmworking people must endure.

⁴ Originally written in Spanish, a few English translations, including one by Evangelina Vigil-Piñón, appeared in a bilingual edition. An English rendition, which is more sound and just to the Spanish articulated in Rivera’s target language rather than Vigil-Piñón’s attempt, appeared in 1987 by Rolando R. Hinojosa-Smith entitled This Migrant Earth (Houston: Arte Público).

Writers from Mexican America explore all literary genres to articulate the people's orature and ways of seeing and knowing. These genres have included the short story, the novel through a series of vignettes, and the personal essay. In the volume of essays entitled *Nepantla* (1993), Pat Mora affirms, "We raise our voices to be of use. The work of the poet is for the people" (181). In a sense, texts written by Rivera, Cisneros, and Mora represent a holistic as well as humanistic view of the experiences of Mexican-origin people in the United States. The literature born in the 1960s by Mexican Americans also speaks to contemporary struggles and turmoil. Rivera's writings, such as his novel *... y no se lo tragó la tierra*, inspired Mexican Americans to contribute to literature, especially by presenting the realistic view of migrant farmworkers' lives. Although it is a fragmentary novel, *... y no se lo tragó la tierra* offers a voice to the migrant workers who remained in the shadows of society during a lifetime of work. The novel introduces nameless characters, reminding the reader of the marginal status of migrant farmworkers. Held together by the people who previously held no space on the literary page, Rivera captures the vernacular language and the plight of marginal people in a novel.

Through the content and the formal aspects of his writing, Rivera reveals empathy with the life of the migrant farmworker. The farmworker's fragmented sense of self and the body in pain are of particular interest to Tomás Rivera's literary architecture. The elliptical title of the text conveys the fragmentation of following the crop circuit from the southern to many parts of the United States.

The people work the land and are searchers, harvesting: “*Busca y hallarás.*”⁵ The plight of the farmworker leads them to many spaces across the United States, enduring prejudice and discrimination while working for a living. The migrant workers endure the reality of their life as they struggle against dehumanization, poverty, and marginalization. As they travel and work across the United States, the dangers and the presence of death do not escape their lives. Each day holds a series of haunting events, unfolding before their eyes.

A fragmentary novel through interrelated vignettes, the form reflects the loss of time and the fragmentary life of the characters. Rivera’s *... y no se lo tragó la tierra* resembles a picture that is frozen in time. Rivera’s novel spans a number of years of migrant life. The people who pick from the earth are invisible before the gaze of the people who exploit them. Because of this relationship, the novel is held together by a vast people who daily stoop to the earth. The young male protagonist of the novel reacts in various manners to survive in the environment placed upon him. The protagonist reflects upon episodes that have shaped his self-concept as well as his humanity and relationship to the external environment. Moreover, since the protagonist has no control over the environment and refuses to succumb to it, he changes his cognition and his view of how to find happiness without predefined elements such as money or economics, politics or voting rights, social acceptance as normal from the mainstream society or belief in a Supreme Being. He declares to his mother:

⁵ “Seek and you shall find.” While visiting the museum exhibit, *Los Tejanos: Sus huellas en esta tierra*, *The Texas Mexicans: Footprints on the Land* (12 Oct 1997-8 Sept 1998), I found folk wisdom through selected proverbs, or *dichos*, reflecting communal faith, humor, irony, and love.

“[S]i Dios no se acuerda de uno . . . creo que ni hay [un Dios]” (44). His anger mounts as he continues to think about God.

In the novel’s closing vignette titled “*Debajo de la casa*,” the young, male protagonist is under a house, reminiscing about the events that formed the novel’s evolution, coming into consciousness as he rises from under the house (114). While under the house, however, he is hidden from the public life. He finds tranquility and reflects on the life and thought that formed the past year in a solitary space -- beneath the house. A woman comments on the family’s plight, stating, “*Pobre familia. Primero la mamá, y ahora éste. Se estará volviendo loco. Yo creo que se le está yendo la mente. Está perdiendo los años.*”⁶ This last sentence brings the fragmentary novel to a full circle. The novel begins, “*Aquel año se le perdió*”⁷ (7). For the young, male protagonist, the lost year is (re)found as he finds himself among his people: his sense of self and place and the means to survive. Under the house, he recognizes the people’s collective consciousness, too: “*Necesitaba esconderme para poder comprender muchas cosas. De aquí en adelante todo lo que tengo que hacer es venirme aquí, en lo oscuro, y pensar en ellos*” (113).

The vignette titled “*Los niños no se aguantaron*” focuses on the manslaughter of a child. The boss/grower shoots a “thirsty” child on his property. The field workers had been warned by the grower not to drink water from the tank. However, a child disobeys because he is thirsty. Hence, he is shot by the

⁶ “Poor family. First, it was the mother, and now it’s him (the son). He’s losing it (his mind). He has lost the sense of years.” My translation.

⁷ “That was the year of the lost year.” My translation.

grower who claims that he only fired a warning shot. Nevertheless, the child is killed. The underlying message behind this vignette are the strategies to contain and punish the migrant workers. They are forced into cheap labor, but at the same time, they are denied human rights. Although the grower says that he did not mean to shoot the boy, the boy is killed.

The grower does not go to trial, but to a hearing for the crime. To no one's surprise, the grower is neither punished nor sentenced for manslaughter. The migrant farmworkers are silent and powerless before the repressive structures that contain them. They remain in the shadows and on the margins of justice, hoping to one day overcome the scars of their migrant life. As a foundation against which "American" gets constructed, texts such as Rivera's position migrant farmworkers at the center of economic and sociopolitical realities.

"*Los quemaditos*" focuses on the death of two children, María and Juan. The children die in their home, a chicken coop, while their parents are working in the fields. While boxing, the children play too close to the stove, and the gloves catch on fire. Raulito is the only survivor. Ironically, the boxing gloves survive the fire. In this ironic treatment of the plot, the novel addresses the vulnerability of children while left unattended and their endangered life while living under harsh circumstances. "*Los quemaditos*" are the children who are the victims of the fire. Even within the dilapidated house, the children succumb to the social injustice that restricts them from a life free from danger and exploitation.

Just as Texas Rangers' treatment of Mexicans as worthless and despicable, one notes that the Mexican American has internalized this racism, prejudice, and

self-fulfilling prophecy. For example, the treatment of the other, such as the wetback, *el mojado*, is also of particular interest to both the anthropologist and psychologist.⁸ In “*La mano en la bolsa*” from Rivera’s ...y no se lo tragó la tierra, a married, Mexican American couple, Don Hilario (Laíto) and Doña Bonifacia (Bone), respected in the community, plot to murder a *mojadito*. He is no longer just a *mojado*, but stressed in the diminutive through language, conveying an ironic endearment. After murdering the *mojadito*, the couple means to keep the money he earned as a laborer. The couple stresses that the *mojadito* will not be missed because he has no family. Money overturns individualities, especially with its power to possess goods, exchanging all things and even relegating human life to objectification and commodification.

The woman tells her husband that the wetback’s boss will not worry about him, since he is only *brazos* (as a *bracero*) to him. Thus, although a source of labor, the wetback can easily be replaced by another Mexican. The wetback does not have a house, because he is an undocumented worker far from his homeland in the search for manual labor. The fact that the wetback remains unnamed further confirms the plight of migrant workers: they are nameless and easily exchanged as a commodity from one landowner to another. The wetback is only a part (arms) of a whole (cheap labor force). No one will remember the wetback; thus, no one will search for him in a foreign country. As an object of labor, he is easily murdered and replaced. Is the wetback an object of desire? There is the

⁸ In a vignette titled “Geraldo No Last Name” from The House on Mango Street (1984), Cisneros presents the *bracero* and the ostracism, exploitation, and marginalization he faces as an “illegal alien.” The undocumented worker is described as “[j]ust another *brazer* who didn’t speak English. Just another wetback. You know the kind. The ones who always look ashamed” (81).

probability that the unnamed wetback and Doña Bone had sexual intercourse while her husband was not home. After the *mojadito* is murdered, the youngster is forced to help bury him in the hole dug near a tree on their farm. The murder remains in his conscience, and it haunts him long after he has left the home of Don Laíto and Doña Bone. Throughout the vignette, a certain laughter, perhaps in the tone of a trickster, pervades the narration and action. The *mojadito*, the most wretched of commodities, far away from his native land, can easily be replaced by another *mojado* who is ready to put his body to everyday use, since he only has his labor to sell. Doña Bone explains to her husband,

—Este (mojadito) tiene dinero y además no tiene parientes. Fíjate, viejo, que sería muy fácil. Ni quién se preocupe por él . . . n'ombre, ¿tú crees? . . . al viejo le importa poco, él sabe bien que es puro mojado y si le pasa algo ¿tú crees que se va a preocupar por él? Nadie sabe que viene aquí . . . tú nomás déjame a mí . . . Uh, eso será muy fácil.⁹ (24)

Ironically, the title of this vignette reflects the *mojadito*'s sense of alienation and shame, perhaps the sense of thought, walking in a shuffle, eyes on the ground, and his hands in his pockets. However, the protagonist, an innocent boy, is forced to help the couple to bury the *mojadito*. Since the protagonist never sees the *mojadito*'s face, he remains without an identity. Some time later, the couple visit him, offering him a ring owned by the *mojadito*. After this experience, the

⁹ “This *mojadito* has money and, anyway, he has no relatives. Just notice, *viejo*, that it would be so easy. No one to worry about him . . . Man, can you believe it? His boss doesn't care either. He knows that he's just a plain wetback so if something were to happen to him, do you think he'd worry over him? No one knows that he comes here . . . you just leave him to me. . . . Ah, this shall be easy.” My translation.

youngster is left with the recurring, psychological habit of slipping his hand into his pocket whenever he confronts strangers. Is he searching for a sense of place, a sense of belonging, a sense of identity, money? The protagonist and the *mojadito* have a similar plight in the hands of those in power.

Similar to the marked humor of literary forms prominent in the Southern and Southwestern United States, such as that found in the writings of Mark Twain, Eudora Welty, and Larry McMurtry, Tomás Rivera employs the use of local color and vernacular language in his writings. Through the accurate treatment of the Spanish spoken by farmworking Mexicans as well as their customs and character, Rivera constructs a realistic observation and articulation of their lives. Rivera's vignette titled "*La noche buena*" presents the Mexican woman who is confined to the house and unable to venture beyond its threshold. The husband is the public man who is perhaps *feo*, *fuerte*, and *formal*, while the woman is *abnegada*, self-sacrificing, like the Virgin Mary. As the *Don*, rival, and keeper, the husband is the *patrón* -- the supreme patriarch of the family's private and public space. He handles all of the family's public affairs such as shopping for groceries and clothes. Because of this social privilege, the male leaves the house and assumes a public role.

Like the domestic fiction in early U.S. literature that served as a social text, formulating the lives of women in houses and imprisoning them within these confinements and interiors, Rivera offers a sketch of such a woman named Doña María, a familiar name with many signifiers, who finally enters the public space. Doña María never leaves the house without a guide; thus, she has become

dependent on someone else and lacks a public entrance to the world on her own. She needs her husband as a chaperone to guide her when she occasionally ventures beyond the confined private space. Doña María freely walks a block down the street from her house to visit relatives or attend religious services. Her only world is the one before her eyes, her limited, confining vision. In this vignette, there is, however, a reversal of roles when Doña María has the permission from her husband to shop for Christmas gifts for their children at the downtown's Kress, a department store. It is important to note that Doña María is persistent in gaining the reassurance of her husband who works over eighteen hours a day as a dishwasher and cook at a restaurant. Nonetheless, when she has this freedom, Doña María cannot function nor find order to the public sphere.

An agoraphobic, Doña María enters the public space with much fear and confusion during the Christmas season. The harshness, confusion, and reality of the public space reflects her relationship to the wider world far from her house. In her determined journey to the department store, Doña María walks in the middle of the street, scrambling in her walk. She fears crossing the railroad tracks as she hears the sounds of the roaring train careening down the track. Doña María's journey and exploration becomes both external and internal. The noisy affairs of the broader world startle her sense of self. Through stream of consciousness and monologue, the narration suggests that choices lead to responsibilities and problems. In the turmoil of confronting the public space, Doña María shoplifts the Christmas gifts for her children without being conscious of her responsibilities as a consumer in a capitalistic society. On her way out of the store, she is grabbed

by the arm and finds her eyes before the cement sidewalk. In a pejorative tone, the security officer of the Kress stammers,

—Here she is . . . these damn people, always stealing something, stealing. I've been watching you all along. Let's have that bag.

—¿Pero . . . ? (82-83)

Doña María not only has characteristics of a shoplifter, but she also embodies the stereotypes assigned only to subjects engaged in thievery who are of Mexican descent. She is a shoplifter from a distinct racial category: a typical, despicable Mexican before the law enforcers. When she is rescued from her despair by her husband, Doña María tells him that she thinks she is crazy. In this reaction, the female acknowledges the division between human impulses and social constructs. As the response of her husband suggests, it is likely that Doña María previously experienced such hysteria and turmoil when she entered a public space on her own in another town. Indeed, Doña María fears the freedom she has never experienced, while her cramped existence as a domestic woman provides her with a sense of security.

As the vignette suggests, Doña María discovers from her journey that there is no place free from tension and grief. She yearns for a quiet bourn, which to her becomes an insane asylum after this incident. In the essay “Untitled: The Housing of Gender” (1992), Mark Wigley maps spatial confusion and the feminization of space.

Unable to control herself, [woman] must be controlled by being bounded. Marriage, understood as the domestication of a wild animal, is instituted to effect this control. As the mechanism of, rather than simply the scene for,

this control, the house is involved in the production of gender division it appears merely to secure. (335-336)

Doña María failed to find what she had sought for her children: the promise of a fulfilling, commercial Christmas. During Doña María's catharsis, her husband offers the solution that she should just remain indoors, because there is no need for her to venture beyond the house.

A creative and concise literary form, the vignettes written by Rivera in *... y no se lo tragó la tierra* (1971) and Cisneros in *The House on Mango Street* (1984) offer a social context to address migrant farmworker life and urban realities, respectively. As a whole, the novels offer a literary and linguistic innovation to the American literary imagination. In the essay "Mexican-American Literature: The Establishment of Community" (1983), Rivera explains, "The [Mexican American] writer speaks from the community, by characterizing members of the community, thus extracting wisdom, advice, and counsel from it" (127). By articulating such a sense of communion among the migrant farmworkers' lives and thought, Rivera's sense of community is reflected in his otherwise fragmentary novel.

4006 Mango Street

Even though Cisneros's vignettes have the potential to come alive as truths, like Rivera's, she still constructs Mango Street as a fictional narrative. While the mainstream U.S. media and Mexican/Mexican American cultures tend to posit Mexican-origin women as either angelic wives and mothers, or "loose women" (the former more preferable to society's standards), Cisneros constructs

her women as persons searching for autonomy. In the essay “Guadalupe the Sex Goddess” (1996), Cisneros acknowledges the imposed double standard she witnessed as a young girl. Like the narrative voice found in The House on Mango Street (1984) vignette “Boys & Girls” that states, “The boys and the girls live in separate worlds. The boys in their universe and we in ours,” the exclusive differences and separation of the sexes imposes restrictions and social codes of behavior on females within and beyond the house (9). On the topic of icons, sexuality, and sexual behavior, Cisneros writes,

Did boys have to aspire to be Jesus? I never saw any evidence of it. They were fornicating like rabbits while the Church ignored them and pointed us women toward our destiny -- marriage and motherhood. The other alternative was *putahood*.

In my neighborhood I knew only real women, neither saints nor whores, naïve and vulnerable *huerquitas* like me who wanted desperately to fall in love, with the heart and soul. And yes, with the *panocha*, too.
 (“Guadalupe” 48)

In the formula of domestic fiction, women are the repository of the body principle, and the domesticity purifies them as the ideals of motherhood, Christian embodiment, and domestic angelhood.¹⁰ Cisneros recognizes the biased choices for females and *huerquitas* due to the conspiratorial silences of the Mexican-origin and Church community.

Implicit in the description of poverty and hostility, Cisneros’s The House on Mango Street, a *bildungsroman*, becomes an extension of a young person and

¹⁰ Cisneros’s volumes of poetry, My Wicked Wicked Ways (1987) and Loose Woman (1993), reflect a female writer’s search for autonomy as she carves her own sense of self and space, challenging patriarchal paradigms of instruction and subjugation.

her fears of subjugation. Esperanza Cordero grieves in the house located at 4006 Mango Street, because it is a house in the Latino quarter of Chicago as well as the house of a father and future husband. Her name, Esperanza, offers “hope,” yet represents “sadness” from personal confinement and “waiting” for the rage to be overcome by a nonviolent anger. She wishes to “baptize [herself] under a new name, a name more like [her] real being, the one nobody sees,” rather than succumbing to the name (and its signifiers) she was born to accept (13). Moreover, she desires a name that will assert her power to avoid her great-grandmother’s fate. Esperanza shares a similar plight with other girls and young women such as Sally, Rachel, Marín, and Minerva. On the imposed heterosexualization of space and in acknowledgment of a lesbian topography, critic Catrióna Rueda Esquibel states,

Heterosexuality is, throughout the novel, a brutal intrusion into the world of girls.

In Chicana contexts, girlhood is a space and time before the imposition of normative heterosexuality and, as such, provides a site for texts to stage lesbian desires, such as those of Esperanza, whose feelings for Sally go beyond those of friendship. (655)

Esperanza’s given name offers possibilities for transgression to attain self-actualization. For Esperanza, her name represents “hope” to escape from the life within the interiors of the house, only looking out the window, limiting her maximum potential, like that of other women, as a human being and woman. Mango Street is a place where women are locked in their poor, socioeconomic homes by jealous and insecure fathers and husbands. Esperanza yearns for a particular house -- “[n]ot a flat. Not an apartment at back. Not a man’s house.

Not a daddy's. A house all my own" (132). The struggle Esperanza undergoes is against her confinement to the urban setting, which is controlled by mainstream and Mexican-origin patriarchal systems.

The silences of women are articulated through the paraphrasing and dialogue of Esperanza in the hopes of subverting the domestic formula. Like her great-grandmother, Esperanza was born in the "Chinese year of the horse -- which is supposed to be bad luck if you're born female -- but I think this is a Chinese lie because the Chinese, like the Mexicans, don't like their women strong" (11-12). As both systems position her inside the house as the sole space for women, Esperanza rejects the domestic space because it has become an extension of herself, and she fears subjugation in the house. Writing grants Esperanza the voice to express feelings of shame and inadequacy. Through the dynamics of domesticity and the personification of the house, Cisneros positions her text on the spaces of domination with the possibility of transgressing borders and imposed patriarchal paradigms.

Moreover, the neighborhood of the novel reflects the division of a city due to state and federal legislation; these divisions include and are not limited to class and race segregation. Clearly, Cisneros's novel challenges the hegemonic architecture of the Dick-and-Jane primer. As members of the lower economic class, Mexican American females can only live in dilapidated houses of the ethnic barrios, in contrast to the idealized American suburban house constructed in the primer. Through spatial politics, the dominant culture limits and impoverishes Mexican America's geographic, social, and economic space. The denied access

to the suburban house underlies the control of urban space by external policies that aim to exclude the Latino barrio from the broader United States territory. Urban renewal only meant containment of the other through walls, borders, and the iron curtain of industrialization and suburbia through government-sponsored initiatives (Lipsitz 12, 14).

During the decades following World War II, urban renewal helped construct a new “white” identity in the suburbs by helping to destroy ethnically specific European American urban inner-city neighborhoods. Wrecking balls and bulldozers eliminated some of these sites while others were transformed by an influx of minority residents desperately competing for a declining supply of affordable housing units. As increasing numbers of racial minorities moved into cities, increasing numbers of European Americans moved out. (Lipsitz 7)

The impossibility of obtaining the suburban house underlines the control of urban space by external policies that aim to exclude Latinos and the poor from the broader United States territory and imagination. Even today, the need for adequate, clean, and safe shelter for the poor, working class remains to become a reality. Due to class and racial divisions, these families are doomed to live in impoverished houses which demand more domestic labor for women. Thus, the desired house, as a study of personal internal spaces, integrates values that are denied in the neighborhood of Mango Street. Through the values of the “real house,” Esperanza associates the homeless conditions she and members of this community endure (6). This is a world where injustice, violence, incest, and rape are no uncommon.

Is Sandra Cisneros the novel’s young female protagonist named Esperanza Cordero? In the introduction to the tenth anniversary edition of The House on

Mango Street, Cisneros explains to her readers: “Am I Esperanza? Yes. And no. And then again, perhaps maybe. One thing I know for certain, you, the reader, are Esperanza. . . . *You* are Esperanza. You cannot forget who you are” (xix-xx). Hence, the novel’s protagonist is positioned as a collective voice, further confirming Rivera’s anticipation of a literature from Mexican America that articulated the people’s sense of community.¹¹ Cisneros’s response to her readers’ question addresses the sense of self and subjectivity.

In A Room of One’s Own (1929), Virginia Woolf articulates the need for privacy which is critical for creativity and for women in particular to raise their interior voices. According to Woolf, the expressed genius of women was shown through witches, wise women, and mothers of remarkable men. Had Shakespeare had a sister named “Judith” who was as talented as he or had Aristotle been expected to cook and clean, would their genius have been part of the center, the forefront of civilization?¹² Indeed, these were not born among the “laboring, uneducated, servile people” (52). Theirs was an academic, economically privileged life of letters as public men during the Elizabethan Age and in Ancient Greece, respectively. Because the life of the working class is demanding, and too often exploitative and demoralizing, the innate genius is hardly ever expressed, and much less nurtured by these systems of domination.

For women, there is a search for houses of their own in which to flourish with their creative energies without the shadow of a dominating, overpowering

¹¹ See footnote 18.

¹² Later in this report, I discuss Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz’s experimentalism in the kitchen.

being. Furthermore, the underlying fear of being exchanged from one patriarch to another surfaces, too. In *Mango Street*, however, the houses and rooms are empty spaces in which women are geographically, psychologically, emotionally, and sexually entrapped. Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* addresses subjugation through the personification of a house as a spatial extension of female life. Cisneros's "house" reveals that women's spaces are not only geographically and socially limited, but also sexually and psychologically violated. In the critical essay "Memories of Girlhood: Chicana Lesbian Fictions" (1998), Catrióna Rueda Esquibel explains, "[Esperanza] does not want to wait for a man to change her life; she wants to write her own changes. Esperanza seeks an alternative to the options presented to her: options prescribed by sexism and institutionalized heterosexuality" (650). Within the "houses" of the novel, women struggle for autonomy to consciously shape their spaces above all the contradictions of everyday existence. The house is constructed in a distinct "Cisnerian" voice, a voice that speaks through young protagonists in succinct lyricism and curiosity, conveying the poetry of everyday encounters.¹³ This voice also offers the linguistic innovation of a bilingual community populated by people of Mexican and Puerto Rican descent.

In exploring further the "Cisnerian" voice, Cisneros employs literary techniques such as local color, the vernacular, and synesthesia to give life to

¹³ In the introduction to the tenth anniversary edition of *The House on Mango Street* (1994), Cisneros writes, "The language in *Mango Street* is based on speech. It's very much an anti-academic voice -- a child's voice, a girl's voice, a poor girl's voice, a spoken voice, the voice of an American-Mexican. It's in this rebellious realm of antipoetics that I tried to create a poetic text with the most unofficial language I could find. I did it neither ingenuously nor naturally. It was clear to me as if I were tossing a Molotov" (xv). Such confirms the "Cisnerian" voice I describe.

urban realities. Through the voice born as the novel progresses, Cisneros articulates the linguistic component shaped by cultural values, patriarchal domination, and social norms. An “anti-academic voice” of an “American-Mexican” female, Esperanza’s voice offers language all of its possibilities -- both spoken and written. These possibilities occur within and beyond the house, a space in which females experience oppression and victimization from the Mexican patriarchal system and the broader mainstream society.

In The House on Mango Street, Cisneros introduces the reader to another character of an urban space, Ruthie. According to the vignette titled “Edna’s Ruthie,” this older woman is an abandoned wife, and she cannot make any decisions on her own, asking for permission even as an adult. Esperanza Cordero explains, “Sometimes we [children] go shopping and take [Ruthie] with us, but she never comes inside the stores and if she does she keeps looking around her like a wild animal in a *house* (my italics) for the first time” (84). Ruthie is not familiar with the public space, and she fears the decisions and choices that life brings; thus, she remains entrapped in Mango Street, full of dreams and hopes, unfulfilled. The story does not inform the reader what exactly happened to Ruthie, since she once “got married and moved away to a pretty house outside the city” (85). The title reflects her status as that of still belonging to her mother, Edna, even though she has come of age. Thus, Ruthie finds herself confined to a matriarchal space and her sufferings of agoraphobia. As these two vignettes suggest, the world is set in motion by social constructions, and each of these is indifferent to human beings, particularly to confined, silenced women.

Similar to Ruthie from The House on Mango Street, Doña María from ... y no se lo tragó la tierra need not look for a haven from the public life's pressures, confusion, and predatoriness. In the safety of domesticity, Doña María can remain in the house as her husband's reasoning concludes. Both Ruthie and Doña María retreat in horror and fear over freedom far from the familiar, the house. Doña María hopes to spare her children from a Christmas without gifts, sparing them from feelings of dissatisfaction and self-criticism; however, she cannot overcome the physical and emotional pressures in her quest to meet their expectations of Santa Claus. Indeed, the human body becomes fragile in confronting the perplexing realities and grand griefs of life. Because of these realities, Doña María's husband decides to tell the children that Santa Claus does not exist to lessen the tension and demands on the family.

Mango Street is a place where Esperanza Cordero may have, at times, felt joy and a sense of belonging; however, it is also a place where she realizes that women are imprisoned in their poor, socioeconomic rooms by men. By denouncing this subjugation and resisting automarginalization, Esperanza gains control of her past and creates a present that will allow her to go "away to come back. For the ones [she] left behind. For the ones who cannot out" (134).

In the Search for a House of Houses

A native of El Paso, Texas, Pat Mora traces the lives of her ancestors, *sus antepasados*, who settle in El Paso, Texas in 1913, during the Mexican Revolution. Another addition to the growing canon of Mexican American letters,

Mora's family memoir explores the architecture of an adobe house inhabited by generations of desert dwellers. The family's beginnings are in Spain and México, leading them to the United States. The focus on the landscape and the seasons in the struggle for survival further enriches the memoir. In Mora's "dreamhouse," all of the family members -- both living and dead -- commune on this honorary, oratory, and literary occasion to share their stories: the sense of self, place, and belonging (1). Mora writes, "In my dream house, as in my dreams, we are together, the family spirits, the soul of this adobe" (43).

Similar to Mexican novelist Laura Esquivel's *Como agua para chocolate* (1989), a novel based on monthly installments with recipes, romances, and home remedies, Mora's *House of Houses* (1997) consists of fourteen chapters, twelve named after a different month, and is enriched with proverbs, or *dichos*. The former text, however, is categorized as a novel, while the latter is a family history and autobiographical memoir. The organization of Esquivel's novel is through a recipe calendar, while Mora's memoir is informed and architecturally conceived by the seasons and liturgical calendar year. Esquivel, too, shapes her text along the border region of Piedras Negras, Coahuila, Mexico, while Mora's takes place between the El Paso, Texas/Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, Mexico area and Santa Fe, New Mexico. Three rhetorical questions inform the text's overall framework as Mora muses, "How much does our body know that we know not? Can it be cajoled to release its secrets? What does the house, the body, know?" (2, 4). Mora, as family member, poet, scribe, and writer, continues the art of storytelling, deciphering and inscribing signs and symbols of space and selfhood.

The multiplicity of voices within the many rooms of “*la casa de casas*” offer portraits of the interior lives of family members who freely express their thoughts, articulating the realities of the living, of the past that hovers in memory, of the domestic and public space, of the desert’s heat, and of the tempestuous landscape (45). In other words, this is a house in the middle, in *nepantla*. Gaston Bachelard notes in *The Poetics of Space* (1958) that these houses shape the interior life of the inhabitants, forming the “totality of values” in a personal space (5). Mora’s role as observer, participant, poet, and scribe in the family history and autobiographical memoir’s evolution adds another perspective on seeing, inscription, and the art of storytelling.¹⁴

Mora’s memoir renders the lives of desert denizens who survive as (im)migrants in the United States through faith and hope despite U.S. society’s challenges and shortcomings. Mora explores the lives of women and men who find themselves molding one another in a house found in the desert, a harsh desert demanding perseverance against the glaring heat and scorching dryness. Like Latin American writers Isabel Allende, Laura Esquivel, Ángeles Mastretta, Elena Poniatowska, and Sara Sefcovich, Mora explores the domestic space of women who devote their time and energy to the family for a collective evolution. Through the house motif, Mora compresses time and space by gathering the

¹⁴ In the essay “The Dance within My Heart,” Mora acknowledges her privileges as an observer and writer, especially when visiting a public “house” such as the museum. She writes, “I think again of how privileged I am to be in these quiet rooms, not having to wait for a free day -- free in either sense, from job responsibilities and from admission fees. I am privileged to choose when I want to come. I can wander these galleries rather than, like many Latinas, having to care for someone else’s children while mine are alone, or ironing clothes my employer will wear” (*Nepantla* 50).

voices of relatives both living and dead in constructing the leitmotif -- generations of a family between El Paso, Texas, and Santa Fe, New Mexico, stretching along the divided United States-Mexico borderlands.

Recognizing the influences of Roman, Christian, and Islamic heritages in Spain and Latin America, Daniel D. Arreola notes, “Dwellings formed a compact series of enclosures in this core to shelter families, especially women, from public exposure, a form of domestic segregation that is a hallmark of Islamic culture” and religion (301-302). The walls, fences, and gardens of Mora’s House of Houses protect the house from outside encroachment and chaos. However, part of the struggle for these families is home ownership. Much is sacrificed for basic shelter. For the families, endless labor proves inevitable. In addition, the home becomes a space for definition of both interior and exterior life. In “The Architecture of Ethnicity in Chicano Literature,” Monica Kaup acknowledges,

Mexican American cultural discourse -- in particular, Chicano literature -- has used architectural forms to express a Mexican American subjectivity as it was constituted in the cultural border zone between Mexican, indigenous, and American influences. For Chicano writers, . . . the architectural metaphor is a key figure of identity; the dwelling is the house of being. (363)

In the house, symbols are introduced, (re)defined, and negotiated. Constructed out of adobe, the foundation of Mora’s house is the family history with multiple voices, documenting the stories of many Mexicans and Mexican Americans in the Southwest United States. Mora redefines cognitively the psychic borders and the cultural terrain. In doing so, she locates the familiar space of the house as the center of family ritual, ceremony, and communion.

Mora's earthy adobe house in the Chihuahua desert welcomes the guest, luring the reader into the home of desert dwellers to show their struggle and triumph. Not only does the architecture of this memoir reflect the relationships between family members, it also posits the voice of Mora as storyteller, interpreter, and translator of the sacred realms and of the mundane. In Mora's House of Houses, desert dwellers savor earth's delights through the art of storytelling. This memoir confirms that the dead only die when they are forgotten, when they are no longer living in the memory of those who loved them, and when those who loved them have died, too. Nevertheless, in Mora's "dreamhouse," her father returns. "How can you still be hungry if you're dead?" Aunt Chole asks her brother, Raúl Antonio (1). Mora renders a family space with voices sliding in and out of the evolving narrative.

From beginning to end in transmitting a family history, the writer's objective proves successful: "Rumors of my unending questions alter the pitch and rhythms of speech within these walls I know. All know: I'm after stories, brewed in the bone. It's the older voices and bodies who have the patience to talk and remember" (7). Mora's house has many rooms in which quiet, intimate conversations and spirits emerge from this "protected intimacy," as Bachelard notes (qtd. in Mora, House of Houses 3). These conversations share "stories from the interior" against the backdrop of the Southwest United States landscape, between the "treacherous pass" to the North and en route with faith to El Paso, Texas, and Santa Fe, New Mexico (4, 288). By constructing this house, Mora

records the voices of family members who merit articulation on the page and in the historical and literary imagination of their country.

Local Color

Similar to Juan Rulfo's novel, Pedro Páramo (1955), Mora explores the voices of people and nature through intemporality, paradox, stream of consciousness, monologues, flashback, and magical realism. The souls wander in Comala, because the parish priest failed to absolve their sins. While Rulfo offers a realism of Comala, Jalisco, México on the literary map, Mora's architecture shapes the story of the "dream house hovering near el Río Grande between El Paso and Santa Fe, between the pass to the North and holy faith, a treacherous pass, the route to faith, all of us immigrants" (288). That Mora's adobe house is constructed from sun-dried brick made of clay and straw is not a coincidence either. In the opening pages of the memoir, Mora asks, "Is this our adobe confession?" (4). Of Arabic and Coptic origin, the Spanish verb *adobar* means "to conserve, to preserve." Hence, Mora embarks on her labor as a cultural preservationist. In the essay "Endangered Species" (1993), Mora explains the work of the craftsperson and the writer, forming an analogy between Maya women weavers and the scribe using the white sheet of space.

Although my life and the nature of my work separate me from being a traditional craftsperson, I want to learn from that world of women and men who have a strong sense of place, who daily work at their craft, choose a reliance on former community artists, seek to embed in their work patterns from the past, struggle and delight in bringing to those around them works of both use and beauty. Maya women weave designs that echo on cotton cloth, their white space; mine is paper. (*Nepantla* 25)

Sense of place and craft enrich each other, and Mora seeks a relationship between these two realities that inform the shape and content of art. Both are cultural preservers, yet artists carving images of the past and present. Likewise in her labor with language and symbols as a poet and storyteller, Mora constructs an analogy between the Chicana writer and the *curandera*. For Mora, both are healers through a form of white magic, utilizing language, myths, and symbols to carve a literary tradition that merits articulation and validation. Paradoxes of space abound in Rulfo's novel and Mora's memoir. For example, in House of Houses, Mora acknowledges the paradoxes of space and being and how they inform her "dreamhouse."

Within the body of the family dwell the homes of the next generation, another nesting, and within each of our bodies, all the selves we've been and are, held together by skin, fragile yet sturdy; a paradox, like the house that's green yet in the desert, visible yet private, unique yet organic, old yet new, open yet closed, imagined yet real, a retreat, private yet communal. (289)

The paradoxes reflect the sense of being, the sense of place. However, unlike Rulfo's novel full of murmurs, Mora does not opt for a description of the dead in another world, but the rising of the long-dead into a living "dreamhouse" full of song, memory, and history.¹⁵ On All Saints Day, *el Día de los angelitos*, November 1st, Mora muses, "The month of the living and dead ponder one another. "Who, who, who," calls an owl. Who is living, who is dead?" (253). In the same manner that the dead arise in the "dreamhouse," a genealogy is traced from Pat Mora's great-grandmother Sotero Amelia "Mamande" Landavazo's

¹⁵ Juan Rulfo originally titled his novel The Murmurs. He changed the name, since he felt the character Pedro Páramo was, indeed, the center of the story.

(1881-1962) time to Pat Mora's present life and her children's (the 1990s). A number of passages within the memoir reflect the complication of names, time, and place, especially when remembering, realizing that the living memory retrieves and summons events and people who are, indeed, alive.

Through literary techniques such as *realismo mágico* credited to Gabriel García Márquez in the novels *Cien años de soledad* (1967) and *El amor en los tiempos de cólera* (1985), Mora offers a native, Southwestern United States magical realism, transcending the fictional space of Macondo in Colombia to the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. For Mora, the Southwestern United States landscape is "pregnant with possibilities" (4). Mora incorporates the landscape of her birth, including elements from native America and the Spanish Conquest. After his death, Mora's father, Raúl, returns as a bird, refusing to leave the "house of houses" (149-151). Magical realism, in a matter-of-fact tone, combines incredible events with realistic details. Through this technique, the art of storytelling is enriched by elements of surrealism, local color, and folklore. As part of the oral tradition, these storytelling techniques offer people a sense of unity with a collective past, an oral history. A place remains a mere geographic location until its people give it an identity, a value, and a life.

In Mexican and Mexican American houses, questions of identity surface from birth through adulthood. Novels from Mexican America continue to explore the politics of naming. The power of naming and the power to be named illustrate the conflicting status of marginal citizens of the United States who must encounter the public names and surnames of two colonizers -- whether they be in

either English and/or Spanish. Thus, the (sur)names of Mexican Americans and spaces inhabited by natives in the Southwestern United States do not always speak to their reality and sense of self, place, and belonging. Instead, questions of identity formation surface in fragmented form, but evolve into a dialectic of hybridity. Mora's questioning reflects the distorted images and the power of naming that thwart selfhood and reflect the politic of mapping geographic space within and beyond Mexican America.

Where are the other holy songs in the family, the non-Christian songs -- chants for rain, corn-growing songs, sun-rising songs, harvest songs, hunting songs, heartbreaking songs, hatebreaking songs, healing songs, love songs? What are the names of Indian women and men, part of this family, who sang the songs? Why have only the Spanish names been passed from mouth to mouth. When does the legacy end of cherishing only white skin and *ojos azules, azules, azules*?¹⁶ In this desert garden, when does the *agua santa* heal us, when do we heal our spirits, the soul of this house? (House of Houses 156)

Following Lipsitz's theory on the "possessive investment in whiteness," Mora does not fail to question such topography of colonization and exploitation, including color hierarchies. Rulfo's Pedro Páramo presents the complex, fatalistic life of indigenous peoples of Mexico, while Mora's House of Houses questions

¹⁶ Mora's repetition of the color *azul* resonates the sociopolitic of the white gaze. At the same time, the color blue reflects themes found within Morrison's novel, The Bluest Eye (1970). In the novel, Morrison names the "unnamable" -- how white standards of beauty mutilate the other. The novel is based on the secret wish one of Morrison's female schoolmates shares with her. In the afterword to the twenty-fifth anniversary edition, Morrison writes, "We had just started elementary school. She said she wanted blue eyes. I looked around to picture her with them and was violently repelled by what I imagined she would look like if she had her wish" (209). This reality served as the framework for the story of Pecola Breedlove, a young, African American girl who believed that she would be loved if she only had the bluest eyes. Then, the world would hold her as a whole being without dismissing her for her "blackness," for her "ugliness." Morrison's labor as the writer of The Bluest Eye articulates the "racial self-loathing" exchanged for the "reclamation of beauty" that took place during the 1960s within African America (210).

images, orature, and songs that have remained through distorted images and iconography. Conscious of the constant present images of “usually pale saints, Europeans, a white pantheon of goodness and sacrifice and virtue,” Mora erupts the distorted images by articulating the omnipresent ethnocentric glossia and cultural parochialism that resist the nativist approach to spatial constructions and the sacred realms of the everyday.

Mora’s father, Raúl Antonio, faces the politics of color hierarchies not only from strangers in his public life, but also from fellow Mexicans and Mexican Americans who favor light skin. Because he is *prieto*, dark-skinned, and of *raza mestiza*, Raúl is dismissed by his future light-skinned in-laws (House of Houses 80, 185-186). They ask, “¿Y ese prieto? ¡Es un escándalo! ¿[E]n dónde conociste a ese prieto?” Pat Mora’s mother explains, “My family’s racist about skin color.” This passage further alludes to the obsessive, “possessive investment in whiteness” that Lipsitz confirms in his critical study.

In the narrative, Uncle Eduardo “Lalo” Delgado shares with Pat Mora how he rarely faced discrimination, because he was light-skinned. However, he was questioned by the U.S. Immigration and other ideological forces in many instances because of his surname. For example, during the economic hardship of The Great Depression, a sergeant at Fort Bliss tells Lalo, “You don’t look Mexican, Delgado” (Agua santa 96). The sergeant then advises, “Just change your name, Delgado, and you’ve got a job” (House of Houses 220). The reality of Uncle Lalo’s public life is first expressed in the poem titled “Depression Days” found in Mora’s fourth volume of poetry, Agua santa: Holy Water (1995).

Perhaps the surname, “Delgado,” is too ethnic, rather than distinctly *American*.¹⁷ The last few lines of the poem read, “[Uncle Lalo] tries not to think of the bare icebox, his mother’s sighing / eyes, of his father who never understood / this country, of the price of eggs and names and skin” (96). As these passages suggest, the quiver in identity slides in and out of Mexican American life; the sense of self is conflictive. Ending the poem with a list of values for specific items, Mora chooses the value of skin color last. She continues the dialectic similar to that of having the bluest eyes and the fairest skin in a country inscribed by these physical features of colonization, privilege, and upward mobility.

In the search for a place of belonging, Mexican descendants in the United States struggle with self-recovery, actualization, and consciousness. In the “*Abril lluvioso/Rainy April*” chapter, Mora resurrects her father at a significant time -- perhaps near the Easter Triduum. She begins the passage, “Four days after he dies in 1993, [my father] takes a walk with me. We had last walked together three months before” (Houses of Houses 114). In a father-and-daughter stroll in urban California, Raúl Antonio and Pat Mora are “arm-in-arm,” savoring the flower gardens and produce markets. They observe the labor of Chinese and Mexican men and women. “*¡Mira todos los chinitos!*” he says (115). This is a reflective stroll, a recollection, a musing on language, labor, and selfhood. Each creates order in the world. Conscious of her father’s use of English and Spanish and his perceptiveness, Mora reflects,

¹⁷ While Esperanza Cordero from Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street* has a conflicting first name, Eduardo “Lalo” Delgado suffers in his public life due to his surname.

His use of the diminutive conveyed his general affection for most humans, his compassion at their/our antics, his awareness that every group has its difficulties, his belief that people are basically trying, the guy who pumps gas, the woman at the cleaners. (115)

The commentary communicates the “work hard” rhetoric in the United States. Nevertheless, Mora does not ignore conflicting social architectures that impinge on one’s successful climb and ascent in the pursuit of happiness. Reflecting on the prejudices he overcame because he was *prieto* and of *la raza mestiza*, Raúl Antonio Mora tells his daughter, “Honey! I have a map of Mexico on my face” (116). The father realizes that his origin cannot be erased, because it is a part of him. A society predicated on the reading of physical features, the public disdains him. He has witnessed the societal disadvantages of not having fair skin in a country dominated by color hierarchies and the unequal distribution of resources and life chances.

Because of conflicting names and color hierarchies, Mexican Americans question their identity and selfhood in attempting to negotiate their origin and present (dis)location, because *el ciudadano de la frontera no es de aquí ni de allá*. A citizen of the borderland is neither from here nor from (over) there, but perhaps from *nepantla*, a space that remains unnamed. The colonized must confront alienation from the mainstream United States and Mexico, two countries that resist their true faces: a buried mirror. Thus, these people are often captive between two houses, two lands, two languages, two cultures, two realities. Perhaps the sense of belonging is found in *nepantla*: “the place, the land in the middle” (Mora, *Nepantla* 5, 174).

Before the walk comes to an end, before this father and daughter return to their house, their economically privileged life, they meet a woman who confides her daily labor with them. They ask, “¿Cómo está[,] señora?” She responds, sharing the struggle for survival. “*Trabajando para mantener esta familiota grande que tengo. Esto nunca se acaba*” (House of Houses 118). This woman knows the other “trick” of labor: she must continue as a provider regardless of harsh circumstances. Capitalism thrives on interpellation, a “trick” that makes workers feel they are free agents and independent of social forces. The larger the family, the more manual the labor. The values maintained by the ruling middle class are reproduced by the family. In the act of production by the worker, estrangement of the body and home occurs. As the narrative suggests, the work is never-ending, and the woman struggling to support her family does not have the freedom to walk, to wander, to wonder about life with so much leisure like Pat Mora and her father.

A factor in situating local color and a strong sense of place is the amount and speed of change in novels . . . *y no se lo tragó la tierra* and The House on Mango Street and the family memoir House of Houses. In an environment that hardly changes, the settings of narratives remain as visual reminders of a visible present. At the same time, if the population remains stable, generations transmit their reminiscences and family histories associated with the sense of place. Rolando R. Hinojosa-Smith writes about the “essentiality” of a writer’s sense of place, offering examples such as Larry McMurtry, Américo Paredes, and Tomás Rivera:

For the writer -- this writer -- a sense of place was not a matter of importance; it became essential. And so much so that my stories are not held together by the *peripeteia*, or the plot, as much as by the *what* the people who populate the stories say and *how* they say it; how they look at the world out and the world in; and the works, then, become studies of those perceptions and values which in turn were fashioned and forged by the place and its history. (122)

The description of a “writer’s sense of place” reflects the labor found in the writings by Sandra Cisneros and Pat Mora, too. The shared sense of community occurs through the interaction of the characters to form place and selfhood.

Toward a Feminist Equation

In “The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State” (1884), Frederick Engels describes the family as a reproductive unit for capitalism, producing labor. The relationship between man and woman becomes analogous to the capitalist and worker, respectively. The woman becomes both a producer and commodity; in other words, an object of exchange. In the domestic tradition in literature, women are represented as repositories of the body principle. As some nineteenth-century fiction illustrates, women’s hopes were only to find a marriage partner to fulfill their biological and social function while not being ostracized as social failures. Domestic fiction served as a social text, imprisoning women within interior spaces of society. The home became a jail for women, restraining them from fulfilling their maximum potential due to society’s ascribed roles and norms. Women, too, faced the unequal distribution of resources, opportunities, and life chances. Thus, marriage only further bound women into a fixed social system, denying them autonomous selfhood.

Nineteenth-century writings convey society's ideology that domestic life purifies women, forming the ideal, angelic mother and wife. Because every sign is gendered, gender becomes understood in terms of the social roles of men and women as determined by the body. Following the connection of the body as an extension of domesticity within the house, the Mexican-American writer articulates the female body in texts such as House of Houses. Some women in Mora's memoir cannot marry due to the economic circumstances of their families, thus extended families are born. These Mexican-origin women are sources of labor, and their parents and siblings cannot subsist without the collective family strength. In an extended family, the women transmit myths and orature with the children. Hence, the women serve as nurturers and storytellers of a culture and a history.

Feminist criticism is concerned with gender, society, literary works, and readers. Two types of feminist criticism include woman as reader, looking for latent, rather than for the manifest aspects of the text; and, woman as writer, examining literary history, specific writers, and specific works. In the evolution of feminist criticism, women have imitated male authors, protested against male domination, and emphasized unique female experiences. Moving from the house leitmotif to unexplored rooms and women's bodies and sexuality, Sandra Cisneros, driven to articulate the unspoken, writes woman's body and her sexuality. In an interview titled "Returning to One's House" (1997), Martha Satz asked Cisneros what "writing from the vulva means to [her]." Cisneros responded,

Well, you know how they say you have to write with balls. I really think that's not right, because for men, everything happens from the balls. . . . Women have to move away from the heart and go down just a little bit farther, don't you think? We have to go "down there." Writing from "down there" is difficult, again because there are all of these restrictions. There are all these lead walls and vaults with doors -- again, I'm thinking of Chernobyl. We've got that nuclear power plant down there. It's very powerful. (177)

Cisneros challenges phallocentrism and discourages sentimentalism in the literature produced by female writers, especially Chicana and U.S. Latina writers. Essentially, Cisneros resists marginalization and advocates a gynocentric discourse. Women must push against walls and closed doors to carve their voices on the page. Women need not adopt patriarchal institutions that repress them from their body and sexuality. By referring to the nuclear plant accident that occurred in the Northern Ukraine city of Chernobyl in 1986, Cisneros conveys an analogy between nuclear (atomic) and feminine energy -- each fusing bonds from a nucleus. Writing can be a dangerous act, especially if it voices feelings of sexuality, shame, and inadequacy. As male Chicano writers strode to the literary forefront of Chicano literature during the 1960s, female Chicana writers remained in the shadows, carving their own voices in a double marginalized space.¹⁸ Cisneros's commentary reflects, in part, the tension from that emerging literary period. Moreover, the presence of such phallogocentric discourses remains present

¹⁸ In the essay "Depicting Women's Culture in *Intaglio: A Novel in Six Stories*" (1997), Roberta Fernández refers to the male Chicano literary scene of the 1960s and 1970s as producing a "criticism of anticipation, defining what Chicano literature should be like before it was actually written" (76). This theoretic limited the signs and symbols within Mexican America, since the discourse centered on a male-constructed paradigm.

in literary texts and criticism produced by contemporary male Chicano writers and cultural critics alike.¹⁹

How has the instructional iconography of the Virgin Mary or the Virgin of Guadalupe, the latter in particular, shaped the life and thought of Mexican-origin females? Chicana historian Deena J. González's critical essay, "Speaking Secrets: Living Chicana Theory" (1998), acknowledges,

Historically, in Mexican societies, female identity coexisted with racial/cultural identities and fluctuated, remained unsettled, but were rarely articulated. Femaleness tended to be situated and fixed in paradigm dramas of medieval and post-medieval periods: Virgin, martyr, witch, whore were the points on a quadrant within which women's behaviors, attitudes, images, even values and beliefs, were plotted. (58)

González recognizes the evolving patterns of restricting women's identity and femaleness. The sociopolitical plot served as a paradigm for containment over time and space.

In From Out of the Shadows: Mexican Women in Twentieth Century America (1998), Chicana historian Vicki L. Ruiz reminds readers of the "Americanization" projects that reinforced messages of consumption and acculturation, while women of Mexican descent struggled to carve their own selfhood across multiple "border journeys" and "internal migrations" (xv). Like the women of Mora's memoir, Mexican women have consciously shaped their

¹⁹ In the critical essay "Memories of Girlhood: Chicana Lesbian Fictions," Catriona Rueda Esquibel recognizes how Julián Olivares, Alvina Quintana, Renato Rosaldo, and Ramón Saldívar mistakenly define women in relation to men, "missing the significant relationships between girls that occur in [The House on Mango Street]" (651). Most recently, two volumes of essays by Ilan Stavans resurrect and nurture such phallogocentric ideology, especially when analyzing the novels by Sandra Cisneros, Laura Esquivel, Cristina García, Ángeles Mastretta, and Elena Poniatowska.

collective space in spite of their relegation to the house and the margins. Women of Mexican descent subvert existing paradigms of domination through means accessible to them.

In “Guadalupe the Sex Goddess,” Cisneros offers a feminist revision of the Virgin of Guadalupe with the possibility of incorporating beliefs and practices not favored by Roman Catholic sanctions and sacraments. Cisneros explores the Virgin within and beyond the Church and house and offers a many-layered revision for critical consciousness and empowerment. Following the “bad girl, taboo-breaking” dialectic to fulfill the “volcanic” eruption, challenging social imperatives, Cisneros strives for an active engagement within both public and private discourses through language. She wishes the essay was “in every sixth graders textbook,” but realizes that it will not find its way into such publication for students (176). Following the idea of writing from “down there,” Cisneros constructs an alternate worship and reading of *La diosa de las Américas* both within and beyond enclosed sacred spaces. The Virgin of Guadalupe is no longer saintly submissive with downcast eyes and clasped hands and with Juan Diego’s image glowing in her eyes, but a force overflowing with sexual and creative energies. Cisneros recognizes her “Buddha-Lupe” as:

a goddess who makes me feel good about my sexual power, my sexual energy, who reminds me I must . . . write from my *panocha*. . . . When I see *la Virgen de Guadalupe* I want to lift her dress as I did my dolls’ and look to see if she comes with *chones*, and does her *panocha* look like mine, and does she have dark nipples too? Yes, I am certain she does. She is not neuter like Barbie. She gave birth. She has a womb. *Blessed art thou and blessed is the fruit of thy womb* . . . Blessed are thou, Lupe, and, therefore, blessed am I. (49-51)

Cisneros revisits and revises sacred texts of the Catholic Church, presenting an alternate narrative for women in search of writing their bodies and sexual energy on the page.²⁰ Hence, in Mexican America, false passivity can be conveyed through Catholic iconography. Although Cisneros's revisionist iconography is on a white sheet of space like Mora, her proposition reflects a similar labor on canvas by the Chicana artist Yolanda López who depicts the Virgin of Guadalupe (a new Mexican American woman) running in tennis shoes with the hissing serpent clasped in her left hand and a mantle ballooning behind her.

By using the offensive word *panocha*, Cisneros challenges language purists who favor a language free from derogatory expression; in the case of this word, perhaps male expression, too. Similar in meaning to the English word "cunt," Cisneros offers an articulation of the word *panocha*. As an architect of the house leitmotif, Cisneros is not only (re)constructing the American literary imagination, she posits the female body as the center for (re)writing texts and (re)using language -- all of its possibilities in both English and Spanish.

In the antithetically titled text, Women Singing in the Snow: A Cultural Analysis of Chicana Literature (1995), Tey Diana Rebolledo criticizes the phallogocentric paradigm Julián Olivares utilizes in analyzing space in Cisneros's The House on Mango Street, situating the novel with the writings of Gaston

²⁰ The fifth edition of The Norton Edition of American Literature (1998) introduces Sandra Cisneros to the undergraduate student reader with the following thoughts: "Sex is a topic in *all* Cisneros's work, including her poetry collected as My Wicked Wicked Ways (1987) -- sometimes gentle and even silly, other times brutally assaultive (my italics). What remains constant is the author's view that by romanticizing sexual relations women cooperate with a male view that can be oppressive, if not physically destructive" (Baym et al 2374). Six stories from Sandra Cisneros's volume of short fiction titled Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories (1991) are included in the anthology.

Bachelard (4). Rebolledo fails to recognize the academic circumstances that led to the writing of the house vignettes within The House on Mango Street. Cisneros has explained that a conversation in a graduate seminar on the “house of memory” found in Bachelard’s Poetics of Space led to the search and founding of her voice -- a voice she discovered by “ingest[ing] the class readings and then [going] off and d[oin]g the opposite” (The House xv). Cisneros’s novel conveys the thoughts inscribed by Virginia Woolf in A Room of One’s Own. In contrast to the concept of a pure narrative that is free from other cultural influences, Mora’s family memoir finds spaces for Anglo-American and European writers and cultural critics that Rebolledo resists in molding a Chicana feminist theoretical framework. For instance, Mora’s “dreamhouse,” offering a familiar communion through family reunion and ritual, is informed and inspired by the writings of W.H. Auden, Gaston Bachelard, Carl Jung, Mary Oliver, and Adrienne Rich among others. Consequently, a Chicanacentric approach to *American literatures* only subjugates the goal of a collective, canonically inclusive rendering of marginal and mainstream texts. Clearly, Cisneros and Mora’s literary labors have been shaped by multiple voices and spaces.

At the same time, Rebolledo advocates a limited critical approach to the study of Chicana literature through First World theorists such as Lacan, Derrida, and Anglo-American and French feminist critics. For Rebolledo, First World critical theory can guide readers to “understand and contextualize the opus of Chicana literature” (4). Is it possible to seize Chicana subjectivity into a speaking/writing subject as Rebolledo proposes? Hélène Cixous argues for a

grounded methodology to guide women's writing as well as feminist criticism that Rebolledo endorses. Furthermore, Cixous states that the absence of the feminine in the patriarchal law and order of language represents woman negatively.

A seminal text and perhaps feminist manifesto, Hélène Cixous's "*Le rire de la méduse: The Laugh of the Medusa*" (1975) is concerned with women writing the body, articulating the voice of the whole woman beyond the darkness and shadows of servitude in the "inevitable struggle against conventional man" (245). Women need not conform to masculine standards to achieve success in accord with society's norms. As a discourse, *écriture féminine* is concerned with subjectivity, sexuality, and language. This form of writing arises from the feminine body. Because the existing symbolic systems are inadequate, women are restricted from becoming active subjects. Thus, an alternative form of language must be constructed to express these differences, both physical and linguistic.

Through a means of articulation, the turn to finally speak, women share and ease their shame and fear, countering the force and inscription of patriarchy. By placing their whole bodies at the forefront without denying any part of it, women transgress their sense of self and being which has kept them in "secret," on the margins of society. Cixous explains her work: "I write woman: woman must write woman. And man, man" (247). By doing so, the possibility of coming into consciousness becomes a reality. Indeed, writing becomes a liberatory act for women as they write their bodies, hearing themselves speak on

and beyond the page. Women have been subjugated and trained to be ashamed of their bodies, even though they have been relegated as a repository of the body principle. In articulating a sense of self and being, the female body becomes a text. Thus, a feminine text is subversive, “volcanic,” upheaving society’s constructions for keeping women passive (258).

Cixous argues that women are not simmering in the literary forefront, but must be rooted out; too often, woman is found in the context of binary oppositions, struggling for supreme autonomy to find order in language. According to Cixous, the passivity of women can become a positive agent in identifying the arbitrary. Women must raise their voices to articulate their relationship to the world. By writing these “self-seeking text[s],” women subvert patriarchal orders and institutional hierarchies, resisting marginalization in “blow[ing] up the law, to break up the ‘truth’ with laughter” (258-260). In the vignette, “Beautiful & Cruel,” from Cisneros’s The House on Mango Street Esperanza decides to not grow “tame like the others.” Esperanza acknowledges the powerful woman in the movies “with red red lips who is beautiful and cruel. She is the one who drives the men crazy and laughs them all away. Her power is her own. She will not give it away.” (110). Esperanza secretly clings to the construction of such a woman, even though she appears only on the screen, beginning her own “quiet war” by “leav[ing] the table like a man, without putting back the chair or picking up the plate.” However, in the vignette, “Red Clowns,” the reversal of “laughter” occurs when Esperanza hears their “thick-tongue laugh” after she has been raped (123). In two vignettes, Cisneros presents laughter in a

binary opposition to illustrate unarticulated sounds and the victimization of women.

For many women of Mexican origin -- both in Mexico and the United States, Roman Catholicism has shaped their thinking and their lives, especially in the struggle to attain virtue and honor through self-sacrifice before public scrutiny. Numerous litanies, holy songs, *Padre Nuestros*, and *Ave Marías* are repeated and by women as invocations, incantations, and expressions of their unswerving faith. The women in Mora's House of Houses often turn to the power of prayer, praising the Lord and asking for Jesus Christ's blessings and guidance in their everyday lives and in the lives of their loved ones. The nostalgia for the Latin-language Roman Catholic Church and the traditional church sanctions, further suggests these women's strict Catholic upbringing. In addition, saints are invoked perpetually. However, the women in this memoir are not passive subjects, but active ones: working, working, working to support large families and to raise somebody else's children. Women are protected from the public space; curtains serve as interior fences from the knocks and nettles of public life. However, Mora offers a revisit to women's spaces by offering another voice on women's domestic labors. Mora's sensual, succinct lyricism and storytelling on the labor of female gardeners and cooks merits quoting.

Women who button their blouses to the neck, avert their eyes at bare curves and cleavage across a room or on canvas; such women in their kitchens and gardens release their senses to play. With firm hands, they knead bread dough and smell the drunk steam from cranberries simmering in port, with a tasting spoon sip the crimson concoction. . . . Such sensuality is sanctioned, even sacred when performed in the service of

others, self-sacrifice a noble path for women, certainly in both Mexican and Church culture. (158-159)

Do the patio/garden and kitchen serve as the loci of desire? Because women are confined to socially acceptable spaces such as the patio or garden and the kitchen, Mora articulates the creative energy within these female spaces. Must self-sacrifice come beforehand? By basing language as the location of resistance to the production of gendered meanings, the power relation inherent in social constructions of the male and female subject cannot be overlooked in transgressing the norms of gender difference. In this passage, Mora (re)writes the body, the bodies of women, in an attempt to articulate their whole bodies from the marginal house, garden, and kitchen to the page in exploring their creative and sensual energies.

In the epistolary letter/memoir entitled Response to the Most Illustrious Poetess Sor Filotea de la Cruz (1691), Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Mexico's acclaimed seventeenth-century woman poet, reflects on the life and thought of women in public and private spaces through the centuries. Most importantly, the text is based on Sor Juana's response to the Portuguese Jesuit Antonio de Vieira's sermon on St. Augustine and St. Thomas. An intellectually gifted scholar and thinker, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz offers a spirited and theological defense of women's intellectual capabilities and equal rights. The Biblical allusions and analysis of specific sacred texts confirm Sor Juana's voracious reading and grandiose knowledge across the humanities and sciences. Before the gaze of her male critics, woman thinking is dangerous and "volcanic" to systems of order and domination as she questions the function of truth and silence. In an architectural

rendering on the discovery of cooking and experimentalism in the kitchen, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz advises Sor Filotea de la Cruz,²¹

Pues, ¿qué os pudiera contar, Señora, de los secretos naturales que ha descubierto estando guisando? . . . Por no cansaros con tales frialdades, que sólo refiero por darnos entera noticia de mi natural, y creo que os causará risa; pero, señora, ¿qué podemos saber las mujeres sino la filosofía de la cocina? Bien dijo Lupercio Leonardo,²² que bien se puede filosofar y aderezar la cena. Y yo suelo decir viendo estas cosillas: Si Aristóteles hubiera guisado, mucho más hubiera escrito.²³ (42)

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz articulates her “nature,” both as a woman in the kitchen and as an intellectual in the public space. Her letter was retitled by the Bishop of Puebla as *Carta Atenagórica*, alluding to the prowess of the Greek goddess of wisdom, Athena. Perhaps Aristotle’s writings would have been enriched had he been enlightened by the philosophies of the kitchen. Nevertheless, woman thinking in a non-horizontal position was discouraged as a personal undertaking. Hence, there is a search for “a house of one’s own” beyond the marginal domestic space designated for women, beyond the physical enclosures.

As seen through the young, female protagonist-scribe Esperanza Cordero of *The House on Mango Street*, writing serves as an active, liberatory engagement for marginalized women. In the essay entitled “From a Writer’s Notebook,

²¹ Pseudonym for the Bishop of Puebla, Don Manuel Fernández de Santa Cruz y Sahagún.

²² Lupercio Leonardo de Argensola (1559-1639), poet, playwright, and historian.

²³ “And what shall I tell you, lady, of the natural secrets I have discovered while cooking? . . . I do not wish to weary you with such inconsequential matters, and make mention of them only to give you full notice of my nature, for I believe they will be occasion for laughter. But, lady, as women, what wisdom may be ours if not the philosophies of the kitchen? Lupercio Leonardo spoke well when he said: how well one may philosophize when preparing dinner. And I often say, when observing these trivial details: had Aristotle prepared victuals, he would have written more” (43). Translation by Margaret Sayers Peden.

Ghosts and Voices: Writing from Obsession” (1986), Sandra Cisneros reflects on the tension between the reality of “writing by obsession” versus “writing by inspiration.” Cisneros writes,

[T]alking with fellow writer and friend Norma Alarcón, we agreed there’s no luxury or leisure in our lives for us to write of landscapes and sunsets and tulips in a vase. Instead of writing by inspiration, it seems we write by obsession, of that which is most violently tugging at our psyche.

If I were asked what it is I write about, I would have to say I write about those ghosts inside that haunt me, that will not let me sleep, of that which even memory does not like to mention. Sometimes it seems I am writing the same story, the same poem, over and over.

Perhaps later there will be time to write by inspiration. In the meantime, in my writing as well as in that of other Chicanas and other women, there is the necessary phase of dealing with those ghosts and voices most urgently haunting us, day by day. (73)

For Cisneros, “writing by inspiration” demands immediacy and an attentive listener and scribe of women’s voices and storytelling. The writer searches and retrieves the unspeakable and even what “memory does not like to mention,” summoning events and happenings that shape our “perception of reality.” In the United States, writers of color, Chicana writers, rarely have the leisure of “inspiration” to construct imagined, exotic topographies like voyeuristic tourists; instead, these women writers construct architectural spaces out of elements accessible to them, whether it be a “dreamhouse” along a grand river of haunting voices and barb wire or a neighborhood full of limitations and encroaching violence. Such violent “push and pound” is not foreign to Mexican America and other marginal spaces in the United States. Mora and Cisneros write women’s narratives not only from within the house, but beyond the house to revisited

public and sacred spaces. In the solitary labor of writing, Cisneros and Mora struggle to carve women's voices on the literary page.

Conclusion

In the essay "Building Dwelling Thinking," Heidegger focuses on the idea "to dwell" and of "belong[ing] to a dwelling" (323). (Re)examining the question of the public and private space, how is the architecture of these houses divided and, if at all, finally restored as a dwelling of U.S. citizens -- readers, writers, learners, and thinkers? Does a negotiation of space ever occur to locate a sense of self, place, nationhood? Whose house is it anyway? How does one return to the house, the genesis of being? The roots of this house, this corpus, the architecture of the house leitmotif -- are in the orature of the people, in the people's sense of history and story, regardless of what is canonized as "Knowledge" and "Literature" by the learned's access to "power-laden cultural practices" (West 47). By denouncing and resisting (auto)marginalization and subjugation, Mexican-origin people in the United States gain control of their past, creating a present in which they can shape their autonomous and collective identity. In addition, as the narratives and passages suggest, women of Mexican descent must control their own destiny, becoming active agents in a system that subdues them as mere objects, oppressing their sexuality and feelings.

Literature is influenced by the circumstances in which it is produced, becoming a socially symbolic act. Through writing -- as a process of condemnation of oppressing systems -- the possibilities of liberation in

articulating aspects of dominant and subdominant cultures become a reality. Through diverse genres, writers such as Sandra Cisneros, Pat Mora, and Tomás Rivera architecturally construct spaces that merit validation and articulation both within and beyond canonical imperatives. Urban and rural realities merge and evolve to articulate the questions of subject and object. In recent years, the works of American ethnic writers have been reformulating and repositioning all the architectures of our United States literature -- its borders, its subjects, and its forms.

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