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[(essay date fall-winter 1987) *In the following essay, Olivares examines Cisneros's use of imagery in The*

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House on Mango Street, analysing the metaphor of the house and the dialectics of inside vs. outside, here vs. there, integration vs. alienation, and comfort vs. anxiety.]

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collectively titled "**From a Writer's Notebook**,"¹ Sandra Cisneros talks about her development as a

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writer, making particular references to her award-winning book, *The House on Mango Street*.² She states that the nostalgia for the perfect house was impressed on her at an early age from reading many

Critical essay

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Burton's *The Little House*. It was not until her tenure at the Iowa Writers Workshop, however, that it dawned on her that a house, her childhood home, could be the subject of a book. In a class discussion of Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*, she came to this realization: "the metaphor of a house, *a house, a house*, it hit me. What did I know except third-floor flats. Surely my classmates knew nothing about that" ("**Ghosts and Voices**," 72-3). Yet Cisneros' reverie and depiction of house differ markedly from Bachelard's poetic space of house. With Bachelard we note a house conceived in terms of a male-centered ideology. A man born in the upper crust family house, probably never having to do "female" housework and probably never having been confined to the house for reason of his sex, can easily contrive states of reverie and images of a house that a woman might not have, especially an impoverished woman raised in a ghetto. Thus, for Bachelard the house is an image of "felicitous space (...) the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace (...) A house constitutes a body of images that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability."³ Cisneros inverts Bachelard's nostalgic and privileged utopia, for her's is a different reality: "That's precisely what I chose to write: about third-floor flats, and fear of rats, and drunk husbands sending rocks through windows, anything as far from the poetic as possible. And this is when I discovered the voice I'd been suppressing all along without realizing it."⁴

The determination of genre for *Mango Street* has posed a problem for some critics.⁵ Is *Mango Street* a novel, short stories, prose poems, vignettes? Cisneros herself states:

I recall I wanted to write stories that were a cross between poetry and fiction. I was greatly impressed by Jorge Luis Borges' *Dream Tigers* stories for their form. I liked how he could fit so much into a page and that the last line of each story was important to the whole in much the same way that the final lines in poems resonate. Except I wanted to write a collection which could be read at any random point without having any knowledge of what came before or after. Or that could be read in a series to tell one big story. I wanted stories like poems, compact and lyrical and ending with a reverberation. ("**Do You Know Me?**," 78)

She adds that if some of the stories read like poems, it is because some had been poems redone as stories or constructed from the debris of unfinished poems.⁶ The focus, then, on compression and lyricism contributes to the brevity of the narratives. With regard to this generic classification, Cisneros states:

I said once that I wrote *Mango Street* naively, that they were "lazy poems." In other words, for me each of the stories could've developed into poems, but they were not poems. They were stories, albeit hovering in that grey area between two genres. My newer work is still exploring this terrain. ("**Do You Know Me?**," 79)

On a different occasion, Cisneros has called the stories "vignettes."⁷ I would affirm that, although some of the narratives of *Mango Street* are "short stories," most are vignettes, that is, literary sketches, like small illustrations nonetheless "hovering in that grey area between two genres."

I should like to discuss some of these stories and vignettes in order to demonstrate the manner in which Cisneros employs her imagery as a poetics of space and, while treating an "unpoetic" subject—as she says, expresses it poetically so that she conveys another element that Bachelard notes inherent to this space, the dialectic of inside and outside, that is, *here* and *there*, integration and

alienation, comfort and anxiety (211-12). However, Cisneros again inverts Bachelard's pronouncement on the poetics of space; for Cisneros the inside, the *here*, can be confinement and a source of anguish and alienation. In this discussion we will note examples of (1) how Cisneros expresses an ideological perspective of the downtrodden but, primarily, the condition of the Hispanic woman; (2) the process of a girl's growing up; and (3) the formation of the writer who contrives a special house of her own.

This book begins with the story of the same title: "**The House on Mango Street**":

We didn't always live on Mango Street. Before that we lived on Loomis on the third floor, and before that we lived on Keeler. Before Keeler it was Pauline, and before that I can't remember. But what I remember most is moving a lot. Each time it seemed there'd be one more of us. By the time we got to Mango Street we were six—Mama, Papa, Carlos, Kiki, my sister Nenny and me. (...) They always told us that one day we would move into a house, a real house that would be ours for always so we wouldn't have to move each year. (...) But the house on Mango Street is not the way they told it at all. It's small and red with tight little steps in front and windows so small you'd think they were holding their breath. Bricks are crumbling in places, and the front door is so swollen you have to push hard to get in. There is no front yard, only four little elms the city planted by the curb. Out back is a small garage for the car we don't own yet and a small yard that looks smaller between the two buildings on either side. There are stairs in our house, but they're ordinary hallway stairs, and the house has only one washroom, very small. Everybody has to share a bedroom—Mama and Papa, Carlos and Kiki, me and Nenny. Once when we were living on Loomis, a nun from my school passed by and saw me playing out front. The laundromat downstairs had been boarded up because it had been robbed two days before and the owner had painted on the wood *YES WE'RE OPEN* so as not to lose business. Where do you live? she asked. There, I said, pointing up to the third floor. You live *there*? *There*. I had to look to where she pointed—the third floor, the paint peeling, wooden bars Papa had nailed on the windows so we wouldn't fall out. You live *there*? The way she said it made me feel like nothing. *There*. I lived *there*. I nodded. I knew then I had to have a house. A real house. One I could point to. But this isn't it. The house on Mango Street isn't it. For the time being, Mama said. Temporary, said Papa. But I know how those things go. (7-9)

Mango Street is a street sign, a marker, that circumscribes the neighborhood to its Latino population of Puerto Ricans, Chicanos and Mexican immigrants. This house is not the young protagonist's dream house; it is only a temporary house. The senses that we ordinarily perceive in house, and the ones that Bachelard assumes—such as comfort, security, tranquility, esteem—are lacking. This is a house that constrains, one that she wants to leave; consequently, the house sets up a dialectic of inside and outside: of living *here* and wishing to leave for *there*.

The house becomes, essentially, the narrator's first universe. She begins here because it is the beginning of her conscious narrative reflection. She describes the house from the outside; this external depiction is a metonymical description and presentation of self: "I knew then I had to have a house. A real house. One I could point to." By pointing to this dilapidated house, she points to herself. House and narrator become identified as one, thereby revealing an ideological perspective of poverty and shame. Consequently, she wants to point to another house and to point to another self. And as she longs for this other house and self, she also longs for another name. But she will find that in growing up and writing, she will come to inhabit a special house and to fit into, find comfort, in her name.

In "**My Name**" the protagonist says: "In English my name means hope. In Spanish it means too many letters. It means sadness, it means waiting ... It is the Mexican records my father plays on Sunday mornings when he is shaving, songs like sobbing" (12). In this vignette Esperanza traces the reason for the discomfiture with her name to cultural oppression, the Mexican males' suppression of their women. Esperanza was named after her Mexican great-grandmother who was wild but tamed by her husband, so that: "She looked out the window all her life, the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow ... Esperanza, I have inherited her name, but I don't want to inherit her place by the window" (12). Here we have not the space of contentment but of sadness, and a dialectic of inside/outside. The woman's place is one of domestic confinement, not one of liberation and choice. Thus, Esperanza would like to baptize herself "under a new name, a name more like the real me, the one nobody sees. Esperanza as Lisandra or Maritza or Zeze the X. Yes. Something like Zeze the X will do" (13). That is, Esperanza prefers a name not culturally embedded in a dominating, male-centered ideology.

Such a dialectic of inside/outside, of confinement and desire for the freedom of the outside world is expressed in various stories. Marin, from the story of the same name, who is too beautiful for her own good and will be sent back to Puerto Rico to her mother, who wants to work downtown because "you ... can meet someone in the subway who might marry and take you to live in a big house far away," never comes out of the house "until her aunt comes home from work, and even then she can only stay out in front. She is there every night with the radio ... Marin, under the streetlight, dancing by herself, is singing the same song somewhere. I know. Is waiting for a car to stop, a star to fall. Someone to change her life. Anybody" (27-8). And then there is Raphaela, too beautiful for her own good:

On Tuesdays Raphaela's husband comes home late because that's the night he plays dominoes. And then Raphaela, who is still young, gets locked indoors because her husband is afraid Raphaela will run away since she is too beautiful to look at. ("**Raphaela Who Drinks Coconut and Papaya Juice on Tuesdays**," 76)

One way to leave house and barrio is to acquire an education. In "**Alicia Who Sees Mice**" (32), a vignette both lyrical and hauntingly realistic, the narrator describes her friend's life. Alicia, whose mother has died so she has inherited her "mama's rolling pin and sleepiness," must arise early to make her father's lunchbox tortillas:

Close your eyes and they'll go away her father says, or you're just imagining. And anyway, a woman's place is sleeping so she can wake up early with the tortilla star, the one that appears early just in time to rise and catch the hind legs hidden behind the sink, beneath the four-clawed tub, under the swollen floorboards nobody fixes in the corner of your eyes.

Here we note a space of misery and subjugation, a dialectic of inside/outside, a latina's perception of life—all magnificently crystallized in the image of the "tortilla star." To Alicia Venus, the morning star, does not mean wishing upon or waiting for a star to fall down—as it does for Raphaela, nor romance nor the freedom of the outside world; instead, it means having to get up early, a rolling pin and tortillas. Here we do not see the tortilla as a symbol of cultural identity but as a symbol of a subjugating ideology, of sexual domination, of the imposition of a role that the young woman must assume. Here Venus—and the implication of sex and marriage as escape—is deromanticized, is eclipsed by a cultural reality that points to the drudgery of the inside. Alicia "studies for the first time at the university. Two trains and a bus, because she doesn't want to spend her whole life in a factory or behind a rolling pin ... Is afraid of nothing except four-legged fur and fathers."

There are two types of girls in *Mango Street*. There are those few who strive for an education, like Alicia and the narrator, but most want to grow up fast, get married and get out.⁸ But these, like Minerva, usually have to get married, and they leave a father for a domineering husband. Such is the fate of Sally in "**Linoleum Roses**":

Sally got married like we knew she would, young and not ready but married just the same. She met a marshmallow salesman at a school bazaar and she married him in another state where it's legal to get married before eighth grade ... She says she is in love, but I think she did it to escape. (...) [Her husband] won't let her talk on the telephone. And he doesn't let her look out the window. And he doesn't like her friends, so nobody gets to visit her unless he is working. She sits at home because she is afraid to go outside without his permission. She looks at all the things they own: the towels and the toaster, the alarm clock and the drapes. She likes looking at the walls, at how neatly their corners meet, the linoleum roses on the floor, the ceiling smooth as wedding cake.⁽⁹⁵⁾

The title is an oxymoron expressing an inversion of the positive senses of house and revealing a dialectic of inside/outside. "Linoleum roses" is a trope for household confinement and drudgery, in which the senses of rose—beauty, femininity, garden (the outside)—and rose as a metaphor for woman are ironically treated. The roses decorate the linoleum floor that Sally will have to scrub. This is an image of her future. The image of the final line, the "ceiling smooth as wedding cake," resonates through the story in an ironical twist, a wedding picture of despair.

Such images as "tortilla star" and "linoleum roses" are the type of imagery that perhaps only a woman could create, because they are derived from a woman's perception of reality; that is to say, that this imagery is not biologically determined but that it is culturally inscribed. A woman's place may be in the home but it is a patriarchic domain.

With regard to the poetics of space and the dialectic of inside/outside and as these apply to the process of growing up, I shall give only one example, but one that also touches on the formation of the writer.⁹ It is taken from the story "**Hips**," in which the process of a girl's growing up is initially described as a physical change, the widening of the hips:

One day you wake up and they are there. Ready and waiting like a new Buick with the keys in the ignition. Ready to take you where? They're good for holding a baby when you're cooking, Rachel says turning the jump rope a little quicker. She has no imagination. (...) They bloom like roses, I continue because it's obvious I'm the only one that can speak with any authority, I have science on my side. The bones just one day open. Just like that.⁽⁴⁷⁾

Here, then, Esperanza, Lucy and Rachel are discussing hips while jumping rope with little Nenny. At this point the kids' game turns into a creative exercise as the older girls take turns *improvising* rhymes about hips as they jump to the rhythm of the jump rope. Esperanza sings:

*Some are skinny like chicken lips.
Some are baggy like soggy band-aids
after you get out of the bathtub.*

I don't care what kind I get.

Just as long as I get hips.

(49)

Then little Nenny jumps inside but can only sing the usual kids' rhymes: "Engine, engine, number nine." Suddenly, the awareness of time passing and of growing up is given a spatial dimension. Esperanza, on the outside, is looking at Nenny inside the arc of the swinging rope that now separates Nenny's childhood dimension from her present awareness of just having left behind that very same childhood: "Nenny, I say, but she doesn't hear me. She is too many light years away. She is in a world we don't belong to anymore. Nenny. Going. Going" (50). Yet Esperanza has not totally grown out of her childhood. She is still tied to that dimension. Although we perceive a change in voice at the end of the story, she is still swinging the rope.

Indications of Esperanza's formation as a writer and predictions of her eventual move from home and Mango Street are given in two stories related to death, suggesting perhaps that creativity is not only a means of escape from the confines of Mango Street but also an affirmation of life and a rebirth. The first story is "**Born Bad**," in which Esperanza reads her poetry to her aunt who appears to be dying from polio. The aunt replies:

That's nice. That's very good, she said in her tired voice. You must remember to keep writing, Esperanza. You must keep writing. It will help keep you free, and I said yes, but at that time I didn't know what she meant.(56)

In "**The Three Sisters**" three mysterious women appear at the funeral of a neighbor's child. Here Esperanza begins to fit into the cultural space of her name. These women seek out Esperanza for special attention:

What's your name, the cat-eyed one asked. Esperanza, I said. Esperanza, the old blue-veined one repeated in a high thin voice. Esperanza ... a good name. (...) Look at her hands, cat-eyed said. And they turned them over and over as if they were looking for something. She's special. Yes, she'll go very far ... Make a wish. A wish? Yes, make a wish. What do you want? Anything? I said. Well, why not? I closed my eyes. Did you wish already? Yes, I said. Well, that's all there is to it. It'll come true. How do you know? I asked. We know, we know. Esperanza. The one with marble hands called aside. Esperanza. She held my face with her blue-veined hands and looked and looked at me. A long silence. When you leave you must remember always to come back, she said. What? When you leave you must remember to come back for the others. A circle, understand? You will always be Esperanza. You will always be Mango Street. You can't erase what you know. You can't forget who you are. Then I didn't know what to say. It was as if she could read my mind, as if she knew what I had wished for, and I felt ashamed for having made such a selfish wish. You must remember to come back. For the ones who cannot leave as easily as you. You will remember? She asked as if she was telling me. Yes, yes, I said a little confused.(97-8)

In this paradigm of the fairy godmother, Esperanza receives a wish that she does not understand. How can she leave from *here* to *there* and still be Mango Street? How can she come back for the others? What is the meaning of the circle? Esperanza thought that by leaving Mango Street and living in another house, one that she could point to with pride, she would leave behind forever an environment she believed to be only temporary. A mysterious woman embeds in Esperanza's psyche a cultural and political determination which will find expression in her vocation as a writer. Esperanza will move away from the confining space of house and barrio, but paradoxically within them she has encountered a different sort of space, the space of writing. Through her creativity, she comes to inhabit the house of story-telling. Although she longs for "**A House of My Own**" (100)--

Not a flat. Not an apartment in back. Not a man's house. Not a daddy's. A house all my own. With my porch and my pillow, my pretty purple petunias. My books and my stories. My two shoes waiting beside the bed. Nobody to shake a stick at. Nobody's garbage to pick up after.

--it is clear, nonetheless, that a magical house is had through the creative imagination: "Only a house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem."

The realization of the possibility of escape through the space of writing, as well as the determination to move away from Mango Street, are expressed in "**Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes** (101-02)":

I like to tell stories. I am going to tell you a story about a girl who didn't want to belong. We didn't always live on Mango Street. Before that we lived on Loomis on the third floor, and before that we lived on Keeler. Before Keeler it was Pauline, but what I remember most is Mango Street, sad red house, the house I belong but do not belong to. I put it down on paper and then the ghost does not ache so much. I write it down and Mango says goodbye sometimes. She does not hold me with both arms. She sets me free. One day I will pack my bags of books and paper. One day I will say goodbye to Mango. I am too strong for her to keep me here forever. One day I will go away. Friends and neighbors will say, What happened to that Esperanza? Where did she go with all those books and paper? Why did she march so far away? They will not know I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot get out.

I do not hold with Juan Rodríguez that Cisneros' book ultimately sets forth the traditional ideology that happiness, for example, comes with the realization of the "American Dream," a house of one's own. In his review of *Mango Street*, Rodríguez states:

That Esperanza chooses to leave Mango St., chooses to move away from her social/cultural base to become more "Anglicized," more individualistic; that she chooses to move from the real to the fantasy plane of the world as the only means of accepting and surviving the limited and limiting social conditions of her barrio becomes problematic to the more serious reader.¹⁰

This insistence on the preference for a comforting and materialistic life ignores the ideology of a social class' liberation, particularly that of its women, to whom the book is dedicated. The house the protagonist longs for, certainly, is a house where she can have her own room¹¹ and one that she can point to in pride, but, as noted through this discussion of the poetics of space, it is fundamentally a metaphor for the house of storytelling. Neither here in the house on Mango Street nor in the "fantasy plane of the world"--as Rodríguez states, does the protagonist indulge in escapism. Esperanza wants to leave but is unable, so she attains release from her confinement through her writing. Yet even here she never leaves Mango Street; because, instead of fantasizing, she writes of her reality.¹² Erlinda Gonzales and Diana Rebolledo confirm that the house is symbolic of consciousness and collective memory, and is a nourishing structure so that "the narrator comes to understand that, despite her need for a space of her own, Mango Street *is* really a part of her--an essential creative part she will never be able to leave"; consequently, she searches in (as narrator) and will return to (as author) her neighborhood "for the human and historical materials of which [her] stories will be made."¹³ On the higher plane of art, then, Esperanza transcends her condition, finding another house which is the space of literature. Yet what she writes about--"third-floor flats, and fear of rats, and drunk husbands sending rocks through windows, anything as far from the poetic as possible"--reinforces her solidarity with the people, the women, of Mango Street.

We can agree, and probably Cisneros on this occasion does, with Bachelard's observation on the house as the space of daydreaming: "the places in which we have experienced daydreaming reconstitute themselves in a new daydream, and it is because our memories of former dwelling places are relived as daydreams that these dwelling places of the past remain in us for all time" (6). The house that Esperanza lives and lived in will always be associated with the house of story-telling--"What I remember most is Mango Street"; because of it she became a writer. Esperanza will leave Mango Street but take it with her for always, for it is inscribed within her.

Notes

1. "From a Writer's Notebook": "Ghosts and Voices: Writing from Obsession," "Do You Know Me? I Wrote *The House on Mango Street*," *The Americas Review* 15:1 (1987), 69-73, 77-79.
2. *The House on Mango Street* (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 1984).
3. *The Poetics of Space*, Trans. María Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969).
4. Although Cisneros echoes the strong family bonds that Tomás Rivera speaks of with regard to the *casa*, home, theme, her criticism of patriarchal domination offers a challenging perspective. See Rivera for his discussion of the themes of *casa*, *barrio* and *lucha* in Chicano literature, in "Chicano Literature: Fiesta of the Living," *Books Abroad* 49:3 (1975), 439-52.
5. See, Pedro Gutiérrez-Revuelta, "Género e ideología en el libro de Sandra Cisneros: *The House on Mango Street*," *Crítica* 1:3 (1986), 48-59.
6. Eg., "The Three Sisters," "Beautiful and Cruel," "A House of My Own," in "Do You Know Me?" 79.
7. "The softly insistent voice of a poet," *Austin American Statesman* (March 11, 1986), 14-15.
8. The dialectic of inside/outside also is manifested in the personae some of the characters assume. For example, there is Sally who, outside the house, "is the girl with eyes like Egypt and nylons the color of smoke. The boys at school think she's beautiful (...) Her father says to be this beautiful is trouble (...) And why do you always have to go straight home after school? You become a different Sally. You pull your skirt straight, you rub the blue paint off your eyelids. You don't laugh, Sally. You look at your feet and walk fast to the house you can't come out from. Sally, do you sometimes wish you didn't have to go home?" ("Sally," 77-8).

9. Another example is "The Monkey Garden," 87-91.

10. "*The House on Mango Street*, by Sandra Cisneros," *Austin Chronicle* (August 10, 1984), cited in Gutiérrez-Revuelta, 52.

11. Cf., Virginia Woolf, "A Room of One's Own."

12. Even were she to move away from the barrio and have her own house, Esperanza states her conviction not to forget who she is nor where she came from:

One day I'll own my own house, but I won't forget who I am or where I came from. Passing bums will ask, Can I come in? I'll offer them the attic, ask them to stay, because I know how it is to be without a house. Some days after dinner, guests and I will sit in front of a fire. Floorboards will squeak upstairs. The attic grumble. Rats? they'll ask. Bums, I'll say, and I'll be happy.—"Bums in the Attic," 81.

13. "Growing Up Chicano: Tomás Rivera and Sandra Cisneros," *International Studies in Honor of Tomás Rivera*, Ed. Julián Olivares (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 1985), 109-20.

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