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[(essay date Fall 1992) In the essay below, de Valdés examines the "highly lyrical narrative voice" of *The*

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House on Mango Street in relation to textual representations of "a poetics of identity" as a Chicana writer.]

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Contemporary Literary Criticism. Ed. Jeffrey W. Hunter and Timothy J. White. Vol. 118. Gale, 1999. From *Literature Resource Center*. Sandra Cisneros (1954-), a Chicago-born poet of Mexican parentage, published her first novel in 1984. *The House on Mango*

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Street is written in the manner of a young girl's memoirs. The forty-four pieces are, however, not the day-to-day record of a preadolescent girl, but rather a loose-knit series of lyrical reflections, her struggle with

Critical essay

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self-identity and the search

for self-respect amidst an alienating and often hostile world. The pieces range from two paragraph narratives, like "**Hairs**," to the four-page "**The Monkey Garden**."

There are a number of significant issues to be discussed concerning *The House on Mango Street* but I believe that the most pressing issue is the ideological question of a poetics of identity in the double materialization of a Chicana. I am opposed to any critical strategy which ignores the qualitative perspective of the lyric narrative voice, the referential situation from which she is writing, and the issues she is writing about. In this study, I shall present the highly lyrical narrative voice in all its richness of a "persona" to which my commentary will seek to respond.

Cisneros's literary persona, Esperanza, is the lyric narrative voice to whom the reader responds and who the reader eventually knows. My theoretical position is closely allied and, to a large extent, indebted to Naomi Black's social feminism, which she defines as "the argumentation and process in which feminism is able to use the doctrine of difference not to obliterate differences of kind, but to change a society that uses difference as a basis for exclusion." The feminist social criticism that I have developed over the last four years builds on the infrastructure of Black's work and the orientation of Julia Kristeva's writing, but also draws from Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutic mode of inquiry.

The plan of this paper is to move rapidly from a semiotic level to a semantic level of the text before attempting an intertextual interpretation of my reading. The final stage of my exposition is to present the significance of the reading experience in that dialogic relation between the text and the reader and the reader's community. The sensibility and feeling that the narrator captures from her experiences governs her relations with her world and its people, and is part of the long tradition of literature of the coming of age. As an aesthetic process, the apprehension of the world of Mango Street becomes a metaphor for identity. The consequence of this aesthetic process is that the reader is directed less toward the singularity of the places, events and persons of Mango Street than toward the eye/I that writes them. The protagonist, Esperanza, probes into her world, discovers herself and comes to embody the primal needs of all human beings: freedom and belonging.

I am aware that some feminists, especially in English-speaking North America, do not share my philosophical premises, but it is my conviction that they will listen and respond to this voice from the North American third world. The following passage from ["What Is Text?"] by Ricoeur will serve as an intellectual paradigm for my commentary on Chicana identity as a part of the reading experience. Ricoeur writes: "What we want to understand is not something hidden behind the text, but something disclosed in front of it. What has to be understood is not the initial situation of discourse, but what points toward a possible world. . . . To understand a text is to follow its movement from sense to reference, from what it says, to what it talks about." The organization of the study is, therefore, a strategy of communication. The main semantic focus of the text is the presentation of the narrating self.

My commentary is aimed at establishing a historically based, critical model of reading for the presentation of self. The narrating presence is a composite of a poetic enunciating voice and a narrative voice, and this presence can best be described as a formal function within the literary structure who, as a speaker, is only knowable as a story-teller in her response to the extratextual, societal, and historical, determinate referents. Notions of self or voice are implicitly controlled by the spectrum of the world of action as known to the reader, and notions of character are explicitly linked to the notions of person in the world. The union of the self and person is the hallmark of the lyrical text. If voice or self is an impulse toward the world, person or character is a social structure of dispositions and traits. In brief, the text in *The House on Mango Street* presents the exterior and the interior of living in the world.

The narrative situation is a familiar one: a sensitive young girl's reflections of her struggle between what she is and what she would like to be. The sense of alienation is compounded because ethnically she is a Mexican, although culturally a Mexican American; she is a young girl surrounded by examples of abused, defeated, worn-out women, but the woman she wants to be must be free. The reflections of one crucial year in her life are narrated in the present from a first person point of view. This was the year of the passage from preadolescence to adolescence when she discovered the meaning of being female and Mexican living in Chicago, but, most of all, this was the year she discovered herself through writing. The girl who did not want to belong to her social reality learns that she belongs to herself, to others, and not to a place.

The frame for the short narratives is simple but highly effective. The family has been wandering from place to place, always dreaming of the promised land of a house of their own. When they finally arrive at the house on Mango Street, which is at last their own house, it is not the promised land of their dreams. The parents overcome their dejection by saying that this is not the end of their moving, that it is only a temporary stop before going on to the promised house. The narrator knows better. The conflict between the promised land and the harsh reality, which she always recognizes in its full force of rejection, violence, fear, and waste, is presented without compromise and without dramatization. This is just the way things are on Mango Street, but the narrator will not give up her dream of the promised house and will pursue it. The lesson she must learn is that the house she seeks is, in reality, her own person. She must overcome her rejection of who she is and find her self-esteem. She must be true to herself and thereby gain control of her identity. The search for self-esteem and her true identity is the subtle, yet powerful, narrative thread that unites the text and achieves the breakthrough of self-understanding in the last pieces.

We can trace this search through some of its many moments. The narrative development begins in the first entry, **"The House"**: "I knew then I had to have a house. A real house. One I could point to. But this isn't it. The house on Mango Street isn't it. For the time being, Mama says. Temporary, says Papa. But I know how those things go." The narrator goes on to establish the family circle where she has warmth and love but is lonely and, most of all, estranged from the world outside. Her name, Esperanza, in English means hope: "At school they say my name funny as if the syllables were made out of tin and hurt the roof of your mouth. But in Spanish my name is made out of a softer something, like silver." Fear and hostility are the alienating forces she tries to understand. Why do people of other color fear her? And why should she fear others? That's the way it is. "All brown all around, we are safe." Changes are coming over her, she is awakening to sexuality and to an adult world. It is in **"Four Skinny Trees,"** that the identity question is explored: "They are the only ones who understand me. I am the only one who understands them."

"A Smart Cookie" touches one of the most sensitive areas of the text: the mother-daughter relationship. Her mother remains nostalgic not for what was, but for what could have been: "I could've been somebody, you know?" Being somebody is full of unarticulated significance, but in its impact on Esperanza, it means primarily to be herself and not what others wanted her to be. Her mother tells her she had brains, but she was also self-conscious and ashamed not to look as well as other more affluent girls. She quit school because she could not live looking at herself in the mirror of the other girls's presence. She states forthrightly: "Shame is a bad thing, you know. It keeps you down." The syndrome is there; it is a closed circle. You are poor because you are an outsider without education; you try to get an education, but you can't take the contrastive evidence of poverty and "[i]t keeps you down." The constant movement of the narrative takes up one aspect after another of the circumstances of the emerging subject that is Esperanza Cordero.

There is a subtle sequential order to the short sections. The text opens with the description of the house and its significance to the narrator, moves on to a delicate image of the family group, and with the third piece, **"Boys and Girls,"** begins the highly lyrical

exposition of the narrator's world, punctuated with entries of introspection in the narrator's struggle with her identity. **"My Name," "Chanclas," "Elenita, Cards, Palm Water," "Four Skinny Trees," "Bums in the Attic," "Beautiful and Cruel," "The Monkey Garden," "The Three Sisters,"** and **"A House of My Own,"** are the most significant pieces because they mark the narrative development of identity. The text ends with the anticipated departure from the house and the literary return to it through writing. Although each piece can be seen as a self-contained prose poem, there is the subtle narrative unity of the enunciating voice's search for herself as she observes and questions her world and its social, economic, and moral conventions.

Esperanza Cordero observes, questions, and slowly finds herself determined through her relationship to the others who inhabit her world. She is drawn to the women and girls as would-be role models; within her family, her mother and her younger sister Magdalena (Nenny) are characterized, but the most searching descriptions are of girls her own age or, as she says, a few years older. Marin from Puerto Rico is featured in **"Louie, His Cousin and His Other Cousin"** and **"Marin,"** Alicia in **"Alicia Who Sees Mice,"** Rafaela in **"Rafaela Who Drinks Coconut and Papaya Juice on Tuesdays,"** and, most important of all, Sally in **"Sally," "What Sally Said," "Red Clowns,"** and **"Linoleum Roses."** The older women are treated with a soft-spoken sympathy through imagery: Rosa Vargas in **"There Was an Old Woman She Had So Many Children She Didn't Know What to Do,"** Ruthie in **"Edna's Ruthie,"** the neighbour Mamacita in **"No Speak English,"** and her own mother in **"A Smart Cookie."**

The enunciating voice never breaks her verisimilar perspective. She speaks about what she sees and what she thinks. Her style is one of subtlety, understatement, and generosity. When she reflects on social hostility or the brutality of wife-beating, it is not with violence or rancour, but with a firm determination to describe and to escape the vicious circle of abused women: Rosa Vargas is the mother "who is tired all the time from buttoning and bottling and babying, and who cries every day for the man who left without even leaving a dollar for bologna or a note explaining how come"; Marin who is not allowed out and hopes to get a job downtown so that she "can meet someone in the subway who might marry and take you to live in a big house far away"; "Alicia, who inherited her mama's rolling pin and sleepiness" and whose father says that "a woman's place is sleeping so she can wake up early with the tortilla star"; "Rafaela, who is still young but getting old from leaning out the window so much, gets locked indoors because her husband is afraid Rafaela will run away since she is too beautiful to look at"; "Minerva is only a little bit older than me but already she has two kids and a husband who left . . . she writes poems on little pieces of paper that she folds over and over and holds in her hands a long time." And, there is Sally whose father hits her and "her mama rubs lard on all the places where it hurts. Then at school she'd say she fell. That's where all the blue places come from. That's why her skin is always scarred."

The first person moves effortlessly from observer to lyrical introspection about her place in the world. The language is basic, idiomatic English with a touch of colloquial speech and a few Spanish words. The deceptively simple structure of sentences and paragraphs has a conceptual juxtaposition of action and reaction where the movement itself is the central topic. For example, **"Those Who Don't,"** which consists of three short paragraphs, is about alienation and fear in a hostile society, but it is only fourteen lines in total. It begins with a direct statement about life as she sees it: "Those who don't know any better come into our neighborhood scared. They think we're dangerous. They think we will attack them with shiny knives. They are stupid people who are lost and got here by mistake." The second paragraph, five lines long, begins with the "we" that is the implicit opposite of the "they" of the preceding paragraph. "But we aren't afraid. We know the guy. . . ." With the economy of a well-written sonnet the third five-line paragraph brings the "they" and the "we" into an inverted encounter: "All brown all around, we are safe. But watch us drive into a neighborhood of another color and our knees go shakity-shake and our car windows get rolled up tight and our eyes look straight. Yeah. That is how it goes and goes." The description has been that of a keen observer, the composition is that of a poet.

This structure operates through a conceptual back and forth movement of images, like the action of the shuttle in the loom. An image appears which moves the reader forward, following the woof of the first-person through the warp of referential world, but as soon as the image takes shape it is thrust back toward the enunciator. The process is repeated again and again slowly weaving the tapestry of Esperanza's Mango Street. For example, in **"Those Who Don't,"** the initial image is about the others, "Those who don't know any better," but it reaches culmination with the observation that "they think we're dangerous." The counter-move is that "They are stupid people." The new thrust forward is the reassurance of familiarity with the ostensible menacing scene that greeted the outsiders and led them to fear they would be attacked. But, when the shuttle brings back the narrative thread, it presents the inversion. The "we" are the

"they" in another neighborhood. The movement back and forth will go on, the narrator says, "That is how it goes and goes." The colour of the warp is different in each community, the woof keeps them next to each other, but their ignorance and fear keeps them separate. The tapestry that is being woven by this constant imagistic back and forth movement of the narrator's perceptions and thoughts is not a plotted narrative, but rather a narrative of self-invention by the writer-speaker. The speaker and her language are mutually implicated in a single interdependent process of poetic self-invention.

The poetic text cannot operate if we separate the speaker from her language; they are the inseparable unity of personal identity. There is no utterance before enunciation. There is a fictional persona, Esperanza Cordero, who will speak, and there is the implicit continued use of idiomatic American English. But the enunciation that we read is at once the speaker and the spoken which discloses the subject, her subjectivity, and ours. An inescapable part of this subject is what she is expected to be: "Mexicans, don't like their women strong." "I wonder if she [my great-grandmother] made the best with what she got or was she sorry because she couldn't be all the things she wanted to be. Esperanza. I have inherited her name, but I don't want to inherit her place by the window." This close reading of the text with attention to how it operates, suggests a movement and a counter-movement which I have described metaphorically as the movement of a loom weaving the presence of subjectivity. Subjectivity is always seen against the background of her community that is Chicago's changing neighbourhoods. This determinate background gives narrative continuation, or narrativity, to the narrator's thoughts. The narrative development of this text can be described as the elaboration of the speaker's subjectivity. The symbolic space she creates should not be abstracted from the writing, because the writing itself is the creation of her own space. The structure of this text, therefore, begins as a frame for self-invention and as the writing progresses so does the subject. She is, in the most direct sense of the word, making herself and in a space of her own.

There are numerous empirical and verisimilar truth-claims about the way of life in the neighbourhood. All of these references form a well-knit web of specific truth-claims about social reality. Simultaneous to these truth-claims is another kind of reference. The reference to the narrator's own sense of the world, her wonderment and search for answers of why things are the way they are for her and for those who are her family, friends, and neighbours: Minerva "comes over black and blue and asks what can she do? Minerva. I don't know which way she'll go. There is nothing / can do"; "Sally. What do you think about when you close your eyes like that? . . . Do you wish your feet would one day keep walking and take you far away from Mango Street, far away and maybe your feet would stop in front of a house, a nice one with flowers and big windows." Esperanza meditates after her Aunt Lupe's death: "Maybe she was ashamed. Maybe she was embarrassed it took so many years. The kids who wanted to be kids instead of washing dishes and ironing their papa's shirts, and the husband who wanted a wife again. And then she died, my aunt who listened to my poems. And then we began to dream the dreams." This quest for answers takes on an explicit tension because of the depth of the themes the narrator treats, but the manner in which she develops her search for answers is the fundamental dialectic of self-world. She describes what is around her, she responds to people and places, but, most importantly, she reflects on a world she did not make, and cannot change, but must control or she will be destroyed. She is a young, dark-skinned girl of Mexican parentage, born in Chicago, speaking English, and feeling alienated.

The use of these determinate features is of primary importance, for it is through the interplay between the lyrical introspection and the truth-claims that the fusion of self (enunciating voice) and person (character) takes place. The power of the text lies precisely in the creation of this presence. It is this human presence that transcends the time, place, and condition of the composition to create a literary metaphor for a woman coming of age. Readers halfway around the world, who have never seen Chicago and have never experienced what it is to live with the fear expressed in "All brown all around, we are safe," can, nevertheless, understand what it is to be lonely and alienated and how difficult it is to come out free from an environment that enslaves.

The images evoked by the text all signal a subject: Esperanza Cordero, an adolescent Mexican American girl who wants to be a writer. As critical readers, we read in a manner that creates ourselves as recipients, our own self-invention as the sympathetic listeners of the tale, attentive to actualize the words into images clothed in the colors of our own experience. The subject that emerges from our reading is neither the author's nor ours; she is a unique construct of intersecting designs and paradigms, those of the author's structure of the text, and those of the larger cultural context we share, in part, with the author. But this construct can only be reconstructed from its effects on us, its readers. Thus, the subject I am dealing with in these pages is a deliberate reconstruction from the effects of reading.

In order to draw out the subject of this text I will comment on three of the numerous images which are part of this work. The imagery in this text functions on three levels, in the manner of prose poems. Images in this text are effective because they function at the level of form, of plot, and of symbolic significance. Each of these images serves, first, to establish the identity of the enunciating voice; this is primarily a poetic function of creating the lyric presence who experiences and speaks. But, the images also have a narrative function as a part of the plot line which is the search for the promised house. And, finally, each image takes on symbolic proportions because it participates in the rich intertextuality of literature.

"Four Skinny Trees" presents the most iconic image in the entire text. The trees are personified in the image of the narrator: "Four skinny trees with skinny necks and pointy elbows like mine," but the description is also markedly referential to the specific urban setting of the text: "Four who grew despite concrete." At the primary level of the enunciating voice's identity, the image evokes a powerful statement about belonging and not belonging to the place where they happen to have grown: "Four who do not belong here but are here." The narrative is composed of four short paragraphs. The first, with lyrical rhythm, establishes reciprocity between "I" and "they," "four skinny trees." The second completes the personification: "they" completely supplants "trees." The third paragraph introduces their function: "they teach"; and the fourth gives the lesson: to reach and not forget to reach and to "be and be."

At the level of plot, the trees serve as a talisman of survival in a hostile environment:

Let one forget his reason for being, they'd all droop like tulips in a glass, each with their arms around the other. Keep, keep, keep, trees say when I sleep. They teach.

When I am too sad and too skinny to keep keeping, when I am a tiny thing against so many bricks, then it is I look at trees. When there is nothing left to look at on this street. Four who grew despite concrete. Four who reach and do not forget to reach. Four whose only reason is to be and be.

Esperanza's survival amidst surroundings that are negative and a rejection of her sensibility is not a denial of where she is and who she is, but rather a continuous fight to survive in spite of Mango Street as Esperanza from Mango Street. It is, however, at the symbolic level that the image of the trees attains its fullest significance. There is a secret to survival that the trees make manifest—an unconquerable will to fight without respite in order to survive in an urban setting:

Their strength is secret. They send ferocious roots beneath the ground. They grow up and they grow down and grab the earth between their hairy toes and bite the sky with violent teeth and never quit their anger. This is how they keep.

I want to emphasize that the visual aspects of the textual imagery engage the reader in the visual figuration of vertical movement in trees. Is this a form of intertextuality? I think it would be more appropriate to say that this visual imagery is a woman's prose painting.

The highly lyrical presentation of **"The Three Sisters"** evokes the fairy godmothers of fairy-tale lore, each with a unique image and gift for the heroine. Their gift is the gift of self: "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." This poem-piece is unlike any of the others in form because it combines the prose-poem quality of the rest of the book with the most extended dialogue sequence. The three sisters speak to Esperanza. The speaking voices are of crucial importance for through their enunciation they become full participants in the story-telling evocation with Esperanza.

At the level of plot the sisters serve as revelation. They are the narrative mediators that enter the story, at the crucial junctures, to assist the heroine in the trial that lies ahead. It is significant that they are from Mexico and appear to be related only to the moon. In pre-Hispanic Mexico, the lunar goddesses, such as Tlazolteotl and Xochiquetzal, were the intermediaries for all women. They are sisters to each other and, as women, sisters to Esperanza. One has laughter like tin, another has the eyes of a cat, and the third hands like porcelain. This image is, above all, a lyrical disclosure of revelation. Their entrance into the story is almost magical: "They came with the wind that blows in August, thin as a spider web and barely noticed," for they came only to make the gift to Esperanza of her selfhood. At the symbolic level, the three sisters are linked with Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos, the three fates. Catullus depicts them weaving their fine web of destiny: "These sisters pealed their high prophetic song, / Song which no length of days shall prove untrue." The tradition of the sisters of fate runs deep in Western literature from the most elevated lyric to the popular tale of marriage, birth, and the fate awaiting the hero or heroine. In Cisneros's text, the prophecy of the fates turns to the evocation of self-knowledge.

The last image I shall discuss is based on the number two, the full force of opposition between two houses, the one on Mango Street and the promised house which is now the projection of the narrator. Although this image runs throughout the text, "**The House on Mango Street**," "**Alicia**," "**A House of My Own**" and "**Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes**," are the principal descriptions. The imagery of the house is in constant flux between a negative and a positive, between the house the narrator has and the one she would like to have: "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." On the level of the narrative voice's sense of belonging and identity, it is clear from the first piece that the house is much more than a place to live. It is a reflection, an extension, a personified world that is indistinguishable from the occupant. The oppositional pull and push continues throughout and reaches its climax in the last three pieces. In "**Alicia and I Talking on Edna's Steps**," it is in the form of reported dialogue: "No, this isn't my house I say and shake my head as if shaking could undo the year I've lived here. I don't belong. I don't ever want to come from here . . . I never had a house, not even a photograph . . . only one I dream of." Because the house has become an extension of the person the rejection is vehement. She knows the person she is does not belong to the hostile ugly world she lives in.

"**A House of My Own**" expands on the promised house of her dreams in subtle, yet evocative, intertextuality to Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*: "Only a house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem." The house is now a metaphor for the subject and, therefore, the personal space of her identity. The last piece resolves the oppositional tension by transforming it into writing, into the metaphor of going away from Mango Street in order to return.

At the level of plot, the opposition of the house on Mango Street and a house of her own provides the narrative thread for the text. It is the movement implicit in the description of hostility and poverty and the belief in a better life that gives the story its inner cohesion and builds the consistency of the narrator's reflections. The fact that this conflict between alienation and the need to belong is common to persons of all cultures and across history gives the text its thematic link to world literature. There is a perfect circularity in the plot insofar as the text ends when the writing begins. The opening lines of the text are the closing. Esperanza has made her tension a tension creative of her subjectivity.

The idea of creative tension is well known to us through the work of Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* and *The Poetics of Reverie* as well as Paul Ricoeur's *The Rule of Metaphor*; however, we must be reminded that this idea was already implicit in Aristotle's discussion of representation as the tension between the object known to be represented and the means used to represent it. In my work, I follow the theory that the image is not the residue of an impression, it is not an imprint that fades with time; on the contrary, the image that is produced through speech gives us the speaking subject and the subject spoken of, entwined in a unity of expression. If we move from speech to the written text, the situation becomes richer with possibilities. The text makes the image possible, the reader makes it actual and the image is something new in our language, an entity of reflection that was not there before; it is the poetic subjectivity in which we participate.

My commentary on these pages is reflective, aimed at participation and not at imposing closure on the text for other readers. As readers, regarding the self-invention of writing, we must respect the specificity of the self-invention, that is, a Chicana coming of age. In all patriarchal societies, but especially in this one, there is the imposition of the sign of gender which serves to silence women, to force them to particularize themselves through the indirect means of the way and style in which they serve others. This is the ideological meaning of "a daddy's house." By writing, this young woman has created herself as a total subject and not a gender role or a disembodied voice.

The symbolic level of the image of the house is the most basic expression of existence. Everything about the house on Mango Street repels the lyric narrator. This house is not hers and does not reflect her presence. The house of her dreams is first described in negative terms, by what it cannot be: "Not a flat. Not an apartment in back. Not a man's house. Not a daddy's." This is followed by its attributes: "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." And it also excludes: "Nobody to shake a stick at. Nobody's garbage to pick up after." The problem is that she belongs to the house on Mango Street and to deny it would be at the expense of herself, of her identity. She belongs to a world that is not hers; it is an opposition that will not be resolved in a synthesis or a compromise. The metaphor of a place of her own draws upon the continuing tensional opposition. She learns not only to survive but to win her freedom, and the text itself with its title and its search

for the promised house is the creative tension of poetry. The semantic impertinence of belonging and not belonging creates the metaphorical meaning of identity as one who does not forget to reach and to reach and whose only reason is to "be and be."

The conclusion, "**Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes**," is lyrical and meditative:

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 that I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot out.

The liberation of Esperanza through her writing draws from a rich tradition of a writer's self-creation. Reflection, in this tradition, is the movement toward the very core of being. Not only does the past become the present through the act of writing, but, of more consequence, the projection into the self's future is predicated on the self-knowledge of this existentialized consciousness. To remember, therefore, is not just to go back in time, it is the recovery of the past that makes the future. Cisneros writes it in these words: "You must keep writing. It will keep you free, and I said yes, but at that time I didn't know what she meant."

Sandra Cisneros's text is a fictional autobiography of Esperanza Cordero. This is a postmodern form of fiction stitching together a series of lyrical pieces, "lazy poems" Cisneros calls them, into the narrativity of self-invention through writing. In her study on autobiography, Sidonie Smith establishes a theoretical position which is at once lucid and fully applicable to my endeavor in this essay. Esperanza's position as a woman gives a particularity to the writing itself in four instances: (1) the fiction of memory, (2) of self, (3) of the reader, and (4) of the narrativity itself. Her position of authority to interpret herself must be asserted by writing, but it must be done against the grain, for she lives in a patriarchal Mexican American culture where stories about women silence and subjugate them as in the case of her namesake, her great-grandmother. Finally, Esperanza's basis of authority--she knows what she has lived and felt better than anyone else--is vulnerable unless she asserts her presence in a specific everyday reality; in other words, it cannot slip into a daydream escape route which would be an evasion, not a liberation; she must make her presence, the presence of a woman writing.

Cisneros begins the end of her text with the affirmation of self-invention that displaces men's stories about women: "I like to tell stories. I am going to tell you a story about a girl who didn't want to belong." By writing, Esperanza has not only gained control of her past, she has created a present in which she can be free and belong at the same time. Her freedom is the fundamental freedom to be herself and she cannot be herself if she is entrapped in patriarchal narrativity. Mango Street will always be part of this woman, but she has taken the strength of trees unto herself and has found the courage to be the house of her dreams, her own self-invention.

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