In the following essay, Sloboda portrays Esperanza in The House on Mango Street as a character who maintains her hope and self-worth despite the nature of her environment.

In The House on Mango Street, Sandra Cisneros presents Esperanza Cordero and her remembered experiences after her family moves to their new "sad red house" on Mango Street. She assembles, in forty-five short chapters, a collage of recollections by the young female protagonist. Esperanza, in her introspective narrative, looks back and remembers (and, in a sense, re-creates) her childhood in a depressed Mexican-American neighborhood. While this character has become an important figure in the development and expression of female subjectivity in recent Mexican-American fiction, all too often she is read exclusively as a voice of opposition to dominant-culture practices of oppression and hegemony. Ellen McCracken announces that "Cisneros links both the process of artistic creation and the dream of a house" to "enable" or promote "social rather than individualistic issues" (1989, 66). McCracken proceeds to describe Esperanza as a "positive objectification" (65) that critiques "bourgeois individualism" (64). Barbara Harlow similarly asserts that Cisneros's text is "premised on the alienation between the young girl's emergent sense of a socially conditioned self and the new neighborhood" (1991, 160). Harlow also contends that "the Mango Street house has failed to actualize the child's aspirations of status and comfort raised by the promise of 'moving'" (160). While such interpretations correctly point to Esperanza's desire to "redress humiliation and establish a dignified sense of her own personhood" (McCracken 1989, 65), they tend to overlook the value of Esperanza's distinctly playful nature and its effect on both her individual character and communal consciousness. I intend to show that Esperanza develops a self-resilience and acceptance that retains no "aspirations of status." Cultivating these attributes in conjunction with her playfulness, the young protagonist gains a self-understanding that extends well beyond any desire for mere "comfort." Her character, accordingly, is not merely confined to and contained by her often oppressive environment.

Beyond Oppositional Readings

Oppositional readings often typify the novel's protagonist. Terry DeHay uses such an approach to interpret Esperanza's experiences predominantly in the context of her growing awareness of her cultural, economic, and social objectification. DeHay restricts Esperanza's insights to "understanding ... what it means to be both a member of a minority and a woman in a white patriarchal culture" (1994, 40). By claiming that Esperanza's memories and stories "all focus on the social, cultural, and sexual alienation she experiences as a child" (40, italics mine), DeHay, like McCracken, neglects Esperanza's positive experiences. DeHay, in fact, perceives Esperanza's conscience as focused exclusively on surviving, as exercising a "commitment to saving herself" (40). Cisneros, however, does not limit her central character to a static agent of counter-discourse. Depicting Esperanza's active negotiation of her identity in light of both constricting social conditions and, significantly, liberating personal aspirations, she presents the young protagonist as a vital and dynamic individual. In the process, Cisneros demonstrates how a subject can be defined but, at the same time, not totally restricted by its material (representative) and psychological (cognitive) space. Not focusing on the superficial, exotic qualities of her young protagonist's otherness, Cisneros, instead, shows how Esperanza "waits" to gain her appropriate voice in light of the prevalent hegemonic forces, patriarchal oppression, and ethnic marginalization in urban America. In particular, she juxtaposes Esperanza's burgeoning awareness of the harsh socioeconomic realities around her with her personal dreams and playful spirit. The different aspects of the protagonist's character are hinted at in her name itself. Esperanza explains that, "In English my name means hope. In Spanish it ... means sadness, it means waiting" (Cisneros 1984, 10). Through her minimalist narrative voice, Esperanza enters into a "dialogue" with her new home environment and learns to apply her hopefulness in the fashioning of her dream for a home of her own.
Cisneros opens *The House on Mango Street* by demonstrating how a home space plays a major role in shaping life and world experiences. She establishes the prominence of setting through a series of images that depict life in a predominantly Chicano urban American slum. Through these images, she exemplifies what Edward Soja, in his theoretical analysis of "postmodern geographies," terms a "social hieroglyphic" (Soja 1989, 7). The short novel begins with an all too typical scene for new or recent immigrants in America: a large family on the move. Esperanza, a member of such a family, is already accustomed to the migratory nature of lower-class life. Through Esperanza's differentiating between a "house" and "home," Cisneros specifically addresses the issue of transiency and shows how the local neighborhood can temper dreams and aspirations. In her "materialist interpretation of spatiality" (Soja 1989, 120), to draw from Soja's interpretive framework, Cisneros exposes a connection between spatiality and being. Soja contends that this type of "ontological spatiality situates the human subject in a formative geography" (8). Through her initial focus on the nature of Mango Street, Cisneros draws attention to the "formative," but not deterministic, role of the protagonist’s new home space.

From the outset of the novel, Cisneros captures both the protagonist's individual plight and the general struggles of a lower-class family. Esperanza recalls her life as a young girl in a Mexican-American family: "But what I remember most is moving a lot" (3). Here, Cisneros implicitly distinguishes the perspective (and life) of her protagonist from the middle-class child (who would likely remember and describe other things). Esperanza then summarizes her life before Mango Street by listing the different streets where she has already lived: "We didn't always live on Mango Street. *Before* that we lived on Loomis on the third floor, and *before* that we lived on Keeler. *Before* Keeler it was Paulina, and *before* that I can't remember" (3, italics mine). The repetitive and cyclic quality of the moving experience reveals that the constant shifting to different locales does not lead to a dramatic improvement in living conditions. With Esperanza explaining that her family's relocations are out of economic necessity, Cisneros exposes the limitations of living as members of a minority and the lower class in America. She also points to the difficulty in breaking from a life of poverty.

In this opening section of the short novel, Cisneros establishes the house on Mango Street as a sign--at once real and symbolic--of the rift between the reality and dreams of Esperanza and others living in this ghetto. From this perspective, *The House on Mango Street*, as Harlow generalizes, "radically critiques the inherently political ideology of the 'American dream'" (1991, 160). Cisneros continues to unveil the harsh living conditions in Esperanza's new neighborhood by establishing a contrast between the ideal and the real. Although Esperanza recognizes the value of her family living in their own house and appreciates the lack of "a landlord banging on the ceiling with a broom" (3), she nonetheless realizes that "it's not the house we'd thought we'd get" (3). While listing what she perceives to be the general advantages of ownership—not paying rent or sharing the yard—Esperanza also reiterates that the house is "not the way they told it at all" (4, italics mine). Her use of the indefinite pronoun "they" refers to those in mass communication and the media that propagate the myth of the "better life." With this comment, the protagonist reveals that she is aware of her family's position outside of the comforts and serenities typically associated with the American dream. Later, in fact, she further acknowledges her neighborhood's separation from mainstream America by noting that "the thought of the mayor coming to Mango Street makes me laugh out loud" (107).

Upon moving to Mango Street, Esperanza also alludes to her own already long-standing disappointment with her living conditions by sadly conceding that their new house is still not a "real" house that she could "point to" (5). Even though her mother describes their move as "for the time being," and her father calls it "temporary," Esperanza now understands, "But I know how those things go" (5). Although the young protagonist dreams of a "real house" and, implicitly, a better life, Cisneros shows that, even at this early stage of her life, Esperanza is already less idealistic and has learned to condition or temper her dreams.

Cisneros, however, also shows that, in spite of finding herself in another depressed neighborhood, her young protagonist does not abandon her hope and ideals. Almost immediately after moving to Mango Street, Esperanza contrasts her new house with her dream "home" environment. First she describes her ideal, "real house": "[O]ur house would have running water and pipes that worked. And inside it would have real stairs, not hallway stairs, but stairs inside like the houses on T.V." She also imagines the external features: "Our house would be white with trees around it, a great big yard and grass growing without a fence" (4). At this early point in the short novel, Cisneros reveals that her protagonist maintains her vitality and hopefulness. Through her awareness of the less than ideal nature of her new home and, at the same time, her determination not to abandon her dream, Esperanza begins to fashion her consciousness--at once socially informed and individually hopeful. Shortly thereafter, Cisneros again draws attention to Esperanza's playful and creative spirit by immediately contrasting the protagonist's bleak depiction of her new house on Mango Street with a scene in which she playfully describes the "different hair" (6) in her family. By consistently including the positive aspects of Esperanza's perspective,
Cisneros reveals another significant dimension of her protagonist's character.

Cultural Tensions

In her new neighborhood, Esperanza learns that the issue of a respectable house and neighborhood is linked not only to people's economic plight, but also to their cultural identity. By drawing attention to the interconnection of these different facets of life on Mango Street, Cisneros addresses what Alberto Sandoval theorizes as the struggle of the "Latin American" woman to survive the "dialectics of a bi-cultural identity" (1989, 203). Esperanza gains an understanding of the nature of the cultural tensions in the neighborhood through her observations of Mamacita, a new immigrant who struggles with her sense of loneliness and isolation. She describes how a man worked two jobs to bring Mamacita, his "big mama," and her baby boy to the country. After arriving in their neighborhood, the new immigrant does not learn English; instead, she "sits all day by the window and plays the Spanish radio show and sings all the homesick songs about her country" (77). Mamacita not only longs for her homeland, but also faces an impoverished life in her new home. Cisneros actualizes Eliana Ortega and Nancy Saporta Sternbach's theories about crosscultural contact by describing how Mamacita longs for "Home ... a house in a photograph, a pink house, pink as hollyhocks with lots of startled light" (77). This poignant image illustrates that a home space, as a physical and psychological site of familiarity and comfort, plays a vital role in the (re)settling of the subject on both an individual and communal level.

Cisneros continues to highlight conflicts arising on Mango Street from differences between many of the residents' "home" culture and their new homes in America. Mamacita tries to preserve her sense of identity in her new country by speaking only in her mother tongue and not in English, the language "that sounds like tin" (78). She is aghast upon hearing her baby singing a Pepsi commercial in English. "No speak English, no speak English," she chants, "and bubbles into tears" (78). Presenting Mamacita's disquietude as a typical part of life on Mango Street, Cisneros exposes how the "Latina," according to Ortega and Sternbach, is "inscribed into two symbolic orders: English, the language of the hegemonic culture, and Spanish, the mother tongue" (1989, 14). This "bicultural" subject, Ortega and Sternbach explain further, engages in a process of "constantly ... negotiating her alliances with one or both of these orders" (14). The man, frustrated at Mamacita's sadness and constant longing for "home," exclaims: "We are home. This is home. Here I am and here I stay" (78). Refusing to even consider the possibility of this locale becoming her new home, Mamacita responds to her "man" and predicament by occasionally letting out a "cry, hysterical, high, as if he had torn the only skinny thread that kept her alive, the only road out to that country" (78). By watching how Mamacita struggles to adapt to her new homeland, Esperanza begins to appreciate the immigrant woman's feeling (and knowledge) that she does not "belong" (78).

Within this backdrop of transiency and strife on Mango Street, Cisneros shows how Esperanza must struggle to experience what other children in middle-class America take for granted. While looking for new friends, Esperanza confronts the negative stereotype of her otherness. She describes how Cathy, the "Queen of Cats," agrees to be her friend, "But only til next Tuesday" (12). Cathy then reveals, "That's when we move away" (13). Cathy's comment reminds Esperanza of the transient nature of life in her type of neighborhood. It also verifies for her that other families do not want to live near to or be associated with her class and people. In response to Cathy's remark, Esperanza states: "Then as if she forgot I just moved in, she says the neighborhood is getting bad" (13, italics mine). Her use of the conditional tense alludes to her melancholic awareness of the way in which she is perceived by those around her. Cathy proceeds to explain to Esperanza that her family will be inheriting the family house in France. Even though Esperanza most likely realizes that Cathy's story is a fantasy, she still becomes sad, as she seems to realize that she cannot even dream the same dreams as her friend. She gloomily concludes that Cathy's family will "just ... move a little farther north from Mango Street, a little farther away every time people like us keep moving in" (13). Through her experience of having to keep looking for new friends, Esperanza soon discovers that friendships can be tempered or even lost due to factors quite apart from personal compatibility and from her control. Cisneros also uses this exchange between the two young girls to expose the alienating effect of social stratification on a community, especially its children.

Cisneros further confirms how the difference in living conditions between the slum areas, with its run-down houses, and mainstream America, with its picket fences, leads to divisiveness. One day, Esperanza thinks about a neighborhood far away from Mango Street: "I want a house on a hill like the ones with the gardens where Papa works" (86). She, however, decides that she no longer wants to go with the rest of her family on Sundays to visit these gardens, as she now finds herself "ashamed" at "all of us staring out the window like
the hungry" (86). Emphatic about her decision, Esperanza directly states: "I am tired of looking at what we can't have" (86). She then describes the attitudes of the rich over the poor: "People who live on the hills sleep so close to the stars they forget those of us who live too much on earth" (86). Cisneros uses Esperanza's reaction against her family's weekly drive to show how hope, when constantly set in the reality of impoverishment, wears thin.

Throughout her childhood, Esperanza faces people from the middle who, intentionally or not, differentiate and relegate her to a disempowered space. Once, at school, Esperanza had to stand at the window and point to where she lived. She remembers the Sister Superior's response: "That one? she said, pointing to a row of ugly three-flats, the ones even the raggedy men are ashamed to go into" (45). Even though these houses are worse than those in her neighborhood, Esperanza finds herself unable to do anything but nod her head and cry. Earlier, when Esperanza lived on Loomis, Esperanza experiences a similar scene of degrading objectification. One day, a nun from her school passes by. Spotting Esperanza, she stops and asks her whether she lived "there," pointing to the third floor of a decrepit house. Her feeling of embarrassment is still vivid in her memory: "There. I had to look where she pointed--the third floor, the paint peeling, wooden bars Papa had nailed on the windows so we wouldn't fall out" (5). Now understanding the nun's tone, Esperanza reflects on her experience and forced resignation: "The way she said it made me feel like nothing. There. I lived there. I nodded" (5).

Through these seemingly innocent exchanges, Cisneros not only highlights the carelessness with which entire communities are negatively typified, but she exposes an irony, as Esperanza is repeatedly treated insensitively by someone who is supposed to be aware of the plight of the lower class and oppressed.

Alternative Voices

*The House on Mango Street*, however, is not merely a critical social commentary that articulates the anger and frustration of the victimized. In her narratives, Esperanza also establishes a hopeful voice that playfully "dialogues" with those in the local community. Notwithstanding the aforementioned hardships of life on Mango Street, Esperanza formulates a positive, personal vision. By accentuating the vibrancy of her protagonist, Cisneros develops, to apply Renato Rosaldo's terms, a "fresh vision of self and society" (1991, 85). While describing Cisneros's innovative narrative technique as exemplifying "the experimentation and achievement of recent Chicana narrative," Rosaldo explains that such Chicana writers in general have "opened" a "heterogeneous world within which their protagonists no longer act as 'unified subjects,' yet remain confident of their identities" (85). Esperanza, Rosaldo specifies, "acts assertive and playful ... moving through a world laced with poverty, violence, and danger" and, in the process, "subverts oppressive patriarchal points of cultural coherence and fixity" (85). Scenes that expose Esperanza's playful and creative side include her experiences with Rachel, Nenny, and Lucy, such as their sharing a bicycle (14-16), naming clouds (33-38), trying on pairs of fancy shoes (38-42), playing jump rope (49-52), and spending time in what they call "the monkey garden" (94-98). Cisneros, accordingly, does not restrict Esperanza to a socially typified agent who merely exposes the disempowerment of ghettoized peoples in the United States. Instead, she shows how her protagonist uses her dynamic, individual attributes to maintain a positive perspective and, later, to begin to effect change in her life and in the community around her.

In formulating her own response to the neighborhood around her, Esperanza gains inspiration from the actions and the decisions made by her friend Minerva. Even though this young woman is about the same age as Esperanza, she already has two children whom she is raising herself, as her husband has left "and keeps leaving" (85). During the day, Minerva handles all her familial responsibilities. After her children are asleep, however, she writes poems "on little pieces of paper that she folds over and over and holds in her hands a long time" (84). Sharing creative interests, Esperanza and Minerva exchange poems. In the process, Esperanza realizes that her friend writes her hardships into her poetry; she describes Minerva's verses as "sad like a house on fire" (84). Through this striking image, Cisneros affirms the centrality of the house motif in the life of Esperanza and those around her. She also reiterates that local socioeconomic reality makes it difficult to break the cycle of poverty. Esperanza, in fact, soon discovers that Minerva is beaten regularly by her husband. In a tragic scene, Minerva arrives, "black and blue," at Esperanza's house and asks Esperanza what she can do. Through this scene, Cisneros illustrates that in neighborhoods like Mango Street oppression and even abuse often pervade the lives of the young women. Although Esperanza appreciates her friend and gains strength from her perseverance, she also sadly realizes that "There is nothing I can do" (85).

Esperanza learns to use her playful perspective and creative imagination to respond to the diverse forms of oppression around her on
Mango Street. In particular, Cisneros develops Esperanza's alternative viewpoint through a highly poetic and stylistic writing. Along these lines, McCracken describes Cisneros's textual style as distinct from "the complex, hermetic language of many canonical works" (1989, 64). Esperanza employs a seemingly simple and direct language in expressing her creativity, as when she takes note of the differences in the hair of the members of her family. She describes Papa's hair as being "like a broom," her own as "lazy," Carlos's as "thick and straight," Nenny's as "slippery," and Kiki's as being "like fir." Esperanza then concentrates on her mother's hair, focusing on its beauty:

But my mother's hair, my mother's hair, like little rosettes, like little candy circles all curly and pretty because she pinned it in pincurls all day, sweet to put your nose into when she is holding you, holding you and you feel safe, is the warm smell of bread before you bake it, is the smell when she makes room for you on her side of the bed still warm with her skin, and you sleep near her, the rain outside falling and Papa snoring. The snoring, the rain, and Mama's hair that smells like bread. (6-7)

By switching to the second person point of view during the description, Cisneros brings readers closer to Esperanza's stream-of-consciousness and, in the process, enhances the scene's mood and tone. Her use of repetition, rhythmic language, and simple but effective figures of speech not only accurately portrays a child's point of view but also creates both striking and positive images.

Esperanza's playful and creative use of language extends beyond her personal moments of reflection to her social activities on Mango Street. One afternoon, Esperanza, her sister Nenny, and her friends Lucy and Rachel, talk about their "hips." Lucy then begins to dance, while Esperanza and Nenny twirl their skipping ropes. Esperanza describes the process: "It's gotta be just so, I say. Not too fast and not too slow. Not too fast and not too slow" (50). The repetitive and rhythmic language helps draw attention to both the motion of the skipping ropes and the girls' bodily movements, while the songs and choruses further establish the scene's playful atmosphere. Rachel is the first to introduce a refrain:

Skip, skip,
snake in your hips.
Wiggle around
and break your lip.
(51)

By including other genres in this chapter, Cisneros not only playfully represents language but, in a sense, sets it in motion. This narrative strategy can be interpreted in light of Bakhtin's call for the deliberate incorporation of genres into moments of heteroglossia that "further intensify its speech diversity in fresh ways" (1981, 321). By refreshing the children's utterances, Cisneros creates a "dialogized heteroglossia" (272). In the process, she points to Esperanza's creative use of language and how this positively influences her character.

Cisneros's presentation of a variety of opposing and competing forces in Esperanza's world can be further understood in terms of Bakhtin's notions of "centrifuge" and "centripede." Bakhtin theorizes about this simultaneous inclusion of diverse, even competing socio-ideologic voices within the "environment," or "dialogized heteroglossia," of "every concrete utterance of a speaking subject." He explains that "processes of centralization and decentralization, of unification and disunification, intersect in the utterance" (272).

"Centripetal" forces, accordingly, strive for a unified voice and a singular meaning, whereas "centrifugal" forces seek to fragment voices and enact a pluralistic discourse. Cisneros depicts Esperanza as a subject in the process of developing a voice of her own amidst these types of conflicting forces. She shows how Esperanza's creative means of "dialoguing" with her neighborhood helps her establish a space of her own. Watching four trees by her house, she notes that she is the "only one who understands them. Four skinny trees with skinny necks and pointy elbows like mine. Four who do not belong here but are here" (74). Aware that "[f]rom our room we can hear them [the trees]" (74), Esperanza formulates a link between the trees and her home, between her inner and outer worlds.

Appreciative of the trees, Esperanza explains how they survive in the city: "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" (74). With these four trees now a noticeable part of her world, Esperanza learns from them and gains inspiration from their strength.

Transforming Spaces
Continuing to carve out a space for themselves in their neighborhood, Esperanza and her friends transform their living environment from a wasteland into a play-land. While describing some of Esperanza's experiences in this modified space, Cisneros also alludes to the dynamic interrelationship among individual consciousness, social expression, and spatiality. Soja, in his linking of "space" and "social ontology," theorizes about this type of spatial transformation in terms of a process of "incorporation": "Not only are the spaces of nature and cognition incorporated into the social production of spatiality, [but] they are [also] significantly transformed in the process" (1989, 120). Establishing their own particular "ideational space," to apply Soja's term, the neighborhood children on Mango Street take over a lot in which a man used to keep monkeys, but that now lies empty. The "garden" is filled with flowers, bees, spiders, thistles, weeds, rotting wood, and abandoned cars (95). The children play and find solace in their recycled space, this place where "[t]hings had a way of disappearing" (95). Esperanza remembers this lot as "[f]ar away from where our mothers could find us. We and a few old dogs who lived inside the empty cars" (95). She further recalls how, in no time at all, their play space acquired magical qualities: "Somebody started the lie that the monkey garden had been there before anything." Esperanza proceeds to describe the "garden" in almost mythical terms: "We liked to think the garden could hide things for a thousand years. There beneath the roots of soggy flowers were the bones of murdered pirates and dinosaurs, the eye of a unicorn turned to coal" (96). From what was essentially a dump, Esperanza and the neighborhood children transform the lot and create, for themselves, a sanctuary, a space very different from the depressed streets in their neighborhood. As part of the neighborhood's heteroglossic environment, the "monkey garden," however, is not totally separate from the reality of life on Mango Street. In this empty lot, Sally soon starts to spend time apart from Esperanza and, instead, with Tito and the local boys. At first, Esperanza tries to stop the boys from their game playing, but Sally tells her to go away. Esperanza wants to run away and hide "at the other end of the garden, in the jungle part, under a tree" (97). After watching Sally play with the boys, Esperanza feels angry. The lot that had been "such a good place to play" (98), now is beginning to lose its special attributes. In fact, after this event, Esperanza never returns to the "monkey garden."

In the midst of her varied experiences on Mango Street, Esperanza's long-standing dream for a house of her own begins to take shape. One day, Esperanza visits Elenita, the "witch woman" for a palm reading. Upon asking her specifically about the possibility of a house in her future, she is told, "Ah yes, a home in the heart. I see a home in the heart." Elenita then repeats this phrase, "I see a home in the heart" (64). Not satisfied with this answer, Esperanza asks, "Is that it?" (64). Recognizing Esperanza's sadness, the "witch woman" again rechecks the cards, Esperanza's palm, and her "special water" but, much to Esperanza's disappointment, reiterates: "A new house, a house made of heart" (64). Esperanza, at the time, does not understand that Elenita is offering an insight about the spiritual (and not material) nature of her character. Later, Esperanza comes to integrate Elenita's revelation into her dream of a house of her own. While affirming that "One day I'll own my own house," Esperanza does not ignore her social reality. "but I won't forget who I am or where I came from" (87). She then imagines how she'll offer "passing burns" a place to stay, in the attic, "because I know how it is to be without a house" (87). By detailing Esperanza's fantasy of "Bums in the Attic," Cisneros clarifies that Esperanza's aspiration for a home indeed includes "heart."

Cisneros contrasts Esperanza's burgeoning personal and social awareness with the changes in her friend, Sally. Esperanza wonders about Sally's decision to dress up like someone older and to change her lifestyle. She notices that her friend is now "different" and no longer laughs (82). Later, she discovers that Sally is beaten by her father (92). Esperanza then recounts how Sally met a marshmallow salesman at a school bazaar and quickly married in another state, where underage marriages are legal. By highlighting the results of Sally's actions, Cisneros unveils the consequences of a path followed by many young women in depressed neighborhoods. Upon seeing her friend in her new home and life, Esperanza observes that her friend is "young and not ready but married just the same" (101). Although Sally had hoped to "escape" (101), she now lives an even more confined life, as her husband does not let her talk on the phone or even look out the window. Her friends can visit only when he is at work. Esperanza summarizes the bitter-sweet quality of Sally's victory, by noting that her friend "sits at home because she is afraid to go outside without his permission. She looks at all the things they own" (102). Esperanza recognizes that while Sally gains material wealth, she loses her autonomy, character, and, perhaps most important, her dignity.

In spite of her friends falling victim to various forces of economic and social oppression, Esperanza, nonetheless, does not abandon her idealism. Instead, she recognizes the need to broaden the scope of her dream to include the reality of her life on Mango Street. Esperanza, in fact, has a glimpse into her future, on visiting with her three aunts at the funeral of a baby cousin. One of the aunts takes.
Esperanza aside and, after looking at her for a long time, states: "When you leave you must remember always to come back" (105).
The aunt then repeats that line and adds, "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" (105). The repetition of this simple sentence draws attention to Esperanza's
increasing awareness of a bond between her individual identity and her home space. The aunt, then, for the third time, reiterates her
call for Esperanza to remember to come back; this time, however, she clarifies the reason for returning: "For the ones who cannot leave
as easily as you" (105). Esperanza's meeting with her aunt further verifies for her the importance of developing her individual talents
and accepting the social consequences of her actions.

While gaining insights about her own be-longing, Esperanza benefits from her time with her friend Alicia. Realizing that her friend
"doesn't want to spend her whole life in a factory or behind a rolling pin" (31-32), Esperanza understands and respects Alicia's
commitment to studying hard at the university. Later, Esperanza recalls a conversation during which Alicia confirms the bond between
Esperanza's sense of self and her life on Mango Street. Esperanza begins to tell Alicia about her "sadness" at not having a house:
"You live right here, 4006 Mango, Alicia says and points to the house I am ashamed of" (106). At the time, Esperanza passionately
rejects Alicia's declaration: "No, this isn't my house I say and shake my head as if shaking could undo the year I've lived here." Not
wanting to associate herself with her neighborhood, she adds: "I don't belong. I don't ever want to come from here" (106). Alicia,
however, verifies the intimate nature of the relation between Esperanza and the neighborhood: "Like it or not you are Mango Street" (107, italics mine). Through this exchange, Cisneros exposes the core of the young protagonist's conflict: on the one hand, Esperanza
does not want to be associated with this type of neighborhood, with its oppression and poverty; on the other hand, however, she wants
to accept her life, family, and friends, not in some fantasy or abstract space, but in the actual locale where she lives. Esperanza
eventually resolves this seeming contradiction in her life by realizing that, first, she must affirm her presence in her own community and
then try to improve it, to be a "somebody" who "makes it better" (107).

In light of her encounters and experiences with those around her on Mango Street, Esperanza begins to fashion her desire for a house
of her own in a manner that includes both integrity and "heart." She realizes that in order for her own self to emerge to its fullest, her
ideal house, in turn, must be her own and "Not a man's house. Not a daddy's" (108). Esperanza, accordingly, distinguishes herself from
Sally by rejecting her friend's decision to attain material wealth and status at the expense of her personal character and integrity.
Esperanza, instead, imagines that her dream house will be filled with "My books and my stories" (108). With Esperanza realizing that
she cannot separate her living space from her creative perspective, Cisneros affirms the interconnection between an individual's
physical and psychological reality. By adapting Virginia Woolf's famous novel title, A Room of One's Own, in describing Esperanza's
dream for "A House of My Own" (108), Cisneros suggests a possible comparison between Woolf and Esperanza, particularly in terms
of their shared strength of character, resolve, and rejection of imperial and patriarchal hegemony. Through this literary reference,
Cisneros also echoes Woolf's promotion of communal (over colonial) dynamics, specifically, her recognition of the role and value of the
individual in the context of a people.

The novel closes with Esperanza accepting the neighborhood as her own but, at the same time, refusing to become another of its
victims. She announces her intention to tell stories about herself, "a girl who didn't want to belong" (109). Esperanza acknowledges that
the "sad red house" is "the house I belong but do not belong to" (110). About her future, she remains hopeful. She talks about how, one
day, she will leave "Mango" with her books and paper but, with a strong sense of purpose and direction in her life. She explains that her
friends and neighbors "will not know I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot out" (110). By
ending the short novel with this deliberate stylized expression that omits a word of action, Cisneros uses Esperanza's personalized and
minimalist language to accentuate the despair of those left behind and their inability to enact change. Overall, through her encounters
with a variety of people—young and old—in the neighborhood, Esperanza gains the strength and perspective to challenge the prevalent
socioeconomic oppression that, as she has seen, all too often entraps individuals in a life without hope. By realizing that her personal
aspirations to be a writer and to have a home of her own carry a social duty, Esperanza also understands that she will become her real
and true self only by fulfilling both her personal and communal responsibilities.

Self Re-vision

In The House on Mango Street, Cisneros brings to the surface the tensions between individual aspirations and societal restrictions
(economic, social, racial, gender) inscribed in and, in part, regulating a local community. The short novel's young protagonist quickly learns about the limitations of life in an urban slum and the nature of the struggle she faces to realize her dream of a house of her own. By observing her friends Minerva and Sally, Esperanza also begins to understand the particular difficulties facing young women in the neighborhood. She, in fact, has an encounter of her own that involves inappropriate sexual behavior. While at work at her first job at Peter Pan Photo Finishers, she is confronted by an older Oriental man who, Esperanza recalls, "grabs my face with both hands and kisses me hard on the mouth and doesn't let go" (55). Such vignettes expose Cisneros's double focus, prevalent throughout the novel. On the one hand, she draws attention to the difficulties facing minority populations in ethnic ghettos arising from their economic, gender, and social stratification. On the other hand, she demonstrates that, nonetheless, it is possible to develop and maintain a positive, but not automatically naive, perspective. During these moments, Cisneros shows how Esperanza comes to recognize that only by accepting who she is--deep in her heart--and where she came from will she truly achieve her dream for a "home." Esperanza later realizes that, through her own talents as a writer, she can use her artistry to effect change in her self and her neighborhood. That is, she gains an awareness that she can use her voice as a poet to not only affirm her own sense of self but also to convey this positive energy and life-spirit to others. Esperanza thus begins to learn about the power of the written word and to understand what her aunt had once said to her: "You must keep writing. It will keep you free" (61). She recognizes that her poetry is a means of actualizing her personal vitality and spirit. Through Esperanza's epiphany, Cisneros confirms the potential (albeit at times hidden) for, as Esperanza's name suggests, "hope.

While charting Esperanza's experiences and insights, Cisneros does not ignore the "subaltern, adjunct" (Bhabha 1994, 168) reality, to draw from Homi Bhabha's theoretical readings about the location of culture, of life on Mango Street. Bhabha explains that this type of space "doesn't aggrandize the presence of the West but redraws its frontiers in the menacing agonistic boundary of cultural difference" (168). Through her short novel's distinct narrative strategy, Cisneros opposes forces of hegemony and seeks to break free from boundaries within which minority peoples are often confined. Esperanza's awareness and exploration of different perspectives, then, can be seen as "postcolonial" in, to adapt Bhabha's explanation, its refusal to "give a hegemonic 'normality' to the uneven development and the differential, often disadvantaged histories of nations, races, communities, peoples" (171). Not restricting her perspective to a discourse about a victimized minority culture in America, however, Cisneros also addresses the dynamic interrelationship between spatiality and the formation of the individual and social subject. Specifically, she points to the transformative potential of socially responsible and individually creative thoughts and acts. With her protagonist exhibiting an enthusiasm and vigor for life, Cisneros shows how Esperanza learns to use this energy to build a will within herself. As she develops both a critical and creative awareness, she comes to accept her past and, at the same time, transform her present. By developing this strength of character, Esperanza finds herself able to move beyond assigned, contained, and disempowered mental and physical ghettoes, and live a meaningful and fulfilling life.

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