

‘This Bridge We Call Home’: Crossing and Bridging Spaces in Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street*

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The representation of ethnic American subjectivity is a theme immersed in discussions of crossroads, borders and bridges. In this paper, I argue that the formation of selfhood, a central thematic concern of the *Bildungsroman* (also known as the novel of development), is defined for ethnic Americans by a constant negotiation of belonging in distinct territories, in other words by a kind of border-crossing. If in the traditional *Bildungsroman* the protagonist grows up expecting to learn ‘the art of living’ (cited by Rosowski, 1983, p.49), in the ethnic American variant the protagonist becomes apprenticed to ‘the art of the present’ (Bhabha, 1994, p.1), and develops ‘a consciousness of the Borderlands’ (Anzaldúa, 1999, p.99). While the first phrase above suggests an organic unfolding and a harmonious integration of all aspects of the self, the other two, when used in the context of the genre, redefine traditional notions of eighteenth-century *Bildung* by turning attention away from organic integration in order to express the acute conflicts and complexity that characterises life ‘on the border’.¹ Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street* (1984), a coming-of-age narrative pieced together by assembled patches like a quilt, can be read as an example of what it means for a Mexican-American female to grow up in the cultural and textual borderlands.

Although schematisations of the traditional *Bildungsroman* posit the developmental journey as a teleological movement from stage to higher stage, feminist critics have proposed an alternative geometry.² Susan

¹ For the ways in which the *Bildungsroman* reflects Enlightenment ideals of a harmonious form of cultivation aimed at developing the whole person, see Martini, 1991, pp.1-25.

² See Howe (1930) and Buckley (1974) for an account of the narrative trajectory in the English *Bildungsroman*.

Fraiman, for instance, envisages the female process of growing up ‘not as a single path to a clear destination but as the endless negotiation of a crossroads’ (1993, p.x). Gloria Anzaldúa also draws on the idea of ‘The Crossroads/*La encrucijada*’ (1999, p.102), which, placed in a Mexican American or Chicano/a context, is recast as ‘*El camino de la mestiza* /The Mestiza Way’ (1999, p.104). In her words, the Chicana is ‘caught between *los intersticios*, the spaces between the different worlds she inhabits’ (Anzaldúa, 1999, p.42). Torn between Anglo, Mexican and indigenous cultures, Chicanas face ‘*Una lucha de fronteras*/A Struggle of Borders’ (Anzaldúa, 1999, p.99). The U.S. - Mexican border, to which Anzaldúa alludes in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, is not merely the geopolitical boundary, which since 1848 divides Mexico from the United States. As most border theorists agree, the idea of the border becomes even more fertile when we ‘liberate it from the notion of space [or from a specific *locale*] to encompass [among others] notions of sex, class, gender, ethnicity, identity and community’ (Benito and Manzananas, 2002, p.3).

The House on Mango Street embodies and amplifies Fraiman’s negotiation of crossroads and Anzaldúa’s struggle of borders. The dilemma that arises here is at the centre of the traditional *Bildungsroman*, but becomes qualified with the consideration of additional factors such as gender and ethnicity, notably: How can individuality and freedom from constraint coexist with the demands of socialisation, both the larger world ‘of necessity’ (Moretti, 2000, p.17) and the more intimate, though not empty of symbolic obligations, sphere of community? This tension between ‘individuality’ and ‘normality’, for Franco Moretti (2000, p.16), puts considerable burden on ethnic American women writers, since their texts are usually judged by their ethnic communities on the basis of and according to the degree in which they fulfil their responsibilities toward them. As Sau-ling Cynthia Wong succinctly summarises their predicament:

[V]ictimised by sexism [women] must be ready to suppress potentially damaging (to the men, that is) material; to do less

is to jeopardise the united front and to prostitute one's integrity for the sake of white approval. (1992, p.259)

In other words, any attempt by women of colour to interrogate the patriarchal structures of their local communities becomes equated with betrayal as it is considered synonymous either with an assimilationist anti-ethnic stance or with a fashionable white feminism.³

For ethnic women writers then, the opposition between individualism and community, or between privacy and affiliation, frequently implies another border struggle, namely between gender and ethnicity. The ways in which women of colour choose to negotiate their divided loyalties often decides, as already mentioned, whether their writing is to be dismissed as a depoliticized gesture or praised as a politicized endeavour. One could imagine that many ethnic American women writers have responded to the pseudo-dilemma 'Individualism or Community?' imposed by their male counterparts with the joke with which Slavoj Žižek opens (and entitles) one of his essays, that is, with the answer 'Yes, please!' (2000, p.90); a refusal of choice between the two, which is accompanied by a very serious effort to articulate a synthesis of the competing values.⁴ For Anzaldúa, this synthesis can take place in an ideal space, namely 'the borderlands'; 'a third element which is greater than the sum of its severed parts' (Anzaldúa, 1999, pp.101-

³ Geoffrey Sanborn relates such responses to the tension between 'privacy and affiliation' in American literature and discusses writing as a form of private pleasure (2001, p.1346, n1). Wong (1993) describes a similar tension between 'Necessity' and 'Extravagance' in Asian American Literature through an investigation, among other things, of writing as 'play'. Elisabeth Mermann-Jozwiak makes the distinction between postmodernism as 'an aesthetic and ahistorical practice' and 'a multicultural, political version of postmodernism' in Chicano literature (2000, p.113). In this paper, I briefly touch upon issues of political engagement and upon the ways in which they mediate ideas of playful writing, but I have further explored the latter's relation to notions of borderlands and to the *Bildungsroman* in a more extensive chapter of my thesis, which looks at *The House on Mango Street*.

⁴ In Chicana fiction in particular, a second wave of women writers in the 1980s, which includes among others Sandra Cisneros, turned to oppression from within the ethnic community as opposed to merely from outside (mainstream America), thus seeking to add gender-identified perspectives to the larger Chicano cause against the racial and material

2) and where ‘a new *mestiza* consciousness’ can flourish (Anzaldúa, 1999, p.99).⁵

I would like to suggest that *The House on Mango Street* participates in the creation of such a textual border zone through the attempt to articulate a consciousness of the Borderlands. Literary texts seem to offer an ideal site in which to explore the coexistence of conflicting principles as well as the conditions in which contradictions can be transcended and dichotomies merged. The *Bildungsroman* in particular has functioned as ‘a cultural mechanism’ that tests the various compromises between self and society, aiming at a proper balance between the two (Moretti, 2000, p.9). For Moretti, what explains the continuing appeal of the genre is the fact that it has succeeded, at least in its original eighteenth-century form, in representing the fusion of such opposites as autonomy and social integration ‘with a force of conviction and optimistic clarity that will never be equalled again’ (2000, p.16). The last point may be true, but this does not render the social function of the genre obsolete; its mediating and compromising project, to fuse, in other words, opposites ‘into a new unity until the former is no longer distinguishable from the latter’ (Moretti, 2000, p.16) may not be convincing anymore since ‘absolute cohesion and totalizing harmony’ (Moretti, 2000, p.72) do not correspond to viable ideals. Still, an attempt at integration, however contingent and precarious, should not be necessarily treated as suspect; when seen in relation to ethnic subjectivity in particular, it becomes a vital tool of survival. Indeed, by virtue of the genre’s ‘synthetic vocation’ (Moretti, 2000, p.17), contemporary versions of the *Bildungsroman*, could be seen as participating in the process of transcending ‘unnatural’ borders and boundaries through the articulation of borderlands. As I hope to show, such gestures are productive and ultimately political in that, in Bhabha’s words, they can ‘initiate new signs of identity and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation...’ (1994, pp.1-2).

conditions of oppression (Lomelí, 2002).

⁵ Alternative terms to Anzaldúa’s ‘borderlands’ are Mary Louise Pratt’s ‘contact zones’ (1992, p.6) and Alfred Arteaga’s ‘border zone’ (Benito and Manzanás, 2002, pp.2-4).

Although Cisneros is not a conscious practitioner of the *Bildungsroman*, *The House on Mango Street* has been perceived against this conceptual horizon, in particular as a revision of a western individualistic and patriarchal genre (see Gutiérrez-Jones, 1993). Moreover, unlike other Mexican American fiction of development, which uses the geographic border as the backdrop of their protagonists' 'education', or recreates border encounters between Mexico and the United States through code switching and linguistic hybridity, *The House on Mango Street* dramatises the idea of border struggle in a more subtle way; through its basic structural principle, that is, the *vignette*.⁶ The imagistic or episodic *vignette* seems a simple technique, but I would argue that its alleged lack of complexity is deceptive. Cisneros herself has described some of the sections in *The House on Mango Street* as 'lazy poems [...] hovering in that grey area between two genres' (1987, p.79), and one might interpret this grey space between prose and poetry as a kind of textual borderlands. In an interview referring to *The House on Mango Street*, another statement of hers echoes the idea of fluidity associated with the *vignette* form:

I wanted to write a series of stories that you could open up at any point. You didn't have to know anything before or after and you would understand each story like a little pearl, or you could look at the whole thing like a necklace. (cited by Sanborn, 2001, p.1345)

In *The House on Mango Street*, the compressed stories, lazy poems and vivid sketches - each with its own title - derail the progressive train of Esperanza's development by dispersing the narrative across several trajectories. The text can be thus approached not merely as a temporal continuum, which is what one would normally expect from a

⁶ Ana Castillo's *The Mixquiahuala Letters* (1986) is an example of a Chicana text that uses the actual Mexican-American border and the trope of border crossing (in a literal sense) in order to dramatises the protagonist's search for home. For border crossing in the sense of border writing, see Arteaga (1997). In her later work, Cisneros intersperses English with Spanish more extensively (for instance in *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*, 1991). A Chicano novel of development with which *The House on Mango Street* shares a structural affinity (the use of the *vignette*) is Tomás Rivera's *...y no se lo tragó la tierra/... and the earth did not part* (1971).

Bildungsroman, but also as a spatial configuration (Bronfen, 1999). In this spatial whole, the chapters are interchangeable and carry equal weight. At the same time, they reconstruct the narrator's process of growing up as a movement in contradictory directions by inscribing competing narratives of development (Fraiman, 1993). These rival narratives can be uncovered through a close juxtaposition of different *vignettes*. As a form, the *vignette* has soft edges that often bleed out into the surrounding area, causing 'a narrative overspill'. As a result of its fluid boundaries, then, the *vignette* can become an effective tool for establishing connections and highlighting oppositions.

A series of *vignettes* in *The House on Mango Street* underwrite the narrator's wish to escape from the confining patriarchal scripts of her community into a space of 'private enjoyment' (Sanborn, 2001, p.1334); both into a real house and into 'the house of fiction' (Sage, 1992). This is what Esperanza, whose name means 'hope', dreams of in a section entitled 'A House of My Own':

Not a flat. Not an apartment in back. Not a man's house. Not a daddy's. A house all my own. With my porch and my pillow, my pretty purple petunias. My books and my stories. My two shoes waiting beside the bed. Nobody to shake a stick at. Nobody's garbage to pick up after. Only a house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem. (Cisneros, 1992, p.108)

This *vignette* comes before the last story of the text, and it has made a few critics suggest that Esperanza seeks 'to become more "Anglicized"' (cited by Valdés, 1993, p.289) or that her development culminates in 'her deterritorialization from kinship, friendship, group, community, and history' (Morales, 1993, p.231). This is the price ethnic American women presumably pay in the pursuit of a possessive individualism, or in the pursuit of Virginia Woolf's feminist dream of 'a room of one's own' (1929).

Such criticism, though not necessarily directed at Cisneros, fails to do justice to the text by treating it as univocal. As I have suggested, the text is split between competing narratives, and the individualistic *vignettes* have their communal counterparts. For instance, the above *vignette* can be juxtaposed with another in which Esperanza offers to open that very same house to ‘bums’, since, as the narrator confesses, she knows ‘how it is to be without a house’ (Cisneros, 1992, p.87). Moreover, through an even closer attention to the text, we can see that it not only explores a conflict between the narratives of individualism and community, but also proceeds to problematize each of these narratives from within, thus challenging narrow understandings of concepts such as privacy and affiliation. For example, the narrator yearns for a private space, yet she weaves her tale of growing up with snapshots of women entrapped in houses, exploring in this way the indeterminate area between privacy and confinement. Similarly, her attitude towards the public site of the *barrio* is ambivalent. Both houses and local communities are arbitrary; like borders, they enclose people within the safety of familiar or intimate territories, but can, at the same time, become prisons. *The House on Mango Street* constantly registers this tension by mapping the protagonist’s vertiginous border crossings not only from one extreme (privacy) to the other (communal affiliation), but also to several other intermediate positions.

In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa imagines a way of transcending the duality that seems to be imposed by life on the border:

I am an act of kneading, of uniting and joining that not only has produced a creature of darkness and a creature of light, but also a creature that questions the definitions of light and dark and gives them new meanings. (1999, p.103)

With this statement Anzaldúa tries to turn the experience of growing up in what initially appears to be a space of ‘neither/nor’ into a more inclusive and empowering position (Turner, 1967; Anzaldúa, 1999, p.41). *The House on*

Mango Street partakes in this process of uniting and joining that is also typical of the *Bildungsroman*; when seen as a whole, the text is ‘a layered discursive space’ (Sánchez, 1997, p.1014), which weaves the developmental narratives of individualism and intersubjectivity *simultaneously* in its fabric. Through such a close juxtaposition, these contradictory discourses become conflated, and out of this textual collision new subject positions emerge. As Anzaldúa puts it, individualism may be ‘condemned in the Mexican culture and valued in the Anglo’ (1999, p.40), but on her back the Chicana carries both the ‘...baggage from the Spanish ... [and] the Anglo [father]’ (1999, p.104). Thus, the Chicana refuses the choice of either of the two ‘opposite bank[s]’ and learns to be ‘on both shores [of the border] at once’ (Anzaldúa, 1999, p.100). In more technical terms, borders inevitably generate borderlands that blur boundaries by creating opportunities for cultural exchange, dialogue and ‘hybridization’ (Benito and Manzananas, 2002, p.4). Though such ‘third spaces’ as the ones suggested by the concept of the borderlands bear ‘the traces’ of the positions that inform them, they are syncretic constructs which can give rise to ‘a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation’ (Bhabha, 1990, p.211). Anzaldúa agrees that this is a search for a *new* consciousness, ‘*una cultura mestiza*’, which she is determined to make ‘with my own lumber, my own bricks and mortar and my own feminist architecture’ (1999, p.44).

Anzaldúa’s imagery of construction is evocative of the central unifying trope in *The House on Mango Street*, that is, the house. Esperanza also builds a new space by imagining a house that moves ‘toward a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes’ (Anzaldúa, 1999, p.101). Neither private nor communitarian, the house she imagines belongs to ‘the realm of the beyond’ (Bhabha, 1994, p.1); it is porous, an interior space, which is experienced as open; it is a creative site of introspection and at the same time a space of intimacy and connection, a refuge for the ‘home girls’ of the *barrio* (Quintana, 1996, p.ix) but also for all those without a

roof. Thus, Esperanza's imaginary dwelling crosses customary boundaries and becomes a bridge, 'this bridge we call home' (Anzaldúa and Keating, 2002).

How does Esperanza construct this more encompassing space that fuses oppositions into a new synthesis? As Anzaldúa suggests:

[The Chicana] can be jarred out of ambivalence by an intense, and often painful, emotional event, which inverts or resolves the ambivalence. I am not sure exactly how. The work takes place underground-subconsciously. It is work that the soul performs. (1999, p.101)

For Esperanza, as for Cisneros, it is also work that the pen performs. In 'Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes', the final *vignette* of the text, both escape from, and relocation into, the space of the community become simultaneously possible for the narrator through the means of writing: 'I put it down on paper and then the ghost does not ache so much' (Cisneros, 1992, p.110). Like Anzaldúa, Esperanza expresses the pain, conflict and contingency that accompanies any effort at synthesis and integration. As the narrator reveals, her attempt to escape through writing is not always successful: 'I write it down and Mango says goodbye *sometimes*' (Cisneros, 1992, p.110, my emphasis). In the same *vignette*, Esperanza reiterates her desire to leave her community only to return '[f]or the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot out', and this promise is fulfilled at least on the level of the text since Esperanza circles back to the first words of the book: to 'what I remember most [...] Mango Street, sad red house, the house I belong but do not belong to' (Cisneros, 1992, p.110).

Esperanza's return through writing seems then to be triggered by a desire to speak for her community. Yet, as the narrator admits without remorse at the opening of this concluding *vignette*, she also 'returns' because she likes to tell stories. As Geoffrey Sanborn explains, 'Nowhere does Esperanza renounce her private enjoyment; nowhere does Cisneros suggest that she should' (2001, p.1335). As I have suggested, individualistic

and communitarian ideals not only coexist in Cisneros's text without the one erasing the other, but also cross and overlap; and it is by means of the fluid technique of the *vignette* that these imaginary acts of crossing and bridging are performed.

Like her narrator who does not wish to inherit the ready-made house of her *barrio*, Cisneros renovates 'the rented cultural space' of the *Bildungsroman* (Gutiérrez-Jones, 1993, p.310). The fictional 'house' she builds with her Chicana and feminist architecture, in other words the textual container of these *vignettes*, accommodates within its fluid walls a multiplicity of worlds simultaneously. Nevertheless, one might ask, is this good enough for a politically self-conscious ethnic American woman writer? The *Bildungsroman* with its 'contradictory, hybrid and compromising nature' (Moretti, 2000, p.12) does not appear to be the most suitable terrain for radical politics. Yet, just as these features are 'intrinsic to that way of [everyday] existence' refined by the traditional novel of development (Moretti, 2000, p.12), I have shown that they are also appropriate for another mode of existence, notably what can be described as a 'constant process of revision, mediation, negotiation, and transformation dictated by life on the border' (Mermann-Jozwiak, 2000, p.113).

In *The House on Mango Street*, Cisneros appropriates the *Bildungsroman*'s age-old function as a cultural mediator, and carves a space which becomes the meeting ground of several of the dichotomies that define ethnic female identity: the discourses of individualism and solidarity, the realms of the private and the public, and the categories of gender and ethnicity. Contesting the boundaries of the above pairs through the articulation of borderlands exposes the injustice of 'moral dilemmas', which request the curtailment of personal freedom or the sacrifice of certain allegiances in order to do service to others. Challenging the fact that the diverse loyalties of ethnic subjects are mutually exclusive is a political act that serves to multiply the sites of identification and allow people who grow

up in the interstices of varying territories to claim a more inclusive and potentially empowering subject position. The outcome of this encounter in the borderlands, as exemplified in Cisneros's text (and as can be investigated in other ethnic texts), invites a comparison with a series of syncretic terms, which are constantly coined and used in critical discourse. The phrases below further reveal the increasing interest in, various applications, and political impact of in-between and third spaces. Terms among which 'interested disinterestedness' (Wong, 1993, p.13) and 'the politics of private enjoyment' (Sanborn, 2001, p.1334) provide a serious response, analogous to the teasing 'Yes please!', which unsettles oppositions, and deconstructs boundaries between 'Extravagance' and 'Necessity', 'individuality' and 'normality', pleasure and purpose (see *n2*). Thus, this blurring of boundaries also offers new dialogic models of reading literary texts, which challenge totalizing interpretive paradigms. It is for its overall contribution to the articulation of such productive border zones and bridges that *The House on Mango Street* claims a place among other 'border' novels, on the way towards 'a consciousness of the Borderlands'.

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