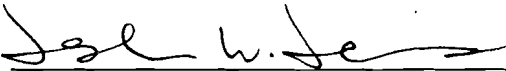


AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Melody Joy Stutzman for the Masters of Arts

in English presented on April 16, 1998

Title: "A Home in the Heart:" Esperanza's Discovery of Home in Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*

Abstract approved: 

This thesis begins by introducing the reader to Chicana feminism, the issue of home, and how Chicana women fit into and challenge social roles. As Chicana feminism continues to develop a new definition of home, I focus on Gloria Anzaldúa's theory in *Borderlands: La Frontera* and Sandra Cisneros's fiction in *The House on Mango Street*, both of which specifically address the definitions and processes involved in the creation of a significantly new idea of "home."

Following the introduction, this thesis analyzes Cisneros's main character, Esperanza, and the character's narration of the process of discovering and moving towards "home" as parallel to Anzaldúa's theoretical development of ideas of the Borderland and the Mestiza. Divided into three distinct sections, stories found within *The House on Mango Street* are used to illustrate the importance of Esperanza's narration of the lives of other women on Mango Street, the narration of her own experiences, and the narration of a new understanding of "home." In the first section, "The Women of Mango Street: Esperanza Narrates the Struggles of Chicana Women," I analyze three stories in which Esperanza narrates the situations of three Chicana girls to show how

personal struggles and traditional social roles can hinder each woman's journey "home." The second section, "Esperanza's Narration of Self," focuses on stories in which Esperanza's own character, hopes, and fears are exposed allowing the reader to see the developing Chicana woman that Esperanza is becoming. The third section, "A Home in the Heart": Esperanza Moves Towards the New Vision of Home" analyses stories in which Esperanza's old idea is challenged and eventually replaced by the more abstract version of the new "home." This final section is also where I develop the importance of Esperanza's connection to writing.

In the conclusion, I determine that while Anzaldúa's *Borderlands: La Frontera* gives the reader a good theoretical basis with which to consider terms and concepts, it is Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* and the use of the girl narrator, Esperanza, that gives feminism the best illustration of the process of how to eventually reach this newly conceptualized "home" so crucial to Chicana feminism.

"A Home in the Heart:"  
Esperanza's Discovery of Home in Sandra  
Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
The Division of English  
Emporia State University

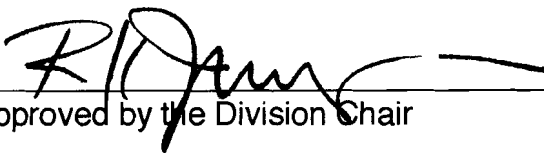
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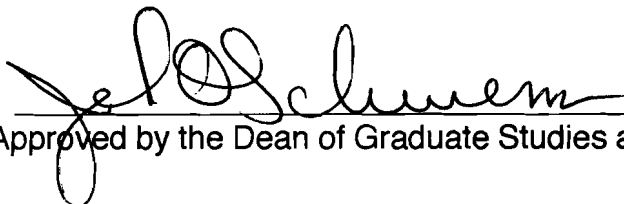
In Partial Fulfillment  
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by  
Melody Joy Stutzman  
May 1998

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## Introduction

It was during the 1970s with the voice of Chicano nationalism and La Raza gaining power and attention that an emerging Chicana movement also took form. While fighting for the political and cultural freedoms that La Raza stood for, Chicanas began to see problems that dealt specifically with Chicana women and their demands being ignored or pushed from the spotlight. Chicana women were playing an important role in the liberation of La Raza, but when asked if they felt discriminated against within that organization, 72% answered yes, none said no, and 28% had no opinion (Vidal 22). It was apparent by 1971 that El Movimiento was succeeding and beginning to create changes, but it was also very true that the issues of women were not being addressed. It was in that year that Chicana women stepped outside of La Raza, not in rejection of its political demands, but in an effort to address their own issues and bring them to the forefront.

La Conferencia de Mujer por La Raza, held in Houston, Texas in 1971, was one of the attempts to discuss some of the specific concerns Chicana women felt needed to be addressed in relation to their lives. The conference consisted of about 500 women, and the majority of women at the conference were between the ages of 18-23. With the atmosphere of young Chicanas still fueled by the politics and energy of La Raza, these women focused their conference on "clarifying the woman's role as Chicanas and in the (Chicano) movement, mainly eliminating the passive role (home and motherhood) the Chicana has always played" (Cotera 156). Workshops and lectures covered all of the areas that were important to the women's livelihood and place within their culture and addressed issues that had never been vocalized because they had been looked upon as taboo or radical. Julia Ruiz, one of the main speakers of



the conference, discussed "The Mexican-American Woman's Public and Self-Image," while other topics included: identity in the movimiento, marriage Chicana style, religion, the Catholic Church as an oppressive institution, exploitation of women, and resolutions concerning birth control and abortions (Cotera 156). The outcome of the conference was, overall, a positive one, and many key issues that Chicanas wanted to discuss were included in their final resolutions: more inclusion of Chicanas in El Movimiento; creation of new marital roles; recognition for female contributions to La Raza; education and career opportunities; and acceptance of differences of opinion within the Chicana movement

That same year, La Raza Unida Party of Northern California paid special attention to the demands of Chicana women within their movement and adopted a platform with a section that specifically addressed the demands of the Raza women. Within this section they specifically state the unique situation of Chicana women within their own cultural struggles:

For our women . . . there exists a triple exploitation, a triple degradation; they are exploited as women, as people of la Raza, and they suffer from the poverty that straightjackets all of la Raza. We feel that without the recognition by all of la Raza of this special form of oppression that our women suffer, our movement will greatly suffer. (La Raza Unida Party of Northern California 165)

Within the specifics of the platform, many of the issues that the conference in Houston addressed were also included. Issues of child care (although only in the context of Raza schools and workplaces), equality in the workplace (including equal pay and the Raza woman in domestic situations), birth control, and equal availability and opportunity for women in education, for example,

were all included in the platform. Although many other issues addressed in the conferences set up by Chicanas were not included as part of the platform, especially issues addressing machismo and male domination within the family, the attention that La Raza gave to the women's demands was a good indicator of the power of Chicana women and their necessity to the movement. The platform set out by La Raza Unida Party of Northern California did not solve all of the problems that Chicana women faced within the movement and in their own lives, but it did create an atmosphere of sincerity from which Chicana women continued to support and work towards their own liberations.

While the demands that Chicana women made to La Raza and the Chicano movement increased, so did the numbers of Chicana women not active in El Movimiento who wanted to vocalize the needs and issues that affected their lives. The discussion and definition of Chicana women's issues, originally associate with La Raza, began to shift toward the women who had no affiliation with political groups but who had an obvious and profound connection to Chicana life. The feminism that grew from the issues first discussed in La Raza became more specialized and inclusive of the women who worked at home raising their families, the single women working to support themselves through college, the professional or the blue collar women who were still not earning half of what their male counterpart earned. Chicana women began to see the differences in, and the specific needs of, Chicana feminism in comparison to the other types of cultures and feminisms to which they subscribed. Very quickly, the issue of Chicanas within the context of home and family became a great dividing line between Chicana feminism and Anglo feminism. As Elena H. García states in her essay "Chicana Consciousness: A New Perspective, a New Hope," "Chicana consciousness defined is not a white

woman's liberation movement nor a ladies auxiliary. We find little connection in the women's liberation movement being that we are working within a *cultural* context, a *Chicana* context" (39). This cultural, Chicana context that García speaks of is inclusive of home and family and women's roles within those areas of life and culture. In the example of child care, many of the solutions that Anglo feminists pushed for collided head-on with Mexican-American values and were found to be unacceptable forms of female liberation by Chicana feminists. In "Women's Rights and the Mexican-American Woman," Elizabeth Olivarez explains this split of opinion and cultural values:

For example, the day-care center was not only viewed as an economic necessity, a view similarly held by Anglo women's liberation groups, but also being based on the cultural concept of family unity, still a strong force in the Mexican- American family. Therefore the destruction of the nuclear family unit was not considered an acceptable solution, and thus the rationale for the day-care center as urged by some women's liberation groups also was not acceptable. (132)

As Chicana feminism grew and ideas and concerns were exchanged with other feminist groups, it became very clear that a good portion of Chicana feminists insisted on a dialogue that did not reject the Mexican-American ideal of home and family, but worked within that context to better the situations of the women who chose that option for their lives. Rejecting the domestic woman and the idea of family was not an option for many Chicana women, and that issue alone became and continues to be an important distinction between Chicana feminism and many other types of women's liberation.

The balance of duty to home and family and duty to self is a central focus in Chicana feminism; issues concerning the economic plight of Chicana women

who support large-numbered families, balancing family and career or family and education, and the idea of personal identity within the family unit continue to be addressed at national conferences and within theoretical work. What is crucial to the concept of home and family for Chicana feminists is that those older values are not completely abandoned or rejected, but that the identity that the woman has is not destroyed or ignored within the home and family. Olivarez comments on this particular balance of home/family and self when she states: "While she realizes that her self-determination cannot be realized without changing or modifying the concept of family unity which places the main responsibilities on her, she also realizes that the humanism and personal ties that are part of this unity must not be destroyed" (133). Chicana feminism insisted that the realities of Mexican-American culture be addressed and respected; home and family, for the most part, are both important parts to Chicana life, but what is important and new in this idea of home and family is the attention given to the woman as an individual and the needs and demands that she has -- exclusive from the family and home and inclusive of herself. In Chicana feminism, the value and importance of the woman, wife, mother, daughter is as important as the rest of the family unit. She must have a liberation within the home that had not been present before. The humanism that Olivarez advocates focuses on the reality of Chicana life in a familial context. In effect, home must encompass more for Chicanas than their duties to family or the sacrifices they must make as a wife and mother; home must be a place in which women can thrive and achieve their potential.

More than ten years after the conferences in Houston, Texas, Chicana feminism and the issues of home and family were still being addressed within the Chicana community but, as the debates continued, the idea of home began

to evolve and take on new definitions. Self-identity, one of the major motivational forces behind the search for a new and improved model of home and family, remained an important topic of conversation. As Chicana feminists continued to analyze their own demands concerning home and family, a slow shift from focusing on the woman's duty to home and family to a consideration of the Chicana woman's own livelihood and fulfillment within the the idea of home began to develop. This new consideration was best articulated with the publication of Chicana feminist writings in the 1981 edition of *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings By Radical Women of Color* which was co-edited by two vocal Chicana feminists, Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa. While never condemning the Mexican values of home and family, *This Bridge Called My Back* and the voices of Chicana feminists within that text began to speak more specifically of the Chicana woman as an individual, how she can survive in the world and within her culture and, more importantly, how she can mediate her own change and her own happiness. Using the symbol of a human bridge, a woman who is able to straddle all of her cultures and selves, the Chicana woman can be a part of and include all of the things in her life that make her whole. The bridge can encompass family, cultures, homelands, and relationships, but the woman who creates this bridge is motivated to do so not by anyone else or any outside force; she becomes the bridge simply for her own survival and for the development of her own power. She creates the bridge so that she can touch every corner of her life and culture, and it is within that connection that she can begin to live to her fullest potential as an individual Chicana woman.

In the opening of *This Bridge Called My Back*, Donna Kate Rushin writes a poem entitled "The Bridge Poem" which summarizes the importance of the

bridge and the effect it will have on the women who choose to make a bridge between the parts of themselves. The final lines of the poem state the symbolic meaning of this female bridge:

The bridge I must be  
Is the bridge to my own power  
I must translate  
My own fears  
Mediate my own weaknesses  
I must be the bridge to nowhere  
But my true self  
And then  
I will be useful (xxii)

This proclamation articulates Chicana feminism's gradual move from focusing on the Chicana within the established Mexican institution of home to the new definition which sees home as an individual place in which each woman can find her own powers. While Donna Kate Rushin wrote this poem for all women of color in all different types of struggles, the poem holds a strong connection to Chicano/a culture. For a Chicana woman to accept the idea that "I must be a bridge to nowhere/ But my true self"(xxii) contradicts the old idea that the Chicana woman must put herself behind the needs and demands of her family. The act of becoming the bridge is a necessary step for the Chicana woman, but she does not symbolically stretch on all fours in order to carry the burdens of her home and family; she makes the symbolic gesture for herself and in reaction to her own survival and personal fulfillment in mind. The bridge that she makes connects the parts of her life that had been fragmented or lost, and it is within that idea of connecting the scattered pieces of the Chicana woman's strength

and power the ideal of the new home is created. The definition of home evolves and is no longer limited by the idea of home as simply being the place in which the woman resides and takes care of husband and children; instead, a new dimension has been added to home -- the option for home as a symbolic or actual place in which a woman can be at home with herself and all of her cultures, strengths, and potentials. Still abiding by the early demands of Chicana feminists, the new definition of home does not insist that the Chicana woman give up her physical home and family to pursue the other but, with the publication of *This Bridge Called My Back* and the symbolic creation of a bridge to the power of self, the Chicana woman now has choices to make -- choices that will only help strengthen and empower her.

By the early 1980s, the new concept of what "home" can bring to the struggle of the Chicana woman was being discussed within feminist theory and poetry, but the symbolic pursuit of this new "home" had not been developed into a common definition understood in all its complexity. Chicana feminists were speaking about and applying this new idea of home to their written work, their politics, and their lives, but because each woman was still choosing her own symbol or word to describe the new vision of home, the new idea motivating Chicana women to pursue their own cultural strengths and complexities remained effectively nameless.

This phenomena, the nameless idea of a new "home," continued to grow throughout the eighties. One example of how consistently and closely Chicana feminists were talking about this new definition of home is found within the similar terms that both Sandra Cisneros's fictional narrative entitled *The House on Mango Street* and Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands: La Frontera* use in their works. Both women, one a writer of fiction and poetry, the other a writer of theory

and poetry, concerned with and surrounded by Chicana feminist theory, write books focused on the underlying issue of home. Even though separate from each other and each other's lives, both women write about home with different language but with the same theory and goal in mind: each author focuses on the plight of Chicana women through an analysis of how to achieve the abstract idea of "home."

Theoretically, the "home" that Anzaldúa and Cisneros talk about are the same, but the terms that they use, the way in which they name "home" is much different. In some ways, the differences in terminology come from the differences in approach: Anzaldúa chooses to write about home from a theoretical standpoint and therefore is more clear in her assignment of an actual word for this abstract idea-- the "Borderland"; however, Cisneros chooses to develop her discussion of home through a fictional narrative, that of a young Chicana girl, and therefore concerns herself mainly with the process of getting to the new "home" instead of defining what it is. So, while each woman uses a different writing style and language to discuss the new concept of "home," the theoretical connection that the two women share solidifies the emergence and development of this concept and its necessary place in the context of Chicana feminism.

While each woman's text is bound to the other by the similarities in discussing the idea of "home," the way in which these similar theoretical ideas is expressed is also very individualistic and created with very separate voices. It was in 1987, three years after the publication of Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*, that Gloria Anzaldúa published *Borderlands: La Frontera*. Using a combination of English and Spanish, poetry and prose, Anzaldúa creates the concept of the Borderland and uses the symbol to define



her idea of “home” and what it could do for the current struggles of Chicana women. *Borderlands: La Frontera* was Anzaldúa’s text for creating a new consciousness, a new way for Chicana women to perceive themselves, their culture, and their place within the world. Anzaldúa begins her own theory by taking the negative definition of borders or “the border,” and creates the concept “Borderland” which could encompass a wider and more positive definition for Chicana women. To get to this final definition of the Borderland, Anzaldúa addresses the weaknesses and negativity of the border concept and shows how it creates an emotional barrier that is detrimental to the women who live within it.

As Anzaldúa begins her discussion of borders, she situates her own life and experiences within that emotional barrier: “ This is my home/this thin edge of/ barbed wire” (Anzaldúa 3). The image that Anzaldúa creates for her reader is a harsh one: the image of barbed wire is quickly associated with the physical border that runs between Mexico and the United States, but it also expresses a definition of borders that Anzaldúa’s compares to her image of home and the pain that she feels while being forced to reside within that place. Anzaldúa describes the emotional and mental borders as equally important to the definition of the physical borders: “The psychological borderlands, the sexual borderlands are not particular to the Southwest” (Anzaldúa preface). For Anzaldúa, borders and borderlands are not created single-handedly by barbed wire and fences, nor do they stay placed between Mexico and the United States; instead, borders are also created all over the world through the psychological and emotional devastation created by splitting cultures or peoples that are not exclusive to each other. The psychological borderlands that Anzaldúa mentions are the borders that are used to split one culture from

the other without respecting or identifying the inter-dependence that each culture has for the other. Drawing psychological or physical borders between one culture and another alienates the people who find they have all of those cultures within them.

Anzaldúa continues to build the validity of the psychological effects of borders when she refers to her own life and the splitting of those cultures: "I am a border woman. I grew up between two cultures, the Mexican (with a heavy Indian influence) and the Anglo (as a member of a colonized people in our own territory). I have been straddling the tejas-Mexican border, and others, all my life" (Anzaldúa preface). Anzaldúa calls herself a "border woman" for two reasons: she identifies the physical border that separates her two homes, Mexico and the U.S., but she also reinforces the idea that she is a "border woman" because not only are her physical homes separated but so are the cultures with which she identifies. The Indian, Anglo, and Mexican cultures that make her part of who she is have been separated and made foreign to her. The psychological border she has been forced to live with has essentially made opposites out of the many cultures that, at one time, resided equally within her. The physical and psychological effects of borders place Anzaldúa in a situation in which her analogy of living on a "thin edge of barbed wire" is valid.

"The House On Mango Street": The Need For A New Home

Living on the edge, trying to create a new place between two or more worlds, is what Anzaldúa focuses on in *Borderlands: La Frontera*, but it is also what Esperanza struggles with in the stories that she tells in *The House on Mango Street*. Obviously, Cisneros's attempt at discussing "home" precedes Anzaldúa's definition of the Borderland by three years, so there is no way for them to talk about the same idea with the same vocabulary. Cisneros uses a

different, but just as important approach; through the voice and the vocabulary of a young Chicana girl, Cisneros introduces Esperanza and through her mouth addresses the issues of house and home and her views of her own world.

Although Esperanza is not as conscious of her situation and her struggles, although she cannot envision or speak about the barbed wire that Anzaldúa discusses, the confinement of borders and Esperanza's hopes for a new home, and the similarities in situation and emotional struggles are just as present in this fictional account of a young Chicana girl addressing the issues of home.

The opening story of *The House on Mango Street* establishes Esperanza's own "thin edge of barbed wire" and her emotional situation within the border. A nun's comment about Esperanza's old home is just as piercing and sharp as the barbed wire that Anzaldúa mentions: "'Where do you live?' she asked. 'There,' I said pointing up to the third floor. 'You live there?'" (Cisneros 5). In this opening story, Esperanza relives the pain and frustration that she deals with every day, moving from one broken down apartment to the next, always dreaming of a real home for her family. Esperanza's shame is forced up by the nun's comments: "'You live there?' The way she said it made me feel like nothing. 'There. I lived there.' I nodded" (Cisneros 5).

The nun's reference to Esperanza's home and Esperanza's own reaction to her comment help illustrate Anzaldúa's first use of and interpretation of a borderland as a "vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary" (Anzaldúa 3). Esperanza's admission that she lives "There. I live there" reinforces the psychological pain and separation brought about by constant moving from place to place and the shame and insecurity she feels about where she lives. Esperanza's emotional connection to the idea of "home" is as painful and disconnected as Anzaldúa's is. She has

moved so much and has straddled so many different cultures and lifestyles that she has no real picture of what “home” is. As Esperanza points to her house and tells the nun that she lives “there,” she gives a powerful example of the old definition of home that Mexican culture values. Esperanza points to the one thing she has been told is a “home”: the building in which her mother, father and siblings reside. Esperanza does not find an emotional connection to the word “home” and, therefore, it is natural for her to take a disconnected view of her home, to point away from herself, and to refer to her home as “there.” By pointing away from herself, it is obvious that within this first story Esperanza has no understanding of the second, internalized, and specifically feminist concept of home. Instead of pointing to her heart or mind, she relies on the old definition of home and points away from the one place in which the true definition of home will eventually reside: herself.

Esperanza reinforces the psychological borders that she lives within when she continues to talk more about her life of transition and the vague connection she has to the idea of home: “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. But what I do remember most is moving a lot” (Cisneros 3). For Esperanza, even the literal definition of home is in a constant state of transition and is never permanent or secure. She does not feel safe or accepted; the physical home is comparable to the borderland that Anzaldúa describes: “It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants . . . in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the normal” (Anzaldúa 3). By agreeing with the nun and using the word “there” to describe her home, Esperanza has clearly internalized her dilemma, and she feels the weight of being labeled as “other,” as living “there.”

As Anzaldúa defines the people caught in a borderland as “the prohibited and forbidden” (Anzaldúa 3), Esperanza expresses those same sentiments, feeling like she is nothing. “The House on Mango Street” is the opening story that introduces the commonality between Anzaldúa’s analysis of borders and Esperanza’s image of home. “There” is the disconnected image of home that Esperanza begins her narration with and the same borderland that Anzaldúa compares to barbed wire.

Fortunately, Esperanza’s struggle does not end with a complete acceptance of her home as “there.” In the final paragraph of the first story, Esperanza makes an encouraging and bold statement: “I knew 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” (Cisneros 5). With this statement it is clear that, even at the Mango Street house, Esperanza still feels homeless. The disconnectedness of “there” has continued to follow her out of the Loomis apartment and into Mango Street. What is surprising is that Esperanza is capable and very willing to dream of her future, and the most motivating aspect of her future is to dream about her own home; a place that she can be proud of and that she can claim as hers. Her dream, and the hope that she has for her future, prove that, psychologically, Esperanza has not given up on the idea of home. She illustrates that she is open-minded enough to learn about and accept a new definition of home that, in turn, will help her point inward when trying to identify home.

The dream and pursuit of a future home for Esperanza are comparable to the place that Anzaldúa envisions for her image and definition of the Borderland.<sup>1</sup> After giving her accounts of the detrimental and negative images

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<sup>1</sup> Anzaldúa uses the lower case b when referring to a borderland as a “vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary: (Anzaldúa 3). Her Borderland, on the other hand, is a visionary place where the new Mestiza, embodying a new Chicana feminist consciousness, will reside: “It is the consciousness of the Borderlands” (Anzaldúa 77).

of borders and borderland, Anzaldúa claims a new space for the Chicana woman and defines what that space, in essence, what the new idea of home, will include:

What I want is an accounting with all three cultures -- white, Mexican, Indian. I want freedom to carve and chisel my own face, to staunch the bleeding with ashes, to fashion my own gods out of my entrails. And if going home is denied me then I will have to stand and claim my space, making a new culture -- una cultura mestiza -- with my own lumber, my own bricks and mortar and my own feminist architecture. (Anzaldúa 22)

With these requirements, Anzaldúa has not only defined what the Borderland will have to include for Chicana women, but also how involved and active Chicana women will have to be to create and live in the Borderland. Anzaldúa defines the Borderland as a place that can only happen if the Chicana woman takes charge of her own future and demands those things in her life. She is the only person who can move her from the old borderland into the new Borderland.

Although Esperanza has not articulated the same list of demands for her future home, it is obvious after the opening story that Esperanza will be an active participant in the determination of her future. Esperanza states that: "I knew then I had to have a house. A real house" (Cisneros 5). She determines very early that she will own a house of her own, and by dreaming of a future home for herself she is also claiming for herself the new idea of home. Esperanza has been denied a secure and proud image of home; she has been forced to live "there," but she has claimed her future home and has also taken responsibility for getting herself there. Esperanza has envisioned the home of her future and has decided to pursue that vision.

The first story in Esperanza's narration, "The House on Mango Street," does introduce the young girl's ultimate goal of a future home and the symbolic quest for the Borderland, but many of the other stories focus not on her quest for what Anzaldúa calls the Borderland but on the reality of her situation and how this reinforces her drive for a future home. Through the narration of her life and the brief glimpse the reader gets of each individual situation, it is impossible to ignore "the vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary " that Anzaldúa works against and that Esperanza lives in (Anzaldúa 3). The stories that Esperanza tells, in effect, reinforce the same issues of home that Anzaldúa articulated with her own theoretical discussion in *Borderlands: La Frontera*. Both address the unnamed, yet similar phenomena that demonstrates the need that each Chicana woman has to discover a way to bridge herself over and into a new Borderland -- a new home in which each woman is finally complete.

The task of speaking from a theoretical standpoint, as Anzaldúa does in *Borderlands: La Frontera*, is a difficult and necessary one; definitions of terminology such as " borders" and "borderland" are an essential step in vocalizing and acting upon the issues found within Chicana feminism. So, while Anzaldúa creates the vocabulary and theory behind the action of the Chicana woman working towards the discovery of her own "home," it is the fictional character of Esperanza in Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* that gives an account of the realities and challenges of that process. Esperanza never speaks with the vocabulary of the theoretical language that Anzaldúa uses in later years, but the narration that Esperanza offers within the pages of this fictional work are just as important and as heavy with an understanding and search for a new idea of "home" as Anzaldúa's.

As seen in "The House on Mango Street," Esperanza's narration of stories that affect her directly or indirectly as a young girl in a Mexican-American neighborhood, when placed within the theoretical construct that Anzaldúa articulates three years later, are far more complex and important than they may first appear. While Anzaldúa creates a language to express the actions that must take place within the life of a Chicana woman striving for "home," it is the fictional character of Esperanza who allows the reader to witness the actual process, the slow growth and struggles that must take place within each woman who chooses to move towards a Borderland. While never articulating a specific feminist vocabulary or agenda, Esperanza narrates the stories of her life and the pain, joy, or lessons learned from each instance. *The House on Mango Street* becomes the road map, the documentation of each small step that Esperanza takes to get to the new definition of "home" that Chicana feminists have been discussing for years. Esperanza is one small example of the process, the actual journey, to what Anzaldúa will later call the Borderland.

Finally, it is the youth of Esperanza, the fact that the narrator of this journey is still a child herself, that adds more force and validity of *The House on Mango Street* and all of the stories told within it. Too young to have exposed herself to a literal Chicana feminist education, Esperanza sees through the eyes of a child and speaks as one. The stories that she tells seem pure—untouched by any sort of political or personal agenda. What Esperanza narrates are the things that she sees in her life and in her neighborhood, and the reader can trust that Esperanza is revealing the experiences in her life that have helped to create the person that she is gradually becoming. Esperanza speaks with a clarity that a Chicana woman cannot; in the security of her childhood, Esperanza still lives within the luxury of sitting back and observing, finding time



to write or sit on the stoop and talk to other people. Esperanza is not burdened by the duties that many women in her community have been assigned.

Relatively untouched by the pressures of acceptable social roles within her culture, Esperanza does not have personal experiences that could cloud the purity of her narration; she can look at situations in which negative social roles are in place and respond to them in an unbiased manner—something that many women in her community could not do. Esperanza comes to her narration and each situation free from anger or fear; she can approach each situation with the eyes and words of a child; she is free to create her opinions after seeing that experience with an unbiased mind.

It is with this child-like lens that Esperanza begins to narrate the stories of her life and journey -- the journey toward the home she craves and the Borderland as Anzaldúa envisions. It is in the quest for that home that Esperanza narrates three distinct types of experiences that help move her towards the new vision of home. First, Esperanza narrates and is affected by stories of women in her community who are also struggling in their quest for a new vision of "home." Second, Esperanza narrates her own personal struggles and victories. Finally, Esperanza articulates her acceptance of the new definition of "home." Although not all of the stories in *The House on Mango Street* fit into these three categories, the journey that Esperanza makes toward a new home is challenged and motivated by significant stories that fall into these three categories.

## The Women Of Mango Street: Esperanza Narrates The Struggles Of Chicana Women

In the final prose chapter of Anzaldúa's analysis entitled "La conciencia

de la mestiza: Towards a New Consciousness” Anzaldúa warns of the passivity, neutrality, and helplessness that Esperanza illustrates when pointing away from herself in “The House on Mango Street” and that is sometimes characteristic of Chicana woman who are caught within their own struggles. She begins to focus her analysis on a vision and definition for the new Mestiza: a woman who will play an important part in removing herself from restrictive borders and begin to move towards the Borderland. Anzaldúa insists on the struggle to overcome the passive nature sometimes forced onto the Chicana woman by her culture when she says: “She can be jarred out of ambivalence” by an intense, and often painful, emotional event which inverts or resolves the ambivalence. . . . That focal point or fulcrum, that juncture where the mestiza stands . . . is where the possibility of uniting all that is separate occurs” (Anzaldúa 79). The mestiza that Anzaldúa envisions living in the Borderland has the ability to identify the injustice, in this case the appearance and rigidity of borders, and then reject those rules and work toward an acceptance of multiple cultures existing in one place. This place where multiplicity is the norm is also where opposites combine to strengthen and validate the mestiza woman who lives and functions within it.

The most important person, the woman who must decide to accept all of these battle and challenges and who will eventually live within the Borderland, is the mestiza woman and Anzaldúa’s new vision for her. Historically, the mestizo/a race was formed from a mixing of Indian and Spanish blood, and that race’s offspring were the Mexican people. Moving beyond the historical and biological definition, Anzaldúa gives a new definition to the mestiza woman by focusing on her psychological and cultural multiplicities and using her as the ideal: a role model or pattern by which she can develop her vision for a strong,

independent, feminist, Chicana. Anzaldúa begins to expand the mestiza from a historical and biological fact into the psychological and cultural ideal with her definition of the new mestiza:

The new mestiza copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to be an Indian in a Mexican culture, to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view. She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode --nothing is thrust out . . . nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else. (Anzaldúa 79)

In this outline and new definition that Anzaldúa articulates, it is obvious that she is placing new characteristics and demands onto the term "mestiza." Although Anzaldúa does not spend much time analyzing the distinctions between the historical/biological mestiza and the mestiza that she claims Chicana women have the potential to become, it is important to keep clear the distinction between the two. The ideal of the new mestiza can be much easier identified and separated from the old definition by referring to it as the new Mestiza.

Anzaldúa's requirements for the New Mestiza are thorough and challenging: the ideal of the mestiza includes one essential requirement: she has the power to remove herself from the borderland, and she does this by accepting and drawing power from the very differences and oppositions that the border creates. While the border creates a false rigidity and separation of all cultures, it creates an emotional turmoil within the mestiza herself because to separate the cultures is to separate distinct and important parts of herself. The Mestiza who lives within the Borderland rejects the segregation the borders inflict on her, gathers all of her multiplicity and dualities and uses them to

strengthen her life and her person. This act itself, of the Chicana woman who takes back her cultures and power from whomever has taken them away from her, is seen by Anzaldúa to be a very political and aggressive act. She states simply, "The struggle of the mestiza is above all a feminist one" (Anzaldúa 84). This struggle, as outlined by Anzaldúa, will consist of addressing the institutions of Mexican and Anglo religion, politics, sexism, and the stereotypes placed on Chicana women. The potential and the power that Anzaldúa assigns to the Mestiza seems huge; she places the success of the Borderlands on her shoulders, but she also backs up her confidence in the Mestiza by continuing to analyze her power: "La mestiza has gone from being the sacrificial goat to becoming the officiating priestess at the crossroads" (Anzaldúa 80). Anzaldúa sets up the ideal Chicana woman—the Mestiza— as a person of power. Anzaldúa no longer allows the mestiza to symbolize the sacrificial woman who has to bear the injustices of her culture and the fragmentation of her spirit; instead, Anzaldúa focuses on the new Mestiza who carries her own knowledge and power and destiny.

Still too young and immature to take on the Mestiza characteristics that Anzaldúa sees within the Borderland, Esperanza spends much of her time narrating the situations that she observes within her community, and retelling the stories of girls and women with whom she interacts. As Esperanza begins to focus on the women around her, she tells many stories of people who continually battle the negative stereotypes and gender roles that have been placed on Chicana women. Anzaldúa comments on some of those female roles: "For a woman of my culture there used to be only three directions she could turn: to the Church as a nun, to the streets as a prostitute, or to the home as a mother" (Anzaldúa 17). The roles that Anzaldúa points to are similar to many of

the stories that Esperanza tells; they serve as examples of the struggle of the Chicana woman caught within the confines of those old roles, but they also give some insight into the emerging struggle of Chicana women who have the potential to emerge from those bonds and become the Mestiza that Anzaldúa envisions.

So, it is with Anzaldúa's underlying definition for the Mestiza and Esperanza's ability to expose the strengths and weaknesses of the women around her, that individual stories of other Chicana women's attempts to reach the new idea of "home" emerge. Although the stories that Esperanza tells about the women in her community are plentiful, three stories of young women, all relatively close to Esperanza's age, stand out as strong examples of the different journeys to the Borderland, the new idea of "home," and how each woman struggles to make it there.

The first example of this process, found in the story "Marin," focuses on a girl only a few years older than Esperanza and who she clearly admires. The connection that Esperanza feels with Marin is strengthened by the closeness of their age and the fact that they are both walking on the border between their girlhood and womanhood. Balancing between a child-like innocence and their first sexual encounters, Esperanza talks about Marin with a sense of awe -- diligently documenting what Marin does and says in relation to boys, sex, and even the issue of marriage. Beginning her observation and narration of Marin, Esperanza establishes her situation and priorities in the first lines of the introduction: "Marin's boyfriend is in Puerto Rico. She shows us his letters and makes us promise not to tell anybody they're getting married when she goes back to P.R." (Cisneros 26). From the beginning of the story it is easy to see that Esperanza admires Marin and all of the worldly and "grown-up" issues that

Marin is sharing with her: "But next year Louie's parents are going to send her back to her mother with a letter saying she's too much trouble, and that is too bad because I like Marin. She is older and knows lots of things" (Cisneros 26-27). It is as if Esperanza looks to Marin for the big sister advice that she had never received; Marin is the one who gives her information about the real world: "She is the one who told us how Davey the Baby's sister got pregnant . . ." (Cisneros 27). But beyond the sisterly advice and admiration, Esperanza spends most of the story narrating Marin's own personal beliefs about marriage and her role in it. Marin places her importance and self-worth on the fact that she will be married; all that she is capable of thinking about when talking about and planning her future is her need for a boyfriend and her dreams of marriage. Even when discussing the possibility of a job, she is only motivated by the prospects of being able to go downtown "since you always get to look beautiful . . . and can meet someone in the subway who might marry you and take you to live in a big house far away" (Cisneros 26). Getting a job for financial and personal independence is not a concern for Marin; she sees a job as a tool to get her downtown and closer to a chance of meeting someone who will marry her, take her away, and take care of her.

A Puerto Rican girl living in a Mexican neighborhood in the United States, Marin's own childhood experiences are different from Esperanza's, and her own connection to home is complex in its own unique ways. In her essay "Puerto Rican Writers in the United States, Puerto Rican Writers in Puerto Rico: A Separation Beyond Language," Nicholasa Mohr explains the many unique problems that Puerto Rican people are faced with in the United States. Mohr comments on the complexity of the Puerto Rican identity when she states: "Although a commonwealth of the United States, Puerto Rico continues to use

Spanish as its official language. Puerto Ricans born in Puerto Rico, unlike other immigrants or migrant groups, hold the unique position of being citizens while still remaining part of the greater Latin American family” (265). Having a place in and a right to both places, Marin’s identity is different from Esperanza’s in that she, at least politically, can have a home in both places.

Unfortunately, the commonwealth relationship that Puerto Rico has with the United States does not secure an atmosphere of acceptance. In many ways, Marin and Esperanza, young examples of Mexican and Puerto Rican cultures, are treated the same – they are both made to feel like outsiders. Mohr comments on this reality in reference to her own Puerto Rican heritage. While she was living in New York she chose to write in Spanish: “I write here in the United States about my personal experiences and those of a particular group of migrants that number in the millions. Yet all of these actualities seem to have little or no bearing on those who insist on seeing me as an “intruder,” an ‘outsider’ who has taken on a foreign language” (265). The “outsider” mentality that Puerto Rican culture must deal with in America and that Marin has been exposed to at one time or another is similar to the disconnected “there” that Esperanza is dealing with. Although the girls are from different cultures, the alienated and disconnected understanding of home that each girl has been exposed to is still the same.

Although Marin’s life is somewhat different from Esperanza’s based on the knowledge that she has grown up in Puerto Rico, the seemingly innate need Marin has to rely on marriage and men for financial and personal security is similar to Anzaldúa’s analysis of Mexican culture and the traditional Mexican stance on marriage. Stated simply, Anzaldúa comments that: “The culture expects women to show greater acceptance of and commitment to, the value

system than men. The culture and the Church insist that women are subservient to males" (17). One of the ways that Mexican women are forced to continue their subservience and commitment to the males is for the culture to place the women's self-worth and sexual status within the concept of marriage. Anzaldúa reinforces this as an idea within Mexican culture when she says: "If a woman rebels she is a *mujer mala*. If a woman doesn't renounce herself in favor of the male she is selfish. If a woman remains a *virgen* until she marries, she is a good woman" (17). Clearly, Mexican culture has created an institution of marriage in which the woman's character and sexuality are made or destroyed. Although Marin's Puerto Rican culture may have taught her another meaning of marriage, her insistence that marriage will bring her instant happiness and security mirrors the basic idea of a Mexican view of marriage: that marriage can bring happiness and a secure life to the women who honor and respect it. In other words, the girl who pursues and works toward marriage and honors that value system will be accepted and cared for by the society.

While Esperanza admires Marin for her knowledge of beauty and how to pursue a man, she makes a good attempt to comment on the reality of Marin's life and some of the borders that Marin has to deal with in her own life: "We never see Marin until her aunt comes home from work, even then she can only stay out front" (Cisneros 27). The fact that Marin's family will not allow her to come outside exemplifies clearly how the culture's sacred but distrustful attitude concerning female sexuality creates suffocating borders for the young women caught inside. Unable to trust Marin with her own life and sexuality, the family restricts her experiences and life to the front steps. This image of Marin, alone, waiting on the front stoop, is something that troubles Esperanza and makes a lasting impression; her final comment creates a sad and troubling image of



Marin: "Marin, under the streetlight, dancing by herself, is singing the same song somewhere. I know. Is waiting for a car to stop, a star to fall, someone to change her life" (Cisneros 27). The image that Esperanza creates of Marin is one of loneliness and hopelessness; she is the prime example of a young woman struggling to find her own independent life but limited in her search because of the restrictive borders of marriage and female dependence on a husband/father. What is so frustrating about this story is that Marin obviously wants a way to independence and a new life -- she wants out of the confining borders that she sees in her own family and home; unfortunately, she sees a man and the promise of marriage as her only way out.

Through "Marin," Esperanza illustrates one instance of a woman who believes in her ability to get her out of the social borders that she finds herself living in, but is hindered by the ways in which she tries to obtain that freedom. Marin can only see the pursuit of freedom in her commitment to the value systems and institutions that have been ingrained in her mind. Although Esperanza does not say that Marin is wrong or will never find happiness, the final picture of Marin, alone, under a streetlight is not promising. As a character in Esperanza's world, it is important for Esperanza to remember her and the image of her underneath the streetlight; Marin is an example of a young Chicana woman who never realized her potential and who, in the struggle to find a new home, fell to the old idea that she could not reach that new place without a man picking her up and taking her there.

While Marin is far from realizing her own potential, Esperanza tells the story of another woman who has found one way to begin expressing her feelings and the difficulty of her situation. In "Minerva Writes Poems" Esperanza tells the story of a young girl who is very close in age to her but has lived a very

different life: "Minerva is only a little bit older than me but already has two kids and a husband who left . . . Minerva cries because her luck is unlucky" (Cisneros 84). Esperanza acknowledges the closeness of their age and how different their lives are, but she continues to talk about Minerva because she notices a creative outlet that both girls share: "She lets me read her poems. I let her read mine" (Cisneros 84). For Esperanza, sharing her poetry and listening to others helps create a very important and emotional connection. By this point in the book it is very obvious that writing is an important part of Esperanza's life; it is how she documents all of her stories and situations. The similarities that Esperanza and Minerva share in age, culture and creativity make this an important story for Esperanza to tell; it is as if she knows that Minerva is very much like herself and Minerva's outcome could eventually be Esperanza's -- the need to write creates a connection to each other's lives. In many ways, the story that Esperanza tells could have been a story about her own situation; she could have been the woman writing poems in the midst of her children instead of Minerva.

Minerva's need to write is not simply a creative outlet -- it is an act crucial to her survival: "But when the kids are asleep . . . she writes poems on little pieces of paper that she folds over and over and holds in her hands a long time, little pieces of paper that smell like a dime" (Cisneros 84). Like the beads of the rosary, Minerva seems to meditate over the folded over poems that she has put on paper. The poems serve as a sort of prayer for Minerva; she keeps her poems close to her and depends on them to help her through her day. Her suffocating situation concerning her failed marriage, violent husband, and her needy children, paired with her need and determination to write, illustrates the situation of a Chicana woman caught between the border of her old life and a

life in the Borderland. Her journey out of the home that oppresses her and threatens to stifle her creativity and towards the new definition of home in which she can write and express herself becomes the crux of the story. Esperanza's observation of Minerva's life makes it clear that Minerva must eventually choose: "Minerva. I don't know which way she'll go. There is nothing I can do" (Cisneros 85). By the time Esperanza finishes her narration of Minerva with this final comment, the lines have been clearly drawn and it is up to Minerva to make the final decision. The violence and fighting between Minerva and her husband illustrate how much she is suffering in the old definition of home, and her continual need to write poems illustrates her potential to move into the Borderland. While Minerva struggles in her journey to the Borderland, Esperanza's comment "I don't know which way she'll go," (Cisneros 85) is a valid concern. In reference to the requirements set out by Anzaldúa, Minerva has the same creative potential and drive that Esperanza has, but Esperanza's personal account of Minerva's life and situation sheds some doubt on the outcome of the situation. By the end of the story, nothing has been determined and it is very uncertain which way Minerva will go.

The final image that Esperanza creates concerning Minerva is a sad one. The violent husband has returned again, Minerva is bruised and worn down, but she continues to write poems. She still carries with her the potential to use her writing to help her reach the Borderland, but she continues to write while living in the suffocating situation of her marriage and family. Through this narration, Minerva also becomes an example of a young woman who has the ability and the potential to become a Mestiza but whose journey to the Borderland is slowed to a painful pace by the borders in her path. She is the Chicana woman still living on "this thin edge of barbed wire" (Anzaldúa 3).

The final story of a young woman who is struggling to reach the Borderland is found in "Alicia Sees Mice." Unlike the other two examples of young Chicana women and their personal situations, Esperanza is able, for the first time, to discuss the issue of education and the realities of life for the young women who attempt to receive one.

The idea of a Chicana girl receiving an education, especially a higher education, is a topic that has always had a place in Chicana feminism. For a young girl to focus on an education challenges the basic values of the Mexican home and family. Essential to the situation that Alicia has to face when trying to go to college, as Anzaldúa explains it, is the stubborn insistence on female servitude in the Mexican household: "The culture and the Church insist that women are subservient to males . . . . If a woman doesn't renounce herself in favor of the male, she is selfish" (Anzaldúa 17). The very act of Alicia attempting to better herself through an education is a direct attack on the belief that the male is better and more important than the female. In her father, and possibly the rest of her family's eyes, Alicia's attempt to go to school is selfish. She has put her own future in front of the responsibility of taking care of her family, a job that she had never agreed to accept but was simply forced to inherit.

So, for Alicia to get an education she must overcome two obstacles: the task of completing an education, and overcoming the demands of her father and his rigid concept of her role within the home and family. Esperanza comments on the immensity of these obstacles and Alicia's situation when she says, "Alicia, whose Mama died, is sorry that there is no one older to rise and make the lunchbox tortillas. Alicia, who inherited her mama's rolling pin and sleepiness is young and smart and studies for the first time at the university"

(Cisneros 31). Being the oldest daughter of a deceased mother, it is assumed that it will now be Alicia's job to take care of her father and her siblings. Her education is considered secondary to the family and their needs, and her father enforces that belief. When Alicia expresses her fear of the mice who are in the kitchen when she rises to make the family's meals, her father simply states: "Close your eyes and they'll go away . . . You're just imagining. And anyway, a woman's place is sleeping so she can wake up early with the tortilla star" (Cisneros 31). Telling her to ignore her fears about the mice and even questioning if they exist, her father expresses his view of Alicia and his insistence on her role as caretaker. He is unwilling to see her as an independent woman with her own dream and fears that are separate from himself and the family. He simply refused to acknowledge or support the goals that Alicia has set for herself.

Esperanza's final comment concerning Alicia's situation is just as uncertain as Minerva's:

Two trains and a bus, because she doesn't want to spend her whole life in a factory or behind a rolling pin. Is a good girl, my friend, studies all night and sees the mice, the ones her father says do not exist. Is afraid of nothing except four-legged fur. And fathers. (Cisneros 31-32)

Alicia's two fears reinforce the fact that she is able to see things as they are: she fears the mice because they represent her fear of spending the rest of her life in the kitchen in place of her mother, and she fears her father because he believes in and will try to force her to abide by the old institution of home and family and her supposed place in them.

Alicia studies all night and rides a great distance to school every day, and Esperanza gives no indication that Alicia is planning on stopping.

Esperanza says Alicia is a “good girl” and calls her a friend. It is apparent that Esperanza admires her determination and is hoping that she will make it. Alicia represents the Chicana woman who has a direct goal and seems to be on the most direct path to achieving it. She is acutely aware of the obstacles and fears that might stop her from achieving what she wants, and this awareness seems to be the thing that is helping motivate her more. The fear of her father and his plan for her life is helping push her towards an education and her own path to the new idea of home.

These three young Chicana women, mirrors of Esperanza’s own unstable position between childhood and womanhood, all represent different dreams, different struggles, and different places on the path to a new home. While each of these young girls are at different points in the process of their journeys, Marin, Minerva, and Alicia all give Esperanza examples of the reality of each girl’s struggle and reinforce the necessity to keep trying and keep stretching towards the new idea of home.

### Esperanza’s Narration Of Self

While the stories of young women are important to Esperanza’s own understanding of the struggles Chicana women must face during their own personal development, no real changes or improvements in Esperanza’s own character can begin until she starts to focus inward and reflect on the stories of her own life and experiences. Through these personal narrations, Esperanza begins to show her own potential for becoming a Mestiza; her personal characteristics and her continual need to write illustrate the characteristics that Anzaldúa defines in her vision for the Mestiza. Esperanza’s personal experiences and the changes that will occur in her character will parallel the

characteristics of the Mestiza that Anzaldúa will create for the Chicana. It is through the reflections on her mother, her ancestors, her community, and her own personal symbols that proof emerges of the Mestiza that Esperanza wants to become. Narrating her personal experiences, she is pointing inward, instead of to a disconnected “there,” and analyzing the experiences within herself that might lead to the discovery and better understanding of “home.”

Only through the voice of an adolescent girl could a reader get the honest and blunt stories about Esperanza’s need for her mother or the disdain she has for her name, but Esperanza’s narration moves beyond the superficial retelling of a young girl’s life. As the narrator, Esperanza is able to focus on the injustices and societal problems that she sees affecting her gender and her culture. The passivity that Esperanza describes being forced onto her great-grandmother in the story “My Name” is the fate that Esperanza fears in her own life; it is for that reason that she feels the need to choose for herself a new name that will not bring with it those images or realities. It is as if she tells her stories from the innocent, naturally honest directness and point of view of a young Chicana girl, but the images and issues focused on within those stories come from the experience and language of a Chicana woman.

When Esperanza begins the process of describing herself and her world, she immediately describes herself through comparisons to her mother and her great-grandmother. Esperanza is describing and detailing their lives for a very important reason. She is attempting to make a step that Anzaldúa illustrates her own theory. In the section entitled, “El camino de la mestiza/ The Mestiza Way” Anzaldúa talks of this step: “ Her first step is to take inventory. . . Just what did she inherit from her ancestors? This weight on her back -- which is the baggage from the Indian mother, which is the baggage from the Spanish Father, which is

the baggage from the Anglo?" (Anzaldúa 82). With "Hairs" and "My Name" Esperanza takes inventory of the people who have made the biggest impressions on her life: the mother she feels a deep bond to and the great grandmother's name and fate that she fears she will inherit. Esperanza tells these stories because she feels that descriptions of her mother and great-grandmother are the best way to introduce herself and because she is subconsciously trying to understand their influence on her life.

Esperanza's personal description begins with a vignette entitled "Hairs" which gives descriptions of the people in Esperanza's family through a discussion of the texture and look of their hair. It becomes the tool by which Esperanza describes each family member, including herself, but it also serves as a way to characterize each personality. Esperanza's short description of her own hair, "It never obeys barrettes or bands" (Cisneros 6), introduces the rebellious and proud spirit that Esperanza believes she is. Just like her own description, each family member is discussed in a few short sentences, but Esperanza's description of her mother's hair in the second paragraph takes on a more detailed and sensual description. Esperanza's narration of her mother is a powerful switch in the vignette; she not only describes her mother's hair, but she also describes a personal and important bond that she has with her mother. No other description of her family's hair has the same impact as the description of her mother. Esperanza's narration becomes very complex and motivated by the use of the senses; she expresses this emotional connection to her mother when she says, "But my mother's hair, my mother's hair . . . 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 . . ." (Cisneros 6). Within that description Esperanza has focused on her own sense of security and tranquility, and her



mother's hair has become the symbol through which she can more adequately express the bond she has to her mother. By comparing the smell of her mother's hair to the life sustaining image of bread, Esperanza has established that she identifies and holds a deep love for her mother. This insight into Esperanza's character establishes her as a person who respects the presence of the females in her life; she knows that "female" constitutes a very big part of who she is. The description of her mother's hair goes beyond the descriptions given to other family members' hair; Esperanza focuses her details on the deep emotional connection that she feels with her mother.

The connection that Esperanza describes is also developed by Cherrie Moraga in her essay "A Long Line of Vendidas." In her personal essay, Moraga describes the connection she felt as a young child to her sickly mother: "There was something I knew at that eight year-old moment that I vowed never to forget -- the smell of a woman who is life and home to me at once. The woman in whose arms I am uplifted, sustained" (Moraga 94). Moraga takes this connection and need for her mother and expands it into what she feels is an important premise of Chicana feminism: the love of La Madre, La Chicana. She says, "If I were to build my womanhood on this self-evident truth, it is the love of the Chicana, the love of myself as Chicana I had to embrace . . . ." (Moraga 94).

Moraga's realization of the need and instinct she has to love her mother and the Chicana metamorphoses into the necessity of loving and respecting herself as woman and Chicana. Esperanza's loving and powerful description of her own mother rings with the same type of importance. Esperanza, through what appears to be a description of her mother, is also articulating her respect and need for La Madre, La Chicana. Through the vignette "Hairs" she has

established herself as a character who will place more importance on the female, most specifically, the Chicana. She is not afraid to narrate the connections she feels to her mother and the other women in her stories. The love for La Chicana that Moraga expresses and the obvious connection that Esperanza feels for her mother are part of the development of the Mestiza. In "El camino de la mestiza/ The Mestiza Way," Anzaldúa continues to claim that "The struggle of the mestiza is above all a feminist one" (Anzaldúa 84) and that a rejection of machismo and all forms of hatred and sexism against women is imperative. Anzaldúa talks of the many obstacles the Mestiza must overcome to reach the Borderland, but she reinforces one characteristic that the Mestiza already has accomplished and should continue to hold on to: "We're halfway there -- we have such love of the Mother, the good mother" (Anzaldúa 84). The "love of the mother" that Anzaldúa speaks of is the same love that Esperanza and Moraga feel for their mothers. It is characterized by a deep need which goes beyond the dependence that a child has for its mother to supply food, shelter and love. This need touches Esperanza's heart; she finds a safety and an emotional bond in her mother that she finds with no other family member. For Esperanza, the familiar smell of bread and its symbols of sustaining life are also found in the smell of her mother's hair. This same sensory connection is found in Cherrie Moraga's description of the bond she found in her mother. The smell of her mother brings forth emotional connections that have helped her define a concept of home and life. Esperanza and Moraga have illustrated the respect and pride they have in their mother -- the Chicana mother -- the Good mother that Anzaldúa sees as important to the well-being of the Mestiza.

Esperanza continues to describe herself through a comparison of female relatives when she discusses the significance of her name in the story "My

Name." In this story Esperanza uses a family member, her great-grandmother, to establish herself as a self-aware narrator who acknowledges and understands how her name and the story of her great-grandmother affect her life. In the first sentence of "My Name," Esperanza gives her negative summary of what she feels her name means: "In Spanish it means too many letters. It means sadness, it means waiting . . . It is the Mexican records my father plays on Sunday mornings when he is shaving, songs like sobbing" (Cisneros 10). In addition to stating her opinion concerning the meaning of her name, she also focuses on the story of her great-grandmother's life. Esperanza speaks of her great-grandmother with a respect and admiration: "My great-grandmother. I would have liked to have known her, a wild horse of a woman, so wild she wouldn't marry. Until my great-grandfather threw a sack over her head and carried her off" (Cisneros 11). She speaks of her great-grandmother as a strong and proud woman -- qualities that Esperanza wants to find in herself, but she also speaks of her great-grandmother's kidnapping as simple fact -- as something that would invariably take place and to which she would have to succumb. The sadness and pain that Esperanza describes in the meaning of her name is made into a vivid picture when she applies it to Esperanza, her great-grandmother. This story makes it obvious that Esperanza understands that her name, but more importantly the femaleness of her name, will create many opportunities for her to be taken advantage of by others. Esperanza's proud character is even more apparent when she proclaims that "I have inherited her name, but I don't want to inherit her place by the window" (Cisneros 11). Esperanza is aware of the "place by the window" that, as a Mexican girl, she will probably inherit, but she establishes herself as an aware and defiant young girl by articulating her rejection of what her name entails and

by her refusing to allow herself the same fate that her great-grandmother had to face.

Esperanza continues this proclamation when she says that “I would like to baptize myself under a new name, a name more like the real me, the one nobody sees . . . Something like Zeze the X will do” (Cisneros 11). Zeze the X is Esperanza’s creation and she gives it to herself to help her name the part of her personality that she feels is left unaddressed by her birth name. Zeze the X is the best way for Esperanza to describe herself, both physically and emotionally, to her readers. She feels that the defiant, proud, aware, and vocal Esperanza who is beginning the task of narrating her life can be best imagined with a name that holds no connection to pain or unfulfilled dreams.

Esperanza’s childish attempt to reject the name she inherited from an ancestor and to create a new name for herself illustrates the part of Esperanza that still points away from her heart and her heritage when trying to identify who she is. Literally, the word Esperanza in Spanish means “hope”; her own name carries with it the idea of continuation in the face of struggle. Hope is the thing that Esperanza obviously has for herself and her vision of a future home. She is named for the one thing that drives her the most: she is an example of the hope that Chicana feminists have when they discuss the possibilities of home. Instead of accepting the sad story of her great-grandmother’s life and finding strength in the literal meaning of her name, Esperanza looks outside herself and creates a name that has no connection to her family. The rejection of her name is not damaging; Esperanza simply names herself Zeze the X in retaliation against the situation of her great-grandmother. The fact that Esperanza does not discuss the meaning of her Spanish name does not mean that she is unaware of the literal translation; she does not reject or dismiss the

term “hope” -- the creation of Zeze the X is only a way to defend herself against the fate that she feels is connected to her name.

By wishing for a chance to change her name, Esperanza is showing a child-like attempt to adhere to some of the ideas found within Chicana feminism. Although Esperanza is unable to leave her home, the wish to change her name is her attempt to get out from underneath the name and the fate that has been “imposed” on her; Zeze the X is her attempt at naming the “intrinsic nature” that she feels she has within her. By creating this name, she is attempting to vocalize her need for self-identity -- the self-identity that is one of the founding ideas in Chicana feminism.

With the stories “Hairs” and “My Name” Esperanza has completed a short description of her physical self and a more complex picture of the emotional connection she has to her mother and her bittersweet understanding of her great-grandmother’s life and name. The descriptions of herself reveal the emotional and mental capacity the young narrator has; more importantly, her capacity for narration is based on an astute awareness of herself as both female and Chicana. “Hairs” and “My Name” are only the first two stories that Esperanza chooses to narrate about herself, but they establish her as a competent and vocal narrator who will continue to narrate, even if the stories include her personal thoughts and struggles, the truth about her situation. Esperanza seems to speak to bigger issues, issues that are beyond her years, and centers the stories that she tells around the things that need to be revealed and addressed. It is for these same reasons that Esperanza is slowly working towards fulfilling the characteristics of a strong Chicana feminist or the similar idea of the Mestiza; she is able, even at her young age, to address her own emotional state and work towards conquering her own personal struggles.

While “Hairs” and “My Name” point to examples outside of Esperanza to help explain her personality and situation, “Four Skinny Trees” and “Beautiful and Cruel” are stories that Esperanza tells which focus inward and reveal the personal determination that she is beginning to develop within herself. Instead of describing herself through her family, Esperanza turns her focus inward and begins to narrate personal stories that reveal her fears and her perspective on who she wants to become in the future. These stories show Esperanza’s gradual willingness to point inward and analyze her own power; her ability to look within herself to complete the analysis of her life illustrates her growing confidence in what she has to say and what she feels she must eventually do. Both “Four Skinny Trees” and “Beautiful and Cruel” express Esperanza’s determination to reach her future home and the personal symbols she creates to keep her motivated and on the right path.

Esperanza’s survival instincts that she is developing within herself is addressed in the story “Four Skinny Trees.” In many ways, this story illustrates best the borders that Esperanza feels growing up and how she chooses to deal with them and fight against them. Not immune to her own feeling of frustration, confusion, and fear, Esperanza uses the symbol of the trees outside her window to give her own childish but heartfelt example of how she continues in the face of adversity.

In “Four Skinny Trees,” Esperanza talks in great detail about the four trees outside her Mango Street window that she feels fight to survive much like she does. She comments about the trees’ ability to grow in such adverse conditions when she says, “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” (Cisneros 74). Esperanza pictures that the strength of the skinny trees is deep underground, and even though they appear skinny and weak, she can imagine their roots working farther and farther into the ground, gaining stability and strength.

The symbol of the roots, being not only the roots that supply stability and nutrients to a growing thing, but also the roots that a person describes as their heritage or their culture, is also a symbol that Anzaldúa uses when describing her vision for the Mestiza and her move towards the Borderland. In the first beginning steps of moving away from borders and into the acceptance of the Borderland, Anzaldúa creates a scenario of the Mestiza woman digging into the roots of her heritage:

Caught between the sudden contraction . . . the brown woman stands still, looks at the sky. She decides to go down, digging her way along the roots of trees. Sifting through the bones, she shakes them off to see if there is any marrow in them. Then, touching the dirt to her forehead, to her tongue, she takes a few bones, leaves the rest in their burial place. (Anzaldúa 82)

Using the image of trees and their roots, it is there that the Mestiza woman can begin her journey to the Borderland. Among the roots of the tree is where the Mestiza can find the burial place of the cultures that she has been forced to forget. The bones of the ancestors and the power that they can give the Mestiza woman are essential for her journey. The emotional and mental act of digging up the cultures which reside at the roots of her own self will return to her the knowledge of the past that she had lost.

For Esperanza, the trees outside her window do an important job: “Keep, keep, keep, trees say when I sleep. They teach” (Cisneros 75). What the trees teach Esperanza is never clearly articulated, but she obviously sees the trees’

ability to survive even in the confines of the concrete that surrounds them.

Esperanza looks to those trees when she is feeling tired and sad; they, at very least, teach her to continue to struggle against the concrete, or the borders, that confine her.

The final image of the trees that Esperanza gives echoes her own personality and the characteristics of the Mestiza that she seems willing to accept. Although most of "Four Skinny Trees" focuses on what Esperanza looks to when she is at her saddest and most defeated moments, her final image of the trees is very promising and proud: "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" (Cisneros 75). It is obvious that Esperanza is not only describing the trees, but also describing herself. "A tiny thing against so many bricks" (Cisneros 75), Esperanza is, at that moment, feeling the pain and frustration of the borders she lives within and wants desperately to get out of. As she looks to the trees and finds strength in their ability to survive, she comments on qualities that she imagines in the trees but, in reality, knows she has in herself.

Situated a bit more than halfway through her stories, "Four Skinny Trees" comes at an appropriate time in her narration. Esperanza, by this point in the book, has seen many of the people in her neighborhood struggle to survive in the confines of the borderland that they find themselves in, and she has also begun to see the amount of energy and confidence that she must have to find a home of her own. "Four Skinny Trees" is a story that Esperanza tells so that she can find new confidence in herself and her ability to one day get to the new idea of home. She has transferred all of her strong qualities onto the image of the



trees outside her window so that she can look outside whenever she needs to and remind herself of the qualities and person she wants to become.

“Beautiful and Cruel” is one of Esperanza’s last statements about herself; more specifically, it is the last statement about the woman, the Mestiza, that she wants to become. She states: “ My mother says when I get older my dusty hair will settle and my blouse will learn to stay clean, but I have decided not to grow up tame like the others who lay their necks on the threshold waiting for the ball and chain” (Cisneros 88). Acknowledging the fact that she is getting to the age in which her mother, and she, should be thinking about a future marriage, Esperanza quickly states her refusal to move into what she sees as the passive and confining role of marriage. The image of Esperanza putting her neck on the threshold of a home, waiting for the guillotine, makes it very clear that she does not see a positive outcome to marriage.

Esperanza continues her statement of personal power and independence by comparing her own personality to two very different but equally powerful images. First she expresses her envy and her determination to be like a woman she had seen in the movies: “In the movies there is always one with red, red, lips who is beautiful and cruel. She is the one who drives the men crazy and laughs them all away. Her power is her own. She will not give it away” (Cisneros 89). Unlike the image of the pure and passive mother or the dominated and shamed whore, Esperanza wants to pattern herself after the character who has a powerful sexuality that is not dominated or shamed by men. She admires the sexuality and beauty of the woman, but equally admires her ability to stay in control of that sexuality and use it to her own benefit instead of being destroyed by it.

What is interesting about Esperanza’s statement concerning what she

wants to become is that after she describes her envy of the beautiful and powerful woman with red, red, lips, she then describes the rest of her future personality through a description of what seems to be a dominant father, husband or man. In this final proclamation she states: "I have begun my own quiet war. Simple. Sure. I am one who leaves the table like a man, without putting back the chair or picking up the plate" (Cisneros 89). Esperanza, for the first time, has clearly stated that she has begun a war—she is consciously fighting against the borders in her life—the things that keep her from reaching her potential and the dream of her own home. Probably a scene that Esperanza has seen her father perform after every meal, Esperanza uses that image of the man leaving the table to proclaim that she will also be a person who resides at the head of the table and comes and goes as she pleases. Esperanza sees the freedom and the power that the men in her community, both American and Mexican, are given, and she wants to have that for herself. The ability to be unapologetic to another person seems to be the common factor between both the female and male examples that she uses. Both of those examples are of people who are looking out for themselves and living for their own benefit. She wants to be able to live like that also.

The combination of the two examples, the male and the female, illustrate the characteristics that Esperanza will most likely become. In Esperanza's eyes and the eyes of many other people, the male and female qualities are separate and unequal; Esperanza wants to take the power of both of those roles and let that duality reside in her -- taking power from both of them at the same time. Anzaldúa comments on this need for the inclusion and combination of both genders -- proving that Esperanza's wish to include them both is a very important step to take:

What we are suffering from is an absolute despot duality that says we are able to be only one or the other. It claims that human nature is limited and cannot evolve into something better. But I, like other queer people, am two in one body, both male and female. I am the embodiment of the hieros gamos: the coming together of opposite qualities within. (Anzaldúa 19)

Although Anzaldúa uses the concept of the “hieros gamos” in reference to her personal experience and her lesbianism, the idea of having a “coming together of opposite qualities within” is exactly what Esperanza wants for herself.

Esperanza has been told and brought up in a culture in which the male and the female are treated differently and as opposites. Regardless of this, she is able to focus on the most powerful and positive parts of the male and female and wants those very separate but effectual qualities to be part of her life. Esperanza states that she is starting her own war; she has acknowledged that there are borders, stereotypes and social constructions to fight against, and as a developing Mestiza she wants to take with her the qualities of both the female and the male to help her reach the Borderland.

“A Home In The Heart”: Esperanza Moves Towards The New Vision Of Home

One theme that Esperanza mentions at the beginning of her narration but does not specifically focus on again until halfway through the books is the dream and image of her future home. This image, and Esperanza’s slow but continual movement towards that image of home, is the most important and necessary realization that Esperanza must make. Redefining what “home” means is a slow and complex process for Esperanza -- one that she cannot achieve by herself, that involves many people, both friends and strangers, and her own ability to challenge her preconceived ideas. The first mention of

Esperanza's idea of home comes very early in the book; in the first story entitled "The House on Mango Street" Esperanza states that, "I knew I had to have a house. A real house. One I could point to" (Cisneros 5). It is not until much later, once Esperanza has narrated the stories of her own life and the lives of other women in her community, that she finally comes back to the image of her home and what she wants that home to be like. This process of coming back to an issue that she had mentioned at the very beginning of the book is important because by the time she again begins to discuss the issue of "home" she has already dealt with herself and some of the issues that have affected the women around her. It would be wrong to say that Esperanza has resolved all of her personal issues when she begins to address "home" again, but she has spent a great deal of time focusing on the borders that she sees and the ways in which she can combat them. By the time Esperanza is ready at the end of the book to challenge her old concept of home, she has become a more articulate and powerful girl; she has seen and learned from her own experiences and the experiences of those around her. Although she is still an adolescent girl, she has narrated and experienced enough to be able to address the issue of home with more knowledge than at the beginning of the book.

The fact that Esperanza comes back to the first issue she addressed at the beginning of the book is also important because it illustrates the presence of a circle—the ability for Esperanza to "come back" to the one issue that she was not ready or knowledgeable enough to address. As Esperanza moved through the narrations of other Chicana women and the narrations of her own experiences, she was gaining the insight and the personal confidence needed to come back to that first question of home; it is not until she has completed that circle that she can then address the questions that she wants to resolve.

Esperanza's final step, analyzing the issue of home and challenging what that concept could mean to her as a Chicana woman, is a continuation of the same issues that Chicana feminism had been discussing years prior. The fact that Esperanza is at the point in which she must think about that issue illustrates her potential to live in the Borderland and her ability to address issues that are essential to Chicana feminism. Although Esperanza seems ready to think about the issue of "home," it becomes very apparent that much of what Esperanza must think about and consider is brought to her from outside forces. In the stories that consider "home," it is usually a friend or stranger that challenges some idea of home that Esperanza believes in and forces her to rethink her ideal. Although this is not always something that Esperanza readily accepts, the small challenges and ideas put in Esperanza's head make her reevaluate what home could mean to her. This process is a complete switch from the rest of Esperanza's experiences. Instead of Esperanza giving her advice or making her comments about other's lives and situations, it is now the people in her neighborhood, as well as complete strangers, who are giving her advice and challenging her to think more about her own beliefs. It is the neighborhood, and the ones that she feels she knows so thoroughly, that end up teaching her and helping her with the most important step of all: redefining the vision of home.

The first time in which Esperanza brings up the issue of home and is challenged to rethink that idea is in "Elenita, Cards, Palm, Water." In this story, Esperanza goes to the neighborhood fortune teller to ask some questions about her future and, more specifically, her future home. After laying out the cards, Elenita begins to look into Esperanza's future: "What about a house, I say, because that's what I came for. 'Ah yes, a home in the heart. I see a home in the

heart" (Cisneros 62). This is not the answer that Esperanza was waiting for and Esperanza is both frustrated and confused by her telling. By this point in the book, Esperanza has not considered the emotional or spiritual connection that people have with their home; she is still only imagining the physical existence of a home. She has not acknowledged or prepared herself for what "home" could mean to her growing power as a Mestiza. Esperanza sees her home as a place to help her get away from Mango Street and the person she is in that world.

Anzaldúa's own idea of home is, of course, more developed in its adult stage, but it serves as a good example of what Esperanza's own home could eventually be: a the place where all of her cultures and identities are celebrated:

On December 2nd when my sun goes into my first house, I celebrate el día de la Chicana y el Chicano. On that day I clean my altars, light my Coatlopeuh candle, burn sage and copal . . . . On that day I bare my soul, make myself vulnerable to friends and family by expressing my feelings. On that day I affirm who we are. . . . I identify our needs, voice them . . . On that day I gather the splintered and disowned parts of la gente mexicana and hold them in my arms . . . We can no longer blame you, nor disown the white parts, the male parts, the pathological parts, the queer parts, the vulnerable parts. . . Let's try it our way, the mestiza way, the Chicana way, the woman way. (Anzaldúa 88)

Anzaldúa talks of her first house as the place where the idea of the Borderland was brought to life. The Borderland itself did not manifest itself as an actual, physical spot on the map; instead, her physical home in which she wrote and lived independently became the place where the idea of the Borderland thrives. Within her physical house and the conscious application of the Borderland she

is able to worship her own gods, celebrate her complex emotions and cultures, and vocalize the plurality of culture that resided within her. Anzaldúa's life in her home become the ultimate example of the Mestiza living within the Borderland; she has created an emotional and spiritual place within her physical home that speaks to all of her culture, to her drive to create, and to the issues that she must continue to fight and address in her life.

In the context of Esperanza's life, it is Elenita, the fortune teller, who first challenges Esperanza's definition and vision of home. After Elenita looks at Esperanza's fortune once again in hope of finding an outcome that Esperanza will understand, Elenita still comes to the same conclusion: "A new house, a house made of heart. I'll light a candle for you" (Cisneros 64). Elenita has not described a physical manifestation of a home as Esperanza wants; she has instead described a home in the heart that Esperanza can use to develop a place where all of her multiplicities can live together and be expressed.

"Elenita, Cards, Palm, Water" is the first instance in which Esperanza's own vision for the future and the image of her "home" is challenged. She leaves Elenita's house with confusion, but she also leaves with a new idea planted in her head that creates many more questions. Just as Anzaldúa envisions the Mestiza residing in her own mental Borderland, Esperanza must now also try and envision herself in that home.

For the first time, someone has challenged Esperanza to not point away from herself when defining home; Elenita has challenged Esperanza to point to herself, specifically her own heart, when thinking about home. This new idea contradicts the experiences that Esperanza had had before. It was the nun, a symbol of European Catholicism, who makes Esperanza point away from herself when identifying home, but now it is a fortune teller, a woman who is

influenced by religious and pagan symbolism, who challenges that idea and forces Esperanza to point to herself when identifying home.

Each woman, the nun and the fortune teller, becomes the symbol of the old and new definitions of home that Chicana feminism has been addressing for years. The religious view of home points away from the woman, the individual. The home is a place in which the family must thrive -- usually at the sacrifice of Chicana women. Religion demands the subservience of the wife to the husband and even the wife to the children and, therefore, the old definition of home that is supported by the Church would also reflect this belief. The woman's self-identity is taken from her; she is disconnected from herself and her potential. This feeling of disconnection is illustrated when Esperanza agrees with the nun's summation that she lives there and then points away from herself.

In contrast to the religious idea of home, Elenita gives her a way to consider the new, feminist definition of "home." By telling her she will have a "home in the heart" she focuses on the potential and power that Esperanza has within herself. "A Home in the Heart" creates the possibility for self-identity; Esperanza now has the symbol of something important living inside her, and she must point to herself and no one else to discover her own "home."

Esperanza leaves Elenita with this new idea of "home," and begins to narrate some of her own mental processes concerning this new idea. When she continues debating the issue of her future home in "Bums in the Attic" it seems as though she has given some thought to "a home in the heart" and has changed some of her ideas of what that could mean for her. In this story, Esperanza makes one tender but important realization about her future home: she begins to include a significant memory that she has carried from her childhood and her time on Mango Street. "One day I'll own my own house, but I



won't forget who I am or where I came from. Passing bums will ask, 'Can I come in?' I'll offer them the attic, ask them to stay, because I know how it is to be without a house" (Cisneros 87). Unable to forget the homelessness and the poverty she sees on Mango Street, Esperanza creates a scenario in her future house in which she accepts this memory and take it in. A powerful example of what "a home in the heart" will consist of, Esperanza is here unable to forget who she is and that bums are a part of her life and her memory. The bums represent a part of her world that she now seems unwilling to forget. Claiming that she will own a house but not "forget who I am or where I came from" (Cisneros 87) Esperanza seems ready to take with her parts of her culture that she had earlier said she wanted to forget and leave it behind. The bums that will reside in the attic of her house symbolize the small part of her heart that will not reject or forget her experiences and connection to Mango Street.

Combining the cultures and worlds that she has known and that she wants to experience, Esperanza continues this scenario by commenting on her emotional state in this future house that includes her new life and the presence of her old life living in the attic: "Some days after dinner, guests and I will sit in front of a fire. Floorboards will squeak upstairs. The attic grumble. 'Rats?' They'll ask. 'Bums,' I'll say and I'll be happy" (Cisneros 87). What seems to be a strange combination of dinner party guests and bums in the attic is a scenario that Esperanza now sees as both normal and something that will make her happy. All parts of her life are represented in this future home, and Esperanza has created a scenario that illustrates the way in which Esperanza wants to live in the future; she has begun to modify her future, physical image of home to include the plurality of cultures and experiences that she will take with her.

Esperanza's encounter with three magical old women in "The Three

Sisters” also forces her to continue to challenge her ideas of who she is and what home will mean to her. More importantly, it is in this story that the three sisters give her a new symbol, a new way to view her “home” and how she must continue to live her life. In this story, which falls four stories from the end of Esperanza’s narration, the three sisters come to Esperanza and tell her things about herself that she both knew and did not know. Esperanza describes them as powerful and irresistible to her: “They must have known, the sisters. They had power and could sense what was what . They said, ‘Come here,’ and gave me a stick of gum. They smelled like Kleenex or the inside of a satin handbag, and then I didn’t feel afraid” (Cisneros 104). With Esperanza close to them and interested in their powers, the women begin to see things in Esperanza and tell her things about herself that she had previously addressed throughout her narration. One of the first things that the blue-veined woman comments on is Esperanza’s name: “Esperanza, the old blue-veined one repeated in a high thin voice. Esperanza . . . a good good name” (Cisneros 104). In opposition to the negative images that Esperanza had created concerning her own name, the old woman contradicts her and gives her something to be proud of. The literal meaning of Esperanza’s name -- the idea of “hope” -- may be what the old woman is referring to. In any case, the old woman builds Esperanza’s pride and confidence and continue to point to Esperanza and tell her about her good and powerful qualities. The old women continue to study Esperanza and tell her things about herself that she has mentioned previously: “‘Look at her hands’, cat-eyed said. And they turned them over and over as if they were looking for something. ‘She’s special. Yes, she’ll go very far. . . Make a wish. A wish? Yes, make a wish. What do you want? Anything? I said. Well, why not? I closed my eyes” (Cisneros 104). In her hands the women see what is special about

Esperanza; they see the strength of her emerging character. In many ways, the three sisters represent the perfect example of strong Chicana sisterhood. They attract Esperanza to them and Esperanza feels safe among them because of their power, their ability to speak their minds and feel confident about what they see. They are three independent women who call themselves sisters and have a bond between them. When they pick Esperanza out and call her special they are seeing in her what they already have.

Once Esperanza makes her wish, the sisters know exactly what she has wished for and give her some advice -- forcing her to think harder about what it means to be Mestiza and what it means to have a home. "She held my face with her blue-veined hands and looked and looked at me. A long silence. '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'" (Cisneros 105). This demand by the blue-veined sister contradicts all that Esperanza had planned for her future and complicates her vision of home, just like Elenita did. While Esperanza wanted to forget her name and its history and create a new name like Zeze the X, and while she continued to think of herself getting away from Mango Street and forgetting the shame she felt there, the blue-veined sister tells her that it is those things that she can never forget.

The blue-veined sister introduces the concept of the circle to Esperanza; the idea that everything -- even her name and her street -- is connected to who she is and who she will always be. The circle has no breaks -- it never fragments or separates parts of itself; this idea is comparable to the cultures of the Mestiza -- no part of her culture or experience fragments or separates itself from any other part. The blue-veined woman forces Esperanza to think of a

circle and to think of including the experiences of Mango Street and her name in that circle. It is obvious, by Esperanza's own determination and the sister's insight into the future, that Esperanza will someday leave Mango Street, but the sisters warn Esperanza that to leave Mango street does not mean she can leave and forget the people or the experiences that have occurred there. They must become part of her circle of culture and experience and go with her.

In many ways the three sisters give Esperanza encouragement and the concept of the circle to her help complete the new definition of home that was instigated by the nun and challenged by Elenita the fortune teller. The mystical characteristics of the three sisters that Esperanza admires so much illustrate the move away from the advice of the religious nun to the mystical and pagan ability for the sisters to see in Esperanza a strong and powerful Chicana woman who will "go away to come back." The sisters' powers are all their own, and it is that power that eventually convinces Esperanza to look at "home" with a new definition

Even after the three sisters leave Esperanza and give her time to think about what they have said, Esperanza still has dreams of a physical house in the future that she can call her own. What is different in the story "A House of My Own" is how she describes her future home: "Not a man's house. Not a daddy's. A house all my own" (Cisneros 108). Esperanza had made it clear that she will be independent when she grows up. She will live as an independent woman who can support herself and does not have to answer to a father or a husband.

She also describes her home in its emotional or spiritual sense and reinforces an important issue that Cisneros has been developing in Esperanza's character all along: "Only a house as quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem" (Cisneros 108). Echoing Virginia

Woolf's own demands for "a room of one's own," Esperanza sees her future home as a place where she will be able to move freely within a creative space. She will live the life of an independent Mestiza that has the freedom and the power and the space to create. Her future home is comparable in many ways to the Borderland that Anzaldúa envisions for the livelihood of the Mestiza; but Esperanza's important addition to the concept of home is that it will be the place where she can write, the place where she will be able to create and therefore survive. By insisting that she will be able to write in her new home, Esperanza has illustrated that she is now able to point inward and claim that home is within herself and not out "there." It is obvious that writing is a very personal act that helps her find an understanding of the world around her and her own potential. For Esperanza to compare her writing to her future home proves that, just like the personal process of writing, her future home must also be an internal reflection of herself.

## Conclusion

*The House on Mango Street* ends with Esperanza still dealing with her childhood and Mango Street; there is not resolution or any image of Esperanza as an adult. In the final story, however, "Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes," there is a rather solid indication of how Esperanza will continue to grow and obtain her dreams for the future. When speaking of her life and of herself, she begins by speaking of her need to write and of what she feels drawn to write about:

I like to tell stories. I am going to tell you a story about a girl who did not want to belong. We didn't always live on Mango Street. Before that we lived on Loomis on the third floor, and before that we lived on Keeler.

Before Keeler it was Paulina, but what I remember most is Mango Street, sad red house, the house I belong but do not belong to.

(Cisneros 109-110)

It is in this short example of the stories she likes to tell that many changes are revealed in Esperanza. Not surprisingly, she has reinforced her ability and need to write and tell stories. It is obvious that Esperanza will continue to feed her creative talents and that the subject of what she writes about will continue to focus on her life and the lives of the people around her.

The fact that she begins to tell her story with the same words at the beginning of the book, "I am going to tell you a story . . ." but then changes the ending to the story by saying ". . . but what I remember most is Mango Street, sad red house . . ." indicates that the narrator telling the final story is different from the one who told the first story. Esperanza has grown and accepted the experiences of Mango Street enough to come back to this story—the beginning of the circle—and change the ending to directly focus on her time at Mango Street. By repeating and changing the words of the first story, Esperanza is showing to her readers that the circle is intact and that every time she comes to the beginning of the circle she will tell the stories of Mango Street with the mind of a maturing Chicana woman and with the influence of all that she continues to experience.

Secondly, it is in this example of the story she tells that she repeats, word for word the beginning lines of the first story "The House on Mango Street." With this repetition of lines she has created an example of the circle that the three sisters had introduced to her. She has tied the first story to the last -- creating an eternal circle of her experience on Mango Street -- each story is connected and relies on the experiences that took place in all the other stories.

By this act, it is apparent that Esperanza is beginning to understand, believe in, and utilize the concept of the circle in her own life. For her life and experiences to be complete within her "home in the heart" each piece of the circle must remain; the circle cannot be broken by removing or forgetting any part of her time on Mango Street. Wherever Esperanza goes, she will take the circle of experience with her -- Mango Street will always be part of her life.

The third instance of change that can be found in Esperanza's narration is her new acceptance of her "belonging" to Mango Street. In that paragraph and at the end of her repetition of the first lines of the first story she says, "the house I belong to but do not belong" (Cisneros 110). The words of the three sisters are beginning to make sense to Esperanza. She has accepted the fact that her life experiences and part of the young woman/Mestiza who is growing out of that experience has emerged directly because of her time on Mango Street; she finally acknowledges that part of her world will always belong to and include Mango Street. She still expresses her need to move from Mango Street by also saying "and do not belong," but it is apparent that she is willing and able to understand that she will never leave or cut her ties to Mango Street.

In this final story, Esperanza also continues to talk about her creative outlet and her talent as part of the growing image of her new home. She states: I put it down on paper and then the ghost does not ache so much. I write it down and Mango says goodbye sometimes. She does not hold me with both arms. She sets me free" (Cisneros 110). The suffocating hold of the borders that Esperanza felt she lived within at the beginning of her story is eased somewhat by her ability to write and express her complexity of emotions. Her writing becomes a releases for her, she is able to express her multiplicity of cultures and experiences within the Borderland of her writing. In many ways, she is the

developed Mestiza that Minerva in "Minerva Writes Poems" was never able to become. Esperanza holds onto and understands the importance of her writing; writing for her own survival is one way that she will continue to keep her "home in the heart." This writing as an expression of survival helps her continue to grow and understand herself and the experiences that go on around her.

Finally, it is the last image of the future that proves her continual move towards a new idea of home. Esperanza imagines that:

One day I will pack my bags of books and paper. One day I will say goodbye to Mango. I am too strong for her to keep me here forever. One day I will go away. Friends and neighbors will say, 'What happened to that Esperanza? Where did she go with all those books and paper/ Why did she march so far away?' They will not know I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot out.

(Cisneros 110)

With those final words, it is very clear that Esperanza is on the right track to fulfilling her potential as a Chicana woman and creating a home in which she can survive and all of her dualities can thrive. It is certain that Esperanza still wants to move away from Mango Street; its physical presence in her life is not important to her. The realization that Esperanza has by the end of this book is that her emotional connection to Mango Street and the place that it holds in her "home in the heart" is something that she will never forget or reject. Although she states she will leave, she responds to the people who ask her why she is leaving by saying, "They will not know I have gone away to come back" (Cisneros 110). The image of the circle that the three sisters gave to her is still branded into her brain. Esperanza states she will "come back;" she will do this "For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot out" (Cisneros 110).



The question that Esperanza leaves for her readers is captured in the ongoing image of the idea of home and the symbol of the circle. The question that Esperanza creates deals with what she means when she says she will “come back.” Although Esperanza says that she must go away in order to come back, reinforcing the idea of the circle, it is unclear as to how she will “come back.” Esperanza imagines that some day she will march away from Mango Street, but she does not walk away alone; she leaves with the experiences and culture that Mango Street gave to her and, more importantly, with the “bags of books and paper” (Cisneros 110). It is obvious by the end of the book that Esperanza’s power and strength lie in her ability to write and preserve both her experiences and culture on paper. In a very realistic way, Esperanza could “come back,” by making the symbolic journey of the circle and returning to Mango Street through her writing. She could come back for the ones she had to leave behind by writing their stories and struggles and commenting on the situations that they continue to survive -- just like she had done throughout the novel in each story that focused on a person in her neighborhood. To “come back” to Mango Street becomes just as abstract and symbolic as the new idea of home. There is no physical and concrete “place” that is the future “home” for Esperanza, but it is certain that this new “home” will be created from her ability and need to write. In relation to Anzaldúa’s terms, Esperanza’s home will reside within her mind and heart -- a place where all her complexities and cultures can live together. The Borderland is the abstract “home in the heart” that Elenita saw in Esperanza’s future, and Esperanza’s claim that she will “come back” to Mango Street is an abstract way of envisioning her return to that part of her life through her writing and her security in her new concept of home.

Even though Esperanza’s promise to “come back’ to Mango Street is an

abstract idea, the strength that Esperanza is continually gaining as a Mestiza and a writer ensures that her promise will be kept, "For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot out" (Cisneros 110). By writing her stories, Esperanza preserves the lives and experiences of her neighbors and family that lived on Mango Street, and she is reinforcing her ability as a Mestiza to live with and benefit from the pluralities of her life and culture. Every time she remembers and writes about her time on Mango Street she is "coming back" and completing the circle again and again.

A decade before, when Chicana feminism was beginning to analyze the concept of home and to challenge old definitions so that Chicana women could survive and even thrive, there was no real understanding of how to make that dialogue, that idea of a new home, become a reality. The abstract idea of a home in which a Chicana woman could assemble all of her cultures, needs, and potentials seemed intangible; the idea was a strong feminist statement, but the chances of that idea becoming a reality was slim.

It is the act of writing, Esperanza's one tool for survival and personal growth, that serves as one realistic example of how Chicana women can actually obtain and live within their own "home." Esperanza's bridge between her home on Mango Street and "the home in her heart" is her writing. It is the connection that bridges and connects the validity and necessity of both homes, -- the inclusion of all of her experiences. This final example, the missing piece of the bridge that Esperanza reveals, is where the commonalities between Anzaldúa's theory and Esperanza's journey end. While Anzaldúa's *Borderlands: La Frontera* is essential to the creation of dialogue concerning the new idea of "home," it is still only a dialogue. Esperanza's connection to writing and its ability to help her reach her future "home" is one example of an action

that can make the abstract tangible; it is that action -- the reality of being able to mentally or physically do something to aid in the journey "home" -- that makes Esperanza's experiences in *The House on Mango Street* more helpful to Chicana feminism.

Cisneros leaves the reader without the security of knowing that Esperanza will complete and be successful in her journey. Esperanza is still growing and developing and telling her stories on Mango Street at the end of the novel, but the idea that Cisneros wants her readers to take from the character of Esperanza has been established and illustrated. While Esperanza used the process of writing to help her continue her journey "home," it is clear that Esperanza is just one example of how Chicana women can begin their own personal journey, and that writing is just one example of the tools that women can use to get there. The final image that Cisneros creates is of Esperanza telling stories as she moves through life; stories that help her make sense of the world around her and her role in it. It is that same image that Chicana feminism is striving to create for Chicana women so that they might find a tool to express themselves and interpret and understand their roles in the world. It is Esperanza's character in *The House on Mango Street* that serves as a model, an example, of what Chicana feminism is still trying to create in the lives of every Chicana woman who is trying to make it to a new understanding of her "home."

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