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More Room of Her Own: Sandra Cisneros’s
_The House on Mango Street_

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“Books continue each other,” Virginia Woolf told an audience of young women some sixty years ago, “in spite of our habit of judging them separately” (Room 84). Books such as Ellen Moers’s _Literary Women_, Elaine Showalter’s _A Literature of Their Own_, Patricia Meyer Spacks’s _The Female Imagination_, Tillie Olsen’s _Silences_, and Alice Walker’s _In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens_ continue Virginia Woolf’s own book, _A Room of One’s Own_, extending her fertile meditations on the effects of economic deprivation on women’s literature, and her pioneering efforts to reconstruct a female literary tradition. Tillie Olsen has uncovered a rich vein of writing by American working class women, and has offered poignant personal testimony to the obstacles to writing posed by gender and class. Alice Walker has explored the silences created by gender and race in America: “What did it mean for a black woman to be an artist in our grandmothers’ time? In our great-grandmothers’ day? It is a question with an answer cruel enough to stop the blood” (233).

While feminists following Woolf’s advice to “think back through our mothers” have expanded the literary canon in the past two decades, too many have ignored the questions of race, ethnicity, and class in women’s literature. Adrienne Rich laments the “white solipsism” of white feminists—“not the consciously held belief that one race is inherently superior to all others, but a tunnel-vision which simply does not see nonwhite experience or existence as precious or significant” (“Disloyal” 306). Barbara Smith, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison have angrily denounced the canon implicit in early studies of women’s literature such as Moers’s and Spacks’s. To Spacks’s tepid defense that she preferred to dwell on authors depicting “familiar experience” and a “familiar cultural setting” (5), Walker counters: “Why only these? Because they are white, and middle class, and because to Spacks, female imagination is only that—a limitation that even white women must find restrictive” (372).

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Confined by what Rich criticizes as the “faceless, raceless, classless category of ‘all women’” (“Notes” 13) women of color in the United States have all too often felt themselves compelled to choose between ethnicity and womanhood. Mitsuye Yamada speaks for many when she observes: “I have thought of myself as a feminist first, but my ethnicity cannot be separated from my feminism” (73). Sonia Saldivar-Hull writes of the damaging “color blindness” and “ideological erasure” of contemporary white feminist “sisterhood” (204). Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano points out that while a Chicana feminist perspective shares “with the feminist perspective an analysis of questions of gender and sexuality, there are important differences between a Chicana perspective and the mainstream feminist one with regard to issues of race, culture and class” (140). Many women of color reject the monolithic notion of a “woman’s voice.” If Woolf in A Room of One’s Own brought Shakespeare’s silenced sister to life, Maria C. Lugones and Elizabeth V. Spelman point to new silences within contemporary feminist discourse itself: “Indeed, many Hispanics, Black women, Jewish women—to name a few groups—have felt it an invitation to silence rather than speech to be requested—if they are requested at all—to speak about being ‘women’ (with the plain wrapper—as if there were one) in distinction from speaking about being Hispanic, Black, Jewish, working-class, etc., women” (574). Sandra Cisneros recalls sitting in a University of Iowa seminar at the age of twenty-two and suddenly realizing that she was “different from everybody” there:

It wasn’t as if I didn’t know who I was. I knew I was a Mexican woman. But, I didn’t think it had anything to do with why I felt so much imbalance in my life, whereas it had everything to do with it! My race, my gender, and my class! And it didn’t make sense until that moment, sitting in that seminar. That’s when I decided I would write about something my classmates couldn’t write about. (Aranda 65)

Cisneros’s The House on Mango Street, dedicated in two languages “A las Mujeres/To the Women,” both continues Woolf’s meditations and alters the legacy of A Room of One’s Own in important ways. Her series of vignettes is about the maturing of a young Chicana and the development of a writer; it is about the women she grows up with; it is also about a sense of community, culture, and place. Esperanza, the young protagonist, yearns for “a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem,” and for a house of her own:

Instead she shares a bedroom with her sister Nenny, in a house marked by constriction and absence: “windows so small you’d think they were holding their breath,” a front door “so swollen you have to push hard to get in,” “no front yard,” and a small garage out back “for the car we don’t own yet” (4).

The dilapidated series of apartments and houses Esperanza inhabits with her mother, father, sister, and two brothers—particularly their dwelling on Mango Street—represents her poverty, but also the richness of her subject matter. “Like it or not you are Mango Street,” her friend Alicia tells her, “and one day you’ll come back too” (107). “You must remember to come back,” the three aged sisters tell her, “for the ones who cannot leave as easily as you” (105). A Room of One’s Own would seem to allow Esperanza this subject, even to encourage it. “All these infinitely obscure lives remain to be recorded,” as Woolf told her young female audience. Pondering the shopgirl behind the counter, she commented, “I would as soon have her true history as the hundred and fiftieth life of Napoleon” (Room 93-94). But Woolf’s class and ethnic biases might also deter Esperanza from achieving her own literary voice.

Cisneros’s The House on Mango Street covertly transforms the terms of Woolf’s vision, making room in the female literary tradition for a young working-class Chicana who “like[s] to tell stories”: “I make a story for my life,” Esperanza tells us, “for each step my brown shoe takes. I say, ‘And so she trudged up the wooden stairs, her sad brown shoes taking her to the house she never liked’” (109). If Esperanza’s name means “too many letters,” means “sadness” in the life she knows in Spanish, it translates as “hope” in English (10). Thinking back through her mothers and their comadres and across through her sisters, she builds her house from the unfulfilled hopes and dreams around her. “I could’ve been somebody, you know?” sighs her mother (90). Edna’s Ruthie next door “could have been [many things] if she wanted to,” muses Esperanza, but instead she got married to a husband nobody ever sees (68). Esperanza inherited her name from her great-grandmother, a “wild horse of a [young] woman” who, tamed by marriage, spent her days confined in her husband’s house. “She looked out the window all her life,” says Esperanza: “I wonder if she made the best with what she got or was she sorry because she couldn’t be all the things she wanted to be. Esperanza. I have inherited her name, but I don’t want to inherit her place by the window” (11). As Esperanza revises and lays claim to her matrilineal inheritance, so Cisneros in Mango Street offers a rich reconsideration of the contemporary feminist inheritance as well.
No one has yet written *A Room of One's Own* for writers, other than women, still marginal in literature. Nor do any bibliographies exist for writers whose origins and circumstances are marginal. Class remains the greatest unexamined factor.

(Tillie Olsen *Silences* 146)

Woolf famously concluded *A Room of One's Own* with her hopes for the resurrection of Shakespeare’s voiceless sister. “She lives in you and in me,” Woolf told her young female listeners, “and in many other women who are not here tonight, for they are washing up the dishes and putting the children to bed” (117). Woolf’s all-inclusive vision of sisterhood, however, barely admits the possibility of actual artistic expression among those women “not here tonight”—particularly those marginalized by race, ethnicity, and class. The five hundred pounds a year that afford her first-person narrator the freedom and independence to write are a legacy from her aunt (37-38). While Woolf expresses the hope that young women of the future will actually be “capable of earning over five hundred a year,” and suggests that they limit child-bearing to “twos and threes” rather than “tens and twelves” (117), she seems to overlook the obstacles to creative freedom that a job and motherhood might pose even for the woman privileged with an income and a room of her own. She sees little future for women without those privileges.

Arguing the necessity of economic security for artistic production, Woolf asserts that “genius like Shakespeare’s is not born among laboring, uneducated, servile people.... It is not born today among the working classes” (50). When she numbers among the advantages of “being a woman” the fact that “one can pass even a very fine negress without wishing to make an Englishwoman of her,” she excludes women of color both from her audience and from her implicit definition of “being a woman” (52). Similarly, when she observes that “genius of a sort must have existed among women as it must have existed among the working classes” (50), she implicitly addresses a community of women in the middle and upper classes, and thereby excludes working-class women. Tillie Olsen’s wry footnote to this passage some years later reads: “Half of the working classes are women” (*Silences* 11n). And Alice Walker invites us to recast Woolf’s sentence to read: “Yet genius of a sort must have existed among slaves as it must have existed among the wives and daughters of sharecroppers” (239).
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In Silences, Olsen supplements Woolf’s well-known comments on the “Angel in the House” in “Professions for Women” with her working-class equivalent: “another angel…the essential angel, with whom Virginia Woolf (and most women writers, still in the privileged class) did not have to contend—the angel who must assume the physical responsibilities for daily living, for the maintenance of life” (34). So “lowly as to be invisible,” the essential angel makes no appearance in A Room of One’s Own. If Woolf nods to those women “not here tonight, for they are washing up the dishes and putting the children to bed” (117), Adrienne Rich draws our attention to “women whom she left out of the picture altogether—women who are washing other people’s dishes and caring for other people’s children, not to mention women who went on the streets last night in order to feed their children” (“When We Dead” 38).

In a tribute to the “essential angel” of her own childhood, Cisneros has acknowledged the importance of Woolf’s belief that a room of one’s own is a necessary precondition for writing. Allowing her room of her own, Cisneros’s mother enabled her daughter to create: “I’m here,” Cisneros explained to an audience of young writers, “because my mother let me stay in my room reading and studying, perhaps because she didn’t want me to inherit her sadness and her rolling pin” (“Notes” 75). In “Living as a Writer,” Cisneros again stresses that she has “always had a room of [her] own”: “As Virginia Woolf has said, a woman writer needs money, leisure, and a room of her own” (71). Elsewhere Cisneros indirectly questions the class bias of Woolf’s perspective, however, when she discusses her early “dream of becoming a writer” and the inspiration of Emily Dickinson as a female literary precedent for her poetry. “What I didn’t realize about Emily Dickinson,” Cisneros told a junior high audience, “was that she had a few essentials going for her”.

1) an education, 2) a room of her own in a house of her own that she shared with her sister Lavinia, and 3) money inherited along with the house after her father died. She even had a maid, an Irish housekeeper who did, I suspect, most of the household chores…. I wonder if Emily Dickinson’s Irish housekeeper wrote poetry or if she ever had the secret desire to study and be anything besides a housekeeper. (“Notes” 75)

As Woolf speculated on Shakespeare’s hypothetical, silenced sister, Cisneros speculates on Dickinson’s housekeeper, comparing her to her own mother, “who could sing a Puccini opera, cook a dinner for nine with only five dollars, who could draw and tell stories and who probably would’ve enjoyed a college education” if she could
have managed one (“Notes” 75). In The House on Mango Street, Esperanza’s mother tells her that she herself should never have quit school (91). “Study hard,” she tells her daughter, stirring the oatmeal, “Look at my comadres. She means Izaura whose husband left and Yolanda whose husband is dead. Got to take care all your own, she says shaking her head” (91).

Woolf stressed the importance of a female tradition for the woman writer: “we think back through our mothers if we are women” (A Room 79). For both Alice Walker and Sandra Cisneros, these mothers include women outside the “tradition” as it is conventionally understood, women who, perhaps anonymously, “handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see; or ...a sealed letter they could not plainly read” (Walker 240). Esperanza’s mother—her encouragement, but also what she has not written, not expressed—is central to the community of female relationships informing her daughter’s development as an artist. Esperanza’s tribute to her mother, “A Smart Cookie,” opens: “I could’ve been somebody, you know? my mother says and sighs.” Her list of talents—“She can speak two languages. She can sing an opera. She knows how to fix a T.V.”—is framed by her confinement in a city whose subway system she has never mastered, and extended in a list of unfulfilled desires: “Someday she would like to go to the ballet. Someday she would like to see a play” (House 90). The House on Mango Street strikingly enacts what Rachel Blau DuPlessis sees as a “specific biographical drama that has entered and shaped Künstlerromane by women”: “Such a narrative is engaged with a maternal figure and...is often compensatory for her losses....The daughter becomes an artist to extend, reveal, and elaborate her mother’s often thwarted talents” (93). Esperanza’s mother points to the girl’s godmothers (her own comadres, or, literally translated, “comothers,” powerful family figures in Chicano culture) as examples of the necessity “to take care all your own” (91). In the extended filiations of her ethnic community Esperanza finds a network of maternal figures. She writes to celebrate all of their unfulfilled talents and dreams and to compensate for their losses.

Cisneros loosely structures her series of prose pieces as a Künstlerroman, whereby the final piece circles back to the opening. Esperanza’s closing statement, “I like to tell stories. I am going to tell you a story about a girl who didn’t want to belong,” is followed by a repetition of the opening lines of the book that she is now able to write (109, 3). The paired sections opening and closing the book strongly evoke Esperanza’s maternal muse. While the opening chapter describes their ramshackle series of third-floor flats and the unsatisfac-
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tory house on Mango Street where Esperanza has no room of her own, her mother’s body in the second chapter provides all of the security and warmth and “room” that the small girl desires:

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, is the smell when she makes a little room for you on her side of the bed still warm with her skin, and you sleep near her, the rain outside falling and Papa snoring. The snoring, the rain, and Mama’s hair that smells like bread. (6-7)

The two closing sketches, “A House of My Own” and “Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes,” describe the grown Esperanza’s ideal house of her own where she can create, “a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem” (100), and also her new relation to Mango Street and her origins. The house on Mango Street becomes an overtly maternal figure who collaborates in her freedom and creativity: “I write it down and Mango says goodbye sometimes. She does not hold me with both arms. She sets me free” (110).

DuPlessis sees the circular structure of the twentieth-century woman’s Künstlerroman as a way of writing “beyond” the traditional endings available to women, what Woolf in A Room of One’s Own called “breaking the sequence” of conventional plot (A Room 85, 95). “In these works,” DuPlessis writes, “the female artist is given a way of looping back and reenacting childhood ties, to achieve not the culturally approved ending in heterosexual romance, but rather the reparenting necessary to her second birth as an artist” (94). The “maternal muse” and “reparenting motifs,” DuPlessis suggests, are among the “strategies that erode, transpose, and reject narratives of heterosexual love and romantic thralldom” (94). Esperanza contrasts fairy tale romances with the lives of the women around her as she develops a new narrative form to tell their stories and give shape to her own vocation. “You must keep writing,” her aunt tells her, “It will keep you free” (61).

2

There will be narratives of female lives only when women no longer live their lives isolated in the houses and the stories of men.

(Carolyn G. Heilbrun Writing a Woman’s Life 47)

In A Room of One’s Own, Woolf looked ahead to the woman in the future who would write a different sort of “novel,” “some new vehicle, not necessarily in verse, for the poetry in her” (80). She anticipat-
ed that women writers would need to break the sentence and to break the sequence, “the expected order,” in order to develop forms “adapted to the [woman’s] body” and expressive of women’s lives (85, 95, 81). Women’s books, she suggested, would possibly “be shorter, more concentrated, than those of men” (81), and would undoubtedly deal with new subjects (86-96). The House on Mango Street fulfills many of Woolf’s prophecies, most obviously in its brevity and generic instability. Cisneros herself has called her stories “a cross between poetry and fiction,” which she wanted her readers to be able to read both in and out of sequence: “I wanted to write a collection which could be read at any random point without having any knowledge of what came before or after. Or, that could be read in a series to tell one big story. I wanted stories like poems, compact and lyrical and ending with a reverberation” (“Do You Know Me?” 78).

Woolf specified gender and class as the two subject areas yet to be explored. The female writer of the future need no longer depict women exclusively in relation to men; she would be free to explore “relationships between women,” particularly friendships, “those unrecorded gestures, those unsaid or half-said words, which form themselves, no more palpably than the shadows of moths on the ceiling, when women are alone, unlit by the capricious and coloured light of the other sex” (A Room 86, 88). Further, Woolf wrote, “she will not need to limit herself any longer to the respectable houses of the upper middle classes” (92). In lectures Cisneros has explained that her subject emerged in a “defensive and rebellious” reaction to her white middle-class fellow graduate students at the University of Iowa Writer’s Workshop: “My intent was simply to chronicle, to write about something my classmates couldn’t” (“Do You Know Me?” 78).

Poverty was the “ghost” she attempted to escape before she found her subject, Cisneros told an audience of young writers (“Ghosts” 72). “As a poor person growing up in a society where the class norm was superimposed on a t.v. screen, I couldn’t understand why our home wasn’t all green lawn and white wood like the ones in ‘Leave It To Beaver’ or ‘Father Knows Best’” (72). The metaphor of the house emerged, Cisneros said, in a heated graduate seminar discussion of Gaston Bachelard’s Poetics of Space: “What did I know except third-floor flats. Surely my classmates knew nothing about that. That’s precisely what I chose to write: about third-floor flats, and fear of rats, and drunk husbands sending rocks through windows, anything as far from the poetic as possible” (73).

Julián Olivares argues that Bachelard’s book delineates a “poetics of space” that is particularly the provenance of the privileged upper-class white male, “probably never having to do ‘female’ housework
and probably never having been confined to the house for reason of his sex.” Bachelard’s reveries of “felicitous space,” he contends, evoke “images of a house that a woman might not have, especially an impoverished woman raised in a ghetto” (160). Olivares overlooks a number of feminist writers, however, who have explored the special relation of women to houses and rooms, the traditional realm of their “separate sphere.” In A Room of One’s Own Woolf described the creative power exerted by women in the drawing-room or nursery, “the centre of some different order and system of life” (90):

One goes into a room—but the resources of the English language would be much put to the stretch, and whole flights of words would need to wing their way illegitimately into existence before a woman could say what happens when she goes into a room.... One has only to go into any room in any street for the whole of that extremely complex force of femininity to fly in one’s face. How should it be otherwise? For women have sat indoors all these millions of years, so that by this time the very walls are permeated by their creative force, which has, indeed, so overcharged the capacity of bricks and mortar that it must needs harness itself to pens and brushes and business and politics. But this creative power differs greatly from the creative power of men. (91)

While it might be argued that Woolf’s privileged experience of domestic space more closely approximates an upper-class white Englishman’s than a contemporary woman of color’s in the United States, Toni Morrison has also commented on the peculiar “intimacy” of a woman’s sense of place, “a woman’s strong sense of being in a room, a place, or in a house.” “Sometimes my relationship to things in a house would be a little different from, say my brother’s or my father’s or my sons’,” she told Robert Stepto in an interview, “I clean them and I move them and I do very intimate things ‘in place’: I am sort of rooted in it, so that writing about being in a room looking out, or being in a world looking out, or living in a small definite place, is probably very common among most women anyway” (Stepto 213).9

The domestic realm arouses a variety of responses in contemporary women writers. Tillie Olsen has most vividly described the difficulty of making space in a woman’s daily life for writing: “habits of years—response to others, distractibility, responsibility for daily matters—stay with you, mark you, become you” (39). Esperanza boldly proclaims her intention to break these habits early: “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” (House 89).10 Gender roles, as well as class, condition Esperanza’s response to women’s confinement to the household. Olivares is largely correct in
his central premise that “Cisneros...inverts Bachelard’s pronouncement on the poetics of space; for Cisneros the inside, the here, can be confinement and a source of anguish and alienation” (161). In story after story of the women in her community, Esperanza recognizes that a room—if not of one’s own—can be stifling.

Her own grandmother, unhappily married, “looked out the window all her life, the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow” (11). Because Rafaela is beautiful, her husband locks her indoors on Tuesday nights while he plays dominoes; Rafaela is “still young,” Esperanza explains, “but getting old from leaning out the window so much” (79). Louie’s cousin Marin “can’t come out—gotta baby-sit with Louie’s sisters—but she stands in the doorway a lot” (23-24). “We never see Marin until her aunt comes home from work,” Esperanza tells us, “and even then she can only stay out front” (27). Across the street on the third floor, Mamacita, who speaks no English, “sits all day by the window and plays the Spanish radio shows and sings all the homesick songs about her country” (77). Sally’s father keeps her inside and beats her when he thinks of his sisters who ran away. Later Sally’s husband won’t let her talk on the phone or even look out the window:

She sits at home because she is afraid to go outside without his permission. She looks at all the things they own: the towels and the toaster, the alarm clock and the drapes. She likes looking at the walls, at how neatly their corners meet, the linoleum roses on the floor, the ceiling smooth as wedding cake. (102)

“There Was an Old Woman She Had So Many Children She Didn’t Know What to Do” suggests the Mother Goose character who lived in a shoe; “Rosa Vargas’ kids are too many and too much” and even the neighborhood has given up trying to help (29). Throughout Esperanza’s narrative shoes intersect with the theme of dwellings as images of constricting femininity.11 The enormous fat Mamacita with her tiny feet arrives in the United States with “a dozen boxes of satin high heels” and then never leaves her room again, perhaps because she’s fat, perhaps because she doesn’t speak English, perhaps because she can’t climb the three flights of stairs” (77). Sire ties his girlfriend Lois’s shoes as Esperanza concludes that Lois doesn’t know how. “Mama says those kind of girls, those girls are the ones that go into alleys. Lois who can’t tie her shoes. Where does he take her?” (73). In “The Family of Little Feet,” Esperanza and her girlfriends Lucy and Rachel spend a day teetering on high heels, sampling adult femininity. “It’s Rachel who learns to walk the best all
strutted in those magic high heels. She teaches us to cross and un-
cross our legs, and to run like a double-dutch rope, and how to walk
down to the corner so that the shoes talk back to you with every
step.” The men on the corner “can’t take their eyes off” them. The
grocer tells them they’re “too young to be wearing shoes like that,”
the shoes are “dangerous” and he’s going to “call the cops.” A bum
accosts Rachel and offers her a dollar for a kiss. “Tired of being beau-
tiful,” the girls abandon the shoes and never wear them again (40-42).

Gender identity in “The Family of Little Feet” becomes an arbitrary
cultural construct assumed like a pair of shoes.12 “The boys and girls live
in separate worlds,” as Esperanza explains to us (11), yet it is possible to
act like a male by refusing household chores, or to act like a female by
wobbling helplessly on high heels. Even “scientific facts” marking gen-
der difference, such as women’s hips, become part of the cultural pro-
duction of gender identity as the girls speculate on their functions:

They’re good for holding a baby when you’re cooking, Rachel says
turning the jump rope a little quicker. She has no imagination.
You need them to dance, says Lucy.
If you don’t get them you may turn into a man. Nenny says this and
she believes it. She is this way because of her age.
That’s right, I add before Lucy or Rachel can make fun of her. She is
stupid alright, but she is my sister.
But most important, hips are scientific, I say repeating what Alicia
already told me. It’s the bones that let you know which skeleton was a
man’s when it was a man and which a woman’s. (47)

Like the high heels, hips require practice. “You gotta know how to
walk with hips,” Esperanza explains, “practice you know—like if half of
you wanted to go one way and the other half the other” (50). As their
jump rope game progresses, what separates Nenny from the three older
girls is not the immaturity of her hips, but her inability to improvise new
rhymes on hips as they swing the rope. “Not that old song, I say. You
gotta use your own song. Make it up, you know? But she doesn’t get it or
won’t. It’s hard to say which. The rope turning, turning, turning” (50).

By improvising their own songs, Esperanza and her friends “write
beyond the ending” of the cultural scripts confining the women
around them,13 rejecting “that old song” that Nenny repeats, or the
“same story” that Minerva tells, every time she takes her husband
back (50, 85). Esperanza observes that the “stories the boys tell in the
coatroom” about her friend Sally are “not true,” and also that Sally
herself has perpetuated lies from the “storybooks and movies”: “Sally,
you lied. It wasn’t what you said at all…. The way they said it, the
way it’s supposed to be, all the storybooks and movies, why did you
lie to me?” (99). Just as the relationship between the two girls is more central to Cisneros’s loosely structured plot than any heterosexual bonds, so Esperanza seems to feel Sally’s betrayal more keenly than the rape she suffers while she waits for Sally at the carnival. “Sally Sally a hundred times,” she says, hoping her friend will “make him stop” (100). And later she repeats over and over, “You’re a liar. They all lied. All the books and magazines, everything that told it wrong. Only his dirty fingernails against my skin, only his sour smell again. The moon that watched” (100). When she cries, “I waited my whole life” (100), Esperanza bitterly evokes the “romance” of deflowering as well as the eternity she waited for Sally to rescue her.

Woolf suggested that twentieth-century women writers would be free to explore relationships between women, who in the past had “not only [been] seen by the other sex, but seen only in relation to the other sex” (A Room 86). The friendship between Esperanza and Sally in Mango Street recalls Clarissa’s bond with another Sally in Woolf’s experimental novel Mrs. Dalloway. Esperanza’s Sally, like Clarissa’s bohemian friend, represents danger and adventure: “Sally is the girl with eyes like Egypt and nylons the color of smoke” (House 81). While Clarissa’s Sally is undone by the relatively benign institutions of bourgeois marriage and motherhood, Esperanza’s Sally endures physical abuse from her father, the cruel gossip of the boys in the coatroom, and an unhappy marriage before she reaches eighth grade. When Sally ignores Esperanza’s attempt to “save” her from Tito and his friends, who significantly will return her keys only if she kisses each of them, the grief-stricken Esperanza loses the Edenic innocence of her girlhood: “I looked at my feet in their white socks and ugly round shoes. They seemed far away. They didn’t seem to be my feet anymore. And the garden that had been such a good place to play didn’t seem mine either” (98).14 Esperanza’s “monkey garden,” choked with weeds and abandoned cars, would seem “far away” from the flower-filled British terrace of Woolf’s novel, where Clarissa and Sally’s kiss was rudely interrupted by Clarissa’s suitor Peter and the intrusive cultural expectations of adult heterosexuality (Mrs. Dalloway 52-53).15 Yet within their disparate socioeconomic settings, both narratives self-consciously resist the closure of the conventional romance or marriage plot, which DuPlessis defines as “the use of conjugal love as a telos and of the developing heterosexual love relation as a major...element in organizing the narrative action” (200n22).

Tensions between Esperanza’s new narratives and “all the books and magazines, everything that told it wrong” are most evident in her use of fairy tales as counterpoints to women’s lives in the barrio. Locked in her room, Rafaela “dreams her hair is like Rapunzel’s” and
yearns to be rescued (79). Marin moons in the doorway under the streetlamp, hoping the boys will see her: “Is waiting for a car to stop, a star to fall, someone to change her life” (27). When they receive the gift of the discarded shoes, Esperanza and her friends shout, “Hurray! Today we are Cinderella because our feet fit exactly” (40). Their encounters with men as they strut in their glass slippers escalate in danger until they flee from the drunken “bum man,” a leering Prince Charming whose kiss they refuse.16

Princes are conspicuously absent or threatening in almost all of Esperanza’s stories. Rosa Vargas’s husband “left without even leaving a dollar for bologna or a note explaining how come” (29). Minerva’s “mother raised her kids alone and it looks like her daughters will go that way too” (84). Edna’s daughter Ruthie sleeps on a couch in her living room and “says she’s just visiting and next weekend her husband’s gonna come back to take her home. But the weekends come and go and Ruthie stays” (69). Esperanza’s godmothers’ husbands left or died (91). Minerva’s husband, who “left and keeps leaving,” throws a rock through the window when she “finally” puts him out. “Then he is sorry and she opens the door again. Same story. Next week she comes over black and blue and asks what can she do? Minerva. I don’t know which way she’ll go. There is nothing I can do” (85). When Sally marries a marshmallow salesman out of state, she tells Esperanza she is in love, but Esperanza thinks “she did it to escape” her father’s beatings. Trapped in her room with its linoleum roses and “ceiling smooth as wedding cake,” Sally is imprisoned by the very prince who was to rescue her (102).

Most of the women yearn for different endings. Minerva secretly 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” (84). On Tuesday nights Rafaela lowers a shopping bag on a clothesline from her locked room so that the children can send up coconut and papaya juice, “and wishes there were sweeter drinks, not bitter like an empty room, but sweet sweet like the island, like the dance hall down the street where women much older than her throw green eyes easily like dice and open homes with keys” (80). Yet if Rafaela desires her own key, she continues to dream of what Duplessis terms “romantic thralldom” (66-67), the same stories that locked her in her room: “And always there is someone offering sweeter drinks, someone promising to keep them on a silver string” (80). Marin also yearns for the silver string—a job downtown, where you “get to wear nice clothes and can meet someone in the subway who might marry you and take you to live in a big house far away” (26). Esperanza’s little sister Nenny insists “she won’t wait her whole
life for a husband to come and get her,” nor does she want to leave
the house like Minerva’s sister by having a baby: “She wants things
all her own,” Esperanza says, “to pick and choose. Nenny has pretty
eyes and it’s easy to talk that way if you are pretty” (88). Esperanza,
whose hair “never obeys barrettes or bands” (6), tells us that she is
the “ugly daughter,” “the one nobody comes for” (82). She dreams of
being a movie screen femme fatale, “beautiful and cruel”: “Her power
is her own. She will not give it away” (89). She has decided, she tells
us, “not to grow up tame like the others” (88).

Indifferent to the prince’s glass slipper, Esperanza seeks to develop
an autonomous identity. She and Lucy and Rachel decisively abandon
their high heels after a day of playing grownup princesses at the ball. In
a related episode, Esperanza, dressed in new clothes for her cousin’s
baptism, is ashamed to dance because of her old and scuffed brown and
white saddle shoes. Her feet “grow bigger and bigger” as she declines
invitations to dance until her uncle pulls her onto the dance floor:

My feet swell big and heavy like plungers, but I drag them across the
linoleum floor straight center where Uncle wants to show off the new
dance we learned. And Uncle spins me and my skinny arms bend the
way he taught me and my mother watches and my little cousins watch
and the boy who is my cousin by first communion watches and every-
one says, wow, who are those two who dance like in the movies, until
I forget that I am wearing only ordinary shoes, brown and white, the
kind my mother buys each year for school. (47)

Esperanza reconciles herself to “ordinary shoes” as she will later
reconcile herself to Mango Street. In both cases this reconciliation en-
tails a new freedom, to dance, to imagine a house of her own with her
“two shoes waiting beside the bed,” a house “quiet as snow,” “clean
as paper before the poem” (108). The blank page allows her the free-
dom to imagine new scripts for women’s lives. “You can never have
too much sky,” she tells us (33).

Woolf’s Mary Beton in A Room of One’s Own explained that her
aunt’s legacy of five hundred pounds a year “unveiled the sky” to her,
“substituted for the large and imposing figure of a gentleman,
which Milton recommended for my perpetual adoration, a view of
the open sky” (39). Esperanza’s first vision of a house with a room of
one’s own is inspired by her passionate sorrow for Sally, her wish
that Sally could escape the life she leads on Mango Street:

Sally, do you sometimes wish you didn’t have to go home? Do you
wish your feet would one day keep walking and take you far away
from Mango Street, far away and maybe your feet would stop in front
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of a house, a nice one with flowers and big windows and steps for you to climb up two by two upstairs where a room is waiting for you. And if you opened the little window latch and gave it a shove, the windows would swing open, all the sky would come in. (82-83)

In an environment where “there is too much sadness and not enough sky” (33), Esperanza’s dream is collective and redemptive: to liberate the women around her from the tyrannies of male houses and male plots.

3

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.

(Sandra Cisneros The House on Mango Street 110)

Pondering the doors shut by the male custodian of the library, Woolf in 1928 “thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out; and... how it is worse perhaps to be locked in” (A Room 24). To be confined within male structures might be as great a disadvantage to the female artist as to be outside them. To achieve the “freedom and fullness of expression” Woolf considered necessary to art, women must design new spaces appropriate to their dreams and needs. “A book is not made of sentences laid end to end,” wrote Woolf, “but of sentences built...into arcades or domes. And this shape too has been made by men out of their own needs for their own uses” (80).

As Esperanza shapes her narrative, images of constricting, infelicitous space are balanced by powerful feminine images of what Bachelard terms “felicitous space.” Their third-floor flat on Loomis above the boarded-up laundromat, which they had to leave “quick” when the water pipes broke, is an early source of shame to Esperanza, when the nun from her school says “‘You live there?’ ... You live there? The way she said it made me feel like nothing” (5). The series of third-floor flats, on Loomis, and before that on Keeler, and before that on Paulina, more flats than Esperanza can remember, would not seem to exemplify Bachelard’s intuition that “life begins well, it begins enclosed, protected, all warm in the bosom of the house” (7). What Esperanza “remember[s] most is moving a lot” (3). “I never had a house,” she complains to Alicia.
on Mango Street, “…only one I dream of” (107). Yet the “maternal features of the house” that Bachelard describes are literally exemplified in the felicitous peace of Esperanza’s mother’s body, “when she makes a little room for you on her side of the bed still warm with her skin, and you sleep near her,” “when she is holding you, holding you and you feel safe” (6). Within this shelter, the small girl can begin to dream.

The overcrowded house on Mango Street, with its “swollen” door, “crumbling” bricks, and “windows so small you’d think they were holding their breath,” is “not the house we’d thought we’d get,” Esperanza complains, “not the way they told it at all” (3-4). Yet Mango Street becomes an integral part of herself, the source of her art and her freedom. Las comadres, the three magical sisters, tell Esperanza: “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” (105). If Mango Street is “not the way they told it at all,” then Esperanza’s developing resolve is to re-member herself through a new telling that will not erase realities, and to begin by circling back to “what I remember most…Mango Street, sad red house, the house I belong but do not belong to” (110). Bachelard suggests that circular structures “help us to collect ourselves, permit us to confer an initial constitution on ourselves,” and advises that “by remembering ‘houses’ and ‘rooms,’ we learn to ‘abide’ within ourselves” (234, xxxiii). Esperanza’s negotiation with her origins is more ambivalent and less nostalgic than Bachelard’s, but remembering Mango Street is nevertheless intimately connected to the formation of her identity as a woman, an adult member of her community, and a writer.

Through Mango Street, Esperanza is able to explore the tensions between belonging and not belonging. Hers is a story, she tells us, “about a girl who didn’t want to belong” (109). In “My Name” she confides her rebellious desire to “baptize myself under a new name, a name more like the real me, the one nobody sees. Esperanza as Lisan- dra or Maritza or Zeze the X. Yes. Something like Zeze the X will do” (11). Her successive baptisms, like the names for the shape-shifting clouds in “And Some More,” keep Esperanza’s identity fluid. Yet she also acknowledges that the name Esperanza belongs to her, a legacy from her great-grandmother, a “wild horse of a woman.” “I have inherited her name,” Esperanza tells us, “but I don’t want to inherit her place by the window” (11). When Alicia tells her that “like it or not” she is Mango Street and will come back, she replies:

Not me. Not until somebody makes it better.
Who’s going to do it? The mayor?
And the thought of the mayor coming to Mango Street makes me laugh out loud.
Who’s going to do it? Not the mayor. (107)

Through naming herself and her community, Esperanza returns both to accept and to alter her inheritance. Her most conspicuous alliances when she constitutes herself as speaking subject are ethnic and local. The “we” she speaks is Hispanic, herself and her barrio neighbors. “Those who don’t know any better come into our neighborhood scared,” she says of outsiders:

But we aren’t afraid. We know the guy with the crooked eye is Davey the Baby’s brother, and the tall one next to him in the straw brim, that’s Rosa’s Eddie V. and the big one that looks like a dumb grown man, he’s Fat Boy, though he’s not fat anymore nor a boy. (28)

Names and stories create an intimate realm of safety in Esperanza’s early stories. “All brown all around we are safe” (29). In “And Some More,” a litany of names punctuates the girls’ conversation: Rachel’s cousin who’s “got three last names and, let me see, two first names. One in English and one in Spanish… Phyllis, Ted, Alfredo and Julie… Jose and Dagoberto, Alicia, Raul, Edna, Alma and Rickey…” (35-36). Musing on the Eskimos’s thirty names for snow, Esperanza and her friends supply over fifty-two names of the people around them, drawing their magic circle to a close with the communal declaration of their own names: “Rachel, Lucy, Esperanza, and Nenny” (38). Yet as Rachel, Lucy, Esperanza, and Nenny grow, this sense of community shifts. The dangers that threaten them come from without but also within their own neighborhood, even within their own households. Men’s names appear far less frequently in the latter part of Esperanza’s narrative, where women’s names and the bonds between women predominate. Alicia is “young and smart and studies for the first time at the university,” but her father defines her reality and her “place” when he insists that she is “just imagining” the mice in the kitchen and that “anyway, a woman’s place is sleeping so she can wake up early with the tortilla star” (31). Rafaela’s husband locks her in. Sally becomes a “different Sally” when she hurries “straight home after school,” where her father beats her “just because [she’s] a daughter” (82, 92). Minerva’s husband leaves her “black and blue” (85), and though she “cries” and “prays” and “writes poems on little pieces of paper” she remains trapped in the “same story,” the same cycle of violence. Esperanza and her girlfriends successfully flee the bum who wants to kiss them, but already Rachel, “young and dizzy,” is tempted by the “sweet things” he says and the dollar in his pocket,
and “who can blame her” (41). Later Esperanza endures the unwanted kiss of the “older Oriental man” at her first job, and the brutal sexual assault at the fair where she waits in vain by the grotesque red clowns for Sally.18 “Why did you leave me all alone?” (100). Sally’s escape from the violence of her father’s household leads to a new form of confinement and a husband who sometimes “gets angry and once he broke the door where his foot went through, though most days he is okay” (101). Impatient with writers who “make our barrios look like Sesame Street,” Cisneros told an interviewer that “poor neighborhoods lose their charm after dark.... I was writing about it in the most real sense that I know, as a person walking those neighborhoods with a vagina” (Aranda 69).

Esperanza’s dream of a house of her own—“Not a man’s house. Not a daddy’s.” (108)—is both solitary and communal, a refuge for herself and for others. In Felicitous Space, Judith Fryer dwells on the spaces women inhabit, as well as those they imagine:

It is not only, then, as Virginia Woolf suggested, that women have had no space to themselves, not only that they have been forbidden spaces reserved for men. Trapped, as she has been at home, a home that in America has been “not her retreat, but her battleground...her arena, her boundary, her sphere...[with] no other for her activities,” woman has been unable to move. She has been denied, in our culture, the possibility of dialectical movement between private spaces and open spaces. But let us not forget the room of one’s own...(50)

In Cisneros’s reconstruction of Woolf’s “room of one’s own,” Esperanza’s “house of my own” simultaneously represents an escape from the barrio, a rejection of the domestic drudgery of “home” (“Nobody’s garbage to pick up after” [108]), a solitary space for her creativity, and a communal expression of women’s lives. Like her name, her dream of a house is a legacy from her family. “Our house would be white with trees around it,” Esperanza explains in the opening chapter, “a great big yard and grass growing without a fence. This was the house Papa talked about when he held a lottery ticket and this was the house Mama dreamed up in the stories she told us before we went to bed” (4). The older Esperanza stops listening to her mother’s stories of the house when she begins to develop her own (86). As she gazes longingly at the houses on the hill, “the ones with the gardens where Papa works,” she vows that she’ll allow space for bums in the attic when she owns her own house (86). The house becomes as well an imaginary dwelling—the “home in the heart,” “house made of heart” prophesied by the witch woman Elenita (64)—as Esperanza’s sympathy for Sally animates her vision of a
house “with plenty of blue sky,” providing shelter for laughter and imagination: “And you could laugh, Sally. You could go to sleep and wake up and never have to think who likes and doesn’t like you. You could close your eyes and you wouldn’t have to worry what people said because you never belonged here anyway and nobody could make you sad and nobody would think you’re strange because you like to dream and dream” (83). Finally the house for Esperanza becomes a creative refuge, “quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem” (108). Many women in the community help her to arrive there: Edna’s Ruthie, who listens when she recites “The Walrus and the Carpenter”; Elenita, who tells her fortune; her Aunt Lupe, who listens to her read library books and her first poems; Minerva, who trades poems with her; the three sisters, who offer her prophecies; and her mother, who encourages her to study.

Esperanza dreams of release and of reunion. She will leave Mango Street, “the house I belong but do not belong to” (110), but, she tells us, “I won’t forget who I am or where I came from” (87). Traditionally the Künstlerroman closes with a departure. Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus in Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man leaves the poverty and numbing provinciality of Dublin behind him, ready to “fly” the “nets” of “nationality, language, religion” in order to devote himself to art (203). But Esperanza will go away “to come back”: “For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot out” (102). Her book, dedicated “A las Mujeres/To the Women,” will tell not only the story of her own artistic development but the stories of the many women around her. “You must remember to come back,” Lucy and Rachel’s mysterious aunt tells her, “for the ones who cannot leave as easily as you” (98).

First world feminist criticism is struggling to avoid repeating the same imperializing moves that we claim to protest. We must leave home, as it were, since our homes are often sites of racism, sexism, and other damaging social practices. Where we come to locate ourselves in terms of our specific histories and differences must be a place with room for what can be salvaged from the past and what can be made new.

(Caren Kaplan “Deterritorializations: The Rewriting of Home and Exile in Western Feminist Discourse” 194-95)

In A Room of One’s Own Woolf suggested that the female writer is always “an inheritor as well as an originator” (113). Her own legacy has crossed color and class lines in the feminist community. Michèle Barrett, writing from a Marxist-feminist perspective, applauds Woolf’s fruitful and still largely unexplored insight in A Room of One’s
Own that “the conditions under which men and women produce literature are materially different” (103). Tillie Olsen uses A Room to meditate on the silences of women more marginal than Shakespeare’s sister, exploring not only gender as one of the “traditional silencers of humanity,” but also “class—economic circumstances—and color” (24). A Room of One’s Own serves explicitly as the foundation for Alice Walker’s reconstruction of her African American mothers’ and grandmothers’ creative achievements in “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens.” Elsewhere Walker numbers Tillie Olsen and Virginia Woolf among the artistic models indispensable to her development (14). Amy Ling stresses “how much we share as a community of women and how often our commonalities cross cultural and racial barriers”: “Reading Barolini, like reading Alice Walker’s ‘In Search of our Mothers’ Gardens’ and The Color Purple, Audre Lorde’s poems and essays, and Virginia Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own is like finding sisters I didn’t know I had” (154).

While some women of color have expressed radical alienation from the privileged position of “our reputed forerunner Virginia Woolf,” others read Woolf through Olsen’s class perspective. “Ideally,” the Chicana writer Helena Maria Viramontes comments, “it would be bliss to manipulate the economic conditions of our lives and thus free our minds, our hands, to write. But there is no denying that this is a privilege limited to a certain sex, race, and class. The only bad thing about privilege, Virginia Woolf wrote (I’m paraphrasing from Tillie Olsen) was that not every one could have it” (34). Viramontes and Cherrie Moraga have acknowledged the inspiration of contemporary African American women writers for their own writing. Cisneros’s “house of my own”—“Not a daddy’s. A house all my own. With my porch and my pillow, my pretty purple petunias” (100)—may have been inspired not only by Woolf’s “room of one’s own” but also by a similarly complex crossing of Emily Dickinson’s dwelling “in Possibility—/A fairer House than Prose—,” Alice Walker’s maternal gardens and “Revolutionary Petunias,” and Audre Lorde’s landmark statement “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House.”

Jane Marcus has designated Virginia Woolf “the mother of us all” (Meese 91), who invited her feminist successors to become “co-conspirators against culture,” and who envisioned “untying the mother tongue, freeing language from bondage to the fathers and returning it to women and the working classes” (“Thinking Back” 83, 73). Yet Woolf’s relation to women of the working classes is frequently problematic. In 1930, when she was invited to write an introduction to a collection of papers by working women, Woolf found much of inter-
est in “these voices...beginning only now to emerge from silence into half-articulate speech.” But she also asserted emphatically, “It is not from the ranks of working-class women that the next great poet or novelist will be drawn” (“Memories” 148, 147). Woolf and many of her contemporary defenders seem all too often to imagine speaking from a privileged position for the obscure, the silenced, and the oppressed. In “Still Practice, A /Wrested Alphabet,” Marcus elaborates her well-known metaphor of Woolf as the swallow Procne voicing the tongueless Philomel’s text:

The voice of the nightingale, the voice of the shuttle weaving its story of oppression, is the voice which cries for freedom; an appropriate voice for women of color and lesbians, it speaks from the place of imprisonment as political resistance. The voice of the swallow, however, Procne’s voice, is the voice of the reader, the translator, the middle-class feminist speaking for her sisters: in a sense, the voice which demands justice. The socialist feminist critic’s voice is a voice of revenge, collaboration, defiance, and solidarity with her oppressed sister’s struggle. She chooses to attend to her sister’s story or even to explicate its absence, as Virginia Woolf told the story of Shakespeare’s sister. (215-16)

While Procne may support and even empower her sister, Marcus neglects to address the possibility that Procne may fail to attend to her sister’s story, may even herself silence Philomel in the process of explicating her story’s “absence.”

Certainly much of the anger and frustration voiced by the women of color in collections such as This Bridge Called My Back and Making Face, Making Soul derives from the easy assumption of power among white middle-class feminists, who seem either to ignore their presence or to usurp their voices. “What I mind is the pseudo-liberal ones who suffer from the white women’s burden,” Gloria Anzaldúa writes: “She attempts to talk for us—what a presumption! This act is a rape of our tongue and our acquiescence is a complicity to that rape. We women of color have to stop being modern medusas—throats cut, silenced into a mere hissing” (“La Prieta” 206). Chandra Mohanty firmly concludes her discussion of the position of “third world women” within Western feminist discourses with the directive: “It is time to move beyond the Marx who found it possible to say: They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented” (354). Countless Philomels have not lost their tongues. If she is truly to achieve “collaboration” and “solidarity” through her song, Procne needs to imagine more harmonious alternatives to her solo performance. Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde are among the growing number of feminists voicing the urgent necessity for dialogue be-
tween groups divided by race, ethnicity, class, and sexual preference within the feminist movement. While the editors of This Bridge Called My Back uncovered radical “separation” in their effort to forge a “connection” with white women, the aim of their anthology was nevertheless to “create a definition that expands what ‘feminist’ means to us” (This Bridge 61, xxiii).

By engaging A Room of One’s Own in The House on Mango Street, Cisneros opens a dialogue. Preserving Woolf’s feminist architecture, she enlarges and even reconstructs Woolf’s room to make space for her own voice and concerns. “I like to tell stories,” her protagonist announces simply. “I put it down on paper and then the ghost does not ache so much” (101). Woolf predicted that the female writer would remain conscious of “the experience of the mass...behind the single voice” and of “the common life which is the real life and not...the little separate lives which we live as individuals” (69, 117). The female writer would enjoy a greater anonymity than the male writer, who was unhappily prone to erect an “I” that overshadowed his subject (A Room 52, 115, 103-105). Esperanza, who often speaks as “we,” and sometimes is not present at all in her stories, achieves a collective as well as an individual voice. In vignettes such as “What Sally Said” and “A Smart Cookie,” she is primarily a listener, aware, as Woolf was, of the “accumulation of unrecorded life” on Mango Street (A Room 93). In “Geraldo No Last Name” we hear “what he told” Marin, the “story” that Marin told “again and again. Once to the hospital and twice to the police.” And the story that no one told: “Only Marin can’t explain why it mattered, the hours and hours, for somebody she didn’t even know. The hospital emergency room” (65-66). Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano has suggested that an impulse toward a “collective subject” is characteristic of the Chicana writer, who finds “the power, the permission, the authority to tell stories about herself and other Chicanas …from her cultural, racial/ethnic and linguistic community” (141).

Free to tell stories, Esperanza—hope—will speak for herself and her people, in her own voice, from a vividly imagined house of her own. “One day I’ll own my own house,” she assures us, “but I won’t forget who I am or where I came from” (81). She will speak in two tongues, English and Spanish, from inside and outside the barrio. She will speak for the nameless: for “Geraldo No Last Name”—“just another wetback” who died in the emergency room before anyone could identify him.

His name was Geraldo. And his home is in another country. The ones he left behind are far away. They will wonder. Shrug. Remember. Geraldo. He went north...we never heard from him again. (63)
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She will speak for the speechless: for Mamacita, who “doesn’t come out because she is afraid to speak English” (74), and whose son grows away from her in America.

And then to break her heart forever, the baby boy who has begun to talk, starts to sing the Pepsi commercial he heard on T.V.

No speak English, she says to the child who is singing in the language that sounds like tin. No speak English, no speak English, and bubbles into tears. No, no, no as if she can’t believe her ears. (75)

She will speak for all the women shut in their rooms: for Rafaela, “who is still young but getting old from leaning out the window so much” (76), for Sally, who “sits at home because she is afraid to go outside without [her husband’s] permission” (95), for her great-grandmother Esperanza, who “looked out the window all her life” (12). She will speak for the banished: for Louie’s other cousin, who gave all the kids a ride in his yellow Cadillac before the cops took him off in handcuffs (25-26), for Marin, whose employers will send her back to Puerto Rico.

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. (28)

She will speak for the dead: for her Aunt Lupe (54-57), for Geraldo, for her great-grandmother, for Lucy and Rachel’s baby sister (96), for Angel Vargas, “who learned to fly and dropped from the sky like a sugar donut, just like a falling star, and exploded down to earth without even an ‘Oh’” (31).

She will speak for herself: “I have decided not to grow up tame like the others who lay their necks on the threshold waiting for the ball and chain” (82). Instead, like the four trees “who grew despite concrete,” “four who reach and do not forget to reach” (71), Esperanza survives to reach for her own freedom and to release the stories of those around her. “There are so few of us writing about the powerless,” Cisneros said in a lecture, “and that world, the world of thousands of silent women, women like my mama and Emily Dickinson’s housekeeper, needs to be, must be recorded so that their stories can finally be heard” (“Notes” 76).

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Notes

1. See Smith 160-62, Walker 371-79, and Tate interview with Morrison 121. Lillian Robinson also professes herself “disheartened” by the “increasingly hegemonic, essentialist tendencies in feminist scholarship and criticism,” arguing forcefully for the total revaluation of women’s literature that an open canon would entail: “…the difference of gender is not the only one that subsists among writers or the people they write about. It may not always be the major one. Women differ from one another by race, by ethnicity, by sexual orientation, and by class. Each of these contributes its historic specificity to social conditions and to the destiny and consciousness of individual women. Moreover, these differences are not simply or even primarily individual attributes. They are social definitions, based on the existence and the interaction of groups of people and of historical forces. As scholarship—itself primarily or secondarily feminist—reveals the existence of a black female tradition or a working-class women’s literature, it is insufficient simply to tack these works onto the existing canon, even the emerging women’s canon. Once again, every generalization about women’s writing that was derived from surveying only relatively privileged white writers is called into question by looking at writers who are not middle class and white” (“Feminist Criticism” 148, 146). See also Robinson, “Canon Fathers and Myth Universe”; Judith Kegan Gardiner, Elly Bulkin, Rena Grasso Patterson, and Annette Kolodny, “An Interchange on Feminist Criticism”; the writings by women of color collected in This Bridge Called My Back, edited by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, and Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras, edited by Gloria Anzaldúa; and Audre Lorde’s collection of essays Sister Outsider, particularly “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” (also included in This Bridge Called My Back), “Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,” “The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism,” and “Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger.”

2. See also essays by Maria C. Lugones and Elizabeth V. Spelman, Caren Kaplan, Cora Kaplan, and Chandra Mohanty. Mohanty writes: “What is problematic, then, about this kind of use of ‘women’ as a group, as a stable category of analysis, is that it assumes an ahistorical, universal unity between women based on a generalized notion of their subordination. Instead of analytically demonstrating the production of women as socio-economic political groups within particular local contexts, this move limits the definition of the female subject to gender identity, completely bypassing social class and ethnic identities. What characterizes women as a group is their gender (sociologically not necessarily biologically defined) over and above everything else, indicating a monolithic notion of sexual difference. Because women are thus constituted as a coherent group, sexual difference becomes coterminous with female subordination, and power is automatically defined in binary terms: people who have it (read: men), and people who do not (read: women). Men exploit, women are exploited. As suggested above, such simplistic formulations are both reductive and ineffectual in designing strategies to combat oppressions. All they do is reinforce binary divisions between men and women” (344).

3. Jane Marcus leans heavily on this line in her defense of Woolf as a “socialist feminist”; see particularly “Still Practice, A/Wrested Alphabet” (235-36), and
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her discussion of the “romantic socialist vision of the charwoman” in “Daughters of Anger” (298-99). See also Lillian S. Robinson’s “Who’s Afraid of a Room of One’s Own?” for a class-based critique of A Room and specifically of Woolf’s stirring peroration (146).

4. I am indebted to Mary Lou Emery’s discussion of this passage in her unpublished conference paper. “The sentence quoted above,” Emery writes, “not only makes use of the no longer acceptable term ‘negress,’ but it constitutes its subject—‘woman’ and ‘one’—as exclusively white. The subject of the sentence excludes black women from the category ‘woman’ and presumes to judge them as ‘very fine’ in the same breath that it criticizes masculine imperialist habits of thought. My point here is not to smash the idol (feminism’s ‘great mother and sister’) Virginia Woolf but, borrowing a term from Julia Kristeva, to demassify it in an exploration of the ways ‘western feminist’ writings constitute colonized and working-class women as outside of the subject ‘woman.’” See also Mary Eagleton’s discussion of this passage in “Women and Literary Production” (42) and Michèle Barrett’s thoughtful deconstruction of a similar passage in her own earlier work “Ethnocentrism” (35).

5. Tillie Olsen makes similar observations on Emily Dickinson’s privileges in her essay “Silences” (Silences 17).

6. This form evolved gradually. Cisneros describes piecing the book together like a patchwork quilt (“Do You Know Me?” 79). In an interview, she explained that originally she did not even conceive of Esperanza as a writer: “When I started the series she was not going to be a writer. The book started out as simply memories. Later on—it took me seven years—as I was gaining my class, gender and racial consciousness, the book changed, the direction changed. I didn’t intend for her to be a writer, but I had gotten her into this dilemma, and I didn’t know how to get her out…. So the only way that I could make her escape the trap of the barrio was to make her an artist” (Aranda 69).

7. Cisneros, who published two volumes of poetry before The House on Mango Street, in fact sees many of these sketches as unrealized poems: “If several of the stories read like poems it’s because some of them originally had been poems. Either poems redone as a story (‘The Three Sisters’) or a story constructed from the debris of an unfinished or unsuccessful poem (‘Beautiful and Cruel’ and ‘A House of My Own’) (“Do You Know Me?” 79). Elsewhere she has referred to these prose pieces as “vignettes” (“The softly insistent voice of a poet,” Austin American Statesman, March 11, 1986, qtd. in Olivares 161).

8. See Judith Fryer’s Felicitous Space for a particularly rich and imaginative meditation on women’s interconnections with “the spaces they inhabit, break free from, transform” (xiii). In Nancy Mairs’s memoir Remembering the Bone House—directly inspired by Catherine Clément, Hélène Cixous, and Bachelard’s Poetics of Space—female embodiment unfolds in a series of domestic and erotic spaces (7).

9. Bachelard himself dwells on the phenomenology of “women’s construction of the house through daily polishing,” though he is perhaps more excited about the sacramental potential of housework than most housewives might be: “Through housewifely care a house recovers not so much its originality as its origin. And what a great life it would be if, every morning, every object in the house could be made anew by our hands, could ‘issue’ from our hands” (69).

10. In My Wicked Wicked Ways, Cisneros prefaces her title section with a line chosen from Maxine Hong Kingston’s The Woman Warrior: “Isn’t a bad girl almost like a boy?” The narrator in The Woman Warrior also flouts the female roles pre-
scribed for her by deliberately spilling soup, breaking dishes, neglecting her grooming, and affecting an unattractive limp.

11. "Perhaps women were once so dangerous that they had to have their feet bound," Maxine Hong Kingston writes in The Woman Warrior (23). Cisneros uses a line from The Woman Warrior as an epigraph to a section in My Wicked Wicked Ways; in The House on Mango Street Esperanza explains that "the Chinese, like the Mexicans, don't like their women strong" (12).

12. See Sandra Gilbert ("Costumes of the Mind") for an illuminating discussion of costumes and the creation of sexual identity in female modernist texts such as Woolf's Orlando.

13. The term "writing beyond the ending" is from Rachel Blau DuPlessis, who writes: "When women as a social group question, and have the economic, political and legal power to sustain and return to questions of marriage law, divorce, the 'couverture' status, and their access to vocation, then the relation of narrative middles to resolutions will destabilize culturally, and novelists will begin to 'write beyond' the romantic ending" (4). DuPlessis explores a variety of strategies that undermine the romance plot, itself "a trope for the sex gender system as a whole": "Writing beyond the ending means the transgressive invention of narrative strategies, strategies that express critical dissent from dominant narrative. These tactics, among them re-parenting, woman-to-woman and brother-to-sister bonds, and forms of the communal protagonist, take issue with the mainstays of the social and ideological organization of gender, as these appear in fiction" (5).

14. The Biblical resonance of Esperanza’s loss of innocence in the monkey garden is underlined when the children spread the rumor “that the monkey garden had been there before anything” (96). Though Esperanza is the one who wants to “save” Sally from kissing the older boys, she is left feeling “ashamed” and displaced from her former Edenic child’s play. The substitution of two young women—Esperanza and Sally—for Adam and Eve parallels the shift in narrative focus from the heterosexual romance plot to a female-centered Künstlerroman. Elizabeth Ordóñez has suggested three modes of discourse common to recent works by ethnic women writers that all seem clearly relevant to Mango Street: 1. “disruption of genre”; 2. “the power to displace ‘the central patriarchal text,’ that is, the Bible”; and 3. “the invention—either through inversion or compensation—of alternate mythical and even historical accounts of women” ("Narrative Texts" 19). Possibly Cisneros also acknowledges Woolf’s feminist agenda in Mrs. Dalloway when she adds solitude to a “room of one’s own” as necessary for the creation of art: “And I’m here because I didn’t marry my first boyfriend, that pest who never gave me any time alone, something crucial to every writer—‘aloneness’ breeds art” (“Notes” 75). Clarissa Dalloway rejects Peter’s marriage suit on similar premises.

16. Erlinda González-Berry and Tey Diana Rebolledo also see echoes of “Little Red Riding Hood” in this scene, as the bum, like the wolf, asks the girls to come closer and closer (116). González-Berry and Rebolledo argue persuasively that Cisneros plays these fairy tales against a new model of the female Bildungsroman whereby the heroine is allowed the mythic quest and achievement of the traditional male hero.

17. María C. Lugones and Elizabeth V. Spelman explore “the differences among women and how these differences are silenced” through a dialogue. The Hispana in the dialogue reflects on the different contexts in which she uses the
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word “we.” In the paper, “when I say ‘we,’ I am referring to Hispanics,” she writes; ‘you’ refers to “the white/Anglo women that I address.” However, she adds, “‘we’ and ‘you’ do not capture my relation to other non-white women,” and in a footnote she meditates on her general use of “we” outside of the paper: “I must note that when I think this ‘we,’ I think it in Spanish—and in Spanish this ‘we’ is gendered, ‘nosotras.’ I also use ‘nosotras’ lovingly and with ease and in it I include all members of ‘La raza cosmica’ (Spanish-speaking people of the Americas, la gente de colores: people of many colors). In the US, I use ‘we’ contextually with varying degrees of discomfort: ‘we’ in the house, ‘we’ in the department, ‘we’ in the classroom, ‘we’ in the meeting. The discomfort springs from the sense of community in the ‘we’ and the varying degrees of lack of community in the context in which the ‘we’ is used” (“Have We Got a Theory” 575). Although The House on Mango Street is clearly a feminist text, Esperanza does not use “we” to refer to women; instead “we” refers to herself and her family, herself and her childhood girlfriends, and herself and her neighborhood ethnic community (“brown all around”).

18. Esperanza’s “first job” is at the Peter Pan Photofinishers, where she paradoxically must appear grown up by pretending to be older than she is, and where the older man’s kiss “on the mouth” damages her innocence. Both her violations come from men outside of her culture. For useful discussions of the rape in “Red Clowns” and violence against women in Mango Street, see María Herrera Sobek, Ellen McCracken, and Ramón Saldívar.


20. Walker quotes repeatedly from A Room of One’s Own in this landmark essay. Her bracketed substitutions in Woolf’s prose revise Woolf’s perspective to incorporate black women’s experiences in often startling ways; however, she is clearly inspired by Woolf’s essay. Elsewhere she mentions that she has taught Woolf and Kate Chopin in her course on black women writers, “because they were women and wrote, as the black women did, on the condition of humankind from the perspective of women” (“From an Interview” 260).

21. The phrase is from Trinh T. Minh-ha (246). See also Gloria Anzaldúa (“Speaking in Tongues” 170), and Nellie Wong, who writes: “You are angered by the arrogance of some articles that would tell you that Virginia Woolf is your spiritual mother, your possible role model, for the work you have to do: to write. And why are you angered except for the fact that she was white and privileged, yet so ill that she walked into the sea” (178). Toril Moi offers a somewhat useful discussion of Woolf’s controversial position in contemporary white feminist theory in “Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?,” though she is conspicuously uninterested in women writers of color.

22. “Once I discovered the Black women writers—Walker, Morrison, Brooks, Shange, again to name a few,” Viramontes writes, “womanism as a subject matter seemed sanctioned, illuminating, innovative, honest, the best in recent fiction that I’ve seen in a long time” (“Nopalitos” 37). In an interview, Moraga remarked, “I feel that I am a part of a movement of women of color writers. I feel that I have gotten a lot of inspiration from Black women writers in this country” (Umpierre 66).

23. See Walker’s discussion of the title poem in Revolutionary Petunias in “From an Interview” (266–69). Lorde’s influential essay appears in both Sister Outsider and This Bridge Called My Back. Cisneros credits Emily Dickinson, her “favorite American poet,” with giving her “inspiration and hope all the years in high
school and the first two in college when I was too busy being in love to write” ("Notes” 74, 75). She prefaces the four sections of My Wicked Wicked Ways with epigraphs from Emily Dickinson, Gwendolyn Brooks, Maxine Hong Kingston, and the Portuguese feminist text The Three Marias. These choices seem deliberately to suggest the national, international, class, and ethnic range of her feminist alliances.

24. See particularly Rich’s “Disloyal to Civilization,” the essays in Lorde’s Sister Outsider, which also includes an “interview” dialogue between Lorde and Rich, and the essays in Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras, ed. Gloria Anzaldúa. Richard Ohmann has recently written of the challenges involved in all “alliance politics.” Reflecting on his role as a white male who “work[s] in women’s studies,” he points out, “What we do there [in feminism] with our experience, our competence, and our gender and class confidence, is a matter to be negotiated through caution, flexibility, improvisation, listening, and often doubtless through a strategic fade into the wallpaper. But I don’t see drawing back from the knowledge that feminism is our fight, too. So is racial equality, so is gay liberation, so is antiimperialism. I see the difficulties of our participation in these struggles as parallel to those of our joining in women’s liberation, and in consequence I see alliance politics as our challenge and aim” ("In, With” 187).

Works Cited

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