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American Life Writing

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The oeuvre as the result of the identity crisis

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Introduction

The House on Mango Street is “a story about a girl who didn't want to belong” (Cisneros 109). It is structured as a series of vignettes, telling the story of the 12-year-old Esperanza Cordero, a Chicana girl, growing up in a Hispanic neighborhood of Chicago. The novel presents the protagonist over the time span of one year. With entering adolescence, she becomes part of the category of a young woman in a poor and patriarchal community. The themes of race, class and gender oppression intersect in Esperanza’s character and further, more sensitive matters such as sexuality, identity, domestic violence, and sexual harassment become important topics in this coming-of-age novel.

Recognizing the fact that Cisneros does not begin the story of Esperanza with telling the reader how and when her protagonist came to the United States - unlike most other immigrant authors do in their autobiographies, we hereby encounter a different start in the life writing. The story itself contains nonetheless many typical patterns and tropes of immigrant writing as Esperanza's dream to have a house of her own is introduced on the very first pages: “A real house”, but the “house on Mango Street isn't it” (Cisneros). The tropes of the success story, the self-emergence, as the maker of one's own life become apparent here. Eventually, Esperanza's story covers an identity crisis as she is coming of age and grappling with societies power hierarchies of sexism, sexual harassment, and domestic violence.

Sandra Cisneros’ text is quite a different literary work compared with the other immigrant stories we have discussed in our *American Life Writing* seminar. As Cisneros herself is of Mexican American origin and grew up in a Hispanic neighborhood in Chicago too (Montagne), we consider these remarkable overlapping characteristics to infer that she has written a rather autobiographical story. The vignettes are based on Cisneros’ life and stories of her neighbors and students. In *Understanding Contemporary Chicana Literature* we are introduced to further biographical aspects of Cisneros' life which seem to be well-incorporated in her protagonist's life. Living in a condition which was “leaving her marginalized as a consequence of her gender”, she was constantly moving from one place to another in urban neighborhoods. Feeling solitary and writing stories about her life in the form of poetry, she discovered “the voice she had unconsciously suppressed, the voice of the barrio.” This personal information seems to validate the assumption that Cisneros adapted her

biography into a “modified autobiographical structure” for *The House on Mango Street* (Madsen 106–07).

This structure definitely breaks with Lejeune’s classical understanding of autobiography being a contractual genre. His concept, the autobiographical pact, follows the idea that the author of an autobiographical text gives their signature of being identical with the narrator and protagonist of the same text. This contract therefore allows no fiction. Norma Klahn instead explains in her contribution *Literary (Re)Mappings: Autobiographical (Dis)Placements by Chicana Writers* her understanding of “autobiographical fictions” as “the construction of identities in the present by reactivating memories” (116). This is clearly what happens in Cisneros’ text. It appears that Cisneros is following rather De Man’s understanding of autobiography: “[it] is not a genre or a mode, but a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts” (DeMan 921). The autobiographical project produces the life of the writer in a self-portraiture and “thus determines, in all its aspects, by the resources of its medium” (920), meaning a text can never be anything but fictional.

Having set this clear and referring to Klahn’s statement, this autobiographical fiction by Cisneros creates an identity in its protagonist Esperanza. The story of a girl who didn’t want to belong is the story of an identity creation, moving through an identity crisis. *Out of the Margins* reveals Sandra Cisneros’ realization of her power in the uniqueness of her poor family background to “find her unique voice precisely by writing about such” in vision of *The Poetics of Space* (Antoszek 152). This biographical moment happens as the author’s writing guides her protagonist Esperanza through her identity crisis. This introductory part leads to my thesis that Cisneros creates a literally productive outcome of Esperanza’s identity crisis through her fictional autobiography. This paper is going to elucidate in three parts how Esperanza’s identity crisis is negotiated throughout the process of the creation of the book.

Negotiation through the House

The house on Mango Street is the central setting in Esperanza's story, a place chosen by her parents to be her home, a place from which she starts on all relationships with the female neighbors as characters of the story, on the relationship with herself and with the community she is growing up in. The house furthermore functions metaphorically as a unit in which time and space intertwine and provides space in time for the development of Esperanza's identity. In the process of identity formation, we consider space to be of high importance for its construction. The house on Mango Street is "a key figure of identity" (Antoszek 151–52) and consequently holds as an important figure during the process of Esperanza's identity crisis, throughout her stories.

Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope allows to examine the house as a place "where complicated issues of race, gender, sexuality, class, and nationality intersect – spatially and temporally" (Holmgren Troy 12). The name chronotope expresses "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (Holquist 84). The chronotope is understood here as well as in Bakhtin's work "as a formally constitutive category of literature. [...] Time [...] becomes artistically visible; likewise; space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope" (84). The house on Mango Street takes center stage as the time comes when Esperanza and her family move in. The house as a space becomes the central issue of Esperanza's identity crisis as she is making this place responsible for her shame of living in a home which merely provides enough room for herself to develop and proper housing conditions for her family. Instead, it becomes the place Esperanza lives in at the time of her coming of age, noticing the social hierarchies around her gender.

Hence, the house can be seen as an "image of living under occupation" (Madsen 113) as the social categories of race, class and gender intersect in the literary feature of the chronotopic house on Mango Street. In contrast, "the ideal dream house [...] becomes a symbol of the writer's attainment of her identity through artistic creation" (McCracken 66). McCracken is debunking the accusation of Esperanza's desire for a house of one's own as appearing rather individualistic, instead "Cisneros socializes the motif of the house, showing

it to be a basic human need left unsatisfied for many of the minority population under capitalism." The inequities of income distribution in U.S. society lead to the inadequate housing situation of many in the Chicano community to which we are introduced with the description of the broken water pipes in the old house on the very first pages of the first vignette. McCracken focalizes a "positive objectification of the self" in Esperanza's desire as she is searching for a place to "provide to the process of artistic creation" rather than owning private property (McCracken 64–65). The house of one's own signifies a much-needed domestic space for processing the own personhood of every child through having a private sphere, providing room for the development of not only creativity but also self-worth. In Esperanza's surrounding every female character's domestic space is forcefully occupied by violent men who are, despite class distinctions, the winners in the patriarchal system. Like the feminist Virginia Woolf elaborated in her famous essay, a room of one's own next to enough money to pay for paper and ink is essential for women as to be able to become writers (Woolf). Esperanza claims such a space for herself in which she can be creative and express herself. "[T]he house provides a controlling metaphor [chronotope] [...] and that Esperanza's growing awareness of herself as an artist is tied to her need to discover a space of her own; a place to think her own thoughts and to write them down in an appropriate silence" (Madsen 127).

We hereby find an important characteristic feature of immigrant life writing: the doctrine of individualism. In Esperanza's case the doctrine applies in how she is the maker of her own rather on the level of the development of her identity through owning an appropriate house. One day, she will own her own house, but she will not forget who she is and where she comes from. She will offer the homeless her future home as she knows "how it is to be without a house" (Cisneros 87). Once more Esperanza's words are proving her community-oriented senses over an egocentric desire in the vignette *Bums in the attic*. She views "her departure from the Mango Street house to enable her artistic production in social rather than isolationist terms" (McCracken 66) as we can figure from the very last sentences of the novel: "They will know I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot get out" (Cisneros 110). Nevertheless, she needs to leave the place of the house on Mango Street for a certain time, long enough as to develop her writing skills to be able to break the silence of the community of Chicana women she leaves behind through writing about them.

Accordingly, Esperanza's identity crisis is negotiated through the house on Mango Street as a chronotope for her inner development of growing up, realizing the intersecting social categories bound onto her and of finally finding her identity of being a writer. This chapter has argued how "narratives of place recognize the ways space and location are important in the processes of identity formation" (Klahn 116). The following chapter analyzes how Esperanza's identity crisis is negotiated through the lyrical form of poem writing, which appears to be the dominant form of writing in Cisneros' autobiographical fiction.

Negotiation through the lyrical form

"Feminist scholars have time and again claimed that writing style is 'the method of inquiry' itself, and that 'mainstream textual formations are often related to a system that privileges certain kinds of knowledge over other, subjugated knowledge'" (Ilmonen 19).

It was during the late 1970s, early 1980s, when "a wide corpus of fiction – essays, novels, manifestos, short stories, poetry – began to emerge", processing and performing the intersectional forms of oppression experienced by women of Color. Since that time, intellectuals of the Black and PoC[1] community "invite us 'to discover "theory" in "poetry"' and vice versa (Covi, qtd. in Ilmonen 12), until today. Cisneros walks in those footsteps when she makes her autobiographical protagonist Esperanza process and express her intersectional experiences of coming of age as a woman in a poor neighborhood in the Chicana culture through her poem writing. To give expression to the experiences of herself and the multiple oppressed women in Esperanza's surrounding in Mango Street, "she had to 'transform the silence into language'" (Lorde, qtd. in Ilmonen 14) as many other female writers of Color did before her.

The simplicity of the chosen language stands out in this fictional autobiography by Cisneros. Instead of choosing a more formal, academically inclined speech as we find it in

[1]Black and People of Colour are capitalized as they are political self-designations, having an empowering impact while symbolizing the common experience that comes with racism.

autobiographical texts of the American Standard, mentioning Franklin and Malcom X here, Cisneros "recuperates the simplicity of children's speech, paralleling the autobiographical protagonist's chronological age in the book" (McCracken 64). Meanwhile, the first-person narration is brings across the "nuances of a child's expression, balanced against the demands of the vocabulary of adulthood into which Esperanza is entering" (Madsen 131), Cisneros' text as a whole uses "a hybrid form that weaves poetry into prose" (105), creating a linguistic texture of symbolism and imagery that one can find in almost every vignette in which Esperanza is describes her surroundings. The chosen stories in the form of vignettes function as self-containing and autonomous units, yet for the narration of the novel they follow "an emotionally logical fashion" to form the process of Esperanza and "her developing consciousness of herself as an artist" (110).

As the African American poet Audre Lorde outlines in her feminist works, we find "enormous differences in the material demands between poetry and prose. As we reclaim our literature, poetry has been the major voice of poor, working-class, and Colored women" (Lorde 855). This is because "poetry is the most economical. It is the one which is the most secret, which requires the least physical labor, the least material, and the one which can be done between shifts" (855) and hereby seems to fit perfectly for all oppressed groups in a patriarchal and capitalistic system. In Esperanza's life we find exactly these circumstances when we are introduced to Minerva who "has many troubles", one being her violent, physically abusive husband. Cisneros chooses the poetic form of rhythmic language to formulate this misery when Esperanza expresses "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." Minerva finds a bit of release between her cries in writing "poems on little pieces of paper" and exchanging them with Esperanza (Cisneros 84).

Furthermore, with the usage of direct speech in the vignettes *Sally* and *Red Clowns,* Esperanza raises her voice toward Sally when she first tries to make Sally aware of her oppressed situation and then exposes her to be a liar after Esperanza was raped, hereby becoming a victim and survivor of the most aggressive form of entering sexuality with another person in her adolescence. This usage of direct speech in the poetic vignette might put the reader in a more emotional effected state of reading as it "empowers the object as agent by forcing the reader to engage *with* the poem" (Ilmonen 18). For Esperanza it seems to be

indeed a start of breaking her silence after using strong poetic imagery to describe the garden containing “sunflowers big as flowers on Mars and thick cockscombs bleeding the deep red fringe of theater curtains” (Cisneros 94) in the vignette before, *The Monkey Garden.* The vignette started in this calm way of describing her surroundings, a place where she is able to let her poetic thoughts blossom. When the strange plays of Sally with the boys started though, “something inside [Esperanza] wanted to throw a stick” (ibid. 96). Realizing that Sally does not want to be rescued by her, Esperanza formulates a maturing moment through her poetry when she wakes up after a nap under a tree realizing that “the garden that had been such a good place to play” did not seem to be her place anymore, comparing it with her feet, which did not seem to be her feet anymore (ibid. 98). This maturing moment comes across clearly as we are moving toward the end of the novel. This high level of introspection appears to be, next to being a characteristic feature of immigrant life writing, a proving dynamic of Esperanza’s coming of age.

In sum, after using various forms of poetic features in the first two-thirds of the vignettes, the last third of the novel stands out as Esperanza is using direct speech to address Minerva and Sally, the two young women closest to her. This seems to capture the process of Esperanza, starting to write her experiences down in poem-like vignettes, then using direct speech to address her friends who are suffering under the same oppression the patriarchy is offering all three of them. Finally, she ends her writings when the last vignette *Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes* is finished, and Cisneros is offering us as the readers the productive outcome of Esperanza’s identity crisis with this autobiographical fiction in our hands. Writing poetry becomes “the real business of living” as one enters a contesting process of battling against all the intersecting pressures of growing up as a Chicana woman. The enactment of writing becomes self-liberating (Madsen 128).

Cisneros like Esperanza like Lorde “needed art to articulate intersecting identity positions. [...] Linda Garber, in her influential study, refers to such identity-political literary writings as ‘identity poetics’” (Ilmonen 12). Lorde, like Woolf before, mentions a room of one’s own which “may be” necessary for the production of literature but, more importantly, calls out for witnessing the awareness of intersectionality of age, race, class and sex when it comes to the effects of producing art (Lorde 855). This intersectionality is the third dynamic

which is going to be analyzed in this paper by way of negotiating Esperanza's identity crisis throughout the autobiographical novel.

Negotiation through coming of age in an intersectional manner of race, class and gender

The two vignettes toward the end of the novel *The Monkey Garden* and *Red Clowns* are not only interesting from the viewpoint of analyzing Esperanza's developing poetics, the two stories likewise "reveal Esperanza's growing awareness of the link between sex, male power, and violence in patriarchal society" (McCracken 68). All the men in Esperanza's stories, be it the father who beats his daughter, the husbands who lock away their wives, the men who rape or sexually harass women or "the corner grocer's attempt to control female sexuality by threatening to call the police to stop the girls from wearing the heels" in *The Family of Little Feet*, "the men in these stories control or appropriate female sexuality by adopting one or another form of violence as if it were their innate right" (McCracken 67). This form of male power is tying these women down, through the institutions of marriage and family or, in general, through the social system of patriarchy which gives men moral authority and the social privilege to dominate other genders.

As the novel is dedicated "A las Mujeres To the Women", providing a cluster of focalized female characters taking part in Esperanza's life on Mango Street, the book itself as the productive outcome of Esperanza's identity crisis captures a bundle of knowledge about the life realities of women in the Chicano culture *for* these marginalized women who are usually silenced by the several forms of patriarchal violence the men in the stories exert. This is to say, not without underlining, that patriarchal violence is part of a global system of male privilege not only in Black or PoC communities but in the *white*[2] dominated Global North as well. Esperanza though manages to create stories about these life realities of women in her marginalized group, writing down her life reality which is about coming of age in the socially constructed and intersecting categories of race (Chicana), class (poor) and gender (woman).

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[2]The italic spelling symbolizes the constructive character of *white* as a social position, which is constructed through the power dominion of racism.

She hereby intersectionalizes the genre of writing itself, like Lorde did before her (Ilmonen 14).

Intersectionality became a feminist buzzword as “it sought to understand ‘the social and material realities of women’s lives’” (Davis, qtd. in Ilmonen 11) that were and are until today multiple simultaneously intersecting forms of oppression. In the vignette *Hips* Esperanza is confronted with the mainstream assumption of female identity being inscribed upon *the female body*[3] as the girls discuss about the necessity of knowing how to walk with the hips of a woman (Cisneros 50) and hereby learn how to act like a woman. Later, in the vignette *Beautiful & Cruel* Esperanza then starts reflecting strongly about the gender pattern she is being assigned to by society around her. She does not let her personal qualities as an individual be tied to lookism and the beauty norms which come with it. Instead, she has “decided not to grow up tame like the others who lay their necks on the threshold waiting for the ball and chain” (ibid. 88). She observes from all the women she has met so far in her neighborhood that being silenced means being chained for a lifetime, locked away into a house and being held small as a wife or a daughter under guidance of a man. She has begun her “own quiet war. Simple. Sure. [She is the] one who leaves the table like a man, without putting back the chair or picking up the plate” (Cisneros 88–89). She hereby in fact only passes on the work of washing the plate to another woman in the family household, but she begins to rebel and seriously questions gender roles.

The first dynamic of Esperanza’s intersectionally lived identity crisis is about what it means to be a woman. “[T]he literary expression of Latino groups in the U.S., including Chicanos/as, had been focusing on identity problematics since its beginnings in the second half of the nineteenth century” (Mujcinovic, qdt. in Antosezek 9) and with it “the question of identity and the processes of its construction” (Antoszek 9). Chicana women need to be distinguished here from Chicanos, as the role of gender oppression adds on to the dynamics of race and class categorization. During the process of Esperanza’s coming of age she deconstructs her identity into these three dynamics which leads her out of her identity crisis.

[3] I write *the female body* in italics here to symbolize its constructed character, as people get assigned male or female at birth based on their sex to categorize them into a binary system. Whether or not their gender fits into these categories have become an important issue whilst categorizing body parts to a sex.

She questions the gender role of being a woman and claims a space for her own, a house in which she is not forced to live under any men and a space which allows for her creativity to develop as a writer. Connecting this with Bakthin who sees chronotopes as being able “to find themselves in complex interrelationships”, having the general characteristic of *dialogical* interactions (Holquist 252), these intersectional dynamics interact in the house chronotope which has been analysed in the first chapter of this paper. Esperanza reveals how the house on Mango Street symbolizes the class category which she was born into through formulating her desire of owning a house of her own. Processing these interacting and intersecting dynamics, her race category of being a Chicana influences her form of writing poetry as she notes down the life realities of the woman in her neighborhood in poem-like stories. Hereby, she takes part in the making of Chicana literature, which has provided ever since “feminist perspectives on the issues of self-definition and emancipation” (Antoszek 9). In Esperanza, Cisneros manages to create a character who is able to subvert the oppressive definitions of all the categories her intersectionality carries with her and leads her with the development of her poetic writing into salvation of her identity crisis.

Conclusion

This paper was meant to elucidate in three parts how Esperanza’s identity crisis is negotiated throughout the process of the creation of the book. Her deepest desire is to have a house of her own from the very first pages of the novel. The formulation of this desire transforms the house into a key figure which symbolizes, according to Bakthin’s concept, an “internal chronotope (that is, the time-space of [her] represented life)” (Holquist 130). This literary figure accompanied her throughout her process of coming of age, realizing, and battling all the complicated issues of race, class and gender which intersect in her character. Esperanza chose poetry as her form of art while processing the life realities of all the women in her neighborhood and hereby discovering the identity of a writer.

To write down the stories of all the oppressed ones is, in Cisneros’ understanding, “the opportunity to do something for the silenced women” (Cisneros, qdt. in Madsen 134). This understanding is adapted by Esperanza who realizes that after going away she will come back

for the ones who cannot get out. She realizes "for the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (Lorde 859). Knowing she needs to leave the house on Mango Street to develop her identity of being a writer in "a house quiet as snow, a space for [her]self to go, clean as paper before the poem" and that she is "too strong for her to keep me here forever" (Cisneros 108), Esperanza finally gains complete confidence in her identity as a writer as she will pack her "bags of books and paper" and "will say goodbye to Mango" (ibid. 110).

Aranda suggest the definition of a story to be "something that someone wants to listen to" (Madsen 129). Esperanza states in her last vignette of Mango Street that she is going to tell us, the readers, "a story about a girl who didn't want to belong." Following Aranda's definition, she already knows that her storytelling is waiting to be listened to. She has gained much confidence in herself and therefore in her identity, finding a way out of her identity crisis by writing down her story. Cisneros formulates that being a writer includes the privilege and the duty to note down the worlds of those who remain silenced. With this at hand, "Chicana writers elect to redefine and reinvent themselves through their writing". (Cisneros, qdt. in Madsen 134) Finally, with the creation of the autobiographical novel Cisneros enables Esperanza to embrace literary writing and guides her out of her identity crisis. "The construction of identity through writing represents a synchronic moment fixed through the text itself" (Klahn 123).

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