Chicana Empowerment Through Escape:

Coping with Poverty and Womanhood in *The House on Mango Street*

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Cisneros uses Esperanza as a conduit through which the reader may view and learn about the confines placed on poor Latinas in *The House on Mango Street* (1991). Throughout this essay I will analyze Esperanza's understanding of established Chican@"^1" gender roles through a study of vignettes focusing on women in Esperanza's community. Esperanza observes these women in her community in order to build a schema of women's roles in society. She incorporates trapped wives, overworked mothers and abused daughters, among others, into her schema. However, in her community she does not find an independent, autonomous woman. Though this type of woman falls outside the schema she builds about women's roles, Esperanza nevertheless recognizes this role and decides to fill it. To become an independent, autonomous woman Esperanza must break free from the accepted gender roles in her community as well as escape from the poverty which envelops her. Therefore, this essay will also attend to the compounding of poverty and confining Chican@ gender roles which incite Esperanza's desire to escape Mango Street. Esperanza must leave Mango Street in order to achieve success as defined by mainstream American culture. By leaving, she must leave part of herself behind in order to find a new self, a

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^1 Chican@ refers to both Mexican American women, Chicanas, and Mexican American men, Chicanos, at the same time
self undefined by men or poverty. In order to connect Esperanza's experience to the contemporary experiences of poor minority women, I will also comment upon two artworks which were shown in the exhibit "The House on Mango Street: Artists Interpret Community". This exhibit, first housed in the National Museum of Mexican Art in Chicago, grouped together pieces of art which represent and comment upon salient themes in Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*.

One of the major themes in *The House on Mango Street* is that Chicanas must learn to break beyond the gender roles that men establish for them, in order to become autonomous and in order to fully become themselves. This theme is evident in the vignette "My Name". Esperanza inherits her great-grandmother's name, but she does not want to inherit the confining gender roles that restricted her great-grandmother. The story of Esperanza's great-grandmother provides the first clear account of the subordination of women that Esperanza describes. Esperanza's great-grandmother was independent until Esperanza's great grandfather came along and "threw a sack over her head and carried her off" (Cisneros 11). This 'kidnapping' made Esperanza's great-grandmother the unequivocal property of Esperanza's great grandfather. Due to her subordination, Esperanza's great-grandmother became submissive, "look[ing] out the window her whole life" (11). The established gender values of Chican@s trapped her, confined her in too narrow of a space to be anything more than a Chicana as defined by patriarchal precepts. Esperanza wants to avoid her great-grandmother's fate. Esperanza wants to escape the gender norms that she metaphorically inherits by taking on her great-grandmother's name. Through her recognition of gender roles, Esperanza seeks to break them.

Esperanza never knew her great-grandmother, but Esperanza sees the shadow of her great-grandmother in other women in her community who occupy that same spot by the window.
Rafaela is one of these women. When Esperanza and her friends play next to Rafaela's apartment, Rafaela often asks the children to buy her "coconut or sometimes papaya juice" (80) because she "gets locked indoors" (79) by her husband. Because she cannot go outside "Rafaela leans out the window," (79) a double of Esperanza's great-grandmother. The windows that Rafaela and Esperanza's great-grandmother gaze out of are literally physical barriers to their freedom, but they metaphorically represent social barriers to their freedom. Their subordination to their husbands is one of the social barriers they face. This subordination occurs because Chicanos perpetuated their established gender role as the dominant partner, controlling the actions of the women in their family (Horowitz 23). Horowitz publishes her survey of Chican@s society, in 1983, within a year of the date when the First Edition of The House on Mango Street came out. Therefore, the ideology and beliefs Horowitz finds in her survey are representative of the prevailing beliefs of members in Esperanza's community in The House on Mango Street. As part of her study, Horowitz observed interactions of Chican@s in a local park. She documented a young man and woman who both frequented the park before they started dating (131). Once this couple started dating, many of the man's friends believed it was prudent for him to restrict his girlfriend's excursions to the park. When they married, she completely stopped visiting the park altogether (131). This example underscores a man's ability to control a woman's behavior in Chican@ culture. These deep seated cultural characteristics perpetuate Rafaela's subordination and discourage her from protesting against her oppression. Esperanza recognizes Rafaela's subordination, and this recognition is her first step towards breaking barriers of confining gender roles.

She recognizes the restrictions upon Rafaela's life, and Rafaela's desire for freedom.
Rafaela who drinks coconut and papaya juice on Tuesdays 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. And always there is someone offering sweeter drinks, someone promising to keep them on a silver string. (Cisneros 80)

These sweet drinks in of themselves represent freedom though they always come with strings attached, kept "on a silver string" (80). Rafaela longs for these sweet drinks in their pure form, for complete freedom. This is evident because Esperanza separates the sentences describing Rafaela's desire for sweet drinks, for freedom, with the reality of partial freedom Rafaela acknowledges. For Rafaela the dance hall down the street represents the sweet drink of freedom. The women who go to the dance hall act on their own volition, and by throwing "their green eyes easily like dice" (80) these women act spontaneously, possibly even dangerously by taking a gamble or 'rolling the dice'. Rafaela desires to make her own decisions like these women at the dance hall, but her husband denies her this freedom by literally locking her inside her house. Her husband locks her away due to his pride and his fear that "Rafaela will run away since she is too beautiful to look at" (79). He wants her to remain chaste with other men, and he believes it is his prerogative to control her sexuality (Horowitz 23).

This literal locking away of Rafaela mirrors the metaphoric locking away of Rafaela. This locking away means that her hopes and dreams are locked away as well, making her desperate to find the keys. She wants to be one of the women who "open homes with keys" (Cisneros 80). These keys represent the ability to free her hopes and dreams which are locked within her. It is especially important that these keys open homes. This imagery holds an incredible potency coming from Esperanza, who desires a 'real house'—a home—with all of her
being. Her fervent desire for a home adds a quality of desperation to the phrase "open homes with keys" (80). This desperation alerts us to the fact that Rafaela also longs for a home.

Why does Rafaela long for a home when she already has a home? She desires a home because she feels trapped in her real house. A home in The House on Mango Street represents a refuge from the outside world, a place to set aside troubles and despair. Because she is confined to her house, it becomes a type of prison for her instead of a home, a place of respite. Cisneros' depiction of domestic spaces as places of struggle diverged greatly from writings of Chicanos before her who often depicted domestic areas as havens in the harsh world (Jacobs 110). Cisneros re-envisions these spaces from a female perspective, portraying domestic sites as places of struggle against patriarchal dominance (110).

Rafaela's house does not offer the freedom she desires because her husband dominates that space. Rafaela knows that there are other men promising freedom, "[always] someone offering sweeter drinks, someone promising to keep them on a silver string" (Cisneros 80). Yet freedom, the sweet drinks, come with strings attached, compromising the freedom promised. These men offer women freedom from their parents and freedom from destitution, but these men seek something in return. They seek the most integral part of a woman's freedom—the freedom to control one's actions and decisions. The 'freedom' these men promise in truth only becomes an offer of luxurious confinement because these women may escape absolute poverty and their parents through their husbands, but their husbands control their actions, usurping a vital part of their freedom. Rafaela recognizes that these silver strings represent false promises, so the sweet drinks of freedom turn bitter.

Marriage irrevocably trapped Rafaela, but it serves as a means of escape for Sally, Esperanza's best friend from school. Esperanza comments that "Sally got married like we knew
she would, young and unready but married just the same” (101). Sally marries before the eighth grade to escape her abusive father; her marriage provides an escape from her family without bringing shame upon the family, which living alone would incur (Horowitz 69-70). However, using marriage as a means of escape only reinforces accepted gender roles because the man 'harbors' the woman and provides for her. By providing shelter the man retains dominance and controls the relationship. Sally's husband "won't let her talk on the telephone. And doesn't let her look out the window. And he doesn't like her friends, so nobody gets to visit her unless he is working" (Cisneros 102). Essentially Sally flees from the cage of her father's house, only to be trapped in a cage of her husband's making. He isolates her by not allowing her to talk on the phone and see her friends, and he denies her freedom by not allowing her to look out the window. But Sally permits her captivity because her marriage originally allowed her to escape her father. She convinces herself of her happiness through materiality, looking at the "the towels and the toaster, the alarm clock and the drapes" (102) in her house. These ordinary objects symbolize a stability in her life which she did not possess when she lived with her abusive father. Because her husband offers her stability, Sally willingly accepts her captivity. Esperanza on the other hand is unwilling to trade her freedom for stability. It is true that Esperanza's father does not abuse her, so unlike Sally, Esperanza does not need to escape immediately. Even so, Esperanza wants to escape from Mango Street one day, and by viewing Sally as an example, Esperanza knows she does not want to escape her circumstances through marriage. She wants to find a different route of escape.

Sally chose marriage as a path of escape, and Marin also sees marriage as a conduit leading her to escape or even adventure. Marin lives near Esperanza, and instructs Esperanza about boys among other things. Marin says, "what matters […] is for the boys to see us and for
us to see them" (27). She stands outside waiting for men to interact with her, and Esperanza joins her. In this way, Marin shows Esperanza how to be passive and submissive. Esperanza notices this attitude and comments that Marin "Is waiting for a car to stop, a star to fall, someone to change her life" (27). In this sentence Marin waits but performs no other action. The car stops; the star falls, and someone else changes Marin's life. She remains unable to change it herself.

Like a passive fairytale princess, Marin wishes for a prince to carry her off to a happily ever after that allows her to escape. However, fairy tales omit the many complications that arise in a real relationship—the complications identified in the stories of Rafäela and Sally. By contrasting the examples of Marin and Sally, Esperanza understands that marriage is unlikely to offer the fairytale ending that Marin desires; it is more likely to inhibit freedom. Esperanza wants to find another means of escape, a path that truly offers freedom, not just the dream of freedom.

Yet Esperanza like any young girl loves the idea of love. She wants "to sit out bad at night, a boy around [her] neck and the wind under [her] skirt. Not this way, every evening talking to the trees, leaning out [her] window, imagining what [she] can't see" (72). This sentiment shows that Esperanza feels lonely, and she believes that a boyfriend will provide her with the affection she needs. Even though she recognizes the imbalance of power in Rafäela's and Sally's relationships, part of her believes that her relationship will be different. As a young girl, she is still a dreamer like Marin who hopes for a magical love. She thinks that it might be easier to conform like everyone else, to slip into a woman's submissive and subordinate role. Breaking away from the established gender roles she views around her is a difficult and lonely process. She must fight to overcome society's expectations. The ease of conforming and the lure of love entice her to reenact the roles of Rafäela and Sally and the various other women that she sees around her. But, her desire for freedom reigns supreme. Esperanza will not repeat the cycle
of submission. She will break free of the accepted pattern in order to define herself according to her own principles instead of the expectations of men.

In fact, Esperanza not only views marriage as confining, she views motherhood as confining as well. In the vignette "There Was an Old Woman She Had So Many Children She Didn't Know What to Do" Esperanza explores the dynamics of being a single mother. Rosa Vargas is the mother in question, a woman who lives near Esperanza and "only one mother who is tired all the time from buttoning and bottling and babying" (29). Like a stereotypic Chicana mother her life centers around "a series of endless and infinitely repeatable chores" (Jacobs 106). "For the Mexican American mother the family is the site of the affirmation and replenishment of others at the expense and through the erasure of the self" (106). Rosa follows this pattern by devoting all of her time to taking care of her kids, yet in this investment she loses herself. In this effort, others see her in relationship to her children instead of as a unique individual. Esperanza says, "Rosa Vargas' kids are too many and too much. It's not her fault you know, except she is their mother and only one against so many" (Cisneros 29). These sentences demonstrate that Esperanza and corresponding society views Rosa first and foremost as a mother, not as an individual, because Cisneros always qualifies Rosa as a mother in her prose. Esperanza views Rosa's life with sympathy, but she does not want to become Rosa. Esperanza desires to fully become herself, but she does not see any examples of how to become an individual while also being a wife and/or mother, so she disregards others' expectations that she will marry and have children and instead decides to develop herself as a person. Esperanza looks around her and feels restrained by the accepted gender roles of being a wife and mother—she wants to be defined as a unique individual, not in relation to men or children.
Esperanza's friend Alicia also desires to escape from confining gender roles and poverty. Alicia goes to college and is a role model for Esperanza. However, even though Alicia goes to college, she still conforms to normative gender roles. Her father tells her that "a woman's place is sleeping so she can wake up early with the tortilla star" (31). He dictates that women should be subservient to the family, sacrificing themselves for the family's greater good. In Chicano ideology there is a dichotomous version of the female: one is either a virgin or una malinche, a fallen woman (Petty 122). Alicia's father imposes the virgin identity upon Alicia. While being a virgin explicitly dictates that one acts sexually chaste, it also implies that one acts with purity, compassion and self-sacrifice in accordance with the virtues of la Virgen de Guadalupe\(^2\) (121). Alicia follows her father's instructions by sacrificing for her family, waking up early to make tortillas even though she needs this time to sleep and to study for school. Even as she sacrifices, Alicia yearns to break down the barriers around her: "she doesn't want to spend her whole life in a factory or behind a rolling pin" (Cisneros 32). In effect, Alicia wants to break away from poverty and the confines of established gender roles. Esperanza shares these same aspirations, so Alicia becomes an important role model for Esperanza. However, Esperanza's model for escape is flawed. Even though Alicia wants to break free, she cannot at the moment, because her mother died, so she must take care of her younger siblings since her father will not. Her mother's death causes her to inherit "her mama's rolling pin and sleepiness," (31) in effect, becoming the mother of the household. Alicia provides a link between Esperanza and the other women in the neighborhood because she inhabits a transitory position in Esperanza's schema of women. Alicia works towards liberation through education, but must assume the responsibilities of motherhood.

\(^2\) La Virgen de Guadalupe is a reincarnation of the Virgin Mary. La Virgen de Guadalupe appeared to a Native Mexican boy, as opposed to a Spaniard, and asked him to build a temple to her on the top of a hill. She is associated with protecting the indigenous population. (Petty 121)
early on, and therefore, she may be thwarted in her attainment of escape. Esperanza does not possess a role model who actually escapes Mango Street, but in Alicia, Esperanza finds inspiration to escape Mango Street through education.

Throughout her community Esperanza sees many women who try to escape. Sally chose to marry, and Alicia chose to go to college to escape. Marin only dreams of escape, but Esperanza wants to actually achieve escape. She does not want to be classified as a virgin like Alicia, or una malinche like many of the other women she encounters. La malinche represents the fallen woman or violated woman (Petty 122). The archetype of la malinche comes from the mistress and interpreter of Cortez, who conquered the Aztec Empire (121). Sally falls into the category of la malinche before she marries because she is beautiful and therefore tantalizing. "Her father says to be this beautiful is trouble" (Cisneros 81). Sally's circumstance mirrors Rafaela's imprisonment because Rafaela's husband believes, "she is too beautiful to look at" (79). These women are both punished for the physical manifestation of their sexuality and each categorized as una malinche, or a whore. Marin also falls into this category by standing outside at night and inviting stares from men. Esperanza wishes she could stay out at night, "leaning against somebody without someone thinking [she is] bad, without somebody saying it is wrong" (83). Through this hope, Esperanza expresses a desire to break the virgin/la malinche dichotomy. She wishes to find a third option. Even if Esperanza chose to emulate the values of the virgin, the 'good girl', when she grew up, she would find herself in an impossible situation because a woman is expected to remain a virgin while also submitting to the sexual demands of her boyfriend (Horowitz 121). Chican@ society commonly holds the belief that a woman will inevitably submit to a man's advances (121). This leaves a woman with no way to win—to
uphold the qualities of the virgin she must be submissive, but to submit to sexual advances
would make her lose her virginity and become a whore (123).

The virgin/la malinche dichotomy effectively divides women into categories of chaste
women and sexual women. In The Family of Little Feet Esperanza and her friends fall into the
category of sexual beings, even though they are adolescents, because they put on high heels—a
symbol of womanhood. Esperanza and her friends parade around the street in these heels, which
are first described as magical. All of the men look at them as they pass by, and a 'bum' asks to
kiss one of the girls—an overt sexual objectification of these young girls. At the end of the
vignette, Esperanza says that they were "tired of being beautiful," (Cisneros 42) a euphemism for
being tired of being sexually objectified.

The sexualization of women is not confined to the Latin@ barrio that Esperanza grows
up in; this type of oppression affects women across the world. A painting called I see red/Yo veo
rojo by Polar Acevedo sums up the greater plight of women around the world who are sexually
objectified and also embodies Esperanza's experience of others seeing her as merely a sexual
being. The painting was displayed in "A House on Mango Street: Artists Interpret Community".
I see red/Yo veo rojo depicts a young girl sitting on a floor, her legs splayed in a V shape
(Acevedo). She wears a pink dress and red high heels. She wears lipstick and eyeliner, and she
wears her hair in pigtails. However, she doesn't have any arms (Acevedo). She is not whole. We
can deduce from the artwork that she is broken because of the stereotypic sexual objectification
of her gender. It is notable that she is 'all dolled up'. In fact, the way she is painted makes her
look like a doll, as does the make-up—this stylistic choice makes her seem like an object. The
viewer sees her as an object; therefore, she may see herself as an object as well. However, the
viewers who objectify her do not recognize the effect of their objectification. They still believe
her to be whole which is evinced by the shadow cast by her invisible arms on the canvas. This reflects how society at large also ignores the effects of its objectification of women.

The heels she wears also signify her dollhood. Acevedo does not paint the feet or shoes on the child in *I see red/Yo veo rojo*, instead the artist used two cobbler's wooden models as feet. On these wooden feet, she attached heels. Both feet, clad in heels are bolted to the canvas with large silver metal bolts (Acevedo). These bolts add to her doll-like appearance, which in turn demeans her because as a doll she can only be seen as beautiful, as a sexual object, and she cannot escape these boundaries. The bolts that attach her feet to the canvas make it especially clear that she cannot escape from the gender stereotypes which the viewer constructs around her.

The heels that the girl wears in *I see red/Yo veo rojo* have several words on the bottom of them (Acevedo). All of the words derive from the word *huir* which translates to: 'away, to escape, to take to one's heels' in English. These words show that the girl in the painting wants to run away from the gender stereotypes which envelop her—the heels, her make-up, wearing pink. She yearns to escape their persistent grasp.

Like a doll, the girl in *I see red/Yo veo rojo* is extremely flexible; she sits with her legs splayed unusually wide, nearly in a split (Acevedo). I believe that this arrangement of her body invites the viewer to contemplate sex while viewing her. In this way, the artist shows once again how a girl may be viewed as a sexual object. Viewing women as sexual objects, dehumanizes them and creates a theoretical foundation for the justification of rape. In fact, in modern society many rape victims face derision instead of receiving support because society believes these women provoke their rape by drinking or wearing scanty clothing. According to the *virgin/malinche* dichotomy, a raped woman falls under the category of *una malinche* (Petty 129).
By labeling rape victims as *malinches*, Chicanas are forced to bear the responsibility for their rape.

To avoid the virgin/ *la malinche* dichotomy Esperanza decides to act like a man. By rejecting the suffocating stereotypes of women, Esperanza provides a model for Chicanas to follow (123). In order to reject the accepted female role, Esperanza starts 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 89). This independence and even selfishness characterizes the hallmarks of what she considers to be a man's role in society. Society tells her that men may act as they please (Horowitz 64) while women must serve their family (Jacobs 106). Esperanza chooses to put her own desires first instead of subordinating them to the goals of the family. By working to achieve her own goals she takes control of her future, refusing to "grow up tame like the others who lay their necks on the threshold waiting for the ball and chain" (Cisneros 88). She recognizes marriage as a form of bondage. She will not be bound willingly.

Esperanza must fight to attain her freedom, by thwarting the accepted gender roles in Chican@ society and by fleeing poverty itself. Since the hardships of being both Chicana and being poor are compounded in Esperanza, it becomes doubly hard for her to escape her circumstances. Being Chicana and being poor also reciprocally influence each other. If Esperanza adopts the established role of a Chicana, as a wife and mother then she will not be able to make enough money herself in order to escape poverty. Instead, she will have to rely on her husband to make enough money for the family to escape poverty, which will reinforce the established Chicana gender role of acting passively and submissively.

How can Esperanza escape these two barriers when they are inextricably woven together in her community? She decides that the best way to escape these obstacles is to leave Mango
Street altogether. In the opening vignette, "The House on Mango Street" Esperanza says, "I knew I had to have a house. A real house. One I could point to. But this isn't it" (5). At the beginning of the book she already knows she must leave her house, but as the book progresses she knows she must also leave her community in order to escape her poverty and subordination as a woman. In the vignette "Sally" Esperanza mentally asks Sally rhetorical questions which emphasize her desire to leave 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 of a house, a nice one with flowers and big windows and steps for you to climb up two by two upstairs to where a room is waiting for you. (82) Esperanza expresses her own desire and longing in this sentence which runs on and on as if Esperanza tries to transport herself to this other place by a flow of words instead of an incessant movement of her feet.

The implied answer to Esperanza's question is yes—yes she would like to leave Mango Street. This affirmation is found in the second half of her question, which literally becomes an affirmation itself because the sentence ends with a period instead of a question mark. In the second half of the question Esperanza implies that leaving Mango Street leads one to a nice house with "big windows and steps" (82). This description directly contrasts with Esperanza's description of her own house that is "small and red with tight steps in front and windows so small you'd think they were holding their breath" (4). She describes her own house as suffocating and cramped, whereas the fantasy house she describes is large—a place of freedom.

Esperanza emphasizes the freedom this dream house would provide when she says, "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). In the stories of Rafaela and Esperanza's great grandmother, Esperanza characterized windows as separating women from life, as a barrier to freedom, but in this depiction the window provides an exchange with the outside world, which turns the window into a symbol of freedom. By shoving the window open Esperanza affects the outside world, and when the windows open up, the sky comes in and the outside world interacts with her. This window allows Esperanza to freely participate in both the world inside and outside of the home.

However, the house on Mango Street that Esperanza lives in does not provide the freedom she desires, nor does it provide her with a positive sense of ownership. Its "bricks are crumbling in places, and the front door is so swollen you have to push hard to get in” (4). Owning a house symbolizes the achievement of the American dream, but in Esperanza's case her dilapidated house only signifies what her family does not have (Perez 56). By moving to the house on Mango Street, Esperanza's family does not move up the socioeconomic ladder; they merely move laterally. By owning a house which only symbolizes their lack, Esperanza's family calls into question the foundation of the American dream, "that hard work, self-sacrifice, frugality and self-sufficiency will ultimate[ly] earn one a place within the nation, exemplified by home-ownership” (61). Esperanza's poverty infinitely complicates her ability to achieve the American Dream because she cannot obtain it exclusively through hard work. She must eventually leave Mango Street to escape her poverty and achieve the American Dream.

The poverty that Esperanza lives in is representative of many Hispanics’ circumstances today: 24.6% of the current Hispanic population lives in poverty today, and the unemployment rate for Hispanics is 9.9% (Stepler & Brown). A majority of Hispanics, 62.4% obtain a high school degree or less, and many Hispanics end up working menial labor or manual labor jobs

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3 These statistics are drawn from calculations by the Pew Research center, which uses the word Hispanic to classify people who are originally from Latin America or Spain, or can trace their lineage back to Latin America or Spain.
(Stepler & Brown). Today more than half of the Hispanics living in America rent their home instead of owning it, and this same statistic held true in the 1980's when The House on Mango Street was written—the time period Esperanza grows up in (Stepler & Brown). Many Hispanics cannot afford to own their own house because houses cost enormous sums of money. This is one reason Esperanza desires a house—because it symbolizes breaking through the barrier of poverty. She dreams of "A real house. One [she] could point to," (Cisneros 4) but her poverty wears her down and at times makes this dream seem unattainable, yet she continues to dream.

The four skinny trees outside her house give her strength to hope.

They [the four skinny trees] are the only ones who understand me. I am the only one who understands them. Four skinny trees with skinny necks and pointy elbows like mine. Four who do not belong here but are here. Four raggedy excuses planted by the city. From our room we can hear them, but Nenny just sleeps and doesn't appreciate these things. (74)

When Esperanza introduces the trees, she irrevocably connects herself with these trees, so through the rest of the vignette when she describes the trees, she describes both the trees and herself. Due to their exclusive mutual understanding, Esperanza and the trees are of one mind. "They are the only ones who understand [her. She is] the only one who understands them" (74). Esperanza describes the trees as outcasts who do not belong. She views herself the same way because she remains unsatisfied with her house, and she dreams of escape, while others seem content to live on Mango Street. She sees herself as an outcast because she refuses to accept confining gender roles and "grow up tame like the others who lay their necks on the threshold waiting for the ball and chain" (88). She will not be complacent or complicit in her subordination as a poor Chicana. In this way she is different from those around her. She shows us that she is even different from her sister Nenny because "Nenny just sleeps and does not appreciate these
Nenny does not try to learn about hope and strength from these trees as Esperanza does.

Esperanza learns from the trees and explicates their lesson for the reader.

Their strength is secret. They send ferocious roots beneath the ground. They grow up and they grow down and grab the earth between their hairy toes and bite the sky with violent teeth and never quit their anger. This is how they keep. (74)

These trees stand strong against their adverse circumstances. As an extension of these trees, Esperanza also maintains a buried reservoir of strength, one hidden from society around her. The reader already knows about her strength, but this description of the trees is the first time Esperanza acknowledges her anger. The trees "never quit their anger. This is how they keep" (74). Esperanza learns from them to stay strong through anger because losing her anger would allow her to accept her situation and fall into complacency. Watching these trees provides her with hope because they are "Four who grew despite concrete" (75). These trees have overcome great obstacles in order to grow, and they symbolize that Esperanza will also be able to overcome the obstacles around her of poverty and confining gender roles. She knows she can surpass the boundaries that society has put upon her if she follows the lessons of the trees "who reach and do not forget to reach. Four whose only reason is to be and be" (75). She must stretch herself and reach beyond the accepted gender roles of society to find herself. She must reach and stretch herself to break down the economic barriers erected around her.

A painting entitled Hoodratgurl (Roberts), in the exhibit "The House on Mango Street: Artists Interpret Community", perfectly captures the challenges Esperanza faces as a poor minority woman, the barriers she believes she can break down thanks to the teaching of the trees. Hoodratgurl by Deborah Roberts depicts the compounding of poverty and being a minority
woman. It portrays a brown girl from the neck up. The word 'Hoodratgurl' is painted in pink behind the girl's head. Black paint drips from the ends of her hair and streaks run across the entire painting, looking like laceration's upon the girl's face (Roberts).

The streaks across the young girl's face, reminiscent of lacerations, signal the young girl's pain. Her poverty and the way others perceive her trigger this pain. The painted word 'Hoodratgurl' shows how an onlooker may perceive her. This word and its negative connotations have been internalized by this young girl. Recognizing that such a word describes her diminishes her self-esteem, for this girl does not smile, proud of the epithet, instead her face seems stony, protecting herself from other harsh words. Esperanza also recognizes the fact that society labels her as a 'Hoodratgurl'. When people conjured up images of the inner city Chican@ barrio Horowitz wrote about in the 1980's, people believed the residents to be "poor, helpless, and undesiring of education" (31). The media increased this perception by emphasizing the social problems and violence in this neighborhood in their reports (36). The barrio that Horowitz described in the 1980's closely resembles Esperanza's neighborhood, so it follows that society would also perceive Esperanza's community as poverty ridden and undesirous of climbing the socioeconomic ladder. Esperanza wants to escape from these stereotypes of poor minority women by leaving Mango Street far behind and disassociating herself from its poverty.

Esperanza may escape these stereotypes by leaving Mango Street, her poverty and confining gender roles behind, but stereotypes are still regularly placed upon poor minority women today. Roberts' *Hoodratgurl* testifies to that. The young girl in the portrait is denoted as a 'hoodrat' due to her poverty, and simply being a girl allows her to be identified as a 'gurl'. The use of this spelling, instead of the correct spelling of 'girl', shows her objectification due to her gender. Society labels her as someone who is not worth much, as more of a sexual object than an
individual. This portrait represents the challenges that poor minority women face, while specifically speaking to the challenges that Esperanza faces. The 'Hoodratgurl', like Esperanza, must overcome the challenges of being objectified and dismissed as a female in her culture, and she must work hard in order to escape the 'hood'.

To escape the confines that society seeks to put on her, Esperanza must leave Mango Street. In the vignette "A House of My Own" Esperanza makes it clear that she doesn't want "a man's house. Not a daddy's" (Cisneros 108). Esperanza tells us that she wants "A house all my own" (108). She demands a space where she is not categorized as either a virgin or a whore, a space where she is not expected to act subserviently towards men, a space where poverty does not define her in her eyes or the eyes of others.

Esperanza decides to obtain this dream by leaving. Esperanza announces "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" (110). In Gloria Anzaldua's autobiography, Anzaldua states that there were only three options for women in her culture, a culture she shares with Esperanza; a woman could become a nun, a prostitute, or a mother (17). However, Anzaldua mentions that in the 1980's, as she wrote her autobiography, the choice of obtaining an education and entering a career started to emerge (17). This option is limited to a small group (17), but Esperanza decides to go in this direction, to pursue her education because it is the only option she sees available to her that will allow her to break free from accepted gender roles. After surveying the women in her community, Esperanza knows she could not bear conforming to the accepted gender roles around her. Esperanza believes that she is stronger than her circumstances and will be able to break through the barriers that have been erected around her by pursuing an education. She will persevere and break free, yet she "will always be Mango Street" (Cisneros 105). She internalizes the important parts of
Mango street while refusing to succumb to its realities of poverty and confining gender roles (Sloboda, 103). But Esperanza promises herself that she will "come back. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot out" (Cisneros, 110).

The story ends there, with a picture of altruism. It would seem that Esperanza reaches a resolution which brings her peace. Sloboda argues that she reconciles the oppression in her life with the positive parts of her communal culture by first recognizing that she belongs to her community and then deciding that she must come back and fix the oppressive aspects of her community (102). With this view in mind it is easy to imagine that Esperanza surpasses any marginalization, and indeed, lives "a meaningful and fulfilling life" (105). However, this view is problematic. Esperanza may indeed leave Mango Street behind, pursue an education and come back to fix Mango Street, but she will always feel marginalized. In Horowitz's study, men and women who left their community in order to come back and fix it often found when they returned that "their families no longer [understood] them and [could not] give them support" (202). She further comments that, "Frequently mobility means succeeding alone and, in the end, possibly not belonging to either world" (202). Esperanza cannot abide the sexist gender roles that are in place in Chican@ society, so she leaves to escape these confines and the confines of poverty, but this bars her from fully being part of the community. Even if she comes back, she can never be fully reintegrated. However, when she leaves Mango Street, her background will also isolate her, because she "will always be Mango Street" (Cisneros 105). She cannot completely disregard her culture, nor does she want to completely forget it; she merely wants to escape its oppressive aspects. But in order to do this she must leave Mango Street behind. After leaving, she must straddle two cultures, never being completely at home in either the world of Mango Street, or the world of mainstream middle class American culture. Like the Chican@
who lives in the Southwest, Esperanza psychologically becomes split in two, (Anzaldúa 2-3) part of her belonging to the Chican@ culture of her youth, while the other half belongs to the Anglo culture she turns to when she leaves Mango Street. Esperanza must leave Mango Street to escape, but she must also return to help others. Through her escape she loses part of herself, though this loss is necessary in order to find a new self, one free from oppressive gender roles and debilitating poverty.
Bibliography


