

## Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*: (Collective) Memory Resonating from "the Barrio"

Jelena Nikodinoska  
*Sorbonne-Nouvelle, Paris, France;*  
*University of Texas at Austin, Austin, USA*

**Abstract:** "The people I wrote about were real, for the most part, from here and there, now and then, but sometimes three real people would be braided together into one made-up person... I cut apart and stitched together events to tailor the story, gave it shape so it had a beginning, middle, and end, because real life stories rarely come to us complete. Emotions, though, can't be invented, can't be borrowed. All the emotions my characters feel, good or bad are mine." (xxiii) Although Sandra Cisneros draws on autobiographical elements in *The House on Mango Street* (1984), her novella does not stand for an autobiography, but it rather represents a collage of events, characters, and places that independently from one another constitute vignettes. These vignettes are not necessarily chronologically related, yet they make up a whole of voices, stories, colors, and movements that once reverberated along Mango Street. Through her (Cisneros's) stories, Esperanza Cordero's stories, and Esperanza's neighbors' stories, Cisneros conveys the Southwestern Latino experience of the big city and the streets, of the *barrios* that is.

Taking my cue from Cisneros's "The House on Mango Street," I will try to examine how personal experiences become memories and those memories transcend into stories. Is what comes from experience and memory that makes writing strong, powerful, persuasive, and to a certain extent relatable? Have Cisneros's memories, reflected in Esperanza's living experience and language contributed to the Latino's collective memory of the life in the barrios coupled with racism, poverty and shame? On that note, I shall see how Maurice Halbwachs's concept of collective memory applies to Cisneros' story and the Latino experience, where Latinos' memory is dependent upon the life in the barrio within which the majority were/are situated.

**Keywords:** Sandra Cisneros, Latino, barrio, Chicana/o, (collective) memory, Maurice Halbwachs

"The people I wrote about were real, for the most part, from here and there, now and then, but sometimes three real people would be braided together into one made-up person... I cut apart and stitched together events to tailor the story, gave it

shape so it had a beginning, middle, and end, because real life stories rarely come to us complete. Emotions, though, can't be invented, can't be borrowed. All the emotions my characters feel, good or bad are mine." (Cisneros 1984: xxiii) Although Sandra Cisneros draws on autobiographical elements in *The House on Mango Street* (1984), her novella does not stand for the genre of autobiography, but rather represents a collage, of events, characters, and places that independently of each another constitute vignettes. In turn, the vignettes are not necessarily chronologically related, yet make up a whole of voices, stories, colors, and movements that once reverberated along Mango Street. Through her (Cisneros's) stories, Esperanza Cordero's stories, and Esperanza's neighbors' stories, Cisneros conveys the Southwestern Latino experience of the big city and the streets, of the *barrios*, that is.

Taking my cue from Cisneros's "The House on Mango Street," I will try to examine how personal experiences become memories and those memories transpire into stories. Is what comes from experience and memory that which makes writing strong, powerful, persuasive, and to a certain extent, relatable? Have Cisneros's memories, reflected in Esperanza's living experience and language, contributed to the Latino's collective memory of the life in the barrios? On that note, in the first part of this essay I'll examine Maurice Halbwachs's (1925) concept of collective memory as it applies to Cisneros' story and the Latino experience, where Latino memory is dependent on life in the barrio, within which the majority of Latino experience was/is situated. In the second part of this essay, I'll look at the way in which the fate of the women in the barrio reads from/through Esperanza's neighbors' stories.

#### COLLECTIVE MEMORY: INTERTWINING OF EXPERIENCES, STORIES AND KNOWLEDGE

I have always been keen on coming-of-age stories. What appeals to me about these stories is the innocent voice we encounter at the beginning of the story, which gradually shapes us as it sets out to discover its surroundings, and with that its place in the world. Maturation, acculturation, awareness of sexuality, wisdom, to mention but a few of the stages that make up the chain of growing up are the processes each and every one of us has underwent through. To write about childhood is to acknowledge and give meaning to the years when a younger "self" was tracing its own life path. During our childhood years, we absorb and accumulate values taught by family and community, we experiment with those values: we put them into practice and see whether or not they work in everyday life. As a white Macedonian female, I cannot write about the Chicano experience or the life in the barrio, without considering the dangers of essentializing this experience. Inexplicably Chicano writers have appealed and still appeal to me, through their heartfelt stories about growing up, family, school life, love, making friends; something that my own southern culture (positioned along a similar axis of pain and tears along with laughter and music) stands for as well.

One of the major demographic changes the US has been undergoing for the last five decades is the constant growth of the Hispanic population, wherein Mexicans constitute the largest Hispanic ethnic group, accounting for nearly two-thirds of the U.S. Hispanic population. Besides the historical, economic and political circumstances the Mexican population have up to now experienced in the US, they've managed to

preserve their traditional cultural values, outside the borders of their homeland in the new milieu they've found themselves living in. Yet, values and traditions cannot be kept in a vacuum, and be perpetually static.

Through her growing-up story, Cisneros does not simply borrow elements from her own past, thus giving the readers a specific historic setting of the 1980s, but she picks bits and pieces from her students' stories, stories in which she recognizes her own childhood barrio from the past and the life therein. Those stories coupled up with her experience as a Chicana growing up in a barrio in Chicago have made her open the drawer of memories, stories, perfumes and colors long locked-up and once an object of shame: "For the more than eighteen million Mexican Americans living in the United States, the growing-up years have been a mixture of joy, frustration, pain and a search for identity." (Lopez 1993:6)

In "Growing Up Chicana/o," Tiffany Ana Lopez carefully selected and put together diverse Chicana/o stories by prominent Chicana/o writers that trace different stories, yet that have been inextricably linked by "an autobiographical voice, which continues to be important to members of the community searching for reflections of their own lives within the works." (19) In such a way, through her writing, Cisneros reconstructs her experience out of the memories she had long tried to repress, and re-erects the house on Mango Street. The house, as a memorial site, does not serve the purpose of commemorating merely the people who inhabited its spaces at a given moment; it extends beyond and encompasses the shared memories of the neighbors, the streets and the corners of the barrio. Namely, Cisneros uses collective memory - her memory coupled with her mother's and her students' to relate the story of the barrio. She revisits the

abandoned spaces, accepts the differences that set her apart from the rest of her Anglo-Saxon classmates, such as their social and economic background, and plucks up the courage to accept what she had once ardently refused to point to - her home. "In a nation of immigrants, most American ethnic groups have at some point wrestled with how to reconcile having an identity that is rooted simultaneously in their countries of origin and in the United States, particularly when they are also racialized ethnic minorities. This hybrid identity often blends divergent cultures and traditions." (Weiner and Richards 2008: 114)

The construction of a hybrid identity stems from the need to make sense of one's own different, ambivalent, and oftentimes conflicting views of the world and one's place in it. They accept part of what their parents have taught them in life, but then decide to put away things disliked or disagreed with, because maybe, experience has taught them differently. Put in these situations, people, especially children, fear that their disagreement reads as disobedience and even betrayal of one's culture and thus one's parents. This is Esperanza's constant struggle, trying to negotiate her traditional Mexican values with the surrounding modern, and in her view, liberating American mindset.

In his seminal work on collective memory, Maurice Halbwachs states that the mind reconstructs memories under pressure: "What makes recent memories hang together is not that they are contiguous in time: it is rather that they are part of a totality of thoughts common to a group, the group of people with whom we have a relation at this moment, or with whom we have had a relation on the preceding day or days." (Halbwachs 1992: 52) During her time at the Iowa Writers' Workshop (1978), devoid of any inspiration, Cisneros felt dislocated; she experienced

her otherness, which she did not realize, until her second year of college, that would become the very subject of her first book. Powered by personal experiences, hearing the stories of her students, inspired by the fate of Chicanas, and always guided by her mother's voice, "[for] it's her voice I hear when I sit down and begin a piece," Cisneros lends her voice to Esperanza, so as to relate the story of the barrio. Hence, individual memory exists no longer by itself, but it becomes a part of a group memory of shared knowledge and experience, as Halbwachs underlines in his study. Furthermore, in his study, Halbwachs discusses the mentality of the traditional family, and the way in which its memory gets instantiated. Memory does not simply refer to images of the past, but rather, it combines "models, examples, and elements of teaching", expressing the attitude of a group, which is then being perpetually reproduced in the future (1992: 59). In the narrative discourse this translates as the communal "we". In *The House on Mango Street*, "we" emerges every time Esperanza talks about her family moving from one place to another; she shares the "we" with her little sister, Nanny, whenever they are outside playing with their friends, Rachel and Lucy, or whenever she talks about the people living in the barrio including herself opposed to "those who don't."

Accordingly, in his essay "Between Memory and History," Pierre Nora underlines the urgent need of the individual to give meaning to his/her existence, by tracing back his/her past. "Following the example of ethnic groups and social minorities, every established group, intellectual or not, learned or not, has felt the need to go in search of its own origins and identity. Indeed, there is hardly a family today in which some member has not recently sought to document as

accurately as possible his or her ancestors' furtive existences." (Nora 1989: 15) Whether afraid of being forgotten, or merely willing to share their stories, or both, people are always in search for their vehicle of memory that will best fit their story and enable them to contribute to the pool of shared cultural knowledge.

#### A LAS MUJERES / TO THE WOMEN:

When I read a book or watch a movie, I cannot help but trace the male-female relationships. Moreover, as a 21st-century female reader, I focus on the female characters, the importance they and others place on their sexuality, the use of their body as an instrument, and their self-awareness or lack thereof. As a result, in the second part of the essay, I've chosen to talk about the female characters in *The House on Mango Street*. Through each of the female portraits Cisneros foregrounds the fears, constraints and dreams of the women who live exclusively in the barrio, as well as those who live outside its confines.

Sandra Cisneros opens her text with a dedication, "A Las Mujeres to the Women," thus "acknowledging that a large part of her struggle for identity in the barrio was driven by issues of gender." (Bloom, 2010: 19) Along those lines, Esperanza's observations of women living on Mango Street build up diverse female profiles. At the same time, her depiction of women reveals much of her personal fears and reveries. The majority of the stories, though, stand as a warning of what Esperanza does not want for herself in life, i.e., to be a dependent woman overshadowed by male dominance. Peeking in every yard and corner of the street, she finds a new story to relate. Esperanza takes the reader on a stroll, allowing us to hear, see and bear

witness to the diverse lives women make for themselves on Mango Street.

To dig a bit deeper and further: indeed, Latino culture is largely patriarchal in its essence, as the power-holder is identifiably the oldest male family member. Looking at this world from the bottom up, Cisneros chooses for her principal Latino character, Esperanza, a girl at a vulnerable age - no longer a child and not quite a woman. This ambivalence parallels Esperanza's own conflicting feelings towards home and family, coupled with a sense of dislocation reflected in a desperate search for a place of her own, one she can point to without being embarrassed. Esperanza's dream of the red balloon (1984:9), and her admiration for the tall trees, directly mirror her craving to leave the barrio, once and for all, namely to transgress the limits of the barrio and reach the blue sky. Similarly, this wish to cross the psychological borders of her everyday living is reflected when she asks the nun in her school for permission to eat in the school canteen. However, she ends up disappointed, concluding that the cafeteria is not as good as she imagined. (45) Consequently, the purpose this metaphorical episode serves is to teach Esperanza not to idealize the world outside the barrio since she might end up disillusioned.

Furthermore, what this coming-of-age novella, exhibits is the conflicting, and often inconclusive thoughts tied to Esperanza's maturing, as she becomes aware of her sexuality and appeal to men. What at one point might seem amusing, in the next disgusts her. For instance, in the chapter "The Family of Little Feet," Esperanza, together with her friends, Lucy and Rachel, put on colorful high heels and walk down the street provoking lascivious comments from the onlookers. At the beginning, the feeling of being the center of

attention excites them, however, in the end they are disgusted by the old men who ask them for a kiss; they throw away their shoes, because "[they] are tired of being beautiful." (42) Though young, Esperanza realizes that to be a beautiful woman is dangerous. Hence, her craving to leave the barrio doesn't simply stem from her awareness of the racial and economic conditions around her; she wants to escape the fate that befalls the women in the barrio. Thus, she becomes aware of the imposed gender roles and the repressed female body. For gender in the barrio is a constant: a construct that does not change and is perpetually enacted as men and women adopt their prescribed traditional roles. This perpetuation often suggests a fear of change, a fear of betraying one's tradition or simply lack of guidance or an example to follow. For instance, children take their parents as examples in the everyday situations and struggles they face, and follow their guidance, at least in their early years. In such a way, in a traditional society, girls have the tendency to look up to their mothers and grandmothers and the women in their lives, and consider being a caring mother, an obedient wife and a talented cook as the right role to assume. As Fabienne Darling-Wolf underlines in his study on hybrid identities "Unfortunately, gendered dichotomies are not that easy to sidestep. Because of the lack of other possible identifications, the categories of man (masculine)/ woman (feminine) can never be completely escaped in the daily realities of individuals' lives." (2008: 68) In *The House on Mango Street*, for instance, children attend Catholic school to learn about tradition, how to preserve it, and hence how to adopt and internalize the already ascribed and scripted gender roles. Moreover, Esperanza introduces several characters who best illustrate the repression of the

woman in the barrio, their fate and what they consider to be their means to leave the barrio. For example, her cousin Marin is stuck at her home because she is expected to look after her siblings. Although her gender subjects her to this role of a secondary caretaker, she also relies on her gender and her beauty to find a husband who would enable her to leave the barrio. While in Marin's case beauty is the means by which a woman could escape the barrio, in Rafaela's case beauty imprisons the woman; Rafaela's husband keeps her locked in the house, because she is too beautiful. Hence, Esperanza becomes aware of men's repressive power in wanting to control [their] women's sexuality. Similarly, Sally and Minerva are other victims who fall in the repressive hands of their father and husband, respectively, from which Esperanza's learns about the life of abused women subject to violence in domesticated spaces. On the other hand, there is Mamacita, who embodies Mexican culture, thus unable to "fit in" with the American-Mexican lifestyle. Thus, she epitomizes the feelings of dislocation and powerlessness Esperanza often ponders upon and struggles with. Nobody sees Mamacita on the streets, due to language constraints; as Esperanza claims, she chooses to stay at home, grieving for her home. Thus, she remains, as Melissa F. Weiner and Bedelia Nicola Richards (2008) conclude in their essay on the diasporized hybrid, "unable and unwilling to assimilate" living on the margins of two cultures which never really merge. Through the Spanish songs she sings and the Spanish radio shows she listens to, which echo through her window, Mamacita constantly reminds the passers-by and the children playing on the streets of their Mexican roots. Last but not least, Esperanza talks in somewhat doleful yet admiring tones about her mother, an educated

woman who likes singing and listening to opera. Moreover, her mother stands for the nursing and caring parent. As Cisneros assembled the portraits of herself, her mother, her father and other fathers, aunts and her students into her characters, Esperanza assembles in two scenes the recollections of her mother. What she portrays goes beyond the physical appearance of her own mother, namely, she depicts feelings of love, warmth, protection and nurture that arise in her from her contact with her mother. Although Esperanza describes Mama as multitalented, her mother seems hidebound by cultural norms and unable to function outside the confines of the barrio. She teaches Esperanza the importance of education, encouraging her to keep up with her dreams, for that will assure her independence.

Undoubtedly, in her partly biographical novella, Cisneros interweaves the stories of women she encountered in the barrio; in her interview with Martha Satz she states: "To me the barrio was a repressive community. Found it frightening and very terrifying for a woman. The future for women in the barrio is not a wonderful one." The purpose of writing *The House on Mango Street* was, as Cisneros claims, to counter the colorful, lively representation of the barrio by men. Whether or not one chooses to read this book as an autobiographical sketch, the parallel between the writer, Sandra Cisneros, and the character, Esperanza proves unavoidable. They escape the barrio and find home in their heart through their writing; they both write "to liberate the others by telling their stories." (Bloom 2010: 54) I hope this analysis helps us rethink the consequence of (collective) memory in the quest for identity. Where do my parents come from, whose stories did I listen to as a kid, who did I play with on the streets, where did I go to school, what role models

did I choose to follow, to name but a few questions one comes across when trying to discover, identify and define who one is and where one comes from. Whether consciously or not, sometimes one avoids speaking of one's origins, one's past, wanting to forget these facts out of shame, unpleasant experiences or other reasons. Yet, to put something on hold, does not make it disappear; things find a way of re-emerging at a given moment and thereby teach us a lesson. It is up to us, whether we will try to avoid our past and our memories over and over again or choose to acknowledge them, learn a lesson, and put experiences in a story to be shared with the others.

#### ENDNOTES

- [1] Mango Street is an invented street. Yet the house from The House on Mango Street is based on a real house located on Campbell Street in Chicago. However, Cisneros manipulates time and space, and brings to the house on Mango Street experiences from other neighborhoods as well that are not necessarily her own.
- [2] Esperanza is the main character and the principal narrator in *The House on Mango Street*
- [3] In Spanish, the word *barrio* means a neighborhood or a district. In English, the word is used to denote a Spanish-speaking quarter of a town in the USA
- [4] Gonzalez-Barrera, Ana, and Mark Hugo Lopez. "A Demographic Portrait of Mexican-Origin Hispanics in the United States." *Pew Hispanic Center RSS*. Pew Research Hispanic Center, 1 May 2013. Web. 26 July 2013.
- [5] Sandra Cisneros worked at the Latino Youth Alternative High School in Chicago, and later as an administrative assistant and counselor to minority and disadvantaged students in Loyola University of Chicago
- [6] "Returning to One's House: An Interview with Sandra Cisneros." Interview by Martha Satz. *Sandra Cisneros with Martha Satz*. <[http://www.istanbul.edu.tr/ake/lisans\\_undergrad/courses/226\\_material/articles/Cis/cis10.pdf](http://www.istanbul.edu.tr/ake/lisans_undergrad/courses/226_material/articles/Cis/cis10.pdf)>.

- [7] Those Who Don't (28) is the name of one of the chapters in *The House of Mango Streets*
- [8] This is the dedication Sandra Cisneros chooses to place at the beginning of her book *The House on the Mango Street*
- [9] "Hairs" and "A Smart Cookie" are chapters devoted to Esperanza's mother
- [10] "Returning to One's House: An Interview with Sandra Cisneros." Interview by Martha Satz. *Sandra Cisneros with Martha Satz*. <[http://www.istanbul.edu.tr/ake/lisans\\_undergrad/courses/226\\_material/articles/Cis/cis10.pdf](http://www.istanbul.edu.tr/ake/lisans_undergrad/courses/226_material/articles/Cis/cis10.pdf)>.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] Cisneros, Sandra. *The House on Mango Street*. N.p.: Vintage Contemporaries; 25th Anniversary Edition Edition, 2009. Print.
- [2] López, Tiffany Ana. *Growing up Chicana/o: An Anthology*. New York: W. Morrow, 1993. Print.
- [3] Smith, Keri E. Iyall and Leavy, Patricia. *Hybrid Identities: Theoretical and Empirical Examinations*. Leiden: Brill, 2008.
- [4] Halbwachs, Maurice. *On Collective Memory*. Trans. Lewis A. Coser. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1992. Print.
- [5] Bloom, Harold. *The House on Mango Street : (New Edition)*. N.p.: Infobase, n.d. <http://www.utxa.ebib.com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu>. 01 May 2010. Web. 20 Apr. 2013.
- [6] "Returning to One's House: An Interview with Sandra Cisneros." Interview by Martha Satz. *Sandra Cisneros with Martha Satz*. Web. 20 Mar. 2013. Available: [http://www.istanbul.edu.tr/ake/lisans\\_undergrad/courses/226\\_material/articles/Cis/cis10.pdf](http://www.istanbul.edu.tr/ake/lisans_undergrad/courses/226_material/articles/Cis/cis10.pdf)
- [7] Nora, Pierre. "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire." *Representations*, No.26, Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory. (Spring, 1989): 7-24. Web. 20 June 2013
- [8] Gonzalez-Barrera, Ana, and Mark Hugo Lopez. "A Demographic Portrait of Mexican-Origin Hispanics in the United States." *Pew Hispanic Center RSS*. Pew Research Hispanic Center. 1 May 2013. Web. 26 July 2013. Available: [www.pewhispanic.org](http://www.pewhispanic.org).