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Chicano Literature of Memory: Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street* (1984) and Gary Soto, *Living Up the Street. Narrative Recollections* (1985)

This article deals with two autobiographical narratives which served as points of departure for Sandra Cisneros' and Gary Soto's subsequent work in the same mode. *The House on Mango Street* (San Francisco: Strawberry Hill Press, 1985) demonstrates both the varieties and the unity of Chicano autobiography as distinctive from the mainstream tradition and Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger of Memory. The Education of Richard Rodriguez* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1982). Even the titles of the books and of some of the stories indicate the closeness of the two childhood and youth experiences concerning the nature of events and their settings. Sandra Cisneros and Gary Soto break off during the initial stages of their writing careers which will be shaped by different views of the past and the evaluation of their present situation.

Reading the works of the two authors confirms Chicano literature as celebrating a "Fiesta of Living"[1] by carefully exploiting the rich reservoirs of memory. This definition links it with considerable sections of contemporary Native American literature and of Puertorican literature in the US, each of these gathering strength form their history of victimization, of lost causes and miraculous survivals.[2]

The House on Mango Street consists of forty-four relatively short pieces. Form the table of contents the reader cannot derive the theme of the book though the first and last titles suggest narrative movement from the acquisition o f to the separation f r o m the place given in the title and firmly established in the first story as a stage of experience for the narrator, Esperanza Cordero.

In contrast to the previous homes, also signified by street names, this one seems to stand for social advancement as the parents can buy it. Quite early Esperanza questions the new reality by reminding her family that their dreams did not fully materialize: "But even so, it's not the house we'd thought we'd get." (7), though property guarantees stability, a share in the blessings of modern technology allowing for a certain degree of individuality in a place "like the houses on T.V." (8)

Esperanza's radical thinking exposes her parents' affirmative attitude as self-deceit. Her own wish to fully realize her aspirations is explained by an experience form a previous home. At the moment a teacher

spontaneously and naively asked "You live t h e r e ? The way she said it made me feel like nothing."(9), the norms of middle-class respectability, being able to point to an object as representing one's personal achievements, became her directive for winning the future: "I knew then I had to have a house. A real house. One I could point to" (9). At the end of this introductory story Esperanza confirms her rejection of the house on Mango Street, again trying out an individual voice and her superior wisdom in a rather limited vocabulary:

> But this isn't it. The house on Mango Street isn't it. For the time being, Mama said. Temporary, said Papa. But I know how those things go (9).

This suspicious voice accepts the provisional nature of life on Mango Street and, at the same time, the protagonist prepares herself to settle in it as a territory for the long-term pursuit of her happiness. By way of vehement protest she paradoxically comes pretty close to imitating her parents' strategies.

Esperanza starts her exploration of her new space by describing the limited freedom provided for her with the ambivalent image of "a red balloon tied to an anchor" (11). One string is the Christian name programming her as a person living on unfulfilled dreams like her father and, in particular, her grandmother:

> She looked out the window all her life, the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow. I wonder if she made the best with what she got or was she sorry because she couldn't be all the things she wanted to be. Esperanza. I have inherited her name, but I don't want to inherit her place by the window (12).[3]

As Esperanza is yet unable to set anything against these restrictions, she begins to look for options beyond the family circle. In "Cathy Queen of Cats" she meets someone living in self-imposed isolation, in a valley of tears she expects to leave behind for future glories pretty soon, a person surviving merely on self-deceit. The narrator vaguely contradicts her and, as a compensation, immediately plunges into Mango Street life and new relationships, all at once feeling at the center of things, for at least one "Good Day".[4] This rush into accommodation even permits her to acknowledge the family's Mexican heritage which in this situation does not limit but tightens her grip on reality.

Discovering that by the power of the imagination and the word phenomena can be appropriated to define oneself and others, represents a first step towards liberation and foreshadows the book's conclusion, the

evolution of a creative writer at peace with her past. In a number of testing episodes connected to basic human experiences like birth, growth, love, and death, Esperanza gradually builds for herself a strong position which enables her to accept roles assigned to her by others. This process is suddenly held up when she finds herself caught in a web of new interdependencies.

The subsequent effort of reorientation is the result of a haunting experience not properly analysed at the time. Recalling the innocent ridiculing of dying Aunt Lupe in "Born Bad" causes Esperanza to consider what this person signified for her:

> She listened to every book, every poem I read her... That's nice. That's very good, she said in her tired voice. You must remember to keep writing, Esperanza. You must keep writing. It will keep you free, and I said yes, but at that time I didn't know what she meant (56).

Though in "Alicia Who Sees Mice" she was already taught the simultaneity and complex interdependence of acts of liberation and commitment, Esperanza does not see obvious continuities and rather pursues a secondary matter when deploring her utter depravity in the scene remembered. Such evasiveness reveals itself as a useful strategy of self-protection in the following stories that deal with the phase when the needs of an adolescent asked for deeper involvement in street life.

Starting from the notion of her isolation in the story "Four Skinny Trees," Esperanza recognizes the coexistence of permanence and change, the surrender to mere existence and the need for a purpose, the urge of relating, of growing deep roots, but also of growing upward and outward, thus linking past, present, and the future, closeness and remoteness.

"No Speak English," "Rafaela Who Drinks Coconut and Papaya Juice on Tuesdays" and "Sally" exemplify the exact opposites: lives wasted away, unreconciled with their environment. These impressive examples do not yet convert her to Aunt Lupe's concept of integrated oppositions. They once more create confusion and new desires to evade. Progress is made in this situation as Esperanza constructs an emergency bridge between the present and her dreams. Significantly enough, the house plays a dominant role. She condemns her parents for having to look "at what we can't have" (81), she frowns at their spirit of acceptance and immediately afterwards builds her own castle in the air, her "red balloon which she now tries to anchor in reality" by promising to become a houseowner with unusually high moral standards in "Bums in the Attic:"

> One day I'll own my own house, but I won't forget who I am or where I came from. Passing bums will ask, Can I come in? I'll offer them the attic, ask them to stay, because I know how it is to be without a house (81).[5]

Esperanza can now publicly pledge that she will stand up for her past by accepting people like herself, even after she has left her original social environment. So she wants to keep in touch with herself!

For some time Esperanza remains an uncommitted character, suspended between gains and losses, between closeness and detachment. After a series of encounters demonstrating moral ambivalence and the permanence of change, Esperanza's relation to Mango Street is prescribed by "The Three Sisters:"

> She's special. Yes, she'll go very far... When you leave you must remember to come back for the others. A circle, understand? You will always be Esperanza. You will always be Mango Street. You can't erase what you know: You can't forget who you are... You must remember to come back. For the ones who cannot leave as easily as you. You will remember? She asked as if she was telling me. Yes, yes, I said a little confused (97-98).

Promising spiritual and moral rewards within her reach, inevitably sets Esperanza on the road to the final vision of her past and future as an artist accepting social responsibility, detachment and identification, continuity and change.

It is quite fitting that in this difficult situation Esperanza appears to return to her dream of middle-class respectability, to "A House of My Own" (100). A careful reading shows that the images of the final line transform the house as a symbol of material possessions into Esperanza's assumed starting blocks for a creative journey to finally reclaim Mango Street as an integral part of her identity, a pre-requisite for the practice of her craft: "Only a house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem" (100). Her ultimate means of taking Mango Street into possession are storytelling, an activity that combines actual experience, social responsibility, and the detachment of retrospective narration as displayed in the final "Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes." Here the perspectives of the protagonist and the narrator merge. Esperanza is ready to start setting down her past and has already found her new identity during the process of liberation and belonging. She can both begin and finish her book:

> I like to tell stories. I am going to tell you a story about a girl who didn't want to belong.
> We didn't always live on Mango Street. Before that we lived on Loomis on the third floor, and before that we lived on Keeler. Before Keeler it was Paulina, but what I remember most is Mango Street, sad red house, the house I belong but do not belong to.
> I put it down on paper and then the ghost does not ache so much. I write it down and Mango says goodbye sometimes. She does not hold me with both arms. She sets me free (101).

Whereas the middle paragraph of this quote more or less paraphrases the first paragraph of the book, the mother-and-child imagery appropriately illustrates Esperanza's new freedom as a woman who has outgrown her past without sacrificing it. Collecting and examining significant fragments from her life, finding recurrent patterns in very diverse events, settling former irritations, and recording all this on paper have slowly defined her present and future as an individual and as a writer, as egocentric and philanthropist. Her affirmative approach originated in a growing awareness of opportunities to influence life as lived and as remembered. Therefore, her storytelling celebrates physical and mental mobility, her peace treaty with life's puzzling complexity.

The book frees her from the pains inflicted by the ghosts of the past,[6] but it also publicly promises to honor Mango Street, the powers of memory and the imagination. The same constituents allow her to communicate this slice of experience to readers marginal to this world. The book deliberately establishes permanence, a point of reference in the flux of life, a reliable starting point for new encounters with reality. *The House on Mango Street*, Esperanza's real house and her house of fiction, are the debutante narrator's and author's courageous, persuasive, and self-persuasive answer to the outsider's bewildered question "You live there?"

Such self-confidence ist not achieved in Gary Soto's *Living up The Street. Narrative Recollections.* The school photographs, the xerox of Soto's saving book, and the fact that the narrator introduces himself with the author's name make the autobiographical intentions of the book very evident. To characterize its structure, I shall start at the major turning point in Soto's life, as reported in "One Last Time" and "Black Hair", which took him on the road to an artist's career. Afterwards, I will discuss the introductory and the concluding stories, "Being Mean" and "A Good Day," to point out the overall progression in the book.

> "One Last Time" draws on Soto's 'last picture show: Yesterday I saw the movie GANDHI and recognized a few of the people - not in the theater but in the film. I saw my relatives, dusty and this as sparrows, returning from the fields

> with hoes balanced on their shoulders. The workers were squinting, eyes small and veined, and were using their hands to say what there was to say to those in the audience with popcorn and Cokes. I didn't have anything, though. I sat thinking of my family and their years in the fields... (101).

The recollecting narrator demonstrates his ability, unique in the audience, to relate himself to a re-enactment of Indian colonial history. After some brief comments on his grandparents and parents, he considers his own part: Working with his mother in the fields, thus being introduced to the established pattern of stoop labor and new clothes as a reward, made him strive for spiritual compensations. When daydreams no longer served this purpose, he openly rejected the role prescribed: "... I'd rather wear old clothes than stoop like a Mexican" (105). Together with his brother he switched to cotton-picking, but very soon found that this job was as painful and limiting to the imagination as the one he had left. The conclusion of the story brings the brothers back to where they started from: labor Mexicans do. Gary has preserved an echo of his rebellious spirit in his conclusive and uncommented "for one last time" (109), defying his personal experience which opened up a rather gloomy outlook into his future. His past as remembered in the theater contradicts the liberation from oppression displayed in the GANDHI film. Still, when looking back on yesterday's scene, the narrator discovers his singular ability to relate to people from another context. His own protest ends in a poor self-protective gesture which the narrator and his reader sympathetically observe from the perspective of ironic detachment. In this story, the autobiographer's craft provides Gary with the freedom of the imagination he hungered for while doing stoop labor.

Consequently, the next story, "Black Hair," again stresses the negative effects of manual labor and justifies the narrator's current pre-occupation with the work of the mind which he immediately qualifies as belonging to a provisional, untested phase of his life: "There are two kinds of work: One uses the mind and the other uses muscle. As a kid I found out about the latter." (113) Such caution makes him concentrate on yet another total failure with the work of the muscle. After recapitulating his heroic efforts to find some brightness in a dark environment, he gives up and incorporates this experience into his previous ones and the set of aspirations closely connected with his "black hair:"

> As a kid I had chopped cotton and picked grapes, so I knew work. I knew the fatigue and the boredom and the feeling that there was a good possibility you might have to do such work for years, if not for a lifetime. In fact, as a kid I

> imagined a dark fate: To marry Mexican poor, work Mexican hours, and in the end die a Mexican death, broke and in despair.
> But this job at Valley Tire Company confirmed that there was something worse than field work, and I was doing it... There was no grace at work. It was all ridicule (119-120).

In contrast to "One Last Time" the narrator of "Black Hair" does not discover any rewards in the recollecting process:

> How we arrived at such a place is a mystery to me. Why anyone would stay for years is even a deeper concern. You showed up, but from where? What broken life? What ugly past? The foreman showed you the Coke machine, the washroom, and the yard where you'd work. When you picked up a tire, you were amazed at the black it could give off (121).

As the reflecting person, Gary Soto cannot attach meaning and continuity to these observations but only sustain the pose of a puzzled recorder of life's vicissitudes.

In the subsequent stories he confirms this attitude. He starts making a living from poetry but describes his craft in very negative terms:

> ...push words from one side of the page to the next. I was eager to reinvent my childhood, to show others the chinaberry tree, ants, shadows, dirty spoons - those nouns that made up much of my poetry...nothing came except a few stilted lines about loneliness in contemporary society. I felt sick. The poems I had written in the previous weeks had been dismal efforts to rekindle a feel for the past (139).

So, there does not seem to be any grace at all in the work of the mind though he eagerly uses it as a means of communication with others. Soto obviously has come to a dead end while looking for methods to make his past usable. On the one hand does he feel that he has lost and lived up the street of his childhood and youth, on the other he does not really find new substance and permanence in his adult life. So how can he eventually spend "A Good Day" at the end of the book with such burdens on his mind? How far has he progressed from his starting point in *Living Up the Street*?

"Being Mean", the first story, reconstructs life on Braly Street in Fresno at the age of six. The story itself is an extension of the introductory phrase "We were terrible kids, I think" (9). It tentatively modifies an adult evaluation. The meanness and violence recalled are balanced by the thorough enjoyment of street life. And we realize how very reluctantly the narrator applies adult standards. Again and again he is carried away by the kids' spontaneous reactions including those of his former self. The present

attitude parallels his own preference of the rather liberal and careless style of education of the Molinas to the Soto concepts in the story. Instead of stabilizing him, the exploration of the past leaves the autobiographer dangling between identification and detachment, creates a pervasive sense of loss.

Not the limited successes of the initial stages of the recollecting process but its pain are intensified in the following stories. When in "One Last Time" and "Black Hair" the narrator reaches the transitional period before adulthood, he is deprived even of the objects of his nostalgic longings. As the phenomena of the new phase but irritate him, it is quite logical that in the last story of the book he tries to escape some of the pitfalls of his intellectual activity. This means that he will ignore the useless past and all references to a reality beyond actuality.

"A Good Day," therefore, revives the spirit of unrestrained enjoyment of the immediate as retrieved by memory from his childhood and youth. The story about a group of adults in Mexico starts with boredom and confusion, emotions quite familiar to the kids of "Being Mean". Relief is easily provided by mobility and the application of superficial sophistication. The stereotypical responses to immediate reality are based upon a spontaneous use of the pre-mediated:

> We walked along a leaf-littered path, paired off into couples looking very much like the tourists that we were... We stopped and leaned against a stone fence, first to take pictures of the divers, and then of one another gazing into the distance, in the mock concentration of would-be free thinkers (158).

The tourists stick to this pattern to the end of the story, eagerly living up to the promises of the title. They ignore the full potential of some of the scenes; the narrator does not even pick up those details which very obviously refer to the recollective process. He rather joins in the naive, exclusive celebration of the immediate, thus denying his role as an autobiographer.

Gary Soto leaves his book as a mere collector of evidence who deliberately abstains from deep thinking. Thus he returns to his former self while at the same time negating the reality of the book which made him into an autobiographer, a tendency already manifesting itself in the earliest stage of his artist's career. The work of the muscle and the work of the mind failed Gary Soto's testing. So his search for an identity in both fields results in self-denial. Nonetheless, this unstable personality stubbornly keeps on recording and communicating his experience. Once more, reality evades the individual's desire for self-determined participation. The conclusions of

Living up the Street clearly question the usefulness of the autobiographical impulse as determinant for the present and the future. It has no redeeming qualities but only increases the number of life's inconsistencies, ambiguities, and disappointments.

Such insights explain the narrator's insistence on the pose of the naive observer wondering about the uncontrollable, strange ways of the world. Soto's *ratio*, the threat of isolation and his sense of survival urge him to continue writing, expecting the satisfaction denied to him while exploring his past from the act of communication with the reader as an objective outsider. The question is whether such strategy can actually compensate for the losses depicted in the book.

Gary Soto continued to publish autobiographical narratives. *Small Faces* (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 1986) and *Lesser Evils. Ten Quartets* (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 1988) mainly celebrate the family circle, the immediacy of a very small world but also sporadically returns to the narrator's childhood and youth. Sandra Cisneros's book of poems *My Wicked Wicked Ways* (Bloomington, Indiana: Third Woman Press, 1987) also deals with a rather limited range of experience. The motto of its first section, taken from Gwendolyn Brooks, is quite programmatic:

> I've stayed in the front yard all my life.
> I want a peek at the back
> Where it's rough and untended and hungry weed grows.
> A girl gets sick of a rose (1)

Some of the poems are early drafts for the stories of *The House on Mango Street*, all of them do not substantially transgress the space established in the first work. Even in her critical-autobiographical articles, Cisneros returns to her debut.[7] Both writers tend to public posing, a valid approach to modern reality which, in honor of Oscar Wilde, could be called "compensative dandyism."

Both writers deal with the beginnings of their careers. Sandra Cisneros describes her haunting past up to the starting point of something new and promising which she begins by writing *The House on Mango Street*, the portrait of her accepted identity as process and result. Gary Soto crosses that line and already looks back in anger on his first artistic efforts as a poet and recollecting individual. Like Cisneros, he returns to his beginnings but without her new sense of continuity between past, present, and future. In his book the emotions of loss and disappointment dominate. His only life-saving device seems to be a deliberate attempt to reduce the phenomena threatening to overwhelm him.

Whereas Cisneros fully accepts her social responsibility as an artist towards the people of Mango Street, Soto, here again, is very cautious and selective. He recognizes it for the small Fresno street gang, for himself and, in the last quarter of the book, for his wife and daughter. So *The House on Mango Street* can be understood as a public call to the Chicano artists to see the political implications of their efforts, whereas *Living up the Street* argues for the retreat into a small, private world with the faint possibility of re-emergence.

The two books have circular structures. As series of individual stories they lack the comprehensiveness and consistency of traditional autobiographies, though Cisneros establishes an overall continuity by generally relating herself to the whole package of her past, including its inconsistencies. The two Chicano autobiographers reject an artificial concept of reality and its perception; their modes of presentation rather stress the fragmentary and largely evasive character of reality. To attach some degree of meaning to life, both authors trust the "lifting powers" of the imagination and of memory, Esperanza Cordero and Sandra Cisneros more than Gary Soto.

Footnotes

[1] I am referring to Tomas Rivera's symposium contribution "Chicano Literature: A Fiesta of the Living," in Tom J. Lewis, ed., "Fiesta of the Living: A Chicano Symposium," in *Books Abroad* 49 (1975), 439-452.

[2] See e.g. the poetry of Jimmy Santiago Baca (*Martin & Meditations on the South Valley* (New York: New Directions, 1987)), José Montoya ("El Louie," in Antonia Castaneda Shular, Tomás Ybarra-Fausto and Joseph Sommers, eds. *Literatura Chicana. Texto y Contexto* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1972), 173-176), Raúl Salinas ("A Trip Through the Mind Jail," in Shular, Ybarra-Fausto, Sommers, eds. *Literatura Chicana*, 182-186 and "Journey II," in Dorothy E. Harth and Lewis M. Baldwin, eds. *Voices of Aztlan* (New York: Mentor, 1974), 192-196), Ricardo Sánchez ("Barrios of the World," in *Selected Poems* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1985), 45-88) and Tino Villanueva ("History I Must Wake To," in *Shaking off the Dark* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1984), 53-78). See also Rolando Hinojosa. *Estampas Del Valle y Otras Obras/Sketches of the Valley and other works* (Berkeley: Editorial Justa, 1980), or Books like Enedian Casarez Vasquez. *Recuerdos de una Niña* (San Antonio: Centro de Comunicación, Misioneros Oblatos de María Inmaculada, 1980), Helena Maria Viramontes. *The Moths and Other Stories* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1985), and Denise Chávez. *The Last of the Menu Girls* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1986), which in many respects resemble *The House on Mango Street.*

See also articles like Wolfgang Binder, "Mothers and Grandmothers: Acts of Mythification and Remembrance in Chicano Poetry," in Renate von Bardeleben,

Dietrich Briesemeister and Juan Bruce-Novoa, eds. *Missions in Conflict. Essays on U.S.-Mexican Relations and Chicano Culture* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 1986), 133-143, Luis Leal, "Tómas Rivera. The Ritual of Remembering," in Julián Olivaris, ed. *International Studies in Honor of Thomas Rivera* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1986), 30-36, Ralph F. Grajeda, "Tómas Rivera's Appropriation of the Chicano Past," in Joseph Sommers and Tomás Ybarra-Fausto, eds. *Modern Chicano Writers. A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1979), 74-85, Tey Diana Rebelledo and Erlinda González Berry, "Growing up Chicano: Tómas Rivera and Sandra Cisneros," in Julián Olivares, ed. *International Studies...*, 109-119 and Marcienne Rocard,"The Remembering Voice in Chicano Literature," *The Americas Review* 14: 3-4 (1986), 150-159.

For Puertorican literature see e.g. Wolfgang Binder, "'A midnight reality: Puerto Rican Poetry in New York, a Poetry of Dreams," in Geneviève Fabre, ed. *European Perspectives on Hispanic Literature of the United States* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1988), 22-32.

For Native American literature see e.g. Robert F. Gish, "Memory and Dream in the Poetry of Ray Young Bear," *Minority Voices* 2:1 (Spring 1978), 21-29 and the interviews with Native American poets published in Joseph Bruchac. *Survival this Way. Interviews with American Indian Poets* (Tucson: Sun Tracks and The University of Arizona Press, 1987): "Talking with the Past. An Interview with Peter Blue Cloud," 23-42; "The River is the Past. An Interview with Koroniaktatie," 135-144; "Our own Pasts. An Interview with Maurice Kenny," 145-155; "Connected to the Past. An Interview with Ray Young Bear," 337-348.

The literature of the South also meets some of the criteria. See Richard Gray. *The Literature of Memory. Modern Writers of the American South* (London: Edward Arnold, 1977). It would be quite daring but probably very rewarding to compare the social and ideological functions of this literature to those of the Black slave narratives.

[3] This evaluation of her grandmother's life again demonstrates her adherence to middle-class values.

[4] The title of the story is "Our good Day."

[5] Her vocabulary clearly indicates her concept of private property.

[6] See Sandra Cisneros, "Ghosts and Voices: Writing from Obsession," *The Americas Review* 15:1 (Spring 1987), 69-73.

[7] See ibid.

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