
Constructing Latinx American Identity

Having a Latinx American identity is an incredibly complex experience that tens of millions of Americans all share. A combination of African, European, and Native heritages have melded into a unique Latinx culture, and being Latinx in America often means straddling the Latinx culture of one's ancestry and the American culture one is surrounded with. As a Latina woman living in the United States, this experience becomes deeply personal and resonates within me. Preserving pride and respect for one's culture while also accommodating to American life can become a bit of a balancing act that dramatically impacts one's life. In Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*, Esperanza Cordero, the young protagonist, experiences this identity divide herself. Her youthful encounter represents a situation that millions of Americans still experience every day.

In her article "Adolescent Journeys: Finding Female Authority in *The Rain Catchers* and *The House on Mango Street*", Christina Rose Dubb of the University of Pennsylvania notes this encounter as she defends her thesis that Esperanza uses her literary abilities to understand her identity and the world around her using Julie Langer's four stances of envisionment-building. Rather than analyzing Dubb's analysis of *The House on Mango Street* in regards to Langer's four stances, which Dubb has already thoroughly developed, I will further explore her argument that Esperanza is living stuck between her Mexican identity and her American identity. I certainly agree with Dubb that Esperanza's mixed identity is fundamental to helping us understand her progression and maturation throughout the novel. In order to achieve her "authorial voice" (230), as Dubb puts it, Esperanza must first question, analyze, and come to understand her culture.

In a nutshell, Christina Rose Dubb is using Julie Langer's framework of envisionment-building to analyze adolescent authority in both *The House on Mango Street* and *The Rain Catchers*. She linearizes these stages to create a pathway for the protagonists in each novel to find their voices and become active, assertive parts of their worlds. In the beginning of this argument, Dubb recognizes the additional obstacles that Esperanza faces because of her background-referring to this in-between life as living in "los intersticios", the cracks, as Anzaldúa puts it (222). She argues that the use of vignettes and switching between Spanish and English allows this sense of flexibility and in-betweenness to flourish. This in-betweenness makes understanding her culture and background significantly more difficult for Esperanza than it would be had she been simply white.

At the start of the novel, Esperanza blindly accepts her culture and her life in general. Dubb classifies this part of her life as the "Silence stage of development, where they live their lives

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on the surface, without questioning their situations or using words as power at all,” (224). Esperanza writes simple descriptions of her world and culture, without even realizing that her culture is distinct. She talks of houses that “look like Mexico” (18) and dogs “with two names, one in English and one in Spanish” (21). Her identity is woven into her life so precisely that she is not conscious of it. Esperanza’s naivety and innocence keep her unquestioning of the world around her.

However, this childlike obedience does not last for long. Further into the novel, Esperanza starts to struggle with her identity as she is unable to find solace within it. About halfway into the novel, Esperanza visits Elenita. Elenita is spiritual like many other older Latina women. She combines traditional beliefs with Catholicism, and following this notion, she reads lotería tarot cards to tell a person’s future. Elenita reads the cards for Esperanza, and tells her she sees “a home in the heart” (64). This disappoints Esperanza, who was hoping to learn more from the reading.

Now Dubb interprets this event as another example of Esperanza looking to other women in the community to “help her sort out her feelings” (226), I see this as an opportunity to allow Esperanza to think more critically about her life on Mango Street. This is one of the first times that Esperanza starts to feel disappointed in of her culture- forcing her to think through her culture and her role in society as an adolescent girl. This questioning of her culture is an integral part of her maturation throughout the novel. Thinking critically about one’s background allows for better understanding of both the benefits and limitations involved.

Esperanza is also forced to reconcile with her feelings of guilt as her culture intertwines with her socioeconomic background. At Mango Street, and at the prior residencies, Esperanza never feels at home. She is embarrassed by the house’s “small and red with tight steps”, “windows so small you'd think they were holding their breath”, “bricks are crumbling in places”, and “front door is so swollen you have to push hard to get in” (4). Because Latinx culture is so closely tied to community, it could be inferred that Esperanza is upset with her socioeconomic status, as it puts her at odds with her culture.

Esperanza wants to hold on to her culture, but she also associates her culture with her working class neighborhood she wants to escape. When Esperanza visits with the three aunts and is told to make a wish, she feels “ashamed for having made such a selfish wish”- that is, wishing to get out of the neighborhood. However, with the support of community members, Esperanza is able to settle this conflict at the end of the novel. When Esperanza makes her wish, one of the aunts tells her,

When you leave you must remember to come back for the others. A circle, understand?

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You will always be Esperanza. You will always be Mango Street.

You can't erase what you know. You can't forget who you are. (105)

Although she initially admits that she did not understand what the aunt had meant, she is later able to process and understand it. On the last page of the novel, Esperanza writes,

One day I will pack my bags of books and paper. One day I will say goodbye to

Mango. I am too strong for her to keep me here forever. One day I will go away. (110)

However, she adds a finishing though:

They will not know I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind.

For the ones who cannot out. (110)

With this page alone we can witness a change in Esperanza's understanding of her life on Mango Street. She moves past the guilt of wanting to leave, now understanding that her culture and community growing up will always have a profound impact on her life, and that she will certainly return.

Esperanza matures very quickly in this short-spanned, short-paged novel. By looking at the struggle of balancing Latinx and American identities, we can better understand how Esperanza grows to understand the significance of her culture and community living on Mango Street, allowing her to blossom into a strong, ambitious, and down-to-earth individual.

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