

More Room to Play in Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*.

Stella Bolaki

In a recent article which explores the relationship between Sandra Cisneros and Emily Dickinson, and which forms part of a larger project on privacy and affiliation in American literary history, Geoffrey Sanborn starts his argument with the following question: "What happens to the political dimension of a work of art when the artist shows signs of becoming lost, or of being lost, in the pleasures of creation?" (1334). One area where issues of politics and aesthetics remain strong and contentious is in writing by women of color. In the case of their work, Sanborn's question is usually broken down into related questions that create a false "either/or" choice; questions such as must an ethnic American woman choose between individualism and community or between formal experimentation and realism, raise "moral dilemmas" which present their various political allegiances and artistic choices as mutually exclusive. Among the writers who have received criticism on the basis of "acts of betrayal" are Alice Walker, Zora Neale Hurston and Maxine Hong Kingston. For Chicana writers in particular the image of *La Malinche*, Cortés's traitorous translator, never ceases to be relevant. If Gloria Anzaldúa is right that a borderland is "created by the emotional residue of an *unnatural boundary*" (25, my emphasis), Chicana literature exhibits in its own way that unnatural divisions can be deconstructed so that "a consciousness of the Borderlands" can emerge (99).

This paper seeks to continue the dialogue opened by Sanborn on the ways in which Cisneros gestures towards what, as this critic notes, might seem a paradox: "a socially progressive politics of private enjoyment" (1345). Sanborn investigates the "collision" of discourses of personal pleasure and communal responsibility in *The House on Mango Street* through an examination of the relationship between Cisneros and Dickinson. In terms which evoke ideas of borders and borderlands, he suggests that "a slash" that also functions as "a suture" separates Cisneros from Dickinson as it brings them together (Sanborn 1345), turning the "recreational" activity of writing, to which the protagonist Esperanza aspires with her dream of a house "clean to go before the poem", into "re-creational" (1337, my emphasis). I want to suggest that Esperanza negotiates a similar balance between the demands of her community and her need for a space of creativity and pleasure not only through writing, which is what Sanborn stresses in his account, but also through playing. The notion of "play" that I advance here is situated between the literal, in other words the actual games of Esperanza and her friends, and the metaphorical, that is the ways in which play is understood as an artistic practice. The link between the child and the artist has been established in literary history through such movements as Romanticism and

Surrealism. In many ways, an artist shares “the child’s instinct for fantasy; the free play between its imaginings and the world of fact; its spontaneous connection between widely different spheres and categories” (Ismond 75). Whether it becomes associated with children or with artists, however, play is often seen in opposition to reality or to serious work. Children are not expected to contribute to society; as Borges observes about childhood, “Todo es juego para los niños” (qtd. in Mackintosh 98). Despite the nostalgia with which adults view childhood, there is, nevertheless, the expectation that children will grow up and take a socially responsible position in the adults’ world. Similarly, an artist’s only possible work is art, but when reduced to free play and formal experimentation it risks being dismissed for promoting an aestheticism that has no practical value. Thus, artists, especially minority ones, are also expected to grow up by making their art more mature.

In my reading of several *vignettes* from Cisneros’s text, I linger more on the literal sense of play because it seems a fair thing to do in a text that recuperates the simplicity of children’s speech. Just as a host of critics have argued that Cisneros revises the motif of the house as a private abstract space, I want to retain here a more “quotidian” sense of play which does not dissolve into poststructuralist theorisations of “the free play of the signifier”. At the same time, I wish to defend the various ways minority writers, in particular women, appropriate notions of playful writing from the charges made against it by those who see it as a politically insignificant or even dangerous practice.<sup>1</sup> In contrast to both the above attitudes, I want to move “toward a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes” (Anzaldúa 101) so as to claim both the pleasure associated with play but also to recuperate its political value. In this sense, like Sanborn I hope to show that “traces of private enjoyment”, whether they are expressed in the act of writing or that of playing in *The House on Mango Street*, do not necessarily “indicate the abandonment of communities and causes” (1334), because the boundaries between personal pleasure and social responsibility are more porous. This is a realisation that seems to apply for ethnic American writing at large, so in order to encourage cross-ethnic comparison, in what follows I blend Sanborn’s conceptual framework with Sau-ling Cynthia Wong’s similar intervention into western discourses of the private and the public in Asian American fiction.<sup>2</sup>

Sanborn’s conception of “private enjoyment” in the article mentioned above moves from the domestic space as the private space *par excellence* to the space of writing and of other seemingly gratuitous acts such as self-talk and fantasy. These spaces are “heretical” and through their refusal to be contained, as Sanborn argues, undermine unity. Unity is something that Sanborn associates with what Iris Marion Young has described as “the communitarian ideal”, which denies difference for the sake of complete identification (Sanborn 1336). Cisneros belongs to a generation of Chicana writers who problematize the notion of a unified community by articulating gender-identified perspectives. She is determined to demystify romanticized notions of ethnic ghettos by writing about them “in the most real sense I knew, as a person walking those neighbourhoods with a vagina” (Cisneros,

"On the Solitary Fate" 69).<sup>3</sup> Like Sanborn, Wong is interested in questions of political engagement and private pleasure in a larger study that explores a series of motifs in Asian American fiction.<sup>4</sup> These motifs are woven together under two terms, *Necessity* and *Extravagance*, which lend her study part of its title. Wong takes these two terms from the first chapter of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (13). In Wong's words, *Necessity* usually appears with words like "force, demand or constraint", whereas *Extravagance* with words like "urge, impulse, or desire" (13). *Extravagance* denotes "excess", whereas *Necessity* is characterized by a sense of "containment" similar to what Sanborn associates with the mode of social organization structured by "the communitarian ideal" (Wong 13).

Both Sanborn and Wong explore writing and its place in the respective dichotomies of privacy and affiliation and of *Necessity* and *Extravagance*. Sanborn explains that writing is often seen as "a technology of privacy" which, like self-talk and fantasy, flirts dangerously with "mental masturbation", in the words of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, because it is not productive in the strict sense (Sanborn 1338). Wong makes a similar point; she maps her distinction between *Necessity* and *Extravagance* on the larger dichotomy of "work" and "play" (171), and explains that in an Asian American context transcendence through art is suspect since it appears to be in the service of personal pleasure, and thus is not socially useful. Unlike the aesthetic ideal of autonomy nurtured by artistic *Extravagance*, work contributes to common welfare. Both Sanborn and Wong interrogate the tendency to see art (and in particular writing) as "irresponsible" and "dissipative" (Wong 171), and undertake to recuperate the good that such a subversive space safeguards in non-atomistic and non-patriarchal terms.

In his discussion of *The House on Mango Street* Sanborn suggests that the mantra "wait, wait, wait" and "keep, keep, keep", which is what Esperanza hears coming from the four skinny trees that first appear in an eponymous *vignette*, becomes realised through "the stubborn materiality of writing" (1340). Because the idea of "keeping" is evoked once more in the *vignette* "Sire" that describes Esperanza's "auto-erotic reverie", Sanborn aligns it with the private pleasure of masturbation, but the imperative to *keep writing* is also part of Aunt Lupe's advice to Esperanza in "Born Bad": "You must keep writing. It will keep you free" (61). As Sanborn concludes after having established a connection of "keeping" with either masturbation or writing, it is the tenacity of this alternative that allows Esperanza to escape the other women's "fantasy scenarios" (Sanborn 1341), which through enforcement of marriage and of domestic confinement serve a patriarchal *Necessity*.

As I want to show, playing has a similar function in *The House on Mango Street*. Like writing, playing is "stubborn" not only because the text is interspersed with games, but also because games continue for Esperanza longer than is necessary. Although games in *The House on Mango Street* become an occasion to interact with other people and thus are not as private as Esperanza's practice of self-talk, they, too, refer to a potentially "heretical" space of enjoyment, which allows one to maintain distance from the properly social. As Hugh Matthews, Melanie Limb and Mark Taylor put it, spaces where young people gather "are places 'won out' from

the fabric of adult society although they are always in constant threat of being reclaimed" (64). In "The Monkey Garden" Esperanza describes such a space of freedom and autonomy. As she explains, the children "took over the garden" when the monkey that used to live there moved, and from then on used to go to the garden because it was "far away from where our mothers could find us" (94-5). The garden presents an alternative to some of the stifling domestic settings in *The House on Mango Street*. With its "dizzy bees", "the sleepy smell of rotting wood", "weeds like so many squinty-eyed stars", and with "flowers that stopped obeying the little bricks that kept them from growing beyond their paths" (94-5), it is presented as a locus of enjoyment, and, to recall Wong's concept, as a site in which *Extravagance* resides. Esperanza likes this place because "[t]hings had a way of disappearing in the garden, as if the garden itself ate them". On one occasion a child fell asleep under a tree while playing a game and disappeared "until somebody remembered he was in the game and went back to look for him" (95). As Esperanza notes, "This is where I wanted to die" (96).

Does this precocious fascination with death demonstrate a stubborn determination not to grow up, a fantasy of never leaving childhood? The garden, after all, with its "big green apples" and which gives the impression that it has "been there before anything" (95-96), gathers echoes of the Garden of Eden and brings in mind the myth of Childhood as Paradise Lost. At first glance, Esperanza seems to want to prolong this dimension of her life, to retain the child in her. To the suggestion for instance that she is too old to play games, she responds, "Who was it that said I was getting too old to play the games? Who wasn't it I didn't listen to?" (96). Lauren Berlant explains what is behind the imperative to grow up. As she explains, women in particular have become the targets of "'those mortifying charges (sentimentality, self-indulgence, narcissism) which our culture is prepared to bring against anyone who dwells in subjectivity longer or more intensely than is necessary to his proper functioning as the agent of *socially useful work*...'" (qtd. in Berlant 271, my emphasis). Children's games are characterised by a similar intensity, absorption and a commitment peculiar to the child, whose whole world is that of "el juego", or of playing, to recall us of Borges's comment. Given that children are allowed to spend their time like that, does Esperanza stop being immune to the kind of criticism mentioned by Berlant from the moment people tell her that she is too old to play the games?

Esperanza's friend Sally also seems to be prone to acts of *Extravagance* which could be dismissed as frivolous. Esperanza describes Sally as a woman who is in pursuit of her own enjoyment, too: "Sally is the girl with eyes like Egypt and nylons the color of smoke...her hair is shiny black like raven features and when she laughs, she flicks her hair back like a satin shawl" (81). The language of this passage with its descriptive extravagance heightens such an effect. Although Esperanza admires Sally for her self-expression and identifies with her in an eponymous *vignette* that allows a glimpse of Sally's innermost thoughts, she also "keeps her distance", to evoke Sanborn's central phrase. In "The Monkey Garden" the boundaries between the adult world and that of children are demarcated spatially and through the idea

More Room to Play in Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*

of play. Esperanza asks Sally to join her: "I said, Sally, come on, but she wouldn't. She stayed by the curb talking to Tito and his friends. Play with the kids if you want, she said, I'm staying here" (96). Sally's comment not only signals a division between the world of adults and that of children but also differentiates between the kinds of games that are appropriate for boys as opposed to those that are prescribed for girls. Sally stays by the curb, immobile, while Esperanza wants "to run up and down and through the monkey garden, fast as the boys, not like Sally who screamed if she got her stocking muddy" (96).

Esperanza prefers to continue playing "with the kids" rather than participating in Sally's game. As with writing which can be divided into "procreative" and "re-creational", to evoke Sanborn's terms, there are different kinds of games.<sup>5</sup> "Sally had her own *game*", as Esperanza explains, and adds, "One of the boys invented the rules. One of Tito's friends said you can't get the keys back unless you kiss us and Sally pretended to be mad at first but she said yes. It was that simple" (96, my emphasis). Sally's game, however innocent, fulfils a necessity in that it is almost an initiation ritual into proper womanhood. Contrary to this conditioning game, Esperanza's games fail to become indexes to her internalization of male definitions of female sexuality. In an earlier *vignette* Esperanza expresses her desire to baptize herself under a different name so as to escape the destiny of her grandmother, to escape "inheriting the place by the window", which is what most women in the *barrio* become reduced to, once they get married ("My Name" 11). Sally's game provides training for domestic "labours of love" and thus cannot help her escape that closure, as the subsequent *vignette* entitled "Linoleum Roses" starkly reveals.

On the contrary, Esperanza's games open different paths and thus allow her to maintain distance from limiting scripts of femininity. This is not to say, however, that Esperanza does not try out more traditionally "feminine" games. As Sanborn is right to point out, the imperative to wait or to keep, which the young protagonist realizes through writing, is an advice to keep some distance as opposed to completely separate herself from the fairy-tale fantasies of the other women, to which she is also drawn (1341). In "The Family of Little Feet", for instance, Esperanza puts on high heels and imagines that she is Cinderella, but by the end of the *vignette* she "reconciles herself to 'ordinary shoes'" (Doyle 18). In the familiar double movement of the text, which Sanborn discusses in relation to Cisneros's revision of Dickinson's discourses of privacy, Cisneros tries out the fairy tales and myths of proper femininity only to discard them later for being too constricting. Similarly, Esperanza does not renounce the pleasure that play affords, but also turns its energy into something else which demonstrates that play is not a frivolous and gratuitous activity devoid of meaning.

Many *vignettes* align the children's games with linguistic games. Games provide for Esperanza a kind of laboratory to conduct her experiments with language, a space which complements the private space of creativity that she longs for, that is the house. In a *vignette* entitled "Hips", Esperanza's formation as a writer is anticipated through an immediate connection of language and play. Drawing on

## Bolaki

their thoughts about a physical change in their bodies, Esperanza and her friends participate in a creative exercise; while they dance or jump the rope, each one improvises a little poem about the meaning of hips:

*Some are skinny like chicken lips.  
Some are baggy like soggy band-aids  
After you get out of the bathtub.  
I don't care what kind I get.  
Just as long as I get hips.*

The scene could be dismissed as trivial or as an example of the reason why female culture, a culture of “children-women”, is susceptible to charges of worthlessness: “For women are consumed by their ‘Mutual Admiration Society; emptying their budget of love affairs; comparing bait to trap victims; sighing over the same rose leaf; sonnetizing the same moonbeam; patronizing the same milliner; and *exchanging female kisses!*” (qtd. in Berlant 273, emphasis in the original). As I would like to suggest, however, the pleasure derived from the game is not a pure waste of energy. The game depends on the contribution of each player and promotes collaboration. The outcome of the song the girls create, unlike the same song that Marin sings in order to attract the boys (24), a private pleasure absorbed by patriarchy, is “not totally assimilable to the model of normative heterosexuality” (Sanborn 1338). Its product is of a different kind; work and play seem to coexist in this game, which, to recall us of Sanborn’s phrase once more, can be seen as “recreational, in the strong *re-creational* sense of the word” (1337, my emphasis). The distinction between this type of creative Work and “real” work becomes evident through the sharp contrast between this *vignette* and the one that directly follows, entitled “The First Job”. This *vignette* starts with a sense of guilt on the part of Esperanza - “It wasn’t as if I didn’t want to work” (53) - and ends with an account of sexual abuse in the workplace. Unlike the game described in the previous *vignette*, work in “The First Job” takes the form of a series of uncreative and repetitious duties, which allow no room for personal feeling.

The game in “Hips” is not, nevertheless, totally free in the sense of undisciplined; it has its own rules, but these are voluntarily adopted. Only Nenny, Esperanza’s younger sister, cannot follow them. She does not seem to be able to move away from the kids’ usual rhymes while, as Esperanza explains, the purpose of the game is to invent something new:

Not that old song, I say. You gotta use your own song. Make it up, you know? But she doesn’t get it or won’t ... Nenny, I say, but she doesn’t hear me. She is too many light years away. She is in a world we don’t belong to anymore. Nenny. Going. Going. (50)

Julián Olivares explains that through this scene “the awareness of time passing and of growing up is given a spatial dimension” (165-6). Just as Esperanza in “The Monkey Garden” scene is inside the garden looking at Sally who is outside, in this scene Esperanza is on the outside “looking at Nenny inside the arc of the swinging rope that now separates Nenny’s childhood dimension from her present awareness of just having left behind that very same childhood” (Olivares 166). Trough the

differentiation between various kinds of games and through the use of spatial indexes, the text shows how Esperanza maintains her distance from both Nenny and Sally. It is not that she resists the inevitable process of growing up, but she resists those developmental patterns that provide models for "growing down", in Annis Pratt's phrase (168). Esperanza inhabits a threshold zone; she is neither a child who cannot yet grasp her responsibility towards her community nor a woman who sacrifices her creativity to the imperative of *Necessity* enforced by patriarchy. Although "The Monkey Garden" ends with Esperanza realizing that "the garden that had been such a good place to play didn't seem mine" (98), which resonates with the ending of "Hips", this closure does not imply a definitive removal from the children's world. Esperanza is still tied to this dimension of pleasure, and, as I have been arguing, it is precisely this anchor that enables her to keep a necessary distance from patriarchal narratives of maturation. As Olivares puts it, "[a]lthough we perceive a change in voice at the end of ["Hips"], Esperanza is still swinging the rope" (166).

The image of the swinging rope is invoked, however subtly, in the concluding *vignette* of the text entitled "Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes". There, Esperanza fulfills the message of the three sisters, which tells her to remember that she will "always be Mango Street ... A circle, understand?" (105), in a playful way, that is by literally circling back to the opening of *The House on Mango Street*. Esperanza has not entirely abandoned games, but she now finds an outlet for her playful energy through the act of writing. The circle is no longer literal as in the case of the children's games but it still designates a space of creativity and bonding, which, as argued, also allows room for difference and distance. In this last *vignette*, Esperanza's words that she makes "a story for my life, for each step my brown shoe takes" (109) recall the girls' creative game in "Hips", in which a poem is made for each jump of the rope. More importantly, what recuperates the value of Esperanza's playful exit through writing, making it socially responsible, is the statement "[t]hey will not know I have gone away in order to come back. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot out" (110). The promise of return that Esperanza makes asks us to remain open to the generative potential of distance and play, a "recreational" potential to be realized in the future. This is part of Sanborn's conclusion, as already mentioned, but the playful closure of *The House on Mango Street* can be also approached in light of what Wong writes about play: For Wong, *Extravagance* and play "may be in the service of some Higher Necessity", which would "relocate and re-distribute [play's] value" (186). Play may feel like play in the short term but can bear fruit in the future. Wong blends *Necessity* and *Extravagance*, creating "the third space" of a *Higher Necessity* where both pleasure and responsibility coexist. This seems consistent with Sanborn's idea of a "socially progressive politics of private enjoyment".

The playful Esperanza cannot be seen outside Cisneros whose writing crosses genres and constantly experiments with new forms ranging from the use of the *vignette* in *The House on Mango Street* to the hybridity of her later work. Are Cisneros' "lazy poems" in *The House on Mango Street* (Cisneros, "Do You Know Me?" 79)

indicative of a self-indulgent and childish mood that is irresponsible? Wong raises the question whether images that draw attention to the more playful aspects of art in Asian American literary texts should be subsumed “under the modern bourgeois concept of the alienated artist” (166). Although Asian Americans resort to play in order to counter stereotypes such as “the model minority” that reduces them to obedient subjects, play is never reduced to a purely “disinterested play” (185). As Wong stresses, “[Asian American artists] can hardly abandon questions on the moral and political propriety of play” (185). Using the terms she coins, Asian American fiction displays “a conscientious aestheticism” (191) or “an interested disinterestedness” (13). Elisabeth Mermann-Jozwiak has a similar argument with respect to Chicana literature. Like Wong, she examines the question of aesthetics and political engagement turning in particular to possible intersections between postmodernism and multiculturalism in Chicana fiction (101). She suggests that formal experimentation by Chicana women writers never becomes reduced to “ahistorical play of signifier” (113). Chicana fiction, on the contrary exemplifies “a multicultural, political version of postmodernism” (113). In an article that specifically considers *The House on Mango Street*, Ellen McCracken argues that Cisneros’s use of a child’s voice departs from “the hermetic language of many canonical works” (64), but it is a voice, nevertheless, that is “deceptively simple” (71). In her words, in *The House on Mango Street* Cisneros exhibits “a community-oriented introspection” (McCracken 62).

All the aforementioned syncretic terms which find their way into critical discourse and which destabilize fixed oppositions are examples of imaginative solutions which women of color devise; strategies and tactics of *mestizaje* that are appropriate to their borderland condition as artists with responsibilities to their communities but also a need for room to exercise their creativity. In *The House on Mango Street* in particular, as I hope to have shown, Esperanza glimpses in the childhood experience of playing, which becomes transmuted into playful writing, the possibility of a creative *and* politically responsible adjustment to the complex world she inhabits. Beyond the specific text considered here, when it comes to the broader questions of aesthetics and political engagement in the area of writing by women of color, in “the artist’s plea for room to play”, in Wong’s words (211), there is room for both private enjoyment and communal affiliation.

### Works Cited

- Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1999.
- Berlant, Lauren. “The Female Woman: Fanny Fern and the Form of Sentiment.” *The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender and Sentimentality in Nineteenth-Century America* Ed. Shirley Samuels. New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992. 265-281.
- Cisneros, Sandra. *The House on Mango Street*. 1984. London: Bloomsbury, 1992.



More Room to Play in Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*

- \_\_\_\_. "Do You Know Me?: I Wrote *The House on Mango Street*." *The Americas Review* 15 (Spring 1987): 77-79.
- \_\_\_\_. "On the Solitary Fate of Being Mexican, Female, Wicked and Thirty-Three: An Interview with Writer Sandra Cisneros." With Pilar E. Rodriguez Aranda. *The Americas Review* 18.1 (Spring 1990): 64-79.
- Doyle, Jacqueline. "More Room of Her Own: Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*." *MELUS* 19.4 (Winter 1994): 5-35.
- Ismond, Patricia. "First They Must Be Children." *Jamaica Kincaid*. Ed. Harold Bloom. Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 1998. 71-77.
- McCracken, Ellen. "Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*: Community-Oriented Introspection and the Demystification of Patriarchal Violence." *Breaking Boundaries: Latina Writing and Critical Readings*. Ed. Asuncion Horno-Delgado, et al. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1989. 62-71.
- Mackintosh, Fiona J. *Childhood in the Works of Silvina Ocampo and Alejandra Pizarnik*. Woodbridge: Tamesis, 2003.
- Matthews, Hugh, Melanie Limb, and Marc Taylor. "The Street as Thirdspace." *Children's Geographies: Playing, Living, Learning*. Ed. Sarah L. Holloway and Gill Valentine. London and New York: Routledge, 2000. 63-79.
- Mermann-Jozwiak, Elisabeth. "Gritos desde la Frontera: Ana Castillo, Sandra Cisneros, and Postmodernism." *MELUS* 25.2 (Summer 2000): 101-118.
- Olivares, Julián. "Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*, and the Poetics of Space." *The Americas Review* 15 (Fall-Winter 1987): 160-170.
- Pratt, Annis, et al. *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction*. Brighton: Harvester P, 1982.
- Sanborn, Geoffrey. "Keeping Her Distance: Cisneros, Dickinson, and the Politics of Private Enjoyment." *PMLA* 116.5 (Oct. 2001): 1334-1348.
- "Search for Identity." *American Passages: A Literary Survey*. An Online Video Course. Oregon Public Broadcasting, 2003. 1 Dec. 2005 <<http://www.learner.org/resources/series164.html>>.
- Wong, Sau-ling Cynthia. *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance*. Chichester: Princeton UP, 1993.

---

**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> For the ways in which Cisneros revises the motif of the house, see Ellen McCracken's "Community-Oriented Introspection" and Jacqueline Doyle's "More Room of Her Own". For the charges against women in relation to play, see Sanborn p.1334.

<sup>2</sup> Without neglecting the fact that Wong's paradigm is devised to capture the historical and contextual specificities of Asian American fiction, given that the terms *Necessity* and *Extravagance* are characterized by a certain level of abstraction, as Wong herself admits, it is relatively safe to transplant them from their "original" context. As Wong explains, the two concepts "function mainly rhetorically to tie together related tendencies contingent upon concrete social circumstances" (13). On several occasions throughout her study, Wong suggests potential comparisons with other minority literatures. A more "playful" justification for bringing an Asian American paradigm together with a Chicano text is the

---

sentence that appears in the *vignette* "My Name" from *The House on Mango Street*. There, Esperanza states that "the Chinese, like the Mexicans, don't like their women strong" (10). Cisneros has said in an interview that Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, from which Wong takes the terms *Necessity* and *Extravagance*, gave her "permission" to write *The House on Mango Street* ("Search for Identity"). Finally, Sanborn in a note at the end of his article suggests that "a similar argument [to his own] could be made with respect to the work of...Kingston" (n1, 1346), and chooses as one of the epigraphs of his article a sentence from the first chapter of *The Woman Warrior*.

- <sup>3</sup> Although community protects from outside danger, it is not a haven. Local communities may be invested with a redemptive significance, especially at a time when people live in an increasingly fragmented and alienated world, but they also make claims to their members that can be oppressive. Cisneros investigates the degree of concession a woman can make to her community before starting to feel less at home.
- <sup>4</sup> Like Sanborn who suggests that Cisneros revises Dickinson's discourse of privacy, Wong explores alimentary images, the motif of "the double", patterns of mobility and images of art and artists, revealing the distinctive characteristics that these seemingly universal motifs acquire when contextualized in an Asian American context.
- <sup>5</sup> Sanborn draws on Gayatri Spivak and distinguishes between "the imperative to reproduce" that Spivak calls "uterine social organization" and pleasure which is not only valued for its outcomes but on its own terms. As Sanborn explains, such a pleasure is productive in a different way, a difference that becomes captured through the term recreational as both *recreational* and *re-creational* (1337, my emphasis).