HOMES ON BORDERS IN CHICANO LITERATURE

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Abstract: In “*Borderlands/ La Frontera*” (1987), Gloria Anzaldúa writes about the “tradition of long walks” (11) across physical and imaginary borders, which defines her Mexican-American people. The borderland is both a space of transit and a state of transition from where the Chicanos venture into unknown territories. Their identity is constructed around and across space(s). In this paper, I seek to examine the Chicanos’ fluid spatial identity in their searches for a real home, in Pat Mora’s “*House of Houses*”, Sandra Cisneros’ “*The House on Mango Street*”, Gloria Anzaldúa’s “*Borderlands/ La Frontera*”. I argue that in these literary and autobiographical works, the cosy domestic home is impossible to find because of constant displacement and imposed mobility.

Keywords: borders, *Borderlands/ La Frontera*, Chicano literature, fluid identities, *House of Houses*, *The House on Mango Street*

1. Introduction

In *Borderlands/ La Frontera* (1987), Gloria Anzaldúa writes about the “tradition of long walks” (11) across physical and imaginary borders, a tradition embraced by her Mexican-American people or Chicanos. They are the first or the second generation of Mexican descend who are raised in the U.S.A., many of whom are already American citizens or permanent residents in America. However, ‘Chicano’ or ‘Chicana’ are often derogatory terms, used to describe a marginalized population, aliens or transgressors inhabiting the Mexico-Texan border. Having lived for such a long time on the common border between Mexico and the US, Chicanos are captured between two cultures: their Mexican homeland and the American culture. Like other Chicana writers, Anzaldúa in her *La Frontera* tries to get back to the historical roots of the Chicano population, tracing back their Indian and Spanish ancestry in what is now Mexico and Central America. This mixed race with *mestizo* ancestors explored the Southwest part of the US as early as the 16th century and settled there, but finally many of these northern territories were lost to the United States in the mid-19th century, resulting in the annexation of approximately one third of its present territory, including what is now Texas, California, New Mexico, Arizona, and Colorado. With the victory of the US over the Mexican forces in the Mexican-American War, what used to be a homeland for the Mexican population became a borderland, while they were no longer part of their country of origin, but not yet assimilated by the American society either. Chicanos and Chicanas were therefore forced to walk away from their own culture, feeling dispossessed and forcibly separated from their homes, which explains why they have always continued to migrate, either legally or illegally, to their native lands.

Like in a mythological odyssey, their return to the promised land is a way to reconnect with their native culture and finally gain a sense of who they are and where they come from. However, the paradox is that their return home is not a safe journey, but a journey plagued by the strange fear of going home and of being a migrant in a homeland that is no longer welcoming and accessible. No matter how difficult this journey might be, finding home is in fact seen as a necessary act of finding who they truly are. Before reaching their homeland, Chicanos and Chicanas inhabit a third country, called ‘the borderland country’ by Gloria Anzaldúa. The

concept of borderland shows how Chicano/a identity and culture are formed through what used to be a fluid border between Mexico and the U.S.A., which triggers the question about who inhabits whose land. In this much contested borderland country, Chicanos inhabit a narrow strip of land and live in the margins of two territories and cultures that have been shrinking with too much intimacy. Regrounding homes in the borderland can be also seen as an act of uprooting the fixed boundaries of the US, after Chicanos and Chicanas have experienced themselves a long process of historical uprooting, forced displacement, and imposed migration.

2. Space, homes, and borderlands

Chicanos and Chicanas living in this hybrid area of the limited borderzone need to accommodate to narrow and sparse spaces where they have to re-ground their (new) homes. It is evident why, in general, Chicano/a literature deals less with a presentation of wide landscapes, while being more concerned with the construction of small domestic spaces. Open spaces, whether mountains, beaches or deserts, are only imprinted in their inner nature particularly because Chicanos could not travel and see the world: “we yearn to see the shapes and vistas that live in our interior” (Mora 1997:25). Instead, they are trapped in small-sized houses as the one on Mango Street, where Sandra Cisneros lived a rather unhappy life with many cultural restrictions: “small and red with tight steps in front and windows so small you’d think they were holding their breath. [...] Out back is a small garage for the car we don’t own yet and a small yard that looks smaller between the two buildings on either side” (Cisneros 1991: 4). This description of her house emphasizing its narrow and confining places suggests that even the windows ‘hold their breath’, while its inhabitants experience psychological and emotional suffocation.

Given their close relationship to space, Chicanos and Chicanas build their identity primarily in domestic spatial terms. More specifically, their inner reality is created by a painstaking reconfiguration of home and a permanent rethinking of homecoming. Firstly, the conventional understanding of home is challenged, since it is no longer seen as a stable and welcoming place, but only a small dwelling offering very little comfort or ramshackle houses in shameful and depressing neighbourhoods. Sandra Cisneros’s protagonist in *The House on Mango Street*, Esperanza, remembers moving from one house to another before her family finally settled down in the dilapidated house in the *barrio* on Mango Street. This time again, their family house is a reversed dream house, another temporary residence, with only one bedroom for her family of six. In the stifling atmosphere of the Mango house, Esperanza gave up on her dream house she had seen on television, feeling hopeless that her family would be ever able to move into ‘a real house’, with running water and pipes that worked, with ‘real’ stairs inside the house. Outside, she dreams of a large yard that is not surrounded by a fence. This apparently insignificant detail, a yard without a fence, reveals the migrant’s fervent quest to live in a free and open location, away from the physical limitations imposed by surveillance fences and barbwire. In her turn, Anzaldúa voices the same fear of having to live in a place enclosed by a border fence: “This is my home/ this thin edge of/ barbwire” (1987: 13). In houses that are supposed to be familiar and welcoming, these two Chicana writers experience strange feelings of ‘not being at home’, developed out of a very intimate sensation of out-of-placeness and even displacement. It is true that their unsettling narratives not only reconsider their individual relation to homes, but they also speak on behalf of the entire Chicano community and about their collective homecoming. Home is then considered in terms of a plurality of similar dwelling experiences. Stories about Mexican refugees who cannot make it past the Border Patrol and who are sent back across the border are a daily reality, while others more fortunate are finally able to reach the dilapidated Chicano *barrio*. While going home is denied to the former, the latter manage to return home safely, but their homecoming is still an unsettling experience.

Whether these Chicano houses are material, like in Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*, or imaginary, like Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/ La Frontera* and Pat Mora's *House of Houses*, they all emerge from a dynamic process, involving the acts of losing, regrounding and revisiting homes. Life here becomes possible when the space of these dilapidated small homes is symbolically stretched vertically or horizontally. In their autobiographical accounts about migration and homecoming, Cisneros, Mora and Anzaldúa create a new sense of belonging to the domestic place by re-dimensioning the size of their migrant houses on vertical and horizontal axes. Despite the lack of physical space in these dwellings, migrant houses that are vertically and horizontally resized are not only symbolically higher and bigger, but they can also accommodate the expanding spirit of the Chicano and Chicana migrant along with their fluid identity.

3. Homes and hybrid identities

Anzaldúa argues that her people need to remain flexible if they wish to "stretch the psyche horizontally and vertically" (1987: 79) and, in the end, they will be able to get rid of the fear of going home. Even though she always carries her home on her back, like a turtle, permeating every sinew and cartilage of her body (21), Gloria Anzaldúa constantly needs to claim and reclaim her own space out of which a new culture emerges: '*una cultura mestiza*' (22). In fact, *la mestiza* inhabits this new space. She is the dark-skinned woman who has been "silenced, gagged, caged, bound into servitude with marriage, bludgeoned for 300 years" (22), whose new home is now the borderland, which gives her a new consciousness: a *mestiza* consciousness, "*una conciencia de mujer*" (77). Here, Chicanas are no longer invisible and voiceless, but they can speak their mind, act on their own and protest openly. At the same time, there is always a reconnection to their ancestral roots: "*la cultura Chicana* identifies with the mother (Indian) rather than with the father (Spanish)" (30), Anzaldúa argues in her feminist voice. She remaps the home in her imagination and transforms it into a larger place accommodating harmoniously a dual identity and a hybrid of two cultures with various degrees of Mexicaness and Angloness, but "nothing defined or definite, a boundless, floating state of limbo" (72). Living in the hybrid borderzone affects the *mestiza*'s identity, not yet fully completed but still struggling for self-definition as the struggle for borders continues even today.

In the same vein, Pat Mora's 'house of houses' is symbolic of this fluid identity developed between present and past family generations. Both those who are alive and those who are dead are floating simultaneously in her traditional Mexican house, made from mud, built around a central patio, and situated in the desert landscape, somewhere near the Río Grande, between El Paso and Santa Fe: "I created a place welcoming to our spirits, a place for communion and reunion, no invitation necessary; a space, like all spaces, as real as we choose to make it, ample enough for the family spirits who will refer to us in the past, tense can turn to us and create with us what they need" (1997: 272-3). In her *House of Houses*, Mora talks about her Chicano identity in relation to a sense of belonging that can be best formulated providing that all these generations in her family were living together in a shared domestic space. Finally, in her imagined house, Pat Mora makes it possible for her family to dwell in a place of "communion and reunion", a place they fully deserve after a long and troubled history of migration: "Mora has created a house of memory, in which belonging (*pertenecer a un lugar*) is inscribed in history, migration, and the domestic" (Rebolledo 2013: 132). In this house of memory, the spirits return as "we return to old homes and wander the chambers, touch the ledge of a favorite window, stare at a favorite arch, stretch out on a bed in which we dreamed, open closet doors and see what we wore, who we were, the self that continues in us as our dead do" (Mora 1997: 263). Her dead maternal aunt, Lobo, is moving comfortably through the house, talking to Pat's maternal grandmother who died in 1962, and, together with the others dwelling there, they create a family

space replete with special gifts, 'recipes for living', languages and stories. Whether lost or abandoned, homes are still 'engraved' and 'inscribed' in the family (15), while the rooms in this house become vital chambers in their heart.

Mora's dream house accommodating so many generations and images of other lost homes is, in fact, an imaginary map of a home that has been symbolically extended. Unlike Anzaldúa's borderland house that is symbolically built on a vertical axis, Pat Mora extends her house horizontally by exploring the garden which is intimately attached to the house. The garden outside is often visited by the spirits of those who are dead, with whom they engage in slow conversations and share memories about traditional medicinal plants and health remedies. Their collective sense of belonging is not only reduced to this shared house of memory, but it also further develops in the garden outside, which functions as a private space animated by familiar figures and voices that "mingle with the voice of the fountain, parrot, broom, wind, *voces del jardín*" (7).

Finally, Anzaldúa imagines a new borderland home while Mora revisits her memory home, but they both recreate previously unaccommodating and claustrophobic spaces by following two main spatial directions: verticality and horizontality. In search of "a piece of ground to stand on, a ground from which to view the world-a perspective, a homeground where she can plumb the rich ancestral roots into her own ample *mestiza* heart" (1987: 23), Anzaldúa wishes to ascend and reach the top from where she can enjoy a wider perspective. In fact, moving along a vertical axis shows her fight to overcome resistance against people who 'cross borders': "the females, the homosexuals of all races, the darkskinned, the outcast, the persecuted, the marginalized, the foreign" (1987: 38). If Anzaldúa symbolically extends the borderland home vertically, accommodating the new *mestiza* culture, Pat Mora's house of houses is enlarged horizontally, by exploring the garden attached to the house, inhabited by many of her family members. With her special relationship to the garden space, a safe natural world, Mora maps symbolically the landscape of her imagination that keeps alive the connection between the past and the present.

However, with Cisneros's house on Mango Street, the relationship between female subjects and space becomes more problematic. Here, the space available is extremely small inside the house and very narrow on the horizontal street of the Chicano neighbourhood. Esperanza is willing to cross the borders of such limited domestic space, where obviously she does not want to belong, but her departure is blocked with locked doors and closed windows. In a state of constant confusion of belonging to a place while not wishing to belong there ("the house I belong but do not belong to," 110), she finds it almost impossible to make any alterations to this place, in which she feels trapped and marginalized by the world outside. It is evident that she refuses to live in this home, not private or homely, with very few prospects and opportunities for her and for the other Chicanas, mainly because of their sparse income and ethnicity.

What is at stake in most of the stories in *The House on Mango Street* is gender. To these women, interior spaces are places of seclusion while they are denied the possibility of exploring the neighbourhood where they live. In fact, the confining space of the house becomes even more hazardous for women than the dilapidating *barrio* outside because the domestic place is constantly under strict patriarchal control. Chicanas are both victims of racial prejudices and patriarchal restrictions. They are trapped in their own houses, forced to withdrawn behind barred windows and locked doors. For instance, Esperanza's great-grandmother spent her whole life looking out the window, "the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow" (1991: 11). In *Rafaela Who Drinks Coconut & Papaya Juice on Tuesdays*, Rafaela is a young married woman who is trapped in a confining house which she is not allowed to leave because her husband believes she might run away. Imprisoned by her controlling husband, Rafaela can only lean out the window, longing to be free and using the small window to project her dreams of a better and free life: "On Tuesdays Rafaela's husband comes home late because that's the night he plays

dominoes. And then Rafaela, who is still young but getting old from leaning out the window so much, gets locked indoors because her husband is afraid Rafaela will run away since she is too beautiful to look at" (1991: 79). Instead of having fun in the dance hall down the street, she must ask the kids from the neighbourhood to get her papaya and coconut juice. She sends the money down tied to a string and then pulls it up with the things she has requested. This prison-house indicates "a gender trap fortified by the cycle of poverty from which women and children suffer in their economic dependence on men" (Pagán 2010: 97).

Unlike other women who can "open homes with keys" (Cisneros 1991: 80), Sally in *Linoleum Roses* is even more abused than Rafaela. Her violent husband not only keeps her locked inside the house, but she is not even allowed to lean out the window or talk on the phone with her relatives. Even though she got married before she was in her eighth grade, Sally seemed to have enjoyed her marriage in the beginning, because she could afford buying things in her house, but later she realizes that she herself becomes an object:

She sits at home because she is afraid to go outside without his permission. She looks at all the things they own: the towels and the toaster, the alarm clock and the drapes. She likes looking at the walls, at how neatly their corners meet, the linoleum roses on the floor, the ceiling smooth as wedding cake (Cisneros 1991: 102).

Indeed, Sally is "trapped by the borders she attempted to cross" (Careri 2013: 17), her gaze fixed on the walls blocking her view, she carefully observes the ceiling, the floor and the corners of the room, but sadly she cannot find any opening. It is then when she realizes she is not allowed to cross the borders between her home and the neighbourhood because of her domineering husband and her violent father. Torn apart by the same power dynamics, Alicia in *Alicia & I Talking on Edna Steps* fears her father who forces her to fulfil all the household duties after her mother's death, although she attends the university. Even though both Esperanza and Alicia do not like their life on Mango street, Alicia insists that they need to return to this place: "Like it or not you are Mango Street and one day you'll come back too" (Cisneros 1991: 107). What she means is that they, in a communal effort, need to reach out and recreate their space in accordance with their newly acquired identity: "Chicano writers strongly emphasize their places in the built environment and just as strongly resist displacement through tenacity and a strong map of landscape and memory" (Rebolledo 2013:135).

4. Dangerous neighbourhoods and interior borders

Unlike Anzaldúa and Mora who act on the domestic space vertically and horizontally, on Cisneros's Mango Street there are only a few indicators that the female characters aspire to move up on a vertical axis. Just after Esperanza and her family moved in the house on Mango Street, she notices there is no yard in front of the house but "only four little elms" (Cisneros 1991: 4). If trees are associated with a vertical position, then directing your attention to their tall bodies and high branches reaching towards the sky indicates an aspiration that Esperanza might already harbour, a hope suggested by her Spanish name that an ideal space can be reached "by waging a constant fight against reality, from the tension between opposing directions that may appear irreconcilable, from the difficult conciliation between multiple aspirations and identities" (Careri 2013: 20). In the story *Meme Ortiz*, there is a tree growing in the dirty backyard, cramped between "a greasy bunch of boards that used to be a garage" (Cisneros 1991: 22). The fact that Esperanza remembers "this tree, huge, with fat arms and mighty families of squirrels in the higher branches" (22) shows her attraction to the vertical dimension, which might be translated into an active movement and her constant aspirations, so that one day she will be able to put behind her bad memories about this rundown house and derelict neighbourhood. However, these are not places that Speranza reaches involuntarily, but rather committed and determined (Careri

2013: 20). This oppressive place never opens up, so reaching toward the sky and gazing on the horizon are clear attempts at leaving behind the claustrophobic atmosphere of Mango Street. Darius in *Darius & The Clouds*, who is usually a bully, does something profoundly different one day: he pointed at the sky and told Esperanza “That’s God” to the other kids’ surprise, “God? Somebody little asked. God, and made it simple” (Cisneros 1991: 34). His abrupt reflection on the complexity of the world above leads Esperanza to conclude on the same profound note: “You can never have too much sky. You can fall asleep and wake up drunk on sky, and sky can keep you safe when you are sad. Here there is too much sadness and not enough sky” (33). While playing outside, the kids from the Chicano neighbourhood look upward, watch clouds and give them names: “clouds got at least ten different names” (Cisneros 1991: 36), which indicates a creative mind but also a clear sign that their aspirations go beyond the neighbourhood.

Except for these very few attempts at extending the space vertically, Cisneros shows that her neighbourhood appears to be an impossible border these female subjects have difficulty in crossing since every time they venture into the public space, they risk being abused, harassed, and harmed. In fact, the *barrio* is a place of risk for Esperanza and for the other girls of her age. For example, when she wanted to get her first job, not only did she have to lie about her real age, but she was also exposed to the sheer brutality of the aggressive male world when a man from her workplace forced a kiss onto his lips, claiming it was his birthday (*The First Job*).

5. Conclusion

The focus on homes and private spaces in Chicano literature shows how these female writers situate themselves within their own private universes which play a very important role in framing the reality as it is experienced when they leave their homes and neighbourhoods. The descriptions of their homes function as imaginative self-definitions and are essential elements that speak about their cultural heritage. In the three narratives analysed, the female Chicana writers validate their identity through the sense of belonging to places which they seek to alter in writing. What they achieve is the reconstruction of their private geographies and the redefinition of their Chicana identity.

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