

Topics in Other U.S. Literatures

From Having a “House of my own” to Forgetting “the Room of one’s Own”: A Reflection on Michele Serros’s *How to Be a Chicana Role Model* and Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street*

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ABSTRACT

Chicanas have historically been made aware of their difference not only because of their Mexican cultural heritage but also for their gender. Despite their current protection under the US Constitution and the many advances achieved by the Chicana Feminist Movement, Chicanas remain to be marginalized. Thus, their literary contribution of the 20th and 21st centuries has been closely connected to the production of *Bildungsroman* a subgenre within fiction which centres on the protagonist's rite of passage, i.e., in the creation of the identity of young Chicanas. Both novels this paper attempts to contrastively analyse belong to this subgenre, these are Michele Serros's *How to Be a Chicana Role Model* (2000) and Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* (1980). In this essay, I examine the portrayal of the female characters of both narratives and argue that whilst Cisneros set the standard for Chicana writers, Serros's work revisits the canon and introduces the notion of "role models" to deconstruct it. However, *How to Be a Chicana Role Model* follows a similar approach to Cisneros's work, as it reaffirms the idea of Chicana women as exoticized and otherized by both Anglos and Chicana/os due to the overlapping oppression of class, gender, and race; Serros contributes to this debate by problematizing the homogenization and emphasizing the difference among several generations of Chicanas/os owing to the disconnection from their Mexican roots. Hence, Serros illustrates that the oppression is obscured but latent. Besides, by analysing the employment of two aspiring writers as protagonists, the essay draws on the role of writing for escaping their reality and identity construction. Then, both novels reflect that Chicanas remain pertaining to in-between spaces, against the generalized belief of amelioration of oppression. Thus, this paper lays bare how even if there is an evolution in the portrayal of Chicanas due to globalization and acculturation, Chicanas have not been emancipated.

KEYWORDS: Chicana Identity, Michele Serros, Sandra Cisneros, Bildungsroman, Feminism, Acculturation

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1. Introduction

The US is a country of immigrants. Thus, multiculturalism is a key notion when describing its social arrangement. Nonetheless, America's multicultural and multiracial culture has been traditionally denied by the dominant society for the "real America" (Baker 264) relies on the morals and race of the Anglo-Saxons. The ethnic heterogeneity which characterizes America implies the existence of ethnic minorities, i.e., subordinate groups which coexist with the dominant society ("Minority"). The existence of this power relationship among communities, hints back at both slavery and colonization, as through these practices, the ideas surrounding white supremacy were further empowered. One of these ethnic minority communities is the Chicana/o because twenty-five million people born in the US are of Mexican descent (Noe-Bustamante et al.). However, even if individuals pertaining to the Chicana/o community are currently protected under the US Constitution as equal citizens and have been granted visibility, their condition as a marginalized group is no less distressing and far from the intention of the Chicano Movement.

Through ideological colonialism, Chicanas among other ethnic communities were made to belong in in-between spaces. In the 1960s and 1970s, they fought for their rights as US-born citizens through the Chicano liberation movement. This national-struggle movement was characterized for being highly conservative, male-dominated, and for leaving their female counterparts, the Chicanas, in minor or assisting roles (A. García 18); as a matter of fact, the Chicanas who identified themselves as feminists were referred to as "*vendidas*" (Castillo 34). Consequently, "many Chicana/Latina activists, disenchanted, if not simply worn down, by male-dominated Chicano/Latino politics, began to develop our [their] own theories of oppression" (Castillo 10). Within this context, Chicana Feminism became a new branch within Chicano theory.

Similarly, in the Women's Suffrage Movement in the 1848-1900 period, minority women were marginalized as the movement advocated against "immigrants and the working class" (Cotera 205) to gain the vote for the white women's elite without fail. Besides, the idea of the existence of a universal woman which was employed within Western Feminist Theories was also problematic as it was rooted in white women, failing to address the heterogeneous identities of women and their specific oppressions (Flores 689). Hence, Chicanas suffered oppression simultaneously not only for being Mexican

but also for being women and poor; as Castillo highlights, “although women everywhere experience life differently from men everywhere, white women are members of a race that has proclaimed itself globally superior for hundreds of years” (24).

With the help of Chicana Feminism, Chicana female activists encountered a way to voice their own oppression and distance themselves from the Western Feminist Theory to question: “machismo, discrimination in education, the double standard, the role of the Catholic Church, and all the backward ideology designed to keep women subjugated” (Vidal 30). As a group of third-world feminists¹, they distanced themselves from both the Chicano movement and the Feminist Movement of the US middle-class. Chicanisma or Chicana feminism attempts to “reconsider behavior long seen as inherent in Mexican Amerindian woman’s character, such as patience, perseverance, industriousness, loyalty to one’s clan, and commitment to our children” (Castillo 40). Their approach is similar to that of intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw which investigates “the ways in which the location of women of color at the intersection of race and gender makes our [their] actual experience [...] different from that of white women” (Crenshaw 2). It also addresses how the problem of violence against women of colour has been overlooked by both feminist and antiracist movements (Crenshaw 2).

In the following lines, I aim to provide proof to support the claim that the female characters in Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street* (1984) and Michele Serros’s *How to Be a Chicana Role Model*²(2000) are defined by the overlapping oppression they suffer because of race, class, and gender. To this end, I will analyse contrastively these two young adult fiction books written by Chicana authors from a critical Chicanista approach. Indeed, I intend to prove that the generational gap that can be perceived through the publication date of both books, the former having been published in 1984 and the latter in 2000, does not provide us with proof of amelioration of the above-mentioned oppression. Both books employ coming-of-age female characters to depict the flawed remains of the postcolonial era in Chicana women’s lives. The paper begins with a brief historical background of the Chicax community and the literary panorama of the 20th

¹ Following Chandra Mohanty’s definition of Third World Feminism it refers to the distancing from “reference feminist interests as [that] they have been articulated in the US and western Europe” (61), i.e., to distance from the “implicit assumption of the west” (61) in order to satiate “the urgent political necessity of forming strategic coalitions across class, race and national boundaries” (62).

² The novels will be referred to through the acronyms *HOUSE* (*The House on Mango Street*) and *ROLE* (*How to Be a Chicana Role Model*) hereafter.

and 21st centuries within Chicano literature. Next, I introduce both *Bildungsroman* by highlighting the specific reality of Chicana women, referring to mestizaje, machismo and marianismo. In addition, the analysis focuses on the protagonists' integration into US society, the marginalization through generational clashes within the community, and the relevance of writing as a tool for identity search. The paper concludes with a summary of the discussed aspects and a potential outlook for future research.

2. Contextualizing the Experience of the Chicana Woman: The Historical Background

The denial of constitutional and civil rights against the Mexicans dates back to the first interactions in the borderline between Mexican and Anglo-American communities at the beginning of the 19th century (Tatum). This was the time in which, after Mexico had declared itself independent from Spain, the US first annexed and then conquered Mexico's Northern territories. The war between Mexico and the US ended by signing the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, by which Mexico lawfully ceded the occupied territories to the US and in exchange, the US granted citizenship and equal civil and constitutional rights to the Mexicans who stayed. However, the widespread refusal of Anglo Americans to accept their citizenship derived from systematic racism and stereotyping. As Richard Dyer, the author of the article "The Role of Stereotypes" illustrates: "it is not stereotypes, as an aspect of human thought and representation, that are wrong, but who controls and defines them, what interests they serve" (par.3). Treaty agreements were neglected, Chicanas/os were regarded as second-class citizens, and an exponential increase in racial crimes against them was perceived.

The following generations of Mexican Americans who settled in the mid-19th century organized around the ideology of Mexican Americanism which "identified them as permanent residents of a new country" (Tatum 23) and joined forces with the Mexican Americans born in the US to force the government to re-establish their rights as US citizens. These ideas were reacquired by the Chicano movement of the 1960s when Chicanas/os showed their discontent and frustration openly and opposed their systematic marginalization through an evaluation of their relationship with the Anglo society, and the system (Ybarra-Frausto *qtd. in* Tatum 25-26).

The Chicana/os' heritage as second-class citizens resulted in a probably undeniable connection to poverty; according to a US survey conducted in 2020, 20% of US-born

Mexicans currently live in poverty (Noe-Bustamante et al.). Additionally, poverty should not be understood as an isolated phenomenon as its devastating consequences cannot be overlooked. Those below the poverty threshold confront the possibility of having their most basic needs denied, e.g., nutrition, health care, education, and housing. Besides, the detected stress and frustration that poverty entails can arguably be connected to further developmental problems when faced during childhood, as it culminates in an increased probability of experiencing it likewise during adulthood (G. García 4-5). Thus, in the experience of the Chicana, the intersection not only between her race and gender but also the poverty status in which they are raised in overlaps. In *Massacre of the Dreamers*, an anthology written by Ana Castillo, she highlights the idea of “a countryless woman” (34), emphasizing that Chicana women are “not considered to be, except marginally and stereotypically, United States citizens” (35).

Femininity in Chicana culture is widely conditioned by the values established by the Spanish colonizers in Mexico through Catholicism, which intertwines with notions about machismo and marianismo. As highlighted by Ana Castillo in her book *Massacre of the Dreamers*, “the church [...] represents authority in her life especially over her sexuality and reproductive ability” (48). While marianismo defined women’s gender roles, machismo did the same for men. Marianismo refers to praising the figure of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* and trying to mimic her virtues such as chastity, self-sacrifice, self-silencing, and feminine passivity. In contrast with this passive-like femininity, we encounter machismo, a sense of exaggerated masculinity. The man is depicted as a strong self-reliant figure who should be dominant and is expected to use aggression for this end (“Machismo”). Gender-based violence is generally normalized through machismo, thus, violence against women who do not comply with marianismo is a nonchalant act; at the end of the day “Mexicans adore the Virgin, but she has her place” (Castillo 54).

Through the *marianista* and *machista* discourses, women were educated and accustomed to desiring their status (Castillo 54). In Mexico, the model of the perfect woman is exemplified especially by *La Virgen de Guadalupe*. Besides, two other feminine archetypes are worth mentioning; *La Malinche* and *La Llorona*. *La Malinche* represents the first mestiza in traditional Mexican culture, she was the betrayer, who supposedly aided the Spanish settlers (Castillo 109). Besides, *La Llorona* is the symbol of the bad mother a weeping female phantom who killed her own children. The three together represent *Las tres madres* of Chicana culture, “mother, virgin and whore”

(Priewe 354). These were variations created by the combination of both Catholicism and indigenous religions and were employed by the Spanish settlers to control the inhabitants, and as it can be appreciated, they are closely connected to female submission and passivity.

Besides, these values established by the Catholic church in Mexico were not left behind when Mexico's northern territories were annexed to the US, or when Mexicans moved to different cities in the US to follow the American Dream, believing that they could all have a piece of the cake if they worked hard enough (Castillo 31). However, when Latinx communities moved to America, they encountered no piece of the pie, and they were once again otherized as it happened during colonization. The *othering* refers to differentiating "us from them" (Vichiensing 52) and consequently creates an exclusion, enhances inequality, and breeds tensions among groups around the dichotomy of inferiority and superiority.

3. The Chicana Literature Production: 20th-21st Centuries

Chicanas' experience has been determined by their consciousness of being different, of not belonging; thus, the theme of female coming-of-age has been central in contemporary Chicana literature (Eysturoy 3). The *Bildungsroman* genre, a subgenre within fiction which concentrates on "the process of self-development" (Eysturoy 3), is a long-established literary form among the diverse contributions of Chicana writers. Indeed, both novels that I aim to compare, i.e., *HOUSE* and *ROLE* pertain to this genre and hence handle the search for identity of a young Chicana adolescent by analysing her experiences and environment. The reader is introduced to the background of the protagonists that led them to construct their young-adult identities (Eysturoy 4). The rite of passage is then overtly conditioned by the interaction of the self with the community, and the world by and large (Eysturoy 4), thus Chicana writers do not centre the characterization of their female protagonists only on the female quest, but they also explore "the crucial effects particular ethnic contexts and patterns of economic deprivation have on the female developmental process" (Eysturoy 134). Another aspect of the Chicana *Bildungsroman* is the role that writing plays in the formation of the self, as Eysturoy confirms, "the act of writing or creating becomes essential to discovery of self (4)", *Bildung*, that is, education is then portrayed as a subversive act.

Besides, it is worth acknowledging that “Postmodern Chicano/a literature has matured beyond being a one-dimensional social discourse or an essentialist formula of identity-building” (Rosaura Sánchez qtd. in Lozano-Alonso 13-14). Thus, later-generation Chicanas are not outsiders to the American world, they feel at comfort with it and are part of this tradition. Michele, the protagonist of *ROLE*, is part of this culture; her struggle remains in the acceptance of both mainstream US and Chicano communities to accept her as she is (Lozano-Alonso 13-14). This, unlike in *HOUSE*, is the approach that Serros takes, as “the danger lies in ranking the oppressions. The danger lies in failing to acknowledge the specificity of the oppression” (Anzaldúa 24).

4. Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street* (1984) and Serrros’s *How to Be a Chicana Role Model* (2000): the Context

Sandra Cisneros and Michele Serros both analyse their unique experiences as Chicana females, even if they belong to different generations. While *HOUSE* has a strong focus on a specific Chicana community in Chicago in the late 1960s, it is a distinctive feature that the portrayed reality constantly hints back to the heritage of Mexican culture and postcolonial trauma. Chicago, the setting of *HOUSE*, is the city with the second largest Mexican American community in the US, as many as 28.9% of the residents are of Latinx origin according to the 2000 Census Data (U.S. Census Bureau: Chicago City, Illinois). However, as the book itself highlights, instead of completely assimilating the culture and integrating into the cities, Latinxs and hence Chicanxs, tend to be restricted to certain neighbourhoods due to their scarce economic capacity and the segregation through othering. The protagonist, Esperanza, is part of the Chicanxs of this community and the story is narrated through her frame of reference which is lopsided not only for her age but also for her gender. In addition, the narrative is set in the late 1960s, a time in which Chicana embraced their cultural heritage to claim their rights (Castillo 31) through the Chicano Movement.

The attention switches between the collective identity of the female individuals of the neighbourhood and that of its protagonist, Esperanza Cordero, emphasizing the reality of growing up in the borderlines; not only as a physical space but also as a psychological space related to language and culture. The book mostly centres on female subjectivity. During the process of creating her own identity “Esperanza balances past and present where she negotiates history and culture” (Busch 123) in relation to her Chicana identity.

Cisneros acknowledges the complexity of having to merge several identities into one, she knows what it is to live in the borderlines both physically and psychologically. And, as Esperanza, the protagonist, she wanted to become a writer when she was small, she wanted to have her own voice and her own physical space, a home. The following quote serves to illustrate this plight: “When she thinks to herself in her father’s language, she knows sons and daughters don’t leave their parent’s house until they marry. When she thinks in English, she knows she should’ve been on her own since eighteen” (Cisneros xiii).

The book consists of 44 vignettes, in which Esperanza, both the protagonist and the narrator, introduces the reader to several female individuals from her Chicana working-class neighbourhood, where the house on Mango Street, her new house, is located. Esperanza does not like her new house; it is not her home as it cannot be more disparate from what their parents promised her, and she expresses her embarrassment regarding her economic capability. Throughout the book, she explores the complex realities of her neighbours, referring to cultural anxieties, poverty, exile, sexual harassment, and gender roles. Esperanza is as well affected by them and struggles with these realities in her coming of age. Through the depiction of her life and her friends’ and neighbours’ life, Esperanza gives a unique portrayal of what being a woman in a Chicana community is like combining both the impact of their cultural heritage as Mexican and as US inhabitants. In the end, Esperanza seeks a new destiny for herself through her writings and escapes the reality in Mango Street.

In an akin fashion, Michele Serros’s book is crowded with autobiographical characteristics, starting from the name of the protagonist or the setting of the novel, Oxnard. Thus, there is this blurred line between the narrator and the author (Lozano-Alonso 4). Unlike Cisneros’s book, which is divided into vignettes, Serros experiments with rules, the rules for becoming a Chicana Role Model. The physical form of the books, one organized in vignettes and the other one in teachings, and the employment of Cisneros’s comment on the cover, “A young sassy writer whose brilliant weapon is her humor” (Serros *cover*), builds bridges between the writers and their works. Serros explores moral values by employing fragments of her life to satirize the absurdity of being a Role Model as such. For doing so she employs wit, the novel follows the search of a Chicana writer to encounter her place in a world where she is not an insider but neither an outsider, she does not belong.

The book starts and ends with a special assembly, this refers to the acts organized by schools to inspire students to pursue their academic future. In the following chapters, Michele sheds some light on the supposed teachings that a role model should follow to deconstruct and mock them by showing their absurdity, e.g., role model number one tackles the idea of “Never Give Up an Opportunity to Eat for Free”. In the last chapter, Michele becomes the speaker of the assembly, the supposed role model, and she dismantles the myth of success through educational attainment. Unlike Esperanza, Michele does not live in an urban barrio, she lives in Oxnard, a rural area of California, and is a fifth-generation Chicana. Hence, the marginalization she suffers from is not as latent as what might be perceived in Esperanza’s character, it is more veiled (Ibarraran 99). It is also crucial to highlight that by 2000, the time in which this novel was published, “the Chicano literature movement was an established part of the U.S. literary canon” (Lozano-Alonso 3). Serros knew that prior to her other Chicana writers had been successful and acknowledged the standardization in her piece of writing, as “individual writers come to represent the entirety of the literary movement” (Lozano-Alonso 3). Through globalization and acculturation, systematic marginalization had become less overt than before, and a sense of false integration was enhanced. However, as Serros illustrates, fifth-generation Chicanas are also made to belong in in-between spaces, as their identity distances them from both mainstream Anglo society but also from former generation Chicanas. In this novel, then, Serros does not only play with the genre but with the reader as well because she “conflates the character Michele Serros with the author Michele Serros” (Kurzen 143), yet in the cover of the book we encounter “fiction” written down.

4.1 Integration into Mainstream US Culture: The Impact of Acculturation

Esperanza expresses her anxieties with her identity as early as in vignette 4, “My Name” she questions her role in life. As a child and a woman of a poor Chicano community, she represents the reality of the borderlines, in which, through *machismo* and *marianismo*, the female becomes objectified. This notion is exemplified by Esperanza’s great-grandmother, who she is named after; “I have inherited her name, but I don’t want to inherit her place by the window” (Cisneros 11). Her place by the window might refer to being secluded and restricted as a Chicana woman. First, Chicanas appear to be the possession of their father until they get married and end up being the possession of their

husband. The novel emphasizes that the Virgin Guadalupe-like figure is mostly praised; “because the Chinese, like the Mexicans, don’t like their women strong” (Cisneros 10). Even if having left their motherland, assimilation is not complete, and the female characters of the narrative do not dispose of their Chicana cultural heritage (ZHOU 20). However, Esperanza has other plans for herself and from an early age she analyses her surroundings and realises that she wants to be different: “I would like to baptize myself under a new name, a name more like the real me, the one nobody sees” (Cisneros 11). She wants to decide for herself, to self-label herself, and to this end, she refers to the idea of re-baptizing. Interestingly enough, re-baptizing alludes to the Catholic practice, and thus might suggest the relevance of the Catholic church in Esperanza’s community and the long-rooted Catholic ideals she was educated in. Baptizing in the Catholic sense, involves giving a child a saint’s name, who will become his/her patron. Through self-baptizing and naming herself “Lisandra, Maritza or Zeze the X” (Cisneros 11), she declines to have a saint to protect her, and she puts forward the idea of becoming her own patron saint (Busch 127).

Besides, in “My Name”, the narrator also refers to the notion of belonging simultaneously to several worlds, how this is illustrated through names and shapes your identity. “In English my name means hope. In Spanish it means too many letters. It means sadness, it means waiting” (Cisneros 10). Esperanza, the name, symbolizes the world of both our narrator Esperanza, a Chicana born in Chicago and her great-grandmother; by cause of the name, both worlds intersect. By inheriting her great-grandmother’s name, she inherits her culture, but as a US citizen born with a Spanish name, her past and present collide. She cannot either be “hope” or the vibrant representation of Chicana culture, she must combine both as both realities shape her; she cannot forge her identity if she does not interpret the heritage of being a first- or second-generation Chicana woman and all that it entails (Busch 6). Thus, the term double consciousness, employed in postcolonial theories, refers to the idea of being part of two antagonistic or conflicting cultures simultaneously, mostly that of the settler and the indigenous community and is also applicable to Esperanza (Vichiensing 55). By self-baptizing Esperanza creates a third space, her own psychological world which distances herself from both what is expected because of being a Chicana woman and an American citizen; “Zeze the X will do” (Cisneros 11).

In addition, even if Esperanza tries to define and label herself, the characters surrounding her life have an undeniable impact on constructing her identity. To Esperanza, her *otherness* and class and cultural differences are acknowledged through other characters like the nun of her school. In the first vignette, “The House on Mango Street”, Esperanza narrates an encounter she had with the nun in front of her house. When asked where she lived, Esperanza answered sincerely, and the answer she received, reasserting what had already been clarified “made me [her] feel like nothing” (Cisneros 5). When the nun pointed at “the third floor, the pain peeling, wooden bars Papa had nailed [...] so we wouldn’t fall out” (Cisneros 5). Esperanza, even if a young age child, was not naive and realised the poverty she was living in and knew that the nun criticized her way of living and felt embarrassed about it. Embarrassed of her own house, her supposed safe space; “But this isn’t it. The House on Mango Street isn’t it” (Cisneros 5). Through the lens of the Sister Superior, Esperanza is mislabelled and portrayed as the child of a poor working-class Chicana family. By doing so, the nun marginalizes Esperanza and makes her feel not worthy, making her realize that “people in positions of power (mis)label others (Busch 128). Hence, self-labelling does not come without the impact of external labelling and *othering*.

This can be further developed when analysing the vignette “Those who don’t” in which thoughts about the connection between race and neighbourhood restrictions are introduced. The narrator discusses the notion of *othering*. For Esperanza, her community is a self-place, she does not feel scared there; “All brown around, we are safe” (Cisneros 28). However, she also refers to people from outside the community feeling insecure when they enter her neighbourhood; “they think we’re dangerous” (Cisneros 28). Despite her short age, Esperanza further analyses the idea of the unknown and unfounded prejudices. She understands that as part of the neighbourhood, she knows her fellow residents and is not familiar with the stereotypes surrounding her Latinx community and her colour. The narrator goes further and criticizes her own prejudices when entering a “neighbourhood of another colour” (Cisneros 28). By doing so, she realises that she is labelled, but also a labeller (Busch 129), because “we are they in another neighbourhood” (ZHOU 21).

Opposed to Esperanza’s character, Michele has already been “anglicized”, as “the more effectively we could pass in the white world, the better guaranteed our future”

(Anzaldúa 23). This idea of trying to erase the past, their heritage, is present in “Senior Picture Day” when Michele narrates her practice of squeezing her nose having the goal of looking “less Indian. I look less Indian and you can bet that’s the main goal here” (Serros 14). Even if her family has acculturated and she is culturally a part of the US, physically she is still different as her appearance speaks for herself. Similarly, the idea of exoticization can be exemplified through another passage, in which Michele creates a CB handle for herself, “Cali Girl” (Serros 16). The reaction she receives renders the otherizing visible: “But you’re Mexican” [...] “Yeah, but I *am* Californian. I mean, real Californian. Even my great grandma was born here” (Serros 16). For Michele her appearance and specifically her “nose made me [her] look like I [she] didn’t belong” (Serros 19); she is constantly reminded that she does not look American enough, that acculturation is not enough contrary to what previous generations claimed.

In an akin fashion, in “Role Model Number 5: Respect the 1 Percent” Michele’s identity as a US citizen and her heritage clash when she criticizes how Latino images have been appropriated by mainstream pop culture, but simultaneously she employs popular culture to legitimize her integration (Lozano-Alonso 9). As early as on page 1 of the novel, there appear references to Anglo pop culture: “General Hospital” (Serros 1), a TV show of the time in which Anthony Rivera starred. The novel begins with the “Special Assembly”, in which people from within the community go to inspire youngsters to follow their academic careers. In this certain assembly, the main guest is Anthony Rivera, and Serros, the writer, employs this character to dismantle the idea of a role model from the very beginning of the novel, as what Michele learns is that “if you’re Mexican or even Puerto Rican, like Anthony Rivera, and you’ve dropped out of school and lived on the streets [...], you can still make it” (Serros 3). The writer leaves the reader to decide whether this actor could be considered a role model or not. The idea of popular culture is revisited as I have aforementioned in “Role Number 5: Respect the 1 Percent”. Here Serros introduces the idea of globalization, and how through it anyone could portray a Latino, which endangers the jobs of Latino actors (Lozano-Alonso 7). In this chapter, Michele respects the one per cent, by rejecting to go to see the film *Evita* in which Madonna and not a Latina actress starred and criticizes her family for forgetting about the reality that their late uncle Charlie endured as a Latino actor. This acknowledgement of the past and of being part of a minority community shapes Michele’s identity as she fluctuates between her Mexican heritage and the Anglo culture.

Thus, there are many uncontrollable aspects in Michele's life, namely the exoticization and otherizing she suffers from for having a multicultural identity she somehow pertains everywhere and nowhere. This notion is rendered visible in "Role Model Rule Number 8: Citizen of here, here", where the narrator draws attention to the "The Question": But when whites ask me The Question, it's just a reminder that I'm not like them, I don't look like them, which must mean I'm not from here. Here, in California, where I was born, where my parents were born, and where even my great-grandmothers were born. (Serros 124). Michele acknowledges her difference but struggles to come to terms with it as she is constantly reminded that she does not utterly belong anywhere.

In the chapter "Let's Go Mexico" in which Michele narrates her stay abroad in Taxco to learn Spanish the pertaining to in-between spaces is also rendered visible. Her main motivations to participate in this program and those to learn Spanish are claimed to be "for credit. The foreign-language credit" (Serros 101), hence, the protagonist does not learn Spanish for being more in contact with her past, her heritage, but for practical reasons, she needs it to graduate. Moreover, Michele also provides the reader with other motivations for undertaking this experience: "so I could talk behind white people's backs" (Serros 101). Serros problematizes these motivations and mocks them "as they address a common misperception that monolingual speakers make" (Lozano-Alonso 9). During her stay in Taxco, Michele is assigned to live in a house with other students who she labels the White Socks, as they all have the same appearance and attitude. Michele feels an outcast when she is with them, and this is worsened when they correct her Spanish "Well, maybe tourist-looking women [...] But I mean, I think I can blend in. [...] Yeah, until you open your mouth" (109). She feels embarrassed that the *Gringos* could speak better Spanish than her, she distances herself from US culture, acknowledges her difference and feels offended by the comparison. However, simultaneously, she feels like an outcast concerning the Mexican community of Taxco "I could only feel so fairly familiar with it" (Serros 105), the language acts like a virtually indestructible barrier to her identification with Mexican culture. Consequently, even if her appearance makes her belong in Taxco, language prevents total integration. Michele also highlights the different attitudes towards Chicanas/os and *Gringos* when attempting to produce Spanish, as Anglos are "celebrated for speaking bad Spanish" (Lozano-Alonso 6). By doing so, she recognizes her disadvantage as a Chicana woman who cannot produce fluent Spanish but also endorses the reasons behind this plight; "So they didn't speak Spanish at home? No way. They

already had so much discrimination and shit, they didn't want their kids going through that. They just wanted us to speak English all the time" (Serros 113). Thus, by neglecting their Mexican heritage, Chicanas, as Anzaldúa suggests "may feel that they had been forced to forfeit an important part of their personal identity and still never found acceptability by white society" (39).

Overall, the construction of both characters exhibits dissimilarities which might be connected to the time they reflect, the 1980s versus a more globalized, recent time. Both characters' identity is thus characterized by the existence of an internal battle between the several groups to which they belong. In Esperanza's plight, her Chicana heritage encourages her to stick to the expectations regarding women in Mexican culture. Besides, her American citizenship makes values of independence also overlap in her self-labelling. Esperanza realises it is not just herself and the wishes that define her, but also how society portrays her as being part of the Chicana working-class community in Chicago and all the prejudices this entails. Esperanza represents "The generation that came of age in the 1980s [who] was given the general message that acculturation can be rewarding. Yes, the status quo will always reward those who succumb to it, who serve it, and who do not threaten its well-being" (Castillo 31). On the other hand, Michele has "anglicized", she is to a certain extent part of the average American teenager, however, obscured racism and classism makes her recognize her difference.

4.2. Coming of Age Being a Latter Generation Chicana: Marginalization within the Community

Both novels illustrate that marginalization is not only professed by Anglos as within the group of Chicanas there exists also the tendency to differentiate from one another, and hence, homogenization is problematized. In her book's preface, Serros utilizes a quote by Esmeralda Santiago that says as follows:

"It's a strange phenomenon. A Latino or Latina gains a bit of attention, and the next thing he or she knows, the words spokesperson or role model become attached to their names. It's as if who you are and what you've done is not important on its own. You must stand for something greater than yourself; otherwise your accomplishments are meaningless" (Serros *Preface*).

By the time Michele Serros wrote *ROLE*, there were other Chicana contributions which had been integrated into the US canon, e.g., Sandra Cisneros's *HOUSE*. These texts set the standard and thus provided Chicana literature with a certain path to follow,

i.e., the writing of *Bildungsroman* and the stories of the dreamers. These were precisely the narratives that created a homogenized depiction of Chicana identity. Thus, Serros distances her prose from previous works and acknowledges the difference by making individuality and specificity key notions of her work. This way, she portrays the reality of the latter generations of Chicanas/os and the development of their identity after globalization. Specifically, she illustrates how identification with previous generations of Chicanas/os was blocked because of further acculturation.

Serros problematized the creation of a standard in her novel by portraying the marginalization from within the group of Chicanas that Michele endures. In “Role Model Number 1: Never Give Up an Opportunity to Eat for Free” the main character is misled to believe that she will participate in a Chicana Writer’s Conference to present her poems, but she ends up working as a server there. This chapter is an account of the attitudes of fellow “brown sisters” to Michele. As aforementioned Michele’s Spanish is limited and when she tries to respond in Spanish the reaction she gets is “I thought this was a Chicana writers’ conference and this one can’t even speak Spanish” (Serros 8). Following this interaction, the narrator provides the reader with Michele’s thoughts: “Did I use “muy” instead of “mucho”? Rs not rolled out long enough? [...] A Chicana help another Chinana with her Spanish? I don’t think so” (Serros 8). Serros recurrently examines the attitude of people from the community who have climbed up the ladder and forgotten about their roots, namely Latinx academics (Loranzo-Alonso 6). She problematizes their racist and classist attitudes towards Michele, i.e., their “brown on brown crime” (Serros 206). Serros, unlike Cisneros, does not belong to the first generation of Chicana writers who established the canon, hence, through distancing she criticizes their becoming part of the hegemony by creating the ideal Chicana role model. This is further exemplified by a recurrent storyline in the novel, Michele is on the wait to receive an honorarium from a Latino university professor for having read her poetry in his luncheon. The novel’s actions are suspended to insert the continuous phone calls demanding her salary, but as a friend of Michele emphasizes, “No, listen. It’s not about brown, black, or white, it’s all about green” (Serros 86). Hence, the road towards inclusion does not only entail building bridges between the Chicanxs and the Anglos, but also within the Chicax community, which is increasingly heterogeneous as Moraga and Anzaldúa vindicate “We are women without a line. We are women who contradict each other” (xli).

Besides, it is worth acknowledging that Michele is not completely discouraged by these encounters as she attempts to fraternize with other Latina women; she searches for identification. “Role Model Number 2: Seek Support from Sistas” hinges around the notion of belonging and the storyline centres on Michele’s experience in working as a page for Fox Television Studios. Here we encounter, though obscured, the idea of the American Dream, i.e., escalating in US society through hard work; going from rags to riches. Michele intends to encounter support from a “sister”, a fellow Latina woman who was a Fly Girl, a more celebrated job than hers but she encounters her attempts being repeatedly ignored. Michele struggles to understand the logic hidden behind this stance; however, it is clarified to her by others “I’m sure she knows you’re Latina and maybe she thinks if someone sees you guys talking, it’s gonna make you both look the same” (Serros 27). Throughout the novel, we encounter an isolated positive sister-to-sister interaction “Do it while you can! Take it from one sister to another” (Serros 31). Interestingly enough, it is with a Latina actor who is not successful anymore; “Oh, honey, I haven’t been on a list for years” (Serros 30). Thus, this entails that fame and hierarchical escalation also grant Chicanas the role of marginalizing others due to the obscured racism and classism that exacerbate fellow sisters’ plight. Marginalization from within the group is then rendered visible through Serros’s characterization.

Another crucial aspect which is vindicated is endorsing one’s background and roots; Michele “wondered how he knew where he was going if he didn’t know where he was from” (Serros 127). This vision of the past accords with Cisneros’s approach in the *HOUSE* as depicted in the vignette “The Three Sisters”: “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 forget who you are” (Cisneros 105).

Looking more closely at characterization in the *HOUSE*, Cisneros employs archetypes of Mexican culture to construct female characters in the book unlike what Serros does when portraying a more globalized reality. The only worth mentioning character who is devoted to these archetypes might be Michele’s grandmother as she is devoted to Virgin Guadalupe for being a representative of a prior generation. The dichotomy between good and bad, which culturally defines what is apt and what is not, appears to be rigid in Mexican culture. You can either be good or bad, there is no in-between. Similarly, the ideas surrounding the good and bad woman are also internalized

and this is done through Catholicism, you can either be *la Virgen de Guadalupe* or *la Malinche*, it is a black-white duality.

Cisneros's acknowledgement of these culturally established archetypes seems apparent when taking a closer look at the construction of the female characters. Even if these recurrent character traits are visible in all female characters, at least to a certain extent, they are further developed in a handful of them. By looking closely at the figure of *la Malinche*, the traitor and the violated, also resembling the notion of females seeking the attention of men and succumbing to their charms; we encounter two characters worth analysing. In the following passage, we encounter part of the vignette "Marin" which is devoted to the introduction of this character.

What matters, [...] is for the boys to see us and for us to see them. And since Marin's skirts are shorter and since Marin is already older than us in many ways, the boys who do pass say stupid things [...]. And Marin just looks at them without even blinking and is not afraid. [Marin] is waiting for a car to stop, a star to fall, someone to change her life (Cisneros 27).

Marin is presented to the reader as a self-empowered woman who knows her virtues and seeks the attention of men, she waits for a man to change her life, but she does not passively wait, she tries to attract their attention. Consequently, if compared with the values stuck to *marianismo* which emphasize the idea of females as passive and modest Marin appears to be out of the norm and to resemble the traits encompassing *la Malinche*.

On the other side, the archetype of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* is introduced in the book with Esperanza's mother. As the Mexican poet, essayist and Nobel Prize winner Octavio Paz insists: "Guadalupe is pure receptivity, and the benefits she bestows are of the same order: she consoles, quiets, dries tears, calms passion (qtd. In Petty 121). In the vignette "Hairs" Esperanza narrates similar attributes about her mother:

"But my mother's hair, my mother's hair, like little rosettes, [...] all curly and pretty [...], sweet to put your nose into when she is holding you, holding you and you feel safe, is the warm smell of bread when you bake it, is the smell when she makes room for you on her side of the bed still warm with her skin, and you sleep near her" (Cisneros 6-7).

She embodies the figure of motherhood, Esperanza's safe place which could be related to the archetype of *La Virgen de Guadalupe*. Even if her self-sacrificing motherhood fulfilled her to a certain extent, it was not enough for her as later in the book, she acknowledges how unsatisfied she feels with herself, "I could've been somebody, you know" (Cisneros 91). That's why she reminds Esperanza that "[you] got to take care all

your own”, and she advises her to “study hard” (Cisneros 91), she foresees a better future for her daughter, a future that rejects the self-sacrificing path dictated by Chicana culture (Petty 124).

Last, Esperanza’s figure represents both “the violation associated with *la Malinche* and the nurturing associated with *la Virgen de Guadalupe* all the while rejecting feminine passivity that is prompted by both role models” (Petty 123). Throughout the novel, as Petty mentions, Esperanza conveys many different characters in her search for identity. “Red Clowns”, for instance, describes a reality similar to that of the Malinche as it narrates the episode in which Esperanza was abused: “The one who grabbed me by the arm, he wouldn’t let me go. He said I love you, Spanish girl, I love you and pressed his sour mouth to mine. [...] I couldn’t make them go away” (Cisneros 100). In other passages, however, we encounter Esperanza portrayed as a passive viewer of the life in the neighbourhood reminding a *Virgen de Guadalupe* kind of figure, as if she were her great-grandmother looking out from her window. However, unlike her great-grandmother, for Esperanza, it was not the house she needed to escape from, but it was Mango Street that imprisoned her. Consequently, she distances herself from the established good/bad notion and transcends feminine archetypes; “I have begun my own quiet war. Simple. Sure. I am one who leaves the table like a man, without putting back the chair or picking up the table” (Cisneros 89). By doing so she serves as a new role model of Chicana identity: “an independent, autonomous artist whose house is of the heart, not of the worshiper, nor of the conqueror” (Petty 123).

The heterogeneity within the group of Chicanas is dissimilar when comparing both novels. This is rendered visible through the characterization of the female characters. Cisneros, unlike Serros, inserts concerns on race, class, and gender into her discourse more overtly through the usage of *Las Tres Madres*, while Serros’s approach is to describe the current picture, which distances herself from what the previous generation of writers aspired to. For doing so she criticizes the generational clash, the marginalization among generations. Thus, even if they share their Chicana identity Serros and Cisneros do not understand reality similarly, as their experiences were not alike. However, even if the marginalization from within the community might be more obvious in Serros’s book due to globalization and the existence of various generations; Cisneros also delved into the depiction of the community as diverse by connecting it to classical archetypes of Mexican culture. She problematizes not only a gender-based distinction through the usage of the

machista and marianista discourses but also the possible roles within the female gender, i.e., “mother, virgin and whore” (Priewe 354).

4.3 The Role of Writing for Self-Discovery

“A woman who writes has power. A woman with power is feared. In the eyes of the world this makes us dangerous beasts” (Anzaldúa 162). The role of writing in both novels is central as Esperanza and Michele attempt to become professional writers. Besides, as aforementioned, both novels are crowded with autobiographical traces and thus illustrate the priority of writing for each author. Cisneros’s duty was to set the standard and encounter space for her and other Chicana writers within mainstream American Literature. Serros, on the contrary, acknowledges the pre-existing standard and writes to deconstruct it through the employment of humour and irony. These different approaches are marked by the time they developed their work, the former in the 1980s and the latter in the 2000s. However, in both *Bildungsroman* the protagonist “discovers the power of her own creativity, that language is a way of becoming, a way of imagining herself beyond the confinements of the status quo” (Eysturoy 90).

In *HOUSE* there is a clear influence of Virginia Woolf’s essay *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) in which Woolf handles the topic of Women and Fiction, i.e., money and space. Her thesis is that if a woman is to write fiction, she must have a space, a room of her own and economic capability. Consequently, writing and most precisely writing fiction is depicted as a privilege.

Even if the term intersectionality was not yet coined when Virginia Woolf wrote her essay, she highlighted the crucial need of being economically capable if you were female and willing to be a writer. Hence, it might be argued that she acknowledges the overlapping systems of oppression of gender and class. However, Virginia Woolf’s essay centred on her experiences as a white female, excluding the realities of women of colour. Consequently, Esperanza’s discourse differs from that of Woolf, she requires more and that is why it is not enough with a room of one’s own, Esperanza needs a house (Lorna 91-94). For Esperanza, her house is not a safe place, she even admits “I don’t have a house. [...] I’ve lived here. I don’t belong [...] I never had a house, not even a photograph... only one I dream of” (Cisneros 106-107).

In addition, instead of employing the first vignette to introduce the protagonist, Cisneros decides to employ it to present the house, placing the readers' attention on the house on Mango Street rather than in the story of Esperanza. In an era in which houses are supposed to be the shelter of dreams, if the shelter happens to be a symbol of embarrassment, violence, and failure, what is your safe place? This question proposed in Lorna Pérez's essay "Haunting the House on Mango Street: Sandra Cisneros's Radical Revision" (88) refers to the reality that many female inhabitants of Esperanza's Latinx community experience. Many examples are present in the book: Esperanza feels shame for her house, she wanted a house, "A real house. One I could point to" (Cisneros 5). Besides, Sally feels trapped in her house as she depends on her husband to start her new married life, but before that, she was abused by her father who makes her house a safe place for physical harassment; "he just forgot he was her father between the buckle and the belt" (Cisneros 93). Minerva has an always-leaving husband and is a single mother of two kids "She has many troubles, but the big one is her husband who left and keeps leaving" (Cisneros 85). Houses then become lived spaces rather than feelings of safety (Lorna 89).

Moreover, the difference between house and home is of paramount importance for Esperanza. Even if she has had many houses, Esperanza has not yet encountered her home, she portrays them as something temporary, pass-through; "For the time being, Mama says. Temporary, says Papa" (Cisneros 5) referring to the house on Mango Street. Because of intergenerational trauma, having a house and creating a home of her own is of crucial importance for Esperanza, she knows that her home will be her pride as she knows that not everybody has a home. Esperanza acknowledges that homes for dreamers were many times "in another country" (Cisneros 66).

What we encounter in Serros's book, however, is a more contemporary depiction of Chicana identity which however does not distance itself from the general approach in Chicana literature which defends the employment of literature not only to question their peripheral positions but to redescribe the stereotypes and to give voice to their previously negated opinions and thoughts (Ibarraran 98).

A shift in the necessity of having "a room of one's own" to be a female writer can be appreciated in more current writings as is the case in the anthology *This Bridge Called My Back*:

Forget the room of one's own—write in the kitchen, lock yourself up in the bathroom. Write on the bus or the welfare line, on the job or during meals, between sleeping or waking. I write while sitting on the John. No long stretches at the typewriter unless you're wealthy or have a patron—you may not even own a typewriter. [...] When you're depressed, angry, hurt, when compassion and love possess you. When you cannot help but write (Anzaldúa qtd. in Moraga & Anzaldúa 168).

In the same vein, Serros distances her narrative's function from previous work as Michele "was armed. I was ready" (Serros 10) because of writing. Throughout the novel, she reflects on the key role of writing in her life "Writing granted me freedom. It gave voice to all the opinions I was afraid to say out loud for fear of sounding unladylike or babyish[...] writing allowed me to escape [...] Yes, escape was wonderful" (Serros 41-42). Yet she is continuously discouraged from following her dream by her family and friends; "It was Tía Annie who told me I shouldn't be a writer. It's not like it's a real job and really [...] how much money can you actually make? [...] You gotta have a real job" (Serros 41). Writing is thus portrayed as a privilege and an entertainment, as for being able to write there is the necessity of finding another job to make a living. This notion could be connected to Cisneros's view which parallels with *A Room of One's Own*, but it appears to be crucial to acknowledge that it was her aunt Annie who had this view of reality, not Michele. This might be related to the oftentimes mentioned generational gap.

In addition, Serros goes further to analyse the difference between writing for one's liberation or to become a professional writer and records passages when she felt not worthy of having a voice. She even considered the employment of a pseudonym "people aren't gonna be interested in what a girl has to say, let alone a Mexican one. You need to make yourself less Mexican, less girl" (Serros 43). Here the different systems of oppression overlap, as she feels not worthy to write for not being a woman and for being Mexican as well, both render her invisible. However, later in the book, when Michele attends Mexican-Literature classes at the university, she "discovered not one writer hid their sex or ethnicity" (Serros 44).

In Cisneros's view, "Art should serve our community" (Cisneros xvii). Nonetheless, Serros criticizes the Latinx who had already climbed up the ladder for forgetting others left behind and distancing themselves from their inheritance. She problematizes it through the depiction of Ernesto Chavez, the Latino scholar who never paid Michele her honorarium by employing his higher status to take advantage of his community while he excused himself with his ethnicity "You really helped raise the

awareness of Latinos in the arts” (Serros 34). In such a manner, Serros deconstructs the idea of role models as people who have achieved success and could thus give back to their community but end up forgetting their roots. The only time Michele feels deserving of the entitlement “Role Model” is at the very end of the novel when after giving a non-profitable speech at a school which could be labelled as disastrous, a woman from the school canteen acknowledges her work and talent. It goes as follows:

Big deal I’m not fluent in Spanish and that I still wear a corduroy smock to pay rent. Here is someone telling me they actually stopped what they were doing just to hear what I had to say[...] And then, more than at any other time during my fledgling career as an aspiring Chicana role model, I sorta, in a way, actually feel like one (Serros 222).

All in all, Cisneros's reference to Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, strengthens her argument about the necessity of women to be economically reliant on themselves and have a place of their own. Nevertheless, through the significant differences she makes to Woolf, she accentuates the reality of the unique experience of women in Chicana communities and contrasts it with that of white women. Furthermore, Serros departs from the already existing Chicana tradition to problematize it. Writing despite being also depicted as the provider of space for the self is not idyllic. Serros's notion of writing could be paralleled with the following quote from *La Frontera* “Being a writer feels very much like being a Chicana, or being queer—a lot of squirming, coming up against all sorts of walls” (Anzaldúa 72). For Serros being a writer is suffering from homogenization, knocking on many closed doors, and only scarcely feeling like a great Role Model. These aforementioned lines might help reinforce the thesis of the existence of an evolution in Chicana identity as Serros's narrative distances from the canon even if being still a *Bildungsroman*.

5. Conclusion

Although Chicana literary contribution is currently a set standard within US Literature, we encounter a shift in the approach that current writers follow; the problematization of the standard and homogeneity. In this paper, I have attempted to prove that, indeed, we encounter an evolution in the identity of the Chicanas by analysing the female portrayal in Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* and Serros's *How to Be a Chicana Role Model*. Whilst Cisneros's work set the canon for Chicana writers, Serros's approach has proved to be dissimilar and revisits and questions the standard by

introducing the question of “role models” into the debate. What I have identified is that despite Chicanas being more integrated into mainstream US society in the more recent literary work, i.e., Serros’s work, they are still exoticized and otherized. Thus, I argue that the oppression is not over but obscured.

To reach this conclusion, I have analysed the portrayal of the integration into mainstream US culture, the marginalization that Chicanas suffer from within the Chicana community and the role of writing in their contributions as means of constructing self-identity. The dream is problematized in Serros, Michele is disenchanted with her reality, and Serros does not depict a fairy-tale-like reality. Even if she eventually becomes a supposed “role model”, she criticizes the term as a whole. Ironically, this essay has shown that it is the standardized marginalization held by the mainstream Anglo citizenship and also from within the community that foments the oppression and thus prevents Chicanas from full integration into US society. The spaces they are granted are in-between spaces, not Anglo but neither merely Chicana at all.

Alongside this, the latent evolution in Chicana identity is tightly linked to acculturation, as they have distanced from customs and particularly from the language, i.e., Spanish. Whilst the systematic marginalization held by Anglos against Chicanas is maintained through exoticization and *otherizing*, the segregation within the Chicana community is also latent as later generations are commonly less in contact with their roots and more integrated as is the case of Michele. This is the main discrepancy in the identity that could be encountered between the depiction of Esperanza and that of Michele.

As aforementioned, the concerns in both narratives are alike, both are *Bildungsroman* of female Chicana protagonists who attempt to become professional writers. Nevertheless, the approaches are discordant, and the novels concern distinct realities as they occur at different times in history. Whereas writing is of paramount importance for both Michele and Esperanza for escaping and for identity construction, the idea of becoming a role model through writing and the notion of “role model” as a whole are problematized in the former. Correspondingly, Serros distances her narrative from other feminist or Chicana feminist contributions, not only by comparing their plight to Woolf as in Cisneros. Her work moves further to analyse not only questions of race and gender but also obscured notions such as age and nationality which become central to defining later-generation Chicanas' experience.

I have attempted to contribute to this debate on Chicana literature by illustrating that Chicanas have not been allowed to free themselves from the restraints of the past as their experience no matter if that of the 1980s or the 2000s is largely defined by their roots even if acculturation has occurred. I feel it crucial to reinforce the idea that betterment is still insufficient as Chicanas still belong to in-between places, their heritage distances them from US society while acculturation does so from older members of the community. The question of belonging remains consistent, Chicanas remain “countryless woman” (Castillo 34).

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