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(HOME)GIRLS: THE URBAN FAMILY EXPERIENCE IN SANDRA CISNEROS'S *THE HOUSE ON MANGO STREET* AND GLORIA NAYLOR'S *THE WOMEN OF BREWSTER PLACE*

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis will explore and analyze variations of the family and domestic space in two feminist texts, Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* and Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*. Although both texts have been well-studied and commercially successful for decades, scholars have neglected an area of study crucial to the understanding of these works, family representation. Situated within the framework of literary criticism, family studies, spatial theory, and feminist criticism, my study establishes that Cisneros and Naylor center their texts around variations of domestic space to reveal "nontraditional" female experiences within the family home. These authors ultimately challenge normalized images of the Anglo-American middle-class nuclear family by including literary representations of "alternative families," which are families that deviate in structure, cultural identity, and traditional "family values" (e.g. ethical behavior, morality, and discipline). As the titles indicate, home and the local community are central spaces for the characters. Thus, Cisneros and Naylor create environments that identify with the emotional and physical deprivation of the protagonists' families, homes, and neighborhoods. These combined elements demonstrate the symbiotic relationship between home, community, and family identity, which ultimately distinguishes families on the fringe from other fictional representations of family seen on television and canonical U.S. literature.

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## **Introduction**

### **Domestic Space in American Culture**

Although we live in a so-called equal and multicultural United States, our country possesses severe chasms in race, gender, and socioeconomic relations. Instead of addressing the practices of social institutions that construct these gaps in Americans society, political leaders urge citizens to meditate on “American values.” American values form the basis of our national culture and include values like individualism and self-reliance, economic achievement and materialism, and equality. Often, politicians conflate “American values” with America's smallest social unit, the family. This conflation between American values and family values transforms traditionally private moral and ethical principles like honesty, kindness, and self-discipline into political positions on varying issues like marriage, abortion, and labor laws, to name a few.

Evidence of social anxieties surrounding the “collapse” of the nuclear family has emerged in nearly every presidential administration. Largely due to soaring divorce rates following the 1960s, elected officials either directly or indirectly, and usually ineffectively, implemented anti-family policy to remediate changes in family structure. What I mean by anti-family policy is policy that targets variations of American families such as working class nuclear families, non-heterosexual families, single-parent households, etcetera. In the 1980s, President Ronald Reagan identified the decline of family values as responsible for America’s “welfare culture” and, as a result, slashed social spending for needy families. Just a decade later, President Bill Clinton’s 1994 Crime Bill targeted youth gang members with the notion of “superpredators,” leading to a dramatic increase in Hispanic and African American prison populations. In the early

2000s the George W. Bush administration funded and promoted already proven ineffective high school abstinence programs to combat sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies. Although not implicitly stated, these policies portray non-nuclear families as a type of social sickness, in which divorce rates, poverty, single motherhood, neglected children, and loose morals are endemic to these households. As a result, such policies mask declining material socioeconomic conditions as declining family values. If we are aware that these policies are a masquerade, then why do myths surrounding “alternative” families, or nontraditional families, permeate our culture?

America’s myths surrounding “alternative” families are largely situated within small towns across our nation and television screens alike—the family home. The imagery attached to the nuclear, single-family home evokes images of 1950’s suburbia. Despite that it is an era gone by, American culture still espouses suburbia’s brand of Americanism—capitalist, individualistic, and exclusive—and associates suburban domiciles with good, American “family values.” As Levittowns erected across the nation in the 1950s, family theorists developed “functionalism,” which served as the leading theory throughout the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Despite that theorists dispute “functionalism” today, it continues to influence modern public policy and attitudes affecting the U.S. family and their relationship to domestic space. The chief thinker of functionalism, Talcott Parsons, proposed that the family is the fundamental source of social balance in our society. Parsons argued, “The purpose of an organism is to survive. In order for a society to survive, the subsystems (the family and other institutions) must function in ways that promote the maintenance of society as a whole” (Igoldsby 9-10). Thus, a family’s ability to *function* rests upon proper socialization and their level of productivity within society. Embedded within functionalism are four concepts that promote “social equilibrium:” sexual function and

reproduction within marriage, proper socialization of children to promote responsible citizenship, and an economic division of labor within the family based upon physical and mental abilities (Igoldsby 13). Despite that “functionalism” does not address individual differences in family organization or access to economic resources, it established the nuclear family as the paradigm of civic duty and national belonging. Talcott’s theory privileges individuals on the basis of ethnicity, socioeconomic status, geographical location, and sexual orientation, making the “nuclear family” ideal widely inaccessible to the majority of Americans. Despite that the suburban, “nuclear family” ideal is unrealistic for many, undesirable for others, the entertainment, media, and consumer industries portray the home as a symbol of cultural values and the primary educational institution, while labelling as abnormal families with “alternative” family formations and domestic structures.

It is nearly impossible to miss America’s obsession with the family home. Television channels, magazine, and websites are dedicated to home improvement, interior design, and real estate. However, this is not a recent phenomenon. Americans, women in particular, have understood the cultural significance of the home decades before the creation of the “nuclear family.” Not unlike today, American women during the 19<sup>th</sup>-century were compared to their own domestic ideal, called the “cult of domesticity,” that encouraged white middle-class women to embrace their place within the domestic sphere and properly perform their roles as wives and mothers. During the popularization of “separate spheres”—public and private—advances in technology produced more leisure time for women, engendering a large female readership that demanded textual negotiation of shifting social changes. The birth of American domestic fiction, a predominantly female genre, began in the 1920s and remained popular until the 19<sup>th</sup>-century’s

last decades. Although “woman’s fiction” was considered as an inferior genre by prestigious literary critics, Nina Baym explains why many of these novels are seriously studied today:

The term ‘domestic’ for this fiction generally means that the content is largely descriptive of events taking place in a home setting and that it espouse a ‘cult of domesticity,’ that is, fulfillment for women in marriage and motherhood . . . For our authors, it meant something else. Their fiction is mostly about social relations, generally set in homes and other social spaces that are fully described. (26)

Although many modern critics read these novels as anti-feminist texts, they serve as a popular feminism that allowed women to reconsider their prescribed roles and find agency within domestic space. These works collected mass popularity, but they promoted a singular, domestic identity—white Anglo-American middle-class womanhood. With a few exceptions, these texts primarily included stock characters that were either born poor or lost all of their money; however, their “proper” femininity and mental faculties allowed them to successfully integrate into “genteel” society, a society inaccessible to working-class or ethnic women. However, domestic fiction provided an alternative perception to the “cult of domesticity” by suggesting that “The idea that a woman’s identity or place in life is a function of her father’s or husband’s is firmly rejected” (35), moving forward feminist literature.

In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, marginalized women responded to their historic literary exclusion and created a modified domestic genre called “neodestic fiction.” This form of fiction both responds to the historic and modern denial of alternative domesticities, which according to Kristin L. Jacobson, challenges readers “to remodel our own understanding of the American family and, by extension, our national identity. Key to neodestic fiction’s literal and generic remodeling projects is how race and gender shape the American home’s physical and

ideological contours” (78). In direct contrast to the characterization and plot development of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century domestic narrative, “neodomestic” works centered on diverse characters who possess alternative domesticities in the realms of ethnicity, family formation, class, and so on. Sandra Cisneros’s novel, *The House on Mango Street* (1984), and Gloria Naylor’s novel, *The Women of Brewster Place* (1980), fall within the category of “neodomestic fiction” through their exploration of diverse domestic identities and spaces within Mexican-American and African-American communities.

Both novels respond to the proliferation of nuclear family iconography and the historic oppression of alternative families in fiction by addressing the institutions that perpetuate racism and poverty, the power of mythmaking, and the reality of family life in urban centers. Although Cisneros and Naylor chronicle the lives of two different ethnicities that have different experiences, they both centralize their texts around families, domestic geography, and community. In an interview, Naylor discusses the importance of setting in her novel: “I wanted to write a book that would reflect the diversity and the richness of the black female experience in America -- and no one woman could do that for me, and no one geographical location could do that for me. That's when the idea got born that Brewster Place would be a microcosm of American society” (Osen). Certainly, Naylor achieves her goal by employing a short-story cycle to articulate variations within family structures, domestic spaces, and identity, creating a mosaic of characters that reflects the diversity of her community. Similarly, Cisneros experiments with structure, genre, and narrative voice, only she distributes her novel through a series of vignettes, which she calls “little stories,” that are immensely poetic and “can be opened at any page and will still make sense to the reader who doesn’t know what came before or comes after” (Cisneros xvii). Fundamental to these authors’ literature is their readability, honesty, and unique approach

to communicating the many realities of Mexican American and African American women.

Overall, Cisneros and Naylor destabilize the institution of the white U.S. nuclear family by anchoring their narratives within alternative domestic spaces, providing diverse representations of domesticity for Mexican American and African American urban families.

In the sections below, I deconstruct Cisneros and Naylor's narrative modifications to the domestic genre and juxtapose their protagonists' spatial constructions to the Anglo-American single-family home. In the chapter, "Alternative Representations of Domestic Space," I discuss the historical evolution of the domestic narrative and its marginalization of non Anglo-American middle-class domesticities. As a regeneration of the domestic genre, both Cisneros and Naylor reproduce the home as construction of gender, socioeconomic, sexual, and geographical oppression. In the first section, "*The House on Mango Street: Chicana Subjectivity within the Home*," I consider Cisneros's fictional homes to be microcosms of Chicana familial structure and domestic identities. In the second section, "*The Women of Brewster Place: African American Family Experiences in Domestic Space*" I analyze Naylor's domestic representations in the context of historical African American family formation and modern spatial inequality. My analysis argues that Naylor's domestic spaces reflect the adaptive and fluid domestic organization of African American female-centric families and practices. By analyzing these works' presentation of individual family experiences embedded within the greater community, we can conceptualize the diversity of the Chicana and African American female experience that has been excluded from the American imagination.

## Chapter 1

### Alternative Representations of Domestic Space

Critics of both *The Women of Brewster Place* and *The House on Mango Street* often discuss the home as a recurring motif significant to the works' classification as "community narratives." Since the mid-nineteenth century, women writers translated female identity in relation to community, society, and nation into the fictional form, developing unified narratives comprised of fragmented short story sequences. Today, literary critics associate short story cycles with the evolving genre called "community narratives," which Sandra Zagarell defines as a genre that "takes as their subject the life of a community (life in 'its everyday aspects') and portrays the minute and quite ordinary processes through which the community maintains itself as an entity. The self exists here as part of the interdependent network of the community rather than the individualistic unit" (450). Zagarell also notes that common characteristics of "community narratives" include episodic structures, local color, and intimate portrayals of domestic life. Many critics analyze Cisneros and Naylor's works through the lens of the "community narrative" and suggest that the centralization of the home and domestic labor creates plot development narrative continuity. Certainly, both Cisneros and Naylor's novels fall into the genre of "community narrative" through their composition of short-story sequences that reconcile individual characters with the greater community; however, I believe these critics overlook the fundamental function of the literary home within American literature. I posit that Cisneros and Naylor's portrayals of the home serve as sites for reinterpretation and alternative

representation of Chicana and African American women, which overall contribute to a revitalization of the domestic genre.

During the rise in popularity of the “community narrative,” the subject of the literary home became widely popularized within 19<sup>th</sup>-century domestic fiction. This literature predominately chronicled white middle-class womanhood, namely through the 19<sup>th</sup>-century domestic ideal dubbed the “cult of domesticity,” which Margaret Anderson describes as “a limited and gender-specific role to play—namely, that of the person responsible for the moral and everyday affairs of the home” (163). Although the “cult of domesticity” excluded working class women and women of color, it became the model for American motherhood and gender performance. As participants of this brand of domesticity, many women writers subtly criticized the oppressive psychological environment it produced and wrote to the audience that best understood it, white Anglo-American middle-class women. Domestic fiction’s characters mirrored their audience, members of the “genteel” society who embodied female propriety through their displays of piety, purity, and most importantly, domesticity. Although this literature marginalized poor and ethnic women, Nina Baym defends these novelists as early feminists merely writing within the confinements of a restrictive sociopolitical milieu: “Feminism [was] constrained by certain other types of beliefs that are less operative today. For example, these authors interpreted experience within models of personal relations, rather than classes, castes, or other institutional structures. The shape of human life was perceived not as determined by various memberships, but by various private interactions” (18). Baym’s analysis sheds light onto the cultural context in which women authors wrote—their work did not intend radical social transformation; rather, it encouraged women to function through the domestic sphere and subtly question women’s socialization.

While popular culture chronicled Anglo-American domesticity, African-American and Chicana families' family practices and structures that conflicted with prevailing domestic ideology were largely absent in American literature. If we read Cisneros and Naylor's fiction as a dialectical conversation between 19<sup>th</sup>-century and modern domesticities, we discover in American literature an evolution and modification of a genre that better serves women today. *The Women of Brewster Place* and *The House on Mango Street* expand upon the literary tradition of tapping into female subjectivity through the home by reconceptualizing domestic space. Unlike their predecessors, Cisneros and Naylor employ "neodomestic" adaptations that emphasize that the home is a reproduction of intersecting factors such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, geographical location, and cultural tradition; and in turn, these factors constitute the physical and interior construct of the home. When I refer to the "interior" home, I am discussing both the interior organization of the house as well as the psychic space of the characters within. Although Blacks and Chicanas express domesticity differently, both texts alter public interpretations of domestic space by ascribing sociocultural conditions onto the physical and interior construct of the home.

## Part 1:

### *The House on Mango Street: Chicana Subjectivity within the Home*

#### Esperanza and the “American Dream” House

Cisneros uses domestic space as a recurring narrative motif to demonstrate the variations of family representation in the Chicana community. Although one may expect Cisneros to present the home as an idyllic symbol of protection or nostalgia for the child protagonist, she instead has her protagonist experience the complex negotiation of inside and outside cultural identities, as the home comprises the territory in which new, complicated, at times conflictive versions of those cultural identities begin to manifest. Literary critics Chiara Briganti and Kathy Mezei expound upon Witold Rybczynski's theory, which proposes that the historic literary home is a source of insight into character consciousness: "'The appearance of the internal world of the individual, of the self, and of the family' in which the house is appreciated as a 'setting for an emerging interior life' . . . Thus, novels *and* houses furnish a dwelling place—a spatial construct—that invites the exploration and expression of private and intimate relations and thoughts" (839). Along with this insight, it is useful to consider how the home as a tangible site of character subjectivity does not account the ways that brown/black bodies navigate such domestic space. In order to conceptualize minority domestic experience as represented in literature, we must consider how domestic space is a spatial and a social construct. According to geographer David Delaney, spatial geography is socially constructed by power and identity relations. Delaney suggests, “contemporary geographical theories have stressed the mutual constitutivity of the social and the spatial. According to this line of thought, elements of the social (race, gender, and so on) are not simply *reflected* in spatial arrangements; rather, spatialities are regarded as *constituting* and/or reinforcing aspects of the social” (7). In other words, space is socially

constructed and reproduced within both public areas (e.g. the neighborhood) and private areas (e.g. the home). Thus, when Esperanza Cordero navigates the most intimate and personal spaces, like her home, it becomes an exploration of ethnic alterity.

In response to both racialized urban spaces and the normalization of the white middle-class suburban home, Cisneros presents her literary home with a point of difference—she introduces the home as a territorialized site for identity, in which the physical and interior home imbues unique cultural meanings for Mexican Americans. Delaney suggests that “race-centered ideologies combine with other ideological elements—such as those centered on public-private, ownership, sexuality, citizenship, democracy, or crime—and with other axes of power to produce the richly textured, high variegated, and power laden spatialities of everyday life.” (7) As a Chicano nuclear family, the Corderos “express” space differently, especially in terms of property ownership. For the Corderos, home ownership symbolizes their ability to “placemake,” or set roots, in American society, as opposed to the home as a demonstration of wealth.

In the first vignette, Esperanza emphasizes that property ownership symbolizes national belonging and spatial stability for her family. She tells readers,

We didn't always live on Mango Street. Before that we lived on Loomis on the third floor, and before that we lived on Keller. Before Keeler it was Paulina, and before that I can't remember. But what I remember most is moving a lot . . . The house on Mango Street is ours, and we don't have to pay rent to anybody, or share the yard with the people downstairs, or be careful not to make too much noise, and there isn't a landlord banging on the ceiling with a broom.” (3)

For many individuals the home symbolizes the realized immigrant dream, which according to Lorna L. Perez is the “achievement of the home of one's own [and] signals an adherence to those typically ‘American’ characteristics: hard work, self-determination, and self-sufficiency” (61).

Unlike the Cordero’s other rented properties marred by broken infrastructure, the newly purchased home on Mango Street is a symbol of sovereignty, recognized property rights, and economic power. The transition from renting to owning appears as a vertical leap in contrast to their previous dwellings:

We had to leave the flat on Loomis quick. The water pipes broke and the landlord wouldn’t fix them because the house was too old. We had to leave fast. We were using the washroom next door and carrying water over in empty milk gallons.

That’s why Mama and Papa looked for a house, and that’s why we moved into the house on Mango Street, far away, on the other side of town. (4)

Unlike the landlord/tenant relationship that strips the Corderos of domestic autonomy, property ownership supplants the their pattern of displacement and domestic disruption; however, readers learn that “the other side of town” is a predominately Hispanic neighbored, suggesting that the Cordero family was economically and racially segregated into buying a home on Mango Street. Upon Esperanza’s arrival on Mango, she divulges that “This house on Mango Street isn’t it” (5), meaning her home is not a symbol of national belonging or power because its material conditions fail to meet Esperanza’s idealizations of what a home should look and feel like. Thus, for her the home becomes the opposite—a symbol of failure and lack.

The physical construct of the Mango Street home reifies the social conditions of urban, racialized spaces. The home’s material deprivation reiterates the Chicana community’s socioeconomic disenfranchisement and cultural displacement within dominant society. Briganti

and Mezei assert that the aesthetic home provides insight into an individual's sociocultural milieu: "the exterior façade and style along with the interior decoration, furniture, style, and layout of houses compose a semeiotic system that signals status, class, and public display and creates meanings that observers, visitors, and the public may interpret and read; as Dolores Hayden notes, 'the vernacular house forms are aesthetic essays on the meaning of life within a particular culture'" (840). Esperanza desires a house that signifies American achievement—an aesthetically pleasing suburban home to connote pride and middle class status, and moreover, physical comfort and safety. Her "dream" house includes "running water and pipes that worked. And inside it would have real stairs, not hallway stairs, but stairs inside like the houses on T.V. And we'd have a basement and at least three washrooms so when we took a bath we wouldn't have to tell everybody. Our house would be white with trees around it, a great big yard and grass growing without a fence" (4). Gwendolyn Wright argues that a desperate attachment to an idealized home is common within the "neodomestic" genre: "confronting the problems of those for whom 'home' is lost or denied can intensify the potency of this ideal, making one's own 'perfect home' seem all the more essential and precarious" (qtd. in Jacobson 76). Unlike the middle-class home projected onto Esperanza's television screen, the decrepit red house has crumbling bricks, tight steps, cramped windows, no backyard, one washroom, and one bedroom shared by all members of the family, essentially reflecting the family's lack of socioeconomic agency and familial unbelonging.

It is important to note that Esperanza models her imagined home after the residences where her father works, which are positioned on a literal and metaphorical hill that demarcates locational and socioeconomic barriers. Moreover, Esperanza exemplifies a developing social consciousness when she identifies how structural inequalities are maintained by elite classes and

affirms that poverty is a structural not pathological issue: “People who live on the hills sleep so close to the stars they forget those of us who live too much on earth. They don’t look down at all except to be content to live on hills. They have nothing to do with last week’s garbage or fear of rats” (86). As Esperanza gazes toward a life she will never have, she envisions alternative domestic spaces for the members of her community. Although the physical construct of the home embodies external sources of socioeconomic inequality, the interior home reflects both the social and emotional status of Chicana mothers and daughters maintained through cultural tradition.

In the novel, the physical and psychological bordered domestic landscape entraps women within the domestic sphere, impeding their ability to transcend an identity unattached to the home. Interestingly, modern sociologists and architects assert that the interior organization of the home reflects a shifting social and cultural landscape regarding family organization and functioning. According to Basil Bernstein “positional families,” which were more popular before the 1990s, function through hierarchical family roles and authoritarian parenting (qtd. In Vermuelen 113). Thus, interior spaces reflected family rigidity through the creation of physical boundaries throughout the home (e.g. Dad’s office, Mom’s bathroom). In contrast, “person-oriented” families are more democratic and unstructured. Architects follow changing family patterns and construct newer homes with fewer boundaries and more open, communal areas. David Sibley uses Bernstein’s observations to discuss the spatial arrangements in “positional-homes:” “we could assume that the use of domestic space would be controlled in that children would be denied access to ‘adult spaces’ either permanently or at certain times of day. The indifference of children to boundaries would, in these circumstances, be seen as transgression requiring admonishment.” (113). Although Sibley discusses family patterns and spatial structures within suburban middle-class homes, he nonetheless establishes a relationship between interior

organization and mobility. Due to spatial restrictions, cultural family practices, and gender roles, the women in Esperanza's family have a history of being surveilled by the patriarchs of their families.

Esperanza learns that the interior home doubles as a form of social imprisonment for her female relatives. In the vignette titled "My Name," Esperanza tells readers that she inherited her name from her spirited grandmother who was kidnapped and forced into marriage with Esperanza's grandfather. As the legend goes, Esperanza's grandmother spent the rest of her life staring out the window, a physical border between the public and private sphere, because "Mexicans don't like their women strong" (10). Karen M. Martin finds this to be especially problematic for a Chicana character because her mobility is thwarted by boundaries inside and outside of the home: "It follows that if identity is indeed positional, determined either by means of our navigation of or confinement within boundaries, the Chicana woman's immobility precludes her development of a sense of self and further exacerbates her dependence on the male-identified male" (60). Esperanza discovers that forced immobility functions as a medium of social control over the physical and psychological body by complicating the ability to acquire identity independent from the domestic sphere. Furthermore, female immobility within the home compromises the purpose of the domestic space—to ensure safety and protection from the outside world. Thus, Esperanza mourns her grandmother's stagnancy, but envisions a domestic space that possesses spatial fluidity: "I wonder if she made the best of what she got or was she sorry because she couldn't be all the things she wanted to be. Esperanza. I have inherited her name, but I don't want to her inherit her place by the window" (11). As Esperanza discovers, the negotiation between domestic and public boundaries is not unique to her own family's history.

Cisneros juxtaposes the multiple houses on Mango Street to other female characters to portray the variations of domestic representation throughout the Chicana community on Mango Street.

### **The House(s) on Mango Street: Sally and Mamacita**

Cisneros's title, *The House on Mango Street*, is misleading because it suggests that the text primarily focuses on a single domestic space; however, the street and the multiple homes that occupy it transform the text into a "community narrative" embedded within multiple domestic spaces. Cisneros anchors her community narrative to domestic space in order to reflect traditional Mexican practices of familialism in Chicano neighborhoods. Although white Anglo-American middle-class domesticity practices family-centeredness through maternal nurturance of the intermediate family, familialism in a Mexican American context requires an expansion of the definition. U.S. colonization of Mexicans, sustained through Mexican labor exploitation, restricted the social, political, and economic rights for Mexican men and women. Mexican-Americans had little reason to follow Anglo-American family codes because it did not afford them access to American society. According to Maxine Baca Zinn and Barbara Wells, extended family systems supplanted the need for greater societal belonging: "studies have found that kinship networks are an important survival strategy in poor Mexican communities and that these networks operate as a system of cultural, emotional, and mental support, as well as a system for coping with socioeconomic marginality" (234). Whereas Anglo-American middle-class family education teaches individualism and self-reliance, Chicanos maintain collective support networks in their neighborhoods. Cisneros reflects such traditionally-rooted family patterns in her fictional Chicana community on Mango Street, ultimately rejecting the normative family expectations for marginalized members of dominant American society.

Esperanza averts her focus to multiple homes in her neighborhood, allowing for a more robust view on Chicano neighborhoods, one that according to Perez, “shifts away from models of individual American exceptionalism, epitomized by the singular house, and focuses instead on the failures of this ideology, as symbolized by the marginalization of the entire community” (58). Perez underscores Cisneros’s ideological shift that renegotiates traditional private/ public borders and permits the protagonist to narrate diverse domestic representations. It is important to note that the expansion of private/public spheres does not automatically result in fluid family practices within the represented families. Esperanza’s movement through domestic and public spaces enables her to narrate the experiences of other families, which illuminates additional sociocultural borders that constitute immigrant and Chicana domestic lives.

In the novel, the interior home reflects the complexities of Chicana subjectivity through the physical and cultural boundaries constructed throughout domestic spaces and identities. Cisneros’s depiction of hybridized identities is an adaptive strategy to the domestic genre which in Jacobson’s view “blur[s] boundaries that are usually-considered sacrosanct—boundaries such as race, gender, and class” (48). The home reveals specific challenges for a character who possesses competing subjectivity but is confined to a one-dimensional domestic role. According to Gloria Anzaldúa, Chicana identity can be described as “cradled in one culture, sandwiched between two cultures, straddling all three cultures and their value systems . . . *la cultura chicana*, commonly held beliefs of white culture attack commonly held beliefs of the Mexican culture, and both attack commonly held beliefs of indigenous culture” (qtd. in Grum 41). In Anzaldúa’s view, Mexican culture, regulated within the home, and American culture, regulated in formal institutions and multimedia, simultaneously compete to define Chicana women. Thus, domestic space becomes a territory for competing cultural identities, which are controlled and

thwarted by the patriarchs of their families. Historian George J. Sánchez notes that historically “Most interpretations characterize Mexican families as hierarchical, rigidly patriarchal, solidified by age-old customs rooted in peasant values and Catholic tradition. Mexicans were characterized as having large, extended family structures in which gender roles were strictly separated, reinforced by stern parental discipline and community pressure” (109). Although Sánchez does not address specific gender roles that are especially oppressive for women, he is accurate in observing that monolithic gender expectations provide the cornerstone of Mexican familial stability. Similar to the Anglo construct of the Madonna/Whore complex, Mexican women are characterized according to la Virgen de Guadalupe/la Malinche dichotomy. According to Leslie Petty, la Virgen de Guadalupe “represents the holy, chaste woman, the embodiment of feminine purity as well as the virtues of nurturing and self-sacrifice” (115); whereas, la Malinche represents “both the passivity and violation associated with the fallen woman while simultaneously representing the powerful act of treason as one who ‘betrays the homeland by aiding the enemy’ (117). Chicanas are forced into a complex negotiation between both Mexican and American standards of “proper” womanhood. Although la Virgen de Guadalupe/la Malinche complex is tightly regulated through physical appearance and sexuality, Cisneros emphasizes the larger implications that these archetypes have on domestic roles and environments. In the novel, the character Sally best exemplifies a Chicana who attempts to transcend cultural archetypes that imprison her within the home.

The cultural boundaries that circumscribe Esperanza’s friend Sally to the home represent her hybridized identity, in which she is physically and metaphorically “entrapped” in a cycle of patriarchal domesticity. In the novel, Sally is a major secondary character who is the subject of three vignettes that provide much insight into prevalent domestic attitudes within Esperanza’s

community. Sally's character serves as a foil to Esperanza and often exposes Esperanza's childlike naiveté. While Esperanza's character learns gender codes through observation, Sally actively negotiates Mexican/American femininity within public and private spheres. In the vignette titled "Sally," Esperanza describes Sally as "the girl with eyes like Egypt and nylons the color of smoke" (81), which makes her the subject of "coatroom" banter among the boys at Esperanza's school. Moreover, Sally's father believes "to be this beautiful is trouble" (81), so he beats her as a form of punishment. In an effort to transcend rigid family practices promoted through Mexican tradition, Sally elopes at thirteen years old, hoping to locate an alternative domestic experience for herself.

As a Chicana daughter at the cusp of young adulthood, Sally has difficulty expressing an identity unattached to the domestic realm. Spatial restrictions become the biggest impediment to Sally locating an identity outside of "proper" Mexican femininity. According to Petty, "no one in *The House on Mango Street* more fully embodies the 'cruel incarnation of the feminine condition' than Esperanza's friend, Sally" (121). I agree with Petty's observation that Sally best embodies la Lady de Guadalupe/la Malinche complex, the virgin/whore dichotomy built into Mexican history and cultural imagination. Public spaces like the school provide areas for identity experimentation within the realms of "improper" femininity. Sally's public image, more compatible with the "fallen woman," exudes sexuality from her black suede shoes to her painted eyes. Sally's representation can be understood as a form of backlash against her sexual and physical containment within the home. Despite that Sally removes her makeup before returning home, her beauty and perceived promiscuity incite violent outbursts from her father, highlighting the issues surrounding both male and female domestic identities. In a conversation between Esperanza and Sally in the vignette, "What Sally Said," Esperanza relays Sally's experience, "He

never hits me hard. Sally doesn't tell about that time he hit her with his hands just like a dog, she said, like if I was an animal. He thinks I'm going to run away like his sisters who made the family ashamed. Just because I'm a daughter, and then she doesn't say" (92). Both Sally and her father's perception of domestic abuse is compatible with Sánchez's analysis of Chicano sociology, which proposes that historically "*machismo* was not so much a maladaptive response which solidified male dominance, but rather represented an appropriate mechanism to insure the continuation of Mexican family pride and respect. Although noted in the literature, the oppression of women within the family was dismissed as a necessary evil in order to main family stability and tradition" (108). Certainly, the father's indifference towards domestic abuse supports the maintenance of rigid family structures for stability, but Sally's age and passivity leaves her defenseless against her father's wrath. Petty provides useful insight into the relationship between la Lady de Guadalupe/la Malinche and male/female domestic roles: "Like la Malinche, Sally's sexuality is doubly threatening to her father's masculinity. Not only could she betray him by being promiscuous, but her beauty might also entice a man to violate her, which would threaten the father's role as protector" (123). In an effort to escape the characterization as la Malinche and her father's physical abuse, Sally elopes with a "marshmallow salesman" and attempts to recreate a domestic space that reflects shifting cultural values.

Unfortunately, Sally's new home only reiterates cultural boundaries inscribed onto domestic space and her transition from daughter to wife presents itself as a repackaged form of patriarchal domesticity. Through Sally's characterization, Cisneros employs a popular trope within 19<sup>th</sup>-century domestic fiction. Baym asserts that "when a woman turns to marriage or elopement as escape, she finds herself enthralled to a tyrant even worse than the one she fled"

(40). In the vignette “Linoleum Roses,” Esperanza discloses that Sally married a “marshmallow salesman,” the seeming antithesis of her father, who she met at a school fundraiser. Esperanza tells readers that Sally “has her husband and her house now, her pillowcases and her plates. She says she is in love, but I think she did it to escape” (101). Sally’s marriage occurred before her eighth grade year, which is compatible with Sánchez examination of Chicano/a marriage patterns. He suggests, “For children seeking greater independence, young marriages provided an escape from immigrant parents” (118). Like many immigrant children, Sally views marriage as a mechanism for redefining cultural values. Sally hopes to construct a self-defined, borderless space that would allow her to experiment through a multi-dimensional identity. According to Martin, Sally’s “longing for freedom is tied to an idealized house, an open space characterized simultaneously by privacy and limitless” (64). Although I agree that Sally attaches her idealizations of a liberated domestic space to the physical home, this exaggerated attachment overshadows her limited agency within this space. Sally’s husband exercises total control over his wife’s mobility—she can’t have visitors or leave the house without his permission. Esperanza tells readers that while Sally is cloistered within the home: “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” (102). Since Sally’s home fails to meet her domestic fantasy, she averts her attention to the material home instead of the emotional home, ignoring her lateral movement from daughter to wife of domestic abuse. Petty perceives the trope linoleum roses to be symbolic of Sally’s departure from la Malinche to the la Lady de Guadalupe: “Like the Virgin, Sally gets the home that she wants, but again the house functions more like a prison than a shrine. As Julián Olivares argues, the linoleum roses are a ‘trope for household confinement and drudgery, and an ironic

treatment of the garden motif, which is associated with freedom and the outdoors” (123).

Following Petty’s logic, Sally’s submission to the “good wife” archetype blocks her movement through public and private spheres, with self-definition only visible beyond the walls of her home. Sally’s marital home replicates the difficult hurdles Chicana characters confront—her home is a bordered zone and an ultimate reproduction of the childhood home she desired to escape.

In the vignette “No Speak English,” Cisneros presents the home as a site of deterritorialization for Mexican immigrant and Mexican-American identities, delineating additional patterns of cultural entrapment inscribed onto domestic space. Mamacita the subject of the vignette, expresses a domestic identity at conflict between nativism and cultural assimilation. After months of separation, Mamacita’s husband finally affords to bring his wife and child to Mango Street; however, Mamacita is reluctant to assimilate to American culture and confines herself to the home. Upon Mamacita’s arrival, Esperanza gazes at the exotic woman who is the physical embodiment of homeland: “Out stepped a tiny pink shoe, a foot soft as a rabbit’s ear, then the thick ankle, a flutter of hips, fuchsia roses and green perfume . . . All at once she bloomed. Huge, enormous, beautiful to look at, from the salmon-pink feather on the tip of her hat down to the little rosebuds of her toes . . . Then we didn’t see her” (76). Mamacita’s designation as the neighborhood recluse emanates from her linguistic inability—that is she is reluctant and “afraid” to speak English. Martin argues that “As she loses her linguistic identity, she loses the ‘social topography’ that had previously defined her ‘intimate geography’ by reconcil[ing] subject and country, ethnicity and place, ‘leaving her deterritorialized, feeling homeless despite constant positionality at ‘home’” (63). Martin’s analysis is useful in explaining Mamacita’s effort to bridge her “intimate geography” to her Mango Street apartment by painting the walls pink and

listening to Spanish radio; however, socialization is fundamental to her reconciling her native identity to her reproduced homeland. Thus, she “sits all day by the window” (77). Unlike Esperanza’s grandmother, Mamacita’s window is not only a threshold between private and public spheres, but a cultural barrier, primarily a linguistic one, that impedes her cultural integration.

Although some readers may interpret Mamacita’s behavior to be self-indulgent, the combination of her characterization by others as exotic or folkloric, and her hesitation towards acculturation, once again evoke the historical Mexican archetype, La Malinche. Whereas Sally embodied the physical and sexual essence of la Malinche, Mamacita reflects the cultural implications of its association. According to Martin, female cultural transgression “equates to a betrayal of the larger community in the archetypal figure of Malinche, whose intellect and transgression—although against her will—of the borders of her native culture branded her a traitor and intensified traditional Mexicans’ resistance to the interloper, as well as to the female who is seen as having usurped a position in society” (60). In Chicana culture, preserving the Spanish tongue preserves the dignity of Mexican heritage. Thus, Esperanza narrates “No Speak English” with empathy for Mamacita’s “unhomely” condition and identifies her linguistic barrier to be the defining source of conflict within her domestic space. Esperanza often hears the husband shouting, “We *are* home. This *is* home. Here I am and here I stay Speak English. Speak English . . . *Mamacita*, who does not belong, every once in a while lets out a cry, hysterical, high, as if he had torn the only skinny thread that kept her alive, the only road out to that country” (78). Whereas other women strive to create an identity outside of the domestic realm; the ghost of La Malinche and American standards of linguistic purism prevent Mamacita from locating a domestic identity resonant with her cultural identity.

Moreover, Mamacita's sense of domestic "deterritorialization," emblematic through losing her native language, has a profound impact on the cultural identity of her son. Dill argues that preserving Spanish within the home is "of vital importance to the integrity of traditional culture" (34). When Mamacita witnesses her child, who is just starting to talk, sing the Pepsi commercial he heard on television, she breaks down "No speak English, she says to the child who is singing in the language that sounds like tin. No speak English, no speak English, and bursts into tears. No, no, no, as if she can't believe her ears" (78). This sample of narration underscores that sociocultural influences from the public sphere (e.g. television) infiltrate the private sphere, permanently threatening Mamacita's cultural legacy through the linguistic disruption of her child. Although many Chicano/a communities strive to retain their culture through language, song, storytelling, and cultural rites of passages, Cisneros suggests that geographical distance gives way to cultural adaptations within the younger generation, creating tension between immigrant parents and their Americanized children.

Although many critics categorize *The House on Mango Street* as a "community narrative" for its vignette structure and representation of an interconnected community, I argue that Cisneros's textual distribution bridges her protagonist's family history to her larger community, providing a rich meditation of Mexican American family values. Since Cisneros heavily embeds her characters within alternative domestic spaces, I interpret *The House on Mango Street* to be a modification of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century domestic narrative and the genre's proliferation of Anglo-American domesticity. In contrast to nuclear family iconography and the single-family home, external and internal social pressures etch themselves onto Cisneros's domestic spaces and manifest the ramifications of discrimination, poverty, and cultural alterity. Through Esperanza's relationship to domestic space, Cisneros articulates the unique cultural

meanings of property ownership for Mexican Americans, transforming the physical home as signifier of wealth into a symbol of national belonging. Furthermore, Esperanza's narration of family experiences outside of her home gives readers access to diverse Chicana family structures and domestic identities. In the vignettes that place Sally and Mamacita as the subject, Cisneros presents the interior home as a site of competing cultural identities between Mexican and American culture. Through Sally's characterization, Cisneros introduces the domestic challenges for a Chicana adolescent who has difficulty resisting Mexican cultural archetypes that dictate her domestic role. In the vignette "No Speak English," Cisneros introduces the home as a deterritorialized zone that pressures Mamacita to choose between her native culture and American assimilation. Although *The House on Mango Street* depicts the unique domestic experience for Mexican Americans, *The Women of Brewster Place* provides many parallels through its emphasis on communal family concepts and redefined American domestic attitudes.

## Part 2:

### ***The Women of Brewster Place: African American Family Experiences***

As I previously stated, both the physical and interior home is a social reproduction of family concepts and values negotiated and reinterpreted through ethnic tradition, family hierarchy, and social institutions. Although cultural images of American families and their relationships to domestic space vary within historical and cultural contexts, ethnic writers must revamp the literary process of homemaking and represent varying domestic ideologies. In *The House on Mango Street*, Cisneros portrays diverse female relationships to domestic space through the dialectics of American, Mexican, and Chicana cultural identities. *The Women of Brewster Place* also discusses female domesticity in alternative spaces, but addresses the different configurations of power that specifically oppress African American families. Naylor communicates the varied and adaptive natures of African American families by juxtaposing domestic organization to social factors that threaten family stability. Throughout the novel, the physical and interior home reflects continuous shifts in family disintegration and revival within Brewster Place's families.

The homes in Brewster Place reflect the fluidity of both physical and interior domestic space, mimicking adaptations of African American family structures throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Historically Anglo-American institutions, such as slavery, controlled African American family life. During slavery, masters commodified African American families to basic labor units and denied slaves marital and reproductive rights to prevent social discord. Thus, the survival of African American families and cultural tradition depended upon the continuation of

Afrocentric concepts of family that included blood relatives, “fictive kin”—social and care networks extending beyond the biological family—and “othermothers,” women who assume a maternal role over non-biological children. Patricia Hill Collins suggests that the reorganization of family relationships, especially the placement of mothers as the central figure of power, is an act of resistance towards oppressive institutions that embrace capitalistic notions of private property: “By continuing community-based child care, African-American women challenge one fundamental assumption underlying the capitalist system itself: that children are ‘private property’ and can be disposed of as such . . . by seeing the larger community as responsible for children and by giving othermothers and other nonparents ‘rights’ in child rearing, African-Americans challenge prevailing property relations” (212). Although Collins applies this shift to parenting styles, the disassociation between children and property changes the entire climate of the household. Many 19<sup>th</sup>-century domestic narratives presented the propertization of children as a “normal” family value within dominant culture that connects spatial control to abusive parenting practices. Baym provides insight into the authoritarian stock character in the domestic genre: “The abusers of power run a gamut from fathers and mothers to stepparents, aunts, uncles, grandparents, guardians, and matrons of orphanages. They are the administrators or owners of the space within which the child is legally constrained” (37). In contrast to the private and individualistic spirit of white middle-class families, African American perspectives on property maintain kin networks and communal domestic spaces, contributing to a family system based on shared domestic labor and socioeconomic responsibility. These patterns during the antebellum period extend to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but rampant industrialization and urbanization necessitated that African Americans make additional adaptations to their community-based familial organization.

Although the vestiges of slavery shaped early patterns of African American family formation, the contemporary formation of the urban Black family is a byproduct of 20<sup>th</sup>-century economic, social, and geographical conditions. Kinship relations followed hopeful African Americans as they made their way North, but family roles and relationships to domestic space changed. While overt racism led to the rampant unemployment of Black males, which made women the primary breadwinners (Anderson 168), urban development created less overt expressions of spatial inequality that affected family development. Urban geographer Edward Soja suggests that unequal spatial distribution, or what he calls “spatial (in)justice” is “a matter of locating [spatial (in)justice] in the specific conditions of urban life and in the collective struggles to achieve more equitable access of all residents to social resources and advantages the city provides . . . Urban life is nested within many different geographical contexts and above and below the administrative space of the city itself” (32). In other words, lack of access to social and economic power organizes spatial injustice within race, class, and gender hierarchies. Certain urban “conditions” are mapped along these geographical and institutional lines in the processes of city planning, political districting, commercial building, and the placement of schools, hospitals, transportation systems, and importantly, low-income housing. More problematic than the existence of socioeconomic rifts is the ideological underpinnings of “spatial (in)justice” that operates as a justification for social control. Soja argues that “Rather than being seen as modifiable injustices or violations of civil rights, distributional inequalities have most often been buried under claims that they are normal, expected, unavoidable consequences of urban living” (48). Through increasing normalization, dominant culture represents urban conditions as natural side effects of urban development, and more importantly, pathological to certain ethnic populations. In the *Women of Brewster Place*, Naylor includes characters who made the

northward journey and struggle to reproduce the Southern domestic landscape in their urban neighborhoods. By situating families in a Harlem housing project, Naylor address the association between unjust spatial geographies and the Black family contemporary to her time. In doing so, she illuminates the adaptations African Americans families face when external “emplacement” impedes on their ability to placemake.

Set in the post-civil rights urban North, Naylor’s novel articulates the daily rituals of eight women who live in the Brewster Place housing project. Naylor’s text is organized into seven individual stories, each narrated through a third person omniscient narrator, and bookends her novel with a prologue and epilogue that establishes Brewster Place not only as the geographical focal point but a sentient character itself. According to Roxanne Harde, the short-story cycle is an effective strategy for multicultural “community narratives” because it “allows for multiple representations of the members of the community” (4) and furthermore reconsiders the goals of the narrative genre itself. Certainly, Naylor’s conclusion to her prologue indicates that she was conscious of form, genre, and character representation. She writes, “Like an ebony phoenix, each in her own time and with her own season had a story” (5). Although Naylor distributes her novel through seven distinctive episodes, she provides continuity by reconciling these individual stories to the narrative whole through her characters’ domestic routines and interactions within communal spaces. Despite that many critics read her text as a “community narrative,” I propose that it aligns itself with the domestic genre because of its domestic focus and insight into multiple subjectivities within the home. Through its female-centric “domestic geography,” Naylor dissolves boundaries between separate spheres and bridges characters at the individual and communal level.

### **“Dawn:” Brewster’s Beginnings**

Naylor’s focus on the principle geography of Brewster Place provides more than a site for character unity—it reiterates the women’s stories and functions as a secondary character that has both a beginning and end to Naylor’s story. Like the people of its community, Naylor establishes that Brewster Place is a physical manifestation of racist practices that produce social fracturing within African American families and the community at large. “Dawn” introduces Brewster Place as a microcosm for urban development throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century in that it undergoes a series of socioeconomic and ethnic changes, transforming from an Irish population to an exclusively African American. The creation story of Brewster Place is crucial in understanding that poverty and dispossession are not pathological to African Americans; rather they are induced by economic and political strategy. Conceived of as a social project for its poor Irish residents during WWII, corporate and political negotiation created the housing project:

Brewster Place was the bastard child of several clandestine meetings between the alderman of the sixth district and the managing director of Unico Reality company . . . They came together, propositioned, bargained, and slowly worked out the consummation of their respective desires. As an afterthought they agreed to erect four-double housing units on some worthless land in a badly crowded district . . . And so in a damp, smoke filled room, Brewster Place was conceived.”

(1)

Literary critic Celeste Fraser finds that Naylor’s language resonates with political rhetoric surrounding African American families. She states, “Naylor repeats claims for illegitimate children as the cause of poverty, but she shifts the stigma of illegitimacy from the illicit sexuality of single black women to the illicit partnership between government and commerce that created

the ghetto” (75). By using illicit sex as a metaphor for Brewster’s inception, Naylor immediately establishes spatial injustice, poverty, and racism as contributors to the social stigma attached to African American families—sexual licentiousness, illegitimate pregnancy, and failed patriarchy, to name a few. In this way, the author aligns Brewster’s physical construction and family practices with political corruption and capitalist greed.

Throughout the narration of Brewster’s story Naylor anthropomorphizes Brewster Place, which reinforces the symbiotic relationship between space and domestic experiences. Naylor establishes Brewster Place as a sentient being by supplying it a heart that sustains the geographical topography of the town and the political and economic vitality of its residents. The community hoped that Brewster Place would be the “main artery of the town” that carries its residents to the economic opportunities of the local commercial district, but the developers walled off Brewster’s alleyways. The narrator divulges,

The boulevard became a major business district, but in order to control traffic some of the auxiliary streets had to be walled off. There was a fierce battle in the city legislature between representatives of these small veins because they knew they were fighting for the lifeblood of their community, but there was no one to fight for Brewster Place. The neighborhood was now filled with people who had no political influence. (2)

The construction of the wall was a spatial adjustment for consumers and workers of the business district; however, the wall serves as a racial and institutional buffer between Brewster’s immigrants and the whiter, wealthier urbanites. According to Edward Soja, constructed boundaries are efforts towards a watered-down “spatial colonization” that suggests a “fear of potential invasion and violence by what the more powerful perceive as threatening ‘others’ drives all these processes of spatial control” (43). The wall functions as a form of spatial control

that prevents socioeconomic and cultural invasion by Brewster's immigrants and makes them invisible to dominant culture. Yet, the children of the original Irish and Italian immigrants overcome socioeconomic roadblocks and "Brewster Place mourned with these mothers because it had lost its children—also to the call of a more comfortable life and to the fear of these present children who were once strange but were now all it had" (3). As Brewster moves into the 1960s, integration brings African Americans to Brewster Place. Brewster responds to the social tensions between these individuals and society, and for the African American women and children at Brewster Place, the wall becomes the defining structural boundary that localizes their experiences to the housing project.

As Brewster becomes increasingly alienated from economic expansion and neglected in its elderly years by its property owners, the interior organization of African American families revitalizes the apartment complex. In stark contrast to the Irish and Italian immigrant families that left Brewster Place in search for the "American Dream," Matus asserts, "In Brewster Place there is no upward mobility; and by conventional evaluation are no stable family structures. Brewster is a place for women who have no realistic expectations of revising their marginality, most of whom have 'come down' in the world" (61). Matus's statement offers insight into the cultural differences between African Americans and other ethnic groups in terms of the process of homemaking. For the characters in *The House on Mango Street*, home is located elsewhere whether in location, memory, or fantasy; whereas, the characters in *The Women of Brewster Place* reflect the resiliency of making a home despite the objectionable and unstable circumstances. For these reasons, the narrator discloses that the building becomes "especially fond of its colored daughters as they milled like determined spirits among its decay, trying to make it a home" (4). Naylor captures African American women's durability through her

reproduction of the historic fluidity of African American family patterns, a tradition that blurs private and public spaces throughout the Brewster development. When the women are not performing their own domestic duties,

they stood together—hands on hips, straight-backed, round-bellied, high-behinded women who threw their heads back when they laughed and exposed strong teeth and dark gums. They cursed, badgered, worshipped, and shared their men. Their love drove them to fling dishcloths in someone else’s kitchen to help him make the rent, or to fling hot lye to help him forget that bitch behind the counter at the five-and-dime. (4)

This sample of narration captures communal domesticity, demonstrating the erasure of physical boundaries within domestic space that allows the women to move freely throughout each other’s homes, to laugh together and even scold other women’s husbands. Moreover, the conclusion emphasizes that collective love and labor are the defining concepts of home to the women and serve as mediums for social power. According to literary critic Maxine Lavon Montgomery: “‘Dawn;’ an account of Brewster’s ironic postwar beginnings, interweaves the everyday rituals of domestic arena with the community’s destiny in order to underscore the close connection between private and public spheres and incendiary potential of housewives and mothers” (14). Interactions between domestic spaces and housework, which may seem menial to some, generate spatial and power restructurings that transcend national, racial, and familial borders, allowing Brewster’s women to create a domestic environment on their own terms. Although the women create a healthy, communal attachment to domestic space while they are at Brewster Place, their lives before their arrival provide additional insight into alternative domestic experiences and the failures of “placemaking.”

The organization of Naylor's texts suggests that family instability is both a critical adaptation and thematically significant because she immediately follows her prologue, "Dawn," with Mattie Michael's narrative, a narrative that best emphasizes spatial and familial insecurity. Naylor's novel shares key themes of the "neodomestic" genre by having a novel "defined by its embrace of (in)stability" (Jacobson 60). Each of the seven individual stories that predicate the women's arrival to Brewster convey a series of failed attempts to "placemake" due to spatial and familial disequilibrium, which serves as a revision to the stable model of home in domestic fiction. Moreover, in following the novel's concepts of non-traditional, "unstable" family structures, we see how African American women rely on female-centered family networks.

### **Spatial Representation of "(Other)Mothers"**

Naylor characterizes Mattie Michael as the central maternal presence of Brewster Place who serves many functions within the novel. Although she predominately "othermothers" Ciel and Etta, her maternal presence echoes throughout the other characters' individual stories, providing narrative unification to an otherwise fragmented text. Like most of her counterparts with the exception of Kiswana Browne, Mattie will come and stay at Brewster Place because she has no choice. Mattie, the paradigm of the self-sacrificing Black mother, forfeits her home for a son who abandons her. Although most women on Brewster suffer some sort of significant loss and family trauma, Mattie's losses are among the most pronounced because she loses both her financial independence and the defining characteristic of her identity—her role as a mother. Mattie's family narrative flows through stages of collapse and revival, but she ultimately establishes and builds family stability through Brewster Place. Before Mattie experiences a revival of her maternal role, her family narrative is disrupted through cyclical patterns of male betrayal. This is evident in Mattie's introduction in which the narrator states that Mattie's

journey can be traced to “Sugar cane and summer and Papa and Basil and Butch. And the beginning—the beginning of her long, winding journey to Brewster” (8). We can only conceptualize Naylor’s emphasis on the essential nature of kin networks within female-centric spaces by following the moments of instability couched within Mattie’s pre-Brewster experiences.

The repossession of Mattie’s home signifies the destruction of her intermediate family, emphasizing the shifting process of family fragmentation and revival transcribed onto the physical and emotional home. Unlike other characters, Mattie fully “placemakes”—that is establishes a spiritual connection to the physical home through property ownership—via “fictive kin.” After receiving multiple rejections from landlords because of her single-mother status, Mattie stumbles onto Eva Turner, one of the only two propertied Black women in the novel, who opens up her home to Mattie and her son Basil. For the next thirty years, Eva functions as an “othermother” to both Mattie and Basil and refuses rent money. Mattie successfully develops an authentic connection to “home” at Eva’s because the pair’s relationship reflects a restructuring of power relations between the landlord/tenant by transcending economic and legal and affective, blood boundaries. According to Houston Baker, an individual achieves a sense of place by having control over their property: “For place to be recognized by one as PLACE, as personally valued locales, one must set and maintain the boundaries. If one, however, is constituted and maintained by and within the boundaries set by a dominating authority, then one is not a setter of place, but a prisoner of another’s desire” (qtd. in Soja 10). Whereas other critics view Mattie’s domestic solace as a byproduct of Eva’s reproduced Southern home, I posit that Eva and Mattie’s relationship evokes a spiritual connection that binds the pair through collective property

ownership—in which both “mothers” desire to ensure the material and emotional safety of their “kin.”

Unlike Anglo-American concepts of property rights attached to individualism and economic success, Naylor’s novel emphasizes that female African American property ownership demands a spiritual connection to place and collective domestic care. When Eva dies, she intends for Mattie to have the home, ensuring the physical survival of her “kin” and the preservation of her maternal spirit: “as Mattie would look around the gutted house, she’d know why the old yellow woman had made her save her money. She wanted her spirit to remain in this home through the memory of someone who was capable of loving it as she had” (40). As Mattie’s son, Basil, grows, Mattie will work two jobs, cook and clean for her child, and repeatedly search for the old woman’s wisdom among her china bric-a-brac to maintain the dignity of her shared home. In this way, she transforms property maintenance from a signifier of wealth into a powerful symbol of love for her son and his children. Unfortunately, both Mattie and Basil contribute to the destruction of this extended family, eventually leading to repossession of Mattie’s home.

The repossession of Mattie’s home reflects the internal fracturing of her family, delivering her as an economically and psychologically disoriented woman to Brewster Place. Although Montgomery is accurate in pointing out that Mattie’s relocation to Brewster Place presents an opportunity for “placemaking,” she deemphasizes the importance of a maternal foundation: “The eventual move to Brewster Place represents the failure of Mattie’s dream of home ownership and belonging” (7). Montgomery makes the mistake of reading Brewster as solely a “community narrative”—Mattie’s revival occurs through the return to her domestic role as mother. Moreover, the spiritual and collaborative emphasis on homeownership suggests more

than a loss of a material space. When Basil goes to jail for manslaughter, Mattie, who is prone to overindulging her son, posts her home as bail. Mattie's perceived failures as a mother, primarily her enabling the "void in his being that had been padded and cushioned over the years" (52), cause Basil to flee as he awaits trial and for Mattie to lose her home and her domestic identity. The loss of the home that Eva and Mattie nurtured reflects the personal costs of single motherhood. Collins suggests that "Black women's willingness to sacrifice for their children may stem from a deep-seated but largely unstated reliance on motherhood in the absence of committed love relationships with Black men" (196). In absence of a partner, Mattie suppresses her sexual and emotional needs and finds self-expression through mothering Basil. This is evident in moments of loneliness during Basil's early childhood in which she "turned toward her manchild and let the soft, sleeping flesh and the thought of all that he was and would be draw those yearnings onto the edge of her lips and the tips of her fingers . . . planting a kiss for a sleeping child" (38). Even when Basil returns home on bail, Mattie attentively watches Basil perform chores and the narrator reveals that "she grew full from this nectar and allowed herself to dream again of the wife he would bring home and the grandchildren who would keep her spirit there" (51). These samples of narration indicate personal expressions of motherhood, which Collins considers to be "a symbol of hope for many of even the poorest Black women" (198). When Basil abandons Mattie, she loses hope that Basil will preserve her maternal legacy, the sole motivation for her hard work.

*The Women of Brewster Place* not only explores family adaptations surrounding single motherhood. As the next section will show, Naylor's novel also juxtaposes the realities of Black women that challenge heteronormative family formations to both white and black society.

### **“The Two:” Lesbianism and Domestic Space**

The *Women of Brewster Place* encompasses a diverse representation of African American families, extending from single motherhood, dysfunctional nuclear families, “othermothers,” to lesbian cohabitation. In the narrative, “The Two,” Naylor introduces a lesbian couple, Lorraine and Theresa, who experience rampant discrimination within both Black and White society. It is worth mentioning that *The Women of Brewster Place*, Naylor’s debut text, was first published in 1982 and lesbianism remained a taboo topic for many African American writers. Collins refers to renowned author Ann Allen Shockley’s explanation for lesbian exclusion in Black writing. Shockley suggests that “the fear of being labeled a Lesbian, whether they were one or not” discouraged many Black authors from addressing the topic (167), further masking the reality of many Black women’s lives. Unlike her predecessors, Naylor displays “neodomestic” adaptations compatible with Jacobson’s theory on “queer domesticity,” which refers to “an alternative articulatory space of gender and sexuality” and a family formation that “upsets the strict gender roles, the firm divisions between public and private, and the implicit presumptions of self-sufficient economics and intimacy in the respectable domestic household” (17). Although Jacobson defines “queer domesticity” in broad terms, her analysis reveals “alternative families” in direct opposition to nuclear family iconography. “The Two” fully represents “queer domesticity” because Lorraine and Theresa do not possess race, gender, class, economic, or sexual privilege. In Naylor’s text, “The Two” explores homophobia within the black community and demonstrates its ramifications on spatial and domestic organization.

“The Two” maps the consequences of homophobia onto the interior home and the relationships developed within. Theresa and Lorraine’s home, which ultimately contributes to their domestic instability. Despite that Naylor accentuates the importance of female-centric

supportive networks, she also highlights prejudices within Black society that impinge on the process of homemaking for lesbians. Unlike the other characters, the women never accept Theresa and Lorraine as “kin” nor do the couple get the opportunity to mobilize through their domestic identities. Such external and internal fracturing dissolves Lorraine and Theresa’s family unit and homophobia leads to Lorraine’s rape by neighborhood “thugs,” causing Lorraine to displace her anger towards her friend and father-figure, Ben. The conclusion of “The Two” remains ambiguous but provides cathartic power for the women at the novel’s close. Despite that Lorraine and Theresa are the exception to Naylor’s rule, they are necessary in depicting Brewster Place as a microcosm of the urban Black female experience.

As represented in Naylor’s text, homophobia impresses upon public and private spaces, which is doubly problematic for Theresa and Lorraine because the domestic sphere is a socially legitimized, heterosexual space. After being twice displaced because of her sexual orientation, Lorraine convinces Theresa to move to Brewster Place, an area too removed from dominant culture for anyone to expose Theresa’s sexuality to the school where she works. According to Matus, the couple’s move is a result of Lorraine’s weak constitution: “unwilling to confront hostility, Lorraine defers by changing location. The couple has moved from one district to another, giving up Theresa’s apartment in Linden Hills because of Lorraine’s sensitivity about what ‘they’ will think” (56). Although Matus misinterprets Lorraine’s desire for belonging within the esteemed Linden Hills community as “sensitivity,” she is accurate in identifying Lorraine’s constant displacement. Lorraine’s unbelonging is a result of heterosexist thinking that views homosexuality as disruptive to fixed boundaries, preventing a lesbian woman from moving freely within the public and private spheres. Lorraine desires to publicize her domestic and feminine identity, which explains her desire to be part of an interconnected support system:

“She wanted to stand out there and chat and trade makeup secrets and cake recipes. She wanted to be secretary of their block association and be asked to mind to their kids while they ran to the store” (136). Unlike Theresa, who organizes her self-concept around difference, Lorraine’s way of dealing with her sexual orientation results in her suppression of public displays of sexuality and femininity. If she publically reveals her true sexual identity, she will never be able to fulfill a “normative” domestic identity among the straight women of her community.

The association between homosexuality and social transgression saturates throughout the communal organization of Brewster Place, problematizing Theresa and Lorraine’s attachment to domestic space. After Sophie, Brewster’s Christian crusader, exposes Theresa and Lorraine’s relationship, the narrator metaphorizes the community’s repulsion: “They could almost feel the odor moving about in their mouths, and they slowly knitted themselves together and let it out into the air like a yellow mist that began to cling to the bricks on Brewster” (131). Likening homosexuality to a pervading, putrid odor reflects the women’s anxieties about homosexuality infiltrating and contaminating Brewster’s shared domestic space, threatening the stability of a heteronormative domestic construction. Laura Nicosia attributes the women’s exclusion to “their sexual orientation and the perceived brand of threatening feminism they represent” (181). Nicosia’s observations recognize conflicting tensions within African American feminist communities. Collins provides further insight into Black women’s homophobia, suggesting that “the homophobia expressed by many Black heterosexual women is influenced, in part, by accepting societal beliefs about lesbians. For Black women who have already been labeled Other by virtue of race and gender, the threat of being labeled a lesbian can have a chilling effect on Black women’s ideas and on our relationships with one another” (167). In other words, heterosexual Black women feel that lesbianism compromises their already vulnerable social

position, especially within female-centered communities. Collin's theory on homophobic attitudes is compatible with Brewster's social and familial structures.

Sophie's combined essentialist and religious beliefs lead her to invalidate lesbianism as a "hidden stain" (132) and "an abomination against the Lord (140). Whereas other characters, specifically Mattie and Etta, exhibit benign curiosity. When Mattie asks Etta if she believes that homosexuality is a biological condition, Etta responds that it may be an expression of love. Mattie replies, "'But I've loved some women deeper than I ever loved any man . . . 'And there been some women who loved me more and did more for me than any man ever did . . . 'Maybe that's why some women get so riled up about it, 'cause they know deep down its's not so different after all'" (141). Both Etta and Mattie feel troubled by their discovery, which resonates with Collin's analysis on lesbianism's effect on female-centered communities. Through a homophobic perspective, lesbianism not only compromises Black women's only "earned privilege", heterosexuality, but romantic love between women throws a wrench in collaborative family systems predicated upon mutual intimacy and support. Feeling that lesbianism is an assault on heterosexuality and "kin" relationships, the majority of Brewster's women intimidate the couple through heterosexual dominance. The women are "supported by the sheer weight of their numbers and comforted by the woven barrier that kept them protected from the yellow mist that enshrouded the two as they came and went on Brewster Place" (132). Homophobic attitudes construct barriers within the already "spatially colonized" building, providing additional barriers within Theresa and Lorraine's domestic space.

Even when Theresa and Lorraine return to the protected space of their apartment, Sophie's voyeurism publicizes their daily rituals, converting everyday activities into a spectacle, which attributes to domestic instability within their home. One of the novel's most tragicomical

scenes occurs in the “The Two.” After experiencing racism on her way home from work, Theresa begins to prepare meatloaf for dinner; however, she catches Sophie spying on her through the window. Feeling encumbered by her multiple oppressions as an African American lesbian, she throws meatloaf ingredients at Sophie’s window. Initially, she sarcastically shouts ““Now, here’s something *freaky* for you—olives! I put olives in my meat loaf! So run up and down the street and tell that!”” But her outburst transforms into a serious meditation on homophobia: ““You might feel I’m a *pervert* or something—someone you can’t trust your damn children around!”” (159). Theresa identifies Sophie’s essentialist views on gender and sexuality that consider it inherently deviant and potentially corruptive to Brewster Place’s morality. More importantly, this scene establishes the community’s constant surveillance of the couple, which provokes incompatible responses within the women.

With their private life further publicized, Theresa and Lorraine’s contrasting domestic and sexual identities produce instability within their home. According to Nicosia, “Theresa and Lorraine do not enjoy a relationship based upon a shared sense of equal power . . . [they] ‘alternate between fostering and fighting’ and cannot enjoy the period of nurturing their own loving relationship since each is ‘still struggling to find her own identity’” (188). Nicosia’s statement reveals the couple’s incompatible self-concepts, specifically through their oppositional definitions of lesbian identity. As Lorraine becomes emboldened by her neighbors’ prejudices, the narrator reveals Theresa’s desire to oppress Lorraine, almost reiterating patriarchal control of sexuality: ““Didn’t she want Lorraine to start standing up for herself? To stop all that sniveling and handwringing every time Theresa raised her voice . . . What nagged at Theresa more than the change was the fact that she was worrying about it. She had actually thought about picking a fight just to see how far she could push her—push her into to what? (155). Theresa’s anxieties

stem from Lorraine's investment into social acceptance. Lorraine maintains that coming out did not have a radical effect on her overall identity; therefore, heteronormative society should not treat her differently. In contrast to Lorraine's brand of lesbian feminism, Theresa believes that their sexual orientation automatically defines them as "other." Theresa criticizes Lorraine because "'They wouldn't understand—not in Detroit, not on Brewster Place, not anywhere! And as long as they own the whole damn world, it's them and us, Sister—they and us. And that spells different!'" (166). The combined communal exclusion and varying self-concepts permanently dismantle their relationship. Following Theresa and Lorraine's blowout, Lorraine is brutally gang raped by homophobic teenagers and the trauma pushes her to murder her only friend, Ben. Critics remain divided on the symbolic value of Ben's murder, but I believe that Fraser best articulates the performative power of Theresa's crime: "Naylor completes the circle of resistance trapped in the closed economy of oppression with a reversed gender dynamic in Lorraine's murder of her friend Ben" (102). Theresa chooses a brick from Brewster's wall, a symbol of the total sum of her oppression, and transforms it into a weapon against patriarchal notions of heterosexuality. Although Theresa and Lorraine never experience familial revival, their tragedy encourages the women to mobilize around their domestic identities as mothers, wives, and daughters in effort to uplift the community

## Conclusion

In both *The House on Mango Street* and *The Women of Brewster Place*, the characters create self-defined domestic spaces, premised upon feminized geography that collapses hierarchical and separate spheres, allowing for full expression of hybrid identities and diverse family systems. The neodomestic genre these authors employ revitalizes the concept of home, not to defeat space or bring radical oppositional forms; rather, this genre affords them the space to portray the evolution of diversity, including in relationships once limited to inside/outside, public/private dichotomies (Jacobson 48). While Cisneros and Naylor's physical and interior homes represent spatial inequalities that promote patriarchal domestic identities, the characters create inclusive concepts of home that dissolve borders between public and private spaces, welcoming their community to share in this revitalized space. This is a direct contrast to 19<sup>th</sup>-century domestic fiction because the protagonists remain within the domestic sphere. Largely due to the genre's didactic nature, Baym finds that the protagonists "could change others by changing themselves and the phrase 'woman's sphere is in the home' could appear to mean 'woman's sphere is to reform the world'" (49). Cisneros and Naylor's imagined homes do not mimic the individualistic white middle-class family enclave—their imagined spaces begin the process of redefining prevailing domestic ideology to gain control over domestic space. Importantly, these characters do not actually establish an alternative physical space; rather, they imagine homes and psychic spaces that are compatible with their traditional while evolving family patterns. Although Cisneros and Naylor demonstrate these alternative home spaces and relationships in different ways, both authors suggest the possibilities of a radical transformation of spatial and domestic identities

Although this opportunity does not provide enough space to elaborate on Cisneros and Naylor's strategic narrative variations such as narrative voice, short story structure, and archetypal characterizations that function to reiterate dominant culture's representation of Chicana and African American women, my analysis offers a particular insight into families that are often absent from our conceptualizations of "family values" and national identity. Cisneros and Naylor's works deconstruct America's "moral crisis," shifting blame from "alternative" families for issues like divorce, poverty, and single motherhood to political and social institutions. Overall, the authors' diverse portrayals of cultural diversity and family adaptations take back power from politicians by promoting actual "family values"—concepts like equality, community reliance, and belonging—that Americans of all stripes can cherish.

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