

# Changing Conceptions of Community in the Modern Latino Novel

by

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### Abstract

Latino literature has become established as an important, emerging genre in part because it helps define and explore the role of community of a group of people coming from separate nations to one identifying rubric here in the United States. Therefore, community and the experience of this phenomenon as Latino people immigrate to this country remains a topic under scrutiny in various works of Latino literature. Bitter Grounds(1997), by Sandra Benitez, How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents(1992), by Julia Alvarez and The House on Mango Street (1984)by Sandra Cisneros are important narratives for exploring the idea of Latino communities because of their successively greater contact with the U.S. in their characters' lives. As these novels move toward increasing contact, the sense of community based on a family model begins to break down in the experience of the female protagonists. Patriarchy initially emerges as a rubric under which the female protagonists experience community. However, successively greater contact with the United States and the disruption groups unified by markers such as language and geography makes maintaining patriarchal and national models of community more difficult. The characters must seek creative solutions to the problem of loss of the former community—rejecting the community wholesale reveals itself as an unhappy option because of the sense of deprivation of identity and place. These characters struggle with their identities within the community, and thus help the reader understand both the past and the present of experiencing community in the context of immigration and blending of old and new cultures. The voices in these novels, as well as the narrative structure of each help to delineate the formation of these groups.

The authors of these works contribute to an important and pertinent dialogue of multiculturalism, alive in many arenas of society within the United States. Literature provides a particularly enlightening medium through which this dialogue can take place—and makes unique contributions to a larger social polemic. The growing presence of Latinos, their effect on our culture and the reciprocal effect of American civilization upon Latinos are important issues to discuss and consider. Furthermore, the need for Latinos to understand more greatly their identity and place in our contemporary society can also be met through manifestations of these topics in literature. Exploring the topic of a Latino community and how it changes in response to the influence of the United States helps to further clarify these issues.

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## **Preface**

North American history has long been intimately associated with the experiences of immigrants and their relationships to the culture they find upon arriving in the United States. Latino people have had one of the longest legacies of immigration to this continent—from the conquistadors to present day political refugees. In the past thirty years, the literature of Latino people has gained a wider audience in North America. The impetus of American Latinos to understand their place and identity has increased markedly as they become the fastest growing minority group in the United States. As such, the rapid emergence of Latino literature for English-speaking audiences in this country comes as no surprise. When discussing Latino literature the topic of community remains especially pertinent as it relates to the understanding place and identity. It also sheds light on an apparent paradox: for political and social reasons, Latinos in the United States have become more aware of each other as belonging to a larger group. However, individual origins in many different nations makes being demarcated only as “Latinos” a negation of the rich cultures which constitute each person’s background. Nonetheless, literature, and particularly literature which examines the role of community and the changing nature of this concept as Latinos become an increasing presence in the United States emerges as an important force for understanding and clarifying a cultural phenomenon alive in our midst.

## **Introduction**

### ***Benitez, Alvarez and Cisneros: Visualializing Distinct Manifestations of Latino Community***

In the past twenty years, Latino<sup>1</sup> literature in the United States has gained more national attention. Various important authors have helped bring this body of work to the forefront, and this movement has played a significant role in the continuing development of the identity of the

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<sup>1</sup> In choosing between the terms Latino and Hispanic, I don’t find that either is necessarily satisfactory. I’ve chosen to use Latino through most of the work, in the interest of consistency.

fastest-growing minority group in the United States. In particular, a new generation of female writers has produced an interesting body of work examining many aspects of the experience of Latino people, both living inside and outside the United States. This work will concentrate on three of these female authors: Sandra Benitez in her novel Bitter Grounds (1997), Julia Alvarez in How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents (1992) and Sandra Cisneros in The House on Mango Street (1994). Although these individual authors examine many, often disparate issues pertaining to Latino populations, the subject of community remains a topic that all three authors choose to explore in the novels chosen for this work.

Understanding Latino communities and the many forms they take when influenced by the U.S. culture and society is a topic central to the examination of the shaping of Latino identity today. As such, the authors mentioned each inquire into distinct forms that the community may manifest itself in, following a general trajectory of immigration. For example, Sandra Benitez examines the dynamic of a community completely outside the United States yet influenced by the economic policies of that nation. Julia Alvarez explores the effects of an exiled Latino community and its experience negotiating both the cultures of their home country as well as that of the United States. Finally, Sandra Cisneros imagines the creation of a “new” Latino community within the United States among first and second-generation Latino-American citizens. As the reader may note from this brief description, the influence of the United States becomes progressively greater in each of the novels. This work will seek to show that the greater influence of the United States upon each community changes the dynamics of the group at hand, from more unified and nationalistic to progressively more creative and inclusive.

Investigating each of these manifestations allows the reader to understand the different experiences of many Latino groups and how these experiences contribute to the construction of identities. It also underlines the notion that a Latino identity is not constructed by a static set of circumstances. Instead, many varied arenas inform how and why a Latino community and identity becomes constructed. These three books are also interesting because the novel's narrative

structures mirror their conceptualization of community. For example, the cohesive, defined communities of Bitter Grounds are embodied in the six female narrators whose stories interconnect. By contrast, the disjointed, non-traditional community experienced by the main protagonist of The House on Mango Street is aptly described by her single voice and vignette style narration.

The feminine viewpoint of each novel also contributes to the questioning of a traditional community based on the idea of family and nation-hood, such as one proposed by commentator Benedict Anderson. Greater freedom and exposure to different norms outside patriarchal Latino cultures leads to dissatisfaction with this initial formulation of community. Eventually the characters break these customs and create new communities on their own terms.

*Hispanic/Latino Literature: Contextualizing and Clarifying these Terms*

Nonetheless, before proceeding any further on the concept of a Latino community in these novels, one must acknowledge the issue of the often-discussed labels of “Latino” and “Hispanic.” In this country, almost all Spanish-speaking and some non-Spanish speaking groups tend to be put in these categories. People who had previously considered themselves cubanos, chilenos, puertorriquenos, paraguayos, brasileiros or mexicanos are all considered under the simple category of “Latino” or “Hispanic” upon arriving in the United States—negating their strong nationalist identifications. North Americans tend to assume that because all of these people speak Spanish<sup>2</sup> they must share a very similar culture and lifestyle. Like many generalizations, this one isn’t true. In the introduction to the Latino Reader, Gustavo Perez Firmat notes:

My trouble is, I don’t see myself as Latino, but as Cuban.

To tell the truth, the Latino is a statistical fiction. Part hype  
and part hypothesis, the Latino exists for the purposes of

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<sup>2</sup> Ironically, even this generalization doesn’t hold true for all groups: Brazilians speak Portuguese for example.



politicians, ideologues, salsa singers, and Americans of  
non-Hispanic decent.” (Augenbraum xii)

Although Firmat rather cynically describes this phenomenon, his comment clearly identifies the frustration of groups of people who shared no identity previously, yet find themselves placed under one rubric upon coming to the United States.

Despite this frustration, Latinos from different national groups have actually chosen to come together in some arenas—consolidating a new identity within the boundary of the United States. One example includes forming a consensus over issues of civil rights. The movement of Cesar Chavez in the sixties did a great deal to promote grass-roots organization and rights for Chicano/Hispanic workers. Literature also provides another outlet in which authors from various backgrounds contribute to the growing movement of “Latino Literature,” creating another arena for this new Latino identification. Literature remains especially important because of its role in creating a rallying point and an identity for Latino populations in the United States. As Suzanne Oboler notes, “After all, literature, as Eliana Ortega and Nancy Saporta have said, is not so much a search as it is an articulation and affirmation of people’s identities” (Oboler, 159). It also helps to make many Latino people aware of each other, and helps to give a voice to common problems experienced by Latinos—regardless of their differing national backgrounds. The editor Harold Augenbraum sheds some light on how and why this has been the case.

Despite the thematic, aesthetic and political diversity of  
Latino literary culture, a common historical subtext permeates  
this multivocal and even multilingual literature. (Augenbraum xix)

What Augenbraum actually refers to when he speaks of a “common historical subtext” remains a complicated subject. Latino people in the United States often have similar experiences and interests, which makes it important for them to be aware of each other. One critic, Jose Martin Ramirez, comments on this phenomenon: “They (Latino people in the United States)

share the common denominator of the expression regarding (their) living conditions, as well as the challenges and battles in their process of adapting as an immigrant to the new society<sup>3</sup>” (Falquez-Certain 207). Ramirez continues by explaining that similar themes arise in Latino creative expressions, as a result of these commonalties (208). People of Hispanic descent encounter similar prejudices, often many enter similar types of jobs because of familiar connections or precedents, find themselves living in Spanish-speaking neighborhoods of New York or Miami, also because of familial connections, or have come to the United States because of oppressive governments. Although the political histories of the Dominican Republic, Cuba, Chile and Argentina are all very different, at certain times, they have all experienced oppressive regimes in the twentieth century. Many people were forced to flee their home countries because remaining meant death or loss of freedom. These common experiences contribute to shaping a new identity for Latino people living in the United States—thus constituting the “common historical subtext” Augenbraum speaks about. At the same time, this new identity remains fused with the roots each person also brings with them. Further, the U.S. culture becomes instrumental in helping to create a “new” Latino identity, and thus the exploration of this phenomenon cannot be underestimated—as will be examined further in the discussion of the novels of interest. One also notes that there are different circumstances that lead to distinct experiences of how Latino communities feel and are affected by the influence of the United States. For that reason, three different situations or “arenas of contact” with the United States will be explored in the three novels in question.

This cursory discussion of the issue of Hispanic identity in the United States reveals that one must be careful when applying any labels, yet at the same time acknowledge the importance and the relevance of the Latino voice emerging in today’s literature. One commentator, Alfredo Arango, tries to reconcile these differences in his essay, “Notes on United States Latino

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<sup>3</sup> This and all references to Ramirez, I translated from an essay written by him in Spanish.

Literature.” He says, “To clear up this apparent contradiction<sup>4</sup>, we say that our (Latino) literature in the United States is characterized by a grand unity composed of parts that, upon closer reflection, reveal individual particularities<sup>5</sup>” (Falquez- Certain 226). He cites the following example: if one were to talk about a work written by a Peruvian author living in the United States, then the signifier “Peruvian” must more accurately describe the authors who write from a “body of experience” that references itself to the Peruvian experience in Latin America. At the same time, these authors are writing primarily for a U.S. audience—and the more universal experience of being a Hispanic-American (277). Hence Arango’s “peculiarities” refers to the national influences of the individual Latin country particular to that author. On the other hand, the “grand unity of parts” reflects the aspect of these works that encompass the experience of being a Latino in the United States.

In many works of Latino authors who may have originally identified themselves as separate nationalities, it becomes clear that various themes, styles, ideas and representations derive from similar origins of understanding. Religious practices, forms of entertainment, nicknames, themes of oppression and themes of community, as well as the liberal use of Spanish sprinkled throughout works, unifies a genre. Originally disparate parts working together towards a whole make this genre of Latino literature unique, while still retaining “individual particularities.”

These reasons contribute to why one can begin to think of Sandra Benitez, Julia Alvarez and Sandra Cisneros as representing a literary niche that shares similar concerns, despite the very differing nationalities from which they each write. As authors deeply invested in Latino literature, they express perspectives on the experience of being Latina from their particular understanding. They also begin to develop a multifaceted picture on the idea of a Latino/a-American community as constructed in a Latino novel and how the United States influences it—

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<sup>4</sup> Contradiction=between not labeling and discussing a “movement.”

<sup>5</sup> All references to Arango are also translated.

hence the topic of this thesis. This experience, and how it occurs in the many geographical areas of the United States and even outside the United States, remains central in helping to understand the identities of Latino people today in the United States. Each of these novelists explores the gradations of how communities are created in response to increasing contact with the United States.<sup>6</sup>

A community, and the idea of identity it helps to create, can be a necessarily vague term, and will be explored in the subsequent section. However, the discussion of what a Latino identity means in the United States contributes importantly to how Latino communities appear in these works of literature. Similar to the way that a Latino person may be described by their culture of origin in conjunction with the experiences of being Hispanic in the United States, a Latino community may also be defined by this melding of influences. In short, the idea of “contact” with the United States, as well as the original cultural influences are both vital in determining the nature of communities in the above mentioned authors’ works.

### *Community and its Manifestation in Latino Literature*

As already mentioned, community as an idea must be further discussed before attempting to explore it in the type of literature concerning this work, both due to its vagueness and the inherent pitfalls in defining social structures. A great deal of debate exists in the critical literature regarding the existence both in society and in literature of the Latino community. Some literary critics characterize the community as a romanticized ideal, and therefore seek to deny it. Their claims are legitimate and understandable. These concerns stem in part from some of the ideas already discussed in relation to the “Latino/Hispanic” debate. Many authors feel that to categorize Latinos through an idealized community in the United States (especially because of so many nationalities) devalues their country of origin and encourages stereotypes of Hispanic people. Others contend that the idea of community oppresses its supposed members. Still others

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<sup>6</sup> The idea of “increasing contact” briefly referred to here, will be developed further in following paragraphs.

claim that the very culture of individuality in the United States makes the community an impossibility.

For example, one critic—Suzanne Oboler—objects to the idea of a Latino-American community in the United States because of the ways it sometimes becomes represented—and how this representation, especially at the national level, distorts the varying backgrounds of the supposed participants in this community. She posits that sometimes political actions of the majority population create false ideas about what the Latino community entails—if one exists at all. She uses the example of Nixon’s proclamation of “Hispanic-American Week” during the sixties to illustrate her point. Oboler notes that the week was declared during September, around the dates of the Mexican, Guatemalan, Honduran, El Salvadoran and Nicaraguan respective independence days in order to recognize Hispanic-Americans. As Oboler points out, the homogenization of all these groups, precisely at the moment when civil rights groups of Puerto Ricans and Mexicans were trying to establish themselves separately seemed to establish an imaginary community of Latinos (Oboler 81). She comments,

While on one level the proclamation of Hispanic Heritage Week may indeed have acknowledged the presence of Spanish-speaking populations in the United States, it did so at the expense of acknowledging the respective histories and demands of the two distinct national-origin groups . . . (Oboler 84)

Another article, analyzing the idea of community and nation in Paule Marshall’s Brown Girl, Brownstones, claims that belonging to a defined ethnicity may be oppressive or coercive—forcing members of the community to take on its views for the good of the whole. Martin Japtok, the author of this article, concludes that in order to reconcile equal claims of individualism and ethnicity, the protagonist must create “a new conceptualization of ethnicity in the process.” (12)

In a final example, David Mitchell in his dissertation, Conjured Communities: The Multiperspectival Novels of Amy Tan, Toni Morrison, Julia Alvarez, Louise Erdrich and Christina Garcia claims that there can be no such thing as a functioning, smooth community in ethnic-American novels because the idea of being American itself as experienced by individuals is too varied to be categorized (11).

... all of the characters in these novels contemplate  
the myriad ways that life in this country has been abstracted ...  
they struggle to incorporate and critique from their  
individual frames of reference –the idea of “American-ness”  
becomes increasingly dislodged from the very possibility of  
a singular state of being or lifestyle. (11)

Despite the interesting contention that Mitchell makes, he neglects to acknowledge the fact that the concept of community does not necessarily have to mean “a singular state of being or lifestyle.” As will be shown in discussion of the three primary texts, community can actually be something much more varied and complex—while still shaping the identities of the participants.

These interpretations tend to characterize the community as a monolith, and that individual experience is not encouraged when interests of the community as a whole are threatened. Other interpretations take a different, and sometimes directly opposite view. Bonnie TuSmith, in her book All My Relatives, argues that in fact, the American value of individualism threaten important group identification and that “communal values (of various cultures of ethnic Americans) continue to inform the cultures’ worldviews” (viii). She goes on to explain how community does not necessarily have to represent the controlling entity that others paint it as, and also talks about how the identity of the individual actually crucially informs the community.

... Community refers to the relatedness and dynamic interdependence  
of all life-forms rather than the stagnant, conformist vision that

the term tends to invoke in a capitalist society. In other words, without a sense of individual self-worth one cannot attain true community with others. The concept of individualism (in a capitalist society) on the other hand . . . pits the individual against the collective in North American society. (Tu Smith vii)

In Bonnie TuSmith's view, the nature of a capitalist state and our pride in individual accomplishment are what make North American society hesitant in acknowledging interdependence and community.

Despite the critical debate over the issue, and the understandable hesitancy to label the "Latino community" within novels or society, the idea of a community in Latino literature does not always conform to understood terms usually associated with it. The reader witnesses change when the community adapts to new environments—creating new borders for what a community means, without negating the idea itself. How the Latino community responds to and changes when met by increasing degrees of contact with the United States remains particularly solvent to our day and age, as a current cultural phenomenon. Not surprisingly, authors writing for U.S. audiences often have intimate experience with this issue, and this theme emerges in novels, as is true with Sandra Benitez, Julia Alvarez and Sandra Cisneros. In the novels that concern this work, contact with the United States serves as a mediating influence that helps to shape and to create the Latino community in question. Increasing contact with the United States tends to change the sense of community.

In the three novels under discussion, Bitter Grounds, How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents and The House on Mango Street, the idea of community remains intimately influenced

by the degree of contact with the United States. The books are interesting because the first<sup>7</sup> moves through peripheral contact with the U.S, the second deals with the bridging of two geographical spaces and the last deals with immersion within the U.S. culture. Thus their increasing continuum of contact allows the exploration of how the integrity of a Latino community changes and adapts to new and outside influences. This work will argue that the communities in these three books are influenced by, and in some sense created or disrupted by varying degrees of contact with the United States. This idea of community also encompasses forms of identity and meaning to the group—what does community mean in terms of defining a people? Thus the definition does not only allow a single interpretation, but many unique and flexible ideas of community.

### **Chapter 1: *Bitter Grounds*: Peripheral Contact with the United States and How it Creates Community**

The novel *Bitter Grounds* begins this discussion of community because of the relative distance of its communities from the United States. The peripheral nature of contact with the United States creates a community that remains most aligned with one modeled on a family structure. In the novel, author Sandra Benitez explores both the idea of strongly defined community modeled on the idea of a nuclear and traditional family, and also how this community becomes shaped by nationalism. Benedict Anderson, in his work *Imagined Communities*, argues that the nation states of South and Central America first created a national identity for themselves in opposition to the ruling power that colonized them—Spain or Portugal (Anderson 50). As times and economic situations changed however, Latin American republics became more greatly influenced by the economic power of such places as England and later, the United States (Williamson 3). In *Bitter Grounds*, the latter is the case. The economic situation of El Salvador,

<sup>7</sup> The way I will order this discussion of the three novels will be as listed in this paragraph, with *Bitter Grounds* being the “first” and *Mango Street* being the “last.” The dates of publication does not inform the



the primary setting of the novel, depends mainly on the export of coffee. The United States serves as the main recipient of this export. The formation of national and class-based groups within the novel depends greatly on this peripheral, yet nonetheless critical contact with the U.S. economic power.

There are two groups, sharply delineated by classes in Bitter Grounds, and as the novel progresses, the reader has a sense that these groups have developed recognizable identities and goals. Benedict Anderson's work, Imagined Communities, greatly informs the manifestation of community described by Benitez in her novel because of his emphasis on the "imagined" sense individuals have of a large, national community. Anderson proposes that through the spread of print capitalism and other societal influences such as religion, individuals began to see themselves as part of a cohesive group, despite the fact that many members never meet or know the vast majority of participants in the nation. The sense of flowing unity that evolves from Anderson's conception remains very much alive in Bitter Grounds. By the end of the story, the reader also recognizes the interdependence of both groups on each other, and the way that this contributes to a larger national community in El Salvador. The two groups referred to are the rich oligarchs who own coffee plantations and the poor, working-class people. Coffee and the economic power behind it create marked and often "bitter" divisions among these people. However, more subtly, coffee and the economic dependence upon it also engender a larger unity among the groups in the novel. As such, the influence of the United States upon these communities and the formation that they take cannot be underestimated. Benitez especially illustrates this in the relationships among three generations of women, who serve as the narrators of the story. In each generation, Benitez includes a working class and an upper-class narrator, composing a book consisting of three sections. These women are referred to in the titles of the three parts of the novel: "Mercedes and Elena", "Jacinta and Magda" and finally "Maria Mercedes and Florencia." These sets of women are respectively from the Prieto family—the working class, and the Contreras family—

representatives of the upper class. Although the alliance remains uneasy and not necessarily harmonious, there are many instances in the novel where the coffee-based economy creates a larger family unit, blending the two groups. As already mentioned, the peripheral economic contact of the United States mediates this creation.

*Section 1: Text Discussion and the Construction of Separate Identities*

In Bitter Grounds, the divisions between these two sets of people become immediately apparent; tension between them remains a running theme throughout the novel. Although this later gives way to elements that show how these groups are connected, one must first explore how each group creates its separate identity. A poem opening the book helps to describe how these two collectives exist in relation to each other, and it especially shows how coffee creates these divisions and therefore, the separate identities.

In Salvador, coffee is  
trips abroad,  
languid Miami shopping:  
dewy hands  
plunged between  
voile and cambric and silk.

In Salvador, coffee is  
filled berry baskets  
tied around waists;  
bloodied fingertips  
wrapped in strips of rag;  
sisal arms  
reaching up again to pick. (Benitez 1)

The poem describes clearly what coffee means for these two groups of people, as well as the divisions and identities created thereof. A comparison of hands as they are represented in the poem gives an accurate snapshot of the subsequent groups of people the reader encounters in the novel. The upper-class people are represented by “dewy hands/plunged between voile and cambric and silk.” Quite clearly, the privileged status of these people remains apparent, especially in comparison to the “bloodied fingertips/wrapped in strips of rag” that represents the working people whose labor enables the realization of upper-class luxuries. As shown by the discussion of this poem, the two groups create their identities in part through opposition to the other. The working class grudgingly sees their existence dependant the work provided to them by oligarchic landowners, while the rich people in this novel believe they deserve the luxuries gleaned from workers.

These differences also stem in some part from an understanding of race in the novel, and the way in which race creates a “family” of people who can easily recognize each other—whether or not they are actually related. The working people, especially in the opening chapters of the novel, strongly identify themselves as native Pipil Indians, while the landowners believe they are superior because they descend directly from colonizing Spaniards. The Pipil people follow a lifestyle that in various ways keep them apart from these creole landowners. For example, they speak Nahuatl, an indigenous language not understood by their employers. In the opening scenes of the novel, Mercedes Prieto, a working-class character, muses on this phenomenon, revealing her class’ conscious choice to identify themselves apart.

Mercedes’s family spoke Spanish, of course, but it was Nahuatl  
they preferred. In these disordered times, Pipil ways had to be  
preserved. (Benitez 5)

This reliance on common heritage to demarcate the working-class group also appears in other instances throughout the novel. For example, Ignacio, Mercedes Prieto’s husband, hears of

a revolution against the landowners<sup>8</sup>, and initially he does not want to endanger himself or his family by becoming involved. Nonetheless, on a trip to the finca<sup>9</sup> to try and obtain medicine for his infant son, Ignacio finds himself in the midst of an attack against the finca owner. Guards capture him and assume him to be implicated in the plot. Terrified, and not knowing how to handle himself, he is suddenly reassured when other native men are brought before la guardia.<sup>10</sup> Before the guards kill him, Ignacio experiences a moment of security.

Ignacio recognized the men. They were all pickers who worked here on Don Pedro's plantation. Ignacio looked to these indios who did not cry out, and their valor lessened his fear. He was with his own people now. He was buoyed by them and the hatred for the enemy that shone in their eyes. (Benitez 22)

In this scene, the sense of connection that Ignacio feels towards the relatively unknown men arises not because they are part of his immediate community or because he is related to them. Rather he refers to them specifically as "indios," men who share a common bloodline and culture with him. He feels a larger sense of shared goals—spoken of as "the hatred for the enemy" and thus identifies with them, and it is because of this that he is able to die in some semblance of peace. The native identity Ignacio feels in these men, because of their shared race, allows him to feel part of a larger community. In this instance, the manifestations and implications of Anderson's ideas on the imagined community remain particularly notable.

The upper-class people of El Salvador, by contrast, see themselves as superior because they are non-native, and descended from the Spaniards who came to the country early in the establishment of the colony. Of course, they only speak Spanish, despite their long stay in El

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<sup>8</sup> For the reader's reference, (and because this revolution will be referred to again) this event of the novel was an uprising against exploitative landowners. It unfortunately ended in a wholesale massacre of the Pipil people to discourage further rebellion.

<sup>9</sup> plantation

<sup>10</sup> "hired guards"

Salvador with the accompanying exposure to the native language. Similar to the lower class, the upper class of El Salvador create a feeling of “race-based family” made up of Spanish speakers, even though many of these people don’t know each other personally—again mirroring Anderson’s contention. People in the upper class, as seen in the lower class, identify strongly with each other as well. Their prejudice towards others and adherence to each other becomes most apparent in their treatment of the native people whom they have basically enslaved to work for them. There are also other instances where this prejudice becomes noticeable, even towards other people of their own class when they are not of Spanish descent. These instances are worthy of discussion because they show the true extent of race-solidarity among upper-society, even regardless of class, and as such community formation in the country of El Salvador. For example, the wealthy people referred to as “Turcos”<sup>11</sup> are also ostracized and kept from mingling with polite creole society. The Contreras family and others like them believe that the Turcos are fit business partners, but not fit for anything else. In this sense, their treatment of this group bears similarity to the way that the upper class acknowledge the working class—their dealings remain restricted to business matters.

In the following passage, Magda (Contreras) Tobar muses on why she has lost touch with a good friend—Isabel. Apart from a scandal between the families which precludes Isabel and Magda from being friends again, Isabel has gone a step further by marrying Abraham Salah:

. . . the rich grandson of a Palestinian immigrant . . . she (Isabel) had committed an overt act of self-banishment, stepping away, as she had from the bosom of mainstream society and into the welcoming arms of a fringe community that, except where business was concerned, was both discriminated against and subtly reviled. (Benitez 179)

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<sup>11</sup> People described as Palestinian immigrants.

As this passage shows, Salah family has actually been in El Salvador for three generations.

Presumably, they are well aware of the customs and culture of the country they inhabit.

Furthermore, there are no references in the novel to instances where the Salahs act any differently from other people of their class. Nonetheless, they are treated as second-class citizens. A similar uproar occurs in the novel when Florencia (Contreras) Tobar, Magda's daughter, marries the son of Abraham Salah. At last, the Contreras family is forced to accept the Salahs, but only because of marital ties. These anecdotes reveal much about how the upper class of El Salvador identifies itself along racial lines in opposition to the class that works for them as well as other groups with whom they do business. As seen in the case of the working class as well, this identification creates a unified group akin to a family that considers itself as such because of common heritage. The control of coffee by the upper-class society creates the need for such divisions among the two sets of people, and thus the justification of racial superiority by the Contreras family and others like them.

One notices once again that the economic situation of El Salvador has given rise to these divisions among racial groups. Coffee has created the haves and the have-nots, because a good profit requires cheap, and thus exploited, labor. In this situation, the communities in question thus feel the peripheral influence of the United States strongly. Even though the influence remains indirect, one must acknowledge the power of the economic situation of El Salvador, as it creates racial divisions. Although the system of agriculture present in El Salvador during the setting of this novel was one initially implemented by colonial Spaniards, the oligarchy of rich landowners maintain the established order because it serves their interests. However, the United States also subtly but powerfully influences the communities of this novel because of its status as the major source of buying power and capital. As portrayed in Benitez's novel, the United States remains the ultimate root of the perpetuation of racial divisions in El Salvador—and thus the creation of two communities separated by class as well as race.

The customs of these two groups of people<sup>12</sup> are another means of creating identities of separate communities. Benitez illustrates this with references to food and environments that are familiar and reassuring to each group as a whole. For example, Jacinta Prieto encounters many new experiences after she and her family are driven out of their original home because of the ill-fated revolution that killed her father, Ignacio. Nonetheless, she always feels safe in innumerable instances during the novel when she smells rich, plain coffee and tortillas cooking on charcoal braziers. Several other native foods are also referred to in conjunction with the working-class people—always associated with terms of reassurance. Such things as “curtido, green and red peppers, long pointed chiles, cilantro and chipilin, red eyed iguanas” and savory soups made from native ingredients make up a colorful list typical of the staples common to the poor of this novel (Benitez 99). Nervousness strikes Jacinta in the following scene—she now works in a city far from her original home, and a new situation in her personal life upsets her. On a trip through some of the unfamiliar parts of San Salvador, the memory of her childhood in her village comes back sharply because of the smell of familiar food. Her reminiscences allow her to feel more secure in the new environment because she identifies with the comedor<sup>13</sup> patrons.

The comforting odor of hot tortillas wafted down the street,  
and they soon passed a comedor filled with patrons eating lunch.  
El Congo came rushing back. . . . When you least expected it, at  
the oddest hour, the past could reach its long arm out and touch  
your life again. (Benitez 161)

In an earlier instance, her mother, Mercedes feels reassured by the ability to buy fresh food at a market—she also has been displaced and the presence of this stable factor in her life brings her comfort.

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<sup>12</sup> Although I have mentioned a third group of people—Arabic immigrants—they are a minor force in this novel, and I will focus primarily on the two major groups of upper and lower-class people.

<sup>13</sup> dining hall

. . . Mercedes went from stand to stand, buying ingredients. . .

The sight of all this food, and the fact that she was able to buy  
a basketful gratified Mercedes. (Benitez 44)

Similarly, these types of foods create environments familiar to the working-class people and allow them to welcome each other's society, even when they don't know each other personally. The native foods allow a connection between people and create a sense of inclusiveness. During a party for Jacinta's Saints Day, the villagers come together and celebrate with a simple type of cake, "semita" and coffee (Benitez 49). The many members of the community who come to celebrate together, don't expect anything fancy, but the food prepared nonetheless comforts and provides a unifying context for the gathering.

In yet another example, Mercedes and Jacinta befriend a young man who has lost both his parents in the revolution named Basilio Fermin. Basilio, understandably frightened and lonely, finds a connection with the two women he barely knows. Mercedes adopts Basilio, and he remains with them for the rest of his life. In one of the first scenes where they appear together, Mercedes tries to reach out to the boy in the first way she knows how—through food. Importantly, she uses hot tortillas and coffee (42). Although Basilio does not know Mercedes, he finds a connection through the food of common people. Benitez shows in this passage as well as others already mentioned that commonalties become created for these people because of customs and the things that they eat. Food also helps to foster a welcoming and inclusive community. Through these connections, the working people feel that they are unified even when they don't know each other.

A similar type of sharing of customs associated with food occurs with the upper-class people, except the food and situations are somewhat different. Several instances arise where the characters drink coffee, but the settings strike the reader as worlds away from the simple coffee drinking of the lower class. Expensive china sets, maids who pour the drink and exotic



distillations are prized over the common blend that the working-class people favor. The emphasis in coffee drinking, as experienced by elites, centers on opulence, luxury and structured social settings. As for the foods of the people in the upper class, the reader is struck by the difference from the varied, simple palate of the working class. While the workers of this novel enjoy uncomplicated, native foods prepared from staples from the country—all the references to the food of the rich seems to be foreign in origin. In an earlier scene we hear a lush description of the wedding feast Elena Contreras provides for her daughter Magda. One immediately notices the emphasis on imported foods.

... guests would nibble on French cheeses and pates. Caviar,  
beluga of course. Discerning palates would be well pleased by beef  
tenderloins, and lobster, by fresh asparagus flown in from Los Angeles,  
by tender lettuce greens in classic vinaigrette. (Benitez 110)

A little clarification of the context of this paragraph makes it clear that these staples not only constitute part of the feast, but that the upper-class guests who will come to the wedding expect the inclusion of these foods. Even though Elena Contreras worries about the expense of having a wedding during the war when the finances of the family are tight, she does not stint on these luxuries because they comprise a part of the culture she and the guests who will attend share. The Contrerases would never think to serve cheaper and certainly more abundant, native food. Nonetheless, both types of food serve a similar purpose. The communities being entertained use these foods as part of their daily lives, and thus they contribute to community identity by creating an environment of familiarity and belonging.

Differences in race, language, customs and food separate the upper and lower class people in the novel, Bitter Grounds. The ultimate division between people—and one that serves as the basis for the other differences just mentioned—comes about because of economic circumstances. As the major economic force in El Salvador, the exportation of coffee underlines

the creation of these divisions. This phenomena separates the two groups, but it also forces the creation of strong identifying markers that create collections of people who feel connected to each other, even without knowing each other personally. In *Bitter Grounds*, everyone knows their identity within the group and several circumstances let them know where they are from. Even though much discontent exists among the poor people, this group also gains comfort and a sense of purpose from belonging to each other. The existence of their own culture also validates their way of life—and the work that they do. Among both groups both kinds of individuals also experience pride about their role in each community—both groups prize connections among people.

## *Section 2: Beyond Differences: The Construction of a Larger National Community*

### *Identification*

As the novel continues, a larger community also starts to emerge in the novel, perhaps one that the two separate groups do wholly acknowledge. The distinctions between groups already discussed at length remain in the story, but they also begin to break down in some small and perceptible ways. Surprisingly, the economic situation that creates divisions also later serves to connect the two classes of people. Benitez explores this change mostly through the relationships of the six women mentioned at the opening of this section. In each generation, two women form uneasy alliances that cannot exactly be called friendships. On the other hand, one cannot ignore a definitively apparent sense of connection emerging as the novel develops. These alliances illustrate the connections that the upper class and the lower class form with each other, and as such, the larger community formed in El Salvador. The image of a family can once again be applied to this connection. While the associations (modeled on a family) felt between poor people and similarly felt between rich people were previously aligned with family because of common heritage and lifestyle, other familial-type connections arise when rich and poor form unspoken alliances. When necessity becomes a factor in the daily lives of each group, the strategy of interdependence maintains a common way of life directly linked to nationality. In

these instances, “being part of the El Salvadoran family” submerges differences between groups for a time. Like families who don’t like some of its members, but nonetheless help each other when they have to ensure a survival of a way of life, the groups of rich and poor in El Salvador identify a tentative “we” in each other. As previously mentioned, coffee and economic situation bring about this “unmentionable” unity in various ways.

The same poem already mentioned previously hints at this connection in its ending stanzas. It has already been shown how this poem illustrates the divisions and created identities of the upper and lower class, but in the last stanza, something more emerges.

In Salvador, coffee left  
in tins, pottery mugs, china cups,  
never grows cold.

In Salvador, coffee steams while it sits. (Benitez 1)

At this point in the verse, the image of two groups of people living separate lives becomes coalesced. It pictures coffee in the cups of all types of people in El Salvador, both rich and poor. “Tins and pottery mugs” refer to the poor people, while “china cups” certainly refers to the rich, all in one line. Interestingly, although the first part of the poem illustrated how the coffee economy created differences between people, here the opposite appears true. Coffee serves as the common denominator between classes. The implications for the role of the United States shift slightly here. Where before the economic draw of the United States divided people into well-defined and identified groups, here the United States brings them together into another group, also well defined (albeit more unspoken) with a common identity.

To explore this phenomenon further, one notes that the loss of certain distinct aspects of class lifestyle accompany this emergence of tenuous connection between the rich and the poor in the novel. For example, because of the worker’s revolution and subsequent massacre, the Pipil

Indians are forced to stop speaking Nahuatl and dressing in native attire, for fear of being suspected of more treason against the landowners (Benitez 41). Mercedes and Jacinta, as representatives of this group, give up their way of life and move to the city to serve in the houses of the very people who destroyed the peaceful existence they previously led. As Jacinta muses to herself about her life in the Contreras household, "She was an Indian girl, now seemingly content to live her life with people like the very ones who had stolen her past from her" (Benitez 149). Although Jacinta remains somewhat uneasy with the turn of events that has brought her to San Salvador<sup>14</sup>, she makes her peace with it, and becomes the woman who discreetly handles all the affairs of the household. Jacinta makes a new place for herself, and comes to depend on upper-class people. Despite her loss of village life, the reader cannot help but notice that Jacinta experiences happiness and satisfaction in her new lifestyle. In Jacinta's life, the change was at first necessary and later becomes desirable as she achieves greater status in the running of the household.

The upper class also undergoes changes and lifestyle losses that force them to depend in some ways upon the people they disdain as beneath them. In one example, a world war makes it difficult for upper-class ladies to have their gowns made overseas, as they are accustomed to. As a result of the war, the seamstress Pilar (a friend of Jacinta's) suddenly experiences a deluge of orders from all the upper-class women of the area once they hear how adeptly she practices her trade (Benitez 147). This reliance on a local woman instead of French or Spanish designs represents a change in the privileged way the upper class lives. The change also brings about a needed relationship between the two classes—benefiting both. The asymmetrical relationship evidenced earlier between the haves and the have-nots becomes slightly ameliorated in cases such as these.

The actual relationships between the three sets of women narrators also illustrate the uneasy alliance formed between rich and poor. In many instances, these women help each other

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<sup>14</sup> Capital of El Salvador.

out in ways that go beyond mere working relationships. In an early scene, Jacinta hysterically calls the Contreras household when an enemy of the family murders Mercedes in a distant town. Elena comes to the funeral and comforts Jacinta, eventually taking her back to the city and giving her an important role in the household (Benitez 126). The reader notes that Jacinta immediately calls the Contrerases for help and also that Elena responds readily—despite the fact that Jacinta “only” works in the household and thus there are no familial ties between the women. Both Elena and Jacinta recognize the relationship that develops between them. Elena grows to appreciate the quiet, hard-working ways of Mercedes and Jacinta, while these two look to their mistress for reassurance and help.

Jacinta and Magda also eventually form a key relationship in the novel. Magda aspires to entrepreneurship—she wants to open a gift shop called “Tesoros” against the wishes of her husband. In so doing however, she will have to abdicate some of the responsibilities of running a household—without angering her uneasy husband. In order to create a relatively new role for women within society, Jacinta and Magda form a partnership to quietly implement some change in their strictly patriarchal culture.

You know, when Tesoros opens, you’ll be the one in charge of the house and the boys. You really don’t mind, do you Jacinta? It will mean everything to me. (Benitez 157)

Jacinta readily assents, enjoying the responsibility she now holds as the acting head of the household. In the years following this request, the two women work harmoniously together to run the household smoothly while also managing what becomes a fabulously successful business. The partnership of these two women, and the bond that forms between them, allow these unprecedented events to take place. Their relationship, felt through a bond between women understanding each other’s goals, appears to transcend class and illustrates the growing alliance between these two groups of people as the novel enters its conclusion.

Finally, one must also note that the narrative structure of the story also illustrates the relationship between poor and rich beginning to emerge in this novel. As already mentioned, Benitez writes so that each section has two narrators—an upper class one and a lower class one. After the section concludes, we rarely hear the story told from the point of view of these characters—yet they remain important figures in the narration of the subsequent speakers. For example, Elena Contreras and Jacinta Prieto are characters who figure in the entire length of the story. During the sections where each speaks as narrator, we become deeply involved in their views and their telling of events. When their sections conclude however, we don't hear from them directly again. Nonetheless, the people who pick up the narration continue to carry out the stories of Elena and Jacinta by telling us about them. Elena Contreras speaks as one of the first narrators. Before her section ends, we see her devastated by the actions of her adulterous husband. The section concludes with Elena completely changed by these events; the reader wonders how she will handle the breach. We never hear from Elena how she makes her peace with her husband's infidelity—but through the narration of Jacinta, Magda, Maria Mercedes and Florencia, we watch Elena Contreras grow to be an older woman who forgives her husband.

Benitez employs this structural device of unifying the characters in many manifestations of stories within the novel. The voices of the protagonists, both upper class and lower class continue to carry the lives of the people around them. Although they all lead different lives, especially those characters separated by class, Benitez establishes the connection between them by the way in which she writes the story of Bitter Grounds. This blending of lives, although unacknowledged by the characters themselves, contributes to the emergence of a larger "family" in El Salvador. Furthermore, the strategy of using many voices to tell these stories and the fact that the stories are linked to each other (rather than using one narrator) creates the image of community acting in conjunction with one another. Benitez deliberately uses this strategy to highlight the community and this particular manifestation of it in the novel. The narrative echoes and reinforces the unified groups of people so apparent in Bitter Grounds. As will be shown in

the next sections, each of the authors discussed uses a narrative style that reveals much about the sense of the community conveyed in the novels. Interestingly, the physical makeup of the story remains an important vehicle for elucidating the structure of the community groups themselves.

I have already shown how the groups within Bitter Grounds form strongly defined and unified communities of people both within their own class and, as the novel progresses, within the larger society of El Salvador. The peripheral contact of the United States helps to greatly shape these communities of people. The impact of economics is felt everywhere throughout this story—evidenced most clearly in the title itself. Despite the problems created by the oligarchical system of power, positive side effects arising from the creation of these sharply defined communities also exist. The characters experience no confusion about their identity or their role in life. The community allows each member of its group understand a great deal about themselves, how they relate to the world and how the members within the group relate to them. As in the example of Ignacio Prieto, before his brutal death or any of the members of the upper class—the characters have no question about who they are and what their life means. Above all, the community confers a deep-rooted sense of who each member really is.

This description of a Latino community deals with the most indirect contact of the United States with its members. The results, as have been explored, were to create unity among members. The book ends on an interesting note, and one that directly leads into the discussion of the next book—which deals with immigration and “dual contact” or being in contact with both the United States and the “mother” country. In Bitter Grounds, the final passages chronicle Jacinta Prieto and Magda and Elena Contreras on a plane bound for Miami. Political unrest in El Salvador has finally forced them to leave. Benitez also uses this scene as the last evidence of the unity that has been created between upper and lower class people by an outside power. They literally move to their new future bound together through trouble. This forced exile leads them into the next arena of Latino community under discussion for this thesis and the next degree of contact experienced with the United States.

## Chapter 2: How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents

In 1991, Julia Alvarez wrote How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents modeled on her own personal experiences. The novel recounts the story of a family from the Dominican Republic who must flee the island due to politically dangerous circumstances. The father in this story, much like Alvarez's own father, was involved in plots against the country's dictator, Rafael Leonidas Trujillo. When Dr. Garcia's political activities were discovered, the entire family moved to the United States to avoid danger.

Yolanda Garcia, the third eldest daughter among four children acts as the novel's main voice. This character resembles Alvarez herself greatly; the author, born third of four sisters, also shares in Yolanda's profession as poet and writer. Yolanda and her sisters engage in a difficult struggle as they grow up in the United States and spend their summers in the Dominican Republic. They must reconcile their old life with the new, and try to find a place for themselves. The Garcia girls live in uncertainty between two cultures, and aspects of both are troubling for them. Although the island represents home and family, the girls find that they also reject the traditional way that their staunchly patriarchal family treats women. Their U.S. education makes it increasingly harder to accept the second-class status of females proposed by their Dominican family, with the expectation that each woman will aspire to being married and raising a family. On the other hand, the state of their lives in the United States remains difficult for other reasons. They are treated differently because they are immigrants. Even when the Garcia girls, as adults, begin to master English and forget some of their Spanish, others treat them as foreigners. Furthermore, the fast-paced life of the United States does not provide a replacement for the sense of belonging and security they experienced in their extended family. The novel concludes on a confused note; Alvarez characterizes her protagonists' experience with an inability to create or find a community that the characters feel wholly comfortable in. The communities themselves present few options for a middle ground—the women feel they must choose one or the other. As



a strategy to survive in their new life, the women decide to reject the old way of life and wholly embrace the new. The discussion of the consequences of this helps to explore an interesting manifestation of a Latino community as pictured in this novel.

### *Section 1: Rejecting the Past, Consequences*

In many senses, the Garcia Girls begin where the characters of Bitter Grounds end. Their arrival in the United States and the influence a new culture has on their lives creates a unique situation for these Dominican-born sisters. In Bitter Grounds, the peripheral contact with the United States serves to create strong, definable communities for the people in question. In many senses, the groups in El Salvador undergo unification against a common situation—that being the situation created by an economy driven to produce for the United States.

In Garcia Girls, the characters have to deal with a much more immediate contact with the United States, as well as continually negotiating their Dominican roots. Their simultaneous contact with both cultures—the Dominican culture through their family and the U.S. culture in most aspects of their daily lives—creates tension and confusion for the four women. Although they spend part of their lives in the Dominican culture, they must ultimately negotiate both. The women in the novel quickly develop a strategy to handle their cultural confusion—they reject the old values of life in the Dominican Republic in favor of the new U.S. existence. However, they are ultimately unhappy with the results.

Before proceeding further, an important historical note must be mentioned. As already noted, the Garcia family flees the D.R. because of the dictator Trujillo, a despot who terrorized the country for thirty years. However, the United States played a vital role in bringing him to power and maintaining him there in order to protect its own political interests. As a means of survival in a new country, the Garcia girls choose to completely reject their old life and where they came from. But the role of the United States in indirectly bringing them to exile cannot be underestimated. Even though the Garcia girls come to dislike the patriarchal systems alive in the culture of their family, and they attempt to become more fully American to escape this—they

cannot reconcile the hypocrisies of a country that brought them to their current state of confusion in the first place. As a result, a reluctant nostalgia for the “simpler” systems of the D.R. pervades the novel, even as the women try desperately to deny it.

The sense of community found in Bitter Grounds, a community only peripherally influenced by an outside culture becomes bifurcated in Garcia Girls. The two cultures that the girls find themselves in both have strong identities, customs and expectations for the people participating in each group. Either you are a “dominicana” or you are a “gringa” as they are told many times. Each culture asks the sisters to make a choice: which culture will you remain loyal to? The women choose their new life in the United States as a means of survival. However, in so doing they reject many of their family’s values, trading them for “American” ones. There are several problems with this choice. In denying a part of themselves, the women experience several crises of identity as the novel progresses. For example, the main character, Yolanda, intersperses her charming and sometimes funny stories of growing up with troubling episodes where she suffers greatly in attempting to deny her old identity in favor of a new one.

One of the first manifestations of this occurs in the chapter entitled “The Rudy Elmenhurst Story.” Yolanda meets Rudy in an undergraduate poetry class, and quickly becomes aware that his exciting crowd of friends treats sex and drugs with a carefree attitude. The tension in this relationship evolves when the single-minded Elmenhurst begins to pressure Yolanda to sleep with him. Although Yolanda wants to, she cannot get over her revulsion to the crass way in which Rudy talks about sex. To her own consternation, her ardent desire to rebel and to take part in the exciting atmosphere of college collides with her more traditional romantic notions of love, sex, and religious values as well as her fear of becoming pregnant. The following exchange, between Rudy and Yolanda on why she won’t sleep with him reveals some of the identity conflicts Yolanda experiences.

(Rudy) “Why? What’s wrong with you, are you frigid or something?”

Now there was a worry. I’d just gotten over worrying I’d get pregnant

from proximity, or damned by God should I die at that moment, I'd started wondering if maybe my upbringing had disconnected some vital nerves. "I just don't think its right yet," I said.

"Jesus, we've been going out for a month," Rudy said. (Alvarez 97)

Although the conversation sounds rather like a bad after-school special in its predictability, the anxiety Yolanda feels reveals much about her crisis of identity. She remains caught between Catholic and family mores and her own desire to cast them off, and the desire to imitate every one else she sees around her. Schoolgirl uncertainty alone does not explain this conflict. When she remarks "maybe my upbringing disconnected some vital nerves" the reader realizes that this awkward exploration of sex is not simply that, but also an attempt to free herself from the restrictions she feels through her old, Dominican identity. As her relationship with Rudy ends without consummation, he wounds Yolanda by pinpointing exactly the trouble she has had all along, and adding some more identity confusion with his ignorant cultural impressions.

You know, he said, I thought you'd be hot-blooded, being Spanish  
and all, and under all the Catholic bullshit, you'd be really free . . . .  
But Jesus, you're worse than a fucking Puritan!" (99)

Not only does Yolanda have to contend with her own confusion about who she is as she tries to shake off her reservations for what she sees as more "normal" American values, but she must also contend with ill-gotten misconceptions about her sexuality and behavior due to her ethnicity.

In another example of identity confusion as a result of the bifurcation of communities, the chapter entitled "Joe" (an Americanized nickname of Yolanda). This section deals with her relationship with a man who tries to remake her in various ways by distorting her name, or giving her nicknames. At first, Yolanda finds this charming and eagerly tries to involve herself in the identities her lover sees in her, as a means of creating an "American" self. Finally however, we

see Yolanda craving his understanding of who she already is her past, her family and their way of life. Although she herself has trouble dealing with her family and their values, she finds it disturbing when another person can so clearly ignore them. At the end of this chapter, Yolanda becomes so disturbed that she leaves the man who has become her husband and ends up under psychiatric care. This chapter shows the struggle Yolanda (and by extension, all of the sisters) undergoes when trying to reconcile both her desire to ignore her past, and her need to have it recognized. Ultimately, Yolanda cannot reconcile her exiled present with an idealized childhood past she remembers so clearly from the days when they still lived in the Dominican Republic. Her strategy of completely rejecting her past ultimately backfires.

The loss of the moorings of a stable family also emerges as another problem when the Garcia women reject their Dominican identity, and cannot find a replacement for this community in any part of their new lives. Their reasons for divorcing themselves from their extended family are apparently important to the four women as they grow up in the United States. A traditional, upper class Hispanic way of life and the submissive role of the female in this schema awaits the Garcia women if they choose to embrace life in the Dominican Republic. The Garcia family of the D.R., wealthy and respected, have no compelling reasons to question their way of life. They live in a large compound where everyone intermingles, and the watchful eye of older members keep the younger ones in line. The aunts, by and large, especially defend traditional values. The four Garcia girls find the attitude demeaning and unnecessary, especially when the role of women in the United States seems comparatively freer. As a teenage Yolanda remarks about their efforts to change her family's strict viewpoints on the role of women:

We don't even try to raise consciousness here anymore.

Once, we did take on Tia Flor who indicated her large house, the well-kept grounds, the stone Cupid . . ."Look at me, I'm a queen," she argued. "My husband has to go to work every day. I can sleep until noon, if I want.

I'm going to protest for my *rights*?" (Alvarez 121)

While in other respects the family welcomes, reassures and exists as a definite place of belonging in the world that the Garcia women inhabit, they also find it oppressive and backwards—especially after a few years of living in the United States.

This family atmosphere in some ways gets carried over to the United States when the Garcias emigrate. Mami and Papi—as the girls call their parents—insist on raising their girls in the way that they themselves were raised. Strict rules govern everything the four girls want to try, from making outside friends, to going on trips and engaging in social activities they see all their American friends doing as a matter of course. The girls eventually figure out ways to bypass these restrictions, but this necessarily damages family ties. Their parents, who in the world of the Dominican Republic seemed knowledgeable and gentle, suddenly turn into embarrassing, over-protective caricatures when viewed through the new American values all four girls want to emulate. As the girls begin to adjust to their new life, their old life begins to seem *passe*.

We learned to forge Mami's signature and went just about everywhere, to dance weekends and football weekends and snow sculpture weekends. We could kiss and not get pregnant. We could smoke and no great aunt would smell us and croak. We began to develop a taste for the American teenage good life, and soon, Island was old hat, man. By the end of a couple of years away from home, we had more than adjusted. (Alvarez 108)

Unfortunately for these girls, the transition to a United States way of life isn't as easy to internalize as imitating it initially appears. Rejecting the family they perceive as oppressive has an unforeseen trade-off. They lose the stability, harmony and community easily proffered to

them by the Garcias and the Dominican culture. Their attempts to find other, replacement communities in the individualist culture they eagerly embrace meet with disappointment.

In some ways, family disruption obviously results from the Garcia family's exile in the United States. In other ways this disruption and its larger consequences emerge more subtly. The alienation the four daughters feel from their parents has already been mentioned, whom they see as hindering their progress in assimilating into a faster-paced, more exciting world than the one offered by their home country. Their early experiences in school by hostile children who see them as foreigners also add impetus and pressure for their desire to "fit in" and their attempts to take on American society wholly and without questioning it. As a result, the values of the parents and of the daughters become radically different on issues of religion, sexuality, the position of women in society, among many others. For example, the future that Laura and Carlos Garcia envision for their daughters and the one the daughters want for themselves clearly shows this disjoint. The parents, although they educate the four girls, expect them to ultimately marry Dominican men and become matrons in charge of households, like the abovementioned Tia Flor. The daughters envision themselves as professionals with their family life secondary. Family life as perceived from a Dominican standpoint gets turned on its ear by the independent girls—because they see it representing everything that is holding them back from assimilating.

More subtly however, as was true in Bitter Grounds, the author perceives the idea of family in the Dominican Republic as the model for the community. Life in the Garcia compound on the Island very much reflects this. All the families live together, and the men serve as heads of household. All the members are aware of everything that goes on within the compound, and the adults supervise day-to-day life. The family acts like a source of support for each other. The nation itself is also modeled on this idea—Yolanda finds family members or friends-of-friends wherever she goes on the island, and Trujillo as dictator acts as the figurative head of the large population overall. The ideal of nation and community found in Bitter Grounds also gains

importance here, at least in the lives of the Dominican characters. The hierarchies of the family are reflected everywhere in society in the Dominican Republic.

When the girls leave this system behind, living in a country where people openly question patriarchy during the sixties, they believe that they lose their ability to exist in the community of the D.R. Much less centralized communities exist in the United States; the ideal is to be individualized—at least among the people the Garcias eventually associated with.

Nonetheless, the girls also become quickly aware that there are groups within society where they are not welcome.

Several factors contribute to why the Garcia Girls can't seem to belong in the United States. They are held back as much by their desire to completely cast off their old identity, as they are by the fact that they look different and speak differently than their eventual prep-school crowd of contemporaries. In an attempt to provide the "best" for their children, Laura and Carlos Garcia send them to expensive private schools where well-to-do families send their children. As a result, they are surrounded by "the cream of the American crop, the Hoover girl and the Hanes twins" (Alvarez 108). As the girls ironically remark, "We met the right kind of Americans all right, but they didn't exactly mix with us" (108). The privileged crowd they are thrown into do not accept the four girls for many reasons, not the least of them being that they are foreigners. Nonetheless, the snobbish, cool attitude of these well-pampered teenagers provides little substitute for the warm, caring and boisterous atmosphere of the family structure they want to leave behind. Even as the women grow older and develop means to appear part of the crowd, they mentally remain "fish out of water." The new society of rich Caucasian upper-crust people simply remains an inadequate replacement for their previous existence—despite the more liberal attitude they hold regarding women.

As already mentioned, by rejecting the family structure, they also lose the moorings of community that the family offers. Nonetheless, despite their eventual success in appearing

assimilated into the American way of life,<sup>15</sup> sadness and longing remains with the girls, and no one is more surprised about it than they are. In reality, they do not find their true niche in the United States, and instead are somewhere in-between the two. Yolanda, visiting the Island as an adult after many years' absence, feels the pang of longing for the community of the family and her role in it that she rejected years ago.

There have been too many stops on the road of the last  
 twenty-nine years since her family left this island behind.  
 She and her sisters have led such turbulent lives—so many  
 husbands, homes, jobs, wrong turns among them. But look  
 at her cousins, women with households and authority in their  
 voices. Let this turn out to be my home, Yolanda wishes.

(Alvarez 11)

As this passage shows, although the Garcia girls made their break with the old way of life, in order to adapt to the new, they are not really happy or situated in the new. Although the book has many chapters showing how each woman has tried to make a clean break with the past, and adapt to the an American way of life, apparently, this approach does not seem to work. The fact that these women have not really negotiated both cultures and the loss of the old prevents them from true happiness in the new. They have chosen to reject one and adapt to another, and this approach leaves them unhappy and disillusioned. Interestingly, one notes that the only sister who manages to find some happiness by adulthood is Fifi—the youngest daughter. The other three go through various love affairs, crises in their professional lives and become distanced from each other and their parents. Two of the daughters eventually have nervous breakdowns. By contrast Fifi falls in love, marries and devotes herself to her two young children. Although she has not consciously

<sup>15</sup> They are only successful in “appearing” assimilated because their lack of happiness with the life they’ve constructed for themselves is a point of tension throughout the novel.



returned to her Dominican family's way of life, it is interesting to reflect that she only finds happiness when reverting to what her parents and her native community originally wanted for her.

As a final exploratory note, one must also compare the style of narration seen in Garcia Girls to the already mentioned "many interconnected voices" strategy discussed in the novel Bitter Grounds. Like Bitter Grounds, the narration of Garcia Girls says much about the essence of community as experienced by the characters in the novel. Alvarez technique employs some interesting similarities to the one used in Bitter Grounds, but her style remains much more disjointed and confused. For instance, the chapters are divided by speaker akin to what one observes in Bitter Grounds. A sister or their mother narrates each chapter. However, each character tends to disrupt the fluid continuity of the story. Their perspectives often vary, and one receives a fractured telling of the events that occur. As the reader moves from one chapter to the next, several story lines begins but often different speakers never complete them. For example, the sister named Sandi undergoes a nervous breakdown but as the reader shifts to new narrators, we never hear the outcome or how she manages afterwards. Many stories in the novel remain unfinished like this one, and this phenomenon echoes the sense of a confused and fractured identity each woman experiences as she tries to find a place for herself in her new life. In Bitter Grounds, the women of the novel picked up each other's lives as the speaker changes, and the narrative style imitates the sense of defined community apparent in the novel. Similarly, in Alvarez's novel, the narrative style imitates the experience of ruptured community that her characters experience.

The novel at first appears to comment that one can only truly be happy if one remains in a consistent cultural mindset. The four women cannot be happy in the Dominican way of life because their new "liberal" values prevent acceptance of patriarchal systems. On the other hand, neither are they happy in the individualist society of rich Americans because that culture denies them the warmth and familiarity they experienced previously. Therefore, the first assumption

cannot be true. The women try to stay in the consistent cultural mindset of the United States, but they are unable to.

Alvarez's exploration of a Latino community through the lives of these four women, and by extension, her own experience—reveals that any attempts to merely graft onto the prevailing groups already established will result in frustration for the people involved. The failure of the four women to establish their own niche in their new lives occurs not because they are foreigners, but because they try and cut themselves off completely from any roots they have from their previous existence. The situation of the four Garcia girls demands creativity—in attempting to find a middle ground between two cultures that offer both positive and negative advantages. The nationalizing influence felt in Bitter Grounds, one that much more automatically created communities, cannot be relied on here. One of the aspects the women find most objectionable about their family's life in the Dominican Republic arises when the members of that nation do not question a patriarchal way of life. Despite their scorn for what they see as a blind mentality, these women ironically perpetuate the same attitude of blind acceptance for a way of life when they arrive in the United States in their attempts to fit into the culture they find there. They assume that to survive, they must wholly accept the perceptions and lifestyle of the upper class Americans they associate with. Thus they end up disillusioned and unhappy, strangely nostalgic for the a lifestyle they sought to deny.

The role of the United States and its impact upon a Latino community in this novel is both clear in some respects and unclear in others. On one hand, the reader witnesses a very marked transition as the role of the United States shifts from peripheral to direct. In Bitter Grounds, the peripheral status of the United States as an economic force created a sense of nationalism, and as such bound the communities of El Salvador together under a common identity, despite class and race differences. In Garcia Girls, the effect of direct contact with the United States juxtaposed with the influence of the native country of origin leads to confusion for the exiled members of a community. One must also note that this community was, and remains

strongly unified under a national identity like the one discussed in Bitter Grounds, and as such, the tension caused by exile becomes especially marked by a demand to choose one or the other. In this novel, the United States represents both a haven and a threat to the characters of the story. On one hand, they find a life free from violence and fear once they move to North America. On the other hand, the influence of the government and its role in bringing the dictator Trujillo to power caused the exile of the Garcia family in the first place. It seems no coincidence that when attempting to establish new communities for themselves within this country by immersing themselves wholesale in it, the Garcia women encounter mixed results.

Furthermore, there are also unclear aspects about the role for the United States in shaping this community, because of the attitude of the women themselves. The strategy they attempt to imitate has a direct influence on the outcome. Alvarez examines in detail a phenomenon which no doubt occurs frequently to many immigrants, Latino or not, when they reach a new culture. The pressure to conform to a new way of life may cause these people, especially the children of immigrants, to reject everything that marks them as different from the prevailing population of people in the new country. Alvarez shows the unhappy results of this pressure to conform, and how leaving oneself without roots creates only further identity confusion.

Garcia Girls comments keenly on the difficulties of a particular set of Latino immigrants in the United States. There are certainly many strategies that one could adopt to deal with the demand of two simultaneous cultures—and perhaps ones that are more successful than the one that the Garcia women chose. Nonetheless, Alvarez chooses to portray the cultural confusion her four characters' experience when coming to a new country while still having to negotiate the old. Her deliberate choice to portray this situation describes the experience of many Latinos in our country, and as such remains a critical phenomenon to be aware of. In effect, this novel describes the complete loss of a Latino community in the new country—both as a result of the actual contact with the United States as well as the attitudes of the women themselves.

The reader may ask themselves if there are any other, more successful strategies the characters could have employed, and if so, what circumstances might make these characters more likely to do so. In the following chapter, the “immersion” of a Latino community in the United States will be explored—shedding light on this question.

### **Chapter 3: The House on Mango Street: Struggling With a New Formation of Community**

Once again, the landscape of community shifts in the third and final novel under discussion, The House on Mango Street by Sandra Cisneros. The contact between the United States and the Latino community in question has here moved a step farther. Cisneros’ chooses a context where the Latino characters now view their country of origin as secondary to the United States. Here we reach the opposite extreme from the first novel discussed, Bitter Grounds. Mango Street deals with the immersion of Latino people within the United States.

Once again as seen in earlier discussion, the experience of community has changed for the people in question as the environment shifts to greater contact. The changes are in fact significant and as seen in the previous two novels, greatly influenced by the degree of contact with the United States. In The House on Mango Street, the Chicano family struggles to make a life for themselves in inner city Chicago. They operate in a world that primarily dominated by an Anglo culture, yet the influence of their heritage and the environment of the working-class neighborhood defines them and keeps them from blending into the majority culture. Furthermore, unlike what the reader saw in Garcia Girls, the characters of Mango Street aren’t really sure if they want to blend in. The characters are much less likely to accept the American way of life wholesale. In fact, much of the book questions just exactly what an “American way of life” really means. The novel’s protagonist, a young girl named Esperanza, deals with the issue of identity and the roles that her Mexican background, her American upbringing and the influence of the variegated and diverse neighborhood she lives in all contribute to her sense of self.

A Latino community per se and the role it has in helping ascertain identity for the main characters, appears much less clearly here than in earlier incarnations seen in Bitter Grounds and Garcia Girls. In fact, the total absence of a community defined by national identity (such as the El Salvador people as a whole in Bitter Grounds and the Dominican family of the Garcia sisters) strikes the reader immediately. Instead, the presence of a Latino community that is more generally “Hispanic” or influenced by various Latin cultures. Notably, the discussion of definitions of “Latino” and “Hispanic” from the introduction operates most strongly here. Mexicans, Puerto Ricans and other various ethnicities mingle in Esperanza’s neighborhood. Although the characters don’t feel the same sense of belonging to each other as was noted in the two previous novels, the Latino inhabitants of Mango Street nonetheless tentatively find commonalities in such things as language and lifestyle. More importantly, they also become united by common experiences of being Mango Street residents. These similarities lie outside any specifically ethnic identification. Shifting heterogeneity characterizes Esperanza’s community on Mango Street, defying most of the traditional definitions that have, in part, helped explain the communities in the previous two novels. An absence of markers to easily denote groups of people prevails—despite some instances of similarities. A single language, culture, foods or education fail to provide the unifying forces they manifested in the previous two novels. The identity that Esperanza begins to understand as she explores the community she lives in likewise remains less traditional than previous characters’ understanding of themselves. Since she cannot rely on convenient markers, she must instead create them according to her understanding and her environment.

Patriarchy however remains one exception to this trend of traditional markers that have previously unified a community. This element does not disappear in the move from a more unified Latino community to a less unified one. As the protagonist seeks to find her identity, the emergence of this element remains especially notable. Patriarchy, and its role in the family and

society, continues to play a vital part in the barrio of Mango Street. Sandra Cisneros explains in an interview the role of patriarchy and its manifestations as she described them in her novel:

... My (male) contemporaries write about the barrio as a colorful, Sesame Street-like, funky neighborhood. To me the barrio was a repressive community. The future of women in the barrio is not a wonderful one. So I wanted to counter those colorful viewpoints, which I'm sure are true to some extent but were not true for me.

(Satz 168)

The idea of a “repressive community” and what this protagonist can do to overcome it, in part greatly influences Esperanza’s need to find her identity, creating a new version of womanhood.

The House on Mango Street describes how a young girl both tries to find her place and also rejects some of the elements she finds in her community. She has problems with many of the options offered to her by her community, especially those elements that denigrate women. Her difficulty in finding a place gets made more difficult by the heterogeneity of her world. Nevertheless, the circumstances of her surroundings—the lack of convenient groups and markers—also allow her to be more creative about how exactly she wants to be a part of her environment. Arguably, the lack of unity she finds in her world also further enhance her predilection for questioning and not being satisfied with easy answers. In this novel, one sees Esperanza fitting into some aspects of her community, and then becoming dissatisfied with others. This superimposition of belonging, not-wanting-to-belong, and not-being-able-to-belong remains one of the hallmarks of the community immersed within the United States, as these communities negotiate their new identities which lack solid (albeit restrictive) boundaries as seen in Bitter Grounds or Garcia Girls.

*Section 1: Describing Esperanza's feeling of belonging and not belonging*

Cisneros aims to illustrate her protagonist's identity struggle and eventual resolution by showing Esperanza dealing with the community of Mango Street—and how she experiences conflicting feelings about how she relates to it. The community of Mango Street and Esperanza's place within it emerges initially as a source of confusion for the young girl. As already mentioned, the people in her barrio are a disconcerting melee of different ethnicities, cultures and personal backgrounds. Esperanza not only has trouble seeing herself as part of them because of the lack of "obvious"<sup>16</sup> similarities between herself and others, she also isn't sure she wants to belong. Furthermore, the treatment of women and their role within it makes Esperanza question belonging to the system of patriarchy alive in the barrio. At other times, the young girl finds niches of belonging among the people of Mango Street and experiences fleeting moments of security she wants to hold on to.

For example, a vignette that describes Esperanza's confusion about her role in her community and her questionable need to belong is entitled, "Cathy, Queen of Cats." This scene illustrates both the heterogeneity of the community where Esperanza lives, and how although others identify Esperanza as part of the neighborhood on Mango Street, she can't seem to find how she fits. Cathy, a girl who reluctantly befriends Esperanza, rather snobbishly values silly things, as her description reveals. Cathy claims to have rich relatives in France, and this supposed lineage puts her outside the confines of Mango Street as she sees it. Cathy gossips to Esperanza about all the people in the neighborhood—she vaguely describes Mexicans, poor people, big noisy families, a girl who goes to college and becomes stuck up, and Joe, the "baby grabber" (Cisneros 12). However, Cathy then goes on to say that her family will move north up Mango Street because "the neighborhood is getting bad." In one sentence Esperanza, who has just moved in, finds herself categorized among the various suspicious elements Cathy wants to

dissociate herself from—and as the causative agent of Cathy’s flight. By the end of the paragraph, Esperanza herself reluctantly accepts the designation Cathy has thrown on her when Esperanza notes that Cathy will move “a little farther away every time people like us keep moving in”(13).

Certainly, the unspoken question in Esperanza’s tentative observation sounds like “what does *us* really mean?” and “Since when am I really a part of *us*?” Until Cathy makes her aware of it, Esperanza has not even been conscious that she belonged to the group her acquaintance sneeringly describes—or that others perceived her as belonging to this group. The derogatory descriptions of a rag-tag lot of neighbors don’t seem to appeal to her, yet she still uses the word “us” to describe herself as a part of them, accepting Cathy’s interpretation.

In other instances, Esperanza feels strongly the joy of being a part of that unknown “us” even if she can’t define that inclusion in light of her initial ambivalence. She feels included in the community of Mango Street—and her identity becomes more clarified during these instances. This tends to happen when she views parts of her community that suggest it contains unity despite its outward appearance of heterogeneity. One example arises in Esperanza’s dealings with “a Puerto Rican Family” in the vignette entitled “Louie, His Cousin and His Other Cousin” (23). As the description reveals—Esperanza at first views this family as separate from her. The scene develops as Esperanza finds herself playing with her neighbors and having fun. However, the real moment of coming together happens with “Louie’s other cousin” drives up in a brand new Cadillac.

Everybody looked inside the car and asked where he got it. There  
were white rugs and leather seats. We all asked for a ride and where  
he got it. Louie’s cousin said get in. (24)

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<sup>16</sup> When I say obvious, I’m referring to things such as ethnic backgrounds, goals, food etc. These things have previously served as common grounds for the characters in the previous two novels, and as such



The events following remain a memory imprinted in the protagonist's mind, as Louie's cousin drives them all around the neighborhood. The new celebrity wants to share his new car with everyone, and the amazement and joy at the brand new Caddie serve to make the trips around the block an incredible ride. The moment gains more significance later when sirens start howling in the barrio. As it turns out, Louie's cousin stole the car—but instead of running off with it, his first action had been to return to the neighborhood to show it off. The implication remains clear: it would not have been worth stealing the car if he hadn't been able to share it back home.

Esperanza's moment of inclusion as the neighborhood partakes in the joy and wonder of one of its members illustrates clearly one of the instances where she knows she belongs without really knowing why. In this case, her initial feeling as being separate from "that Puerto-Rican family" becomes transcended by the fun of being part of a joyous group, and later the sadness and dismay that group feels at the arrest of one of its members. Quite clearly here, Esperanza belongs. The scene ends with her using the language of inclusion to underline that fact. The police take away Louie's cousin and Esperanza notes, "We all waved as they drove away." Her use of "we" here contrasts strongly with her earlier tentative and skeptical "people like us" the reader heard in "Cathy, Queen of Cats." Although Esperanza has trouble describing exactly what has changed here, she wants to belong to it despite the strange way her sense of inclusion comes about.

When she experiences this inclusion, parts of Esperanza's identity begin to develop in her relation to becoming a member of the barrio. Almost immediately after the scene with Louie's cousin, she talks about how "others" who come into the neighborhood don't really understand the people they find there. In the vignette called "Those Who Don't" she remarks that those who don't know any better think of Mango Street as a dangerous place. She lists various members such as "Davey the Baby's brother, Rosa's Eddie V., and Fat Boy"—community members she knows to be harmless, but seem threatening to outside people. She concludes that she herself

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facilitated much more automatic identification with each other.

feels safe in the barrio—"All brown and all around, we are safe" (28). In this instance the reader understands that Esperanza identifies herself with the people around her, and in relation to them.

There are other moments in this book when Esperanza clearly articulates the opposite—that she does not want to be part of the group she perceives on Mango Street—despite her moments of feeling included, and despite the fact that others see her as part of the group. As the book progresses, various aspects of the barrio Esperanza dislikes begin to emerge. The most prevalent and important of these involve the denigrated role of women within the community. Esperanza tells stories of various women, young and old, who are unhappy in the barrio and who are treated poorly. Her tired friend Alicia, whose mother died, attempts to study and go to the university while at the same time keeping house for her father who opines, "a woman's place is sleeping so she can wake up early with the tortilla star" (31). Another woman, named Rafaela, "gets locked indoors because her husband is afraid Rafaela will run away since she is too beautiful to look at" (79). Yet another girl, Sally, known for her beauty, carefree ways and her success with boys suddenly becomes inward and withdrawn—her father sexually and/or physically abuses her because her older sisters "have brought shame on the family" (91). Sally wistfully notes he beats her "just because I'm a daughter . . ." (92). Sally eventually marries a "marshmallow salesman" who controls and abuses her also—all before she reaches the eighth grade (83, 101).

Esperanza herself also personally experiences the effects of sexism and a patriarchal culture—in everything from a general lack of respect to the extreme of being assaulted. Early in the novel she notes that her brothers get preferential treatment from the family. In other instances she realizes because she isn't beautiful as her sister Nenny; Esperanza will be the one "nobody comes for" (45). When Esperanza nervously goes to work in a photo shop for her first real job, one of the other older employees takes advantage of her by gaining her trust and then "he grabs my face with both hands and kisses me hard on the mouth and doesn't let go" (55). This instance, although unpleasant for Esperanza, doesn't do much damage. Nonetheless it becomes an

ominous precursor to a later scene in the book entitled "Red Clowns." In this vignette Esperanza refers to being raped or molested by some unknown boys at a carnival while she waits for her friend Sally to appear.

Sally, make him stop. I couldn't make them go away.  
 couldn't do anything but cry. I don't remember. It was  
 dark, I don't remember. I don't remember. Please don't  
 make me tell it all. . . Their high black gym shoes ran. . .  
 He said I love you, I love you, Spanish girl. (100)

Esperanza apparently achieves her desire to block out this event, because she never again refers to it in the course of the novel. On the other hand, it only culminates the many things that she finds distasteful, frightening and denigrating for the women and girls in the barrio. Quite understandably, these experiences lead Esperanza to want to have nothing to do with the neighborhood.

In both previously discussed books, patriarchy was an important element that helped to shape the protagonists of the novels. However, those characters chose to work within the system or to ignore it to achieve their identity rather than openly defying it. The women of Bitter Grounds achieved economic and personal liberties—but only by subversively attacking patriarchy, such as in the case of Magda Contreras setting up a shop with the help of Jacinta Prieto at home. The women in Garcia Girls resent the patriarchal system they were born into, but instead of confronting it, they seek to escape it or ignore it by assuming new identities in the United States. One must note that the option of direct confrontation of patriarchy was certainly the most difficult route in these stories—other, less direct and successful avenues were available to the characters. In The House on Mango Street the reader notices the first direct confrontation of this system of living embodied in the character Esperanza.

Esperanza begins to develop her own ideas about what she wants for herself—and this eventually translates into a wish to have nothing to do with the barrio itself, and the role it offers for the women within it. She says, “. . . but I have decided not to grow up tame like the others who lay their necks on the threshold waiting for the ball and chain” (89). This opposition helps to shape another aspect of her identity, and makes it more difficult for her to find a place in the community. Although the options of ignoring, escaping or quietly subverting the system are also available to Esperanza in this novel, she instead chooses the more direct—though personally disruptive—route. She begins to think of herself as different from the other women in the barrio.

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 plate. (89)

Examining this choice reveals a great deal about the conception of community in Mango Street. What, the reader may ask, changes this community enough that the female protagonist cannot find the earlier options appealing? The answer lies in the lack of unity Esperanza finds in those around her. Although the earlier discussed sense of inclusion on Mango Street definitely exists—it remains a unity that is much more constructed by the members of the community themselves rather than overarching principles of class, common language etc. Thus a sense of the creative potential of each individual in formulating their experience strikes Esperanza much more strongly than for earlier characters of Bitter Grounds and Garcia Girls. Because the community itself on Mango Street remains a shifting experiment created by the members, the possibility of change seems a much more viable option. Thus the creation of a new role for women, and the challenging of its repressive elements seems possible and desirable. Esperanza does not want to be a part of what Mango Street offers for women, despite the other moments where she feels extremely at home and included in the other aspects of the lifestyle she encounters there.

Esperanza's dislike of her community's conception of women at first mirrors the escapist attitude of the Garcia girls. When speaking to a friend in the vignette entitled "Alicia and I Talking on Edna's Steps," she reveals her wish to leave the neighborhood.

No this isn't my house I say and shake my head as if shaking  
could undo the year I've lived here. I don't belong. I don't  
ever want to come from here. You have a home, Alicia, and  
one day you'll go there, to a town you remember, but me I  
never had a house, not even a photograph . . . only one I  
dream of. No, Alicia says. Like it or not, you are Mango  
Street, and one day you'll come back too. (106-107)

Interestingly, here the reader sees here that Esperanza doesn't want to have anything to do with the community she lives in because she doesn't feel like she belongs. Yet, as we have already seen, there are also instances where she clearly does belong to the community on Mango Street, and where she partly bases her identity on her experience of community. Eventually, this opposite influence reasserts herself, and Esperanza becomes confronted with the need to reconcile her two impulses. She receives some help, and an inkling of her future from three sisters who come to the neighborhood posing as seers in the vignette entitled "The Three Sisters." They tell her she will leave the barrio, but they also admonish her to come back.

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

At this point in the novel, the protagonist reaches a solution for the conflicting feelings she experiences when trying to fit into the disjointed community of Mango Street. She begins to accept the fact that Mango Street forms her identity, but that she also can play a role in modifying its troubling aspects. She does not have to accept the repressive elements, or escape them. Instead, she can be part of the solution by “coming back”—after she has become educated. The significance of the meaning of Esperanza’s name—“hope” suddenly becomes clarified. Esperanza will be able to create a new place for the women within the community—and not by escaping it. Thus she embodies the hope for the new generation of women who want to be a part of the community without being marginalized by it. In doing this, Esperanza achieves a balance not accomplished to the women of Garcia Girls. In escaping their community, they also lose its moorings and its security, as well as the elements that helped them shape their identity. Esperanza keeps her identity, but she also creates new parts of it on her own terms.

As in the previous two works already discussed, the narrative strategy of the author here also influences the formulation of community as experienced by the protagonist. Cisneros uses short, impressionistic vignettes characterized by the quick impressions Esperanza has. The community here remains most controlled by the single protagonist—her impressions, and therefore her formulation receives most primacy in the telling of the novel. The story, because of the non-linear telling, also remains somewhat disjointed. As in Garcia Girls, this reflects the relative lack of unity of the community. On the other hand, the single retelling of the author focuses the story, and also unifies it through her vision.

This discussion of community, Esperanza’s uncertainty about her role within it, and her eventual creation of a niche reveals much about the nature of a community that has lost its unity, connectivity and sense of common boundaries—at least relative to the earlier communities already explored. The Latino/ethnic community in the United States presents itself as one much more shifting, heterogeneous and non-traditional. The people of these communities have generally lost most of their primary ties to the country of their origin. They may even be second-

or third-generation Americans, and as such they have created their own lifestyle in response to the situation of being a person of ethnic descent in the United States. Despite their immersion in the United States, they have not been assimilated by any means. Instead of denying their roots, they have instead transplanted some of these into the new community—this transplantation of many cultures adds color and variety to the eventual mix that results in the neighborhood of Mango Street.

In this situation, the members of the community must form their own identities because the community itself does not provide easy or convenient means to demarcate its members. Language, customs, history or background cannot be relied on here to pull this community together or to provide a sense of immediate belonging for its members. As a result, Esperanza creates her identity both because she is part of Mango Street and because at other times, she rejects aspects of its manifestations. Esperanza's solution ultimately remains creative. She cannot take part in the oppressive roles she finds for women in the barrio. On the other hand the culture of relying upon one another, neighborhood pastimes, joys and sorrows, and the perceptions of those outside of the community serve to bind her to a community she is intimately a part of. Esperanza becomes a part of the unique culture generated by the intermingling of people on Mango Street.

### **Conclusion**

As this discussion has shown, the idea of a Latino community in these novels is far from being something static, monolithic or controlling to the individual characters. The many changes the community undergoes reflects how adaptive and responsive a community can be to internal and external influences. Clearly, the communities of the three novels are crucial in determining the identity of the individual. Nonetheless, the individuals themselves also have a direct effect on how the community grows and becomes shaped. The picture of Latino community as portrayed in these novels shows it to be multifaceted; the three “arenas” of contact as they have been described show that under different circumstances, different forms of a Latino community arise.

Further, these communities represented in Literature don't stereotype or romanticize a singular lifestyle or "type" of Latino individual. If anything, the communities function to show what the response of a certain Latino group is to a different situations—descriptions which are accurate and critical in understanding the responses of Latino citizens in today's world. When examined together, the three novels present a picture of Latino society that remains rich and complex. Understanding that there are many manifestations of a Latino community helps the reader to correct the assumption that when a "Latino community" is mentioned, many and varied interpretations can be gathered.

The examination of these novels in a trajectory of immigration also reveals the importance of community moorings as Latino people change their surroundings and circumstances in relation to the United States. The formation of community as each novel moves to successively greater contact with the United States provides an interesting means of understanding a current cultural phenomenon. Relying on older, problematical national model to create community in a new life does not seem to work for the characters of Garcia Girls, although such a model worked admirably for the characters of Bitter Grounds. In the latter novel, the peripheral influence of the U.S. economic power served to reinforce the groups within the country of El Salvador, unified through various cultural and economic interdependence issues. The direct contact of the United States in Garcia Girls however, makes the patriarchal mode of community evidenced in Bitter Grounds and mimicked in the early lives of the Garcia women (in the Dominican Republic) complicated and untenable. Rejecting this older community wholesale has its consequences however, and the Garcia women lose an important source of refuge and identity. In The House on Mango Street, the character Esperanza regains a sense of community by creating her own vision and by confronting the patriarchal restrictions that made the older conception of community oppressive and at odds with the life of Latino-American women of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The influence of the United States cannot be underestimated or ignored. Although many other factors contribute to how modern communities are created, the effect of the U.S. culture



upon these remains particularly pertinent today. The three novels under discussion were all written for North American audiences within the past twenty years, and thus one must assume that the issues dealt with by these works of literature are especially appropriate to the contemporary social and political situation of the United States. As such, and especially in light of the status of Latinos as the fastest growing minority in America, understanding the issue of identity and community formation in relation to the United States gains special significance and impetus. Consider: the influence of the powerful Miami voting bloc, controversies over a migrant workforce, the issue of bilingual education in schools and our policy in Latin America are only a few of the compelling reasons why one might choose to highlight the presence of Latinos in the United States today. The idea of community informs all these issues. Comprehending the formation of Latino community and identity through literature means that we will more greatly appreciate both the existence of these groups, as well as the influence that the United States holds regarding their formation. Furthermore, literature remains an invaluable arena in which readers can explore not only outside influences but the experience of defining identity as the individual authors themselves struggle through their unique understanding. This is especially seen in the use of the feminine viewpoint in the three novels as a particular voice and niche in the broader discussion of community formation.

Whether or not one agrees with the presumption that there is such a thing as a "Latino Community," the discussion of its particular manifestations in these three novels has important consequences for a continuing dialogue which with far-reaching consequences for today's U.S. society. Literature remains a complex and compelling vehicle for examining social phenomena, and further discussion can only widen our scope and understanding as well as informing greatly the formation of identity among Latino-American citizens. The characters of each novel—Bitter Grounds, Garcia Girls and Mango Street—all seek and understand their identity through the story's progression. Examining all three in light of the influence of the United States gives the reader a larger dimension through which to comprehend their own identities and communities.

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