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## Building the Chicana Body in Sandra Cisneros' *My Wicked Wicked Ways*

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Sandra Cisneros' poetry has been long overshadowed by her novel, *House on Mango Street* (1991), which has received a great deal of critical attention, and by her collection of short stories, *Women Hollering Creek* (1991), which won her a MacArthur "genius" award. The general oversight of Cisneros' poetic corpus—*Bad Boys* (1980), *My Wicked Wicked Ways* (1987), *Loose Woman* (1994)—is perplexing since Cisneros is arguably one of the foremost Chicana poets and a master at the craft.<sup>1</sup> Her poetry has garnered praises from well-regarded poets such as Gwendolyn Brooks and Alberto Ríos, both of whose words decorate the back cover of *My Wicked Wicked Ways*.<sup>2</sup>

*MWWW*, in Tey Diana Rebolledo's words, "illustrates the progression of wickedness, and it acquires added dimensions of freedom and power that include sexuality, but go even beyond it" (192). Rebolledo's brief overview of *MWWW* examines the representation of "wickedness" as a transgression of various boundaries particular to Chicanas' history, culture, and family structure. "To be wicked, then, is to know that you have sinned—against the church, against your parents, against the norms of society" (193). It is evident, in both Rebolledo's interpretation and in Cisneros' own glosses of her creative writing, that wickedness involves not only a free and powerful sexuality but also the violation of gendered expectations.<sup>3</sup>

Rebolledo's concise review of *MWWW* prevents her from providing a fuller explanation of the "progression" into "wickedness," but more extensive analysis of Cisneros' poetry collection illustrates the development of a Chicana subject whose body is shaped by social, cultural, and spatial forces. Over the course of the poems, the speaker undertakes a literal and metaphoric journey in order to discover herself and her place and space in the world; the speaker's shaping of and understanding of her body plays a major role in her journey and development. Four sections comprise this book, each dealing with a stage of a Chicana's journey through life: the first examines the childhood of several different Chicanas through the lens and voice of a single girl; the second focuses on the speaker's relationship to her family; the third section follows the speaker on a journey through Europe;

and, finally, the fourth, "The Rodrigo Poems," relates the speaker's attempts to negotiate personal relationships.<sup>4</sup>

The speaker's struggle to forge a powerful, sexually-liberated, autonomous female identity can be traced in the text as a movement through space. From a girl in a circumscribed barrio of Chicago in the first section to a young woman grappling with love and loss in a cosmopolitan and erudite world in the fourth and last section, the poems reveal the transit from sites perceived as constrictive to global geographies portrayed as full of possibility. Thus, while "wickedness" is a central thematic concern in *MWWW*, the concept as such does not begin to address the complex Chicana identity constructed within these pages through the subject's negotiations with her surroundings.

*MWWW* must be read within a framework that takes into account Cisneros' landmark novel, *The House on Mango Street*. Ellen McCracken says of *House* that Cisneros "roots the individual self in the broader socio-political reality of the Chicano community" (63-64). Many critics, including Erlinda Gonzales-Berry, Tey Diana Rebolledo, Annie Eysturoy, and McCracken, have analyzed *House* as a modified *Bildungsroman* or coming-of-age novel. As Annie Eysturoy explains, "the *Bildungsroman* is written for the sake of the journey, the exploration of the path towards self-development" (3). However, the typical *Bildungsroman* journey results in the hero's return home and his reabsorption into society and an ordained social order. Thus the hero discards his rebellion, taking home only that which has been learned via the rebellion, not the rebellious attitude which has propelled his *Bildung*.

*The House on Mango Street* describes the coming-of-age of Esperanza, a young Chicana growing up in a Chicago barrio. Sonia Saldívar-Hull describes this world as one where "women are betrayed by the ideology of family, of 'home,' of sexuality, and of national language" (90). In other words, the barrio depicted in *House* provides certain teachings to Esperanza: that men have and wield power; that female sexuality is dangerous because it invites violence upon the women; that traditional family values for someone of her class and culture dictate marriage and subservience; and that the home, the domestic site presumed safe for women given its feminine associations, actually can enslave and limit them. "The Mango Street neighborhood is filled with women imprisoned in the domestic space by patriarchal and economic constraints" (Saldívar-Hull 94). Saldívar-Hull's analysis delineates the diverse and complicated factors that contribute to the Latinas' imprisonment, from undereducation, to the fear of economic dependency, to the belief in either hegemonic or Chicano-specific ideals of femininity.<sup>5</sup>

The first section of *MWWW* is set firmly into Chicago's landscape; titled "1200 South/2100 West," it directs the reader to a barrio much like, if not the same as, the one that provides the setting for *The House on Mango Street*. The barrio has always served as an important symbol of Chicano ethnicity, representing both the unity of the community and the community's distinction from the rest of American society. It symbolizes a "place, a traditional place, that offered some security in the midst of the city's social and economic turmoil" (Griswold del Castillo 150). This romanticized vision of the barrio is inseparable from a diametrically opposed understanding of the barrio as locus for and/or origin of crime and poverty. As Richard Griswold del Castillo observes, "while for many the barrio may have signified a place of familial warmth and brotherhood, it was also a place of poverty, crime, illness and despair" (140). "The barrio" represents ambivalence embodied: it encompasses both the heart of the community and the community's broken heart. Yet many Chicana/o cultural expressions focus on the upbeat aspects of barrios; Raúl Homero Villa's comprehensive and impressive study, *Barrio-Logos*, demonstrates how "many of the cultural practices produced and exercised in the barrios have tended toward positive articulations of community consciousness" (5). Villa examines cultural expressions that emerge out of Chicano social spaces (with a primary focus on barrios) in Los Angeles. His analysis takes into account the effects of hegemonic institutions upon Chicano social spaces within a capitalist economy and posits barrio residents as resistant or defensive subjects who, alongside the institutional forces, contribute to a "dialectical production of barrio social space" (5).

Villa's accounting of the forces that limit and control those residents of the barrio includes a recognition of the "masculinist barrio culture" and the "patriarchal power endemic to the familial community sphere of the barrio" (141, 248). Cisneros' rendition of barrio life concentrates on intracultural problems: male dominance within the Chicano culture she represents, poverty and its constraints, and the lack of education available to Latinas. Saldívar-Hull's reading of *The House on Mango Street* interprets the representation of these obstacles to Chicanas as a necessary antidote to the "tendency even with in Chicano traditions . . . to idealize the home" (94). However, neither *House* nor *MWWW* generally provide a critique of dominant society's institutional shaping and control of the barrio's boundaries and effects. As an example, in "Curtains" (15), the representation of poverty does not extend to a critique of the political or legal discourses that are employed to both justify and sustain the economic marginalization of U.S. Latino/as. "Poor people tie theirs into fists / or draw them tight as modest brides / up to the neck. . . . [Bright colors] can't make you forget / the dinette set that isn't paid for, / floor-

boards the landlord needs to fix, / raw wood, linoleum roses, / the what you wanted but didn't get." The slight gesture to inculcate the landlord is belied by the overcharged imagery of the first stanza, where the curtains of poor people take on feminine qualities laced by violence. Tied "into fists" or drawn "tight as modest brides," the curtains reveal that the arguably "feminine" domestic space is circumscribed—even in its decorative dimensions—by discourses of masculine domination or, in the case of the landlord, masculine willful oversight. The depiction of gang life in "Sir James South Side" (5) similarly returns to themes of male power over women within discourses of desire and romantic love. "Sugar Rat the sweet-lipped one / says he will lover her like no other / Genuine Forever and She—*He is insane* / Though gang love is true love...." The overriding issue for Cisneros' speaker and protagonists is that of masculine or, to be more specific, paternal or spousal control. In these poems, the barrio becomes a restrictive, masculine space that threatens the well-being of the girls that inhabit it. This first section of *MWWW* sets up the first social and physical space that shapes and determines the speaker's needs and desires.

"Velorio" is the first poem in the collection (3-4); and while the *velorio*, or funeral wake, is the ostensible subject of the text, the child narrator focuses on her friends and the dialectic between inside and outside the house where the *velorio* takes place. The speaker and her friends enter the house: "Rachel me you I remember / and the living room dark / for our eyes to get used to." This second stanza sets the tone: the house's inside is confined and dark; the outside is a freer environment where "Rachel me you / we fresh from sun and dirty."

Between inside and outside there is a border zone, the porch "where rats hid under." While the porch promises the glory and sun of the outside, it hides indications of disease, filth, and poverty. The poem thus emphasizes that the outside of the house still remains inside of an ambivalent, poverty-stricken space. Descriptions of the house augment the sense of neglect and deprivation: the living room is "pink / The paint chipped blue beneath."

The speaker actively defers the dead baby's appearance until the seventh stanza, even though it is the subject of the poem, intimating that the subject is too painful to broach. The baby's body rests in a "satin box," a "box like a valentine." This jarring image deflects our gaze from the baby's actual body—the child speaker herself cannot look upon such a sight—and focuses attention on its enclosure, this box, this valentine that will now be sent away. For the child speaker, all that needs to be revealed is the box, for the death of the baby girl cannot be understood nor accepted: "That baby in a box like a valentine / and I thinking it is wrong / us in our raw red ankles / And mosquito legs / Rachel wanting to go back out

again / you sticking one dirty finger in.” The speaker perceives that it is wrong for her friends and herself to be so alive that they can feel pain (raw ankles) and so close to the outside (mosquito legs), while the baby has no chance of life. Simultaneously, the casket’s valentine appearance romanticizes the baby’s death and signals the child speaker’s perception that death approximates romance (the possibilities of romance that she is aware of, anyway) in its finality and, perhaps, its irony. After all, the baby is free from the deprivation and the constraints of impoverished domesticity that Rachel, Lucy, and the speaker experience.

The color of the living room, this “living room pink,” parallels the valentine-like coffin, suggesting that just as the baby is enclosed in a “box like a valentine,” so too do the living girls inhabit a metaphorical casket. For the young girls, their “casket” is a domestic space made more abject by its stark barrenness; the young speaker implies (in a subtext that refers us back to Cisneros’ *House*) that middle-class domesticity might have saved the baby. This interpretation is further enhanced by the last verse: “Said cold cold the living / room pink Lucy and your hair / smelling sharp like corn.” The lack of punctuation and the enjambment make “cold” modify both the “living room” and the “living” (the girls). Also, both Lucy and the living room are pink, further emphasizing the deceptive nature of this “happy,” feminine color, just as domesticity and its apparent pleasures are deceptive. Within this economically-constrained urban household, the children’s bodies become important: the dead baby is contrasted with the girls’ raw red ankles and mosquito legs.

The last image of the poem—“Lucy and your hair / smelling sharp like corn”—is perhaps the exception to the negative impact of these girls’ lived reality. These lines evoke a setting that may seem utopic to the girls, for they imply both food and blond hair, neither of which, the poem suggests, are readily available to them. However, it is Lucy’s body, her pinkness and “hair smelling sharp,” that breaks the dystopic binds and opens a window out of the cold living room and restrictive domestic space. The smell of the hair accomplishes this slight escape by providing a different sensoried approach to the body that, as Peter Brooks observes, does not “belong to our cultural definition of the epistemological project” (100). In our culture, which is preoccupied by the visual, any sensuality not based on sight destabilizes the drive towards meaning. In these verses, the sense of smell becomes the only way to avoid the horrific sights that form Lucy, Rachel, and the speaker’s world: a dead baby, rats, and “bad boys.” By metaphorically opening up the children’s world, the smell of corn potentially refers us to maize, to an indigenous history, to a female subjectivity that cannot be colonized by the oppressive material or social conditions that surround her. As Gloria Anzaldúa has written: “In-

digenous like corn, like corn, the *mestiza* is a product of crossbreeding, designed for preservation under a variety of conditions” (81).<sup>6</sup>

“Traficante” leaves the domestic and private sphere to enter the public spaces of this barrio (18-19): in this poem “traficante” refers to “Traficante’s Drugs” where the so-called doctor “had an office / behind the case of eyeglasses.” This title cannot avoid the connotation of drug traffickers, another reference to the potentially dystopic, dangerous space of the speaker’s lived reality. Lack of economic means directs the poetic narrative; the mother takes her child to Traficante’s Drugs instead of to a certified doctor because she cannot afford health care. The poem also hints at the systems that evolve to take advantage of the barrio’s residents.

The child protagonist of the poem must visit the doctor/pharmacist after a fence “poked through” her hand. Her hand is swollen and infected, “pink like a starfish’s belly / or a newborn rat.” The confluence of the child’s imagination and an adult world shaped by poverty compels the child’s body to become both a marker of and a method of escape from the barrio. She symbolizes the barrio and its effects: it is within the barrio that the child is injured. Also, the wound’s origin—a fence—suggests her attempt to breach the barrio’s contours and her social world. Instead of escaping, however, she is trapped anew within her newly-imperfect body and its intimations of the economic, material, and social circumstances of her family.

But despite her pain, the child transforms her lacerated hand into fantastic images. It becomes various animals: “starfish’s belly” and “newborn rat.” Where the original cut was—“a tiny slit”—the child sees “the mouth of a small fish.” She picks at her scab until “the wound / turned a purple-pink,” like a tropical fish. The child’s hand acts as an analogy for herself—“She liked to draw the fat hand / into her sleeve, / keep it hiding there”—and as alter ego—“sometimes it would come out / and she would talk to it.” In effect, the child protects and nurses this injury so that it becomes something apart from herself, even while still attached to her body. In the pharmacist’s office the hand’s otherness is highlighted when he asks to see her hand and “the fish poked out / from the cuff of a nubby sleeve, / darted back in, then was out again.”

As in “Velorio,” the pinkness of the body is emphasized and signals the vulnerability of the child’s body. And just as Lucy enters her mother’s house and the wake unwillingly, the child protagonist of “Traficante” does not want to reveal her injury. The girl’s reticence to reveal her injured hand suggests her shame and fear; her hand’s injury represents transgression as her body becomes less humanly feminine and more animalistic. Moreover, her shame could be connected to the knowledge that her “mistake” will cost her family money. As such, the girl’s hand reveals

the complex intersections of economic and material conditions that inform her expectations and understandings of her body's place in the world.

At the pharmacist's office, surrounded by eyeglasses that gaze down and intimidate the girl, the grotesque hand—the child's fantasy beyond the barrio—must be reined in.

The doctor took down from the shelf  
 the medical encyclopedia, vol. 2,  
 and holding her by the wrist  
 said turn around.  
 Mrs. Ortiz was having a prescription filled  
 for Reynaldo's fever and was asking  
 how much when the book came down.

These last lines contain an undercurrent of violence that emphasizes the danger of girl's injury and transgression. Does the book come down on the girl's hand, as if it were killing a rat or a spider, reining in her violation? Or does the last line merely anticipate the pharmacist's search for knowledge, with the encyclopedia placed gently on the counter so that he can read up on infections? If it does smash her hand, is it because the pharmacist also has entered the child's fantasy and believes that the hand has a life of its own and must be subdued?

The hand's metamorphosis into animal suggests Deleuze and Guattari's proposal that "becoming-animal" is to "participate in movement, to stake out the path of escape in all its positivity, to cross a threshold" (13). The hand-fish marks out a path of escape through the girl's idealization of the fish's potential to hide. Since this girl's body is divided between the becoming (hand) and the static (the rest of her body), the pharmacist's aggressive action effectively limits the girl's escape by what Deleuze and Guattari would call a "re-Oedipalization," or a reintegration of the girl into the family, social, and class structure to which she belongs. In a way, her alter ego, her spirit, has been killed. In the collision between the child's imagination and her epistemology grounded in specific material circumstances, the latter has, for the time being, won.

Both "Traficante" and "Velorio" present pivotal moments in the construction of a Chicana subjectivity: the working class Chicana child faces certain rites of passage which unveil her body's fragility but also allow her to develop an inner strength, however fleeting. In Cisneros' poems, the barrio embodies those social forces that limit possibilities for education, health care, and basic safety. These forces contain the raced, sexed, and classed Chicana body: "Velorio" metonymically links the barrio with literal and figurative death while "Traficante" illustrates the barrio's ability to kill dreams. In contrast, "I Told Susan Reyna" (12-

13) in its representation of menstruation, the paradigmatic feminine rite of passage, reveals the fear and mistrust engendered by becoming a female adult in this particular space and social location. Spoken by a girl who most probably has not yet entered puberty and finds menstruation distasteful, the poem inventories the speaker's reason for disliking Susan, all of which point to two major differences between the two girls: Susan has gone through puberty and she is an epileptic ("Susan / who is sick / and has the fits"). Each of these bodily "conditions" suggests a certain uncontrollability on Susan Reyna's part; her body is not neatly contained or restrained. But the speaker's rejection of Susan seems to be based on the girls' ultimate similarities of gender and ethnicity. The narrator sees in Susan Reyna what she will become; what she sees is distasteful to her.

Julia Kristeva, in *The Powers of Horror*, suggests that "menstrual blood . . . stands for the danger issuing from within the identity (social or sexual); it threatens the relationship between the sexes within a social aggregate, and through internalization, the identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference" (71). It also threatens the relationship between the initiated and the uninitiated. Susan's body scares the speaker because it has crossed a threshold and now bespeaks an adult uncontrollability (as with the fits and menstruation) or excess (fat, large breasts). Again Cisneros focuses the reader's attention on the smell of the body: in fact, the stink of Susan Reyna is the speaker's final argument for disliking her.

Susan Reyna and her ominous bodily presence make it impossible for the speaker to ignore her own approaching puberty. There is a fear of puberty because "the patriarchal power endemic to the familial community sphere of the barrio" (Villa 248) threatens the adult woman, as *The House on Mango Street* and the poem "South Sangamon" make clear (6): "Then quiet / so we figured he'd gone. / That day he punched her belly / the whole neighborhood watching."<sup>7</sup> The young girls of *MWWW* see, in poems such as "Velorio," "South Sangamon," and "Curtains," that their economic status and gender places them at risk.

These three poems focus on young girls' bodies, ghettoized and endangered by the barrio and a social geography that restricts them. In a certain sense, the urban space depicted here is but an embodiment of what Saldívar-Hull calls "the conventions of male rule" (98). The bodies of the baby and Lucy, of the anonymous girl in "Traficante," and of Susan Reyna are marked by patriarchal conventions and traditions. Simultaneously their bodies act as symbols of the children's attempts to break free. Cisneros' ambivalence about the two options—imprisonment or excessive, painful escape—is reflected in Gonzales-Berry and Rebolledo's observation that "when escape is an option, it is most often found through death or insanity" (110). Here the lack of potential for escape not only points to the

gendered identities of the protagonists but to their economic class and racial identity. The combination of the three imprisons the girls, or, as McCracken observes, links “sex, patriarchal power, and violence” (69). Violence is not necessarily domestic violence but rather is the result of the confluence of social and material effects that delimitate the protagonists’ lives.<sup>8</sup> In this context, the barrio that Cisneros has drawn for us has material effects on the young Chicanas as it becomes a “house of horrors that threatens [the Chicana writer’s] life” (Saldívar-Hull 83) and the first section of the poetry collection becomes a searing indictment of the “misogyny that is embedded in the culture” (Saldívar-Hull 83).

The second section of *MWWW* portrays the poetic speaker’s family life and history, with an emphasis on the speaker’s desire and need to separate herself from them and gain physical, intellectual, and corporeal independence. Prefaced by the telling epigraph by Maxine Hong Kingston—“Isn’t a bad girl almost like a boy?”—the poems here inform the reader what is required of a single daughter in a family of seven children: to “keep the good name clean” (“Six Brothers,” 25); to not turn out “bad,” “audacious,” disobedient, or sexually promiscuous; and above all, she is expected to remain at home (“His Story,” 36-37).<sup>9</sup> Maxine Hong Kingston’s words suggest an “acknowledgement that bad girls transgress the realm of propriety for females by acting outside the rules and by desiring completion and freedom for themselves” (Rebolledo 192-193). Moreover, the use of Kingston’s phrase as epigraph foregrounds the shifting corporeal status of the poetic speaker as she moves from childhood into adulthood. The adolescent’s body and her incipient sexuality defy the boundaries given unto her by her father, by her culture, by tradition.

The defiant body emerges in “Six Brothers” as the speaker announces she’s got “the bad blood in [her]” and in “His Story” where the father’s versions of her life are silenced by her simple and direct statement, “An unlucky fate is mine / to be born woman in a family of men” (37). In both of these poems, the speaker fights the unspoken patriarchy of her family and of a Latino culture that punishes women who transgress with the language of her body.<sup>10</sup> Her marked female body acts as a “boy” since she disregards gender conventions predominant in both larger society and in her family.

Several poems in this section depart from the family environment to offer us portraits of “bad girls” who are like boys. “In a red-neck bar down the street” (31) introduces Pat who can “chug / one bottle of Pabst / down one swig” so that the bartender “runs over / says lady don’t / do that again.” Enforcing femininity becomes a community project, shared by bartenders and fathers. In contrast, the speaker of “I the Woman” revels in her badness: “I / am she / of your stories / the

notorious / one” (28-29). Pat’s body is threatened by containment but this poetic speaker refuses it, becoming by the end of the lyric the “black smoke / in your / clothes / and in / your / mouth.” Dematerialization is not generally an option or an answer to the strictures of familial, cultural, and gender conventions. Thus the third section of *MWWW*, with its focus on European travels, crystallizes the body of the Chicana speaker in order to give her strength and standing.

This section’s travels out of the barrio mimic *The House on Mango Street’s* Esperanza, who at the end of the narrative says: “One day I will say goodbye to Mango. I am too strong for her to keep me here forever. One day I will go away . . . They will not know I have gone away to come back” (110). The poetic journey differentiates itself from *House* in that the speaker makes no promise to return to the space of the barrio. Titled “Other Countries,” the section’s epigraph is from *The Three Marias*: “at times we feel a little like exiles; a woman feels like that when she does not live up to the image of her required by the times . . . and hence searches for other paths, for other ‘countries’” (39). The journey abroad allows for an escape from both the barrio’s limits and from the speaker’s family’s strict gender-driven expectations.

The speaker understands the impossibility of returning home unchanged: her journey ends far away from the barrio and her family. In order to embark on the journey and still retain tenuous ties to family and community, the narrator must travel a tricky path. Norma Alarcón has justly asserted: “within a culture such as ours, if one should not want to merely break with it, acquiring a ‘voice of one’s own’ requires revision and appropriation of cherished metaphysical beliefs” (63). For Cisneros, the way to acquire a “voice of one’s own” becomes clear in the second section: being “bad” and flirting with the open sexuality and the transgressive power of solitary travel allows the poetic speaker to take on male attributes such as independence and aggression.

In the first poem of the “journey” section, “Letter to Ilona from the South of France,” the rejection of traditional female characteristics and the espousal of masculine power are clear. The speaker exclaims: “the night I let slip from my shoulders. / To wander darkness like a man, Ilona. / My heart stood up and sang” (41). The rhythmic beauty of these lines details the uncloaking of the woman’s body to reveal the carriage of a man; the awakening of a selfhood rooted in her naked body enables her to acquire masculine freedom. Darkness provides comfort and freedom because “it wrapped [her] like a skin” and it was “a joy . . . simple like your daughter’s hand outlined in crayon.” The speaker associates the darkness both with the erasure her own female bodily contours and also with the draw-

ing of a new corporeal outline that permits the independence and freedom which she associates with masculinity.

Other poems enact transgression through hints of non-monogamous sex or, in complementary fashion, gestures towards death. "December 24<sup>th</sup>, Paris—Notre Dame" reunites both death and romance in its flirtation with suicide: "Tomorrow they might find a body here—/ unraveled like a poem, / dissolved like wafer" (43). As the speaker imagines her dead body encompassing textual and spiritual releases, her thoughts climax at her wrists, nexus of both life, death, and desire: "I go out into the streets once more. / The wrists so full of living. / The heart begging once again."

As in "Letter to Ilona," moments of self-realization and self-discovery appear in several of the poems, but rarely do these moments last. Many of the poems are deliberately superficial, as the speaker hides details from her readers. In effect, she flirts with her interlocutors and with us. Thus, although the speaker flaunts her "wickedness" (the majority of the journey poems reveal the speaker's trysts with men) her own body and the "wicked" sexual act are invisible.

The poetic voice's tendency to "cover up" is especially noticeable because of the charged erotic tone of many of the poems; the female body disappears into the verbal and imagistic icons of sexuality that serve as a mask. In the poem "Postcard to the Lace Man—The Old Market, Antibes," the speaker relates a flirtatious afternoon with a man whose name she can't remember. Instead, her memory centers on her body's non-sexual sensation of "inky tea," "sticky perfume," and "a cigarette / from Persia" (45). The speaker's focus on sensuality through these synesthetic images is interrupted by her matter-of-fact recognition in the third stanza of the man's wife: "I forgot to tell you. / I have a great respect / for wives. / Especially yours." The recognition of the man's wife with short, punctuated phrases differentiates this discourse from the prior stanza's lingering, lulling rhythm.

As in the other poems of this section, the exoticism of the speaker's travels is accentuated by the title and by her fascination with all things iconic of Otherness: the cigarette from Persia, the photos of Tangiers, and the lines in French. This open, othered space away from the Chicago barrio depicted in the book's first section allows the speaker to become the bad girl who can have a short affair and then move on. This poem, as well as many others in this section, flaunt the speaker as world traveler, not tied to any space but that of her own body and consciousness.

"Letter to Jahn Franco—Venice" (46-48) offers another example of the relationship between the speaker's travel and her ownership of her body and time. As in the previous poem, the speaker admits that this escapade, though erotic and

flirtatious, involved no sex: "So I let you down. / Didn't give in and fall / under the spell of a bona fide / Venetian artist." Further on she adds, "tell me, / one artist to another, / what does a woman owe a man, / and isn't freedom what you believe in? / Even the freedom to say no?" Her refusal to have sex with him eventually hinges upon her unwillingness to join her journey to his: "No, I won't / come to Sardinia with you. / Or even Spain." Her journey must remain hers alone; she cannot achieve full self-sufficiency if she submits her will and her body to another.

The speaker's fierce fight for her right to refuse a sexual encounter also relates to her belief in the freedom of her body: "I think true nature rises / when the body dances. / Perhaps that's why I never / have one partner, / prefer to dance alone." Dancing alone is a metaphor for the solo journey, but it also suggests the newly-found freedom of the female body, unrestricted by her social and economic circumstances. The protagonist leaves for other cities as the Venetian begs her to return: "In case you change your mind, you said / I know you won't, but just in case, / I'll wait in Venice seven days." She replies, "You were right about one thing—/ I didn't come back." The fairy-tale-like seven days expires and she has vanished. Her body remains cloaked, again, hidden by the dialogue of whether or not to undress; her corporeality is only available to herself in her private dance.

The absence of her body also means that, just as she can assume a masculine "form" (and with it male powers), she can also leave behind her embodiment as a Chicana. This differently-embodied journey aids her in her first transgression out of the barrio and its limitations. It also enables her to focus on bodies other than her own, an act which emphasizes a distinctly female gaze. However, perhaps because of the speaker's lack of feminine corporeality or perhaps because her gaze has been authorized through and by masculine conventions, her gaze tends to be blurry and indistinct. The instability of this female gaze becomes central in "Beautiful Man—France," where the speaker states paradoxically (44): "I saw a beautiful man today / ... Very beautiful. / But I can't see / Without my glasses." Even though the tables are turned so that the man acts as poetic inspiration to the woman, her gaze is not all-powerful. She must turn to the woman next to her in order to confirm his beauty, then must go "to see for [her]self." The gaze's potential fallibility, its reliance on communal aid, and its need to shorten the distances that blur vision mark the limitations of the speaker's power as gazer. Thus neither an overt, liberated sexuality nor owning the gaze allow the speaker to realize herself at this moment.

This is not to say that the female gaze offers no power at all; it does, particularly in the poem "Ass" (50-51). This playful, punning, parodic ode to

Michelangelo's David focuses on both the male posterior and the power of the speaker's gaze and words to transform his lifeless body into what she wants it to be:

Did I say derriere?  
 Derriere too dainty.  
 Buttocks much too bawdy.  
 Cheeks so childishly petite.  
 Buns, impudently funny.  
 Rear end smacking of collision.

Ah, misnomered beauty.  
 Long suffering  
 butt of jokes,  
 object of derision.

However, as she moves from derriere to buttocks to cheeks to buns and, finally, to rear end, unable to decide on a title for this "hypnotic anatomy," her incipient power over the word and David's ass steadily diminishes until she gives up her attempt at Adamic naming. In parallel fashion, she relinquishes power over her gaze as she is hypnotized by David, transfixed like Pygmalion a "victim / of [his] spell." This poem demonstrates once more the limited power of the female gaze and word within the transient space that the speaker inhabits. The speaker's journey to forge an independent female identity is not yet complete.

In the *bildungsroman* genre, a protagonist such as the poetic speaker of *MWWW* uses the journey to find teachers and eventually, to reunite him or herself with the community he or she initially abandoned. The speaker in these poems does not use the journey to find masters at whose knees to learn nor to seek mastery of anything other than herself. Her world-traveling opens her own eyes to other sexual bodies, to the limitations and advantages of owning the gaze. However, the disembodied sexuality and vacant corporeality offered by these poems indicates that the speaker has not reached full self-realization, for she is as yet unable to draw the geography of her own body. Adrienne Rich observes, "to write directly and overtly as a woman, out of a woman's body and experience, to take women's existence seriously as theme and source for art, was something I had been hungering to do, needing to do, all my writing life" (182). Not until the poem "By Way of Explanation" does the poetic speaker reveal the self-realization and self-empowerment that emerge through the discovery and disclosure of her own body (84-85).

Found in the fourth section titled "The Rodrigo Poems," in "By Way of Explanation" the speaker can finally reveal her body in its entirety. All the poems in this section use what Rafael Pérez-Torres calls "iconic evocation," the use of a diverse

and almost deluge-like iconography in order to construct a Chicano/a cultural identity (199). From “Valparaiso” to “Rodrigo de Barro” to “the So-and-So’s,” the poems in this segment employ lists of nouns and nationalities to emphasize the speaker’s explosive voice and control of her subjects. The strategy certainly reaches its apogee in “By Way.” Each of the ten stanzas associates the speaker and/or a part of her body with a different geographical location: she reveals that there is “a bit of Madagascar in” her and that her interlocutor’s attention missed the “Amazons.” Given her encompassing corporeal expanses, the speaker does not need to travel any longer; she finds she can take hold of world geographies and incorporate them into her body. Analogously, she has extended her body throughout the world. Both moves endow the speaker with enormous power over space. Shirley Ardener remarks that “the fact that women do not control physical or social space directly does not necessarily preclude them from being *determinants* of, or *mediators* in, the allocation of space” (17). Cisneros’ speaker in “By Way of Explanation,” upon completing her *Bildung*, can now undertake determination of and mediation in “the allocation of space.” Appropriately, she creates a world that is materially female with its “odd womb,” “breasts,” and allusion to the Amazons, which also emphasizes her warrior status and self-sufficiency.

This poem underlines another revealing trend: the speaker’s focus switches from the United States (her home) and Europe (the location of her journey) to what is considered the Third World. The sites named also have been sites of colonialism, of possession and dispossession. The poetic speaker invokes, through her body, Madagascar, Egypt, Bengali, Tierra del Fuego, Quintana Röö [sic], Papeete, and Pago Pago. Andalusia—“Pale moon of belly—/ Andalusian!”—represents the only location not easily categorized as Third World. However, Andalusia’s Islamic and Jewish influences and its economic troubles have long placed it in a marginal position to mainstream Europe.

The speaker of “By Way” defies simple answers to questions of national identity, political alliance, and origin as she spreads her body through space and resists easy classifications. She halts the interlocutor’s search for the “authentic” Chicana or Third World woman. Each part of her body belongs to a different geography: she herself is an amalgam, the embodiment of Anzaldúa’s “nueva mestiza.” As Anzaldúa challenges, “this mixture of races, rather than resulting in an inferior being, provides hybrid progeny, a mutable, more malleable species with a rich gene pool.... It is a consciousness of the Borderlands” (77).

The tone of the poem emphasizes the speaker’s teasing of her interlocutor, someone with apparent intimate knowledge of her: “Here are the knees / you claim are yours,” “The breasts / to your surprise.” Denying his presumed knowledge,

she teases him with hints that he does not know her fully, nor, she implies, will he ever. She deflects his insistent, possessive gaze—"Amazons / have escaped / your rapt / attention"—and gains the power to create herself and her own space.

The extension of the speaker's body across various and variable geographies makes her less penetrable by the interlocutor's mind or eye. Her declaration that he cannot know her depends on the decentralization of her body: there is no one origin or erotic center. In a similar vein, Hélène Cixous applauds the feminist implications of the move to abandon the center:

She doesn't create a monarchy of her body or her desire. Let masculine sexuality gravitate around the penis, engendering this centralized body (political anatomy) under the party dictatorship. Woman does not perform on herself this regionalization that profits the couple head-sex, that only inscribes itself within frontiers. (87-88)

As each of the speaker's body parts becomes associated with different geographies, the female body indiscriminately crosses geographical boundaries. The focus on a diversity of body parts (knees, hands, womb, belly, heart, breasts, eyes) reveals the eroticization of the entire female body. The speaker does not privilege any one area of her body, nor one area of the globe; the erotic and geographic decentralization disallows the interlocutor from penetrating the speaker's self-construction of her body. There is no "nerve center" to conquer.

Cisneros' evocation of the Third World in this poem could be understood as a type of exoticism, an unquestioning appropriation of foreign geographies. The reference to Gauguin's Papeete in the sixth stanza especially seems to foreground the male gaze upon the "native" female body. However, the linking of land with body disavows this reading: the poetic speaker integrates spaces and body parts so that there is no "Other" created through her varied and diverse discursive geography. In other words, no objectification is possible when the speaker's body has no territorial limits or interior cohesion. In addition, as she evokes Gauguin, she aligns herself with the depicted native women of the South Pacific in an overtly political move. The poem aspires to establish a connection between the Third World and the speaker, thus implicitly inscribing the narrator as a Third World woman of color. The speaker's expansive and diverse geocorpus enacts a "re-writing [of] the ethnic female subject as site of differences" (Trinh 44). And the subject that is a "site of differences" cannot be easily comprehended, assimilated, or colonized; in addition it rejects the common move in many feminist writings to "discursively colonize the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the third world, thereby producing / re-presenting a composite, singular 'third world woman'" (Mohanty 53).

Thus in *My Wicked Wicked Ways* the speaker's journey from girlhood to adulthood, from Chicago to the world, culminates in her bodily extension over many territories: a sign that her body is powerful, strong, and ultimately unknowable to all except herself. For Cisneros' speaker, the need to leave her Chicago barrio impels her to use her travels in order to learn how to find power, not injury, in her body. She removes her body from the geography that constricted and inflicted pain and finds relative freedom in a liberal displacement through space. She learns to hide her body, cloak it in darkness, in words, and other worlds. "By Way of Explanation" uncloaks her body at will, and since her self-disclosure carries the power of the world behind it, it will never be vulnerable again.

*My Wicked Wicked Ways* also chronicles the move made from a singular Chicana working-class identity to a cultural and potentially political community of Third World women of color that is imagined as limitless and diverse. Despite the intimations in "By Way" that the speaker's journey can be communitarian, the speaker's struggle and success ultimately depend on a structure and understanding of the self both overtly poetic and individual. The lyric speaker's singular voice chronicles the relationship between her body and the various spaces she occupies. The evolution of these spaces reflects the speaker's gradual social ascension. "By Way" presents us with a subject who is widely-traveled and read, someone who, in other words, now occupies the middle class. The transformation from the scared and uneducated girls of "Velorio," "Traficante," or "I Told Susan Reyna" to the confident and outspoken woman of "By Way of Explanation" occurs through the expansion of personal and political space that metonymically represents education and economic opportunity as well as the understanding that comes with age.

The body, Elizabeth Grosz contends, is not "an ahistorical, biologically given, acultural object." It is a "lived body" that is "irreducibly sexually specific, necessarily interlocked with racial, cultural, and class particularities" (18-19). The poems of this collection, through the spaces they choose to inhabit and the bodies they uncover, present these particular bodies, inflected by race, class, culture, but especially and above all, by space. The book culminates in the cultivated adult protagonist in "By Way" who can demonstrate her own strength and her ability to transform herself and global geographies. The adult speaker of *My Wicked Wicked Ways* defies the home and the private and lets herself loose upon the world. ✨

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank, effusively, the anonymous reader at *Letras Femeninas* who, through a careful and generous reading, helped me reformulate substantially my analysis. For works that focus on Cisneros' poetry, see Chávez-Silverman, Estill, and Rangil. Saldívar-Hull mentions Cisneros' poetry in the context of her prose; Pérez-Torres and Rebolledo both analyze several poems; Rebolledo goes on to present a concise, global reading of *My Wicked Wicked Ways* (henceforth designated as *MWWW*).

<sup>2</sup> Brooks is quoted as saying, "her work is sensitive, alert, nuanced" while Ríos exclaims, "[her] poems work hard for a living." Brooks further assures us that Cisneros "is one of the most brilliant of today's young writers."

<sup>3</sup> See Cisneros' 1997 autobiographical piece or her earlier 1987 article.

<sup>4</sup> Because of the tonal and emotional consistency of all the poems and their comparable figurative vocabulary as well as because of the measured and steady development of the poems' epistemological project, I maintain that there is one poetic speaker throughout *MWWW*.

<sup>5</sup> See Saldívar-Hull (90-102) for her insightful analysis of *House*.

<sup>6</sup> Once more, thank you to the anonymous reader at *Letras Femeninas* who referred me to this passage.

<sup>7</sup> As several critics have pointed out, Gonzales-Berry, Rebolledo, and McCracken among them, one of the salient features of *The House on Mango Street* is its focus on the women in the barrio to whom Esperanza looks for guidance. Many of them appear as negative role models: women subdued, cowed, and imprisoned by male violence.

<sup>8</sup> Witness, for example, the intrafamilial but not "domestic" or "masculine" violence of "Arturo Burro," where a boy is hidden "inside inside," "my brother who spins his eyes" (8). The implied madman in the attic involves a dynamic of exclusion and secrecy that bespeaks an emotional and extremely understated physical violence of neglect. "Mexican Hat Dance" (9) features a mother who breaks a record over her child's head to punish him/her—the somewhat playful irony of the situation ("besides, it was her favorite record—Lucha Villa, / the lady who sings with tears in her throat") only emphasizes the undercurrent of nostalgia and pain in an immigrant family. Finally, "Joe" tells of a "54 years old and lazy" man who, upon disobeying his mother, "dies under a wheel / on the road to St. Charles / which everybody knows / was God's will" (16-17).

<sup>9</sup> See Estill for a thorough reading of this section. Her article focuses on the instrumental role of the father in the sexual and social liberation of the daughter.

<sup>10</sup> "His Story" discusses the many different Sandra Cisneros who were punished for daring to not "be good."

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