



“FEROCIOUS ROOTS”: HOSPITALITY, IDENTITY, AND EXCLUSION IN RECENT AMERICAN LATINA LITERATURE

When I was formulating this article, my thoughts turned, oddly enough, to Ethel Merman. For the uninitiated, Ethel Merman was a popular American entertainer from Broadway’s golden age. Gifted with a big voice and a brassy demeanor, she starred in such musicals as *Annie Get Your Gun*, *Gypsy*, and *Hello, Dolly*. Merman was, in her heyday, the seldom-disputed queen of American musical comedy. In 1964, she was married to an Academy Award-winning actor, Ernest Borgnine. Their union didn’t go very well; the happy couple separated after only six weeks. When she published her memoir, Merman exacted a pretty piece of revenge in a chapter titled “My Marriage to Ernest Borgnine.” When readers, eager for gossip and revelations, flipped to that chapter, they discovered a single blank page.

That story connects well with the subject of the conference under whose auspices this work was conceived: American Hospitality. Given observable trends in American society during most of my lifetime, most of which have rendered my country dramatically less hospitable, I have felt the temptation to honor Miss Merman by submitting my own blank page for publication. To do so might, perhaps, be a worthy piece of performance art. However, an empty article version of a noteless keynote would also present a true test for the hospitality of the editors of this volume, who would be more than justified in returning my submission posthaste, along with some very uncharitable and non-literary suggestions. Therefore, both good manners and a fondness for my reputation urge me to continue.

Another option would be simply to quote liberally from Robert D. Putnam’s excellent study of community in America, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. Putnam argues that,

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in part, because of its largely money-driven ethos, the United States has come to chronically neglect another essential form of wealth—the value deriving from sustained and sincere human interaction, to which Putnam refers as social capital. Since the 1950s, Americans have taken less and less of a part in every kind of informal and formal institution that used to bring Americans together, ranging from bowling leagues and bridge clubs to charitable organizations and political parties. In meticulous detail and with deep statistical analysis, Putnam's book chronicles and examines this sobering trend. With the decline of these institutions has come a commensurate lessening of interpersonal trust. And that diminution of trust has occurred, not only on an individual level, but also on a national one, as one observes in the currently rising hostility of Americans toward newly arriving foreigners, especially toward those from disadvantaged countries.

This text will approach the problem of hospitality with perspectives drawn from two fields of inquiry: social theory and literary study. On the sociological side, it will argue that some of the blame for the decline of hospitality falls on our ingrained habits of transactional, market-based thinking, a system whose virtues are evermore subject to question. But it will also argue, perhaps more controversially, that the decline of American hospitality also has its roots in liberalism—a societal gospel in which my faith is generally strong, but whose insufficiencies are becoming more evident by the year. Turning to the literary side, this piece will examine a trio of Latina authors: Julia Alvarez, Quiara Alegria Hudes, and Sandra Cisneros, in an attempt not only to discover why hospitality is to an extent missing in America, but also to understand what hospitality truly is.

First, a somewhat obvious observation: literature inherently thrives on depictions of conflict and dysfunction. Writers and readers alike are more drawn to disharmony than to its opposite. Thus, without more, the kindly person who always keeps a made bed and a pot of soup ready for whoever may require it invites less artistic interest than the misanthrope who roughly shuts the door in the undeserving stranger's face. Within this point, of course, we find room for exceptions: one of literature's greatest achievements, *Les Misérables*, begins with an elaborate portrait of Monsignor Myriel, surely one of the most hospitable figures in any important work of fiction. But I think the general practice leans toward depictions of conflict, and we may therefore expect literature to supply more violations of the rules of hospitality than instances of conformity. Most often, art is concerned with the struggles of a particular protagonist, a figure whose experiences of social discontent may or may not be intended to stand for those of a community, a nation,

or a species. A hero perfectly at home in his surroundings is almost assuredly a boring one. And because, for the most part, it cares most about the subjective experience of a handful of imagined individuals, a novel, play, or short story has only so much value as sociological evidence. A literary work can help us to expose and understand behaviors that we disapprove, but it is less reliable in telling us how prevalent that behavior actually is. So, it is with those caveats in mind that we move forward.

Consider, if you will, that most hospitable of English phrases, “Make yourself at home.” Hospitality at its best seeks to encourage the guest or stranger to feel at ease, to sense that she or he *belongs*. To the extent that the subject finds it impossible to enjoy the relaxed feeling of having been accepted, of feeling *at home*, hospitality has failed. True hospitality, I would suggest, also contemplates some degree of voluntary sharing: how generous or genuine can a welcoming attitude be if it is a service offered for sale? (I will admit here that I have always been faintly troubled by the decision to refer to businesses like hotels and restaurants as “the *hospitality industry*.” A hospitality that is purely transactional feels like a very attenuated virtue.) Indeed, the widespread use of the phrase, “hospitality industry,” may offer some clues as to just how strongly the American mind has learned to associate hospitality with the sale of professional services. It would be foolish to argue that capitalism has driven all evidence of warmth and good will out of what we now call hospitality; to the contrary, it seems likely that hotels and restaurants are more likely to succeed if they deliver their service with a caring attitude. Nevertheless, we have come a long way from the ancient world, in which the Greeks considered the welcoming of strangers so important that they made it a moral obligation and a political imperative. Hospitality was, in fact, a core virtue so essential that its immortal patron was Zeus, the greatest of the gods. We are distant as well from the traditions of ancient Hinduism, which are rife with stories of strangers who, having been welcomed by an unsuspecting host, reveal themselves to be avatars of divinity. We in our own time are not nearly so likely to tell ourselves, “The Guest is God.” We tend to tell ourselves instead that hospitality is something that you buy.

But it is not just that hospitality has become commodified. Equally important is a question of character, and the kind of character that our political assumptions foster. We are falling victim to some unforeseen consequences of the entire philosophy of liberal self-reliance, a set of beliefs that has been ascendant in America since the days of Emerson. Democratic liberalism is the paradise of the talented, able-bodied

radical individual. Except at the limits set by legality, it is an ideology that does not judge how we define our goals in life. Instead, it seeks to create political and economic structures through which one's goals may be efficiently achieved. And here's the catch: by creating so much space and deference for individual growth and gain, liberalism eats away at social connection and community. Emphasizing the transactional elements of life, it ignores the transcendent. In an individualist, self-regarding culture, a person may have incentives to be superficially pleasant, whereas divine injunctions about loving, protecting, and sheltering our neighbors command little or no allegiance. We look to the *systems* of democracy and capitalism to create hospitable conditions for the triumph of talent, ambition, and energy. Our personal hospitality matters less and less. As a source of values and vindication, we are left with what, in the 1960s, Sir Kenneth Clark referred to as "heroic materialism" (347). Clark knew that it was an insufficient value then. It is no more satisfying now.

One finds, as well, an atmosphere of presumptive distrust in American society that has grown more palpable throughout my lifetime. Let us return for a few minutes to *Bowling Alone*. Hospitality, it should go without saying, depends on trust. I welcome you into my home or into my country with the confidence that you will repay me with gratitude and responsible behavior. You enter my home or country with the hope and expectation that you will be treated with respect and dignity. For this relation to function, it must exist not only regarding individuals we already know intimately and have specific reasons to trust—what Putnam calls "thick trust,"—but also to some lesser degree with regard to someone whom we don't know and whom we trust simply because of our general belief that people are trustworthy (136). We base our actions on a kind of standing decision that most people deserve the benefit of the doubt—what Putnam calls "thin trust." Thin trust is actually more important than thick trust because it expands our radius of trusting relations beyond the number of people we can actually know. Beyond the emotional benefits that come with believing that human society is, on balance, a trustworthy place to be, a social atmosphere of thin trust confers demonstrable economic benefits. The more a culture can depend on trust and less on force or legal action to enforce its bargains, the more efficient it will be. Moreover, as Putnam points out, *within* any given society, the well-to-do are more trusting than the disadvantaged. Trust and trustworthiness pay dividends.

And yet, in the United States of America, perceptions of the trustworthiness of others have steadily declined. In 1952, asked whether they

thought people were as honest and moral as they used to be, over half of all respondents said yes. By 1998, Americans who considered their fellow human beings to be as good as they used to be were outnumbered by the misanthropes three to one (Putnam 139). In the first edition of *Bowling Alone*, published in the year 2000, Putnam observed parallel declines in both civic engagement and organizational involvement. In the preface to the revised twentieth anniversary edition, published six years ago, Putnam reports that civic engagement, organizational involvement, and social trust have all continued without interruption on their downward path (Putnam 2). Bowling leagues, bridge clubs and fraternal organizations, which were once fixtures in the American social landscape, have dwindled and often vanished.

The years since *Bowling Alone's* first edition have, of course, witnessed the rise of social media. Studies cited in Putnam's revised edition indicate that the increase in access to the Internet has accelerated the previous declines in civic engagement. Whereas, on the one hand, social media have made it dramatically easier to maintain long-distance friendships, the connections it most ably fosters are just that: distant. Where physical presence is absent, so, too, is the true interpersonal bond that is the lifeblood of human interactions. As Putnam puts it, "we [are] communicating more but listening less. Our devices allow the illusion of connection without the demands of friendship and conversation" (425). Among the lessons of the COVID-19 shutdown is this: human beings are not wired for social distancing. The truly personal, the face-to-face—these are the evident foundations of societal and emotional health. As the respected religious scholar Albert J. Raboteau once told me, "There is no substitute for contact."

Without doubt, other contributors to this volume will address thoroughly and eloquently the disastrous turn away from hospitality that has marked American immigration policies since the regrettable rise of Trump, and this essay will leave that exploration largely to them. However, I do feel qualified to speak anecdotally on the subject of hospitality as it relates to American immigration. Since 1997, I have taught proudly at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in the City University of New York. Approximately thirty percent of John Jay's student body is foreign born. Add in our number of students born in the USA to immigrant parents, and you have described more than half of our student population. To the hordes of lunatics and criminals that the Republican Party so colorfully and fancifully imagines as constituting our new arrivals, these students do not bear the slightest resemblance. They are dedicated, hard-working, and generally cheerful about their chances in the Land of the Free—if only that

land will actually give them a chance. My college is in the business of creating those chances. It stands among the top ten colleges nationally, both on raising students from the working class into the middle class and in getting Latinx students admitted to law school. I think better of myself knowing that I work for an institution that provides a beacon of hope and a place of true hospitality for the eager and ambitious from other shores. And it makes me sad that a major political party in my country would gladly extinguish that beacon with hardly a hesitation. In John Jay's view, in my own view, America represents a promise. It is a promise that we vow to keep.

We shall now move a bit abruptly from the sociological to the literary. At the core of my argument is the hypothesis that the act of writing for an audience is, in its own peculiar way, an act of hospitality. The writer invites us into the living space of her or his thoughts—a sanctum far more private and personal than any apartment or living room. We, the readers, are offered a guided tour of this space—its bright spaces, its architectural curiosities, and its dark corners. The writer shares with us the music of her or his mental space and, if the connection is deeper, serves us a generous helping of an idea, garnished with experience and washed down with a draught of speculation. But there is a profound difference between the hospitality of the conventional host and that of the writer, and it is this: the writer is under no obligation to make the reader comfortable. Indeed, on some occasions, an impolite author may gratify us more than a gracious and obliging one. By the same token, we, as readers, are free to leave at any time, without even so much as a thank you. I am thinking, somewhat arbitrarily, of Lockwood's stumbling entry into Heathcliff's abode at Wuthering Heights. He enters with every naïve expectation that at least the formalities of welcoming will be observed, only to find, at every turn, gestures of defiance and barely checked hostility. He feels the uneasiness that comes with unsolvable mysteries. But it is Lockwood's very discomfort that draws him further in; he will wrestle with this place and its meanings, and he will not banish it from his mind until he knows it, through and through. A guest like Lockwood never ceases to desire hospitality and acceptance, but it is his having been denied it that spurs him onward to feats of probing and reflection.

I have chosen for the essential core of my remarks a triad of female Hispanic-American authors, each of whom offers particular insight into the question of hospitality in America: Julia Alvarez, Quiara Alegria Hudes, and Sandra Cisneros. Alvarez's novel, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, captures in prose both the sentiment of forever looking backward and the tension between the new and old

identity of someone who has found a lack of hospitality in an unfamiliar place. The very title of the book conveys a hint of this tension; although the book purports to tell about the loss of one's foreign accent, the diacritic mark over the "i" in the family name *García* remains conspicuously present, a reminder that the former selves of the four sisters have not been forever extinguished. Moreover, the structure of the book breathes a spirit of nostalgia. To emphasize the yearning for an unrecoverable past, the anecdotes that comprise the narrative are told in reverse chronological order. As our knowledge of the protagonists deepens, we move further into their earlier lives and closer to the family's origins in the Dominican Republic. In reading this tale of assailed and compromised identity, we feel the narrative leading us against the currents of time, charting a magical course toward its recovery. As the story moves forward, it moves backward, in a fashion mimetic of the functions of memory, and memory is made the more poignant because the things recalled are inaccessible, not only because of the passage of time, but also by the barriers of geography. We learn that, in the old country, Mr. García was a man of wealth and influence who was forced to flee along with his family after taking part in a failed attempt to overthrow the brutal dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo. Thus, during the family's early years in the USA, Thomas Wolfe's famous phrase is a political reality: you can't go home again. The time and place where these characters were always welcome, where hospitality needed not even be thought of, will never again be experienced in the same way.

A pivotal chapter in the book, titled "The Rudy Elmenhurst Story," chiefly concerns the book's central character, Yolanda García. Alvarez's novel not only features a quartet of sisters, but also foregrounds the sibling who aspires to become a writer and who sometimes goes by the nickname "Joe." The echoes of *Little Women* are highly audible. Alcott's March sisters continually confront the discomforts of being a relatively poor family within a prosperous and occasionally snobbish social circle. However, thanks to their Anglo-Saxon ancestry, they are never prompted to question their place in American society writ large. It goes otherwise with the García sisters. In "The Rudy Elmenhurst Story," Joe has enrolled in a collegiate creative writing seminar. She seeks, by mastering the tropes of her new country's literature, to find a toehold of acceptance. To the contrary, however, the class is, for her, an experience of exclusion; she feels like an unbidden intruder into a sanctuary of English majors. Fascinatingly, the gesture that makes her most painfully conscious of her otherness is one that is intended to have the opposite effect. Alvarez writes:

He called roll, acknowledging most of the other students with nicknames and jokes and remarks, stumbling over my name and smiling falsely at me, a smile I had identified as one flashed on “foreign students” to show them the natives were friendly. I felt profoundly out of place. (71)

In these brief lines, Alvarez encapsulates the inwardly contradictory nature of hospitality. Hospitality, of course, seeks to include. However, unless the tact that accompanies it is practically perfect, its exercise implies distance that conveys a message that differs from inclusion. The hospitable nod or smile does not really mean: “You are one of us.” Rather, it means, “You are different. We perceive and know that you are different. But just see how polite we are being about it!” While appearing to be concerned with the comfort of the recipient, the gesture is really about the self-perceived openness of the giver, who either does not recognize or cannot conceal the inherent hint of paternalist condescension.

Perhaps justifiably, one might argue that Joe is being overly sensitive—that a well-intentioned smile from a professor should be accepted in the best spirit and promptly moved on from. But the professor’s awkward welcome is only a prelude to the much more egregious false hospitality of the classmate who gives his name to the story. Rudolph Brodermann Elmenhurst III relies on his rakish charm and recklessly forward demeanor to win Yolanda as a girlfriend. She gradually discovers, however, that he has the mindset of a would-be stay-at-home sexual tourist, whose parents approve of his pursuit of Yolanda as a kind of hands-on geography lesson in a different culture. At the end of their relationship, which has consisted mostly of his arrogant romantic advances and her uncomfortable denials, Rudy discloses the stereotype-spewing bigotry that attracted him to her in the first place:

“You know,” he said, “I thought you’d be hot-blooded, being Spanish and all, and that under all the Catholic bullshit, you’d be really free, instead of all hung up like these cotillion chicks from prep schools. But Jesus, you’re worse than a fucking Puritan.” (Alvarez 99)

Rudy’s vulgar rejection is, for Joe, a sad revelation. She recalls, “I saw what a cold, lonely life awaited me in this country. I would never find someone who understood my peculiar mix of Catholicism and agnosticism, Hispanic and American styles” (Alvarez 99). Yolanda is looking for the hospitality, not only of a different country, but that all-too-rare hospitality of a comprehending heart, the uncommon kindness of a soul that approaches another, not with a desire to dominate or possess, but to deeply and genuinely sympathize. When we consider the actual

contours of human need, we begin to realize that hospitality alone is essentially a minimum. The heart craves more than to be treated like a guest. It seeks not a mere hostelry but rather a home. In this highly relatable sense, all but the most fortunate of us are, in a sense, emotional foreigners, seeking a haven whose contours truly correspond to our inner nature. That haven bears the simple but complex name of love.

Yet it is a well-known feature of the human condition that the frustration of our desires may eventually benefit us more than their fulfillment, and so it turns out to be with Joe. We learn that, back home in the Dominican Republic, she was a terrible student, whom no one could force to open a book. Alvarez observes, however, “In New York, she needed to settle somewhere, and since the natives were unfriendly, and the country inhospitable, she took root in the language. By high school, the nuns were reading her stories and compositions out loud in English class” (Alvarez 141). Language is a filler of voids—not only of silences and the distances between people, but also of the empty spaces within the individual. In her loneliness, in the very condition of having been denied hospitality, Joe uses words to construct her space of safety and of value. Language and literature are also, for her, the tools of challenge and competition, the mastery of which may make her, in at least one precious sense, more American than the established Americans. Had there been no gaps in and around her, it seems unlikely that her linguistic creativity would ever have flourished. Communication expresses need. It is in the aching lacunae of life that the profoundest speech is formed.

Quiara Alegria Hudes, winner of the Pulitzer Prize for her play *Water by the Spoonful*, has reflected meaningfully on the relation between language and the at-home feeling that we seek through hospitality. The daughter of a Jewish father and a Puerto Rican mother, she faced all the slights and subtle exclusions that await an American child of mixed ancestry. Hudes’s salvation came through music and, crucially, through reading. She has referred to her fluency in the Western canon as her “emergent superpower”—an acquired linguistic ease that, she says, “brought exhilaration and comfort because, if you’re fluent in a language, there’s a place you belong” (Hudes, *My Broken Language* 127). For Hudes, one of the core purposes of writing is to make our world a more congenial home and habitat. She asserts, “Each story is two stories: its absence and presence; its voice and silence. What would the world be without this particular story? What is the world now, with this story? Write the ones that fill a void. The ones whose absence would make a less complete world” (177).

And yet, with all her appreciation of language and its ability to close our gaps and to complete our realities, Hudes also recognizes that language alone cannot produce the rich atmosphere of welcome and belonging that the human organism requires. *Water by the Spoonful* comments insightfully on the displacement of hospitality in the age of social media. The action begins very shortly before the death of Ginny Ortiz, a kindly North Philadelphia woman whose determined and non-judgmental hospitality has long been the emotional glue that has held her neighborhood together. Based on Hudes's real-life grandmother, Ginny has been a wellspring of community: she has always left her door open. We learn that she has planted community gardens and installed wheelchair ramps for the disabled. Ginny never appears on stage; the audience knows her only through the affectionate and wistful recollections of those who knew her. In the context of the play, Ginny figures most prominently as the subject of a eulogy. She belongs to an irretrievable past, as does her kind of genuine, attentive and universal hospitality. Always "having a fresh pot of rice and beans ... for any hungry stranger," Ginny has built her community, not with a chatroom or blog posts, but "with a hammer and nails" (69, 67).

It is a major point of Hudes's drama that deep face-to-face hospitality has been swept aside in the era of social media. Indeed, the most actively functioning community in *Water by the Spoonful* is an online chat room, with participants in Philadelphia, San Diego, and Japan, open only to recovering crack addicts. Through the agency of the internet, community and hospitality are transmuted into unprecedented forms. Utterly detached from physical reality, the word becomes all. It becomes the sole conveyer of emotion and the unique bearer of character and identity. No longer limited by space and no longer inhibited by the expectation of personal contact, Hudes's characters enjoy broader possibilities but also encounter new pitfalls. The patrons of the chatroom are partially anonymous; each has a handle that differs from their actual name. Freed from the requirement of being physically present for one another, they are also freed from the burdens of their personal histories; they are free to invent themselves anew. For some participants, this last chance at community works, saving them from relapse and likely death. For most, it fails. As one of them observes:

It usually doesn't end up so good. One in twenty, maybe, hang around. Most people just don't write one day and then thirty days and then you're wondering ... And sometimes you get the answer. Cuz their wife looks on their computer and finds the website and logs on and writes, "I found him face down in the snow." (48)

At the center of the chat space is Odessa, a Puerto Rican woman who signs herself online as Haikumom. We discover that she is actually Ginny Ortiz's sister. But, in stark contrast to the saintly Ginny, Odessa, in her real life, has failed catastrophically at the basic demands of community. Decades earlier, her infant daughter died during a bout of stomach flu because Odessa was too far under the influence of drugs to keep the girl hydrated. Odessa/Haikumom is the link between the two "worlds" of the play—the online space of www.recovertogether.com and the real world where characters interact in person. She is also central because the divided nature of these two worlds reflects a parallel division within her. Online, she is anonymously benevolent, providing a safe space for crack addicts who are trying to get over their habits. Perhaps above all else, Odessa in her alter ego as Haikumom is, as her online handle suggests, motherly—giving guidance, censoring foul language. And, of course, it is as a mother that she has failed spectacularly in her real life, letting a daughter die because of her drug habit. *Water by the Spoonful* excels in demonstrating how the internet has revolutionized identity—enabling people to get second chances and to create second selves. You were a bad mother? Here's your opportunity to learn from your failures and try again. But a kind of fraudulence lies at the core of Odessa's attempted reformation. The past cannot be altered; at best, it can be concealed. Odessa can resurrect her moral being only by rewriting herself as a fictional character. When her fictions are inevitably exposed, she again descends precipitously into crack use, and nearly dies. Even in the best of times, in the chatroom imagined in *Water by the Spoonful*, hospitality is contingent, frail, and imperfect in its capacity to support and to sustain. As in life itself, the online environment offers powerful temptations toward incivility: the participants are sometimes no more generous or respectful toward one another than a drive-by shooter. One might optimistically expect the chatroom to become a place where the participants could set aside their racial differences and class antagonisms, thereby reaping the benefits of a kind of disembodied, Platonic equality. Alas, not so. Recriminations and f-bombs fly freely. The privileged status of a white computer programmer infects a black government employee with deep feelings of inferiority, prompting him to lash out with furious insults and cruel accusations. Despite some grim subject matter, Hudes's story is, in the end, optimistic; the main characters resolve into essentially happy pairs. Yet we also feel an atmosphere of comparative emptiness. We know that the bygone world of open doors and warm welcomes represented by Ginny Ortiz is a grievous loss, for which the chatroom is a flawed and feeble substitute.

Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* does not merely comment on hospitality and its absence: it openly strives to be a hospitable text. The book does not limit itself to a single front door: in writing it, the author imagined "people who are busy working for a living [people who] deserve beautiful little stories, because they don't have much time and are often tired" (xvii). She intended "a book that can be opened at any page and will still make sense to the reader who doesn't know what came before or comes after" (xvii). More importantly, in this house of many doors, there is no gatekeeper in the form of needless complexity. Cisneros recalls that she emphatically did *not* "want to write a book that a reader won't understand and would feel ashamed for not understanding" (xvii). Those words appear in Cisneros's introduction to *The House on Mango Street*, and it remains heartening to read them. One grows easily and justifiably frustrated with the academicized nature of literary studies: the way in which our profession, hoping to appear more "professional," tends to exalt and fetishize the esoteric and the obscure, fostering a cultural divide that mirrors the political division that tragically plagues America. Far too much writing about literature is delivered with an elitist sneer, wrapped in an impenetrable sleeve of jargon. As a profession, we are, too often, hell bent on shaming and alienating the lay person and, in so doing, making ourselves as repellent and laughable to the general public as we possibly can. Cisneros reminds us that literature, properly understood, is a labor of inclusion—of making the thoughts and experiences of the Other comprehensible and sympathetic, of using language as a bridge, not as a forbidding wall topped with strands of barbed wire spun out of hierarchical hegemonic hermeneutics.

The House on Mango Street deals with exclusion and the want of hospitality with singular insight and grace, gently and modestly probing the psychology that emerges in inhospitable places. Cisneros subtly argues that places in which we feel alien do more than make us feel out of place in an external surrounding. With time, the unwelcoming environment makes a person inwardly hostile to herself. This happens because, like it or not, places leave their mark on us. They become part of who we are, no matter how furiously we may wish to deny the infiltration. Although she finds herself *in* Mango Street, the book's protagonist, Esperanza Cordero, struggles consciously not to let Mango Street become a part of her. "This isn't my house," she declares to a friend, and shakes her head as if the shaking can undo the time she has lived there. "I don't belong," she adds. "I don't ever want to come from here" (106). To Esperanza, the street comes to signify poverty, lack of protection, thwarted opportunity, and sexual humiliation—all forces that shape her experience but which

she never wants to shape her identity. She despises Mango Street. To let its influences become a part of her would require her to detest a portion of herself. The place that shows so little hospitality to her makes her inhospitable to the totality of her own being.

Her relationship to her ostensible home is, in this way, one of grim-faced resistance, but even this spirit of resistance acts upon her in a formative fashion. In a work with many splendid rhetorical moments, possibly the most sublime is the extended pathetic fallacy titled “Four Skinny Trees,” which deserves to be quoted in its entirety:

They are the only ones who understand me. I am the only one who understands them. Four skinny trees with skinny necks and pointy elbows like mine. Four who do not belong here but are here. Four raggedy excuses planted by the city. From our room we can hear them, but Nenny just sleeps and doesn’t appreciate these things.

Their strength is secret. They send ferocious roots beneath the ground. They grow up and grow down and grab the earth between their hairy toes and bite the sky with violent teeth and never quit their anger. This is how they keep.

Let one forget his reason for being, they’d all droop like tulips in a glass, each with their arms around the other. Keep, keep, keep, trees say when I sleep. They teach.

When I am too sad and too skinny to keep keeping, when I am a tiny thing against so many bricks, then it is I look at trees. When there is nothing left to look at on this street. Four who grow despite concrete. Four who reach and do not forget to reach. Four whose only reason is to be and be. (74–75)

Paradox abounds in these brief lines. The passage exudes a tone of mute resistance, but, of course, Esperanza is not mute. Language, indeed, is her ultimate and only way out of her metaphorical prison. A curious effect is created as well when we learn that the secret of the trees’ persistence lies in the roots that they thrust into the ground. Granted, these roots teach Esperanza the importance of digging in, of standing one’s ground. But the trees are immobile, rooted in the very ground that Esperanza feels she must escape. Resistance to the inhospitable environment entails and demands attaching oneself to the environment all the more deeply. To wrestle against otherness, one must embrace the other, in a union that becomes inextricable.

As character names go, Esperanza is perhaps too overtly on the button. The name, of course, means hope, and Cisneros’s novel intends to show us something about the kinds of hopes that it is fitting and proper to have. The lack of hospitality that Esperanza has encountered creates in her a desire to be different. She wants a real house of her own with, as she alliteratively imagines it, “my porch, my pillow, my pretty purple petunias” (108). The repeated possessive pronouns make their point:

the hoped-for security depends on ownership. But Esperanza wants her own space not only for her personal comfort. With the innocent zeal of someone who is lavishly generous with an imaginary fortune that has yet to be earned, she vows that, when she has her house, she will not forget who she is or where she comes from. Cisneros writes:

Passing bums will ask, Can I come in? I'll offer them the attic, ask them to stay, because I know how it is to be without a house.
Some days after dinner, guests and I will sit in front of a fire. Floorboards will squeak upstairs.
The attic grumble.
Rats? They'll ask.
Bums. I'll say, and I'll be happy. (87)

Repelled by her life on Mango Street, Esperanza vows to flee it when she can and to never return. Toward the end of the narrative, however, an older woman speaks to her with words that seem to be both a prophecy and a command.

When you leave, you must always remember to come back. [...] 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)

Esperanza hangs onto her pledge to leave. But now she knows what her friends and neighbors will not understand: that she will go away *in order to* come back, for the ones who cannot so easily get out. For this forlorn place is, at long last, and in spite of itself, its own community, uniting people even as they feel inwardly divided.

America is a place of almost universal and perpetual displacement. As much as the country may superficially celebrate the virtues of home and the familiar, the stronger impulse of America is to leave home and, often, to erase as much of home from our hearts and minds as we can bear to lose. The search for the next frontier has persisted long after the true frontier vanished into highways, shopping malls, and defiantly bland housing developments. A case can be made that the three quintessential protagonists of American fiction are Ishmael, Huck Finn, and Jay Gatsby. They are all characters who are or have been on the move. The first two are orphans and runaways. For Gatsby, orphanhood is a convenient and appealing fantasy. He firmly rejects his parentage and midwestern roots, telling Nick Carraway that his family are all deceased. In the America of our own time, rootlessness is a badge of accomplishment, success often measured in the miles one

has placed between oneself and the place of one's origins. The prediction, "He or she will go far" is an expression of high praise. Few figures are more tacitly pitied in American culture than the adult child who lives with his parents. I once asked a dear French friend where she would live in France if she could choose any place at all. She replied at once, "Next door to my parents." In the United States, an analogous answer would be almost unthinkable. I once helped a second cousin of mine with a genealogy assignment he was assigned in school, to trace his ancestry in America. The first eleven ancestors I discovered had each settled in a different state. I myself am a native of California. I have not lived there for 34 years and do not expect ever to return. Although the number is increasing, the average length of home ownership in America is only eight years. Astonishingly, nearly one in every five Americans changes address every year (Putnam 204).

Having had typically so relatively little to do with home, is it that much of a wonder that postmodern Americans are losing the talent for making others feel at home, when we are less and less acquainted with this feeling ourselves? Yet this observation speaks in the broadest of generalities, and an important distinction must be made between the general and the particular, in two different respects. First of all, the American trend toward isolation and away from hospitality has an incalculable number of exceptions; one finds everywhere Americans who have retained a spirit of welcome and sympathy for the newly arrived. Secondly, there is a dissonance within American attitudes toward the unfamiliar. Thinking in gross, abstract terms, imagining the Other as a looming, faceless mass, the American often reacts with avoidance and distrust. But when the Other comes to him as an individual in need, the American's generosity is rediscovered. I am reminded of a significant chapter from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, in which Stowe introduces us to Senator Bird, an Ohio legislator who, just hours earlier, has declared his support for legislation against the interests of fugitive slaves. Happenstance brings two visitors to his door: Eliza and her young son Harry. Senator Bird, who has just confidently displayed his intolerance for an entire class and race of his fellow countrymen, gives copious aid to the two runaways, thus violating the very law he has supported. Perhaps it is true that American attitudes toward the unfamiliar have not changed so much from the time of Stowe and abolition. So long as we are able to put ideology out of the way, so long as we continue to see with our own eyes the unmet human needs around us, Americans will, with their unselfish actions, continue to write encouraging chapters in the history of hospitality.

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Abstract: “No, this isn’t my house ... I don’t belong. I don’t ever want to come from here.” With words of cold fury, Sandra Cisneros’s heroine Esperanza Cordero rejects the place in Chicago that her family has attempted to embrace as its new home. The embrace is prickly and problematic, as young Esperanza struggles to find an identity, to cope with sexual harassment, and to resist being defined by her parents’ crumbling, one-bedroom house on Mango Street. This essay seeks to understand the problems of community and its threatened loss as they are addressed by three essential works by three Latina American writers: Julia Alvarez, Quiara Alegria Hudes, and Sandra Cisneros. It also references the groundbreaking sociological work of Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, which examines in more general terms the loss of cohesion and trust in American society. Turning to Alvarez’s novel, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, the essay pursues the problem of young women whose ethnicity becomes a focus of sexual curiosity and is overtly associated with a presumption of promiscuity. Alvarez’s novel is presented as an exemplar of a nostalgic text, wherein episodes are narrated in reverse chronological order, mimetically evoking a wistful desire to return to a lost heritage, now accessible only through the act of writing. In its treatment of Hudes’s play *Water by the Spoonful*, the essay observes the transvaluation of community that has taken place in the age of social media. The literal open doors of hospitable houses give way to internet chat rooms, in which contact takes place across thousands of miles, but at the palpable expense of true empathy and fellow feeling. In its discussion of Cisneros’s novel *The House on Mango Street*, this essay examines the phenomenon of the hospitable text: a work that an author creates with a conscious desire to create a congenial, comfortable space for the reader, even as the novel’s characters contend with their emotional homelessness in a new land—a condition that persists even when one has a literal roof over one’s head. The essay also observes how the isolation of a sexually tormented girl is made worse by unfamiliar, unwelcoming surroundings.

Keywords: hospitality, identity, community, Julia Alvarez, Sandra Cisneros, Quiara Alegria Hudes, Robert D. Putnam

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Review of International American Studies

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