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Down These City Streets: Exploring Urban Space in *El Bronx Remembered* and *The House on Mango Street*

Nicholasa Mohr and Sandra Cisneros exemplify new voices in their respective Latino literary traditions by addressing the topic of urban space from a Latina feminist perspective. Mohr was among the first Nuyorican writers in the 1970s to examine the role of women of Puerto Rican background in their social environment in the United States, specifically New York City. Unlike her Nuyorican male counterpart, Piri Thomas, Mohr observes the space of the home to understand how that ambience influences young girls in public. She does not recover one-dimensional and stereotyped Latina female protagonists in a life of crimes, drugs, and prostitution the way many male writers portray them. Rather, she carefully penetrates the interior worlds of the women who lead ordinary as opposed to escapade lives. She traces how young Nuyorican girls move and cope with obstacles in their urban world in her *El Bronx Remembered* (1975). In a revealing essay "The Journey Towards a Common Ground," Mohr discusses the value of her work in discovering new characters and voices in the representation of Puerto Rican women. She asks:

> Where was my own mother and aunt? And all those valiant women who left Puerto Rico out of necessity, for the most part by themselves bringing small children to a cold and hostile city. They came with thousands of others, driven out by poverty, ill-equipped with little education and no knowledge of English. But they were determined to give their children a better life and the hope of a future. This is where I had come from, and it was these women who became my heroes. When I looked for role models that symbolized strength, when I looked for subjects to paint and stories to write, I had only to look at my own. (83)

Sandra Cisneros, in turn, represents one of the first Chicana writers in the 1980s who speaks to the transitional situation of young Chicana/Latina women who cross

the borders of the domestic sphere into the city streets. Unlike many Chicano male writers before her, Cisneros depicts female protagonists who struggle between the home and the desire to escape that domestic space. Like Mohr, she prefers to illustrate women as people who need to be heard and understood, subjects in their own right. Cisneros also understands a woman's need to realize that she has opportunities beyond those of her home such as a university education. In *The House on Mango Street* (1984), the character of Esperanza becomes aware of her abilities to move through urban spaces physically and symbolically, a new perspective in U.S. Latina literature. What is more important, this female protagonist is breaking boundaries with the patriarchal paradigm set up for young girls within traditional Latino culture. Cisneros pays homage to the woman who wishes to control and organize her own life as well as those who offer a community of emotional support. In a relevant essay "Unveiling Athena," the feminist critic Erlinda Gonzales-Berry points out to the importance of Cisneros' portrait of Chicanas. She states:

> She makes women the central focus of the narrative and presents a firmly centered female protagonist who acts, not as the Other of a male protagonist but, rather, as a subject who dares to confront lies and to deconstruct myths. Mothers and virgins are certainly still present, as are women content in their role of the Eternal Feminine, but these are viewed with a critical eye. Are they the only roles available to Chicanas? What price have women paid for protection and dependency? (43)

Social Context

In *El Bronx Remembered*, Nicholasa Mohr sets her narrative in the post-World War II period when waves of Puerto Rican immigrants began to form Nuyorican communities in the United States. At a crucial moment in Nuyorican history, these Latino migrants discover Anglo-American culture, predominantly European, with much conflict. During this time, most Nuyoricans come from a racially mixed, working-class background, a factor which makes them objects of racial, linguistic, and class discrimination. In addition to feeling unwelcome, Nuyoricans must live in limited housing situations, be they tenements in barrios, Latino neighborhoods, or other forms of cultural spatial boundaries. Segregation serves as a basis for all of Mohr's stories in *El Bronx Remembered*. She addresses a specific place, El Bronx, to recount her stories and show the effects that these living conditions have on Nuyorican people, particularly on women.[1]

While *El Bronx Remembered* is devoted to the different stories of people who form part of the Nuyorican community after World War II, in *The House on Mango Street*, Sandra Cisneros organizes the voices of the Chicano/Latino community around a central character Esperanza in Chicago of the late 1960s. Like the Bronx

context, the Latino characters in this neighborhood are bilingual, working-class, and primarily young girls at a transitory stage. Historically speaking, different Latino cultures--Chicano, Mexican, Puerto Rican--are coming into contact with each other in the urban space as they move around to find a home during this radical time of the 1960s.[2] Interestingly enough, this cultural history also coincides with the world-wide feminist movements that empowered women. It is no wonder that Cisneros continues to explore this U.S. Latina feminist literary consciousness in an urban context in the 1960s that Mohr had already initiated in the 1940s. Despite the fact that these women authors come from different national backgrounds and histories, they share an interest in the way their female protagonists of Latin American heritage combat similar problems of racism, class conflict and patriarchy in an American city context. Cisneros' and Mohr's texts develop this urban Latina feminist awareness in the young Esperanza and Nuyorican protagonists.

Urban Space

New York City and Chicago are urban areas with large Latino populations. For Nuyoricans, New York City serves as their cultural capital: it provides a sense of home in the mainland. Chicago, on the other hand, represents a crossroads for the two largest Latino cultures, Chicano and Puerto Rican, a place where new cultures are born. In *El Bronx Remembered* and *The House on Mango Street*, the Latina protagonists develop a social consciousness of the urban space as they travel in their respective cities. In both contexts, urban space serves as a landscape for exploration where young girls traverse cultural boundaries from one social milieu to another. On a symbolic level, it also represents the recognition of the female body, a sexual awakening. This process of change alerts the mind (of both the city and the body) to an awareness of gender. In "The Subjects of *This Bridge Called My Back* and Anglo-American Feminism," feminist critic Norma Alarcón explains how women's knowledge and familiarity of the world surrounding them can be understood in conjunction with their race, class and gender identity as women of color. She says, "Through 'consciousness-raising' (from women's point of view) women are led to know the world in a different way. Women's experience of politics, of life as sex object, gives rise to its own methods of appropriating that reality: feminist method" (33-34). In *El Bronx Remembered* and *The House on Mango Street*, the effects of coming of age in the urban space can be captured through the process of moving and coming across new experiences in the public sphere. This movement symbolizes a journey through different social environments that will give young Latinas new visions of their capabilities to transcend social restrictions placed upon them by cultural values, educational authorities, and patriarchal domination. In the three examples, street playing amongst girlfriends, socializing in school, and transforming traditional gender roles, the Latina protagonist (Chicana/Nuyorican) forms a self-awareness of her social role in an attempt to find "a space of her own" in the modern metropolis. According to David Harvey, living quarters within an urban

community can be so intense that people must control a particular space to give themselves a sense of belonging to that geographic area. He says:

> Within the community space, used values get shared through some mix of mutual aid and mutual predation, creating tight but often conflictual interpersonal social bonding in both private and public spaces. The result is an often intense attachment to place and 'turf' and an exact sense of boundaries because it is only through active appropriation that control over space is assured. (266)

The Significance of Movement

In *El Bronx Remembered*, movement becomes an important issue to understand the pubescent experience of young Latina girls in city culture. In "A Very Special Pet," family members face rapid cultural changes as they migrate from "their tiny village in the mountains" (2) in Puerto Rico to the cities in the United States. Mohr describes the transition: "City life was foreign to them, and they had to learn everything, even how to get on a subway and travel" (2). In the urban environment, a Puerto Rican woman encounters problems because she is not accustomed to living in this fast-paced city and culture that differs radically from her small hometown. Mohr offers the example, "Graciela Fernández [the mother] had been terribly frightened at first of the underground trains, traffic, and large crowds of people. Although the mother finally adjusted, she still confined herself to the apartment and seldom went out" (2). This self-imposed physical imprisonment affects her psychologically because she refuses to participate in the daily routine of city life. Yet, the children who gradually familiarize themselves with American culture through media and school will follow a different path from their mother because they will be raised in the Bronx. The young girls become especially aware of the need to explore urban space.

In *The House on Mango Street*, Esperanza, a young Latina in the city, experiences several changes by moving with her family from one apartment to another. In the vignette "The House on Mango Street," Esperanza's formative years take place in a very mobile environment. Her parents are in search of the American Dream, to be able to own a house. Since her parents are Mexican immigrants, it is difficult for them to find a stable and adequate home. The protagonist says, "But what I remember most is *moving* a lot. Each time it seemed there'd be one more of us. By the time we got to Mango Street, we were six—Mama, Papa, Carlos, Kiki, my sister Nenny and me" (7, emphasis mine). Like the young girls in *El Bronx Remembered*, the immigrant experience of the parents will affect Esperanza's gender consciousness because she will be raised in an urban environment, a place where one has to know the rules of the game called survival. Consequently, Esperanza must also learn how to defend her own turf to show that she will redefine

the cultural borders placed on her by ignorant outsiders who visit her barrio. She says: "Those who don't know any better come into our neighborhood scared. They think we're dangerous. They think we will attack them with shiny knives. They are stupid people who are lost and got here by mistake" (29). In this example, Esperanza challenges the stereotypical prejudices that people may have about the living spaces of working-class Latinos. Instead of having these spatial boundaries imposed on her, the protagonist traverses them to know other neighborhoods in her city.

This experience to find a home serves as a metaphor for another kind of search which is that of her consciousness and her relationship to that space around her. In "A House of My Own," Esperanza defines her space. She says, "Not a flat. Not an apartment in back. Not a man's house. Not a daddy's house. A house all my own. . . Nobody to shake a stick at. Nobody's garbage to pick up after. Only a house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem" (100). She becomes aware of the necessity then to find "a space of her own." The process of traveling through the world of the streets, the school system and the city will awaken Esperanza and other young Latinas to avenues of change and better understanding of their social and gender roles.

The Streets

Mohr and Cisneros invent their Latina female protagonists so that when they establish relationships with their girlfriends in the streets, they develop an awareness of their capabilities to penetrate forbidden zones in the city. In the story "Once Upon a Time. . .", Mohr explores the relationships among a group of three nameless girls who disobey their parents' orders by searching for an appropriate playing field, in other words "a space of their own." Since these girlfriends cannot seem to find a suitable place in their neighborhood, the Bronx, because it is too crowded or they do not belong to a specific turf like the boys in the group The Puerto Rican Leopards, they must settle for a more elevated space, the rooftops of buildings. In traveling this aerial space, these girlfriends find a space of their own. Mohr elaborates: "They walked along the rooftops, going from building to building. Each building was separated from the next by a short wall of painted cement, . . . no higher than three and a half feet. When they reached each wall the girls climbed over, exploring another rooftop" (41). Although their parents, especially the mothers, may have warned these girls about crossing into dangerous areas such as rooftops, the girlfriends experience an exhilarating feeling of freedom, as if they are literally on top of the world. From this angle, they acquire a new perspective on life. The title of the story may remind us of a children's fairy tale being told to learn a moral.. Mohr, nonetheless, expands the meaning beyond children's simple language. She emphasizes the adventure in the story, the daring experience that may only take place "once in a lifetime" in the case of these girls. Instead of learning from what older people may tell them, these youngsters prefer to take destiny into their own hands by evading the rules of the home. The awareness that they are willing to

confront danger face to face assures us that these girls are not the homebodies we thought of them in the beginning of the story. Mohr also calls attention to the importance of female friendship when a young Latina decides to experience independence in the urban environment. This female bonding manifests itself in their street singing, part of an oral tradition, which is the "language of the streets" or "the language of working-class dialogue" (Flores 51). Because of the spatial, economic, and cultural limitations placed on them in the home, these girls must learn to create their own sense of space to survive within the public sphere of the city.

In "Our Good Day" in *The House on Mango Street*, Esperanza also develops relationships with girlfriends and crosses prohibited city streets with them. Like the three nameless girls in *El Bronx Remembered*, Esperanza and her new friends, Rachel and Lucy, form a social alliance and collectively purchase a bicycle to ride around their neighborhood. In this story, Esperanza also undergoes a social change because she breaks her relationship with Cathy, Queen of Cats, a girl from a more upwardly mobile social status in exchange for two working-class, Texan Latinas, Rachel and Lucy, who had just migrated north to Chicago.[3] These girlfriends celebrate their freedom when they acquire a bicycle of their own, a mode of transportation that will take them places. This particular investment also makes Esperanza more independent and provides an avenue to travel into unknown spaces she would never have dreamed of otherwise as she enters the danger zone in rapid movement. She says: "We ride fast and faster. Past my house, sad and red and crumbly in places, past Mr. Benny's grocery on the corner, and down the avenue which is dangerous. Laundromat, junk store, drug store, windows and cars and more cars, and around the block back to Mango" (17). The rebellious Esperanza not only leaves her home but she also trespasses the limitations of her street and explores the other streets in her neighborhood. She takes the initiative in traveling to different places with her girlfriends even if it means crossing social restrictions placed upon her. By taking this step, Esperanza becomes an active agent of her life who wishes to become familiar with her social environment and beyond. Cisneros insinuates that young Latina girls should find appropriate wheels if they are going to discover new places in the urban space. Like boys who long to own a car, Esperanza learns to ride a bicycle to show that she too knows how to move around in this modern city. She dives into this transportation culture to avoid the pitfalls of a "sitting by the window" destiny. It is no wonder that for Esperanza and her new girlfriends this experience of owning a bicycle occurs on "our good day." She has found other girls with whom she can identify who are also willing to take risks. This moment symbolizes a beginning in being able to go wherever they desire to venture. From here to eternity, these Latina protagonists have the ability and the means to travel anywhere down the city streets. This movement also signifies a new perspective of space and the ability to develop one's potential when everyone tells Esperanza that she should not bother to leave her home. A motivated figure, she proves that she too can set up her own definition and appropriation of space in the city.

The School System

Mohr and Cisneros also address the school system's role in the formation of young girls' social consciousness. In "The Wrong Lunch Line" in *El Bronx Remembered*, the young Nuyorican protagonist Yvette faces humiliation when a schoolteacher reprimands her for eating with her Jewish friend, Monica. The schoolteacher barks in an authoritative tone: "You have no right to take someone else's place. . . You have to learn, Yvette, right from wrong. *Don't go where you don't belong*" (74, emphasis mine). In this social context, Yvette becomes the victim of class and cultural segregation within the school environment because she free-willingly enters a cultural space different than her own Latino one by disobeying the school authorities. Evidently, Mohr plays with perspectivism in this story. What is "the wrong lunch line" for the school authority, turns out to be "the right lunch line" for Yvette who follows her instincts. This means that Yvette takes the initiative to think for herself and believes in loyalty to her friend Monica who bonds with her in "a space of their own" rather than a space set up by institutional boundaries. The educational authorities prevent these young girls from crossing cultural borders by repressing their natural desires to make friends with children of different cultural backgrounds. In this scene, Mohr vividly captures how the young girls contest the authority of the educational school system. A dehumanizing machine, this institution functions to divide young children into separate physical and cultural spaces, a microcosm of society at large. The cultural divisions that take place within the spatial boundaries of the city definitely influence the young Nuyorican girls' social formation leaving them with limited opportunities to transgress beyond their potentials within the educational system and their social peers. In spite of these setbacks, though, Yvette refuses to play the role of the quiet Latina student. She rejoices with Monica: "'Boy, that Mrs. Ralston sure is dumb,' Yvette said gigglingly. They looked at each other and began to laugh loudly" (75). Within this context, the girlfriends celebrate the last laugh and triumph.

Esperanza also wishes to challenge the school system's authority in "A Rice Sandwich" in *The House on Mango Street*. Reminiscent of Yvette in *El Bronx Remembered*, Esperanza wishes to cross into foreign territory by sitting in the section of the "canteen," an eating place for "special kids" who are allowed to bring their lunch to school. Little does Esperanza realize that the spatial divisions of the school structure leave little room for personal freedom. She explains: "But lunch time came finally and I got to get in line with the stay-at-school kids. Everything is fine until the nun who knows all the canteen kids by heart looks at me and says: *you, who sent you here*? And since I am shy, I don't say anything, just hold out my hand with the letter. This is no good, she says, till Sister Superior gives the okay" (42, emphasis mine). Esperanza not only faces public degradation like Yvette, but she also becomes cognizant of the fact that she does not belong in the line with the canteen kids. The educational authorities, in this case the Catholic Church, do not even care to acknowledge her mother, a poor Latina woman, as an authority figure

because they treat her as if she were invisible. Moreover, this "rice sandwich" represents a different economic element. Esperanza's mother does not prepare her a bologna or peanut butter and jelly sandwich. But instead, she makes use of what resources are available to her. Esperanza says: "Okay, okay, my mother says after three days of this. And the following morning I get to got to school with my mother's letter and a rice sandwich because we don't have lunch meat" (42). Since she comes from a working-class background, she should be treated accordingly. This class and culture conflict transfers into a deep sense of marginalization for a young Latina girl who learns about the injustices of spatial divisions in school, a mirror image of the problems of the urban city. Like Mohr's character in "The Wrong Lunch Line," Esperanza becomes aware of the borders that can impede her from traveling to the other side, a place of restriction but one she must attempt to cross.

Sexuality in the Public Sphere

Transforming traditional gender roles by leaving the domestic space in the discovery of sexuality becomes a significant issue in both texts. Mohr's representation of sexuality in the novella "Herman and Alice" in *El Bronx Remembered* departs from the conventional male perspective because she defines new outlooks for young Latinas regarding choice and circumstance. In *Sobre la literatura puertorriqueña de aquí y de allá: aproximaciones feministas*, the feminist critic Margarita Fernández-Olmos explains:

> Las novelas de ... autoras chicanas y puertorriqueñas, como la mayor parte de las escritoras contemporáneas, incluyen una crítica cultural que no se encuentra normalmente en las obras de autores masculinos: la diferenciación sexual de las funciones sociales de hombres y mujeres, niñas y niños. (120)

Likewise, Mohr shows the need to change the sexual roles of young Latina girls, in this case Alice, who redefine their positions within the family structure. Although the young Nuyorican Alice becomes a teen-age mother leaving her without many choices, she learns from her first sexual experience about the physical meaning of womanhood. Mohr offers an example, "Later that night they met on the stairway leading to the roof. It happened so quickly. She felt nothing except fear and pain. Stevie was drunk and held her tightly. For a moment she struggled to leave, but he covered her mouth with his hand, warning her not to cry or scream because someone may hear them. Alice now found herself crying as she remembered how Stevie forced his way into her" (139). Living under this kind of sexual terror then becomes part of her sexual formation and eventually leads her to be more aware of the physical dangers of being a woman in an urban environment. In this process, Alice not only discovers the trials and tribulations of being a mother, but she also learns about being a woman who needs to know how to protect her body, even from the

intimate people such as her first boyfriend, Stevie. This problem of ignorance arises from cultural values as well. Alice's parents never allow her to be in control of her life. By living sheltered, she never has an opportunity to meet and deal with males personally. She also misses chances to socialize and discover new places to learn about survival in New York, a place that demands knowledge of its geographic space. As a result of this lack of knowledge and experience, she becomes pregnant unexpectedly. However, she marries a homosexual Puerto Rican friend, Herman, a socially marginal figure himself. Even though Alice may yield to the idea of marriage as an institution, she refuses to play the role of the dutiful wife. Her husband acts more like a friend than a domineering husband. Together, they redefine the idea of a traditional patriarchal Latino family where the man dominates. Hence, Alice dares to explore places outside of her neighborhood with Herman. In spiritual bonding, they travel from the Bronx to Manhattan. He says: "She had never been inside the Empire State Building, but she had heard about it from the kids in school" (135). In broadening her scope of New York City, Alice undergoes a social and gender awakening of her potentials to move through the urban space. Though she must deal with the hardships of motherhood at a young age, she discovers new ways to achieve self-fulfillment with Herman.

The characters Marin, Rafaela, and Sally also fall prey to patriarchal domination in *The House on Mango Street*. Like Alice's sheltered life in Mohr's text, they are never allowed to leave the father's home to learn about themselves and their social environment. When they do walk into the public sphere, men take advantage of their naiveté. This sexual exploitation of her girlfriends leads to the formation of a social and feminist consciousness in Esperanza. She later realizes that to be imprisoned at home can have traumatic consequences for young girls once they do step out into the public sphere. In "Red Clowns," she claims: "Sally Sally a hundred times. Why didn't you hear me when I called? Why didn't you tell them to leave me along? The one who grabbed me by the arm, he wouldn't let me go. He said I love you, Spanish girl, I love you, and pressed his sour mouth to mine" (93). While Esperanza is waiting for her friend Sally at a carnival by the "red clowns," boys sexually attack her. This desperate cry for help, for a friend, or for consolation reflects a profound cultural and social critique on the violence of young girls' bodies in the streets. Esperanza realizes that even in a children's world like a carnival, young girls are not safe. Any kind of violation can occur. In this case, the laugh or shout of the red clown corresponds to the screaming and bleeding from rape. Like Mohr, Cisneros defends the education and protection of Latina women's bodies, especially if they have to deal with people who try to invade their private space in the public sphere.

Exploring and "Conquering" the Urban Space

In *The House on Mango Street* Cisneros carries the torch of hope, "Esperanza,"

and liberation from Mohr in order to explore new possibilities for U.S. Latina women in a city environment. In the vignette "The First Job," Esperanza moves beyond her neighborhood to become a young working girl, which is to say an urban explorer. She learns to take public transportation downtown, a different environment, to earn a living. Esperanza must work in order to support her educational costs. She becomes financially responsible at a young age in the real world. She is so insistent on earning her own money that she must lie about her age. She says: "Aunt Lala said she had found a job for me at the Peter Pan Photo Finishers on North Broadway where she worked and how old was I and to show up tomorrow saying I was one year older and that was that" (51). At this new workplace, though, Esperanza becomes aware that she can still be a victim of physical harassment. She speaks of a fellow male co-worker: "he grabs my face with both hands and kisses me hard on the mouth and doesn't let go" (52). When she finds herself in the workforce which tends to provide security, Esperanza must pay the price for being a young vulnerable woman. Even in the workplace, Latina women must be on their guard for any kind of physical harassment. This experience serves as another form of sexual awakening for Esperanza who becomes alert as she crosses new social spaces in the city.

Similarly in "Alicia Who Sees Mice" in *The House on Mango Street*, the young protagonist Alicia travels a distance in the city to receive an education. Esperanza describes her: "Alicia, who inherited her mama's rolling pin and sleepiness, is young and smart and studies for the first time at the university. Two trains and a bus, because she doesn't want to spend her whole life in a factory or behind a rolling pin" (32). Alicia attempts to define her own space by developing her mind. Cisneros demonstrates this progression of Latina consciousness because now she explores the intellectual role of a Latina who has a right to think for herself and dictate the direction of her life. In fact, Alicia becomes a role model for Esperanza to leave the domestic space to acquire "a mind of her own." Alicia's situation, however, remains a bit problematic because she continues to live at home and serves the males in her family almost like a self-sacrificing mother. She must fulfill the domestic duties as well as her academic ones. Cisneros then finds it necessary to create an imaginary as well as a real space for Esperanza by using the notion of the house as a metaphor for space and freedom. What is at stake here may not just be the physical sense of independence for Esperanza, but rather intellectual and psychological freedom from patriarchal domination. In effect, the materialistic independence becomes a symbol for an intellectual development in the conquest of the urban space and the development of her feminist consciousness. She says: "I have begun my own quiet war. Simple. Sure. I am one who leaves the table like a man, without putting back the chair or picking up the plate" (82). These feelings of activity, rebellion, and movement have been present in her since she was a child in her home.

A Generation of *Mujeres en marcha*

The experiences of living in urban space for the female protagonists in *El Bronx Remembered* and *The House on Mango Street* provide a new perspective on the representations of the conditions of Chicana/Nuyorican women who form part of a border culture, Latino culture, a special mix of Latin American and Anglo-American. It is important to understand the similar concerns of the Latina protagonists in the different social contexts of these narratives to grasp how they react to different urban factors. While many Latino male authors have concentrated on "the bigger issues" of the Latino immigrant experiences from Mexico and Puerto Rico to the United States, it is just as imperative to study the dynamic experiences of Latina women who migrate within the big cities, New York and Chicago, places that provide a haven for change and growth. The social and feminist approaches I have utilized in this essay serve to bridge the gap between the literary texts of two U.S Latina writers who unite in dealing with issues in the city like street life, school, and sexuality in the public sphere. The common grounds between the Chicana and Nuyorican writers who develop "their feminism on the border, or bridge feminism" (Saldívar-Hull 207) looks at cementing a U.S. Latina literary tradition in the exploration of the urban space. Mohr and Cisneros offer ground-breaking narratives as they develop new visions and possibilities for U. S. Latina women as never shown before in either of their respective literary traditions, a generation of *Mujeres en marcha*.[4]

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NOTES

1. Juan Flores describes the historical context of *El Bronx Remembered* in a conversation with Nicholasa Mohr. He says: "The setting changes from Spanish Harlem during the war (1941-1945) in *Nilda* to the South Bronx of the decade following, from 1945-1956, the years when the migration of Puerto Ricans to New York reached tidal-wave proportions." In an interview with Edna Acosta-Belén, Nicholasa Mohr explains her own personal background, a blend of cultures, in relationship to the historical context and urban space. She says, "My rich heritage as a Puerto Rican, stemming from the Caribbean, Europe and Africa, provides me with source material for a unique interpretation of life in *urban* America (emphasis mine)." Both of these examples demonstrate how dedicated Mohr is to the representation of the Puerto Rican experience in a city environment at a time of social mobilization in history.
2. In the essay, "Ghosts and Voices: Writing from Obsession," Sandra Cisneros discusses the

importance of moving back and forth from Chicago to Mexico City as a youngster reflecting the bicultural experience of many immigrant people in the big cities in a moment in history of rapid modernization. She also stresses the impact that poverty had on her in discovering her unique voice. She poses the question, "What did I know except third floor flats... And this is when I discovered the voice I'd been suppressing all along without realizing it." In another essay, "Notes to a Younger Writer," Cisneros reveals the importance of writing about experiences in places that she knows personally. She says, "I can write of worlds (urban context) they (classmates at Iowa Writing Workshop) never dreamed of, of things they never could learn from a college textbook." In both of these examples, Cisneros like Mohr stresses the value of combining personal with social experience in the construction of reality in literature. All these pieces are contained in a larger essay entitled, "From A Writer's Notebook."

3. The Chicano/Latino movement from the South, Texas, and the island of Puerto Rico to the cities in the North of the United States has roots in other cultural experiences as well. For instance, the African-American novelists Alice Walker and Toni Morrison represent feminist voices who portray the experiences of African-Americans who have migrated from rural to the Northern cities in the twentieth century. In a comparative perspective, Latinas and African-American women share many similar experiences in the urban space because they have also struggled with racism, class conflict, and patriarchy.

4. Nicholasa Mohr and Sandra Cisneros reflect new and conscientious women's voices in U.S. Latina literature who examine the role of young women in a patriarchal society. It is interesting to note that they can almost be considered contemporaries with the leading feminine voices on the other side of the border in Latin American literature. The Mexican Rosario Castellanos in the 1970s and the Puerto Rican Rosario Ferré in the 1980s also emerge in response to a host of issues regarding the "woman question" within their own social contexts: they reconsidered the role of women in culture and society to free them from patriarchal rule.

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