

“Belong But Do Not Belong:” Exploring “Home” in *The House on Mango Street*

The concept of “home” is a complicated thing. Typically imbued with positive connotation and associated with the four-walled structure of one’s childhood house or images of the area in which one grew up, the sense of the word seems to imply that someone could easily say, “Where are you from?” and receive a simple location for an answer. However, “home” is more complex than it implies. Not only does “home” encapsulate the physical setting of formative places, but also the manifestations of the convergence of political, social, and cultural, not to mention familial, spheres. To this intersection, we bring our own interpretation of our lives and continually growing sense of identity, which adds another layer of meaning and context to our lives. All of these factors combined offer a fuller, although not definitive, picture of the nature of “home.”

In Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street*, the overarching arc of the story can be framed as main character Esperanza’s struggle to navigate the tension between her identity and her “home.” The series of vignettes that make up the novel offer glimpses—visceral, minimalist snapshots—of growing up during a pivotal year on Mango Street. Embodying an intersection of multiple identities: female, Mexican, immigrant, working class, and creative, Esperanza both opens and closes the book by describing the tension between simultaneously identifying and disidentifying with her home, the place that has formed her. In *The House on Mango Street*, Esperanza’s home represents the untruth of the American Dream, shame of stigmatized identity and racialized geography, and every-day trauma that goes hand-in-hand with systemic oppression. In the same turn, Esperanza’s home also is the site of authentic, simple childhood memories and relationships. Her experience of the inextricable positives and negatives of living on Mango Street shapes her into an individual, woman, and writer with a critical and creative

awareness attuned to justice (Sloboda, 2007). Cisneros's novel invites the reader to sit next to Esperanza and question the nature of home and belonging: what are the costs and benefits of identifying with or disidentifying with your home?

These questions surrounding the nature of "home" and its relationship to those who belong to it are not only present within *The House on Mango Street*, but in other literary works as well, across genre and time. In Jason Reynolds's 2017 novel in verse, *Long Way Down*, Will, the fifteen-year-old protagonist who sets out to take revenge on his older brother's killer, must confront the societal "rules" in his community that dictate his emotional response to tragedy. Within the rules of his home, Will states, there is no crying, no snitching, and always revenge, perpetuating an endless cycle of murder and relational loss. Through his interactions on his way down his apartment's elevator to murder the suspected killer, Will explores the ways in which he, willingly or unwillingly, belongs to the social rules through their shaping of his present reality and awareness of choices. Choice and its relationship to home also plays a major role in *Kindred*, a historical science fiction novel written in 1979 by Octavia E. Butler, in which a Black woman, Dana, is supernaturally transported back in time to the slave-holding South—the purpose of her time-travel to preserve the life of a white boy, Rufus, long enough for him to father her ancestors. As Dana travels back and forth through time, she finds herself becoming increasingly masterful in navigating the social and ideological conventions of the antebellum South, which deeply disturbs her sense of morality and identity. This forces her to reckon with the extent to which she associates and dissociates from her twentieth-century identity to continue her mission. While *Kindred* and *Long Way Down* are not part of the typical high school canon, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, a hallmark of high school English, also questions the nature of home and its impact on one's identity and morality through its exploration of Huck's

relationship to civility and “civilized” views of slavery. Especially poignant in the famous scene in which Huck decides not turning Jim in is worth going to hell for, the novel asks readers to question their sense of belonging to the values that shape their home.

When the tensions between home and identity are approached through a historical lens, Native Americans’ survival and cultural resilience in the face of genocide points to the long-standing significance of this conversation. Specifically, the legacy of government-funded boarding schools designed to eliminate all Native language, culture, and identity markers from Indigenous children is one of mass trauma, which has been passed down through generations. Thirty years after the forcible removal of Native peoples in the Southeast from their ancestral homes with the Indian Removal Act of 1830, the era of Indian boarding schools, which lasted from 1860 to 1978, sought to eradicate all elements of belonging from Indigenous children—homes, families, language, appearance, and culture (Pember, 2019). These efforts stemmed from systemic and individual racism and ethnocentrism; the goal of Indian boarding schools was to control and subjugate Native Americans through the removal of their very identities and sense of belonging. The ramifications of this loss are catastrophic, creating psychological, relational, and health crises that persist today in Native communities. In Tommy Orange’s 2018 novel, *There There*, he explores the question of home in the context of the Native American story through the intertwining narratives of twelve people with Indigenous ancestry in contemporary Oakland, asking the question: what kind of home does an Indigenous person belong to? Although Orange does not offer any clear-cut answers to settle this tension, *There There* itself makes the case for the value of community, storytelling, and the centering of marginalized voices.

In today’s context in 2020 America, a major issue that centers around the question of identity, home, and belonging is DACA, or Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals. This

executive order was created by President Obama in 2012 to provide a pathway to legal residency for immigrant people who were raised in the United States but hold an illegal immigration status due to having been brought to the U.S. as children (ADL, 2020). The position these people find themselves brings up important questions: where is the home of child immigrants? How should the government decide what constitutes belonging? According to the Anti-Defamation League's informational guide, for those people eligible for application, DACA permits recipients to remain in the country if they renew every two years. The legislation provides documentation that recipients may use for work authorization, application to higher education, driver's licenses, and other benefits (2020). Most importantly, people who are covered by DACA cannot be deported. Approaching the question of identity and its relationship to home from the perspective of immigrant children raised the United States, who constantly experience the anxiety of threats of deportation in addition to racial discrimination, we see that "home" is tied to the active formation of identity much more significantly than it is tied to geographic origins. The courage and organization of immigrant activists powerfully enact the same sense of purpose Esperanza conveys at the end of *The House on Mango Street*, "One day I will go away... They will not know I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot out" (p. 110). Although we are formed by our experiences of "home," –perhaps even because of our identification with our home—we are able to propel and enact change within our homes in pursuit of justice.

Through an approach to the complexity of "home" and its relationship to identity and belonging by seeking literary, historical, and contemporary context, the costs and benefits of identifying and disidentifying with one's home are significant and long-lasting. While there are no simple solutions to the tension that Esperanza exemplifies in *The House on Mango Street*, her

struggle, in company of the textual and real-life individuals confronted with similar issues, sheds light on the possibility that becomes available *through* struggle in community with awareness.

The end of *The House on Mango Street* concludes as stated above, conveying a sense of purpose and transcendence while maintaining a deep connection to the places and, more importantly, the people, who grew her into the person that she is. Furthermore, we see through Esperanza as the fictional writer of this collection of vignettes that she *does* come back for those who are unable to escape the limitations of Mango Street set by oppression. Despite the varied and diverse experiences of all those discussed in the literary, historical, and contemporary contexts, they share this same sense of purpose with Esperanza: to live in the tension and allow the friction that occurs to motivate action for change, whether that action be telling the stories of those who have been marginalized and silenced, empowering others within the community to overcome barriers placed on them, or organizing to make long-lasting, tangible social and political reform. Within and because of this tension, there is room for continual growth, compassion, and justice.

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