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# Coming of Age at the Margins: The Diasporic Coming-of-Age Novel in Works by Hanif Kureishi, Sandra Cisneros, and Yuri Herrera

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COMING OF AGE AT THE MARGINS: THE DIASPORIC COMING-OF-AGE  
NOVEL IN WORKS BY HANIF KUREISHI, SANDRA CISNEROS, AND YURI  
HERRERA

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty

of

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Ricardo Quintana Vallejo

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of

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Para mi madre, Angelica Vallejo.

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## ABSTRACT

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The *Bildungsroman* is a genre of the novel that portrays a process of identification by which heroes construct their identities based on the cultural signs, symbols, and practices in their social environments. The end of the process, in its most traditional iteration, illustrates the ideal subject of the fictionalized society. This traditional iteration corresponds to the German white middle class of the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century. Produced and consumed by the Bourgeoisie, these novels followed the coming-of-age processes of boys who became respected adults who embodied the values and practices of the middle class.

However, I focus on three Coming-of-age novels in which the archetypal plot does not unravel in a traditional manner: *The House on Mango Street* (1984) by Sandra Cisneros, *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990) by Hanif Kureishi, and *Señales que precederán el fin del mundo* (2009) by Yuri Herrera. The heroes are culturally hybrid and marginalized. Thus at the end they can neither find nor create an ideal model of adulthood within the limits of their fictionalized societies. Ultimately, the impossibility of becoming an ideal citizen and worker subverts the archetypal plot and interrupts the formative process.

I propose a new model to read these novels: the Diasporic Coming-of-age. The formative processes may remain unfinished, but these stories are sites for complex and intersectional exploration of the cultural practices, signs, and symbols that conform a fluid identity. Where the first kind of *Bildungsromane* offered readers an ideal model of imitation, Diasporic Coming-of-age novels empower readers to resist rather than fulfill stereotypes. 2015 marks the 220<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1795), often considered the first *Bildungsroman*, but the Coming-of-age genre is still relevant today, at a time when diasporas and globalization beg the questions: who am I and what is my place in the world?

## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

In the event-racked revolutionary years of the late eighteenth century, the emergence of the hero's character increasingly mirrored the emergence—socially, economically, politically, ideationally—of the world around him.

—Thomas Jeffers, *Apprenticeships: The Bildungsroman from Goethe to Santayana*<sup>1</sup>

The *Bildungsroman* is a genre of the novel that portrays a process of identification<sup>2</sup> by which heroes construct their identities<sup>3</sup> based on the cultural signs, symbols, and practices in their social environments, embodied in the characters they imitate. It is a process by which heroes experiment with the available configurations of sexuality, class, religion, race, and nationality, among other cultural constructs. The end of the process, in its most traditional iteration, illustrates the ideal subject of the fictionalized society. The

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Jeffers. *Apprenticeships: the Bildungsroman from Goethe to Santayana*. Nueva York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. eBook.

<sup>2</sup> According to Chris Weedon, "the process of identification . . . inserts individuals into ideologies and ideological practices that, when they work well, are lived as though they were obvious and natural" (6). In the *Bildungsroman* readers find this process in fragments, since the heroes do not know, at the beginning, the cultural signs, symbols and practices they will perform by the end. Rather, the *Bildung* is a process in which heroes experiment with various models (as well as cultural and ideological practices) to understand, perform, and ultimately internalize a role in their social environment.

<sup>3</sup> Ian Watt defines identity in terms of Locke's *Human Understanding* as an "identity of consciousness through duration in time" (21). For Watt, identity arises from the "exploration of the personality as it is defined in the interpenetration of its past and present self-awareness" (21). Identity is therefore ever changing, influenced by past events and their interpretation in the present. In the *Bildungsroman*, rather than encountering a complete character that reflexes on past events, readers walk alongside the heroes during the significant events that will—in the classic *Bildungsroman*—form the adult.

archetypal *plot* process culminates in "some accommodation, as citizen and worker" (Jeffers 52) where, in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries according to Jeffers, the idealized citizen is an example adult readers should strive to become.

However, I focus on three Coming-of-age novels<sup>4</sup> in which the archetypal plot does not unravel in a traditional manner: *The House on Mango Street* (1984) by Sandra Cisneros, *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990) by Hanif Kureishi, and *Señales que precederán el fin del mundo* [*Signs Preceding the End of the World*] (2009) by Yuri Herrera. The heroes are culturally hybrid<sup>5</sup> and marginalized heroes, as expected: Esperanza is the daughter of Mexican working class immigrants in the run-down suburbs of Chicago, Karim Amir is a sexually fluid and culturally and racially hybrid boy in the suburbs of London, and Makina is a girl of Indigenous descent who leaves her poor village in rural Mexico to cross the Border into the urban Southwest. The plots, however, unfold so that the heroes cannot find an accommodation as citizens or workers. At the end they do not define their identities in clear-cut terms nor find a place where they feel they belong. They can neither find nor create an ideal model of adulthood within the limits of their fictionalized societies. Ultimately, the impossibility of becoming an ideal citizen and worker subverts the archetypal plot and interrupts the formative process. This ultimately disrupts the didactical purpose, characteristic of the early *Bildungsromane*.

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<sup>4</sup> As opposed to the traditional *Bildungsroman*, which is historically situated in the European middle and upper classes of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, I use the term Coming-of-age as a broader category that can encompass the experience of first- and subsequent- generation immigrant characters in 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> globalized societies.

<sup>5</sup> In *Hybridity and Diaspora* Virinder Kalra describes hybridity as the cultural identities that emerge at "the edge or contact point of diaspora, describing cultural mixture where the diasporized meets the host in the scene of migration" (70). I use "cultural hybridity" because it signifies a cultural mix that originates a different identity to the one of the immigrants or hosts. The heroes cannot fully identify with the culture of their parents or of their host country.

Shifting the key concept of accommodation to one of belonging, Heather Fielding offers a model of reading so that the ending of these stories are not evaluated by the success of the heroes as citizens and workers or the degree of perfection they achieve. Rather, her model, the ethnic *Bildungsroman*, evaluates the ending as completed or failed processes of assimilation. Her reading unfortunately defines the goal of assimilation as the flattening of the character, so much so that Karim Amir, the hero of *The Buddha of Suburbia*, is rendered a caricature at the end of what Fielding interprets as a successful assimilation. Characters that are first- or subsequent-generation immigrants undergo a process of identification that is particularly complex and oftentimes the only "accommodations" for heroes reflect a desire to flatten their identity, to force them to conform to a stereotype: to assimilate. In Coming-of-age stories where intersecting forms of oppression afflict the hero, a completed formative process becomes impossible and thus, the heroes resort to exile, forms of inner betrayal, or both. In *The House on Mango Street* Esperanza chooses exile from her community in order to become an artist. In *The Buddha of Suburbia* Karim resorts to a form of inner betrayal in order to conform to the expectations of the television industry that is only willing to accept him if he represents stereotypical characters. In *Señales* Makina changes her name and receives false documents in order to stay in the United States. She simultaneously chooses exile from her home country and abandons her name. In doing so, she loses the semantic magnet<sup>6</sup> that, at the end of the novel, is the signifier of all that she has lived and experienced. In

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<sup>6</sup> For Luz Aurora Pimentel the name of a character starts out as a word devoid of meaning and acquires significations throughout a narration. The narrative discourse takes a blank name and fills it with meanings. By the end of the narration, readers associate the name of a character with the constellation of characteristics that the text has built. (Pimentel 56) Much like a magnet, the name of a character is a noun that attracts adjectives as though they were scraps of metal.

this form of inner betrayal, Makina chooses to abandon the identity she constructed throughout the novel.

But exile and the possibility of further development outside the narrative are not necessarily grim. The unfinished formative processes are often optimistic and show a more nuanced understanding of identity than when the characters set out. Therefore, I propose a new model to read these Coming-of-age stories: the Diasporic Coming-of-age. Even though the formative processes may remain unfinished, these *Diasporic Coming-of-age* stories are sites for complex and intersectional exploration of the cultural practices, signs, and symbols that conform a fluid identity. The archetypal plot fails in the most traditional sense but the genre of the Coming-of-age enables the heroes to ask themselves who they are and where they belong. These three novels do not show a clear-cut ideal, but where the first kind of *Bildungsromane* offered readers an ideal model of imitation, the Diasporic Coming-of-age empower readers to think of identity as complex and dynamic: to resist rather than fulfill stereotypes. Even though the year 2015 marks the 220<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* [Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship] (1795), often considered the first *Bildungsroman*, the Coming-of-age genre is still relevant today, at a time when diasporas and globalization beg the questions: who am I and what is my place in the world?

The *Bildungsroman* novel was born in Germany at the end of the eighteenth century, with Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* [Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship] (1795).

Thomas Jeffers states that although there had been novels that depicted a character growing up, this was the first text to have stronger inward than outward concerns: Goethe

is the first of novelists who "fixed their attention ever more burningly, and resignedly, on the self" (3). The genre itself may be said to have come of age internationally with authors such as British Charles Dickens and French Gustav Flaubert, who transported it to their social contexts but retained its classical structure and its didactic purpose: to serve as an example for readers. In the most traditional plot, the young male hero successfully brings his coming of age to a conclusion where he is an admirable citizen and worker. *David Copperfield* (1850) and *Great Expectations* (1861) by Dickens and *L'Éducation sentimentale* [*Sentimental Education*] (1869) by Flaubert embody idyllic conclusions that depict the moral and social goals of their generation. Albeit critical of industrial practices in the case of the former and of impermeable class structures in the latter, these *Bildungsromane* enable their heroes, David, Pip, and Frédéric, to attain a commendable social and economic role: David becomes a respected writer and journalist without having to resort to exile, Pip becomes a gentleman in London, and Frédéric is, at the end, a member of the middle class.

The structure of the genre began to change, depicting incomplete formative processes, when the heroes could not find a praiseworthy social role because of their marginalized identities or because the social conditions (i.e. war) did not allow them to become adults. An incomplete formative process may take various forms and several novels written during or shortly after World War I exemplify variations of to the traditional plot: in *Maurice* (written in 1913-1914 and published posthumously in 1971) by E. M. Forster, the formative process of a homosexual man culminates in the titular character's unexpected renouncement of his social standing in England in order to go into exile with his lover Alec Scudder. In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) by

James Joyce, Stephen Dedalus exiles himself from Ireland, in hope of finding a place where he can become an artist and "forge in the smithy of [his] soul the uncreated conscience of [his] race" (384). In *Demian Die Geschichte von Emil Sinclairs Jugend* [Demian The Story of Emil Sinclair's Youth] (1919) by Herman Hesse, Emil Sinclair's formative process is interrupted by World War I, and the ending does not show a final accommodation: the narrative ends in an infirmary close to the battlefield, depicting an incomplete process.

In the same country as Maurice but many years later, Karim Amir also fails to complete his formative process in *The Buddha of Suburbia*. Like Maurice, Karim is marginalized in terms of his sexual identity, but just as importantly, Karim belongs to an ethnical minority, as he is the son of an Indian immigrant and a white Englishwoman. He is a *culturally hybrid subject*, a term Virinder Kalra uses to describe the mixture of cultures that takes place "where the diasporized meets the host in the scene of migration" (70). Karim states he is a "funny kind of Englishman" (3), not Indian like his father but not fully English like his mother either. Amidst this confusion, Karim grows up in a social environment where the available social roles reduce the cultural wealth of his personality to a caricature. For example, in his work as an actor he is irremediably typecast as the exotic foreigner: he is asked to perform an Indian accent and to even wear brown make-up. *The Buddha of Suburbia* subverts some of the traditional conventions of the *Bildungsroman* insofar as Karim's cultural hybridity prevents his full belonging to the English society of the 1970s. Particularly, the ending of the novel does not match, as Heather Fielding argues, the convivial vision of the ethnic *Bildungsroman*, but simultaneously includes convivial and melancholic characteristics since Karim does not

solve the customary identity crisis of the Coming-of-age story due to the instability of his sexual, racial, and class identities.

Likewise, *The House on Mango Street* portrays a process where the protagonist Esperanza cannot find, among the roles that her social environment offers, a model of representation that can encompass her complexities. And in the extreme case of Makina, the protagonist of *Señales que precederán el fin del mundo*, the heroine must assume a completely new identity in order to find an accommodation in the world where she wants to belong: she chooses to acquire a new name and documents.

Therefore, even though the social contexts are different, these processes of identification have a common characteristic: the hegemonic majority tries to fix and simplify the identity of the hero to the extreme of caricature. Accepting the roles available in their fictionalized societies would mean sacrificing their complexity and unwalking the difficult roads they left behind. Karim betrays his resistance by embodying a stereotype<sup>7</sup> in his work as an actor. Much like Maurice and Stephen Dedalus, Esperanza leaves Mango Street, realizing she does not want to belong. And in a combination of exile and inner betrayal, Makina realizes she cannot go back to Mexico because she has changed too much and ultimately forgoes all that she has been and her name in order to become someone entirely new. In these stories a new kind of *Bildungsroman* emerges, one where the process of identification is at the very center, where the heroes have to explore their culturally hybrid identity, and resist oppressive stereotypes through the means of nuanced self-representation: the Diasporic Coming-of-age, related to but

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<sup>7</sup> In "The Spectacle of the Other", Stuart Hall defines stereotype as "any simple vivid, memorable, easily grasped and widely recognized characterization in which a few traits are foregrounded and change or 'development' is kept to a minimum" (257). Stereotypical representations reduce characters to simple and fixed terms that do reject nuance or development.

distinct from Fielding's useful concept of the ethnic *Bildungsroman*. I clarify these concepts by means of briefly analyzing some examples of the traditional plot and variations thereof.

### 1.1 The Traditional Plot of the *Bildungsroman* and its variations

In the following paragraphs I explain the characteristics of the most traditional *Bildungsroman*. I offer an example of the archetypal plot: *David Copperfield* by Charles Dickens, and two examples of variations where the heroes cannot complete their *Bildung* within the confines of the diegesis: *Maurice* by E. M. Forster and *Demian* by Herman Hesse.

According to Miguel Salmerón, the *Bildungsroman* represents the hero's formation from the beginning up to a determined degree of perfection; he adds that through this representation, the protagonist's coming of age motivates the coming of age of readers (46-47). This didactic purpose becomes more apparent if one considers the intended readers of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. According to Ian Watt, novels were a luxury attainable only by "a small portion of the labouring classes who were technically literate" (40). The aristocracy had little interest in novels because they did not deem them "established and respectable forms literature and scholarship" (42). Thus, the *Bildungsroman* was one of the genres of the novel produced and consumed by the Bourgeoisie: unsurprisingly, the early *Bildungsromane* depicted young white males whose final accommodations represented the values and practices of the middle class.

In terms of the plot, Salmerón argues that all the events in the novel form a "causal mosaic" that describe, in great detail, the upbringing of a character: both the central theme and the plot of the novel are built upon the *Bildung*. We can identify the causal mosaic in Thomas Jeffers's archetypal plot, in which the succession of events leads to the "degree of perfection":

A sensitive child grows up in the provinces, where his lively imagination is frustrated by his neighbors'—and often by his family's—social prejudices and intellectual obtuseness. School and private reading stimulate his hopes for a different life away from home, and so he goes to the metropolis, where his transformative education begins. He has at least two love affairs, one good and one bad, which help him revalue his values. He makes some accommodation, as citizen and worker, with the industrial urban world, and after a time he perhaps revisits his old home to show folks how much he has grown. No single *Bildungsroman* will have all these elements, Buckley says, but none can ignore more than two or three. (Jeffers 52)

There are as many variations to this archetypal plot as there are *Bildungsromane*, and although the most traditional scheme shows the end of the narrative immediately after the formative process concludes, there are many instances where the process remains open at the end; one of such variations is the Diasporic Coming-of-age. Porter Abbott notes in *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, the end does not necessarily mean closure: "When a narrative resolves a conflict, it achieves closure, and this usually comes at the

end of a narrative. [However,] closure does not have to come at the end of the narrative; in fact, it does not have to come at all" (56).

*David Copperfield* possesses the archetypal *Bildungsroman* plot. The beginning of the novel is set in the suburbs, where a sensitive child, David, lives with his mother Clara. They live well, as the Copperfield fortune belongs to his mother. But when David is eight years old, Edward Murdstone marries his mother and manipulates her into accepting him as the owner of the household. The circumstances of her death are never clear, but it is possible that Murdstone murdered Clara in order to secure her possessions. After a brief period in a boarding house where David is harshly mistreated by Mr. Creakle, a friend of Murdstone, David goes to work in London in Murdstone's wine bottling factory. Because David cannot endure the conditions in the factory, he flees and almost succumbs to starvation before he reaches his aunt Betsy Trotwood's house in Dover, where he receives the first part of his education in a suburban setting. He then moves back to London, the metropolis, where he has two important relationships: the "bad" one ends with the death of his first wife Dora Spenlow; the "good" one is his first love, Agnes Wickfield, whom David has to save from Uriah Heep, the novel's villain. In accordance with Jeffers's archetypal plot, at the end, the hero finds, among the roles that society has to offer, one in which he can feel accomplished and completely represents an ideal and final version of himself, or of his identity, in terms of the social symbols and signs that he wishes to perform. David becomes a gentleman and a famous and respected writer. In the second to last chapter he is referred to as "the eminent author" (746). The last lines of the novel are written many years later, in a state of economic and social bliss: "And now my story ends. I look back, once more—for the last time—before I close these

leaves. I see myself, with Agnes at my side, journeying along the road of life. I see our children and our friends around us; and I hear the roar of many voices, not indifferent to me as I travel on" (748).

Although *Maurice* follows many of the steps in Jeffers's archetypical plot, at the end he does not find an accommodation. It is nonetheless a Coming-of-age novel because the formative process is both the central theme and moves the plot forward. At the beginning, the hero leaves Sunnington, the preparatory school where he has learned that marriage is the ultimate goal of life, to receive his education in Cambridge. He has a "bad" relationship with Clive Durham, a fellow student, and a "good" one with Alec Scudder, a poor man. The latter relationship leads Maurice to ponder and finally reject his position as a "gentleman" in society. Unlike David Copperfield, Maurice's society does not offer a suitable place for him. If the ultimate goal is marriage, then a homosexual man cannot achieve "a degree of perfection". Maurice is a character whose *Bildung* is incompatible with the expectations of his social environment. At the time, homosexuality was outlawed and Mr. Lasker Jones, a hypnotist who attempts to cure Maurice, even suggests relocating to a country that has accepted the *Napoleonic Code*, which decriminalized same-sex activities. Much like Esperanza, Maurice rejects his social environment and finally leaves his social standing and fortune in search for happiness. Maurice is not part of the dominant social group and his experience is comparable to the represented experiences of Karim, Esperanza, or Makina insofar as they all search for identity and belonging. However, *Maurice* cannot be classified as an ethnic *Bildungsroman* because he identifies with the ethnic majority.

As opposed to Maurice, Emil Sinclair's Coming-of-age is an example of a variation to the classic plot where the hero's identities are not marginal, but the hero nevertheless fails to achieve final accommodations. The reason is that World War I destabilizes the social environment so that class structures are rendered irrelevant: as opposed to *David Copperfield*, *Demian* does not offer an ideal middle class adult because the war removes Emil from class structures. I offer this novel as an example because it illustrates the connection between *Bildung* and the representation of the world where the character grows up.

Emil grows up in a German middle class family and notices that there is a world outside of home, full of darkness and the possibility of immorality:

Die eine Welt war das Vaterhaus . . . zu dieser Welt gehörte milder Glanz, Klarheit und Sauberkeit . . . Hier wurde der Morgenchoral gesungen, hier wurde Weihnacht gefeiert . . . in [der] zweiten Welt gab es . . . Betrunkene und keifende Weiber, gebärende Kühe, gestürzte Pferde, Erzählungen von Einbrüchen, Totschlägen, Selbstmorden . . . Alle diese schönen und grauenhaften, wilden und grausamen Sachen<sup>8</sup>. (10-12)

The first world is clean and upholds traditional Christian values. The second is both scary and beautiful, as it is the site of the *Bildung*: the place where the character can experiment with the available social models and values. In the latter world Emil meets Demian who, according to Jeffer's plot, fulfills the role of mentor. Demian teaches Emil to defend himself from Kromer, a boy who has tormented him since the beginning of the

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<sup>8</sup> The first world was my father's house . . . to this world belonged a gentle glow, clarity and cleanliness . . . here we sung the morning chorales and celebrated Christmas . . . in the second world there were drunks and nagging women, cows giving birth, dying horses, stories of burglaries, homicides, suicides . . . all these beautiful and morbid, wild and cruel things.

narration. Demian also urges Emil to reinterpret the story of Cain and Abel. He explains that Cain is actually God's favorite because he is the one who truly sacrifices what he loves in the name of God: his brother. This reinterpretation is symbolic of Emil's moral upbringing under the guidance of his mentor because it challenges the moral conventions Emil had been taught in his home environment. In this novel the home functions as Jeffer's suburbs in that it is a place where the hero's "lively imagination is frustrated" (Jeffers 52). Emil continues onto boarding school where his friends drink and look for sex without love. Emil is unsatisfied with these practices and starts painting portraits of an ideal woman. He cannot help but notice that these portraits look like Demian. The novel allows readers to wonder whether Emil might be in love with Demian, which evidences the exploratory nature of heroes' identities even in earlier variations of the archetypal plot. These doubts are however mitigated when Emil meets Demian's mother and realizes she is the one he has been painting. At the end of the novel readers find Emil wounded in the infirmary. Demian tells Emil he no longer needs his guidance since his moral upbringing is complete. The novel has a didactic dimension that encourages readers to question their moral values, but there is no representation of the ideal place of an adult in society. Unlike David Copperfield, who becomes a respected worker and a family man, Emil's *Bildung* is only partially completed.

The novel constitutes a variation to the plot that reveals how extreme conditions, such as war, subvert the expectations of the genre. In the novels I analyze in the following chapters, the representation of the world of the characters is fundamental to understand why they cannot find "accommodations". Much like Emil's, the formative process of Karim Amir is interrupted by the social conditions. In Karim's case his setting

does not allow him a nuanced self-representation in his work as an actor. Esperanza's exile is closely related to the lack of social roles for women in her community in Mango Street. And Makina's form of inner betrayal is only necessary because the social conditions force her to change her name in order to stay in the United States.

## 1.2 Heather Fielding's Ethnic *Bildungsroman*

The ethnic *Bildungsroman* possesses most of the characteristics of the traditional or classical coming of age story. The hero, however, does not belong to the dominant group but to an ethnic minority: In *The Buddha*, *The House on Mango Street*, and *Señales* the ethnic minorities are second generation immigrants, from India and Mexico respectively. Heather Fielding argues that the ultimate goal is assimilation, rather than a degree of perfection: "[In] the ethnic bildungsroman or assimilation narrative . . . an ethnic character 'grows' along a trajectory that culminates in his or her assimilation to the nation" (201). According to this reading, the heroes explore the roles that they could represent in society and, at the end, by means of a process of self-discovery and education, they choose, internalize, and personify a role that matches the collective social identity. Fielding argues that the ethnic *Bildungsroman* can represent society either as convivial or melancholic, concepts she takes from *Postcolonial Melancholia* by Paul Gilroy. A melancholic society is one that dreams of an ethnically pure past (which Gilroy explains never existed) where national identity was unchallenged by migration (Gilroy 90). A convivial society acknowledges its diversity. Conviviality is the process of

cohabitation and interaction by which multi-culture has become habitual and ordinary in the social lives of postcolonial cities around the world (Gilroy XV). Conviviality is not a product of governmental inertia or institutional indifference, but a concrete political, aesthetic, cultural, and academic project (Gilroy 99). Multicultural conviviality allows people who are not white to define themselves as "English" and, in the context of the United States, it allows people from different racial and national backgrounds to identify as American, even though the racial majority is white and the ethnic majority is non-Hispanic. This possibility challenges the melancholic concept of national identity. Fielding argues that convivial representations of society allow heroes to assimilate and melancholic representations reject the heroes, forcing them to leave.

However, assimilation is opposite to conviviality, which advocates for empathy across lines of diversity and broader definitions of national identities. Heather Fielding's model is insufficient because it incorrectly associates assimilation, defined as the loss of cultural wealth that transforms characters into stereotypes, with conviviality. This misunderstanding becomes evident in her reading of *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian* (2006) by Marina Lewycka and *The Buddha of Suburbia* in her article "Assimilation After Empire: Marina Lewycka, Paul Gilroy, and the Ethnic Bildungsroman in Contemporary Britain". Fielding asks how the novels represent English identity at the end of the novel because, she argues, this is the key moment in the ethnic *Bildungsroman* where readers discover whether the representation of a society corresponds to a melancholic or convivial vision. According to Fielding, *The Buddha* illustrates a convivial resolution while *Short History* is a combination: it is melancholic because the English government deports Valentina, a Ukrainian character who represents

“the synthetic whiff of New Russia” (Lewyvka 2) and convivial because Nikolai and Nadezhda, two Ukrainian immigrants of an earlier generation, can finally sympathize with Valentina only after she is forced to leave: “Nikolai and Nadezhda begin to make themselves British precisely by learning to sympathize with someone unlike them—Valentina—they finally assimilate only after she is deported” (Fielding 201). This interpretation is strange since, in fact, Nikolai and Nadezhda, the narrator, express a sense of relief when Valentina is forced out of society. Fielding is right in stating that *Short History* illustrates a story of assimilation, but, contrary to what she argues, it is not Valentina’s but Nadezhda’s story that depicts assimilation.

Nadezhda’s process of assimilation takes place in Peterborough, a small suburban city to the north of London. Nadezhda tells the story of her family: hard-working Ukrainian immigrants with an idyllic connection to the land. Her mother, deceased at the time of the narration, used to be a gardener and to enter into competitions, which the narrator describes as a quintessential English tradition. Nadezhda’s husband is a white Protestant and her daughter’s name is Anna; her sister’s daughters are named Alice and Alex. She thinks of herself as an English citizen, while Ukraine is a nebulous past whose remnants are only palpable in her name, a name that she chose not to bestow on the following generation. In this novel, Nadezhda’s successful assimilation is a process of cultural erasure and a complete detachment from the home country. The narrator does not have to confront her parent’s immigrant past until her old father decides to marry Valentina, a young but vulgar Ukrainian woman who has agreed to exchange sexual favors for a visa. In the last chapters Nikolai manages to get divorced and proves that Valentina has been unfaithful to him and Nadezhda expresses her relief when she asks:

“Can this really be the end?” (280). Even though Fielding argues that Valentina is assimilated after she is gone, the other characters never express sympathy for her and happily go back to their assimilated identities. So according to Fielding, the novel is melancholic in its rejection of a character that is foreign and refuses to adapt, but convivial in its acceptance of those immigrants who assimilate. Similarly, Fielding interprets Karim’s acceptance of his role in a soap opera, where he plays a rebellious Indian teenager, as a successful assimilation.

However, the problem that Karim faces is that this role is stereotypical and feels alien to him because it does not allow him to perform his sexuality and ethnicity in nuanced terms. In order to assimilate he chooses a role that makes him unhappy because it reduces the wealth of his identity to a caricature. This reduction does not point to a convivial society as Fielding suggests; rather, it shows a melancholic representation of ethnic minorities. Indeed, the assumption that assimilation is the only ideal course for minorities is melancholic in itself, as assimilation, at least in the terms Fielding articulates, requires the rejection of the heroes' parents' culture in favor of the expectations of the host society. Therefore, Fielding's reading is useful as it enables a connection between the heroes; failed *Bildung* and the representation of the world around them; but the logic of assimilation is *not* the ultimate goal of these novels. Rather, I propose the Diasporic Coming-of-age as possible solution: a variation of the archetypal plot where the process of identification is at the center of the *Bildung* and where the ultimate goal is for the heroes to resist oppressive caricatures through the means of nuanced self-representation.

### 1.3 The Diasporic Coming-of-age Novel

When the heroes of the Coming-of-age experience intersecting forms of marginalization due to their ethnic, racial, and cultural identities, they struggle to understand who they are and cannot rely on their parents to explain the kind of adult they ought to become. First generation immigrants like Makina in *Señales que precederán el fin del mundo* encounter cultural differences that call for a reconsideration of their identity. Subsequent generations live in hybrid spaces where bilingualism is common and where their parents' worldview often contrasts, to an irreconcilable extent, with the expectations and models they encounter outside their homes. *The Buddha* and *The House on Mango Street* are examples of these struggles, and so are novels like *Down These Mean Streets* (1962) by Piri Thomas and *Bless me, Ultima* (1972) by Rudolfo Anaya. Regardless of whether the heroes are first-, second-, or subsequent generation, these formative processes are woven with issues of class, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and religion, among others, and form a network that is so entangled it often cannot be unraveled in the course of a formative process. The Diasporic Coming-of-age does not expect to find simple resolutions.

The novels I analyze in the following chapters adopt some of the conventions of the classical *Bildungsroman*, but disregard others. The Coming-of-age genre is a great fit for these stories because migration presses both hosts and guests, to use the terms of Virinder Kalra, to ask questions about belonging and the interaction between cultures. Many immigrants struggle to understand their place in society and while some idealize assimilation, others resist it by making an effort to stand out, to reject belonging and favor dislocation, something perhaps more valuable. The Coming-of-age genre enables

characters to build their whole story on the quest to understand who they are, at the same time that they build their identity. The three novels I analyze reveal a transformation of the traditional *Bildungsroman*, but the genre has retained its preoccupation for the ontological questions: who am I and what is my place in the world? The Diasporic Coming-of-age strives to make sense of the expectations and models of the heroes' worlds but it is not uncomfortable to bring identity to a state of tension, even if it remains unresolved. In the following chapters I offer three examples of such Diasporic Coming-of-age stories.

The first chapter "Conviviality and Melancholia" focuses on *The Buddha of Suburbia*. I study Karim's process of identification under the light of conviviality and melancholia, and conclude that his formative process remains unfinished. The end of the novel conveys simultaneous convivial and melancholic visions of what it means to be English.

The second chapter "The girl who did not want to belong" focuses on Esperanza's process of identification in *The House on Mango Street*. The focal point in this chapter is Esperanza's development as an artist and storyteller because in her capacity to tell her own story she finds the possibility to reject the traditional female role epitomized by her grandmother. Furthermore, I establish a dialogue between Esperanza's story and two other Diasporic Coming-of-age stories: *Down These Mean Streets*, the story of Piri, a second-generation Puerto Rican boy who grows up in a similar urban environment and *Bless Me, Ultima*, the Coming-of-age of Antonio in New Mexico, a hero who also comes from a Mexican background. I do this in order to show how Esperanza's gender identity further reduces the available social roles within her already marginalized community.

Chapter 3 "Treading Lightly" focuses on the Coming-of-age of Makina in *Señales que precederán el fin del mundo*. Makina is a Mexican girl who travels from Mexico to the United States in order to give a message her mother has entrusted: she must tell her brother to come back. In a journey filled with peril, Makina is faced with the decision of where she wants to stay, which she articulates with the metaphor of footprints. Even though she promises herself to tread lightly before she sets out, she finds herself transformed by her experiences. In terms of the subversion of the genre, this novel is the furthest removed from the traditional *Bildungsroman* as it opens a dialogue with the genre that places the novel at the very limit of the definition, while still relies on a process of identification. This novel is therefore a Coming-of-age at the margins not only in terms of the social place of the character but of the genre itself.

The *Bildungsroman* is constantly changing and evolving and, as demonstrated by these novels, it remains an ideal site for the experimentation with identity and for the analysis of ever-changing societies.

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## CHAPTER 2. CONVIVIALITY AND MELANCHOLIA

The Coming-of-age story of Karim Amir, the protagonist of Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*, puts in relief the intermingling of the melancholic and convivial visions of English society. In analyzing English immigration and multicultural policies, Paul Gilroy offered melancholia and conviviality as two opposing ways to understand English national identity. In Heather Fielding's definition of the ethnic *Bildungsroman* these concepts contributed to a firm analysis of the way racism and xenophobia are represented throughout Karim's formative process. These frameworks highlight the tension between these opposing visions of national identity and enable readers to identify the opposing and often contradictory expectations that the novel's realistic society has for Karim. Further, the Diasporic Coming-of-age model enables a reading that focuses on Karim's process of identification, on his experimentation with the social expectations and mentors he encounters, and the decisions to partially resist and conform to stereotypes. Key to such a model is Enoch Powell's "Rivers of Blood," a 1968 speech that criticized immigration and anti-discrimination policy, because the racist character "Hairy Back" in *The Buddha of Suburbia* refers to the speech to express his expectations for Karim's identity and place in society. These elements are the foundation for this analysis of Karim's process of identification and disidentification, one which does justice to the significance of this novel within and as a development of the *Bildungsroman* genre.

My main focus is on Karim's imitation and ultimate rejection of four characters that in other Coming-of-age novels might have figured as models for the protagonist in traditional *Bildungsroman* novels to imitate: the theater director Shadwell; his father Haroon; his first romantic partner, neighbor, and eventual stepbrother Charlie; and his cousin and romantic partner Jamila. These models encompass two generations: Shadwell and Haroon are of the former generation, while Charlie and Jamila are peers. Just as important and in new fashion, Shadwell and Charlie are English while Haroon and Jamila are Indian. The dispersal of their identities shows that none of the available models in Karim's social environment can encompass his complex identities. Thus, the novel hints at but clearly thwarts the possibility of an ultimately convivial vision for Karim. Instead, it represents the context that propels Karim to choose a form of inner betrayal that corresponds with a melancholic vision of society.

Paul Gilroy argues that in order to understand contemporary English identity, a postimperial melancholic vision emerged after the Second World War. This vision imagines England as the victim and survivor of Nazi aggression. In this "ethnic myth," the Germans are characterized as "foes who [were] simply, tidily, and uncomplicatedly evil" (89). But the victory in the war also meant the loss of a homogenous British Empire that was, until then, fundamental for the understanding of England as the metropolis. This melancholic vision intends to make the victimhood of the Second World War "a privileged point of entry into national identity and self-understanding" for British citizens (89). Since then, "the nation has been dominated by an inability even to face, never mind actually mourn, the profound change in circumstances and moods that followed the end

of the empire and consequent loss of imperial prestige" (90). This inability to cope with change has been worsened by

successive political and economic crises, with the gradual breakup of the United Kingdom, with the arrival of substantial numbers of postcolonial citizen-migrants, and with the shock and anxiety that followed from a loss of any sense that the national collective was bound by a coherent and distinctive culture. (90)

It is this historical context that gives rise to the Diasporic Coming-of-age. According to this melancholic vision of English identity, citizen-migrants, who used to be subjects of the British Empire, threaten the political body of England: they are imagined as an ethnic menace that destabilizes the identity of the former metropolis.

In this melancholic vision, "the history of the empire became a source of discomfort, shame and perplexity" (90). It aims to erase the brutality and guilt of the empire in order to enshrine a conception of imperialism as a noble effort to civilize: "that unsettling history was diminished, denied, and then, if possible, actively forgotten" (90). In turn, this erasure feeds racism and xenophobia because it imagines postcolonial people as "unwanted alien intruders without any substantive historical, political, or cultural connections to the collective life of their fellow subjects" (90). Gilroy explains that before the Second World War, English identity was based on an ethnic and racial hierarchy where white subjects living in England imagined themselves in the top tier. The narrative that justified the empire imagined England as Prometheus, bringing the light of civilization to the most savage parts of the world. As an example, Gilroy quotes a 1897 speech Joseph Chamberlain delivered as the Secretary of State for the Colonies:

You cannot have omelettes without breaking eggs; you cannot destroy the practices of barbarism, of slavery of superstition, which for centuries have desolated the interior of Africa, without the use of force . . . The cause of civilization and the prosperity of the people will in the long run be eminently advanced . . . such a mission as I have described, involves a heavy responsibility . . . it is a gigantic task that we have undertaken when we have determined to wield the scepter of empire . . . we shall have the strength to fulfill the mission which our history and our national character have imposed upon us. (61)

The "national character" was built on colonialism as a force of good in the world, a burdensome responsibility. After the Second World War, this narrative of the use of force to expand civilization is effectively swept under the rug and postimperial melancholia replaces, for many, the notion of English identity. This vision ignores the "hidden, shameful store of imperial horrors" and ultimately "seeks firstly to minimize the extent of the empire, then to deny or justify its brutal character, and finally, to present the British themselves as the ultimate tragic victims of their extraordinary imperial success" (94). In this melancholic vision multiculturalism constitutes a threat to national identity. The possible outcomes for this Diasporic Coming-of-age are limited by the discrimination and stereotyping Karim that experiences along his formative process, especially in his work as an actor.

Conviviality, conversely, upholds the vision that amid the contemporary cultural diversity of England, English identity should be regarded as multicultural; in other words, in order to be English it is not necessary to be white and Anglican, to belong to the

middle class and to speak the Queen's English. This vision presumes that the multiplicity of cultures and races that interact in both public and private spaces characterizes the routine and day-to-day life in England. It proposes that the normalization of the experience of multiculturalism can engender empathy across lines of difference and respect for contrasting worldviews, as

processes of cohabitation and interaction that have made multicultural an ordinary feature of social life in Britain's urban areas and in postcolonial cities elsewhere . . . It does not describe the absence of racism or the triumph of tolerance. Instead, it suggests a different setting for their empty, interpersonal rituals, which, I suggest, have started to mean different things in the absence of any strong belief in absolute or integral races . . . The radical openness that brings conviviality alive makes a nonsense of, closed, fixed, and reified identity and turns attention toward the always unpredictable mechanisms of identification. (Gilroy XV)

Gilroy argues that conviviality does not eradicate a history of white supremacy and social hierarchies, but it does allow for a process of acknowledging the horrors of the empire that postcolonial melancholia so desperately tries to erase. Conviviality also finds fixed identities nonsensical. Thus, in a convivial representation of society in the novel, Englishness would have been more inclusive. To illustrate conviviality, Gilroy uses the example of *Changing Rooms*,<sup>9</sup> a television show where the manipulation of "the innermost private spaces [showed] that taste and lifestyle preference are more important

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<sup>9</sup> *Changing Rooms* was a reality show that the BBC broadcasted from 1996 until 2004. Two couples who were friends or neighbors exchanged their houses in order to decorate and remodel a room. At the end, the couples would return to their houses and see the results.

elements of identity than ethnicity, class, or regional ties could ever be . . . the liberating ordinariness [made] strangeness recede in a fog of paint fumes and sawdust" (119). This series served as a metaphor of conviviality because neighbors of diverse ethnicities entered freely and transformed each other's private spaces, welcoming otherness into their houses. In this vision of English identity the components of everyday life are much more important than race or ethnicity to form notions of Englishness. On the contrary to this vision and televised practice, most characters in *The Buddha of Suburbia* further exclusionary national identities that leave Karim at the margins.<sup>10</sup>

One of the blunter examples of postcolonial melancholia in *The Buddha of Suburbia* occurs when Karim visits Helen, a young white girl he met in Chislehurst, the London suburb of his childhood. Helen's father answers the door. Karim nicknames him Hairy Back because he "was a big man with a black beard and thick arms" (39). Karim imagines this man has "hairy shoulders and, worst of all, a hairy back, like Peter Sellers and Sean Connery" (40). This man is a model of idealized white masculinity and his course manners are a contrast to Karim's father Haroon's "delicate hands and manners" (4). Helen's father back becomes in Karim's mind the foremost symbol of an English body that contrasts with his own. Hairy Back opens the door and tells Karim:

‘You can’t see my daughter again,’ said Hairy Back. ‘She doesn’t go out with boys. Or with wogs.’

‘Oh well.’

‘Got it?’

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<sup>10</sup> A larger study would look at Karim's stepmother Eva Key as interior designer who manipulates the suburban spaces to fit oriental characterizations.

‘Yeah,’ I said sullenly.

‘We don’t want you blackies coming to the house.’

‘Have there been many?’

‘Many what, you little coon?’

‘Blackies.’

‘Where?’

‘Coming to the house.’

‘We don’t like it,’ Hairy Back said. ‘However many niggers there are, we don’t like it. We’re with Enoch. If you put one of your black ‘ands near my daughter I’ll smash it with a ’ammer! With a ’ammer!’ (Kureishi 40)

Hairy Back uses the terms "blackie," "wog," and "nigger" interchangeably. In doing so he eliminates any possibility for nuance in Karim's identities: Karim is flattened as a generalized other since his only relevant characteristic is the color of his skin. Hairy Back simplifies people of color because doing so allows him to think they are all loathsome, foreign to English society, and a threat to the nation insofar as his house is a metaphor for the country and Karim's presence is an imagined invasion of that intimate space. In this sense, Karim "seeing" his daughter is also dangerous to Hairy Back's vision of Englishness since it makes the possibility for miscegenation intelligible. The Diasporic Coming-of-age not only displays the too-pervasive xenophobic sentiments of this historical context but also enables the hero to retort, in this instance with humor, to Hairy Back's violent rejection. Karim asks, "have there been many?" in order to make fun of Hairy Back's senseless generalization: "We don’t want you blackies coming to the

house." Karim also implies Hairy Back's daughter Helen has had other relationships with men of color.

In order to eliminate the possibility of miscegenation Hairy Back references Enoch Powell, whose speech "Rivers of Blood" epitomized anti-immigrant sentiment. On April 20, 1968 Enoch Powell, a conservative English politician who served as member of Parliament from 1950 to 1978, spoke against the open immigration and antidiscrimination policies proposed by the English Parliament. His speech opened with the following: "The supreme function of statesmanship is to provide against preventable evils" (Rivers of Blood). Powell proposed that migration and multiculturalism were preventable if understood as social evils. And, while in some parts of the speech he explained why immigration was the seed of the destruction of Great Britain, his main objective was to set forth a plan to stop current immigration and start a process of re-emigration, by which immigrants would be returned to their home countries. Powell compared the previous 20 years of immigration policy to "watching a nation busily engaged in heaping up its own funeral pyre." For him, the growth of "immigrant-descended population" equated with the destruction of the British way of life and values, as well as an attack on white working-class families that were forced to compete with "commonwealth immigrants and their descendants" for jobs and access to healthcare and other governmental services. *The Buddha of Suburbia* also shows the converse fear of miscegenation by those "commonwealth immigrants" when Karim's uncle Anwar compels his cousin Jamila to marry an Indian immigrant in a later episode in the novel, as discussed later in this chapter.

Powell articulated normativity as masculine and white. He imagined a white "ordinary working man" who became "a stranger in his own country." In imagining this stereotypical symbol, Powell intended to instill fear among the everyman, and went as far as saying that "in this country in fifteen or twenty years time the black man will have the whip hand over the white man." Powell stated that the power dynamic would flip and what he viewed as the master would become the slave. The whip was particularly dramatic in evoking plurality as hierarchy in his recollection of the legal slavery of Great Britain's past. The melancholic vision of his plan involved a pure and ideal past distorted by cultural mix:

But while to the immigrant entry to this country was admission to privileges and opportunities eagerly sought, the impact upon the existing population was very different. For reasons which they could not comprehend, and in pursuance of a decision by default, on which they were never consulted, they found themselves made strangers in their own country.

Powell emphasizes the positive qualities of the native soil and explains the basis for the local population's failure to prevent the current situation. By removing the agency from the decision to allow immigration, made "by default," he absolves the "ordinary working man." He thinks of commonwealth immigration as an accidental mishap up to this moment. But then elicits the agency of the local population to stop it:

They found their wives unable to obtain hospital beds in childbirth, their children unable to obtain school places, their homes and neighborhoods changed beyond recognition, their plans and prospects for the future

defeated; at work they found that employers hesitated to apply to the immigrant worker the standards of discipline and competence required of the native-born worker; they began to hear, as time went by, more and more voices which told them that they were now the unwanted. On top of this, they now learn that a one-way privilege is to be established by Act of Parliament: a law, which cannot, and is not intended, to operate to protect them or redress their grievances, is to be enacted to give the stranger, the disgruntled and the agent provocateur the power to pillory them for their private actions.

Powell imagined a past where the streets were familiar and where there was no unemployment or lack of access to health services. The transformation of familiar streets signified a violent disfiguration of the face of the country, further supported by the concepts of "agent provocateur" and "power to pillory". With the image of an overcrowded hospital, Powell calls attention to the changing body politic, and argues that native bodies are in need of tending. As well, Powell selects the masculine space of the workplace and the feminine space of the hospital bed in order to show how immigration has presumably transformed the cultural conventions of gender politics.

In the scene under discussion in *The Buddha of Suburbia*, we encounter one such "ordinary working man." Hairy Back has internalized the fear of being unable to access public services and jobs. He accepts the notion that before Karim, his house and daughter, as symbols of the private and intimate, were safe and familiar. The relationship between Karim and his daughter Helen signifies the possibility of a new body politic. In the bodies of the younger generation, Hairy Back sees the possibility of miscegenation, a

threat to the power structures that Powell references with the image of the whip. When Hairy Back states he is with Powell, he means the only possible outcome he imagines for Karim is re-emigration.

The novel does not have a symmetrical episode that so clearly represents a convivial vision. This void is unsurprising because a convivial representation of Englishness would have allowed Karim to understand Englishness as a national identity that is not necessarily white. Instead, Karim's work as an actor further establishes his identity as foreign, as he is cast as Mowgli in a staging of *The Jungle Book* and, in a much delayed pivotal moment, as a stereotypical Indian teenager in a soap opera.<sup>11</sup> His work as an actor makes Karim's performance of ethnicity conspicuous. But throughout his process of identification, Karim explores many of his other cultural identities by means of imitation.

In *The Buddha of Suburbia* the process of identification starts with the title. Buddhism's importation and the referent—the father rather than the protagonist—point to a multicultural past, as well as the perplex juxtaposition of the religious and secular social of "suburbia." The title pulls these two dissonant concepts together and announces the pervasive motif of non-belonging. In the very first paragraph, Karim Amir explains he is "a funny kind of Englishman, a new breed as it were, having emerged from two old histories" (3). Karim starts his coming of age by calling attention to how difficult it is to understand and define his identity within the parameters of his social environment. Therefore, this Coming-of-age story becomes a complex search for identity, an

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<sup>11</sup> A larger study would look at Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* and other works such as "The White Man's Burden" to matters of labor, work, and employment.

identification process in which the character experiments through imitation of adults and his peers, both Indian and white English. By imitating the characters that surround him, Karim rejects the features that seem contrary to the idea that he forms of himself and accepts the features he wants to perform. Similarly, he encounters the expectations of other characters with acceptance or rejection. However, Karim never finds a model with which he can identify fully because the social environment does not allow the possibility of being a non-white Englishman.

In the first part of the novel, we encounter the expectations Karim's father Haroon has for him. Haroon's expectations illustrate his ideal image of an immigrant: a professional worker who accesses the middle class by means of education. "Dad was still convinced I was trying to be something – a lawyer, I'd told him recently, because even he knew that that doctor stuff was a wind-up. But I knew there'd have to come a time when I broke the news to him that the education system and I had split up. It would break his immigrant heart, too" (94). Haroon has lived in England for 20 years and works for the English government as a "badly paid and insignificant" civil service clerk (7). He thinks that higher education, especially the social status it entails, is an essential part of the ideal goal of an immigrant. However, Karim rejects it for two notable reasons. The first is that he associates education with racial abuse. Of his school experience, he says, "I was sick too of being affectionately called Shitface and Curryface, and of coming home covered in spit and snot and chalk and wood-shavings" (63). The second is his desire to imitate Charlie, whose aspirations lie outside of school: "I, who wanted only to be like Charlie" (16). From Haroon's expectations we may conclude that he sees his son as an immigrant

like himself. For Haroon there is no possibility of hybridity, a definition of an Englishman that can include his son.

But Haroon's expectations are not the only way this character influences Karim's path. Haroon serves as Karim's first model of imitation—and disidentification. Early in the narration Haroon abandons Karim's mother Margaret and his job to live with Eva Kay, a white suburban middle-class woman. By means of Eva's help and encouragement, Haroon starts doing "gigs" where he leads yoga sessions and lectures London suburbanites on eastern philosophy. Eva sees Haroon as the embodiment of everything exotic and of an ancient and eastern kind of wisdom. When she introduces him to his friends in the context of his first "gig," Eva says, "My good and deep friend Haroon here, he will show us the Way. The Path" (13). Haroon readily performs these expectations and leads shirtless yoga where he displays his lean and muscular body in Eva's house: in doing so Haroon becomes the *Buddha of Suburbia* of the title. Karim's mother Margaret conversely dislikes it when Haroon practices yoga and exposes his body: "Oh God, Haroon, all the front of you is sticking out like that and everyone can see!" (4). Eva wants to exhibit what Margaret would prefer to keep hidden from the neighbors. While Karim dresses similarly to his father and is eager to go with his father to Eva's house, Haroon is an imitation model only in the first few pages. Karim swiftly recognizes that Haroon is performing an oriental caricature to seem wise to Eva and her uniformly white middle-class friends. Karim tries to resist this model because he thinks it is inauthentic and ridiculous: "I wanted to see if Dad was a charlatan . . . whether . . . Dad really did have anything to offer other people, or if he would turn out to be merely another suburban eccentric" (22). Emphasizing the strength of the parental model, at the end of the novel

Karim does something very similar to his father: in his work as an actor he accepts the role of a typical Indian teenager working in a convenience store, thereby adopting and performing a stereotype, a form of inner betrayal that contradicts his resistance throughout the novel.

Within his family, Karim also finds the expectations and an imitation model in Jamila. She is about the same age as Karim (52), but she is very different in that she is the daughter of two immigrants. At the beginning of her Coming-of-age, we encounter Jamila filling shelves in her father "Anwar's shop, Paradise Stores" (50).<sup>12</sup> Karim describes the shop as "a dusty place with a high ornate and flaking ceiling" (50). Karim suspects it is not prosperous since "they never bought any of the things people in Chislehurst would exchange their legs for" (51). Through the influence of activists such as Angela Davis, Jamila's formative process takes her out of the store and into the streets, where she enthusiastically demonstrates against neo-fascist groups and right-winged politics: "She was preparing for the guerilla war she knew would be necessary when the whites finally turned on the blacks and Asians and tried to force us into gas chambers" (56). Jamila rejects the beliefs and lifestyle of her father, as is made clear in the episode where she initially rejects the husband Anwar had chosen for her. In retaliation, Anwar goes on a hunger strike in order to force his daughter into marriage with another Indian immigrant, thus avoiding miscegenation and countering genetic and cultural hybridity. Jamila characterizes this hunger strike "as old-fashioned, extreme and narrow-minded" (71). She is worried that her father's type of backlash furthers the Indian stereotypes she tries to fight and eventually agrees to marry Changez. However, she finds ways to resist

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<sup>12</sup> A larger study would look at the secondary peer coming-of-age stories in the traditional *Bildungsroman*.

the oppressive institution of marriage by means of the political act of having many sexual partners and finally moving to a commune where everybody has sexual relations with each other. In her own Coming-of-age Jamila shows the bravery self-determination requires: she does not sit quietly at home but rather looks for a family model that best fits her desires and takes to the street to demonstrate and march against racism and fascism. Indeed, Jamila's actions are a consequence of her rejection of her parent's life and of the constant fear of being attacked by neo-fascist groups: "Jamila's attitudes were inspired by the possibility that a white group might kill one of us one day" (56). In the second part of the novel Jamila becomes a political activist. Jamila's demonstrations show how the fight for conviviality in the public sphere can coexist in tension with the postcolonial melancholy represented in the discourse of the characters Karim encounters throughout his formative process.

In a particularly relevant public act, Jamila participates in a demonstration that takes place shortly after her husband Changez is beaten by a white supremacist group, The National Front, an exclusively white political party active in the 1970s. Jamila asks Karim to go with her but Karim does not go.

She just eyed me steadily, as if I were some kind of criminal rapist. What was her fucking problem, that's what I wanted to know.

‘What’s your problem?’

‘You weren’t there,’ she said. ‘I couldn’t believe it. You just didn’t show up.’

‘Where wasn’t I? ‘Where?’ I said. ‘Do I have to remind you? At the demonstration, Karim.’ (232)

Instead, Karim goes to an orgy in Pyke's house, "England's most interesting and radical theater director" with whom Karim had staged a play (203). This episode demonstrates starkly that Karim does not identify with Jamila's ideals. She thinks of Karim as an immigrant just like her, which is why she cannot understand why her political struggle is not equally important for Karim. The hero finally rejects this expectation and rejects Jamila as a model of imitation. Just like Haroon, Jamila cannot see Karim as an Englishman, but only as an immigrant like herself.

Also within the realm of Karim's family, his mother Margaret enunciates entirely different expectations of Karim's performance of national identity. The first is early on, when his mother reacts to the traditional Indian attire that Karim wears to please his father: "When she saw me she too became tense. 'Don't show us up, Karim,' she said continuing to watch TV. 'You look like Danny La Rue'" (7). Danny La Rue was an English comedian known for his representation of feminine characters. Even though Karim is dressed exactly like his father, his mother finds the outfit strange and effeminate on Karim. Margaret implies that the attire corresponds to her husband Haroon's body, but that on her son's body it looks queer. Margaret wants Karim to dress as a "non-effeminate" Englishman. Much later in the novel, Margaret highlights Karim's choice of clothing, but without the focus on gender:

‘You weren’t in a loin-cloth as usual,’ she said. ‘At least they let you wear your own clothes. But you’re not an Indian. You’ve never been to India. You’d get diarrhoea the minute you stepped off that plane, I know you would.’

‘Why don’t you say it a bit louder,’ I said. ‘Aren’t I part Indian?’

‘What about me?’ Mum said. ‘Who gave birth to you? You’re an Englishman, I’m glad to say.’

‘I don’t care,’ I said. ‘I’m an actor. It’s a job.’

‘Don’t say that,’ she said. ‘Be what you are.’ (232)

Margaret sees Karim as an Englishman because of her blood and upbringing. But to do so she has to reject his Indian heritage: his clothes and the characters he represents.

Margaret does rightly note the fact that he has never gone to India and that he would be physically incapable to adapt to it. Karim does not want to shed his "Englishness" but he does not want to reject his "Indianness" either: "Aren't I part Indian?" In a convivial environment he would not have to, because these identities would not be mutually exclusive.

The last member of his family to express an expectation for Karim's process of identification is his younger brother Allie. Like Karim, Allie is a culturally hybrid subject, but the way he assesses his place in society and his path to adulthood is dissimilar. Allie explains that he hates fellow non-Anglos "who go on all the time about being black, and how persecuted they were at school, and how someone spat at them once" (267). Allie tells Karim that while other groups have experienced oppression, "no one put people like you and me in camps, and no one will. We can't be lumped in with them, thank God. We should be just as grateful we haven't got white skin either" (268). Allie dismisses the evidence of current discrimination on account of perceived historical privilege: "Let me say that we come from privilege. We can't pretend we're some kind of shitted-on oppressed people. Let's just make the best of ourselves" (268). Karim cannot make sense of Allie's assessment—"the things he was saying were strange" (268)—

because they do not correspond to his own experience of racism. While Allie tries to make a distinction between what he perceives as the imaginary oppression that Indians experience and the real oppression of Blacks or Jews, Karim knows that for people like Hairy Back and Enoch Powell, there is no difference. Karim tries to challenge Allie's ideas by meekly insisting that people like themselves should talk about oppression: "Shouldn't they — I mean, we — talk about it, Allie?" (267). When Allie categorically answers no, Karim changes the subject. Allie's idea of betterment involves turning a blind eye to discrimination, something that Karim experiences daily in his work as an actor.

Karim's family has different, and often contradictory, expectations for him. The expectations, more than a guide for the hero's *Bildung*, confuse Karim and signify the impossibility of cultural hybridity. In a traditional *Bildungsroman* such as Dicken's *David Copperfield* multiple characters confirm an unequivocal expectation: David knows he must become a gentleman and understands that once he has received an education, he will also receive the praise of his family and friends. The hero of the Diasporic Coming-of-age does not find a path set out for him. Indeed, Karim also finds these confusing discourses outside of his family.

In the first chapter, Karim steps outside of his house wearing the "Danny La Rue" outfit to his first visit in Eva's house. In this first contact with larger society, his clothes elicit contradictory reactions from Eva and her son Charlie, Karim's first love. These reactions depict the expectations of the characters. When Eva sees him dressed in "turquoise flared trousers, a blue and white flower-patterned see-through shirt, blue suede boots with Cuban heels, and a scarlet Indian waistcoat with gold stitching around the edges" (6), she says, "Karim Amir, you are so exotic, so original! It's such a

contribution! It's so you!" (9). The "Cuban heels" clash with the "Indian waistcoat" to form an image of otherness that is discordant, which nonetheless works perfectly for the purpose of Haroon's "gig," to perform exoticism. Much like with Haroon, Eva wants Karim to perform her idea of the oriental and is happy when Karim's outfit matches her idea of who he is. However, Charlie tells him to change the way he dresses:

‘Levi’s, I suggest, with an open-necked shirt, maybe in pink or purple, and a thick brown belt. Forget the headband.’

‘Forget the headband?’

‘Forget it.’

I ripped my headband off and tossed it across the floor.

‘For your mum.’

‘You see, Karim, you tend to look a bit like a pearly queen.’ (16)

Charlie articulates two arguments against the outfit. The first one is "for your mum." Charlie thinks Karim's clothes are a rejection to his mother Margaret, as if the clothes were contrary to English heritage. The second is reminiscent of Margaret's connection between masculinity and Englishness. In Charlie's opinion, the outfit does not match Karim because it is both contrary to Karim's ascribed national and sexual identities. Thus Eva's expectation corresponds with Haroon's, which rejects his Englishness, and Charlie's with Margaret's, which rejects his Indianness. These expectations show how Karim's social environment ignores his cultural hybridity.

Just as important, Margaret's expectations reject the possibility for Karim's sexual fluidity especially since sexuality is so imbricated in social and cultural identities.

This episode highlights Karim's exploration of his sexual identity, a part of his process of identification. Karim desires and has sexual relations with both men and women throughout the novel. However, as opposed to national identity, sexuality does not cause him uneasiness or anxiety. Instead, he is comfortable with ambiguity. He considers himself “lucky that [he] could go to parties and go home with anyone from either sex” and states that “it would be heart-breaking to have to choose one [sex] or the other, like having to decide between the Beatles and the Rolling Stones” (55). And, unlike Charlie and his mother, Karim does not associate femininity with being Indian or masculinity with being English.

In addition to the importance of his expectations, Charlie serves as a model of imitation early on. After the previously quoted excerpt where Charlie tells Karim to change the clothes he wears, Karim states, “I, who wanted only to be like Charlie – as clever, as cool in every part of my soul” (16). However, Charlie is not a model in the long term because Karim cannot acquire Charlie's unequivocal English heritage. As well, Charlie constantly changes the way he represents himself to others in order to be liked or praised. For example, before Charlie becomes a famous punk star, he expresses his admiration for “kids with hedgehog hair, howling about anarchy and hatred” (130). Karim replies that changing to be like them would be artificial since kids from the suburbs have not suffered nor hated the same way. The next time Charlie appears in the novel he has moved to New York and become a famous singer because he has decided to perform a marketable character in the United States: a cockney punk. Charlie performs a particular stereotype of Englishness that sells very well but that Karim thinks is completely foreign to what Charlie really is: “I walked down the street, laughing, amused

that here in America Charlie had acquired this cockney accent when my first memory of him at school was that he'd cried after being mocked by the stinking gypsy kids for talking so posh" (247). Much like Haroon, Charlie artificially performs a caricature for his own gain. Karim had also left for the U.S. for career reasons, but when he gets a call from his agent asking him to come back for an audition in London, he turns down Charlie's offer to become his assistant. After having lived with Charlie for a few months, Karim understands, through a process of un-identification that he wants to be in England. He misses his parents, Eva, and the arguments with his father; so he returns to London for an audition (257-258).

This audition leads to Karim's final job, the soap where he takes on the role of a stereotype he has tried to resist throughout the novel. That this is an inner betrayal becomes particularly clear when readers compare this job to the resistance to type-casting he displayed in his first theater play: Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*. Jeremy Shadwell, a white and racist theater director, hires Karim to play Mowgli. Shadwell expects Karim to be exotic, as evident by an uncomfortable discussion of language:

Instead of talking about the job he said some words to me in Punjabi or Urdu and looked as if he wanted to get into a big conversation about Ray or Tagore or something. To tell the truth, when he spoke it sounded like he was gargling. 'Well?' he said. He rattled off some more words. 'You don't understand?'

'No, not really.'

What could I say? I couldn't win. I knew he'd hate me for it. 'Your own language!' [ . . . ] 'What a breed of people two hundred years of

imperialism has given birth to. If the pioneers from the East India Company could see you. What puzzlement there'd be. Everyone looks at you, I'm sure, and thinks: an Indian boy, how exotic, how interesting, what stories of aunties and elephants we'll hear now from him. And you're from Orpington.' (141)

Shadwell expects Karim to talk about elephants, to perform what Indian means in his mind, but is violently disappointed by Karim's "breed." Shadwell is the only character to recognize that Karim is something new: neither Indian nor English. However, Shadwell thinks this "newness" is a monstrous brood, which is why he gives Karim the disguise of dark makeup, "shit-brown cream" (146), and an exaggerated Indian accent,

‘What d’you mean authentic?’ ‘Where was our Mowgli born?’ ‘India.’

‘Yes. Not Orpington. What accent do they have in India?’

‘Indian accents.’

‘Ten out of ten.’

‘No, Jeremy. Please, no.’ (147)

So Shadwell erases what he deems a monstrous hybridity and compels Karim to become a completely Indian caricature, flattening his complexities. Karim feels terrible and at first explains his resistance is a political matter to him: that, like Jamila, he does not want to reinforce the old and offensive colonial Indian stereotype. However, at the end of the novel he adopts a related diasporic stereotype and performs a character that is a rebellious teenager, son of a traditional Indian couple who owns a small convenience store. The final point in Karim's acting career is a male version of Jamila's starting point in her Coming-of-age. This makes him feel miserable, but he finds no alternative.

In the final scene of the novel, Karim is in a restaurant with his brother Allie, Haroon, Eva, Margaret, and Margaret's new boyfriend, a white Englishman. Haroon has just announced that Eva and he are getting married and they are all seemingly happy: "And so I sat in the centre of this old city that I loved, which itself sat at the bottom of a tiny island. I was surrounded by people I loved, and I felt happy and miserable at the same time. I thought of what a mess everything had been, but that it wouldn't always be that way" (284). It is because of the superficially joyous ambiance of the scene that Fielding matches the novel with her convivial mode, "Karim shows himself to have achieved the double task of the bildungsroman protagonist: he matures by locating himself in a social whole. He locates himself in three communities: 'people I loved,' 'this old city,' and the 'tiny island'" (210). Karim has seemingly finished his *Bildung* and found a suitable place within an immediate social group and in society. Indeed, the diversity of the group appears to point to the emergence of a multicultural English society in which "Englishman" can include white Englishmen and women, Indian immigrants, and two people in-between: Allie and Karim. However, this analysis ignores the interlaced misery of the scene. Haroon has found an accommodation and a way to quit his government job, but to do so he has been forced to portray a caricature of Indian culture, to feed a fetish that corresponds to a melancholic vision of Englishness where the exoticism of the former empire persists. Karim is happy to feel love, but he is miserable because his job has taken him backwards, forced him to undo the part of his *Bildung* that taught him to resist inauthenticity and stereotype. In one of the final scenes of the novel, his father asks him whether he lives "an untrue life" (265), to which Karim assents. Like his father,

Karim performs a melancholic stereotype that flattens his identity, fetishizes his body, and erases his cultural hybridity.

This historically embedded novel closes not by representing a convivial closure but rather with hope for a better future: " I thought of what a mess everything had been, but that it wouldn't always be that way" (284). This hope is expressed on March 29, 1979, the day after the vote of no confidence in the government of James Callaghan, then leader of the Labour Party, which would lead to The Conservative Party's Margaret Thatcher's election two months later. The rise conservatism is what Jamila had rallied against and what Karim's friend Terry characterizes as England falling apart and "the rise of the Right" (258). Karim's hope for a better future takes place in the context of the beginning of a conservative government led by a Prime Minister who repeatedly expressed sentiments against immigrants, especially people of color: "She thought it quite wrong that immigrants should be given council housing whereas white citizens were not . . . She made clear, however, that she had 'less objection to refugees such as Rhodesians, Poles and Hungarians, since they could more easily be assimilated into British society'" (Swaine).

The novel finishes with the augury of an ominous future. There is hope, but the ending is ambivalent, both happy and miserable. The hero has found a job that enables him to "have a lot of money . . . be recognized all over the country" (259), but that symbolically places him at the beginning of Jamila's Coming-of-age story. The Diasporic Coming-of-age does not offer an unequivocal solution to the problematic expectations and models the hero has encountered. At the end, the question of Englishness is open, like Karim's formative process. The novel's ending does not correspond to one of Paul

Gilroy's visions of society, but keeps both visions in tension, portraying a convivial micro universe at the dinner table and a pessimistic foreshadowing of the decade to come. Even though the hero does not arrive at a final model for imitation, his Coming-of-age enables readers to puzzle over the identities of the hero who is, at the end, still a "funny kind of Englishman" (3).

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## CHAPTER 3. THE GIRL WHO DID NOT WANT TO BELONG

I'm all my characters. And I'm none of my characters. I can write truth only if I get out of the way and disappear. And from this Houdini trick, amazingly enough, I reappear.

— Sandra Cisneros, *A House of my Own*<sup>13</sup>

*The House on Mango Street* depicts 44 vignettes of the working-class Latino community of Mango Street in Humboldt Park, Chicago. Its central focus is the Coming-of-age of the narrator, Esperanza Cordero, a Mexican-American girl. Her intersecting identities of class, gender, and race marginalize her both within her community and in the larger Chicago context. Isabelle Rigoni explains, "The concept of intersectionality is used as an analytical tool to explore how various categories of power asymmetries interact in the construction of subjectivity and material conditions of subjects, and thereby contribute to social exclusion and political injustice" (836). Esperanza does not experience marginalization because of one single dimension of her identity; rather, her race, class, and gender interact to contribute to her social exclusion from the Anglo majority of Chicago and to the submissive role she would have to assume within her Latino community. Therefore her Coming-of-age subverts many of the expectations of the

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<sup>13</sup> Sandra Cisneros. *A House of My Own*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015. 124.

archetypal *Bildungsroman*. Esperanza's process of becoming does not yield a completed and ideal adult, but rather enables fluid and intersecting identities up to the very end. Esperanza's autodiegetic voice weaves her own experiences with depictions of her community and the voices of the people around her. In doing so, the novel presents a shift from the individual capitalistic focus, characteristic of the classic iteration of the *Bildungsroman*, to a collective utterance. As well, the novel does not lead the hero to a final accommodation within her community, but rather leaves Mango Street—the name Alicia, a friend who attends college, bestows on Esperanza—to pursue her career as storyteller (107). Unlike in *The Buddha of Suburbia*, in which the protagonist Karim Amir's decides to perform a stereotype in order to assimilate into the English society of the early 1980's, following a melancholic vision of national identity, Esperanza departs from her community not to assimilate to the larger Chicago context, but indeed to get an education and come back, as Sonia Saldívar-Hull affirms in her anti-assimilationist reading of *The House on Mango Street*. Also key is Sandra Cisneros's own readings of the novel because her own experiences of alterity and discovery of her unique voice as a storyteller parallel and illuminate Esperanza's process of identification.

In *A House of My Own* (2015) Sandra Cisneros states she started to write *The House on Mango Street* at the Iowa University Writer's Workshop during "the spring of 1977, Iowa City" (125). Sonia Saldívar-Hull observes that in this "elitist writing program in the Midwest" Cisneros "was alien because of her race and ethnicity, alien as a working-class woman—alien, that is, as a product of her specific history" (83). Cisneros confirms that this triple alienation prevented her from understanding many of the texts assigned there because "none of the books in this class . . . had ever discussed a house

like mine" (*A House of My Own* 125). She cites Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*, Isak Diensen's *Out of Africa*, and Gaston Baschelard's *The Poetics of Space* (126). The latter was especially challenging since it described a "house of memory" using the metaphor of an attic, a room that none of Cisneros's apartments ever had. The "class" in this passage refers to the university space, but can also be understood as socioeconomic class because all the other students came from backgrounds, and had experiences, that allowed them to understand and relate to canonical literary texts. In this process of realizing and subsequently coming to terms with her "otherness," Cisneros explains how she found a voice distinct from that of her classmates:

It was not until this moment when I separated myself, when I considered myself truly distinct, that my writing acquired a voice. I knew I was a Mexican woman, but I didn't think it had anything to do with why I felt so much imbalance in my life, whereas it had everything to do with it! My race, my gender, my class! That's when I decided I would write about something my classmates couldn't write about. (quoted in Sagel)

Cisneros decided to tell the story of her race, gender, and class. In doing so she would fill the "literary void" she had found as a teenage reader. Cisneros was "trying to write the stories that haven't been written," and felt "like a cartographer" who would draw the map of her community in Campbell street and, instead of streets and avenues, she would use experiences and stories (quoted in Sagel). *The House on Mango Street* therefore constituted a project of a collective utterance: the imprinting of experiences Cisneros had lived and witnessed. The novel is not only a coming-of-age of the character but also a coming-into-existence of the Latina/o community of Humboldt Park. At the end of the

novel the three sisters will tell Esperanza she "will always be Mango Street" (105). The process of becoming Mango Street turns Esperanza into a point of convergence for stories. In becoming a storyteller, Esperanza assumes the responsibility of voicing those underrepresented, untold tales, specifically linked to the place where she grew up. Paradoxically, it is her departure from this specific place that enables her to become its storyteller.

Saldívar-Hull keys in on the fact that Esperanza assumes the responsibility to tell the stories as the main factor that disables assimilationist interpretations of the text. Saldívar-Hull explains that when the book was first published Juan Rodríguez, "editor of the notoriously sexist Chicano newsletter *Carta Abierta*," misread the novel when he affirmed "that Esperanza chooses to leave Mango Street, chooses to move away from her social/cultural base to become more 'Anglicized,' more individualistic" (quoted in Saldívar-Hull 85). Saldívar-Hull resists this interpretation explaining that Esperanza "does not have to be a bourgeois escape to an academic ivory tower." Rather, higher education constitutes an option that allows "the Chicana working-class intellectual the possibility of a return" (102). Saldívar-Hull then clarifies that "the return, of course, is the book itself. The house Esperanza seeks is . . . a site that offers countless Chicanas and other women a mirror of their own lives under Chicano (male) rule and signals how it is possible to resist and to build new structures as women" (102). The stories of the girls and women in Esperanza's community represent the possible outcomes for the Coming-of-age process. The multiplicity of stories and voices that converge in Mango Street subvert the bourgeois individualistic representation of early *Bildungsromane* and enables Esperanza not to assimilate, but rather revise the genre so that the collective can escape

oppressive gender roles. Esperanza returns to Mango Street in the form of the story "for the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot out" (110). The Coming-of-age novel is the right fit, the *Bildungsroman* the sufficiently pliable genre, for this project because it depicts the alternatives, mentors, and models of imitation that Esperanza encounters during her process of identification and her final rejection of traditional social roles for working-class women of color. The power of storytelling enables nuanced self-representation for marginalized and often stereotyped identities.

In "trying to write the stories that haven't been written" (quoted in Sagel), Cisneros also raises the question of intended readership. The archetypal *Bildungsroman* was written and consumed by the male *Bourgeoisie*. In reflecting on her creation of the novel, Cisneros says she wanted to "fill a literary void." She implies that there are readers, like her younger self, who crave fair and nuanced representations of their experiences, which are not to be found in the novels of Charles Dickens and James Joyce. Indeed, in the novel's dedication Cisneros writes: "A las Mujeres To the Women" (xviii). Cisneros addresses women, a radical variation to the original male readers. In the vignette "Boys & Girls" Esperanza explains that "boys and girls live in separate worlds" (8), establishing a break from male experiences: she announces her subsequent focus on girls' and women' experiences and imitation models.

In intermingling Spanish in the narration, she announces a hybrid linguistic identity and, therefore, cultural hybridity.<sup>14</sup> The bilingualism of the dedication indicates

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<sup>14</sup> In *Hybridity and Diaspora* Virinder Kalra describes hybridity as the cultural identities that emerge at "the edge or contact point of diaspora, describing cultural mixture where the diasporized meets the host in the scene of migration" (70). I use "cultural hybridity" because it signifies a cultural mix that originates a different identity to the one of the immigrants or hosts. The heroes cannot fully identify with the culture of their parents or of their host country.

the novel is intended not exclusively, but especially for readers that grew up speaking as bilinguals, Spanish-English bilingual in particular, experiencing their distant home culture simultaneously with the one of the host country. The hybridity of language and the intended readership are two of many alterations to the classic expectations of the classic *Bildungsroman* plot.

From the moment readers hold the book in their hands, the variety of signs that constitute the paratext<sup>15</sup> call attention to Esperanza's cultural hybridity. The title of the book has a Spanish-sounding street in an English-speaking world. In her essay on belonging, Regina Betz explains, "despite living in a Spanish-speaking community, young Esperanza's identity is torn between her English tongue—given to her by the Catholic school and the Chicago context—and her traditional roots in the Spanish-speaking domain" (18). These symbols suggest that cultural hybridity is rooted in bilingualism. The book cover of the Vintage edition shows three women of color holding what could be either a veil or white threads that partially cover their faces.<sup>16</sup> The threads evoke the image of Penelope in Homer's *Odyssey*, unwilling to complete the tapestry therefore taking control of her own destiny. The image suggests both a process of unveiling and the possibility to sew one's own narrative. The removal of the veil points to the understanding of one's identities and the ontological questions of coming-of-age stories: who am I? And what is my place in the world? The threads point to at once

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<sup>15</sup> Paratext is defined by Gérard Genette as "the means by which a text makes a book of itself and proposes itself as such to its readers, and more generally to the public . . . exterior presentation of a book, name of the author, title, and what follows as it meets the eye of a docile reader, which is certainly not always the case" (261-262). In the case of *The House on Mango Street* the paratext of the Vintage Contemporaries edition is a means to call attention to the cultural hybridity readers will encounter: both the title and the imagery signal the story of women of color.

<sup>16</sup> Further research should study the book covers of the Iowa Writers Group cohort of Sandra Cisneros.

Cisneros's and Esperanza's processes of becoming artists and storytellers. Their ability to sew their own narratives is what ultimately enables them to leave Mango Street and the submissive feminine roles their community, real and imagined, have to offer. Another key element of the paratext, the back cover contributes to the metaphor of sewing as empowerment: "Esperanza's story is that of a young girl coming into her power, and inventing for herself what she will become." As well, the summary of the novel underscores the importance of Esperanza's process of identification and the genre's development, as the novel "has entered the canon of coming-of-age classics."

As readers move beyond the paratext, we encounter not a linear or monolithic Dickensian narration, but a series of short lyric snippets of story: 44 vignettes in 110 pages. These vignettes are built with incomplete sentences, phrases, and fragments of thought; they often rhyme and the narrative focus often switches from one character to another. The hybridity between short story and poetry parallels the hybridity of the languages and the polyphony of voices that come together to map Mango Street. Saldívar-Hull argues hybridity inserts the novel in a U.S. feminist working-class tradition: "Cisneros's mestiza text is both lyrical and realist; it has the rhythms of poetry and the narrative power of fiction. It participates (borders on) a variety of genres—historia, testimonio, and poetry, as well as working-class, U.S. feminist fiction closely allied to [working-class feminist writer] Tillie Olsen's novel of the 1930's *Yonnondio*" (87). The *House on Mango* is relentlessly liminal. Its hybridity sews the novel together

with other feminist voices<sup>17</sup>; but for the Coming-of-age framework it represents the possibility to open up its traditional characteristics.

Esperanza begins her formative process in Humboldt Park. The first lines of the novel describe the experience of moving around, from one run-down apartment to the next, propelled by the dream of owning a house with "stairs inside, like the houses on T.V." (4). The house on Mango Street depicts a reality far from dreamlike *Bourgeoisie* proprietorship, setting the stage for the subversion of the classic expectations of the *Bildungsroman* genre.

In the second vignette of the novel, Esperanza explains, "In English my name means hope. In Spanish it means too many letters. It means sadness, it means waiting" (10). Her name represents the impossibility of reconciliation with her hybrid identity. While "the English definition is motivating and positive" (Betz 19), the Spanish definition is associated with sadness. The melancholic *Bildungsroman* figures in this struggle with hybridity as it places the Spanish meaning in a subordinate position in relation to the dominant English meaning of "hope." Further, the name begins as the story of the woman who had it before her: her great-grandmother,

It was my great-grandmother's name and now it is mine. She was a horse woman . . . I would've liked to have known her, a wild horse of a woman, so wild she wouldn't marry. Until my great-grandfather threw a sack over

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<sup>17</sup> The connection with other working-class women writers is particularly relevant in light of the literary voids Cisneros tries to fill. Indeed, *Yonnonidio* could too be approached from a *Bildungsroman* framework as it depicts the lives of a working-class family, the Holbrooks, (and is therefore a collective utterance) although it, unlike *The House in Mango Street*, focuses particularly on the coming-of-age of the younger daughter Mazie. *Yonnonidio* remains unfinished, much like Penelope's tapestry in Homer's *Odyssey*, as if Tillie Olsen had not been able to find a suitable final accommodation for this family. Esperanza's own formative process is more aligned with Mazie Holbrook's than with David Copperfield's because these working-class girls face similar forms of oppression.

her head and carried her off. And the story goes she never forgave him.

She looked out of the window her whole life, the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow . . . Esperanza. I have inherited her name but I don't want to inherit her place by the window. (11)

The "sack over her head" topples the unveiling of the paratext. The power of male violence encases the woman's wildness, taming the "wild horse." The outcome is a trapped woman who looks perpetually out of the window, rather than towards the inside of her house and the reality of her life. In Esperanza's process of identification, her great-grandmother functions as a model of imitation and rejection. Esperanza wants her strength, but she does not want to repeat her story. Esperanza's name carries both admiration and refusal. She tries to reject what being from Mango Street could mean for her: becoming a submissive wife.

In the vignette where Esperanza tells the story of her great-grandmother, Esperanza's name collides with the English-speaking world: "At school they say my name funny as if the syllables were made out of tin and hurt the roof of your mouth. But in Spanish my name is made out of a softer something, like silver, not quite as thick as sister's name—Magdalena—which is uglier than mine. Magdalena who at least can come home and become Nenny. But I am always Esperanza" (11). Esperanza envies the linguistic and cultural possibility her sister has of shedding the name, of becoming a Nenny for some time; that is, of becoming someone else. Nenny's name mutates to assimilate into the cultural space she inhabits. But Esperanza has to carry her great-grandmother's story at all times; and it is exhausting. However, her desire to shed her

name, her semantic magnet,<sup>18</sup> disappears in the end, when she achieves what her great-grandmother never could. Esperanza goes to the world outside the window and promises to come back to bring the change to Mango Street that outside forces cannot bring: "I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind" (110).

In her great-grandmother's story, readers also encounter the violent nature of most of the men in her life. Except for her father, who we see crying when he gets news of Esperanza's grandfather's death (56), men are depicted as violent and abusive of women. Several men sexually assault Esperanza, mirroring her great-grandmother's story of abuse, as in the vignettes "The First Job" and "Red Clowns."

In "The First Job" Esperanza is isolated from the rest of the workers because her age and inexperience make her afraid to build work relationships. She "was scared to eat alone in the company lunchroom with all those men and ladies looking" (54). A man takes advantage of her isolation and asks her for a kiss on account of it being his birthday. Esperanza explains, "I thought I would because he was so old and just as I was about to put my lips on his cheek, he grabs my face with both hands and kisses me hard on the mouth and doesn't let go" (55). Even men who seem benign are violent. Esperanza ends the vignette with the kiss and does not explain what happened to the man or whether she stayed at the job. The lack of a follow-up signifies a lack of consequences for the man. This vignette depicts the dangerous working conditions for a working-class girl who lied

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<sup>18</sup> For Luz Aurora Pimentel the name of a character starts out as a word devoid of meaning and acquires significations throughout a narration. The narrative discourse takes a blank name and fills it with meanings. By the end of the narration, readers associate the name of a character with the constellation of characteristics that the text has built (Pimentel 56). Much like a magnet, the name of a character is a noun that attracts adjectives. Pimentel explains that a proper noun "*es un centro de imantación semántica al que convergen toda clase de significaciones arbitrariamente atribuidas al objeto nombrado*" [is a semantic magnet where all kinds of arbitrary significations arbitrarily attributed to the named object converge] (26-27).

about her age to get the job and therefore has no protections from harassment or abuse. As she explains earlier, she does not even know whether she can take breaks or sit down while she works. This vignette thus poignantly represents the social class that creates the conditions for the assault to take place and for it to go unpunished.

In one of the most ambiguous vignettes, "Red Clowns" Esperanza tells, or rather is unable to tell, the story of her rape. Esperanza is again isolated in a fair since her friend Sally has left her alone. In this scene Esperanza's racial identity comes into play, as is signified when the man who grabbed her said, "I love you, Spanish girl, I love you, and pressed his sour mouth to" hers (100). Violent masculinity is inescapable, as in the stories of Esperanza's great-grandmother and Sally, who is abused by her father who hits her when he finds out she has been talking to boys, "he just went crazy, he just forgot he was her father between the buckle and the belt" (93), and later beaten by her husband, "sometimes her husband gets angry and once he broke the door where his foot went through" (101). As evidenced by Sally's family and Esperanza's great-grandmother's husband, male violence is institutionalized in family structures and marriage. In this sense, Esperanza's escape from her community and her quest for a house free of men is not only a quest for higher education or the means to become a storyteller, but also a quest for security and physical wellbeing.

In Thomas Jeffers's bourgeois plot, the love affairs of the heroes play a crucial role to their developments. For example, In *David Copperfield*, the titular protagonist has "two love affairs, one good and one bad, which help him revalue his values" (Jeffers 53). The "bad" one ends with the death of his first wife Dora Spenlow; the "good" one is his first love, Agnes Wickfield, whom David has to save from Uriah Heep, the novel's

villain. The antagonism of Uriah Heep enables David to emerge as a hero who saves his bride by vanquishing evil. Contrastingly, in these stories of assault, Cisneros exposes the impossibility of a "good love affair," in Jeffers's terms, for this working-class Latina. Cisneros demonstrates the romantic and idyllic relationships, like the ones of *David Copperfield*, are bourgeois constructs unattainable for women who are marginalized and whose bodies are treated as a commodities or worse.

In her process of identification Esperanza finds two other characters that fulfill the function of mentors in Jeffer's archetypal plot: her aunt Lupe and her Puerto Rican neighbor Alicia, who studies at a university. Esperanza's aunt, who lives by herself in a "dark apartment, second-floor rear building where sunlight never came" (60), is extremely sick, and is the only adult who listens to Esperanza's poems and encourages her to work on her art:

She listened to every book, every poem I read her. One day I read her one of my own. I came very close. I whispered it into the pillows:

I want to be  
like the waves on the sea,  
like clouds in the wind,  
but I'm me.

One day I'll jump  
out of my skin.

I'll shake the sky  
like a hundred violins

That's nice. That's very good, she said in her tired voice. You just remember to keep writing, Esperanza. You must keep writing. It will keep you free, and I said yes, but at the time I didn't know what she meant . . .

And then she died, my aunt who listened to my poems. And then we began to dream the dreams. (60-61)

Even though Esperanza does not understand at that point that writing will set her free from the oppressive roles in the stories of her great-grandmother or Sally, she does start to "dream the dreams." For the first time she accepts the notion that the possibility of dreaming to go away does not necessarily mean the same thing as jumping out of her skin or shedding her name; however, she can only fully accept this at the very end, when she is able to acknowledge that she is Mango Street but that she can go away nonetheless.

In her last vignette she says,

I like to tell stories. I am going to tell you the story about a girl who didn't want to belong. I didn't always want to live on Mango Street . . . Mango Street, sad red house, the house I belong but do not belong to . . . One day I will go away. Friends and neighbors will say, What happened to that Esperanza? Where did she go with all those books and paper? Why did she march so far away? They will not know I have gone away to come back. (109-110)

In her process of identification she parts away from the dimensions of her identity she rejects: she recognizes that she can refrain from repeating her great-grandmother's story without having to reject her name, but rather becomes the new story of the resignified name of her own sewing. The possibility of becoming an artist enables Esperanza to re-

signify the name so that it no longer symbolizes her great-grandmother's story. The meaning of the name becomes more flexible since she recognizes the possibility to have her own home, and live by herself: to not marry. Where a traditional *Bildungsroman* would enshrine marriage as a fundamental part of the respectable accommodations of the middle-class protagonist, *The House on Mango Street* enables readers to understand singleness as a possible and desirable accommodation.

Alicia is the first to present the possibility of escaping by means of education through her own practices. Alicia lives with her father who thinks "a woman's place is sleeping so she can wake up early with the tortilla star" (31). Since Alicia's mother is dead, she has the responsibility of cooking. She "inherited her mama's rolling pin" (31). However, Alicia "is smart and studies for the first time at a university" (31). Alicia's decision to go to college shows that educated women become ostracized in the community, as evidenced by Esperanza's earlier perception in the fifth vignette: "Alicia is stuck-up ever since she went to college" (12). Her education is by no means an easy feat not only because of her gender, but also because of her class position, geographically in the city, which forces her to take "two trains and a bus" in order to get there. But she is willing to do it "because she doesn't want to spend her whole life in a factory or behind a rolling pin" (31-32). Her aunt and Alicia represent the possibility of empowerment that Esperanza will later embody.

In addition to her great-grandmother, aunt, and Alicia, Esperanza's social environment disperses modeling among several other characters: her mother and Minerva, an older married girl, are ambivalent models while her neighbor Marin is a negative model. Both her mother and Minerva are storytellers. In the first chapter, where

Esperanza yearns for a middle-class suburban house, she says "this was the house Mama dreamed up in the stories she told us before we went to bed" (4). In "A Smart Cookie," Esperanza's mother is shown to have an artistic sensibility that she was never able to develop. Her mother recalls, "I could've been somebody . . . She can sing an opera" (90). Esperanza's mother sings Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*, an opera about a Japanese woman who also waits by the window, in this case for her husband to return, and who eventually kills herself. "That Madame Butterfly was a fool," exclaims Mama (90). The reference to *Madame Butterfly* inserts the novel into a centuries'-old and global history of lack of positive models for young girls. It is a model distinct from but related to her mother's shame of her social class, which prevented her however from finishing her education. Esperanza's mother embodies the potential of talent and the paralysis that stems from class shame.

Minerva is also a writer, but even though she "is only a little older than" Esperanza (84), she already has two children and depends on an irresponsible man who leaves her and comes back time and again. These women depict two ways in which class and gender can halt the development of talent, imprisoning them. Esperanza's neighbor Marin recalls the image of Esperanza's great-grandmother because, like her, she is also looking out and waiting. But, unlike her great-grandmother, Marin hopes to find a man who will marry her "and take [her] to live in a big house far away" (26). Marin "is waiting for a car to stop, a star to fall, someone to change her life" but she cannot imagine the possibility of changing it herself.

The stories of Sally and Mamacita depict the most pessimistic outcomes for women in Mango Street. Sally's story depicts marriage as a false escape from male

violence. Her story appears in three non-consecutive vignettes. In the first one, "Sally," Esperanza depicts her friend as a beautiful girl who only wants "to love and to love and to love" (83). For this reason, she is called a nasty name and the boys tell lewd stories of her in the coatroom. In "What Sally Said," Esperanza reports a particularly bad beating her father gave to Sally when he "catches her talking to a boy" (93). This beating is described in unclear terms but suggests the possibility of sexual abuse when Esperanza explains, "he just forgot he was her father between the buckle and the belt" (93). In "Linoleum Roses" Sally gets married to a "marshmallow salesman" she met "at a school bazaar" (101). They have to go to another state, "where it's legal to get married before the eighth grade" and Esperanza explains she thinks "she did it to escape" (101). The outcome is despairing as her husband is just as violent and completely isolates her: "He doesn't let her look out the window. And he doesn't like her friends, so nobody gets to visit her unless he is working" (102). Sally's isolation is more brutal than Esperanza's great-grandmother's experience of oppression because Sally is forced to look inside her house; she is not allowed to imagine the possibilities out the window. Sally's escape presents a grim alternative for the women in Esperanza's community, jumping from one abusive household to the next, completely dependent on men and their desires. It also portrays an imprisonment made possible by socioeconomic conditions: the only escape from her father's house that Sally can imagine is another man's house. Sally becomes a linoleum rose, as the title of the vignette suggests, in a household that cannot afford real flowers, as beautiful and unmovable as the rose, unable to escape again.

*Mamacita* is also imprisoned in her apartment. It is not however her husband who restrains her, but her Spanish monolingualism, which alienates her from the larger Anglo

Chicago context and from the bilingual community of Mango Street. *Mamacita* portrays both a disadvantaged position within her marriage and a sort of imprisonment that arises from her unwillingness to learn English. She is therefore marginalized linguistically and in gender terms. As opposed to Esperanza, *Mamacita* cannot escape any of the oppressing forces of her life because in the larger context of Chicago she is unable to speak. *Mamacita's* husband had come to Chicago before her. He worked and "saved and saved because she was alone with the baby boy in that country [Mexico]" (76). When *Mamacita* arrives she instantly becomes secluded, which Esperanza suspects is due to her fear of speaking English. Esperanza mentions that when her own father first came to *this* country he ate "hamandeggs" for three months because it was the only word he knew. *Mamacita's* desire is to go home but her husband is annoyed with her nostalgia. He tells her, "*¡Ay, caray!* We *are* home. This *is* home. Here I am and here I stay. Speak English. Speak English Christ!" (78). Afterwards, *Mamacita's* greatest fear is realized when her little son "starts to sing the Pepsi commercial he heard on T.V." (78). The protection from linguistic marginalization she has built within her house crumbles when English invades her intimate space. "No speak English, she says to the child who is singing the language that sounds like tin. No speak English, no speak English, and bubbles into tears" (78). The broken English signifies a broken relationship with her son, who is learning how to interact with the outside world and possibly forgetting his Mexican heritage. Unlike *Mamacita*, Esperanza has the capacity to interact with the outside and escape because Mango Street is a place where individuals are either bilingual or have to stay home and eat "hamandeggs" for the rest of their lives.

*Mamacita* is an extreme example of the marginalization that the English-speaking Chicago exerts on the immigrant community of Mango Street, but Esperanza also draws one vignette where the rest of the city interacts with Mango and vice versa. Esperanza explains: "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" (28). *Mamacita* cannot interact with the city because she cannot speak English; but conversely the "stupid" outsiders, who speak English, cannot interact with this street either. Mango Street seems dangerous to outsiders, but the people of Mango Street are also scared: "All brown around, we are safe. But watch us drive into a neighborhood of another color and our knees go shakity-shake and our car windows get rolled up tight and our eyes look straight. Yeah. That is how it goes and goes" (28). Chicago is fearful of the Mango community. The community becomes a marginal "them" to the ones who get there by mistake and reduce their identity to an object: a shiny knife. Esperanza resists this reduction by saying, "But we aren't afraid. We know the guy with the crooked eye is Davey the Baby's brother, and the tall one next to him in the straw brim, that's Rosa's Eddie V., and the big one that looks like a dumb grown man, he's Fat Boy, though he's not fat anymore nor a boy" (28). Esperanza gives names to the people in Mango. By acquiring a name or nickname, they also acquire collections of adjectives that turn them into individuals. In mentioning their names Esperanza resists the stereotypical symbol of the knife.

This short vignette also calls attention to the segregated communities of Chicago. Racism permeates the city and fosters communities that are segregated from each other. Chicago is depicted as a city reigned by fear of difference and delimited by both racism

and social class. This is how it goes and goes: everyone is guilty of the ubiquitous lack of sympathy and solidarity between races. Thus the symbol of the knife represents the reason why there is a necessity for fair and nuanced storytelling. Resisting the violent stereotype associated with people of color can foster solidarity and understanding.

Throughout the novel Esperanza has suffered from different kinds of oppression: as a woman she is abused by a man at her first job and raped at the fair; as the daughter of immigrants living in a segregated U.S. city she is associated with the symbol of the knife. She also experiences class shaming that bookend the novel. In the first vignette, a nun in her school asks Esperanza to show her where she lives. Esperanza points to the "third floor, the paint peeling, wooden bars Papa had nailed on the windows so we wouldn't fall out," and the nun says "You live *there*?" (5). This experience parallels the reason her mother left school: "Shame is a bad thing, you know. It keeps you down. You want to know why I quit school? Because I didn't have nice clothes. No clothes, but I had brains. Yup, she says disgusted, stirring again. I was a smart cookie then" (91). Esperanza's mother was paralyzed by the shame of her class, written in her clothes for everyone to read. Like her mother, at the beginning of the novel Esperanza learns to be ashamed of Mango Street. Esperanza feels sad about what her name represents: roughness and marginalization in school, marriage and imprisonment in the house. However, at the end of the novel Esperanza has found a way to accept her name. This acceptance empowers Esperanza to continue her education, the path that will ultimately enable her not to repeat her mother's story of frustration and shame.

In a conversation that she has towards the end of the novel in "The Three Sisters," one of the old ladies tells her "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 does not know how to respond: "It was as if she could read my mind, as if she knew what I had wished for, and I felt ashamed for having made such a selfish wish" (105). Esperanza feels ashamed that she had wanted to get rid of her name, like her sister Nenny, in order to become someone else. In the final chapters the identity Esperanza has constructed enables her to imitate the characteristics that she had admired in her great-grandmother, her strength and wildness, but to reject the roles of wife and mother. In her rejection of the secluded nature of Mango Street and the static longing of her great-grandmother gazing through the window, Esperanza imitates brave women like her aunt Lupe and Alicia. From her aunt, Esperanza learns to recognize the value of her poetry and the possibility to have a house of one's own, even if it is small and dark. Alicia embodies the possibility of social mobility through education. Esperanza's process of identification enables her to escape the brutality of men and to get a house that is "Not a man's house. Not a daddy's. A house all of my own" (108).

Esperanza's story follows some aspects of Jeffer's plot, except for the love affairs and the final accommodation characteristic of the most traditional *Bildungsroman*. Her need to tell stories and survive is what frees her from Mango Street, although she still feels a responsibility, at the end, to "come back. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot out" (110). As she explains in one of the last conversations of the novel, there are no outside powers that can change the conditions that Mango Street represents:

Like it or not you are Mango street, and one day you'll come back too.

Not me. Not until somebody makes it better.

Who's going to do it? The Mayor?

And the thought of the mayor coming to Mango Street makes me laugh out loud.

Who's going to do it? Not the mayor (107).

Since the mayor, as a representative of the power structure that marginalizes Mango Street, is not going to do anything to change Mango's conditions, she believes it is her responsibility to speak for those who don't have a voice, as she has done when resisting the symbol of the shiny knife. Betz argues that the acquisition of English "is perceived as a chance to escape poverty and restraint in such a misogynist culture, so author and heroine establish English as mother-tongue" (32). I disagree with Betz on this point. Neither Cisneros nor Esperanza are sellouts, as was suggested by many critics when *The House on Mango Street* was first published:

When Chicana feminist writers begin to examine Chicano "tradition" and criticize wife battering, child abuse, "drunk husbands," the misogyny that is embedded in the culture, they are branded "vendidas," sellouts, who betray their people and contribute to the damaging stereotypes of Mexicans and Mexican Americans that Anglo America already believes. (Saldívar-Hull 83-84)

Esperanza's narration does not adopt English in order to further the stereotypes associated with Latino communities in segregated U.S. cities, but rather to show the constellation of characters and experiences that constitute the community. Her voice is predominantly in English, but it is woven with Spanish terms of endearment. Her name signifies the English word hope, but it also carries the story of her ancestry and her fight against repressive models. The power Esperanza acquires during her process of identification is

not the adoption of the privileged language, but rather the capacity to be the one who tells the story. Esperanza decides which adjectives she wants and which adjectives she does not for herself and for her community. In the context of a collision between us (Mango Street) and them (the Chicago majority), the possibility to represent implies the power to build an identity as rich as the storyteller desires.

Esperanza's coming of age challenges the conventions of the *Bildungsroman*. She does not find an available role model within her community and at the end of her story she leaves. Her self-inflicted exile is not entirely grim, however, because she has found a way to resist the oppressive family structures that her great-grandmother could not. She has also found a way to resist stereotypes and to reconcile with her name, a name that means hope.

Unlike the *Bildungsroman* of the 18th century, Cisneros' intended readers are not white middle-class young men who ought to imitate heroes, but people like her, whose class, race, and gender identities are confusing and marginal, who exist in liminal places where they are not always certain of who they are or should be. The Diasporic Coming-of-age conventions enable the exploration with identity and the open-ended conclusion allows a fluid notion of adulthood. Cisneros does not tell readers what they ought to become, but rather enables her marginalized readers to understand their identities as complex and nuanced. Cisneros fills the "literary void" in telling the story of "My race, my gender, my class!" (Sagel 74)

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## CHAPTER 4: TREADING LIGHTLY

Yuri Herrera's *Señales que precederán el fin del mundo*<sup>19</sup> depicts the perilous migration of Makina from rural Mexico into the U.S. Southwest. More generally, the novel represents a breaking away from the traditional expectations of early *Bildungsromane*. It depicts a Coming-of-age where the hero chooses to forego her name,<sup>20</sup> the identity she has created throughout the process, and, instead of starting with the birth of the character, it begins with Makina's voice explaining "estoy muerta" (11),<sup>21</sup> a reversal of the traditional temporal unraveling of any formative process. For these reasons and several others that I analyze throughout this chapter, I argue that the novel subverts the expectations of the *Bildunrsroman* genre while it keeps the most important of its characteristics at its center: the exploration and construction of identity in the process of identification. According to Chris Weedon, "the process of identification . . . inserts individuals into ideologies and ideological practices that, when they work well, are lived as though they were obvious and natural" (6). In the *Bildungsroman*, readers find this process in fragments, since the heroes do not know, at the beginning, the cultural signs,

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<sup>19</sup> *Signs Preceding the End of the World*. All English translations are included in the footnotes and are mine, unless otherwise noted. I do not italicize Spanish quotations throughout the chapter in order to forego the distancing formatting and to incorporate the narrator and characters' speech stylistically to the text.

<sup>20</sup> For Luz Aurora Pimentel the name of a character starts out as a word devoid of meaning and acquires a network of significations throughout a narration. The narrative discourse takes a blank name and fills it with meanings. By the end of the narration, readers associate the name of a character with the constellation of characteristics that the text has built (Pimentel 56). Much like a magnet, the name of a character is a noun that attracts adjectives as though they were scraps of metal.

<sup>21</sup> "I am dead."

symbols, and practices they will perform by the end. Rather, the *Bildung* is a process in which heroes experiment with various models (as well as cultural and ideological practices) to understand, perform, and ultimately internalize a role in their social environment. This novel portrays the story of a character that lives and metaphorically dies at the legal and cultural margins of the U.S. border while it sets itself at the margins of the genre.

The Coming-of-age framework enables a sensitive reading of the novel that focuses on the possible alternatives that Makina encounters throughout her journey. Such a reading diverges significantly from other approaches to Herrera's work. Ivonne Sánchez Becerril, for example, interprets the story as a metaphor for crossing into the Mictlán, the underworld of Aztec mythology. The nine sections of the novel mirror the nine levels of the journey whereby the souls of the dead become detached from their bodies, material possessions, and cultural identities. This allegorical interpretation, supported by the nebulous atemporal setting, underscores that the location of the U.S. is, similar to the Mictlán, "debajo de la tierra y hacia el norte" (109).<sup>22</sup> Sánchez Becerril indicates that this is not a mere coincidence, but rather proposes that Makina's arrival at the "región norte, al inframundo, a Mictlán"<sup>23</sup> is also her arrival at the "vida clandestina, subterránea – *underground*– de los migrantes mexicanos en Estados Unidos" (112).<sup>24</sup> To further this allegorical reading, Sánchez Becerril proposes that the ambiguous names of the "lords" in Makina's town can be read as Aztec divinities that help her soul across. Makina enlists Dobleú, Tlaloc, God of water and rain, to help her cross the river; Hache, Huitzilopochtli,

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<sup>22</sup> "Underground and northward."

<sup>23</sup> "North region, to the underworld, to the Mictlán."

<sup>24</sup> "Clandestine life, subterraneous –underground– of Mexican migrants in the U.S."

the foundational patron of Mexico City and God of War, to help her find her brother (whom she finds in a military base); and Q, Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent, God of life, wisdom, and duality, to help her return. This allegorical reading underscores the symbolic dimension of the characters in the story and is helpful in illuminating the connection between Makina's initial death and her journey into a "subworld" of material and social inequality. Such a reading valuably shows the pertinence of an allegorical interpretation of the characters' names and plot. It pays tribute to the mythical quality of Herrera's novel and to the foundational tension in the *Bildungsroman*, in which the protagonist is at once a realistic, historically-situated character and an everywoman. The reading I propose shifts the focus towards Makina's coming-of-age enabling an analysis of her formation and final rejection of her identity that highlights her voice, her own interpretation of her identities, and her resistance to the dire and often opprobrious spaces other migrants inhabit.<sup>25</sup>

*Señales* adopts specific conventions of the genre to tether the experimental innovations to it: the protagonist Makina goes through a process of identification, she finds mentors to imitate, and she struggles to understand who she is and her place in the world. However, her intersecting<sup>26</sup> and marginalized identities also subvert the expectations: her story does not depict ideal white middle class male values; rather, Makina's journey illustrates the formative process of a poor female migrant who

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<sup>25</sup> A larger study would study the willing interaction of the protagonists' voices and authors' voices in the development of the *Bildungsroman*, from the traditional objective authorial voice of *The Buddha of Suburbia*, the tacit mingling of voices in *The House on Mango Street*, and the foregrounding of the authorial voice in the protagonist in *Señales que precederán el fin del mundo*.

<sup>26</sup> Isabelle Rigoni explains, "The concept of intersectionality is used as an analytical tool to explore how various categories of power asymmetries interact in the construction of subjectivity and material conditions of subjects, and thereby contribute to social exclusion and political injustice" (836). Makina does not experience marginalization because of one single dimension of her identity; rather, her race, class, and gender interact to contribute to her marginalization.

experiences several forms of intersecting oppression. Her representation at the end of the novel is not of a middle class worker nor does it uphold the bourgeois institutions of marriage and family. The intersecting oppression in *Señales* differs significantly of those in *The Buddha of Suburbia* and *The House on Mango Street*; it is more direct and constantly life threatening.

Makina grows up in *la provincia*, the derogatory way Mexico City inhabitants refer to the rest of the country. We know little about her education, but the novel portrays a "sensitive child," in Thomas Jeffers's terms. Makina is well respected by the lords and inhabitants of her village for her capacity to keep secrets and deliver messages without questioning the content or recipients, "Una no hurga en bajo las enaguas de los demás" (19).<sup>27</sup> Makina is therefore ideal for her job: "estaba a cargo de la centralita con el único teléfono en kilómetros y kilómetros a la redonda" (19).<sup>28</sup> Makina receives all the messages and phone calls, even the ones from the migrants in the U.S. who "ya se habían olvidado de las hablas de acá" (19).<sup>29</sup> Makina speaks three languages: "la lengua," an indigenous language; "la lengua latina," Spanish; and "la lengua gabacha," English. And most importantly for the role she plays in her community, she knows when to remain silent in all of them: "Makina hablaba las tres, y en las tres sabía callarse" (19). Makina thinks of herself as a messenger, a door between distant worlds, but she does not want to be the one who crosses into either side: "Una es la puerta, no la que cruza la puerta"

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<sup>27</sup> "One does not poke around in other people's underskirts (figuratively, other people's business)."

<sup>28</sup> "She was in charge of the only telephone switchboard for kilometers and kilometers around."

<sup>29</sup> "had already forgotten the local language here."

(19).<sup>30</sup> Her multilingualism enables her Coming-of-age because she is able to cross borders and communicate in every liminal space she traverses.<sup>31</sup>

Unlike the hero in Jeffers's plot, Makina is content with her life, but a request from her mother Cora upturns her world. She must go to "el gran Chilango," Mexico City, and then to "el gabacho," the U.S., to find her brother and give him a letter asking him to come back. Sánchez Becerril explains that the novel depicts migration not as an individual desire, but as a cycle: "una cultura de la migración, cultivada, creada y recreada a través del mismo proceso de migración" (110).<sup>32</sup> Thus, the plot of *Señales* represents the culturally constructed nature of coming-of-age processes that other Coming-of-age novels tend to minimize in deference to attending to the personal agency of the heroes. Indeed, it is not only Makina who starts the process due to external forces: her brother does too. The brother left because lord Hache (Huitzilopochtli) suggested their father might have owned a plot of land on the other side. He initially travels to the U.S., where he becomes rootless in order to reclaim the land that belonged to his ancestors.<sup>33</sup> Makina has to migrate to bring him back. For Sánchez Becerril migration begets migration, a completely different motivation for travel than those in classic *Bildungsromane*, where the protagonists seek an education or better socioeconomic standing.

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<sup>30</sup> "One is the door, no the one who crosses it."

<sup>31</sup> A larger study would develop the theme of the acquisition of languages, be it the opposite socio-economic register, sets of vocabulary, and wit.

<sup>32</sup> "A culture of migration, cultivated, created and recreated through the very process of migration."

<sup>33</sup> An allegorical reading underscores the significance of Makina's brother receiving instructions from Huitzilopochtli, the god that instructed the Aztecs to leave Aztlán and look for a valley to found their city, Tenochtitán, to go back to Aztlán and reclaim the land. Her brother's journey and failure are a comment on the myth of the Aztlán, central to Chicano identity.

Makina gets ready to set out but the narrator states the fear of losing herself in her journey:

No quería ni quedarse por allá ni que le sucediera como a un amigo suyo que se mantuvo lejos demasiado tiempo, tal vez un día de más o una hora de más, en todo caso bastante de más como para que le pasara que cuando volvió todo seguía igual pero ya todo era otra cosa, o todo era semejante pero no era igual: su madre ya no era su madre . . . hasta el aire, dijo, le entibiaba el pecho de otro modo.<sup>34</sup> (21)

She does not want to become a stranger to her own land and experience. In the first subversion of the archetypal plot, Makina's intersecting lower class (that pressured her brother to migrate) and gender (as her mother tells her she cannot entrust the message to a man) compel her to leave her village, to change even though she does not want to. Instead of the nineteenth-century *Bildungsroman* hero who keenly sets out to come of age abroad or in a large metropolis, Makina's travels are forced on her. Makina does not fulfill the entrepreneur type that actively seeks betterment.

When Makina arrives in Mexico City on her way to the U.S. Southwest she decides to ride the underground subway from the one bus station to the other because she does not want to see the city. She explains she does not want to "perderse de veras, perderse para siempre en las lomas de lomas" (27).<sup>35</sup> Makina is afraid the city might allure her; merely looking at it could make her want to stay. She does not seek

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<sup>34</sup> "She did not want to stay over there nor to repeat the experience of a friend of hers who was there for too long, maybe only a day or an hour too long, but in any case long enough that when he came back everything remained the same but was already something else, or everything was similar but was no longer the same: his mother was no longer his mother . . . even the air, he said, warmed his chest differently."

<sup>35</sup> "To really lose herself, lose herself forever in the mountains of mountains."

transformative experiences in unfamiliar spaces, as earlier heroes such as Pip in *Great Expectations* and the titular protagonist of *David Copperfield*, but rather tries to avoid change. Here she introduces the metaphor of treading lightly: "[Makina] plantaba el pie suavecito porque no era ése el sitio donde quería dejar huella" (27).<sup>36</sup> Makina fears that standing too long will imprint her identity forever, trapping her where she stands. This metaphor finds its counterpart at the end, when she walks in a park in the U.S. and "al andar sus pies –pat, pat, pat– dejaban huella sobre la tierra" (115).<sup>37</sup>

In Jeffers's bourgeois plot the heroes' love affairs play a crucial role to their development. Jeffers explains the hero "has at least two love affairs, one good and one bad, which help him revalue his values" (52). In the bus to the border Makina encounters her first "love affair," the "bad one." To consider this encounter a love affair one must do so with irony, as the male character does not express love, but a form of sexual violence that Makina learns to reject. At the line to buy the bus tickets a man comes up to Makina and tells her: "Me apellido ¡Merezco!" (32).<sup>38</sup> In the bus he sits next to her and starts brushing his hand against her thigh "como por descuido, pero ella conocía esa clase de descuidos" (33).<sup>39</sup> When "el idiota" puts his whole hand on her leg,

Makina se volvió hacia él, lo miró directamente a los ojos para que supiera que lo que venía no era accidental, se puso un dedo en los labios, calladito, eh, y con la otra mano prensó el dedo medio de la mano con que la había tocado y lo dobló hasta acercarlo a un par de centímetros de su reverso . . .

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<sup>36</sup> "She treaded lightly because this was not the place where she wanted to leave footprints."

<sup>37</sup> "When she walked her feet –pat, pat, pat– left footprints on the ground."

<sup>38</sup> "My last name is I deserve you."

<sup>39</sup> "As if by accident, but she knew about this kind of accidents."

No me gusta que me manoseen pinches desconocidos ¿puedes creerlo?<sup>40</sup>  
(33-34)

Makina learns that the society on the border imposes sexual violence on her body: the man thinks it is permissible to assault her and foresees no consequences: "I deserve you." The violation of her body emerges as a possible outcome of her journey, but Makina violently rejects this possibility and asserts her agency.

Her second love affair, the "good one," starts when she meets Chucho,<sup>41</sup> the man who helps her across the U.S.-Mexico border. Unlike the man in the bus, Chucho does not make a pass at her, which makes her feel safe at first and soon makes him desirable. After they have crossed the river, Chucho and Makina go to a shack where she changes out of her wet clothes in the same room as Chucho:

Makina comenzó a desvestirse de espaldas a Chucho, que fumaba y miraba por la ventana al cabrón en vigilia, y pensó que era cosa rara no sentir ni miedo ni rabia por tener que encuerarse sin pared de por medio . . . Makina supo que él seguía mirando por la ventana pero su voz caía sobre ella. Sintió que ese segundo de tensión duraba y duraba, y ahora se sorprendió de que ya hubiera pasado tanto tiempo y ella no comenzara a sentirse culpable de querer lo que quería.<sup>42</sup> (51)

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<sup>40</sup> "Makina turned towards him, she looked him directly in the eye so he would understand that what was about to happen was not accidental, she placed her finger over her lips, be quiet, ok?, and with her other hand she grabbed the middle finger of the hand that had touched her and she bent it back until it almost touched the back of his hand . . . I don't like getting touched by fucking strangers, can you believe it?"

<sup>41</sup> In an allegorical reading, Chucho, short for Jesus, becomes a Christian symbol of the passing of souls.

<sup>42</sup> "Makina started to undress with her back to Chucho, who smoked and looked out the window for the bastard who was watching them. She thought it was weird not to feel fear or anger for having to take her clothes off with no wall separating them . . . Makina knew he was still watching out the window but his voice fell on her. She felt that second of tension kept going on and on, and now she was surprised that so much time had passed and she had not felt guilty of desiring what she desired."

Makina is surprised to find no guilt associated with her desire. This is the last instance where we encounter Makina in a situation charged with the possibility of sex. Thus her experiences with the man on the bus and with Chucho succinctly portray a sexual coming-of-age. She violently rejects a relationship where she is the object of power imbalance but desires the man who respects her intimacy. The relationship has a positive outcome for Makina, one that is in a different mode from the expectations readers might have. Afterwards, Chucho protects her from a racist farmer and police officers that open fire against them. Makina is wounded in the brawl, but she survives because Chucho enables her to escape.

During her crossing, and shortly after she leaves Chucho behind, Makina finds two possible outcomes for migrants and, therefore, alternatives that she could unwillingly embody. The first one is what she thinks at first to be a pregnant woman lying peacefully under a tree. Makina sees the woman's "vientre antes que las piernas o su rostro" (47),<sup>43</sup> which can easily read as an image of serenity, "un buen augurio" (47).<sup>44</sup> Soon thereafter and suddenly, Makina realizes it is not a woman, but a "pobre infeliz hinchado de putrefacción al que los zopilotes ya le habían comido los ojos y la lengua" (48).<sup>45</sup> The dead body is indeed an omen, a possible outcome for the bodies of migrants, men or women, pregnant with putrefaction rather than life. Where David Copperfield has the ideal social body—white, male, and heterosexual—Makina's body could end up forgotten under a tree, unclaimed and unrecognizable. A real possibility since she almost drowned

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<sup>43</sup> "Womb before the legs or face."

<sup>44</sup> "A good omen."

<sup>45</sup> "An unfortunate wretch, swollen and rotting, whose eyes and tongue had been eaten by buzzards."

in the river when she crossed and soon gets shot. The dead body is an expansion of the individual protagonist of the *Bildungsroman* genre to groups of people like her.

Another possible outcome occurs when Makina drives by a baseball stadium with Lord Hache's contact, an old Mexican migrant. She asks him what the "gabachos" are doing, and the man explains they gather every week in the stadium to celebrate who they are. He explains that the game is a metaphor for imperialism, where a player has to visit bases around the world and come back home victorious. In a question that enunciates the possibility of assimilation, Makina asks whether the man enjoys the game. He explains that "yo aquí nomás estoy de paso" (66).<sup>46</sup> Makina asks him how many years he has lived there and he answers "voy para cincuenta años" (66).<sup>47</sup> This displacement, a feeling of being a passer-by despite decades of residing, enunciates an alternative for Makina that she rejects in the next chapter. Assimilation is impossible for this man who does not adopt the culture or the love of baseball. And while Latin American men have played baseball professionally, the "American pastime" is implicitly less available as a pastime to Makina as a woman and certainly unavailable to her and other Latina women professionally.

The more she experiences the U.S., the more Makina becomes comfortable with hybridity. "Son paisanos y son gabachos" (73),<sup>48</sup> she explains about the Mexicans living in the U.S. Southwest. These identities are not mutually exclusive, but coexist in the same bodies: "Hablan una lengua intermedia con la que Makina simpatiza de inmediato porque es como ella: maleable, deleble, permeable, un gozne entre dos semejantes distantes"

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<sup>46</sup> "I am only passing through."

<sup>47</sup> "Almost fifty years."

<sup>48</sup> "They are countrymen and they are Americans."

(73).<sup>49</sup> This is a contrast to her singularity in speaking three distinct languages in her native town. Her hometown distinguishes between the languages and considers both Spanish and English foreign, as evidenced by their epithets "lengua latina" and "lengua gabacha." In this border space, the distinction between languages fades. In her discovery of this linguistic dimension of cultural hybridity she begins to consider the possibility of belonging in the U.S. I use "cultural hybridity" because it signifies a cultural mix that originates a different identity to the one of the immigrants or hosts. Virinder Kalra describes hybridity as the cultural identities that emerge at "the edge or contact point of diaspora, describing cultural mixture where the diasporized meets the host in the scene of migration" (70).

In the subsequent chapter Makina comes across a Gay and Lesbian rally, which further shows her the possibility of a marginal identity. It demonstrates the ways in which identities such as sexual or political are not easily parsed and carry different meanings in the U.S. Southwest from the ones in her hometown.

había mucha gente con banderas multicolores . . . se matrimoniaban. Tan deslumbrada estaba Makina con la belleza del rito que tardó en reparar en que las parejas eran de hombres o eran de mujeres pero no de hombre y mujer; y al advertirlo le conmovió cuánto largaban lágrimas, como flores de ojos, por cuán difícil debía de haber sido llegar ahí, y pensó que ojalá la

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<sup>49</sup> "They speak an in-between language with which Makina immediately sympathizes because it is like her: malleable, erasable, permeable, a hinge between two distant neighbors."

gente que había conocido en esa situación hubiera podido estar así de contenta.<sup>50</sup> (90)

The joy of this sight moves Makina to tears because she sympathizes with the same-sex couples. Makina is aware of the marginal place they occupy in her own society and this rally allows them openness and participation in what Makina has experienced as a quintessentially heterosexual rite, marriage. Sexual fluidity becomes a possibility for Makina, adding to the hybrid identity she has only recently discovered, even though these marginal sexual identities are not ones she adheres to specifically.

After these transformative experiences, which shift her focus to puzzle over her own place in the U.S., Makina resumes the objective of her journey. She finally finds her brother but he has undergone a process of identification whose result is an assimilated citizen and soldier, different from Makina's memory and expectation. He tells her he found their plot of land but it was worthless. Ashamed of his failure to re-conquer the land, he enlisted in the army because a white suburban family paid him to go to the war in place of their son, a citizenship path not available to Makina. Through this process he becomes a citizen and Makina realizes he has no intention of coming back. When they say their final goodbyes, he hugs her "como si no fuera su hermana" (98),<sup>51</sup> fulfilling the fear Makina experienced at the beginning of the novel:

No quería ni quedarse por allá ni que le sucediera como a un amigo suyo que se mantuvo lejos demasiado tiempo, tal vez un día de más o una hora

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<sup>50</sup> "There were many people with multicolor flags . . . they were getting married. Makina was so dazzled by the beauty of the rite that she took a while to notice that the couples were either men or women but not man and woman; in noticing she was moved by the shedding of tears, like flowers blooming from their eyes, for how difficult it had been to get there, and she wished that the people she knew in this situation could be as jubilant."

<sup>51</sup> "As though she were not his sister."

de más, en todo caso bastante de más como para que le pasara que cuando volvió todo seguía igual pero ya todo era otra cosa, o todo era semejante pero no era igual: su madre ya no era su madre . . . hasta el aire, dijo, le entibiaba el pecho de otro modo.<sup>52</sup> (21)

In the penultimate chapter Makina has an epiphany where she understands her place in the U.S Southwest. A policeman has gathered several migrants and tells them he will teach them a lesson. While she is on the floor, the policeman takes a little notebook from one of the subjugated men. The policeman realizes it is a book of poems and in an attempt to humiliate the poet he tears a piece of paper, gives it to the man, and orders him to write. Makina takes the paper from the man's shivering hands and quickly scribbles the following lines:

Nosotros somos los culpables de esta destrucción, los que no hablamos su lengua ni sabemos estar en silencio. Los que no llegamos en barco, los que ensuciamos de polvo sus portales, los que rompemos sus alambradas. Los que venimos a quitarles el trabajo, los que aspiramos a limpiar su mierda, los que anhelamos trabajar a deshoras. Los que llenamos de olor a comida sus calles tan limpias, los que les trajimos violencia que no conocían . . . nosotros, a los que no nos importa morir por ustedes . . . Nosotros los oscuros, los obesos, los anémicos. Nosotros, los bárbaros.<sup>53</sup> (109-110)

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<sup>52</sup> "She did not want to stay over there nor to repeat the experience of a friend of hers who was there for too long, maybe only a day or an hour too long, but in any case long enough that when he came back everything remained the same but was already something else, or everything was similar but was no longer the same: his mother was no longer his mother . . . even the air, he said, warmed his chest differently."

<sup>53</sup> "We are guilty for this destruction, we are the ones who don't speak your language nor know when to be silent. We do not arrive in boats, we sully your gates with dust, we cut through your wires. We come to take your jobs, we aspire to clean your shit, to work at late hours. We fill your clean streets with the smell

Instead of conforming to the barbarian stereotype imposed on migrants, her sarcasm signifies the polar opposite, the utmost alterity, which represents the wide spectrum of possibilities for self-construction. In this climactic moment for her process of identification, Makina uses her written words to get rid of the policeman who reads the lines out loud, losing volume as he reads, at the end whispering, and finally tosses the paper, calls someone on his radio, and leaves. She finds the power in an effective voice to resist the oppressive force of this state apparatus and ironically calls herself the barbarian (namely, the savage who cannot speak) when she is the eloquent one. In her written speech she describes the place of migrants at the lower tier of working conditions, but she denounces the portrayal of Mexicans as dirty, of their bodies as imperfect and sick. Makina has found a way to stay in a place that offers her social and sexual possibilities that she had not encountered before by ironically proclaiming: "We, the barbarians" (110). In assuming this characterization, she has found a way to resist it. Indeed, the mere act of speaking up and being silent constitutes her resistance to the stereotype she is enunciating and shows a deep understanding of migrant experience in the U.S.

In the last chapter, the novel subverts the final convention of Jeffers's plot: the return of the perfected hero, the prime example of which is the titular character of *David Copperfield*.<sup>54</sup> Makina decides to stay, the price for which is to change her name and

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of food, we bring violence you didn't know . . . we, who don't mind dying for you . . . We the dark ones, the obese, the anemic. We, the barbarians."

<sup>54</sup> David becomes a gentleman and a famous and respected writer. In the second to last chapter he is referred as "the eminent author" (746). The last lines of the novel are written many years later, in a state of economic and social bliss: "And now my story ends. I look back, once more—for the last time—before I close these leaves. I see myself, with Agnes at my side, journeying along the road of life. I see our children and our friends around us; and I hear the roar of many voices, not indifferent to me as I travel on" (748).

acquire new documents. Up to this point "Makina" has been a semantic magnet<sup>55</sup> that signifies her network of experiences and characteristics. At the beginning of the novel her name told readers little about her past and upbringing. Her name translates as *machine* but is misspelled—*máquina* would be the correct spelling. The spelling points to a phonetic rather than orthographic emphasis, which could be interpreted as a result of the illiteracy of Makina's mother Cora. However, many of the characters have nicknames—Lord Q, Lord H, Chucho—and "Makina" could be an acquired epithet, the name the village gave her because of her function: receiving calls from abroad and relaying messages. The lack of a written accent shifts the stressed syllable to the penultimate, which suggest "Makina" is a verb rather than a noun. *Maquinar* translates as to plot maliciously, an ironic name for someone whose intention was for everything to stay as it was. Nevertheless, when the wheels of the plot start to turn, Makina begins to plot her departure, visiting the lords' houses. And by the end of the novel, *Makina* has acquired the meaning of the woman who learned to use the power of physical violence to resist the possibility of sexual assault and the power of self-definition in order to resist police abuse. Makina has become comfortable with hybridity, as evidenced by her sympathy for fluid multilingualism, "Hablan una lengua intermedia con la que Makina simpatiza de inmediato porque es como ella: maleable, deletable, permeable, un gozne entre dos semejantes distantes" (73), and queer identities.<sup>56</sup> In the loss of her name, Makina loses

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<sup>55</sup> The name of a character is a noun that attracts adjectives. Luz Aurora Pimentel explains that a proper noun "*es un centro de imantación semántica al que convergen toda clase de significaciones arbitrariamente atribuidas al objeto nombrado*" [is a semantic magnet where all kinds of arbitrary significations arbitrarily attributed to the named object converge] (26-27).

<sup>56</sup> "They speak an in-between language with which Makina immediately sympathizes because it is like her: malleable, erasable, permeable, a hinge between two distant neighbors."

her outer layer, her semantic magnet: "me han desollado" (119),<sup>57</sup> she responds at the very end, after she has received her new identity. But this metaphorical shedding of identity represents for Makina a new beginning: a birth. Unlike the classic *Bildungsroman*, the first sentence of Makina's coming of age is "I am dead," and through an arduous journey of self-discovery that ends with a character that is ready to accept hybridity, Makina is finally born under a different name.

The plurality of the heroes' identities as signified by this name change and the reexamination of Esperanza's name *The House of Mango Street* cannot be emphasized enough. In *The House on Mango Street*, Esperanza struggles with the meanings and stories that her name carries. "Esperanza" signifies her great-grandmother's history of abuse. In school, the larger Chicago context, Esperanza sounds "funny as if the syllables were made out of tin and hurt the roof of your mouth" (11). But Esperanza comes to terms with her name at the end, when she acknowledges that wanting to be someone else was selfish, and one of the three old sisters reminds her she will always be Esperanza, she will always be Mango Street (105). In both novels, as well as *The Buddha of Suburbia*, the names of the protagonists introduce an element of strangeness. They are social elements that do not fit in the host societies: *Karim* elicits exotic and flattening expectations, *Esperanza* sounds funny, and *Makina* signifies undocumented migration and is therefore dangerous.

These novels have shown a fundamental part of the Diasporic Coming-of-age is the process of re-signifying the hero's name, so that it can bear the meanings acquired through the journey. In *The Buddha of Suburbia*, *Karim* becomes normalized to the

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<sup>57</sup> "They have flayed me."

readers through the process of reading the novel in a way that is not done by the society represented in the novel. Esperanza learns to accept her name and her origin and promises to come back. She does not run away from her name, as she wanted to at the beginning, but rather understands that pursuing an education does not mean to reject her roots. Makina has to let go of her name in order to be able to stay, evidence of how much she has changed in her journey. Makina betrays her former identity in order to become who she wants, to set footprints on the Borderland.

These three novels from the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s represent the key elements of the Diasporic Coming-of-age novel, a development of the *Bildungsroman* genre. The protagonists undergo a process of identification whereby they experiment with identity, modeling themselves on the characters they encounter and the expectations their families and societies set forth. The protagonists are culturally hybrid and marginalized. Their cultural identities emerge at "the edge or contact point of diaspora, describing cultural mixture where the diasporized meets the host in the scene of migration" (Kalra 70). Because cultural mix originates a different identity to the one of the immigrants or hosts, the protagonists cannot fully identify with the culture of their parents or of their host country. Unlike the traditional hero-entrepreneur of the *Bildungsroman*, the Diasporic Coming-of-age protagonist is not assured an idyllic *accommodation*—in Jeffers's terms. Instead of an ideal model of adulthood, the novels portray characters that at the end still try to make sense of their identities and place in society, that are still in the process of becoming.

Each of these elements is flexible and captures the most attractive features of the *Bildungsroman*. In this exciting development of the genre, the *Bildungsroman* loses its

original purpose: to represent the ideal social body and collect in a white male heterosexual hero all the values of the middle class. The Diasporic Coming-of-age is not concerned with the creation of moral entrepreneurs and family men, but rather takes the core of the *Bildungsroman* —the process of identification—and uses it to show how culturally hybrid protagonist experiment and puzzle over their confusing identities.

The framework of the Diasporic Coming-of-age novel enables a nuanced reading of an even larger set of novels that have emerged worldwide from the end of the 20th Century. Piri Thomas's *Down These Mean Streets* (1967), Chang-Rae Lee's *Native Speaker* (1995), Cristina Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban* (1996), Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000), Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* (2003), Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), and Moshin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) are novels that portray cultural hybridity and complex processes of identification. In these the protagonists strive to make sense of the expectations and models of their worlds but are not uncomfortable to bring identity to a state of tension, even as it remains unresolved.

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