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THE HOUSE ON MANGO STREET:
A PARABLE OF DEGENERATION OR A CHICANA REWRITING
OF CHARLES KINGSLEY'S *THE WATER-BABIES**

A b s t r a c t. Reading Charles Kingsley's *The Water-Babies* (1863) makes it possible for Esperanza Cordero to imagine an idyllic site of empowered identity in *The House on Mango Street*. Yet, I argue that Esperanza's transformed identity can only reside outside her original community and that her journey from the sad red house of Mango Street to her reconceived clean house at the end of the text is necessarily a trajectory of desired uprootedness that follows the script presented in *The Water-Babies*. Like Tom, Kingsley's protagonist, Esperanza undergoes a metamorphosis to shed off the traits that categorize her as Chicana in order to embrace a remodeled subjectivity and, consequently, become an ontologically deterritorialized Hispanic.

Keywords: *The House on Mango Street*; *The Water-Babies*; Charles Kingsley; Darwinism; degeneration; deterritorialized identity.

Does not each of us, in coming into this world, go through a transformation just as wonderful as that of a sea-egg, or a butterfly? And do not reason and analogy, as well as Scripture, tell us that that transformation is not the last? And that, though what we shall be, we know not, yet we are here but as the crawling caterpillar, and shall be hereafter as the perfect fly.

(*The Water-Babies* 87)

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Jamaica Kincaid's story "Wingless"—originally published in *The New Yorker* on January 29, 1979, and reprinted in her 1983 collection *At the Bottom of the River*—opens with the description of a group of children in a school in Antigua reading from Charles Kingsley's *The Water-Babies: A Fairy Tale for a Land Baby* (1863). Kincaid's narrative tells about the heroine's quest for identity as she struggles to become independent from her mother. Five years later, in 1984, Sandra Cisneros showed Esperanza Cordero, the protagonist of her novel *The House of Mango Street*, also reading Reverend Kingsley's work. In the span of five years, two women writers, a Caribbean and a Chicana, rescued *The Water-Babies* from what Deborah Stevenson has called their "drowning" (112), and placed this nineteenth-century narrative at the center of their intertextual fictional worlds. As Kincaid and Cisneros show, and in contrast to what Stevenson declares, Kingsley's text had not slipped from memory in the English-speaking world of the 1980s but seemed to hold a firm "place in the sentimental canon", evincing the fact that "the chain of affection" had not been broken (Stevenson 126). Both writers picked up Kingsley's fantasy thinking perhaps "not of nostalgia of a childhood memory worthy of sharing" (Stevenson 124), but of the ideological canonicity that the book represented in the Anglo-protestant world.

Peter Hunt asserts that *The Water-Babies* is "often regarded as a landmark text in British children's literature, the first book of the first 'golden age' of children's literature, when children's imaginations were liberated" (164). This literature of fantasy represented an important progress when compared to the didactic Sunday School writings that had monopolized children's readings until that time. Yet, far from being ideologically neutral, Kingsley's text, as well as many other of its literary contemporaries, is anchored in a period coincident with the establishment of nineteenth-century colonial imperialism. For Catherine Hall, the book is replete with "a grammar of difference" and it "reminds us of the pervasive nature of hierarchies of difference and the relations of power constituted through them" (64). In fact, Jo-Ann Wallace interprets Kincaid's "Wingless" as an example of "de-scribing Empire", that is to say, a narrative that rewrites an imperialist text. She argues that "the child"—a discursive construct that paraphrasing Teresa de Lauretis' definition of *women* is "a real historical being who cannot as yet be defined outside discursive formations" (5)—is the focus of mid-nineteenth-century educational, social reform and imperialist debate, and "is repoliticized" in "Wingless". For Wallace, this investment in the figure of "the child", in the same way that facilitated nineteenth-century English imperialism, facilitates "many

twentieth-century forms of resistance to imperialism” (171). The appearance of Kingsley’s novel in Kincaid’s story is, for Wallace, using Homi Bhabha’s term (149), “a signifier of authority” (180).

Cisneros also makes *The Water-Babies* a signifier of authority and an important intertext that critics have previously overlooked. Citing this fairy tale in the chapter titled “Born Bad”, placed in the middle of the narrative, Cisneros adopts Kingsley’s text and, similar to Kincaid’s strategy of appropriation, reuses it “to fuel” her protagonist’s “emancipatory fantasies of future empowerment” (Wallace 183). In this twenty-third vignette, Esperanza visits her Aunt Lupe, a woman who used to be a swimmer before she fell down and hurt her spine. She is now sick from “the disease that would not go, her legs bunched under the yellow sheets, the bones gone limp as worms. The yellow pillow, the yellow smell ... drowning under the sticky yellow light” (*House* 58–59). Cripple and rid to a bed after her fall, this former *water-woman* lives the life of a recluse in a second-rear dark apartment where the sun does not shine, listens to the protagonist’s stories. Blind as the Greek Tiresias, Aunt Lupe plays the role of the mythic soothsayer for Esperanza. Moreover, reading a copy borrowed from the library of *The Water-Babies* and sharing it with her aunt makes it possible for Esperanza to imagine an idyllic site of empowered identity. Yet, I argue that Esperanza’s emboldened new self can only reside outside her original community and that her journey from the house of Mango Street to her reconceived “house” at the end of the text is necessarily a trajectory of desired uprootedness that follows the script presented by Kingsley’s protagonist in *The Water-Babies*. Esperanza undergoes a metamorphosis to shed off the traits that categorize her identity as a Chicana in order to embrace a remodeled hyphenated subjectivity as an ontologically deterritorialized Hispanic.

Critical readers of *The House of Mango Street* pointed out how Esperanza rejects her origins to embrace a disturbing Anglo-American version of individualism at odds with a communal Chicano *Weltgeist*. In 1984 Juan Rodríguez observed that Cisneros’ text subscribed to the traditional ideology of the American Dream: “That Esperanza chooses to leave Mango St., chooses to move away from her social/cultural base to become more ‘Anglicized’, more individualistic; that she chooses to move from the real to the fantasy plane of the world as the only means of accepting and surviving the limited and limiting social conditions of her barrio becomes problematic to the more serious reader” (52). For Julián Olivares, critical towards Rodríguez’s understanding of Esperanza’s quest for self, “this insistence on the preference for a comforting

and materialistic life ignores the ideology of a social class' liberation, particularly that of its women, to whom the book is dedicated" (242). For Olivares, the house where Esperanza can have her own room is "fundamentally a metaphor for the house of story-telling. Neither here in the house on Mango Street nor in the 'fantasy plane of the world'—as Rodríguez states, does the protagonist indulge in escapism. Esperanza wants to leave but is unable, so she attains release from her confinement through her writing" (242). Thus, the house stands as a symbolic site of "consciousness and collective memory" (ibid.), a source of experience and inspiration for her writing. For his part, Ilan Stavans argues that even if Cisneros addresses relevant social issues, she does so "from a peripheral, condescending angle, drawing her readers to the hardship her female characters experience but failing to offer an insightful examination of who they are and how they respond to their environment" (31).

Olivares and the critics who vindicated Esperanza's borderland identity à la Anzaldúa were oblivious to the fact that Cisneros has Esperanza construct her future house on *The Water-Babies*' foundations, and traditionally ignored or considered Cisneros's turn to this nineteenth-century children's classic merely as exotica. Even though Cisneros's novel teems with literary allusions and interlocking texts, Kingsley's book is her main source of inspiration and the specular textuality against which Esperanza traces her journey towards emancipation and fulfillment.

The Water-Babies: A Fairy Tale for a Land-Baby, in contrast to Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, for example, seems to have fallen into readers' oblivion and "has been ostracized from the English literary canon as a result of both general and academic indifference" (Padley 51).¹ Yet recent academic appreciations have triggered a wide range of responses. Kingsley's fairy tale has been read as a reformist novel, a religious treatise, a fabulation on Darwinian evolution and science, and an ecological tract, among other possibilities. The *Water-Babies* tells the story of Tom, a poor ten-year-old Dickensian

¹ Jonathan Padley argues that, even Kingsley was supposed to have written the book for his five-year-old Grenville, it is not entirely true that his principal or intended readership were exclusively young people. This is corroborated, according to Padley, by the fact that *The Water-Babies* "was initially serialized across eight editions (August 1862 to March 1863) of the gentleman's publication *MacMillan's Magazine*, in which it rubbed shoulders with—to list a few of the more significant contributions—poetry by Christina Rossetti (March 1863), a review of a collection by Arthur Hugh Clough (August 1862), a theosophical essay by Matthew Arnold (January 1863), and a substantial chunk of (principally American) political material. Even in Victorian times, it is unlikely that such pieces would have contributed to the literary diet of those youngsters whose circumstances permitted them to read" (53).

chimney-sweep, ignorant of the basic principles that ruled Victorian middle-class life. He works for Mr. Grimes, a soulless exploiter, and is far from being a model of infant innocence since he drinks, gambles, shows cruelty towards animals and expects to become a Mr. Grimes in the future. For Naomi Wood, Tom “is not just a pathetic victim, but a type representing the begrimed social body of the English working class” (240). In the first chapter, on his way to work, this boy meets the Irishwoman, who tells him that those who want “cleanliness” will find it, revealing to readers Tom’s moral potential for improvement and goodness. After falling down a chimney into a little girl’s room, he escapes and accidentally falls into a river. He drowns and becomes a water-baby, a fact that symbolizes his baptism and regeneration, or as J. M. I. Klaver declares, “the first stage of a process of growth towards the ideal of man, Christ” (514).² In his new state as a water-baby and following the script of his moral progress, he experiences exciting adventures in the underwater world, entitled to transform him according to “the parameters of the plucky, dutiful, hardworking, clean, God-loving Englishman and gentleman” (Klaver 514). As Gillian Beer explains, the shoals of water-babies who inhabit these marine depths are “all the neglected, the unwanted, the superfluous, for which society found no love or use” (116). In this oceanic world, Tom is chastened by two female authorities, the maternal Mrs Doasyouwouldbedoneby and the harsh Mrs Bedonebyasyoudid, both of them sisters. At the end of the book, he is rewarded with a life of success.

Critics have considered *The Water-Babies* a literary refashioning of Darwinian theories. For Beer, Kingsley, “in his images of extinction, of degeneration, and of recapitulation and development, mythologizes Darwinian theory with remarkable insight” (138). Klaver argues that “although Kingsley never abandoned his creationist view of life, he ably assimilated the newness of Darwin’s discoveries. Darwin’s emphasis on random change in the animal and vegetable kingdoms was introduced in Kingsley’s fable as proof of the infinitely *wonderful* quality of creation. Darwinism contained for Kingsley a valid mythology of existence” (523). For her part, Jessica Straley observes

² Mircea Eliade in his study of religious symbolism explains the function of water and the symbolism of immersion: “In water everything is ‘dissolved’, every ‘form’ is broken up, everything that has happened ceases to exist; nothing that was before remains after immersion in water, not an outline, not a ‘sign’, not an event. Immersion is the equivalent, at the human level, of death at the cosmic level, of the cataclysm (the Flood) which periodically dissolves the world into the primeval ocean. Braking up all forms, doing away with the past, water possesses this power of purifying, of regenerating, of giving new birth.... Water purifies and regenerates because it nullifies the past, and restores—even for a moment—the integrity of the dawn of things” (194).

that the narrative is a “fantasy of morphological reversion and progress”, and through it Kingsley sought to establish “the literary text as an allegory and vehicle for the moral cultivation of the child” (ibid.). Tom is described as post-Darwinian thinkers regarded the child—not an innocent ideal, but “a living vestige of the species ‘bestial pre-human past’” (ibid.).

Yet, there is more than just a story of moral progression to Tom’s journey from the land to the sea and from the sea back to the land. Clare Bradford argues that to read *The Water-Babies*, as all children’s books of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, is “to read texts produced within a pattern of imperial culture” (196). Shaping his fairy tale according to this model, “Kingsley’s mobilization of imperial ideologies is distinguished by its convergence of categories of race and class” (ibid.). Like most of his contemporaries, both liberal and conservative, Kingsley was a popular exponent of the racialist thinking of Victorian times and exposed it in his writings. In his study on Kingsley and Darwinism, Jonathan Conlin contends that the cleric’s application of concepts from evolutionary biology in his novels and lectures went beyond the mere borrowing of fashionable post-Darwinian speculation on evolution. Kingsley “sought to construct a ‘Natural Theology’ for the Victorian age, one in which natural and national history merged completely” (167). Kingsley presented “the history of Britain as the history of a divinely favored Teutonic race, one with a mission to subdue the world. Less favored races were doomed to assimilation into this race or to complete annihilation” (ibid.). His racialist thinking in *The Water-Babies* is eloquently illustrated in the first chapter when Tom falls down the wealthy house chimney into Ellie’s room and is engulfed by a sea of whiteness: “The room was all dressed in white,—white window-curtains, white bed-curtains, white furniture, and white walls, with just a few lines of pink here and there” (23). In this monochromatic space, Tom discovers the existence of a large number of utensils related to cleanness and body hygiene:

The next thing he saw, and that too puzzled him, was a washing-stand, with ewers and basins, and soap and brushes, and towels, and a large bath full of clean water—what a heap of things all for washing! ‘She must be a dirty lady,’ thought Tom, ‘by my master’s rule, to want as much scrubbing as all that. But she must be very cunning to put the dirt out of the way so well afterwards, for I don’t see a speck about the room, not even on the very towels’ (*WB* 23).

...Tom then looks toward the bed and sees that dirty lady, and held his breath with astonishment. Under the snow-white coverlet, upon the snow-white pillow, lay the most beautiful little girl that Tom had ever seen. Her cheeks were almost white as the pillow, and her hair was like threads of gold spread all about over the bed. She might

have been as old as Tom, or maybe a year or two older; but Tom did not think of that. He thought only of her delicate skin and golden hair, and wondered whether she was a real live person, or one of the wax dolls he had seen in the shops. But when he saw her breathe, he made up his mind, and stood staring at her, as if she had been an angel out of heaven. No. She cannot be dirty. She never could have been dirty, thought Tom to himself. And then he thought, 'And are all the people like that when they are washed?' (WB 25)

Shocked at the whiteness and purity distilling from Ellie's body, Tom turns to his own body for racial and class reassurance but he starts at the sight of a creature he had never seen before in front of him. That individual who looks like a black ape turns out to be his own reflection in the mirror of the room. This scene, placed at the very beginning of the book, stands as the fundamental clue to interpret Kingsley's Victorian fears about evolutionary Darwinian theories and his society's anxieties about the missing link between human beings and apes. Kingsley writes:

And he looked at his own wrist, and tried to rub the soot off, and wondered it ever would come off. "Certainly I should look much prettier then, if I grew at all like her."

And looking round, he suddenly saw, standing close to him, a little ugly, black, ragged figure, with bleared eyes and grinning white teeth. He turned on it angrily. What did such a little black ape want in that sweet young lady's room? And behold it, it was himself, reflected in a great mirror, the like of which Tom had never seen before.

And Tom, for the first time in his life, found out that he was dirty; and burst into tears with shame and anger. (WB 26)

At the time Charles Darwin published *The Origins of Species* (1859), Europeans and Americans started to reinterpret the natural world using the new concept of evolution. Su-chuan Yan observes that the scientific study of the relationship between humankind and apes was "the focus of much public attention in the 1860s" (241). Among other things, scientists tried to reconcile the ideas about the divine origin of man to the evolutionary theories that proposed that humans were descended from apes. The concern soon translated into a fierce obsession which was soon caricatured both in England and American papers and magazines in pictures that satirized the common ancestry shared by humans and African apes and rendered visible the galloping Victorian anxiety to differentiate themselves from other lower species.

The Water-Babies amply illustrates this widespread fear. Tom, the working class but still white boy, is described as a combination of animal and traditional antebellum negro stereotypes that is in fact reminiscent of "a nigger minstrel, a caricatured black man" (Hodgson 228). As mentioned above, critics have noted how in the wake of Darwin's controversial findings, Western

imperial discourse established natural parallelisms between apes and lower races—Irish people and African Americans, among others, and scientific discoveries legitimized nineteenth-century ideologies of racial difference linking biology with racial classifications and traits. In fact, when Kingsley visited Ireland in 1860, he was struck by the aspect of the Irish working-class. In a letter to his wife, he wrote:

I am haunted by the human chimpanzees I saw along that hundred miles of horrible country. I do not believe they are our fault. I believe there are not only many more of them than of old, but that they are happier, better, more comfortably fed and lodged under our rule than they ever were. But to see white chimpanzees is dreadful; if they were black, one would not feel it so much, but their skins, except where tanned by exposure, are as white as ours. (Frances E. G. Kingsley 111–12)³

The analogy between Tom and an ape continues in the book when he tries to run away from Ellie's room and she takes him for a thief:

And all the while poor Tom paddled up the park with his little bare feet, like *a small black gorilla fleeing to the forest*. Alas for him! there was no big father therein to take his part—to scratch out the gardener's inside with one paw, toss the dairymaid into a tree with another, and wrench off Sir John's head with a third, while he cracked the keeper's skull with his teeth as easily as if it had been a cocoa-nut or a paving-stone. (*WB* 31, emphasis added)

As a Darwinian and a defender of the theory of degeneration, Kingsley felt that evolutionary ideas and religion went hand in hand. In fact, *The Water-Babies* was his most brilliant adaptation of Darwin's theory of evolution for children. The survival of species, he seemed to argue, depended not only on the body, but on the condition of the soul. He clarifies his point through the Doasyoulikes, individuals who degenerate by natural selection into apes, because they ignore Victorian moral values. According to Beer, Kingsley presents “evolutionary ideas as a series of social fables, like the Doasyoulikes gradually retrogressing by a process of natural selection from high leisure to culture to gorillas” (127).

A fairy shows Tom and Ellie a book with photographs and on its title page it is written: “The History of the great and famous nation of the Doasyoulikes, who came away from the country of Hardwork, because they wanted to play on the Jews's harp all day long” (*WB* 229). The Doasyoulikes lead a life of leisure and no work, are fond of music and go scarcely dressed for want of time to make convenient clothes. Surrounded by ashes, slag and cinders, these

³ In *The Wages of Whiteness Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (1991, revised ed. 2007) David Roediger explains that in the nineteenth century the Irish Catholics were thought to be a race apart the white race, and dehumanized as simians and savages.

happy-go-lucky creatures dwindle in number as time goes by as shown by the chronological photographs shown by the fairy. Moreover, they become less civilized and approach a state of savagism vividly illustrated by a reversal to hairy skin, vegetarianism, brutality, idleness and lack of human speech. The fairy laments: "I am afraid they will be apes very soon, and all by doing only what they liked" (*WB* 235). The narrator then explains that "in the next five hundred years they were all dead and gone, by bad food, and wild beasts and hunters; all except one tremendous old fellow with jaws like a jack, who stood full seven feet high" (*WB* 236–37). This "old fellow" was shot by M. du Chaillu, the famous French-American anthropologist and explorer who confirmed the existence of gorillas and Pygmies at the end of the 1850s. As this last specimen of the Doasyoulikes approached Chaillu, "he stood roaring and thumping his breast. And he remembered that his ancestors had once been men, and tried to say, 'Am I not a man and a brother?' but had forgotten how to use his tongue; and then he had forgotten the word for one. So all he said was 'U bboboo!' and died" (*WB* 235–36, emphasis added). The Doasyoulikes mockingly refers to the words inscribed in the medallions created by English potter Josiah Wedgwood for the antislavery campaigns at the end of the eighteenth century. The narrator concludes manifesting that, in their lack of morals, "they were more apish than the apes of all aeries" (*WB* 237). The fairy makes Tom and Ellie understand that "if only they would have behaved like men, and set to work to do what they did not like. But the longer they waited, and behaved like the dumb beasts, who only do what they like, the stupider and clumsier they grew" (*WB* 237).

For Beer, "beyond these individual tales there is emphasis on the prodigality of creation, the thronging lower world of the deep sea, and in the midst of this bountiful creativity, the responsibility of the individual to transform himself" (127). Kingsley's Tom works for Mr. Grimes and the grime of the chimneys that dirty and blacken his body and skin, "a signifier of Tom's lowly position within the domestic economy", "is mapped onto the blackness of peoples colonized by British imperialism" (Bradford 196). Yet, Tom is always a white imperial subject and his blackness is only temporal and transitory. He, in fact, shows the capacity and willingness to transform himself. He will thus be able "to rub the soot off" and convert into "a man" at the end of the narrative. Tom's journey of ascent/descent/ascent to the middle class is parallel to his definite metamorphosis into "a white imperial man" (*ibid.*). Thus, at the end of the book, Tom "is now a great man of science, and can plan railroads, and steam-engines, and electric telegraphs, and rifled guns, and so forth" (*WB* 326–27); the things he learnt when he was a water-baby.

Like *The Water-Babies*, *The House on Mango Street* is a story of conversion, permeated with ideas of evolution and degeneration. Critics have consistently pointed out that *The House of Mango Street* is a mosaic of references to other texts, genres and discourses. Yet, they have paid little attention to the fact that the text upon which Cisneros builds her textual home is Kingsley's classic and, consequently, they have traditionally denied the constructedness of the figure of the Chicana in the novel. In fact, non-celebratory opinions on the novel have been systematically discarded as "misreadings", as Elizabeth Jacobs claims when explaining that the text had to suffer from these myopic approaches until 1985 when it was sacralized with the Before Columbus Foundation's American Book Award (110).

Esperanza, like Kincaid's protagonist in "Wingless", is also a female child narrator who is a "subject-to-be-educated", a "subject-in-formation" (Wallace 173). Esperanza will go through a process of evolution, from a lower rank to a higher rank, which parallels Tom's land-sea-land tour, and through which she will morph from Mexican-American to Hispanic or assimilated Latina. When Tom falls down the wrong chimney and arrives at Ellie's room, he finds a pristine white scenario with a pure white heroine. Tom's job as a chimney-sweep makes him both literally and figuratively "black"/dirty, but he, unlike black people, can aspire to cleanliness because he can wash off his blackness/dirtiness. Jonathan Padley explains, "these borderline character traits contribute to Tom's effectiveness as one who draws attention to margins and marginalization because of his continual existence with both" (55). For critics such as Cunningham (127), Wood (240) and Padley (56), "dirt emblemizes Tom's human marginalization" (56) and "his desire to be rid of it pushes him toward another margin: the surface of the stream's water, under which the fairies turn him into a water-baby" (Padley 56). In a similar manner, Esperanza is also characterized with borderline traits that separate her from both the ideal world metonymically described in the text by the "house on a hill" (*HM* 86) and her own Chicano community.

The House of Mango Street, like Kingsley's text, is also largely organized through binary oppositions of self and other—Mango Street (Chicano Barrio, subjection) and The Land Beyond Mango Street (freedom). Esperanza's conversion entails an abandonment of origins that undergoes a process of transformative acculturation. Esperanza is caught between two opposed ethnic, social, economic, cultural, linguistic and religious groups and will necessarily have to submit herself to a mutative cycle to inhabit a higher level of existence represented by the metaphoric home of writing at the end of the text. As her

journey from “my house, sad and red and crumbly in places” (*HM* 16) of Mango Street to a deterritorialized space at the end shows—“a house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem” (*HM* 108)—she struggles to engage in a acculturating exile (Mexico is “in that country”, *HM* 56) through spiritual and physical translocations in order to reach what will most probably be an alienating space of Anglo-Americanness. In this new space, located outside the boundaries of the carceral territory of Mango Street, Esperanza expects to become a writer bound on a redemptive mission for her abandoned community of Chicanas. In her much-longed-for journey beyond the gates of Mango Street Esperanza is forced to grapple with issues of identity, ethnicity and sexuality. Her quest of a reconfigured home is controversial since it entails a devastating inner fight between her cherished communal identity and the seemingly urgency to shed off the Chicano stigmas of this same belonging—Esperanza’s version of Tom’s “rubbing the soot off”.

Cisneros places Kingsley’s text at the center of her narrative, transforming Esperanza’s quest for self into a Chicana feminist replica of its English source. Mango Street Catholic Chicano homes, even if doctrinally described as the proper *locus* for women, are, similar to Victorian homes, “heavily patriarchal in terms of territory, control, and meaning” (Walker 826). They are also “associated with the female body and its enclosed interior” (*ibid.*). For Esperanza, the most haunting stigma will be that of a woman’s place by the window, an image she has to grow out of since, by inheritance, will pass on to her: “I don’t want to inherit her place by the window” (*HM* 11), she boldly declares about her great-grandmother, while she has in mind that her friend Alice’s desires of emancipation were destroyed by her inheritance of her “mama’s rolling pin” (*HM* 31). Consequently, Mango Street is characterized by the cloister-like look of its houses as nests for the seclusion and interment of its women—young and old, as Rafaela’s life attests when she “leans out the window and leans on her elbow and dreams her hair is like Rapunzel’s” (*HM* 79). Her struggles interlace with the efforts of other women in Mango Street. These women are consumed with a transcendent desire to know what is life beyond the windows that barred their sight and existential possibilities of self-determination. They must embrace their prescribed roles of wives and mothers as the keystone of the moral Catholic world. Their position is, however, essential to the maintenance of a social and political order that struggles to survive in the face of political and social exclusion in the Anglo-American world. “The concept of home as nation,” Lynne Walker explains, “a representation of national identity, and a site of social

and moral regeneration” (827), cornerstones of the Victorian home, is also relevant in the labyrinthic configuration of Mango Street territoriality. Even Aunt Lupe’s house is a degenerated environment that has reversed to a state of fetidness, waste and dirtiness. Esperanza must go from this state of filth to another of purity and taintlessness. Mango Street sad houses lack the power to be sites of social, cultural or political regeneration as well as the potential force for positive enforcement of a Chicana identity.

While in *The Water-Babies*, Tom catches a first glimpse of his own self-image in the white girl’s bedroom mirror, Esperanza epiphanic moment of striking self-realization of her own image is placed in the very first chapter when she encounters the gaze of the nun. In the nun’s bewildered question, Esperanza realizes the depth of her degeneration as a representative of the urban poor Chicanos whose geographic marginalization suggest for white middle-class American the symptoms not only of economic but most important moral regression.

Mango Street is thus a territory of threatening impurity leading to social, economic and moral degeneration. Its inhabitants, whether temporary or not, are classified as if they belonged to a Great Chain of American Being. Thus, whereas Esperanza’s family inspires repulsion in the nun, the Vargas kids appear as specimens occupying the lowest rank of the Barrio scale and as the embodiment of its potential for pollution and defilement. Mary Douglas’s understanding of pollution is deeply imbedded in the mind of Mango Street inhabitants so that they can guard the ideal order of their community manipulating dangers with which to intimidate its transgressors. Esperanza’s surveillance is thus considered instrumental in keeping Nenny away from the Vargas kids since Nenny runs the risk of getting polluted: “she’ll turn out just like them” (*HM* 8). As Douglas notes, “these danger-beliefs are as much threats which one man uses to coerce another as dangers which he himself fears to incur by his own lapses from righteousness” (3). Moreover, “moral values are upheld and certain social rules defined by beliefs in dangerous contagion” (*ibid.*), as shown when Esperanza voices the need for money to avoid going to a public school, a place to reject “unless you wanted to turn out bad” (*HM* 53).

Hence, *The House on Mango Street* resembles a conduct book. The protagonist is endowed with a pedagogical mission: to change in order to create a new self, capable of becoming a model for the others who, unlike her, will not be able to go through this same process of transformation, and thus she will become the voice of the speechless. Nineteenth-century conduct books

were deployed to grant moral responsibility to their child heroes. As Elaine Ostry explains, “specifically, they appropriate the language of these books: the instructional dialogue, the use of the moral guide or mentor, and the emphasis on wonder and growth” (27). In Cisneros’s text, Aunt Lupe is the surrogate parent who fosters moral and physical growth in Esperanza. She listens and encourages Esperanza’s wishes to become a writer/a poet and thus escape the bleakness and marginalization of Mango Street. Aunt Lupe’s role parallels that of the mysterious Irishwoman who meets Tom on his way to Harthover House, who is in fact the Queen of all the water-babies and lives in the sea, and who declares both to Tom and Mr. Grimes: “Those that wish to be clean, clean they will be; and those that wish to be foul, foul they will be. Remember” (*WB* 13), words that will be recalled by Tom in Chapter 2 and repeated three times before he walks into the river: “I must be clean, I must be clean” (*WB* 55–56).

Water is “both a physical and also a spiritual cleansing agent” (Rapple 42), and it is the element that figures prominently in Kingsley’s fantasy world. For him it was a moral agent “which would help beget that bluff muscular Christian Englishman of masculine vigor, doughty spirit, and yeoman mien whom he believed was needed to save England from her increasing effeminacy and soft ways” (Rapple 42). In fact, in the last chapter of *The Water-Babies*, titled “Moral”, the end reads as follows: “Meanwhile, do you learn your lessons, and thank God that you have plenty of cold water to wash in; and wash in it too, like a true Englishman. And then, if my story is not true, something better is; and I am not quite right, still you will be, as long as you stick to hard work and cold water” (*WB* 329). It is not coincidental that Esperanza initiates her narrative highlighting the lack of sanitary conditions that have plagued her family. The derelict dwellings they inhabited forced them to move to Mango Street in search of improvements: “The water pipes broke and the landlord wouldn’t fix them because the house was too old” (*HM* 4). Esperanza and her family, the Corderos, reject being sacrificial lambs and engage in a process of physical displacement that for her turns to be an internal repositioning towards a purified self: “We had to leave fast. We were using the washroom next door and carrying water over in empty milk gallons” (*HM* 4). Mango Street is thus associated with filthy unhealthy living conditions, in need of sanitary reform: “They always told us that one day we would move into a house, a real house that would be ours for always so we wouldn’t have to move each year. And our house would have running water and pipes that

worked.... And we'd have a basement and at least three washrooms so when we took a bath we wouldn't have to tell everybody" (*HM* 4).⁴

As in *The Water-Babies*, cleanliness (Klaver 518) is a central theme in Cisneros's text. Esperanza presents herself as a conscientious refugee from the dirt on a search for a respectable dwelling, and her continuous use of tropes of degradation and decay throughout the narrative echoes back to Kingsley's Victorian obsession with cleanness as the fundamental requirement for art. In fact, her exodus consists of a relocation from the house with "only one washroom" (*HM* 4) to "a house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem" (*HM* 108). "Tom's moral development is served by doing what he does not like to do, which is to help Mr. Grimes, his former employer. It is thus linked to aiding that of a more degenerate character. His reward is to be taken up the mysterious backstairs into the world, where he becomes 'a great man of science'. We do not see him change into his adult form; it is as foggy as his way back to land" (Ostry 34–35). But Cisneros, like Kingsley, makes it clear that this advancement is linked to Esperanza's awareness as a new she-Moses in her Chicana female community. Writing sublimates all types of oppression.

Mango Street is not only an inhospitable, but a *dirty*, foul place to Esperanza's desire of growing and self-fulfillment. Not only is her house a "sad red house" (*HM* 110) she is ashamed of, but her whole barrio lives captive to a mantle of squalor: the junk store is "small with just a dirty window for light", "skinny aisles to walk through" and "dusty furniture" (*HM* 19); Meme's back yard is "mostly dirt" (*HM* 22); Aunt Lupe cannot see "the dirty dishes in the sink" or how the ceilings are "dusty with flies" (*HM* 60); the boy who abuses Esperanza has "dirty fingernails" and a "sour smell" (*HM* 100); Elenita has a "dusty Palm Sunday cross" (*HM* 63); Edna's basement has "dusty geraniums" (*HM* 70); Esperanza is afraid of looking straight into "the dusty cat fur" of Sire's eyes (*HM* 72). Antonia Domínguez Miguela observes that the Barrio "represents a figurative borderland between the past and the future, a transitional space of internal transformations," which is at the same time "a source of cultural resistance" and a space "to resist assimilation" (59). Esperanza's Mango Street, however, is constructed as a Foucauldian incarcerated continuum, where gender, class, religion, and ethnicity inscribed into its domestic architecture as a metonymical site of female subjugation to a primitive state of being. Monika Kaup notes that for Cisneros "the house is the master

⁴ "The Victorian bathroom is the innermost sanctuary of domestic hygiene and by extension the private temple of public regeneration" (McClintock 214).

metaphor for the construction of identity” (363). Middle-class spatial and social and propriety hierarchies collapse in the Catholic barrio inhabited by Esperanza, her family and friends, together with the proper divisions between the private and the public. The material boundaries according to status, role, and perceived needs of the home’s inhabitants disappear and coalesce in a Chicano Gothic underworld of misery, poverty and cohabitation between beasts and people. Cathy is “queen of cats” (*HM* 13), two girls are “raggedy as rats live across the street” (*HM* 12), people are animalized and Joe is a “baby grabber” (*HM* 12); Alicia’s house is full of “mice” (*HM* 31); and people “live too much on earth” (*HM* 86).

Esperanza Cordero’s quest for self-discovery encloses an acceptance of American middle-class ideals that emerge in the text as the natural requisites for Chicanas’ freedom and success. In that process Cisneros finds no place for the interplay of hybrid categories of identity and reinforces the hegemony of Anglo-American models of living and identity leaving Chicano identities as undesirable and ostracizing them to the territory of the Other. Caroline Levander explains that in the nineteenth century, “the unique progress of which the United States is hypothetically capable depends upon American children’s successfully shrugging off what scientists term their ‘savage’ origins and developing into completely ‘civilized’ bourgeois citizens” (34). “To maximize each child’s supposedly ‘natural’ development from ‘savage’ to ‘bourgeois’, education needs to be reconceptualized so that it mirrors the developmental process itself” (Levander 36). The child’s natural interests in the world must be guided to produce the habits of industry and morality that characterize the nation’s successful middle-class adults (*ibid.*).

Esperanza is a child living in abject conditions, practically in a state of barbarism, that longs to be elevated to the scale of humankind. As a primitive, she finds herself in a state of pre-literacy. Craig Tapping points out that a European, print-based culture has assumed that “[g]roups of humans who do not use script are—by definition—inferior, and often less than human” (89). The word infant (Latin *infans*) means ‘without speech’. Spanish language represents the world of orality, whereas English stands for the world of literacy and literature. Like Tom, who stands between his life as a chimney-sweep and the white world represented by Ellie, Esperanza is rendered captive to a life of imprisoned yellowness, the life of a Chicana, and the purity promised by the alleged freedom outside the boundaries of Mango Street. Consequently, she has to go through a spiritual evolution which will conclude with the reward of a new life, not as a scientist, as in the case of

Tom, but as a writer, the crafter of a new history and reality. Esperanza's success, as Tom's, depends on her capacity to escape from "the contagious dirt of the poor" (Schülting 66) and adapt to the symbolic cleansed writerly space of the American outside world.

Moreover, the defining ideological purpose underlying *The Water-Babies*, the intersection of race and class, is also translated into an intersection of ethnicity and class in *The House of Mango Street* to underwrite Cisneros' ultimate rewriting of Kingsley's "parable of degeneration" (Beer 111). In fact, "The Monkey Garden" sketch symbolizes the Eden gone wild, and it stands as a parable of natural theology corrupted by the environmental forces of Mango Street. Paradoxically, the space of savagism, of fiercely overgrown vegetation and discarded urban debris, stands a space where Esperanza will necessarily suffer an initiation rite into sexuality that will be instrumental in her emerging from an innocent child to a knowing young girl, redeeming her of her sexual anxieties and facilitating her conversion into a free Chicana, ready for a transcendental life. Cisneros appropriates the traditional Victorian representation of the figure of the monkey to describe the paradise gone wasted, and suggests that its inhabitants fare lowest in the rank of human races. The Monkey-Garden stands as a place of utmost horror inside the Gothicism inspired by Mango Street, the scenario where Esperanza is sexually abused. Feminist critics have traditionally viewed rape in patriarchal societies as "a metaphorical construct skillfully designed to insure the continuation of phallographic rule" (Herrera-Sobek 245). Here, however, the abuser is not a Chicano as he calls Esperanza "Spanish girl" (*HM* 100), and, paradoxically, her rape as a "loss of innocence" (Herrera-Sobek 252) precipitates her last stretch of her journey to self-awareness and spiritual cleansing.

Whereas Esperanza's story traces a pattern of evolution, other women—Ruthie and Sally—in the text draw a pattern of regression. Naomi Wood asserts that, in *The Water-Babies*, "moral decisions can determine a species' ultimate position on the great ladder of development" (244). A salmon, for example, tells Tom that some species devolved into trout. If Esperanza features an example of transformation, these other women are examples of retrogressive extinction. Sally's story is the most salient cautionary tale in Cisneros's conduct book. Like the Doasyoulikes, Sally turns back into "a cloistered woman" and ends up as a victim of the social and economic circumstances defining Mango Street, a fact that prevents her from following the path of personal advancement and growth.

Against Esperanza's post-Mango amnesia, the Three Sisters warn her against rites of forgetfulness: "When you leave you must remember to come back for the others. A circle, understand? You will always be Esperanza. You will always be Mango Street. You can't erase what you know. You can't forget who you are" (105). Yet, she will only exorcize Mango's ghostly presences through seemingly protocol returns. Readers may infer that in her self-appointed role as scrivener of submerged female Chicana voices she will seek to recover the stories of her colonized friends and neighbors, her "mujeres", and tell them. Esperanza longs for a deterritorialized identity because it caters for her wish of abandonment and at the same time fidelity to her origins. Only at the end of the narrative will Esperanza transform the patriarchal Mango Street into a feminized site of her writerly origins: "I write it down and Mango says goodbye sometimes. She does not hold me with both arms. She sets me free. One day I will pack my bags of books and paper. One day I will say goodbye to Mango. I am too strong for her to keep me here forever" (110).

Readers are left feeling skeptical about the validity of Esperanza's leaving Mango Street—her moving over the liminal boundaries of her Chicano world—and wondering what will possibly change with this transition. Even if she has the opportunity to grow morally into a literary creature, a writer, the reality of gender and social exclusion she has left behind will be possibly mirrored in the outside white American environment. Unlike Tom, who is granted the privilege of washing off the external signifiers of his muckiness, Esperanza is left alone to struggle against external and internal signs of class, gender and ethnic differentiation. Esperanza's solitariness on her way to ethnic, class and gender cleansing, involves necessarily a paradoxical journey of alienation from her origins. Reverberating throughout the narrative drums the chant of "keep keeping" that culminates with a negotiated return ticket. Esperanza leaves because she has to complete her cycle of regeneration and translation into a higher mode of being before she can come back to Mango Street.

Mango Street remains full of oppressive tropes and, as Ilan Stavans writes, "[t]he cast is presented as real folks but, in truth, it is Manichean and buffoonish. Together they introduce a risky rhetoric of virtue that utilizes the powerless victim to advance a critique of the Hispanic idiosyncrasy, but that fails to explore any other of its multiple facets" (32). Esperanza reads *The Water-Babies* because, as a political allegory about nineteenth-century British industrialism and racial anxieties, this fairy tale mirrors the situation she

lives in a marginalized urban Chicano barrio in twentieth-century capitalist Chicago. Esperanza desires the same transformation experienced by Tom, Kingsley's protagonist, and longs desperately to be free and escape from Mango Street in the same way as Tom wants to escape from his blackness and washes off the soot that covers his skin. "One day I'll jump/out of my skin," she writes as a poet. One of the earliest reviewers of *The Water-Babies* writing for *The Times* was alert to its originality and declared: "That *The Water-Babies* will outlive many generations of ordinary gift-books would probably be no unsafe prophecy." The critic was prophetic but what he would never have imagined was that more than a hundred years later Kingsley would resurface in a timely text acclaimed by liberal American readers that, as Stavans claims, would elevate its author as the classic Latina writer of her generation due to an act of "collective nearsightedness" and "one more piece of evidence of how exoticism pays its dues" (34).

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THE HOUSE ON MANGO STREET: PRZYPOWIEŚĆ O DEGENERACJI
ALBO WERSJA *WODNYCH DZIECI* CHARLESA KINGSLEYA W STYLU CHICANA

Streszczenie

Dzięki lekturze *Wodnych dzieci* Charlesa Kingsleya, Esperanza Cordero, bohaterka książki *The House on Mango Street*, wyobraża sobie idylliczne miejsce pełne mocy. Autorka artykułu stawia tezę, że zmieniona tożsamość Esperanzy ma rację bytu wyłącznie poza rzeczywistym środowiskiem, w którym ta żyje, a jej przeniesienie się ze smutnego czerwonego domu na Mango Street do wyobrażonego, nieskazitelnego domu, opisanego pod koniec książki, jest z konieczności trajektorią pożądanego wykorzenia, opisaną w *Wodnych dzieciach*. Tak jak bohater powieści Kingsleya, Tom, Esperanza przechodzi metamorfozę, w wyniku której wyzbywa się cech charakteryzujących ją jako Chicanę i uzyskuje nową podmiotowość, a w konsekwencji staje się ontologicznie aterytorialną Latynoską.

Słowa kluczowe: *The House on Mango Street*; *Wodne dzieci*; Charles Kingsley; darwinizm; degeneracja; deterytorializacja; tożsamość.