

# Neoliberalism and the Negotiation of the American Dream in Contemporary Latina Narratives

*Jenifer A. Skolnick and Emmanuel Alvarado*

## **Latinos and the persistence of the American Dream**

The present chapter seeks to contribute to this volume by examining the ways in which elements of neoliberalism are presented and assessed in the works of contemporary Latino fiction writers in the US. Although it is possible to often find competing definitions of neoliberalism in the media and academic literature, we broadly define neoliberalism here as an economic philosophy that favors free market competition, limited or minimal government intervention in economic and social affairs, and unrestricted international trade and finance as the best way to achieve economic growth and economic prosperity (Palley, 2004; Harvey, 2005). In the US, neoliberalism's earliest, most vocal and prominent supporters included the Business Roundtable, the Heritage Foundation, the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, Milton Friedman, and the Chicago School of Economics (Harvey, 2005). Since the 1980s neoliberalism has been, to varying degrees, the leading economic philosophy in American political life (Monbiot, 2016).

Neoliberalism's influence in the US has not been limited to economic policy. As an economic ideology, neoliberalism has had a profound impact in modern American cultural life due in part to its overlap with

some of the basic tenets of the American Dream cultural narrative. As a utopian ideal, the American Dream narrative has historically served as a central ethos of American aspirations about class mobility and economic success. Novelist Thomas Wolfe emphasized this possibility of material gain as a central component of the American Dream in *You Can't Go Home Again*:

So, then, to every man his chance—to every man, regardless of his birth, his shining, golden opportunity—to every man the right to live, to work, to be himself, and to become whatever thing his manhood and his vision can combine to make him—this, seeker, is the promise of America. (Wolfe, 2011, p.508)

Although there has been much criticism as to whether the promise of class mobility and financial success embedded in the dream could be reached today, or whether it was ever realistically attainable by the majority of the US population, the American Dream remains a potent narrative in contemporary America. This dream continues to inspire many citizens and immigrants alike to work hard and aspire to attain a higher income, a prestigious job, home-ownership, as well as economic security and independence (Hochschild, 1995). Neoliberalism has blended well with the American Dream in emphasizing self-reliance, personal responsibility, and individual risk as part of the common sense fabric of everyday life and as needed beliefs and behaviors to achieve economic independence and social mobility (Rank et al, 2016; Winslow, 2017).

The American Dream and its promise of economic achievement continues to be an influential ideal for members of the Latino community in the US, both among the second and third generation Hispanics as well as more recent immigrants. A recent poll conducted by Atlantic Media and Pearson Opportunity and a 2014 survey done jointly by the *Washington Post* and the University of Virginia found that Hispanic Americans lead, while compared to other ethnic groups in the US, in their support for the basic premise of the American Dream—that anyone who works hard still has a fair chance to succeed and live a comfortable life (Vasilogambros, 2016; Constable and Clement, 2014). The polls suggested that, among Latinos, the confidence in the belief of merit-based economic success was most palpable among recent immigrants and second generation Latinos who observe economic success among their peers and in the generations that follow. However, this faith in economic meritocracy and advancement contrasts sharply

with the harsh realities of life for many Latinos in the US. For Latinos in the US, these realities include incomes and college graduation rates well below the national median and the persistence of urban poverty in many Latino-majority neighborhoods.

This discrepancy between the economic aspirations and realities of Latinos in the US is a theme that has been underexplored in the scholarship on contemporary Latino literature. Other themes, such as biculturalism, the hybridity of identity, migration, as well as cultural assimilation and fusion, have traditionally received more attention in academic research and literary criticism about recent Latino American narratives (Kevane, 2003). To bring more attention to the socioeconomic dimension of these narratives, the purpose of this chapter is to analyze the way in which neoliberalism, through its embedment in the American Dream, is portrayed and adapted in selected examples of contemporary Latino fiction. Two literary works that exemplify how perceptions of neoliberalism adapt when viewed through the lens of the American Dream are *Dreaming in Cuban* and *The House on Mango Street*. Both of these novels have received favorable critical reviews and, through expanded readership over time, have positioned themselves as influential contemporary Latina fiction novels (Kevane, 2003). In these novels, Christina Garcia and Sandra Cisneros develop themes on how the American Dream and neoliberalism are experienced. The literary work of both Latina authors was written in and portrays contemporary times in which the effects and implications of neoliberalism have been palpable. In addition, these novels capture perceptions of neoliberalism that are emblematic of experiences that occur among two important subsets of Hispanic populations in the US—Cuban Americans and Mexican Americans. The following subsections explore the aspirational socio-economic themes and propositions developed within these two novels.

### **Economic dreams in *Dreaming in Cuban***

First published in 1992, *Dreaming in Cuban* tells the story of three generations of women and their individual responses to the Cuban Revolution. The novel has been well received by Latino American scholars and helped establish Cristina Garcia as an influential writer of the contemporary Cuban American experience (Kevane, 2003; Stavans, 2008). The *New York Times* book review of *Dreaming in Cuban* acknowledged the favorable reception of the book by commending the hybridity in language and style evidenced through its narration of events happening in the US and Cuba:

*Dreaming in Cuban* is beautifully written in language that is by turns languid and sensual, curt and surprising. Like Louise Erdrich, whose crystalline language is distilled of images new to our American literature but old to this land, Ms. Garcia has distilled a new tongue from scraps salvaged through upheaval ... It is the ordinary magic in Ms. Garcia's novel and her characters' sense of their own lyricism that make her work welcome as the latest sign that American literature has its own hybrid offspring of the Latin American school. (Davis quoted in Garcia, 1992)

Beyond its appealing hybridity in language and narrative style, the novel is uniquely valuable for the purposes of this chapter because its plot and central characters offer competing perspectives on socioeconomic ideology as well as contrasting interpretations about the value of the American Dream.

In a similar fashion to Isabel Allende's *The House of Spirits* and Julia Alvarez's *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accent*, Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban* narrates the story of a family whose life is transformed by broader historical events. The broader historical event in this case is the Cuban Revolution. The story, told in the first and third person, is mostly presented from the perspective of three strong female characters: Celia del Pino (mother of Lourdes), Lourdes Puente (mother of Pilar), and Pilar Puente. Celia is a staunch defender and believer of the Cuban Revolution, its ideals, and the leadership of Fidel Castro. Celia is also suspicious of the selfishness of capitalism and feverishly opposes American intervention in Cuba. Lourdes, on the other hand, flees Cuba as a result of the revolution, opens a bakery shop in New York, and becomes a successful entrepreneur. She believes in the neoliberal, free market system, in the opportunity that immigration to America brings, and seeks to defend the US from the spread of socialism. Pilar is caught in the middle between her mother and her grandmother. She becomes a young aspiring artist in the US who is critical of the excesses and superficiality embedded in modern capitalism. She continuously reminisces about the sayings and memories of her grandmother to contrast herself with her mother's ideals. Pilar goes to Cuba seeking to find what she believes is a missing part of herself and her own identity, which can only be found with the company of her grandmother, Celia. In the end, Pilar discovers on her own the repressiveness of communist Cuba. She decides to come back to the US after realizing that her own artistic freedom would be compromised in a Cuba where all art and cultural expression must serve only the purposes of the revolution.

Throughout the novel Celia del Pino's socioeconomic views are shaped by conditions prior to the Cuban Revolution. We learn through Celia's letters to Gustavo, a former Spanish lover, of the glaring social inequality and misery of the poor in the Cuban countryside prior to the Cuban Revolution during the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista from 1952 up until his overthrow by the revolution in 1959:

I'd forgotten the poverty of the countryside. From the trains, everything is visible: the bare feet, the crooked backs, the bad teeth. At one station there was a little girl, about six, who wore only a dirty rag that didn't cover her private parts. (Garcia, 1992, p.54)

This passage highlights Celia's sensitivity to the plight of Cuba's most economically vulnerable populations and her dissatisfaction with Cuba's status quo during the Batista years. In another letter to Gustavo, in which Celia reminisces about their time together in Havana, Celia also reflects about her perceived failure of the capitalist economy under Batista, about the inequality it created, and about the emptiness of the materialism embedded in it:

I remember our spring walks through Havana. The destitute were everywhere, spread out on the benches in the Parque Central, asleep on yesterday's newspapers. Remember the young woman with the dangling wooden leg and the single oxford? The beggar families from the countryside looking for work in the iron-fenced mansions of Velado? The smart couples in their convertible driving by without a second glance? ... Why is it that most people aspire to little more than comfort? (Garcia, 1992, p.98)

As the story progresses, we learn that these views become central to Celia's support for the revolution and Fidel Castro.

The novel skips over the actual battles that occurred during the Cuban Revolution and, instead, resumes its plot once Fidel Castro has taken over as the new leader of Cuba. The revolution brings new hope to Celia as she internalizes many of its promises. In contrast to the first part of the novel in which Celia appears trapped in distant memories of Gustavo, her Spanish lover prior to her marriage with Jorge del Pino, Celia's life is recharged with the revolution's aspirations and socioeconomic changes brought by the communist takeover: "No one is starving or denied medical care, no one sleeps in the streets,

and everyone works who wants to work.” (Garcia, 1992, p.117) In another passage, Celia adds that the hardest part of the early years of the revolution was not the rationing of goods and services but rather the need to contain her excitement from her anti-Castro husband Jorge:

Those first years were difficult, not because of the hardships or the rationing that Celia knew were necessary to redistribute the country’s wealth, but because Celia and Javier had to mute their enthusiasm for El Líder. Her husband would not tolerate praise of the revolution in his home. (Garcia, 1992, p.118)

In these two passages, we also observe Celia’s support for government-led redistributive economic policies associated with communist and democratic socialist governments as the best way reduce poverty and misery, in contrast to the trust placed in the efficiency of free markets and limited government interference traditionally advocated by neoliberalism.

Celia’s support for the revolution gradually grants her a more prominent role in the communist regime. Celia becomes a local judge presiding over the People’s Court in her local neighborhood and a coast guard against foreign invaders and enemies of the revolution:

Three nights per month, too, Celia continues to protect her stretch of shore from foreign invaders. She still dresses up for these all-night vigils, putting on red lipstick and darkening the mole on her cheek, and imagines that El Líder is watching her, whispering in her ear with his warm cigar breath. She would gladly do anything he asked. (Garcia, 1992, p.112)

Celia’s intellectual and emotional attachment to the revolution transform her primary social role from being a mother and housewife to becoming one of the communist regime’s ideological and physical gatekeepers.

The Cuban Revolution has the opposite effect on Celia’s oldest daughter, Lourdes. Shortly after the revolution, Lourdes immigrates to the US with her husband Rufino and their daughter Pilar. While they arrive in Miami, Florida, eventually they relocate to New York City. Lourdes is happy to adopt the US as her nation and she sees her migration as an opportunity for rebirth and as a chance to prosper in America’s market-driven economy:

Lourdes considers herself lucky. Immigration has redefined her, and she is grateful. Unlike her husband, she welcomes her adopted language, its possibilities for reinvention ... She wants no part of Cuba, no part of its wretched carnival floats creaking with lies, no part of Cuba at all, which Lourdes claims never possessed her. (Garcia, 1992, p.73)

Lourdes's reinvention through immigration allows her to strive for and eventually attain some level of success. She opens her own bakery shop called Yankee Doodle in New York and aspires to become a leading entrepreneur by franchising it nationwide:

Lourdes ordered custom-made signs for her bakeries in red, white, and blue with her name printed at the bottom right-hand corner: LOURDES PUENTE, PROPRIETOR. She particularly liked the sound of the last word, the way the 'r's rolled in her mouth, the explosion of the 'p's. Lourdes felt a spiritual link to American moguls ... She envisioned a chain of Yankee Doodle bakeries stretching across America to St. Louis, Dallas, Los Angeles, her apple pies and cupcakes on main streets in suburban shopping malls everywhere. (Garcia, 1992, pp.170–71).

Lourdes exemplifies the ethos of the American Dream, as described by Thomas Wolfe in the introduction to this chapter, through her pride in her business ownership and her relentless pursuit to transform her local shop into a major American franchise. Lourdes's pride in the ownership of her business and in her achievement of the American Dream is also manifested through the letters and pictures which she sends to her mother Celia back in Cuba. However, these letters and pictures about the success of her bakery in New York also let her mother Celia know of her relentless support for American capitalism:

Lourdes sends her [Celia] snapshots of pastries from her bakery in Brooklyn. Each glistening éclair is a grenade aimed at Celia's political beliefs, each strawberry shortcake proof—in butter, cream, and eggs—of Lourdes' success in America, and a reminder of the ongoing shortages in Cuba. (Garcia, 1992, p.117)

Just as Celia takes on the role of guardianship against the possibility of foreign invaders in the Cuban coastlines, her daughter Lourdes

assumes the role of protector of American capitalism. Lourdes serves the local police department as a community service officer at night and is perpetually concerned about the potential communist threat against American capitalism. She perceives the media, the universities, and the Democratic Party as sources of potential socialist infiltration which must be cautiously followed:

Above all, Lourdes and her father continue to denounce the Communist threat to America. Every day they grow more convinced that the dearth of bad news about Cuba is a conspiracy by the leftist media to keep international support for El Líder strong. Why can't the Americans see Communists in their own backyards, in their universities, bending the malleable minds of the young? The Democrats are to blame, the Democrats and those lying, two-timing Kennedys. What America needs, Lourdes and her father agree, is another Joe McCarthy to set things right again. He would never have abandoned them at the Bay of Pigs. (Garcia, 1992, p.171)

As observed, Celia and Lourdes represent opposite sides of the spectrum in terms of their socioeconomic views. However, it is Lourdes's daughter, Pilar, who is caught in the middle and symbolizes the battleground for the ideological soul of the new generations of Hispanic Americans. Pilar left Cuba as a very young girl when her mother, Lourdes, and her father, Rufino, escape the island and migrate to the US. In contrast to her mother, Pilar views Cuba, and in particular the company of Grandmother Celia, as an idealized home and as a source of inspiration and hope:

I feel much more connected to Abuela Celia than to Mom, even though I haven't seen my grandmother in seventeen years. We don't speak at night anymore, but she's left me her legacy nonetheless—a love for the sea and the smoothness of pearls, an appreciation of music and words, sympathy for the underdog, and a disregard for boundaries. Even in silence, she gives me the confidence to do what I believe is right, to trust my own perceptions. (Garcia, 1992, p.176)

Although Pilar is not in direct or frequent contact with her grandmother Celia, we learn that Celia's views are highly influential in the intellectual development of Pilar, in her quest to maintain independence from



her mother, Lourdes, and in her pursuit to become an artist. Celia's sympathy for the underdog and commitment to social justice lead Pilar to question her mother's faith in the free market as the best allocator of wealth and the notion that greed and ambition should be at the core of individual aspirations. These doubts along with the desire to be reunited with her grandmother in Cuba prevents Pilar from sharing her mother's zeal for material gain and the traditional American Dream.

Nonetheless, Pilar does not fully adopt the socialist worldview of her grandmother either. Toward the end of the novel, Pilar finally has a chance to travel to Cuba with her mother when they learn about the unexpected death of Lourdes's sister (Pilar's aunt) Felicia. During her stay in Cuba, Pilar is very happy to be reunited with her grandmother but learns first-hand about the limited lifestyle of many Cubans under communism:

Abuela doesn't get any hot water at her house. The ocean water is warmer than what comes out of her pipes, but I am getting used to the cold showers ... I have to admit it's much tougher here than I expected, but at least everyone seems to have the bare necessities ... I wonder how different my life would have been if I'd stayed with my grandmother. (Garcia, 1992, pp.234–5)

In this quote, while Pilar does admit that everyone seems to have their basic needs met, she also acknowledges that life in Cuba is very limited economically just as Lourdes, her mother, had always described. Beyond the economic limitations, Pilar is also deeply disappointed when she learns that art expression is restricted in Castro's Cuba: "I ask Abuela if I can paint whatever I want in Cuba and she says yes, as long as I don't attack the state. Cuba is still developing, she tells me, and can't afford the luxury of dissent." (Garcia, 1992, p.235) Pilar's disagreement about the government's restriction on art content in Cuba is palpable as she replies: "I wonder what El Líder would think of my paintings. Art, I'd tell him, is the ultimate revolution." (Garcia, 1992, p.235)

Pilar searches for her own identity while in Cuba and quickly realizes that she must return to New York despite her fondness for the vibrant and inspirational life next to her grandmother, Celia:

I love Havana, its noise and decay and painted ladyness. I could happily sit on one of those wrought-iron balconies for days or keep my grandmother company on her porch ... But sooner or later I'd have to return to New York. I

know now it's where I belong—not instead of here, but more than here. (Garcia, 1992, p.236)

While Pilar appreciates the simplicity of life in Cuba and the fact that the very basic economic necessities are cared for under communism, she ultimately returns to the United States because of the economic opportunities and political freedoms for aspiring artists such as herself granted under American capitalism.

### **Interpreting the American Dream in *The House on Mango Street***

In *The House on Mango Street*, Sandra Cisneros explores themes of biculturalism, gender roles, socioeconomic status, and the coming of age bildungsroman. While these themes have often been discussed as they relate to issues of identity, the study of socioeconomic status as it relates to neoliberalism is an important area for analysis in the narrator's, Esperanza's, development of socioeconomic worldviews. Robin Ganz describes Sandra Cisneros' writing as

the sound of many voices speaking—over the kitchen table, out on the street, across the borderlands, and through the years ... she charts new literary territory, marking out a landscape that is familiar to many and unfamiliar to many more. And yet, resonating with genuineness, testifying to the ability of the human spirit to renew itself against all odds, Cisneros' voice carries across and beyond the barriers that often divide us. (Ganz, 1994, p.19, p.29)

Cisneros creates a literary space where identity, particularly identity experienced when assimilating into another culture, is both dissected and developed. There are generational differences in perceptions of the immigrant experience, of those who experience migrating to the US and the children who were born in the US. The promise of the American Dream and the reality of the American Dream factor into these multigenerational perceptions and how the neoliberal experience is negotiated.

Through the eyes of Esperanza, Cisneros captures not only the perceptions of neoliberalism as it is embedded in the American Dream, but the effects of those worldviews on each of the characters Esperanza encounters while living on Mango Street, including Esperanza herself. The American Dream is an inspirational cultural device that drives

many of the characters in their motivations and aspirations, but it is Esperanza who redefines her identity as she negotiates her own version of the American Dream. She does this as she watches the experiences of those around her and, rather than following their footsteps and repeating their actions, she develops a separate understanding of what it means to be self-reliant in an environment where she learns social norms expected of her as they relate to both her Hispanic heritage and “the American cultural landscape.” (Telgen, 1997, p.113)

In her depiction of Mango Street, Cisneros sheds light on the experiences of Hispanics who struggle with the reality of the American Dream when it falls short of its promises:

Esperanza's community serves as a microcosm of Latinos in America, and her own identity is interwoven with the identity of the neighborhood. People in the barrio relate to one another because of a shared past and current experience. In “Those Who Don't,” Esperanza considers the stereotypes and fears that whites have of Latinos and vice versa. (Telgen, 1997, pp.118–19)

In the chapter Diane Telgen describes here, Esperanza realizes how perceptions of others impact the ways in which those within her community, and without, deal with conceptions of “the other.” Esperanza observes,

Those who don't know any better come into our neighbourhood scared. They think we're dangerous. ... All brown all around, we are safe. But watch us drive into a neighbourhood of another colour 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. (Cisneros, 2009, p.28)

In this moment Esperanza sees the stereotypes through which Latinos are perceived by those outside their community, but also the way Latinos within the community perceive those “others” outside their community: through fear of the unknown, fear of those who might take away the dream of a better life, and envy for those who have it. This fear is significant as it relates to a neoliberal narrative that emphasizes self-reliance and personal responsibility because

the formation of social character is an inherently psychosocial process, in which the “push” of material conditions and the “pull” of political ideas and ideologies are mediated by the fears, anxieties, and needs which condition and determine the affective charge of political and social beliefs. (Foster, 2017, p.3)

The fears and anxieties Esperanza describes are indicative of how those fears can impact the actions of individuals within her community, and perceptions of those outside her community, as they create political and social barriers that inhibit upward mobility. These fears lead to stereotypes that cast individuals, like those on Mango Street (as Esperanza witnesses), into socially defined molds that are difficult to escape.

Sandra Cisneros captures one such stereotypical perception, the migrant worker, in the chapter titled, “Geraldo No Last Name.” In this chapter Esperanza describes a man her cousin, Marin, met at a dance, who becomes a nameless, faceless victim of a hit-and-run car accident. The man Marin met has no known address and no known last name, and no way to discern these things because he does not carry any form of legal identification. Esperanza observes:

Only Marin can't explain why it mattered, the hours and hours, for somebody she didn't even know. The hospital emergency room. Nobody but an intern working all alone. And maybe if the surgeon would have come, maybe if he hadn't lost so much blood, if the surgeon had only come, they would know who to notify and where. But what difference does it make? ... Just another *brazier* who didn't speak English. Just another wetback. You know the kind. The ones who always look ashamed. ... What does it matter? They never saw the kitchenettes. They never knew about the two-room flats and sleeping rooms he rented, the weekly money orders sent home, the currency exchange. How could they? His name was Geraldo. And his home is in another country. The ones he left behind are far away, will wonder, shrug, remember. Geraldo—he went north ... we never heard from him again. (Cisneros, 2009, p.66)

This man represents the ugly side of capitalism, the faceless, nameless migrant worker whose cheap labor we are happy to have, yet do not care enough to save when he needs medical attention. Cisneros gives

a voice to this man, to this experience, and brings the reality of the neoliberal narrative about the free mobility of labor and capital to light. The neoliberal narrative provides an opening to migrate to the US and the American Dream promises economic opportunity and upward mobility. However, as Cisneros demonstrates in the experience of Geraldo, the reality of that dream through the neoliberal narrative is quite different.

In addition to bringing to the foreground the experiences of migrant workers, aspiration for economic independence and freedom is a theme that pervades the novel in the experiences of other characters, such as Alicia and Esperanza's mother, as well as Esperanza herself. In the chapter "Alicia Who Sees Mice," Alicia struggles with the responsibilities of her home where

a woman's place is sleeping so she can wake up early with the tortilla star ... Alicia, who inherited her mama's rolling pin and sleepiness, is young and smart and studies for the first time at the university. Two trains and a bus, because she doesn't want to spend her whole life in a factory or behind a rolling pin. Is a good girl, my friend, studies all night and sees the mice, the ones her father says do not exist. Is afraid of nothing except four-legged fur. And fathers. (Cisneros, 2009, pp.31–2)

The expectations placed on Alicia by her father, who represents the patriarchal dominance that saturates her culture, clash with the opportunities attending an American university offer. Esperanza calls Alicia a "good girl" and "my friend" and admires Alicia's strength as she perseveres in her struggle to change her economic conditions. Alicia's fears, her determination, and her perseverance all contribute to shaping her social character. Esperanza acknowledges Alicia's fears of being trapped in a room, "behind a rolling pin," a traditional task for women in her culture, but in the American cultural landscape, this tradition becomes deficient. Alicia fearfully defies the cultural norms placed on her by her father and embraces the neoliberal edicts for self-reliance as she strives to place herself into a position where she has the independence to choose her economic condition through hard work. This example illustrates the optimism inherent in those seeking to fulfill the promises within the American Dream, and through Alicia, Esperanza is able to see both the potential to fulfill such desires for higher socioeconomic status and the struggle to do so when attempting to adopt a new cultural narrative in the US.

Esperanza's mother expresses similar views in the chapter, "A Smart Cookie":

I could've been somebody, you know? ... 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. (Cisneros, 2009, p.91)

Esperanza's mother describes how her insecurities, her fears of how she would be perceived by others according to her economic status, prevented her from pursuing educational opportunities. The connection between prejudice and socioeconomic status is not uncommon in these populations:

Historically, Mexican American men and women have suffered negative stereotyping and prejudices that prevented them from securing desirable jobs and being upwardly mobile within the society. Therefore, many remain concentrated in low-income neighborhoods like the one portrayed in *The House on Mango Street*. Poverty is a reality faced by many Mexican American populations living in the United States. (Telgen, 1997, p.122)

The insecurities Esperanza's mother relates in this chapter are an example of the very real circumstances of poverty that exist in neighborhoods like Mango Street, as well as the negative stereotyping that makes educational and economic opportunities seem impossible. The experiences of Alicia and Esperanza's mother illustrate the ways in which Hispanic immigrants have had to adapt their worldviews toward socioeconomic independence to meet the demands of reality in low-income neighborhoods.

The choice Cisneros makes to tell this story through the eyes of a young girl still developing her own identity is significant because she creates a voice that encompasses the many voices of those around her. Esperanza observes the experiences of the women in her neighborhood, of her parents, friends, and neighbors, and creates her own interpretation of self-reliance and freedom. Janet Sarbanes recognizes the significance of Esperanza's character as narrator:

By making the narrator of her novel a preadolescent girl, Cisneros represents Mango Street from the point of view of

someone who is not yet placed, not yet put into position. Esperanza's is a voice that can question, a voice of hope (Esperanza), a voice of transition. She is not inside the house looking out, like many of the other girls and women, nor is she outside the community looking in with strange eyes, like the nuns. Often she is out in the street, looking in at the other women—observing, analysing, evaluating their situation. (Sarbanes, 1997, p.125)

Cisneros creates this narrator, a young girl, who can witness the experiences others have faced as they struggle with the realities of poverty, stereotypes, and lost identity in an environment that promised to provide economic success, the US. Esperanza watches as those around her adapt that narrative and their perceptions of the American Dream, and she develops her own worldview as she finds her voice. She wants more than the poverty-stricken reality she has seen her parents face.

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 inside it would have real stairs, not hallway stairs, but stairs inside like the houses on T.V. (Cisneros, 2009, p.4)

Esperanza associates her home with economic success and yearns for a space that will not fill her with shame because it does not meet the expectations that American television shows promote. Her parents use the lottery as another source of hope for achieving that economic prosperity:

I want a house on a hill like the ones with the gardens where Papa works. ... I don't tell them I am ashamed—all of us staring out the window like the hungry. I am tired of looking at what we can't have. When we win the lottery ... Mama begins, and then I stop listening. (Cisneros, 2009, p.86)

For Esperanza, all the dreaming about things they do not have, the hope held out for the slim chance of winning a future and home that fits the image promised by the American Dream, is unrealistic. She only sees the house they have and the place that never adheres to that

dream. So, she imagines a house of her own where she can help those in need, those “without”:

People who live on hills sleep so close to the stars they forget those of us who live too much on earth. They don't look down at all except to be content to live on hills. They have nothing to do with last week's garbage or fear of rats. Night comes. Nothing wakes them but the wind. One day I'll own my own house, but I won't forget who I am or where I came from. Passing bums will ask, Can I come in? I'll offer them the attic, ask them to stay, because I know how it is to be without a house. (Cisneros, 2009, p.86)

Esperanza refuses to accept the American Dream as it exists in the minds of her parents. Her own dream incorporates the realities she has experienced in the barrio on Mango Street, and, like Cisneros, she seeks to provide a safe space to those who suffer the same reality.

The independence Esperanza grows into makes her feel disconnected from her home and ashamed of it, but it allows her to assert a power that offers her a greater sense of freedom. She says:

In the movies there is always one with red red lips who is beautiful and cruel. She is the one who drives the men crazy and laughs them all away. Her power is her own. She will not give it away. I have begun my own quiet war. Simple. Sure. I am one who leaves the table like a man, without putting back the chair or picking up the plate. (Cisneros, 2009, p.89)

Esperanza's quiet war is a fight against poverty. It is a fight against antiquated social norms that no longer endure in an environment where capitalism means banging against walls of cultural stereotypes ridden with boundaries that restrict movement between cultures and above the poverty line.

When Esperanza meets the three sisters, reminiscent to “the Fates of Greek mythology, three old crones who know the fate of all human beings” (Sarbanes, 1997, p.126), she resists their prediction of her future at first because she still feels ashamed for wanting her own space, a home of her own, where she can fashion her own dreams. She feels guilty for wanting this, as if wanting such independence would mean she had to give up Mango Street and thus give up her cultural connections to her family and heritage, which she often associates with shame because of



their socioeconomic status. This conflict reveals a struggle between associating poor economic conditions with the Latino community and economic prosperity with American capitalism. In Esperanza's mind, to be able to attain any kind of prosperity must mean severing ties with her Latino community. However, the sisters tell her:

When you leave you must remember always to come back ... 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. ... You must remember to come back. For the ones who cannot leave as easily as you. You will remember? She asked as if she was telling me. Yes, yes, I said a little confused. (Cisneros, 2009, p.105)

Esperanza listens but does not quite understand why leaving must also mean coming back, why to be Esperanza also means to be Mango Street, or how this place has become as much a part of her as her own dreams of being free of it. Yet, the sisters also make the point to say she must come back for the others, for those "who cannot leave as easily" as she will, for those who cannot escape the weight of poverty or the negative stereotypes that prevent them from getting the education or the desirable job. This is a feeling we have seen Esperanza already express as she did with the bums in the attic and her feelings about her first job. It is not until the last chapter, "Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes," that Esperanza realizes what the three sisters meant. For while Esperanza

may not accept the house on Mango Street as her home—that is to say, while she may refuse to accept the self that is handed to her—she does ultimately accept Mango Street as a part of herself. She comes to identify with the street itself, that border space which is within the community (within Chicano culture). (Sarbanes, 1997, p.126)

Even as Esperanza comes to a new understanding of Mango Street, as the space tied to her cultural roots, she also has gained an understanding of what it means to have the freedom to leave that space and build an identity beyond her roots. Esperanza reveals that this house she has come to accept is still:

the house I belong but do not belong to. I put it down on paper and then the ghost does not ache so much. 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. One day I will go away. Friends and neighbours 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. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot out. (Cisneros, 2009, p.110)

Esperanza comes to understand that she can leave that street and embrace the part of the American Dream that offers the freedom to forge an identity of her own, and she realizes that through writing she can give a voice to those who have none. She recognizes that “storytelling, or writing, is one way to create this relationship between self and community, to carve out her own place in the world ... Like Cisneros, Esperanza will free them with her stories” (Sarbanes, 1997, p.126). This is how she will return for those she leaves behind. Esperanza becomes conscious of her own strength, and because of this she can leave; because of this she can create change rather than accept a fate of marginalization, poverty, and negative stereotypes. She can break the cultural barrier and pursue economic upward mobility to better her own life, as well as the lives of those on Mango Street. Her ability to do this comes from her art, her writing, as it is within storytelling where she finds that the greatest freedom exists. She can free herself and others and this interpretation of freedom is her adaptation of the neoliberal narrative and the American Dream.

### **Negotiating the American Dream**

In both novels, the leading characters, Esperanza and Pilar, embark in life journeys in which they not only develop their self-identities but also their socioeconomic views and life aspirations. As part of this process, both novels are communicating directly to the younger Latino/a generation and provide models for them to come to terms with their ethnicity and socioeconomic realities. In the case of Esperanza:

[her] journey is deeply rooted in her observations about her barrio. They aid her in coming to terms with her identity.

Esperanza's search for her identity and her coming-of-age is universal; most readers will be able to identify with the feelings that trouble Esperanza—feelings of not belonging, of being other, of “the shame of being poor, of being female, of being not-quite-good-enough,” as Cisneros states in the introduction to the tenth-anniversary edition (1993). The answer to these feelings, according to Cisneros, is to recover, celebrate, and always remember one's roots. (Kevane, 2003, pp.55–6)

Early in the novel, we see that Esperanza clearly aspires to move out of the neighborhood to live in a nice suburban house and to surpass her parents' low socioeconomic level. However, this changes as she internalizes the experiences of others in her barrio and she realizes that her economic goals do not force her to leave her roots and the plight of others with whom she grew up. In this sense, the novel presents Esperanza's negotiated American Dream in which becoming a successful Latina writer does not demand forgetting about her cultural upbringing and the social issues which inform her writing, such as poverty cycles, immigration, and the persistence of gendered disadvantages.

In the case of Pilar, her journey differs somewhat from Esperanza in that she is the daughter of Cuban exiles who have been able to achieve a middle-class standard of living. Her mother, Lourdes, has fervently adopted the traditional American Dream narrative. She believes in the value of hard work and risk-taking to climb the socioeconomic ladder. Hanson and White describe this belief among many Latinos who migrate to the US:

Like other race/ethnic groups that immigrated to the United States, there is considerable evidence that Latino/as believe in the American Dream and its promise of upward social mobility ... Like earlier immigrant groups, they place high value on education, working hard, and success in careers. (Hanson and White, 2016, p.11)

In fact, Lourdes has worked hard to set up her bakery shop that she plans on franchising across the country and dreams about being a titan in the American pastry industry. In contrast to Esperanza's experience, Pilar's negotiation with the American Dream involves resistance to what she perceives to be the shallowness of her mother's greed and materialism. Instead, during much of the novel, Pilar romanticizes

the involvement and support which her grandmother lends to the communist regime in Cuba.

While their experiences contrast in many important ways, at the end of both novels both Pilar and Esperanza make conscious decisions to accept the freedom of opportunities provided by the American Dream in their role as creative artists. While both are aware that the American Dream has left many people behind, the freedom of artistic expression which is granted to them under American capitalism outweighs the harsh reality of social inequality. In the case of Pilar, she realizes that, despite the coverage of basic needs for the entire population under communist Cuba, her art would have to submit to the advancement of the revolution. As a result, she decides to return to the US and pursue opportunities as a painter who is free to make her own artistic choices, which could include criticism of ongoing and cyclical poverty traps embedded in the American neoliberal experience. In the case of Esperanza, her aspiration to become a professional writer becomes a tool to overcome the oppression of poverty and the historical gender role of domesticity:

As [Esperanza] develops both a critical and creative awareness, she comes to accept her past and, at the same time, transform her present. By developing this strength of character, Esperanza finds herself able to move beyond assigned, contained, and disempowered mental and physical ghettos, and live a meaningful and fulfilling life. (Sloboda, 2010, p.95)

While both Esperanza and Pilar are aware that American neoliberalism has left the American Dream as unattainable for many in the Latino American community, they also realize their own potential to achieve it through their artistic talents. This contradiction is ultimately resolved in the case of both characters through their deliberate choice to participate in American capitalism as artists who are socially engaged in the cultural and economic advancement of their own communities.

### **Works cited**

- Cisneros, S. (2009) *The House on Mango Street*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries/Random House.
- Constable, P. and Clement, S. (2014) "Hispanics often lead the way in their faith in the American Dream, poll finds." *The Washington Post*, January 31.

- Foster, R. (2017) "Social Character: Erich Fromm and the Ideological Glue of Neoliberalism", *Critical Horizons*, 18(1), pp 1-18.
- Ganz, R. (1994) "Sandra Cisneros: Border Crossings and Beyond." *MELUS*, *Varieties of Ethnic Criticism*, 19(1), pp.19-29.
- Garcia, C. (1992) *Dreaming in Cuban*. New York: Random House.
- Hanson, S.L. and White, J.K. (2016) "Introduction" in S. L. Hanson and J. K. White (eds), *The Latino/A American Dream*, College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press.
- Harvey, D. (2005) *A Short History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hochschild, J.L. (1995) *Facing up to the American Dream: Race, Class and the Soul of the Nation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Kevane, B. (2003) *Latino Literature in America*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Monbiot, G. (2016) "Neoliberalism – the ideology at the root of all our problems." *Guardian*, April 15.
- Polley, T. (2004) "From Keynesianism to Neoliberalism: Shifting Paradigms in Economics." *Foreign Policy In Focus*, May 5.
- Rank, M.R., Hirschl, T.A. and Foster, K.A. (2016) *Chasing the American Dream: Understanding what shapes our fortunes*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Sarbanes, J. (1997) "Presenting Analysis, Context and Criticism on Commonly Studied Novels" in D. Telgen, K. Hile, M. R. Napierkowski, and S. Ciccarelli (eds), *Novels for Students* (Vol. 2), Detroit: Gale Research, pp. 123-26.
- Sloboda, N. (2010) "A Home in the Heart: Sandra Cisneros's The House on Mango Street." In H. Bloom (ed), *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Sandra Cisneros's The House on Mango Street*, Bloom's Literary Criticism/Infobase, pp.81-95.
- Stavans, I. (2008) *Latina Writers*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Telgen, D. (ed) (1997) *Novels for Students: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Novels*. Detroit, MI: Gale.
- Vasilogambros, M. (2016) "The Ethnic Groups That Still Believe in the American Dream." *The Atlantic*, March 8.
- Winslow, L. (2017) *Economic Injustice and the Rhetoric of the American Dream*. Lanham: Lexington Books.
- Wolfe, T. (2011) *You Can't Go Home Again*. New York: Scribner.

