

Midwest Raíces:

Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* _____

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In 2005, Garrison Keillor, best known for his radio program *A Prairie Home Companion*, launched a radio series called *Literary Friendships* as a way to showcase well-known authors and place a spotlight on literature. “Inspired by famous literary companions such as F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway or Gertrude Stein and Thornton Wilder,” Keillor, according to the *Los Angeles Times*, designed each episode to feature “two noted writers who are also close friends, discussing their craft,” as well as how their friendship has strengthened their writing. He intended the show to shatter the stereotype of the lone writer working in isolation from his or her peers. Among the show’s participants was Sandra Cisneros, who had chosen the Muscogee poet and musician Joy Harjo to join her. The two had been friends for more than twenty years.

Cisneros led the conversation by discussing how she and Harjo had met when they were students at the prestigious Iowa Writers’ Workshop at the University of Iowa. Keillor was quite interested in their experiences and lauded the workshop as the best in the country. However, Cisneros recounted the difficult experiences both she and Harjo endured at Iowa. Cisneros remarked:

Well, it was like . . . when you said something in class, there was a silence in the room. [to Harjo] Do you remember that? I came with all the courage I had. I didn’t have any feelings to feel defensive. But when I said something, there’d be this absolute silence. And you just felt like: Did I say something wrong?

Keillor, assuming that Cisneros’s and Harjo’s classmates were all from the Midwest, suddenly took their side. He chided: “We may be like that in the Midwest, however.”

Cisneros took a breath, then quietly said, “Well I thought *I* was from the Midwest. I come from Chicago” (*Literary Friendships*).

The audience roared with laughter at Keillor’s obvious mistake and applauded Cisneros’s defense of her midwestern heritage. Yet, did the audience really understand the irony here or were they laughing and applauding at the mistake many people make about who counts as a midwesterner? Does Cisneros’s black hair and brown skin, which is often adorned with silver jewelry and colorful rebozos, point to what is considered midwestern? “I thought *I* was from the Midwest,” she said to the hundreds of people listening in on the program that day. The greatest irony in this exchange is the fact that Cisneros’s most well-known book, *The House on Mango Street*, is clearly set in the Midwest—in Chicago. And this irony underlines the mistake often made regarding the character and racial background of the typical midwestern American. This essay places a careful lens on the geographic location of *The House on Mango Street* and Cisneros’s Latino characters who inhabit this space in order to reveal how the novel’s interrelated stories create a specific midwestern “house” with universal themes regarding class, race, and gender.

Theorists and scholars such as Catrióna Rueda Esquibel, Leslie Petty, and Monika Kaup have explored issues of friendship, homosocial relations, and female sexuality against the backdrop of Cisneros’s multiple meanings of “house.” Petty writes:

It is Esperanza’s dream for a house, a dream inextricably linked with her poetry. . . . In such a metaphorical space, Esperanza can create for herself an identity that reconciles the violation and pain that she associates with Mango Street as well as the responsibility she feels to nurture and aid her community. (130)

Petty’s essay resonates with Esquibel’s, which investigates the way characters such as Sally and Esperanza negotiate their friendship within a heterosocial working-class environment that causes tension