Towards the Poetics of Sandra Cisneros’
*The House on Mango Street*

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I. Introduction

Within the American minority literary canon, Mexican American literature is, relatively speaking, ‘a new kid on the block.’ What is implied here is certainly not that American writers of Mexican descent have only recently begun to produce works in earnest (indeed the origins of Mexican American literature date back to as early as the late 19th century with the publication of Eusebio Chacon’s *The Son of the Storm* and *The Calm after the Storm*), but rather that Mexican American literature had previously lacked the quantitative, as well as the qualitative, requisites manifest in other long resident minority
literatures such as African American literature or Jewish American literature. For all means and purposes, Mexican American Literature, as a viable and potentially dynamic literary movement, emerged in the 1970s with the debut of talented Chicano (i.e. ‘male’ Mexican American) writers such as Tomas Rivera, Rudolfo Anaya, and Rolando Hinojasa.

The 1980s saw the advent of young Chicana (i.e. ‘female’ Mexican American) writers, among whom Sandra Cisneros is "the most visible within mainstream literary circles" (Tompkins 40). Cisneros is arguably the first Chicana writer to successfully make the crossover from 'marginalized' ethnic writer to 'mainstream' popular writer. In a number of significant ways Cisneros' debut novel, The House on Mango Street (1983), was to Mexican American literature what Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior (1976) was to Asian American literature in the 1970s. The commercial success of Mango Street (unprecedented in the annals of Mexican American literary history up to that time) owes much to the fact that it was published at a time when the term 'Mexican American literature' was slowly beginning to be recognized as a viable facet of American minority literature. Furthermore, it proved that woman writers of Mexican descent could not only produce works of literary merit but also successfully speak to a broader audience beyond their immediate ethnic enclave.1)

Exhibiting the familiar trappings of a 'coming of age novel,' Mango Street is deceptively simple, at least as far as its content is concerned. Maria Elena de Valdes' assessment that the novel is written in the manner of a young girl's memoirs, "not the day-to-day record of a preadolescent girl, but rather a loose-knit series of lyrical reflections..."

1) The House on Mango Street was awarded the Before Columbus American Book Award in 1983 and is currently one of the most popular additions to reading lists in a variety of academic programs from Creative Writing to Ethnic Studies.