Narratives of Community
Narratives of Community: 
Womens Short Story Sequences

Edited by

Roxanne Harde

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Narratives of Community: Womens Short Story Sequences, Edited by Roxanne Harde

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

During the early stages of my doctoral work, I was lucky enough to read in tandem Sarah Orne Jewett’s The Country of the Pointed Firs and Sandra Zagarell’s germinal essay “Narrative of Community: The Identification of a Genre,” the former as part of my search for another dissertation subject and the latter in my search to understand how women write about community. “Narrative of Community” provided some insight for my thesis, and became a major influence on how I read women’s texts. While Country did not come into my doctoral work, it gave me a lasting interest in the short story sequence, and inspired the first seminar I taught at Augustana, a course on women’s short story sequences. Using Zagarell’s essay as a matrix of interpretation brought the seminar together in meaningful ways. My students were guided by and benefited from her theoretical approach enormously. More recently, Professor Zagarell has been most gracious in contributing to this collection, reading the essays, and responding to them in her conclusion. I am deeply grateful to her for all of it.

This book is a communal effort, and I thank my contributors for two years of creative and intellectual effort. I found these authors endlessly good-natured and conscientious about matters of revision, formatting, and bibliography. I would especially like to thank Caroline Smith, Stella Bolaki, and Michelle Pacht for organizing a panel and presenting versions of their essays at the 2007 Conference of the National Women’s Studies Association. I feel connected in a community with all the contributors through emails about the essays in the collection, the conference panel, our other research and publishing, and teaching. It has been my pleasure to consult with these scholars about work matters and to get to know them as people.

I owe a supreme debt of gratitude to my research assistant, Eva von Buchenroder, whose work on copy editing and formatting has afforded the book correctness and consistency it would not have had without her diligence and expertise.

Because of commitments to his primary research, Jeremy Lalonde could not contribute to this volume, but I thank him for his input and for his Short Topic Presentation; his work confirmed that my own research on Zagarell and the short story sequence would be fruitful.
I thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for financial support. I also received generous funding from the Provost/Vice-President (Academic), the Research Services Office, and Augustana Campus at the University of Alberta, and I thank them for this support. I am grateful to Chicago University Press for permission to reprint Sandra Zagarell’s essay (“Narrative of Community: The Identification of a Genre,” in Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, 1988).

Finally, I thank the community that is Augustana. My students are a continual source of joy; they are consistently interesting, inspiring, and worth every effort. In particular, through their desire for a suitable anthology of criticism, the students in my seminar, “English 440: Women’s Story Books,” encouraged me to undertake this collection, and I thank them. My colleagues at Augustana give me good advice, affectionate support, intellectual challenge, and laughter, and I am grateful on a daily basis for a position that allows me to work among them.
While the greater diversity of narrative of community in the twentieth century attests to the genre’s continuing vitality, these changes need to be explored in depth. Other matters must also be addressed, including the extent to which twentieth-century narratives of community may be inspired most strongly by writers’ own racial, ethnic, class, and or cultural traditions, and the changing roles of gender.  

We ranked by fours, and even then we made a long procession. There was a wide path mowed for us across the field, and, as we moved along, the birds flew up out of the thick second crop of clover, and the bees hummed as if it still were June. There was a flashing of white gulls over the water where the fleet of boats rode the low waves together in the cove, swaying their small masts as if they kept time to our steps. The plash of the water could be heard faintly, yet still be heard; we might have been a company of ancient Greeks going to celebrate a victory, or to worship the god of harvest, in the grove above. It was strangely moving to see this and to make part of it.

While James Joyce’s *Dubliners* (1914) is often credited as the first story sequence or collection of linked short stories, and while Sherwood Anderson claimed that he had invented the genre with *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), sequences by women, including Elizabeth Gaskell and Sarah Orne Jewett, predate them both. Since the mid-nineteenth century, this form of narrative has appealed to women writers from around the world who often

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1 Zagarell, “Narrative of Community,” 527.
3 Referring to the “*Winesburg* form” in a 1941 letter to Roger Sergel, Anderson writes that this genre “is a form in which I feel at ease. I invented it. It was mine” (qtd. in Schevill 96).
use it to negotiate the tensions between individual identity and community. In “Narrative of Community: The Identification of a Genre,” Sandra Zagarell advances a theory of a women’s genre that denotes a text’s ethos and subject matter, a privileging of community over self, and a concern with process rather than a linear narrative’s conflict or progress. In describing the genre and its historical origins, Zagarell devises the term “narrative of community,” and applies it in her examination of several short story sequences, other forms of fiction, and memoir. She does not, in fact, use the terms “short story sequence” or “short story cycle” at all, but her work provides an essential interpretive lens through which many, if not all, women’s short story sequences ought to be read. Zagarell sees narratives of community as a tradition of coherent response to social and cultural changes, although these coherent responses come out of texts that are often fragmented or episodic. They are collective, continuous, and bear the culture of community through a focus on the details of local and domestic life. Moreover, according to Zagarell, because they were formed as women’s literary responses to vast world social change in the nineteenth century, narratives of community are outside of national literary traditions, and come from many countries. Although she focuses on nineteenth-century narratives, Zagarell names several sequences published in the twentieth-century, and suggests, in the epigraph above, that a good deal of scholarship needs to be done on this narrative genre. This collection draws together essays that read short story sequences by women as narratives of community. Its uniformity and unity of formal and thematic genres, however, fulfill rather disparate goals as it expands scholarship on the short story sequence, and demonstrates how Zagarell’s theory can provide a point of reference for multiple approaches to women’s writing.

Scholarship on this genre began with Forrest Ingram’s *Representative Short Story Cycles of the 20th Century* (1971), the first study to offer a sustained discussion of how the sequence or cycle, Ingram’s preferred term, works. Ingram’s focus on the internal patterns of recurrence and development that give unity to these texts precludes wider socio-cultural readings of the texts in part or whole. His study also sets the tone for the systemic New Critical reliance on unity found in scholarship on the genre, and draws attention to the compositional and print histories of the stories in each text. Following Ingram, Susan Garland Mann, in *The Short Story Cycle* (1989), Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris, in *The Composite Novel*

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4 For the reader’s convenience, I include Zagarell’s essay as an appendix; however, all references to the essay throughout this book use the pagination from the essay’s original publication in *Signs.*
Introduction

(1995), and Gerald Lynch, in *The One and the Many* (2001), survey the genre and categorize the texts by the features that lend them unity. Rolf Lundén, in *The United Stories of America* (1999), points to the genre’s indeterminacy and open form. While Rocío Davis’s *Transcultural Reinventions* (2001) and James Nagel’s *The Contemporary Short-Story Cycle* (2001) suggest readings interested in culture and ethnicity, they are as concerned with how these texts mean in terms of genre as with what they mean. Consequently, Davis argues that the form appeals to ethnic writers because of its mediation between individual stories and unity as a sequence offer a hybridized model of subjectivity. Rather than reading ethnicity, Nagel reads the genre’s historical roots in other sequential literature and exhaustively charts the differences between the stories as they have appeared in periodicals and in the sequence, which is also the concern of Suzanne Ferguson’s article on Louise Erdrich.

Critical attention to thematic and cultural concerns in short story sequences began with Robert Luscher’s seminal essay “The Short Story Sequence: An Open Book.” The form’s kinship with disunity and its openness, Luscher suggests, allow readers to construct networks of associations that allow interpretation of wider themes; according to Luscher, the sequence becomes

> an open book, inviting the reader to construct a network of associations that binds the stories together and lends them cumulative thematic impact.5

Following Luscher, Gerald Kennedy’s edited collection of essays, *Modern American Short Story Sequences* (1995) demonstrates that attention to textual discontinuities provides more insight into the cultural significance of the form than concerns with unification; however, many of the essays are preoccupied with defining each sequence studied as a sequence. More relevant is Kennedy’s point in his introduction that the sequence as a genre shows a recurrent interest in “the problem of community and its relation to the fictional form.”6 While he limits the usefulness of his argument with claims that the sequence is a peculiarly American form, Kennedy builds on Luscher’s work and points towards the scholarship in this collection and to a number of recent readings of sequences by women. Among those are Gerald Lynch’s fine analysis of Mavis Gallant’s “Linnet Muir” cycle as a *künstlerroman*, Danielle Schaub’s reading of transcultural identities in Fredelle Bruser Maynard’s story cycles, and Noelle Brada-Williams’s consideration of how the genre allows for multiple representations of the

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members of a community in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies*. Jeremy Lalonde’s essay, “Narrative Community in Edna Alford’s *A Sleep Full of Dreams*,” draws on Zagarell’s work to read Alford’s characters as part of an interdependent network.

Even more interesting is Lalonde’s suggestion, in an unpublished doctoral project, that the extant criticism on the short story sequence forms its own narrative of community as it loosely follows two models: one with an emphasis on generic unity and another that privileges the genre’s loose organization and allows for non-hierarchical and multicultural readings. The essays in this collection follow the second model; they are driven by arguments grounded in the open-endedness of the sequences they examine, texts written in English by women from many countries. The contributors do not dwell on questions about whether and why their subjects are sequences, although they do consider how the features of the form help to make meaning. Nor do they engage with the question of what to call this genre; enough critical energy has been spent on that. Each essay, at some point and to various degrees, engages with Zagarell’s work as it reads the semiotic systems of community. While “narrative of community” provides an organizing principle behind this collection, these essays offer critical approaches drawn from a variety of disciplines. The contributors thus join the community of critics that Lalonde posits; as in the above quotation from Jewett, they, and I, join a procession engaged with a narrative genre that inspires and affords a rich and growing tradition of scholarship. I have been moved “to see this and make a part of it.”

The following essays employ diverse theoretical models to examine how female identity is negotiated in community or the roles of women in domestic, social and literary community. Recognizing that there are many ways to arrange this collection, I have grouped the essays into four sections based on these examinations. In the first section, “Subjectivity and Community: Identity, Sexuality, and the Body,” contributors analyze their protagonists’ quests for autonomous female subjectivities within their communities. Stella Bolaki argues that by using the fragmentation of *vignette*, Sandra Cisneros privileges both the *künstlerroman*’s development of individual artistic identity and the formation of identity in a Chicano community in *The House on Mango Street*. Considering the communal orientation of ethnic American literature, Bolaki traces the ways in which this sequence as *bildungsroman* slides from a story of individual development into a narrative of community. Relying on Zagarell’s distinction between conflict and process, Bolaki delineates how, by breaching unnatural boundaries and privileging the voices of many over the one, Cisneros ties together narratives of self and community to create
spaces of ethnic solidarity, communal belonging, and individual freedom. Like Bolaki, Pam Chamberlain reads a sequence whose narrator is a young woman as both *bildungsroman* and *künstlerroman* as she interprets the tensions between the protagonist’s rejection of and reliance upon other characters and their value systems in Margaret Laurence’s *A Bird in the House*. Following Zagarell’s points about the influences of class on community, Chamberlain argues that in Laurence’s Manawaka, paradigms of class inherited from British ancestors create deep divisions within and among families, and destroy those marginalized members of the community. Chamberlain traces the ways in which Vanessa’s narrative of development is shaped by her divided community.

Drawing on semiotic theories of literature and the body, Stéphanie Durrans offers an intertextual reading of the female body and community memory in *Fast Lanes* by Jayne Anne Phillips. Zagarell’s points about instability of form and focus characteristic of narratives of community come into play as Durrans outlines how Phillips’s short stories destabilize traditional epistemological frames of narrative when they foreground the failure of the American community to give sense and identity to all its disenfranchised characters. Arguing that in Phillips’s work, memory, bodily and intratextual, brings together in community those whose failure to comply with normative standards leads them to alienation and relegation to the margins of social discourse, Durrans identifies the nature of a community of memory that emerges as a counterpoint to the fragmentation of the American family and social structures. Jessa Lingel also reads the body and community in Shelley Jackson’s *The Melancholy of Anatomy*, a text that traces communal perceptions of the ordinary and monstrous female body. Lingel argues that *The Melancholy of Anatomy* documents a communal experience through a series of vignettes focused on a single part of the body, and she considers how experimental texts that fit into recognized genres can become both acts of rebellion and reifications of hegemonic values. Using as a reference point Zagarell’s ideas about geography as a defining component for narratives of community, Lingel argues that Jackson identifies community through the geographies of a particular body, in this case a queer or female body. Sarah Peters’s essay, the last in this section, also looks to the reaction of a community to the aberrant female body and sexuality as she uses myth theory to interpret Eudora Welty’s *The Golden Apples*. Arguing that social codes in Welty’s Morgana are shaped and passed along through communal stories, Peters considers how the women of Morgana create and perpetuate the mythology surrounding King MacLain and thereby forge a language of desire outside Morgana’s dominant discourse.
“Family and Community: Domesticities and Women’s Roles,” the second section, brings together essays that read community through figurations of familial and domestic life. In her reading of *The Golden Chariot*, Emily Smith examines in Salwa Bakr’s domestic prison stories the concomitant political and ideological dangers in Egyptian women’s lives. Relying on Zagarell’s view of daily domestic practices, Smith argues that the prison community developed in Bakr’s narrative depends on Aziza, a damaged woman who finds coherence through domestic ritual. Characterizing these rituals as “fragmented domesticities,” because activities like cooking and eating both build and break community in Bakr’s text, Smith demonstrates what and how they uncover about women’s self-construction through the conventional, although often unintelligible, processes of food preparation and other common household rhythms. Pointing out that family and familial roles are the organizing motif in Mary Caponegro’s *The Complexities of Intimacy*, Pedro Ponce examines the mingling of domesticity and taboo in which members of a community narrate stories from the point of view of members of one nuclear family. Drawing from Zagarell’s ideas about how women resuscitate community in narrative, Ponce argues that Caponegro does this by contesting domestic space and communally imposed ideals, and by defamiliarizing the family. Because each of Caponegro’s protagonists belong to a different family and their narratives are ordered in reverse, Ponce concludes that in her revisions of the nuclear family, Caponegro’s sequence connects traditional family structures with regression rather than progress.

Following Ponce’s discussion of destabilized domesticities, Michelle Pacht’s essay examines the domestic and political agendas of three Chippewa mothers as discourses of twentieth-century Native American identity and community. Pacht argues that mothering is a key component in gaining and understanding a sense of self in Louise Erdrich’s *Love Medicine*. Guided by Zagarell’s ideas about narrative of community as episodic, circular, concerned with process, and sometimes fragmented, Pacht makes relevant connections between the form of Erdrich’s sequence and how Indigenous oral culture is traditionally defined by many different, and often fragmented, voices adding to the communal narrative. Laura Nicosia also looks at the dailiness of women’s lives to argue that these domesticities are the force behind the community of women in Gloria Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place*. Using Zagarell’s work as a paradigm, Nicosia traces how the sequence revivifies a decaying community through entwined narratives of women’s daily lives and thereby establishes social cohesion and kinship ties within the text.
Nicosia also contends that by expanding the paradigm of this narrative genre, Naylor forges connections between characters, the narrators, and the reader by extending community beyond the covers of the book. In the last essay of the section, Kate Falvey reads Grace King’s narrative of domesticities in a postbellum New Orleans community. Locating King’s *Balcony Stories* within the context of southern Gothicism, Falvey draws on Zagarell’s notice of how the details of the everyday, or the dailiness of women’s lives, unite the personal and communal to read the themes of violent racial, class, gender, and family disjunctions through the stories told by King’s female narrators. As participants and observers, Falvey argues, these women reshape their community and assume responsibility for their own moral destinies.

Essays in the third section, “Society and Community: Economies, Politics, and Ethnicities,” analyze the ways in which communities identify themselves through ethnic origins, local social organizations, or local economies. In the first essay of the section, Heidi Hanrahan offers a second reading of Grace King’s *Balcony Stories*. Hanrahan focuses on the trope of women’s storytelling on New Orleans balconies which creates community within the city and without as it forges a connection with the nation. King invites readers, Hanrahan suggests, to identify with these balcony storytellers and their city, as they dismiss old aristocratic social systems and embrace those eclectic and diverse spirits who will heal the city and the South. Following Zagarell’s discussion of the self as an imagined part of an interdependent communal network rather than as something separate, Hanrahan argues that the sequence’s female storytellers forge connections between individual and group, city and nation. In a collaborative essay, Neil Browne and Michelle Harvey use Zagarell’s suggestion that contemporary narratives of community may be inspired by the writer’s ethnicity and Gloria Anzaldúa’s theories of borderland culture as a double lens to examine the chicana narrative of community in Denise Chavez’s *The Last of the Menu Girls*. In noting that those who live on the margins of the dominant culture face the daunting task of maintaining community, Browne and Harvey contend that community survival depends on narrative or at least on some form of story transmission, and they analyze the ways in which *The Last of the Menu Girls* offers a space where narrative and community seem to construct each other, a storied space which affords a functioning reciprocity between narrative and community.

In the section’s third essay, Kristin Berkey-Abbott examines the earliest sequence undertaken in this book, Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Cranford*. Berkey-Abbott looks to the sequential structure of a narrative community
created by the elegant economy of women’s storytelling. Following Zagarell’s ideas about the community’s own characterization and agency, Berkey-Abbott argues that Gaskell explores the issues of community and the ways in which community can destroy an individual or offer salvation. Berkey-Abbott points out that through women’s stories, Cranford demonstrates the redemptive power of community by subverting patriarchal religion and offering an earlier, community-centered model of Christianity. In her reading of gender in Maxine Hong Kingston’s The Woman Warrior, Sarah Gardam also looks to the recovery of women’s stories. Instead of the emphasis on the individual critics usually bring to readings of The Woman Warrior, Gardam follows Zagarell by reading the sequence as a hybrid that allows for a search for self within community even as it creates a community of women through an imaginative integration of forgotten women’s stories with the narrator’s own. Attending to the political and personal trauma in Kingston’s narrative, Gardam argues that by voicing the unsaid, The Woman Warrior challenges and expands the genre by creating and preserving community even as it deliberately exposes that community’s power to damage the individual.

In the final essay of the section, Kim Kirkpatrick suggests that by consistently drawing her audience’s attention to community and to narrative, Ursula LeGuin ensures that the stories and communities in her body of work are open-ended and on-going, and will appeal to multiple generations of reading audiences. Focusing on LeGuin’s sequence Seaford, Kirkpatrick argues that LeGuin sees both change and growth as necessary components of community: stories and individuals are added and communities grow and change as people age; community and its narrative is never closed or finished. Kirkpatrick connects Zagarell’s ideas about community, change and continuity to LeGuin’s themes of change and aging. Where patriarchal societies, Kirkpatrick notes, see age as weakness, Le Guin’s communities continue through time and include aging and death as part of their narratives and evolution.

“Literature and Community: Literary Movements and Histories,” the last section of the collection, brings together essays that read sequences as women’s self-reflexive attempts to develop various types of literary community. They engage with questions of community as imaginary space, as being formed between a text and its readership, and as part of literary influence, print culture, and canon formation. Anne McConnell argues that in Virginia Woolf’s A Haunted House, literature forms a female space of continuity and community as fragmented stories and characters communicate with each other. McConnell uses Zagarell’s work as a lens through which she sees the relationships of Woolf’s often
Introduction

fragmented characters and stories come together. Noting that the sense of community arising in *A Haunted House* operates at the level of the imaginary rather than the social, McConnell argues that the imaginary provides a refuge for women suffering from the limiting aspects of social convention, and therefore creates a kind of community in the text. She points out that Woolf’s literary, rather than literal, community affords communication and continuity to her female characters. Forming a female community of readers and characters is one purpose of the fragmentation and isolation found in Melissa Bank’s *The Girls’ Guide to Hunting and Fishing*, argues Caroline Smith as she considers the sequence as part of the new genre of “chick lit.” Smith uses Zagarell’s ideas about the individual in relation to community as a point of departure, and notes that *The Girls’ Guide* creates community, but in a slightly different sense than Zagarell imagines. Focusing on Bank’s protagonist’s participation in the self-help reading community as she consumes and critiques these texts throughout the sequence, Smith argues that Bank’s collection creates a community of readers outside of the text connected through their shared reading experiences.

In the section’s third essay, Ellen McWilliams considers literary influence and narrative form as she traces the relationship between Alice Munro’s *Lives of Girls and Women* and James Joyce’s *Dubliners* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Looking to Zagarell’s points about narrative of community’s investment in the detail and texture of the everyday life, McWilliams demonstrates how Munro’s detailing of the fictional town of Jubilee follows Joyce’s descriptions of Dublin, and how both write in the tradition of *bildungsroman* and *künstlerroman*. In comparing these writers’ treatment of the idea of community, McWilliams argues that in her development of the female artist, Munro keeps her connected to the complexities of home and communal life in a Canadian small town. Small-town life is also a concern of Grace Sartwell Mason’s *Licky and His Gang*, which, Diane Wellins Moul argues, creates a community that continues to offer a unique literary and historical moment. Part of a larger project to recover Mason’s work as an important part of American literary and cultural heritage, Moul sees this sequence as a children’s text that would have had greater meaning for adults. Following Zagarell’s contention that narratives of community recover a world being lost to modernization, Moul points out how Mason forms a connection between the nostalgic adult reader and the text as she recaptures sensations and events from a distant and seemingly simpler past. The final essay also looks to a nineteenth-century text which keeps alive an even more distant communal past. Arguing that *The Country of the Pointed Firs* serves as a
landscape map of the much larger American literary tradition, Frances Zauhar examines the ways in which Sarah Orne Jewett invokes, alludes to, and sometimes revises a major work and, in so doing, forges a community of American authors. Zauhar focuses not on Jewett’s debt to writers from Washington Irving to Mark Twain, but on how Jewett references them in order to question the male-centered paradigms their works create. Zauhar reads the sequence as recasting several conventional genres of American literature—among them adventure, seduction, and domestic novels—in order to redefine relationships between individuals, especially between women, as a formative and exemplary experience of American life. In so doing, Zauhar notes, Jewett revises the relationship among genres and insists upon placing women authors in the American canon, a community of American authors.

Sandra Zagarell contributes the collection’s concluding essay, in which she provides a series of reflections on literary and cultural representations of community, on generic categorizations of community, and on regionalism and narrative of community as she returns to theoretical ground she first broke almost twenty years ago. Zagarell’s reading of Mary Wilkins Freeman’s The Jamesons, told first as a series of episodes in The Ladies’ Home Journal, suggests the ways in which Freeman critiques the Journal’s vision of acceptable womanhood even as she entrenches the importance of community. Zagarell’s consideration of community as the central concern in the preceding essays and in contemporary social life highlights its multi-valency, the ways in which community can be negative and limiting as well as positive and enhancing. She concludes her essay by pointing out the importance of understanding the vitality of genres. In the case of this collection of essays both narrative of community and the short story sequence are vital genres for examining both historical and contemporary circumstance.

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SECTION I:

SUBJECTIVITY AND COMMUNITY:
IDENTITY, SEXUALITY, AND THE BODY
CHAPTER TWO

WEAVING STORIES OF SELF AND COMMUNITY THROUGH VIGNETTES IN SANDRA CISNEROS’S
THE HOUSE ON MANGO STREET

STELLA BOLAKI,
UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH

Many works that participate in narrative of community, as Sandra Zagarell writes in the essay that formally identifies this new genre, “are also quite actively in dialogue with other genres.”¹ The negotiation between genres may give the impression that a text is pulled in one or another direction depending on which generic element manages to establish dominance. The pattern, however, is not fixed as it can be reversed within the boundaries of a single text and across texts leading to “instability of form and focus.”² This is a characteristic that Zagarell attributes to the narrative of community justifying it on the basis of the latter’s “freedom of not belonging to a fully developed tradition.”³ What the narrative of community primarily defines itself against is the ideology of individualism, which in Zagarell’s words, “predominated in so much contemporary fiction.”⁴ Of course, when Zagarell defines and describes the genre in the essay mentioned, she works in the context of nineteenth-century literature focusing on the initial practitioners of the narrative of community, namely “white women of the middle classes.”⁵ She closes her essay, though, by considering the heterogeneity of this genre in the twentieth century. Asserting its “continuing vitality” and use by a diverse group of writers, Zagarell notes that among the questions that will have to

¹ Zagarell, “Narrative of Community,” 511.
² Ibid.
³ Ibid.
⁴ Ibid.
⁵ Ibid., 500.
be addressed in the future are the extent to which the narrative of community is informed by the writers’ own racial, ethnic, class, and cultural identity more than before, the changes in gender patterns and roles that it has mediated, as well as “the genre’s complicated interactions with plot structures around individualized protagonists.”

Sandra Cisneros is a contemporary Chicana writer whose work becomes more and more committed to representations of community and, given her position as a Mexican-American woman, to communities situated on the border of languages and cultures. Her first work, *The House on Mango Street*, which was published in 1984 by a small regional press but which soon gained popularity, constituted a testing ground for the development of a distinct voice. It is structured through imagistic or poetic vignettes, a technique which makes it possible to read it either as a novel or as a short story sequence (or cycle). The text has many affinities with the narrative of community considering the way Zagarell describes it: it has an episodic structure, it offers sketches of ordinary individuals, its language has a vernacular flavor (a mixture of colloquial English and lyrical Spanish), and it is “unified by the characters’ common yearnings,” revolving, in particular, around the motif of the house which provides the title.

Still, *The House on Mango Street* exemplifies the kind of tension between genres and discourses that Zagarell writes about. The more individualized narrator, through whom Cisneros tells the story of Esperanza’s growing up in a Hispanic community in the United States, places the narrative of community in dialogue with more individualistic genres like the *bildungsroman*, while discourses of gender, ethnicity and class determine to a great extent the shape and nature of this dialogue. In this paper, contrary to readings that betray an anxiety to find a stable and safe “house” for Cisneros’s text, whether this is on the side of individualism or of community, I will argue that *The House on Mango Street* affirms and exemplifies the art of living “in the borderlands” of such discourses. My analysis will begin by briefly considering ethnic writing

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6 Ibid., 527.
7 As Cisneros explains in an interview, “I take my responsibility seriously of being a woman who lives on the border of cultures, a translator for a time when all these communities are shifting and colliding in history” (Cisneros, “A Home in the Heart”).
9 On the subject of borders and borderlands I have argued elsewhere that *The House on Mango Street* turns the “art of living” in the traditional *bildungsroman* into a “consciousness of the borderlands.” See Stella Bolaki, “‘This Bridge We
by women in the context of genres like the bildungsroman and the narrative of community and will move to Cisneros’s complex position within such spaces as part of a generation of Chicana writers who set out to problematize the idea of a unified community and to articulate more gender-identified perspectives without rejecting it altogether. Turning to the structural choice of the vignette, which gives the text a spatial dimension and allows us to trace the various developmental narratives in Esperanza’s community, I will recast Zagarell’s idea of “the participant/observer narrator” as that which gestures towards “a consciousness of the borderlands” in The House on Mango Street. The vignettes, as I will conclude, in going beyond “unnatural boundaries,” weave stories of self and community that create new spaces of ethnic solidarity and communal belonging, making room for individual freedom, contingent unities and critical empathy.

**Positioning Ethnic Women’s Writing within Discourses of Individualism and Community**

While the traditional novel of education or formation traces a young hero’s development by portraying his journey out into the world, many ethnic American texts which fall under this genre, such as Cisneros’s The House on Mango Street, Toni Morrison’s Sula, and Kingston’s The Woman Warrior, examine their protagonists’ complex and ambivalent relationships with the communities in which they grow up. In these texts, individual development takes place within the framework of the ethnic community. If, as Zagarell suggests, the ideology of individualism has permeated fiction, this may be true for Anglo-American texts, but when considering the multiethnic literatures of America such as Asian American, Chicana, African, and Native American, another picture emerges: a picture that stresses community values, social relationships, and forms of narration that create a shared identity, such as storytelling and oral tradition. Just as Carol Gilligan and Nancy Chodorow have argued that women have more permeable self-boundaries, ethnic American communities have been conceptualized in similar terms. Paul Leinberger and Bruce Tucker suggest that “the indigenous psychology of

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11 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 25.
self is more fluid, more inclusive.” Similarly, Rita Felski describes feminist writing in ways that correspond to how ethnic American literature has been perceived by both its practitioners and ethnic as well as Anglo-American critics. In her words, such writing departs from the “literature of bourgeois individualism” as it blends individualism with solidarity “through an acknowledgement of a shared experience of subordination.”

Numerous critics have written about the communal orientation of ethnic American literature. Bernice Johnson Reagon, for instance, argues that black autobiography is to be apprehended as “cultural autobiography in that it roots the story of an individual within a sense of community.” Martin Japtok reiterates the idea that “ethnic forms communalize individualist forms and are answering to different, more communalist demands.” The pattern of what he calls “the ethnic Bildungsroman,” in particular, is to “propose a more communalist-oriented model of development.” Felski’s reference to the “shared experience of subordination” in the above quotation is important in that it contextualizes and historicizes what is often described in essentialist terms as a more fluid female or, in our case, ethnic self. An appeal to communal identity, as Felski seems to suggest, is not the result of some kind of natural drive but a survival tactic that offers a safety net for minorities who suffer discrimination by the mainstream culture, thus becoming a legitimate and necessary alternative to narratives of rugged individualism.

Given the communal orientation of ethnic American literature, would we say that when placed in an ethnic context the bildungsroman slides into narrative of community? It seems from the brief account above that there is a great area of overlap between the two genres. In identifying some of the characteristics of the latter, Zagarell makes an important distinction between conflict and process, noting that the narrative of community is not linear or teleological like the bildungsroman, which follows a movement toward success or failure, but rather “seeks to represent what gives the community its identity, what enables it to remain itself. The approach is imbued with a concern for process” rather than conflict. Like other ethnic narratives of development, The House on Mango Street does this

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12 Patell, Negative Liberties, 152.
13 Felski, Beyond Feminist Aesthetics, 78. I draw parallels between female and ethnic writing following Zagarell whose identification of narrative of community is indebted to feminist scholarship.
14 Reagon, “My Black Mothers,” 81.
15 Japtok, Growing Up Ethnic, 149.
16 Ibid., 73.
17 Zagarell, “Narrative of Community,” 520.
through a series of vignettes that do not focus exclusively on the narrator; the text is interspersed with the stories of a whole cast of characters, and in accordance with Zagarell’s description, we read about “the small-scale negotiations and daily procedures through which communities sustain themselves.”

If the narrative of community, especially in the nineteenth century, tries to maintain all these practices, habits, daily activities and rituals that bring communities together in the face of fragmentation and of the increasing industrialization and modernization of societies, Cisneros’s narrative is, however, situated somewhat ambivalently in relation to such an objective. For, as I will show, what gives the barrio in which Esperanza lives its integrity is not only its function as a social buffer against mainstream oppression, but also the existence of patriarchal structures that keep its women locked in houses and old plots.

It should not be surprising that many ethnic American women writers, while representing their communities in positive ways, also reveal the lurking oppressive nature of intimate spaces, which promise to deliver what a more abstract idea of community embodied in the official U.S. story of individualism is unable to, notably comfort, empowerment and a sense of belonging. Such less alienating spaces, usually “invested with a redemptive significance,” are not, nevertheless, devoid of obligations and responsibilities.

In most cases they demand a surrender of individuality or freedom for the guarantee of security. This is a system of exchange according to which both the traditional bildungsroman and the narrative of community operate: individuals willingly limit their freedom in order to enter society. Security and freedom do not always fit together. In many ethnic communities, independent and stronger women, that is, women who pursue self-fulfillment, become outcasts. Community can easily be marred by communitarianism and nationalism and show a blatant disregard for any kind of difference that risks threatening coherence and unity.

In Chicana fiction, more specifically, a first wave of female writers in the 1970s started to pay attention to female issues, but as Francisco A. Lomeli explains, this group of writers remained “influenced by the nationalist vogue” of the period, and as a result more specifically gendered needs were sacrificed to the larger Chicano cause. A second wave of Chicana writers in the 1980s, which includes Cisneros, soon turned to oppression from the inside as opposed to merely from the outside, seeking thus to rethink the meanings of Chicano community. However, those female writers who seemed more concerned with gender issues were

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18 Ibid., 503.  
19 Patell, Negative Liberties, 141.  
20 Lomeli, “Interpretive Assessment,” 75.
“considered traitors, non supportive of La raza—Malinchistas,” after the mythical figure of La Malinche, who betrayed her people by helping Cortés’s conquest of the Aztec Empire. The above shifts were largely effectuated through genres like the bildungsroman and the narrative of community. The second’s relation to nationalism is perhaps more obvious since nationalism is necessarily tied to a primordial cultural community. As for the bildungsroman, critics like Fredric Jameson have shown how genres of individual development are often appropriated by minority groups for national causes. In the case of Chicano literature, as Candida Hepworth notes, the bildungsroman was chosen by writers like Tomás Rivera and Rudolfo Anaya to further the cultural work of “El Movimiento” in the 1970s.

A community often extorts women’s consent to its oppressive practices by threatening to inflict the charge of betrayal to those women who depart from its precepts. In this way, a community’s traditional practices, however outgrown, oppressive, or deadening, remain unchallenged. Individualism, however, is not necessarily detrimental to the community and can even revitalize communal values. A community, as Morrison stresses in an interview, contains “pariahs” within it that are “very useful for the conscience of that community.” In Sula, for instance, the community’s narrow vision makes it impossible for it to see the protagonist’s defiance as a potential source of renewal and agency for the whole community. In The House on Mango Street, although Esperanza is not as rebellious as Sula and never becomes a threat to her community’s practices, she maintains, as I will show, a space of privacy and relative distance, which can rejuvenate her barrio, in particular by giving agency to its entrapped women.

It is here that Zagarell’s description of the narrative of community is most useful. She writes that “participant/observer narrators” are used in the narrative of community to “represent the contrast between community life and the modern world.” The narrators “typically seek to diminish this

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21 Rebolledo, Women Singing, 71.
24 Tate, Black Women Writers, 129.
distance in the process of giving voice to it.”26 Esperanza’s dilemma is how to free herself from Mango and “yet belong” to it.27 As I would like to suggest, the “borderland” position that Zagarell identifies and attributes to the narrator of the narrative of community, that is, of participant/observer, allows us to read Cisneros’s text without resorting to narrow interpretations that depend on fixed binaries. The slash in “participant/observer” can be interpreted as both a slash and a suture: Esperanza can find a way to belong and not belong simultaneously, and the text, given the way it is formally structured, represents precisely such an effort. Being a participant and an observer at the same time, Esperanza is trying to bridge the gap and to maintain distance from her community’s socialization patterns.

**Challenging Fixed Boundaries through “the soft edges” of the Vignette**

According to Rivera, the tropes of the house and the barrio are constant elements in the lives of Chicanos and their literatures.28 Depending on the meaning that Esperanza attaches to these two spaces, *The House on Mango Street* has been primarily interpreted in two ways, which speak of the pressure to reduce complexities to fixed and static oppositions. More specifically, the vignette where Esperanza wishes for a house of her own has made a few critics, like Juan Rodríguez, suggest that she seeks “to become more ‘Anglicized,’” or that her development culminates in “her deterritorialization from kinship, friendship, group, community, and history.”29 For them, Esperanza rejects community for the benefits of privacy and comfort, which become synonymous here with an Anglo way of life, and thus with betrayal. Cisneros, nevertheless, has not received the kind of criticism Kingston has for her project of translation in *The Woman Warrior*, perhaps due to what Alvina E. Quintana calls the “polite indignation” of *The House on Mango Street*.30 Therefore, the majority of critics hold an opposite view. They take it for granted, as Geoffrey Sanborn explains, that Esperanza is inextricably connected to her barrio and that her development takes place only within this space.31 Sanborn has

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26 Ibid.
27 De Valdés, “Critical Reception,” 293.
31 Sanborn, “Keeping Her Distance,” 1336.