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The Minority American Dream in Sandra Cisneros'
The House on Mango Street and Celeste Ng's
Everything I Never Told You

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ABSTRACT

The concept of the American Dream has been attached to the country's identity since the early stages of independence. The notion that an individual is able to achieve whatever one might imagine through hard-work and perseverance has always fueled Americans' life expectations. However, Research shows that that gleaming green light does not shine the same for everybody, which ironically goes against the Dream's own rules. Racial minorities have generally been excluded from the country's own History since the beginning, and with that they can be ostracized from American identity; which can lead to being pushed aside from the frequently white literary canon. Nonetheless, since the civil rights movements which emerged in the seventies, many minority authors have tried to raise their voices against the alienation their groups often suffer. Sandra Cisneros and Celeste Ng are two of the writers that challenge the concept of the American Dream in regard to their minorities. Through strategic techniques they weave a complex exploration of this prime concept of Americanness. This essay will analyze the aforementioned notion in two of their most renowned novels. Sandra Cisneros, one of the first voices to tackle this theme concerning the Latino community in the eighties, will master it in her novel *The House on Mango Street* (1984). A more updated example of this same idea is *Everything I Never Told You* (2014), in which Ng represents the difficulty of integration and unattainability of the American Dream within the Asian American community.

RESUMEN

Incluso antes de su independencia, el concepto del sueño americano se ha considerado parte de la identidad de los Estados Unidos. El que una persona mediante perseverancia y trabajo duro pueda conseguir cualquier cosa que se proponga siempre ha alimentado las expectativas para mejorar la calidad de vida de sus ciudadanos. Sin embargo, la realidad que muchos estudios revelan es que este ideal no se presenta de forma equitativa ante toda la población estadounidense, lo que puede provocar que el concepto se contradiga a sí mismo. Desde su nacimiento, Estados Unidos ha excluido muchas veces a minorías étnicas en su historia, y con ello, les ha privado de formar parte de la identidad del país; dejándolos al margen para priorizar un canon literario primariamente blanco. Aun así, desde el movimiento por los derechos civiles de los setenta, una gran mayoría de autores pertenecientes a minorías raciales se han rebelado en contra de este aislamiento. Sandra Cisneros y Celeste Ng son dos escritoras que exploran el concepto del sueño americano visto a través de la perspectiva de las minorías a las que pertenecen. Exploran este ideal fundamental de la identidad estadounidense en dos de sus obras más prestigiosas y que este trabajo analiza. Una de las primeras en abordar este tema en los ochenta, visibilizando a los latinos americanos, es Sandra Cisneros a través de su novela *The House on Mango Street* (1984). Tomando el mismo concepto, pero de una forma más actualizada, Ng presenta en *Everything I Never Told You* (2014) los problemas de integración y el sueño americano como ideal inalcanzable a través de la experiencia asiática-americana de sus protagonistas.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Since the first settlers landed into what would become the United States the notion of the American Dream started to form and settle in the minds of its people. The idea that, in the land of the free, an individual is able to achieve whatever one might imagine through hard-work and perseverance has always fueled Americans' life expectations. Unsurprisingly so, this shining green light reached the shores of other countries, and lured other people who wished for a better life for themselves. As a result, "the thought of an opportunity of social mobility by migrating became one of the mainstays that sustained the idea of the American Dream" (Cannon, qtd. in Sánchez Carballo 25). That is, certain communities migrate to the United States because they are acquainted with this concept, and in the hopes to gain economic stability through hard work they travel to America.

However, for many Americans, this could become a double-edged sword. The Dream raised the influx of immigrants coming to America wishing for a quality life (Fraga et al. 321). Whether the notions of the American Dream will evolve with this demographic change, modifying their known notions on American identity (Cohen-Marks and Stout 825) has now become a feared topic. Many scholars have studied this concept and "recognized its importance in shaping the consciousness of the American nation," (Márquez 4) reinforcing the idea that the American Dream is a fundamental concept on their collective minds and how, perhaps, they would feel threatened by newcomers that arrive with a different cultural baggage that may stain theirs. In fact, still to this day, the general concept of white America is still prevalent, as Kim paraphrases Lipsitz and mentions that "a central privilege of being white is to be an authentic American—*the American*" (554).

Just by taking a look into America's current state, the fear of the Dream changing seems to be a flimsy hypothesis. Racial groups in America, immigrants or not, often feel

underrepresented and forgotten by the nation's symbolic constructions that were created by white colonialists. Many feel as if "the American dream has conditions for minority groups" (Sánchez Carballo 25). No matter how true this notion may ring for some, recent studies also show how minority groups nonetheless still believe in the Dream (see Cohen-Marks and Stout).

Latinos and Asian Americans might have been amongst the most deprived ethnicities from being considered Americans themselves, at least historically. Still treated as 'new immigrants' even if they have been in the country almost since its birth and were part of its development—these two communities have suffered the most in terms of assimilation to American culture or to even being able to gain citizenship. From the laws of exclusion on Asian people passed at the end of the 19th century to the great obstacles Latinos have to overcome to be able to reside in the United States currently, they are repeatedly considered 'forever foreigners.' Consequently, they are often forgotten in racial debates which are usually focused on other minorities. Indeed, "because of the white-over-black racial model of the United States that has pivoted on the color line and its ideologies of racial superiority-inferiority, Asian Americans have been subordinated in a different manner as not second-class Americans but as the *not-Americans*" (Kim 556). Despite Kim's study focusing on the Asian community, she also adds that Latinos, too, suffer a similar fate.

Perhaps due to this closeness regarding the nation's treatment of both Latinos and Asians, they share somewhat similar views on America and the American Dream. Sandra Cisneros is an American writer of both Chicano and Mexican descent that has always been concerned with representing her multicultural heritage in all her writings. She best portrays her views on the Dream in her debut novel, *The House on Mango Street*. It is still a novel analyzed in schools throughout America for its socio-cultural importance and

its later influence on works alike. Celeste Ng is one of the current literary voices who addresses topics of race and identity in the most accurate way possible to portray her Chinese-American origin. *Everything I Never Told You*, also her first novel, tackles the shaky attainability of the American Dream within an Asian American family.

Both writers' debut novels also share a common genre, the *Bildungsroman*. The *Bildungsroman*, that usually "explores the manner in which the protagonist develops morally and psychologically" (Encyclopaedia Britannica) has detached itself from its European origin to fit minority writings. In fact, Karafilis argues that many writers of color "adopted and radically revised the classical *Bildungsroman* to suit their purposes of narrating the development of a personal identity and sense of self" (64). Said emphasis on communities silenced before is something that both novels in question share. Consequently, identity is the backbone of the American Dream, thus the use of this particular genre is fundamental for the creation of the novels' depiction of the Dream. It seems that both Cisneros and Ng saw the genre as the perfect foundation necessary for their representation of the minority American Dream.

Ultimately, as one of the central pillars that constitutes American identity, the American Dream excludes ethnicities often, mainly due to their status as forever-immigrants, assimilation problems, and racial prejudices. The aim of this essay is, thus, to explore and analyze how the concept of the American Dream is currently portrayed in minority writings to represent the hardships these groups suffer in America to attempt to fit in and fulfil the Dream. This essay will focus on the Latino and Asian community specifically. *The House on Mango Street* (1984) by Sandra Cisneros and *Everything I Never Told You* (2014) by Celeste Ng have been the chosen novels to explain the aforementioned notion.

This paper will be divided into two chapters. Chapter I will be dedicated to Cisneros' novel. I will first contextualize it both in its cultural and literary terms. It is a Chicano story published after a huge racial revolution in America that will influence later works. I will also analyze how the novel addresses the theme of the American Dream in her protagonist, Esperanza, and the use of symbolism to exemplify its points. The analysis of Ng's work will be written in the essay's Chapter II. Similarly to the other novel, I will present an overview of its context to support my literary analysis of the text, which tackles the struggles of an Asian American family to both fit in society and achieve their American Dreams.

2. CHAPTER I: *THE HOUSE ON MANGO STREET* AND THE *AMERICANO DREAM*

1.1. A COMMUNITY OF BORDERS

As an author of mixed heritage, thanks to her mother's Chicana origin and her father's Mexican one, representing her rich background was always a fundamental topic in all Sandra Cisneros' (1954-) writings. As such she even considers herself a 'border woman'; meaning living socially and geographically in this mixture of cultures (Pearce 205). She often takes marginal characters not used to be the protagonist in mainstream media to tell stories that are an amalgamation of her Mexican, American and Chicana heritage (206). Writing in the eighties, almost at the birth of America's interest on multiculturalism, Cisneros came to be one of the most influential writers of her time (Stavans 30), considering herself a "spokeswoman for Latinos" (Cisneros qtd. in Stavans 29).

The House on Mango Street in particular holds great inspiration from previous movements, such as the Chicano Novel. In essence, the term Chicano/a is used to identify an American individual of mainly Mexican descent, and was popularized during the

Chicano Movement of the sixties (Gallardo). This period of social and political activism also left a mark in literature and as such the Chicano Novel was popularized in the seventies. The main reason of migration was leaving their home's "oppressive governments" for "the achievement and realization of ... social and political freedoms" (Márquez 5) in America. Thus, it is expected that the "conflicts with the myth of America and the American dream can be found in every medium used to express Chicano thought and sensibility" (6). The notion of the American dream is at the core of this minority's writings and, hence, also in Cisneros' debut novel.

Among other characteristics shown both in this literary movement and in *The House on Mango Street*, the duality caused by the amalgamation of two cultures, and their struggle to fully assimilate to American culture stand out. This is something that both Cisneros' protagonist, Esperanza, and the Latino community at large will struggle with. In fact, it is interesting how this desire yet struggle to assimilate to mainstream America is as relevant now as it was when the novel was written. The latest study carried out by Fraga et al. in 2016 highlights how "the importance of assimilation or at least 'accommodating American ways' was evident in similar comments made in practically every focus group we held" (337). This will be essential in Esperanza's desire to achieve the American Dream, and its improbable attainability.

1.2. LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY IN *THE HOUSE ON MANGO STREET*

The House on Mango Street (1984) gathers the thoughts and hopes in form of vignettes that young Esperanza has of leaving Mango Street's toxic environment to become a poet and have a house of her own. Just by the plot alone, this work is a clear example of a *Bildungsroman* novel. Ultimately, its aim is to "show the struggle of the Chicano/a people to find identities that are true to themselves as individuals ... but that do not betray their culture" (Klein 21). This notion is embodied by Esperanza, as her journey deviates from

traditional conventions for the search of her “real self and cultural responsibility in the face of different oppressions” (26). Instead of embarking in a physical journey, due to her racial status she is stuck in her neighborhood, and has to go through the “rites of passage” common in the *Bildungsroman* mentally to be able to leave Mango Street (22).

As the novel is written in the first person, Esperanza’s desire to escape her current life are heard from the very beginning of the story. She expresses her great disappointment with her new house and neighborhood and ends up stating her dream in chapter 1 already: “I knew then I had to have a house. A real house ... The house on Mango Street isn’t it” (Cisneros 5). Esperanza’s negative remarks on her life in an ostracized neighborhood in Chicago are not deviant from the average second-generation Latino living in America. Studies have shown that the desire to avoid these highly ethnic-centered neighborhoods is universal to both immigrants and their second-generation offspring (Fraga et al. 325-326). Still, it is the latter group who seeks this the most. This is due to the fact that, being born in the States already, they have assimilated more of the many tenets of American culture, and with that the American Dream. First generations will be satisfied, and will think that they have reached the American Dream by just living comfortably in the country. Second-generations will be mostly eager to demand more. Having more opportunities than their parents enjoyed, they will attempt to achieve a higher level of financial and socioeconomic success, which will frequently mean to simply move out of their neighborhood to live a better life elsewhere (Márquez 14-15). This is something that Esperanza, as a second-generation Latina, will have in mind as her own American dream, while her parents will hope for her to be more successful than them. Like her own mother advises her: “I could have been somebody, you know? Esperanza, you go to school. Study hard ... Look at my *comadres*” (Cisneros 91)

Esperanza has, in fact, a difficult relationship with her heritage. She sees its downsides and limitations which she perceives as something that will hold her down into achieving her American Dream. Due to racism and the sometimes-constraining traditional culture that she lives in, she sees her Hispanic heritage in not the best eyes, and this bleeds through her narration and her environment's perceptions (Betz 19).

One of her ways to avoid dealing with her double identity will be to evade talking in Spanish, save when she is paraphrasing other characters' words into the narration. Many times, "the manner in which a person communicates suggests something about her identity in relation to ... ethnic background" (18) which here means Hispanic characters who are still bound to their identity use Spanish. Thus, Esperanza sees at the beginning her Latino heritage as a barrier to leave Mango Street, becoming a poet, and living her American Dream. She does not identify with her origins as much as other characters. Her English-speaking, Americanized self is more relatable to her. Therefore, she avoids the language as much as she can. Linking language with identity is a classic relationship in literature. It can even be traced in real life, as Latinos often consider being proficient in English "to be the most important aspect of cultural adaptation" (Fraga et al. 331). For example, Esperanza inherits her name from her grandmother which is a marker of ancestry and origin. However, she is not too keen on its Spanish realization but prefers its English translation, inferred by her comment "in English my name means hope. In Spanish it means too many letters. It means sadness, it means waiting" (Cisneros 10). In Esperanza's eyes, her grandmother lived a very constraining life because of Hispanic patriarchal conventions, with no hopes to leave her house, metaphorically or not. This is Esperanza's biggest fear, to be trapped and not to achieve her dream. So, when she narrates "She looked out of the window her whole life ... I have inherited her name, but

I don't want to inherit her place at her window" (11) her skepticism regarding her name might be understandable.

However, there are more instances of her reluctance to accept her heritage because she links it with not being able to attain her dream. She is judged and alienated because of her race several times in the novel. The most remarkable scene would be, perhaps, the one in 'A Rice Sandwich.' In an attempt to fit into American society, Esperanza asks her mother to have lunch in the school's canteen, like the rest of the kids, for once. Her mother writes her a note to hand in to one of the nuns in charge, so she is allowed to do so. However, the nun's denial is clear, unfairly justifying it by saying that she does not live that far. Furthermore, she also holds prejudices against her community, as seen by her comment: "That one? She said pointing to a row of ugly three-flats, the ones even raggedy men are ashamed to go into ... that wasn't my house" (45). In thinking that her family lives in the worst of neighborhoods, and not letting her mingle with the rest, she is perpetuating the stigma these communities suffer to fit into America. This is not the only case where minorities are frowned upon. By Esperanza's narration it can be noted that outsiders are scared of her neighborhood because it is mostly inhabited by Latinos: "Those who don't know come to our neighborhood scared. They think we're dangerous. They think we will attack them with shiny knives" (28).

Due to the racism and alienation communities like hers have to sometimes endure in American society, it is no surprise that Esperanza sees her heritage as something negative. If "the language barrier is perceived as an undesirable boundary between self and opportunity in America" (Betz 20) Esperanza sees that in many characters who refuse to acculturate to American society, so she will seek the opposite. The clearest example being 'No Speak English,' Esperanza describes her new immigrant neighbor, who refuses to leave her house. Esperanza pours her thoughts into the narration: "I believe she doesn't

come out because she is afraid to speak English ... since she only knows eight words” (Cisneros 77). This handicaps her so much that it seems that she is unable to live an average life in her new country. Betz considers this situation as her failed attempt to assimilate to her new environment: “Rather than assimilating or accepting her newfound double-identity, *Mamacita* denies the English language and views America as the distant road away from the home where she belongs” (Betz 24). It is in fact highlighted when she refers to a picture as ‘home,’ thinking about her old house, instead of the current one. Esperanza knows this will not be an impediment for her to seek her dreams and leave Mango Street. As a second-generation Chicana, she has assimilated both cultures equally. Therefore, she understands that speaking both languages will enable her breaking through “at least one of the factors that isolate other women” in that neighborhood, which is English proficiency (Marek 181). Or, plainly stated, her acculturation to mainstream America.

1.3. THE HOUSE’S CONSTRAINING FORCE

The house’s recurrent appearance as a constraining force to different characters is, perhaps, the “central leitmotif” of Cisneros’ debut novel (Stavans 32). It is important to remark that this image of the house as a metaphorical jail that traps people into not achieving their dreams will succeed in engaging side-characters living in Mango Street. It will serve as a warning to Esperanza’s hopes to obtain hers too. Indeed, Marek highlights this symbol in his article, stating that the house “represents the constraints placed on people in Esperanza’s social position” (179). Thus, if the house and Mango Street depicts the community’s situation in America—full of hardships that make their dreams generally inaccessible—Esperanza’s fantasies are in danger. Even if she is more privileged than the rest, because she is a second-generation Chicana with an assimilated

American culture, her situation as a minority difficults her path to succeed. Cisneros represents this notion by Mango Street itself, but especially through the symbolism she lays on the house.

There are several instances in which the house traps secondary characters' dreams of a better life. Esperanza's fear of ending up like her grandmother, who spent her life trapped in her house is one of those: "I have inherited her name, but I don't want to inherit her place by the window" (Cisneros 11). Soon in the novel Marin is introduced. She is young as Esperanza, and as she does, she expresses her desire to escape Mango Street, to get a good job and acquire a big house. She migrated recently, so it could be said that she has yet to acculturate to the new country and has more connections with her Hispanic heritage than Esperanza. On top of that, it seems that Marin's way to break away with her community is sought by waiting for a man to save her (Betz 24). In consequence, she spends the majority of her time inside: "We never see Marin until her aunt comes home from work, and even then she can only stay out in front" (Cisneros 27). It is hinted that she will return to her motherland, and thus her American Dream will vanish.

Ruthie, another neighbor, will go through a similar fate. In this case, she did find someone who took her out of there, however it was not herself, but an abusive husband. She will return to Mango Street. Esperanza narrates: "There were many things Ruthie could have been if she wanted to ... She had lots of job offers when she was young but she never took them. She got married instead" (68-69). Even if she tried to, life dragged her to Mango Street anyway. Minerva is described as young as Esperanza, and already married. She is also a poet, but no one save the protagonist have read her work. She is so bound to the symbolical reading of the house as a constraining force that she is even compared to that: "she is always sad like a house on fire" (84). Lastly, even her aunt, paraplegic and unwilling to leave her house, encourages her not to follow her equals' fate

in Mango Street to pursue Esperanza's own dreams: "You must keep writing. It will keep you free" (61). Even if her situation as a minority woman in a rough neighborhood makes her dream difficult to achieve, it will be this very same wish that will enable her to escape.

In seeing people similar to her bound to this life that she wants to leave behind, Esperanza relies on her poetry and imagination to try to achieve her dreams (Stavans 33). As such, the narration is filled with symbolism. A part from the house and Mango Street, another recurrent tool Cisneros masters is that of sky imagery. The sky will signify how her dreams are high and unreachable, however it is a nice view to focus instead of her rough life. Her usage of this symbol to convey said concept is seen in the next example: "You can never have too much sky... Here there is too much sadness and not enough sky... Still, we take what we can get and make the best of it." (Cisneros 33).

This particular portrayal of life in a minority-centered neighborhood which the author presents to her protagonist may have influenced Esperanza's struggle to accept her heritage. That is why she wants to escape the neighborhood and buy a house elsewhere, to run away from the symbolism those places entail. However, not all is bleak. A slight shift of her perspective happens when three mysterious 'witches' come to visit Mango Street. One of them tells Esperanza: "When you leave you must remember to come back for the others ... You will always be Mango Street ... You can't forget who you are" (105). Taking her double American-Chicana identity, Esperanza's American Dream was firstly a "private desire" and "an internalization of Anglo values" produced by her desire to escape racial prejudices and gender constraints (Marek 183). However, after the three sisters' confession, in which they include her in Mango Street, the representation of Chicana community throughout the book, Esperanza realizes she is part of them. She will always belong to this minority group, and being privileged as she is because of her double background and intelligence, she must not forget that she is part of the community.

Therefore, even if her dream stays still, from now on she will be more lenient towards her own perceptions on her community.

By the ending chapter, she has now accepted her Hispanic heritage, with all the hardships that it entails. She recognizes it using, again, the symbol of the house: “the house I belong but do not belong to” (Cisneros 110). She is referring here to the ethnic community she struggled to come to terms with throughout the novel, and also to her double culture, both Chicana and American. Although she seems determined, the novel is left open-ended. She is still in Mango Street, her life untouched, her dream unattained. In terms of narration the last and first chapter have both the exact same paragraph structure, starting with “We didn’t always live on Mango Street” (109). Besides, the fact that the protagonist’s life has not really changed in terms of achieving her dreams can lead one to think of the novel as having a circular structure. As such, it is uncertain to assure that Esperanza’s American Dream will be attainable at last. However, she did come to terms with her heritage, and promises to come back for those who are not as lucky as her to even wish for a better life.

3. CHAPTER II: *EVERYTHING I NEVER TOLD YOU* AND THE ASIAN AMERICAN DREAM

3.1. THE CURSED MODEL MINORITY

Author Celeste Ng (1980-) always has in mind the importance of representing her ethnicity in mainstream literature. As Ng states in multiple interviews, “I write about issues of race and privilege and identity because I care deeply about them and because they affect my own life daily” (qtd. in East 16). Born in a family of Hong Kong immigrants that came to America, she lived in a middle-class Ohio neighborhood with very few people who looked like her (Begley 58). Though perhaps not as harshly as other people might have suffered it, she still admits to have experienced “racially charged

incidents,” which is often part of Asian American’s daily lives (Laity). Therefore, her obsession with the theme of representing “attitudes about race in America” (Lamy) first comes from a biographical background. Besides, this topic is very relevant to the current state of America, as it has been noted that many readers seek these kind of stories (Laity). Indeed, the plot of her debut novel, *Everything I Never Told You* (2014) will revolve around that.

Asian American literature has often been eclipsed by the American classics and their influence, which happen to be, mostly, literature written by white Americans. Scholar Hong Sohn gives a definition of what is traditionally thought of being ‘Asian American literature.’ It is defined as “a body of texts written in English that depicts a specific social history in which individuals of various ethnicities have faced discrimination due to perceptions and laws that designated them as aliens” (Hong Sohn 1). It can be arguable that this laid importance on the representation of their struggle as a minority in America can alienate their literature from the rest, disabling them to write about anything else. However, it is this obsession with it that reveals that “the writer’s racial identity still matters and can be used to categorize a literary body” (3) and it is important to “diversify what we understand as the American experience” (5).

Indeed, Asian Americans seem to be regarded more highly than other minorities would, because of their better performance in education and their stable financial status. This does not mean that they can be part of American identity (Kim 566). In fact, it has been researched that “Asian Americans are increasingly subject to racially motivated crimes in their homes, workplaces, and schools” (569). If Asian-Americans are deemed more successful than other minorities, then they would consider the American dream as a more of a reality (Cohen-Marks and Stout 829). However, research has shown that they “are notably pessimistic about the American dream” (841). This stems from the fact that

the Dream is a social concept stemmed from the American identity Asians are denied to be a part of. The struggles to attain the American dream as part of a ‘model minority’ will be thoroughly explored in Ng’s novel.

3.2. FAMILY AND LEGACY IN *EVERYTHING I NEVER TOLD YOU*

Everything I Never Told You recounts the story of a teenager’s sudden disappearance in the seventies, and the search and trauma that causes on her biracial—American and Chinese American—family. Although Ng’s novel breeds from several genres, by the treatment of at least two of its protagonists, James and Lydia, the work is a *Bildungsroman* tale. Indeed, the *Bildungsroman* is one of the most used genres in Asian American literature for its “ability of the minority writer to explore his or her life ... in ... fictional form has thus consistently provided a valuable means to nuance and diversify what we understand as the American experience” (Hong Sohn 5). That is, the *Bildungsroman* enables them to break through mainstream media with stories that depict their struggles to fit in America. Ng expertly uses this technique to portray James and Lydia’s struggles with the American Dream.

James Lee, the family’s father, is the one who carries the theme of the American Dream determined by race the most throughout the novel. Ng expressed her interest to explore this “idea of being ‘other’ even within one’s own family” both from her own accounts as a minority, and her experience being in an interracial marriage, like James (Laity). Although James was born in America, his parents were Chinese immigrants seeking a better life in the United States. As a second-generation person of color, his childhood experience is similar to that of Esperanza’s, Cisneros’ protagonist. Second-generations often absorb an American identity on top of their own heritage, and that clashes with their American Dream, and ultimately with their perception of one’s own

ancestry. This is relevant to James' characterization, especially during his childhood. Like Esperanza, he is alienated in school, and even mocked because of it. "The girl next to him asked, "What's wrong with your eyes?' ... he realized he was supposed to be embarrassed" (Ng 43). Taking this quote into account, if schools are usually a smaller representation of society, it is in here where James first felt his sense of otherness that separates him from fully integrating into America, like Esperanza experienced. Indeed, he soon realizes that even if he dresses like the rest and does the same things any child would do, he is still seen as other: "He had a bookbag, a Lloyd uniform. Yet he didn't live at the school like the rest of them: he looked like no one they'd ever seen ... He spent twelve years at Lloyd and never felt at home" (43-44). Instances of racial prejudice will not stop at his childhood. In fact, in the novel's opening chapter there is already another example, James being a grown adult now. Said scene leaves him upset but desensitized already about that fact, as it unravels like this: "He enjoys the surprise in people's faces when he tells them he's a professor of American history. 'Well, I *am* American,' he says when people blink, a barb of defensiveness in his tone" (9). Research shows that "Asian Americans face much of their racial discrimination in institutional contexts" (Kim 568) so it is no coincidence that where James' suffers it the most is in his school and later on at University, both as student and professor. It is this discrimination that eventually withers his hopes to attain his American Dream.

The racial prejudices that James went through at such a young age only deteriorated his reluctance to view his heritage in a good light. It is something that Esperanza had to experience in her own story as well. In his attempt to fit in with the rest of his classmates, James forced himself to stop talking in Mandarin at home: "In the fifth grade, he had stopped speaking Chinese to his parents, afraid of tinting his English with an accent" (Ng 48). James' perception on his other language is similar to Esperanza's.

James considers that “language brings its own culture ... which can help establish identity” (Teleky 208-209), and in an attempt to integrate to society fully, he tried to forget his heritage. He will not speak his other mother tongue throughout the book, nor will he teach it to his children.

In fact, it is his anxiety to be like everyone else and integrate within America the main driving force that leads him to study the most stereotypical topic of American culture and History: cowboys. Cowboys, and American History in general, serves as a literary symbol throughout the novel. It will all start at Lloyd, when in trying to spark conversation with the other kids “he set himself a curriculum of studying American culture” (Ng 44). However, probably because of his ethnicity, it was of no use, for he did not have any friends there. Notwithstanding, he did not give up on his dream of integration. He will indeed become professor of ‘The Cowboy in American Culture,’ a course her future wife will attend.

Tutoring that class will be where James first meets Marilyn, his wife. In their relationship, and Marilyn herself, James’ efforts to fit into American society are the most obvious. He sees her as a symbol for America, who now loves and accepts him. As mentioned, the novel lays great importance on how invisible some minorities might feel when looking at American society, and Marilyn and James’ relationship “leads to more circumstances of fitting in” (Willoughby 122). When the narration focalizes on James’ first impressions on Marilyn the reader gets to know how she makes the cut for an ‘all-American girl.’ She is a blue-eyed, blonde white girl that embodies the ‘average-looking’ American, especially at that time. He himself admits it in “this was the first reason he came to love her: because she had blended in so perfectly, because she had seemed so completely and utterly at home” (Ng 37-38). It will not be the last time that James compares the notion of ‘home’ with fitting in America itself. Already seen at Lloyd, he

now links it with cliché-looking Marilyn. In “coming to her made him feel perfectly welcomed. Perfectly at home, as he had never in his life felt before” or more bluntly “It was as if America herself was taking him in” (40; 45), it can be observed how James draws this comparison between Marilyn embodying America, and America finally accepting him as he is. However, not everyone was as welcoming as Marilyn. Her own mother rejected him at their wedding, hinting that their future family will not fit in. They will not fit in America, she really means. Being a woman that was brought up before the civil rights movement, the fact that she compares her daughter marrying the man she loves to “running along the edge of a cliff” (54) just because he does not look like her is unsurprising.

It is important to address the notion of ‘model minority’ to understand James. There is an ideal of Asian Americans as being the perfect immigrants—hard-working, financially stable, successful—that other minorities do not enjoy. This is not necessarily less harmful. The “model minority acclaim has not been enough to grant Asian groups ‘authentic American’ status” (Kim 560) as seen in James’ failed attempts to fraternize at Lloyd, who faced racial discrimination by those children in return. Likewise, this concept entails that “Asian American’s heads have certainly been bruised by the infamous glass ceiling” (561). Despite being recognized as very successful people with good jobs, they nonetheless suffer discrimination in the workplace. James is set to be a model minority since his father told him that he was the first Asian to ever attend Lloyd, and as such, he reminded James to “set a good example” (Ng 43). He will obtain a good job at University despite being very young, so his excellence and hard-work can be easily traced. James will go on to even dream for a permanent spot at Harvard. It was a job that was almost granted by his peers. Still, he was deceived to think that they were going to give him the spot: “Carlson as good as told me I’m in” (49). When the time came, “I wasn’t the right

fit for the department, they said” (50). The use of the italics on ‘fit’ highlights the ironic tone of the narration. It is not his lack of training that will be the reason, but quite possibly being an Asian American aiming for a high-status job in the sixties. He resigned his dream and settled for a humble University instead. Although seemingly satisfied with his occupation, when the narration focalizes on him it can be noticed by his sour thoughts that he is dissatisfied with it. James seems to have given up on trying to achieve his dream. He is stuck between not liking his current job, in which he thinks this little of it: “Well, this isn’t Harvard, that’s for sure’ ... ‘Sometimes I wonder if it’s all a waste’” (10) and firmly thinking he is unable to achieve anything better: “You never got what you wanted; you just learned to get by without it” (196).

3.3. THE AMERICAN DREAM, TWICE FAILED

James was not able to achieve his dream most probably due to America’s prejudices laid on those who look non-mainstream. However, he hopes that his children will have a different future, brought up in a world after the civil rights movement, a supposedly more welcoming world. James’ zealous obsession with fitting in America will be inherited by Lydia, the middle child. She is the preferred child, by both parents, to lay their failed dreams onto her, pushing and pressuring her until she literally choked on them. Lydia is the teenager found dead at the beginning of the story. Perhaps because she is the one that looks the most like her mother. She is described as almost a copy of her, “only the hair color is different” while the other siblings look more like their father (3). Thus, James might have thought it easier for Lydia to belong. In his desperate attempt to make her fit in, he always showered her with gifts full of symbolism: “James liked to buy Lydia dresses off the mannequin; he was sure it meant everyone was wearing them” (264). He also bought her self-aid books to learn to socialize better, because that is what he would

have always wanted to have. In return, Lydia only saw those presents as a symbol of her father's pressuring dreams and begged in silence for something meaningful from him. She realized James' desire to fit in, how "her father was so concerned with what *everyone* was doing" (227). However, wishing for a better future for your children does not grant you that dream, for she was also racially discriminated. From her focalization in the narration, Lydia's awareness can be inferred. She ironically gave her opinion on that: "As if a dress and long hair and a smile would hide everything about her that was different" (227). Lydia felt her otherness at all times: "Even with blue eyes, she could not pretend she blended in" (192).

James and Marilyn's son, Nath, on whom James also projects his desire to fit in, even if it was not as fervently as with Lydia, also suffers from the same racial prejudices his father went through when he was his age. One day when Nath was a kid, James brought him to swim. There, James started to daydream about Nath being the typical successful American athlete teenager. He thought that "Nath would be the star of the team, the collector of trophies, the anchorman in the relay" (88). He saw him swimming with Jack, their white boy neighbor, and wished Nath to be more like him. James considered Jack a "good role model" (89) for his son. Interestingly enough, to compare their imagined friendship he used cowboys, the American stereotype he studies. He refers to those boys as filling the role of "sheriff and deputy" (89). However, all his dreams turned sour when he saw the other kids mocking his son while laughing at the phrase "chink can't find China" (90). James still wished "to shape him into something different" (92). Perhaps it was this "first disappointment in his son, this first and most painful puncture in his fatherly dreams" (92) that made him turn his expectations onto Lydia, who was seemingly socializing better. Therefore, Nath also feels pressured by his father to strive for the dreams he could not. Nath projects his desire to escape what he feels is a

toxic environment onto sky imagery, like Esperanza did. In his case, his getaway car to escape home is college. He compares it to a “stop-off at the moon before shooting into space” (167).

No matter how innocent James’ efforts to push his children to fit in were, it is clear it did not work out. It will all climax onto Lydia’s disappearance. Even if Lydia’s death is revealed to be nothing but an accident at the end of the novel, it is all the more tragic. She realized she was “so long enthralled by the dreams of others” (275) meaning James’ pushing desire for her to be like the others. When she finally thought about pursuing her own dreams, she drowned in her parents’ expectations, quite literally. The metaphor she uses to describe her life—“the fly landing daintily in the pool of resin ... By the time it had realized its mistake, it was too late. It had failed, and then it had sunk, and then it had drowned” (273)—will symbolize Lydia’s gradual mental deterioration and ultimate death in the lake’s neighborhood.

Despite the immeasurable pain one must feel when losing a child, James has now failed twice in meeting his dreams. James’ struggle with his otherness and lack of opportunity have always remained silenced, bottled up in himself. When James married Marilyn, they vowed to leave the past behind, and with that James meant trying to repress what makes him different: his race. Thus, he never taught anything about Chinese culture to his children, nor did he connect with it himself. Then, the accident happened and Lydia passed away. As much as he tried to run away from his past before, this issue is still here. For the first time, he starts to show how inferior he feels to Marilyn. One day, he just exploded: “I’m too different. Your mother knew it right away ... You’ve never been in a room where no one else looked like you. You’ve never had people mock you to your face. You’ve never been treated like a stranger” (242).

There is a line that gets repeated quite often by people outside the family—Marilyn’s mother, the newspapers—that summarizes James’ blaming himself for their current situation: “*Children of Mixed Backgrounds Often Struggle to Find Their Place*” (200). After Lydia’s passing, all this repression will be focused in finding what he thinks to be his place in America. That is finding a partner like him, Chinese, in his coworker, Louisa. He is so caught up in this idea of being with “A woman who looked just like ... him” (205) that, in that time of mourning and pain, he will not notice his wife never saw him as different. Every instance where they fought about Lydia’s disappearance and James blamed himself, her thoughts were the same: “*you cannot blame yourself*” (213). At the end of the novel, this topic is inferred to be discussed between the couple. James will finally be at ease with his heritage, much like Esperanza did at the end. However, Esperanza’s open ending can leave room to imagine Esperanza achieving her dreams. For James they are long forgotten, his own and the ones dreamt towards Lydia. Like Cisneros did with Esperanza, Nath’s dream to escape his house by going to college will be inferred but not shown, leaving another ending half-opened.

4. CONCLUSION

While belonging to a minority in the United States cannot be the sole factor of blame when one fails at achieving their life goal, it is undeniable that it plays a part in it. Setting aside their differences, the Latino and Asian American community have struggled to be even considered part of American society, othering them into the ‘forever foreigner’ stereotype. Therefore, as the notion of the American Dream is an integral part of American identity, they have often been denied that because of their origin, even if that same concept was what made them come to America initially. For those who can dream of it, which are second-generations who have inherited a double identity, they see how

that other heritage might be holding them down into achieving their dreams. What is more, the racial prejudices that they suffer from communities aside their own can make them shy away from their roots.

More and more authors of color are portraying the struggles minorities find when challenged to achieve their American Dream, nonetheless. Sandra Cisneros and Celeste Ng tackle this issue, representing their own Latino and Chinese-American background respectively, in their debut novels. Both being racially concerned and just starting their literary career, they turned to the *Bildungsroman* for their first text. It is a genre currently reinvented by minorities, where they can freely portray their journeys to accept their heritage and represent the struggles said communities suffer to fit in America. They use a similar symbol, the sky, to depict the struggle of adaptation to America and be able to attain their dreams. The novel's characters either fail to do so, or the ending is left open to interpretation, highlighting the great difficulty that is for them. The usage of language as marker of identity, instances of racial prejudice in public institutions, immigrant parents giving up their dreams for their kid's, and initially wanting to leave their own communities to be able to fit in better and thus be eligible to achieve their dreams, are features both novels deal with to depict their shared topic. In conclusion, it can be observed that, even if Cisneros' novel was published in the eighties and Ng's just a couple of years ago, the struggle for Latinos and Asian-Americans to attain their American dreams due to their heritage continues to be a rocky path in need to conquer.

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