

“GUIDING A COMMUNITY:” UNWORKING COMMUNITY IN SANDRA CISNEROS’ *THE HOUSE ON MANGO STREET*

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ABSTRACT

The present study revises communitarian boundaries in the fiction of Chicana writer Sandra Cisneros. Using the ideas of key figures in post-phenomenological communitarian theory and connecting them with Anzaldúa and Braidotti’s concepts of *borderland* and *nomadism*, this essay explores Cisneros’ contrast between operative communities that crave for the immanence of a shared communion and substantiate themselves in essentialist tropes, and inoperative communities that are characterized by transcendence or exposure to alterity. In *The House on Mango Street* (1984) the figure of the child is the perfect starting point to ‘unwork’ (in Nancy’s terminology) concepts such as spatial belonging, nationalistic beliefs, linguistic constrictions, and gender roles through a selection of tangible imagery which, from a female child’s pseudo-innocent perspective, aims to generate an inoperative community beyond essentialist tropes, where individualistic and communal drives are ambiguously intertwined. Using Cisneros’ debut novel as a case study, this article studies the female narrator as embodying both a community of one and Cisneros’ search for an intellectual Chicano community.

RESUMEN

El presente estudio revisa las fronteras comunitarias de la ficción de la escritora chicana Sandra Cisneros. Partiendo de presupuestos comunitarios post-fenomenológicos y conectándolos con los conceptos de *frontera* y *nomadismo* de Anzaldúa y Braidotti, este ensayo explora el contraste que se da en Cisneros entre comunidades orgánicas que buscan la inmanencia a través de una comunión entre

sus miembros y de la elaboración de etiquetas esencialistas, y comunidades inorgánicas, caracterizadas por la trascendencia o la exposición a la alteridad. En *The House on Mango Street* (1984) la figura de la niña es el punto de partida perfecto para ‘desobrar’ (en palabras de Nancy) conceptos como la territorialidad, el nacionalismo, las constricciones lingüísticas y los roles de género a través de una selección de imágenes tangibles que, desde la perspectiva pseudo-inocente de una niña, pretende generar una comunidad inorgánica más allá de cualquier esencialismo, donde las fuerzas individualista y comunitaria se entrelazan ambiguamente. Partiendo de la novela arriba indicada como caso de estudio, este artículo estudia la figura de la narradora como representante a la vez de la voz individual y de la búsqueda de una comunidad chicana intelectual en Cisneros.

The philosophical debate around communitarian theory is central to understanding literary experiments in contemporary narrative. Studies in Chicano/a Literature in general and Sandra Cisneros’ narrative in particular have generally taken for granted traditional or immanent communitarian perceptions invariably leading to essentialist ethnicity tropes about a distinctive Chicano/a community.¹ The present study aims to problematize the placidly accepted term “community” in Chicano/a fiction and show how writers like Cisneros re-invent communitarian spaces in their fiction. Jean-Luc Nancy very aptly brings up the “question of community” in contemporary fiction, “as it haunts us, as it abandons us or as it embarrasses us” (*Finite* 27). Indeed, together with Maurice Blanchot –and George Bataille as a third participant in *absentia*–, Nancy was responsible for generating a communitarian debate in the early 80’s which can be reconstructed in three essays: Nancy’s “The Inoperative Community” (1983), Blanchot’s “The Unavowable Community” (1983) and Nancy’s “The Confronted Community” (2001). After this revival of the communitarian debate, critics such as Blanchot (1) and Roberto Esposito (1) urged a revision of the term *community*. As Julián Jiménez Heffernan concludes in his introduction “Togetherness and its Discontents,” “the meaning of community is too often taken for granted, and reluctance to examine its conceptual logic is widespread” (Martín Salván et al. 5).

This new trend heralded by Nancy, Blanchot et al. –the so-called *Utopianism*– defends a community that is temporary and always in process. Indeed, this utopian community contrasts with traditional notions of organic, operative communities that crave for the immanence of a shared communion and substantiate themselves in the essentialist tropes of nation, class, race, and/or gender. These

¹ Some of the clearest examples are Bonnie Tusmith’s Chapter 5 on “Chicano/a Writers” (1993) to investigate the link between Community and Ethnicity in Chicano/a Literature, and Marya Mae Ryan’s revision of Community and Gender (1995). Julio Cañero Serrano specifically studies the communitarian sense in *The House on Mango Street* (1999), but neither Cañero nor others (McCracken, 1989; Gutiérrez-Jones, 1993; Olivares, 1996) question the very notion of community.

communities are immanent as they are self-enclosed and fed by mysticism – religious and/or nationalistic. In these communities, death is transfigured/“worked” into mysticism in order to avoid direct confrontation and to create a metaphorical sense of plenitude in the community, which is radically closed to the outside in a process of auto-immunity. In contrast, utopian or inoperative communities – following Nancy’s terminology– reject communal and essential immanence and are characterized by opening themselves to transcendence in a contact with alterity through communication rather than communion; what Nancy calls “being-together” or “being-with” by means of “being outside” oneself (*Inoperative* 24). It is a question of singularities that are not fused to create a whole, but rather respected in their own separateness, which is alleviated by means of communication –not communion/fusion– with alterity. This inoperative community is connected with what Juan Bruce-Novoa considers as Chicano Literature’s “deconstruction of the myth of *axis mundi* stability, the revelation that all claims of fixed centeredness are actually rhetorical discourses of territorialization, [thus] undermin[ing] a whole series of centralizing projects, from nationalism to tribalism to ethnicity” (242).

Studies in Chicano/a Literature and Sandra Cisneros’ narrative highlight Chicana writers’ attempt to deconstruct what Anzaldúa called *borderlands* or *fronteras* (cultural, geographical, racial, etc.),² calling for “a new mestiza” who challenges the binary thinking of the Western world (1987).³ In her comparative study of Carmen Boullosa and Sandra Cisneros, Yolanda Melgar Pernías speaks of an effective dialogue in both writers that materializes into “avenidas [que] logran atravesar las fronteras que separan ambos espacios, avenidas que forzosamente han de ser fluidas, oscilantes y en constante (re)construcción” (235). This dialogic perception is precisely what makes María Herrera-Sobek speak about the appropriation of the confessional mode in Chicana writers as a way to break “the silence Chicano hegemony had imposed on them in the name of ethnic unity” (26). Herrera-Sobek and Melgar Pernías’ idea of Cisneros’ geographical and cultural space as temporary and fluid effectively contributes to break the ethnic unity of organic communities by making us “hear the voice of the dispossessed, the powerless, the working poor” (Herrera-Sobek 23),⁴ thus coinciding with Nancy’s

² “The U.S.-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture. Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them” (Anzaldúa 3). At a more symbolic level, Anzaldúa refers to the politics of space created by power relations. José B. Monleón provides a very interesting summary of Chicano Literature from the perspective of crossing borderlands.

³ Gutiérrez y Muhs’ work on *Communal Feminisms* is a good example to illustrate the link of fluid communitarian explorations and gender in Chicana writers. My study of Cisneros’ revision of Chicana stereotypes is a more specific example applied to Cisneros’ gender fluidity.

⁴ This idea is elaborated on Elizabeth J. Ordóñez’s chapter.

utopian, inoperative community, which will be here explored in a selection of passages from Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*.

In her interview with Juanita Heredia, Cisneros looked almost Messianic when she confessed: "I find myself in the role of guiding a community" (54). Her allusions to the word *community* are numerous throughout the interview and her debt to the Chicano community in particular seems almost a burden, a throbbing impulse: "I felt a great responsibility to represent the community;" "I also take my responsibility seriously of being a woman who lives on the border of cultures, a translator for a time when all the communities are shifting and colliding in history. Chicanos have that unique perspective" (53-4). However, when we might think that she epitomizes the most conservative example of the organic, saturated, essentialist community, she clarifies that, even though as a child she was "a good girl" leading a "sheltered Catholic life" (49), she "get[s] so tired of seeing these religious fanatics" and uses her mother as an anti-stereotypical example to create Latina characters (54). She is well aware of her bordering position and, therefore, of her role as offering an alternative communitarian imaginary that, as will be illustrated with examples from her fiction, closely resembles Nancy and Blanchot's utopianism. Indeed, this imaginary and utopian community is perfectly described in Cisneros' novel *Caramelo*, where she recollects an imaginary homeland, "a country I am homesick for, that doesn't exist anymore. That never existed. A country I invented. Like all emigrants caught between here and there" (434).

In her debut novel, *The House on Mango Street*, the defamiliarization provided by the narrative figure of the child, Esperanza, is the perfect starting point to "unwork" (in Nancy's terminology) concepts such as spatial belonging (the house, the street), nationalistic beliefs (The American Dream), linguistic constrictions (names), and gender roles through a selection of tangible imagery which, from a female child's pseudo-innocent perspective, aims to generate an inoperative community beyond essentialist tropes, where individualistic and communal drives are ambiguously intertwined. Considering Cisneros' "guiding role" in the community, the conflict individual/community, or I-We ontology in Etzioni's words, comes to mind. According to communitarians such as Etzioni, it is not the individual right that determines the subject, but his/her responsibility to the community (165).⁵ The radicalization of these ideas leads to organicism and it is not, in my opinion, what we find in Cisneros' writing. Her compromise with the community is clear, as can be inferred from her words in the interview with Heredia,⁶ but she ultimately creates what elsewhere I call "a community of one"⁷

⁵ Etzioni speaks of "We-ness," so that the isolated individual is nothing (165).

⁶ This communitarian bonding in Cisneros is also the generalized analysis of *The House on Mango Street*, which most critics study following Erlinda Gonzales-Berry's opinion about the process of inscribing Chicana selfhood: "the voice of the child/woman Esperanza of *House on Mango Street* explodes into the voices of dozens of women (and occasionally the voices of men)" (83).

that transcends organicist communitarian perceptions in an attempt to create a fluid, utopian community in line with Nancy and Blanchot. Therefore, the key to understand Cisneros’ special literary enterprise is the link between individual and communitarian drives.

In pursuing an ultimately inorganic community, Cisneros first pretends to take the immanent ethnic Chicano/a community as a departure point, thus deploying a number of essentialist tropes about it through the abundant signifiers of ethnicity that she sprinkles throughout the novel. She addresses both “insiders” and “outsiders” (who respond differently) through these references, and asserts herself unquestionably as a Chicana writer through them. In *The House of Mango Street* the chapter “Those Who Don’t” is the clearest indication of this ethnic immanence. There is a sharp separation of “insiders” (“our neighborhood”) and “outsiders” (“They, stupid people” 28). Following Nancy’s ideas of communitarian immanence, Esperanza initially shares this communitarian self-enclosure highlighting the ethnic security of this organic formation (“They think we’re dangerous. They think we will attack them with shiny knives”; “All brown around, we are safe” 28), which sharply contrasts with the ethnic insecurity of stepping into a different community: “But watch us drive into a neighborhood of another color and our knees go shakety-shake” (28).

Nonetheless, this ethnic saturation is a mere façade as Cisneros undermines essentialist notions of community at the same time, ultimately leading to a new communitarian model. Esperanza’s alternative community, symbolically represented by the house motif, is linked from the beginning of the novel with Rosi Braidotti’s concept of nomadism. Braidotti defines the nomadic subject as “a figuration for the kind of subject who has relinquished all idea, desire, or nostalgia for fixity. This figuration expresses the desire for an identity made of transitions, successive shifts, and coordinated changes, without and against an essential unity” (22).⁸ In Braidotti’s words, it is a political fiction that implies “the affirmation of fluid boundaries, a

⁷ See Gerardo Rodríguez Salas and Julián Jiménez Heffernan for an explanation of Jane Frame’s unworking community of one in its confrontation with death. The unworking of death beyond communitarian mysticism is suggested but not elaborated in *Mango Street* when, in the chapter “Papa who wakes up tired in the dark,” after receiving the news of her grandfather’s death, Esperanza is directly confronted with this reality and looks for a corporeal, non-verbal communication with her father (Nancy, *Inoperative* 28), now being conscious of the evanescence of life for the first time beyond religious mystification: “And I think if my own Papa died what would I do. I hold my Papa in my arms. I hold and hold and hold him” (57).

⁸ This subjective fluidity, following Kristeva’s seminal notion of ‘the subject-in-process’ and more specifically Anzaldúa’s “borderlands,” is the main idea of critics such as Rosaura Sánchez and Cornelius Castoriadis (107), the latter offering a very interesting debate about the imaginary construction of society in line with the communitarian approach of this essay. See also Bruce-Novoa’s perception of “the non-defined state of process which allows for continuing exploration of identity as something to be created not inherited” (242).

practice of the intervals, of the interfaces, and the interstices” (6). This nomadism is what we find at the beginning of Cisneros’ novel: “We didn’t always live on Mango Street. Before that we lived on Loomis on the third floor, and before that we lived on Keeler. Before Keeler it was Paulina, and before that I can’t remember” (3). Following Braidotti, Esperanza is a nomadic subject in terms of fluid subjectivity, which is symbolically linked with spatial movement. But probably the most remarkable aspect is Blanchot’s notion of the “unavowable community” and his insistence on secrecy at the bottom of communal communication, a secrecy that remained deeply unavowable and therefore unlikely exposed. As far as Esperanza remembers, she and her family have been moving and there is no stable notion of identity or geographical root.

Similarly, the characters are linked by Roberto Esposito’s “community of debt” as another example of an inoperative community: the “I” is constituted through an obligation (*munus*) for a favor, grace or gift (*donum*), which remains invisible inasmuch as virtually never given. The members of this community have nothing positive in common. Rather than sharing a possession (a thing), what they have in common is a dispossession, an absence, a lack. As in many literary works, the house on Mango Street becomes a symbol of the self, as clarified with a personification: “It’s small and red with tight steps in front and windows so small you’d think they were holding their breath” (4). Speaking of the house, Gaston Bachelard asserted that it “shelters day-dreaming,” “protects the dreamer.” In the house, “[l]ife begins well, it begins enclosed, protected, all warm in the bosom of the house” (7). His perception coincides with the immanence (self-enclosure) that characterizes organic communities. However, according to critics such as María Herrera-Sobek, in postmodern fiction the house begins to assume negative connotations and, indeed, for feminist writers the house is no longer perceived as a symbol of security but as a metaphor for prison (165). Herrera-Sobek speaks of the natural evolution in Chicana writers (e.g. Evangelina Vigil and Beverly Silva) –and we can extend it to Cisneros in *The House on Mango Street*– from the necessity to escape from the self-imposed enclosure of the house “to sail forth into the throbbing orb of the street in search of a connecting, electrifying spark that may shock [them] back to the realm of the living” (167). Indeed, as proved by Esperanza, the house is devoid of roots and is neither a cradle for its inhabitants nor a source of dreams. On the contrary, it becomes a locus of failed dreams and nightmares that prompt her to look for a communitarian connection outside in the street. Indeed, at some point she connects both tropes:

One day I’ll own my own house, but I won’t forget who I am or where I came from. Passing bums will ask, Can I come in? I’ll offer them the attic, ask them to stay, because I know how it is to be without a house. (87)

The communitarian link outside the immanence of the house is materialized in the “electrifying spark” that Herrera-Sobek mentions, when Esperanza becomes the guiding voice of the marginal group on Mango Street. However, as will be analyzed later, Esperanza and the rest of the community occupy different levels that end up detaching her from the community she stands for. At the end of the novel she comes to terms with the “sad red house” on Mango Street, showing the plurality of identity and the temporariness to be found in an inoperative community of one: “the house I belong but do not belong to” (110). Both the house and the street embrace her nomadic identity, ‘not holding me with both arms, [but] set[ting] me free” (110).⁹

In the figure of Esperanza, Cisneros suggests that her community of one that breaks essentialist tropes is that of the writer with the suggestion that she may then extend it to a larger community of writers.¹⁰ However, as in George Bataille’s failed attempts at an intellectual community, Cisneros suggests that creating bonds among intellectuals is not easy. In the novel, she introduces the figure of Minerva, who writes poems. Her name echoes the Latin goddess as a visionary and war-like figure. The new Minerva is a domestic but intelligent woman who, in spite of her imposed domesticity, looks for the time to write poetry:

Minerva is only a little bit older than me but already she has two kids and a husband who left. Her mother raised her kids alone and it looks like her daughters will go that way too. Minerva cried because her luck is unlucky. Every night and every day. And prays. But when the kids are asleep after she’s fed them their pancake dinner, she writes poems on little pieces of paper that she folds over and over and holds in her hands a long time, little pieces of paper that smell like a dime. (84)

The setting cannot be more pessimistic as regards women’s roles: how the different generations of women have been relegated to domesticity and the suggestion is that the same will happen to Minerva’s daughters. At the beginning, it seems that Minerva is a prey of the drama and religious imprisonment that characterizes Chicana women in the novel,¹¹ but then she looks for an alternative realm to her oppressive maternity to write her domestic writing.

⁹ For a detailed analysis of the symbolic and ambiguous meaning of the house in Cisneros’ novel, see Julián Olivares’ chapter on the Poetics of Space.

¹⁰ One example of such a community of writers can be traced back to George Bataille, who engaged with friends like Roger Caillois, Michel Leiris and Simone Weil in successive attempts to give shape to an intellectual community—the *Cercle communiste démocratique*, the *Collège de sociologie*, the group *Contre-Ataque*, the journal *Acéphale*—, although most of them failed.

¹¹ Another example is Marin and her performance of femininity as a commodity for men. She looks like a femme fatale who controls boys with her physical appearance, and yet “is waiting for a car to stop, a star to fall, someone to change her life” (27).

There is a suggestion that Bataille's intellectual community is possible between Minerva and Esperanza ("She lets me read her poems. I let her read mine," 84). However, Minerva proves to be anchored in the saturated Chicano community of patriarchal gender roles. In spite of the rebellious attitude with her husband ("One day she is through and lets him know enough is enough. Out the door he goes," 85), she eventually becomes the cyclical victim of a physical and psychological abuser ("Then he is sorry and she opens the door again. Same story," 85). Instead of an intellectual community of women writers, Esperanza represents the intellectual community of one who might eventually find connections, but which remains unattainable in the novel. Her rebellion is connected with the revision of the Chicano *femme fatale* stereotype, La Malinche: "In the movies there is always one with red red lips who is beautiful and cruel. She is the one who drives the men crazy and laughs them all away. Her power is her own" (89).

Although Esperanza does not find the intellectual community that she is striving for—with the suggestion that education is not properly fostered among Chicana women (the only few exceptions in the novel being the narrator and Alicia, who studies at the university "because she doesn't want to spend her whole life in a factory or behind a rolling pin," 31-32)—, she is actively encouraged by other women figures in the novel to cultivate her literary genius as a way to guide the inhabitants on Mango Street, and ultimately Chicana women.¹² This is the case with her Aunt Lupe, who teaches her one of the most important lessons:

She listened to every book, every poem I read her . . . That's nice. That's very good, she said in her tired voice. You must remember to keep writing, Esperanza. You must keep writing. It will keep you free, and I said yes, but at that time I didn't know what she meant. (56)

In addition, the episode entitled "Three Sisters," with a clear reference to female communitarian bonding, ends up teaching Esperanza her role as an artist accepting social responsibility:

¹² The proto-narrator of *Mango Street* is elaborated almost twenty years later in autobiographical *Caramelo*, where Celaya becomes the self-appointed family storyteller through the 86 chapters of this family saga. In *Caramelo* this intellectual community of Chicana writers is further explored in the playful mixture of narrative voices. Although Celaya is the narrator, the figure of the grandmother is central in punctuating the narrated events, to the point when she takes over the narration herself in chapter 25 and shows the connection with Celaya in playing as fast and loose with the threads of history and fiction as her granddaughter does. A central motif in the novel is the way truth and story are blurred, thus offering an alternative version to historical events that "unworks" the official, saturated version of patriarchy. Indeed, as clarified by Salvucci: "Despite Cisneros's undermining of the Anglo-American dominant point of view, *Caramelo* is not a pro-Mexican novel. The author is far from endorsing any binary ideological system" (175).

She’s special. Yes, she’ll go very far . . . When you leave you must remember to come back for the others . . . You will always be Mango Street. You can’t erase what you know: You can’t forget who you are . . . You must remember to come back. For the ones who cannot leave as easily as you. You will remember? She asked as if she was telling me. Yes, yes, I said a little confused. (104-105)

Indeed, Cisneros follows the tradition of other exponents of racial feminism, like Alice Walker. In her essay “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,” Walker presents the example of her own mother to mark the contrast between prior generations of mothers and grandmothers, who did not have the possibility to be educated, and the new generation of daughters, who materialize their mothers’ intuitive artistic potential into tangible and professional writing.¹³ The big difference, though, is that while Walker tried to uncover an artistic tradition of black women (her *womanism*), Cisneros was highly determined to live in her community of one, as she has proved throughout the years:

But to tell you the truth, sometimes when people would poke me out of my solitude, I wish they were not there. I liked spending time by myself more than anything until I was an adolescent . . . I was always creating, imagining, and inventing. I was an artist. I spent a lot of time daydreaming, a kind of fantasy world. It was certainly lots of flights of the imagination that transformed my environment. (Heredia, 2000: 47)

Her debut novel, *The House on Mango Street*, is Cisneros’ first fictional journey to explore the notion of community, which is so central in Chicano culture. Cisneros partakes of the notions of borderland and nomadism to reject organicist and saturated versions of the Chicano community (religious, nationalistic, racial) and to offer her alternative communitarian bet, which is temporary, fluid, maybe solipsist in appearance, but intensely committed: “I also take my responsibility seriously of being a woman who lives on the border of cultures, a translator for a time when all the communities are shifting and colliding in history. Chicanos have that unique perspective” (53). The community of one is the pervasive idea in *The House on Mango Street*, where Esperanza becomes the voice, mainly of Chicanas, while actually remaining isolated as a woman writer; indeed, in Heiner Bus’ words, the book offers “the evolution of a creative writer at peace with her past” (130-131), and yet the political, communitarian message is there: “*The House on Mango Street* can be understood as a public call to the Chicano artists to see the political implications

¹³ Cisneros admits: “I don’t have women who are writers in my family,” and then she speaks of them as “weavers” and she considers herself part of their tradition: “I can’t even sew a button . . . But I do with words what they did with cloth” (Weeks 57).

of their efforts” (Bus 138). Following Gonzales-Berry’s words (84), the novel begins a dialogue with Gloria Anzaldúa, Carmen Tafolla and other Chicana writers and artists in an attempt to inscribe Chicana selfhood in process beyond the organicist Chicano community.

After all, Cisneros creates a dialogue between her novel (and the solipsistic role of Esperanza as a writer) and the external world of Chicano Literature (where Chicano writers should join forces in sharing an alternative type of community). She begins with suggestions of the ideology of Chicano nationalism that deployed various essentialist notions of community to foment an oppositional movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Like other Chicana writers, Cisneros contests this notion by bringing women’s issues into the picture. When Cisneros (and the other Chicanas that Herrera-Sobek refers to) rearticulate the concept of the house, they are also rearticulating the gender-excluding concept of nation that underlies Chicano Nationalism. She perceives herself in the role of guiding a community, and this is more easily achieved by sharing the artistic tenets of a whole group of (Chicano) writers. In her debut novel, Cisneros is unable to materialize an intellectual community of Chicano writers. Esperanza becomes the isolated bard that gives voice to the whole community. The first impression might be that she defends the solipsism of the bard, but maybe this was Cisneros’ strategy to stir the reader’s conscience. Indeed, in real life Cisneros has been instrumental in building a strong Chicano community of artists in San Antonio with the Macondo and Alfredo Cisneros del Moral Foundations. In an interview with Tom Vitale on National Public Radio (19 September 1991), she openly stated her link with Chicana writers when, discussing her success as a writer, she concluded:

I think I can’t be happy if I’m the only one that’s getting published by Random House when I know there are such magnificent writers –both Latinos and Latinas, both Chicanos and Chicanas– in the U.S. whose books are not published by mainstream presses or whom the main-stream isn’t even aware of. And, you know, if my success means that other presses will take a second look at these writers . . . and publish them in larger numbers then our ship will come in. (qtd. Ganz 27)

The link between communities and between the fictional narrator of *Mango Street* and Cisneros herself is finally achieved in the locus of the house: Esperanza’s long-desired wish for her own place was materialized some years later by Cisneros when in 1997 she was finally able to buy a very idiosyncratic house (as testified by its painting controversy), paying for it with the money earned through her writing (Salvucci 163). Virginia Woolf’s room of one’s own finally becomes a reality for the woman writer when her intellectual solipsism is tinted with the communitarian ink of a writing community.

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