



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## Pat Mora's Literary Nepantlia: Blueprints for a Word-House Refuge

Crystal M. Kurzen

a/b: Auto/Biography Studies, Volume 26, Number 2, Winter 2011, pp. 342-363 (Article)

Published by The Autobiography Society  
DOI: 10.1353/abs.2011.0013



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/abs/summary/v026/26.2.kurzen.html>

# Pat Mora's Literary *Nepantla*: Blueprints for a Word-House Refuge

By Crystal M. Kurzen

*Quien habla con refranes es un saco de verdades, who speaks  
in sayings is a sack of truths.*

—Pat Mora, *House of Houses*

IN CHICANA/O literary studies, *nepantla* is both a theoretical and a metaphysical border space, most famously conceptualized by Gloria Anzaldúa.<sup>1</sup> Within this space, self and expression find new forms like the ones included in Cherríe Moraga and Anzaldúa's co-edited mixed-genre collection *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981)<sup>2</sup> as well as both of their personal autobiographical collages *Loving in the War Years: lo que nunca pasó por sus labios* (1983)<sup>3</sup> and *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987).<sup>4</sup> For Anzaldúa specifically, the idea of *nepantla* guides her writing process, and it is from this space, one characterized by transition, that she produces her most influential cultural study, *Borderlands*, which theorizes gender, language, sexuality, and spiritual practice. When asked to reflect on her understanding of *nepantla*, Anzaldúa offers the following: "*Nepantla* . . . is a Nahuatl word for the space between two bodies of water, the space between two worlds. It is a limited space, a space where you are not this or that but where you are changing. You haven't got into the new identity yet and haven't left the old identity behind either—you are in a kind of transition" ("Interview" 237). Similarly, in her Preface to the collection *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation* (2002), Anzaldúa defines *nepantla* in this way: "I use the word *nepantla* to theorize liminality and to talk about those who facilitate passages between worlds, whom I've named *nepantleras*. I associate *nepantla* with states of mind that question old ideas and beliefs, acquire new perspectives, change worldviews, and shift from one world to another" (1). In *Borderlands*, she draws on personal experiences to theorize this liminal space she inhabits, carving out an activist-subject that takes her life in the borderlands, on the fringes

of multiple cultures, and turns it back on itself, taking up a dynamic new consciousness—the New Mestiza Consciousness—to re-create the borderlands as a place of empowerment where subjects (not objects) of multiple identities thrive. While this space is ultimately a productive one for Anzaldúa, she famously defines the border as “*una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds” (*Borderlands* 25). The lived experience of it is chaotic and filled with “an agony you experience [daily]” (“Preface” 238).

For Chicana author Pat Mora, *nepantla* represents something slightly different. While she too sees it as a middle space that presents possibilities for social and cultural activism, it is not characterized by the agony Anzaldúa emphasizes. Instead, Mora finds home in this middle region. In an interview with Maria Antònia Oliver-Rotger, Mora answers a question about what the term “border” conjures for her and how it affects her writing: “the border for me, la frontera, is a definite place, the U. S./Mexico border, that space separated by El Río Grande, those two tangled countries, the U. S. and Mexico rubbing against one another, the friction of languages, histories, values, economic disparity, attraction and revulsion. That constant tension is the geographical/emotional place from which I come.” Mora’s physical proximity to the border between the US and Mexico informs her definition and understanding of *nepantla*: “The land in the middle. ‘I am the middle woman, / not my mother, not my daughter.’ I had at times considered *nepantla*, which means ‘place in the middle’ in Nahuatl—one of Mexico’s indigenous languages—as a possible title for a poetry collection” (*Nepantla* 5). Instead, she chose *nepantla* for her collection of essays that theorizes her position as a Chicana writing at the end of the twentieth century in the United States. Although other scholars like Moraga and Anzaldúa are most often attached to the auto/biographical,<sup>5</sup> mixed-genre, activist literary productions conceived of in the middle spaces of *nepantla*, in this essay I argue that Mora, through her construction of a multi-generational family home both physically and metaphorically in the transitional state of *nepantla*, initiates a parallel conversation about space and form—one that has been largely ignored—as she writes her family and cultural history into the canon of American literature. While she radically reconfigures space and genre, representing the shifting and in-betweenness of this geographical and emotional state by accommodating multiple forms and artifacts, creating what I call a “literary *nepantla*,” she, in contrast to Moraga and Anzaldúa, reinforces notions of class privilege and heteronormativity. Mora’s work in this genre demonstrates that this form not only embraces material objects but also effectively challenges conceptions about who is included and excluded from the Chicana/o literary conversation. As a form,

literary *nepantla* helps us to move beyond issues of nationalism and imposed thematizing, ultimately showcasing diversity within Mexican American experience.

Through her prolific production of poetry, essays, fiction, and memoir written for both adults and children, Mora tackles complicated questions. She focuses on varied topics ranging from US-Mexico border politics and the ways in which Mexican Americans have been erased from national narratives of American identity formation to such quotidian themes as guacamole and dandelions. Born in 1942 in El Paso, Texas, Mora attended Catholic schools before receiving her B.A. from Texas Western College in 1963 and an M.A. in English from the University of Texas at El Paso in 1967. After finishing college in 1963, she worked as an English teacher in the El Paso Independent School District and El Paso Community College. Several years later she returned to the University of Texas at El Paso as an instructor and from 1981 to 1989 served as a university administrator and museum director. Her commitment to education and the examination of bicultural and bilingual themes in her writing have made Mora a popular speaker and activist among teachers, educational professionals, and literary scholars across the country.

Repeatedly, Mora challenges narratives that elide the lived experiences and cultural histories of Mexicans in the US. Critics of Mora's work often focus on this aspect of her writing in her collections of poetry. However, I direct my analysis toward Mora's *House of Houses* (1997) as it engages with questions of space and generic form while situated in the *nepantla* of the borderlands between the US and Mexico. In this mixed-genre memoir, Pat Mora places her own relatives in the imagined space of her word-house, a metaphysical place made of adobe thriving in the harsh desert sun, hovering somewhere between Santa Fe, New Mexico, and El Paso, Texas. In and a part of the desert, Mora likens this word-house to agave, nopal, and yucca, plants that grow and bloom under the harshest conditions. All are welcome as "[v]ines, winds, and strangers enter large, bare / rooms with ease, no private entrances, no secret locks, / just rough *álamo* slabs framing windows and doors" ("Word-house" 3–5). She imagines a center courtyard with a luscious fountain that offers refuge to various kinds of birds and fish. The men and women who reside in this space "pull threads from / their mouths" and "then weave them as the wind loosens / songs" (13–14, 15–16). These men and women are the storytellers who will speak in this house; like hearty desert plants that thrive under extremely adverse circumstances, they rely on the elements of the desert landscape to inspire them while Mora crafts their mouth-threads into the cloths of story-songs.

In this space, she offers a detailed family history through the words and physical presence of her long-dead ancestors. Like an architect drafting plans for additional rooms in a home, Mora adds genres—or houses—as she draws up the complicated blueprints that will help her ultimately construct her word-house—her house of houses. She first imagines the word-house in poetry in 1991, then moves to theorize it through the essay in *Nepantla: Essays from the Land in the Middle* (1993), and finally arrives at habitation in memoir. By employing multiple genres in the realization of her word-house, she searches for structural materials—like recipes, *dichos*, poems, songs, love letters, a missal, and photographs—as a good builder contracts with those who lay brick, hang drywall, install carpet, and paint. By rethinking this home space through its metaphorical construction in *nepantla*, Mora creates a place where not only she and her immediate family can dwell and be heard, but also where the spirits from her past can find solace and community. Mora, then, constructs a literary *nepantla*, a genre that comes from the border places between time and space, past, present, and even future.<sup>6</sup> She shows herself and her family dwelling in a space that shifts in the desert heat like a mirage, but it never wavers from the border region between the US and Mexico. Mora locates her word-house in the physical spaces of Aztlán, recuperating both her history and her voice to speak, filling those gaps that exist in the national narratives; *House of Houses* thus resides in the spaces of activism. As a result of this specific intervention, her *nepantla* text acts as an instructional guide for her children and for generations of Chicana/os to come. As Mora herself states, “Our womanness, heritage, culture, language all deserve preservation. To transform our traditions wisely, we need to know them, learn from them, be inspired and saddened by them, choose for ourselves what to retain. But we can prize the past together, valuing the positive female and Mexican traditions. We can prize elements of the past as we persist in demanding, and creating, change” (56). She creates this alternative genre as a legacy while at the same time petitioning us to evaluate the past and present. Most importantly, Mora models this through a form that accommodates different modes and methods of conveying family stories.

When theorizing Mora's work within the landscape of a literary *nepantla*, the shape of her word-house shares noticeable features with the dwelling Alicia Gaspar de Alba describes in the Introduction to *Velvet Barrios: Popular Culture and Chicana/o Sexualities* (2003)—the *solar*. In her collection of critical essays on Chicana/o popular culture, Gaspar de Alba argues for the necessity of a particularized conceptualization of self, culture, and cultural production. This “theoretical blueprint” is derived from the notion that “Chicano/a

culture is not a subculture but rather an *alter-Native* culture, an Other American culture indigenous to the landbase now known as the West and the Southwest of the United States. Chicano/a culture, then, is not immigrant but native, not foreign but colonized, not alien but different from the overarching hegemony of white America” (“Introduction” xxi). Gaspar de Alba’s naming of Chicana/o culture as alter-Native allows us to think about the classification of Chicana/o cultural productions differently. These forms are not other or even alternative; they stand apart but exist together with dominant modes of storytelling. Therefore, Gaspar de Alba urges that Chicana/o popular culture be juxtaposed against the “two-story, pitch-roofed middle class, nuclear-family-sized, suburban bungalow . . . semiotically inscribed with the myths, beliefs, values, and assumptions of the dominant culture” (xx). In its design, the culturally-specific home space of the *solar* can accommodate, according to Gaspar de Alba, the complexity and diversity of Chicana/o cultural production: “To me, the architecture of the solar—with its enclosed open space upon which all of the rooms look out—signified traditional Chicano/a values of *familia*, community, and homeland across class lines, expressed and embodied in three-dimensional form in the various rooms of the house” (xxi). Gaspar de Alba, like Mora, sees the house as a creative and intellectual space. The word-house refuge Mora describes does not include a garret, but an open, central garden, much like the layout of a *solar*, “a sequence of rooms or apartments built around an open court, central patio, or placita—in other words, a sunny area, a design used in everything from haciendas to tenements in Mexican culture” (Gaspar de Alba, “Introduction” xxi). Privileging this particular model of home space, Mora draws the materials for her word-house from this architectural tradition.

In crafting this kind of alter-Native genre, Mora pays particular attention to the traditional Chicana/o values of family, community, and homeland that Gaspar de Alba mentions, which for Mora are defined by Catholicism, a unified multi-generational Mexican and Mexican American family, and a wealth of material artifacts. As a result, imagining a structure that could adequately house her family stories and cultural customs becomes imperative to both the story she wants to tell and the way she wants to tell it. Whereas Mora figures the essays as rooms in her earlier incarnation of the word-house, in *House of Houses* she imagines them as unique houses or genres. In her house of houses, each house or genre spills into another, like rooms in a *solar*; stories of great aunts and grandparents blend together into cultural histories and myths. The structure of the *solar*, however, does more than this. Gaspar de Alba outlines the way in which the *solar* communicates cultural values: “Although the *solar* is but one

model in the variety of living/housing arrangements experienced by la Raza—tents, boxcars, shacks, trailers, tenements, and, yes, even bungalows are other models—the *solar* image is inscribed with the concepts of community, family, and homeland—all central issues in Chicano/a consciousness—and represents cultural values through architectural design in the same way that the bungalow represents the mainstream American values of conquest, individualism, and private property” (36–37). Mora uses the structure of the *solar* to evoke both personal and cultural values—such as attention to community and shared spaces—and memories at the same time that it acts as a metaphor for the various genres she employs. Gaspar de Alba continues: “The sense of separateness and togetherness evoked by this architecture reflects the private individualism of mainstream American capitalist culture and the collective solidarity of a Mexican working-class culture—both of which inform Chicano/a cultural practices” (46–47). Both Gaspar de Alba and Mora reimagine the site of the home as a transformative space; all of the artifacts Mora brings into her word-house become naturalized to a particularized cultural past, one that is both Mexican and American.

Therefore, *House of Houses* rejects the notion of a private home space and instead focuses on community living as many houses—genres—are contained within it, thus creating a different kind of public and political space from which to narrate her story. Mora envisions a new architecture in building this *solar de palabras* within *nepantla*, adding houses or genres when archives of materials from long-past relatives introduce themselves as is seen with Lobo’s missal and Mora’s parents’ cards and love letters. In this *solar* that Mora builds, culture and self are mediated by voices of the past and present, while imagined exchanges take place between multiple generations as a means of compiling overlapping truths. Writing this text is a political act; Mora recuperates the domestic spaces found in a family home and allows members of her extended family to interact with each other in order to reconcile their histories with hegemonic narratives of American identity that systematically exclude their own lived experiences.

Because the lives of Mexican American women and men are often told through informal histories like family recipes or greeting cards, Mora weaves these into legibility as memoir. Within the many houses inside of her house of houses, Mora listens to the stories her family members tell her and develops a form that can accommodate these multiple types of truths. She takes on the added responsibility of representing those who often go unseen, as well as unheard: “I write for many reasons, among them pleasure and discovery. But I also write and am driven to write to ‘bear witness,’ to use James Baldwin’s

phrase. I'm not referring to polite nostalgia. I write to record the stories of men and women still invisible in our literary landscape" (*Nepantla* 146–47). In further consideration of "bearing witness," James Baldwin offers the following: "Witness to whence I came, where I am. Witness to what I've seen and the possibilities that I think I see. . . . I am a witness" (Lester 1). As witness to a particular kind of cultural truth, Mora includes histories, *dichos*, recipes, photographs, poems, songs, wedding invitations, and the Spanish language in her *House of Houses*. Mora's bearing witness serves her larger purpose as she discloses: "I write because I believe that Mexican Americans need to take their rightful place in U. S. literature. We need to be published and to be studied in schools and colleges so that the stories and ideas of our people won't quietly disappear" (139). The form of her family memoir and the artifacts included in it are dictated by the stories themselves, which have been passed down or exist in material culture. For example, Mora cannot tell a story about her Aunt Lobo without offering a photograph or a description of her beloved missal. She must include her paternal grandmother Lita's recipe for cutout cookies, as she cannot tell the story without it. The recipe stands in for Lita's own voice.

Mora's political project hinges on the word-house's building provisions, the cultural artifacts she chooses to help her tell her family's stories of life in the middle. The inclusion of these raw materials allows her to reinscribe meaning on every day items by using them in her building process. Attached to the "Contents" section, fourteen black-and-white photographs of Mora and her various relatives direct their gazes out of the text toward the reader. These ancestors, young and old, participate in the narrative as co-writers and, along with Mora, both author and authorize the words of their stories. Snapshots are no longer simply mementos of a past generation; they act as evidence of the fact that Mexican Americans lived—and prospered—in the US at the beginning of the twentieth century. She uses these artifacts to make her case for entering the national conversation that has thus far largely excluded her family's and her culture's voices. Articulating the importance of photographs in family histories, Melody Graulich states, "authors situate their photographs within memoirs to provide alternative contexts for reading social and political history, to complicate the West's dominating mythologies. Their photographs offer glimpses into overlooked stories" (388). Mora offers the photos as evidence of lives lived and stories that have not been told. These alter-Native contexts reveal a lot about the family's class status as well as the ways in which this family offers a prosperous version of Mexican American life in the US. For this reason, from the earliest pages of *House of Houses*, Mora employs the kind of narrative



structure that not only accommodates photographs, but also allows them authoritative power in the text.

To this end, Mora uses multiple texts—or houses—both photographs and an old missal, to tell her Aunt Lobo's story. Born in 1889 in Cusihuiriachic, Chihuahua, Mexico, Ygnacia Delgado, a maternal aunt whom Mora and her siblings call *Lobo*, a Spanish word for “wolf,” plays an important role in this family tale. Her photograph shows her hair up, tucked under a black hat, tilted slightly to the left. She is outfitted in a black dress with a high neck and holds a bouquet of wilting daisies. Her facial expression suggests sadness, and one might imagine Nacha, as she was also known, is attending a funeral in such attire. Off to the left side of the photo though is what looks to be a small piece of a wedding veil. Mora's written description of the photograph reads: “Her [Adelina, Nacha's sister] maid-of-honor, stubborn Lobo, stands at the altar in a stylish brimmed hat and long dress. Black. At the photographer's, the daisies wilt in her arms. I study the thin nose and lips, eyes that look away from the camera, see only her father's casket, and men and women's disturbing habit of touching, arm in arm, hand in hand. Or worse” (62). Lobo grows up in a household full of sisters with a widower, their father Eduardo. She cleans and cooks for her father; she lives for him and his happiness. When Eduardo meets Amelia, Mora's grandmother, Lobo is very upset and thus, reacts with the violence suggested by her nickname, creating tension in their household through the verbal abuse of her new stepmother who can speak only Spanish. Lobo acts as she imagines a proper woman should act, shunning any contact with men besides her father. Her roles as primary caregiver and mother to her father and sisters have been usurped. She never marries and as she ages, she devotes herself to Mora and her siblings, calling them her *lobitos*. By telling her story in this way, Mora passes down Lobo's traditional Catholic values of female chastity outside of marriage and even reinforces conventional gender roles in stressing her aunt's domestic devotion both to her father and their household.

While the photograph corroborates Mora's stories about Lobo's life, what Mora highlights most often regarding Lobo is her missal. Since Mora structures the chapters of the text around the liturgical calendar, Lobo's missal allows Mora access to the prayers dedicated to each month's saints. Mora describes Lobo's missal as the prototype to her own text, a book that contains texts, or houses, within: “Pictures and holy cards flutter out, prayers Lobo wanted to repeat, faces to be prayed for, pictures of my children when they were little. Out falls a holy card of the Good Shepherd, pale, sweet, brown-haired Jesus stroking a white lamb. The cold, black words on the back of the card given out at Lobo's rosary the night before her

burial, *Jesús ten piedad del alma de Ygnacia R. Delgado*, November 6, 1983. Someone tucked the card in her thick prayer book after her death” (10). The missal, entrusted to Mora after Lobo’s death, in many ways parallels the form of *House of Houses* so that both function as family albums. Whereas Lobo’s missal is a liturgical book containing all instructions and texts necessary for the celebration of Masses throughout the year, Mora’s text, while it tells the family stories, actually revolves around the liturgical year and the saints that are honored during particular months of that year. In her analysis of Lobo’s missal, literary critic B. Marie Christian maintains, “From its [the missal’s] pages, holy cards and family pictures alike will tumble, for Lobo believes that the family and its special moments are just as important as holy days, saints, and scripture. The women of the family . . . examine this missal in the liturgical ambiance of a scented candle as they drink tea” (139–40). Lobo elevates the family’s special moments to the same level as the holy days celebrated in the Catholic Church. For her, religion is family; she conflates her devotion to God and the saints with her love of her family.

Lobo saves much of the ancestral history in her missal, as a parallel family album, and many refer to it throughout the text. Mora comments, “Prayers and faith weave through our relatives’ words like floral scents weave through the garden” (16). In writing her auto/biography, Mora updates the missal form to arrive at the mixed-genre, multi-generational *House of Houses*. As Christian asserts, “They [Mora and her relatives] begin reconstructing their past on the orderly plan of a twelve-month Western calendar, but they soon superimpose the flexible time of family generations as well as the rotating, astronomy-influenced calendars of the Catholic Church and the pre-Conquest religions of Mexico” (140). The missal, therefore, stands in for Lobo, and the structure of the text supports a combination of traditional Catholic values and various other indigenous religions, reminding us that within *nepantla* there are overlapping faiths and spiritual practices. Mora recognizes this archive that Lobo has maintained for the family, anticipating a project like the one Mora undertakes herself in *House of Houses*.

In Mora’s literary *nepantla*, secular songs, religious songs, and even *Las Mañanitas* sit side-by-side on the page.<sup>7</sup> Together these songs represent the spiritual and cultural affiliations of Mora’s family. Holidays are both religious and spiritual for members of her family, and she finds a way to recognize these different kinds of religious, musical traditions evoked through the missal and the hymnal as they mingle together in her family album. The poetry of the songs throughout the memoir is not only used to instruct or instill religious devotion, however. As Mora records these reimagined events in tex-

tual form, she takes great care in providing the emotional contexts surrounding them. On another occasion, a cold January morning, Lobo accompanies Mora while she is singing. Mora has opened an old, red hymnal, looking for songs to sing alone in the snow that has fallen. She begins with "Amazing Grace" and then transitions into "Angels We Have Heard on High" only to discover that Lobo's "high, faltering voice" has joined hers (19). They both go inside for morning coffee then, talking about the old traditions surrounding *La Epifanía del Señor*.<sup>8</sup> Mora teaches Lobo a new tradition involving the *rosca de reyes*: "We can't cut it till everyone's up. I hid the *Niño* inside and want someone to find it in their slice and have to give the party on February second, the feast of *la Candelaria*, when Christ is first taken to the temple to be blessed. It's Candlemas Day in English" (19).<sup>9</sup> Lobo has never heard of this before, but Mora is happy to teach Lobo something. She comments that Lobo still loves to learn, which is a big relief to her, knowing that "learning continues beyond the body" (20). The senses stay strong even into death, and Mora wants to communicate with both the living and dead through the descriptions she offers in her text. The middle space of the house of houses allows Mora to join younger generations with older ones, and only in this particularized, imagined place can that occur.

Like the other artifacts housed in this space, the mouth-threads that Mora weaves often take the form of *dichos*, cultural sayings that are based on a mutual understanding of the world in which one lives. *Dichos* comprise the alter-*Native* discourse operating in Mora's middle space of the house of houses, and participation in this rhetorical enterprise requires its own skill set. In an essay from his book *This Stubborn Self: Texas Autobiographies* (2002), Bert Almon examines Mora's *House of Houses*. Specifically in relation to the *dichos* she uses, he posits, "The proverbs in the titles and in the text . . . emphasize the reality of a folk culture in Mexican-American life" (275). Almon is correct in that *dichos* capture the lived experiences of Chicano culture; however, they do much more than that. As cultural critic José Antonio Burciaga asserts: "Thus the popularity of *dichos*, with their wonderful style and manner of teaching: they offer a way to make pronouncements, edicts, and judgments, to affirm the culture's self-evident truths, fundamental principles, and rules of conduct. *Dichos* represent the popular mainstream wisdom of the common people and their daily lives. They seek to form a common bond of mutual understanding and respect in society" (xiii). Rather than simply being a reflection of "folk culture," *dichos* represent an important tradition of interaction that offers individuals, the folk of a community, power through words. This discourse reflects cultural knowledge and wisdom and possesses the skill to teach through the

spoken word, among many other things. Burciaga notes, “These word games require a knowledge and dexterous use of words and terms” (xv). Because of their complicated double meanings, *dichos* can often only be fully appreciated by native speakers or cultural insiders. In the Foreword to *Folk Wisdom of Mexico* (1994), Gary Soto describes *dichos* in this way, “The Mexican proverb is the verbal property of common people. It is a condensed saying, some pithy remark from a man leaning on a plow or a woman with her elbows up on a table as she listens to the *chisme*—gossip—of a neighbor” (6). Since Mora is concerned with recording and preserving the traditions of her Mexican ancestry, she underscores the wisdom contained within *dichos* and values them as essential tools in the construction of her word-house. Soto continues, “The Mexican proverb may inform and advise, or it may offer an arguable point in life. It is amusement and it is wisdom itself. It is the snappy scolding of a naughty child. It is the soothing remedy to loss and the loss of hope” (6–7). Both Burciaga and Soto recognize the power that *dichos* embody—the ability to teach, to admonish, to judge, to affirm, to include, to exclude. As with the missal, Mora finds another way to mark space culturally; there are rules for employing the formal and demanding discourse of the *dicho*, and while visitors can enter the space of the house of houses, they cannot necessarily participate.

By including *dichos* throughout her text and in chapter titles, Mora records these sayings in both Spanish and English not only to convey cultural wisdom but also to revitalize it. Mora writes in the tradition of those Mexican American women who came before her, showing her relatives who sat around the kitchen table gossiping through proverbs, further expanding the realm of self-representation in order to open new spaces for other voices to speak about their lived experiences. As is common to the work of some Chicana authors, Mora uses Spanish throughout her text indicating the shift in italics.<sup>10</sup> In a manner similar to that of Anzaldúa, Mora often chooses not to translate her phrases, privileging an audience of cultural insiders who are conversant in Spanish. Mora says in an interview, “I’m interested in including Spanish because it’s part of my world, it’s part of my mind. . . . I built in humor for the person who is bilingual. There is subversion in the use of Spanish, very consciously” (“Interview” 143). While the use of Spanish in her text certainly signals an organizational strategy, it also acts as a means of subversion, one that privileges folk wisdom over or alongside conventional forms of knowledge. In Spanish, the *dichos* she invokes in her text exhibit internal rhymes, rolling off the tongue in a succinct and lyrical manner. Each *dicho* is also a poem with its own generic conventions. Mora leaves the rhymes in their original language not only to preserve their historical

and cultural value, but also to reinforce their emotional worth and generic integrity.

While the inclusion of *dichos* represents the life and language of Mexican Americans, it also showcases a people's love of humor and the way it can be used as a pedagogical tool in the transmission of cultural knowledge. In her "*Dichos/Sayings*" glossary Mora writes, "In Spanish, as in any language, countless sayings, *dichos* or *refranes*, exist that enrich any language and are a means of perpetuating communal wisdom and values, also humor" (292). Mora uses an interesting *dicho* to describe her favorite *soltera* aunt in a scene when she and her siblings reminisce about Lobo. They laugh as they recall the way that she played with them when their parents were out or working late at the optical company. Lobo would put on their father's hat and walk by the windows so that any bad man outside thinking about breaking in would realize that a man was in the house. Lobo says, "We are very clever, aren't we, *mis lobitos*? You have to be very careful in this world of murderers and thieves" (40). Mora goes on to chuckle with her siblings when their mother enters. When asked what they are laughing about, they respond that no wonder they are all crazy, having spent so much time with Aunt Lobo. Their mother exclaims, "Oh that woman was crazy all right. . . . What a thorn she was in your grandmother's life" (41). Mora picks up her role as omniscient narrator and says, "Not in mine. *No hay rosa sin espina*" (41). Mora translates the majority of her *dichos* in the glossary in the back of the book. Every rose has its thorn, by which Mora communicates that no one is perfect and that everyone has a prickly side, especially her Aunt Lobo; however, it does not mean she will love her any less. Soto posits, "Proverbs reunite the listener with his or her ancestors. They bear witness to the ancient human foibles that continue to plague us to this day. It takes only a kitchen table, or two chairs situated under a mulberry tree, to hear a chattering of rural history summed up with an appropriate proverb" (7). *Dichos*, too, soften the blow when judgment or admonition is required.

Similar to the informal way in which *dichos* circulate throughout a community, the exchange of information in Mora's house occurs through encounters around the kitchen table. This gathering space often acts as the main scene in the re-staging of Mora's family life. Toward the end of her story, Mora imagines a scene in which several of her older female relatives sit around the table: "The women talk about how quickly the year passed, how the youngest generation, Bill, Libby, Cissy, Gil, Niki, and Christopher should speak more Spanish. '*Quien sabe dos lenguas, vale por dos,*' says Mamá Clea, but she talks about how bright and beautiful the children are" (274). Mora translates this *dicho* as "If you are bilingual, you count twice" (296).

Mora imagines that the older generations cannot understand why her children, nieces, and nephews do not speak as much Spanish as they might have. Libby, Mora's daughter who is in law school, exclaims, "Tell them I don't have time for this stuff, Mom. I don't mean to be rude, but I've got to finish these papers and try to sleep. How do I say I'm sorry in Spanish? Oh to be five again. Those were the days" (59). Mora desires to reflect the potential tensions between older generations and Mexican American youth on issues of language. The younger generations do not have time to learn the old language of *dichos* or even Spanish itself, evincing Soto's observation, "[*Dichos*] begin to disappear within one generation, along with the use of Spanish, and are replaced with less clever phrasings" (8). Through this text, Mora preserves many of the common *dichos* of her family and her culture, hoping that her children will realize the importance of this discourse as they age.

At the same time that *dichos* preserve oral tradition, they also offer older members of Mora's family a connection to their homeplace of Mexico. In another scene, Mora's father, grandfathers, great-grandfathers, and great-great-grandfathers, who have long-since passed, sit around and contemplate forming a musical group, only they cannot quite agree on what kind of tunes to play. One suggests playing *música clásica* while someone else says they should form a mariachi troupe. Finally another comments, "Ay México, México. Como dice el dicho, como México no hay dos" (280). As they all agree, even the parrot who speaks, that yes, there is only one Mexico, Mora's father begins to sing the Mexican national anthem "in a deep, false bravado" while everyone joins him (280). This *dicho* reminds her father of their heritage, and he begins to sing the anthem in honor of that place of origin. In this instance, the *dicho* offers these members of the older generation a connection to a long-lost home space. Burciaga notes that "dichos often reawaken dormant memories" (ix). *Dichos* remind people of a past that still influences the present. Mora's father and older male relatives use the *dicho* as a nostalgic tool to take them back to the place of their births. Soto reminds us: "[Proverbs] are more honest, accurate, and wise than any one of us because they have traveled through the soothing whisperings of years. They can be relished, memorized, quoted in Spanish and English, tested on friends, and finally evaluated in one's own life. They are meant to put us in our place and then console us as we feel the weight of mortality" (9). Privileging a cultural insider, Mora does not need to explain every approach she employs in the text. *Dichos* are one particular example of the way that she has revised the genre of life narrative to elaborate another strategy of being for both herself and her culture.

Another technique she employs to write her family and cultural history into the canon of American literature through this cleverly-crafted *nepantla* form involves restaging past scenes of domesticity in the particularly gendered space of the kitchen. Since the majority of the action takes place in this private space of the word-house, Mora invites her reader to pull up a chair and have a cup of *te de manzanilla* and chat with her long-dead relatives. The kitchen is not a place of oppression for the women who join Mora here, although it might have functioned that way when they were alive. Tey Diana Rebolledo asserts, "Through new attitudes towards work and its meaning, the intricate descriptions and valorization of women's work, Chicana writers undo the invisibility of domestic work and the invisibility of women's contributions. Through a description of the knowledge necessary for that work, the writers gain authority, seize agency, and are able to represent their own subjectivity" (51). That private, domestic space becomes an actor in the text. It serves as a place of gathering to reminisce warmly about the past, sharing not only stories, but also recipes and gossip. Mora writes: "I savor each simple gesture in this kitchen, filling the tea kettle, lighting the stove, click of the cup in the saucer. They've all been here, the family of women, nursing one another with teas—*de canela*, *hierbabuena*, *gordolobo*. Straight and erect in their good health or bent with age and arthritis, sacramental acts for another woman, or a husband, father, or child, steeping an old cure that began underground" (11). While it is likely that some of these women never met each other when they were alive, Mora imagines a space where all of the advice and support she carries with her resides. This kitchen space of her word-house provides a comfortable home to these women who were so influential in her life, in making her who she has become; it is a familiar space to all of the women who came before her so she must attend to it in her imagined space as well. By reimagining this domestic space, Mora challenges traditional gender roles, exposing a space of liberation to these women instead of one of oppression. She hopes that by recording these stories, she can rescue some of that collective wisdom and pass it along, so that her grandchildren might know the names and habits of their great-great-grandmothers.

In this newly imagined space, Mora writes her own recipe in the form of this text, an instruction manual, for her children and those who come after her. Mora recognizes the importance of recipes to a family's history: "I look at my father's four sisters, the Mora women who've outlived their two brothers, the women whose hands like their mother's know kitchen secrets, the glue of food, how to hold families together with tortillas and coffee. 'I'm trying to collect family recipes. Do you have any of Lita's? Could you each give me

a favorite?” (78). In this text, Mora legitimates the private space of the kitchen and valorizes the work done there by these tough female relatives. She continues, “Why do I crave recipes, seek to know how people who are part of me measure and combine ingredients in this life, how they nourish themselves and those around them, how they define sustenance” (78). Mora desires a model to follow. In the writing of this book, filled with recipes not only for food but also for a way of life, Mora wants to honor those women who came before her and their knowledge of all things domestic; she needs a way to remember. After all, it is these women who authorize her to speak their stories.

Mora’s recuperation of the domestic spaces of this house of houses and the labor performed therein aids her search for a form. For example, when Mora is sitting with her father’s sisters, her Aunt Julie says, “Mama makes a great *mole*. . . . It’s not like that *mole* you buy in jars. We peel the almonds because she makes everything from scratch. She gets out the onions and starts frying them and adds sesame seeds and chocolate and tomato, two kinds of red chile, and toasted tortillas to give the *mole* body” (97). Mora allows these words to be spoken in the voice of her aunt, who stresses that making things by hand always results in a better taste. Aunt Julie finds a voice to honor her mother, but also to lift up cooking as a family activity, a space for spending time together and nourishing each other, both physically and spiritually. Aunt Chloe chimes in, “*Nunca, nunca, comí mole como el de mi madre* . . . And her tortillas, not like the store kind. She presses them with one of those old black irons until they’re roasted, *doraditas, doraditas*” (97). Mora allows her aunts to speak in their own voices, but also adds her own commentary: “Lita’s daughters drift to their childhood kitchen, the taste of food seasoned by their mother’s hands and tears” (97). The recipes found there are not only for special dishes, but for living life. The homemade mole and tortillas, staples in Mexican and Mexican American cooking, stand in for these women as the legacies that they leave behind. These foods offer nourishment for the body, but more importantly for the soul and for the carrying on of tradition. In writing *House of Houses*, she discovers her own recipe for carving out the family’s place in history.

Still searching for family recipes, or arguably, a form that can accommodate the houses within the word-house, Mora remembers a time when she was little, watching her grandmother Lita at the kitchen table rolling out dough for her famous cookie recipe, “her hair and face each a tight knot, dark hands handling the dough with ease” (98). This image sparks a memory for Aunt Chole who responds, “‘Oh, her animal cookies . . . I tried to get the recipe, *corazón santo*, but



*mi mamá* would just say that she added a little bit of this and a little bit of that” (98). Mora gets her chance to document Lita’s recipe in December as everyone is preparing for the Christmas holidays. The women have all gathered again in the kitchen wondering what they can add to the festive spirit that abounds in the house. While the men are singing and practicing for the mariachi group, the women turn to baking. In this context, Mora triumphs by asking Grandmother Lita for her recipe directly: “Lita mutters her recipe as she prepares to make her cookie *animalitos* without measuring cups or spoons. ‘Pero Lita, some of this and some of that won’t work for us.’ . . . She frowns, pushes her glasses back with her floured hand, annoyed at women who have to write everything down, who can’t trust their hands, who don’t know the feel of dough. Firmly beating her bowl of lard with her favorite wooden spoon, she dictates her recipe” (284). Mora records it faithfully in this sacred text of hers although future generations seem to misunderstand her purpose. Her daughter Cissy whispers: “Do they realize what lard does to your insides[?] . . . I don’t mean to be rude, but can I just have a bagel when you all eat these? I don’t mind helping her cut them out, but I just don’t want to eat that stuff” (285). Mora records Lita’s recipe to preserve the traditions of her family. Obviously those traditions change though, which she recognizes by adding her daughter’s response to using lard in Christmas cut-out cookies. Trends and ingredients change, but Mora desires to compile a text that not only offers family recipes, but also preserves the historical context of the making of those recipes.

Just as Mora begins to realize her word-house in memoir, she returns to poetry to continue her family’s story. Mora is not satisfied with just one telling. In “Ode to Spirits,” published in *Adobe Odes* (2006), Mora continues to foreground her relationships with many of the spirits of those who were and still are important in her life:

Daily, you move in me,  
     briskly walk through the chambers  
 of my heart  
     and up and down my bones,  
 greet me in the morning  
 with quick smiles,  
 busy with your tasks,  
 resistant to the pleasures of leisure—  
     no tea sipped for hours  
     as a book cools in the lap. (1–10)

She writes about her experiences with the spirits of her “grave-defying counselors” moving both through and around her as she completes

her own tasks during the day (35). Continuing to carry her relatives around with her (almost ten years after the publication of *House of Houses*) allows access to the family myths and cultural traditions on a daily level, those that could have been lost without her careful recording of them, whether through poetry or prose. Throughout this particular poem, Mora recounts her own tempting of the spirits “with questions and pan dulce, / jokes / about the appetite of the dead,” but Mamande, Tía Nacha, Daddy, and Tía Lola, all mentioned by name, refuse to be distracted and continue their chores until day’s end (13–15). Mora concludes that

[t]emporarily,  
 we’re all housed in the adobe  
 of my skin,  
 the re-worked mud I am. (28–31)

This time in poetic form, she feels compelled to record the precious lives of those she has loved throughout her life, offering much to future generations. In the evenings though, the spirits acquiesce, and giving in to Mora’s request, they sit around the kitchen table enveloping her in their arms while offering prayers and songs in Spanish to nourish her soul. The careful words of her loved ones reconstruct a more complete family history so that she can offer both the struggles and joys to her children and her grandchildren, opening up a generic space that validates identities created by multiple national affiliations and native languages. *House of Houses* could not contain all of her family’s, or culture’s, stories; these stories must continue to be recorded and passed down. Therefore in the years since the publication of *House of Houses*, Mora has continued to tell the narratives of her people in poetry, children’s books, and other works of fiction as a way of carrying on the legacies and embodying the lessons her loved ones have left her.

In the writing of *House of Houses* Mora offers a different perspective on life in the middle, one that is characterized by privilege and the luxury of inherited artifacts and archives. As a result of the inclusive nature of literary *nepantla*, Mora allows Chicanas to explore the private spaces of the interior, fleshing out how both culture and family mediate who they are on the inside. While Moraga and Anzaldúa leave a rich generic legacy, Mora finds a way to use her discussions of space and genre through the same form, literary *nepantla*, to insert voices like hers into dominant narratives of American identity formation. For Mora, the spaces in between are generative and activist, and with the crafting of her auto/biographical, mixed-genre text, she offers cultural histories and myths as well

as private family stories as evidence of the lives of those Mexicans and Mexican Americans who thrived and continue to negotiate their identities in multiple spaces. She offers a different story than that of Moraga and Anzaldúa. She showcases a middle-class, multi-generational, contented, Catholic family life, ultimately illustrating that within the dynamic generic spaces of *nepantla*, there is room for a variety of lived experiences. She notes: “Writers of Color, Chicana writers, feel a moral responsibility to serve their own. Just as the *curandera* uses white magic, manipulates the symbols that are part of her patients’ experience base to ease communication, the Chicana writer seeks to heal cultural wounds of historical neglect by providing opportunities to remember the past, to share and ease bitterness, to describe what has been viewed as unworthy of description, to cure by incantations and rhythms, by listening with her entire being and responding. She then gathers the tales and myths, weaves them together, and, if lucky, casts spells” (*Nepantla* 129). Mora has done exactly this in *House of Houses*. She engineers an alter-*Native* form that casts a spell on her reader, weaving the tales and myths of her family into an instructional guide. Her readers are brought into the clever space of the word-house where Mora communes with their family members, both dead and alive. She imagines their words and gives them power to voice their own private concerns while recuperating the camaraderie of the domestic space. Mora realizes the power of verbalizing multiple kinds of truths and pronounces that “stories are essential as water” (*House* 247). With this text, Mora crafts a *nepantla* form that accommodates multiple kinds of cultural artifacts, and thus, provides a model for middle-class Mexican Americanness that disputes dominant national narratives. As Pamela Moss writes, “An autobiographical critique . . . must challenge the process of writing history, not just its end product” (16). With this text, Mora challenges the process of writing history as demonstrated through her construction of an imaginary space in the Borderlands. By employing notions of collaboration and collectivity, ultimately through this life narrative Mora creates spaces of power and affiliation through which the validation of female identity—and the identities of other formerly marginalized peoples—can occur in an imagined space, a house made of houses, where all might dwell.

University of Texas at Austin

### Acknowledgments

I would like to offer my sincerest gratitude to Domino Renee Perez for years of encouragement and support as I have worked through many of the ideas represented here. Her comments on previous drafts of

this article have proved to be invaluable. My thanks also go to Jackie Cuevas, Lacey Donohue, Amara Graf, Melanie Haupt, Olga Herrera, Erin Hurt, and Lydia Wilmeth-French whose insightful feedback has helped this project grow to fruition.

## Notes

1. While Anzaldúa has talked about *nepantla* in various sources, she explains it most clearly in her Preface to the collection *This Bridge We Call Home*: “There are passageways, conduits, and connectors that connote transitioning, crossing borders, and changing perspectives. Bridges span liminal (threshold) spaces between worlds, spaces I call nepantla, a Nahuatl word meaning tierra entre medio” (1).

2. In response to the growing frustration with their lack of representation in the works of their Chicano predecessors and white feminists, both who claimed to be inclusive of women of color, Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa co-edited a collection in 1981 called *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. Along with the various writers and activists featured in their anthology, Moraga and Anzaldúa push generic boundaries and find their own modes of self-expression that foreground a political articulation of the everyday. These authors represent themselves through mixed-generic configurations, ones that combine poetry, essay, songs, and prayers (to name just a few) that challenge traditional categories of form.

3. In 1983, Moraga published her own autobiography, a stream-of-consciousness, life narrative called *Loving in the War Years: lo que nunca pasó por sus labios*. In this text she continues to struggle with generic representation that can accommodate her experience and identity as the lesbian daughter of a Chicana mother and an Anglo father. She divides her poetry and essays into sections to impose some semblance of structure for the reader, but mostly she is writing for herself. Like in the collection she edited with Anzaldúa, she rejects traditional genres like poetry, novel, short story, and essay for a multi-textual, multi-lingual form that accommodates and accentuates her particular lived experiences.

4. Anzaldúa crafts a theory of Chicana identity construction through her own personal life narrative in a form that challenges the theory of conventional autobiography in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. While others struggle to name emergent forms, Anzaldúa identifies it—*autohistoria*—authorizing the form and giving it power. Anzaldúa’s “history of self” unsurprisingly fails to “fit” into the hegemonic model of life narrative and thus, reveals the limitations of the genre.

5. According to Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, "This acronym [auto/biography or a/b] signals the interrelatedness of autobiographical narrative and biography. Although the slash marks their fluid boundary, they are in several senses different, even opposed, forms. . . . The term also designates a mode of the autobiographical that inserts biography/ies within an autobiography, or the converse, a personal narrative within a biography" (256).

6. At this point in my analysis, some may wonder if the text I am describing can simply be classified as postmodern. While Mora's *House of Houses* shares some generic qualities with postmodern texts, such as the rejection of a single narrative voice, fragmentation, pastiche, instability of form, and simultaneity, ultimately the project of postmodernism is radically different from what Mora undertakes. In postmodernism, among other things, the focus ends up being on the de-structured, de-centered, dehumanized subject and celebrates an incoherent and meaningless world. This, in many ways, is the opposite of what Mora is trying to do. As a multiply marginalized writer, she uses these strategies (co-authorship, erasure of generic boundaries, and a rejection of chronological time, among other things) to position herself as a speaking subject. Her project is one of recuperation and creation that reinserts lost voices into larger master narratives of American identity formation, ones from which she, her family, and her culture have most often been omitted. She creates this form to aid her in that project. This text is about the recovery and affirmation of self, family, and particular histories rather than rejections (or mockeries or parodies) of them.

7. *Las Mañanitas* is a traditional Mexican song often sung at birthdays and other important holidays.

8. *La Epifanía del Señor* signifies Three Kings' Day or the Epiphany and is celebrated on January 6.

9. The Mexican *rosca de reyes* cake (King's cake) generally has an oval shape and is decorated with candied figs and cherries. Whoever finds the Christ Child figurine hidden inside must host a party and provide *tamales* and *atole* to their guests on February 2 (*Día de la Candelaria*). He who finds the small figure of the Baby Jesus is blessed.

10. While many critics such as Alfred Arteaga and Rosaura Sánchez have discussed the politics of Chicana/os including Spanish in their predominantly English texts, critic Elisabeth Mermann-Jozwiak offers an analysis of Pat Mora's language usage in her various works of poetry, situating her work within the conversations of postmodernity and poststructuralism. Since I do not discuss Mora's poetry in detail in this article, I do not engage Mermann-Jozwiak's essay here. See Arteaga, Sánchez, and Mermann-Jozwiak, "Desert."

## Works Cited

- Almon, Bert. *This Stubborn Self: Texas Autobiographies*. Fort Worth: Texas Christian UP, 2002. Print.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria E. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1987. Print.
- . "Interview with Gloria Anzaldúa." Interview by Karin Ikas. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. By Gloria Anzaldúa. 1987. San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1999. 227–46. Print.
- . "Preface: (Un)natural bridges, (Un)safe spaces." *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation*. Ed. Gloria E. Anzaldúa and Analouise Keating. New York: Routledge, 2002. 1–5. Print.
- Arteaga, Alfred, ed. *An Other Tongue: Nation and Ethnicity in the Linguistic Borderlands*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1994. Print.
- Burciaga, José Antonio. *In Few Words/En pocas palabras: A Compendium of Latino Folk Wit and Wisdom: A Bilingual Collection*. San Francisco: Mercury House, 1997. Print.
- Christian, B. Marie. "Many Ways to Remember: Layered Time in Mora's *House of Houses*." *MELUS* 30.1 (Spring 2005): 135–48. Print.
- Gaspar de Alba, Alicia. "Introduction, Or Welcome to the Closet of Barrio Popular Culture." *Velvet Barrios: Popular Culture and Chicana/o Sexuality*. Ed. Alicia Gaspar de Alba. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. xiv–xxviii. Print.
- . "The Solar of Chicano/a Popular Culture: *Mi casa [no] es su casa*." *Chicano Art Inside/Outside the Master's House: Cultural Politics and the CARA Exhibition*. Austin: U of Texas P, 1998. 31–88. Print.
- Graulich, Melody. "Prepositional Spaces: Family Photographs, History, and Storytelling in Memoirs by Contemporary Western Writers." *Western Subjects: Autobiographical Writing in the North American West*. Ed. Kathleen A. Boardman and Gioia Woods. Salt Lake City: U of Utah P, 2004. 386–419. Print.
- Lester, Julius. "James Baldwin—Reflections of a Maverick." *New York Times* 27 May 1984, late ed., sec. 7: 1. Print.
- Mermann-Jozwiak, Elizabeth. "Desert Women, Brujas, and Curanderas: Pat Mora's Linguistic *Mestizaje*." *Postmodern Vernaculars: Chicana Literature and Postmodern Rhetoric*. New York: Peter Lang, 2005. 97–113. Print.
- Mora, Pat. *House of Houses*. Boston: Beacon, 1997. Print.
- . "Interview with Pat Mora." By Elizabeth Mermann-Jozwiak and Nancy Sullivan. *MELUS* 28.2 (Summer 2003): 139–50. Print.
- . "My Word-house." *Communion*. Houston: Arte Público, 1991. 86–87. Print.

- . *Nepantla: Essays from the Land in the Middle*. Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1993. Print.
- . "Ode to Spirits." *Adobe Odes*. Tucson: U of Arizona P, 2006. 17–18. Print.
- Moss, Pamela. "Writing One's Life." *Placing Autobiography in Geography*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse UP, 2001. 1–21. Print.
- Oliver-Rotger, Maria Antònia. *Battlegrounds and Crossroads: Social and Imaginary Space in Writings by Chicanas*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003. Print.
- . "An Interview with Pat Mora." *Voices from the Gap*. Regents of the University of Minnesota, May & June 1999. Web. 5 Nov. 2007.
- Rebolledo, Tey Diana. "The Tools in the Toolbox: Representing Work in Chicana Writing." *Genre* 32 (Spring/Summer 1999): 41–52. Print.
- Sánchez, Rosaura. "Mapping the Spanish Language along a Multiethnic and Multilingual Border." *The Latino Studies Reader: Culture, Economy, and Society*. Ed. Antonia Darder and Rodolfo D. Torres. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998. 101–25. Print.
- Smith, Sidonie, and Julia Watson. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. 2nd Ed. Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P, 2010. Print.
- Soto, Gary. Foreword. *Folk Wisdom of Mexico: Proverbios y dichos Mexicanos*. By Jeff M. Sellers. San Francisco: Chronicle, 1994. 5–9. Print.