

ELEMENTS OF FOLKLORE IN HOUSE OF HOUSES

BY PAT MORA

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my precious daughter, Elvina, whose love and encouragement gave me the strength in my pursuit of this degree.



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My most heartfelt thanks to Dr. Phyllis Bridges, my academic advisor and major professor, for teaching, encouraging, and supporting me throughout my graduate studies and for igniting my interest in folklore.

## ABSTRACT

### ELEMENTS OF FOLKLORE IN HOUSE OF HOUSES BY PAT MORA

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Growing up in an immigrant family in America is a challenge for individuals, for they face the dilemma of abandoning their cultural identity through assimilation into the mainstream Anglo-American culture. Pat Mora, a Mexican-American writer, in her memoir House of Houses develops the theme of the preservation of one's ethnic self through folk elements- -storytelling, proverbs, sayings, recipes, home remedies, and beliefs- -which serve as links among generations.

The thesis examines how folk customs and traditions, passed down from generation to generation through storytelling, daily educating of the young by the elders, observing the family rituals, nurturing earth, and preserving the native language, help the characters of Houses of Houses withstand the cultural clashes in America, embrace the mainstream culture, and sustain their ancestral heritage as well.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

Those who come to the United States from Mexico, unable to completely relinquish their Mexican cultural identity, tend to maintain their folkways, even if only in an adapted form. Many customs, rituals, and traditional forms have been adapted to the culture of the United States, yet still maintain an unmistakable *Mexicano* character.

(Rafaela Castro xiv)

Anyone who decides to explore deeply the past lives of his or her ancestors and connect them with the present may inevitably come across some common features among the present generation and the generations long gone. These common features are not limited by the solely physical resemblances of relatives, but rather they represent the essence of the links between the ancestors and their descendants--the glue that helps each generation survive and live on and that makes each family a family. Such connections can be both oral lore (proverbs, sayings, riddles, songs, tales) and any habitual activities (rituals, customs, domestic practices) that through continual repetition become family traditions and are considered folklore. Stith Thompson defines folklore as "tradition [that is] handed down from one person to another

and preserved either by memory or practice rather than written record" (Leach 403).

Folklore surrounds all individuals throughout their entire lives in the ways of upbringing, educating, dealing with problems and hardships, rejoicing at happy moments, or conforming to certain cultural norms. Folklore also resides in every person's subconscious mind and emerges later on. Whatever values, traditions, and practices parents teach their children inevitably reappear in the future. In any case, folklore--both verbal and non-verbal --represents the material, spiritual, and social life of individuals in a family and community; and its value cannot be overestimated.

Folk practices are important in the life of an individual in any family, but they are particularly crucial in an immigrant family for dignified adjustment to a life style of a foreign country and the preservation of its own ethnicity. Pat Mora, a Mexican-American writer, demonstrates that folklore plays a pivotal role in immigrants' lives, for it certainly strengthens family ties and helps individuals sustain their ethnic identity. In her memoir House of Houses, folklore serves as an essential

link among generations and thus a vital force for survival of the Hispanic culture in America.

A descendant of immigrants who fled their native land during the Mexican Revolution, Mora develops a theme of the preservation of one's ethnic self through folk elements, which she intricately weaves into the rich texture of her narration. Having chosen the technique of magical realism for her memoir, the author invents an imaginary dream house for a setting to which she invites all of her relatives--living and dead--for a family friendly chat to reminisce about their lives. The storytelling of the relatives makes it obvious that folklore deeply and naturally permeates the Mora and Delgado families through domestic practices, cultivating the land, gardening, recipes, rituals, traditions, home remedies, stories, proverbs, sayings, beliefs, and superstitions. Folklore also underscores the high priority of the family in the Mexican culture.

Confirming Archer Taylor's statement that "folklore consists of materials that are handed on traditionally from generation to generation without a reliable ascription to an inventor or author" (Leach 402), Mora shows that the inventor is not important; for folk materials can be transmitted by diffusion from one culture to another. She

claims that "cultural purity is a myth" (House 96). What is extremely significant is that individuals learn about values and traditions from their family--a haven, which empowers them with knowledge, moral strength, and pride for their heritage, derived from the ancestors. Mora shows that such empowerment occurs when a family strives to fulfill the four functions of folklore. According to William R. Bascom, these functions include: amusement (for "beneath a great deal of humor lies a deeper meaning" 343); education of the young (to incorporate "morals" (345); validation of culture "in justifying its rituals and institutions to those who perform and observe them" (344); and "maintaining conformity to the accepted patterns of behavior" (346).

According to numerous opinions, folklore is mostly oral transmission of art, belief, and tradition. However, as B. A. Botkin claims, "the transference of oral tradition to writing and print does not destroy its validity as folklore but rather, while freezing or fixing its form, helps to keep it alive . . ." (Leach 398). This preservation is exactly what Mora has done through recording reminiscences of her relatives, whom she gathers at her kitchen table. She listens to and writes down their

recollections and explains her keen interest in their testimonies by saying, "I'm after stories, brewed in the bone" (House 7). Mora wonders at the call of her soul to record her family history:

Why in my fifties did I decide to explore this house and its garden? I needed a place to put the stories and the voices before they vanished like blooms and leaves will vanish on the wind outside, voices which, perceived as ordinary, would be unprotected, blown into oblivion (272).

Mora is afraid that "voices" of her ancestors might be viewed as "ordinary" because she feels that they, her deceased relatives, would have much to say--the precious words of wisdom that they had lived by and that had been passed to them from previous generations. Now, it is her, Mora's, turn to pay them tribute by doing the same. So she listens to the stories of her family members in order to pass them to others, thus to ensure that their beneficial influence on posterity may occur.

In Traditional Storytelling Today, Rosario Morales explains that storytelling, reflecting "cultural knowledge, concepts, and values," is a family tradition in the Mexican culture that is passed on to the next generation (MacDonald



444). House of Houses serves as convincing evidence of the idea that some stories told within families today have become part of the family's history. Thus, by following the methods of collecting of folk stories identified by such leading scholars as Stith Thompson, Antti Aarne, and others, Mora perpetuates the folk traditions of her family by encouraging her relatives to relate their tales to her for the memoir. She hopes that her children, nieces, and nephews, to whom she dedicates this book, will continue her story.

In analyzing the literary work of Pat Mora, Patrick D. Murphy gives the author credit for her ardent efforts to protect the purity of ethnicity as a valuable treasure in each society. He observes:

Human diversity can be maintained only when cultural conservation is practiced by the marginalized and subordinated groups who defend and recover their heritages in order to generate their futures. [. . .] Mora rightly emphasizes the conservation of Chicano/a and Latino/o cultures, but does not stop there. She also addresses respect for, and awareness of, other cultures internationally and the differing

degrees and kinds of effects that dominant U.S. culture has on subordinated cultures within the U.S. and worldwide.

(Murphy 1: 1)

Indeed, Pat Mora, a representative of an ethnic minority, strives to promote cultural diversity, which she believes enriches any society. Deeply concerned about preserving one's ethnicity, she tries to make people understand that "pride in cultural identity, in the set of learned and shared language, symbols, and meanings, needs to be fostered not because of nostalgia or romanticism, but because it is essential to our survival" (Nepantla 36). This idea permeates the entire memoir. By depicting her Mexican ancestors' attachment to their roots, traditions, and practices, Mora argues that Mexico is passionately a land of folklore and that only through folklore can ethnicity be sustained among various cultures.

## II. PAT MORA'S STRUCTURE AND PRESENTATION

Narration is ageless. The impulse to tell the story and the need to listen to it have made narrative the natural companion of man throughout the history of civilization. Stories are able to adapt themselves to any local and social climate. They are old and venerable, but they are also new and up-to-date.

(Linda Degh Folklore and Folklife 53)

"I'm after stories, brewed in the bone," Pat Mora writes as she justifies her impulse to hear "the older voices" of her ancestors, "who have the patience to talk and remember" (House 7). In order to understand herself and her culture, Mora needs to understand and appreciate her roots. For that purpose, she creates a fantasy house--a nostalgic replica of her parents' home--where she imagines meeting her numerous relatives, living and dead, and listening to their stories about her family's past. At the family kitchen table, Mora shares cookies, tea, and a lively chat with her kin--aunts, uncles, parents, grandparents, and great-great-grandparents. As spirits, the dead visit the house, habitually take a seat at the table, and jump into a lively conversation with their recollections about the past--happy and sorrowful, joyful and poignant.

Explaining the form of her memoir, Mora says, "Since the family isn't together geographically, using the tools I know, I created a place welcoming to our spirits, a place for communion and reunion, no invitation necessary . . . ." (273). Mora's "tools" of telling a story are effective; she has chosen the technique of magical realism, a mingling of the mundane with the fantastic; and she weaves fantasy into reality so masterfully that the boundaries between the two seem nonexistent. Each guest tells a story about the Moras and the Delgados, Mora's paternal and maternal close relatives, giving the biographical background of the family within the historical context of the country. All stories, mingled with the author's own recollections and her conjectures into her ancestors' bygone days gradually create the images of the entire family history. Such a fusion of reality, memory, fantasy, and imagination enables Mora to employ her own conscious and subconscious mind, encourage her relatives to employ theirs, recreate the past events through imagination, and, finally, produce a vivid and fascinating picture of her family's past and present.

Mora's memoir, filled with the spirits of the dead, serves as a reminder about folk beliefs in revenants. In the Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend,

Maria Leach relates that almost "every civilization contains evidence that at some time or other there have been current beliefs that the dead return in either a visible or sensory form" (933). In ghost lore, the revenants may arouse fear among the living by banging on the door, hollering, and moving objects; or they may take part in common human activities, such as eating, drinking, and talking. Mora prefers the latter. The apparitions of the dead do not haunt or scare her by roaming through the rooms; on the contrary, she heartily welcomes them as her guests. Assuredly, Mora remarks, "The dead of this house have no use for cemeteries, staying underground. They drift through the rooms like incense, like a prayer, a melody, a breath" (268).

Envisioning her late father as a huge, ancient tree--a symbol of life--at one moment, or a sparrow--a reincarnated soul of the dead--at another, Mora suggests that we can bring to life the image of our deceased loved ones in any form we want and make it "as real as we choose to make it" (273). She implies that when the deceased persistently occupy our thoughts, we involuntarily involve them in a conversation by predicting how they would respond to our questions or what advice they would give us in our

predicaments. Thus the spirits of the dead can fill in the void in our souls, created by the death of our beloved people. Likewise, the spirits of our late relatives can help us better understand ourselves--our character traits, talents, and habits--if we project the bits of our knowledge about their lives onto ourselves.

Given this statement, we may assume that the spirits of the dead are Mora's keys to perceiving herself. She cannot let them perish without leaving a trace. It is from her ancestors that she tries to learn from whom she inherited her ambitions, zest for creative writing, love for nature, and pride in her ethnicity. And not only does Mora learn about her heritage from the stories of her relatives' past, but she also gains an understanding of what helped her family to sustain its culture. Therefore, the spirits are her essence, and they need to be around.

A story within a story, extensively employed by Mora in the memoir, is an integral part of the ancient oral tradition to pass knowledge from generation to generation for the purpose of entertainment and instruction. Stith Thompson acknowledges: "The teller of stories has everywhere and always found eager listeners. [. . .] When we confine our view to our occidental world, we see that

for at least three of four thousand years, and doubtless for ages before, the art of the story-teller has been cultivated in every rank of society." Elaborating on his statement, Thompson mentions Odysseus telling about "the marvels of his adventures," "long-haired" pages entertaining their ladies by stories of "chivalric romances," "medieval priests" mingling their sermons with anecdotes, peasants "whil[ing] away long evenings with tales," and "the oral anecdote flourish[ing] in a new age" (Thompson 3). Unfortunately, as Angel Vigil observes with regret, "Hispanic storytelling is a dying art because the cultural context of the *cuentos* (stories) no longer exists." He explains that the movement of young people to urban areas to find employment and the intrusion of television in rural areas caused the "decline" of the time of "storytellers," which was previously ample in the "agricultural, extended-family society" (Vigil xiii). Mora demonstrates her awareness of the problem by trying to reverse the process of dying of storytelling. By asking for "any stories, cures, prayers, recipes" from her relatives and writing them down for posterity, Mora shows how through storytelling individuals can acquire knowledge

about their ancestors' past and the folk traditions that help their ascendants sustain their ethnicity (97).

Numerous stories fit into the thirteen chapters of House of Houses. The introductory chapter, named "House of Houses," sets the tone for the entire memoir; for the Moras' family house literally and symbolically represents a foundation where all stories originate and where all narrators, the author's relatives, come to visit. The twelve consecutive chapters, vignettes, are grouped by the Western calendar of the year, with each of eleven months devoted to one member of the family and the last month of December dedicated to all family members--living and dead--who get together for Christmas preparation and celebration.

Mora's choice of the arrangement of the stories according to the months of the year reflects the natural cycle of the folk life. In the agrarian areas, farmers plan their activities based on the seasons. Their lives revolve around such major events as plowing, sowing, and harvesting. In the urban areas, people who do gardening also can depend on such pattern, although the task may not be as demanding as that of the farmers. However, regardless of the area of living, the change of the seasons and the succession of the months influence most people, in



one way or the other. This cycle may be one of the reasons why Mora names each chapter a consecutive month and supplements some chapters with folk sayings. So not only does she make each title meaningful by arranging the stories according to the significance of the month, but she groups the events in the family history according to the four seasons of the year.

Thus, the chapters "Chilly January" and "Crazy February" reveal the difficult times in the lives of the Delgado family. Traditionally, January and February, the coldest months of the year, test people's ability to survive during winter. Mora parallels the events in the memoir with the severe weather because the characters have to go through tribulations, overcome many hardships, and deal with failures. Lobo tells about her father's severe eight-month illness when he was bitten by a fly *baiburi*, his escape from the violence of Pancho Villa during the Mexican Revolution, and his trials and errors in his efforts to support his family in El Paso after they had fled from Juárez, Mexico. Likewise, Mamande's distress of being an orphan in her adolescence, disappointments in adulthood, and the diagnosis with cancer in old age reflect the severity of weather of the month.

"Windy March"--a slow transition from winter to spring--reflects Mora's paternal relatives' transition from a relatively prosperous life in Juárez to a period of deprivation in the United States. The Moras experience "all the pain of the Depression, unpaid bills, bare pantries," and it takes them long years of hard work to acquire a decent financial status (76). However, as the chapter progresses, the mood shifts from cheerless to joyful, reflecting the spring change in weather. Mora speaks about the rebirth and transformation of the deceased loved ones to mirror March as the month "of the vernal equinox, the Awakening Moon [. . .], the month that hints of re-birth" (94). Just as March indicates nature's awakening from winter sleep and rejuvenation, Mora's fancy brings her father to life in the form of a tree:

My transparent father stretches and widens into a giant cottonwood, deeply furrowed trunk; wide, bending branches, but I see his eyes, brimming mischief, winking at me as birds leave the chattering fountain and fly into his arms. (95)

Mora chooses to "transform" her father into a tree to show one of the first indications of the seasons' transition from winter to spring--the beauty of emerald

greenery and the fragrant freshness of the air. Also, according to Maria Leach, in the folklore of various groups, a huge, old tree represents the essence of all trees and identifies with the tree of life, and the one who eats its fruits is guaranteed immortality (1123). It reflects an optimistic mood of spring.

However, spring, like any other season and like life itself, has both happy and sad moments. A period of "emotional inconstancy from the frequent alternation of sunshine and showers [is] attributed to the month" of April (Jobes 114). In some cultures, rain is viewed as tears; and when it rains hard and continuously, people say that nature is grieving over some loss. This folk conviction seems to influence Mora in her choice of the month to describe her family's difficult time of dealing with her father's illness and death. A human identification and connection with nature are shown through the metaphoric comparison of Raul's tears with rivers. His copious tears flood his eyes and cheeks, like rivers, formed by the profuse streams of water, when he feels awkwardness and inadequacy over the deterioration of his physical strength and memory. Thus, this abundance of water in rain and rivers indicates how nature "weeps" together with people.

The cyclical nature of life is a consistent thread in Mora's memoir. Just as warm weather becomes hot, then cools off, and warms up again, so joyous life experiences can be replaced by sad moments and later followed by happy events. Such a cycle of life is the prevailing idea in the "May" chapter, supplemented by saying "Chilly January, crazy February, windy March, rainy April bring on the beauty of flowering May" (122). Mora starts the chapter with Aunt Chole's poignant reminiscences about her inability to finish school and have her own home, her frustration over losing eyesight and seriously falling in love too late in life. Given as a reflection of the weather changes from winter through spring, sad stories lead to a more optimistic topic of gardening, flowers, and birds--the joys of Mexican culture.

The universal folk attachment to the beauty of nature at the end of the spring months logically leads to the summer stories about love. "*Huerta sin agua, cuerpo sin alma*" (An orchard without water is like a body without a soul) complements the chapter named "June." The exuberance of nature in summer time seems to affect human souls profoundly. Mora speculates about the human heart and soul aching for love--love for another human being, nature,

land, or cooking. "Love simmers in the June heat like the preserves Aunt Carmen's making in the kitchen," Mora says wistfully (152). Love for gardening and cooking points to a woman's nature; creativity and sensuality can be revealed in the garden and the kitchen. Mora's filial love for her mother is obvious when she fills the summer chapters with stories about Estela's outgoing and feisty personality, talent for writing and public speaking, zest for education, reasons for failing to achieve her dreams, and selfless devotion to her home and children.

In the fall, nature completes its growth and slows down the rhythm of life. Calmness of the season makes people reflect on the passing year and recall pleasant events, incidents, and dear ones. "To speak of lovely, speak of autumn," Mora states and chooses to talk about her favorite uncle, Uncle Lalo, and his wife of fifty years, Aunt Carmen. Aunt Carmen's great cooking skills, Uncle Lalo's gift as a story-teller, and their kind nature, hospitality, and care for Mora make her feel "pre-adult again" in their house (229). The sweet-melancholic autumn mood compels Mora to recall her own childhood and adolescence and the invaluable influence of home, family,

school, art, literature, and music on shaping her character.

The month of November, with its serene family gatherings to tell stories and commemorate the dead, serves as a final step to the completion of the year's cycle in December. All generations engage in festive activities of cooking delicacies, decorating the house, and participating in lively conversation. As the year completes the cycle, the stories of the old generation--told, listened to, and recorded--complete the memoir; and just as a new year starts a new cycle of life, new stories will be told by a younger generation--in a folk tradition of storytelling.

The style of Mora's presentation deserves special attention. A code switching from English to Spanish is consistent throughout the narration. Mora supports the concept of a "salad bowl" of our multicultural society, where each ethnicity contributes to the country's texture and prosperity by maintaining its own individuality. She stresses that it is through native language that cultural individuality is expressed first and foremost. And it is in native tongue that folk wisdom is best transmitted to posterity. Mora considers languages "unique examples of human inventiveness" that need to be protected. She

interestingly observes, "When a language disappears, a whole way of seeing and explaining the world vanishes" (Mora 1). In an interview, speaking about her dream that "being bilingual would be valued," Mora said:

We have a repressive linguistic atmosphere, and a long and ugly history of devaluing other languages. I love languages. I love their inventiveness. They're a record of human ingenuity. We need to be nurturing them, not suppressing them. (Barrera 226)

Thus, acutely aware of the threat of disappearing languages and ethnic identities through assimilation into the melting pot, Mora attempts to promote literacy and the preservation of languages through writing in both English and Spanish. In House of Houses, Spanish words and phrases seem to be quite naturally interwoven into English narration and dialogue among the characters to indicate the author's intention to make the reader aware of the way bilingual people think and express themselves.

John O. West comments on the use of both languages in a conversation by bilingual people saying that "[. . .] to eavesdrop on conversations between bilingual natives of the border area is a marvelous experience, as they shift freely

from one language to the other and back again--sometimes without being conscious of doing so" (34). West justifies such "intermixture of English and Spanish, coupled with a good-humored attitude towards oneself and one's linguistic/cultural predicament" by calling it "an integral part of the Mexican-American world" (38). Mora admits that she uses both languages "side by side" because she does not want to be "inaccessible to either audience" and that she likes "the feeling generated between" a bilingual audience and herself (Alarcon 125).

Another effective way for Mora to be accessible to any audience is the use of folk sayings and proverbs in narration, for they are an integral part of people's lives of any nationality. Explaining a polygenetic origin of proverbs, Archer Taylor states that "the same theme and even the same formulation of [a proverb] may occur to more than one person" (Leach 902). Therefore, since the same proverbs (with minor variations) can originate at the same time in different places independently, they can be recognized and understood by different nations and by all people, regardless of their educational background. As Ray B. Browne observes, proverbs are "an element of the culture of people on all levels of society, from the most ignorant



to the most sophisticated" and "the accumulated knowledge of the ages [and] the voice of history" (Coffin 192).

House of Houses is replete with proverbs and sayings. Mora explains her use of these pithy phrases in the appendix to the memoir:

In Spanish, as in any language, countless sayings, *dichos* or *refranes*, exist that enrich the language and are a means of perpetuating communal wisdom and values, also humor. *Quien habla con refranes es un saco de verdades*, who speaks in sayings is a sack of truths. (292)

John O. West points out that proverbs, plentiful in Mexican-American lore, "constitute a philosophy of life," as well as "give a very concise explanation of different situations in life" (39).

Mora's use of proverbs and sayings is a proof of the validity of this statement. For instance, listening to Aunt Chole's poignant romantic story about having strong feelings for a man too late in her life (in her eighties), Pat Mora alludes to a folk saying "*Para el amor no hay edad*" (Love is ageless 162). Reminiscing about another aunt, Aunt Lobo, Pat resorts to a saying "*No hay rosa sin espina*" (Every rose has its thorn) in her attempt to excuse

Aunt Lobo's "crazy" influence on her nephews and nieces and her paradoxical attitude toward marriage (146). Lobo, who cannot stand the thought of an intimate relationship between a man and a woman, loves the product of such relationship--her half-siblings--and nurtures them like a mother (41). Being obsessed with cleanliness, Lobo tries to purify the house from dirt and the very idea of impurity, a marital relationship, by constantly scrubbing and sweeping the floor and washing it with a hose. However, as Mora asserts, Lobo's love and devotion to children outweigh her flaws. Mama Cleto's mentioning a folk saying, "*Cada cabeza es un mundo*" (Each mind is a world), compels Mora to philosophize on how little we do know "another person, the unseen chambers into which they can retreat" (229). Although she has known Uncle Lalo her entire life, she hardly knew about the difficulties in his youth, perhaps because of his uncomplaining nature. Unwilling to burden others with his disappointments, Lalo tells about his experiences in a light-hearted, humorous manner. In retrospect, he tells the stories of his life--childhood, adolescence, and adult years--revealing and concealing details about his successful moments and hardships, and exposing his feelings.

Mora's use of proverbs as a pedagogic device to incorporate moral values in children proves that they are widely used in Mexican culture. "*Quien sabe dos lenguas, vale por dos*" (If you are bilingual, you count twice) is a suitable proverb for reminding children of the importance of having a good command of both languages--Spanish and English--in a bilingual family (274). Mama Cleta uses the proverb for Pat's children to see the advantages of speaking two languages. In her conversation with Pat about plants, Mama Cleta mentions a proverb "*Como siembras, segarás*" (As you sow, you will harvest), which expresses the value of hard work in pursuing one's goals. Although Mora says that by the proverb Mama Cleta expresses "the gardener's wisdom," it is obvious that its meaning goes far beyond "the link between sowing and harvest" (9). The proverb includes everything the family does--working, studying, and raising children. Because of its hard work and perseverance, the family is a success story. On another occasion, through a proverb "*Echando a perder se aprende*" (We learn by making mistakes), Mama Cleta passes her knowledge of growing roses to Mora, thus revealing the folk wisdom of learning by trying (143).

The function of proverbs is not always confined to the didactic purpose. Sometimes they are used merely for explaining the feelings of love and appreciation. By a folk saying "*Al que buen árbol se arrima, buena sombra le cobija*" (Seek shade under a worthy tree), Mora wishes to express her love and respect for her mother, Estela (163). Just as a tree explicitly represents Mora's father, so a tree symbolically stands for a nurturing and protective mother. Traditionally, in most cultures, not only does a mother give life to a child, but she also molds the child's personality by ingraining and cultivating the qualities and skills she considers necessary to have in adulthood. Her children's appreciation is clearly expressed in their trust. "There's no problem my mom can't solve," Stella, Mora's sister, says because their mother was always understanding and supportive in all their school and home activities (178).

Through a folk saying "*La que anda entre la miel, algo se le pega*" (Honey clings if you're surrounded by it), Mora expresses her appreciation of her childhood and dwells on one of the primary mottoes of a person's life (233). "Honey" is an inclusive word for values in the Mora's family--the right upbringing, education, art, music,

literature, good people--everything that surrounds children and influences them in a positive way. Thus, several years of admiration for the nuns in Catholic schools make Pat dream about being a nun because these "oh-so-holy sisters" seem to be the "symbols of goodness and purpose" (245).

Literature, loved since her early years, becomes as "essential as water" for Mora and makes her an inveterate reader for life (247).

A truly close relationship between the families is expressed by a proverb "*Cozo comunicado crece*" (Shared joy grows) (284). Whatever the occasion--joyous or sad--all relatives get together and share their experiences and emotions. A folk saying "*Por Navidad, dichoso el que en casa está*" (Blessed, to be home for Christmas) validates the cultural tradition for a family gathering on Christmas to share meals, prayers, entertainment, stories, as well as to reflect on the passing year and project hopes for a new year (274). It is for this reason that Mora's imagination does "invite" all narrators of her memoir to her dream house where Mama Cleto expresses a universal folk truth about every person's natural inclination to hope for the best, "*La esperanza no engorda pero mantiene*" (Hope, non-fattening and nourishing 281).

A folk saying, "*Sólo lo barato se compra con dinero*," (Only what's cheap can be bought with money), articulated by Aunt Chole, carries both didactic and validating purposes (140). It reveals the truth about the family values: the world, filled with their love for land, trees, flowers, and birds, is precious; family members' love and care for each other, and their home is priceless; and the continuation of family traditions from generation to generation is invaluable.

Thus, by employing the technique of magical realism, creating a fantasy family house, imagining the visits of the spirits of her ancestors, arranging the stories by the seasonal cycle of the year, fusing English and Spanish, and using folk proverbs and sayings in her memoir, Mora recreates a memorable family history, "passed" to her from the previous generations, which she wishes to pass on to posterity.

### III. A FAMILY'S ADJUSTMENT TO A NEW LAND

I stroke a rounded adobe mantle above a snapping fire, feel protective of this house that grows naturally in the Chihuahua desert, protects and mothers me, lets me listen, shed the layers I wear outside.

(House of Houses 272)

Immigrant families face the dilemma of whether to adopt the mainstream way of life by abandoning their own customs or adapt to new culture and, at the same time, keep their own traditions and practices. It is hard for immigrants to do the latter because of their lack of roots in a new land. Patrick D. Murphy comments on Gloria Anzaldúa's views on the preservation of Mexican-American ethnicity in the United States, "Anzaldúa recognizes that the vitality of a culture depends on the ability of its participants to adapt key beliefs and practices to changing world circumstances, but the ability to adapt rather than merely adopt or assimilate depends upon rootedness" (Murphy 2: 38). Therefore, the immigrants' priority often is to find a shelter--a home--that would establish security for a family and become a place to put down roots for posterity.

The prevailing idea of Mora's memoir centers on a stable family home. It is a permanent home that can

provide children with a sense of belonging to the land, country, and community. It is in a permanent home that family customs and traditions can be established and reinforced. And it is from a permanent home that children can draw moral strength, support, and ethnic pride. The importance of a permanent home might have served a major reason for Mora to name the first chapter of the memoir "House of Houses," rather than "January," as might have been expected for a calendrical structure.

A folk saying "As the rose is the flower of flowers, so is this, the house of houses," supplementing the first chapter, makes the chapter a launching of the memoir. Upon their arrival in the United States, Mora's ancestors sought security in the private world of their home. Their house served both as their refuge from the pressure of the mainstream American culture and their domain for keeping their indigenous culture intact by clinging to ethnic beliefs, traditions, and language. Mora views her house as a space "through which generations move, each bringing gifts, handing down languages and stories, recipes for living" (House 8).

Mora's parents acquire a small piece of land right before they get married. Raul Mora builds an adobe home



for his bride-to-be Estela Delgado as a wedding gift, instead of a honeymoon trip to Monterrey, as she expected. "This little piece of desert is my wedding present?" a hot-tempered bride indignantly confronts her fiancé. "One day you're going to be happy I did this. I got us a new F.H.A. loan, and we can build a house with just \$300 down," Raul tries to persuade his future wife. And he is right; Estela quickly gets used to the idea of having her own home. When it is built, she loves it. Likewise, her children love their home. Nostalgically, Mora confesses, "What a haven the imperfect, rock-enclosed back yard was for the four of us. We turn cartwheels, hang by our knees on the trapeze or swing-set bars, beautiful and limber we see ourselves in the private, protected space [. . .]" (237). Indeed, "protected space" is an adequate definition for a home of minorities with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The home serves as a mother's womb for a child, for it provides nourishment and safety from all possible hazards of the outside world.

Later on, Raul wants to mortgage their house in order to prevent his optical business from bankruptcy and asks for Estela's signature. She refuses. "[Her home] is the one thing the creditors can't take; she has to protect her

children" because she knows, from her childhood experience, what it means to lose a home (200). In an interview, Mora assures that "any woman who comes from a Latin American culture feels the need to have a good home, a warm home [. . .] to give that back to her children" (Alarcon 123).

The house, where Mora spent twenty-two years from her birth until her marriage, means so much to her that she equates its interior with the interior of the human body; both blend into each other and become one. Speaking for all of her family, Mora suggests that their past and present, their ancestors and living relatives, are embedded in their souls--"the layers of [their] skin"--as much as they dwell "in the adobe skin of [the] house" (122). The house, like the body and the soul, represents an entity that sparkles with opportunities. She wonders, "Through generations, sun, wind, rain, hands, voices, and dreams create and alter this place pregnant with possibilities in a landscape as familiar to me as my body. What does the house, the body, know?" (4). But her entire memoir answers this question by stressing the point that the house/body knows quite a lot: how to survive on a new land, how to adapt to a new way of life, how to raise a family, and how to preserve its heritage and ethnic identity.

Mora speaks about a home as an important link among generations, particularly in a socially underprivileged family. There are obvious similarities--a pattern--among the generations in the way the families spend their evenings. The serenity of the evenings of her childhood home comes to Mora's memory when "the family scatters throughout the house, [where] some work or pray in their rooms, some visit at the kitchen table" (8). Her mother plays Schubert's or Beethoven's soothing music; Lobo, who is visiting, reads; Mamande, Mora's grandmother, murmurs her prayers; Mora waters the plants and reads her favorite books. This description parallels the description of Mora's mother's quiet evenings with all the family members sitting at the kitchen table--the children doing homework, the mother praying, and the father reading. We can see that the family traditions are passed. That is why in her memoir, Mora gathers her relatives in "this family space through which generations move, [. . .] around the kitchen table to serve one another [or] in the walled garden, engaging in the slow conversation of families sitting to pass the time," as if trying to recreate mentally an ideal serenity of the family's evening pastime (7).

Mora consistently refers to her parents' house as the adobe house, and she invents her dream home as an adobe house too, to which she invites all family spirits--"the soul of this adobe" (43). Although adobe houses symbolize low status for being inhabited mostly by poor families (West 205), her family adobe house--an object of Mora's fondest memories--is a symbol of security, generational ties, and family pride. Through the techniques of its construction, an adobe house links the family to several generations.

Adobe, sun-dried brick made of clay and straw, which is slowly dried by the heat of the sun, was widely used by the inhabitants of the Southwest in building houses centuries ago. Rafaela Castro in the Dictionary of Chicano Folklore, explains that the word *adobe*, sometimes called "mud-straw," has Arabic origin and means "unburnt bricks made from earth" (4). This indicates that a house, made of adobe blocks, is not purely a native construction but rather the result of the transmission of folk practices and traditions by diffusion.

Tracing the history of the construction of adobe houses on the border, John O. West emphasizes that folk architecture, sometimes called vernacular, "in style,

materials, and methods of construction, follows tradition rather than any formal or learned school of design or building" (197). West explains that the construction of adobe houses has been the result of blending Indian and Spanish cultures. In the 1500s, the Spaniards brought the knowledge and skills of building dwellings of adobe blocks to the New World. The techniques of producing adobe blocks and using them in construction originated in Egypt, where people used them in the building of pyramids. When Spanish settlers arrived in the 1600s, Indians had already built pueblos--houses made of stones or adobe mud, shaped by hand. Later, their skills were combined with the newcomers' more sophisticated techniques of construction--"the rectangular building block." Bricks were shaped with the help of box-like forma, which looked like "a short section of ladder" (West 198). This is how the native inhabitants of the Southwest learned how to form mud into bricks and build their houses.

In the beginning, the Spanish missionaries used natives' labor to build churches and missions with blocks; but eventually people started using blocks in building houses. West notes that this old technique of adobe-making, being handed down from generation to generation via

demonstration and practice, is still popular nowadays among the Mexican-American population. The biggest advantage of constructing adobe houses is the absence of monetary liability; for the building materials--earth, straw, and water--do not cost anything; all people need is labor and skills.

Different scholars emphasize the importance of the construction of an adobe house in a Mexican family, where it is a joint project of all family members. John O. West points to the passing down of this folk practice from male to male, "The boy learns from the father, who in turn learned from his father--a true process of folk transmission of skills" (199). Rafaela Castro stresses the females' input in the building of a family home, "Within the Hispanic community it has been the role of women known as *enjarradoras* to plaster the walls of the structures, a task that is done with the bare hands" (5). One can assume that just as a father teaches his son to put up the walls of a house, so a mother teaches her daughter to plaster the walls. In her memoir, Mora does not specify who built their house, but she makes it clear that her mother does her best in decorating both its interior and exterior; and she mentions her own active involvement in the gardening.

The earthly-based material for the house has a special meaning for Mora, who feels that the dwellers of an adobe house are spiritually connected with the earth. As Gertrude Jobes in the Dictionary of Mythology, Folklore and Symbols notes, "The body of a house typifies earth; the roof, heaven; the window, deity" (795). Soil, water, and the sun, mingled with human labor, sweat, and love, create the unity of the earth with man. The Southwestern inhabitants use the soil both as an essential construction material for their houses and a substance for nourishing their souls--through deriving pleasure from the trees and flowers they plant on it. Gardening, or aesthetically decorating yards--"yardas"--surrounding their homes, plays a significant role in Chicano culture. Grass, shrubs, and flowers, embellished with potted flowers "arranged in a patterned manner," display people's creativity and "a folk art" (Castro 270). Recycled objects (tin cans, kitchen pots, and car tires), served as flower pots, exhibit "bits and pieces of [their] personal life" and "add visual charm and historical value to a home" (Castro 271). The Moras' garden is a proof of this statement.

The process and the results of the gardening fascinate Mora. She shows people who work the land passionately,

with care and love, and who give away part of their souls to the earth, blending with it. Mora finds it both "eerie" and "appealing" that while digging themselves into earth, "loosening the soil," and "burying some of [their] essence, [their] breath," people become "part of the compost" (68). The family house made of soil, standing on soil, and containing the souls of those who work the soil, represents an inseparable unity between the earth and man. Not surprisingly does she call it an "adobe body to house the spirits, [. . . ] mud refuge whose outer skin, the exterior wall, offers the pleasure of being encircled by earth, the poetry of place" (3).

Not only does Mora have such poetic attitude towards the house, but she also glorifies the land on which the house stands--a piece of desert, which her ancestors and parents cultivated and turned into a garden. Robin Reily Fast comments on Mora's portrayal of the desert by saying that her "desert is not antagonistic to life, is not a wasteland, does not conform to the literary images readers schooled in the male-dominated Western tradition most commonly associate with the word 'desert'" (31). Mora portrays the desert in such a friendly, loving way because



she considers it her home. In Nepantla, she sings an ode to the desert:

That desert--its firmness, resilience, and fierceness, its whispered chants and tempestuous dance, its wisdom and majesty--shaped us as geography always shapes its inhabitants. The desert persists in me, both inspiring and compelling me to sing about her and her people, their roots and blooms and thorns. (13)

Mora proudly calls herself "the daughter of the desert" (44) not only because she grew up on this land, but also because she actively participated in its cultivating, together with her mother and aunts. She admires the family's endeavor to tame the dry land by nourishing and nurturing it and getting it to bloom. Mora's maternal grandfather, Eduardo Luis Delgado, and his four daughters, Ignacia, Adelina, Elodia, and Dolores, had to cultivate the desert in order to feel at home in the new country when they immigrated to the United States from Mexico. Driven from Juárez by the danger of being persecuted by Pancho Villa, Eduardo crossed the Rio Grande and settled in El Paso. A respectable, well-to-do judge in Mexico suddenly became indigent in El Paso. With no means to sustain his

family--a job, house, or knowledge of English--the judge had to do something to survive and provide for his four daughters. By chance, when one of Villa's supporters in Juárez purchased his mine, Eduardo bought a small house in El Paso. A piece of barren desert, adjacent to his house, was treated by the family as home. Actually, they considered the land as a continuation of their home. The Mora family treat the desert "as female mother, [. . .] as whole and self-sustaining" (Murphy 2: 39). The women tame, nurture, nourish the desert, and turn it into a garden by planting trees and flowers. Robin Reily Fast notes that the "desert is a source of life and power for many of Mora's old and solitary women, who live in harmony and reciprocity with it" (31). Indeed, the women employ all their creativity, devotion, and love to make the desert bloom. In her collection of poems Borders, Mora sings an ode to women, made stronger and more persistent by the desert. The desert teaches women how to survive not only on this relentless, bare land and how to get the results of their hard work but also how to survive in the often unfriendly world of different culture. Mora asserts:

Desert women know  
about survival.

Fierce heat and cold  
have burned and thickened  
our skin. Like cactus  
we've learned to hoard,  
to sprout deep roots,  
to seem asleep, yet woke  
at the scent of softness  
in the air, to hide  
pain and loss of silence. (80)

Mora considers the garden as "an accumulation of nurtured possibilities" and stresses that the trees, plants and herbs "survive in this desert oasis [only] because of the attentiveness of the family, its seeds, plantings, cuttings, pinchings, feedings, prunings, and endless, endless watering" (156). It takes families years of hard work to make their piece of dry land fertile. They seem to prove the validity of Richard Dorson's statement, "in the folk region, people are wedded to the land, [and they] themselves possess identity and ancestry through continuous occupation of the same soil" (Dorson 1: 75). The older women transfer their knowledge of horticulture, love for earth and plants, and determination to produce the results of their hard work to their posterity. Mora recalls how

she and her siblings used to water the flowers near their house "trying to tempt roses or larkspur or snapdragons to survive in that hard dirt below the glaring sun" (116).

And the results are gratifying: their garden rewards them with an extravagance of gorgeous species of flora.

Mora writes:

In the desert, a garden demands as love does everywhere, care, intentionality. Ignore the soil, food, light, and water needs of caladiums or cannas, and they will soon shrivel from neglect, vanish from this space both private and communal; a space of labor and frustration, also of meditation, solace, hope, and sensory delights. (8)

The relationship between the desert and its inhabitants is reciprocal. Not only does the desert gain from being cultivated, but the desert dwellers benefit from the land as well. Mora assures that the "desert teaches [people] the value of space." She thinks that especially women profit from the given space, "like the wind, [their] spirits will play if set free in a broad expanse" (Nepantla 67). The desert provides these women with privacy and gives them space for implementing their talents and

creativity, and, at the same time, makes them stronger and more persistent. Gertrude Jobes defines garden as "a guarded or protected place," "a place for devotional purposes, for retirement and meditation, [. . . ] (628).

The garden in the memoir fits this definition: it serves as a haven for the children and a serene space for rest, chat, and meditation for adults.

The memoir reveals how women consistently pass down folk knowledge, skills, and traditions of planting to a new generation, thus fulfilling the didactic function of folklore. Aunt Carmen reveals that she "got" her "love of gardening" from her father, who taught her how to fertilize the soil and nurture the trees and flowers (226). She enriches the soil with "kitchen scraps--rinds, peelings, eggshells," and her husband Lalo adds "leaves and garden clippings to his compost heap" (207). Carmen and Lalo handed down their interest in flora and gardening to their niece, Pat Mora. From childhood, Mora has been interested in various exotic plants and looked for information about them in the catalogs. Knowing that love for horticulture was ingrained in her aunts' minds by her ancestors, she imagines her great-great-grandmother Mama Cleta--"the gardener's wisdom" and "the link between sowing and

harvest"--asking her to plant flowers with the names of saints, giving preference to a religious over "scientific taxonomy" (9). Mama Cleto urges Mora to listen to the music of flowers because she hears "the colors--flutes, guitars, drums, violins, harps" (145).

Another aunt, Aunt Chole, ceremoniously leads Mora to the yard to show her a miracle of blooming of a nurtured "large copper king gazania," after many years of sterility (120). Finally, her arduous efforts to make the flower bloom are rewarded. Most importantly, Aunt Chole's message about getting the desired results through perseverance, hard work, and love gets through. Mora's interest in plants never stops. She keeps ordering and planting "paperwhite narcissus and some hyacinths." She thinks about planting an "aromatic" lemon tree and continues browsing through the catalogs (236).

Mora writes with love about the plants in her garden. Personified flowers and trees seem to speak to her soul and express her profound emotional connection with nature:

March twenty-first, spring, and the earth behaves accordingly--forsythia splashes adobe courtyards yellow, daffodils nod when I walk by, narcissus scent the air, gray chamisa and bare trees unfurl

their green dreams; [. . .] Tulips blare,  
 daffodils lift their round faces to the sun,  
 apricot trees--unable to contain their joy--swing  
 their white--veiled arms, and the river out back  
 rushes, swirls into spring, spring. (House 94)

Mora philosophizes about the meaning plants have for the humankind. She considers flora the essence of life, intricately woven into human life:

Plants, human's first medicines, through ritual and religion intertwine with our lives, become sources of food, shelter, warmth, weapons, clothing, dyes, cosmetics, wine. The world's flora nourish, inspire, intoxicate. Rich sources of mystery, magic, and mythology; they flavor our dishes, beautify our rooms, soothe our aches, scent our beds, decorate our bodies and altars, perfume our paths and poems; these green lifeforms that rise from the dark tangle of underground life, like our subconscious, fertile and full of promise. (8)

The entire memoir proves the truthfulness of these words. Flowers play an important role in the family's life. According to a folk saying, a rose is the flower of

flowers. Mora refers to a rose as a "symbol of the beloved as well as the Virgin Mary," and she gives the information on Persian gardens, about "the custom of sprinkling guests with rose water" and "consuming the essence of the mesmerizing flower in rose preserves and sherbets" (10).

Although the Mora and Delgado families love all decorative plants, they give preference to the rose. Pointing to the turbulent times in the lives of Mexican-Americans, Gloria Anzaldua comments, "Roses are the Mexican's favorite flower. I think, how symbolic--thorns and all" (Anzaldúa 91). In the Dictionary of Superstitions, David Pickering refers to a rose as "the most significant of all flowers in terms of the superstitions attached to it" and says that, as a symbol of love and passion, it has different meanings and interpretations in various cultures (221). The Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend provides rich information about the mythological, symbolic, and practical meanings of a rose in various cultures, stressing its medicinal value. All parts of a rose--"root, bark, leaves, petals, fruit"--contain curative qualities, which have been appreciated since ancient times (Leach 957).



In the memoir, roses play various roles in the families. On various occasions, Mora mentions roses. She routinely peruses the catalogs about roses (10). Raul Mora dreams about planting lots of roses around the house he builds for his family, and eventually his wife plants roses in the yard and places metal cans with roses in front of statues in the house. Aunt Chole mentions buying food for her roses (128). Mama Cleta includes roses in her potpourri (146). Her aunts use rose petals, brewed in the kitchen, as ferments in wines (158). Rose petals are used as a soporific for Libby (59), and they aromatize the rooms in the house (12). Mora and her sisters bring roses to their teachers at school, as offerings, as an appreciation of their work. Mr. Woody, Estela's tutor in piano lessons, showers his student with beautiful roses, expressing his appreciation for her family's friendship.

Mora shows her love for the garden by personifying it, "garden [. . .] has its moods, its storms, its seasons" (45). She even identifies herself with the garden. Either working in the garden--planting and nurturing the flowers--or just resting in it, she experiences different feelings; she can be determined and strong, pensive and sad, or happy and joyful. Speaking about joy derived from a garden, Mora

refers to an ancient Chinese saying, "If you want to be happy for a day, roast a pig. If you want to be happy for a year, marry. If you want to be happy for a lifetime, plant a garden" (143).

The saying proves to be true. Indeed, the Mora's garden makes them happy. On the porch facing the garden and admiring the plants, she listens to her great-great-grandmothers' and aunts' stories; in the garden, her father takes his last "arm-in-walk" with his daughter to admire the flowers, "four days after he dies" (114); in the garden, her father, when alive, loves to "stretch out on the pine needles" and sleep like his "Indian uncles" (80); and in the garden, her father, when dead, "transforms" into a huge tree, "a tree of life" (95). Mora's emotional attachment to trees reveals an old folk reverence for them. Pickering states that the "veneration of trees seems to have been the very earliest forms of worship in human society" (264). People have used trees for practical purposes, medicinal use, and aesthetic pleasure. Thinking of her father as a tree justifies Mora's appreciation of his honest, hardworking life and invaluable influence on his children. Mora cites Saint Augustine's words, "Paradise is a place where there are trees" and adds,

"especially in the desert" (192). She refers to the origin of the word paradise, "walled garden" from Persian, because "gardeners create small places of paradise" (192). Her father's symbolic transformation into a tree carries a profound meaning. Mora writes about a family tree, presenting every member as a very important person in her and her relatives' lives. She implies that when one family member passes away, his/her energy, instruction, education, and love are alive in memory and deeds of the relatives. The children's thoughts about their late parents usually trigger the memories of their house--a place of nurturing, upbringing, and loving.

In the memoir, the ties among generations appear to be very strong, mainly because of the nurturing atmosphere of the family house. The elders--parents and grandparents--try to preserve the family ambience for their children and grandchildren intact. By personal example and by verbal instruction, they teach them morals, hard work, and dignified survival in the world. In his eighties, feeling that he will not live much longer, Pat's father asks his children to remember that family is the most important thing in life. He instructs them, "If you don't have family, you don't have anything. [. . .] Sometimes one

falls down and needs help, and you have to give them a hand and help them up. I can't help anybody up anymore. I just want the family to stay together" (105). And his children certainly support him physically and morally. They daily visit him in the hospital, nurture him when he stays at home. They take care of him when he barely can take care of himself. When they take him out to a nice restaurant and he lacks his former skills to handle food, his daughter Stella saves him from embarrassment by assisting him and redirecting his attention. Mora expresses pride in being her parents' offspring:

In habits and tendencies, I'm both my mother's and father's child--his punctuality, eagerness for work, energy, and ability to sleep--anywhere, anytime; her love of books, pleasure at fitting words together, experimenting with their different colors and patterns; and pleasure at public speaking, persuading. From both, I inherited fire: a need for family closeness and a quickness to anger, for neither of my parents had any use for genteel surfaces at home. They flared, often at each other. (House 149)

Mora inherited the "need for family closeness" and the warm attitude towards her family from her mother. If filial love can be demonstrated through constantly referring to one's parent, House of Houses is the proof of a daughter's devotion to her beloved mother. Mora mentions her mother, Estela Delgado-Mora, throughout the entire memoir; but the chapters "July" and "August" she devotes mostly to her. Estela Delgado--a bright student and talented and ambitious public speaker--experienced many disappointments while trying to show her equality with the white Anglo students at school. Fortunately, her home was her stronghold where she felt protected, understood, and encouraged. Mora lets us know that home can and should be a haven for a child, as a place to draw strength from:

Torn by conflicting loyalties, insecure in a world different from her private world, Mother took with her the security that came from a house yes, with its own structural tensions, and yet where six adults cared about her, their concern in any language assisting her as she grew to incorporate her pain and doubt, to transform them. (182)

Mora describes her mother's confusion by the dichotomy between her Anglo appearance and her Mexican origin and her ways to deal with it. Mora wonders:

What is it this child demands who strives both to blend in and to excel, this child who wants to be different, who wants a costume like the other girls and yet wants to be noticed, makes flamboyant choices unaware yet of the degree of her difference and of price of the attention she seeks? In that space between generations and cultures, in that border in which she is Mexican but doesn't look Mexican, does she long to be seen as she sees herself in her daydreams--as we see ourselves in our day-dreams--full of promise, demand that her mother strive with her, long to take the mother she loves, pulling the mother with her, to be acceptable in a script written in a language her mother will never speak? (170)

Her vigorous participation in every undertaking of the school helps Stella overcome the feeling of non-belonging among her Anglo schoolmates.

In the memoir, we can see such bonding between all mothers and daughters through generations. Just as Amelia,

Mora's grandmother, was there for her daughter by constant chaperoning and assisting her in all school activities, so is Estela for her daughter, and Mora is for her daughters, Libby and Cissy. Although Amelia looks very different from other mothers--"more matronly," "in longer dresses"--and does not speak English, she overcomes the feeling of inferiority and attends Estela's school activities (169). Such devotion and interest in her child's life has been passed down to Estela, who does the same thing for her children. All her life, she tries to be active. Mora recalls:

Mother, our chauffeur all those years, drives us to school, piano lessons, to the library, to the pool and parties and movies, to deliver glasses for my father's business. She plans birthday parties for each of us, taking friends to the movies, or at card tables, rolling dice, calling out, "Bunko." (196)

Whereas Estela's devotion to other people reveals itself later in life, her devotion to her own interests appears earlier when she becomes a student at the elementary and high schools. Although almost all the students are Anglo, she does not feel "isolated" because

she is too busy trying to excel in all subjects and extra curricular activities. She participates in all the festivals and parades, leads the band, and delivers speeches from the stage. In short, she "swims through her school days [smoothly] like a fish in water" (*Como pez en el agua*), comments Mama Clea about Estela (170).

Estela's outgoing nature and perseverance are passed on to Mora. Just as Estela had the audacity to speak up for Mexican people worthy of being honored, so does her daughter Pat have the courage to write and speak about people of her ethnicity. Although the situations are different--with Estela honoring Loranzo de Zavala, the governor of Mexico, from the school assembly podium and her daughter speaking about the rights and privileges of people of color at the conferences and in her books--both endeavors are equally challenging. Stella doubts the heroic deeds of Loranzo de Zavala and even considers him a traitor to Mexico because he signed the Texas Declaration of Independence, but at the contest on Texas heroes, she wants to distinguish a Mexican, rather than always praising Anglos. Stella's pride for the people of her heritage and desire to acknowledge their achievements is obvious in the beginning of the speech she prepared:



Much has been written and more has been said about the Anglo American in the struggle of Texas for Independence, but little or nothing has been written about the Mexicans who fought for this state. (177)

Later, Estela's daughter Pat continues what her mother has started. She inherits Estela's pride in Mexicans as a people worthy of recognition and respect. "As a writer I am most selfishly committed to retrieving my Mexican past," she confesses in the collection of her essays Nepantla (38). In her attempts to establish pride in the Mexican culture, Mora produces children's literature about Hispanic Americans, writes essays and poetry about the Southwest, the border, the desert, and the desert women, tours the country with lectures, and participates in conferences devoted to the conservation of ethnicity and languages. Mora raises her voice for giving equal rights to all United States citizens, "[. . .] Mexican Americans are the products of two very different cultures. [. . .] but we live, and many of us were born, in the United States and rightfully should be heard" (Nepantla 67).

Estela's role as a mother is pivotal in Mora's life not only because she bore and raised her, but also because

she passed to her the spirit of nonconformity and the desire to achieve her dreams. Estela's outgoing and rebellious nature shows progression in generations through the women's endeavors to defend their aspirations.

Estela's mother, Sotero Amelia Landavazo, being an orphan, conforms to the requirements of the family who raised her, when she agrees to marry a man she does not love. But she shows her independent spirit by stubbornly refusing to learn English, apparently trying to keep her personal world intact by "carving linguistic space for herself [and] denying those foreign sounds a place inside of her"

(Nepantla 55).

It is this stubborn resistance that Estela acquires from her mother. But, unlike her mother, she decides to take advantage of being bilingual by creating a wider space for her self-expression. Fluent and eloquent in English, she demonstrates her equality with Anglos through her excellent oratory skills. From the school podium, she calls for perfection from everybody. However, Estela's ambitions fail to go beyond her school activities, for, due to financial limitations, she does not pursue her dream to continue education and become a writer. Mora, nonetheless, admires her mother's free spirit, passed down to her. She

continues Estela's beginnings of public speaking. She also wishes for her children to inherit their "grandmother's articulate fierceness, her determination to be treated fairly" (Nepantla 84).

Thus, calling her family a "crazy" but "holy body," Mora gathers in her "dream house" all family members and the family spirits for a family reunion. Such a reunion can happen only in a dream or imagination, but it can help one fully appreciate the invaluable impact of a family house on its dwellers (43). Alan Dundes says that "a place can be, and often is, an extremely meaningful component of individual identity" (13). Echoing this statement, Mora suggests that nowhere does a person perceive his/her identity better than in a family home, a permanent place through which "generations move" (7).

#### IV. A FAMILY'S ATTEMPTS TO PRESERVE ITS ETHNICITY IN THE UNITED STATES

. . . since minorities experience opposition more than majorities, it is perfectly reasonable that minorities have more of at stake in defining identity (especially their own) than do members of majority cultures.  
(Alan Dundes 7)

Upon their arrival to a new country, most immigrants face the problem of marginalization because of the language barrier, cultural differences, and lack of roots. To find themselves on the border of a new society is not a pleasant situation for people who come to find a better life. But they cannot consider their lives improved if they have to sacrifice their identity for financial or political security. To establish their own and their offspring's desirable present and future, immigrants need to find the ways of preserving their ethnic identity; and folklore can be the answer to the solution of the problem.

Mora's grandfather, Eduardo Luis Delgado, had to leave his native land of Mexico to avoid harm to his four daughters and himself by a rebel Pancho Villa. The family crossed the Rio Grande River and settled in El Paso. When the situation in Juárez improved, Eduardo went back to his

city to continue his abandoned practice as a judge. Every morning he crossed the Rio Grande, and every evening he returned to his new home in El Paso. Living on the one side of the Rio Grande and working on the other, Eduardo literally ended up on the "border," not belonging to either side. Having sold his property in Juárez, he did not have a place to live or the money to buy a new home in Mexico. Having bought a small home in the United States, he did not know English and could not be employed. These circumstances forced him to travel back and forth, from one country to another, in his attempts to reconcile both psychologically and emotionally, to survive and preserve his identity and integrity.

Eduardo Delgado exemplifies "a Mexican population stranded in an alien country," whose "marginal existence" is discussed by Richard Bauman in his introduction to Folklore and Culture on the Texas-Mexican Border. As Bauman gives a historic information on the merging Mexico and America in the South, he acknowledges that "as a cultural region, the lower Border is [. . .] the product of a complex and turbulent development," and he calls the Rio Grande "a symbol of separation" for Mexicans (Paredes xii). Américo Paredes comments that the Rio Grande became "the

international line" separating relatives, friends, and neighbors, who lived "within shouting distance" and found themselves "legally in different countries" (Paredes Folklore 26). Mora calls the Rio Grande a "brown river of sorrows" for separating her from her ancestors who were born, lived, and died on the other side; but she also calls it "the river of hope" for protecting her grandfather from violence and giving him a new country for living (45). Mora projects this hope on the present and future generations that will some day enjoy the equality of citizenship with the mainstream population and will not be left out "on the border."

Adjustment to a new country is not easy for the Delgados. However, such valuable traits, inherited from their ancestors, as loyalty to their family, perseverance, diligence, optimism, love for nature, and national pride help them along the way. Likewise, the family appreciates generosity. Mora's aunt, Aunt Lobo, is grateful to the United States for protecting her family when they fled the Pancho Villa's violence, and "the American flag wrapped itself around" them; but, at the same time, she always remembers and values her Mexican roots (41). She works in the same store for forty-three years and takes pride in her

job. She inherited a serious attitude toward her employment from her father, who daily crossed the river to provide for his family.

For Raul, Mora's father, "work, work, work" is his life; he "grinds lenses, hand-cuts the patterns, [. . .] pushes himself and his employees, many of them his relatives [. . .], to get the jobs out faster" (91). He opens his own optical business, stays successful for a while, thanks to long hours of hard work, but loses his wealth during the years of the Depression. Running his optical business for nearly thirty years, Raul, in his seventies, opens a dispensing business. Mora calls him a representative of "the last generation with little interest in retirement, defining themselves through work" (203). He sets an excellent example for his children and grandchildren through practice, rather than through speech. He also helps his relatives during the difficult years of the Depression by employing them and paying them until the last days of his business.

The problem of identity is a big issue for immigrants. Not only do they sometimes find it hard to understand people of a different country--their nature, culture, beliefs, and attitudes--but it becomes difficult for them

to perceive their own new selves. They form new selves because immigrants cannot remain static. They inevitably change, no matter how much they are opposed to change. They change simply for the reason of questioning themselves: "Who am I now? What am I to do? How am I going to be perceived? Am I going to be liked? What do I do to be accepted AND liked? What if nobody likes me?" Other questions may also attack their consciousness. However, with the strongest of the wishes to be accepted and liked, these newcomers do not want to change. They prefer to be accepted for what they are--with their life experiences, their cultural values, and views of the world. Commenting on the feelings of Mexican immigrants about their position in the United States, Américo Paredes notes:

The Mexican has always been on the defensive in the border situation, afraid of being swallowed whole. He does not have to be sophisticated or an intellectual to realize the risk to his way of life that culture contact entails. The folklore shows his preoccupation about remaining Mexican even when he is becoming most Americanized (Folklore 41).



Still, change is inevitable because immigrants, even if they live in their ethnic communities, have to associate with the natives of the new country, follow the rules and laws of the new society, as well as enjoy the rights provided by the laws. The question is to what degree to adopt and how much to give up of one's own way of life. If one wants to assimilate and at the same time to preserve one's identity and integrity, balance is the answer.

Paredes speculates about a new generation of Mexicans who have been born in the United States and have no notion of the "exile" attitude of their parents but realize the differences that distinguish them from the mainstream Anglo American population: "In self-defense," they invented ways of behavior different from those of their parents, "exaggerating these traits as much as those they have inherited in the desire to create a new personality of their own" (Folklore 12). This concept is one that Mora opposes. She wants the uniqueness and richness of the Mexican culture, as well as any other ethnicity, to be appreciated, respected, and preserved as worthy. She wants us "to question and ponder what values and customs we wish to incorporate into our lives, to continue our individual and our cultural evolution" (Nepantla 53).

Alan Dundes argues, "There is an important connection between the concept of identity and folklore" (7). And what is the first indication of one's identity? Through a person's name is identity represented first and foremost. Américo Paredes states that names are "the simplest forms of verbal folk expression" and that by our names, "we affirm our own identity," thus "separating ourselves from others" (31). Naming a child has always been a special event in families. Naming usually is a careful decision of family members as a result of deliberation or a family tradition. There are different superstitions regarding naming a child: one forbids naming a baby after a deceased older sibling; another warns against giving a baby a parent's name to prevent a child's untimely death (Pickering 184). Often, names carry significant meaning: "The name given may be that of a saint, a hero, an ancestor, or a natural object, and the hope is that a child will develop the admirable qualities of the name it bears" (Leach 782). And, naturally, a family can be extremely upset if a child fails to meet certain expectations.

A person clings to his name, considering it as an integral part of himself, and becomes very sensitive if the name is misspelled, mispronounced, or not remembered after

the first introduction. Pat Mora's mother is upset about the authorities of El Paso who spelled her name with two letter l--the American way--as she assumes, instead of only one l, which is the Spanish way. Thus Estela becomes Estella. To a person who misspelled the name by one letter it is not crucial; however, it makes the whole difference to Mrs. Mora, who in her late seventies wants to change it. She suspects that her parents either overlooked the error or were too "intimidated by all the forms in English." Feeling the loss of a part of her ethnic identity, Estela does not want to give up her Mexican heritage because she thinks she is "becoming more Mexican every year." She also complains about her mother's name, misspelled on her birth certificate. Instead of Sotero Amelia, the county clerk spells it as Sotera Amelia Landavazo. "So much for the accuracy of official birth documents," comments Estela bitterly (166).

Not surprisingly, Estela feels like reaching for her ethnic roots when she approaches her eighties. Through her entire life, she has thought of herself as the one to be deprived of the possibilities she deserves. As a student, Estela is trying to succeed. Bright, hardworking, and talented in public speaking, she competes in a speech

contest but does not win because of her ethnic identity. She is "trapped" between her Anglo looks (light skin) and Spanish name. Being aware of little chance to win, Estela still cherishes hope that she will be lucky: "As long as the judges don't know my name, I have a chance, can probably win." But almost each time, she faces the opposite. As soon as the committee hears her name, Delgado, she is "out" (177).

So Estela's name is an impediment to her success and recognition of her talent and her personality. It is as if she hosts two personalities in one body. Her Anglo appearance allows her entrance and participation in the events meant mostly for white students, but her Mexican heritage prevents her from being fully accepted for the qualities she has--her talent, friendly nature, and outgoing personality. Thanks to her fair skin, she can dine in a restaurant with the sign NO DOGS OR MEXICANS, for "no one there can tell [she is] Mexican," but she feels "bad" about this experience (177). For such discrimination Estela feels bad. She also feels bad about her humiliation and her involuntary intention to resort to deception and hide her heritage, of which she is expected to be proud, behind her Anglo looks. She wants to belong to her school,

environment, community, and society as much as she belongs to her ethnicity and her family, not at the expense of diminishing the importance of her ethnicity. Rightfully, she considers the country of her birth her own. Eagerness to be a part of the mainstream culture and the inability to fit in confuse and frustrate Estela and compel her to pour out her frustration in her diary:

"Being born in Texas certainly never would anyone of Spanish or as is now named Hispanic last name be classified as "white." Lord was I insecure! Why me?? I am fair-skinned, hazel eyes, lite brown hair--heck no one will really know. I can pass myself off as white? No danger of Dad showing up at school. He's a busy man, a lawyer by the way and before that had been a Mexican judge. Oh, no I came from no dummy but" (181)

Estela's brother, Mora's Uncle Lalo, experiences the same pressure of his split identity. He is also fair-skinned, a fact which often saves him the disgrace of discrimination; but his Hispanic name causes confusion. During the Depression, the name cost Lalo a job. He almost gets hired by Fort Bliss, the local army base, but is refused because of his unwillingness to change his name, as

he was advised. "Just change your name, Delgado," says the sergeant glancing up, "and you've got a job" (220). At first, Lalo feels at a loss about what to say. Conflicting thoughts and emotions run through his head and heart. His family counts on his getting this job. It is almost impossible to find employment during the years of the Depression. But as much as he needs a job, he needs his roots to be preserved. His name is his identity, his heritage, and his pride. It is a part of his being. He cannot imagine how he can "surrender his father's name, his father, the judge who recently died" while he "can still hear the dirt he'd thrown on the coffin, his duty as the eldest son." And "looking hard at his shoes," Lalo pronounces his verdict, "I can't, sir" (220). Had Uncle Lalo compromised, he would have eliminated or reduced the family's worry about their financial situation; but his compromise would have cost him his integrity and identity.

Such moral strength and pride for his heritage through his unwillingness to relinquish the name given by his parents are certainly derived from the family. However, despite the disappointment and frustration about this experience, Lalo does not hold grudges against the sergeant. He is even trying to excuse his actions by

blaming the system, not the sergeant, who "was trying to help" him by telling him "the way the things were" (220). What Uncle Lalo does feel frustrated and irritated about is that some individuals of his own ethnicity question his identity. Each time he goes to the bank, a bank teller, who is Hispanic herself, "sneers" at his name of the check and asks for a proof of his identity. She cannot believe that he is a Mexican. Lalo is angry at the fact that "all [people] have to look a certain way" (121), even for people who are also subject to discrimination, and all have to be categorized on the basis of ethnicity rather than just being regarded as the citizens of this country.

Mora raises awareness of the lack of the possibilities for minorities to get a college education. Most of her relatives could not go to college because of financial limitations at home. It was not that they had no desire to continue their education but that they needed to start making money as soon as possible to support their families. Aunt Lobo and her three sisters worked in the store during the Depression bringing their meager income home. Because Aunt Chole could never finish school, she feels "the dumbest in the house" and inadequate among educated people (93). Uncle Lalo had "aspirations to be an engineer" and

study in college (219). But when he was strongly encouraged by his teachers to go to college as one of the brightest students, he declined the advice because of the need to take care of his mother by helping her financially. Estela, his sister, one of the best students at high school, also surprised her teachers and schoolmates by working in the lingerie department, sorting "bras and girdles rather than reading Amy Lowell and Emily Dickinson at the local college" (178). However much sacrifice of the dreams and ambitions might seem regrettable and sad, this sacrifice is certainly worthy and justified by the close family relationship. In Nepantla, Mora proudly asserts, "Family ties [in Latino families] are so strong that not even death can sever them" (77). This statement is another explanation of her decision to gather the ghosts of her relatives at the kitchen table and listen to their stories. Being born in the United States and "very much influenced by this culture," Mora does not tend to the graves of her deceased ancestors, like her beloved Aunt Lobo eagerly did; instead, she wants "to polish, polish [her] writing tools to preserve images of women like Lobo, unsung women whose fierce family love deserves our respect" (Nepantla 78).



Mora's strong sense of belonging to her family and the place of birth is demonstrated through her proud announcement of her identity and remuneration of all the members of her family tree in Chapter 3:

I AM Patricia Mora, born in El Paso, Texas,  
daughter of the desert, of the border, of the Rio  
Grande del Norte, daughter of Estela Delgado, who  
is the great-granddaughter of Anacleto Manquera  
and Nepomuceno Delgado, granddaughter of Ignacio  
Delgado y Manquera and Maria Ignacia Barragan;  
daughter of the circuit judge, Eduardo Luis  
Delgado of Cusiuhirachic, Mexico, [. . .] (44)

The listing of her ancestors and the living relatives is supplied with information characterizing them, a pattern, which shows her great respect and reverence for her family. This meticulous remuneration, completed by the powerful lines "always the crossing of that brown river of sorrows to that city of our births, mine, my mother's, my children's [. . .]" (44), justifies the author's pride of being a part of this country, the country that gave refuge and shelter for her ancestors and became their home.

The female characters in House of Houses struggle against gender, ethnic, and cultural marginality of the

Anglo male-dominant society. In her writing, Mora is concerned about preserving the cultural and ethnic identity of the Hispanic population of the United States. Being born and reared in El Paso, on the border, she knows first-hand what it is like to be on the margin. In the memoir, she portrays mostly her immediate relatives and ancestors and their endeavors not only to survive in dominant Anglo culture, but also to prevent their own culture from disappearing into the melting pot. Although she discusses both men and women, and she writes about men--her grandfathers, father, and uncles--with respect and affection, it is the women in the book that are the objects of Mora's profound admiration. Women in the Mora and Delgado families are a strong physical and moral support for men.

In the family, women seem to enforce patriarchy. When Pat asks her father whether it was a difficult decision for them to leave Mexico, he states, "It is no decision. It is the law. My mother is the law" (82). Mexican women's marginal position in society makes them queens and princesses at home. They attempt to reach the "outer" space by extending their homes to the outside. It is women who nurture and cultivate the desert and turn it into

gardens. "Gardens, like families, can be timeless--if they're tended," says Mama Cleto (143). It is in the garden that women apply their talents. It is through the garden, "a space both private and communal," that they make connections between their inside home and outside space (12). And it is the garden that serves as a place for solidifying women's ethnic identity.

Another primal indication of ethnicity is language. The loss of language leads to the loss of ethnic identity, an irreparable loss. Gloria Anzaldúa in Borderlands affirms that one "cannot take pride" in oneself unless one takes pride in one's language because "ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity" (59). Mora expresses her deep concern about the necessity to preserve languages. In her collection of essays, Nepantla, Mora points to the abundance of statistics on endangered species of flora and fauna and the lack of statistics on the "disappearance of a language or art form or group." "Is a language, that intricate human construct and all its music, its joy and lament, and all that it reveals about human ingenuity, of less value than the burning eyes of a large, magnificent cat?" she asks as a rhetorical question (29).

In the memoir, Mora shows that her ancestors, who moved to the United States, do their best to keep Spanish as the family main language while trying to learn English, the language of their new country. Papande, Estela's father, patiently learns English and encourages the children to acquire it; but they "all speak Spanish in those rooms [in his house] that he considers Mexican territory" (57). He cannot allow his children to forget their mother tongue, the language that represents the richness of their culture, connects them with their ancestors, and helps them understand their roots. In his view, speaking another language in the presence of parents is bad manners. In Nepantla, Mora expresses her own and other parents' concern about contemporary Mexican children who, wishing to "blend in," speak more English than Spanish. She talks about the pride of all *abuelas* (grandmothers) and *abuelos* (grandfathers) in their grandchildren's ability to learn English, "to articulate the pain and sadness of discrimination, and to participate in the civic life of the country" (18). However, this ability, in their view, does not mean forgoing and neglecting their own language, their ethnic heritage.

W. D. Neate makes an interesting observation stating that "the common denominator of the project of Chicana writing is that it allows the female to articulate her identity on her own terms since the language of patriarchal discourse is the key factor in her previous exclusion" (qtd. Murphy 2: 39). Both Estela Mora and later her daughter Pat are trying to define their identities through writing and speaking in both Spanish and English. Their bilingualism helps them to create the exterior space that they wish to occupy. At El Paso High School, Estela excels in writing speeches, "declamation," and "extemporaneous speaking" (176). Estela would do anything to keep this freedom of expression, attention of the audience, and an open space on the stage. She accepts the rides from her teachers (because she does not have the money) to speech contests; she ignores her parents' worries, and she even invents a position of a speaker of the house of the student body at her school. She is aware of the reality that she will not be elected president.

Estela's situation is more ambiguous than the one of her Mexican peers because she looks like an Anglo. She hopes that if she passes herself off as white, she has a chance to win the contest. Mora exclaims, "How early does

this little bilingual girl in the 1920s and '30s--how early do children in the '90s--want to push away their names or skin or accent or family or weight or home or language with one hand while they long to clutch tight to the familiar with the other?" (181). Yes, on the one hand, it is hard for minorities to define their identities, "fit" in the mainstream culture, and occupy the outer space. On the other hand, they can use their bilingualism to their advantage as Estela and her daughter do.

Tomoko Kuribayashi concurs with Neate in expressing her admiration for the narrator of The House on Mango Street by Sandra Cisneros: "[Esperanza] is able to travel back and forth between the two languages and the two worlds, creating, in the process, new space for herself and for the people she wishes to help out" (Kuribayashi 165). So does Mora, who demonstrates her strength in pursuing her career to be a writer and who fights the dichotomous thinking of the socio-economic hierarchy of society by trying to fill in the "outer" space. Using both languages, English and Spanish, she is able to create space for herself, a creation, which helps her see better both cultures and write about the reconciliation of their differences. In an interview, Mora expressed her dream and

"hope for the future" that "'all of our children would feel pride in their cultural heritage'" (Barrera 226).

## V. A FAMILY'S BELIEFS AND SUPERSTITIONS

The need to hold on to one's own not only preserved but reinvigorated ancient folk traditions, creating new ones as well.

(Américo Paredes Our Living Traditions 74)

The desire of the descendants of immigrants both to embrace the mainstream culture of the United States and to preserve their own culture makes them want to hold on to the traditional lore of their ethnicity. John O. West in Mexican-American Folklore states, "Faith, observation, folk wisdom--these are the launching platform for much that is easily tossed aside as 'mere' folklore, believed by what some regard as ignorant peasants" (137). Mora would certainly agree with West, having stressed in her memoir the effect of folklore on all aspects of people's lives. She implies that young people of the modern era may not follow all of the practices of their ancestors, regarding the old ways as based on people's ignorance or naiveté; but they cannot dismiss completely the traditions of their culture, enriched by the practices of several generations and thus engrained in their minds. House of Houses demonstrates the transmission of folk wisdom and practices from one generation to another in curing illnesses,



cooking, and burial practices. These practices and beliefs are sometimes based on superstitions.

Beliefs and superstitions have existed in every culture throughout history. Many human activities--sleeping, eating, working, getting married, getting pregnant, becoming sick, or dying--are connected with and affected by certain superstitions. Unlike uncivilized communities, our technological society offers scientific explanations for most occurrences in the world; however, these explanations do not preclude the existence of some superstitions in our lives. Ralph Steele Boggs states that in "daily life the folk have innumerable 'laws'" of 'do' and 'don't,' based on cause and effect, [which] guide one to social virtues, provide rules of conduct [. . .], furnish medicine for many diseases and comfort the soul in distress" (Boggs 34). Hence, superstitions--an integral part of folklore--contribute to the richness of our lives. Claiming not to be superstitious, we are often leery of a black cat crossing our path; and we are careful about not spilling salt or staying in room number thirteen at the hotel. We may laugh at ourselves for knocking on wood while discussing our plans for the future; but we still do it. Superstitions do persist, and just as we inherited

them from our parents, our children will acquire them from us.

In Mexican culture beliefs and superstitions are plentiful as we can judge by House of Houses. They are a big part of the lives of Pat Mora's ancestors. Aunt Chole tells of her father's dying of a stroke because, as her mother explains, he had eaten fish (7). She evidently has in mind a superstition against fish as a haven for evil spirits and various malevolent demons (Bonnerjea 99). Aunt Chole's assurance confirms the prevalence of folk beliefs and superstitions because people witness and experience their validity through the recognition of some omens.

Superstitions, beliefs in good and evil, helped the Moras to move on with their lives by avoiding evil and embracing good. The family believes in good luck as a reward to generous people for their benevolent deeds and, conversely, in bad luck as a punishment to prejudiced people for their offensive treatment of others. Mora's maternal Aunt Lobo tells a story of a storeowner, Mr. Calisher, who was punished by fire and bankruptcy for his mistreatment of Mexican immigrants, whom he considered all thieves (34). Mora acknowledges that Aunt Lobo was filled with superstitions:

Don't walk under ladders, don't let a black cat cross your path, don't put a hat on the bed, don't open umbrellas in the house, don't let mirrors break, if you spill salt, throw some quickly over your left shoulder. (39)

All these beliefs in averting evil by avoiding doing certain things and acting in a certain way are indigenous to many cultures and have a long history. When the Spaniards invaded the New World, they encountered many beliefs and taboos which fit their perception of life; and they eventually adopted them, and the natives accepted the Spanish beliefs as well. Whatever beliefs or taboos, they had to be observed in order to maintain the harmony between people and nature and between good and evil. If breaking the taboos meant bad luck, sickness, or death, observing the taboos meant good luck and wellbeing (Leach 713).

Lobo's superstitions certainly have some explanations. Thus, the taboo against walking under a ladder may have different meanings in various cultures, but they all foretell bad luck. It is also believed that if one crosses the triangle formed by a ladder, the wall, and the ground, one demonstrates disrespect for the Holy Trinity and God and, at the same time, shows sympathy with the Devil

(Pickering 150). A black cat is associated with the practicing of witchcraft because it is believed a sorceress transformed herself into a cat's body. Consequently, a black cat crossing one's path brings bad luck (Pickering 55). A superstition against wearing a hat in church, donning a hat the wrong way, or placing it on the bed or table persists in many cultures and portends extremely bad luck (Pickering 129). An umbrella opened inside the house is believed to bring a speedy death to the house, and it also denotes that a person will never marry (Bonnerjea 271). Since Lobo had no intention to get married because of her disapproving attitude toward an intimate relationship between a man and a woman, she most likely tried to prevent an untimely death in the family by warning against opening an umbrella in the house.

Lobo's warning against breaking a mirror can be explained by ancient people's perception of mirrors as magic. Since their invention, mirrors were regarded as magical objects; and all magic creates superstitions. The most widely spread belief about a broken mirror is that a person who breaks it will encounter seven year's bad luck. Together with this taboo, the mystical power of mirrors survives today in some cultures. Letting a baby less than

a year old or a bride before a wedding look into a mirror means sickness or an unhappy outcome. Death in the house compels the family members to cover the mirrors, securing the welfare of the living, whose "soul[s] may be snatched by that of the dead patient to provide company on the journey to the hereafter" and wishing well-being to the spirits of the deceased (Pickering 172). In the memoir, Abuela Elena assures that they "cover mirrors during a storm so lightening won't strike" (73) because she is aware of the common superstition that mirrors attract lightening during thunderstorms. Lobo's warning against spilling salt also has a plausible explanation. As a vital and thus valuable food ingredient, salt involves many traditions. Throughout centuries, salt was treated with care and consideration. In ancient times, salt was used as currency or a seal in important transactions. Thus, accidentally spilt salt involves superstitions about evil spirits being aroused and tears shed. A prompt throwing of some spilt salt over the left shoulder can prevent bad luck (Pickering 229). Patrick B. Mullen explains that this belief has "a cause condition (spilling the salt) and a result (bad luck)." Tossing the salt over the shoulder--negating the bad luck--can be called "a conversion ritual" (Green 89).

Recalling her childhood experience of spending the night outside when her family was on its long way to Chihuahua, Aunt Lobo reveals how frightened she and her sisters were to "sleep [. . .] under a sky so alive with stars, no walls to keep away dark shapes moving through the trees" (21). John O. West explains the apprehension of sleeping outside by the folk belief in bad spirits that can invade a body at night, even through the clothes, and make a person sick. These "bad spirits" are associated with "el sereno de la noche"--night dew (144).

The inexplicable nature of the objects and occurrences in the solar system aroused the feelings of awe and fear among ancient people, thus giving rise to various superstitions. Abuela Elena relates the precaution that pregnant women undertook against giving birth to a baby with a finger or toe missing, when they walked outside during an eclipse: they pinned keys on the abdomen (73). In some cultures it is believed that "gazing" at an eclipse during pregnancy can cause the bearing a "hare-lip child" (Leach 713). Maria Leach states that "pointing at the new moon brings trouble, as does seeing the moon, in any phase, over the shoulder [and that] throughout the world, the moon is an evil principle or body as compared with the good sun"

(744). In A Dictionary of Superstitions and Mythology, Bonnerjea explains that the eclipse of the moon is believed "to be caused by a demon swallowing them" (86). Mora, however, regrets the loss of a "more fluid view of the world" of ancient Mexicans, who "believed that stars with their light arrows protect us from form-changers prowling the dark, that stars prevent rocks from becoming jaguars, their eyes reflecting light, two mirrors moving through the jungle night" (21). For Mora, it is preferable to believe in good luck than to be afraid of evil. That is why she involves ghosts in her narration, the ghosts, which in most cultures are objects of fear. Although ghosts, as spirits of the dead, are believed to haunt the living, Mora decides to let them visit her house. She wants the ghosts to enrich the living with their stories, lessons, positive influence, and also to trigger the memories of the living so that they could make connections among the lives of the past, present, and future generations. Thanks to the spirits of the deceased, Mora is able to perceive her heritage acutely, as well as understand better how to build the bridge between the present and the future by explaining the present with the help of the past.

By employing the technique of magical realism in her narration, Mora involves ghost lore, which, as Maria Leach notes, is "a vigorous element in any area where folklore thrives" (933). Ghost lore relates to folk burial lore; for in each culture, people care about the wellbeing of the souls/spirits of their deceased beloved ones. In Mexican culture, the month of November signifies the commemoration of the dead. On November first, Hispanics celebrate *Dia de los angelitos*, a day to remember the deceased children; on November second, they observe *Dia de los muertos*, All Souls' Day. While cooking the deceased's favorite foods and sharing stories, the families muse and laugh, savoring the cordial atmosphere of the gatherings. Maria Leach asserts that people believe that "the dead return to complete unfinished business, to warn or inform, to punish or protest, to care or protect [. . .]" (933). The spirits of Mora's deceased relatives "visit" to assist her in creating *ofrenda*--an altar, decorated with pictures of the family members and gifts, which serves as a shrine for a family. Rafaela Castro explains that the altars, "wonderful artistic creations [and] a form of folk art," are "a result of community isolation from a centralized place of worship." Castro notes that in Mexican culture,



"it is usually women who develop home altars, as expressions of devotion, to pay homage to past family members, and to find a space for daily prayer" (11). Thus, Aunt Chole, assisted by Mora and the spirits, covers the table with a white tablecloth and puts "tiny coffins made of hard sugar--purple, blue, pink; sugar skulls staring at [them] with their foil eyes, miniature plates, breads, candy baskets, bananas, flowers, candles" (253). "The dead are lured back by what they love, sweet temptations," Mora writes to explain the significance of the sweets on the table (House 257).

Mexican families usually create altars both inside and outside the house. In her memoir, Mora imagines making altars to honor the dead, trying to lure their "elusive spirits back on this night of the year when all of [them] hover closer to the earth" (256). Around the small altars, the Moras make a miniature garden, which they sprinkle with sand from the Chihuahua desert. They also sprinkle "handfuls of orange and yellow marigolds, originally called Mary's gold, [. . .] flowers of the dead, [. . .] their scent a lure to spirits, the ancient Mexicans believed," all over the created path that connects the front gate, the front courtyard, the house, and the garden gates; and they

decorate the path with various potted flowers and "add *pan de muerto*--bread skulls, skeletons, sweet bones" (256).

The gravesite decoration, as a means of understanding and appreciating folk beliefs about life, death, grievance, and remembrance, made it a Mexican tradition to attend cemeteries on All Souls' Day. Families clean and decorate the graves with flowers and candles. In some places, relatives bring food to the graves and have a picnic, believing in sharing the feast with the spirits of their beloved ones. In her poem "Love Ritual," Mora dwells on the desire to establish a spiritual connection of the living with the dead:

In Mexico the dead are lured  
back for a day with marigolds and  
candles. Women cook rich, spicy  
*mole*. On graves they put cigarettes  
and tequila, *pan dulce*, ripe manoes.  
"Come back," they're saying, "Come  
back and savor earth's sweet wines." (Chants 21)

John O. West observes that the custom "of paying tribute to the dead is worldwide, and exists in many cultures--the Druids did it on October 31 each year, Asians do it in connection with the lunar New Year, and of course

Catholics have been doing it for centuries" (152). West specifically comments on the border region, described by Mora, where such family feasts were common, devoted to the visiting souls of the beloved ones. He writes:

Plenty of drink was provided, following the logic that travelers would be thirsty, and sweet foods especially were available for the souls of the children. After midnight the visiting souls were considered to have had their fill, and the living family members could then eat and drink. And it was believed that the "baby souls" had extracted all the sweetness from the delicacies provided for them. (154)

Finally, with the sunset, after the cemetery visit, the families "light the wicks of almost fifty candles, place them on the *altares*, [and] watch the smoke curl and rise" (House 256). They believe that at that moment, shadows of the dead start to visit them. Mora speculates on the origin of the Mexican folk belief about the smoke filling the air. She says that Pueblo Indians consider any kind of the air movement or evaporation--smoke, steam, or clouds--"a visible sign of the cosmic breath." She reveals the Maya's belief in clouds being the "struck by lightning"

cotton, grown by "the earth god's daughters" in caves, and the Aztecs' belief in people's transformation into clouds, the "rainmakers" (256). Wistfully, Mora ponders on a lesser known Indian tribe Tewa and its "idea of a grand breath in which we all exist, in which we all continue," thinking that all people--living and dead--are united by the same air, which they breathe in and out, and that makes them whole (257). Here, Mora exhibits her own belief that through the presence of living and dead in the atmosphere, all generations are connected with each other. She implies that one only needs an acute sense of such presence and an ability to dream. Mora says:

I breathe with it and in it in this dream house  
in which our souls gather, the living and dead  
gather ourselves, the bodied and disembodied  
communing within these adobe walls. (257)

While speculating on burial lore, Mora explains its dependence on the beliefs indigenous to her ethnicity; and while pondering on medicinal lore, she also shows a great influence of folk beliefs and superstitions on healing maladies. Thus in the opening chapter of the memoir, Raul Mora expresses his concern about Aunt Chole's cough and advises his daughter to put some honey on the tip of her

aunt's tongue. She promptly responds that she has already added some honey in her tea and is going to throw more wood to the fire to keep her aunt warm. Notably, they do not discuss the common pharmaceutical drugs to cure the cough, only the folk methods of healing. According to a folk belief, honey and warmth combined cause sweating, which helps to clean a person's throat and nasal passages, thus softening and eventually stopping the cough. Mora has learned about the healing power of honey from Abuela Elena, who tells her about the effectiveness of home remedies, practiced by her parents and grandparents. Abuela Elena advises the use of "plenty of honey and lemon for a cough," and a lot of tea for rheumatism, as her mother taught her (73). She recalls her childhood experiences of being cured of cold when during the day her mother blew the powder of ground white rock into her throat, and at night her father stopped her cough by rubbing some saliva into her soles (72). Her father could have been influenced by an ancient belief in the curative properties of saliva, for "in spitting, a person expresses a little of the essence of their soul, which thus becomes a sacrifice to the gods and is guaranteed to attract divine favor" (Pickering 245).

On numerous occasions, Mora mentions her elderly relatives' dependence on folk beliefs in the curative power of cooking items, such as herbs, fruits, spices, honey, oils, flowers, various kinds of tea, as well as massage, and verbal comfort. As the elders help themselves, they also perform their duty of educating the young in what they know, thus rendering their support to physical and psychological cure. Mamande washes her hair with different dried leaves--herbs--"to tone down the long, loud red that shines so in the sun" (47). Mama Cleto is "simmering [. . .] chamomile heads for an hour in last night's rainwater, "wishing to improve the color of Mora's daughters' hair with "golden highlights" (223). She also "plans to heat rose petals with mint at night for [. . .] Libby's forehead to drift her to sleep" because petals of certain flowers were believed to have magical curative power (59). Rose petals and cinnamon sticks or cloves also help one to relax or give energy, as Aunt Chole assures (12). Abuela Elena is rubbing onion on Raul's bald head, promising him hair growth. It is a folk belief in some regions of the South that rubbing the scalp with onion cures baldness (Pickering 195). Whereas hair might grow with the help of onion juice, a wart might disappear when

two halves of an onion, rubbed on a wart, tied back together and buried, decay. Numerous other folk remedies involve onions, such as healing sores, earaches, chest colds, croup (Leach 823). Abuela Elena tries to find spider webs to apply on her cut finger to stop bleeding (71). According to folk beliefs, spiders--shadows of gods--cannot be harmed (Leach 1074). They bring good luck, "reduce the risk of disease" by keeping away the flies--spreaders of infection--and can alleviate fever (Pickering 245). When the children have a stomach ache, Mamande slowly rubs some oil into their abdomens, "her hand gently massaging in circle and then thumping with her finger, massaging again" (66). Mamande clearly believes in the healing effect of oil and massage. Traditionally, perfumes and oils are used by folk to avert evil spirits or other harm and, at the same time, attract benevolent spirits (Trotter 79). Massage, together with oil or warmth, has a healing power, too. Abuela Elena tells Pat how her grandmother used to relieve aches in her mother's back by rubbing it with a small glass, warmed up by a lit candle. The heated glass supposedly sucked out the cold from her body (73).

Why is it that folk medicinal lore was mostly based on beliefs? John O. West states that "folk remedies have found their place in cultural beliefs and practices simply because they work--or because they appear to work, which is perhaps as comforting as any other remedy might be" (137). Sometimes, the best cure for a child can be a parent or grandparent's soothing words--a rhyme or a song. Pat's grandmother, Mamande, while watching her grandchildren play, comforts their hurt feelings and bruises when they fall with her healing rhyme, "*Dana, sana colita de rana,/ Si no sanas hoy, sanaras manana*" (46). Mora does not translate the rhyme, which means, "Rub the frog's tail, and it'll heal. If it doesn't heal today, it'll heal tomorrow."

Another plausible explanation of people's beliefs in home remedies is that of Robert Trotter and Juan Antonio Chavira given in Curanderismo: Mexican-American Folk Healing. They argue that Mexican-American families have been using traditional folk medicine as their "main resource" due to their disadvantaged economic conditions, discrimination, and agricultural isolation, which made them rely mostly on themselves, rather than modern medicine. Even when they became urbanized and better acquainted with regulated medicine, they did not give up their traditional



methods of healing, thus creating "a dual orientation toward health care" (44). *Curanderismo*, a term for "healing," is considered an alternative system of health care among Hispanics in the Southwest. It "places a strong emphasis on the social, psychological, and spiritual factors contributing to illness and poor health" and is still popular with some Hispanics (Trotter 45). This is not to suggest that the majority of people rely on the so-called official *curanderos*, folk healers, who claim to cure the sick like professionally employed doctors, seeing several patients on a daily basis. Rafaela Castro claims, "a *curandero* may only be consulted when all other remedies fail" (83). In the memoir, we can see that, like *cuanderos*, ordinary people, especially those advanced in age, also possess some knowledge in folk medicine, handed down by their ancestors. However, unlike professional *cuanderos*, who use three levels of treatment as the healing techniques (the material, spiritual, and mental), laymen resort mainly to the material level, which "manipulates physical objects" that relieve pain, anxiety, depression, and insecurity (Trotter 73). All three levels of treatment can be interdependent, for a patient feels better psychologically (the mental level) knowing that he is being

helped with the disease (Trotter 77). When there is no medical cure for disease, all a person has are hope, belief in miracle, home remedy, or mere common sense. When Raul's grandmother's health deteriorates and the doctor predicts her end near, Raul, in despair, determines not to let her die. He is afraid that in her sleep his grandmother will die; and thus to prevent it, he "places his arms under her armpits," lifts her from the bed and, "holding her trembling body," makes her walk back and forth in the room to "wear her out" (88). In the morning, he sees her making breakfast. Raul believes that the energy he gave her added another five years to her life.

Mora's deceased and living elderly relatives obviously used to believe in all three levels of treatment and tried to pass down their knowledge to posterity. Flipping through the pages of her mother's small spiral book for jotting down ideas, she reads about the healing qualities of aloe vera, "cut piece and use on any sore" (180). West states that aloe vera, a succulent, can be found in many Mexican-American households as curative for "burns, skin irritations, insect bites, athlete's foot" (143). The medicinal use of aloe, a plant that can live for several years without water or earth and believed to have "magic

compounds," dates back to Roman times and remains popular until present days in various cultures (Leach 39).

On the New Continent, the use of plants for medicinal purposes was a common practice among the Aztecs before the Spanish invasion. The knowledge of healing herbs was passed down orally and later recorded by the Spanish, who added their knowledge to the Mexican medical botany (Hand 172). Rafaela Castro stresses the transmission of folklore through diffusion by saying that just as the techniques of construction of houses were introduced in the Southwest by the Spaniards, so many of the herbal remedies, popular in Hispanic families, were brought by the Europeans, who had learned about them from the Greeks, Arabs, and Egyptians (223). This long tradition of passing down the knowledge of home remedies through centuries prevails. Abuela Elena in her attempts to alleviate Lita's headache, "drapes" a long strip of material, made of stitched together rainbow-colored cloth scraps, on her granddaughter's head. Children, fascinated by the bright cloth, ask her to let them try it on. "And so it begins, children of different generations taking turns walking through the garden all year long proudly wearing the magic cloth of many colors stitched by the rough fingers of Abuela Elena," Mora

comments (72). Likewise, she mentions the benevolent effect of her mother's advice on skin care. Estela, "the vainest woman in the world," as she calls herself, passes down her secret of looking younger than her age, "I use plenty of cream, always have. Be sure you work it up the neck and face. Don't rub your skin going down, Dear" (180). Estela is fulfilling folklore's function of instruction the way her mother, Amelia Sortero Delgado, did. The result is rewarding because their offspring, Pat, carries these lessons throughout her life and believes in their effectiveness.

Based on beliefs and superstitions, both medicinal and burial practices in folklore include food as spiritual and emotional nourishment, rather than mere nutrition. Food is indicative of ethnicity. By Teriyaki chicken, one will recognize Oriental cuisine and by tacos, enchiladas, or burritos, Mexican. Traditional food of any nationality is usually highly regarded for its authenticity in a restaurant run by a family of that ethnicity, especially if the cooks are the owners. Food lore depends on certain folk beliefs about not only the nutritional value of the ingredients and ways of recipe preparation but also the

spiritual atmosphere of cooking, serving, and consumption of food.

In House of Houses, Mora stresses that food does not mean physical nourishment only. Serving as a catalyst for establishing good relationships among people, food expresses an emotional state of being, conveys the sense of community, and strengthens family and generational ties. Clear evidence of the folk value of food is Aunt Lita's demonstration of love for her relatives "through food, like the tamales she makes for Christmas" (98).

A proverb *Pero panza llena, corazón contento* (Full stomach, happy heart) seems to influence Pat Mora's decision to start and end her memoir with the dinner table scenes (House 97). In the first chapter, the events take place during the All Souls' Day week, when Mexican families cook food for the spirits of their deceased relatives who "pay a visit." In the last chapter, Mora crowns her memoir with the get-together of all of her relatives who cook and share meals on Christmas Eve. In both events, Mora clearly emphasizes a close connection between food and spiritual and emotional lives of her folk; for there is a pervasive sense of nourishment of the spirit and imagination that accompany the meals and drinks, prepared and served by the

family. In the Moras' house, the family members and their guests feel more comfortable having a soul-to-soul conversation at the table when cooking and eating meals. Food preparation and sharing meals together have a sacred meaning for them, as they relate them to the feast of angels--a holy event. True to folk tradition, Mora's relatives have coffee and snacks each time they get together. Sitting on a covered porch and admiring the flowers and fruit trees in the garden, the old ladies have a lovely chat about nature, their beliefs, and their past. Mama Cleta rushes to the kitchen to get some cookies to appease their appetite, as if reinforcing the proverb *Las flores contentan pero no alimentan* (Flowers please but appetite they don't ease) (House 182).

The memoir abounds in instances of women's talking about, collecting, and exchanging folk recipes. Most families have their own favorite recipes which they preserve and transmit to the next generation. In House of Houses, Mora looks at her father's four sisters, "the women whose hands like their mother's kitchen secrets, the glue of food, how to hold families together with tortillas and coffee," and asks each of them to give her favorite recipes (78). Craving recipes, Mora wants to learn how her

relatives "measure and combine ingredients in this life, how they nourish themselves and those around them, how they define sustenance," in order to understand their emotional lives (House 78). She knows that through inventing, practicing, collecting, and exchanging recipes, they share their life experiences and support each other in every way they can.

Feeling accepted, comforted, and sincerely loved and cared for, Mora loves to spend time with her Uncle Lalo and his wife Carmen in their kitchen--lured by her favorite chicken enchilada casserole with chiles, loved since childhood, and their stories. Aunt Carmen's warm words and a plate--these "measures of comfort"--seem precious to Pat:

Somehow, the feel of the time with them--he's sitting at the table remembering and she's moving from refrigerator to stove, pouring iced-tea, stirring a pot, adding to his memories, basting slices of pumpkin--and I'm pre-adult again, pre-responsibility, in that private family world with two older people who care about me and have known me since I was born, watching a woman who understands kitchens, whose hands dice, slice, saute, pare, stir, blending ingredients and

serving them on scrubbed dishes, a woman who, when she finally sits at the table, tastes and ponders what she cooked, adjusting mentally, a pinch more pepper next time, a little less garlic, seasoning what she serves us as her husband seasons the stories he tells himself.

(229)

Aunt Carmen, with her passion for cooking ethnic meals, embodies a "queen" of Mexican culture--a title for all women who love culinary art. A kitchen is a "queen's" domain where she rules. Her husband neither invades her territory, nor does he set the rules. What to cook, how to cook, and when to serve food are purely a woman's decisions. Furthermore, not only does she preserve the culinary heritage of her ancestors, she concocts new recipes as well. Improvising gives her power and joy of independence and creativity. Most importantly, women pass their beliefs and skills to their children, thus keeping their heritage alive. So when women get together, they show their pride in making delicious *mole* from scratch, which they prefer over the ones sold in a store, or tortillas, pressed with "one of those black irons until they're toasted" (97). And they have grounds for pride,



for the recipes they use date back to the ancient times.

"Moles," Frances Toor explains, "are the chile sauces in which meats are cooked or served;" and the richest moles are served with turkey, which is "the most festive Mexican dish," popular since the Aztecs time (12). Toor names tortillas as "the most prominent of the corn foods," and "the bread of the natives for many centuries" (10).

Tortillas are an essential supplement to many kinds of food and the basis of tacos, enchiladas, and tostados, which can also be eaten as a separate meal--fried, crisp, soft, or dipped in spicy sauce or hot grease. The ancient folk traditions of cooking in a certain place stay imprinted in people's memories and hearts. Elderly women cherish memories of their old kitchens on the rancho (*mi cocina en el rancho*), which were dark and smelled with smoke but had a delicious odor of "herbs, chiles, corn, and fruits drying from the rafters" (71). The pleasant sounds of the rolling pin on the ranch "seep into a body or a house" and leave a life-long impression on a person's soul. Aunt Elena advises the young to treat the house like a body by being careful about choosing what to bring into it. She makes the kitchen, a place of nourishment of the body, a sacred place--a place for keeping an altar. And it is through the

kitchen that the women know "how to hold families together with tortillas and coffee" (78).

Continuing to prepare ethnic recipes, exchanging them with relatives and neighbors, and keeping the culinary arts alive by passing them down to the next generation is what preserves a culture. Mora's mother recalls how she, as a nine-year-old, used to visit her half-sister Lola at her ranch and watch her make *asaderos*, cheese. Lola would "stir and stir the huge pot of milk, until the curds form [and] [. . .] the white steam [rise]" and wind "the white, thready curds into small balls of soft cheese" (174). Then Estela would "bend over the platter" and smell the cheese in anticipation of the feast. Just as Estela watched Lola cooking, her daughter Pat enjoys observing others prepare food too. As an adult, "ach[ing] for [her] quiet home," she would sometimes visit her aunt, where her grandmother used to live, and watch Aunt Concha "whipping cream for homemade banana ice cream [and] dicing fruit for jello salads" (79). Mora ponders about how much she admires watching "these Mora's sisters' hands like kitchen butterflies heaping tables with tamales and *bunuelos*" (sweet flour tortillas) (79). Women, "family magicians with food," are all good cooks, who have been raised in an

atmosphere of love for good food and obligation to learn the art of cooking (71). The culinary arts are so deeply ingrained in women's minds and so well reinforced by practice that they prepare their favorite recipes by intuition, tested by experience, adding "a little bit of this and a little bit of that" (98). Mama Cleta and Abuela Elena exchange the recipes of wines, brewed on petals of roses and dandelions. Poeticizing the process of making wine, they teach the young how to treat good wine "soothingly, never jolting it, imagining if we wake it abruptly from its thick sleep, the deep fruit flavor will vanish, like a dream" (158).

John O. West asserts that "even if Mexican-Americans were indistinguishable in their use of language, their customs, and other cultural characteristics, the wonders of the kitchen would clearly prove that they exist as a living folk group, one that has influenced other cultures to imitate their tasty foods" (220). So if the Mexican recipes and culinary customs have pervaded and now influence many regions of the United States, it is worth acknowledging the origin of the Mexican cuisine as a mixture of various ways of cooking, which had been formed throughout centuries and transmitted by diffusion. West

presents the Mexican culture as "the intermingling and interaction of the two cultures"--Native American and Spanish (27). The Aztecs, the ancestors of the Mexicans, adopted the ideas, culture, and techniques of cooking introduced by the Spaniards, who conquered them in the 1500s, whose culture and culinary customs also developed under the influence of different conquerors. In The Heritage of Spanish Cooking, Alicia Rios, discussing the origins of Spanish food, writes that the Romans were "interested in exploiting the commercial potential of their Hispanic colonies" and used "Hispania" for the cultivation. At the same time, they introduced their own techniques of preparation of food, like bread making, for one (Rios 12). Later on, in the Medieval era, Spanish cuisine was influenced by the Arab conquerors, who introduced all agricultural produce suitable for growing in this climate, including "herbs and spices"--essential ingredients in Mexican cuisine now (Rios 14). When the Spanish explorers crossed the Atlantic and settled in the New World, they imported some techniques of cultivating the soil and the art of cooking. Likewise, the Spaniards profited from the American continent bringing such "fanciful eccentricities" as "tomatoes and bell peppers," as well as "the monstrous

ear of corn [and] the subterranean potatoes, which were to become an essential resource for a Europe full of hungry people" (Rios 15). In the United States nowadays, Mexican recipes and culinary customs have indeed pervaded many regions of the United States, particularly in the South and the Southwest. Also, the Hispanic population has embraced American food. The cultural blend is shown at the end of Mora's memoir when on the morning after Christmas, Mamande is making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich--a common American snack--demonstrating to us her own acceptance and the younger generation's liking of the food of her new country. While preserving her ethnic identity, she embraces new culture as well.

The table where Mora gathers her relatives--living and dead--is a sacred place for family gatherings. It nourishes both stomach and soul, inspires heartfelt conversation, ties the family's past and present together, and projects connections with the future. A dinner table is a place where the family members savor both food and stories, which influence all aspects of their lives.

## VI. CONCLUSION

I write because I believe that Hispanics need to take their rightful place in American 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. [. . .] I will continue to write and to struggle to say what no other writer can say in quite the same way.

(Mora Horn 436-37)

Finding the voice with which to express the joy and pain, recognition and neglect, past and present of the culture is imperative for an ethnic writer. Mora considers it to be the responsibility of the writers of color, Chicano/a writers. She expresses intentions, deeds, and hopes of such writers:

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 131)

In her memoir, Mora encourages her living relatives to tell their stories about the family's past. As she records them, she brings to life her long-time-ago deceased ancestors by the power of her imagination and "makes" them tell the stories about their lives; and she mingles their tales with stories from her own memory. Weaving all reminiscences into one whole, the family history, Mora intends to "cast the spell" and make the readers see that the preservation of family and community traditions by passing them from one generation to another, on the one hand, and respect for the elders' advice by the young, on the other hand, are the necessary acts that help any group to sustain its cultural identity.

In her essay collection, Nepantla, published in 1993, Mora declares, "Our increased awareness and participation in cultural conservation efforts and opportunities can help shape how and what our children learn about their heritage and heritages" (34). Four years later, in her memoir, House of Houses, she carefully demonstrates that the primary source of the awareness of their cultural heritage is the children's home, where their grandparents and

parents hand down the traditions of the family through fulfilling the major functions of folklore--entertainment, education, validation, and conformity.

Mora decides to collect her family's tales and present them to us. By sending this work into the readers' world, the author pursues the main goal of letting people realize that a family of any ethnicity is a unique representative of a specific time and place on earth. As an essential part of this place, just as any part of nature, each family should be respected for its traditions and values and, therefore, given a full right to preserve them.

Furthermore, each family represents the traditions of a certain ethnicity; and every ethnic group has its own folk traditions. Mora's memoir records the folk traditions and shares them. Through the recording and sharing the folklore of her family, Mora preserves and extends the culture of her ethnicity and reflects the rich texture of diversity.



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