Antares
Letras e Humanidades
Programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras, Cultura e Regionalidade
ISSN 1984-4921

Language and Identity in Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street**

*Adriane Ferreira Veras***

Abstract

This article presents a critical reading of the novel The House on Mango Street *by the Chicana author, Sandra Cisneros. The focus of the reading falls on Esperanza, the novel narrator, and her longing for a home as a representation of her need to self-affirm and develop her identity. This paper analyses the identity issue of a subject culturally hybrid, besides that, it also analyses aspects of the narrative, including language as a mark of such identity. The novel can be considered a representative of a Chicano discourse, in which one can follow Esperanza's journey of growth and development into the adult life, constituting a Chicano Bildungsroman. The theoretical support used comprehends authors who investigate identity issues, such as Stuart Hall, Homi Bhabha and Gloria Anzaldúa.*

Keywords

Esperanza; identity; Mango Street*; language; Sandra Cisneros.*

Resumo

Esse artigo apresenta uma leitura crítica do romance The House on Mango Street *da autora Chicana Sandra Cisneros. O foco da leitura recai sobre Esperanza, a narradora do romance, e sua busca por um lar como representativo de sua necessidade de auto-afirmação e desenvolvimento de sua identidade. O artigo analisa a questão identitária de um sujeito culturalmente híbrido e, ainda, aspectos da narrativa, como a língua. O romance pode ser considerado como representante de um discurso Chicano, no qual podemos acompanhar Esperanza em sua trajetória de crescimento em direção à vida adulta, constituindo um Bildungsroman Chicano. O aporte teórico utilizado compreende autores que investigam questões identitárias, como Stuart Hall, Homi Bhabha e Gloria Anzaldúa.*

Palavras-chave

Esperanza; identidade; Mango Street*; língua; Sandra Cisneros.*

* Artigo recebido em 16/02/2011.
** Mestre em Literatura pela UFRGS. Doutorado em andamento pelo Programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras da Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul.

Language remains the most portable of accessories
(Sneja Gunew)

IN THE NOVEL *THE HOUSE ON MANGO STREET*, the Chicana author (American of Mexican heritage, parents in her case), Sandra Cisneros, introduces us to Esperanza, a young girl who is going through the experience of displacement and longs to have a "house of her own" (1984, pg. 108). The character's most profound wish is to have a home, "I lived *there*. I nodded. I knew then I had to have a house. A real house. One I could point to. But this isn't it. The house on Mango Street isn't it." (pg. 5).

The novel is divided, not quite into chapters, but into forty-four short vignettes, ranging in length from half a page to several pages. These stories can be read separately and together weave a narrative in the category of fictional prose, a novel. Esperanza tells us her story in her own voice, a child's voice, expressing herself in short sentences that approximate to the spoken language, frequently in broken, fragmented sentences. Nevertheless, the girl is often aware of the adult world, for instance, "For the time being, Mama says. Temporary, says Papa. But I know how those things go" (HMS[1], pg. 5). Therefore, readers learn that Esperanza is on the brink of change and of growing up, becoming a teenager. Her rite of passage into adolescence will be one of the dominant themes of the novel.

This story of coming of age can be considered a Chicana *Bildungsroman*[2]. In this Chicana *Bildungsroman*, the narrator must escape the oppressive conditions of her community and the limited options that are available for her, especially marriage. Similar to Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, Esperanza plans to find a house of her own, "a house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem" (HMS, pg.108). At this home she plans to write her own narratives on paper "clean as ...before the poem", clean and free from oppression. Therefore, Cisneros offers not a return to home but a way out of the oppressive, sad and poor neighborhood through her pen, through writing and revising Esperanza's story.

[1] From this point on the novel *The House on Mango Street* will be referred to by the initials HMS.

[2] *Bildungsroman* from the German consists of a novel of formation, or novel of education, where the main character goes through a process of maturing, loss of innocence, the major conflict is self vs. society or individuality vs. conformity, with themes of exile or escape of her/his community. Examples of such works are James Joyce's, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, J.D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*, *etc.* Available at: http://www.victorianweb.org/genre/hader1.html, accessed on February 9, 2007.

The novel was written in the 1980's, and published in 1984. At that time, very few Chicana authors had written about the female condition, growing up in the *barrio*[3]. It meant growing up Mexican and feminist, for Cisneros considers herself to be one, and it is almost a contradiction in terms. She grew up in a patriarchal culture, the Mexican culture, where there is a feeling of great guilt for betraying that culture. To expose in stories the disparities between men and women in the Mexican-American community, and the struggles of these people is almost treason. Authors who decide to write mainly or solely in English are accused of being *pochos*[4], which means that they have become anglicized.

In Sandra Cisneros's case, she practically personifies the *Malinche*[5], who is considered to be contaminated by foreign influences, language and ideas. However, Cisneros is redefining "Mexicanness[6]", which is necessary in order to come to terms with her Mexican and American culture as well. Consequently, it is a conundrum. Her novel is a result of her dealing with "straddling two cultures" and certainly it is something that will be dealt more times in future stories. The idea of "Mexicanness," says Daniel Cooper Alarcón (1997, p.47), "has arisen through a process of erasure and superimposition as these discourses have produced contentious and sometimes contradictory descriptions of their subject."

The *corpus* of Chicana literature written primarily in English, but frequently in Spanish or bilingually, were, until recently, ignored by scholars of US and Latin American literatures as well. The language issue, besides the fact that these writings often have a working class character or that many books are published by small ethnic presses (in Cisneros's case: Third Woman Press, Arte Publico Press, Mango Press), further limit their possibilities for critical acclaim. Nonetheless, Cisneros has acquired a

[3] A chiefly Spanish-speaking community or neighborhood in a U.S. city.

[4] One who is considered to be a cultural traitor, one who speaks the oppressor's language by speaking English, therefore, ruining the Spanish language.

[5] The Indian woman who served as Hernán Cortés's translator, negotiator, and mistress during the Conquest of Mexico. Octavio Paz saw *La Malinche* as the central representative of a negative tradition of subjugation and cultural impoverishment that began with the Conquest. Assigning the pejorative name "*La Chingada*" ("the violated one"), Paz associated her with a history of shame, violation, and defamation. She is a symbolic reminder that indigenous people were "violated" by Spanish invaders, and that a woman enabled this violation (importantly, the word "*malinchista*" has come to mean "traitor" in Spanish). In this reading, *La Malinche* acquires the mythical status of a "Mexican Eve," who has brought about the "fall" of her people through her own selfishness or heedlessness (Paz, Octavio, 1984).

[6] Octavio Paz in his book *El laberinto de la soledad e postdata* talks about Mexicanness as something filled with contradictions that cannot be really described, present in adornments, with carelessness, ostentatiousness, negligence, passion and reservation, which floats in the air in the streets (1984, p.16).

quasi canonical status. Her novel *The House on Mango Street* has been adopted in several schools[7] in the US and many poems and short stories from her books *Loose Woman, Woman Hollering Creek,* and *My Wicked Wicked Ways* have reached a more mainstream readership.

The voices of writers as Cisneros are powerful examples of how geographic, cultural, and language borders are being transgressed, perhaps until they become meaningless or until the US ceases to be not only Anglo/European, not just white, not only the place where the "subaltern other" remains at the margins. These margins and borders keep these individuals caught in a state of displacement produced by physical dislocation from the native culture experienced by (im)migrants. From the dislocations, commuting between cultures, this back and forth, this *de allá y acá,* the movement from "here" and "there" emerge tensions, contradictions, and reconfigurations that shape and influence the construction of identity, which is marked by absence, loss, fragmentation, estrangement, reclaiming, inscribing and revising presences.

Esperanza tells us about her mother "I could've been somebody, you know? My mother says and sighs. [...] She can speak two languages" (HMS, 1984, p. 90). These two languages, Spanish and English, are part of Esperanza's heritage and a mark of an individual co-existing between two cultures, signifiers, nations and languages. Walter Mignolo, in his book *Local Histories/Global Designs* (2000), remarks that this "bilanguaging" is "precisely the celebration of the crack in the global process between local histories and global designs" (p.250).

Mignolo (2000) affirms that the breakdown in global processes takes place at the point where local histories slip away from the global designs. He employs the term "languaging" in order to show us "what makes language possible: without languaging, no language is possible. Languaging is […] a way of life, engaging needs and desires to enact the politics and ethics of liberation" (p. 265). This strategy reminds me of Mary Pratt's (1992) view regarding marginal communities in the United States that began asserting their histories and ways of life as part of their citizenship, becoming, thus, members of the national community, though their histories are different from the officially recognized ones. Mignolo sees these assertions as an enactment of a political

[7] Katherine L. Albiani Middle School, Edward Harris, Jr., Middle School, Samuel Jackman Middle School, James Rutter Middle School and others such as Stanford University. Available at: http://www.egusd.k12.ca.us, accessed on April, 27, 2006.

and aesthetical liberation. These ways of life acted and enacted between languages, between established ways of life, and between polarities of power serve as practices of liberation.

Walter Mignolo notices: "since languaging is interacting in language and language is what allows for describing and conceiving languaging, bilanguaging then would be precisely that way of life between languages: a dialogical, ethic, aesthetic, and political process of social transformation" (p.265). His idea of "bilanguaging" puts the speaker/writer between cultures engaged in a process of change based on dialogue and action. Thus, the speaker's (and writer's) actions and experiences are embedded in the way of life associated with that language. This is not only a linguistic dimension, but rather a dialogical one. He suggests the term "bilanguaging" in an attempt to "draw in something that is beyond sound, syntax, and lexicon" (p. 264). He argues that whereas bilingualism is a skill, "bilanguaging" is a "life-style" and "existentially and politically dramatic" (p. 264). The author claims that only if we acknowledge these aspects of "bilanguaging" we will understand, for instance, Chicana theorist Anzaldúa, "whose seductive force is the force of bilanguaging as living-between-languages and not just a bilingual aesthetic exercise" (p. 264). Anzaldúa says they are "living languages" (1987, p.77), that

> [...] for a people who are neither Spanish nor live in a country in which Spanish is the first language; for a people who live in a country in which English is the reigning tongue but who are not Anglo; for a people who cannot entirely identify with either standard (formal, Castillian) Spanish nor standard English, what recourse is left to them but to create their own language? A language which they can connect their identity to, one capable of communicating the realities and values true to themselves – a language with terms that are neither *español ni inglés*, but both.

The language in which writers choose to express themselves depends both on their upbringing and on the readership they hope to address. When Sandra Maria Esteves, a "Puerto Rican-Dominican-Boriqueña-Quisqueyana-Taino-African-American, born and raised in the Bronx" poet and artist (her own account), published the book of poems, *Yerba Buena* in 1980, Louis Reyes Rivera made the following observation in the introduction: "When you speak the language of your oppressor, you either absorb all of its values or you recreate the tongue to change each image and syllable into weapons for

the people's awakening" (p. xvii). This question of language choice is thus *a priori* politically and symbolic charged.

The language used in Chicano fiction is seen as a representation of language in general, which consciously or unconsciously, chooses a way in which to represent a complex linguistic reality consisting of Chicano discourse. Thus, language, in this discourse, can be seen as a symbolic marker of identity that, among other things, allows a specific group to distinguish itself from others. So, if the language functions as a symbolic tool, we can conclude that it can be also an instrument of power. Esperanza speaks, telling us her story, not only to be understood, but also to be known, respected, believed. She attempts to construct herself as a subject through language; and in order to do that, she first analyzes the meaning (significance) of her own name, as symbolic of her identity. Her effort to decipher the meaning of it turns into an attempt to come to terms with her identity:

> In English my name means hope. In Spanish it means sadness, it means waiting. [...] It is the Mexican records my father plays on Sunday mornings when he is shaving, songs like sobbing [...] At school they say my name funny as if the syllables were made out of tin and hurt the roof of your mouth. But in Spanish my name is made out of a softer something like silver (HMS, p. 10, 11).

Esperanza views her name as a conduit of opposing significances: hope and sadness, waiting and longing; likewise the phonetics of it, which changes when pronounced by her schoolmates and teachers. Her name becomes then a sign of a hybrid cultural context which she needs to mitigate among opposing cultural meanings to come to terms with her own identity (self). Esperanza has the additional burden of having a name charged with meaning.

Esperanza is an individual who is culturally hybrid, straddling the Chicana, Mexican and American cultures, and she lives in a society that in several ways is shaped by colonialism and/or post-colonialism[8]. Therefore it is safe to say that hybridization rejects the principle of monologue and composes itself by choosing from competing discourses. Hence, culturally hybrid peoples are polyglot, multi-voiced; thus, language cannot be analyzed without considering the socio-cultural context in which it is

[8] The first one I am referring to is the Spanish colonization of the Americas - Hernan Cortes bringing the expedition of 11Spanish ships to Mexico, and the second is the Anglo America conquering Mexico, a war which took place between 1846 and 1848. It was a defining event for the US and Mexico, transforming a continent. By the war's end, Mexico lost nearly half of its territory, the present American Southwest from Texas to California, and the United States became a continental power.

produced. It is therefore essential to attempt to untangle the meanings of the complex term, *culture*. Hall (2001) states that when it is said that two people belong to the same culture it means to say that they interpret the world approximately the same ways and can express themselves, their thoughts and feelings about the world in ways which will be understood by each other. Consequently, culture depends on its participants interpreting meaningfully what is happening around them, and, in Brooks's words, "making sense" of the world, in general similar ways (1984). Culture and language are somewhat similar to identity in the sense that they are fluid and constantly changing.

This corresponds well to the particular context of Chicanos/as which consists of three cultural environments: the American, the Mexican and the Chicano. I realize that this is a simplification, once it is virtually impossible to number the cultures that compose each of these cultures. Each culture is itself an amalgamation of several others. Each of these cultural systems mentioned above impact on the others. Therefore, in our globalized world, no culture is pure. Though the US government insists on keeping the US-Mexico border functioning as a clear dividing line of territories and consequently of identities, the Chicano's identity crosses the (virtual) border in the sense that a person can be Chicano/-a if he/she comes from the Mexican side of the border or if he/she is a Mexican descendant born in the US.

The significance of the border has been a major theme in many Chicano studies. Perhaps the best-known thoughts about the border are to be found in Anzaldúa's (1987) *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Anzaldúa writes: "The U.S.-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country – a border culture. Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them"* (1987, p. 25). Anzaldúa further claims that the borderland is "in a constant state of transition" thus implying that a border identity is fluid. Anzaldúa's view of a border culture as a "third country," which is the result of the merging worlds, is a valuable imagery of hybridity and third space.

The terms of border/borderlands are useful since they allow an analysis of Chicano culture as a border Chicano discourse. This can be viewed as what Bhabha refers to as "a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation". As a result, power relations can be resisted, negotiated and they eventually transform culture. Chicano discourse can be considered a border tongue. Anzaldúa (1987) terms it "*el*

lenguaje de la frontera" (p. 77) which literally means 'the language of the border' or 'border language.'

Moreover, Chicano literature can be seen as an example of border Writing. Though Esperanza favors the use of English, it can be observed that in certain moments, Spanish comes to be used in key words, regarding the emotional charge and level of intimacy such words carry within them. In the chapter "Papa who wakes up tired in the dark", she says: "Your *abuelito* is dead, Papa says early one morning in my room. *Está muerto*, and then as if he just heard the news himself, crumples like a coat and cries, my brave Papa cries" (HMS, p. 56). In *Hunger of Memory*, author Richard Rodriguez[9] mourns the loss of Spanish as the loss of intimacy. He considers Spanish to be a private language which Chicano families can use to express their feelings related to the closest ones to their hearts. This premise might be shared by the narrator when she says that her name sounds differently in different environments: "At school they say my name funny as if the syllables were made out of tin and hurt the roof of your mouth. But in Spanish my name is made out of a softer something" (HMS, p. 11). Here, she clearly associates the Spanish language to "something" closer to her heart, comforting and pleasant, perhaps because she relates the language to her comfort zone and intimate life with her family and English to be the public life language.

Since language was something that fascinated me while reading Cisneros's works, I sent an e-mail to her inquiring why the Spanish translation was done by Elena Poniatowska and not done by the author herself. Unfortunately, the only reply I received was from her agent, Susan Bergholz, who answered my question saying that "Sandra writes in English. She speaks Spanish, which is her language mostly at home, but she was not educated in Spanish so her writing language is English". Other authors, much like Cisneros and Rodriguez who use mostly English as their main language to express themselves in literature, are considered to be sell-outs or *pochos*[10] for using the language of the majority, the dominant one.

Chicanos/as are referred to as being a minority; however, the terms minority and minority language are not as obvious as they may seem. These terms wrongly suggest

[9] In an interview available at: http://www.scottlondon.com/interviews/rodriguez.html, accessed on 26th August 2007.

[10] *Pocho* is a derogatory term that Mexicans use to denigrate Mexican-Americans who put on gringo airs. It is an adjective which originally meant discolored, has now come to mean a type of popular slang in Mexico. Available at: http://www.doubletongued.org/index.php/dictionary/pocho/ , accessed on 17th January, 2004.

that the number of speakers of a language solely determines whether a particular group tallies as minority or majority. Instead of only relying on the number of speakers, the status and function of the language itself seem to be of even greater importance in order to determine what constitutes a minority or majority. Since the opportunity to use the language of a specific group is limited in society, in the case of the US where the main language is English (though not the official one), and if the language is restricted to certain functions and spheres, then the group in question constitutes a minority. Besides that, the terms majority and minority often reveal the distribution of power between people in a society; the majority represents the dominant group, while the minority group is the dominated one. Geraldo, without a last name, a character in HMS, can be considered an individual of the latter group; after all, he was "Just another *brazer* who didn't speak English. Just another wet-back. You know the kind. The ones who always look ashamed" (HMS, p.66). Esperanza places Geraldo as minority, not only because of the language barrier, but also because she calls him a *brazer*, which also means *bracero* and in English it means hired hands of usually temporary immigrant workers.

Since Chicano discourse sometimes is referred to as a non-standard variety of English it is necessary to define the two terms, standard and non-standard. According to BBC's writer Susan Fearn[11] the definition of Standard English is that variety of English which is usually used in print, and which is normally taught in schools and to non-native speakers learning the language. It is also the variety which is normally spoken by educated people and used in news broadcasts and other similar situations. *Non-standard English*, then, is defined as any dialect of English other than Standard English.

Nonstandard dialects of English differ from Standard English most importantly at the level of grammar. Examples of widespread nonstandard grammatical forms in English include multiple negation, past tense *done* rather than *did*, and the use of *ain't* rather than standard *isn't, aren't, haven't* and *hasn't*. In the episode of the novel "Gil's furniture bought & sold", Esperanza describes the "junk store" whose owner is a "black man", who can be seen also as a minority: "This, the old man says shutting the lid, this ain't for sale" (HMS, p. 19, 29). There are a few other incidences of this non-standard English throughout the novel: "Mr. Benny says, Hey ain't you kids know better than to be swinging up there?" (p. 30); "There ain't thirty different kinds of snow [...]Both of

[11] Available at: www.bbclearningenglish.com, accessed on 7th January, 2008.

yous better get out of my yard before I call my brothers" (p. 35 -37). Also, in the chapter "Alicia who sees mice", while telling us the girl's hardships; Esperanza uses sentence structure correspondent to questions in the English syntax, though they are affirmations, clearly presenting language interference: "Is a good girl, my friend, studies all night and sees the mice, the ones her father says do not exist. Is afraid of nothing except four-legged fur. And fathers" (p. 32).

Therefore, according to this definition of standard language, Chicano discourse could be categorized as a non-standard variety of the English. Non-standard varieties are often seen as deviations from the norm. Judgments concerning the correctness and purity of linguistic varieties are social rather that linguistic. There is nothing whatsoever intrinsic in non-standard varieties that could make them inferior. Any evident inferiority is due only to their association with speakers who are considered to be from under-privileged, low-status groups.

In the United States the so-called standard language is perhaps most broadly identified with the educated white middle class; Chicano discourse is a hybrid contact variety which mainly draws upon English and Spanish. When attempting to define Chicano discourse it is necessary to bear in mind that, as Anzaldúa (1999) argues, "[t]here is no one Chicano language just as there is no one Chicano experience" (p. 80). She explains that the linguistic background of Chicanos/as, as well as the geographical region in which they live affects their discourse (p. 81). Still according to her (1999), *pachuco* (also called *caló*) can be defined as "(the language of the zoot suiters) […] a language of rebellion, both against Standard Spanish and Standard English. It is a secret language […]. It is made up of slang words from both English and Spanish" (p. 77-78).

In other words, Chicano discourse should be distinguished from code-switching, which, according to Heredia and Brown,[12] happens when "speakers of more than one language (e.g., bilinguals) are known for their ability to code-switch or mix their languages during communication. This phenomenon occurs when bilinguals substitute a word or phrase from one language with a phrase or word from another language". Chicano discourse can include instances of code-switching since code-switching is a part of the linguistic competence of the group and/or community. We can perceive this

[12] Available at: http://www.tamiu.edu/~rheredia/switch.htm, accessed on: 2 January, 2007.

in some instances in the novel, with the use of words such as *frijoles*, *chanclas*, and *tembleque*.[13]

When the girls, Nenny, Esperanza, Lucy and Rachel are discussing the clouds, their shapes and names, they eventually start arguing and calling each other names, like "ugly", "fat face", etc. When the fight gets a little more heated, they start calling each other's mothers' names, like "I'm saying your mama's ugly like … ummm……like bare feet in September![...] Cold *frijoles* [...] Your mama's *frijoles*" (HMS, p. 36 – 38). Apparently it seems to be just a childish game of name calling and threats of "You better not be saying that, Lucy Guerrero. You better not be talking like that…else you can say goodbye to being my friend forever" (p. 38); however, through these name callings we can verify that, in their culture, to compare someone's mother's *frijoles* to a negative and derogatory thing is a huge insult. Given that beans is the staple food for most Latin, thus Chicano, families, saying that the mother, who is usually the homemaker in charge of the cooking, does not cook well her *frijoles* is very offensive. Such insult may not be perceived as it is by a reader who is not familiar to the Mexican and/or Mexican-American cultures. Chicano discourse here functions both as an emblem of identity and as a tool that enables Chicanos/as to express their realities.

The word *chanclas* used in the chapter with the same name means flip-flops or sandals that are really old. As slang it also means ugly girl. The choice for this word is representative of how the girl feels about her appearance and how her shoes stand for her economically impoverished life:

> I'm wearing the new dress, pink and white with stripes, and new underclothes and new socks and the old *saddle* shoes I wear to school, brown and white, the kind I get every September because they last long and they do. My feet scuffed and round, and the heels all crooked that look dumb with this dress, so I just sit. Meanwhile that boy who is my cousin by first communion or something asks me to dance and I can't. Just stuff my feet under the metal folding chair [...] I shake my head no. My feet growing bigger and bigger (HMS, p. 46 – my italics).

Her shoes are old and saddle, meaning they are burdening and also hindering the person she wants to be. Though her clothes are all new, her shoes, the same ones she feels embarrassed to wear in school, are worn out and scraped denouncing how ugly she really feels she is. This vignette will be better analyzed in chapter three.

[13] Available at: http://www.wordreference.com/definicion/tembleque , accessed on: 2 January, 2007.

People on the process of creating an identity which is culturally hybrid are usually rejected by nationalists and purists for such. They may be regarded as people who have turned their backs to their native culture and language, thus becoming unwelcomed and experiencing feelings of discomfort. When this displacement generates feelings of not-belonging to a place, it becomes even worse when the place one cannot feel at home is one's inner self. This means that the person does not know who he or she really is, and this emptiness brought on by the lack of identity causes problems such as low self-esteem, lack of objectives in life, emotional confusion and distress, and a sense that life is not worthwhile. Some desire to connect with the Spanish language in order to answer to the need to establish an ethnic identity different from that of the dominant culture. Others adapt and embrace the dominant language to achieve a social and economical improvement in their lives: "My father says when he came to this country he ate hamandeggs for three months. Breakfast, lunch and dinner. Hamandeggs. That was the only word he knew. He doesn't eat hamandeggs anymore" (HMS, p. 77). Her father had to learn the dominant language, though he still keeps cultural ties to Mexico through his records and relatives who still reside there.

On the other hand, people like the character *Mamacita* turn to the past and try to hold on to her native language in the hopes of not to cede to the English dominant world. Esperanza tells us that "she doesn't come out" (Mamacita) and the girl believes the reason for that is "because she is afraid to speak English, and maybe this is so since she only knows eight words. She knows to say: *He not here* for when the landlord comes, *No speak English* if anybody else comes, and *Holy smokes*. I don't know where she learned this, but I heard her say it one time and it surprised me" (p. 77).

Regarding the question of the language, Juan Gonzalez (2001) says that no other issue "so clearly puts Hispanics at odds with English speaking white and black Americans" (p. 206). The United States is in the unique position of being the largest English-speaking country in the world and at the same time the fifth-largest Spanish-speaking one. Gonzalez states that language is at the "heart of an individual's social identity". Language is the means through which a people expresses its beliefs, sings its songs, and preserves and transmits them all along with its folklore and customs to its descendents.

The issue of a national language in the United States has been a controversial one for many years. The myth of a melting pot country can only be possible if the

immigrants embrace not only the American way of life, but also the English Language. In order to become an American citizen, a foreigner has to take a literacy test. This action is intended to homogenization of the people, which ended up creating more difficulties for immigrants to become American citizens. Gonzalez quotes Edward Said regarding the antagonistic notions of "us" and "them", "cultural imperialism" and "colonized culture":

> The main battle in imperialism is over land, of course; but when it came to who owned the land, who had the right to settle and work on it, who kept it going […] these issues were reflected, contested, and even for a time decided in narrative [culture], the power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism and constitutes one of the main connections between them (SAID apud GONZALEZ, p.214).

The political character of language is made apparent when the dominant class attempts to create a common cultural environment and transforms the popular mentality through a national language. Spanish speakers still these days may cause a lot of fear among such dominant classes in the United States and the purist defenders of a hegemonic nation.

Although Esperanza employs language as a recurring metaphor for the gap between Mexican-Americans and the dominant culture, what maintains Esperanza Cordero and her friends locked in their neighborhood is something more adamant than language; it is a convergence of racism, poverty, and shame. They live with the shame of being poor, of being female, of being "born bad". In his work on transgender autobiography, Jay Prosser describes shame as "a profound grappling with the self's location in the world - the feeling of being out of place, of not being at home in a given situation, combined with the desire to be at home" (PROSSER, 1998, p. 179). His concept explains further Esperanza's desire to have her own home.

Esperanza grows to write stories that are not being told: her mother's stories, her aunt's story, the stories of women in the barrio, the stories of all of those people who do not have the ability to register their lives and to voice their sorrows, the ones "who cannot leave as easily as" her (HMS, p. 105), the excluded ones from the dominant discourse. Regarding this task of reporting about the lives of the outcasts from the majority group, Ian McLean in his essay "Post Colonial: Return to Sender" states "Minority artists are not left alone on the periphery of dominant discourse. Indeed, they

are required to be representatives of, or speak for, a particular marginalised community; [...] They bear a 'burden of representation'"[14].

Thus Esperanza takes upon herself to represent this minority through narrative, which also functions as her *Bildung*, reporting her years between childhood and adulthood. The neighborhood is a repressive community, which is frightening and extremely terrifying for women. The future for women in the barrio is a bleak one, where they cannot roam around; their place is confinement at home. Esperanza wants to disavow the patriarchal dominant discourse on Mango Street, and through her narrative she invests herself with power, a disapproved one, but power nevertheless.

In order to make her narrative personal, Esperanza makes use of the languages that are markers of Chicano discourse – English and Spanish. English is the predominant language of her narrative, but it is possible to see the syntax of Spanish, as well as a few well-placed words in Spanish. Language in the novel becomes a symbol of identity. "Bilanguaging", as Mignolo calls it, reflects Esperanza's identification to both cultures. The fact that she feels at ease navigating through both languages is characteristic of her hybrid cultural identity.

In telling her own story, Esperanza takes part in the process of her growth into adulthood, while at the same instance creates a poetic space that stands as an alternative to the silenced confinement on Mango Street: "I like to tell stories [. . .] I put it down on paper and then the ghost does not ache so much. I write it down and Mango Street says goodbye sometimes. She does not hold me with both arms. She sets me free" (p.101).

References

ALARCÓN, Daniel Cooper. *The Aztec Palimpsest*: Mexico in the Modern Imagination University of Arizona Press, 1997.

ANZALDÚA, Gloria. *Borderlands – La Frontera, The New Mestiza.* 2nd ed., San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987.

BHABHA, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.

[14] Essay available at: http://www.lib.latrobe.edu.au/AHR/archive/Issue-December-1998/mclean2.html accessed on 10 January, 2007.

BROOKS, Peter. *Reading for the Plot*: *Design and Intention in Narrative*. New York: Knopf, 1984.

CISNEROS, Sandra. *The House on Mango Street*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries of Random House, 1984.

ESTEVES, Sandra Maria. *Yerba Buena*. Introduction by RIVERA, Louis Reyes. New York: Arte Público, 1980, p. xvii.

GONZALEZ, Juan. *A History of Latinos in America.* New York: Penguin Books, 2001.

GUNEW, Sneja. *Haunted Nations: The Colonial Dimensions of Multiculturalisms*. New York: Routledge, 2004.

HALL, Stuart. *The Spectacle of the "Other"*. In: Stuart Hall (ed.) *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, London: SAGE Publications, 2001.

HEREDIA, Roberto; BROWN, Jeffrey. *Code-Switching.* Texas A & M International University. Available at: http://www.tamiu.edu/~rheredia/switch.htm. Accessed on: 7 Sep 2007.

MCLEAN, Ian. *Post* colonial: return to sender. Available at: http://www.lib.latrobe.edu.au/AHR/archive/Issue-December-1998/mclean2.html. Accessed on 28 Mar 2007.

MIGNOLO, Walter D. *Local Histories/Global Designs*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, Jan. 17, 2000.

PAZ, Octavio. *O Labirinto da Solidão*. Translator: Eliane Zagury from the original: El Laberinto de La Soledad e postdata. Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1984, 4. Ed.

PRATT, Mary Louise. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. London and New York: Routledge, 1992.

PROSSER, Jay. *Second Skins*: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.