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## Chicana “Belonging” in Sandra Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street*

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The study of language is a complicated and multi-faceted realm. The manner in which a person communicates suggests something about her identity in relation to ulterior motives, prospective audience, and ethnic background. Writer Sandra Cisneros is no exception to this affirmation within her first novel, *The House on Mango Street*. Cisneros’ Mexican-American narrator, Esperanza Cordero, struggles to cope with her community’s poverty, but her misfortunes are expressed through poetically-composed vignettes that include the use of “Spanglish.”

“Spanglish” is currently recognized as a legitimate variety of Chicano English, in the scale of “World Englishes”; this is identified by various linguists ranging from Braj B. Kachru, to Larry Smith, to Jacob Ornstein Galicia. In his introduction to *Form and Function in Chicano English*, Jacob Ornstein Galicia not only argues for the legitimacy and autonomous status of “Chicano English” but affirms the article included in that volume by Gustavo Gonzalez, “The Range of Chicano English,” that this variety is not entirely homogenous. Often it is varied by locale, environment, and sometimes by political choice. In language contact situations, what is generally known as “Spanglish” is varied. Sometimes it is used as an expression of that context and sometimes to express “*orgullo*,” or pride, in the particular variety, whereby it is neither dominated by “Mexican” identity, nor by a “US” identity. This is the case of Esperanza, who seems to be making particular choices in her use of language, choices perhaps dominated by the hegemonic influences which force a young woman to prefer such a variety of English as a tool for fitting in to her context.

Despite living in a Spanish-speaking community, young Esperanza’s identity is torn between her English tongue—given to her by the Catholic school and the Chicago context—and her traditional roots in the Spanish-speaking domain. A psychoanalytical-linguistic approach to the novel reveals that the narrator separates herself from her Spanish-speaking, native community for a number of reasons. It is interesting to analyze why Esperanza clings to the English existing predominantly outside of her Chicana neighborhood. Despite this, Spanglish frequents the pages where Esperanza quotes other characters. Both author and character claim themselves as English in order to flourish as writers and independent women.

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English is the primary language in Cisneros's novel. Linguist Howard Giles' research classifies both Esperanza's and Cisneros' motives alike. Speech-accommodation theory suggests that non-native English speakers strive to use language in a way that best portrays them according to motivation (264). Although Cisneros and by extension her character Esperanza are born in America, they are raised in Spanish-speaking communities. Growing up in multi-cultural Chicago, Esperanza expresses subtle distaste for her Hispanic culture by placing only English language in a positive light. She dwells on the differences between English and Spanish. For instance, she says, "In English my name means hope. In Spanish it means too many letters. It means sadness, it means waiting. It is like the number nine" (10). The Spanish meaning of her namesake reveals a negative connotation to her identity, whereas the English definition is motivating and positive. Her name is important because it represents tradition; ancestral connections provide the foundation to a person's identity, but the protagonist attempts to reject these connections through her disapproval of the Spanish meaning to her name.

According to Manuel Villar Raso and María Herrera-Sobek, the role of grandmother is "prominent in the familial structure" (27). Esperanza is named after her grandmother, and this is viewed by many cultures as honorable, but she opposes it. Her language demonstrates her unhappiness. In her naivety, she believes she will have to follow her "wild horse of a woman" grandmother, who is captured by a man and forced to marry; despite this undisputable fate, she is determined not to "inherit her place by the window" (11). She desires to create a new identity; she wishes not to follow in her grandmother's footsteps. Esperanza denounces her culture's tradition, for she yearns for distance from it. By placing English at the forefront of her name's meaning, Esperanza dismisses her Hispanic ethnicity. Howard Giles and Leslie M. Beebe found that speakers are "motivated to adjust their speech styles as a means of gaining one or more of the following goals: evoking listeners' social approval, attaining communicational efficiency between interactants, and maintaining positive social identities" (8). Esperanza identifies herself as an English-speaking American because she seeks to thrive outside of the Chicago Hispanic community that destroys women; she connects to her listeners outside of the community so that they will understand the struggles of such women. The choice of language within the novel embodies, to some extent, Cisneros' feminisms.

For Esperanza, despite being in a Latino community, she is still surrounded by English speakers in Chicago and the United States; therefore, the dominant language is preferred. William B. Putman and Richard L. Street suggest that a speaker will "either opt for the stereotypic levels associated with competence, or converge toward

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the lower-status speech style of the listener to enhance perceived social attractiveness” when “one’s interlocutor has a less-prestigious mode of speaking” (99). Although others may associate a Mexican-American as a monolingual, Spanish-speaking person, Esperanza uses her dominant English language to convey reliability to her audience as a competent narrator. The shift from her community’s Spanish to her English is an easy feat; as an impoverished child, she is eager to obtain a sense of belonging outside of her community. She is embarrassed by her roots and home. She remarks, “No, this isn’t my house I say and shake my head as if shaking could undo the year I’ve lived here. I don’t belong. I don’t ever want to come from here” (106). The feelings of belonging can even be as miniscule as favoring English or purchasing a house outside of Mango Street, as she ardently desires. Towards the end of the novel, she continues the house metaphor. With tactful language she states, “Not a man’s house. Not a daddy’s. A house all my own.... Only a house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem” (108). After observing her neighbors, friends, and family, she feels suffocated. Her house of dreams is a place she can write and choose to leave or secure herself within. In Mango Street, house and community delay her freedoms, but her own special environment would allow them to flourish. For her and other people eager to cling to English despite possessing a hyphenated identity, the language barrier is perceived as an undesirable boundary between self and opportunity in America. It is interesting to note how in Cisneros’ text, value is placed upon bilingual persons, whereas Spanish speakers are ridiculed and even pitied.

At the beginning of the novel, it is Esperanza who is pitied. A nun approaches her and scoffs at discovering where the young girl resides. The nun remarks, “You live *there*?” Such a remark by a supposed religious figure is bewildering (5). A nun typically has neither possessions nor wealth, so for a woman of that stature to pity the little girl’s lifestyle is patronizing. The dialogue immediately displays Esperanza’s negative memory of the house on Mango Street as being an embarrassing, shameful locale. At the conclusion of the novel, she remarks, “I am too strong for her to keep me here forever” (110). The feminization and personification of Mango Street symbolizes the entire group of women that hold back from conquering their ambitions. The narrator reveals her inability to relate to others within the community, and wishes that “someday I will have a best friend all my own. One I can tell my secrets to.... Until then I am a red balloon, a balloon tied to an anchor” (9). Her mission to take flight as a metaphorical balloon is compromised by the heavy weight of community and familial duties alongside gender and racial challenges that she faces. Esperanza cannot follow in her female ancestors’ footsteps, and in her viewpoint, these women have failed. Whatever

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is on the outside of the impoverished place is a safe harbor for the girl's sense of belonging, but Mango Street and its Chicano community withstand the language barrier outside and separate themselves from outsiders.

The community is exclusive to Spanish-speaking individuals. The narrator demonstrates the differences in what Laura Callahan defines as the "ingroup" and the "outgroup" (29). The secluded community, or ingroup, is afraid to leave; the surrounding, seemingly-threatening external community, or outgroup, is afraid to approach. These outsiders are thought of as "stupid" and "lost" for approaching the Chicana scared; it is crucial to notice how Esperanza marks them as these names only if "they don't know any better" and are scared (28). She says nothing about non-Spanish speaking individuals boldly approaching their community. She only places the Chicano community in a vulnerable position. Esperanza narrates, "All brown all around, we are safe. But watch us drive into a neighborhood of another color and our knees go shakity-shake.... That is how it goes and goes" (28). The rhythmic style of this passage suggests that the cycle will continue as long as communities separate themselves from outside groups; this argument coincides with Giles, Vikki Katz, and Paul Myers belief that "particular features of the local environment, and how these community-level characteristics constrain or enable communicative activity in the local space, are considered central (41). Esperanza seeks to break this cycle for herself.

Cisneros is certain to portray the community's fear to leave its boundaries, and this is due to feeling threatened and insecure. The outside, or outgroup, is unfamiliar and scary. Though the boundaries of the ingroup and outgroup have been previously discussed, attention must be focused on Cisneros' style in the same chapter, which is titled "Those Who Don't." Instead of focusing on the similarities of what Callahan marks as the "ingroup" and "outgroup," the chapter title highlights the separation of Mango Street's community from the outside world. The "don'ts" are the Spanish speaking people that are petrified by the thought of traveling outside their familiar community. Not only does Cisneros further separate the majority, English group from the Chicana community, but she also separates herself from "those" Chicana people. She establishes herself as an English speaker, and believes Spanish to be a part of her past, which correlates to Esperanza's narration. For people eager to leave Latino communities, like Esperanza and Cisneros, English must be favored over the mother-tongue language.

Esperanza's Chicano community is cautious not to exceed their ethnic boundaries, and there is no evidence of them ever being threatened by outsiders. For Cisneros' protagonist, such beliefs are unhealthy; they prevent growth and encourage ignorance. Additionally, Giles, Katz, and Myers recognize that "the local

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context is also affected by changes that individuals can effect on their local space and their interpersonal ties” (42). Part of Esperanza’s mission is to alter the pattern of rejection of outsiders. Yvonne Yarbrow-Bejarano recognizes other variables which factor into Esperanza’s plan to escape her community; she writes how “Esperanza is painfully aware of the racial and economic oppression her community suffers” (142). If she successfully leaves, she will motivate other women to follow her direction. Those in her community believe that they cannot leave because of a language barrier, but once English is learned, the possibilities eliminate physical and social boundaries.

In Esperanza’s eyes, she wonders why someone from the outgroup would want to approach *this* Chicana community anyway. The community is an impoverished one that mistreats women and denies opportunities to their loyal residents; Esperanza’s narration sets out to provide evidence for these traits. Yarbrow-Bejarano identifies the importance of Esperanza observing women’s role in the community:

It is the fate of the women in her *barrio* that have the most profound impact on her, especially as she begins to develop sexually and learns that the same fate might be hers. Esperanza gathers strength from the experiences of these women to reject the imposition of rigid gender roles predetermined for her by her culture. (142)

She desires to extricate herself from Mango Street to discover commonalities with people outside; in order for her to do so, she must find sufficient evidence to provoke her to leave. One of the ways in which she separates herself is by pitying the men in her community. She reminds her readers that “the Chinese, like the Mexicans, don’t like their women strong” (10). She reverses this societal standard in her narration by marking the men as disappointments. For example, she remarks that one boy dating the beautiful Marin was just “another *brazier* who didn’t speak English ... the ones who always look ashamed” (66). This boy, like the others fitting into the stereotypical role, is a disposable being. He cannot speak English and is viewed as superfluous to Esperanza. His inability or lack of desire to learn English places him in a pitiful position. “Geraldo No Last Name” is referred to in Spanish terms by Marin and retold by the narrator because that is the extent of his existence. Without a translation of the word “*brazier*,” Esperanza’s audience regards the boy as just another foreign, distant object. The narration of the vignette assists Esperanza in moving away from the people of her community.

The narrator pities the men in the community, but she sympathizes for the women they possess. Esperanza recites “The Walrus and the Carpenter” to an older friend, Ruthie. As an indication of her “hybridized” nature, it is interesting to note how Esperanza is inspired by English literature and has no ethnic vehicles

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of inspiration. Ruthie is a married woman who retreats to her mother's house when she fights with her husband; both she and Esperanza enjoy reading, and the woman cultivates Esperanza's interest in literature. According to Esperanza, "there were many things Ruthie could have been if she wanted to.... She had lots of job offers when she was young, but never took them. She got married instead and moved away to a pretty house outside the city" (69). Ruthie escapes the community, but because she depends on a man—who lets her down—she returns. When Esperanza goes shopping with Ruthie outside of the community, she is anxious. She notes how Ruthie "never comes inside the store and if she does she keeps looking around her like a wild animal in a house for the first time" (68). The woman is depicted as a wild, foreign object, and she does not have any sense of belonging. She is misplaced outside of her community and therefore feels threatened from outsiders. Esperanza notices that another person cannot be relied on to help with her escape. Ruthie's purpose is to inspire Esperanza; she knows that the growing girl will make something meaningful of her life. In fact, she cries at Esperanza's recitation because she knows that her young friend, unlike herself, will eventually leave Mango Street as an independent woman.

Esperanza further displays the disappointment of men with the portrayal of Minerva's lifestyle. Similar to Ruthie, the woman has a turbulent and abusive relationship with her husband. Esperanza mentions that the girl "is only a little bit older than me but already she has two kids and a husband who left. Her mother raised her kids alone and it looks like her daughters will go that way too" (84). Next, Esperanza recalls the system of arguments and reconciliations between the couple. The language in the vignette describes the cyclic fashion of life surrounding Mango Street. Minerva is a poet, but cannot excel at her craft because she must maintain wife and motherly roles. Esperanza says, "there is nothing I can do," which describes her feeling of helplessness (85). She believes the women will continue to become pregnant and abandoned by their lovers. She is "sad like a house on fire," which is a symbolic caution to the destruction of Esperanza's ultimate desire of a house of dreams (84). The helpless trait is unbearable the more she witnesses women struggle; as she grows, Esperanza will assure herself that she will have control of her own life.

In relation to Minerva's feelings of helplessness, Esperanza introduces the character of *Mamacita*. The woman evokes genuine pity from the protagonist because she is marked as a lost soul in the chapter "No Speak English." *Mamacita* is a grown woman with a limited knowledge of the English language. Esperanza says, "Somebody said because she's too fat, somebody because of the three flights of stairs, but I believe she doesn't come out because she is afraid to speak English,

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and maybe this is so since she only knows eight words” (77). In an interview with Cisneros, Feroza Jussawalla remarks that “there seems to be a voice criticizing [*Mamacita*] for clinging to Spanish; Cisneros finds that “the language, for a lot of people, was a link back.... it’s a frightening thing when you let go of a language because you’ve let go of your tiny thin string back home” (294). *Mamacita* rejects the dominant language because she does not want to lose her connection to her home. Esperanza explains how the woman hopelessly yearns for her home and cries to go back as if she were a child. Giles, Katz, and Myers note that without “access to safe places to interact ... language attitudes may fossilize over time to become deeply-held beliefs”; language attitudes are formed by many “forces, both current and historical” (46-47). For homesick *Mamacita*, the radio is her only outlet. She speaks in Spanish, but her husband yells at her in English. He reprimands her and says, “¡Ay, caray! We are home. This is home. Here I am and here I stay. Speak English. Speak English. Christ!” (78). *Mamacita* cannot connect to him, nor to her baby boy, who “starts to sing the Pepsi commercial he heard on TV” to inadvertently “break her heart forever” (78). The way in which little Esperanza and the neighborhood kids pity an older woman is a pathetic display intended to disturb readers, just as the nun’s insult to Esperanza did. Rather than assimilating or accepting her newfound double-identity, *Mamacita* denies the English language and views America as the distant road away from the home where she belongs.

*Mamacita* arrives at foreign America to fulfill her duties as wife, but Esperanza introduces a character that seeks escape with the aid of a man. Marin’s goal is similar to Esperanza’s in that she desires to reside outside of Mango Street. However, she believes this is possible only with the assistance of a knight-in-shining-armor. She is described as beautiful and she looks to utilize her physical appeal to “meet someone in the subway who might marry [her] and take [her] to live in a big house far away” (26). Esperanza notes how the older girl has a secret boyfriend in Puerto Rico, but explains how she is eager to be rescued by any man; she signifies the distaste of her community and her need to break away. Her identity is defined by men, which is obviously an issue for Esperanza. The older girl’s objective appears promising, but she is willing to endanger herself. She is distant from other people within the community, so she recklessly and romantically desires anyone to save her in her state of being alone.

Marin is restrained by her male cousin and is not permitted to leave the house. Giles, Katz, and Myers write that “feelings of fear and comfort can and do affect who individuals are most likely to interact with” (46). She is kept inside, so she desires to engage with anyone outside of her immediate world. Her freedoms are limited because she is the caretaker to her cousin’s children; he assigns her

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this job to prevent her from getting into trouble. Esperanza morosely reflects on the imprisoned Marin: “Marin, under the streetlight, dancing by herself, is singing the same song somewhere. I know. Is waiting for a car to stop, a star to fall, someone to change her life” (27). Although she communicates with her boyfriend, her departure is unlikely because she does not have the money to leave or independence to establish herself effectively. Her romantic perspective will probably result in injury or manipulation from men. Marin is another example of a person without the sense of belonging and just “longing.” It is imperative to note how Esperanza suggests how another individual must change her life. Her ambitions are completely romantic and unrealistic to Esperanza, and Esperanza recognizes that the woman must work to achieve personal success on her own.

The concept of home is not as distant to Esperanza as it may be for *Mamacita* or Marin, but family matters do not necessarily make her feel like she belongs. Even someone as seemingly-intimate to Esperanza, such as her father, is seen as weak because he chooses to speak Spanish. Coupland notes that importance rests in pronoun choices to display “familial intimacy” (55). Despite this, the repetition of “my Papa” in the chapter “Papa Who Wakes Up Tired in the Dark” portrays the man as a weak being; he cannot help himself or others. He is a figure to be pitied. The narrator’s audience is familiar with Esperanza’s poverty, as she provides various evidence of it; this evidence includes the gentle shame of her father. Raso and Herrera-Sobek note that “in Chicano culture, the family is a most important entity with its endless series of godfathers, aunts, uncles, cousins, nephews, in laws, and other extended members (27). To portray her father and all men as weak and child-like is to offend tradition once again. The male figure is expected to financially provide for his family, and Esperanza’s father fails at this. The audience recognizes this because the family is always moving around to places as dilapidated as their house on Mango Street. It is an example of instability and insecurity within the family infrastructure. He says to Esperanza that her “*abuelito está muerto*,” and he converses with her in Spanish. Although he is a father figure, “he crumbles like a coat and cries,” and yet, she believes it is her responsibility to tell her siblings the news of her grandfather’s death (56). Her father’s image is as infantile-like as *Mamacita* and as pitiful as Gerardo.

Esperanza does not retell her conversations with her infantile father—or anyone—in Spanish; she chooses to portray them in her preferred English language. Nikolas Coupland references Robert B. Le Page and Andrée Tabouret-Keller’s linguistic study on identity; a person’s “self-representation,” is “projected” accordingly depending on her audience (111). Esperanza clarifies that Spanish is a part of her past; the people currently associated with her use the language, but she

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identifies with English. In connection to this, Yarbrow-Bejarano's article "Chicana Literature: From A Chicana Feminist Perspective" may explain why Esperanza cannot entirely deny her audience the Spanish language. Yarbrow-Bejarano agrees with Gloria Anzaldúa's research that suggests how Chicana writers "must draw power from the very conditions that excluded them from writing in the first place, and write from what she calls the deep core of their identity as working-class women of color who belong to a culture other than the dominant one (141). This is true of both Cisneros as writer and Esperanza as coming-of-age writer. In the public realm, it appears that assimilation is appealing for Esperanza to escape the lost, empty souls around her. She connects with her audience to allow them to see the pathetic lives of those she is surrounded by. There exists a duality in voices, which is why Spanish is included in the text. Even if she does not favor her ethnic side, it still remains a part of her being. Victor Villanueva believes that non-white people "are always having to deal with voices, not voice" (68). Esperanza is arguably drawn from an autobiographical basis of Cisneros' life, and it is only reasonable to conclude that both female figures envision the English language as an avenue to their future outside of poverty and male-dominated households.

Esperanza has learned to "diverge linguistically away from those believed characteristic of their recipients" to "disassociate personally from another" within her community, which follows Giles and Beebe's theory (8). Giles' studied methods of "convergence" and "divergence" suggest particular motives of a person that are crucial to decoding identity. The association or dissociation of a person to a group signifies how the person wishes to be perceived by society. Katherine Crawford-Garrett cites De Valdes' argument that "Esperanza's writing and her search for a unique feminist identity" with her "writerly ambitions" are perceived to be "a tool of self-invention" (96). By simultaneously growing as woman and developing self-awareness, she can only invent herself as a prospective writer if she acknowledges her community and the English world alike. Christina Rose Dubb notes that Esperanza "moves from the naivety of childhood to the shocking understanding of the injustices of sexual inequality, violence, and socioeconomic disparities. The novel ends with Esperanza's recognition of writing's power in easing her pain and allowing her to escape, if only briefly, from her situation" (220). Although her future remains uncertain, she will maintain an awareness of potential outside of the community, just like her mother and Alicia.

Both these female characters—Esperanza's mother and her friend—are models for the heroine. In Alicia's circumstance, her relief from the community is temporary as a college student. According to Esperanza, Alicia returns from college with a newfound *dis*respect for her ethnic community; young Esperanza

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notices that her friend has become be stuck-up. When the narrator approaches her older friend, she is rejected by the college student. Coupland notes that when divergence occurs, it may symbolize the “desire to reduce intimacy” (62). This notion is true for Alicia, and it explains her behavior. Esperanza desperately longs to communicate with Alicia, for she is viewed as an inspiration to the young girl looking to leave Chicana Chicago. Alongside Coupland’s study is Laura Callahan’s, which notes that a speaker’s accommodation to please her interlocutor may result in “derision or rejection” by the person the speaker is communicating with (30). It is surmised that people within the Chicana community approach the girl, but she refuses to engage in Spanish with the people who are now beneath her education level. Alicia wants her sole identity to be an unhyphenated American, so the community is a part of her shameful past.

In retrospect, Esperanza reflects that the older girl “doesn’t want to spend her whole life in a factory or behind a rolling pin,” which signifies an understanding for why the girl separates herself from her old community (31-32). Alicia provides inspiration into acquiring higher education. She is another promising figure for Esperanza to emulate, but just like Ruthie’s circumstance, a man weakens her chance of escape. Esperanza mentions that Alicia is “afraid of nothing except four-legged fur. And fathers” (32). There are subtleties embedded in the text that suggest Alicia’s father molests her, so leaving the community is desired. However, her widower father depends on her. He resembles the helplessness of characters such as Esperanza’s father, *Mamacita*, and Geraldo. Alicia’s new intellectual environment offers boundless opportunities for her to leave her community, but her allegiance to her father will hold her back from any success.

Similar to Alicia, Esperanza’s mother demonstrates the failed attempt at breaking away from the community. Raso and Herrera-Sobek state that it is often that “Chicana authors challenge women’s roles as wives and mothers” (31). The narrator blatantly dismisses men in the community, but children are also seen as a burden to fulfilling potential. Esperanza recalls how her mother said, “I could’ve been somebody, you know?” and how she warns her daughter, “Esperanza, you go to school. Study hard” (91). Her mother contemplates how her life could have been, and therefore, Esperanza views the mother role as a trapped position, for she must provide constant service to other people without fulfilling her own aspirations. The conversation between Esperanza and her mother reveals her mother’s true unhappiness, and this suggests the necessary distance Esperanza must initiate to be independent. Additionally, the mother advises Esperanza to ignore tiny matters, for she recalls how the shame of her clothing at school was her why she fled formal education. Esperanza is certain not to allow such a trifling

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matter to affect her ambitions in the future. Felicia J. Cruz argues that “breaking away from one’s family constitute the very steps needed for growing up, even for becoming part of the ‘real world’” (921). If the paths of motherhood or wifehood are followed, Esperanza will never have her freedoms. Despite being praised for her bilingual abilities and seemingly-independent ways, Esperanza’s mother’s agony is just another example of a “dream deferred.” The narrator describes all of the skills her “smart cookie” of a mother is capable of, and yet, “she doesn’t know which subway train to take to get downtown. I hold her hand very tight while we wait for the right train to arrive” (90). Esperanza’s mother is portrayed in a more positive light than her father, but the parent regresses to the child role once again.

Perhaps due to her mother’s limited bilingualism, Esperanza must hold her mother’s hand to properly navigate the subway environment. Her shame is expressed, just as Esperanza’s was as the nun insulted her “home.” Although the narrator’s mother allows shame to torment her, Esperanza views her shame as a challenge to move beyond. In a poem recitation, the narrator symbolically recites that “One day I’ll jump / out of my skin” in order to become “like the waves” and “like the clouds,” or anything other than what she has been raised to be (60). She recognizes women’s faults within her community and seeks to move beyond them for her own success as writer. Raso and Herrera-Sobek continue that Esperanza must “observe, evaluate, and reject paths chosen by the women of her family and her neighborhood” (32). She must observe to distance herself and analyze realistic choices to fully establish a promising future for herself. Her convergence to English stabilizes her motive of escaping community, which is what these women fall short of conquering in *Mango Street*. Perhaps Raso and Herrera-Sobek best define the novel’s conclusion that Esperanza “has gained a measure of the power and determination to achieve it” (32). Esperanza’s identity and self-awareness exists only after she learns of other people’s histories within her community. The intentional escape from Mango Street marks the development of her personal identity. It is only by separating herself from her Spanish native tongue and community will she ever gain belonging away from Mango Street.

To develop the scope of linguistic study on *The House on Mango Street*, one must also question author Sandra Cisneros’ intentions. It is imperative to note that her literary works are written in English with select Spanish words included. The Spanglish element is only possible with a limited number of Spanish words fused within English prose. This is symbolic of her personal language battle. Villanueva states that “there are always tensions in being multicultural, tensions that aren’t all a wonderful richness but indeed tensions, apparently painful” (69). The battle may have easily subsided if Cisneros claimed her writing style in exclusively Spanish,

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but she chose to represent herself in a difficult form. It is curious to contemplate why Cisneros did not compose her vignettes in the reverse: entirely in her native Spanish with select English words. Cruz cites Cisneros' explanation of language usage in the novel; she explains that her protagonist is "very much an antiacademic voice—a child's voice, a girl's voice, a poor girl's voice, a spoken voice, the voice of an American-Mexican" (916). The notion of her as an "American-Mexican" rather than a "Mexican-American" is significant and dismisses the belief that her native ethnicity overpowers her sense of American belonging. Regardless, both identities unite within the writer to create what Yarbrow-Bejarano calls Cisneros' "collective," multifaceted, "authentic voice" (141-2). The carefully chosen language resembles how the English definition is subtly favored over Spanish for her narrator's name at the beginning of the novel. She does not consider herself or her narrator a displaced Mexican (like *Mamacita*), a Mexican-American, or—as white citizens may wrongfully accuse her of being—an immigrant. As previously mentioned, she challenges ethnic tradition and dismisses misogynist beliefs that hold women in particularly helpless, places of servitude. If anything, the narrator feels as if she does not belong on Mango Street, and this is signified by the author's use of English to express belonging.

In addition, Giles' study of audience perception reveals that age and group membership dictate how a speaker is perceived. If Cisneros' narrator is a young girl, then her credibility is immediately questioned. Instead of using herself—a grown female writer outside of Chicana Chicago—she creates Esperanza to depict a person still within the threshold of turbulence; she also gains sympathy as a youthful figure. As a result, autobiography and memoir are vehicles that Cisneros is not willing to utilize completely; she uses her narrator to identify cultural flaws rather than placing herself in a vulnerable position. Raso and Herrera-Sobek define Cisneros' intentions as a "pioneer" Latino writer the result in her "narrative design" of *Esperanza* (31). A developing girl's message provokes empathy and understanding, and a conscientious child within a dysfunctional community is accepted by the masses more than a reflective adult would be. Her English vignettes allow her to relate to people outside of the stereotypical Chicana roles. Coupland cites Giles' "social attractiveness" and "communication efficiency" to be the focus of speakers, and Cisneros abides by these motives by favoring the English language (62). The importance of "belonging" is attributable to human nature and this is no exception to language; whatever language is standard and accessible to the masses will provide the possibility of success for Cisneros.

Identity tension is a common issue for people living in a country with a "foreign," dominant language. Cruz finds that "since its initial publication in 1984, the readership of *Mango Street* has expanded beyond the pale of Chicano and Latino

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communities to include families and students of all ages and ethnicities” (911). This is Cisneros’ ultimate motivation. Writers aspire to communicate to expansive audiences. Voice, as Dubb notes, is even more important to developing girls because they aspire to be writers (223). Especially for writers of a particular ethnicity, reaching others outside of their own background is an achievement of acceptance and of unity with that majority group. For English language learners in America, it is appealing to learn the “official,” or “standard,” language of America in order to develop communication networks beyond native ones. Sandra Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street* displays this through the narration of Mexican-American narrator Esperanza Cordero. By analyzing the socioeconomic status in minority communities like that of Cisneros’ Chicana Chicago, the dominant language is appealing for those looking to leave impoverished communities.

A negativity pervades the novel whenever exclusively addressing speakers of Spanish. Following Giles’ study on pronunciation and dialect, part of belonging to a group is uniting similarities to differences, so if Cisneros does not emulate English, she fails as a member to the group (262). A grown Esperanza at the end of the novel notes how she “didn’t want to belong,” which alters her perception of the community (109). At the beginning of the novel, the insults directed at her house, her shame, and her noted unhappiness with her name indicate that she is not allowed to belong; she is victim. As an adolescent, this vantage point alters; Esperanza gains control. She does not want to belong to Mango Street, but she desires to belong to another group. Therefore, it is necessary to engage in an efficient vehicle of communication. Crawford-Garrett argues that Cisneros’ narration style attracts her readers as if they were people speaking to Esperanza. She writes that “by choosing to tell Esperanza’s story as a series of vignettes, which at times read as disconnected incidents, Cisneros positions the reader as spectator, sitting on a Mango Street stoop and waiting to hear and assess the next bit of news (97-98).

Following Giles’ study on pronunciation and dialect, part of belonging to a group is uniting similarities to differences. Cisneros is merging English and Spanish in her own unique method to establish herself as an American writer; the same is true for what her character Esperanza desires. Cisneros can create her writing as she wishes because her words are visual and are not spoken. Spanish exists as a past to recognize; Esperanza’s Spanish is very limited, and only a handful of phrases exist towards the novel’s conclusion in comparison to earlier parts of the novel. This notion suggests that Esperanza succeeds in moving away from the Chicana community. Even when Esperanza’s interlocutor is speaking Spanish, she narrates her side of the conversation in English; the only Spanish words she narrates are when she recites another character’s words or when she refers to Spanish culture,

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like foods or dance. These insertions are cancelled out by American popular culture references such as Pepsi, Bugs Bunny, Marlon Brando, Marilyn Monroe, and Joan Crawford. The novel would not be realistic if it completely nullified Spanish, and whether both author and protagonist like it or not, their background remains a crucial part of their identity. “Spanglish,” therefore is an option for the author to portray her characters in a realistic manner and to display the linguistic conflict of Esperanza through a unique writing style.

Vignettes are incomplete, poetic, and do not entirely abide by grammatical rules. These freedoms allow Cisneros and her narrator to avoid being perceived as “broken” English speakers. Rose Dubb notes that “Cisneros’s, and therefore Esperanza’s, use of vignettes rather than linear narrative further highlights the idea of living in borderlands because she is placed in an in-between space even in form” (223). Giles and Beebe believe that speakers are “likely to locate the conditions deemed necessary for the attenuation of ethnic speech markers and linguistic assimilation within the ethnic (often dominant) outgroup” (13) Callahan describes how “intercultural differences” in language will affect business (31). Such research correlates to Cisneros’ mission as a writer. In order for her to be successful in conveying her message, she must contact a broad, varied audience. If she wrote the novel in Spanish or entirely in English, it is likely that she would receive negative and limited reception.

Another example of the negation of Spanish is displayed in Cisneros’ novel’s dedication page. The Spanish words “A las Mujeres” grace the blank page, but they are not alone. Directly beneath them are the words “To the Women.” It has often been posited that Chicano writers writing at a time when Chicano literature began pouring into the mainstream were required by their publishers to include simultaneous bilingual translations; this arguable design would be practiced until the reader became comfortable with the text. But it is possible to see that by providing an English translation, Cisneros eliminates the prospect of dedication to the women she left in her Chicano community. Her language is tactful. The author does not write “To My Women” as if she is providing motivation or hope to a particular ethnic background. In this dedication, the boundaries are erased as she unites all female voices—Anglo, Hispanic, and other—alike. Coupland’s study on ethnic hybridity found that people often “celebrate” the “cultural forms” of the converged culture to the native culture (123). Evidence is thoroughly provided that she portrays her Chicana community in a less-than-positive manner as an American writer, and her portrayal of assimilation is praised and heavily acknowledged. Villanueva finds that “people of color try to move away from labels that define us negatively,” and that “our narratives either consciously resist

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or less consciously contend with the linguistic and rhetorical ways in which we can be rendered ‘less than’” (69). One may argue that Cisneros is very aware of the dangers of replicating these labels upon herself, but she does not dismiss her ethnicity. In fact, her narrator presents these through the descriptions of the stereotypical characters in her novel. The use of “Spanglish,” attributes both writer and protagonist’s identities as multifaceted beings. Not only does Cisneros identify as an English-speaking American, but she recognizes that for independence, for writing, and for a single woman of color, she must succeed in acknowledging her past to establish her unique writing voice.

*The House on Mango Street* displays the complexities of language and identity. For Sandra Cisneros’ heroine, Esperanza Cordero, the patriarchal Chicana Chicago community that raised her will not permit her development as a female writer. In order to break away, she must follow Giles’ notion of ethnic “divergence.” Cisneros utilizes her young narrator to address the oppression that women face within communities such as Mango Street. Esperanza observes others around her and pities figures such as *Mamacita* and her father for hopelessly clinging to Spanish as they feel lost in America. Other people are described as having unrealistic, romantic expectations of being rescued by outsiders. Brave, courageous women like her mother and Alicia are models of the potential which exists outside of her community. The notions of home and belonging identify how crucial it is for Esperanza to have a physical and metaphorical house of her own dreams. English acquisition is perceived as a chance to escape poverty and restraint in such as misogynist culture, so author and heroine establish English as mother-tongue. To write in standard American English negates any major differences that the author may have between her interlocutors and her writing identity; the same is assumed by her narrator presenting her own dialogue in English when conversing with Spanish-speaking individuals. English is the American way, and Cisneros clearly identifies herself as one; Esperanza’s transition is more obvious through the bildungsroman story of her childhood. The intentional escape from Mango Street marks the growth of Esperanza’s personal identity as an American. It is only by separating herself from her Spanish native tongue and community, but by also acknowledging it as an irreplaceable part of her past and being, that she will gain the sense of belonging.

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