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Expanding the canon : cultural identity and gender  
in Native American and Mexican American texts  
(interpretations of Anna Lee Walters' Ghost singer  
and of Sandra Cisneros' The house on Mango  
Street

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Cultural Identity and  
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**DATE: May 30, 1993**

Expanding the Canon: Cultural Identity and Gender in Native American and Mexican American Texts (Interpretations of Anna Lee Walters' *Ghost Singer* and of Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*).

by

Melissa J. Fiesta

A Thesis

Presented to the Graduate and Research Committee

of Lehigh University

in Candidacy for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in

English

Lehigh University

May 21, 1993

Department of English  
Lehigh University

Submission of  
Thesis Paper

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Name of student: Melissa J. Fiesta

Title of paper: "Solving Mysteries of Culture and Self: Anita and Naspah in Anna Lee Walters' Ghost Singer"

30-word abstract of paper:

This article examines both the unresolved and the resolved mysteries. I postulate that Walters' allows only involved individuals to solve mysteries. In solving their mysteries, Anita and Naspah prove that Native Americans can reclaim their culture.

Written as: [ ] conference paper [✓] journal article

Intended conference or journal: The American Indian Quarterly

Number of pages, double-spaced: 20

Name of faculty adviser (typed): Dr. Peter G. Beidler

The signature of the adviser, below, certifies that the paper is, in his or her opinion, ready to be sent off for possible presentation at the designated conference or for submission for possible publication to the designated journal. The signature of the department graduate director acknowledges that she or he has been notified that this paper partially fulfills the requirements for the master's degree in English.

Adviser: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: July 7, 1992

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Department of English  
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Name of student: Melissa J. Fiesta

Title of paper: Conceptualizing the Language of Hope: Esperanza's Discourse in Sandra Cisneros's The House on Mango Street  
30-word abstract of paper:

In this text Cisneros purposefully constructs a language outside of the dominant discourse in order to accurately depict her protagonist's individual and communal experience as an adolescent Chicana, who struggles to represent herself against the violent, patriarchal society that attempts to appropriate her.

Written as: [  ] conference paper [  ] journal article

Intended conference or journal: American Women Writers of Color Conference

Number of pages, double-spaced: 23

Name of faculty adviser (typed): Dr. Fifer

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## ABSTRACT

In these complementary projects, I analyze two texts by two different marginalized authors, who share much in common. Both Anna Lee Walters, a Native American, and Sandra Cisneros, a Mexican American, present readers with powerful images of minority women seeking self-expression and transcending the dominant culture to accomplish the personal representation that becomes a political act.

Their female protagonists develop from confused and passive receptors of false representations to confident spokeswomen for silent communities. Through these fictional and accurate representations, the authors successfully claim a space in the world for their aesthetic production -- for telling the stories of their individual and communal life experiences. We see the emergence of a new genre; the representations that they create reflect a reality that many people would not otherwise see.

Both works problematize what it means to be a female storyteller from a traditionally marginalized perspective: how do you tell a story that has existed all along, but can only be articulated after a long process of recovery, i.e. the reconstruction of an identity that has been denied by repressive systems of power? These authors show us that socio-economic conditions have prevented such an awareness and serve as the foundation upon which prejudices are constructed. We finally see, then, that prejudices are stories which require

our sustained interrogation.



## Solving Mysteries of Culture and Self: Anita and Naspah in Anna Lee Walters' *Ghost Singer*

A moment later four mysterious beings appeared. These were White Body, god of this world; Blue Body, the sprinkler; Yellow Body; and Black Body, the god of fire.

Using signs but without speaking, the gods tried to instruct the people, but they were not understood. When the gods had gone, the people discussed their mysterious visit and tried without success to figure out the signs. The gods appeared on four days in succession and attempted to communicate through signs, but their efforts came to nothing.

On the fourth day when the other gods departed, Black Body remained behind and spoke to the people in their own language: "You do not seem to understand our signs, so I must tell you what they mean."

### -- Navajo Myth: Creation of First Man and First Woman (Erdoes and Ortiz 39)

As the Navajo creation myth suggests, mystery has long been part of Navajo culture. To readers of Anna Lee Walters's *Ghost Singer*, the Navajo tradition of mysterious visitors from another world will come to no surprise. *Ghost Singer* differs from conventional mystery novels in that the plot does not revolve around one central mystery and its impending solution. Rather, the mysteries in *Ghost Singer* are multi-dimensional and interrelate. One aspect of the novel that may perplex the modern-day reader is that many of these mysteries remain unsolved. Thus, we share something in common with the first Navajo people. We are both uncertain of the significance of our mysterious visitors. The ghost

singer visits us and communicates through signs, but we are never sure what they mean.

In this article I will explain the meanings of the mysteries in Walters's *Ghost Singer*. I will first suggest the reasons why Walters leaves the mysteries of the ghost singer and Anita's ancestry unresolved. I will then show that Walters has both Anita and Naspah solve mysteries of their own. In *Ghost Singer* Walters postulates that the power to solve mysteries lies within the involved individual.

In "The Values and Vision of a Collective Past: An Interview with Anna Lee Walters," Professor Rhoda Carroll comments on the mysteries that Walters leaves unresolved:

All through *Ghost Singer* I had the feeling that you were giving the reader the threads of a solvable mystery. In Anglo tradition, there's something that wants discoveries made and identities revealed and lost children returned. (69)

In response to this comment, Walters suggests that she does not solve these mysteries because they do not have "easy solutions" (69). But Walters makes a distinction in *Ghost Singer* that she does not make in her interview between insolvable and solvable mysteries. In *Ghost Singer*, the mysteries range from the appearance of a seven-foot giant ghost singer to the identity of Anita's grandmother to the stories that Jonnie Navajo tells to his granddaughter, Naspah. The mystery of the ghost singer is larger than life both literally and

figuratively, and his mystery is never resolved. As we see, even the solvable mysteries do not have easy solutions. Rather, these mysteries are solvable because they involve the everyday lives of individuals.

Mysteries of ancestry and heritage need to be solved in order for Anita and Naspah to know themselves and to fully participate in their own lives. Anita discovers that she is part Native American and realizes that her once-unknown identity has influenced her life, while Naspah discovers what it means for her to be Navajo. Naspah has an advantage that Anita does not. The mystery of ancestry has been solved for Naspah by the communal knowledge passed down to her. Because Naspah already knows who her ancestors were, she can take a more important step and solve the mystery of what her ancestors believed. Thus, we see that the mysteries in *Ghost Singer* are systematically graduated from insolvable to solvable, from factual to mythical, and from futile to transcendental.

All of the mysteries in *Ghost Singer* have one common denominator, however. They revolve around the mental state of being haunted by something unknown. The seven-foot giant ghost singer haunts the Anglo characters--Jean Wurly, Geoffrey Newsome and Donald Evans. Jean Wurly's alleged suicide haunts her brother, David Drake. After her mother's death, the ancestry that Anita never knew

haunts her. Even though Naspah knows her ancestry, she cannot reconcile the history that she has learned in school with the stories that her grandfather has told her about their people. The incompatibility of these beliefs haunts Naspah.

All of the characters in the novel confront at least one mystery though the mysteries that concern them and the way that they deal with these mysteries greatly varies. The Anglo characters become obsessed with mysteries that should not concern them, such as Native American remains, artifacts, and private ceremonies. Not having any appreciation for the mysteries that they attempt to solve, they frustrate their own efforts. In contrast, the Native American characters appreciate the mysteries of life and express reverence for every one of life's phases including childhood, old age, and afterlife. Their spirituality helps them to accept that not all mysteries can be solved. Unlike the Anglo characters, the Native American characters do not meddle in the mysteries of other cultures. Only the mysteries that affect them as individuals or as members of a community concern them. ern them.

All of the Anglo characters fail at their attempts. They die, go crazy, or invent a solution that does not resolve the mystery. Jean Wurly falls down a flight of steps after admitting to David Drake that she has seen

Indian ghosts in the Smithsonian. Geoffrey Newsome is the caretaker of a collection that includes "a necklace of twenty human fingers," "seven human skulls," "a full scalp, with the ears still attached," and "a cloth sack that held the bones and skull of an infant" (38-39). He jumps from the terrace of his thirteenth floor apartment soon after he finds the "sack of tiny bones" (43) in his apartment. Geoffrey feels an "unknown fear" (43) because he cannot solve this mystery in the same way that he solves historical mysteries. He cannot simply sort out the "fragments" and "make the pieces fit into something" (36) that he understands.

After Geoffrey's successor, Donald Evans, confronts "the giant man," he becomes paranoid, imagining that he "heard things in the corner of the room" and contemplating "how one could kill such a man" (212). Donald and his girl friend run away from this mystery. They hope that Hawaii will help them to forget that it ever "happened" (210). Similarly, David tries to forget his sister's last words to him. After revealing to Naspah that Jean was "acting strangely before her death," he bites his tongue, feeling that he had "said too much" (143). David refuses to acknowledge the mystery in life. He believes that a determinable reality exists in all things and that if people "take care to be objective, fair, and thorough" (200), they can solve mysteries.

David would argue that the reason he cannot solve the mystery of the Navajo family's lost grandmother is that no records of the slave-raid exist, and "without records, there is no history" (198). For David, history exists in documents. He has difficulty accepting that history also exists within people.

The Native American characters respond quite differently to insolvable mysteries. In contrast to David Drake, Jonnie Navajo does not see any need for records, and he is "unquestionably a historian" (215) who believes in mysteries. David and Jonnie have opposing epistemic views. David cannot understand how a history can exist without written "accounts" (141), while Jonnie cannot understand why white people keep records "that talk about the people" (24). Jonnie asks his grandson, Willie, "What are those people in *Washingdoon* going to do with them [boxes of papers concerning the Navajo people]?" (24). In response, Willie laughs and ignores the question because he does not know how to answer. But Jonnie is serious. This question is one that deeply troubles him.

Jonnie can see no need for records because his personal "knowledge . . . covers many generations" (159). David first doubts, then is amazed that Jonnie knows "the canyon where the slave-raiders were showered with boulders, and also the cliff where the slave-raiders were forced to jump" (141). Jonnie also knows that the latter

incident occurred "about seven generations ago" and the former occurred "perhaps twenty years after" (141) the earlier incident. Jonnie's knowledge has come from his uncle, Hosteen Nez, who taught him about the people after his own father's death. Because Jonnie's knowledge has come from his elders, he believes that "a great deal depends on our relatives, what they teach us" (122) about those who have lived before and about our own lives. And we see that Jonnie perpetuates the stories that he has learned and the ways of his elders in instructing his own grandchildren. He helps both Naspah and Willie to understand Navajo beliefs. But they must reconcile their cultural beliefs with their modern-day lives on their own.

Perhaps the most revealing example of what Jonnie gives to his grandchildren comes at almost the end of the novel and the end of Jonnie's life. Concerned over the mystery of their missing grandmother, Willie says, "But as long as we don't know what happened to the lost child, we are missing a part of our history" (216). He also asks if they were "foolish to ask" David for his help in finding their "lost grandmother" (216). Jonnie does not "respond for a long time" (217). When Jonnie responds, he reflects upon what he learned as a young boy and relates his elders' words to his grandson's experience. He says, "As a young boy, I was told to care for myself, because

of the holy people. They created us" (217). Here, Jonnie suggests the power that the Navajo creation myth has to heal even in modern times. The sense of self-appreciation that Jonnie conveys to his grandchildren gives them the ability to overcome "the odds against" (217) them and their way of life:

"Don't confuse yourself with thoughts that lead you off the path. Live! Despite all the odds against it, let us live the best way that we can! Take care of yourself, and then these other things will straighten themselves out." (217)

Jonnie conveys this message of self-preservation in the myths and the stories about the people that he tells to his grandchildren. In relating the story of their "stolen grandmother" to Willie and Naspah, Jonnie also gives them hope, the hope that her descendants "may come home yet" (217). This mystery may be solved someday; but for now, it is enough to know and to care for oneself. I will address the mysteries of culture and self that Naspah solves with the guidance of her grandfather in what follows.

But first let us compare the Navajo family with the other Indian family in the novel, the Snake family, and consider their influence on other characters. Like Jonnie, Wilbur Snake accepts that "we live in a mysterious world" (178), and shares what he has learned about life with a younger generation. To Russell Tallman, a younger member of his community who has lived in



Washington D.C. for several years and has forgotten what it means for him to be an Indian, Wilbur explains that life and death are insolvable mysteries:

"These things is wondrous things, sonny. When you and me talk 'bout how one thing lives and dies in a certain way, and that's all there is to it, we make the mystery of life into a tiny thing." (176)

Junior Snake affirms his father's beliefs and argues that it is possible for humans to find peace in the face of the unknown. He says, "We need to look inside our own minds . . . to get a real perspective on the mystery of the universe and the meaning of our lives" (178). These words which pass from father to son to friend seem to be for both Russell's and the reader's benefit.

Russell learns much from the Snakes. He realizes that he has taken the easy "road" and avoided confronting the "mysteries" (188) in his own life. He confesses "that he hadn't really believed his elders, their stories or their philosophies of life" (188). After his visit with the Snakes and their shared encounter with the ghost singer, Russell believes his elders, their stories and their philosophies of life, and finally accepts responsibility for his life. Russell tries to share this knowledge with Donald Evans and to explain about the ghost singer, but Donald refuses to understand. Russell gives up on Donald only after he gives up on himself. He says to Donald, "'You act like a man who hasn't ever been

told or ever learned that living is hard, and that it must be done by ourselves, alone" (211). Russell's words have the potential to make Donald realize that only he can change his situation, but they fall on deaf ears. Donald's obsession with destroying what he cannot understand blocks out any kind of catharsis. He never realizes that he is the source of the problem; rather, he blames the ghost singer for his problems. If Donald would realize that his interference in matters that do not have any personal meaning for him and the resultant haunting of the ghost singer have caused his mental imbalance, he could free his mind from the haunting feelings that he cannot understand. But this catharsis would require change on Donald's part, change that Donald is either unwilling or too lazy to make. David quite literally takes the easy road and goes on a vacation.

In contrast, Anita and Naspah do not take the easy road. They work towards solving their mysteries and taking full responsibility for their lives. Though they are very different women, both are extraordinary characters because they are the only two people who solve their mysteries. It is worth briefly considering how the mysteries that Anita and Naspah seek to solve differ from those of the other characters. The principal difference between the mysteries that Jean, Geoffrey, Donald, and David choose to confront and those that Anita and Naspah

choose to confront is that Anita and Naspah identify with their mysteries. Jean, Geoffrey, Donald, and David attempt to solve mysteries that may or may not interest them personally in order to further their careers. Anita and Naspah provide a striking contrast to the white characters. They have every right to solve the mysteries that involve their lives. Their only reason for investigating the clues to their mysteries is that they want to know more about themselves as individuals and as members of a community.

The mysteries that Anita and Naspah confront also differ from the insolvable mysteries concerning the nature of life and death that Jonnie, Willie, Wilbur, Junior, and Russell accept. Anita and Naspah take steps toward solving their mysteries because they break larger mysteries down to manageable sizes. The mysteries that concern them are not matters of life and death. Rather, their mysteries are about living their individual lives to the best of their ability.

Let us first consider how Anita detects the clues to her ancestry and pieces together a satisfying solution from what she learns about her ancestors and herself. Then, we will consider how Naspah, already aware of her ancestors and their lives, is in a position to solve a mystery that lies beyond Anita's grasp--the mystery of her cultural heritage as a Navajo woman. When we first

meet Anita, she is a part Mexican, sixty-nine year old woman, unaware that she is also part Indian, and caring for her hundred- year-old mother, Rosa. It is the last day of Rosa's life, and Rosa realizes for the first time that Maria is her mother. Rosa holds up a mirror, and asks Anita "to look inside" (34). She says, "Anita, *that is Maria* in there" (34). Her last words to her daughter are in the form of a question: "Why didn't Maria tell me, Anita?" (34). Anita does not have an answer, so she pats "Rosa's hand and let it go" (34). But Anita cannot let her mother's question go until she finds an answer and solves the mystery of Maria's silence.

Anita goes to Taos Pueblo "on instinct" (86), hoping to learn something more about [her] mother" (88). She knows that "it was important" for her to "go alone," but "she didn't know what she sought there, and she didn't know what she might find" (86). Here, Anita appears to be looking for clues to her own identity, as well as her mother's identity. She experiences "momentary confusion" when a young Taos woman at the entrance says to her, "If you're Indian, you don't have to pay" (86). Again, Anita does not know what to say, so she does not respond. She watches both the tourists and the Taos people wondering, "Where did she fit?" (87). She admits to herself that she has been confused about her identity for a long time:

Rosa's death did not cause the confusion and it was not what Rosa had said on the last day. No, it

was what Rosa *didn't* say all those years. (87)

The old man who thinks that Anita is Cheyenne and takes her to his sister's home for a meal asks, "What did you find [in Taos Pueblo]?" (88). She answers, "Nothing" (88). In a sense Anita is like "the turista" who "come looking for Indian" (88). But Anita is looking for a lost part of herself, her Indian identity.

The next morning Anita follows up her only other lead concerning the life that Rosa kept separate from her. Anita returns to "the same white house" and Beth Williams, the mysterious woman who "Rosa had held in her arms for a long time" (89) some sixteen years before. For Rosa, these visits meant getting reacquainted with family. For Anita, they meant being shut out from a part of Rosa's life and that Rosa concealed an important part of her daughter's identity. Rosa "made Anita promise not to ever mention the trip," and had Anita wait "outside on the porch" (89). Anita had always felt that "an element of mystery surround[s] this family" (89). The time has come for Anita to solve the mystery.

It is worth reconsidering the relevant facts of what Anita discovers in talking with Beth. After telling her that Rosa has died, Anita asks, "Will you please tell me about my mother?" (90). Beth relates that Rosa had been a part of her family "from the time that she was born" and that Rosa "shared a lot of experiences with

[Beth's] mother" (91). When Anita asks, "Was Maria her mother?" (91), Beth gives her a definite answer: "Rosa was one of Maria's children" (91). Anita also learns that Maria was "both a servant and a member of the family. Before that, she was . . . an Indian slave" (92). Anita wants to know "why Maria didn't tell [Rosa] this?" (93). Of course, that was the last question that Rosa asks Anita before she dies. Beth reveals, "*Maria herself didn't know the whole story*" (93). Maria never knew "for sure that she was Navajo" (93). Beth reminds both Anita and us, "*We don't even know that now*" (93). We also learn that Maria had once had the chance to return to Navajo country when her Navajo husband "decided to go back to his country" with their two little boys. But Maria "refused, fearing that she would not be accepted in his country if it turned out that she was *not* a Navajo" (93). Because Maria never knew her identity, she could never return home, and she could never be a mother to her sons. Perhaps Maria's confusion over her identity also prevented her from being a mother to Rosa, as well. Maria could not give Rosa a sense of being connected to the past, nor could she share with her "what and who" (Carroll 72) they were because she never knew herself.

Through Maria and Rosa who keep what they know of their past hidden from their daughters, we see that what Anita learns is extremely important. By the end of her

visit with Beth, Anita knows more about her ancestry than Rosa did. As a result, it is possible that Anita may return to her Navajo home, just as it had been for Maria. Anita does not understand her mother's need for secrecy at this point in the novel. Rosa may have been "ashamed of her orphanage, the mystery and stigma surrounding it" (94). The question that remains is what will Anita do with her new-found knowledge and identity? Is solving the mystery of Maria's and Rosa's silence enough?

Interestingly, Anita refuses to see the Bible where Maria's and Rosa's history "is written down" (94). She has solved the mystery of Maria's silence by asking questions of Beth and listening to the answers. Anita finds knowledge in other people, as do all of the Indian characters in *Ghost Singer*. Like Jonnie, she does not trust written accounts. Her distrust of writers and what they write is the reason that she does not respond to the "advertisement" requesting that that "descendants of Indian slaves in the area contact the writer" (196). Anita finds the advertisement "disconcerting to her new found identity," and tosses the newspaper "into the trash can" where it will "not trouble or embarrass her any longer" (196). Anita has "learned without a doubt that she was part Indian!" (196). This realization does not trouble or embarrass her, but the advertisement does because it represents that writers are able to distort

her identity.

When Anita encounters Jonnie in the Albuquerque airport, she feels at peace with her Indian identity for the first time. She may not speak with Jonnie and Naspah, but in seeing them she recognizes herself in the same way that Rosa recognizes Maria in the mirror. According to Jonnie, knowing oneself is perhaps the only mystery that we can solve:

At first I thought it might be possible to discover what what happened to her [Maria] . . . . But it doesn't matter, grandson, because we know who we are. (194)

Before running into them, Anita feels "displaced" (132), "as if she were floating through time . . . failing to make contact with the world around her" (133). She does not "feel inclined to reach out, to break this fog of alienation" (133). In this frame of mind, she boards the plane where May Lou talks to her relentlessly. May Lou reminds Anita of some of the more painful memories in her life: her husband abandoning her for another woman, her subsequent miscarriage and associative self-blame, her feelings of inadequacy and her low self-esteem. After watching Mary Lou with her children, "Anita longed for a child of her own. Never had the longing been so acute" (135). She realizes that after losing her infant "in the sixth month . . . she resolved never to fall for a man again," and keeps "other peoples' children at arm's length" (137). Anita seems never before to have



considered the reasons why she "became a recluse" (137). Here, Anita gains a sense of herself and learns the reasons why she made the choices that she did. Solving some of the mysteries of Rosa's life has prompted Anita to solve some of her own mysteries.

More than anything, Anita regrets not having children. She envies Rosa's other children who have descendants. Maria "had several children. Even Rosa's boy had children" (138). Anita probably will not be reunited with her Navajo family, and without children of her own, Anita has no one with whom to share her Navajo identity after Rosa dies. No one ever tells Anita that she is Navajo. Anita does, however, experience an awakening and a sort of homecoming when she sees Jonnie whom she identifies as a Navajo:

She felt as if she had been asleep for several days. . . . But now she was awake. The old man woke her up, brought her back home. Somehow, it felt good. Yes, she could "feel" again, she wasn't numb anymore. (145)

Anita's contact with her Navajo family is momentary, but it seems to be enough for her to know what and who she is even if she cannot say that she is, without a doubt, Navajo. After this encounter, Anita's life changes for the better. We leave Anita satisfied with the solutions to the mysteries in her life, secure with her identity, and able to embrace her life in a way that she has not since she was a young woman. She has already "decided" to

say yes to a marriage proposal, something that "a year ago, she wouldn't have considered at this late date" (195). And she continues to seek "more information on New Mexico and Indian history" (196), knowing when to believe writers and when to believe herself.

Now let us consider Naspah who also finds a new self-awareness in solving some of the mysteries that surround her life as a young Navajo woman. When we first meet Naspah, she is "a petite teenage girl" (11) and a princess representing the Red Point Indian Club in the 1968 Northern Navajo Fair parade. She wears "a black woven dress, an ancient dress faded in places to a spotty brown" (11). A white woman approaches her, wanting to buy the dress for a thousand dollars. Naspah accepts her card, but says, "The dress belongs to me" (13). The woman remarks that the dress is "a very valuable item" (13). Naspah's friends are impressed by the offer: "'One thousand dollars!'" (13). But she listens to her grandfather, who says, "Whatever is offered will never be enough" (13). Naspah does not yet know the significance of the dress that she wears, nor the significance of her Navajo identity. The mystery of ancestry that Anita solves, however, has already been solved for Naspah. Naspah knows that she is Navajo in the beginning of the novel. She also knows that she belongs to a community of people. Anita, on the other hand, is isolated from her

people, never knowing for sure the community to which she belongs. Because Naspah already knows her place in her community, she is able to solve the mystery of what she believes as a Navajo. Anita does not have this opportunity; for her, knowing herself is enough. Unfortunately, Anita never knows the joy that Naspah comes to know, the joy of sharing in the Navajo way of life with her mind, body, and soul.

Like Anita, Naspah has some mysteries to solve before she can be truly alive. Both ask questions in an effort to resolve what they find mysterious about their own lives. Naspah continues to ask questions of her elders until she is "exhausted" by "all this information," and wants to "mull these new facts over" (58). She first asks her grandmother, "Who wove the first rug?" (53). Naspah learns that "it was probably Spider Woman" who "brought weaving to the people" (53). She then asks her grandfather, "Where did the people come from?" (54). Jonnie has "waited a long time for her question" (54). He expects Naspah's question about the origin of the Navajo people as a natural part of her development into an adult. He answers, "The people were created by Changing Woman" (54). Naspah is not sure whether to accept Jonnie's answer. She says, "But . . . the books don't say that" (54). Jonnie responds that "it doesn't matter" what the books say because his uncle, Hosteen

Nez, told him "that the people came from Changing Woman" (54). Naspah continues to doubt the reliability of her grandfather's knowledge which differs from what she has learned in school. She questions him further: "And who told this to Hosteen Nez, grandfather?" (54). But as Jonnie relates more of their history, Naspah obviously believes him. She not only listens; she becomes involved in Red Lady's and Maria's story. Naspah says, "That's a sad story, grandfather. So much death, so much suffering. All for what?" (57). Of course, here she refers to Red Lady and Maria who were stolen, to Maria who never returned, to Maria's twin who died at Ft. Sumner, and to those who died trying to return to "Navajoland" (57). Now that Jonnie has told her the myth of Changing Woman and the story of Red Lady's abduction, Naspah must resolve what these stories mean for her as a Navajo woman.

At this time, Naspah also learns the significance of the dress that she wears as a Navajo princess. As we recall, the dress is special because "it was the only thing that [Red Lady] carried back to Beautiful Mountain when Tall Navajo brought her back" (58) three years after she had been stolen. Naspah's grandmother had told her about the dress when she was six or seven, "but her mind was probably not ready to hold all this or to understand it" (58). Similarly, Naspah learns about Changing Woman and about Red Lady's abduction early in the novel, but

she does not understand what these stories mean for her until after she goes to Washington. with Jonnie.

Naspah feels "much the same" (193) as her grandfather when they return to Beautiful Mountain. Jonnie feels that "he had seen and heard enough to last him for the rest of his life" (58). Naspah is much more aware of what it means to be a Navajo after she experiences Washington. She notices beauty in her life where she did not before: "Naspah spoke to the baby girl in Navajo and the baby smiled" (213). For "the first time in her life," Naspah "really acknowledged a difference between this place and other places in the world" (214). She understands why her Navajo home is beautiful, and why people have died to preserve the Navajo way of life. She feels "a deep sense of belonging to the purple mesas and the blue mountains" (214). She realizes that she is a part of the mountain just as her Indian ancestors "make up the mountain" (58). In "touching a part of herself that she hadn't reached before" (214), Naspah comes to know that her identity is forever linked to the Navajos who have gone before and those who will come after her. We leave Naspah satisfied with the solutions to the mysteries in her life, secure in her identity, and finding joy in life.

Though Jonnie only alludes to the Changing Woman myth, Naspah's development into a Navajo woman parallels

the myth. First Man and First Woman find Changing Woman, and raise her as their own child just as Jonnie raises Naspah. In the Navajo Origin Myth, Changing Woman shares a close relationship with the world around her. Naspah shares a similar affinity with her world. As Changing Woman grows into a woman, the world around her also grows:

As she grew into womanhood, the world itself reached maturity as the mountains and valleys were all put into their proper places. (Fisher 44)

When Changing Woman becomes a grown "woman," her world is "complete" (Fisher 44). To celebrate, the gods give her a "Walking-into-Beauty" ceremony (Fisher 44). This ceremony is "now given to all the Navajo girls when they reach adulthood" (Fisher 44). Walters does not describe this Navajo ceremony. Instead, she shows us Naspah growing into a woman and walking in beauty. By the novel's end, Naspah is no longer a "petite teenage girl" (11). She becomes a Navajo woman before our eyes. Likewise, Naspah sees that her world is complete after she returns to Beautiful Mountain.

Anita and Naspah do not find one another in *Ghost Singer*. Rather, they discover something more important: "what and who they are" (Carroll 72). Though Anita and Naspah together could solve the mystery of their shared ancestry once and for all, Walters does not seek to achieve this reunion. She has another purpose for these

characters. Anita and Naspah solve the mysteries that have haunted their lives, i.e. that have prevented them from seeing the meaning in their lives. Unlike the Anglo characters, who concern themselves with matters of no fundamental importance for them, Anita seeks to solve the mystery of her ancestry. She solves this mystery to her satisfaction, but she continues to be isolated from her culture. Because Naspah knows her ancestry from the beginning, she is in a position to solve a cultural mystery--what her ancestors believed about life. Thus, through Anita and Naspah in *Ghost Singer*, Walters not only tells us, but shows us that "there's magic in" experiencing "another view of the world besides the one [we've] always known" (Carroll 72). Anita and Naspah embody the hope that Native Americans can rediscover the ancestry and the culture that Anglos have denied them.

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Conceptualizing the Language of Hope: Esperanza's discourse in Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*

"If we don't invent a language, if we don't find our body's language, it will have too few gestures to accompany our story."  
(Irigaray 214)

Although Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* has been rightfully regarded as *Bildungsroman*, a series of Chicana coming-of-age poems or stories, criticism has not fully explored the implications of writing in the persona of an adolescent Chicana and to locate this work within a genre. Cisneros herself refuses to force this particular work into a totalizing category. She refers to the book as "semi-autobiographical" and rejects the notion that it is "'children's fiction'" (Binder, 57). Instead of celebrating Cisneros's unique writing style, many critics have either ignored or trivialized the importance of her language. As the epigram suggests, my project reveals that the discourse, which Cisneros creates in *The House on Mango Street*, meets Irigaray's challenge:

How can we [addressing women] keep ourselves from becoming absorbed again in their violating language? . . . . We must learn to speak to each other so that we can embrace from afar. When I touch myself, I am surely remembering you. But so much has been said, and said of us, that separates us. (215)

It seems to me that Cisneros has learned to speak to

women from afar -- from all races -- and that she illustrates what we all have in common -- particularly, the language of our girlhood. When Cisneros touches this part of herself, she remembers us all because she causes us to be in touch with the experiences we associate with the development of our own female bodies. Furthermore, I think that we as women can hear the difference between this language that embraces and empowers us as a larger community as against the divisive language spoken of us, which belies the anxiety of our alliance.

As Ellen McCracken remarks in her article, "*The House on Mango Street: Community Oriented Introspection and Demystification of Patriarchal Violence*," "Cisneros's text is likely to continue to be excluded from the canon because it speaks another language altogether" (63). In 1989, the year of the book's publication, McCracken rightfully suggests that *The House on Mango Street* will be marginalized because it does not speak the language of canonical texts. In 1993, I find that this text's other language is the source of its power in representing the Chicana experience. What McCracken refers to as "another language" existing beside canonical discourse I see as the other language that is seldom heard by outsiders, specifically the uninhibited speech of young females and the individual voice which can speak for a diverse community without imposing stereotypical models

of feminine behavior. Cisneros's protagonist, Esperanza, speaks in a child's voice for a community of women who do not speak. Literally her name means "hope;" Esperanza represents the hope that women can speak a language that truly represents both their individual and communal experience.

Cisneros's language in *The House on Mango Street* is her attempt to break outside the dominant discourse. As Yvonne Yarbro-Bejanno explains:

The fact that Chicanas may tell stories about themselves and other Chicanas challenges the dominant male concepts of cultural ownership and literary authority. In telling these stories, Chicanas reject the dominant culture's definition of what a Chicana is. In writing, they refuse the objectification imposed by gender roles and racial and economic exploitation. (141)

Cisneros uses childhood speech, images, and metaphors to reclaim a language that embodies her identity as a member of the Mango Street community. As a result, she creates a vital existence for the women who live in this community. We see that she belongs to them, while she creates their existence for us.

Significantly, this community is one outside of the mainstream; its socio-economic conditions make it one rarely seen from the inside, for women within this society are isolated and silent. Cisneros articulates not only the individual adolescent female's experience but also the Chicana communal experience in Esperanza's

writing. I agree with McCracken's conclusion that the characteristics which distance *The House on Mango Street* from canonical texts should be the very reasons this text is included in the canon:

The volume's simple, poetic language, with its insistence that the individual develops within a social community rather than in isolation . . . Its deceptively simple, childlike prose and its emphasis on the unromanticized, non-mainstream issues of patriarchal violence and ethnic poverty . . . should serve . . . to accord it canonical status. (71)

Rediscovering her emotional connections to the community of her childhood enables Cisneros to escape the typical criticism of feminist texts -- her vision is neither utopian nor exclusionary. Through this enduring text, Cisneros brings strangers into the Chicana community.

In a 1982 interview with Wolfgang Binder, Cisneros self-reflectively admits that she had difficulty relating to other females while growing up due to her own upbringing within a community of men. Cisneros examines her adolescent behavior and finds that she unknowingly reinforced the patriarchy in her own family by playing the part of the vulnerable and irresponsible female:

"I had been raised my whole life in the company of men. My father and grandfather had spoiled me beyond retrieval, and I knew from a very early age how to manipulate them in order to get what I wanted. It would seem then that the reins of power were in the hands of the female, but this is not the case. If it is a power it is a tiny one, and in the long run the manipulator becomes the slave. In order to retain that power of control one must conform oneself to what a man desires a woman to be, to

whine and pout and to be forever babied,  
subject to a males's projection of femininity."  
(60)

Cisneros offers her own possibilities or projections of femininity through vitally characterizing the community of women who live on Mango Street, those imprisoned within the social structure and those whose hopes lie outside the limited material circumstances they know. Furthermore, Cisneros finally denies a "male's [singular and limiting] projection of femininity." Esperanza uses her childhood voice to find a language that will not reinforce the patriarchal hierarchy. Through her protagonist, Cisneros recreates childhood friendships with other females and her memories of older, female role models in order to discover the language that lies within, the language that used to be self-evident.

Esperanza writes perceptively, sensitively, and emotionally about what concerns her the most as a girl becoming a young woman. The vignettes occur chronologically; I will consider those that deal with language, sexuality, female relations, and gender representation -- issues that are all interconnected in Esperanza's world. As a young girl Esperanza recognizes, "The boys and girls live in separate worlds" (8). She represents these separate worlds in language, delineating the boundaries around her female existence. She already resists the incongruity between home and society: "[My

brothers have] got plenty to say to me inside the house. But outside they can't be seen talking to girls" (8). Thus Esperanza rightly senses that she has more authority within the home even before she fully understands her delegated role.

But Esperanza does recognize that she has obligations connected to her family position which she cannot refuse, such as her responsibility for her younger sister, Nenny, which extends to even society's conceptions of her: "She can't play with those Vargas kids or she'll turn out just like them" (8). At the end of this early list of grievances, Esperanza wishes for "a best friend all [her] own. One I can tell my secrets to. One who will understand my jokes without my having to explain them" (9). In other words, she longs for someone who will understand her discourse on an intuitive, emotional level without any need for mediation. Cisneros uses a young girl's metaphor to articulate Esperanza's binding ties to her family, which impinge upon her self-representation: "Until then I am a red balloon, a balloon tied to an anchor" (9). Esperanza rightfully sees herself as a bright, energetic entity filled with expectancy and poised to fly away, but unable to express her inner longings.

Nevertheless "in English [Esperanza's] name means hope" (10). Esperanza, however, points out that her name

represents many things that have no direct relationship to her identity:

In Spanish it means too many letters. It means sadness, it means waiting. It is like the number nine. A muddy color. It is the Mexican records my father plays on Sunday mornings when he is shaving, songs like sobbing.

We learn that her name originates with the great-grandmother who she "would've liked to have known . . . a wild horse of a woman, so wild she wouldn't marry" (10-11). Esperanza narrates her grandmother's story, her first tale of an objectified woman imprisoned within the home. She relates that her "great-grandfather threw a sack over her head and carried her off . . . as if she were a fancy chandelier" (11). Her great-grandmother spent "her whole life" passively looking out the window at the world in which she desired to actively participate.

Her grandmother's story causes Esperanza to speculate, "if [her grandmother] made the best with what she got or was she sorry because she couldn't be all the things she wanted to be" (11). It is clear that Esperanza will not allow her namesake, the representation of self that her parents gave to her at birth, to determine her present reality: "Esperanza. I have inherited her name, but I don't want to inherit her place by the window" (11). Before entering adolescence, she proudly declares herself an individual, who implicitly questions the

representations that jeopardize her self-image: "I would like to baptize myself under a new name, a name more like the real me, the one nobody sees" (11). Rebellling against a name that comes with ready-made connotations, Esperanza seeks not only a new name for herself but an entire language that more accurately communicates her intrinsic qualities as a Chicana.

Also Esperanza requires someone with whom to communicate this inner language, a friend. In "Our Good Day", she tells of her attempt to find such a friend. We further see the conditions which potential friends place upon their relationship with Esperanza. Cathy, for instance, will only be her friend "till next Tuesday" because her family intends "to move a little farther north from Mango Street, [and] a little farther away every time people like [Esperanza's family] keep moving in" (13). The reader recognizes that Cathy cannot be a true friend for Esperanza. They do not speak the same language. Cathy brags about the secrets that are not really her own but rather reflect the patriarchy's power over her language, her self-representation, and therefore, her dreams:

Cathy's father will have to fly to France one day and find her great great distant grand cousin on her father's side and inherit the family house. (13)

For Cathy, it is up to her father to claim the "family house" (13). As we shall see, Esperanza, on the other



hand, claims "The House on Mango Street" for herself in her language.

Other evidence that Cathy reinforces both the class structure and the patriarchal representation of how the good girl should act with a constant concern for propriety comes in her evaluation of Lucy and Rachel, which Esperanza rejects for better reasons. Cathy tells her not to "talk to them" because "they smell like a broom" (14); she makes it clear that they are of a lower class. Esperanza, however, sees that she shares more with them than with Cathy. While Cathy's classicism stands in the way of her seeing what is unique about Lucy and Rachel, Esperanza immediately identifies with them for what their distinctive appearance and language communicate to her:

Their clothes are crooked and old. They are wearing shiny Sunday shoes without socks. It makes their bald ankles all red, but I like them. Especially the big one who laughs with all her teeth. I like her even though she lets the little one do all the talking. (15)

Even from this early description of the girls who will share Esperanza's language, she points to both the importance of laughter as a means of breaking out of the dominant discourse and the error that so many women make in allowing others to speak for them.

Although this relationship begins on a note of exploitation, it develops into much more. Lucy's younger sister, Rachel, says to Esperanza, "If you give me five

dollars I will be your friend forever" (14). We learn that the five dollars will be used to buy a bicycle from a boy, which the girls will share. In combining their resources, they enhance both their literal freedom, i.e. their ability to travel some distance away from Mango Street, and their figurative freedom, i.e. their ability to appropriate a boy's commodity, which displaces their own status as commodities on a patriarchal market where men determine their value. Cisneros suggests an implicit danger for the girls as they become adolescents: they begin to recognize that they will share the fate of older women, whose husbands have in effect bargained them away from their fathers. In their assertive language and acts, Esperanza, Lucy, and Rachel rebel against this impending threat.

In purchasing the bicycle for their common use, they illustrate the power in sharing among friends. When Esperanza decides to become part of this communal economy, she knows that Cathy will necessarily leave because she cannot see beyond the economy that objectifies lower class Chicanas; however, what Cathy fails to realize is that she is similarly objectified. Cathy sees herself as the men in her life see her. To Esperanza's credit, then, she always finds the greatest significance in what she gains from interacting with individual women, not in what this interaction represents

to judgmental onlookers:

When I get back [from collecting the five dollars], Cathy is gone like I knew she would be, but I don't care. I have two new friends and a bike too. (15)

Just as Esperanza refuses to judge the sisters according to preconceived notions which come from the home environment where patriarchal authority reigns, Lucy and Rachel do not "laugh" at Esperanza's name even though it is the only one of the three that has another meaning in Spanish. In fact, language barriers break down altogether when Lucy misunderstands the intent of Esperanza's language in their first conversation:

We come from Texas, Lucy says and grins.  
Her was born here, but me I'm Texas.  
You mean *she*, I say.  
No, I'm from Texas, and doesn't get it.  
(15)

Esperanza means to correct Lucy's grammar but does not patronize her after Lucy fails to get the gist of her comment. Instead she focuses her attention on what truly matters: "Down, down Mango Street we go. Rachel, Lucy, me. Our new bicycle. Laughing the crooked ride back" (16). Esperanza's poetic language fully captures the youthful energy of the moment and as a result, disrupts the dominant discourse from its privileged position. Her language does not follow grammatical rules; Cisneros makes sentences from phrases, poetry in paragraphs. Similarly Rachel's language challenges the invisible laws

of propriety that all three girls rebel against in riding the bicycle all at once. Her sassiness makes explicit the girls' attempt to manipulate language for their shared benefit:

A very fat lady crossing the street says,  
You sure got quite a load there.

Rachel shouts, You got quite a load there  
too. (16)

But most of the females who live on Mango Street do not have the luxury of time or the confidence in the articulation of their experience to resist masculine representations. Alicia's father, for instance, denies that she sees mice early in the morning when preparing "the lunchbox tortillas" (31) for her father and brothers. There is no room in Alicia's world for her imaginings or for that matter, for anything but practical considerations. As a result, the only way for her to construct a place for her "female imaginary" (Irigaray 28) is to attend "the university" (31). To have dreams at all, Alicia must make everyday sacrifices "because she doesn't want to spend her whole life in a factory or behind a rolling pin" (32). A role model for Esperanza, she refuses to allow the male imaginary to construct her status in life. Understandably, Esperanza looks up to her friend. Against Cathy's interpretation of what constitutes a "good girl" (32), Esperanza offers Alicia, who "studies all night and sees the mice, the ones her father says do not exist. Is afraid of nothing except for

four-legged fur. And fathers" (32). In other words, Alicia's only fear is the denial of her imagination by a dominating patriarchy, being forced into a stereotypical, subservient role, and having no sense of her individual self.

While Alicia turns to the university, an institution, for self-fulfillment, Esperanza advocates a more personal form of fulfillment for women, which involves finding a language that can tell of woman's experience. The often denied multiplicity of language itself concerns Esperanza. In "And Some More," she discusses that one word can mean many things, reminiscent of what her name has the potential to signify in the earlier chapter. Esperanza encounters some resistance from Lucy when she announces, "The Eskimos got thirty different names for snow" (35). Lucy finds, however, that "there are only two kinds. The clean kind and the dirty kind . . ." (35). Nenny wonders how you can "remember which one is which" (35). Both young females suggest the resistance that Esperanza will encounter in promoting this other language. Lucy's reductivist approach takes a more complex system of representation and simplifies it to the point of arbitration. Nenny, on the other hand, suggests that another system of representation will only confuse people to the point that no one will understand what anyone else means.

This discussion results in an argument. Lucy calls Esperanza's mother "ugly like . . . ummm . . . . . like bare feet in September!" (37). In response, Esperanza threatens the force of her "brothers" (37) to defend her mother's representation. Thus what begins as the girls' liberating play of language deteriorates into a confrontation of class, which Esperanza uncharacteristically reinforces with masculine vindictiveness. She emulates her powerful brothers in this situation but finds their strategy emotionally unsatisfying. This chapter trails off with simply their names: "Rachel, Lucy, Esperanza, and Nenny" (38). The girls return to themselves, and Cisneros leaves the reader to find in later chapters what the character Esperanza and her language signify.

The way in which the girls represent themselves becomes increasingly complicated and crucial as they begin to recognize their sexuality or more accurately, as other people draw their attention to their physical development. When the mother of "The Family of Little Feet" gives high-heel shoes to the girls, Esperanza suggests that her body parts become increasingly alienated from her as she grows into the woman's shoes that she will one day fill and yet at the same time, the experience of growing up thrills her:

Hurray! Today we are Cinderella because our feet fit exactly, and we laugh at Rachel's one

foot with a girl's grey sock and a lady's high heel. Do you like these shoes? But the truth is it is scary to look down at your foot that is no longer yours and see it attached to a long long leg. (40)

Esperanza goes on to describe this episode as the earliest time when she realizes that men evaluate her appearance and justify their behavior as a reaction to it: "Down in the corner where the men can't take their eyes off of us. We must be Christmas" (40). An intriguing metaphor: why must they "be Christmas?" Perhaps because what they ingenuously celebrate as a new beginning, a virgin birth of sorts, the gaze of the corner men corrupts, changing their display of joy into an opportunity for exploitation. Mr. Benny, the corner store owner, does not hesitate to tell the girls that what they perceive as an innocent game of dress-up is illicit:

They are dangerous, he says. You girls too young to be wearing shoes like that. Take them shoes off before I call the cops, but we just run. (41)

But the girls see nothing wrong with their play until the "Bum man" asks Rachel, "If I give you a dollar will you kiss me?" (41).

The older girls know better than to "talk to drunks" (41); however, Rachel "looks like she's thinking about the dollar" (41). Esperanza knows that "to tell [drunks] your name is [even] worse" because it gives strange men the authority to approach you. The drunk comments,

"Rachel, you are prettier than a yellow taxi cab" (41). At this point, Lucy enforces her duty as an older sister; she leads Rachel away. Then the three girls run again but this time in the opposite direction, "past Mr. Benny's, up Mango Street, the back way, just in case" (42). They accidentally wander into uncharted territory and thankfully return home to their childhood:

We are tired of being beautiful. Lucy hides the . . . shoes . . . until one Tuesday her mother, who is very clean, throws them away. But no one complains. (42)

As a result of this episode, the girls discover that though they cannot accept masculine representations of their desires, they are not yet ready to confront what men understand as their rightful entitlement. The girls begin to see that their behavior can put them at risk regardless of their innocent intentions.

The most positive interaction that the girls have with their bodies comes when they jump rope together, secluded from the world of men. In particular, Esperanza reckons with the hips that have recently become a part of her body: "One day you wake up and they are there. Ready and waiting like a new Buick with the keys in the ignition. Ready to take you where?" (49), she questions. The girls offer various interpretations of what the development of hips signifies. Rachel says, "They're good for holding a baby when you're cooking" (49). But as Esperanza expresses, "[Rachel] has no imagination" (49).



Lucy responds, "You need them to dance" (49)\*, which suggests her understanding that her body movements express her emotions. Nenny, the youngest, who does not yet have the beginnings of developing hips, fears, "If you don't get them you may turn into a man" (49). Esperanza supports what she knows is a false notion because Nenny "is [her] sister" and she truly "believes it . . . because of her age" (50).

Critical of these interpretations, Esperanza finally decides, " . . . it's obvious I'm the only one who can speak with any authority; I have science on my side" (50). She does not realize that "science too has its history" (Irigaray 71) and reinforces what she has learned of her body's natural functions from her home. Esperanza explains that the biological reason for their hips is "to have kids" (50). As the girls have seen from their own experience, "But don't have too many or your behind will spread. That's how it is, says Rachel whose Māma is as wide as a boat. And we just laugh" (50). Even when acknowledging that they share body parts with and therefore, the same roles with their mothers, the girls claim the right to decide their futures: "One day you might decide to have kids" (50).

Presently, they face what Esperanza describes as the humorous task of learning to control their hips; however, this exercise prepares them for the more serious task of

asserting control over their developing bodies:

What I'm saying is who here is ready? You gotta be able to know what to do with hips when you get them, I say making it up as I go. (50)

Interestingly, though Nenny is too young to possess hips of her own, she understands hips through her own language: "That's to lullaby it [referring to the baby in the womb] . . . . And then she begins singing *seashells, copper bells, eevy, ivy, o-ver*" (50). At first, Esperanza is skeptical, "I'm about to tell her that's the dumbest thing I've ever heard, but the more I think about it . . . ." Then Esperanza realizes that Nenny's language accurately approximates what she feels in swinging her hips. This childhood language liberates Esperanza and Lucy; they are now in touch with their own body language: "You gotta get the rhythm, and Lucy begins to dance . . . ." (50). In effect, Nenny teaches her older sister how to speak about her new body without comprehending the importance of doing so. While Esperanza concludes, "You gotta use your own song" (52), Nenny returns to the familiar songs of the girls' shared past. In Esperanza's words, "[Nenny] is in a world we don't belong to anymore" (52). And as Julian Olivares points out:

The awareness of time passing and of growing up is given a spatial dimension. Esperanza, on the outside, is looking at Nenny inside the arc of the swinging rope that now separates Nenny's childhood dimension from her present awareness of just having left behind the same childhood . . . . Yet Esperanza has not totally grown out of her childhood. She is still tied to that

dimension. Although we perceive a change in voice at the end of the story, she is still swinging the rope. (166)

Through this episode, Cisneros shows us that in returning to the world of our girlhood, we can reclaim a language that is all our own to describe what patriarchal discourse might overlook.

Knowing that this language exists within her grasp later empowers Esperanza to confront her own, sometimes painful feelings in writing. As Aunt Lupe urges before dying, "You just remember to keep writing, Esperanza. You must keep writing. It will keep you free" (61). Esperanza agrees, "but at that time [she admits] I didn't know what she meant" (61). In the poem that prompts this response from her aunt, Esperanza asserts herself as a strong-willed individual, who looks forward to the time when she will be free from the body which limits her expression: "I want to be/ like the waves on the sea,/ like the clouds in the wind,/ but I'm me./ One day I'll jump/ out of my skin . . ." (60). She later realizes that her aunt must have shared these feelings.

But immediately after sharing this frustration with her aunt, Esperanza, Lucy, and Rachel imitate her aunt's mannerisms, making fun of her frailty, without knowing that she will die the same afternoon. In writing about her guilt, Esperanza explores her aunt's last feelings and becomes a more serious writer who can convey the

humility in everyday life:

We didn't know. She had been dying such a long time, we forgot. Maybe she was ashamed. Maybe she was embarrassed it took so many years. The kids who wanted to be kids instead of washing dishes and ironing their papa's shirts, and the husband who wanted a wife again. (61)

Esperanza carefully examines the emotional undercurrent of her aunt's *ordinary* surroundings in her final days and shows us how her aunt's tragic story alters her own life. We see the difference in her writing; the ordinary becomes extraordinary.

Similarly, Esperanza recounts Sally's impact on her life in later chapters. Soon after Aunt Lupe's death, more somber vignettes detailing the experiences of women imprisoned in lives that they would not choose for themselves replace the relatively carefree days shared with Nenny, Lucy, and Rachel. In these later pieces, Esperanza seems more conscious of her language because she wishes to truthfully tell the stories of the women she has known on Mango Street. In the case of her teenaged friend Sally, Esperanza rewrites "the stories the boys tell in the coatroom" because "they're not true" (82). Indeed she wishes to know the real Sally -- what she "think[s] about when she closes her eyes like that":

Sally, do you sometimes wish you didn't have to go home? Do you wish your feet would one day keep walking and take you far away from Mango Street, far away and maybe your feet would stop in front of a house, a nice one with flowers and big windows and steps for your to climb up two by two . . . . And you could laugh, Sally . . . . you wouldn't have to

worry what people said because you never belonged here anyway and nobody could make you sad and nobody would think you're strange because you like to dream and dream. (82-83)

In imagining Sally's dreams, Esperanza really expresses her own. She directly addresses Sally but shares this desire for a house of her own where she belongs and would find freedom. More importantly, Esperanza advises that both need to shut out the misconceptions, which run rampant in their world, in order to change the world into a place where their sincere, powerful emotions belong:

. . . without someone saying it is wrong, without the whole world waiting for you to make a mistake when all you wanted, all you wanted, Sally, was to love and to love and to love and to love, and no one could call that crazy. (83)

In her writing, Esperanza shows her love for Sally as well as for all the women who survive their lives in the neighborhood; here she creates a world where this love for self and community is possible.

To fully understand the extent to which their world deprives them of external love as well as the everyday conditions which prevent Esperanza from changing the balance of power in the world itself, she gives countless examples of the ways men -- husbands and fathers -- abuse their wives and daughters, both emotionally and physically. She further tells us of her own victimization by Sally, a victim who repeats the cycle by shutting down emotionally, and by the unknown boy who rapes her, forever taking away her virginity, who, in other words,

appropriates Esperanza's body for himself and alienates her from its control. Though Esperanza cannot save the other women, she can save herself by remembering their stories. She suggests that women must learn to save themselves. In regard to her friend Minerva, who also "writes poems," Esperanza doesn't "know which way she'll go" (85) because Minerva must decide for herself. Thus we see that while writing poetry may be a means for temporary escape, commitment to writing a new story for oneself is necessary for complete freedom. Minerva is trapped; she repeats the process of throwing her husband out, dealing with his violence, and accepting his apologies.

While Minerva relives the "same story" (85) time after time, Esperanza learns from the past, then lets it go. Like Minerva, Sally cannot escape her father's abuse. Both listen to the men who beg forgiveness and believe what they hear:

Sally was going to get permission to stay with us a little . . . except when the dark came her father, whose eyes were little from crying, knocked on the door and said please come back, this is the last time. And she said Daddy and went home. (93)

Sympathetic to the emotional loss experienced by their male loved ones, they attempt to put the past behind them until the next violent act prevents final forgiveness. Sally's father "forgot he was her father between the

buckle and the belt" (93). He not only disowns her but far more brutally, dehumanizes her: "he hit her with his hands just like a dog, she said, like if I was an animal" (93). Obviously these men do not mean what they say during emotional moments, the times when these women know exactly what they say.

Esperanza experiences one such moment on the last day that she will go to the "Monkey Garden." She goes off to play with the younger kids and leaves Sally behind with a group of older boys. When she returns, Sally complains that they have taken her keys but laughs along with them: "It was a joke that [Esperanza] didn't get" (96). Esperanza understands that "one of the boys invented the rules." He decides that Sally can have her keys back if she kisses each of the boys. Sally's "game" angers Esperanza: ". . . Sally pretended to be mad at first but she said yes" (96). Esperanza reports "the rules" of this game to one of the boy's mothers: "What do you want me to do, she said, call the cops?" (97). While this mother accepts her son's behavior, Esperanza knows for certain that Sally's act of physical submission should be prevented. But when she arrives on the scene with her "brick," she feels "stupid," "crazy," and "ashamed." Afterward Esperanza experiences a great sense of loss. She feels alienated from what rightfully belongs to her -- her body and "the garden that had been such a

good place to play" (98). Places that had at one time liberated her inner feelings now remind her of her subservient role as a female.

Esperanza's sense of betrayal deepens in the next chapter entitled "Red Clowns" which begins:

Sally, you lied. It wasn't what you said at all. What he did. Where he touched me. I didn't want it, Sally. The way they said it, the way it's supposed to be, all the storybooks and movies, why did you lie to me? (99)

Here she suggests that the way in which sex has been represented to her is very wrong; not only has the wrong story been told through mass media, but also by her "friend." She wonders, why hasn't the truth been told? Herrera-Sobek argues that this recrimination is directed more toward "the community of women who keep the truth from the younger generation of women in a conspiracy of silence" than Sally. She further explicates:

The protagonist discovers a conspiracy of two forms of silence: silence in not denouncing the "real" facts of life about sex and its negative aspects in violent sexual encounters, and complicity in embroidering a fairy-tale-like mist around sex, and romanticizing and idealizing unrealistical sexual relations. (178)

Recalling the details of this vignette, Sally leaves Esperanza waiting by the tilt-a-whirl in an amusement park and goes off with a "big boy." Esperanza decided to come in order to rekindle their friendship, to laugh



together. But as Esperanza relates, Sally "never came for me"; she "didn't hear [her] when [she] called" (100). Esperanza "waited [her] whole life" to share love and to speak a language that would release her from the oppression of the white male. Instead she finds that his words are forced upon her: "He said I love you, Spanish girl, I love you, and pressed his sour mouth to mine" (100). Esperanza submits to his language because she is abandoned by the soulmate who should be able to hear her.

Crucial to her healing process, Esperanza must tell the right story. As Esperanza predicts, Sally marries young in order "to escape" and surrounds herself with material possessions to conceal the truth of her imprisonment: "She sits at home because she is afraid to go outside without his permission. She looks at all the things they own . . ." (102). In contrast, Esperanza seeks to escape from her neighborhood and from the gender role that would be imposed upon her as a wife. The three prophetic sisters, who visit the neighborhood only once in Esperanza's recollection, advise that only one way exists for her to truly escape:

When you leave you must remember to come back for the others. A circle, understand? You will always be Esperanza. You will always be Mango Street. You can't erase what you know. You can't forget who you are. (105)

In other words, the only way for Esperanza to step outside of the patriarchal cycle is to remember the

circle of women who comprise the memories of her girlhood, who will give her the strength to prevail. In a sense, Esperanza can never leave Mango Street. Because it is an integral part of her make-up, she will always look back. Only she can make it a better place.

Unlike Nenny who sings the same rhyme, Minerva who lives the same story, and Sally who believes the stories that others tell about her, Esperanza writes one of her own. She "make[s] a story for [her] life" (109). She tells "a story about a girl who didn't want to belong" but who created a place for others to belong, a home. When she

put[s] [the memories of women from her past who did not belong] down on paper . . . the ghost does not ache so much . . . Mango says goodbye sometimes. She does not hold me with both arms. She sets me free (110).

Esperanza can only find freedom in setting others free, in writing a different story "for the ones who cannot get out" (110).

Cisneros shares Esperanza's objective; she sets us free from the masculine language that binds us to a logic that is not necessarily our own. She tells a different story in a different language with a different moral: women can set both themselves and each other free if they listen to the language that they share in common. As Irigaray argues, "If we keep on speaking the same language together, we're going to reproduce the same

history" (205). If, on the other hand, we "come out of their language," we can produce a history that is all our own. Following Sandra Cisneros's model in *The House on Mango Street*, we can create the language that represents both our individual and communal experiences as women. Esperanza speaks a language and writes a story that touches us all. But there are many more languages to be spoken and many more stories to be told by those who have not yet been heard. Cisneros's image of our inevitable return to the circle of women from whom we originate is a hopeful one; we have begun to build a canon that includes our mothers' stories as well as our own which clearly crosses the cultural boundaries that patriarchal discourse has constructed around our concentric circles. The time has come to tear down the walls that we never built but daily reinforce through speaking their language.

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## VITA

I was born October 26, 1969 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. My parents, Janine and Richard Fiesta, and I moved to the Lehigh Valley in 1978. In 1987, I graduated first in my senior class at Moravian Academy.

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