En Otras Voces: Multiple Voices in Sandra Cisneros' The House on Mango Street

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IN SANDRA CISNEROS’ THE HOUSE
ON MANGO STREET

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In The House on Mango Street, Sandra Cisneros creates a narrator, twelve-year-old Mexican-American Esperanza Cordero, who is fluent in a variety of voices. In this series of vignettes, Cisneros creates variations between an adolescent and a mature voice, between limited points of view and omniscience, and between a speaking voice and a writing voice. The fluidity of the narrative and the relationships created between the opposing voices make The House on Mango Street successful in detailing the people, places, and activities of Mango Street and Esperanza’s life while also relaying the social and cultural messages that Cisneros deems significant.

NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES: POINT OF VIEW AND FOCALIZATION

Linguist Roger Fowler identifies three facets of point of view: the psychological, ideological, and spacio-temporal perspectives. The psychological perspective examines the type and nature of the narrator. The ideological perspective reveals a set of values and beliefs communicated through the language of the text, in other words, the text’s interpretation of the world. The spacio-temporal perspective includes the elements of space and time. To be more specific, the spatial perspective involves the distance from which the subject is viewed as well as its focus. Finally, the temporal perspective involves both the speed by which events progress and whether they proceed in a continuous chain or in isolated segments (Linguistic Criticism 127-30).

The psychological aspect of point of view leads Fowler to create four distinctions within narration. Types A and B narration are both internal narration
where characters’ states of mind, motives, and reactions, that which would be hidden from the common observer in reality, are revealed to the reader. In type A narration, the narrator is inside the events, is a character in the story. This point of view is limited to retrospective and present time. Any anterior narration, or the telling of what will happen, cannot be told with any certainty, but is pure speculation. Type B, however, involves an omniscient narrator, someone who is not a character in the story but has access to some or all characters’ internal lives. Types C and D are both external narration where the narrator “constructs . . . the role of an unprivileged observer coming to a partial understanding of the fictional figures in a fragmentary way” (Linguistics and the Novel 89-90). In type C, the narrator accepts the privacy of other characters’ experiences. Type D narration is an extreme of type C, stressing “the limitations of authorial knowledge, the inaccessibility of the characters’ ideologies” (Linguistic Criticism 135).

Mieke Bal discriminates between narrator and focalizer, claiming that the terms “narrative situation” and “narrative viewpoint” do not create a clear distinction between “the vision through which the elements are being presented and . . . the identity of the voice that is verbalizing that vision” (100-101). In other words, these terms draw no lines between the point of view from which the story is told and the individual the readers assume to be the source and authority for the words used to tell the story. For various reasons, the focalizer may see, hear, or know some things that have not been witnessed by the narrator, thereby creating a distinction between the one who sees and the one who speaks. Many times, readers assume that the narrator is always the speaker, but Bal points out that this is not necessarily the case. She contends that it is quite important to determine which character focalizes which object or event, partly because focalization is the “most important, the most penetrating and most subtle means of manipulation” (116). The means by which the object or event is presented provides information about both it and the focalizer.

Gérard Genette proposes a three-pronged system for analyzing focalization: zero focalization, internal focalization, and external focalization. Zero focalization features an omniscient narrator who knows more than do the characters. Internal focalization can be further divided into fixed, where everything is relayed by the same person; varied, where there is predominantly one focalizer, but the focalization periodically shifts to other characters; and, multiple, where there are numerous focalizers who may relate the same event from different points of view, such as in epistolary novels. Finally, external focalization produces objective novels in which the reader can only observe actions, no thoughts or feelings are expressed. In this case, the characters know more than the focalizer tells (189-90).

An author will often utilize more than one focalizer or shift the angle of focalization by degrees. We will see that although The House on Mango Street is narrated by twelve-year-old Esperanza, or rather that it is her point of view
from which the story is told, she is not always the focalizer. Neither are events and people always focalized in the same manner. *The House on Mango Street* is a mixture of Fowler’s type A and type B narrative where the story is told through a narrator who reveals to us her own thoughts and feelings but is also occasionally able to express the thoughts and feelings of other characters. This utilizes both fixed internal focalization, where we get the thoughts and feelings of one character, and zero focalization, where we pay heed to an omniscient narrator. This creates an interesting case because zero focalization is not defined by Genette as being grounded in a character in the story; however, we could not argue that *The House on Mango Street* uses varied focalization because the others’ internal thoughts are not revealed by the characters who hold them; they pass instead through Esperanza.

**Esperanza’s Narrative Technique**

*Adolescent/Mature Voices*

In *The House on Mango Street*, the status of the focalizer is never fixed. Although the focalizer is always Esperanza, her angle of seeing is dynamic. Sometimes it is clearly a twelve year old’s innocent, juvenile perspective. Other times it is an adolescent’s thoughts embedded in a complex adult vocabulary. Still, other times the focalizer is not a twelve year old, but a more mature Esperanza with the experience of Mango Street within but behind her.

There are stories where Esperanza’s telling of the situation suits that of a twelve year old. One fitting example is the story “And Some More,” in which Esperanza, her sister Nenny, and her two friends, Lucy and Rachel, are discussing the thirty different names Eskimos have for snow and the various names for clouds. However, less than halfway through the story, they resort to name calling. “You know what you are, Esperanza? You are like the Cream of Wheat Cereal. You’re like the lumps. Yeah, and you’re foot fleas, that’s you. Chicken lips. . . . Cockroach jelly. . . . Cold *frijoles*” (37). This name calling is indicative of their age. It is something that “children” do when they cannot think of anything else to argue but do not want to lose the linguistic war through silence. They believe that the name calling can hurt another as much as anything else they could say or do; and it does. However, at the end, one says that yelling “your ugly mama’s toes” is “stupid.” Esperanza writes “Who’s stupid? Rachel, Lucy, Esperanza and Nenny” (38). This episode reveals her in-between age. She is not beyond the name calling game, but in the end shows that she is breaking away from this age, possibly maturing more quickly than the others.

Bal claims that perception “is a psychological process, strongly dependent on the position of the perceiving body; a small child sees things in a totally
different way from an adult” (100). *The House on Mango Street* would, quite obviously, be different if narrated strictly from a child’s or an adult’s point of view. If it had been told in a strictly mature voice, as if it happened in the past, the childlike qualities of innocence and confusion would be forfeited. If it was told strictly through a child’s point of view, the major insights and driving force of the book would be lost. A special effect is created between the child’s innocent report of a situation and the readers’ knowing interpretation. In this case, the child does not fully understand what is happening, but the reader does. There are two specific places where Esperanza’s innocence is purposely played against the readers’ knowledge. The most obvious example is found in “The Earl of Tennessee.” Here, Esperanza claims that “the word is that Earl is married and has a wife somewhere.” A number of people have seen her, but no one can agree on what this woman looks like. Mama thinks she is a “skinny thing, blond and pale like salamanders that have never seen the sun.” The boys believe her to be a tall red-head who “wears tight pink pants and green glasses.” Esperanza says that they “can never agree on what she looks like” but they all know that Earl and this woman “walk fast into the apartment, lock the door behind them and never stay long” (71). Esperanza does not understand that the reason why no one can agree on what this wife looks like is because “she” is never the same woman. Her childhood innocence prevents her from understanding that Earl’s “wives” are more than likely prostitutes, something that an adult reader can easily infer.

Another instance is not as focused on Esperanza’s lack of “adult” knowledge, but her lack of linguistic knowledge to identify tarot cards by name. Instead, she uses what Fowler calls “circumlocutions” to designate that for which she has no name: “blond men on horses and crazy baseball bats with thorns. Golden goblets, sad-looking women dressed in old-fashioned dresses, and roses that cry” (63). “The implication is that [she] has command of only part of [her] society’s classification of objects” (*Linguistic Criticism* 134). Esperanza can describe what the images on the cards look like but is not capable of naming them appropriately.

Although there are times when Esperanza’s voice is clearly that of a twelve year old and occasionally one that shows the beginnings of maturity, there are other times when the voice is much more mature, the voice of an adult looking back on past experiences. This mature voice appears primarily through the topic or content of the story and through prose of which only an experienced author is capable.

One example of an adult voice is found in “Darius and the Clouds” where Esperanza reflects on her surroundings:

You can never have too much sky. You can fall asleep and wake up drunk on sky, and sky can keep you safe when you are sad. Here there is too much sadness and not enough sky. Butterflies are few
and so are flowers and most things that are beautiful. Still, we take what we can get and make the most of it. (33)

Someone of Esperanza’s young age would probably not notice that there is too little sky in the neighborhood and say that she just makes the best of what she has. This sounds like the voice of experience, someone who has been around awhile and knows how to cope pretty well. Another clue that this is a more mature voice is the use of the word “drunk” in “you can fall asleep and wake up drunk on sky.” A twelve year old from Esperanza’s family is not going to know the feeling of being drunk, especially since Esperanza assumes her mother feels sick because of too many tamales at the baptism reception until “Uncle Nacho says too many this and tilts his thumb to his lips” (47). Even then it is not clear that Esperanza knows what Uncle Nacho means by this gesture.

Another passage in which this mature voice appears through content includes “Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes.” Esperanza says, “I put it down on paper and then the ghost does not ache so much. I write it down and Mango says goodbye sometimes. She does not hold me with both arms. She sets me free” (110). Again, this voice is much more mature than the twelve-year-old Esperanza who calls her friends “chicken lips.” This is an author who realizes the value of writing down her life, who realizes what her writing will do for the others still living on Mango Street.

Cisneros says in her essay “Do You Know Me?” that she “wanted stories like poems, compact and lyrical and ending with a reverberation” (78). The techniques used to achieve this poetic effect, such as creative similes and metaphors, repetition, intertextuality identified by motifs, and conversations between the stories reveal a more mature voice, the polished style of an experienced author. It is still the viewpoint of twelve-year-old Esperanza but a different focalizer putting the words onto the paper. Esperanza describes Earl’s dogs as not walking “like ordinary dogs” but they “leap and somersault like an apostrophe and a comma” (71). In “The Three Sisters” she describes Lucy and Rachel’s dead baby brother as a “little thumb of a human in a box like candy” (104). Her father tells her that her grandmother is dead and then “crumples like a coat and cries” (56). While Esperanza claims to have done some writing of her own, these similes are creative and fresh, a sign of an experienced writer. Additionally, Cisneros employs repetition at the end of stories for a poetic effect. “Those Who Don’t” ends with “Yeah. That’s how it goes and goes” (28). “Four Skinny Trees” ends with a series of repetitions for emphasis and a feeling of contemplation: “Four who grew despite concrete. Four who reach and do not forget to reach. Four whose only reason is to, be and be” (75). With these techniques, Cisneros has created the poetic stories she desires and tells them through the eyes of Esperanza.
Cisneros also uses sentences too complex for a young writer. The best example is from “Sally” where Esperanza asks, “Sally, who taught you to paint your eyes like Cleopatra? And if I roll the little brush with my tongue and chew it to a point and dip it in the muddy cake, the one in the little red box, will you teach me?” Cisneros embeds her own author’s voice into Esperanza’s question. None of the words are beyond Esperanza, in fact, they are basic vocabulary. However, instead of Esperanza simply saying, “Will you show me how to put on eye liner?” the sentence is quite complex, not because Esperanza does not know how to ask a good question but because of Cisneros’ stylistics seeping through Esperanza’s voice.

Cisneros’ use of intertextuality among the vignettes also signifies the work of an experienced author and not the “journal entries” of a twelve year old. In “Do You Know Me?” Cisneros claims that she intended for a reader to be able to pick up the collection and read any story without necessarily needing to know what came before or what comes after (78). While this kind of reading is entirely possible, the stories are tightly interwoven with motifs repeated throughout and a number of vignettes converse with each other, again, a sign of a skilled storyteller.

One recurring motif is that of a woman confined to the home but leaning out a window or standing in a doorway in a half-attempt to escape. Esperanza’s great grandmother, for whom she was named, “looked out the window all her life, the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow” (11). Rafaela is locked up by her husband on his domino nights and “leans out the window and leans on her elbow and dreams her hair is like Rapunzel’s” (79). Marin cannot come out of the house because she is babysitting her cousins, but still “stands in the doorway a lot, all the time singing, clicking her fingers” (23-24). Mamacita “sits all day by the window and plays the Spanish radio show and sings all the homesick songs about her country in a voice that sounds like a seagull” (77). These women are confined to their space, but leaning through an opening allows them some degree of freedom; it allows them to see and to be seen. (Or, in Mamacita’s case, to be heard.) Rafaela’s dream that she is Rapunzel clearly suggests that she is waiting for someone to rescue her. Sally’s new husband sees the potential danger in this “leaning” and “doesn’t let her [even] look out the window” (102). This recurring window motif reflects the dismal situation of many women in Esperanza’s neighborhood and larger social environment. The time these women spend at the window reflects their dissatisfaction with their confinement and the inability to break free of it on their own.

Another motif is that of shoes. Mamacita appears with tiny feet and “a dozen boxes of satin high heels” (77). Sire ties his girlfriend’s shoes because she is unable to do so herself. The mother of “The Family of Little Feet” gives Esperanza and her friends a bag of high-heeled shoes. Through the wearing of these shoes, the girls discover that they “have legs. . . all our own, good to
look at, and long” (40). Esperanza even eludes to the nursery rhyme “There Was an Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe” in the story “There Was an Old Woman Who Had So Many Children She Didn’t Know What to Do.” However, this mother, Rosa Vargas, does not live in a shoe or “spank them all soundly and send them to bed.” Instead she cannot control them, and every one in the neighborhood gives up caring about the kids and stops trying to help their mother. Perhaps Esperanza notices others’ shoes and feet because she is preoccupied with her own. In a story dedicated to shoes, “Chanclas,” Esperanza is mortified that she must go to her cousin’s baptism in her new pink dress, new underclothes, new socks and the “old saddle shoes I wear to school. . . . My feet scuffed and round, the heels all crooked that look dumb with this dress” (47). In “The Monkey Garden” again she mentions looking at her “ugly round shoes” (98). The significance of all these shoes become evident in the last vignette. Here she says that she makes a story “for each step my brown shoe takes. I say, ‘And so she trudged up the wooden stairs, her sad brown shoes taking her to the house she never liked’” (109). Even though shoes typically symbolize walking and transportation, most of the observed shoes really get the owners nowhere. Rosa Vargas is confined to her “shoe” full of children and missing a father/husband. Mamacita never ventures down the stairs despite her collection, and the shoes the girls teeter in for one afternoon are thrown away. Esperanza is the only one who ends up using her shoes to walk away from Mango Street – and she hated them for so long.

Another means by which Cisneros employs intertextuality is through the conversations continued between the stories. Esperanza’s dying aunt tells her, “You remember to keep writing, Esperanza. You must keep writing. It will keep you free” (61). Later, the three sisters tell her that when she leaves Mango Street she “must remember always 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 . . . . You must remember to come back. For the ones who cannot leave as easily as you. You will remember?” (105). Finally, in “Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes” Esperanza has realized that her writing is the way to reveal who she is, where she has come from, what she knows and that this is the way to “come back for the ones [she] left behind. For the ones who cannot out” (110). She then continues with the opening lines of the book, “We didn’t always live on Mango Street.” The beginning and ending of the book echo each other. She declares at the end that she is going to tell us a story. She starts (or ends), “We didn’t always live on Mango Street. Before that it was Loomis on the third floor, and before that we lived on Keeler. Before Keeler it was Paulina” (109). These words perfectly echo the beginning, but then the words then change with the year she has spent on Mango Street. In the opening, she states, “But what I remember most is moving a lot” (3). In the ending, she continues, “But what I remember most is Mango Street, sad red house, the house I belong but do not
belong to” (110). She tells us she is going to now begin the story, but has, in effect, just ended it. The circle the three sisters said she must understand is now complete.

**Limited/Omniscient Points of View**

As one would expect in a description of a neighborhood, Esperanza spends a large amount of time describing the people who live there. Her descriptions indicate that it is the people, their hardships, and their relationships to one another that make this neighborhood a community. Out of the forty-four vignettes included in *The House on Mango Street*, fifteen (only four of which feature men) are descriptions of the people. Plus, a large number of the events Esperanza recounts reveal important and interesting information about others in the neighborhood. In these profiles, Esperanza starts with a brief description of how she knows the characters, where they live, what they look like, some general background and then, very subtly, enters their minds. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan argues that “speaking/thinking and seeing need not come from the same agent. We need to allow for cases where the narrator undertakes to tell what another person sees or has seen” (72). Esperanza does this quite frequently with an assortment of her neighbors and friends on Mango Street. She easily sneaks in and out of Fowler’s types A and B narrative, from a limited point of view where she can only report what she can see and hear to an omniscient point of view where the neighbors’ own thoughts and feelings are expressed. This, incidentally, is done only with female characters; Esperanza appears less able to connect with the males in the neighborhood.

In “No Speak English,” Esperanza describes the arrival of Mamacita, who “sits all day by the window and plays the Spanish radio shows and sings all the homesick songs about her country in a voice that sounds like a seagull” (77). This description of Mamacita, as well as that of other characters up to this point, is external, that which anyone passing through could observe by looking up to discover from where the strange seagull sounds come. However, the narrative continues:

Home. Home. Home. Home is a house in a photograph, a pink house, pink as hollyhocks with lots of startled light. The man paints the walls of the apartment pink, but it’s not the same you know. She still sighs for her pink house, and then I think she cries. I would. (77)

From the first “Home” to “it’s not the same you know,” Esperanza has entered into the feelings and thoughts of Mamacita; she has become privileged to know what she feels, what she misses, and what she is thinking. Esperanza
also knows what goes on inside the apartment with no indication that she has actually been there. She knows that when Mamacita’s baby boy starts to sing the Pepsi song from the commercial on TV – in English – that it “breaks [her] heart forever” (78).

This vignette clearly illustrates the division between Esperanza the character/narrator and Esperanza the focalizer. Esperanza the character has no means of obtaining this information. She says that after Mamacita arrived they “didn’t see her” (77). The neighbors only catch a glance of her when she leans out the window and only hear her when she sings or fights with her husband. Esperanza the focalizer, however, is able to get into their apartment painted pink and into Mamacita’s heart to know the deep longing she feels for her homeland.

Esperanza does the same in the next story, “Rafaela Who Drinks Coconut and Papaya Juice on Tuesdays.” She explains that Rafaela is locked up on Tuesdays because that is the night her husband plays dominoes, and he is afraid that she “will run away since she is too beautiful to look at” (79). Esperanza explains that sometimes Rafaela throws down a dollar so the children will buy her a can of coconut or papaya juice, which is then sent upward via a paper bag and a clothesline. Yet, Esperanza tells us much more than what she can actually see. She says that Rafaela “dreams her hair is Rapunzel’s,” and she “wishes there were sweeter drinks, not bitter like an empty room, but sweet sweet like the island, like the dance hall down the street where women much older than her throw green eyes so easily like dice and open homes with keys” (80). The goings-on in this dance hall would not be familiar to Esperanza, especially the minute detail of women throwing eyes like dice. She also reveals Rafaela’s feelings with no indication that Rafaela has ever shared them with her. Once again, she taps into this woman’s mind and heart to reveal her pain and sorrow.

This technique of jumping into certain neighbors’ minds creates a more complete characterization of the neighbors – interestingly – more complete than twelve-year-old Esperanza understands them to be. It gives the reader an added flavor; it deepens the sorrow that so many, particularly women, experience on Mango Street. The only instances when men are shown to express sorrow is when Sally’s father has realized he beats her too badly and when Esperanza’s paternal grandmother dies. Esperanza never enters the hearts or minds of men. The men of Mango Street are strictly described from a limited point of view as if they do not have feelings or as if these feelings are simply not accessible to Esperanza.

“The Earl of Tennessec,” which is filled with only those details that Esperanza can collect by looking and listening, perfectly illustrates the contrast. Any additional information is attributed to what she has been told by Earl. “Earl is a jukebox repairman. He learned his trade in the south he says. He speaks with a Southern accent, smokes cigars and wears a felt hat” (71). Even
the rhythm of these choppy sentences, in comparison to the longer more poetic passages describing women, indicate her limited knowledge of the Mango Street men. In fact, she knows so little about him that she does not know that those women he escorts to his apartment are certainly not his wife.

Speaking/Writing Voices

In two vignettes, Esperanza directs her writing toward one specific person. It is here that the writing voice changes to a speaking voice, something that is intended to be said out loud. This makes readers feel as if we have overheard a very private conversation. These two vignettes are examples of uninterrupted free indirect discourse where all that is told is filtered through twelve-year-old Esperanza’s interpretation. In both instances, this audience is her friend, Sally, who has “eyes like Egypt and nylons the color of smoke,” who also comes to school “with her pretty face all beaten and black” (81, 92). Esperanza is fascinated with Sally. According to Jacqueline Doyle, Sally “represents danger and adventure,” something that Esperanza knows little about (17). Esperanza tries to befriend Sally as best she knows how by inviting her to stay with her family when her father beats her too badly and by defending her against the boys who make her kiss them to get her house keys back.

In the first vignette to Sally, entitled “Sally,” Esperanza begins with some introductions about Sally’s beauty that is beyond her age and her father’s worry that “to be this beautiful is trouble” (81). The rest is directed toward Sally—a conversation that Esperanza wishes to have, replete with questions that Sally is only able to answer through her actions. She starts with something superficial, “I like your black coat and those shoes you wear, where did you get them?” (82). Then she becomes more personal, “What do you think about when you close your eyes like that? And why do you always have to go straight home after school?” What comes next is really the most important question: “Sally do you sometimes wish you didn’t have to go home?” (82). As the “conversation” progresses, Esperanza comes closer and closer to the heart of Sally’s pain, believing that she has somehow understood the world that Sally lives in when she says, “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).

After zeroing in on Sally’s pain, Esperanza attempts to save her. She wants to take care of her, to try to eliminate the loneliness, sadness, and abuse she believes Sally experiences. However, the saving always fails, though not by Esperanza’s lack of trying. In “The Monkey Garden,” Esperanza does everything she can to save Sally from the abuse she is about to receive from the boys and is hurt to learn that Sally actually wants to go “behind the old blue pickup to kiss [them] and get her keys back.” Even Sally tells her to “go
home” (97). When Sally is invited to stay with Esperanza’s family to keep her away from her abusive father, he soon comes to beg forgiveness and takes her home only to beat her again just for talking to a boy. There is nothing that Esperanza can do to keep her friend safe.

Although Esperanza has in some way taken responsibility for Sally, Sally does not feel nor do the same for her. The second direct address to Sally in “Red Clowns” shows not the pain that Esperanza believes Sally feels but the pain that Esperanza endures because Sally is not there for her when she is the one who needs saving.

Sally you lied. It wasn’t what you said at all . . . I like to be with you Sally. You’re my friend. But that big boy, where did he take you? I waited such a long time . . . but you never came, you never came for me. Sally Sally a hundred times. Why didn’t you hear me when I called? . . . Sally, make him stop. Why did you leave me all alone? You’re a liar. . . . Sally, you lied, you lied (99-100)

As Esperanza tells the experience of her sexual assault, possibly even rape (although that word is never used), she balances the injustice done to her by the boy with the injustice she feels Sally has done to her by not saving her and for lying about sex. “It wasn’t what you said at all” (99). She is physically hurt by the boy who whispers “I love you Spanish girl” but even more emotionally damaged by Sally (99).

Esperanza is no longer concerned with Sally’s feelings, yet she appears to feel some connection to her. Sally is probably the only person alive with whom she could share this experience even though she cannot “tell it all” (100). Others might blame her, but Sally might understand. Sally knows how it feels to be abused. Sadly, though, the reader gets the impression that, again, Esperanza’s questions go unanswered. Sally does not care.

In the following story, “Linoleum Roses,” we learn that Sally has married a marshmallow salesman “in another state where it’s legal to get married before eighth grade” (101). Esperanza knows she likes being married because she gets to buy things, but sometimes her husband gets angry, will not let her talk on the phone, or go outside without permission. Esperanza no longer speaks to Sally directly, nor does she feel any need to save her. After Sally’s cold dismissal in “Red Clowns,” this story about Sally seems cold and lacking emotion on Esperanza’s part.

Another place where a “you” is addressed is the last vignette, “Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes.” In the last story, Esperanza focuses on her writing which she has mentioned previously throughout the book. She says, “I like to tell stories. I am going to tell you a story about a girl who didn’t want to belong” (109, emphasis mine). She directly addresses her audience – whether it be the mujeres, the women, to whom the book is dedicated, those who sym-
bolically live on Mango Street, or anyone who has cared to read this account of Esperanza and her experience on Mango Street – who realizes that the story Esperanza believes she is about to tell is the one she has already told. This “you” gives the story direction, a recipient. Just as we realize the vignettes employing free indirect discourse have an intended audience, Esperanza realizes that she has an audience for the entire story she now has to tell/has already told. While it seems that many of the previous stories were told simply for the sake of telling, this direct address to the audience at the end blankets the entire book, gives the entire story meaning. It has been (or will be) told with the intention of someone hearing it.

CONCLUSIONS

What do these variations in ways of telling accomplish for Esperanza and her story? They both reflect and enhance the tensions that Cisneros hopes to express of being female, of being a child, of living in the barrio, of being something other than white. These tensions work with the plot and the social messages that Cisneros intends to send her audience. In an interview, Cisneros expresses her frustration with those writers who “make our barrios look like Sesame Street.” She continues that “poor neighborhoods lose their charm after dark. . . . I was writing about it in the most real sense that I know, as a person walking those neighborhoods with a vagina” (Aranda 69). So, Cisneros’ goal is to tell the real story, to show the reality of an Esperanza’s life. The shifts in the focalizer, the different ways of telling, help her do just that.

By telling the story through twelve-year-old Esperanza’s point of view, Cisneros is empowering someone who is normally not seen as possessing authority in the world – a young, Hispanic female. Esperanza is given a voice. Her entire community is discriminated against both for being a minority (albeit a large one) and for being poor. In addition, we see through the stories Esperanza tells that she is at risk of being discriminated against within that community because she is soon to be a woman.

We learn in “My Name” that “in English [her] name means hope” (10). By giving Esperanza this voice, Cisneros is expressing optimism, optimism that the situation can change, that Esperanza and others like her will not have to spend their lives leaning out windows, that she will not have to be “sorry because she couldn’t be all the things she wanted to be” like her great grandmother, that she will not succumb to the shame that kept her mother, “a smart cookie then,” from continuing with school (11, 91). At the age of twelve, Esperanza dares to rebel against her oppressive world. She “has begun [her] own quiet war.” She is the “one who leaves the table like a man, without putting back the chair or picking up the plate” (89). We are certain by the end of
the text that through Esperanza’s writing she will not inherit her mothers’ sadness and shame, and she will help those who cannot physically move beyond their station to break free in their own private way; she will help them to move beyond the windows and doorways. Esperanza will give them all the key that Rafaela wishes she could possess.

The shifts in point of view, from Esperanza’s adolescent voice to a mature one, from a limited point of view to omniscience, from writing to speaking help to reveal the social realities of Esperanza’s world, where women are locked up by their husbands and confined by their sadness, where little girls are beaten by their fathers because they are too beautiful, where those who do not “belong” to this country are allowed to die without a last name, where twelve year olds are raped and fear that they will be the ones to be blamed. These shifts allow the reader to gaze into more lives than just one and thereby receive a more complete picture of the community of Mango Street. These allow us to see the impact of the realities twelve-year-old Esperanza may not fully realize at this time, but the more mature Esperanza who has been transported beyond Mango Street through her writing has. They show us that Esperanza has a voice she can use to speak out, and although she is taking small steps now, she will likely come to find her strong voice soon.

Interestingly, one voice Esperanza does not speak in, or perhaps is not capable of using, is Spanish, the language which ties the community together. For the most part, the only Spanish she uses is that from others’ dialogue. Her father says, “Your abuelito is dead. . . . Está muerto” (56). Elinita, the witch woman, declares that “los espíritus” have joined them (63). Esperanza’s mother tells her to “look at my comadres” (91). While Esperanza appears to understand what is meant by the Spanish words, she fails to speak the language with a couple exceptions. One is when she and her friends are creating jump rope rhymes. “I want to be Tahiti. Or merengue. Or electricity. Or tembleque!” (51). Here the words mean little but are simply a part of the rhyming game. Another instance is in regard to Geraldo, no last name, when she says that he was just another “brazier” who didn’t speak English. Just another wetback” (66). This seems to be not her own word, but one she heard others use to describe this man.

Wanting to know when they will return home, Mamacita cries to her husband, “¿Cuándo, Cuándo, Cuándo?” He replies, “¡Ay, Caray! . . . Speak English. Speak English. Christ.” (78). He cries out to her both in anger and frustration to speak English, to assimilate. In effect, that is what Esperanza and her friends have done; they have assimilated as best they can. Although her parents’ and others’ English is seasoned with Spanish, there is very little of that language in the children’s speech. Perhaps this is indicative of passive bilingualism, where the children know and understand the language but do not speak it. However, this limited Spanish could also be a statement from
Cisneros. She refuses to let Esperanza speak it. Esperanza’s silence in this language is symbolic of her ability to break out of this neighborhood and the larger culture that have the power to oppress her. If she fails to speak the language, she cannot be confined by it.

WORKS CITED


