THE BICULTURAL CONSTRUCTION OF SELF
IN CISNEROS, ÁLVAREZ, AND SANTIAGO

Ellen C. Mayock

Virginia Woolf once said, “How queer to have so many selves” (Kakutani B2), a comment which immediately introduces the concept of the multiplicity of one's character. In the case of Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street* (1984), Julia Álvarez’s *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1992), and Esmeralda Santiago’s *When I Was Puerto Rican* (1993), multiple selves stem from manifold cultural locations. Each of the three protagonists is deeply affected by her geographical past and present, by the cultural implications of that geography, by the constantly evolving mosaic of the combination of two distinctly different cultures, and, to complicate matters, by the changing “locations” of her developing adolescent self (or selves).

Each of the three novels, or collections of stories (as *The House on Mango Street* and *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* have also been called), is an innovative type of Latina bildungsroman, a display of the corporal, emotional, and cultural development of the protagonists, and by voyeuristic extension, of their communities. The form of the first-person narrative, although somewhat more complicated in Álvarez’s constant play of individual and group perspectives in first and third persons, effectively links protagonist to narrator (and, in these cases, to author), and protagonist to reader. The highly personal and sensorial narrations invite the reader, even the reader who has no intimate connection with the Hispanic world, into the cultural locations of the barrios of Chicago (in Cisneros), the countryside of the Dominican Republic, the Bronx, and suburban New York (in Álvarez), and the countryside, “jibaro” culture of Puerto Rico, urban living in and outside of San Juan, and cement-block city living in Brooklyn (in Santiago).

Each of the three authors provides a clue early in the narration that helps the reader to map not only the cultural implications of the novel, but also its principle themes. Cisneros dedicates her work in Spanish and in English “a las mujeres,” an action which immediately displays her concern for the angst of the developing protagonist, Esperanza, as well as for the other women in the narration. Myriam Díaz-Diocaretz states that “the strategic discursive consciousness emerges from a feminine tradition in Latin America that focuses on the formation of the woman’s voice as a collective as well as an individual subject” (Jehenson xi). If we apply this concept to Latin American women on North American soil, we observe that the female role models in these novels also represent the cultural boundaries (in the sense of *límites*) that have served to lock in many real-life Latina women.

Álvarez grants us two important hints at the emphasis in her work. The format of the backwards timeline demonstrates the mature protagonist Yolanda’s return to her past, implying perhaps a need to recover a distant self or cultural location through memory, nostalgia, and the power of the pen. The Dominican author also draws a family tree that serves to trace Yolanda and her sisters’ roots back to the conquistadores. The presence of
this dynamic past gives a sense of the García and de la Torre power and privilege on the Island. The material comfort on the Island contrasts sharply with the initial hardships upon the family's arrival in New York and even more acutely with the poverty depicted in The House on Mango Street and When I Was Puerto Rican, thus setting up another boundary, this time based on class and the gaps between the "haves" and "have nots."

In her first novel, Santiago provides the reader with an extensive glossary that includes sophisticated words, Puerto Rican slang, typical Spanish sayings, and certain expletives. This combination represents the rich linguistic diversity of the narrator-protagonist's cultural and storytelling vocabulary. In addition, the glossary exposes Santiago's love of language and word play and thematic emphasis on writing as salvation.

The three works also have in common titles that immediately suggest past tense and biculturality, two factors that allow us to explore the travels of the protagonists and their friends and families from one time to another, from one country to another, and from one self to others. Cherry Clayton's quoting of Achebe is appropriate here: "Our future depends on our constant putting together of the past and the present through the story" (Clayton 129). Our three narrator-protagonists are unraveling the past in order to reconcile it with the present.

The three novels are replete with textual representations of the development of the female protagonists as women, as representatives of the nations and/or cultures in which they were born, as transplants, and, significantly, as artists. Intrinsic to the evolution of the bicultural female protagonist are her family relationships, the examples set for her by her female peers and older role models, her struggles to understand and liberate herself from gender-based norms, and her efforts to create a realm where imposed values can survive with well-earned identity. Myriam Yvonne Jehenson's citation concerning Latin American women writers applies equally well to these three Latina writers:

Their writing, in the words of Francine Masiello, constitutes a "double discourse," a conscious recognition of the "structures of power at the same time that it offers an alternative." (Jehenson xiii)

The polarities just mentioned set up a framework of boundaries and limits that influences the protagonists' development from the start. The first set of boundaries contains the antithetic concept of nosotros versus los otros. Cisneros constructs these limits with an emphasis on the traditional Latino roles for boys and men in opposition with the dutiful (duty-full) realm imposed on girls and women. In his interview with Cisneros, Jim Sagel states that the author "relishes the opportunity to startle the jaded reader and poetically unravel stereotypes, especially those that relate to Latinas" (Sagel 74). Again, the term "unravel" transports us back to the text and its interwoven structure of past and present.

In The House on Mango Street Cisneros initiates the woman/man opposition with a selection entitled "Boys & Girls," in which she states:

The boys and girls live in separate worlds. The boys in their universe and we in ours. My brothers for example. They've got plenty to say to me and Nenny inside the house. But outside they can't be seen talking to girls. Carlos and Kiki are each other's best friend . . . not ours. (Cisneros 8)

Cisneros uses a language of oppositions. Esperanza and Nenny's cultural location is the house, the only place it is considered licit for them to interact with boys, brothers who will not acknowledge them outside this familial environment. Cisneros is pointing to the fact that Esperanza and Nenny are potential "window sitters," as are many of the women
characterized in this novel. If they follow the cultural norms codified thus far in their lives, they too will adopt the house as their place of activity, thereby limiting their possibilities in life to that which comes to them and reducing their roles in their own lives to passive ones. Esperanza recognizes the danger of this stagnation when she discusses being her great grandmother's namesake:

Esperanza. I have inherited her name, but I don't want to inherit her place by the window. (Cisneros 11)

Esperanza's interest in her older friend Marin exposes her own voyeuristic nature and willingness to reject certain characteristics of negative female role models. She laments Marin's need to "look beautiful and to wear nice clothes and meet someone in the subway who might marry her [you] and take her [you] to live in a big house far away" (Cisneros 26). Instead of conforming to the numerous examples set by older women in the narration (her own mother included), Esperanza begins her own series of small revolutions which will help to shape her life and give definition to her independence:

My mother says when I grow older my dusty hair will settle and my blouse will learn to stay clean, but I have decided not to grow up tame like the others who lay their necks on the threshold waiting for the ball and chain. (Cisneros 88)

The protagonist is unconcerned about the supposed need for feminine wiles and makes a conscious decision to eschew the traditional values of her cultures (both Latina and North American). She adds, "I have begun my own quiet war. Simple. Sure. I am one who leaves the table like a man, without putting back the chair or picking up the plate" (Cisneros 89). This rebellion is not an effort of a "sisterhood," but rather an individualistic approach that allows for Esperanza's survival in a world not fashioned by or for women. Esperanza refuses to join the ranks of Mexican-American women who serve men.

In Álvarez's narration, the adult Yolanda Garcia pursues the same solitary course of action, displaying, in fact, a further gap between herself and other women, as she faces her aunts and female cousins who do not believe she, a woman, should travel alone in the Dominican Republic: "She [Yolanda] has sat back quietly, hoping she has learned, at last, to let the mighty wave of tradition roll on through her life and break on some other female shore" (Álvarez 9). Both narrators use the word "quiet," thus lending an oxymoronic flavor to their warring protests against the imbalance of male and female roles within their cultures.

In When I Was Puerto Rican, Negi arrives at a similar conclusion about the unpalatable nature of male/female roles as she has observed them in Puerto Rico. Her father has just used Negi as an excuse to abandon her mother and siblings in order to visit another woman in San Juan. Papi leaves Negi at his mother's house and fails to pick her up a week later, as he had promised. Finally, Negi's mother retrieves her, and Negi slowly comprehends her mother's disillusionment, hard work, and isolation at her father's hands. The narrator-protagonist is extremely disheartened by the pain she sees women accepting and suffering. As she strains to listen to her mother and paternal grandmother talk, she "wonders if men ever talked like this, if their sorrows ever spilled into these secret cadences" (Santiago 103). Her youthful consciousness continues on its path of awakening:

It seemed to me that remaining jamona could not possibly hurt this much. That a woman alone, even if ugly, could not suffer as much as my beautiful mother did. I hated Papi. I sat on the bed in his mother's house and wished
Negi's self-inflicted pain is a habit she has developed in order both to punish herself according to externally imposed morality and to avoid expression of possibly more dangerous emotions such as fear, loneliness, outrage at injustice, and powerlessness. The violence follows a pattern of patriarchal power: her father holds the power of freedom to sulk and stray over her mother, who, in turn, holds the threat of physical abuse over the children in an attempt to have some control over her large, unsolicited, single-parented brood. Negi liberates herself from her mother's abuse and feels the power that comes with her newfound freedom: “Mami and I didn't speak for days. But she never, ever, hit me again” (Santiago 252).

Similar patterns are depicted, but to a lesser extent, in How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents, and to a greater extent in The House on Mango Street, in which the scenes of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse are pervasive. The patterns of abuse reinforce the paradigm of woman as object instead of as human being. The panoply of enclosed and abused women in The House on Mango Street begins with the neighbor Rosa Vargas, whose “kids are too many and too much” (Cisneros 29), and “who cries every day for the man who left without even leaving a dollar for bologna or a note explaining how come” (Cisneros 29). Then we see Alicia, who fears her father, and Sally, another one of Esperanza’s contemporaries, who has flashes of potential but fears the constant sexual abuse imposed by her father. Again, the narrator-protagonist learns a valuable lesson through observation:

And who do you always have to go straight home to after school? You become a different Sally. You pull your skirt straight, you rub the blue paint off your eyelids. You don’t laugh, Sally. You look at your feet and walk fast to the house you can’t come out from. (Cisneros 82)

Again, the house has become the girl-woman’s cultural location. Esperanza’s feverish desire for her own, big, self-styled house is a significant indication of the need to break the cycle of female domesticity and to occupy space all her own, one defined by her own loneliness, creativity, and desires.

As the narrators attempt to disrupt these cultural norms through creative success, their sisters have a different modus operandi: both Esperanza’s sister Nenny and Yolanda García’s sister Sandi know they are pretty and see their good looks as an escape from the inferior place they must take within their fathers’ households. Both narrator-protagonists comprehend, upon seeing how their sisters navigate their worlds, that “pretty speaks both languages” (Álvarez 182). As Sandi regards her image in the mirror and splits herself in two, she gets an outsider’s view into the power of pretty:

Being pretty, she would not have to go back to where she came from. Pretty spoke both languages. Pretty belonged in this country to spite La Bruja. As she studied herself, the stall door behind her opened in the mirror. Sandi let her bangs fall and rushed out of the room. (Álvarez 182)

Similarly, Esperanza narrates:
Nenny says she won't wait her whole life for a husband to come and get her, that Minerva's sister left her mother's house by having a baby, but she doesn't want to go that way either. She wants things all her own, to pick and choose. Nenny has pretty eyes and it's easy to talk that way if you are pretty. (Cisneros 88)

It is not that our three narrator-protagonists do not consider their own physical appearances; they simply place more importance on their developing intellect as a means of day-to-day escape and eventual liberation. In When I Was Puerto Rican, Negi also tends towards the cerebral and is in some ways positively influenced by her poetic Papi. When Negi asks him what a soul does, he responds thoughtfully, "Well, it is the soul of a person that writes poetry" (Santiago 53), a revelation that leads Negi to the lovely conclusion, "Now I knew what happened to me when I walked beside myself. It was my soul wandering" (Santiago 54). Again, this ability to separate into two selves helps all three narrator-protagonists to be effective voyeurs, poets, and storytellers along their paths to self-discovery.

Yolanda's multiple selves (captured in the personae of Yolanda, Yo, Joe, one of the García girls, etc.) are validated as she garners her own literary voice in English: "She finally sounded like herself in English!" (Álvarez 143). Yolanda, like Negi, appreciates the poetic in an older role model and understands better her fragmented self when her teacher Sister Zoe says upon seeing snow fall, "Each flake was different, like a person, irreplaceable and beautiful" (Álvarez 167). Thus, the narrator-protagonists are learning to find beauty beyond the limitations of superficial, commercially imposed standards.

Just as the narrator-protagonists confront the boundaries of male/female behaviors and of external standards versus their internal perceptions, they also encounter boundaries between their Spanish and English-speaking worlds. Their unfolding ability to move with ease between the two realms is an indication of their comfort with their own beings and a reflection of their increased interaction with the outside world. The language confrontations are not only linguistically motivated, but are also affected by gaps in generations, in physical development, in religious beliefs, in country versus urban living, and in class standards. In short, the ever-evolving cultural norms of the narrator-protagonists influence their language use. These young women, however, never stop observing, reading, speaking, and writing from the border, for their languages are derived from the intersection of their two cultures. Fortunately, the linguistic blend gives rise not to silence, but instead to a rush of words whose flow will not be stemmed.

This emphasis on language is especially acute throughout Álvarez's novel. A prime example presents itself when Yolanda's mother wonders at Yolanda's most recent breakup, this time with monolingual John. Laura (the mother) asks, "What happened, Yo? We thought you and John were so happy." Yo responds, "We just didn't speak the same language" (Álvarez 81). The protagonist is obviously not referring to basic communication problems in English, but to broader, deeper problems in their relationship. Yolanda later narrates: "... so many words. There is no end to what can be said about the world" (Álvarez 85). Through her writing, Yolanda is slowly coming to terms with difficulties of expression and style and how, despite "all that can be said about the world," there are still always innumerable barriers to real comprehension between one's inner world and the outside world one confronts on a daily basis.

In Cisneros, linguistic confrontations are extended to concepts of physical turf and boundaries. Her vignette entitled "Those Who Don't" immediately sets up a contrast between los otros and nosotros:
All brown all around, we are safe. But watch us drive into a neighborhood of another color and our knees go shakitj'-shake and our car windows get rolled up tight and our eyes look straight. That is how it goes and goes. (Cisneros 28)

Esperanza soon learns that her only escape from that cycle of separation is her writing. She recognizes her way with words as opposed to her sister’s lack of linguistic creativity when the two are playing jump rope with some neighborhood girls:

Not that old song, I say. You gotta use your own song. Make it up, you know? But she doesn’t get it or won’t. It’s hard to say which. The rope turning, turning, turning. (Cisneros 52)

Words and creation are also prime motivators in Negi’s narration in When I Was Puerto Rican. As Negi and her community grapple with the “American invasion of Macún,” the protagonist also navigates the introduction of this gravelly-sounding new language. Negi discusses politics as she knows it with her Papi after an “American” presentation at school:

“I just want to know what it means. Are gringos the same as Americanos?”

“You should never call Americano a gringo. It’s a very bad insult.” (Santiago 72)

In this mini lesson, Papi adds, “Being American is not just a language, Negrita, it’s a lot of other things... Like the food you eat... the music you listen to... the things you believe in” (Santiago 73).

As we observe all three narrator-protagonists struggling with how best to interpret the words of others and how to incorporate new language into their evolving sense of expression, we also see them analyzing themselves and finding their own paths out of their bicultural confusion. The scene in which Negi learns to sew summarizes effectively how all three narrators feel as they learn to weave words:

Sounds dwindled into dull, distant murmurs, backgrounds receded into a blur, and sensations waned as I slid under the hypnotic rhythm of a hook pulling up thread, the finished work growing into my palm until its very weight forced me to stretch it out on my lap and look, and admire, and be amazed at what my hands had made. (Santiago 95)

This desire to weave and create is a salubrious way for the narrator-protagonists to soothe the feelings of, as Yolanda García phrases it, “shifting from foot to foot” (Álvez 107). Although writing does not eliminate the shifting, it does help the writer to define herself through the rich expression of her cultural memories. Esperanza is reassured in The House on Mango Street:

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. (Cisneros 105)

Esperanza’s friend reinforces this declaration by adding: “Like it or not you are Mango Street, and one day you’ll come back too” (Cisneros 107).

Similarly, Chucha, the García girls’ maid from the Dominican Republic, asserts as the family leaves for New York:

I feel their losses pile up like dirt thrown on a box after it has been lowered into the earth. I see their future, the troublesome life ahead. They will be haunted by what they do and don’t remember. But they have spirit in them. They will invent what they need to survive. (Álvez 223)
Indeed, all three narrator-protagonists are survivors and inventors, a combination that helps them move with more ease between present and past, English and Spanish, desire and reality, and narration and action. The treasure of nostalgia and memory combines with the pleasure of word play in two languages to create a narration that reinforces the flow of biculturalism. Barbara Hoffert reports Álvarez as stating that “she would never have become a writer if she hadn’t had to cope with being between two cultures,” and that she “made her home in words, not in the United States or the Dominican Republic” (Hoffert 22). Cisneros echoes Álvarez’s thoughts when she states in an interview:

I knew I was a Mexican woman, but I didn’t think it had anything to do with why I felt so much imbalance in my life, whereas it had everything to do with it! My race, my gender, my class! That’s when I decided I would write about something my classmates couldn’t write about. (Sagel 75)

Cisneros, Álvarez, and Santiago create a life within their words, providing readers with a rich backdrop of stylistic techniques from which to glean the thematic sense of the bicultural bildungsroman. All three narrations demonstrate a call to the senses, an onomatopoeic emphasis (i.e. who am I? how have I been named? and why?), an ironic sense of humor, a Spanish-style flow of prose in English, naturalistic descriptions of poverty and abuse, and a wonderful, ludic emphasis on the pleasure of the word. The authors’ true jouissance in their writing allows for strong connections between themselves and their characters and themselves and their readers. Writing has become both the authors’ existence in and travel to cultural locations defined by their own development.

WASHINGTON AND LEE UNIVERSITY

Works Cited