Chapter 3

Transgression of Cultural Boundaries: Cultural Identity in Transition

\textit{Because I, a mestiza,}

\textit{continually walk out of one culture}

\textit{and into another,}

\textit{because I am in all cultures at the same time} (Gloria Anzaldúa).

The term ‘culture’ opens up a whole world of ideas and concepts, and as it is mentioned in \textit{Key Concepts in Cultural Theory}, “is not easily defined, not least because it can have different meanings in different contexts” (Edgar \textit{et al} 101). As is evident from Raymond Williams’ analysis mentioned in the introductory chapter of this thesis, culture is a social construct. Culture influences our beliefs. Dominant paradigms, predefined concepts that exist as unquestionable, unchallengeable, are transmitted through the culture. Culture defines our identity, behavioural patterns, use of language, etc. Traditional concepts on culture have been revised by cultural theorists and philosophers. According to Bhabha, “cultures are never unitary in themselves, nor simply dualistic in the relation of Self to Other” (\textit{The Location of Culture} 52). The ethnic Americans who feel the pull of different cultures on their identity, experience a kind of \textit{mestiza} (mixed) consciousness, according to Gloria Anzaldúa. The ambivalence experienced by them from a clash of voices results in mental and emotional states of perplexity, an ambivalent state as Bhabha calls it. In attempting to work out a synthesis of disparate cultures, the self experiences a constant state of transition. Its pluralistic nature of identity is recognized in a Third Space or what Gloria Anzaldúa calls “the third element” (102).
where it develops a tolerance for contradictions. It is where the possibility of uniting all that is separate occurs. As mentioned in the first chapter inter- and intracultural problems faced by Kingston and Cisneros are pointed out, before they arrive at the Third Space of annunciation.

Kingston draws memorable and subtle pictures of the harsh realities and cultural conflicts confronted by Americans of Chinese origins in *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* and *China Men*. From the opening section ('No Name Woman') of *The Woman Warrior* itself she demonstrates Maxine’s ability to sift through the cultural fragments that she inherits from her mother and to make use of them for her own purposes. However, she recognises the confusions and contradictions that she faces in separating her two worlds: “Chinese-Americans”, she asks in *The Woman Warrior*, “when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories, from what is Chinese? What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies’” (*WW* 6)? She understands the difficulty of establishing realities, the dilemma in choosing between two worlds, one painted by stories and myths told by elders and what they gather from letters sent by relatives back home, and the other the world in which they have to survive, which they face every day. As she says, “Those of us in the first American generations have had to figure out how the invisible world the emigrants built around our childhoods fits in solid America” (*WW* 5). Kingston confronts the perplexing issue of China narrative within the context of her mother’s talk-stories and her own fantasy, forbidden tales and her own dreams. She speaks about “a great power,
my mother talking-story” (WW 20). Kingston observes: “I couldn’t tell where the stories left off and the dreams began, her voice and the voice of the heroines in my sleep” (WW 19). This section shows the confusion she has in acknowledging the ambivalent state she dwells in. She fails to create a third space at this juncture. Discernment dawns only towards the end of the novel.

In the second section, ‘White Tigers’, the mythical and legendary character of Fa Mu Lan, or the woman warrior is introduced by Brave Orchid. It is, at this point, in the text that we see the Chinese American daughter struggling to reconcile the paradoxical versions of identity with which she is confronted via her mother’s stories and teachings and the influence of American cultural ethos. In The Woman Warrior, Kingston is both part of and apart from the two separate worlds: she positions herself across languages and across cultures. The double perspective of the home culture and the other culture can be both delimiting and empowering. Her ‘self’, instead of dangling as a double-alienated outsider, succeeds in bridging the two cultures and merging the duality. The in-between situation in which she finds herself does not necessarily stand for a split duality of inherent contradiction. It stands for a bridge that both divides and connects. She occupies what Bhabha calls a third space towards the end of the story. Kingston acknowledges the influence of both cultures that exist not as an antithesis that excludes each other but as an integration that combines both. She is at home in this duality. She does not want to build a wall that divides but wishes to create a bridge that connects.
For instance, Kingston does not simply question the traditional mythology of China but incorporates it into her writing even though she rewrites according to her needs. She revives part of the mythology instead of repressing it. Kingston appropriates Fa Mu Lan by configuring it into a new cultural context. She uses the power of Chinese mythology to reinforce her American identity, thereby transcending the customary ways of defining the self and defying the village mentality of Chinatown. In this case, ethnicity no longer hampers her ways of thinking but enriches her imagination, which feasts on diverse traditions and cultures. This in-between position/interstitial space, instead of producing a “feeling of being between worlds, totally at home nowhere” (Ling 105), is not inherently a negative one. It can be positively employed. Kingston’s novels demonstrate the phenomenon of multicultural texts. In *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston says: “I learned to make my mind large, as the universe is large, so that there is room for paradoxes” (*WW* 29). Evidently, she creates a paradoxical self in *The Woman Warrior* that reflects the diversity of American culture.

Kingston’s use of China narrative transcends its original contexts. Her translocation of Chinese mythology signifies cultural replacement and re-positioning that help her form a distinctive identity of her own. She creates her own mythology within the myth of Fa Mu Lan. That paradoxical borrowing emerges as a border issue of bridging instead of separating. She has to separate herself from her ancestral village and its traditions and enter the complex multicultural reality of her American experiences. Paradoxically, her fantasy of China has saved her from a totally depressing fate in
America. The Chinese mythology functions as a semiotic empowerment in the process of identity formation.

At first the maternal pressure and that of her ethnic culture was too burdensome for Maxine. Gradually, she moves away from regarding Brave Orchid and her language as negative and arrives at a recognition that her mother's language is actually more similar to her own than she had realized. Maxine's realization is that the mother tongue is not actually Chinese; rather it is a mixture of Chinese and American and it is this mixed, hybrid discourse that becomes the language of mother-daughter communication. A recognition of this shared lexicon, and the decision to speak -- and of course later to write -- completes the move towards resolution between mother and daughter, and also an acceptance of duality of her personality, so that ending her fictional autobiography, Kingston is able to say, “it translated well” (WW 209). As the legendary poetess Tśai Yen (175 A.D.) does in ‘A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe” she manages to blend two strands of cultures. Tśai Yen who was captured by barbarians and had to live among them for twelve years sung songs for which she made the yearning notes of barbarian flutes the basis. The words of these songs seemed to be Chinese, but the barbarians understood their anger and sadness. One song she eventually brought back to her own people was “Eighteen Stanzas for a Barbarian Reed Pipe”, a song that the Chinese now sing to their own instruments. Tśai Yen made the barbarian music her own. The barbarians thought they heard, in an alien language, snatches of their own experience. The Chinese have adapted to their own instruments music composed for a barbarian pipe. The song is the product of alienation and exile; it is in a way the song of the Other.
As in the case of Tśai Yen who made barbarian music her own, so Maxine manages to find a double-voice by gaining a better command of English and an understanding of the American codes, which causes her and her siblings to be called Ho Chi Kuei by the older immigrants. The narrator tells us that this term “is what the immigrants call us—Ho Chi Ghosts” (WW 204). She does not give the translation of this term. In doing so, Kingston demonstrates that her vision is rooted in Chinese America and Ho Chi Kuei signifies the writer/warrior's identity. This term can be translated as “ghost-like.” “Ho Chi” in Cantonese means “similar” or “like”. “Kuei,” as Gayle K. Fujita Sato tells us, mean ghosts. Because Cantonese call the foreigners, “Kuei Lao,” ghosts, the American-born Chinese in the eyes of the early immigrants are actually “ghost-like.” From her mother's point of view, they “could not sit for very long. They did not understand sitting” (WW 105) and “they were big and smelled of milk” (WW 123). In the immigrants’ eyes, American-born Chinese are just like the Westerners. Chinese Americans are also called “sook Sing” which implies “hybrid” or “bastard” that is even more derogatory and epitomizes the American-born Chinese's dilemma and its disadvantages. Whereas the Chinese immigrants consider them to be ‘ghost-like’, ‘hybrid’, etc., the white dominant society denies their American identity. So, Kingston points out in an article that apparently many Americans do not know that a person born in the US is automatically American (Cultural 59). The Chinese scold them for being “ghost-like” and not being “authentic” Chinese. Only when the narrator comes to realize her “ghost-like” situation can she gradually know who she is and where she belongs. In
leaving the term Ho Chi Kuei untranslated in her text, Kingston signifies the cultural distinctiveness and the nature of Chinese American experience.

Kingston uses “ghosts” in two different contexts. One is the mother's ghost story in China. “In this sense, “ghosts” mean the spirits, the apparition of the dead or the devils. The mother, Brave Orchid, confronts these kinds of ghosts in China and bravely exorcises them. The other refers to the “foreigners” when they live among the whites. Here “ghosts” mean outsiders for the Chinese” (Dasenbrock 4). “America has been full of machines and ghosts—Taxi Ghosts, Bus Ghosts, Police Ghosts, Fire Ghosts, Meter Reader Ghosts. Tree Trimming Ghosts, Five-and-Dime Ghosts. Once upon a time the world was so thick with ghosts. I could hardly breathe” (WW 90-91). By knowing the Chinese perception of the foreigners, non-Chinese readers come to understand a different way of seeing the world and seeing themselves. As the subtitle “Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts” strongly suggests, “ghosts” play a crucial role in The Woman Warrior.

When the narrator describes Americans as various sorts of ghosts in The Woman Warrior, however, she creates a parody by ironically bringing in the experiences of “alienation” and “de-familiarization” of ethnic people living in the so-called “melting pot” or “salad bowl”. After all, whites are the majority in America. But by calling them and other people of colour “ghosts”, the early Chinese immigrants tried to claim their legitimate status and to some extent debased the existence of the others. The early immigrants confronted racist treatment such as the Exclusion Act and the discriminatory
Immigration Act. Calling whites “ghosts” becomes a process of Othering the non-Chinese people.

Maxine’s mother wins in the fight against ghosts (in its literal sense) as is shown in the section ‘Shaman’. But the narrator, in a world thick with ghosts, feels confused. She cannot figure out what is true or what is just fantasy in her mother's stories. She feels isolated among all kinds of ghosts; moreover, she is called Ho Chi Kuei, a kind of ghost herself. Caught between a Chinese immigrant family and the “American normal” life, the young narrator seems more attracted by the “American normal” life. She manages to earn approval from American society. Her school record of straight A's is evidence that she “can do ghost things even better than ghosts can” (WW 179-80). The narrator states, “[T]o make my waking life American-normal, I turn out the lights before anything untoward makes an appearance. I push the deformed into my dreams, which are in Chinese, the language of impossible stories” (WW 82). She has to overcome fear and disorientation.

When she describes her mother's encounter with the ghosts, she reveals that her mother “could be a dragoness” (“my totem, your totem”) and thus be a strong woman. Since she is also a dragon, she can learn from her mother's experience and “talk the ghosts away” in order to reclaim who she is and where she is without confusion about “I” and “here’, both in the American alphabet and Chinese ideographs, confusion she had in the beginning. Actually, placing this section of her mother's story in the middle of the
The young narrator has to come to terms with being called *Ho Chi kuei* to justify herself and her “here”. This term signifies the dilemma of assimilation into the dominant society and of claiming cultural differences as a minority group. The meaning of *Ho Chi Kuei*, to borrow Bhabha's notion of mimicry, is “almost the same but not quite” (86). Straddling her parental Chinese culture and the dominant American culture, *Ho Chi Kuei* is neither/nor as well as both/and, and at the same time, occupies the “in-between” space. When the narrator cannot keep silent about her secrets any longer, she blurts out the whole list of things that she wants to confess to or ask her mother. In anger, her mother shouts, “you Ho Chi Kuei, Get out. I knew you were going to turn out bad” (*WW* 182). After this fight, the narrator chooses to leave home and finds an American way of life: “Give me plastics, periodical tables; TV dinners with vegetables no more complex than mixed with diced carrots. Shine floodlights into dark corners; no ghosts” (*WW* 182).

Kingston’s Chinese America is located somewhere “in-between”. This “in-betweenness” is not a static referent but a process of hybridization. It involves interaction between “culture-sympathy and culture-clash” (*Cultural* 54). The narrator translates cultures in order to constitute a hybrid identity, an identity signified by the term, *Ho Chi Kuei*. After all, the narrator, like her mother, survives among the ghosts despite the difference between the ghosts they confront. At the end of “Shaman”, the narrator, now a
grown-up visits her mother and tells her that she has found “some places in this country that is ghost-free. And I think I belong there” (WW 101).

Kingston admits in an interview that she has learned that “writing does not make ghosts go away. I wanted to record, to find the words for, the ghosts, which are only visions. . . . I want to give them a substance that goes beyond me” (Rabinowitz 178). In terms of her narratives, Kingston gives not only the “No Name Aunt” but also Ho Chi Kuei a substance to pass on and to possess a place in family and/or communal history. In writing and re-telling these stories, Kingston translates a cross-cultural experience into words and transforms the supposedly derogatory meaning of Ho Chi Kuei into a more positive, hybrid identity.

Kingston’s way of returning meaning to her sense of loss of an authentic identity is closely linked to the re-interpretation of her Chinese culture which she imported into a foreign environment and which she tries to trace back via her parents. Through her works she embraces as well as discusses aspects of different cultures and creates a hybrid form of existence. Maxine’s struggle to find a strong voice and escape from imposed silence is a significant part of the creation of her identity. Her initial struggle to speak, to find words, the silent girl whom she punishes, the dilemma in coming to terms with dual cultural fragments, etc. draw attention to the different layers of her identity whose constant re-negotiation emphasizes the open nature of her existence. As Maxine comes to terms with these cultural conflicts, she creates a ‘Third Space’ where different strands of voices meet and where she can grasp the changing nature of American culture as a result
of its contact with a variety of cultures. This space enables her to emphasize the open and ambiguous nature of her existence as an ethnic writer and of her writing by developing a third space- a space that denies the idea of cultural purity and incorporates the different roots and ‘routes’ of the narrator’s heterogeneous identity instead. She knows that certain differences are persistent, if constantly changing, and she lives and works with them. This is her way of finding a new kind of creativity and of avoiding the silence imposed upon her by her ethnic culture via her mother. She understands that in order to become a writer, she has to move away from inhibitions and ideas forced upon her by both the dominant culture of America and the ethnic cultural injunctions and acknowledge the hybrid component of her identity.

In *China Men* the exploration of her own self, understanding of Chinese American hybrid identity is continued further by telling the stories of her male ancestors from her father onwards. From the reminiscences she has of her own father, BaBa she constructs a history for her father. Her *China Men* is composed against the background of her father’s silence. As a daughter, Kingston feels both compelled and obligated to speak on her father’s behalf, to decipher his silence of the past, to hear his China narrative. Kingston writes: “You kept up a silence for weeks and months. We invented the terrible things you were thinking” (*CM* 14). Similarly, she invents a China narrative for her father and incorporates into American history the contributions of the Chinese labourers by reconstructing a legendary text for the “people without history”. Kingston writes: “I’ll tell you what I suppose from your silences and few words, and you can tell me that I’m mistaken. You just have to speak up with the real stories if I’ve got you wrong” (*CM* 15).
She wants to know “the Chinese stories”; she wants to go back to China to see her “ancestral village”; and she wants to meet “the people with fabulous imaginations.” Kingston writes: “I want to discern what it is that makes people go West and turn into Americans. I want to compare China, a country I made up, with what country is really out there” (CM 87).

Thus, in *China Men*, Kingston formulates father land or China in an imaginary space wherein she offered various versions of her father’s origin. However, root-seeking always ends up elsewhere. She has to speak truth by creating legends, making a legendary history for father, reconstructing a China narrative for him in his absence. In short, she creates myth out of silence and legend out of absence. The China narrative in *China Men* is entirely created by the daughter who dedicates a history to the father. She offers different versions of Ba-ba’s story. One fact, though, is constant, and is stressed from the outset: her father is an American citizen. In the beginning she says,

In 1903 my father was born in San Francisco, where my grandmother had come disguised as a man. Or, Chinese women once magical, she gave birth at a distance, she in China, my grandfather and father in San Francisco. She was good at sending. Or the men of those days had the power to have babies. If my grandparents did no such wonders, my father nevertheless turned up in San Francisco an American citizen (CM 231).
Although this section describes BaBa’s life in detail -- his family life and his job running a pigeon lottery gambling house -- much of this history is told askance, and the section is notable for BaBa's strange silences and his reticence in engaging with his family. The author's father was born in San Francisco in 1903. However, he might have been born in some other time or at some other place.

Her father, Ed, runs a gambling hall for another, richer, man. Ed performs all the work of the gambling hall. Ed not only cleans and runs the gambling establishment; he also pretends to be the owner of the gambling house so that when a police raid is on it was part of his job to get arrested. The stories of early Chinese immigrants to Hawaii, the two great grandfathers’ work on a sugar cane plantation in the 1850s, the hardships and racism these men endured are documented by Kingston. Through these stories she brings out the difficulties the Chinese immigrants experienced in trying to relocate to the United States of America. Then the stories of grandfathers’ contribution to the making of American history, how they lived and died in America are traced, slowly bringing the narration to the present.

Through her excavation of the past, the narrator wants to claim America for her Chinese-American countrymen, descendants of the men who cleared rainforests for sugar cane and blasted mountains to lay track—“the binding and building ancestors of this place” (CM 146). These two social objectives are in fact related. As Carol E. Neubauer points out, “both *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* involve self-creation because so much of the actual family history is undocumented or fraught with contradiction, but
China Men also involves “a process of self-justification” (26). If in The Woman Warrior Kingston takes “vengeance against the family by expressing her rage,” in China Men she is “the woman warrior who takes vengeance for the family by reporting the vicious racism her male relatives combatted in America and the uncredited contributions they made to building this country” (Rabine 476-77). She not only “rereads the past,” but by the very act of telling attempts to “reshape the future” (Ordonez 19). Kingston demands for Chinese-Americans recognition as founding fathers, “When I say I am a Native American with all the rights of an American, I am saying, “No, we're not outsiders; we Chinese belong here. This is our country, this is our history, and we are a part of America. If it weren't for us, America would be a different place” (Islas et al 25). Kingston may be writing on behalf of her family and the Chinese-American community, but she is also writing to the broader culture, to Americans in general: “I write for everybody living today and people in the future; that's my audience, for generations” (Islas et al 24). She wants to substitute stories of “Gold Mountain heroes” for stereotypical American images of the Chinese— the clever but buffoonish Charlie Chan, the lone Chinese cooks and the laundrymen in the more generalized stereotype of the inscrutable Oriental. Kingston intends the book to replace the traditional, stereotypical images presented by the dominant culture with a heroic tradition of her own making, one in which Chinese-Americans are no longer marginalized. By the time she reaches the last major chapter of China Men, “The Brother in Vietnam”, the family seems so “normal”, its centre so clearly in America rather than Asia, that the brother receives a top-security clearance.
To accomplish her purpose, Kingston uses exactly the methods that her ancestors used: “In my father-book, *China Men*, I used the very techniques that the men developed over a hundred years. They made themselves citizens of this country by telling American versions of their lives” (“Imagined” 563). The would-be immigrants borrowed or forged facsimiles of the papers of China men who had travelled to America before them; they memorized and retold the stories immigration officials would accept. Kingston asserts that the world of *China Men* is “a non-fiction world because I actually heard people tell its stories with fervor. I feel as if I have direct contact with that non-fiction world's energy source” (Thompson 690). She borrows myths and adapts Chinese folk legends to create American stories. As Linda Ching Sledge notes: “These are not definitive, ‘pure’ myths in the textual sense but are consciously contrived literary imitations that may be ironic analogues of western tales or variations of folk tales” (7). In short, Kingston's narrative appropriates the lives of real people, the facts of history, the tales of another culture, and makes them tell the American story she needs to hear.

Kingston's work also stands at the centre of a broad theoretical concern—the interrelated issues of representation and appropriation. Robert Weimann shows that the concept of appropriation provides a useful framework for discussing the “shifting conglomerate of social energies and conflicting interests” which drives the activities of both writers and readers (92). In order to “represent”, writers appropriate the world they write about, make it their property, and exercise power over it in ways that reflect their own social and political interests. Readers, in turn, appropriate the text and the cultural world in the text. Moreover, appropriation actually involves even more than self-
projection and assimilation; in making certain things their own, writers and readers make other things [and persons] alien (Weimann 94-95). By claiming authenticity as “real” Americans for the Gold Mountain heroes—for herself and other Chinese-Americans and by implication for members of other immigrant groups who have remained marginal, she creates in-between spaces for them in America.

In *China Men* Kingston gives an account of her experience on an island named Chinaman's Hat, located off the coast of O’ahu. The narrator has been standing at the edge of the sugarcane fields, listening for the “voices of the great grandfathers”, traces of the 18,000 Chinese labourers who were brought to Hawaii between 1850 and 1885 to clear fields and plant cane. But there is only silence: “The cane is merely green in the sunlight; the tassels waving in the wind make no blurry fuzzy outlines that I can construe as a message from them— the winds blowing in the long leaves do not whisper words I hear” (*CM* 88).

The name of the island is offensive: “I had a shock when I heard it . . . Chinaman’s Hat. I had only encountered that slurred word in taunts when walking past racists” (*CM* 88). But after spending a day on the island, she hears the “voice” of the land itself, and she is encourage to listen again for the voices of her forefathers.

A howling like wolves, like singing, came rising out of the island.... It was, I know it, the island, the voice of the island singing, the sirens Odysseus heard....
The land sings. We heard something. It's a tribute to the pioneers to have a living island named after their work hat.

I have heard the land sing. I have seen the bright blue streaks of spirits whisking through the air. I again search for my American ancestors by listening in the cane (CM 90).

The singing of the land itself (along with the narrative voice that recounts the tale) has redeemed the offensive name of the island—it is no longer a racist slur but a tribute.

Bak Goong, the great grandfather, is gifted with language; he has a good ear for alien dialects and even for barbarian speech. “If anyone talked long enough in a foreign language and he heard enough, he understood” (CM 113). Therefore, the rule that the Chinese labourers cannot speak while working on the plantations is especially onerous to him: “How was he to marvel adequately, voiceless? He needed to cast his voice out to catch ideas . . . . He suddenly had all kinds of things to say” (CM 100). He attempts in a variety of ways to subvert the oppressive control exerted by the white overseers: he tries ignoring the ban and is fined; he tries singing his comments and is whipped. Finally he learns to use his coughing to expel what is inside him:

When the demons howled to work faster, faster, he coughed in reply. The deep, long, loud coughs, barking and wheezing, were almost as satisfying as shouting. He let out scolds disguised as coughs . . . . All Chinese words conveniently a syllable each, he said “Get—that— horse—dust—away—from—me—you—
dead—white—demon. Don't—stare—at—me—with—those—glass—eyes. I—
can't—take—this—life‖. He felt better after having his say. He did not even mind
the despair, which dispelled upon his speaking it (CM 104).

Bak Goong learns to curse in coughs; he becomes “a talk addict” (CM 110). He
supports the other men with his talk story, adapting a folk tale about an ancient Chinese
trickster in order to make fun of the missionary ladies who speak “well-intoned” but
“disincarnated” Cantonese, peeking in their little black phrase books to see what to say
next. Eventually, when all the men become weakened and sick, he diagnoses their illness:
“It is congestion from not talking. What we have to do is talk and talk” (CM 115).

The account of Bak Goong culminates in a complex and powerful metaphor that
demonstrates how people appropriate the land, making it so completely their own that the
land itself tells their story. He told an apt story to the silenced men, who had heard it
already in the long ago place “where there had been mothers and children” (CM 116).
The story concerns a king with a secret—his son has cat's ears. Years go by, and when
the king cannot contain his secret any more, he shouts it into a hole in the ground, buries
it. But when the grass grows over the spot and the wind blows through it, the wind carries
the words in a song and everybody hears it. The day after Bak Goong has reminded them
of this tale, the China men plough a circle in the ground:
They threw down their tools and flopped on the ground with their faces over the edge of the hole and their legs like wheel spokes . . . They had dug an ear into the world, and were telling the earth their secrets.


Talked out, they buried their words, planted them . . . Soon the new green shoots would rise, and when in two years the cane grew gold tassels, what stories the wind would tell. (CM 117-18)

Just as the wind blowing through the field where the king had planted his secret spread the news throughout the land, the wind blowing through the sugarcane will carry the words of the China men. Once the men have planted their secrets and their longings in the Hawaiian soil, they have made it theirs; eventually it will tell their own stories. They have become American forefathers. “That wasn't a custom,” comments Bak Goong. “We made it up. We can make up customs because we're the founding ancestors of this place” (CM 118). What he means, of course, is how they created spaces for themselves in that alien land and made it their own. With the help of this Chinese folk tale they create a Third Space. The assertiveness of Bak Goong and other men is effective: the demons (Whites) seem to be intimidated by their behaviour. Their stance emancipates Bak Goong and the other men from some of the most insulting work rules: “From the day of the shout: dirty Bak Goong talked and sang at his work, and did not get sent to punishment fields. In cutting season, the demons no longer accompanied the knife-wielding China Men into deep cane” (CM 118).
Much of what the men have to say when they shout into the hole in the ground has to do with women—not only the women they left behind but also the women they have encountered in the new land: “I miss you”. “What are you doing right now?” . . . “I've been working hard for you, and I hate it”. They said any kind of thing. “Blonde demoness.” “Polynesian demoness.”

“I'm coming home by and by.” “I'm not coming home.” “I'm staying here in the Sandalwood Mountains.” “I want to be home,” Bak Goong said. “I'm bringing her home,” said Bak Sook Goong” (CM 117). The metaphor of the men planting their words in the earth is a multi-faceted gesture of relationship; it represents both the impulse to return and the fact of exile. It acknowledges both rootedness in the sense of being grounded in old cultural and personal bonds and rootedness in the sense of sinking roots in the new land. What Kingston implies here is the struggle her ancestor Bak Goong had in defining a third space for him and for others.

Finally the issue of appropriation is suggested again' in the brief account of “The Hundred-Year-Old Man’ near the very end of the book. The old man, living out his days in the Palolo Chinese Home in Hawai‘i, had arrived from China in 1885, at the age of twenty-two, to work in the sugarcane fields. He had sent half of his pay to his family in China; with the rest he lived a modest life, a trip to town on pay day, his principal entertainment. In all those years he had left the Island of Hawaii only twice, once to go to Maui and once to Kaua‘i. “‘In one hundred and six years, what has given you the most
joy?’ the reporters asked. He thought it over. He said, ‘What I like best is to work in a cane field when the young green plants are just growing up’” (CM 306).

In some respects, this anecdote seems to be about a life that has been appropriated, a meagre existence so completely co-opted that all the old man can remember enjoying is the labour that enslaved him. But it is also an echo of Bak Goong's shout party, a reminder that those who have truly appropriated the land are those who have planted their stories in it. By representing the China men who were “the binding and building ancestors of this place,” Kingston changes the meaning of their stories. She appropriates the land in their name.

In China men Kingston indulges in what Bhabha points out as hybrids and their involvement. Hybrids, the displaced and the non-nationals, must invent their own ‘history’ through art which renews the past, reconstructs the past as an in-between space that is useful in interpreting the present. Kingston narrates the stories of her ancestors not only to acknowledge the contribution made by her ancestors in creating the history of America but to really understand the present American context in which she is placed. Her excavation of the past leads her to a better realization of her true ‘self’/identity. She recognizes the necessity of acting as a bridge, of occupying a liminal space in between the faraway China and her adopted country America. In her we find a confluence of cultures, the acceptance of a multicultural self.
Sandra Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street* demonstrates an approach to identity which allows the main character, Esperanza Cordero, to name her with the seemingly same name she was given during the process where she creates a progressive identity. Esperanza balances past and present where she negotiates history and culture; her relationship to both is a fluid and progressive notion of Chicana identity. An obsessive concern Esperanza has is to own a house of her own. The desire for home ownership is often linked to the yearning to belong. ‘Home’ is not merely a dwelling place, but also carries nuances of belonging, nurturance and origins. “The goal of home ownership, one aspect of the American dream, is a preoccupation in much ethnic fiction” (Chandler1). It is clear that the economic security represented by one’s own home engenders social and psychological stability. As Marilyn Chandler points out in *Dwelling in the Text: Houses in American Fiction* home is a cultural preoccupation in America: “Our literature reiterates with remarkable consistency the centrality of the house in American cultural life and imagination” (1). He argues that, stemming from its position as a post-colonial country itself, America’s cultural production has focused upon the necessity of carving out and claiming territory: “In a country whose history has been focused for so long on the question of settlement and development, the issue of how to stake out territory, clear it, cultivate it, and build on it has been of major economic, political and psychological consequence” (1). Thus, part of the process of ethnic American self-definition has always been the definition of its space. Owning a house, “to many remains the most significant measure of . . . cultural enfranchisement” (1). The objective of home ownership signifies a sense of belongingness as well as owning a corner in the world.
In some essays collectively titled ‘From a Writer’s Notebook’, a manifesto of her development as a writer, Cisneros discusses how it dawned on her that a house, her childhood home, could be the subject of a book. Cisneros not only does employ this imagery of house as a poetics of space but also conveys another element that is inherent to this space, the dialectic of inside and outside, that is here and there, integration and alienation, comfort and anxiety. She describes the house from the outside. As Julian Olivares elaborates in ‘Sandra Cisneros’ The House on Mango Street, and the Poetics of Space’ her picturisation of the house is a metonymical description and presentation of self. “I knew then I had to have a house. A real house. One I could point to (HMS 5).” By pointing to this dilapidated and ugly house, she points to her own self. Just as Olivares points out, “House and narrator become identified as one, thereby revealing an ideological perspective of poverty and shame” (CLC Vol.193: 5). Her disillusionment with the house prompts her to wish for another house which in turn leads to another self. The desire to live in a beautiful house is concomitant to finding another identity.

Her longing to flee from the present house also stands for her desire to escape from cultural inhibitions. House here also stands for confinement/chains set by particular culture. At the same time complete denial of her own Chicano culture is not desired for. Even though she asserts that she is too strong for the house in Mango Street to keep her there forever and that she would go away one day, she is sure that she would be gone only to come back later. There is a determination to break away from the binding forces of her culture at the same time she acknowledges the hold the house/ Chicano culture
had on her in the following lines, “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” (*HMS* 105).

The racial identity of the barrio is evident in “Those Who Don’t”, in reference to those who get lost and wind up in the barrio fearing for their lives: “They think we will attack them with shiny knives. They are stupid people who are lost and got here by mistake” (*HMS* 28). Just like that, Latinas, while feeling safe in their own barrio, fear to venture into a neighbourhood of another colour and “our knees go shakity-shake and our car windows get rolled up tight and our eyes look straight. Yeah. That is how it goes and goes” (*HMS* 28). But Esperanza does not want to continue living in that ugly house in Mango Street. She wants to go elsewhere and start a new life. Still she acknowledges the tenacious hold the house has on her.

The “Four Skinny Trees” is an important piece in the narrative development of identity. In her personification of the trees, Esperanza expresses a similarity between them and her: “They are the only ones who understand me. I am the only one who understands them. Four skinny trees with skinny necks and pointy elbows like mine” (*HMS* 74). The image situates text and narrator in a constrictive urban setting. “Four who grew despite concrete” (*HMS* 75), then proceeds to develop the identity of the enunciating voice caught in a place where she and the trees do not belong. At the level of plot, the trees serve as an emblem of survival in a hostile environment: “When I am too sad and too skinny to keep keeping, when I am a tiny thing against so many bricks, then it
is I look at trees. When there is nothing left to look at on this street. Four who grew despite concrete. Four who reach and do not forget to reach. Four whose only reason is to be and be “ (HMS 74-75).

The image of the trees acquires its fullest significance at the symbolic level, at which stage the text manifests its intertextuality in the incorporation of the universal significance of trees: “Their strength is secret. They send ferocious roots beneath the ground. They grow up and they grow down and grab the earth between their hairy toes and bite the sky with violent teeth and never quit their hairy toes and bite the sky with violent teeth and never quit their anger. This is how they keep” (HMS 74). The image of the four skinny trees serves to express Esperanza’s character development and the will to assert her identity. Against the many odds of her harsh environment and dominating culture, she must struggle, like the trees, to grow and to survive. Like the trees, she must be tenacious in her aspiration to greatness.

Her yearning to have another house goes hand in hand with her wish to have another name. The preoccupation this adolescent has with her name is truly depicted in the fourth section, entitled ‘My Name’:

In English my name means hope. In Spanish it means too many letters. It means sadness. It means waiting. It is like the number nine. A muddy color. It is the Mexican records my father plays on Sunday mornings when he is shaving, songs like sobbing.
It was my great-grand mother’s name and now it is mine. She was a horse woman too, born like me in the Chinese year of the horse- which is supposed to be bad luck if you’re born female- but I think this is a Chinese lie because the Chinese, like the Mexicans, don’t like their women strong. . . . I am always Esperanza *(HMS 10-11)*.

It is clear that Esperanza prefers a name not culturally embedded in a dominating, male- centred ideology. She traces the reason for the discomfiture with her name to cultural oppression, the Mexican males’ suppression of their women. As she states in the above quoted passage she is named after her Mexican great-grandmother who was wild but tamed by her husband, so that: “She looked out the window all her life, the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow . . . Esperanza, I have inherited her name, but I don’t want to inherit her place by the window” *(HMS 12)*. The picture we get here is not one of contentment but of sadness, and a dialectic of inside/ outside.

In ‘My Name’, she announces, “I am Esperanza”, instead of, ‘my name is Esperanza’. In English, Esperanza’s name sounds to her like ‘tin’ and ‘painful’ *(HMS 11)*, whereas in Spanish her name is ‘too many letters’, ‘sadness,’ and ‘waiting’ *(HMS 10)*. As an individual born in the United States with a Spanish name, ‘Esperanza’ has multiple connotations. In English ‘Esperanza’ literally translates as ‘hope’ and in Spanish the name carries with it family stories and traditions of her Mexican great-grandmother’s life. She recognizes this subtle mixing of cultures in her personality very early.
Esperanza investigates nicknames of her friends. Esperanza recognizes their multitude of names and nicknames only to be frustrated with her own labeled self, “I am always Esperanza” as opposed to “Magdalena who at least can come home and become Nenny” (HMS 11). Esperanza wants to baptize herself to give herself more names. Just as her friends have different names depending on whether or not they are in school, at home, or playing with friends, Esperanza also wants the various components of her name to be recognized. Esperanza either wants to create more names or add more liberating components to her name, a name like “Zeze the X” (HMS 11). The desire to add more components to her name shows her slow recognition of her multiple selves.

Through her creativity, Esperanza comes to inhabit the house of storytelling. The material house of her own—“Not a flat. Not an apartment in back. Not a man’s house . . . Nobody’s garbage to pick up after”—lies in the future. What Esperanza can have now, however, is a magical house entered through the door of her creative imagination: Only a house quiet as snow. . . before the poem” (HMS 108). The house is a book to be written, blank pages to be filled with her voice and with the voices of women trapped by their economic and cultural restrictions. The absence of punctuation and quotation marks often signal the fusion of these voices. The attainment of identity and the realization of freedom through the space of writing, in fact the third space of true understanding are expressed in “Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes”:

I like to tell stories. I am going to tell you a story about a girl who didn’t want to belong. . . . 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.

One day I will pack my bags of books and paper. One day I will say goodbye to Mango. I am too strong for her to keep me here forever. One day I will go away... I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot get out (HMS 109-110).

Certainly, Esperanza longs for a new house where she can have her own female space, and one that she can point to with pride, but she arrives at the knowledge that this house is also in the heart and that its entrance is gained through writing. The house is a metaphor for the house of storytelling. Put another way, she lives in the book on Mango Street. But neither in the sad red house nor in the house of writing does Esperanza indulge in escapism. She comes to terms with the ethnic consciousness that the house represents through the process of creative fiction (McCraken 66). Consequently, although Esperanza liberates herself from her physical and cultural confinement through her fiction, she never leaves Mango Street because instead of romanticizing or fantasizing, she writes of her reality, resulting in the creation of third space.

Esperanza’s formation as a writer and predictions of her eventual move from home and Mango Street are hinted at in two stories related to death. These stories suggest that creativity is not only a means of escape from the confines of Mango Street but also an affirmation of life and rebirth. The first story is ‘Born Bad’ in which Esperanza reads her poetry to her aunt who appears to be dying from polio. The aunt replies: “That’s nice.
That’s very good, she said in her tired voice. You must remember to keep writing, Esperanza. You must keep writing. It will keep you free, and I said yes, but at that time I didn’t know what she meant” (HMS 61).

In ‘The Three Sisters’ three mysterious women appear at the funeral of a neighbour’s child. Here Esperanza begins to fit into the cultural space of her name. These seek out Esperanza for special attention, asking her name and prophesying her future. They also make her understand that she will always be 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 what you are . . . You must remember to come back. For the ones who cannot leave as easily as you. You will remember? She asked as if she was telling me. Yes, yes, I said a little confused (HMS 98).

In this paradigm of the fairy godmother, Esperanza receives a wish that she does not understand. It is a mystery to her how she could leave from here to there and still be Mango Street. It is an inscrutable puzzle to her the meaning of the circle and also how she could come back for others when all she wanted was to escape the Mango Street and live in another house, one that she could point to with pride, when she would leave behind forever an environment she believed to be only temporary. A mysterious woman embeds in Esperanza’s psyche a cultural and political determination which will find expression in
her vocation as writer. Esperanza will move away from the confining space of house and barrio, but paradoxically within them she has encountered a different space, the space of writing. Through her creativity, she comes to inhabit the house of story-telling. Although she longs for a house of her own-- “Not a flat. Not an apartment in back. Not a man’s house. Not a daddy’s. A house all my own. With my porch and my pillow, my pretty purple petunias. My books and my stories. My two shoes waiting beside the bed. Nobody to shake a stick at. Nobody’s garbage to pick up after” (HMS 100) --it is evident that this magical house is to be possessed through the creative imagination: “Only a house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem” (HMS 100).

The awareness of the possibility of escape through the space of writing, as well as the determination to move away from Mango Street, are expressed in ‘Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes’. She never leaves Mango Street; because, instead of fantasizing, she writes of her reality. Even were she to move away from the barrio and have her own house, Esperanza states her conviction not to forget who she is or where she came from in ‘Bums in the Attic’: “One day I’ll own my own house, but I won’t forget who I am or where I came from. Passing bums will ask, Can I come in? I’ll offer them the attic, ask them to stay, because I know how it is to be without a house” (HMS 81).

Erlinda Gonzales and Diana Rebolledo confirm that the house is symbolic of consciousness and collective memory, and is a nourishing structure so that “the narrator comes to understand that, despite her need for a space of her own, Mango Street is really a part of her- an essential creative part she will never be able to leave” (Gonzales et al 26
consequently, she searches in (as narrator) and will return to (as author) her neighbourhood “for the human and historical materials of which [her] stories will be made” (Gonzales et al 34). On the higher plane of art, then, Esperanza transcends her condition, finding another house which is the space of literature. Yet what she writes about—“third-floor flats, and fear of rats, and drunk husbands sending rocks through windows, anything as far from the poetic as possible” (Gonzales et al 24)—reinforces her solidarity with the people, the women, of Mango Street. The house that Esperanza lives and lived in will always be associated with the house of story-telling—“What I remember most is Mango Street”; because of it she became a writer. Esperanza will leave Mango Street but will take it with her for always, for it is inscribed within her.

Espерanza also wishes to challenge the school system’s authority in “A Rice Sandwich” in The House on Mango Street. Esperanza wishes to cross into foreign territory by sitting in a wing of the ‘canteen’, an eating place for ‘special kids’ who are allowed to bring their lunch to school. Little does Esperanza realize that the spatial divisions of the school structure leave little room for personal freedom. She explains: “But lunch came finally and I got to get in line with the stay-at-school kids. Everything is fine until the nun who knows all the canteen kids by heart looks at me and says: ‘‘you, who sent you here?’ And since I am shy, I don’t say anything, just hold out my hand with the letter. This is no good, she says, till Sister Superior gives the okay” (HMS 42). Esperanza not only faces public degradation but she also becomes cognizant of the fact that she does not belong in the line with the canteen kids. The educational authorities, in this case the Catholic Church, do not even care to acknowledge her mother, a poor Latina
woman, as an authority figure because they treat her as if she were invisible. Moreover, this rice sandwich represents a different economic element. Esperanza’s mother does not prepare her a bologna or peanut butter and jelly sandwich. But instead, she makes use of what resources are available to her. Esperanza says: “Okay, okay my mother says after three days of this. And the following morning I get to go to school with my mother’s letter and a rice sandwich because we don’t have lunch meat” (HMS 42). Since she comes from a working-class background, she should be treated accordingly. This class and culture conflict transfers into a deep sense of marginalization for a young Latina girl who learns about the injustices of spatial divisions in school, a mirror image of the problems of the urban city. Esperanza becomes aware of the borders that can impede her from traveling to the other side, a place of restriction but one she must attempt to cross.

In *Caramelo*, Sandra Cisneros’ next novel, culture is mediated by language and the novel’s critique of Mexican customs is ingeniously accomplished by means of the translations into English that Celaya performs of her family's conversations and everyday speech. Although Celaya speaks Spanish, she has been raised in the United States speaking mostly English. Thus, once she is in Mexico, she often finds herself overwhelmed by difference, perceiving things around her through the refractions of a second language and culture. She grasps for the right phrases, experiences a loss for words “I don't have the words for what I want to say. Not in English. Not in Spanish” (C 60), and compares Spanish and English to discover resonances between the two languages. By representing elements of her family's speech to herself (and to the reader) in a language that is foreign to the original, and by moving back and forth between
languages in different contexts, Celaya is able to notice subtle differences and aberrations of meaning between Spanish and English that give her a heightened awareness of the contingency of meaning in both tongues, as well as their different modes of signifying. In addition, for bilingual readers, as we shall see, Celaya's translations of everyday expressions make available a new, often defamiliarizing perspective on the original Spanish, an effect that gives her translations a critical edge and brings her Mexican American family's diasporic difference from traditional Mexican culture into the novel.

Celaya's linguistic perplexities are compounded by the fact that she is intellectually located in the interstices between two fiercely nationalistic cultures. This liminal location provides Celaya with a certain epistemological privilege with respect to both nations. Simultaneously inside and outside the norms that constitute both spaces, she is fully at home in neither, thus necessitating the creation of a third space. Furthermore, she escapes the boundaries of perspective that a single, national language and its conventional uses strive to create—uses that express a culture's norms. In contrast to this, Celaya's bicultural and bilingual location is a valuable place from which to mount a critique in two directions.

Cisneros's linguistic analysis of Mexican culture is thus paralleled in the novel both by her examination of the hegemonic culture of the United States and her defamiliarization of the norms of English. The novel often renders common Mexican sayings in English, without, at times, giving any explicit commentary about having done so. The result is that, in addition to disrupting English through the use of bilingual code
switching, Cisneros makes the novel's English sound strange. Such moments, “fracture” the language (to use Walter Benjamin's term), renewing and extending its expressive capacities. In addition, they force monolingual English readers to become aware of the self-differentiation of English as it is rearticulated from new points of view and new horizons of experience.

Celaya’s manipulation of language in Caramelo brings to mind what Gloria Anzaldúa discusses in Borderlands/ La Frontera. If Homi Bhabha argues for a hybridity imagined and articulated through transnational literatures (literature is no longer defined by nationality- English literature, American or French. It is required to incorporate the transnational, post colonial, hybrid experience and to transform how we think about literature and its relation to nationality), Anzaldúa is concerned with what language such texts can or should be written. She writes in both Spanish and English to highlight how the politics of language operate within and around the politics of racial, ethnic, national, gender, and sexual identity. She agrees with the post structuralist view that language speaks us, and agrees with Bakhtin that the languages we speak define our identity, our cultural make-up, our definition of self. In Cisneros’ case the strange mixture of languages with which she sometimes chooses to write Caramelo, defines her multiple and conflicting subject positions or identity categories

When, as readers of Cisneros’s novel, we come across a strangely worded phrase in English we are prone to wonder what “correct” English is and why. Our conventional criteria for understanding this, of the norms by which we have become accustomed to
evaluate the world, is disrupted. With respect to the norms of written English, we must ask ourselves how they are grounded, with what justification, and even if they are merely arbitrary. When difference enters one's world, the first thing that is exposed is one's prior ignorance of it. Each moment of confrontation with otherness, therefore, is also an opportunity for self-examination and provides the chance for an ethical rearticulation of our habits of understanding that is responsive to that otherness. It is this ethical imperative, which emerges out of the encounter with difference, that Barbara Johnson seems to have identified as the “surprise of otherness”. Johnson evidently valorizes here the encounter with difference as a means of fundamental self-interrogation:

What the surprise encounter with otherness should do is lay bare some hint of an ignorance one never knew one had. . . . If I perceive my ignorance as a gap in knowledge instead of an imperative that changes the very nature of what I think I know, then I do not truly experience my ignorance. The surprise of otherness is that moment when a new form of ignorance is suddenly activated as an imperative (16).

Bilingual and transnational texts such as Cisneros's *Caramelo* cannot be simply treated as “American ethnic literature,” without any fundamental alteration of the paradigm of what (linguistically or nationally) counts as “American”. A text like this creates a new understanding of what reading (American) literature means. The longtime presence of languages other than English in the United States, as well as the transnational imaginaries that currently inform the writing of its literature exceed the narrow
Given such a situation, moreover, readers should recognize that the various kinds of otherness that *Caramelo* asks readers to confront are not only those external to the self. Rather, we are called upon to recognize differences that are already internal: the reformulation of English by ethnic communities and the revelation through translation of something already latent in everyday Spanish idioms both force us to rethink categories.

Cisneros makes the English in which she is writing sound strange by rendering common Mexican expressions in English without providing explicit hints that such a translation has even occurred. Bill Johnson González in his analysis of *Caramelo* has given some examples of quaint expressions used by Cisneros which are cited here:

1) “Shut your snout, or you ride in the trunk” (6): a barked-out order directed to unruly children; uses animalistic vocabulary to describe their behavior; 2) “What a barbarity” (7): an extremely common way of expressing shock; 3) “You should’ve seen the terrible things that happened to me as a girl, but did I cry? Not even if God commanded it” (24): an exaggeration; 4) “You'll like that, won't you, my queen. . . . Right, my heaven” (24): typical terms of endearment; 5) “How exaggerated” (38): not to indicate an exaggeration per se, but a way of critiquing someone else's histrionic or extravagant manner; 6) “And what am I, painted? . . . Don't I have a say around here anymore?” (55): an expression used to complain about being taken for granted or ignored; 7) “Thank you. Happineses. Goodnight
. . . (62): a common polite expression, like “congratulations”; 8) “It's that she has shame” (7): a compassionate excuse made for someone (3-19).

Bilingual readers (who know both Spanish and English) who hear the echoes of well-known expressions in these quotations might smile to themselves in recognition as they come across these moments in the text, but to the monolingual English reader, these examples, when they do not seem slightly bizarre (“And what am I, painted?”), may simply suggest overwritten moments of poetic excess (“my heaven”) or the quaintness of ethnic dialect. Even if the reader concludes from the context that the phrases should be understood as tacit translations of popular Mexican idioms, they nevertheless might strike some readers as poor translations, precisely because the English in which they are articulated seems odd with respect to how people regularly speak. "Good" translation, in such an understanding, would be the rendering of the otherness of another tongue in a way that smoothly incorporates the foreign matter.

Benjamin, in his article “The Task of the Translator,” is more interested in how translation should extend the boundaries of a given language. To suggest what characterizes a bad translation, Benjamin quotes Rudolf Pannwitz, who, along with Goethe, he claims, has published “the best comment on the theory of translation . . . in Germany” (80). Pannwitz writes, “The basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue (qtd. in Benjamin 81). Both Pannwitz and Benjamin, like Johnson above, place the accent on difference by suggesting that the
assimilation of otherness in the conventional understandings of translation has missed the true encounter with difference. For Benjamin, rather, “The task of the translator consists in finding that intended effect upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it the echo of the original” (76). Given Benjamin's notion of the supplementation of all languages with respect to one another, good translation therefore becomes the means through which the foreignness of another language enters one’s own language in such a way that, that language is fundamentally transformed by it. Producing an echo of the original's foreignness in the target language renews and broadens the expressive capacities of the second language and brings us closer to what in Benjamin's terms would be “pure language” (74), that “inaccessible realm of reconciliation and fulfillment of languages” (75). The echo of the original can only be produced insofar as my own language opens itself up to a new way of signifying, adds this to its own, and through it, is itself altered and newly self-differentiated. It can only be produced, in other words, if the translator finds a way to affect her or his own language in such a way as to give birth to a new version of it. Indeed, Benjamin also writes in “The Task of the Translator” that translation is “charged with the special mission of watching over the maturing process of the original language and the birth pangs of its own” (73). In this sense, then, we might say that, in the examples quoted above, it is not so much that Cisneros translates popular Mexican idioms into English, but that she successfully translates English into Mexican popular speech.

Cisneros's performance in English also brings to mind Mikhail Bakhtin’s description of the appropriation of the word in language:
The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes "one's own" only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language (it is not, after all, out of a dictionary that the speaker gets his words!), but rather it exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions: it is from here that one must take the word, and make it one's own (293-94)

If Benjamin suggests that a good translation from one language to another fractures the second language by importing new forms of expression into it, Bakhtin likewise suggests that any given language is always made up of attempts to refract the language in new ways. The minority writer has no choice but to repeat the dominant culture's language in a different voice, to remind us of the world of difference that already exists within English. Cisneros's odd English stresses the points of articulation from which that language is imagined to be speaking and thus opens us up to a diversity of dialogues that the language helps to construct.

*Caramelo* is therefore filled with small attempts to Hispanicize English in at least two ways: first, to refunct its vocabulary for unusual purposes and, second, to translate into English the more baroque rhetorical style and sensibilities of usage that normatively structure sentences in Spanish. English is thus being refracted and expressively expanded through Spanish. The novel seems to comment self-consciously on the motivation for its
stylistic experiments with English prose when one of its characters remarks, concerning the contrasting tendency of English norms to favour directness in communication: “Qu’è strange was English. Rude and to the point. No one preceded a request with a—Will you be so kind as to do me the favor of . . . as one ought. They just asked! Nor did they add—If God wills it . . . to their plans, as if they were in audacious control of their own destiny. It was a barbarous language! Curt as the commands of a dog trainer” (*Caramelo* 209).

In this observation, what is actually a cultural difference related to two distinct norms of politeness and behaviour is misread as the linguistic difference between Spanish and English. The quotation unconsciously articulates an intimate connection between the normative uses of the language and the forms of life these uses enable and reproduce. Insofar as languages serve as the vehicles through which competing forms of life can realize themselves, moments in *Caramelo* such as the one quoted above thematize the necessity of, having to choose between them, of having to adopt a particular language, with all its preexisting ideological saturations and norms. This condition is what Bakhtin refers to as “the critical interanimation of languages”:

As soon as a critical interanimation of languages began to occur . . . as soon as it became clear that these were not only various different languages but even internally variegated languages; that the ideological systems and approaches to the world that were indissolubly connected with these languages contradicted each other and in no way could live in peace and quiet with one another—then the
inviolability and predetermined quality of these languages came to an end, and the necessity of actively choosing one’s orientation among them began (296).

For Bakhtin, it is not just that such a condition requires us to locate ourselves with respect to languages as they are historically given, with all of the weight of their ideological systems left intact, but rather that the difference between languages denaturalizes each individual language and leads to a critical interaction between them. Through her acts of translation in *Caramelo*, Cisneros simultaneously contributes to the self-differentiation of two languages, introducing new forms of expression into English, as well as expanding the consciousness of the significance of the Spanish original. It is this predetermined quality of language, culture, self, etc. that is interrogated in the Third Space.

Although she is bilingual, Cisneros’s relation to Spanish cannot be presumed to be any more intimate or comfortable than we might presume her relation to English to be. Any language, as Bakthin points out, always has to be appropriated. In Mexico, furthermore, not only does Spanish exist as a hegemonic language at the expense of the public visibility of various indigenous and other tongues, but it is, of course, also striated by relations of power, forms of prestige, and class domination that elevate some forms of the language over others. The position of the diasporic Chicana writer with respect to Spanish, then, is just as vexed and complicated as is her relation to English, and it is often intertwined with the historical realities of poverty, marginalization, migration, class subordination, regional dialect, and so on.
Celaya's translations of her family's everyday speech often produce feelings of uncanniness or unease, not because she gets things wrong exactly, but rather, because she is too faithful to the original, too literal. That is, by moving from one language to another, Celaya succeeds in exposing something to view, in making something obvious that is not fully conscious in the original. At other times, the cultural translation performed by the translation of language articulates traditional attitudes and ideas in new contexts, thus forcing a reevaluation or thematization of issues that were only latent or could only be taken for granted in the original. Especially in this latter phenomenon, we can recognize the novel's articulation of its diasporic differences with traditional Mexican culture; translation precisely activates that critical interaction of languages and ideologies. It's not merely a translation of the language that takes place here, but a cultural translation as pointed out by Bhabha.

The family nickname for Celaya's aunt provides one good example. Because of the legacy of colonialism, Mexico's population is mestizo, or composed of racial intermixture. It is not uncommon throughout Latin America to hear people referred to by nicknames or supposed terms of endearment that call attention to a person's racialized, physical characteristics. Celaya’s aunt, thus, has “always been known as la Guera even when she was a teeny tiny baby because,—Well, just look at her” (C29). “Güera” is a popular slang term in Mexico meaning blond or fair-skinned (and, through frequent association, these characteristics also often imply middle-class status). Because the use of the term is so colloquial, another Chicana writer might well have left the term
untranslated, since there is no easy equivalent for this practice of naming in the United States. Celaya, however, consistently refers to her relative throughout the novel as “Aunty Light-Skin,” belatedly providing the original Spanish expression only once, twenty-nine pages into the novel, in the sentence quoted above.

Celaya's English version thus sounds a bit shocking to a bilingual reader. The English term feels like a decontextualization and a restriction, setting the original idea loose in a new field of cultural meanings, where it is vulnerable to being misunderstood. It directs our attention first and foremost to skin colour but ignores the complexities of class, complexion, and hair colour that “Güera” conjures up. More importantly, the sobriquet also now seems stripped of the sentimentality that softens the use of the word “Güera” in Spanish. Celaya, one might argue, is thus guilty of having captured only the literal meaning of the nickname, not the complimentary spirit in which it is uttered, which might have been better rendered by something like “Blondie.” More specifically (so the argument goes), although the racial significance of the term is not really unconscious in Spanish, the very idea of “race” functions differently in Mexico and is always understood within powerful nationalist discourses that actually celebrate the population's multiracial heritage. Thus, while the English phrase “Aunty Light-Skin” may conjure up uncomfortable readerly associations with the chromatism that has historically infected communities of colour in the United States—in which lighter skin is simultaneously desired and reviled for the privileges of whiteness that it might confer in a racist culture—such an association is really a historically conditioned sensibility more appropriate to a different context. The reader might conclude that it inadequately
comprehends the racial dynamics that have attended the invention and use of a word like “Güera”.

But because Celaya is still a child, striving to become a competent reader of the salient cultural distinctions around her, she notices contradictions that virtually everyone else in the novel has already learned to rationalize away and to defend with authority. For Celaya, “Aunty Light-Skin” provides a good translation for “la Güera” precisely because she also notices, on the very same page of the novel where the Spanish derivation of “Aunty Light-Skin” is given, that when her cousin Antonieta Araceli is asked how she got her name, Antonieta proudly answers, “I was named after a Cuban dancer who dances in the movies and wears beautiful outfits. Didn't you ever hear of Maria Antonieta Pons? She's famous and everything. Blond-blond-blond and white-white-white. Very pretty, not like you” (C 29). Learning what “pretty” means in this culture, in other words, also means learning that beauty is often the metaphorical vehicle for the normative power of whiteness. In fact, when she finally meets a beautiful, dark-skinned Indian girl named Candelaria, Celaya confesses that until that moment, she thought “beautiful is Aunty Light-Skin” (C 54). In addition, despite the well-known nationalist discourses that praise the great monumental past of indigenous communities in the Americas and seem to depict contemporary Mexico as a post-racist land of racial mixture, the novel is overflowing with examples of the Mexican middle class's ideologies of racial hatred, articulated in common speech. Usually, to call someone an “Indian” in the novel is tantamount to an insult: “—How can you let that Indian play with you? My cousin Antonieta Araceli complains. —If she comes near me, I'm leaving. —Why? —Because
she's dirty” (C 36). In another example, the Awful Grandmother complains about visiting an impoverished village: “No use taking anything of value to that town of Indians” (C 7); later, getting off a bus, she mutters, “—Get me out of this inferno of Indians, it smells worse than a pigsty” (C 79). The Awful Grandmother also viciously announces to Celaya's mother: “My son could've done a lot better than marrying a woman who can't even speak a proper Spanish. You sound like you escaped from the ranch. And to make matters even more sad, you're as dark as a slave. The Grandmother says all this without remembering [her other son], who is as dark as Mother. Is that why the Grandmother loves him less than Father?” (C 85).

What is at stake in these comments is not just the revelation of the obvious contradiction between state ideologies of racial tolerance and the material reality of a racially stratified society, but the very question of the critical interaction of languages. For a bilingual reader, the translation of “Güera” as “Aunty Light-Skin” (alongside moments such as these throughout the novel, which reflect common middle-class forms of racism) therefore provides a startling moment that forces him or her to reconsider habitual, racialized forms of address as they are seen “through the eyes of another language” (Bakhtin 296). Even while Celaya makes English sound odd by referring to her aunt by a foreign form of nicknaming (other relatives are called Uncle Fat-Face, Uncle Baby, etc.), she makes Spanish even more strange by forcing it to confront its translatability into the language of U.S. racism and chromatism, from which it had thought itself ideologically distinct. Translation can thus have a reverse effect on the original language, too, whose imaginary “wholeness,” as Barbara Johnson puts it, “can be
maintained only so long as the original is not translated” (61). Translation transfers us into the realm of the symbolic, where the “reality” we took for granted fragments into the linguistic materials out of which it is constituted. In the end, it is not so much a question of wanting to preserve a cultural difference in the original or in ideologies of race between the two languages and nations, but of using the confrontation between the two languages to generate this moment of comparison and raised consciousness about the contingent meanings of “race” in both contexts.

Celaya frequently turns her own inability to speak “proper Spanish” into a critical advantage when she pauses to reflect on the confusions and differences between the two languages throughout her narrative. For example, when her Awful Grandmother proudly declares to her adult progeny, “—All my sons are my sons. They're just as they were when they were little,” Celaya interjects, “She uses the Spanish word hijos, which means sons and children all at once. —And your daughter? I ask. —What about her? The Awful Grandmother gives me that look, as if I'm a pebble in her shoe” (C 29). The phrase “All my sons are my sons” seems redundant in English, but its redundancy is meant to call attention to the multiple functions of the Spanish word “hijos,” which it is Cisneros's aim to denaturalize. The grandmother means something like “All my sons/children are my children” because she is trying to assert her sentimental ownership of them all as their mother, but Celaya wrecks the grandmother’s gesture of reclamation and inclusion by asking a question that exposes the normative masculine gendering of the word for “children,” which rhetorically excludes her Aunty Light-Skin from consciousness.
At the beginning of the text, Celaya describes a family portrait taken as a souvenir during her summer vacation in Mexico. Despite the presumption that a photograph ought to provide a complete index of the reality it captures, “everyone realizes that the portrait is incomplete. It's as if [Celaya] didn't exist” (C 4) because she is nowhere to be found in the photo, although no one notices this until it is already framed and hanging on the wall as the family's preserved memory. Celaya thus spends the novel wondering about what memories capture and what they leave out, what cultural norms preserve as well as what they seek to disavow. This little allegorical preface to the text thus suggests that Cisneros's novelistic practice searches for those gaps in memory that are not merely gaps but the product of a certain way of looking at the world that inevitably excludes or represses some element in it. Through her acts of translation, Celaya strives to become aware of the surprise of otherness, of a difference that helps her to imagine her world, differently.

Cisneros employs architectural metaphors to construct Lala’s racial, ethnic, and class identity in the United States. As Lala’s immediate family and the Awful Grandmother plan to move to San Antonio with the hope of moving up, she contemplates the apartments that her family occupied while living in Chicago. The architectural signifiers of these apartments construct Lala’s identity as a poor, urban, migratory, and ethnically and racially marked “other” and so is not acceptable in the American materialistic culture. These intercultural problems add to her confusion. Cisneros’s implicit comparison of these apartments to the disembodied standard of the
American suburban home clearly fails to fulfil or reinforce Lala’s “otherness” in the American context:

When I was a kid I slept in the living room on the orange Naugahyde La-Z-Boy, but I got too big to sleep there comfortably. . . . I can remember every flat we’ve ever rented, especially the ones I want to forget. Their hallways and their hallway smell, dank and dusty or reeking of Pine-Sol. . . . Voices behind the apartment doors. People downstairs who talk too loud, or people upstairs who walk too much. . . . Floorboards thumping to Mexican country music early in the morning, even on the weekends when you’re trying to sleep, for crying out loud (301).

Despite Father’s claim that the family is not poor, the dilapidated conditions of their residence—the absence of a yard, the darkness in the hallways, and the eroding paint—attest to their poverty. In addition, their lack of privacy within the individual flats and throughout the apartment buildings and their lack of money to improve their built environment underscore the Reyes family’s socio-economic status. The door, “blunted with kicks, carved initials, and the scars of locks like appendectomies” (Caramelo 301), represents a liminal space between public and private that is marked by the previous tenants. The door documents not only the urban migratory status of the Reyes’s and other families’ moves from apartment to apartment in the US, but also the phenomenon of Mexican migration to the United States, one that the three Reyes brothers’ migrations
from Mexico City to Chicago most clearly embody. As well as being marked by the histories of previous tenants, the apartments are both ethnically and racially marked, as can be seen by the constant presence of Mexican music, the ethnic names of the inhabitants, and the darkness that permeates throughout and that cannot be erased by whitewashing with Pine-Sol.

In the case of *Caramelo* and *China Men* both Cisneros and Kingston conduct an exploration of the past to understand the present. By ploughing through personal and political histories of their parents and grandparents they arrive at the awareness of their polarized identities. Their excavation of the past reminds one of Stuart Hall’s words,

Cultural Identity . . . is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power (112).

These ethnic writers’ negotiation and arrival at the third space is achieved after a true reckoning of the past. They become aware of the multiple identities embedded in their personalities as they excavate the past.
By being obsessed about language and tongue, Maxine in *The Woman Warrior* and Cisneros in *Caramelo* draws attention to Bakhtinian notion of the open dialogue that takes place between the languages and cultures which are available to them. Culture is mediated by language. They know how to embrace the ambiguous nature of their linguistic environment after truly understanding the subtleties of two languages. They create a culturally and linguistically flexible language. Kingston’s mother’s stories and language help her to explore her linguistic origin whereas in Cisneros case it is performed with her grandmother’s help.

Kingston’s and Cisneros’ narrators’ arrivals are both a final destination at the root of their existence as writers and a continuation of their re-definitions as culturally and linguistically diverse writers. Their ‘routes’, which involve the autobiographical analysis of past and present, truth and fiction, ‘here’ and ‘there’, and the analysis of language and culture in a ‘Third Space’, are fundamentally different due to their different backgrounds. However, the recognition of the dynamic nature of their hybrid existence as ethnics/ minority and writers have equally shaped and will continue to shape their writing as an open dialogue with themselves.