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Invitation to Deixis: Bilingualism, Identity and the Reader in Latina Literature

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Senior Honors Project

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The Latina author can be both native and foreign in turn. Latina literature, therefore, is sometimes a window to the Latina's world and other times a door slammed to those who would intrude, depending on whether the author chooses to make her text accessible or distant. This choice is the result of the author's "negotiation" of her identity. For the Latina, the process of negotiating her identity refers more specifically to identifying with one cultural/linguistic group or the other.

The bilingual and bicultural Latina author has the unique challenge of positioning herself in relation to the languages and cultures she overlaps. She may identify herself with one while rejecting the other. Or, she may choose to identify herself with both cultures and their respective languages, in which case she must navigate the territory of "in-between." Referring to this place, Guillermina Walas asserts, "...la identidad se establece en un "entre-lugar," donde existe asimilación, pero también, resistencia a la misma" (Identity is established in a "between-place," where assimilation exists, but also, resistance to it) (Walas viii). This space between cultures is the space within which Latinas negotiate their identities.

Negotiation of an identity occurs in relation to others. For the Latina author, the most obvious relationship through which she forms identity is her relationship to the reader. For the sake of this work, references to "the reader" will refer to a very specific classification of reader,
which is distinct from the “ideal reader” described by Gerald Prince (Tompkins 9). Prince’s definition is helpful here because it describes the opposite of what will be referred to as “the reader” in this work. The ideal reader is able to perfectly understand every subtlety and nuance the author achieves in the text. Latina authors, when asked, express a variety of ideal readers. Due to the bilingual and bicultural nature of their works, though, all have relatively high standards for their ideal readers. Sandra Cisneros, for example, speaks of a “world reader” who is both literary and culturally informed. She claims that Chicanas are the people who can most fully interpret her work and get all her jokes (Dasenbrock 2). Chicanas know not only English and Spanish, but likely they are also familiar with Cisneros’ particular style of blending and mixing the two languages. “The reader” referred to in this work does not have these stringent qualifications

Nor does “the reader” necessarily refer to the majority of those who buy and read Latina texts. Instead, the term refers to those who are least readily able to interpret these texts. In linguistic terms, these are English-speaking monolingual readers who have little exposure to Latino language. These typically United States residents conduct their daily lives solely in English with little or no meaningful contact with other languages. The Spanish in the texts is, therefore, not readily accessible and potentially a deterrent to their interpretation of the texts. Likewise, they may not be familiar with the particular cultural context of Latina literature. Rather, “the reader” belongs to the Anglo-American cultural mainstream that would not identify itself as “Latina.” The reader, therefore, represents the cultural mainstream relative to which the author asserts her identity.

In negotiating her identity, each Latina author develops a unique relationship to the place of in-betweenness as well as to both of her cultures. Most importantly, her writing is an
expression of her unique response to her bilingualism and biculturalism. The content of the text explains the process of arriving at her identity while her use of language demonstrates her identity relative to the linguistic territories she spans. It would be overly simplistic to assume that a single author asserts a single expression of her relative identity. Indeed, the responses expressed by Latina authors appear to be identities in flux—their forms ever changing and even contradictory. It is therefore more useful to look at each of the expressions of these solutions and their positions relative to cultures and languages. Rather than exploring the authors’ individual identities, this analysis will focus on the specific forms these identities assume in the texts, and the implications of these types of texts.

The most prominent feature of Latina literature is the presence of Spanish in predominantly English texts. It is the feature of most pertinence to this work because the interface of Spanish and English in the text is the primary expression of the author’s self-identification. “It is more than just a combination of English and Spanish: it reflects the reality of women who live in two worlds” (Castillo-Speed 17-18). These two worlds find expression in language. According to one author, “El lenguaje es uno de los terrenos principales a partir del cual los latinos “negocian” su identidad.” (Language is one of the primary territories from which Latinos “negotiate” their identity) (Walas 11). Since the Latina author negotiates her identity through her language, specific stylistic techniques drawn from Latina texts will be used in this work to illustrate the various identities Latinas express.

These expressions of identity fall into three main categories, which are defined relative to the reader. The author may choose to identify herself with the reader, who represents the Anglo-American cultural mainstream, in which case she calls Latina culture and language “other.” (The term “other” is used here in much the same way as it has been used historically in
anthropology. It labels an object or position relative to a standard which is “us,” i.e. the
dominant Anglo-American culture and language.) Conversely, the author may choose to identify
exclusively with those who have traditionally been called “other.” She then excludes the reader
from her text, in which case she calls Anglo-American culture and language, represented by the
reader, “other.” Finally, the Latina author may choose to do away with the distinctions between
“other” and “us” by merging the two together.

Each of these three options expresses a position relative to Spanish-speaking and
English-speaking groups, which the Latina author has chosen for herself. The reader, who
operates out of the linguistic and cultural mainstream, is invited to respond according to the
author’s position. In the first option, very little response is required because the author does not
challenge the reader’s expectations. In the second option, the reader is marginalized and
excluded, a valuable experience for her because she has come to expect others to be excluded
instead of her. Finally, the third option requires the most of the reader in that it invites her to
work to create meaning. Those texts that initially require more of the reader ultimately benefit
her the most.

Since not all authors can choose whether or not to be foreign, it is worth mentioning why
Latinas are able to make this choice. Their experience of biculturalism and bilingualism gives
Latina authors the option to be foreign (i.e. “other”) or native (i.e. “us”). The experience of
being Latina entails existence between Anglo and Hispanic cultures and languages. By
definition, Latinas are Hispanic woman immigrants to the United States, the female descendants
of these immigrants, or other women of mixed origins who would claim the label for themselves.
Bilingualism and biculturalism is central to their experience. Accordingly, this bicultural and bilingual experience informs Latina literature to the extent that no study of this literature would be complete without recognition of it.

The intricate facets of bicultural identity formation are beyond the scope of this short work, but it is useful to note the complexity of factors that influence how a bilingual and bilcultural person positions herself in relation to each of her cultures. While bilingualism and biculturalism are multi-faceted, only a few aspects of them warrant examination in this work. Though the separation is artificial, this analysis will introduce first biculturalism and then bilingualism.

The most obvious cause of biculturalism is relocation. The geographic location of the author has perhaps the most profound impact on her cultural identification. Of course, a child has no say as to what country her family lives in or when it will relocate. Latinas who become immigrants to the United States during their childhood or adolescence find themselves forced into this in-between place. Two prominent authors, Julia Alvarez and Esmeralda Santiago moved from the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico respectively during their early teenage years. They belong to what is called the “1.5 generation” because they are technically first-generation immigrants, but they grow up cross-culturally, influenced by the new culture that surrounds them. This generation of Latinas, which includes many current authors, knows intimately the experience of biculturalism.

Beyond the initial culture shock of crossing cultural lines, these girls sometimes transition between cultures on a daily basis. Immigrant parents may feel less need to assimilate than their children. Indeed, they may consciously resist assimilation and build a microcosm of their original culture at home. Cofer’s mother, for instance, created a home full of the sights
and smells of Puerto Rico, which was a “shock to my (Judith’s) senses” (Cofer 127). Referring to the short walk between her home and school, Cofer explains, “Every day I crossed the border of two countries” (Cofer 125). For Latinas in such a position, the in-between space of biculturalism is not an option. It is the reality in which they must negotiate identity.

Negotiation of bicultural identity is often wrought with the trauma of rejection and uncertainty. Author Judith Ortiz Cofer, who grew up in transience between New Jersey and Puerto Rico, states, “I saw that “cultural schizophrenia” was undoing many others around me…” (Cofer124). The process of negotiating bicultural identity apparently wrecked havoc on people in Cofer’s life. Esmeralda Santiago tells of her traumatic experience reading her memoir for a Puerto Rican audience in Puerto Rico. Though she had spent all of her adult life and most of her adolescence in the United States, until that point in her life she had identified herself as Puerto Rican. She found at this reading, however, that Puerto Ricans considered her to be a foreign author. Santiago was heart broken to find that they identified her with the United States: “That experience was devastating for me. I spent four months in Puerto Rico crying. I was trying to understand what I had done wrong...I didn’t feel Americanized, I felt very Puerto Rican” (Hernandez 162). Her self-identification was clearly not a choice she could make in a vacuum. Others had their say as to where she belonged and how she should identity herself. These factors played into her negotiation of bicultural identity.

Bilingualism parallels biculturalism. Latinas who belong to the “1.5 generation” learn Spanish in their country of origin and then must learn English when they come to the United States. Latinas who are born in the United States may face a similar challenge in crossing from their family or neighborhood context to the larger mainstream context. Sandra Cisneros, a Chicago-born Chicana, writes of a group of young Chicanos who surprise an English-speaking
tourist by speaking English. In response to her exclamation, “But you speak English!” the children respond, “Yeah, we’re Mericans” (Cisneros 20). Latino children learn quickly that Spanish is the language of their home or barrio while English is the language of the outside world.

Bilingualism is central to Latinos, who have held onto Spanish for more generations than any other immigrant group in U.S. history. Currently, ninety percent of Latinos speak some form of Spanish. This statistic is not surprising considering that the identity of a Latina is intricately tied to her linguistic identity. Gloria Anzaldúa states, “So if you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language” (Castillo-Speed 253). Anzaldúa states the centrality of language well. She also identifies multiple variations of bilingualism, including Spanglish, Tex-Mex, Standard English, Standard Mexican Spanish, Chicano Spanish, and Mexican dialects (Anzaldúa 55). These linguistic varieties are examples of the multiple forms of bilingualism created by Latinos in the space between languages.

While a Latina negotiates her identity in the contexts of two cultures, she also works within the larger context of the sociopolitical relationship between her two cultures. In the United States, Latinos (referred to politically as “Hispanics”) constitute a “minority group.” As such they claim a lesser position in society relative to the dominant Anglo-American culture. Accordingly, Spanish and English acquire relative status in society. Guillermina Walas claims that Latinas articulate their linguistic identity in terms of “difference” relative to the mentality of English-only (Walas 12). English, while not technically recognized as the official language of the nation, is the language required for participation in society at large. Latinas recognize this reality. Gloria Anzaldúa, a Chicana author, recalls her mother telling her “Pa’ hallar buen
trabajo tienes que saber hablar el inglés bien. Qué vale toda tu educación si todavía hablas inglés con un ‘accent’” (In order to get a good job you have to know how to speak English well. What good is all your education if you still speak English with an accent?) (Alzaldúa 53-54). Such a warning is not without effect on the bilingual Latina. Bilingualism, then, depends on the linguistic characteristics of the Latina’s environment.

Bilingualism like biculturalism is formed and maintained and sometimes lost according to the situation in which a Latina finds herself. The choice, then, to identify more strongly with one culture than the other depends largely on context in which she negotiates her identity. The Latina author chooses her particular blend of languages and cultures from the range of options that includes both Hispanic language and culture and Anglo-American language and culture.

The first option a Latina author has is to impose the label of “other” on herself. In so doing she concurs that the Anglo-American cultural mainstream, represented by the reader, is the appropriate point of reference from which to judge everything else. The author calls herself foreign by contrasting the parts of her experience that the reader may not be familiar with to the reader’s idea of what is standard. Whatever is different from the reader’s assumptions and the Anglo norm is called “other.” This perspective is manifest in both the content of these works and the authors’ use of language.

Most Latina autobiography and semi-autobiography begins in a place that is “other.” Julia Alvarez’s How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents follows the four Garcia girls from their childhood in the Dominican Republic through their adolescence in the United States. Similarly, Esmeralda Santiago’s memoir, When I Was Puerto Rican, concentrates primarily on Negi’s
childhood in Puerto Rico and finally on her initial experiences in the United States. Judith Ortiz Cofer’s memoir, *Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance*, traces a childhood in transience between Patterson, NJ and Puerto Rico, positioning the two places in contrast to each other. Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic almost immediately present themselves as “foreign” relative to the United States, a designation made clearer by the contrast of the two places in the texts.

These island settings immediately present themselves as “other” in that they are different from both the United States in the text and the United States known to the reader. Beyond the obvious differences like vegetation and community structure, the narrators overtly signal minute differences and even explain them to the culturally uninformed reader. Most significantly, the authors sometimes explain differences from the point of reference of the reader, such that the Anglo-American cultural mainstream is the automatic standard. Cofer, for instance, speaks of playing “vaqueros, the island version of cowboys and Indians involving cap-gun battles and violent shootouts under the mango tree in Mamá’s backyard” (Cofer 19). She explains that vaqueros is like the United States game known as “cowboys and Indians,” but it varies slightly. In this example, Cofer points to this distinction from the reference point of the United States, acknowledging the U.S. game not as a version of a game, but as a standard to which the other version is compared. The reference point is the United States so that anything different is considered “other.”

Difference is most obvious in relation to language. Esmeralda Santiago (known as Negi) describes her experience of learning the alphabet. Negi reflects on “the mysterious tilde over the n to make ñ, the ü, the double consonants ll and rr with their strong sounds” (Santiago 31). Notably, the only letters she finds noteworthy are those not found in the English alphabet. She
points out the difference as if her point of reference were English, but Negi does not even know English at this point in the memoir. The commentary, then, points to the Spanish as the “different” language. “Different” is then defined in contrast to the English, implicating English as the automatic standard.

Even authors who incorporate only a few Spanish words into their texts make considerable reference to distinctions in language. Latina authors emphasize foreign language countless times in their texts, owing to its primacy in the experience of these women. Most notably, however, this mention is sometimes from the vantage point of the cultural and linguistic mainstream. Spanish appears as the “foreign” language in relation to the standard that is English. Even when the text is narrated by a young character who might herself be called “other,” the signaling of difference tends to point to what the reader would deem “other.” The signaling of difference by narrators and characters alike, then, appears to confirm the assumptions of the reader.

Meanwhile, the language employed by an author further reinforces these conclusions. The primary way an author signals difference is through her choice of language. She adds Spanish to her text to point out that it and its speakers are different from the reader. It takes only the presence of one additional language to create consciousness of difference. Where there are two languages there will be the comparison of sound, meaning and usage. The reader develops an awareness of the “other,” meaning she recognizes that the author is writing out of a cultural and linguistic context somewhat distinct from the one with which she is familiar.

This new consciousness of difference results directly from the inclusion of Spanish in the text. On its most basic level of incorporation, Spanish appears in these texts as scattered “flavoring” (Hernandez 101). Spanish words appear sporadically through a predominantly
English text in no particular pattern. While many Latina authors employ this method, Judith Ortiz Cofer's use of Spanish is almost solely in this manner. She uses the metaphor of “flavoring” to distinguish her use of Spanish from code-switching. While the separation is artificial—the words of the text cannot be divorced from the text itself—there is a very real sense that the Spanish is added on top of the English text.

This sense of layering draws the attention of the reader to the Spanish words that stand out in the text. The Spanish stands out, most tangibly, by appearing in italics. The pages of Judith Ortiz Cofer's *Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood* are sprinkled with italicized Spanish words. Cofer writes sentences such as: “A week later, the chief ladrón rode into town with his men again” (Cofer 72). Then, a few sentences later another italicized word appears: “Why did you not just kill him when you had a chance, muchacha?” (Cofer 72). There is no profound reason for the choice of Spanish with any particular word. Both ladrón and muchacha are ordinary words of common usage in Spanish, so there is no particular need for their use in these instances. In fact, Cofer uses both "thief" and "girl," the English equivalents, interchangeably in the same passage, a fact which confirms that there is no additional connotation conveyed by the Spanish that cannot be found in the English. This is not to say that the text would be the same without this addition of Spanish words, but semantically the text is the same.

Cofer's readers must take note that the speech of the characters and the scenarios of the memoir occur in another language. Indeed, she claims that the purpose of her Spanish words is not to convey additional meaning, but "to remind people that what they're reading or hearing comes from the minds and the thoughts of Spanish-speaking people. I want my readers to remember that" (Hernandez 101). Rather than being an integral part of the text itself, the
Spanish words are reminders of how to read the text. They signal “otherness” by pointing to something exotic or different. Cofer recognizes the appeal of the exotic and draws attention to it with her Spanish.

While this type of text successfully points to the elements that are different, it does not promote interaction between the reader and the Spanish, nor does it require any extra exertion on the part of the reader. She can easily skip over them or use the immediate context to fill in the meaning. The reader can then read this Latina text as she would read an English text with a few vocabulary words she did not know. She is welcome to either ignore the Spanish or call it a quaint touch of foreignness.

Most importantly, with this type of text, the reader’s initial assumptions go unchallenged. Examples from both the content and the use of language appear to position the author as “other” relative to the cultural mainstream. She seems to share the reader’s assumptions. The narratives then confirm what she expected before: that the character and the world of the narration constitute “other” in relation to the reader. Meanwhile, the linguistic technique confirms the content by positioning the Spanish as an irrelevant afterthought in the text. It is different and constitutes “other.”

Before moving on to the second option open to Latina authors, the use of English in the texts merits mention. As we have seen previously, Spanish enters into a predominantly English text, which indicates that the author has not only chosen her use of Spanish, but she has first chosen English. This choice to express herself in English and make reference to the “other” language, i.e. Spanish, seems problematic in regard to the author’s negotiation of identity.
Indeed, the use of English betrays much of how she has identified herself. Though at first it would appear that the use of English as the dominant language in the text is a result of succumbing to the pressures of the English-dominated literary mainstream, the texts cited in this work will demonstrate how Latinas have reclaimed English for themselves.¹

The author’s choice to use predominantly English refers back to her initial experiences with the language. For many Latinas English is the language associated with self-empowerment. Esmeralda Santiago (Negi), for example, recalls that upon her arrival in the United States, she talks to the school principal to enroll in school.² She insists that she be placed in the eighth grade in spite of the principal’s protests that she does not know English well enough. This is the first time Negi ever asserts herself, and significantly it is using the English language. Her mother responds, “Wow!…you can speak English!” (Santiago 227). Negi, realizing her accomplishment, remarks:

I was so proud of myself, I almost burst. In Puerto Rico if I’d been that pushy, I would have been called mal educada by the Mr. Grant equivalent and sent home with a note to my mother. But here it was my teacher who was getting the note, I got what I wanted, and my mother was sent home.

The social norms of the new American system and the young girl’s need to assert herself combine to create an association between the use of English and empowerment.

For reasons that are not completely clear, Cisneros views English in much the same way. In her acknowledgements, Sandra Cisneros thanks her father for giving her the “fierce language,” referring to English. She feels it is the language that suits best the rebellious spirit conveyed in her work. Each of these authors chooses English at least partly because of the emotional associations she has with it.

¹ For a thorough discussion on the use of English in Latina texts, refer to Guillermina Wala’s Entre Dos Americas.
² Since the majority of the Latina texts cited in this work fall in the category of autobiography or semi-autobiography, for the sake of simplicity I have taken the liberty of conflating the first-person narrator and the author.
Notably, many of the reasons an author chooses to use English are merely pragmatic. Both Esmeralda Santiago and Judith Ortiz Cofer claim that they have more words in English. It is the language of their secondary and advanced education and is therefore the language with which they have the most flexibility (Hernandez 160). Their Spanish, on the other hand, being largely confined to familial contexts, is more narrowly applicable. A writer would logically opt primarily for the language in which she feels most adept and provides her with the fullest means of expression. For many Latinas that language is English.

The second option a Latina author has is to impose the label of “other” on the reader. She accomplishes this imposition through a complicated process of distancing and excluding the reader so that the reader comes to experiences herself as “other.” Being forced into the position of “other,” while initially uncomfortable, is particularly valuable to the reader because she is likely unaccustomed to being marginalized. She is used to being the reference point from which “other” is determined, instead of having that position imposed on her.

Faced with distancing and exclusion, the reader must question how much the author wants to include her in understanding. Patricia Linton clarifies, “That an ethnic or postcolonial writer hopes to be read by a broad or varied audience does not mean that he or she invites all readers to share the same degree of intimacy” (Linton 2). The author may actually intend to prevent intimacy. This literary device is a conscious choice on the part of at least some Latina writers. Sandra Cisneros, for example, insists, “I’m not going to make concessions to the non-Spanish speaker” (Dasenbrock). She recognizes that at least part of her audience will not always understand, but she is willing to leave them at that distance.
Though her concern is Native American literature, Patricia Linton’s work on “not understanding” applies to Latina texts as well. She claims that distancing is the author’s intention in including certain events that are not readily understood by the reader. Linton explains, “Such events in an ethnic narrative mark a boundary beyond which many, perhaps most, “mainstream” readers cannot proceed” (Linton 2). While this boundary refers to differing worldviews and cultural understanding, it is most readily interpreted in terms of language. Latina authors create a language barrier with their incorporation of Spanish in predominantly English texts to exclude the reader.

The issue of exclusion is particularly germane to Latina texts because as a minority group and an immigrant population, many have known it directly. Not surprisingly, the experience of exclusion informs much of Latina literature so that while the reader is getting a taste of being excluded on account of the language of the text, she is also acknowledging the characters’ experience of exclusion. The young narrators of both How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents and Silent Dancing tell in simple terms how they feel excluded. Yolanda, Alvarez’s alter-ego, upon finding herself in an English class in an American university for the first time, reflects, “For the hundredth time, I cursed my immigrant origins. If only I too had been born in Connecticut or Virginia, I too would understand the jokes everyone was making…” (Alvarez 94). At this point Yolanda has a fairly good grasp on the basics of the English language, but cultural differences combine with linguistic subtleties she has not mastered to exclude her from the jokes.

Judith Ortiz Cofer also recalls her experience as a young girl trying to fit into the American culture that is so strange to her:

I felt lost in the sea of bright white faces and teased blond hair of the girls who were not unkind to me, but did not, at least that crucial first year, include me in their groups that
traveled together to skating rinks, basketball games, pizza parlors—those activities that they would talk about on Monday in their rapid-fire English... (Cofer 125).

Cofer and Alvarez speak of not understanding the language because the other children speak too quickly and of missing jokes because they do not know the idiomatic usage of words. The experience of exclusion is one that Latinas, especially recent immigrants, know well. Such exclusion is compounded by the language barrier most recent immigrants must work to surmount. While exclusion is multi-faceted, in the case of the recent immigrant the language barrier is the most obvious cause. She may miss whole words or the more subtle implications of words in conversation. The Latina author’s use of exclusionary language, then, is an invitation to the reader to know the experience of exclusion that informs much of her work.

Since the most obvious way these authors feel excluded is through language, it is appropriate that the author use language to simulate the experience for the reader. This choice signals a territory that the monolingual reader cannot access through simple translation. The author excludes the reader with linguistic jokes and cultural references. Sandra Cisneros explains that Chicanas are the only people who are going to get all of her jokes because “they are laughing at the stuff we talk about among ourselves” (Dasenbrock). One of the things she jokes about are the errors newly-arrived immigrants make in English. When Flavio in “Bien Pretty” explains that he must go back to Mexico, he says, “I have compromises to attend to” (Cisneros 156). What he means and what is understood is that he has commitments to attend to. The character is thinking in Spanish at this point because the word for “commitments” in Spanish is compromisos. The reader, since she does not know Spanish, does not get the joke because she cannot recognize the false cognate in Spanish.

Esmeralda Santiago begins her chapters with a Spanish saying, which she immediately translates so the reader can understand. Despite her efforts, however, the meaning is sometimes
still inaccessible to the reader. The chapter titled “El Mangle” begins with the phrase, “De Guatemala a guate-peor,” which she translates literally as “From Guatemala to guate-worse” (Santiago 135). This saying is actually a play on words because “mala” in “Guatemala” means “bad.” She is joking with the phrase, “from bad to worse.” The reader, however, cannot understand this joke even from the translation. As she cannot share in the joke, she remains excluded from the bilingual group that understands. Such texts are designed specifically for this purpose according to Patricia Linton who claims, “The text positions cultural outsiders at a distance that no amount of good will or earnest scholarship will overcome” (Linton 2). The text keeps the reader at a distance to the point of excluding her.

By giving the reader a taste of exclusion, the author invites the reader to become “other,” if only for a moment. When the mainstream reader becomes “other,” the author is then the reference point from which “foreign” is defined. If “other” equates “foreign,” then the reader is now the foreigner. Latina authors can redefine foreignness with something as simple as punctuation. The use of italics reconstructs the reference point of the label “foreign.” Once italics have been established as the standard means of marking the foreign elements in a text, they can be applied to either language. Santiago often italicizes English words to signal that they are foreign to their speaker. Negi’s father, for instance, refers to Nueva York, which is italicized because to him it is a foreign word, even though it has been “Hispanized.” More specifically, its referent is a foreign city. Through the italics, the reader recognizes that the term is foreign in the eyes of its speaker.

Cisneros is especially fond of using utilizing italics to convey foreignness. In the story “Eyes of Zapata” she consistently italicizes the Spanish words scattered throughout. Then, when the narrator’s Spanish-speaking father enters the scene, his words, though written in English,
appear in italics to signal that they have been translated from Spanish. "Well then, my father said, God help you. You've turned out just like the perra that bore you" (Cisneros 89).

Interestingly, in this quotation the English is italicized while the Spanish word is not, thereby reversing the norm that Cisneros has already established in her story. The italics, because of their association with foreignness, have redefined English as foreign. The reference point has switched from the English-speaking reader to the bilingual author, who now defines what is "foreign."

The experience of being excluded and defined as "foreign" or "other" is familiar to the Latina author. Therefore, her exclusion of the reader is paradoxically an invitation to enter into her experience. She lets the reader come closer by initially distancing her. The Latina author creates proximity by distancing. Her use of language simulates for the reader an experience akin to the Latina’s experience of being excluded. This effect is inherently valuable to the reader, not because it is a glimpse into a multicultural or foreign experience, but because it is a chance to be, for once, "the other."

The third and final option open to the Latina author is to discard the term "other" and bring both foreign and native together. No longer must the reader and author interact from separate worlds, designating lines of exclusion and positioning themselves at a distance. Instead, the author and the reader work to meet on common ground. This type of text is designed not to affirm the reader’s assumptions nor to hopelessly distance her. Rather, it presents the reader with the opportunity to approach the author’s experience but only on the author’s own terms.
The primary way the author accomplishes this merger is through the creation of confusion and meaning. The author invites the reader to be temporarily confused by the language of the text. If the reader accepts, then the author can grant her access to understanding that would otherwise be off limits to her. Meaning is accessible but only if the reader is willing to put in her share of the work.

The Latina author creates confusion by including Spanish words. While some of the Spanish words that go untranslated (such as cognates, food and vegetation) are not crucial to understanding the text, other words leave a gap in understanding substantial enough to cause confusion. The words are central enough to understanding the text that overlooking them ceases to be an option, and the immediate context provides little help in decoding them. Sometimes a word is repeated so much that an entire section is incomprehensible without it. Often a whole phrase or a chapter heading appears in Spanish with no immediate direct translation or explanation. Esmeralda Santiago uses such phrases to mark each of the phases of Negi’s adolescence. The title of each section of *When I Was Puerto Rican* is either a Spanish phrase, a Puerto Rican dialect phrase, or a transliteration of the Spanish pronunciation of English, which is also a fairly integrated part of Puerto Rican speech. These are terms that offer no immediate meaning to the reader. In the absence of translation or direct explanation the reader experiences a period—if only for a moment—of confusion.

While Latina authors may use their language to orchestrate confusion for the reader, this is not the ultimate goal. The text’s ultimate purpose is not merely to confound the reader. While such an effect may be desirable, Latina texts of this type extend beyond this purpose. The creation of confusion is not an end in itself but a means to creating meaning.
The confusion is specifically created by the author as a space where she develops the meaning of a phrase on her own terms. She adds and omits nuances and connotations at will, giving the reader enough pieces of understanding to avoid excessive frustration. The author has, in a sense, created a need in order that she might fulfill it. Due to their initial absence of meaning, these phrases create a space in which the author can fit a fuller explanation.

The space of confusion is usually only as long as a few words or a few lines. Direct or approximate translations or explanations usually closely follow any part of the text in Spanish. One of Negi’s young friends in When I Was Puerto Rican exclaims, “Qué bonita te ves!,” which the reader probably does not understand. The very next clause, however, clarifies: “…and we all had to look and agree that yes, she looked very pretty” (Santiago 190). The reader then deduces that “Qué bonita te ves!” means “she looked very pretty.” In this case the reader endures confusion for only a moment before the author provides her with understanding.

Other times the cause of confusion is a single word. When Negi and her siblings are sick her mother tells them, “Tonight you all get a purgante” (Santiago 69). The reader supposes from context that this is some type of medicine, but the word itself conveys no specific meaning. It is, in a sense, a blank word. It carries no meaning for the reader, but it marks a space that should be filled with meaning. It is as if a blank (______) were written into the text so that the reader must read on in order to fill it in. A paragraph later, Santiago reveals that her mother’s purgante is a concoction of codliver oil, mugwort, milk of magnesia, and green papaya juice. Furthermore it gives all the children cramps and sends them running to the latrine. Though the reader may not exactly know to translate purgante as “laxative,” she learns its specific uses, its effects and even the ingredients of this particular type. The meaning created in the space of confusion is more comprehensive than a direct translation could ever be.
Sandra Cisneros is particularly fond of utilizing spaces of confusion because they give her much leeway to craft the her own variety of meaning. In “Eyes of Zapata” she describes a tea as “yoloxochitl, flower from the magnolia tree—petals soft and seamless as a tongue” (Cisneros 97). The word “yoloxochitl” provides no mental picture, but it alerts the reader to something she cannot immediately understand. If she wants to understand, she must pay attention to the details Cisneros provides. Description creates a definition out of nothing for the reader rather than merely expanding on a preconceived notion that the reader has brought to the text. The reader has no reason to pause over words she already understands. However, by communicating first that the reader does not understand and then describing, the author makes the reader more dependant on her for meaning. The degree of dependance created varies with the duration of the state of confusion.

Longer periods of confusion allow for more fully developed meanings, complete with nuances and connotations. Esmeralda Santiago creates extended confusion when she refers to the state of being caso señorita, a phrase she translates in the title of her second work as “Almost a Woman.” This direct translation, however, does not appear until the following chapter, leaving an entire chapter of potential confusion for the reader. This chapter is the space in which Santiago can create her own meaning. The reader learns that being caso señorita is an excuse for Mami to warn against playing with boys and insisting that her daughter do housework. She learns that this state is a cause of concern for Papi and that girls in this state should keep their legs crossed (Santiago 177). The reader sees that the tension between a frightened child and her new responsibility has something to do with being caso señorita. Through the course of the chapter she acquires all these associations with the unknown phrase so that by the end, though
she may not be able to directly translate the phrase into English, she has a rich understanding of its meaning.

The reader’s journey from ignorance to understanding mirrors the young protagonist’s journey. Negi herself is learning what it means to be casi señorita: She finds that men may be interested in her in ways beyond simply teaching her piano lessons, and she learns new rules governing her behavior. Through her experiences and her mistakes, slowly she comes to realize all that her new position in life entails. She comes to understand what it means to be casi señorita in the same manner that the reader gleans this meaning from the chapter. Therefore, the reader’s lack of familiarity with the term and Negi’s ignorance become of point of connection between the main character, Negi, and the reader. It also allows for a fuller definition of the phrase. Because of Negi’s experiences, the phrase casi señorita acquires meaning in a particular context with particular associations, a result not possible with a plain dictionary definition.

While Santiago never directly translates her key phrase with a dictionary definition, she does conclude her process of explanation with a well-crafted incorporation of the English equivalent. In the context of a conversation with her mother, Negi says, “Why do you keep saying I’m casi señorita? When am I going to be a señorita, without the almost?” (Santiago 197). Assuming that señorita is in common enough usage, the clue that casi means “almost” completes the definition and ends the confusion. It is important to note here, however, that the translation is secondary to the implications of the phrase. The reader may still be curious about the exact meaning of the words, but she has long before satisfied the need to understand because she already knows the significance of the phrase.

This process reflects the experience that Negi goes through later in the memoir when she first arrives in New York City. She refers to the English-speaking voices “mingling into a roar
of hello's and how are you's and oh, my god, it's been so long's” (Santiago 215), an utter cacophony in the ears of a little girl accustomed to hearing Spanish all the time. In the confusion of English and trying to hail a taxi, Negi deduces the significance of phrases before she can pin down their definitions: The driver “said some words that I didn’t understand, but I knew what he meant just the same” (Santiago 216). The acquisition of a definition becomes secondary to understanding the implications and associations of words.

In the process of enduring confusion and slow-crafted meaning, the reader potentially makes a concession to the author’s values. The author may deem implications and connotations more important than denotations, or she may want to avoid the connotations that English words bring. The author has the prerogative to communicate meaning on her own terms. She can decide to make the reader work for it. Both the reader and author benefit from this arrangement. The reader has achieved understanding that would otherwise be inaccessible to her. The author has found a way to express herself in her own terms using both of her languages. It is as if she offers a hand to the reader who in turn takes a few steps in her direction in order to accept the proffered hand. It is an interaction that blurs the lines between “other” and “us” because the object is no longer exclusion or demarcating boundaries between reader and author.

In like manner, the author does away with the term “foreign” in reference to language. No longer must either Spanish of English be considered the foreign language. Instead, she blends the two together, making no distinction between them. In her short story “Chata,” Denis Chávez gives no recognition that her Spanish words are part of a different language. She writes sentences like, “My new patrona” and “It’s no bigger than the size of a frijol but very powerful” (Poey 50). “Patrona” and “frijol” appear in these sentences as if they were English, but there are no italics, translations or explanations to indicate this fact.
Almost all Latina writers, including even those most considerate of the English-only reader, leave certain words untranslated and unexplained. *Telenovela* is never translated as “soap opera” or explained as an episodic drama. *Barrio* is rarely rendered as “neighborhood.” Nor is *abuela* translated as “grandmother” (except on occasion in Cofer). Though they are few, their consistent usage by Latina authors points to the contrast between their meanings and the meanings of their translations. The Spanish words bear connotations that the English words cannot communicate. In other words, while translation exists, all of these authors deem it inadequate and opt for the Spanish instead. Their use of both languages allows them to communicate more precise meaning than they would be able to achieve with just one language.

Sandra Cisneros, rather than translating directly or giving long explanations of the implications of the Spanish words included, lets herself be understood through the context. She describes her father as a *fanfarrón*, but proceeds with the narration as if the word did not require any further explanation. Instead, she continues by saying, “That’s what my mother thought the moment she turned around to the voice that was asking her to dance. A big show-off, she’d say years later. Nothing but a big show-off” (Cisneros 71). Through this seamless weaving of the two languages, the reader understands well enough that *fanfarrón* refers to a big show-off. She does not need to indicate which language is foreign because she uses both Spanish and English conjointly.

Sometimes this technique is as simple as repetition. In much the same way that a monolingual writer would use near synonyms to elaborate on an image, Cisneros uses both a Spanish word and its English equivalent, not breaking the rhythm but elaborating. She recalls her father’s persona: “Clothes that cost a lot. Expensive. That’s what my father’s things said. *Calidad*. Quality” (Cisneros 71). In this use of bilingualism, Cisneros takes advantage of both
languages, using one to augment the other, without drawing clear lines of distinction between the two.

Sandra Cisneros, speaking of her own unique method of blending Spanish and English, claims that merger gives her renewed resources for writing: “I just feel so rich, as though you’ve given me all this new territory and said, ‘Okay, you can go in there and play’” (Dasenbrock). By not distinguishing between the two languages, the Latina author multiplies her language options. She uses both Spanish and English to compliment each other such that neither is considered “foreign.” Accordingly, neither of the speakers of these languages—the reader and the author—is termed “other.” In these texts, the Latina author can express her bilingual identity using the full range of her language(s), thereby blurring the lines between the languages and their respective speakers.

“The result of this exquisite balancing act is a matrix of incredible heteroglossia and linguistic torsions and an intensely political situation” (Linton 1).

Latina literature is indeed a balancing act. Rooted in the complexity of biculturalism, the literature vacillates between two cultures, claiming one then the other. It draws from the experiences of Latinas who negotiate their identities in the in-between places. Ultimately, they face the plaguing question: “Where do I belong?” The answer sometimes varies page by page as the author traces her process of negotiating and claiming an identity, or rather, several identities.

The expression of these identities demands heteroglossia. No single voice, no single language is adequate to speak a bilingual author or her experience. Mixed language suits bilingual identity. The Latina voice is a multiple voice in which Spanish and English interface in
endless varieties and expressions. English and Spanish compliment each other, dominate each other and re-create each other in the text.

The relationship between Spanish and English expresses the relationship between their speakers. It defines the political situation according to designations of "other" and "us," referring to the author and the reader. Accordingly, the reader experiences the full range of calling someone else "other," being "other" herself, and bringing the two together. In the most comprehensive texts, the reader experiences all three situations. The author invites the reader to know the options of bilingualism so that she discovers not only the Latina’s unique experience but she perceives herself from a new point reference.

The speaker’s point of reference determines the meaning of deictic phrases such as "other" and "foreign." A linguistic term, deixis refers to expressions that "refer to different entities within the same context of utterance. Deictic terms crucially depend on the speaker’s point of reference" (Parker 45). In the dialogue between reader and author, the terms "other" and "foreign" refer to the author or the reader depending on the author’s expression of identity. Depending on her point of reference, the Latina author defines and redefines both herself and the reader relative to each other. Latina literature, then, is an invitation to deixis.
Works Cited


