Multilingualism and the Teaching of Ethnic American Literary Texts

Maria Assif, University of Toronto, Canada

Abstract: According to the U.S. Census report for year 2000, the number of U.S. residents who speak a language other than English at home has dramatically increased from close to 32 million in 1990 to nearly 55 million in 2006. This fact is reflected in the works of bilingual or multilingual writers in the United States, who mostly write in English but often incorporate their native languages into their works. Using three authors from three different ethnic backgrounds, mainly Sandra Cisneros, Henry Roth, and Amy Tan- I will first discuss what function these authors assign the languages they employ, i.e. how they relate to those languages, analyze the ways the authors make use of their native tongues and possibly other languages, before discussing the reasons for these incorporations and the effects on the reader. I will conclude the essay by analyzing possible consequences for a teaching of bilingual works.

Keywords: Teaching, Multilingualism, ethnicity, United States of America, and Literature.

1. Introduction:

According to the 2000 U.S. Census report, the number of U.S. residents who speak a language other than English at home has dramatically increased from close to 32 million in 1990 to nearly 55 million in 2006 (or about 20% of Americans: for in a total population of around 281 million in 2000—or exactly 306,691,946 on June 17, 2009—this statistic considers only those 279 million US residents who were 5 years old and over in 2006). More than half of these foreign-language speakers say that they also speak English very well.

The predominant use of English in the United States poses the question of what language to use in different situations to those people who, mainly due to immigration, have to choose between languages. This fact is reflected in the works of bilingual or multilingual writers in the United States, who mostly write in English but often incorporate their native languages into their works. As has been discussed by critics, their reasons to use foreign language and/or culture-specific references in their works may range from considerations of ethnic identity, cultural authenticity, and political considerations. Naturally, these issues often coalesce and may constitute specific problems or challenges to the readers of those works, particularly those readers unfamiliar with either the employed languages and/ or the represented cultures.
Using three authors from three different ethnic backgrounds, mainly Sandra Cisneros, Henry Roth, and Amy Tan- I will first discuss what function these authors assign the languages they employ, i.e. how they relate to those languages, analyze the ways the authors make use of their native tongues and possibly other languages, before discussing the reasons for these incorporations and the effects on the reader. I will conclude the essay by analyzing possible consequences for a teaching of bilingual works.

2. Authors’ Views of Multilingualism in literary Writing:

All of the authors discussed here speak English as their native language (they were all born in the United States\(^1\)) and also write in English, but choose to intersperse their works with their second native language: the language they used to speak and probably still speak at home with their families. In some cases, the reader even finds other languages besides the native ones, which are either other languages spoken in their community\(^2\), or which are assigned to a particular setting. While the authors write their novels and stories predominantly in standard English, which indicates that they have a predominantly English speaking audience in mind, their use of their native languages hint at the fact that language to them is more than a mere means of communication. Both Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger of Memory* and Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* confirm this notion. Rodriguez explains in the first part of his autobiography how he grew up speaking only Spanish and that it wasn't until he went to school that he learned English as well. During this important transition period, he realized the difference of these languages in his life and that of his family: Spanish was a "private" language, only spoken at home with family members, while English was the "public" language which he had to speak in school, at the grocery store, or just any time he had to leave the house. Rodriguez describes in a very sensitive way how he used to feel about two languages, and what power Spanish had to create a feeling of security and being at home; Spanish became the "language of joyful return" (16):

For me there were none of the gradations between public and private society so normal to a maturing child. Outside the house was public society; inside the house was private. Just opening and closing the screen door behind me was an important experience. I'd rarely leave home all alone or without reluctance. Walking down the sidewalk, under the canopy of trees, I'd warily notice the suddenly-silent neighborhood kids who stood warily watching me. Nervously, I'd arrive at the grocery store to hear the sounds of the gringo-foreign to me-reminding me that in this world so big, I was a foreigner. But then I'd return. Walking back to our house, climbing the steps from the sidewalk, when the front door was open in the summer, I'd hear voices beyond the screen door talking in Spanish. For a second or two, I'd stay, linger there, listening. Smiling, I'd hear my mother call our, saying in Spanish (words): "Is that you, Richard?" All the while her sounds would assure me: You are home now; come closer Inside. With us.
- "Si," I'd reply. (16-17)

\(^1\) Only Henry Roth came to the United States when he was two years old. 
\(^2\) Henry Roth uses Yiddish and Hebrew besides English in his novel *Call It Sleep* and alludes to some characters' use of polish. Richard Rodriguez mentions the associations he has with Latin.
Sandra Cisneros hints at the same fact when she explains her surprise when she noticed that a direct translation of her book *The House on Mango Street* (a coming of age story about young Latina girl, Esperanza Cordero, growing up in the Chicago Chicano ghetto) from English into Spanish would result in perfect Spanish, and that this is the tone of the books: "If you take *Mango Street* and translate it, it's Spanish. The syntax, the sensibility, the diminutives, the way of looking at inanimate objects -that's not a child's voice as is sometimes said. That's Spanish! I didn't notice that when I was writing it. I thought that my father's language was just something I had at home .." (288; emphasis added).

Similarly, Amy Tan differentiates between private and public language -language spoken at home and outside of it- although she does not refer to English and Chinese, her parents' native language, but instead to different "Englishes" (393). In her essay "Mother Tongue," she explains how her "mother's tongue," the fractured and ungrammatical English her mother speaks, has become her mother tongue, as she not only uses it to converse with her mother, but also with her husband at home. "It has become our language of intimacy, a different sort of English that relates to family talk, the language I grew up with" (394). In contrast, when giving talks or speaking in public, she uses a kind of English full of "nominalized forms, past perfect tenses, conditional phrases, all the forms of standard English that I had learned in school and through books, the forms of English I did not use at home with my mother" (393).

3. Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* (1934):

Henry Roth's novel *Call It Sleep* centers on the experiences of a young boy growing up in the Jewish immigrant ghetto of New York's Lower East Side in the early twentieth century. It presents a similar categorization with view to private and public language. Yiddish is the language which David Scharl, the child protagonist, grows up with and which his family speaks at home exclusively. Gradually, he learns the English of the street, of school, and work (through his father). However, his mother never quite masters the English language, continues to speak Yiddish with David and even complains about insertions of English into his Yiddish in David's family and the beauty and ease with which it is spoken, it is rendered in the book in perfect English, the language of the narrator, while English, in contrast, is mostly presented as accented and ungrammatical. Yiddish is the family's native tongue so that David, through whom the entire book is focalized, perceives it as natural and transparent -just as the reader perceives English. Hence, this explains in part why Yiddish is represented in this way; the reader doesn't even take notice of, or think about the language for the most part of the novel. The reversed situation of language proficiency and use, and its representation become clear, however, when David's mother actually speaks English, as for instance during the incident at the police station after David got lost. After "hearing" her speak in perfect English before, it almost comes as a shock to the reader to hear her desperate attempt to speak even broken English, interspersed with Yiddish: "'T-hanks so-so viel!' she stammered. "....' Er-'his mother began timidly. 'Herr-Mister. Ve-er-ve go?'" (106)
Throughout the novel, Yiddish words are only occasionally inserted into the characters' speech as in the incident just mentioned, or when the Jewish boys, David and his friends, talk amongst each other, as for instance at the cheder. In fact, there are sometimes even three languages mixed: Hebrew, Yiddish, and English. For instance, one boy is asked to read, but curses the other boys under his breath while reading: "'And tell this people, this fallen people-' 'Yea, and I'll kickebeh innee ass! Odds! Halaylaw hazeh kulo mazo- So for, t'rowin' sand on my head I god a big mockee. I seen a blitz just w'en I commed in'" (229). Only at one point is Yiddish represented as Yiddish: in the scene when David and his mother first arrive in the United States and are met by his father: "'Albert', she said timidly. 'Albert.'- Hm?-'Gehen vir voinen du? In Nev York?'- 'Nein. Bronzeville. Ich hud dir schoin gesschribben."' (16)

Another language used in *Call It Sleep* is Hebrew, which is only represented as the language read at the cheder but which is never used to converse. Moreover, for the most part, it is a language being merely pronounced but not understood, as the boys at the cheder learn to read it before they translate it. Hence, it is always inserted on the occasion of the boys'- preferably David, who turns out to have a talent for pronouncing this old and difficult language- reading it at the cheder, but it is never translated, which underlines its confinement to mere sounds without meaning in a religious setting. In fact, Hebrew has in this novel a similar status as Latin does in Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger of Memory*. Latin, Rodriguez explains, is for him confined to church, and he remembers his memorizing of empty phrases and mere sounds when he was an altar boy:

Latin, the nuns taught us, was a universal language. One could go into a Catholic church anywhere in the world and hear the very same mass. But Latin was also a dead language, a tongue foreign to most Catholics. As an altar boy, I memorized Latin in blank envelopes of sound: As day um qui lay tee fee cat u Ven tu tem may um. (98)

The forth language employed in *Call It Sleep*, Polish, is never actually rendered in the novel, but the narrator alludes to it as the secret language spoken between David's mother and her sister, David's Aunt Bertha. In order to ensure that nobody else, especially David, understands when they discuss intimate issues, they switch to Polish, which David perceives as foreign, guttural sounds (195). There is an incident, for example, when David's mother and Aunt Bertha talk about David's mother's love affair with an organist - a story which David pieces together from the occasional fragments of Yiddish he is able to pick up when dropped in "forgetful haste" (197) on the part of either Mrs. Schearl or Aunt Bertha. This half-overheard, half-imagined story later leads to David's "confession" to the rabbi that his father was a Gentile (369). Although David tries very hard to understand, he is shut out by that "alien, aggravating tongue that David could never fathom" (195), and which his mother switches to whenever she becomes aware of David's presence.

Henry Roth's novel can be fruitfully discussed with view to Bakhtin's theory of heteroglossia. Heteroglossia depicts the "social diversity of speech types" (263), "sometimes even diversity of languages," and "a diversity of individual voices" (262). *Call It Sleep* does not only show instances of many voices through a variety of different
languages (national and social) within one text but also their dialogic interaction with one another. In fact, *Call It Sleep* presents one text but also of their dialogic interactions with one another. In fact, *Call It Sleep* presents heteroglossia of both "social languages' within a single national language" as well as "different national languages within the same culture, that is, the same socio-ideological conceptual horizon" (Bakhtin 275). As mentioned before, English, for instance, has three functions: it represents Yiddish as David and his family speak it at home, the language that signifies the security and comfort of the native tongue, but even more so the protection of his mother. Moreover, English the language of the narrator and the one David "speaks" in his interior monologues or thoughts. In the latter case, however, this "English" is not probably again Yiddish rendered in English as this is his native tongue and comes more naturally to him, although David becomes gradually more fluent in English as the novel progresses. Additionally, the English of his inner thoughts is grammatically correct and unaccented (in contrast to his spoken English), which supports this conclusion. On the other hand, English is rendered as the (somewhat vulgar) language of the street as spoken by immigrant children of various backgrounds and thus influenced by a variety of different dialects. Aunt Bertha's attempt to speak English further emphasizes the colloquialism and often ungrammatically of the spoken English in the book. Yiddish had two functions as well" it is predominantly the private language of the family but also the one occasionally used by the Jewish immigrant children, or Aunt Bertha (who tries very hard to master English), for lack of the English word. Both English and Yiddish are cases of dialogized heteroglossia as these two languages are both internally heteroglot, i.e. have various social stratifications, and additionally interact, sometimes conflict with, and revalorize each other. The languages represented in Roth's novel have different functions, ranging from private/ public languages to common street language to literary or religious language, and thus form a clash of voices and languages, which is precisely how Bakhtin defines dialogized heteroglossia:

The authentic environment of an utterance, the environment in which it lives and takes shape, is dialogized heteroglossia, anonymous and social as language, but simultaneously concrete, filled with specific content and accented as an individual utterance. (272)

While it is at times difficult to read and understand Roth's representation of English as spoken by David and the neighborhood children, Roth's doesn't employ any language other than English in such a way that the reader could be left out. As indicated above, the frequent use of Yiddish especially on the part of David's mother is rendered in perfect grammatical English in order to underline the naturalness with which it is spoken and with which David perceives it, and which in turn puts the reader at the same level with the child protagonist. Hebrew, in contrast, is only presented in untranslated form, which most readers probably don't understand, but again this corresponds with the fact that the whole novel is focalized through David, who (at least at first) doesn't understand the language either. The same is true for Polish : whenever the narrator alludes to its use, although it is never rendered in the text, the reader sympathizes with David and understands his frustration of being shut out. Hence, all the languages used throughout the novel *Call It Sleep* serve to influence the audience's reading and to make the reader "see" and above all "hear" the story through David's eyes and ears.

Amy Tan's text focuses on four Chinese American immigrant families in San Francisco, California who start a club known as "the Joy Luck Club," playing the Chinese game of Mahjong for money while feasting on a variety of foods. The book is structured somewhat like a mahjong game, with four parts divided into four sections to create sixteen chapters. The three mothers and four daughters (one mother, Suyuan Woo, dies before the novel opens) share stories about their lives in the form of vignettes. Each part is preceded by a parable relating to the game.

The novel is another example of using English to render another language, in Tan's case Chinese, as it is used by speakers who are not at ease with the English language. Tan's novel consists of 4 parts with 4 episodes each, which are told alternately by, and from the perspective of, mothers and daughters of acquainted Chinese families. The daughters are all American-born while their mothers are first generation Chinese Americans. The latter do speak English, but in moments when they need to communicate something important, or tell their daughters about their lives in China, they resort to Chinese. In these cases, then, the narrator of the respective episodes -one of the daughters narrating in the first person-indicates the speaker's falling back upon Chinese, but the story is rendered in English. For instance: "'I dreamed about Kweilin before I ever saw it,' my mother began, speaking Chinese" (7). Many times, the speakers being in English, which is mostly grammatically flawed and demonstrates a limited vocabulary, but then switch to Chinese, rendered in the text as perfect English: "It is Auntie Ying who finally speaks. 'I think your mother die with an important thought on her mind,' she says in halting English. And then she begins to speak in Chinese, calmly, softly.- 'Your mother was a very strong woman, a good mother. She loved you very much, more than her own life…'" (29)

While in these above cases it is always the mothers who resort to Chinese, there are other cases in which both mothers and daughters use Chinese words inserted into the English text. Many times these words designate special kinds of foods which do not have any names in English, such as syaumei (a dumpling), or tounau (a special kind of soup), but also other objects difficult or impossible to name in English: "My table was from my family and was of very fragrant red wood, not what you call rosewood, but hong mu, which is so fine there's no English word for it." (1) Clearly, this not only serves to show the deficiency of the English language but also of the American culture as the speaker implies the superiority of the object described by the Chinese term.

At other times, the narrators use Chinese words and expressions and translate them immediately afterwards. Some of these are idiomatic expressions and the translations only approximately of the actual meaning:

"A mother is best. A mother knows what is inside you," she said above the singing voices. "A psyche-atricks will only make you hulihudu, make you see heimongmong." Back home, I thought about what she had said. And it was true. Lately I had been feeling hulihudu. And everything around me seemed to be heimongmong. These were
words I had never thought about in English terms. I suppose the closest in meaning would be "confused" and "dark fog." But really, the words meant much more than that. Maybe they can't be easily translated because they refer to a sensation that only Chinese people have, as if you were falling headfirst through Old Mr. Chou's door, then trying to find your way back. But you're so scared you can't open your eyes, so you get on your hands and knees and grope in the dark, listening for voices to tell you which way to go. (210)

Other expressions designate character traits or ways of thinking inherent in the Chinese culture: "My auntie, who had a very bad temper with children, told him he had no shou, no respect for ancestors or family, just like our mother" (35). The following quote is another example of a particular Chinese characteristic: "And although my father was not a fisherman but a pharmacist's assistant who had once been a doctor in China, he believed in his nengkan, his ability to do anything he put his mind to" (128). Clearly, the purpose of these incorporated foreign expressions in just English terms. By using these foreign, Chinese, words, Amy Tan refers to the particularities of her culture, the experience of growing up in this culture as well as the conflict with the American way of life as felt by the American-born daughters. Another important point she makes is the problem of generational differences between immigrant parents and their children. As Gilbert Muller contends,

The 'aunties' in The Joy Luck Club who prefer Chinese...reaffirm the integrity of their marginalized world, while the children, typically bilingual and bicultural, must traverse the margins of immigrant and mainstream culture, mediating their passage across transnational domains. Indeed, the motif of generational conflict, often embedded in bilingual and bicultural tensions, serve as a collective subtext in this fiction as today's immigrants and their children interrogate their fate. (25)

In fact, using foreign words and culture-specific references while implying that the English language is not appropriate or sufficient for expressing the unique cultural or immigrant experience and that foreign language insertions enhance a text's authenticity, suggests a confidence these writers have in their "linguistic and cultural identities." "Nowhere is the ethno-linguistic independence of the new immigrant in American fiction more apparent than in those texts that incorporate words, locutions, and syntactic structures from the native language" (Muller 24). On the other hand, one can raise the question -as Sander L. Gilman does- to what Extent language even represents ethnicity and whether there exists something like "ethnic languages." Moreover, if an ethnic author searches for the right language to write in, does that mean that "some languages are more ethnic than others?" (24). If the answer to all the questions is "no" (as Gilman implies), it means that a text cannot gain any cultural authenticity by employing foreign languages and by drawing the reader's attention to code-switching between English and any foreign language.

One author who not only inserts words and expressions from her native language (with or without translation) into her narratives otherwise told in English but also employs a foreign grammatical structure in English is Sandra Cisneros. As briefly mentioned above, Cisneros at first employed Spanish syntax in her book *The House on Mango Street* without noticing herself that she was doing it. She claims that it wasn't until she wrote a letter in Spanish and -realizing that it sounded like *Mango Street* -translated it into English and found out "where the voice comes from" (Jussawalla/ Dasenbrock 288). Throughout the book there are many instances of almost stream of consciousness sentences uttered by the protagonist Esperanza, which are not grammatical English sentences, as, for instance, in the vignette entitled "Sally":

Cheryl, who is not your friend anymore, not since last Tuesday before Easter, not since the day before you made her ear bleed, not since she called you the name and bit a hole in your arm and you looked as if you were going to cry and everyone was waiting and you didn't, you didn't, Sally, not since then, you don’t have a best friend to lean against the schoolyard fence with, to laugh behind your hands at what the boys say. (82)

This kind of language resembles spoken English in which the speaker wants to include many things in one sentence without paying attention to the grammatically of the utterance -a characteristic typical of children, which thus accounts for the fact that many readers have taken it to be a child's voice.

In *Woman Hollering Creek*, then, Cisneros decided to make use of the foreign grammatical structure by superimposing it on the English text. As she points herself, she achieves that by translating literally from Spanish, preferably to give titles to her stories (Jussawalla/ Dasenbrock 289). Good examples are the stories "My Lucy friend Who Smells Like Corn" and "Salvador Late or Early." The story "Little Miracles, kept Promises" is another instance of ungrammatical English structures, but also of incorporated Spanish words. The first half of the story consists entirely of letters which have been deposited in churches, and which are addressed to various saints by people seeking both spiritual and practical help; the second part resembles more prayers or confessions made by similar. While some of the letters are written in English interspersed with Spanish words, some are written in Spanish interspersed with English words:

Saint Sebastian who was persecuted with arrows and then survived, thank you, for answering my prayers! All them arrows that had persecuted me -my brother-in-law Emie and my sister Alba and their kids -el junior, la Gloria, and el Skyler—all gone. And now my home sweet home is mine again, and my Dianita bien lovely-dovey, and my kids got something to say to me besides who hit who. Here is the little gold milagrito I promised you, a little house, see? And it ain't that cheap gold-plate shit either. So not I paid you back and we're even, right? (120-121)
Wachelos, Dios Santo, y si le quitas el trago a mi hijo te prometo prender velit Ay'udanos con nuestras cuentas, Senor, y que el cheque del income tax nos llegue pronto para pagar los biles. (123)

Moreover, Cisneros employs ungrammatical sentence constructions and colloquial speech in order to underline the nature of the requests and the status of the petitioners. Other stories such as "One Holy Night" or, especially, "Eyes of Zapata," contain an abundance of Spanish words, which for the most part remain untranslated. While some are self-explanatory through the context, some leave the monolingual reader, or at least the one who doesn't speak Spanish, behind. According to Sandra Cisneros, incorporations of Spanish expressions into English allow her to "create new expressions in English -to say things in English that have never said before," to change the rhythm" of her writing, and overall to add a new spice to or enrich the English language (Jussawalla/ Dasenbrock 289). In contrast to Amy Tan, who always translates incorporated Chinese words or, if a direct translation is not possible, explains the meaning of the utterance, Sandra Cisneros tends not to translate her foreign language references in Woman Hollering Creek. The reason for this could be that obviously more people among her potential audience can be expected to speak her native tongue -a fact that Amy Tan cannot necessarily presume- but also because she feels that if a foreign expression doesn't become clear through the context, it is mostly awkward to translate it directly. She maintains that she will not, "for the sake of an Anglo reader," translate a word or expression when she can't do it "without the seams showing":

I'm not going to make any concessions to the non-Spanish speaker. I will try my best everywhere else it flows into the piece, but if the seam is showing and it's obvious that the character is saying something like, "the grandmother cried because I was going to dar a luz, I was going to give birth," that's clumsy. I'm not going to do that for the person who's monolingual, but I will try to weave it in such a way in the rest of the story so they don't lose it. (Jussawalla/ Dasenbrock 290/91)

Gary Keller, in his treatise of Chicano authors' use of bilingual techniques, asserts that "Bilingual writers, by their marshalling of both Spanish and English and their switching between the two, are able to depict characters, explore themes, express ideologies or messages, and fashion rhetorical devices in unique ways" (171). He explains that the reason Chicano writers use this technique so frequently in their writing is that "it is so very common in Chicano society" (172). This is a point that Sandra Cisneros also implicitly makes when she claims that she is "very much a product of my environment." She says that if she's in Mexico, she writes in Spanish; generally, in the United States she writes in English, "but put me in Texas, I start using the two languages " (Jussawalla/ Dasenbrock 291). Being "connected to the spoken word" she writes how people speak; her writing is a clear reflection of the community she lives in.

Keller points out as well that code-switching is an important means to echo the society in which the works is produced: "Chicano code-switches are achieved in the interest of a fiction of mimesis where literature aspires to become the microcosm and mirror of the social macrocosm" (172). He ascertains that
Much code-switching in Chicano literature serves the special function of highlighting the theme, message, ideology of the author. Moreover, the most common example of this sort of alternation also occurs frequently in social communication reflecting a sharp division of domains signaled by the use of English and Spanish. The English language is used to represent the Anglo world, the Spanish language, the Chicano world. (172/73)

Rudolfo Anaya, another important of the Chicano world, who frequently uses Incorporated foreign expressions in his works, very prominently so in his novel Bless Me, Ultima, makes similar claims:

I think we're all [the Chicanos], in many ways, multilingual people. Most of us Chicanos in the Southwest are surely bilingual. So it comes naturally sometimes to shift back and forth. But it is more important to use the rhythms of Spanish in our work, the rhythms of Spanish in the Southwest, which is a unique blend of Spanish." (Jussawalla/ Dasenbrock 251)

In the same interview Anaya states that some Chicano/a writers may feel compelled for political reasons to insert Spanish into their works written otherwise in English and even though they might have grown up speaking English. Similarly to Cisneros, however, Anaya points out that such a practice diminishes the quality of the work if it doesn't come naturally: "The …problem with writers who throw in Spanish for effect is that it sticks out like a sore thumb…" (Jussawalla/ Dasenbrock 251).

In addition to using her native tongue in her works, Cisneros alludes to mythical stories of Mexico and the Southwest and draws on legends of saints, such as the "Virgin of Guadalupe,"la Llorana,"3 and "La Malincha,"4 as for instance in the story "Woman Holloering Creek." The effect of these culture-specific references on the non-Chicano/a reader is similar to the effect the use of untranslated foreign words has. Unless one is familiar with the culture, religion, and tradition of the Chicanos/as, and knows Spanish, one will most probably not "get" the whole story. That's why Sandra Cisneros points out that Chicanas "are going to like my stories best and catch all the subtexts and subtleties" (Jussawalla/ Dasenbrock 290). Does that mean, though, that a monolingual reader, or anybody who knows only little Spanish and nothing about Mexican culture, will completely be lost in the book and not understand it at all? Certainly not. There are other ways to approach a book, and even if one does not get all the "subtexts and subtleties" one can still enjoy the beauty of Cisneros 's prose, sympathize with the fate of many of the women portrayed, or the despair and frustration of the little girl in "Eleven" who isn't hers. Similarly, readers will gain from reading the other books discussed here, even if they do not share the same language or cultural background. IN fact, Sandra Cisneros comes to this same conclusion herself. Acknowledging that only a Chicano/a reader would understand her use of language and myth and the ways in which she appropriates or revises the myths, she clearly says that this does not mean "closing doors"

3 La Llorona is said to have murdered her children, and she can be heard wailing and crying for them at night.
4 La Malincha was the interpreter and consort of the 16th Spanish conqueror of Mexico, Herman Cortes
to a reader unfamiliar with these legends because "You can get it at some other level" (Jussawalla/Dasenbrock 293).

6. What about Theory?

What Cisneros seems to be alluding to is an issue discussed in reader-response criticism, namely the difference between "actual" and "authorial" audience, as Peter Rabinowitz calls it, or the different "interpretive communities," a term most prominently used by Stanley Fish. Fish claims that there are numerous ways of looking at texts and different interpretative strategies a reader can apply, with which each individual reader will then create his/her own text. However, there are similar strategies which an audience can execute "when faced with the 'same' text" (988), (which will then create the same text) because these readers may belong to the same interpretive community. "Interpretive communities are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions" (989). In the case of approaching a bilingual text, or at least one with foreign language incorporations, this means that readers of one particular interpretive community may read, interpret, and create the text as a document of that particular culture and tradition, while another group of readers may look at it from a different angle, for example through a Marxist lens. Either way, the readers will "get" something out of the text, or rather create it in their own way. Fish does not indicate that one interpretation and creation of a text may be more "true" or valid than another nor does he take the author's intentions into consideration because it is the reader, he claims, who even calls the text into being; the author has no part in this process. It is true that there might be dispute or disagreement among the different interpretive communities about the validity of each group's interpretation, but due to the "stability in the makeup of interpretive communities" every group will perceive the "true text" (989).

In contrast to Fish, Rabinowitz does consider the author's intentions and in fact links them to the author's assumption about his/her audience. By differentiating between "actual" and "authorial" audience, he maintains that an author will always have a particular audience in mind and assume certain specific characteristics or knowledge on the part of this audience. For Rabinowitz, the "actual" audience "consists of the flesh-and-blood people who read the book. Each member of the actual audience, and each reads in his or her own way, with a distance from other readers depending on such variables as class, gender, race, personality, training, culture, and historical situation" (999). Since authors have "no firm knowledge of the actual readers" they will create a "hypothetical" audience in their minds, which Rabinowitz then calls the "authorial audience." It is imperative for an author to think about audience in these terms, Rabinowitz contends, because "artistic choices are based upon these assumptions-conscious or unconscious- about readers" (999). Moreover, these assumptions may be specific or general, and of sociological, historical, or cultural nature. Interestingly, Rabinowitz claims that any reader will always attempt to read precisely as the author intended it, which he or she will do by joining a "particular socially constituted way that is shared by the author and his or her expected readers" (1000). Rabinowitz agrees with Fish in the sense that "texts are incomplete when we get them and must put together
according to the principles of the reader's interpretive community, but in the case of
successful authorial reading does in fact engage in an act of production, he or she makes
what the author intended to be found" (1003; emphasis added).

Hence, this is the important difference between Fish and Rabinowitz: In the theory of the
first, it is the reader who makes meaning by creating the text, while in the case of the
latter the reader tries to figure our the meaning by creating the text, while in the case of the
latter the reader tries to figure out the meaning the author intended to give to his/her
text. For bilingual works discussed here this would mean the author intended to give to
his/her text. For the bilingual works discussed here this would mean that any reader has
to try to comply with the author's assumptions of his/ her audience and search for the
"message" the author intended to give to the text. Not complying with the assumptions
made by the authorial audience due to a different background, "knowledge and belief," is
a sign of "the actual/authorial split" (1006), which will result in a reader's inability to
"recover the text in the sense of experiencing the full response that the author intended us
to have as we read" (1005). In other words, if Sandra Cisneros has predominantly
Chicano/a, or at least bilingual (Spanish speaking), readers in mind to constitute her
authorial audience, readers who-due to lack of understanding or personal experience with
that culture- find themselves unable to read in this way will lose the author's intended
meaning. This is not necessarily to say, however, that "doors will be closed" for those
readers, and it is still possible that they will "get it at some other level," but they will not
"discover" the author's text but maybe instead "create" a different one- one that the author
did not necessarily intend.

7. Moving to the Classroom: Teaching Ethnic American
Literature and Multilingualism:

In what way does this now influence and affect a teaching of these works? First of all, it
is necessary to point out that foreign language and culture-specific references do not
completely prevent a reader from reading and understanding the works. As Rabinowitz
puts it, a reader may try to find the intended meaning while attempting to read as an
authorial audience but fail in that sense; however, he/she may still find something else in
the books that may be just as worthwhile to consider. Especially novels such as Call It
Sleep, Hunger of Memory, and The Joy Luck Club incorporate foreign languages with
added translations and/or interpretations or are used precisely in order to underline the
perspective of the protagonist and thus to put the reader on the same level- as could be
seen in the case of Call It Sleep. So instead of focusing on the incorporated words and
expressions and having students read the books with a dictionary in their hands, it is more
important to look at the books holistically, i.e. to consider the main themes and issues
addressed. In addition, it should be avoided to read the works from one angle only, for
instance as immigrant works exclusively and nothing else. Julian Olivares as well warns
against the danger of looking at ethnic literature- which bilingual literature mostly is-
though one lens only. In his discussion of a possible teaching approach to Cisneros's The
House on Mango Street he emphasizes that
One of the most important considerations in approaching *The House on Mango Street* is that it cannot be effectively taught and discussed if it is categorized under feminist literature per se. The discourses of "American" literary and critical feminism, that is, of Anglo women writers and critics, generally do not take into account the questions of class and color, and mistakenly pretend to speak monolithically for all American women. These Anglo women writers and critics do not seem to perceive that women of ethnic and racial minorities are involved in racial and class struggles that directly influence the expression of their own cultural conflict of gender liberation. (227)

Hence, instead of merely focusing on one element of an ethnic work of literature, it is important to analyze the many voices of the works, the dialogized heteroglossia so to speak, and to discuss how they converge and interact with one another. Moreover, any book by an ethnic author can be treated for aesthetic reasons as well, as suggested above - in fact, a point that Olivares makes as well: "A book such as *The House of Mango Street* is fundamentally a book of art. It is not art for art's sake,' however, but an aesthetic expression of the writer's personal and social concerns" (228).

More than any language barrier, there are other factors that might "close doors" to audiences, namely the inability to emphasize with the characters presented, to out oneself into the situation of the characters due to a lack of being able to relate to the respective cultural experience. In fact, this is a point that critics and writers of ethnic (predominantly Native American but also African American) literature have made quite often: How can a reader or critic evaluate or even comment on a book portraying a unique cultural experience when the person does not share that same experience? The answer is that he or she can't, in the sense of recreating or fully understanding the experience. The answer is that he or she can't, in the sense of recreating or fully understanding the experience, but it is certainly possible to emphasize with basic human concerns and to acquire a sensitivity necessary for a fair treatment of ethnic or minority works, just as it is not impossible for a male reader to relate to a story of and by a female writer and vice-versa. In fact, Leslie Marmon Silko confirms this notion when she points out that "on that deep level where we're moved to fear, sorrow, loss, joy, camaraderie, on that deep level, men and women are the same, just like all human beings are. The way the heart pushes in the chest feels the same, whether a woman or a man is experiencing the terror" (Barnes 54). Werner Sollors contends that instead of "overemphasiz[ing] and exaggerat[ing] the ethnic particularities of the works" and of reading and evaluating bilingual or ethnic literature "against an elusive concept of authenticity and the question of who is entitled to interpret the literature," it should rather be looked at as documents of American socialization (11).

Oliveras thinks along the same lines when he ascertains that although "one's unfamiliarity with experiences related by minority writers" might "impede accessibility to the text" (228), it does not necessarily mean that this is an insurmountable obstacle:

The degree of one's response and sensitivity to these texts can be related to one's class, upbringing, education, exposure to other groups and ways of life, and so on. Consequently, the acquisition of such sensitivity depends on one's own initiative in
overcoming the limitations of ethnocentricity and the willingness to benefit from a liberal education an a curriculum with a multicultural component. (228)

8. Conclusion:

To start with, such "sensitivity" could be acquired by an immersion into the field of ethnic writing by beginning to read several of the more but also lesser known books by ethnic writers. Then, it could be fruitful to identify the recurrent themes, such as ethnic identity, and to compare the works with some of the so-called mainstream, or canonized works. Students will consequently arrive at an understanding of the similarities and differences and also be able to place those works into the larger context of cultural experience in America. In fact, Werner Sollors argues that it is precisely ethnic literature that brings to mind "new world imagery and conduct." "the rites and rituals, the customs and taboos of this country" by providing the reader with "the central codes of Americanness" (8).

In addition to acquiring the necessary "sensitivity" to facilitate access to ethnic works and a closer approach to an "authorial reading," it would be helpful to supplement a reading of these works with background readings from the realm of history, sociology, psychology, geography, and mythology. First, "grasp[ing] the history and traditions of each ethnic group" (Maitino/ Peck 7) certainly helps to appreciate and increase an understanding of the individual works, but also of the field of ethnic literature at large. Wendy Ho, for instance, who suggests possible ways of approaching and teaching Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, maintains that:

An understanding of *The Joy Luck* mother's (and their foremothers') Chinese past can help make the problematic interactions with their second-generation American daughters….more accessible to readers. Teachers can assign introductory background readings on women in Chinese and Chinese American history." (333)

In brief, ethnic literature deals with "issues central to our definition of ourselves as Americans." Themes of "marginality, identity, and alienation" are among the issues discussed by these ethnic authors, but they are at the same time "the issues of Americans struggling to understand and come to grips with American life at the end of the twentieth century" (Maitino/ Peck 4). Hence, while works by ethnic writers who use foreign language and culture-specific references might create "impediments an challenges for mainstream readers approaching these texts, for such readers now find themselves in a referential field that is multicultural and linguistically bipolar" (Muller 24), those readers will still be able to find a door to these works that is at least ajar. In other words, by becoming "textual ethnographers" (Muller 25) and acquiring a certain sensibility for ethnic literature, it is possible for any reader to move from actual to authorial reader.
Works Cited


