



2008-07-01

Coming of Age in Spite of the Contrast of Vagueness: Native Speaker and The House on Mango Street as Erziehungsroman

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COMING OF AGE IN SPITE OF THE CONTRACT OF VAGUENESS:
*NATIVE SPEAKER AND THE HOUSE ON MANGO STREET AS
ERZIEHUNGSROMAN*

by

Melissa L. Huff

A thesis submitted to the faculty of

Brigham Young University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of English

Brigham Young University

August 2008

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BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

COMING OF AGE IN SPITE OF THE CONTRACT OF VAGUENESS:

NATIVE SPEAKER AND THE HOUSE ON MANGO STREET AS

ERZIEHUNGSROMAN

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Master of Art

Treating Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* and Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker* as *Erziehungsroman*—that is, stories whose coming-of-age process depends on the characters' education—reveals the similar process that both Esperanza Cordero and Henry Park experience as they navigate the 1960s and 1970s American school system. The most important obstacle in Esperanza's and Henry's ability to achieve academically is the contract of vagueness, the tacit agreement between federal education policy and English language learning (ELL) students to misunderstand one another. Differing cultural conceptions of education perpetuate this mutually detrimental relationship between education policy and ELL students, forcing Henry and Esperanza to choose between satisfying the cultural expectations of their ethnic communities and

fulfilling the cultural expectations of their schools, a decision which initially appears mutually exclusive. Exacerbated by their school experiences, both Henry and Esperanza go through a process of rejecting and reclaiming their ethnicity as they come to terms with their ethnic identity. That both characters eventually turn to social advocacy as a solution not only to their own educational struggles but also to the ghettoization of their ethnic communities suggests cosmopolitanism as a solution to the constraints of the contract of vagueness, both for Henry and Esperanza and for their ethnic communities.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my deep appreciation to the many members of the BYU English Department who graciously offered their wisdom and time in helping me throughout this process. Specifically, I would like to thank Kristin Matthews for her comments on an early draft, Keith Lawrence for challenging my writing and ideas, Debbie Dean for her insight—and inspiration—in the field of education, and especially Trent Hickman, for his sustained patience, mentoring, and optimism. Their support has added inches and feet to my stature as a scholar.

My family, of course, deserves special mention. Their encouragement, flexibility, and humor have provided the cornerstone for my work these past two years. This thesis, like all my work, is dedicated to them: to Paul, for inspiring me to go on this graduate school journey and then accompanying me each step of the way; and to Caleb, for cheering me on and offering the kind of anxious patience only a two-year-old can.

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INTRODUCTION: THE CONTRACT OF VAGUENESS

As two characters with impressively dissimilar backgrounds, *The House on Mango Street*'s Esperanza Cordero and *Native Speaker*'s Henry Park may initially appear to be so different that their common status as immigrants to the US is negligible. Henry is, after all, a 30-something Korean-American living in New York in the 1990s, trying to make sense of his son's death and his disintegrating marriage, while the hopeful adolescent Esperanza is a Mexican-American living in Chicago in the 1960s and 1970s, looking for a revolving door out of the barrio that will allow her to return as a social advocate in years to come. The differences between the characters increase significantly when they are used synecdochally to represent their minority groups. As a Korean-American, Henry is part of the "model minority"—the group widely praised in the media for its seeming ability to assimilate painlessly into US culture. Henry's family achieves all that Esperanza's hopes for: the Parks' house is like those that the Corderos drive to see on Papa's day off, where "people...live on hills [and] sleep so close to the stars" (Cisneros, *HMS* 86)—which, for Henry, makes an easy transition to his New York apartment and Anglo wife. Esperanza, on the other hand, suffers from the stereotype at the opposite end of the spectrum: as a Mexican-American, she—along with her neighbors in her "all brown all around" neighborhood—is broadly believed to be a trespasser on American soil, someone whose native culture is assumed to be so incongruent with the US that few members of her ethnic group ever assimilate, let alone achieve anything like the American dream (Cisneros, *HMS* 28). Coming from such different cultural backgrounds, Esperanza and Henry indeed appear to have so little in common that it seems hardly worthwhile to discuss them in tandem.

Yet it is precisely these differences that make the similarities in their common struggles as immigrant children in the American education system all the more compelling. The myriad differences between Henry and Esperanza illustrate how widespread the failings of the American school system were for immigrant children in the 1960s and 1970s, regardless of differences in socioeconomic status or perceived ability to assimilate. Henry's and Esperanza's most salient similarities can thus be said to be their involvement in an extremely ambiguous relationship with the American education system, one that affects not only the ways in which they are educated but also (and therefore) the ways they conceive of their own identities.

The relationship Henry, Esperanza, and all other immigrant children of the 1960s and 1970s share with the national education system can be described as a "contract of vagueness." A phrase originally coined by Rexford Brown of the National Assessment for Educational Progress at a 1977 summer seminar for teaching writing at Beaver College, the "contract of vagueness" is a tacit agreement between students and teachers wherein they mutually allow for ill-defined parameters and expectations on writing assignments (Soven 135-36). Teachers, accustomed to the writing tasks and requirements that they themselves have invented, tend to be vague when explaining their expectations to their students, thus initiating the contract. The students, muddled by chameleon writing tasks that seem to alternate among a whole set of ambiguous requirements, actually expect their teachers to be vague, since they always have been before. As a result, the students complete their part of the contract simply by not voicing their concerns when their tasks are unclear or by settling for answers that fail to clarify their questions in the unusual instance that they actually ask them.

Extending Brown's writing theory to the national education system, I argue that the same sort of contract exists between federal educational policy (which influences both public and private schools) and immigrant students and their families. The unspoken agreement between the parties to keep English-language learning (ELL) students from fully participating in schools depends on a tradition of inaction and lack of communication. National educational policy initiated its contract of vagueness with immigrant children first through complete silence on the subject of ELL students and then by making only peripheral attempts to accommodate them in English-only classrooms. Federal education policy's standard of non-participation with regards to ELL students, is, superficially at least, a constitutional decree, since the Constitution delegates power over education to individual states. Under this delegation of educational authority, the federal government had a long-standing, legally-mandated commitment to non-involvement in national education through much of the twentieth century. The National Education Association (NEA)—which, until the 1960s, provided support for school administrators and superintendents—was the most important entity in creating national education policy, which it did informally through strategic contacts at schools throughout the nation. With the national problems created by the Great Depression and World War II, however, the federal government adopted an increasingly hands-on approach to education on a national level. According to Joel Spring, "In the 1940s and 1950s, the Cold War created a framework for massive federal intervention, and as a result, the federal government replaced the NEA as the major source of national educational policy" (282).

In spite of the government's increasing participation in developing federal education policy, its relationship with ELL students remained undefined. A flurry of policy emerged on training students with limited English proficiency after the Bilingual Education Act was passed in 1968ⁱ: an Ethnic Heritage Studies component was added to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1972, and with the Supreme Court ruling on *Lau v. Nichols* in 1974ⁱⁱ, the Equal Educational Opportunities Act was meant to reinforce the country's alleged commitment to rooting out national-origins based discrimination. However, these concessions were hardly widespread, and in spite of these rather superficial attempts at accommodation, the contract of vagueness with immigrant children remained strong in the 1970s. The report on the first decade of bilingual and ESL education in the US given by the director of the Center for Applied Linguistics Rudolph Troike at an international conference in 1977 illustrates the lack of impact such legislation made. According to Troike, only 425 bilingual and ESL programs were in place nationwide nine years after the Bilingual Education Act took effect (401), and many of the functioning programs were "mediocre" (401), "inchoate," and "discouraging" (404), largely, Troike says, because of an "absence of any agreed-upon standards and criteria for evaluation" (404). The contract of vagueness, therefore, remained in place through the early stages of policy-making for ELL students and instead was arguably intensified through toothless legislation and rulings, since merely condemning discrimination in teaching (as in the 1974 Supreme Court decision *Lau v. Nichols*) did not provide teachers with any clear solutions to addressing the special needs of immigrant children in the classroom.

Through this rather passive-aggressive lack of communication between federal policy makers and immigrant students, the effects of the lack of accommodations for ELL students become clear: by refusing to acknowledge cultural or linguistic differences among students, schools catered to the students they knew how to teach—those who were white and middle class. The result was, in 1950s criminologist Albert Cohen's words, to reward students' efforts according to middle-class standards, which he describes as an extension of the Protestant ethic—"an obligation to strive, by dint of rational ascetic, self-disciplined and independent activity, to achieve in worldly affairs. A not irrefutable but common corollary is the presumption that 'success' is itself a sign of the exercise of these moral qualities" (87). An education system that imposes this kind of middle-class framework creates a markedly unequal playing field when students from a host of different backgrounds are involved. Championing, for example, Cohen's second middle-class standard—individual responsibility—favors students who have grown up in a culture that "minimizes the obligation to share with others, even with one's own kin, especially insofar as this obligation is likely to interfere with the achievement of one's own goals" (Cohen 89). Students whose cultural background instead emphasizes community and family obligations must not only succeed scholastically but also redefine themselves culturally within the education system in order to achieve. A common result, then, is a sense of ethnic vagueness as non-Anglo students attempt to redefine themselves in completely Anglo terms.

Although unintended, schools' attempts to produce middle-class citizens were more insidious than they sound, given the era. In spite of the increasing moves toward civil rights and away from segregation of the post-World War II era, all students

continued to be assessed and instructed through middle-class methods, which essentially ensured that the separate-but-equal philosophy became together-and-unequal after *Brown v. Board of Education*. As education's unequal competition caused nonwhite and non-middle-class students to "develop feelings of insecurity, become frustrated, and begin to search for some solution to their status problem" (a solution that often included delinquency and dropping out), schools perpetuated class and racial struggles by teaching to middle-class values rather than providing accommodations that would have made success more likely for the myriad of students whose backgrounds weren't white and middle class (Elliott 307).

For their part, ELL students and their immigrant families agreed to the contract of vagueness by responding to their ostracism from the educational community with a collective silence on the subject of their own schooling. Although a handful of key events represented a significant departure from the standard of non-involvement (such as *Lau v. Nichols* and the 1968 East LA walkoutsⁱⁱⁱ), they were also an anomaly among ELL students and their families, since relatively few spoke up to demand that their educational inequities be righted, and those who did speak up often accepted mediocre recompense for their demands. Given the circumstances of immigrant life in the US, however, such silence is understandable. Immigrant families tended to be more migratory than the general population, resulting in a sort of stop-and-go education where gaps in students' knowledge were expected. Another possible explanation for the ELL families' silence is that although the 1960s and 1970s were a time when pluralism was said to be replacing the melting-pot metaphor in the United States through civil rights legislation and increasing waves of immigration (Rosenbaum 444), schools hardly accommodated

differences from the dominant culture. Additionally, simply adjusting to life in the US overwhelmed many immigrant families such that they didn't know what more they could demand from their schools or even have the time to demand it. ELL families' silence could also be attributed to a lack of confidence regarding their living conditions (since the realities of immigration often forced families to live together in non-nuclear structures under less than pristine circumstances) or the parents' ability to speak English. Regardless of the reasons that inhibit ELL families' communication with their schools, immigrants and their children fulfill their side of the contract simply by not voicing their concerns over the inequities in their schooling.

Many ELL students themselves had perhaps a more calculated motivation behind their silence regarding their education. In schools where accommodations for linguistically- and culturally-diverse students were not made, ELL students could actively cultivate a sort of unacknowledged invisibility in the classroom. By not asking for the help necessary to enable them to adequately perform their academic tasks, ELL students remained incognito in the classroom, appearing as likely as their native-speaking counterparts to perform well without accommodations. Such invisibility had immediate benefits to ELL students in allowing them to maintain a sense of social conformity as well as contributing to a sense of independence. Refusing to speak up to right the inequities of the classroom also allowed ELL students to choose the academic path of least resistance, one that required less homework (since requesting extra help might, after all, necessitate doing extra work) but naturally led to an inferior education. Such a failure to express needs makes the contract of vagueness a double-sided issue, one that begins with a lack of acknowledgement on the part of federal education policy and is

perpetuated by the ELL students' and families' choice to remain voiceless. Perhaps the key ingredient to the contract of vagueness, however, is the students' complicity in it, since ELL students' participation in the contract not only ensured that their academic needs were not met but also implied that they actually chose an inferior education.

The negative effects of the contract of vagueness on ELL students can be separated into two categories: first, it ensures a uniform and therefore unequal system of education for a diverse student population, and second, it complicates ELL students' sense of identity. Insisting that all students were instructed in the same way regardless of individual student diversity meant that all students were educated unequally, even assuming that a diverse group of students had similar attendance and put forth equivalent amounts of effort. As Justice William O. Douglas wrote in the 1974 decision regarding *Lau v. Nichols*,

there is no equality of treatment merely by providing students with the same facilities, textbooks, teachers, and curriculum, for students who do not understand English are effectively foreclosed from any meaningful education. Basic English skills are at the very core of what these public schools teach. Imposition of a requirement that, before a child can effectively participate in the educational program, he must already have acquired those basic skills is to make a mockery of public education. We know that those who do not understand English are certain to find their classroom experiences wholly incomprehensible and in no way meaningful.

Assuming that Justice Douglas' characterization of education for ELL students is accurate, the fact that so many of Esperanza's peers seem to remain unaffected by their education is a natural outgrowth of the contract of vagueness. Students whose linguistic differences keep them "foreclosed from any meaningful education" are unlikely to display the language skills necessary to maintain open and frequent communication with their teachers about their needs for accommodations. By withholding from ELL students the opportunity to receive a meaningful or comprehensible education, the contract of vagueness ensures an inequality of education, regardless of student ability or desire.

Beyond the differences in the quality of education ELL students received in the 1960s and 1970s, the contract of vagueness also ensured that immigrant students maintained a conflicted sense of identity. Both federal education policy and immigrant families adopted contradictory approaches to ELL students' identity as a result of their education. Policy declared all children equivalently American by legislating that all children go to school regardless of background or demographics. But those same students were immediately reclassified as outsiders when education policy failed to appropriately fund and provide for successful teaching strategies for a diverse body of students. Immigrant families also sent mixed messages to their students. By establishing residence in the US and then aspiring to financial success—pursuing the American dream—immigrant parents indicated a desire for belonging in American culture to their children. Simultaneously, however, immigrant families often mourned the loss of their native culture in their "too-Americanized" children. Students like Henry and Esperanza are thus in a constant state of flux with regards to their identity as they are constantly categorized

as Americans and subsequently (and sometimes simultaneously) re-categorized as minorities to fit the whims of the contract of vagueness.

Such shifting definitions of immigrant students' identities have particular importance in light of Benedict Anderson's theories on nationalism. Anderson argues that nations are defined not by ideologies but by "finite, if elastic, boundaries," "a deep horizontal comradeship," and a common literacy with a shared language (7). Thus a nation is "an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (6). Using Anderson's definitions, a "nation" is a psychological rather than a physical entity, and claiming a particular nationality is therefore more deeply dependent on one's perspective than one's geographical location. Thus, for Henry, Esperanza, and others like them, the ambiguity behind Anderson's formulations of nationalism provides a kind of logic for the simultaneous acceptance and rejection the students experience as part of the contract of vagueness. Since they are already within the nation's boundaries, Henry and Esperanza should be afforded at least a degree of "horizontal comradeship," especially given their US citizenship. Yet as immigrants to the US's finite boundaries whose experience with English is initially limited, ELL students may share only in Anderson's "deep horizontal comradeship" by providing an outlet for "the actual inequality and exploitation that [...] prevail[s]" in such imagined communities (7). Since Anderson's conception of nationality depends on a certain level of homogeneity in location and—especially—language, those whose ethnic background and accent make their transplantation to the US apparent may appear to be less "American" to those whose Americanness is both geographically inborn and psychologically bred.

Ultimately, Anderson appears to provide a loophole for those in Esperanza and Henry's ambiguous situation: "It would [...] make things easier," Anderson claims, "if one treated [nationalism] as if it belonged with 'kinship' and 'religion,' rather than with 'liberalism' or fascism'" (5). In identifying nationalism not with ideologies but rather with two systems that are both voluntary and involuntary (kinship and religion), Anderson offers nationalism as a sort of limited choice. That is, although everyone is immediately at birth a son or daughter—and perhaps Catholic or Jewish or atheist—not everyone chooses to become a mother or father, or to honor and maintain their role as someone's child, or to hold to the (non-) faith into which they were born. Thus Anderson implies that nationality—as an outgrowth of nationalism—is both flexible and inherent.

Under Anderson's formulations, Henry and Esperanza, then, have a limited series of choices regarding their identities, if they can break free from the shifting prescriptions of the contract of vagueness. That is, they can claim the US as their national identity and choose to abandon their cultural heritage; they can reject the US and its culture while self-identifying only as members of minority groups; or they can attempt some kind of highly individualized hybrid of the two nationalities available to them. The choices the two characters make are largely influenced by their participation in the contract of vagueness and the subsequent interplay between the characters' experiences at school and at home. In the following sections of this thesis, the two characters' constant crises of decision reveal the emergence of a strong ethnic identity as they first reject and later reclaim their ethnicity in an effort to strike a balance between their school and home lives that will allow them to succeed scholastically and culturally without compromising on either front. Unfortunately, such a goal seems unlikely—despite the hopeful nature of

both novels—given the constancy of the national identity and, subsequently, the far-reaching contract of vagueness. In fact, with the contract of vagueness in full effect even today, Henry’s and Esperanza’s struggles continue to be repeated for immigrant students, year after year. In spite of the advancements that have been made in federal education policy over the last few decades, the robust nature of the contract of vagueness indicates the necessity of alternative ideologies that will clarify the relationship between policy makers and ELL students and their families.

The wisdom of discussing such practical (and political) issues through contemporary American fiction may not seem initially apparent. Walter Benjamin’s paradigm of the storyteller, however, provides sufficient justification. Speaking of the Russian author Nikolai Leskov, Benjamin defines the storyteller’s role as one with “an orientation toward practical interests [... one that] contains, openly or covertly, something useful” (86). Thus, following Benjamin’s assertion, the fact that Lee’s and Cisneros’ works are useful in arenas outside of literary appreciation is a testament to the power of their novels, since the “usefulness” of a story is what makes it “real” (86). As Cisneros and Lee tell Esperanza’s and Henry’s stories, they are thereby giving voice to the “speech of the many nameless storytellers” whose similar stories are not written down (84), and in doing so, they become “teachers and sages” (108). The point of excellent fiction, then, is to have “counsel—not for a few situations...but for many” (108). Discussing *The House on Mango Street* and *Native Speaker* in tandem with educational issues thus becomes not only plausible but important in examining the underlying usefulness of both novels.

Additionally, while Henry's and Esperanza's stories serve to illuminate the American education system's problematic approach to teaching a diverse student body, it is important to point out that using education to investigate the novels is a mutually insightful endeavor because examining Henry's and Esperanza's decisions in light of the contract of vagueness highlights the key role education plays in helping them determine who they are, who they want to become and whether that transformation is possible. Also, both novels are fundamentally coming-of-age stories. As such, Lee and Cisneros focus on their characters' psychological, moral, and social development in different life stages, yet their progression toward maturity or a kind of epiphany is similar. Significantly, Henry and Esperanza can succeed in their own coming-of-age only as they examine their educational growth, making *Native Speaker* and *The House on Mango Street* a focused kind of *Bildungsroman*, an *Erziehungsroman*—a novel of coming-of-age through formal education.

In order for Henry and Esperanza to progress in school, two vital elements come into play: first, the influence of outside forces through school, community, and family; and second, their own interests, desires, and plans. In the first section of this thesis, I will argue that the interactions between Henry's and Esperanza's three spheres of influence—their homes, their communities, and their schools—bring the lack of communication inherent in the contract of vagueness into sharp relief. Because the philosophies, expectations and practices among each of Henry's and Esperanza's three spheres of influence are frequently distinct, the two characters face a crisis of decision concerning their education and their culture. For both characters, making the same decisions as other members of their communities will limit their social mobility, thereby decreasing the

potential of their education. Making the decision to fully acculturate into the Anglo-American school system, however, will, to some extent at least, sever Henry's and Esperanza's connection with their ethnic groups and families.

In the second section, I will contend that Henry's and Esperanza's rejection and reclaiming of their ethnicity follows Jean S. Phinney's model of ethnic identity development: as Henry and Esperanza begin school, they are as yet unaware of ethnic difference and its resulting effects on them. As they recognize the issues surrounding ethnic difference, both characters originally reject their ethnicity in favor of achieving a sense of belonging in the Anglo-American culture of their schools. Ultimately, however, both characters eventually reclaim their ethnicity and embrace the duality of the cultures in which they live. In spite of claims that ethnic students must become "raceless" to succeed scholastically, Henry's and Esperanza's abilities to participate fully in their education grow as they come to terms with ethnic identity. Additionally, both characters' formation of an ethnic identity accompanies a commitment to community involvement. Thus, Henry's and Esperanza's educational coming of age is complete only insofar as it includes some kind of social advocacy which will make social mobility more likely for more members of their immigrant communities. It is, then, an "ethic"—or ethical—identity.

In the final section, I will show that although neither Cisneros nor Lee intended education as the focus of their texts, that fact is perhaps an outgrowth of the authors' own experiences with the contract of vagueness. Once readers become aware of the contract of vagueness, however, investigating Lee's and Cisneros' books through its terms necessitates a discussion about educational reform in order to provide ELL students like

Henry and Esperanza fuller access to their education. I propose that the answer to finally terminating the contract of vagueness lies in extending the community building that Henry and Esperanza espouse at the end of both *Native Speaker* and *The House on Mango Street*. Using the kind of cosmopolitanism that both characters display to guide the future of federal educational policymaking will encourage school-community partnerships, which will allow immigrant students like Henry and Esperanza to come of age without the obstacles created by the contract of vagueness. Finally, an educational reading of the two texts implicates readers as community citizens, requiring that they too take an active role in dismantling the contract of vagueness.

ⁱ While the Bilingual Education Act clearly intended instruction in two languages, the act is especially significant in being the first piece of federal education legislation to attempt any form of accommodation for non-English speaking or ELL students.

ⁱⁱ In 1974, Chinese American students with limited English proficiency living in San Francisco alleged that they were not receiving the necessary help to allow them to succeed in school. The Civil Rights Act of 1964, they argued, mandated accommodations for ELL students. The Supreme Court ruled in the students' favor after finding that a lack of linguistically appropriate accommodations denied the students an opportunity for equal education based on their nationality.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sometimes called the Chicano Blowouts, the East LA Walkouts of 1968 were a series of protests against the inequities in the Los Angeles Unified District high schools. After learning of the discrepancies between East Side and West Side schools, Latino students presented their school board with a list of demands, but after bureaucratic delays, they decided direct action was necessary. In March of 1968, students from all five district high schools walked out of their classes; subsequent walk-outs were staged at fifteen more schools over the next several days. The 2006 HBO movie *Walkout* is based on these events and produced by one of the student protesters, Moctesuma Esparza.

LOST IN TRANSLATION:

LOOKING FOR OVERLAP IN STUDENTS' SPHERES OF INFLUENCE

The difficulties created for ELL students by the contract of vagueness may not be readily apparent with Henry and Esperanza, given that both characters not only excel in school but also seem to maintain strong ties to their families. Thus—at least initially—both characters appear to have successfully integrated into American culture without too much of a problem. However, such a simple dismissal of Henry's and Esperanza's struggles denies two important points. First, focusing only on the positive outcome (successful schooling and strong family ties) ignores the painful process both characters experience in determining how to reconcile their cultural differences with their desire to succeed academically—a process that will be explored more fully in the next section.

Second, pointing to Henry and Esperanza as successful icons of immigrant education gives an inaccurate portrayal of both *The House on Mango Street* and *Native Speaker*. Although the two works are heavily introspective, the characters' families and larger communities play an integral role both in the books and in the contract of vagueness, thereby influencing Henry's and Esperanza's approaches to education as well as painting a more varied portrait of the success ELL students experience at school. In *The House on Mango Street*, for example, the number of vignettes that describe the barrio illustrates the crucial role of the community in Esperanza's development: of the forty-four stories, Bridget Kevane lists seventeen that “contribute to Esperanza's development,” leaving twenty-seven (over sixty percent) devoted to the barrio (51). *Native Speaker*, too, is as much a story of Henry's community and as it a story of Henry himself since it is through his community and his family that he comes to understand his

strengths and failings. Min Hyoung Song goes so far as to claim that *Native Speaker* is “a *de facto* commentary on Korean-American life for its many readers” (80).

This focus on the community and family reveals that Henry’s and Esperanza’s success in school is not an outcome that they alone control. Rather, their ability to perform in the classroom hinges on family and community attitudes toward schooling. These attitudes contribute heavily to students’ potential for academic success, either by acting as a sort of scaffolding for their scholastic abilities, pushing them beyond their innate capacities, or by creating a roadblock for students, keeping them from achieving all they are capable of. Additionally, given the importance of communities for immigrant families (through cultural conceptions of the family as non-nuclear or through economic necessity, since many immigrant families depend heavily on the surrounding community while both parents spend long hours working at low-paying jobs), taking into account community attitudes toward education is a natural extension of the importance of family support in education. It is this special family and community role in determining success in education that makes the contract of vagueness particularly problematic for ELL students trying to navigate the differing cultures between school and home. The lack of voice that ELL students’ families and communities maintain creates a wider gap between what a school expects of a child and what the family expects, while a lack of policy-initiated best practices for teaching ELL students alienates not just the non-white, non-middle-class students but their families and communities as well.

The sometimes contradictory expectations between these groups are particularly troublesome given that school, family, and community constitute what Joyce Epstein calls the “partnership” necessary “to support children as students” (39). Epstein extends

equal partnership not only to schools and parents but also to all family and community members, with the community adopting ever more influence as a student grows older. According to Epstein, these “spheres of influence” can “be pushed together to overlap to create an area for partnership activities [among family, school, and community], or pushed apart to separate the family and school based on forces that operate in each environment” (40). In order for students to be able to choose to succeed at school, they need to experience as much overlap as possible between their different spheres of influence. Otherwise, when the “experience, philosophy, and practices” of the family or community do not overlap with the “experience, philosophy, and practices” of schools, they are forced to choose between fulfilling the expectations of home life or school life because they cannot simultaneously operate in both spheres at once (41). For ELL students such as Henry and Esperanza, the potential for a mismatch between spheres of influence becomes more pronounced than for other students because of the additional cultural and linguistic differences between their schools and homes. This compounded difficulty in aligning the philosophies and expectations of ELL students’ families with those of their schools makes the contract of vagueness thrive through a greater potential for misunderstanding between students’ most salient spheres of influence. Ultimately, the stark differences between Henry’s and Esperanza’s school and home/community spheres of influence effectively marginalize them from both their educational and ethnic communities, forcing them to a crisis of decision.

As for any students, the American schools of the 1960s and 1970s provide perhaps the most foreign of Henry’s and Esperanza’s spheres of influence. For Henry and Esperanza, however, the foreignness of the American school system is compounded by

cultural and linguistic differences as well as by their insider/outsider relationship to the school community at large. The American schools they attend maintain an ambiguous stance not only toward ELL students but also toward the purpose of the education they provide. Although perceptions of the relative worth of education in the US were (and are) widely divergent among Anglo-Americans, education in the United States has traditionally been considered the key to social mobility, as evidenced through the status-improving efforts of suffragists and civil rights leaders. The 1848 Seneca Falls Declaration, for example, lists “[denying...] the facilities for obtaining a thorough education, all colleges being closed against [women]” as one of the circumstances that display man’s “absolute tyranny” over women (Stanton par. 13). As the suffrage movement continued to grow during the nineteenth century, a proliferation of women’s colleges cropped up since women were barred from the already-established universities of the time. Similarly, the postbellum concern that the newly-freed slaves would be unable to support themselves without additional education inspired the founding of a number of colleges open only to black students. Nearly a century later in her 1964 denouncement of “the problem with no name,” Betty Friedan suggested education as the antidote to upper-middle-class white women’s predicament, while CUNY’s open enrollment program through the 1970s emphasized the possibilities that free higher education could offer any high school graduate from New York City’s public schools. Education thus has long held a place in the United States as a kind of powerful alchemy that transforms those willing to work hard enough into possessors of the American dream. One of the most tenacious beliefs about education’s primary purposes, then, is that it provides social mobility.

This socially mobilizing approach to education can be seen as a foundation in *Native Speaker* and *The House on Mango Street*. The only form of escape from the ghettoization of their ethnic communities discussed for Henry, Esperanza, Alicia, John Kwang, or, presumably, many other non-Anglo-Americans, lies in their education. Thus Alicia takes “two trains and a bus” to the university so she will not have “to spend her whole life in a factory or behind a rolling pin” (Cisneros, *HMS* 31-32), and John Kwang’s success story is based on going to a “real school” and learning to “read and write and speak his new home language” (Lee, *NS* 211). Esperanza’s hope of owning a real house clearly has academic success as a precursor since writing poetry and reading books is an important element of how she will get “out” (Cisneros, *HMS* 110). Even Henry, years after his own graduation from high school and college, ultimately finds peace through education in his role as Lelia’s assistant in helping ELL children in public schools.

However, both novels—as well as the broader American public—seem equally interested in the frightening possibility that education may *not* provide an opportunity for social mobility, a fear that pre-dates the increasingly diverse student populations brought on by the last four decades’ worth of immigration waves. UCLA professor of education Mike Rose’s brief history in *Lives on the Boundary* traces claims of illiteracy in higher education, but it also points to the perceived waste of resources spent on students whose status was apparently not improved in spite of their Harvard education:

In 1841 the president of Brown complained that “students frequently enter college almost wholly unacquainted with English grammar.” In the mid-1870s, Harvard professor Adams Sherman Hill assessed the writing of students after four years at America’s oldest college: “Every year Harvard

graduates a certain number of men—some of them high scholars—whose manuscripts would disgrace a boy of twelve.” In 1896, *The Nation* ran an article entitled “The Growing Illiteracy of American Boys,” which reported on another Harvard study. The authors of this one lamented the spending of “much time, energy, and money” teaching students “what they ought to have learnt already.” There was no “conceivable justification,” noted a rankled professor named Goodwin, to use precious revenues “in an attempt to enlighten the Egyptian darkness in which no small portion of Harvard’s undergraduates were sitting.” In 1898 the University of California instituted the Subject A Examination [...] and was soon designating about 30 to 40 percent of those who took it as not proficient in English [...]. In 1906 an educational researcher named Franklyn Hoyt conducted the first empirical study to determine if traditional instruction in grammar would improve the quality of writing. His results were not encouraging. Neither were the majority of the results of such studies carried out over the next eighty years. Whatever that stern grammarian was doing to his charges, it didn’t seem to affect large numbers of them, historically or experimentally. (5-6)

This concern with students’ general failings belies what Eldred and Mortensen refer to as the “literacy myth” (where literacy is broadly defined to include education in general): the “easy and unfounded” belief that “better literacy necessarily leads to economic development, cultural progress, and individual improvement” (512). Lurking behind the belief that education offers nearly unlimited social mobility, this “literacy myth”

articulates the horror-story version of American education: that spending resources and time on students causes no discernible difference in their quality of life or the realm of possibility open to them. That the educators in *Native Speaker* and *The House on Mango Street* ascribe at least partially to this myth is evident in Henry's placement in remedial speech and Esperanza's principal's assumption that because of her ethnic background she lives in the worst part of town. Both actions become a sort of intellectual categorization: by assigning non-traditional qualities to both characters—low income and a kind of “disability”—Henry and Esperanza are effectively removed from the group of typical middle-class students, the ones to whom the 1960s and 1970s school system taught. Esperanza's and Henry's marginalization from the mainstream indicates more than a mere recognition of difference by school authorities. As Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson found in their seminal 1968 study *Pygmalion in the Classroom*, “when certain things are known or believed about a pupil, other things about him [sic], true things or not, are implied” (54). When, as for Henry and Esperanza, these implicated beliefs are based on skin color, socioeconomic status, and an interrelated (but often unfounded) perception of students' ability, they mark students as “at-risk” and therefore unlikely to succeed (viii).

Between the contradicting beliefs of the literacy myth and education's potential for social mobility, the boundaries of the school-based sphere of influence become blurred for Henry and Esperanza as their schooling's philosophy and practices alternately express the limitless possibilities available through successful education or offer students little hope in leaving the social class into which they were born. Such ambiguity contributes to education's side of the contract of vagueness by articulating completely

different outcomes for ELL students. Henry's and Esperanza's understanding of their education's potential is further undercut by their communities' and families' often equivocal participation in the contract of vagueness.

Epstein differentiates between the family and community spheres of influence on students, and rightly so. As students grow older, they rely increasingly on the influence of the outside community, and when differences between family and community exist, such a change of alliances is significant. While the family and community spheres of influence for Henry and Esperanza certainly do not overlap completely, discussing the families and communities jointly is useful in illustrating the similarities and disparities between the groups. For the most part, the ways that Henry's and Esperanza's ethnic communities and families respond to the contract of vagueness are merely reactions. Rather than initiating contact with the schools or attempting to alter an already-existent system, the communities and families react in concert with their own traditional beliefs^{iv} surrounding education. Although Henry's and Esperanza's ethnic communities have divergent beliefs about the importance of education and thus react to their children's schooling differently, both communities maintain an impressive amount of influence over the individual members within each community, as is illustrated by the characters whose approaches to education mirror the community's.

Henry, as a representative Korean-American, learns his family's and community's stance on education implicitly. Although his adolescence is spent, in his father's words, as a "rich kid" in a "big house" because "[his] daddy rich man now," the time he spends with the Korean community as a child significantly influences his perception of his education, especially when Korean-Americans' strong belief in the power of education is

considered (Lee, *NS* 64). As a group, Korean immigrants after 1965 often came to the United States in order to offer their children better education. In fact, Moon H. Jo, a retired professor of sociology at Lycoming College in Pennsylvania, states that the major motives for Korean immigrants to the United States following the Immigration Act of 1965 were educational and professional opportunities (22). With such beliefs motivating transcontinental relocations, it follows that most adult Korean immigrants from this time period were already highly educated themselves. Henry's father was no exception: Henry's mother tells him that his father "graduated from the best college in Korea, the very top" (Lee, *NS* 56) and Henry himself eventually learns that "[his father] had been trained as an industrial engineer, and had actually completed a master's degree" (Lee, *NS* 57). His parents' friends' education is never mentioned in *Native Speaker*, but the likelihood of their higher education is indicated in Hurh and Kim's 1975 claim that 77.8% of Korean immigrants graduated from college in Korea before immigrating to the US (qtd. in Hurh 42).

The importance of schooling to Korean immigrants is further highlighted by deep-seated Korean cultural beliefs about the power of education. According to professor of sociology at Queens College Pyong Gap Min, Koreans' belief in education's primary importance draws from Confucianism. Min describes the Korean civil service examination, which dates to the tenth century, as being designed to "bring men of intelligence and ability into government regardless of social position" ("The Korean American Family" 208). These annual examinations, based on Chinese literature and Confucian classics, offered power and economic rewards to those who performed well by giving them the opportunity to work in government positions, regardless of social class.

As a result, Koreans have generally viewed education as the foremost opportunity for social mobility. Further, in a later study, Min states that this historical legacy of attaining social mobility through education can be seen in Korean immigrants' decision to live in suburbia:

Most Korean immigrants with school-age children seem to decide where to live largely based on the academic quality of public schools in the neighborhood. Koreans' desire buy houses in affluent suburban areas with good public schools is reflected in the 1990 census: Koreans, along with Indian-Americans, show the highest rate of suburban residence among all ethnic groups. (*Asian Americans* 224)

Although Min's data points to much more recent decades than Henry's childhood, the Parks' and their friends' relocations to the suburbs corroborate Min's findings, even decades earlier. Henry's father moves the family to Fern Pond—where “all the rich kids live” (Lee, *NS* 64)—and Henry describes his father's friends as living a similar lifestyle: “like us, their families moved to big houses with big yards to tend on weekends, they owned fancy cars that needed washing and waxing” (51).

In keeping with this generalized brand of “Korean culture,” *Native Speaker* illustrates how the Parks instill in Henry a belief in the value of education. This is partially expressed through his parents' explicit efforts to make him into a “princely Hal” (Lee, *NS* 53): his father exhorts him “to casually recite ‘some Shakespeare words’” for the grocery store customers (53); his mother chides him to appreciate all his father's hard work, which “he only does [...] for you, [Henry], he does everything for you” (56). His parents also express their desire for him to do well in school through negative

reinforcement: they hide his mother's cancer from Henry by telling him that "her constant weariness and tears were from her concern over [his] mediocre studies" (77). After his mother's death, Henry describes his interaction with his father during high school as "one long and grave contention, an incessant quarrel" partially inspired by his "imperfect studies" (73). Although none of these examples are positive for Henry—he resents his parents' methods of reinventing him as a model son and student—he is able, years later, to articulate his father's motivations for coming to the US without ever asking him why he chose to immigrate, presumably as a result of these family interactions: he "put me through college," Henry says after spending the night reprimanding his father, "[and] even left me enough money that I could do the same for my children without the expense of his kind of struggle" (49). It is clear, even if only in retrospect, that Henry understands what is most important to his parents: their devotion to the possibility of his education motivated not only their immigration but also his father's "twenty-five years of green-grocerying in a famous ghetto of America" (49).

However, while the Parks consistently emphasize the value of education to their son, they do not believe it will grant them full social mobility. Henry thus learns from his parents' actions that he is expected to be invisible to other Americans. His parents "never felt fully comfortable in [their] fine house in Ardsley," and his mother "would gladly ruin a birthday cake rather than bearing the tiniest of shames in asking her next-door neighbor and friend for the needed egg" (Lee, *NS* 52). Henry's prescribed role as a child of Korean immigrants, then, is to "[believe] in anything American, in impressing Americans, in making money, polishing apples in the dead of night, perfectly pressed pants, perfect credit, being perfect, shooting black people, watching our stores and offices

burn down to the ground” (52-53), and to do all this without complaining because he is, after all, still Korean—an immigrant with (in Henry’s father’s words) a “funny face” and “funny eyes” (73). In other words, regardless of what Henry (or his father, for that matter) ever hopes to achieve through school or hard work, the philosophy of his home/community sphere of influence seems to stress that he will always be an outsider and is better off making himself invisible.

Henry illustrates how typical the belief in limited social mobility is for Korean-Americans when he wonders at John Kwang’s extensive success:

Before I knew of him, [Henry says,] I had never even conceived of someone like him. A Korean man, of his age, as part of the vernacular. Not just a respectable grocer or dry cleaner or doctor, but a larger public figure who was willing to speak and act outside the tight sphere of his family. He displayed an ambition I didn’t recognize, or more, one I hadn’t yet envisioned as something a Korean man would find significant or worthy of energy and devotion; he didn’t seem afraid like my mother and father, who were always wary of those who would try to shame us or mistreat us. (Lee, *NS* 139)

Henry’s surprise that Kwang operates outside the bounds of his family indicates the narrow limitations for Korean-Americans, even for those whose obvious educational achievements might traditionally point to successful social mobility (Henry’s mention of doctors, for example). Social mobility for Henry, then, appears to be psychological as well as financial—which is perhaps another inheritance from the Korean community to which he was exposed as a child. Henry observed as his father’s probably educated

friends “got busier and wealthier” but still had to maintain the long hours that his father also worked, occasionally getting mugged like his father, or, “like Mr. Oh, [...having] a heart attack after being held up at his store in Hell’s Kitchen” (51). Thus, in spite of the financial security his fellow Korean-Americans attain, Henry only sees them operating within a restricted sphere, marked by the potential for violence, outsiders to “the vernacular.” The social mobility promised for Korean-Americans through their traditionally strong beliefs in the power of education is therefore limited psychologically by the differences between Anglo-American and Korean-American cultures. These psychological limits on the social mobility students can achieve through their education serves to strengthen the immigrants’ complicity in the contract of vagueness: by assuming that Korean-Americans occupy a lower position in American society, they become less likely to speak up when the needs of their children are not met. Additionally, by assuming psychological limitations on social mobility, the distance between the home/community sphere of influence and the school sphere of influence fossilizes. When students and families expect education not to change their possibilities for success, they have no reason to seek redress when their social or economic status remains unchanged.

The home/community approach to school described in *The House on Mango Street* is no more facilitating for ELL students’ education than the one in *Native Speaker*. Although individual Mexican-American families may have valued education highly, as a group, Mexican-American families throughout the nation often experienced circumstances that limited the efficacy of their education. Because of the geographic proximity between Mexico and the US, two interrelated factors stand out: a “sojourner”

mentality with regards to immigration (marked by the intention to return to the country of origin) and a tendency to migrate frequently. First, that Mexican immigrants came to the US for mainly economic reasons (Durand, Massey, and Zenteno 124) and did not expect to assimilate into US culture is an outgrowth of the rather contradictory history of Mexican immigration in the US. Professor of policy studies and social welfare at UCLA Rosina M. Becerra illustrates the alternating public sentiment toward Mexican immigrants in the US during the twentieth century. A demand for labor combined with the 1910 Mexican Revolution spurred immigration to the US between 1910 and 1930, but the Depression years brought increasing waves of anti-Mexican sentiment, during which “41 percent of Mexican-born persons actually returned to Mexico” (Becerra 144). The 22-year Bracero program, which operated from 1942 to 1964, also troubled the concept of immigration for Mexicans as it imported Mexican workers into the United States for renewable six-month periods, after which the workers returned home and then entered the cycle again. Such a fluid concept of the border and relative proximity to their native country contributed to the sojourner mentality many Mexican immigrants at the time had—a mentality demonstrated in Cisneros’ characterization of her own family and others like it as “a commuter family,” traveling frequently between Mexico and the US (Cisneros, Interview with Juanita Heredia 46).

This sojourner mentality is illustrated throughout *The House on Mango Street*, perhaps most notably in “No Speak English.” When Mamacita, “the big mama of the man across the street” comes to live in Esperanza’s neighborhood along with her baby boy, her husband does everything he can to make her new home as much like her pink house in “that country” as possible (Cisneros, *HMS* 76). Still, however, she asks when

they are going home. She cannot accept her husband's answer—"We *are* home. This *is* home. Here I am and here I stay" (78)—and when her baby learns English from the Pepsi commercial on television, it "break[s] her heart forever" (78). In spite of her husband's declarations that their immigration is permanent, Mamacita clings to the belief that their move is temporary; she lives her life in the US only cursorily, refusing to go outside and, according to Esperanza, "[sitting] all day by the window and [playing] the Spanish radio show and [singing] all the homesick songs about her country in a voice that sounds like a seagull" (77). Her intention to remain as distant from the US as possible (even while living in Chicago) illustrates the kind of gap that a sojourner mentality can cause between immigrant students' spheres of influence. While the school will require that her son use English in order to succeed, Mamacita's early pleas that he "no speak English" will create a greater distance between the philosophies of the home/community and school spheres of influence. Because the spheres of influence will fail to overlap, the boy's spheres of influence become mutually exclusive. Rather than being able to participate in school as fully as possible while still maintaining an ethnic identity, Mamacita's son will have to choose between pleasing his mother (by eschewing as much of the American lifestyle as possible, as she does) and succeeding in school (by adopting the views and attitudes of the American school system in place of his mother's).

The second factor impacting Mexican-Americans' views of their American education in the 1960s and 1970s was the economic motivation for coming to the US in the first place. Seeking economic freedom meant frequent migration within the United States, which complicated the possibility of an uninterrupted education for children of immigrants. Former professor of education at California State University Dolores

Escobar Litsinger describes the moves of migrant Mexican-American families who, she explains, “set out each year from a home base, a rural village or a barrio. [...] The families (on the average, 6.4 members) [followed] a fairly regular path dictated by the cultivation and harvest patterns of key crops throughout the country” (37). For families whose migration was not based on harvest patterns, frequent moving still occurred as a side effect of renting homes (which also marked students as different because to own property is “American”). Esperanza describes the constant changes of her Mango Street neighborhood and even opens the novel with the genealogy of her family’s addresses, adding “what I remember most is moving a lot” when her memory fails her (Cisneros, *HMS* 3). According to Litsinger, the result of such migration patterns was a host of educational handicaps, ranging from sporadic school attendance to lack of records to “parents who [...] had to rely upon the immediate income of their children and who probably [had] not developed a realistic understanding of the value of education” (40). It becomes clear, then, that regardless of the attitude of individual Mexican-American families toward education, the circumstances surrounding their lives in the United States often limited the degree to which immigrant children could benefit from consistent schooling.

Such is the case for Esperanza and her neighbors. Although the Corderos dream of social mobility, it seems that their ideal house is entirely mythical, since it is built on a foundation of lottery tickets and bedtime stories. Like the rest of the families surrounding them, the Corderos have serious concerns outside the school building. The safety of the children, for example, is just one of many real problems, as evidenced through Louie’s cousin’s arrest (Cisneros, *HMS* 24-25), the “bum man” who propositions

Esperanza's friend (41), and the prostitutes who visit Earl next door (71). Thus, the myth of the dream house and all it represents must take a back seat to the day-to-day realities of living in an inner-city neighborhood. The resulting expectations placed on children in Esperanza's neighborhood are necessary for their families' survival, though they are not conducive to their performance as students. That is, the students on Mango Street must first function in adult roles—by taking on part-time jobs to assist the family economically, caring for younger siblings while both parents work, or cooking and cleaning—before they can perform their duties as students. Before Alicia takes the two trains and a bus to the university, for example, she rises with “the tortilla star” to “make the lunchbox tortillas” for her family because, as the oldest in a family whose mother has passed away, the responsibility is hers (31). Likewise, because Esperanza is the oldest, her parents expect her to act as the guardian for her younger sister at all times, and when her *abuelito* passes away, she assumes responsibility for all three of her younger siblings while her parents go to Mexico for the funeral (56). She is also expected to work in order to contribute to the family income, even before she is legally of age to be employed (54). Because of the abundance of roles these students must fulfill before they can focus on their schooling, they have little time and energy to spend on their education.

Given the multiple roles these students fulfill, it is unsurprising that Esperanza and Alicia are the only positive examples of Mango Street adolescents who work to combine school with the responsibilities and realities of their home life. The rest of their community's attempts to combine home and education succeed to varying degrees. For some, the failure to combine the two spheres is based on their own decisions. Esperanza's own mother, for example, “could've been somebody, you know?” but

stopped going to school because she “didn’t have nice clothes” (Cisneros, *HMS* 90). By choosing social acceptance over school, Esperanza’s mother has limited her options by unwittingly participating in the contract of vagueness, a decision she seems to regret. Through her regrets about leaving school, education is depicted as a process that enriches students’ lives through exposure to different cultures and through professionalizing students and preparing them for careers. Instead of being in a position to use her talents—“she can speak two languages [... and] sing an opera. She knows how to fix a T.V.”—Esperanza’s mother only dreams of seeing a ballet and a play and “borrows opera records from the public library and sings with velvety lungs as powerful as morning glories” (90). Ultimately, the decisions Esperanza’s mother has made to eliminate the school’s sphere of influence from her life have impacted her day-to-day function. Rather than equipping her to live the full life she thought it would, her decision to participate only in the home/community sphere of influence has kept Esperanza’s mother from becoming “somebody.”

For others, however, patriarchal violence keeps the family and school spheres of influence too far apart to even attempt to combine them. In Sally’s case, her father’s expectation that she will “run away like his sisters who made the family ashamed” keeps her from school for several days when he “catches her talking to a boy” (Cisneros, *HMS* 92, 93). After Sally spends years telling people “he never hits me hard” (92), the violence she experiences at home leads predictably to her marriage, performed “in another state where it’s legal to get married before eighth grade” (101). Minerva (who “is only a little bit older than [Esperanza] but already she has two kids and a husband who left”) also gives up school because of a violent relationship (84). The gap between

the two spheres of influence for Sally and Minerva is all the more significant because it seems to be inherited. Sally's father increases the distance between his family and his daughter's school in an attempt to keep her farther away from the dangerous boys (like the ones his sisters apparently ran off with), but in doing so, he limits her potential for success at school. Minerva, too, has perpetuated the kind of home she grew up in, where "her mother raised her kids alone and it looks like her daughters will go that way too" (84). The daily needs of the families that make up Esperanza's community thus fall far from the expectations of the schools that serve the community. For all of these women, the circumstances of living in poverty make daily survival and immediate social acceptance more crucial than the potential social mobility that education might provide. As ELL students thus spend more time operating in their home/community spheres of influence in the interest of their families, they limit their opportunities for participation in the school's sphere of influence—especially if the schools (intentionally or not) exclude them in the first place. As the distance between these spheres of influence becomes more rigid, the contract of vagueness thus gains strength through ever-decreasing interaction between the ELL and school communities.

Esperanza's family, however, does differ from the larger Mango Street community in their approach to education. In spite of their lower-class circumstances, they explicitly (though briefly) express a desire for Esperanza to take school seriously. Papa's input on the matter is limited to encouraging her to get a job to pay for the Catholic high school, which "cost a lot, and Papa said nobody went to public school unless you wanted to turn out bad" (Cisneros, *HMS* 53). Her mother's encouragement to do well in school is more direct, though nearly as concise. "Esperanza," her mother tells

her, “you go to school. Study hard” (91). She illustrates her point by using her *comadres* as examples of what may happen to Esperanza if she chooses some form of social acceptance over the independence that success in school might offer: “Look at [...] Izaura whose husband left and Yolanda whose husband is dead. Got to take care all your own, she says shaking her head” (91). The brevity of the encouragement that Esperanza receives from her family to do well in school does not limit its efficacy. By explicitly valuing Esperanza’s education, her parents begin the process of helping the school and home spheres of influence begin to overlap. That is, although they encourage her to fulfill multiple roles in order to meet their family’s obligations, they also encourage her to do well in school. This is the beginning of the kind of family/school partnership that Epstein alludes to—a partnership that aligns the expectations of both schools and families and allows students to succeed both at home and at school. In stating the importance of school, Esperanza’s family makes the first attempts of breaking the contract of vagueness by showing interest in their daughter’s schooling—the early stages of developing a voice.

As Henry and Esperanza move within these spheres of influence—their schools, communities, and homes—one thing becomes increasingly clear: as long as their spheres of influence maintain such differing philosophies and expectations, they will never be able to fully participate in each of the spheres simultaneously. For Henry, this manifests itself in his adult experiences with Ahjuhma, the woman who takes care of his family after his mother passes away. Representative of at least one aspect of Henry’s ethnic community, Ahjuhma is troubled by Henry’s Americanization, which is portrayed through his half-Korean, half-Anglo family. She clearly doesn’t accept Mitt because of “his round, only half-Korean eyes and the reddish highlights in his hair” or Lelia, whom

she calls a “nasty American cat” (Lee, *NS* 71). Later, Henry generalizes the concern Ahjuhma has with the apparent dilution of his Koreanness by describing how his mother would point to his father as “the best example of our people: how he was able to discard his excellent education and training [...] before he was able to set straight his mind and spirit and make a life for his family” (333). Henry, then, is expected to choose his family and ethnic heritage above the opportunities that the American school system might offer, since, according to his mother at least, any ambition above a caring for family is misplaced.

Esperanza, too, realizes that full participation in any of her spheres will limit the possibility of her participation in the other two. In fact, her plan to go as far as she can educationally will ultimately take her away from the Mango Street neighborhood. While such a move will clearly fulfill the ambitions she states in the first vignette of the text to have a “real house,” it is equally clear that leaving her community and family behind has significant disadvantages as well (Cisneros, *HMS* 4). Besides giving Esperanza the dubious opportunity of remaking herself in the image of Cathy by distancing herself from the problems of a lower-class neighborhood, moving from Mango Street will also mean separation from her family with whom she shares a special connection. Likewise, choosing to take part more fully in home and community life spells tragedy for Esperanza given the myriad examples of women in her neighborhood whose lives are bound by their decisions to allow school to influence them only cursorily.

In examining this three-way conundrum of choosing to what extent to participate in their spheres of influence, Henry and Esperanza confront what James Kyung-Jin Lee calls “the ethics of one’s success and another’s impoverishment, individual rise and

collective fall, [...] the price of privilege and the cost of poverty” (232). As the two characters try to determine on which side of the ethics they would prefer to be—a decision that will be examined in greater detail in the next section—it becomes apparent that such a decision even exists because of the miscommunication ensured by the contract of vagueness. The failure of federal education policy to acknowledge linguistic and cultural difference in students and the ELL students’ and families’ superficial engagement in schools creates a barrier between the school, family, and community spheres of influence. The resulting gaps between these spheres of influence effect a real dilemma for ELL students like Henry and Esperanza whose decisions to reject school in favor of family and community or vice versa must result in a net loss. Seen in this light, the two characters’ progress toward academic success is hindered regardless of whether they choose family and community or school as their sphere of choice.

^{iv} In speaking of “traditional” beliefs for any group of people, it is necessary to proceed with caution, given the wide variety of individual diversity present in any particular group. Nonetheless, speaking of traditional beliefs in broad terms is critical in pinpointing Henry’s and Esperanza’s locations with relation to their often incompatible spheres of influence. Therefore, it is important to note that delineating the differences between cultures’ traditional beliefs is not here meant to imply inferiority to a dominant culture but simply to highlight the tension those differences create.

THE SEARCH FOR SELF:

(E)RACING IDENTITY FOR THE SAKE OF EDUCATION

The distance between Henry's and Esperanza's family, community, and school spheres of influence discussed in the previous section forces them to a decision. They must choose to align themselves with either the philosophies of their schools or the philosophies of their homes and communities, yet deciding to participate fully in either sphere comes at great cost. Put to such a crisis, the decision about which sphere to participate in most fully becomes a question of identity—which, according to developmental psychologist Erik Erikson, is the main objective of the adolescent years. In describing the urgency of identity development, he explains,

In the long run it is only having a genuine sense of who we are that keeps our feet on the ground and our heads up to an elevation from which we can see clearly where we are, what we are, and what we stand for. (110)

In addition to these long-lasting effects described by Erikson, the issue of identity also has more immediate effects on students and their academic careers. Professors of psychology Carmen G. Arroyo and Edward Zigler have found that “academically successful” minority students “achieve their success by adopting behaviors and attitudes that distance them from their culture of origin”—that is, minority students become academically successful to the extent that they become “raceless” (903; see also Fordham and Ogbu).

Educational growth for Henry and Esperanza, then, depends on the identities they choose to assume and the spheres in which they choose to participate, but both available options involve significant sacrifices. If, as Arroyo and Zigler claim, choosing to identify

with their ethnic communities spells failure academically for the two protagonists, that decision will snowball into other negative consequences for both characters. For Esperanza, choosing not to succeed in school means choosing to give up on her dream house and thereby submitting to one of the restricted roles in which she sees the other women in her community. For Henry, academic failure isolates him from the well-off Anglo community surrounding him, in addition to ensuring that his post-graduation life will resemble the legacy his father left him, wherein “you worked from before sunrise to the dead of night” (Lee, *NS* 47). Yet choosing to be academically successful and raceless is equally problematic because of the inherent personal sacrifices that the characters must make in order to abandon their ethnicities. Arroyo and Zigler explain that minority students who shed their ethnicity in order to more closely approximate the dominant culture often experience “cultural alienation, depression, and anxiety” in addition to “loneliness and psychological pain” (904).

Because of these inherent sacrifices, Henry’s and Esperanza’s search for an identity seems doomed to one kind of failure or another, making each character hesitant to commit to a cultural sense of self. Both novels highlight this anxiety about the characters’ identity development early on. For Henry, this anxiety first manifests itself to readers in his reaction to the poem Lelia gives him as she leaves for the islands. Although he claims he originally thought of the list as a love poem, it’s clear that as time goes on, he comes to accept it as a compendium of who he is; he carries it permanently “in [his] wallet, as a kind of personal asterisk” (Lee, *NS* 4). His easy and apparently complete acceptance of Lelia’s less-than-generous description of him as the final word on his identity belies Henry’s own lack of self-confidence in articulating his identity. He

says that he “had always thought [he] could be anyone, perhaps several anyones at once” (127). Although such a statement sounds strikingly like a personal affirmation of the ever-elusive American dream, this chameleon attitude instead provides Henry with the dubious opportunity of becoming a corporate spy, “someone who could reside in his one place and take half-steps out whenever he wished” (127). By taking this secretive approach to his identity, however, he inadvertently proves that his sense of self is not well defined. As Tina Chen points out,

Henry cannot always distinguish his facts from his own narrative impulses: his confusion about which stories to tell and how to tell them results from his multiple betrayals, each one contributing to the unraveling of both his narrative and identity. A good father, a dutiful son, a loving husband, a trustworthy friend, and accomplished spy: he is, at times, all of these things as well as none of them. Lost behind the masks and impostures he effects as part of his job, he discovers that his consummate ability to cast for others “the perfect picture of a face” (12) carries with it a heavy price: the dissolution of self-coherence. (639)

For Esperanza, anxiety about her identity manifests itself when she discusses the implications of her name, none of which are positive. In English, her name sounds “funny as if the syllables were made out of tin and hurt the roof of your mouth” (Cisneros, *HMS* 11). Worse, in Spanish her name means not only “too many letters,” but also “sadness[,]. . . waiting[,]. . . songs like sobbing” (10). As if the linguistic associations weren’t enough to make Esperanza feel that her name is an inadequate representation of who she wants to be, the fact that she was named for her great-grandmother who “looked

out the window her whole life” clinches the deal (11). Esperanza, after all, does not “want to inherit her [great-grandmother’s] place by the window” (11). Instead, she “would like to baptize [herself] under a new name, a name more like the real [her], the one nobody sees. Esperanza as Lisandra or Maritza or Zeze the X” (11).

Esperanza’s approach to her identity resembles Henry’s: the characters’ real identities are hidden—perhaps even from Henry and Esperanza themselves—untried, and arguably vague. The amorphous quality of their identities comes as a result of the complex interplay between the two cultures in which they spend the majority of their time, the ethnic background of their home lives and the Anglo-American culture of their schools. As the novels examine the beginnings of the characters’ declarations of confused identity and continue along that vein, it becomes increasingly clear that Henry’s and Esperanza’s anxieties about who they are and who they want to become not only affect their ability to perform scholastically but are also exacerbated by their interactions at school, where the focus on middle-class Anglo-American culture constantly undercuts Henry’s and Esperanza’s ethnic backgrounds. Because of these competing claims on the two characters’ identities, they begin a process of rejecting and reclaiming their ethnicity in a pattern that follows psychologist Jean S. Phinney’s proposed model of ethnic identity development, broadly accepted as the predominant theory on ethnic identity development. The differing speeds at which Henry and Esperanza move through Phinney’s three stages illustrate the effect their ethnic identity has on their education by showing how integral an “achieved” ethnic identity is to lasting scholastic success (Phinney 38). As they move through the final stage of ethnic identity development, however, Henry’s and Esperanza’s understanding of self moves them to social advocacy,

evidence of their ultimate rejection of the contract of vagueness and their refusal to participate in it any longer.

Relying on Erikson's diction, Phinney's first stage, diffusion/foreclosure, begins with "little or no exploration of one's ethnicity and no clear understanding of the issues [of ethnic difference]" (38). Henry and Esperanza both appear to maintain a certain amount of naïveté with regards to their ethnicity when they recount their early school and social experiences. Henry's ideas of what school will be like illustrate his lack of awareness of difference: "I thought English would be a version of our Korean. Like another kind of coat you could wear" (Lee, *NS* 233). When his difficulties with learning English prove otherwise, he realizes his difference from other students through his teacher's "therapy, struck in sublime meter on [his] palms and the backs of [his] calves" (233). Henry's education in ethnic difference continues on the school playground where his fellow kindergarteners call him "Marble Mouth" because of his struggles with English, and the older black students call him "China boy" (234). In this first exposure to school (and, simultaneously, to the multiple cultures of the student body) Henry is introduced to and then constantly reminded of his ethnic difference. As per Phinney's findings on Asian-American students, once Henry is aware of his ethnic difference, he adopts a negative attitude toward his own ethnic group (46). As an adult, when he listens to two deli workers—one Korean and one Hispanic—talking outside, he admits, "I know I would have ridiculed them when I was young: I would cringe and grow ashamed and angry at those funny tones of my father and his workers, all that Konglish, Spanglish, Jive. Just talk right, I wanted to yell, just talk right for once in your sorry lives" (337). This negative attitude toward ethnic difference marks his initial participation in the

contract of vagueness by indicating his own desire to be able to speak without drawing attention to himself. Such a desire to fit in belies Henry's reticence to speak out against the kind of educational inequity he experiences since acting as a voice for other ELL students would mark him as different from his classmates.

Revelations at school about ethnic difference also mark Esperanza's experience with diffusion/foreclosure. One day when her family was living on Loomis, one of her teachers passes by while Esperanza plays outside. When the teacher finds out where Esperanza lives, her insensitive response—"you live *there*?"—makes Esperanza look at her home as if for the first time (Cisneros, *HMS* 5). She sees "the paint peeling, [and the] wooden bars Papa had nailed on the windows so we wouldn't fall out" and her teacher's tone makes her "feel like nothing" (5). The difference between what Esperanza accepts as an ordinary part of her life—her home—and what her teacher sees as an unlivable hovel demonstrates Esperanza's difference from the mainstream at school. As Nicholas Sloboda says, such a "seemingly innocent exchange" highlights how Esperanza is "treated insensitively by someone who is supposed to be aware of the plight of the lower class and oppressed" (96). Additionally, given that Esperanza's home is representative of her family and community, her exchange with her teacher points unequivocally to the stark difference between her home and community sphere of influence and the school's.

After this experience (and perhaps others like it not recounted in the novel), Esperanza's understanding of the differences between ethnic groups takes on stereotypical overtones. Such a reaction is a natural outgrowth of her initial and limited interactions with other ethnicities. Rather than adopting a negative attitude toward her own ethnic group like Henry does, however, she instead becomes afraid of difference. In

“Those Who Don’t,” she describes the reaction of Anglo-Americans “who are lost and got [to her neighborhood] by mistake”: “they think we’re dangerous. They think we will attack them with shiny knives. They are stupid people” (Cisneros, *HMS* 28). This articulation of racial prejudice isn’t reserved just for those who “come into [her] neighborhood scared,” however (28). She admits that those in her “all brown all around” neighborhood have a similar reaction to unfamiliar surroundings: “watch us drive into a neighborhood of another color and watch our knees go shakity-shake and our car windows get rolled up tight and our eyes look straight ahead” (28). Assigning such reactions to entire ethnic groups demonstrates Esperanza’s early conclusions about ethnic difference: although all groups have the same reaction to difference (fear), the distinctions between the groups are constant and part of the natural order. These conclusions make it possible for her to stereotype the philosophies of entire neighborhoods by saying that the “people who live on hills”—presumably Anglos—“sleep so close to the stars they forget those of us who live too much on earth. They don’t look down at all except to be content to live on hills” (86). At the same time, she stereotypes her own community as having to deal with “last week’s garbage or fear of rats” (87). This stereotyping sets the stage for her complicity in the contract of vagueness because the differences her stereotypes delineate create a demeaning identity for her ethnic group. For Esperanza, then, maintaining a lack of voice in school is a sort of self-defense, since requesting accommodations based on her Mexican roots would mark her as negatively different (i.e., dealing with rats) from the Anglo-American world of her school (where people live close to the stars).

Because Esperanza's approach to ethnic difference is initially so polarizing, her only conceptual alternative to her own ethnic identity is to rewrite it in Anglo terms. This exploration of ethnic identity marks the beginning of Phinney's second stage, moratorium, in which both characters spend the majority of their time. According to Phinney, this stage is marked by "evidence of exploration accompanied by some confusion about the meaning of one's own ethnicity" (38). For both Henry and Esperanza, this confusion encourages the climax of their participation in the contract of vagueness as they experiment with Anglo culture (and, in so doing, feel somewhat raceless). As they continue in Phinney's second stage and begin experimenting with their own ethnicities, however, they begin to recognize the insidious effects of their participation in the contract of vagueness, resulting in their eventual rejection of it.

Of course, for Esperanza, identity revolves around her potential to one day own a middle-class house, a goal, which, she eventually realizes, is intrinsically tied to the social mobility she hopes to achieve through her education. Initially, however, her plan simply consists of living in "a real house. One [she] could point to" (Cisneros, *HMS* 5). This initial phase of her plan represents her position in the first of Phinney's stages, but as Esperanza becomes more ambivalent about her ethnicity, her plan to get a house reflects her approach to her ethnicity: eventually, the plan takes on Anglo overtones, evolving to include leaving Mango Street and all its problems behind in order to achieve the status that a middle-class house will bring her. In fact, when Esperanza watches the mysterious Sally from afar, she projects her own dreams onto the lonely girl:

Do you wish your feet would one day keep walking and take you far away from Mango Street, far away and maybe your feet would stop in front of a

house, a nice one with flowers and big windows and steps for you to climb up two by two upstairs to where a room is waiting for you. And if you opened the little window latch and gave it a shove, the windows would swing open, all the sky would come in. There'd be no nosy neighbors watching, no motorcycles and cars, no sheets and towels and laundry. (82-83)

Significantly, this version of Esperanza's plan sounds suspiciously like something Cathy (arguably Esperanza's only Anglo peer) says. In talking with Esperanza soon after the Corderos move to Mango Street, Cathy mentions that her family has decided to move a little farther north because "the neighborhood is getting bad" (13). Un-racing herself into a less malicious form of Cathy is Esperanza's attempt to escape the admittedly many problems of her ethnically diverse community, and minimizing her race is an effort intrinsically tied to her success at school. Because of the lone example of Alicia, the girl who studies all night and attends the university because "she doesn't want to spend her whole life in a factory or behind a rolling pin," Esperanza knows there is an exit route from Mango Street (31-32). She therefore goes to the expensive Catholic high school and receives as much encouragement as she can about her writing from her aunt and other neighbors (53). All of this bolsters her belief that, unlike all the others stuck in her Mango Street neighborhood, she does not belong.

Esperanza's participation in the contract of vagueness at school also contributes to her degree of racelessness. Reuben Sánchez points out that the multiple references to children's literature throughout *The House on Mango Street* serve as "metonyms through which Cisneros develops the home versus homelessness theme and the rejection of the

patriarchal myth theme” (235). Esperanza recites “The Walrus and the Carpenter” for Ruthie (a poem in which the oysters are tricked by the carpenter and the walrus and then eaten), describes Ruthie’s whistling as “beautiful like the Emperor’s nightingale” (alluding to Hans Christian Andersen’s “The Nightingale” in which a live nightingale is caged and ignored), and uses the vignette “There Was an Old Woman She Had So Many Children She Didn’t Know What to Do” to describe Rosa Vargas’ problems (Cisneros, *HMS* 88, 29). Equally important to any themes Cisneros develops through these specific literature references is the fact that Esperanza’s familiarity with and apparent interest in children’s literature is limited to English-language works of European origin. With such an appetite for literature, Esperanza limits her reading to the Anglo world of her teachers, who, perhaps, encourage this limitation. Using their own education as the basis for the way they educate their students, Esperanza’s probably Anglo-American teachers likely have little experience with literature from other cultures. Even through her references to literature, then, Esperanza chooses to participate in the contract of vagueness by accepting the literature of the dominant culture rather than seeking out the literature of her minority group.

Henry, too, exhibits feelings of ethnic ambivalence because of his school experiences. His willing participation in the contract of vagueness manifests itself through his desire to define himself in non-Korean terms, which is perhaps natural, given that he grows up in an Anglo community and is therefore constantly aware of the divisions his difference creates between him and his classmates. While he, “unable to remember all the poet’s womanly names,” refers to Percy Bysshe Shelley as “Peanut Butter Shelley” (Lee, *NS* 233), his classmates recite Shelley’s verses “punctiliously,”

especially Alice Eckles, whose height, beauty and skin (which has an “oniony sheen”) Henry both “adore[s] and despise[s]” (234). His physical separation from his classmates in Remedial Speech—his school’s solution to the problem of helping ELL students succeed is to enroll them in special education classes—only exacerbates his desire to be more similar to his Anglo classmates. Henry knows Remedial Speech is a place for “misfits,” the kids with “dirty hair and oversized mouths and shrunken foreheads,” who are, “in [his] estimation [...] as dumb as the dead. By association, though, so was [he]” (235). Naturally, then, Henry spends his recess time not just practicing his English but imitating his classmates, “rewhisper[ing] all the words and sounds [he] had messed up earlier that morning, trying to invoke how the [other students...] would speak” (234).

Henry’s attempts to diminish his ethnic difference also reveal themselves in his understanding of world history. He goes so far in high school as to give an oral report on the Korean War that uses his junior encyclopedia’s version of events rather than his father’s own painful experiences: “my report was about the threat of Communism,” he tells Lelia, “the Chinese Army, how MacArthur was a visionary, that Truman should have listened to him. How lucky all of us Koreans were” (Lee, *NS* 242). Ultimately, during his school years, Henry has little choice other than to reject his Koreanness in favor of Americanness: with his mother dead and his father unapproachable, Henry’s only examples and the majority of his instruction come from mainstream America via his schooling, where the narratives about his ethnicity and his native country clearly undermine their value in favor of supporting the mythos of America the Beautiful. Henry’s early academic career can therefore be seen as the result of falling into step with

the dominant culture and accepting their narrative of events, at the cost of understanding his own ethnicity.

The shame that both Henry and Esperanza exhibit as a result of their non-Anglo backgrounds is perhaps the worst casualty of their complicity in the contract of vagueness, which is illustrated in the problems both characters encounter by smothering their minority status with their attempts to erase their race. Henry, for example, does not realize the extent to which he has tried to disguise his Koreanness until Lelia points it out to him, telling him when they first meet that though his English is perfect, “[he] look[s] like someone listening to himself” in a way that belies the fact that “[he’s] not a native speaker” (Lee, *NS* 12). Long after his schooling is finished, even when his son Mitt is alive, Henry does his best to hide his Korean ancestry, insisting that only Lelia read to their son, fearing that exposing the child to his own non-native speech would “handicap him, stunt the speech blossoming in his brain” (239). Esperanza, too, spends much of the novel denying her heritage by claiming homelessness rather than identifying her Mango Street neighborhood as home. Encouraged by their school experiences to deny their ethnicity in favor of racelessness, Henry and Esperanza originally assume that assimilation to the dominant American culture can be complete.

As Henry eventually articulates, however, ELL students’ complicity in the contract of vagueness limits the efficacy of their education. The most that he and other ELL students gain from shedding their ethnicity is expertise in imitation. He recognizes that his efforts to imitate Anglo-American society—which he refers to as “all of my American education”—instigated his loss of ethnic heritage (Lee, *NS* 320). He explains that learning “every lesson of accent and idiom” is the immigrant student’s right (320),

but the lessons are mutually destructive for both the immigrant students and the dominant culture, both of whom end up losing part of themselves in requiring conformity.

Esperanza, too, realizes that conforming to the ideals of those “who live on hills [and] sleep so close to the stars” just so that she can escape Mango Street could result in a perspective she doesn’t want (Cisneros, *HMS* 86). Rather than losing her race so that she can become one of those who “don’t look down at all except to be content to live on hills” (86) Esperanza realizes the long-term negative effects of renouncing her ethnicity for the destructive contract and recommits to her own ethnic heritage: “One day I’ll own my own house,” she says, “but I won’t forget who I am or where I came from” (87).

Thus both characters eventually realize that complete assimilation into the broader American culture is not just unlikely—given their linguistic and physical differences—but also undesirable. This realization pushes them to extend their moratorium period as they begin exploration of their own ethnicities, a process that parallels their repudiation of the contract of vagueness. As Phinney suggests, Henry has, like other Asian-Americans, “tended more toward assimilation than ethnic pride and pluralism” (47). This indicates that Henry’s participation in the contract of vagueness extended throughout his high school and college years, resulting in his adopting many of the attitudes, values, and beliefs of the mainstream Anglo culture while sacrificing his understanding of his Korean heritage. His resulting cultural alienation and depression—evidenced by his problematic relationships with both his father and his wife, not to mention his treatment of his son’s death—are typical of ethnic minorities who approach school by distancing themselves from their ethnic groups (Arroyo and Zigler 904). While Henry’s early decision to mimic the dominant culture has allowed him a substantial degree of academic success, his

failure to acknowledge his ethnic difference has tarnished his sense of self. Relying on imitation of the dominant culture to facilitate his academic success has allowed him to become “anyone, perhaps several anyones at once” (Lee, *NS* 127), yet in so doing, Henry fractures his identity. Each of his relationships calls for a different part of his identity (a role-changing spy, a Korean son, an American husband, and so forth), such that when he is left to himself, he has little idea of who he is.

As Henry gropes throughout the novel for a better understanding of self than the one he developed partially as a result of his schooling, he clearly regrets not taking the time to fully understand the elements of ethnic heritage available to him, specifically his family and his native language. A need to understand his mother and father and subsequently himself colors his references to his parents. Yet a fear that he has never known either of them—and therefore will always be a stranger to himself—pervades the pages of the novel. When Henry and Lelia begin the process of cleaning out his father’s house, Lelia, not Henry, is the one who can recognize the pictures of his mother. When, moments later, Henry explains how he wanted his parents to act less Korean and more like his white friends’ parents, he reveals his lack of ability to understand his parents or himself:

“I wanted just once for my mother and father to relax a little bit with me. Not treat me so much like a *son*, like a figure in a long line of figures. They treated each other like that, too. Like it was their duty and not their love.”

Lelia was quiet to this. “It’s incredible, isn’t it,” she then said, “that it’s so clear what we get from them?” (Lee, *NS* 221)

The regret with which he reflects on his relationship with his parents is most evident, however, when he watches two of Lelia's Laotian students leave with their fathers. Henry describes how this little family will spend the rest of the day selling their "gray-market goods" until an inspector comes along and asks to see their license. Then, "one of the fathers will stall in broken English while the others hastily pack the merchandise into the van. *No trouble, no trouble*, he'll say" (238). As they drive away, both fathers and their sons will together call "no trouble" out of the van. Henry's regrets about his relationship with his own father become clear as he analyzes the situation he has projected: their "[strident], strong-armed, father-son" refrain "is the last language they will share" (238). Significantly, this last shared language refers to more than the fathers' and sons' differing abilities in their native and adopted languages; it also indicates their future inability to share their lives and their cultures. Henry's participation in the contract of vagueness encouraged him to give up a shared language with his family, which, in turn, is what has kept him from understanding his family and therefore his own background.

Henry's desire to be able to speak Korean to John Kwang also illustrates his regrets about his loss of ethnicity: "somehow," he says, describing his conversation with Kwang, "our English can't touch what I want to say. I want to call the simple Korean back to him the way I once could when I was [Kwang's son] Peter's age" (Lee, *NS* 235). He knows, however, that such an exchange in Korean cannot happen, given that when he speaks his first language, the "words creep out [...], the notes uncertain, tentative. [...] I know every pitch and note but can no longer call them forth" (267). Because of his

inability to communicate in his first language, Henry is cut off from the most intimate connections he shares with his homeland, his parents and their language.

Unlike Henry, whose ethnic investigations begin too late to have an effect on his education, Esperanza constantly approaches her ethnicity during the moratorium stage: living in a community of ethnic minorities where she has daily interaction with people who share her ethnic heritage makes acknowledging her ethnicity nearly inescapable. Additionally, because her plan to break out of the cycle of poverty never wavers throughout the book, she never turns her back completely on Anglo society in order to more fully discover her Mexican roots. Instead, she develops strong relationships with other members of her ethnic group throughout the novel, learning both the positive and the negative aspects of what it means to be Mexican-American. In doing so, she develops pride about her ethnic heritage while simultaneously bolstering her ambitions to leave the Mango Street neighborhood. Because the social mobility that education provides is crucial to this plan, the relationship between her ethnicity and her education becomes increasingly clear as she recognizes how integral her ethnicity is. This recognition of the importance of both her ethnicity and her education also marks her refusal to continue participating in the contract of vagueness.

As Esperanza develops relationships with others, notably her family, she demonstrates her desire to identify herself with her ethnic group. Throughout Esperanza's interactions with Lucy and Rachel, she and Nenny constantly side with one another. First, when Esperanza sees a house that she says "looks like Mexico," Lucy and Rachel "look at [her] like [she's] crazy, but before they can let out a laugh, Nenny says: Yes, that's Mexico all right. That's what I was thinking exactly" (Cisneros, *HMS* 18).

Later, when Esperanza and her friends are talking about being prepared for the changes their bodies will make as they approach puberty, Nenny makes a comment that Esperanza thinks is ludicrous. Rather than ridiculing her, however, Esperanza agrees with her sister “before Lucy or Rachel can make fun of her. [Nenny] is stupid alright, but she *is* [Esperanza’s] sister” (50). These two examples provide special insight into Esperanza’s relationship with Nenny. Not only do Esperanza’s and Nenny’s interactions reveal their similarities and commitment to each other, they also show that Esperanza will choose to support her sister over impressing her African-American friends. Because of this familial commitment, Esperanza’s identity is necessarily firmly grounded in her ethnicity: she cannot reject her Mexican-American roots without distancing herself from Nenny and the rest of her family.

Later, Esperanza’s relationship with her aunt Lupe plays a similar role: it reinforces her commitment to her family over her friends, but at the same time it also strengthens Esperanza’s desire to leave the barrio. While Esperanza clearly has a strong relationship with her invalid aunt, she also dreads going to visit her because of the filthiness of her house. Lupe later becomes part of a game for Esperanza and her friends: “We pretended [to be Lupe] with our heads thrown back, our arms limp and useless, dangling like the dead [...]. We screamed in the weak voice of a parrot for Totchy to come and wash those dishes” (Cisneros, *HMS* 61). When Lupe dies, however, Esperanza’s remorse is almost tangible. “Most likely I will die and go to hell,” she says, “and most likely I deserve to be there... because of what we did to Aunt Lupe” (58). Although Esperanza took part in the game that ridiculed her dying aunt, her remorse at treating her so poorly acts as a catalyst for her to “dream the dreams” of escaping the

cycle of poverty because Lupe had encouraged Esperanza to write (61). “You just remember to keep writing, Esperanza,” Lupe tells her. “You must keep writing. It will keep you free” (61). These interactions with Lupe at once tie Esperanza to her family and encourage her to achieve more than they have. These positive associations with members of her own ethnic minority group provide a stimulus to Esperanza to be proud of her Mexican-American heritage while at the same time sending the message that school is important. By reaffirming to Esperanza both the importance of her ethnic identity and her education, her family replaces her earlier stereotypes with more positive associations. Empowered by the recognition of her ethnic group’s worth, Esperanza can stop participating in the contract of vagueness by speaking up in school without fear of embarrassment for the stereotypes she had previously assigned. Her family offers Esperanza a rare and invaluable support system in helping develop a secure sense of identity without having to sacrifice her potential for social mobility in school. As such, in spite of Arroyo and Zigler’s findings that minority students must often become raceless in order to succeed academically, Esperanza will be able both to retain her ethnic identity and succeed in school because of her family support. This strong relationship with her community and family paves the way for her to reach the final stage of ethnic identity development.

As Esperanza and Henry continue to explore their own ethnicities, their increasing commitment to their ethnic backgrounds signals their participation in the last of Phinney’s stages. This final stage, achievement of ethnic identity, calls for a continuation of the “evidence of exploration” that characterizes the second stage of ethnic identity development (38). In this final stage, however, such evidence is “accompanied by a

clear, secure understanding and acceptance of one's identity" (38). While both Henry and Esperanza continue to explore what it means to be a minority American, the two characters also arrive at the same conclusion in the final pages of the books: a more complete sense of self integrates both the American and minority aspects of their identity as well as a form of social advocacy. This realization coupled with the action implied by the end of both novels presages Henry's and Esperanza's final refusal to participate any longer in the contract of vagueness, either as actors in their own education or as influencing parties for other ELL students. Both Henry's and Esperanza's willingness to work on behalf of their communities indicates a necessary change in the attitude of ELL students and their family and communities, and therefore marks the beginning of decades of attempts at communication between federal education policy and ELL communities.

For Henry, his son Mitt's death acts a catalyst for the interplay between his two nationalities. In retrospect, he identifies the problems of hiding his ethnicity in order to appear more "American," describing his former attempts to keep Mitt free from the Korean "handicap[s]" he himself experienced as "my silliness" (Lee, *NS* 239). Barring himself from his son's bedtime rituals failed to make Mitt any less than half Korean; it did not keep the neighborhood kids from calling him names (just like they did to Henry in his childhood). Instead, as Henry remembers the mutually adoring relationship between his son and his father, he finally recognizes the possibility of harmony between the dual components of his identity as personified in the family relationships between his Korean father, his American wife, and his half-Korean, half-American son: "Mitt was beginning to appreciate the differences in the three of us," Henry claims (although it is likely Henry himself who is projecting the appreciation of these differences onto his son); "he could

mimic the finest gradations in our English and Korean, those notes of who we were, and perhaps he could imagine, if ever briefly, that this was our truest world, rich with disparate melodies” (240).

Like Mitt, Esperanza realizes the benefits of integrating her nationalities much earlier than Henry. A conversation with Alicia reinforces what Esperanza perhaps already knows: that “like it or not [she is] *Mango Street*” (Cisneros, *HMS* 107). The three sisters who appear when Lucy and Rachel’s baby sister dies also guide her to a more culturally integrative solution by suggesting that after she leaves, she “must remember to come back for the others...who cannot leave as easily as [she] can” (105). Both comments indicate how integral Esperanza’s ethnicity is to a more complete sense of success (one that is both economic and psychological), something that has previously eluded her as she has suppressed her differences to conform more fully to a definition of middle-class success. By combining her early, mostly economically-based plans of getting a dream house with her commitment to her family, Esperanza achieves an ethnic identity that allows for both her ethnic background (through her connection to her family and desire to return to the barrio) and her success at school (which will facilitate her economic success).

Her need to return to the barrio—which itself is a symbol of her cultural dualism—is also illustrated more subtly through the stories she tells, even before she realizes how integral both her Mexicanness and Americanness are to her identity. In speaking of Marin’s mostly anonymous “brazer” who dies without family or friends, Esperanza articulates what “the ones left behind” in the far-away country will think: “Geraldo—he went north... we never heard from him again” (Cisneros, *HMS* 66). The

tragedy inherent in Geraldo's family's never-verified loss is likely not something that Esperanza wants to duplicate with her own family. Her deep commitment to her family—illustrated, among other things, by her “hold[ing] and hold[ing] and hold[ing]” her Papa (57), who “crumples like a coat” when her *abuelito* dies (56)—will continue to influence her long after she has left the family home.

In recognizing that their identities cannot be sufficiently described by claiming only one nationality, the characters look toward a future wherein the duality of their identities will allow them to go farther than their attempts at emphasizing one nationality over another have. In the final pages of the novels, however, both Henry's and Esperanza's perspectives change as they achieve a secure sense of ethnic identity. Finally comfortable as ethnic minority Americans, both characters turn their interest toward other members of their ethnic communities, hoping that they can offer to their fellow community members what they have experienced themselves: the opportunity for greater access to education without having to sacrifice ethnicity in order to achieve it—in short, access to education by disengaging with the contract of vagueness.

Henry indicates his desire to help his community by retiring from corporate spying and subsequently spending his time among his ethnic community—this time in an attempt to help rather than exploit them. At first, he spends “most of [his] days” walking the streets of New York “search[ing] for [his community],” “stop[ping] in the doorways of every smoke shop and deli and grocer [he] can find” (Lee, *NS* 344). After lingering in each establishment long enough that he makes the owners uncomfortable—after all, “they want you to buy something, or hawk what you have, or else shove off”—he chooses something to buy and leaves (344). These daily visits to the immigrants of the city are

supposed to be mutually beneficial for Henry and the community he has decided to rejoin. Not only does he contribute to their financial success by exercising his consumerism locally, they also contribute to his sense of community by allowing them to see “the shades of skin [he] knows, all the mouths of bad teeth, the speaking that is too loud, the cooking smells, body smells, the English, and then the phrases of English, their grunts to get by” (344). Perhaps most significant in Henry’s return to his community, however, is the assistance he provides to Lelia as she freelances as an ESL educator in the public schools. Although he and Lelia both know that her one-time appearances in schools across the city will not “make much difference” to the students academically (348), the work they provide in the schools is important because they provide an example of “a pale white woman horsing with the language to show them it’s fine to mess it all up” (349). Equally vital is Henry’s role: “some [students] wonder in their looks as they check again that my voice moves in time with my mouth, truly belongs to my face” (349). By telling each of the students that they have been “a good citizen” and then “speaking a dozen lovely and native languages” as they bid the children farewell, Lelia and Henry give the students an opportunity to see themselves as citizens of a pluralistic society.

Esperanza’s intention to help her community is stated succinctly in the final lines of *The House on Mango Street*. After explaining that she is “too strong for [Mango Street] to keep [her] here forever. One day [she] will go away,” she describes the reactions of her friends and neighbors:

[They] will say, What happened to that Esperanza? Where did she go with all those books and paper? Why did she march so far away?

They will not know I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot out. (Cisneros, *HMS* 110)

Her method of helping those “who cannot out” is dependent on “all those books and paper” she carries with her when she leaves (110). For Esperanza, education is clearly the key that will grant her social mobility. By educating herself, Esperanza chooses to actively work to change her family’s and community’s social status rather than adopting her mother’s more passive efforts (like winning the lottery) to get “what we can’t have” (86). Viewing Sandra Cisneros’ efforts to reach out to the barrio as similar to Esperanza’s—as Cisneros herself does—gives further insight into the methods Esperanza will use to advocate for her community. Citing an interview with Cisneros, Bridget Kevane explains, “In many ways *The House on Mango Street* parallels Cisneros’s own journey from an urban Latino neighborhood to her role as a social advocate” (48). After graduating from the Iowa Writers’ Workshop in 1978, Cisneros spent six years “working with Latino students, high-school dropouts, pregnant teenagers, and others” (Kevane 48). Esperanza’s stated intention in the last paragraph of the book—“I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind”—indicates the similarity of her plans to Cisneros’.

The efforts that both Esperanza and Henry make in improving the education of their ethnic communities point toward their refusal to participate in the contract of vagueness. By speaking up for educational reform through their attempts to help ELL students, these characters take their places beside the Chinese students represented in *Lau v. Nichols* and the student protesters of the 1968 Los Angeles walkouts. As the ELL communities thus begin to exercise a voice, the contract of vagueness begins to crumble, a process which will be examined in the final section. Inherent to Henry’s and

Esperanza's educational advocacy with their communities, however, is their development of an ethnic identity. As they come to embrace their ethnicity, their participation in education becomes more active and meaningful, encouraging their future participation in their communities. Additionally, their newly achieved sense of ethnic identity is the crowning mark of their educational coming of age. In spite of the dissonance between their spheres of influence and their initial role confusion, Henry and Esperanza have both arrived at a juncture where they recognize that they can increase their own potential (and that of their communities) by working with the educational system, regardless of its problems.

DISMANTLING THE CONTRACT OF VAGUENESS

For both Henry and Esperanza, the contract of vagueness represents a significant hurdle in accessing their education and subsequently in developing an understanding of themselves as individuals and as members of the larger society. Yet as both characters come to recognize the ways in which their silent participation in school contributes to the contract of vagueness and restricts their education and sense of identity, Henry and Esperanza successfully navigate the competing expectations of their spheres of influence and thereby establish an ethnic identity that encourages more active participation in their education. If, as Eleanor Roosevelt has suggested, “the true purpose of education is to produce citizens,” Henry’s and Esperanza’s actions at the end of *Native Speaker* and *The House on Mango Street* suggest that the two characters have succeeded in coming of age educationally. The focus that both characters place on their communities through education illustrates that they have accepted their ethnic and American citizenship by looking for ways to encourage members of their ethnic communities to enjoy fuller access to the larger American community through education rather than remaining ghettoized in their ethnic enclaves. That is, by taking responsibility for other ELL students like themselves, Henry and Esperanza demonstrate a kind of citizenship dependent on a successful education. By focusing on their communities, they also gesture toward the kind of educational reform necessary to break down the contract of vagueness—a responsibility that belongs to schools, communities, and even readers alike.

However, defining these protagonists’ coming of age in terms of education is not something that either Sandra Cisneros or Chang-rae Lee intended. For Cisneros, education plays a minor role in the writing of *The House of Mango Street*: she explains

that the issues she explores in the pages of *Mango Street* were those of the students she worked with immediately after she graduated from the University of Iowa Writers Workshop (Interview with Juanita Heredia 49). Although her students were at least partially the source of inspiration for her book, Cisneros explains that *Mango Street's* purpose was far removed from focusing on education; instead, she claims Esperanza's coming of age as her own:

I was forming both my spirituality and my politics at the time that Esperanza was. If you had asked me these questions [about what Cisneros was experiencing while writing *The House on Mango Street*] at the time I was writing it, I would not have been able to articulate it as spiritual and political. I just knew that there were many things that I felt very powerless to change, things that I was moved by, things I was learning as I was working in the community. As I learned those lessons, they emerged in my text. I was just writing from my heart. (Interview with Juanita Heredia 49)

Lee's purposes behind *Native Speaker* are even further removed from education. He explains that his primary purpose behind *Native Speaker* is examining language use:

Everything, every character and what they do, everything that Henry sees, every act precipitates down to him through language. Everything is an attempt at communication. From his wife to his son's death... in some ways he's a language freak. He fetishizes it. That's what I was working out, not personality, but voice, and not just his voice, but the human voice. (Interview 112)

By claiming a spiritual and political journey (in Cisneros' case) and an artist's desire to explore one particular facet of communication (in Lee's case), both authors reveal that they had no intention of discussing anything like the contract of vagueness in their fiction, let alone suggesting educational reform through it.

Perhaps Cisneros and Lee fail to see education as a solution to their characters' struggles because of the authors' own experiences with the contract of vagueness. Cisneros, for example, appears to have participated in the contract of vagueness in much the same way Esperanza does, judging from her description of the Catholic schools she attended: in an interview with Hector Torres, she explains that for three years "I went to the school where I had the most negative experiences with the nuns [...] that I write about in *House on Mango Street*" (226-27). Besides the lack of voice demonstrated in the experiences Cisneros retells as Esperanza, a 1993 lecture at the Brooklyn Public Library and subsequent interview also illustrate Cisneros' silent participation in the contract of vagueness. Cisneros began the lecture by passing around her fifth-grade report card, full of Cs and Ds, and commented, "I don't remember being that stupid" (Tabor C1). According to *New York Times* journalist Mary B. W. Tabor, Cisneros then explained that "the teachers [...] just did not know what to do with a working-class Mexican-American girl from the South Side of Chicago" (C1). By suggesting that her teachers bore the blame for her displacement in school, Cisneros reveals her position in the contract of vagueness as a victim to teachers who only knew how to teach white, middle-class students. In an interview with Tabor the next day, Cisneros further commits to this position by declaring, "I really want [young people in the barrios] to question the educational system and the whole system that is created to keep them from becoming

what I became. I'm the exception not the rule" (Tabor C1). Using this line of logic, Cisneros extends her "victim" label to all Latino youth. This suggests, first, that Latino students' involvement in the contract of vagueness is—for Cisneros, at least—a result of pure victimization rather than passive participation, and, second, that education is an obstacle to overcome rather than a ladder to help Latino students succeed. With this framework informing her opinion of schools, it is unsurprising that Cisneros intends to approach education only indirectly in *The House on Mango Street*.

Lee's experiences and philosophies show that the contract of vagueness marks his ideas of education in similar ways. Pam Belluck's rendering of Lee's life is—like Cisneros' is to Esperanza's—similar in significant ways to Henry Park's. Belluck reports that "in kindergarten, Chang-rae Lee did not say a word. Day after day he sat in class in New Rochelle, sponging up the English spoken by his teacher and classmates and wringing it out in Korean in his mind" (B1). This early silence can be translated as a desire not to stand out among his peers—a move encouraged by the undifferentiated teaching methods encouraged by the contract of vagueness. Like Henry, as Lee grew older and more proficient in English, he became "ashamed that his immigrant family had not assimilated" and, as he wrote *Native Speaker*, Lee found himself investigating the reasons behind his own assimilation, just as Henry does. Lee asks himself, "Did I desperately want to belong so much that I did things—like refusing to translate for my mother, like going to Exeter, like dating white women—for that reason?" (Belluck B1). Lee's concerns about his assimilation can be tracked from his silence in kindergarten to his increasing fluency to his eventual doubts about his motivations behind his life choices. His participation in the contract of vagueness therefore creates questions about

the authenticity behind his assimilated identity—doubts which surfaced again when Lee and his Anglo wife Michelle considered what their different ethnic backgrounds would mean for their then-unborn children. “What are they going to think of us? [...] I’ve already sort of steeled myself for them to resent it. ‘Why did you do this to me?’ Michelle is nervous too. She knows our kids will have an even more difficult time than I did” (Belluck B1). Lee’s fears for his children are especially significant given his own impressive academic success: as a graduate of Exeter (the prestigious boarding school in New Hampshire), Yale, and the University of Oregon’s MFA program—not to mention his position at Princeton—Lee is the very model of academic success. His anxiety about his children, however, belies the problems the contract of vagueness created for Lee and that he anticipates for his children. These experiences with the contract of vagueness also provide a rationale for the way Lee views education in his novel. Although Lee—like Henry—is academically successful, the ethnic ambivalence he experiences as a result of assimilation still makes school a source of anxiety rather than a source of possible solutions.

In spite of the two authors’ lack of intentions to discuss in their texts the problems with education, both authors do gesture toward educational reform through Henry’s and Esperanza’s ultimate epiphanies regarding their responsibility toward their ethnic communities. The concluding epiphanies suggest community-oriented educational reform as the culmination of an educational reading of *Native Speaker* and *The House on Mango Street*. Henry’s and Esperanza’s attention to their communities signals the completion of their own education when they adopt roles as citizens responsible to other community members. Extending this perspective to education, a school system that

likewise encourages community building among the population it services is perhaps the kind of educational reform that best addresses the kinds of concerns that Cisneros and Lee have about education; such community-building educational reform also creates forums for communication, effectively breaking the contract of vagueness. In his 2006 book, Kwame Anthony Appiah suggests cosmopolitanism as the appropriate successor to multiculturalism and globalization on a general level; the actions of Cisneros' and Lee's protagonists indicate that cosmopolitanism may also act as a guiding principle for educational policy and may thus become a catalyst to end the contract of vagueness by focusing on responsibility to the community. According to Appiah, cosmopolitanism has two basic tenets:

One is the idea that we have obligations to others, obligations that stretch beyond those to whom we are related by the ties of kith and kind [...] The other is that we take seriously the value not just of human life but of particular human lives, which means taking an interest in the practices and beliefs that lend them significance. (xv)

The double goal of cosmopolitanism is therefore both “universal concern” and “respect for legitimate difference,” two ideals that sometimes clash with one another (xv).

However, it is the very fact that universal concern and mutual respect sometimes lead to different actions that makes them a dynamic foundation on which to build understanding of others. That is, while universal concern by itself might always motivate well-intentioned (but perhaps inappropriate) action, and strong respect for others might always demand restraint, coupling the two ideals forces a balance between action and restraint. The compromises that come as a result of answering to both universal concern and

mutual respect therefore create thoughtful, community-oriented policy despite the clashes between the two ideals, because their fundamental concern—the well-being of the community—is the same.

By illustrating the increasing diversity of our nation today throughout their texts, both Cisneros and Lee highlight the ever-more important cosmopolitan call for concern and respect for others. Rather than perpetuating an unofficial cultural hierarchy with European-descended Anglos at the top and everyone else somewhere below, both *Native Speaker* and *The House on Mango Street* suggest a new kind of equal opportunity to all ethnic groups by encouraging mutual respect and concern for each other as the standard, rather than assimilation. In doing so, both works encourage a sense of community, rather than of individualism. For immigrants in a cosmopolitan society, such an emphasis on community means not having to rely solely on themselves in order to assimilate because of the community-oriented society in which they live. As Henry's father's experience illustrates, participation in a supportive community can offer both the psychological and even financial support that gives each of its members the necessary scaffolding to succeed. In this sense, the two books support the cosmopolitan definition of success through cooperation and mutual support rather than through the utter self-reliance dictated through individualism.

Although such a cosmopolitan society may seem impossibly idealistic (lacking, perhaps, only some kind of federal policymaking fairy godmother to make it into a truly Disneyesque fairy tale)—or worse, perhaps, too radical to be practical—both *Native Speaker* and *The House on Mango Street* gesture toward equally cosmopolitan principles in their conclusions, indicating that perhaps the concern and respect prescribed by

cosmopolitanism can help their communities and other ELL students like themselves to succeed scholastically. Esperanza's concern for her neighbors' welfare and their inability to independently get out of the barrio directs her own desire to leave the Mango Street neighborhood. In describing her friends' and neighbors' confusion about her absence, she concludes her own *Erziehungsroman* by saying, "they will not know I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot out" (Cisneros, *HMS* 110). Henry and Lelia, too, demonstrate a cosmopolitan sense of national identity and respect as they say goodbye to their ESL students in the novel's concluding paragraph:

Lelia gives each one a sticker. She uses the class list to write their names inside the sunburst-shaped badge. Everybody, she says, has been a good citizen. She will say the name, quickly write on the sticker, and then have me press it to each of their chests as they leave. It is a line of quiet faces. I take them down in my head. Now, she calls out each one as best as she can, taking care of every last pitch and accent, and I hear her speaking a dozen lovely and native languages, calling all the difficult names of who we are. (Lee, *NS* 349)

Henry's and Esperanza's simple, concrete applications of cosmopolitanism suggest the kind of pragmatic and valuable policy that can be created by using Appiah's philosophy as a guide. Perhaps the best offering from both cosmopolitanism and Henry's and Esperanza's examples is a change in focus for educational policy. Both Henry's and Esperanza's primary concern is that members of their communities aren't left isolated: it is important for Esperanza to return for those who cannot leave the barrio on their own;

for Henry, no student must be allowed to be marginalized from the main group—each one therefore receives the badge marking them as equal “citizen[s]” of the classroom. The two characters’ focus on inclusion marks a significant departure from the educational policy directing American schools of the 1960s and 1970s. Rather than concentrating only on outcomes (through standardized testing and accountability), Esperanza and Henry instead begin to institute a rudimentary form of school/community partnerships.

For ELL students like Henry and Esperanza and the communities they choose to help, such partnerships offer crucial elements for success in school. Because school/community partnerships encourage understanding, communication, and common goals between students’ different spheres of influence, the common ground between their school and home lives increases, making ELL students struggling with linguistic and cultural differences more likely to succeed at school. Additionally, the common goals between homes and schools minimize the kind of identity crises that both Henry and Esperanza experienced in trying decide whether to whitewash themselves into successful Americans or ghettoize themselves as foreigners in the United States. Finally, Henry’s and Esperanza’s brand of school/community partnerships achieves what turns out to be the simple task of dismantling the contract of vagueness. By valorizing the relationship between schools and communities, Henry and Esperanza force their educational institutions to finally acknowledge the special needs of ELL students by creating a space for schools to approach and accommodate them. At the same time, creating a system that opens a frequent conduit of communication between ELL students, their parents, and their schools provides a forum for ELL students and their families to voice their needs and concerns.

Reimagining *The House on Mango Street* and *Native Speaker* under the influence of the school/community partnerships suggested by Henry and Esperanza in the closing pages of each text—instead of the contract of vagueness—offers new educational possibilities to the two characters as well as to their larger ethnic communities. Three specific groups—not coincidentally, the characters’ spheres of influence—become especially important factors in reimagining school/community partnerships as the basis of the fictional students’ education. Following Henry’s and Esperanza’s lead, both characters’ schools bear the responsibility of reaching out to the community, ideally—and especially for ELL students—before children enroll in school. In order to establish a trusting relationship between the school and students’ families, perhaps individual visits to families from a school ambassador—an administrator, counselor, teacher, or aide—would be most likely to adequately communicate the school’s imminent expectations and philosophies. In a sense, however, these early visits between schools and families would have a greater psychological benefit than perhaps a purely academic one. For Henry, early contact from his school could probably not change his child’s perception of English being “a version of our Korean” and the therefore surprising difficulties of learning a second language (Lee, *NS* 233). Early contact with the school could, however, offer Henry the sense that his ethnic and linguistic differences don’t isolate him from the rest of the school community. In order for Henry not to feel ostracized at school, though, his teachers must also participate in the school/community partnership. On a classroom level, this could take the form of training the likes of Mrs. Albrecht in English-as-a-second-language (ESL) techniques. Rather than using a “therapy [...of striking] sublime meter on [... her students’] palms and the backs of [... their] calves,” Mrs. Albrecht

might instead rely on her ESL training to teach all her students (including those, like Henry, just learning to speak English) to recite Shelley's verses (233).

Esperanza's neighbors in *The House on Mango Street* would experience similar benefits from early contact with schools. By meeting individually with families, school ambassadors could initiate a trusting relationship with Sally's family—a relationship that would become crucial as Sally grew older, given the choices she makes to distance herself from her father's violence. If contact between Sally's family and her school were to continue over the years, perhaps Sally would ultimately choose education instead of early marriage to a controlling man as a means to escape the difficulties of her family life. Other neighbors could also benefit from early contact with the neighborhood schools. Mamacita, for example, might be less heartbroken at her son's increasing fluency in English if a school ambassador were to express mutual respect and universal concern for her family by discussing her fears that her son will lose his cultural heritage by adopting American cultural markers. By helping Mamacita understand that the school hopes to enrich family life (with literacy and the possibilities that come with it) rather than create a chasm between her and her son, a school ambassador might help to align the school and home spheres of influence, making Mamacita's son's future school experience more successful. Marin, too, might spend less time waiting “under the streetlight... [for] someone to change her life” if she herself felt empowered to change it as a result of a personal connection with a school ambassador (Cisneros, *HMS* 27).

Of course, in order for all these students to feel a part of the school community, their teachers—like Henry's—must also be involved. If Esperanza's teachers were to approach her with the same kind of concern that she feels for her neighbors, her

experiences with her teachers could become community-building rather than isolating experiences. That is, rather than creating feelings of shame in Esperanza by expressing shock at her living conditions, the nun who encounters Esperanza playing outside her apartment might instead focus on other possible topics of conversation, such as Esperanza's plans for the future. Likewise, the administrator who assumes that Esperanza lives in the "row of ugly three-flats" might find out Esperanza's real reason for wanting to eat in the "canteen" (Cisneros, *HMS* 45). By creating an atmosphere that values student input, Esperanza's teachers can assume an active role in helping her and her ELL classmates feel part of the school community.

Henry's and Esperanza's attitudes toward helping ELL students succeed would also be mimicked in the family sphere of influence. As families participate in schools by volunteering where possible and otherwise establishing frequent communication with their students' teachers and administrators, cosmopolitan schools can cater to the specific needs of a given community. Henry's school, for example, might respond to families who oppose the odd pairing of learning-disabled students with ELL students in the same class by establishing an early ESL program as well as encouraging their teachers to receive ESL endorsements. Esperanza's schools, on the other hand, might take safety measures for their students if families were to mention that the less savory parts of the neighborhood (such as the "bum man" who tries to buy kisses from Esperanza's friend Rachel) made their children afraid to walk to school (Cisneros, *HMS* 41). Additionally, as more and more families follow Henry's and Esperanza's lead by actively participating in their children's schooling, the focus on educational inclusion would ideally become a community endeavor with community members also encouraging the students'

participation in school. Thus, with increased interaction between Henry's family and their Anglo community, Henry's neighbors—from whom Henry's mother is too ashamed to borrow eggs—might take an interest in his schoolwork (with the possible result of making Henry's father less likely to suggest that his “funny eyes” and “funny face” make him despicable to his peers) (Lee, *NS* 52, 73). Lucy, Rachel, and Esperanza might also receive mutual encouragement from each other's parents to work hard at school, rather than Esperanza alone receiving one-time advice from her mother to “study hard” (Cisneros, *HMS* 91).

Significantly, the school/community partnerships that Henry's and Esperanza's actions suggest require only willingness to communicate openly and to spend time nurturing a mutual relationship between schools and communities. Such willingness is, of course, not a simple task, especially given the many responsibilities that demand families' and teachers' time and resources. Yet if Eleanor Roosevelt's description of education's purpose as creating citizens is coupled with cosmopolitanism's call for respect and concern, then teachers' and families' responsibilities to their students' studies become more broad—and perhaps more important—than helping them pass algebra or write a five-paragraph essay. Instead, education expands to include not only traditional “book learning,” but also mutual respect, universal concern, and community building—which teachers themselves, as examples of successful education, must model. This is, after all, the path that both Henry and Esperanza begin in the closing pages of both *Native Speaker* and *The House on Mango Street* as they begin to reach out to meet the educational needs of their ethnic communities.

By implication, it is also the path that such a community-oriented reading of *The House on Mango Street* and *Native Speaker* suggests for the reader. Interpreting the texts through an educational lens gives readers new responsibility as their participation in Henry's and Esperanza's lives makes them privy to the inner goings-on of the communities in which the two characters live, thus transforming readers into members of the community by proxy. As such, readers who approach *Native Speaker* and *The House on Mango Street* as *Erziehungsroman* are implicated along with schools and the communities they serve in ending the contract of vagueness in an effort to win the kind of academic success and identity integration for members of Henry's and Esperanza's ethnic communities that the two protagonists have achieved. Readers-as-community-citizens who thus take up the community-building banner that waves across the concluding pages of both *Native Speaker* and *The House on Mango Street* may then be able to identify along with Henry and Lelia "all the difficult names of who we are" as they, like Esperanza, work "for the ones [...] left behind. For the ones who cannot out" (Lee, *NS* 349; Cisneros, *HMS* 110).

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