

SOCIAL SPACE, LANGUAGE, AND CONSCIOUSNESS IN HELENA MARÍA VIRAMONTES'S *UNDER THE FEET OF JESUS*

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes social space with the tool of postmodern theories of space in the specific case of migrant agricultural workers portrayed in Helena María Viramontes's *Under the Feet of Jesus*. Language and consciousness are the main vehicles by which Estrella, the central protagonist of the novel, liberates herself from the dominant social discourses—linguistic, racial, economic, and gender—that position her as a neocolonial subject.

Keywords : Chicana literature - postcolonial literature - race - sociolinguistics - postmodern space theory.

INTRODUCTION

Migrant agricultural workers are an underclass that larger society seeks to control. They are defined by society not as individuals but as members of a group. The group is technically defined by the physical place that they occupy—primarily along a circuit of agricultural harvests. But linguistic, racial, and economic markers become important non-geographic signifiers of membership in such classes. The latter categories are all constituted in social space.

The problem for individuals from the underclass is that they must struggle to attain a higher level of social consciousness before they can come into meaningful self-autonomy. To do this they must contest the borders of social space that confine them.

For Estrella, the central protagonist of Helena María Viramontes's *Under the Feet of Jesus*, consciousness of how the

circumscription of social space and discourse situate identity begins with literacy—both learning to read and resist with words as well as literacy of the spaces into which she is inscribed.

This paper will show how Estrella accomplishes personal liberation from her status as a neocolonial subject by gaining literacy of social, linguistic, consumer, racial, and gender space. Postmodern space theory is used to show how Estrella and other members of the migrant agricultural labor force are positioned by these various discourses.

POSTMODERN THEORIES OF SPACE

This section begins the article with references to theorizations of space by current postmodern theorists. Throughout this article I will generally use the term "space" to refer to the postmodern theorization of

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spatial reality, not necessarily geographic, in relation to our psychic interaction with it, while "place" is more in line with the postcolonial notion of a geographical location on which is super-imposed a web of human history, social and political relations, language, and other such constructions. However the usage of the two terms in a different sense or, even, inter-changeably by cited authors lends to some overlap so that a technical, terminological distinction is hard to make. The important technical distinction to make is between strictly geographic places, spaces, or locations and psychic, social, or linguistic spaces. But in human reality the two kinds of space are always inextricably inter-meshed.

Migrant agricultural workers don't own land. If they did they would farm their own land rather than laboring on that of others. In most cases they don't even own a shack that they can call home. They are geographically disinherited, regardless of citizenship,¹ in a world constructed to enforce what Mike Davis calls "spatial apartheid" (1990: 230). Keeping the farm laborers in motion denies them a permanent physical space, a device instrumental to maintaining an underclass and, more importantly, a fluid reserve labor force.²

Historically authorities and those with property have tended to be more concerned with just the opposite-keeping the underclass in one place. Thomas L. Dumm identifies the limiting of such "movement as a synonym for control" (1993: 184). He cites attempts "to control the movement of 'masterless men' by establishing poor laws to criminalize vagabondage" (Dumm 1993: 185) as early as the seventeenth century. Is this a contradiction? Can the same economic and other forces be responsible for both limiting and compelling the movements of the underclass? This is no paradox for the movement itself is constrained.³ The agricultural migrants never stop moving but they are relegated in their movements to certain circuits, namely the fields in harvest. This placing of the Mexican-American migrant workers in a space (social) devoid of place (geographic) makes them vulnerable

in a society economically founded on the principle-and-protection-of property. In regard to political and legal recourse they are nearly invisible. Their identity is one that must be negotiated in an ethnic, racial, linguistic, gender, and economic space without the stabilizing moorings of geographic place.

Kay Anderson notes of Chinatown in Vancouver: "Identity and place were inextricably conflated" (1987: 587). In the case of Chinatown's place is distinct. This is our place, that is yours. Such segregated topography follows Fredric Jameson's less-geographic-than-social notion of inherent "spatial discontinuities" (1993: 414), which could be used to argue the impracticality, and undesirability, of amalgamating the culture, language, and histories of differing groups into one common amorphous, colorless, and tasteless blob of assimilation.

But the Mexican-American migrant workers don't inhabit the bordered and stationary place of a Chinatown. Their nomadic existence is better described by Arjun Appadurai's "ethnoscapes" (1990: 7)-which, though occupied by traveling cultures, severely limit the scope of alterity's influence because the (sub)alterns are bounded by existing cultural, and racial, hegemonies-or by James Clifford's notion of "traveling identities" or "Culture as travel" (1992: 103). As Clifford puts it, the question is "Not so much 'where are you from?' but 'where are you between?'" (The intercultural identity question.)" (1992: 109).

In line with Jameson's term "spatial discontinuities" is awareness that any particular place is always criss-crossed by manifold spaces, some of which are *verboden* to marginalized groups. That is to say that various ethnic and other spaces often occupy the same place simultaneously though existing in separate realms. Viramontes foregrounds the olfactory realm as a metaphor for the superimposition of space on place, repeatedly demonstrating how scent coexists in the same space where vision is usually privileged. Scents permeate the novel just as they saturate reality. Smell is a separate sphere of reality that exists on its own terms but interacts heavily with the

visual realm: "He could not find words or colors to describe the smells. He could only describe what the blanket smelled like" (80-1).⁴ Seeking shade under an oil-dripping truck Estrella "smelled the kelp" (87) of the ocean that Alejo is describing. And Alejo notes, of people, different olfactory auras: "Sleeping in a room full of children was different than sleeping in a room full of men. The smells and noise and dreams were different" (99). Likewise Petra exudes "an aura of garlic as brilliant as the aura circling La Virgen" (101).

In the clinic the Anglo nurse temporarily shares the same place with the migrant family, but each occupies a distinctive space. Overlaying this physical place is a hierarchical space where, almost exclusively, Anglos inhabit the upper, feudal echelons. The migrant family is operating with a different set of cognitive maps-of which Jameson says, 'Cognitive mapping' was in reality nothing but a code word for 'class consciousness'" (1993: 418)-than the bourgeois nurse. Estrella learns to read and raid this bifurcated space, to knock the legs out from under an institutionalized classism and to (re)appropriate space that could easily be shared with a modicum of consideration for cultural, linguistic, and historical differences. In this pivotal scene Estrella will jolt the nurse into acknowledging a cognitive map other than her own.

THE FURROWS OF RACIAL HISTORY IN SPATIAL FIELDS

The clinic scene is the climactic scene of the novel. The lone nurse has diagnosed Alejo as needing a physician and taken the family's last \$9.07-which the family needs for gasoline to get the dying young man to a hospital. The nurse has accepted the lesser amount for the fifteen-dollar clinic fee but has refused Perfecto's offer to barter his services and fix the clinic toilet. After locking the money away the nurse, "handed the receipt to Estrella who handed it to Perfecto who stared at it, then placed it in his wallet where the money had once been" (146).

The replacing of the money with a worthless receipt hearkens back to the years following the perfidious promises of the post-

Mexican War 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which was quickly followed by the Federal Land Grant Act of 1851, by which Mexican Americans were systematically and legislatively divested of lands and ranches that had often been in the families for centuries (Novas 1998: 86). In the words of Ronald Takaki, "In the end, whether or not they won their claims, most of the great Mexican rancheros in northern California lost their lands" (1993: 180-1). Their land was taken and replaced with worthless scraps of paper-receipts, court rulings, and effete treaties.

One of the mechanisms for systematically unlanded the Californios [ethnic Mexicans who inhabited the region before the national borders were redrawn] and indigenous peoples of California, especially after gold was discovered in 1848, was California's initial establishment as a settler colony-one where the Anglo settlers came to outnumber the indigenous natives and long-dwelling mestizos [the Mexican term for the Mexican race, born of the mixture of indigenous and European genes] in the span of a few years. In the familiar Anglo-Saxon model of settler colonization, miscegenation is infrequent and often disdained, exacerbating Frantz Fanon's description of two worlds kept meticulously separated: "The Zone where the natives live is not complementary to the zone inhabited by the settlers. The two zones are opposed,...they both follow the principle of reciprocal exclusivity" (1963: 38-9).

The methodical imposition and maintenance of ethnic, cultural, and racial difference from above-often mirroring or bolstering their own ethnic, cultural, and racial identifications from below-is why the migrant workers can't be assimilated. They are categorically deprived of land and simultaneously excluded from sharing the same space with the dominant culture, which consciously labors to maintain disjunction. Following the disinheritance of the Mexican Americans cultural amnesia sets in among Anglos, taught to forget the contributions and coterminous histories of the minorities that helped them, willing or not, to build a nation.

Perfecto's background is emblematic of Mexican American history in the United States; he is a man with no past: "a man who had no record of his own birth except for the year 1917⁵ which appeared to him in a dream. He had a history unspoken, memories that only surfaced in nightmares" (25). Past hardships make Perfecto's forgetfulness nepenthean. For Anglos benefiting from racial hierarchies such failure of memory is convenient; Perfecto is a symbol of the tendency to treat most Mexican Americans as if they are newly-arrived immigrants.

Economic identity-that of an underclass-becomes fairly imposed on future generations of Mexican Americans in this historical remapping of place that systematically divested many of their ancestors of their land, giving them more reason to "Remember the Alamo" than most Anglo Americans. Today Mexican Americans are ghettoized by the building of freeways that cut off neighborhoods and largely funneled by the force of historical momentum and labor typecasting into the less profitable and less formal sectors of the economy: gardening, illicit sweatshops, construction work and, of course, migrant agricultural labor. Those with capital, resources, and their own businesses (agricultural, industrial, services, and commercial) get their underclass laborers in the most convenient form-an invisible, subhuman, reservoir of second-class citizens that is, therefore, easy to mark for exploitation with one eye while ignoring as socially-marginalized citizens with the other.

As the Haves are disproportionately non-Hispanic, non-Black, and non-Indigenous their search for cheap labor is aided by the social construction of racial inferiorization: "they exude a malodorous body odor; they are intellectually inferior; and, besides, they are contented and loyal because they are a naturally-servile race." It takes an extra effort to get beyond the convenient subclass stereotypes to cognitively acknowledge that the body odor has more to do with habits of frugality and insufficient access to hygiene products than anything else; the differences in literacy levels are mostly the result of

linguistic barriers and the socioeconomics of education; and the servility is a typical human response to a seemingly insurmountable class and power gap-you don't bite the hand that feeds.

But the momentum of history, and the determining groove it wears in social spaces, is not inescapable. Estrella learns that through literacy and language she can write herself out of such boxes-construct new spaces, from old histories.

SPATIAL LITERACY

The "cognitive acknowledgements", mentioned above, made by the privileged class can hardly be expected to make instant and significant differences in the treatment of the underclass. The mind too easily assimilates the inconsistencies of social and political reality and the heart is too easily inured to the suffering of others. Rather, it is principally underclass individuals who are personally invested enough to make a significant difference. Massive social change predominantly wells up from the bottom in the form of a critical mass of oppressed individuals. But such changing of the world outside begins on the inside. One must first come into consciousness of injustice, of exploitative systems, and of the ideologies she is enmeshed in.

To free the body you must first free your mind, as the enlightened Morpheus tells Neo in the film *The Matrix* (1999). The path to control of the body is paved through the psyche. To win agency over the body you must fight for it on the battleground of the psyche, a typically colonized space amongst members of various underclasses the world over.

The mind does the bulk of its thinking through the medium of language. It is impossible to imagine having sophisticated thoughts without using words, as higher level thought is framed in language. It follows then that the most effective weapon on the battleground of the mind would be language. Linguistic tools, self-articulation, and knowledge are the indispensable weapons of the oppressed.

As they are symbolized in the text, words shed light on areas of ignorance: "*The Holy Spirit came in the form of tongues of fire to show his love...and the words seemed to come alive because she saw nips of flames flick like tongues lapping the dark away*" (68). At first Estrella does not "know how to build the house of words she could invite him into....Build rooms as big as barns" (70), but she will learn. But before Estrella learns the alphabet she is bombarded with images, she begins her literacy in a different semiotic mode-by reading image-texts.

Consumer Neocolonial Texts

When Perfecto Flores, "a man who came with his tool chest and stayed" (25), first comes to live with the matriarchal (since their abandonment by Estrella's father) family Estrella is effectively illiterate. Her literacy to this point has come from the ubiquitous consumer product and advertising images with which the narrator peppers the text. But the insubstantiality of this consumerism, though composed mostly of comestibles, is evident from the novel's early encounter with the "hollow drum" of the Quaker Oats box: "Estrella grabbed the chubby pink cheeks Quaker man, the red and white and blue cylinder package and shook it violently and its music was empty" (18-19). The American flag symbolism, inherent in the invocation of the three colors that adorn it, is laden with repudiation of the false promise of an etiolated American dream. Constitutive of the reality of this place where, ideally, all are "created equal" is the actuality of the abjection of citizens who are compelled to palliate pangs of hunger by "trying to feed the children with noise...dancing loca [crazy] with the full of empty Quaker man" (20). We are reminded of the limits of underclass upward mobility when Ricky, reminiscent of the African-American male characters in *Native Son*, see a plane overhead and have the fairly unattainable dream of flying (43).

The image of the "round puffy man's double chins" mocks the starving family as much as the fairly nine-to-five clinic "nurse's white uniform and red lipstick and flood of

carnations made her [Estrella] even more self-conscious" (137). The nurse does not realize that some of her attitudes represent a partial participation in the oppression of the agricultural laborers; she comes to represent the Anglo contingent that is enjoying the American dream on the backs of an ethnic underclass. She is oblivious to the denial of that dream to minorities and the poor underclass; her image promises health and healing but her reality or, rather, "fakery" is like the empty Quaker man-merely that of another consumer product that leaves its promises unfulfilled.

The consumer texts that surround Estrella are legion. These images accumulate and bombard her mind, conquering and colonizing her psychic space. With one hand they give the promise of happiness, health, and beauty, with the other they take away any hope of possessing these qualities. If Estrella can learn to read past the glitzy labels, to read the deeper subtexts, she will have begun the decolonization of her psyche, allowing her to initiate a reterritorialization on her own terms.

La Pina flour and Rex lard (119) are needed to make tortillas and Clabber Girl baking powder takes precedence over the straight-standing "ARGO woman on a box of corn starch" (31). Brillecream offers men a neat, tidy appearance for dusty, windswept hair but does nothing for the lice in the agricultural camps, where "the vigorous brushing and tight braids her mother weaved were not enough for [the teacher] Mrs. Horn" in a school where she encounters the disapprobation of "teachers [who] were more concerned about the dirt under her fingernails...[and who] inspected her head for lice" (24). The taste of Swanson's TV Dinners is relegated to the realm of make-believe in a household whose members can only imagine "people who had couches and living rooms and television sets and who drank coffee at night" (162). Yuban coffee is considered a solely once-a-day staple, taken as part of a meager breakfast. Carnation Milk, providing women with vital calcium nutrition, must be left on the store shelf (109).

Cans of Spam are purchased in its stead, because they are sale items. Bugler tobacco and beer are destructive luxuries, indulged in only by men. The empty Coca-Cola bottle has more use, removing boils, than the empty calories of the product it once contained. GOODYEAR tires become symbolic of the anonymous bones constitutive of the tar pits and the crude oil from which they are made. Coppertone protects easily sun-burnt white skin while Clorox promises to make everything "more than white....[and] sanitary, too!" (31).

These are Estrella's first books. Their message of necessity or, in most cases, merely implied necessity, is written large on the packaging. But as she learns to read between the lines the emptiness of the subtext of commodification and neocolonialism loses some of its narrative, or discursive, control.

Perfecto is able to barter his labor and mechanical skills, circumventing as much of this commodified market as he can. He refuses to be robbed by the strong-arm tactics of Marxian Use Value, reverting back to a more egalitarian form of Exchange Value. But he encounters the limits of true trade, in the form of exchange, when his world grates into direct contact with the White economic world.

The neocolonialization of the agricultural workers is poignantly portrayed in the narrative. El Pato Tomato sauce is the processed, packaged, and overpriced finished ("value added") product made from the raw materials harvested with the exploited labor of the family in the same kind of tomato fields that they are expelled from when a White migrant family is involved in a criminal incident. This neocolonialism enriches the reigning aristocracy and middlemen by impoverishing the workers. Eating any of the oranges that they pick is considered "thievery" by the white *patrones* [landowners, bosses] who own the orchards (12). It is a profane irony that the family cannot even afford the inferior, canned version of the very product that their labor makes possible—the dehydrated Tang must also be placed

back on the shelf (109). But the most emblematic reification of the false promise of consumerism occurs while Petra, Estrella's mother, is, via triage, deciding which food items the family can afford and which must be sacrificed. It is on this trip to the store that the fruits of their labor are most poignantly despoiled and, then, denied:

The fresh produce was dumped into small zinc tubs and pushed against a wall and hardly resembled the crops harvested days before. The fruits and vegetables were firm and solid out in the hot fields; but here in the store, only the relics remained: squished old tomatoes spilled over onto the bruised apples and the jalapenos mixed with soft tomatillos and cucumbers peeked from between blotchy oranges. (110)

This image captures the absurdity of neocolonialism, the enactment of the scene leaning toward the sinister as the family has to go "to the ranch store to start some credit" (41) when they first arrive at the new labor camp. The reliance on company store credit strikes unsavory homologues with indentured servitude, coolie [contract] labor, and payment in company scrip.

Racial Semiotics

Millie the Model presents an unattainable image of accepted beauty: "Looky here, ain't this purty? And Maxine pointed to the picture of *Millie the Model*, her bold yellow hair in a flowing flip, her painted breasts perfect smiles on her chest....her ice blue eyes" (30). Along with catechism chapbooks and an intermittent public schooling education, the reading of the glossy comic books will provide Estrella's next level of literacy—the insidious nature of the fictitious images raining greater destructive power upon self-image than the slogans and the eidetic force of the food product labels have managed to do thus far.

Fortunately, Estrella begins to gain consciousness about the spuriousness of the images and the propaganda imbricated in these products. She begins to deconstruct

the packaging and, like Petra, begins to realize that "truth was only a lesser degree of lies" (17). Under the grueling heat of a cloudless day in the grape fields she is fully aware that, "Carrying the full basket to the paper was not like the picture on the red raisin boxes Estrella saw in the markets, not like the woman wearing a fluffy bonnet, holding out the grapes with her smiling, ruby lips" (49). The reality is that, "the baskets of grapes resisted her muscles, pulling their magnetic weight back to the earth. The woman with the red bonnet did not know this. Her knees did not sink in the hot white soil" and "the woman's bonnet would be as useless as Estrella's own straw hat under a white sun so mighty, it toasted the green grapes to black raisins" (50).

Moments like these are the nascent stages of Estrella's political and economic consciousness, a consciousness that will climax in the clinic scene when Estrella realizes the economic interdependence between her family and the nurse:

She remembered the tar pits. Energy money, the fossilized bones of energy matter. How bones made oil and oil made gasoline. The oil was made from their bones, and it was their bones that kept the nurse's car from not halting on some highway....Their bones. Why couldn't the nurse see that? Estrella had figured it out: the nurse owed them as much as they owed her. (148)

The Tool of Language

Shortly after Perfecto's coming from nowhere to begin living or, rather, traveling, with the family Estrella discovers the "secret" of the contents of Perfecto's red tool chest, full of tools that "seemed as confusing and foreign as the alphabet she could not decipher" (24). The various tools are literally compared to the letters of the alphabet—the "hammerhead split like a V. The small i's resembled nails" (24)—and Perfecto teaches her their names and uses. It is a rousing scene, Estrella's revelation reminiscent of the epiphany that Frederick Douglass relates in his autobiographical account of slavery:

"If you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master." It was a new and special revelation, explaining dark and mysterious things,I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty—to wit, the white man's power to enslave the black man. It was a grand achievement, and I prized it highly. From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom. (in Lauter 1994: 1776).

Estrella similarly makes the connection between literacy, knowledge, and onomastic awareness to power and agency: "names that gave meaning to the tools. Tools to build, bury, tear down, rearrange and repair....and soon came to understand how essential it was to know these things. That was when she began to read" (26). Estrella's education and literacy are raised to a new level. Where the public schools have failed, too obsessed with appearance and hygiene to answer Estrella's questions about the alphabet, Perfecto and his tools offer the gift of literacy. Estrella will soon gain proficiency with these tools; she will begin to accomplish what Richard Wright observed of H.L. Mencken's writing: "fighting, fighting with words. He was using words as a weapon, using them as one would use a club" (Wright, 1993: 248).

THE LINGUISTIC RESTRUCTURING OF SPACE

Likewise the narrator must reject the circumscribing limits of conventional grammar, linguistics, punctuation, and style to come into a more personal and individual articulation of Estrella's story. Taxonomically similar types of linguistic experimentation are one of the more characteristic traits of ethnically-Mexican American texts, such that Bruce-Novoa proposes "a theory of literary space,....[T]he space of continuity" (in Jiménez 1979: 135) where Chicano texts are analyzed for their similarities rather than their differences.

S. N. Sridnar cites the need of bilingual writers to "'nativize' the language to suit their particular purposes. This nativization involves experimenting with the expressive resources of the language on various levels: vocabulary, collocation, idiomaticization, syntax, and rhetorical patterning" (1992: 294). The neologism "púshale" is not in any official dictionary but connotes as much, or more, meaning to bilingual readers as synonyms for it found in dictionaries.

The narrator's voice and vision in *Under the Feet of Jesus* are aligned with Niall Lucy's postmodern notion of "'writing' as 'rewriting'" (35). If "texts are a system of forces institutionalized by the reigning culture" (Said, in Adams 1992: 1222) then the narrator has taken up the task of challenging hegemonic notions about what constitutes acceptable writing conventions in a proper novel.

The original parole, or idiolect, of the narrator creates a linguistic space vital to agency and allowing the individual, as subaltern, to speak. Having one's own voice, telling one's own story, is almost a precondition for the reclaiming of a colonized psyche. Refusing to erase the Latina inflection of that voice is integral to its power to abrogate the psychic bonds of neo-colonialism. Frances Aparicio reminds us that the literary use of Spanish subtexts "may be defined as a subversive act: that of writing the Self using the tools of the Master and, in the process, transforming those signifiers with the cultural meanings, values, and ideologies of the subordinate sector" (1994: 797). The concept works not unlike Henry Louis Gates's notion of African American signifying: "our trope for repetition and revision....repeating and simultaneously reversing, in one deft discursive act" (1984: 286). The narrator's unique voice is comfortingly lyrical yet simultaneously transgressive. Consider the following examples from the text:

–Wanna go for a dip? Asked Maxine,
unstrapping her laces, but Estrella
shook her head NO.
Looky, Looky, she said,... (33)

Watcha las niñas. (108)
Uno dos tres, púshale. (135)
¡Deja ai! (95)
[A]nd X-ed her arms over her chest...
(98)

The first example illustrates the consistent use of em-dashes, in lieu of quotation marks, to bracket dialogue. This is the typical format for Mexican texts, but elided is the use of a second em-dash at the end of a section of dialogue, when narratorial comments, such as "she said" are also in the paragraph. The em-dashes are employed only to introduce dialogue, but not to demarcate it or set it apart. The linguistic result lends a hint of openness to the text, a release from the typical circumscription of character articulation. It is a stylistic maneuver that seems to suggest that voices are not meant to be immured between punctuation marks.

The second example—the iterative phrase, "Looky, Looky"—is an unmitigated violation of authoritative grammarian proscriptions on the use of capital letters. It also eschews quotation marks around dialogue, as in the first example. The result is a transgressive statement that, again, moves the locus of agency closer to the narrator, and contests accepted rules of style.

The third example engages code-switching, a form of hybridity, in a single portmanteau word that is a conflation of the English verb "to watch" and the conjugated ending of Spanish "-ar" verbs, along with the suffix "le," which refers to the direct object. Additionally, the Spanish words are used to count to three.

Also invoked in the text are informal contractions that deviate from official Spanish Academy of the Language orthography—such as spelling, and pronouncing, the two words "mi hija" [my daughter] as "mi'ja" (23). Such Mexican-American phrases are representative of the in-between status Mexican Americans hold, often neither fully Mexican, nor allowed full participation in American citizenship. Far from being a pretentious show of bilingual scholasticism

such words and phrases, such as in the fourth example-the use of the hybrid word, "púshale"-are demonstrative of what Aparicio calls the work's "subversive function-privileg[ing] the bilingual/bicultural reader" (1994: 800) and "creating signifiers that are derived from linguistic 'deviations'" (1994: 798).

Of course not all of the errant language in Chicana texts is intentionally subversive. Such word play is often simply the product of a mind forged between two languages and two linguistic cultures. In Viramontes's case her words are often shaped by her modus operandi of writing as translation: "Sometimes I think in Spanish and translate....I still say that if my works were translated into Spanish, they would somehow feel better. More, more, what's the word? At home" (Viramontes, cited in Aparicio 1994: 797).⁶ We are never told what words or which scenes and dialogues have been translated for us.

Theodore Roosevelt once said of the nation he was president of, "We must have but one flag. We must also have but one language" (in Crawford 1992: 487). When Maxine Devridge asks Estrella, "You talk 'merican" (29) we acknowledge an intertextuality with the work of Sandra Cisneros, who also uses the term, as well as an interpellation of just what language-or, rather, dialect-is truly American as well as why "'merican" must be one hegemonic discourse, or langue, when its citizens are much more heterogeneous in nature. In Viramontes's case the language, and thought, of the author is a hybrid of both Spanish and English.

But besides being the product of a bilingual mind Viramontes's subversion of linguistic and grammatical conventions defamiliarizes the text so that the reader is more attuned to how such sign systems become naturalized. A naturalized text is one read innocently. We read this way when we know what to expect. When we read a mystery story we expect certain conventions to be adhered to; and a familiarity with those conventions allows the text to connote meaning to us. Jonathan Culler defines genre

in this way: "genre, one might say, is a set of expectations, a set of instructions about the type of coherence one is to look for and the ways in which sequences are to be read" (1975: 255). But in attuning ourselves to the conventions of a genre we position ourselves in a very limiting way as readers, as interpreters of meaning. We are likewise positioned as subjects by other discourses: language, ethnicity, gender, and so on. The use of unconventional grammar and hybrid vocabulary is a distancing technique that-like giving the reader a romance novel but telling her that it is a detective story-helps us to step outside of the text in the same way that we must periodically step outside of the discourses which position us in a certain social space.

CONCLUSION

Helena María Viramontes's *Under the Feet of Jesus* depicts a migrant agricultural worker who manages to liberate herself from the various social discourses that position her as a member of the neocolonial underclass. Linguistic, historical, racial, gender and other discourses are constructed in social spaces and inscribed on the psyche. The novel limns the reality of social space and demonstrates how individuals and groups can be oppressed by such spatialization. The discussion of postmodern notions of space at the beginning of this paper theorizes the spatial positioning of subjects that is portrayed in the novel.

The strong, female protagonist gains literacy and learns to fight back against the various discourses that position her as a neocolonial subject. Her thought and utterances occur in the medium of a bicultural language, which is affirmed by the narrator. When another character assumes that Estrella can't speak 'merican because of her race Estrella forges a new hybrid language to match her hybrid identity. Estrella also rejects the cult of consumerism that packages and then prices goods that she has labored to produce out of range of what she can afford. And when a male character tries to bar her from a forbidden place Estrella violates the gender prohibition.

Estrella's newly awakened consciousness and partial liberation from the dominant gender and language discourses are symbolized in the final scene in which she enters the forbidden space of the barn and is symbolically reborn. The inanimate barn is personified as a woman in labor, moaning from the pain of childbirth: "[She] move[d] toward the trapdoor. Estrella tried pushing, palms up, but the door only moaned." Estrella must forcefully push herself through the trapdoor to liberate herself from the constraints of the space she is trapped in: "The light broke through [dar luz a, to "give light to," is the Spanish phrase for giving birth] and the cool evening air pierced the stifling heat of the loft....She heaved herself up into the panorama of the skies ["Estrella" means "star" in Spanish] as if she were climbing out of a box" (175).

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1. Some of the migrant workers in *Under the Feet of Jesus* are American citizens and some of them are "illegal aliens," or undocumented workers from Mexico or Central America.
 2. Someone distributes United Farm Workers flyers in the field only after the foreman has left (Viramontes 1996: 84). The farm owners are antagonistic toward labor unions. They protect their interests-such as the ability to easily dismiss laborers when their labor is no longer needed-by trying to suppress worker's rights and the representation of labor.
 3. This phenomenon is universal. In Jakarta, now, city authorities want to stop the influx of poor into the city while simultaneously evicting those in shantytown areas (particularly on the north side of town and those areas targeted for development). They want to stop the migration of the underclass while also forcing the now stationary underclass of squatters to migrate somewhere else-but their movements are constrained, they can't just go *anywhere* else.
 4. All page references with neither author nor year of publication refer to the 1996 Plume edition of *Under the Feet of Jesus*. References to other texts are preceded by an

author name, either previously cited in the sentence or appearing just before the year of publication in parentheses.

- 5 The year of the new Mexican Constitution, which replaced the postcolonial-era Constitution of 1857. Following the Mexican Revolution sweeping reforms were written into the constitution so that they could not be easily reversed. Among the new rights included in the 1917 Constitution was the right of workers to organize and strike, the right to education, and freedom of religion. Church properties of the overly-powerful Catholic Church became the property of the state-not only vast secular holdings but the very cathedrals themselves-which also retained the right to confiscate private property for the common good. Internationally 1917 is most famous as the year of the Russian Bolshevik Revolution and the beginning of communism.
- 6 See also: Viramontes, Helena María. 1989. "Nopalitos": The Making of Fiction." In *Breaking Boundaries: Latina Writings and Critical Readings*. Ed. Asunción Horno-Delgado, et al. Amherst: U Mass Press, 33-38.

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