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## *Rudolfo Anaya: Exploration of Myth and History in Creating a New Ethos*

Francisco A. Lomelí<sup>1</sup>

Anaya as a highly versatile and prolific writer of fiction (novels and short stories), plays, revisionist folklore, poetry, autobiography, essays, criticism and anthologies stands out as a giant in the field of Chicano<sup>2</sup> and U.S. Latino literatures. It is no coincidence that he is the most translated author in the field of Chicano literature. Often termed the “dean of Chicano Literature”, and definitely one of the best-selling authors, he is at least one of the founding members of the 1967 literary Boom called by some the Quinto Sol Generation, embracing a nationalist literary agenda while also focusing on the past and crystallizing an identity. He is most responsible for establishing

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<sup>2</sup> The term “Chicano” is used to refer to people of Mexican descent in the United States. Although their presence is longstanding since the 16th century, these same people experienced a series of identifiers ranging from Spanish subjects, Mexicans once Mexico gained its Independence in 1821, Mexican Americans once they were conquered by the United States after 1848, but then other terms resurfaced and struggled to survive: Hispanic or *Hispano* was particularly popular in New Mexico up to recent times as a way of differentiating themselves from Mexicans due in great part to the racist attitudes and discrimination. Although “Chicano” floated around as an informal and casual self-reference since the latter part of the 19th century, it emerged more forcefully in the 1960s while gaining new life as an ethnic label of distinction as a result of the Civil Rights struggles and the internal cultural turmoil in the United States at the time. The term is sometimes the center of contention among older or more assimilated New Mexicans, but it is the term with which Rudolfo Anaya identifies. The term Latino is considered broader ethnically as it achieves greater acceptance nationwide as part of some 55 million or about 15% of the U.S. population.

an ethnic ethos grounded in a space and time called Hispanic/indigenous New Mexico that contains long-standing roots in history. He is the product of a region that enjoys the longest connection among Hispanic and indigenous peoples, oftentimes dating back to Before Christ for the latter and since the 1530s for the former. Thus, he exemplifies tradition, legacy, *mestizaje* (more in the theoretical sense of fusion and blending than simply mixing biologically) and permanence in storytelling where myth and legend have blended easily with history and social practices. The Spanish came into the region in mid 16th century but they also mixed with the indigenous population, creating a unique blend of people who learned to co-exist and borrow from each other to survive the harsh winters or the long, dry summers. Anaya comes from a state that offers a conglomerate of salient qualities unlike any other: a unique culinary tradition (often termed part of the *chilero* cycle which depends on particular kinds of peppers to the region); a Spanish language that dates back to the 16th century; an architectural style that fused the Spanish adobe-making with the local indigenous peoples' tastes for the earthy look; and a taste for (neo)colonial furniture that is highly regarded to this day. The region's isolation has contributed to its rich reservoir of folklore, outlandish characters, humorous background, mysticism and elements of the magical real. Anaya, then, is both a product and a promoter of all these features.

New Mexico is a land of some of the oldest myths and legends in the United States due to its long-standing Hispanic past. Its rich rural background and inexhaustible source of folkloric tales make it a natural fountain and foundation for confabulating stories that combine both the quotidian with the magical. Anaya grew up precisely in such a cultural environment where family background, customs, arts and crafts, the seasons, landscape and line of work all contributed to defining who they were. This semi-pastoral setting may seem quaint and outdated, but these folks also reflected on the mysteries of life and death and the meaning of their surroundings.

Anaya captures the old days of simplicity (not necessarily good ole days) where the forces of good and evil seemed quite distinguishable. Much of his literature in the beginning from 1972 to 1985, then, devotes considerable time and space to such a dynamic where main characters have to find their way in the midst of a confusing modern society filled with contradictions, social pressures, paradoxes or opposing alternatives. He appears to tap into the pulse of his cultural past as he indulges in a spiritual collective consciousness where dreams not only matter but can be a determinant to the ultimate symbolism of a given work. Anaya believes in the author as a kind of shaman who listens to his people, his culture and history in order to provide a voice and a medium

to express the rhythm of their existence. In other words, he does not consider himself a ‘creator’ of stories but rather as a conduit or medium to storytelling; in other words, a body of oral literature that fuses a mythic worldview with history. The ultimate objective for him is not to produce an unforgettable story but to tap into that deep-rooted collective dimension of popular creativity. It is, therefore, not odd to call his home (public phone number) and if he doesn’t answer, he offers this recorded message: “If I’m not answering, it’s because I’m writing stories”. In his work *The Silence of the Llano: Short Stories*, he notes:

The storyteller tells stories for the community as well as for himself. The story goes to the people to heal and reestablish balance and harmony, but the process of the story is also working the same magic on the storyteller... who must be free and honest, and ... must remain independent of the whims of groups. Remember, the shaman, the curandero (folk healer), the mediator do their work for the people, but they live alone.<sup>3</sup>

He does not concoct narrations or confabulations, he lives them through the inspiration he experiences in his heritage. In certain ways, he is the Tony Hillerman of Chicano literature, the Walt Whitman of the Llano, the Herman Melville of Chicano myth, the William Faulkner of the small Hispanic town called Las Pasturas consisting of a superficial and a deep meaning social network (comprised of below the waters and above Terra Firme), the Gabriel García Márquez in recreating a magical past through myth, and the philosopher of converging worlds and the soul of nature (the “presence of the river” in *Bless Me, Ultima*).

In addition, Anaya has produced a series of trilogies that tackle connected themes, each time expanding the treatment of his New Mexico as a place of unlimited human experience. *Bless Me, Ultima*, *Heart of Aztlán* and *Tortuga* aim to examine the soul, spirit and origins of Hispanic/indigenous peoples as they grapple with past beliefs and the pressures—as well as temptations and divagations—of the present. Multiple archetypes figure here as warriors of meaning in order to understand how conflicting qualities are filtered by a people in their attempts to

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<sup>3</sup> The book was published in Berkeley by Tonatiuh-Quinto Sol International, 1982, p. 19.

survive and, most of all, understand their microcosm and its surroundings. They search for a common myth at the same time that they struggle to defy the dehumanization of contemporary life. This tension produces many fascinating situations and characters that permit Anaya to universalize his quest for deciphering the forces that shape human interaction through social constructions (ie. institutions, religious practices, interpretations of what is evil and what is good, cultural background, social class, nature, etc.). Although not exactly a part of this first stage of his writing, such works as *A Chicano in China* (1986), *The Legend of La Llorona* (1984) and *Lord of the Dawn: The Legend of Quetzalcóatl* (1987) also point to a certain kind of search for cultural connections beyond his immediate region, stretching into myths and legends of Mexico and as far as the remote origins in China.

In 1995 Anaya initiated a new stage of novel writing, this time concentrating on a trilogy on the mystery or detective genre, beginning with *Albuquerque* (1992) and extending into *Zia Summer* (1995), *Río Grande Fall* (1996) and *Shaman Winter* (1999). However, the trilogy expanded to include *Jemez Spring* (2007) to encompass the four seasons, or a series of cycles in which Sonny Baca struggles against evil forces, including his nemesis (a kind of Sherlock Holmes vs. Moriarty rivalry) named Raven. Again, Sonny finds his strength in some elders, a *curandera* and in a coyote which serves as a spiritual animal or guide to navigate through paths of the unknown and political intrigue. Possessing many of the common qualities of a detective novel, these works use that framework to open up the space within which such Chicano characters move. That is, this space becomes expanded in a diverse racialized network of interrelationships that essentially illustrates how New Mexico is a microcosm of a new America. While the cat-and-mouse pattern is somewhat predictable, Anaya nonetheless manages to culturalize such a genre--including the prioritization of myth--while deliberately expanding the thematic thrust of much of Chicano literature which oftentimes seeks redemption and vindication, and if not, at least instilling some kind of social change. The author, however, underscores the fact that change will not occur until all corners of the social sectors come together in unison to define a new equitable power relationship. Until that occurs, Sonny Baca will continue to explore other dimensions of modern life: myth, past history, folklore, magic, the supernatural, the Chicano files or the unknown.

What may appear to be a partial departure from his other novels, *Jalamanta: A Message from the Desert* (1996), actually represents a reaffirmation of much of what he has created novelistically in the last decade or so. In other words, he articulates a philosophy of belonging through a prophet

motif who, through his self-exile or marginalization, asks and answers fundamental questions about the essence of life, opting for a hippie-like view of the world of anti-authoritarianism, a religion of love, beauty and redemption. The main character, whose name means “removing the veil”, stresses a communal approach to salvation while respecting the earth. We encounter a mixed religious preference for combining a pre-Columbian belief system, Gnosticism, Buddhism and Hinduism with Judeo-Christianity while creating an ascetic wanderer. Clearly, a spiritual character resembling Jesus Christ emerges whose wisdom advocates for a new social order in attempting to return to simplicity and the basics.

Most recently, however, Anaya has switched into the bizarre and legendary through his treatment of an enigmatic figure in *Curse of the Chupacabra* (2006), but his penchant for the magical real tends to bring him back to his central concerns of the unknown. In 2011, he published *Randy López Goes Home: A Novel* (2011) that encompasses another search for authenticity by returning to his origins and reconnecting with the landscape and cultural niche he longs for.

None of this is far away from *Bless Me, Ultima*, Anaya’s tour de force that established him as a narrative voice with whom to reckon. His search for greater harmony and social justice, at the same time he examined a cultural ethos, emerges with force and spiritual impact. Here Anaya seeks to understand the complexities of social as well as psychological elements and how they combine to shape a region, a culture and an individual. His symbolism is insistent while resorting to archetypes (*curandera*, old Indian woman), mythologies, theories, legends, storytelling as mediums to better understand the human soul--much of this couched within the ideas of a collective consciousness as espoused by Carl G. Jung in his famous works *The Dynamics of the Unconscious* (1918)<sup>4</sup> and other works where he emphasizes--comparable to Anaya-- aspects related to dreams, spirituality, myths, nature, the psyche and the soul of humankind. Therefore, the simple story of Antonio Márez, who seeks to find his own path in the midst of his parental poles or opposites and uplifted by *Ultima*’s open and fluid way of looking at the world, all this becomes a stage for reconciliation. A myth can be defined as a tale that portrays in symbolic language the origins of a culture. Classical myths are legendary or traditional stories that are created and passed down by generations to explain how natural phenomena came into existence or how human activity originated. Such myths have to be agreed to by a people for it to have the kind of force and impact

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<sup>4</sup> The work is discussed at length by Fernando Estévez Griego in *Arquetipos inconsciente colectivo de Carl Jung* (Barcelona: Paidós Ibérica, 1998), pp. 125-171.

that becomes long-lasting. Occasionally, they embody deeper concepts and human feelings. Anaya's novel possesses the timeless qualities of a work that touches the chords of universality with a considerable inspiration in Jung, directly or indirectly.

On the one hand, young Antonio is surrounded by the legacy of his father's vaquero background (Márez or oceans, a free-spirited person) and his mother's farming tradition (Luna or moon, that is settled, devout and tied to old ways and customs).<sup>5</sup> The dichotomy he is born into pulls him one way or another, much the same way Anaya himself felt pulled by his traditional llano lifestyle and the lures of modern urban life or how a Chicano had to deal with the forces of assimilation. The novel, then, operates and moves almost exclusively within a framework of incessant dualities and oppositions (contemporary vs. past, Luna vs. Márez, indigenous vs. modern, his town Las Pasturas vs. the underground aquatic space of the benevolent Golden Carp,<sup>6</sup> Catholicism vs. a natural sense of the divine, empiricism vs. magic, nature vs. urbanism, conscious life vs. the subconscious or dreams, timelessness vs. structured time, chapters identified with numbers in Spanish vs. a content written in English,<sup>7</sup> etc.). It is no wonder that the novel is divided into twenty-two chapters (2 x 11), the latter representing symbolically a stage of transition in which Antonio finds himself. In fact, Antonio is faced with and surrounded by various transitions: what route to choose, what decisions to make, what identity to adopt, and ultimately how to define his life path (might this be parallel to Jung's quest of the modern self in search of their soul given that Anaya is also deeply interested in that concept?). Ultima, meanwhile, literally meaning "the last one"--or the last line of her kind, an indigenous woman who shares her vision of a harmonious world--comes into Antonio's life at an early age as a spiritual guide, a shaman or shawoman, a sorceress or healer or *curandera* who is sometimes confused with being a witch (here *bruja* means two things in Spanish, both negative and positive). Actually, she can be both because she fights evil, and much like the owl that hovers over Antonio, she protects him so he can make the most informed choices in his life. The novel, a true *Bildungsroman*, represents choices that have far-reaching

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<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting that while the respective symbols can be viewed independently, they nonetheless exhibit a dialectical relationship because the oceans are directly affected by the moon on a monthly basis. In this sense, we need to understand the interrelationship to be fluid and constant and not simply as a separate entity unto itself.

<sup>6</sup> In a similar manner as described in footnote 3, the Golden Carp, although intended to offer Antonio a natural alternative to institutionalized religion, curiously resembles one of the central symbols of Christianity: the fish. Therefore, the relationship between the two is not distant nor as opposed as one would initially imagine, but certainly distinct. In the same vein, the underground lake below the town of Las Pasturas can be viewed as being linked, at least mythologically, with the important lake of Texcoco where the Aztec empire thrived. Anaya seems to be making such connections either instinctively or artistically, or possibly both.

<sup>7</sup> Stated in another way, the narration occurs and is experienced in Spanish, yet the text is written in English.

implications for the young narrator, principally because his choices help define a cultural ethos, an ability to borrow and mix traditions in creating his own. By facing choices, he learns to fuse and blend instead of rejecting one over the other: the Judeo-Christian with the indigenous traditions and mythological deities with a sense of multiple divinities. In the process, he discovers the shortcomings of institutionalized religions (Catholicism) while finding a special attraction to the Golden Carp, which embodies an indigenous element of the primordial grounded in Nature (could it be seen as a return to the mythology of Aztlán, the mythic homeland of the Aztecs or the origins of the Aztecs?). Thanks to Ultima, he realizes that the latter form of spirituality does not judge nor categorize, but rather allows you to become part of it in and through Nature. In other words, it does not indoctrinate but invites you to become part of a whole in seeking harmony. Thus, Antonio feels in the end freed of guilt, fears, repressed feelings and distant from commandments of what not to do. In the process, he intimates a rebirth, a flowering effect of learning how to be a part of and within Nature and consequently venerate the here and the now. It is no wonder that David Carrasco in “*Bless Me, Ultima as a Religious Text*”<sup>8</sup> claims that the novel by Anaya is a holistic representation of a religious text and not simply an expression of how others have generally couched it as a cultural nationalist text.<sup>9</sup>

*Bless Me, Ultima* offers ample opportunities for archetypal interpretations. The archetypal feminine principle—the intuitive, loving, life-affirming protector and nurturer, can be attributed to Ultima, the Good Mother/Earth Mother, and on another level to the Virgin of Guadalupe, who appears often in Antonio’s dreams and is his mother’s spiritual protector. The Terrible Mother—the frightening female figure, emasculating and life threatening—corresponds to La Llorona, the legendary mother who destroyed her children and threatens those of others. Female characters are presented as contrasts: Tenorio’s daughters are the evil counterparts of Ultima’s beneficent magic. The female temptress, representing female sexuality, appears on several levels: on the idealistic plane in the sirens and mermaids that lure men into dangerous waters but also in the

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<sup>8</sup> See his article “*Bless Me, Ultima as a Religious Text*” by David Carrasco in *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, 13.1-2 (1982): 195-221.

<sup>9</sup> It should be pointed out in passing that Marxist critics in the 1970s tended to dismiss the work as “too poetic”, “too unrealistic” due to Antonio’s young age, and “too quaint” in portraying a semi-magical, protective owl. Such readers preferred for the work to contain a more overt confrontational tone and story of social vindication and to liberate these rural characters from their apparent backwardness. This would appear to be a narrow way of reading the text, expecting certain objectives not inherent to the work. But what they overlook is that the text filled in important gaps for Chicano representations in the early 1970s by illustrating a cross-section of characters with psychological development or personality flaws, some more developed than others due to the archetypal representations. Either way, the work is a riveting read.



prostitutes that work in Rosie's brothel, who cause men to stray from their rightful path. The archetypal Shadow is illustrated in numerous places, most obviously in the form of evil that Tenorio embodies, but the novel also teaches that evil can reside within people, hidden at a deeper level. Antonio's dreams, for example, force him to confront his own sinful temptations and self-doubts that he must overcome if he is to evolve and grow. That is, Anaya here speaks to contemporary lives and not static mythologies or mythified characters.

Dreams and premonitions as well as warnings dominate the narration to emphasize what Ultima claims: "Tony, we live only in your dreams."<sup>10</sup> Not by coincidence there are ten dreams, symbolically representing a kind of intuitive or parallel set of commandments by which Antonio can lead his life. These dreams provide the protagonist with insight, knowledge of the quotidian as well as the sacred, including his progression of maturation within the scope of past-present-future. The oneiric or subconscious and the surreal, then, add to his greater awareness about Good and Evil, including the cosmic forces that tug at him and others to determine their destiny. Antonio's inquisitive nature allows him to observe and experience, thanks in great part to Ultima's guiding hand, in order to pick his own path while avoiding the dangerous pitfalls of temptation and violence. In the process he discovers the mysteries and shortcomings of institutionalized religion, including its contradictions, in order to reach a new state of synthesis while returning to the origins of a natural state. He asks himself: "is the Golden Carp a better God?"<sup>11</sup>

In sum, Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima* is both the focal point and apex of his novelistic production. Many might claim it is the epitome, but I leave that up to other readers. What is undeniable, however, is that *Bless Me, Ultima* contains a foundational narrative, a kind of original fountain, to which the author keeps returning for more, much the same way Ponce de León pursued the Fountain of Youth. The story of a young boy strikes a number of sensitive chords precisely among all cultures due to its universality and primal qualities. Anaya outlines a journey and a search but what he ultimately discovers is a process of navigating through the turbulent waters of being while facing the final challenge of what he will become. The highly symbolic novel filled with an infinite number of provocative and suggestive underpinnings—and symbolism—about humankind's search for an identity resonates with all readers because of the role of regenerating myths in our lives. Anaya's work was an immediate hit in 1972 because it touched deep reflections

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<sup>10</sup> Rudolfo Anaya, *Bless Me, Ultima* (Berkeley: Tonatiuh International-Quinto Sol, 1972), p. 162.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 218.

for Chicanos--and any other reader--about where we fit in and where do we belong. It reminds us that we do not have to look outward to find answers, but rather within ourselves and our surroundings, our history and our culture. We only hope we can find our own Ultimas in this journey as Rudolfo Anaya has presented it in his world-renowned work *Bless Me, Ultima*, thus guiding us to develop and acquire a new consciousness.

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