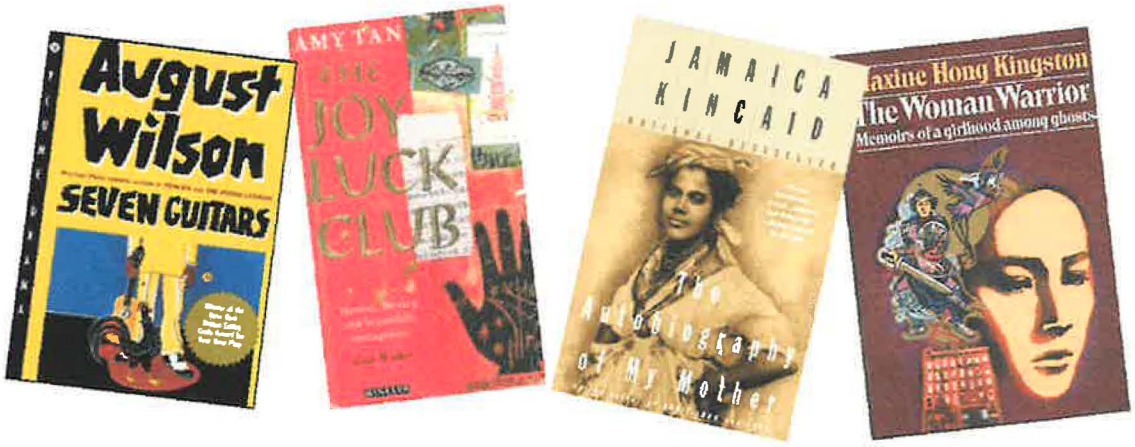
Multicultural Literature

Sabbatical Report

Hispanic-American Literature



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Introduction

This represents the first section of my sabbatical project, Hispanic-American literature. The term Hispanic is currently used to identify descendants of Spanish-speaking peoples: Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, Cuban Americans, as well as Caribbean and South Americans. Moreover, according to editor Rodolfo Cortina, in Mexican American literature, Chicano or Chicana is used to identify the literature and authors who emerged or were influenced by the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and 1970s (xiv). However, Cortina goes on to say that although the nomenclature "Mexican American and Chicano are often used interchangeably, Mexican American is used in general reference to the national group"(xiv). Puerto Ricans, those from the island of Puerto Rico, are also considered Hispanic Americans, while Puerto Ricans who are born or raised in New York have been referred to as Nuyoricans a word which is a combination of New York and Rican (xv). The following poetry, fiction, and nonfiction of Chicano/Chicana writers Rodolfo Anaya, Jimmy Santiago Baca, Denise Chavez, Sandra Cisneros, Laura Esquivel, and Gary Soto and the poetry of Nyorican, Tato Laviera, are representative of the celebration of Hispanic culture and the expanded American literature canon.

Winner of the Premio Quinto Sol literary award, *Bless Me, Ultima* attracted my attention when it was described by a literary critic as a bildungsroman or a maturation novel. Having read Alcott's *Little Women*, Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* and J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* as coming of age novels in American literature, I was interested in learning of the ethnic conflicts of a being a young Chicano boy in a Native American and Anglo environment. After having read the novel, I think that my students (some of whom are also of bi/multicultural heritage) would perhaps see themselves in the protagonist Antonio Mares and glean valuable lessons from his

efforts to forge an identity.

I was introduced to the poetry of Jimmy Santiago Baca as I taught an introduction to literature course. His poem, "Green Chile," evoked such passion and longing not just for food but also for Mexican tradition, that I wanted to read more by this author. My students also enjoyed the connotations and denotations of the red and green chiles, a staple that most were familiar with. I was not disappointed when I read Baca's collection, "Black Mesa Poems" (in which "Green Chile" is included) and his autobiography, "A Place to Stand." Originally, my sabbatical reading list included Baca's poems and his novel entitled *In the Way of the Sun*. However, I could not purchase the novel because it is out of print, and a check of the computerized card catalog and interlibrary loan, the public libraries, and the Borders and Barnes and Noble bookstores yielded nothing. Therefore, I substituted another of Baca's works, his 2001 autobiography, *A Place to Stand* in lieu of the obscure novel, *In the Way of the Sun*; and I was not disappointed. The same passion found in the life affirming poems of "Black Mesa"reverberate in *A Place to Stand.* Baca prefaces his autobiography with his reason for writing his memoir:

> When I asked my father about his history, he would never answer. When I asked my grandmother about her history, she did not want to talk about it. My sons won't have to ask. I want them to know their father's story, good parts and bad. I want to share with them what I have gone through, so they can make wiser choices where I did not and be invigorated with the courage and honor to live better lives (6).

And Baca does very candidly chronicle his life from the age of five in an orphanage, to a detention home, followed by many stints in and out of prison. However, his life's story is a triumphant one, beginning with his learning to read and write at the age of twenty-one. Baca's message will serve

his sons very well; moreover, it may also be inspirational for those who are looking to belong to a community, searching to find their voice, or pursuing the American dream.

Likewise, Gary Soto's fiction, *Buried Onions,* parallels Baca's autobiography in that both central characters are Chicano youths in search of the illusive American dream. The characters differ in that unlike Baca, Eddie, Soto's protagonist, has a series of misfortunes to which he ultimately relents to a life that is punctuated with poverty and crime. However, Eddie's tenacity serves as an example and an inspiration to those seek personal fulfilment.

I once saw a performance of Ntozake Shange's choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf.* Shange's message is that women should not succumb to the restrictions that society places on gender. When I read an excerpt of Denise Chavez's *Last of the Menu Girls* in *The Bedford Introduction to Literature,* I was reminded of Shange's message to African-American women and its applicability to all women: black, white, brown and yellow. Chicana writers, Denise Chavez (*The Last of the Menu Girls*) Sandra Cisneros (*The House on Mango Street*) and Laura Esquivel (*Like Water for Chocolate)* reiterate the same message. Chavez uses the menu as a metaphor for the array of careers and life choices available to Chicanas. Similarly, Cisneros's central character, Esperanza hopes to empower herself through the nontraditional role of writer, thus deciding for herself what her future will be. In similar fashion, Teta, Esquivel's protagonist, also resolves to break the cultural tradition which requires her to care for her aging mother and forgo marriage. The relevant cultural topics of these three classics should render significant student response when discussing and writing about literature.

Tato Laviera is the Nuyorican poet of these Hispanic American literary artists. Laviera was born in Puerto Rico but moved to New York at the age of nine. Although he is considered Puerto Rican, he admits a strong affinity to the Afro-Caribbean culture. *La Carreta Made a U-Turn* is

Laviera's first book of poems. The poems speak of the migration of Puerto Ricans to New York, and for Laviera, this is a process of deterioration for them, as they find themselves, in the thralls of poverty in the Bronx and other barrios of New York. The poems are written in both Puerto Rican Spanish and English to reflect the bicultural, bilingual nature of the Nuyoricans. The proverbial oxcart or la carreta which is the vehicle for a new more prosperous life sought by the Nuyorican, often does a u-turn or longs to return to its origins as Puerto Ricans become disillusioned and nostalgic for their home island.

The literary works in this genre reflect a rich cultural pride and provide an enduring legacy for generations to come. Just as each contributes greatly to the expanded canon of the world's great literatures, the enjoyment and appreciation can certainly begin in the classroom.

Work Cited

Hispanic American Literature. Rodolfo Cortina, Ed. Lincolnwood, Illinois: NTC Publishing Group, 1998.

Annotated Bibliography

Anaya, Rodolfo. *Bless Me, Ultima.* New York: Warner Books, 1972.

Set in 1940s New Mexico, Rodolfo Anaya's novel, *Bless Me, Ultima* is classified as a bildungsroman, or novel of maturation. When the novel opens, Antonio Marez is approaching seven years old. At this time, Ultima, the aging curandera (folk healer) who presided over Antonio's birth, comes to live with his family. Over the two year time span of the novel, Antonio searches for his identity as a young boy of Spanish, Mexican and Native American heritage. He is plagued by having to make a decision to either follow his mother's desire for him to become a farmer, or to yield to his father's wish for him to become a cowboy or vaquero. During the course of the novel, Antonio is faced with several other moral conflicts which he is too young to understand. However, when he is with Ultima, his time is joyous, as she gently guides him in his search for moral certainty. Anaya has created a story of a young boy's journey from innocence to experience as he ponders good versus evil, mysticism versus Catholicism, and life versus death.

Baca, Jimmy Santiago. *Black Mesa Poems.* New York: New Directions, 1989.

- - -. *Poems Taken From My Yard.* Fulton, MO: Timberline 1986.

Poems Taken from My Yard began as a chapbook (1986) and was later incorporated into the collection of what is now sixty-five poems entitled *Black Mesa Poems* (1989). *Black Mesa Poems* is a lyrical compilation that celebrates life in general and Baca's life on the ancient Black Mesa tablelands south of Albuquerque, in particular. Baca pays homage to the land on which he lives, first by describing the terrain of Black Mesa, next by acknowledging that the land holds the blood of great warriors and activists, and then by remembering the earth's endurance for epochs.

Baca, Jimmy Santiago. *A Place to Stand.* New York: Grove Press, 2001.

In a riveting memoir of his life, Jimmy Santiago Baca tells of his search to belong–"to feel more a part of the world." Abandoned by his mother at the age of five, and estranged from an alcoholic father, Baca tells of his life in a Catholic orphanage, a detention center, a New Mexico jail, and ultimately a maximum security prison. It is while in prison, at the age of twenty-one that he learns to read and write. Literacy opened up a whole new world for Baca; his masterfully written autobiography is proof that literacy has afforded him "a place to stand."

Chavez,Denise. *The Last of the Menu Girls.* New York: Vintage Books, 1986.

The Last of the Menu Girls consists of seven episodic stories which could be read together or as individual short stories. The young college student, Rocio Esquibel, is a menu girl at a local hospital in New Mexico. In this her first job, she is responsible for taking the meal orders from the patients in the hospital. It is during this time that she meets many different and sometimes colorful characters. As she is initiated into a world of pain, death, and the drama that accompanies it, she realizes that her life is like a menu, from which she is able to choose which path her life will take.

Cisneros, Sandra. *The House on Mango Street.* New York: Vintage Books, 1984.

Esperanza Cordero expresses her frustration with her family's succession of moves, this time to a rather run down house in a dismal area of Chicago. Despite the dilapidated nature of this house on Mango Street, Esperanza's parents are happy to be homeowners, and they hold on to the hope that someday they will have enough money to leave the barrio. However, Esperanza does not share in their optimism as she agonizes over not having a home of which she can be proud. The novel, a series of forty-four individually titled vignettes, covers a period of one year. During this time, Esperanza develops friendships and acquaintances with the colorful characters of of her neighborhood. She begins to mature physically and emotionally, especially as she comforts her father when his father dies. As Esperanza searches for self-respect and self-knowledge, she resolves to leave Mango Street but vows to return to help those who see no hope of rising above their lives of poverty in the barrio.

Esquivel, Laura. *Like Water for Chocolate.* New York: An Anchor Book, 1992.

Laura Esquivel's first literary work, *Like Water for Chocolate*, is part Mexican cookbook and part novel in which the kitchen becomes a place of refuge and creative energy. The novel's main character, Tita, is born in the kitchen, is nurtured in the kitchen mainly by the family servant, and at times is confined to the kitchen. Because she is the youngest daughter, Mexican tradition dictates that she can never marry, for her fate in life is to take care of her aging, widowed mother. Consequently, she is forbidden to marry Pedro, the man she loves. Instead, Pedro marries her sister, and Tita must bake the wedding cake. In this scene of the novel, Esquibel uses magical realism as a vehicle of revenge. Tita's tears of sorrow and longing for her lost love fall into the icing of the wedding cake. The guests at the wedding who eat the cake experience a profound sense of longing, begin weeping, and then experience pain and frustration. Through her food, Tita has gotten revenge for being denied her chance at love. In further instances in the novel, the themes of hunger and fire/food and passion are intensified by the desires and emotions of the characters, and magical realism is used to heighten such scenes. The novel's title is explained as such: "like [boiling] water for chocolate [Tita was] on the verge of boiling over."

This novel has been recreated in a film by the same name. Its extreme faithfulness to the storyline might be attributable to the fact that Esquivel, herself, wrote the screenplay, and her husband Alfonso Arau directed the film. The theme of passion and its correlation to food is fully enacted in the screenplay. The sound and cinematography are skillfully used to heighten the effects of magical realism. The trained actors are very convincing. However, it is worth noting that nudity is found in several scenes. All in all, this movie is worth viewing.

Hinojosa, Rolando. *This Migrant Earth.* Houston: Arte Publico Press, 1987.

The frontispiece of the novel, *This Migrant Earth*, by Rolando Hinojosa states that this is a "rendition in English of Tomas Rivera's ... *y no se lo trago la tierra.*"(and the earth did not devour him). Consisting of fourteen lyrical reflections on the lives of migrant workers, the first chapter ("The Paling Time and the Fading Time") and last chapter ("The Burden of the World") contribute to the novel's circular structure in their themes of identity and maturation. The lyrical selections may be read together as a novel or as single vignettes. In either case, Hinojosa skillfully presents the enduring spirit of struggling migrant workers and their families just as accurately as Rivera intended.

Laviera, Tato. *La Carreta Made A U-Turn.* Gary, Indiana: Arte Publico Press, 1979.

Puerto Rican born author, Tato Laviera, moved to New York at the age of nine. In his poetry, he portrays the harsh circumstances of Puerto Ricans living in the United States, and describes America from the vantage point of an "AmeRican" one who seeks to be a part of both the American and Puerto Rican community. Laviera emphasizes the multi-ethnic nature of New York City as a microcosm of America. Laviera advocates that Puerto Ricans and other minorities in America should forge a new national identity to reflect the multicultural nature of the United States.

Soto, Gary, *Buried Onions.* New York: Harper Collins, 1997.

Gary Soto's novel, *Buried Onions*, is a story of a nineteen year old Chicano who desperately seeks to leave the barrio and live the American dream. However, even though he enrolls in a community college, honestly earns money by doing odd jobs, and tries to avoid trouble, trouble finds him and disillusionment mounts. Soto has used the onion as a metaphor for sadness, the source of all weeping. In this provocative novel, Soto's protagonist's ill-fated life is shaped by heredity and environment.

Literature Resource Center

Your search, Rudolfo A. Anaya, returned results in the following categories:

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Rudolfo A. Anaya

(1937-)

Variant(s): Rudolfo Alfonso Anaya; Rudolfo Anaya; Rudolfo A(lfonso) Anaya; Rudolfo A. Anaya
Nationality: American
Genre(s): Autobiographies; Western fiction; Novels; Plays; Detective fiction; Children's literature; Autobiographical fiction

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Below are items 1-5 of 5 found.

☐ Anaya, Rudolfo A.
"Rudolfo A. Anaya," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume 278: American Novelists Since World War II, Seventh Series*. A Bruccoli Clark Layman Book. Edited by James R. Giles, Northern Illinois University, and Wanda H. Giles, Northern Illinois University. Gale Group, 2003. pp. 11-20.

☐ Anaya, Rudolfo A.
"Rudolfo A. Anaya," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume 206: Twentieth-Century American Western Writers, First Series*. A Bruccoli Clark Layman Book. Edited by Richard H. Cracroft, Brigham Young University. Gale Group, 1999. pp. 11-19.

☐ Anaya, Rudolfo A.
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☐ Anaya, Rudolfo A(lfonso)
"Rudolfo A(lfonso) Anaya," in *Contemporary Authors*. (A profile of the author's life and works)

☐ Anaya, Rudolfo A.
"Rudolfo A. Anaya," in *Contemporary Literary Criticism-Select*. (A brief review

3)

* Choose "Print" from your browser to print the document. Choose "Back" on your browser to return to the document.

"The Function of the *La Llorona* Motif in Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*"

Critic: Jane Rogers
Source: *Latin American Literary Review,* Vol. V, No. 10, Spring-Summer, 1977, pp. 64-69.
Criticism about: Rudolfo A. Anaya (1937-), **also known as:** Rudolfo Alfonso Anaya, Rudolfo A(lfonso) Anaya, Rudolfo Anaya

Nationality: American

[(essay date Spring-Summer 1977) *In the following essay, Rogers examines the archetypal themes of passage, longing, and deadly seduction in* Bless Me, Ultima, *drawing attention to the symbolism and imagery of the "la llorona" myth.*]

In *The Odyssey,* Circe warns the homeward-bound Odysseus of the menace of the Sirens, who, surrounded by the mouldering skeletons of men, lure and bewitch the unaware man with the music of their song. Yet just beyond their lovely voices--that Odysseus escapes by having himself lashed to the mast of his ship--lurks peril, a choice between annihilation on the sheer cliffs of the Wandering Rocks or a meeting with the double menace of Scylla and Charybdis, the former hideously fishing for a passersby with her twelve dangling feet, the latter but a bow's shot distance away threatening to suck men down into the deep waters near the foot of a luxurious fig tree. Certain death is the fate of the man who succumbs to the sweet lure of the sirens. The peril of life, and yet the promise of home, is the alternative.

A similar theme is developed by Rudolfo Anaya's use of the *la llorona* motif in ***Bless Me, Ultima.*** In the novel, Antonio, symbolically both Christ and Odysseus, moves from the security and from the sweet-smelling warmth of his mother's bosom and kitchen out into life and experience. As he weighs his options--priesthood and the confinement represented by the farms of the Lunas' or the Marezes' freedom on the pagan sea of the llano--and as he grows from innocence to knowledge and experience, the *la llorona* motif figures both on a literal mythological level and as an integral part of Antonio's life.

As "literal" myth, *la llorona* is the wailing woman of the river. Hers is the "tormented cry of a lonely goddess" that fills the valley in one of Antonio's dreams. *La llorona* is "the old witch who cries along the river banks and seeks the blood of boys and men to drink."[1] This myth is closely related to Cico's story of the mermaid.[2] The mermaid is the

powerful presence in the bottomless Hidden Lakes. Her strange music is a "low, lonely murmuring ... like something a sad girl would sing." (p. 109) Cico relates that all that had kept him from plunging into the bottomless lake when he heard the sound was the Golden Carp, whose appearance caused the music to stop. Not that the singing was evil, he relates, but "it called for me to join it. One more step and I'da stepped over the ledge and drowned in the waters of the lake--" (p. 109) Cico continues with the story of the shepherd taken by the mermaid. A "man from Mejico," working on a neighboring ranch, not having heard the story about the lakes, had taken his sheep to water there. Hearing the singing, he ran back to town and swore he had seen a mermaid.

> "He said it was a woman, resting on the water and singing a lonely song. She was half woman and half fish--He said the song made him want to wade out to the middle of the lake to help her, but his fear had made him run. He told everyone the story, but no one believed him. He ended up getting drunk in town and swearing he would prove his story by going back to the lakes and bringing back the mer-woman. He never returned. A week later the flock was found near the lakes. He had vanished--"
>
> (p. 109)

As an integral part of Antonio's life, the *la llorona* motif emerges in his experiences with nature. *La llorona* is the ambivalent *presence* of the river, which Antonio fears and yet with which he senses a sharing of his own soul and a mystic peace. *La llorona* speaks in the owl's cry and in the dove's cou-rou. Even the dust devils of the llano bear *la llorona*'s signature, embracing Antonio in swirling dust as the gushing wind, which imprints evil on his soul, seems to call his name:

> Antonioooooooooooooo ...
>
> (p. 52)

But more significantly for Antonio, the *la llorona* motif emerges in his relationship with his mother and in the imagery of the women in the novel. It is the primary image associated with the mother, Maria. Her frequent extended calls of "Antonioooooo," like that of the whirlwind, reflect the wailing call of the *la llorona* of Tony's dream:

> *La llorona* seeks the soul of Antonioooooooo ...
>
> (p. 24)

In the same dream, Tony hears his "mother moan and cry because with each turning of the sun her son [is] growing old ..." (p. 24) On his first day of school Antonio awakens with a sick feeling in his stomach, both excited and sad because for the first time he will be away from the protection of his mother. As he enters the kitchen his mother smiles,

then sweeps him into her arms sobbing, "My baby will be gone today." (p. 50) At Ultima's stern but gentle persistence, Antonio is separated from his mother, yet as he leaves, following the sisters Deborah and Theresa up the goat path, he hears his mother "cry" his name. Maria, as she prays around the Virgin's altar for Antonio and his three older brothers, is *la llorona.* On the return of Andrew, Eugene, and Leon from the war, Maria alternately sobs and prays until Gabriel complains, "Maria, ... but we have prayed all night!" (p. 58) Mother and Virgin both assume the mournful aspect of *la llorona* in one of Antonio's dreams just prior to the three brothers' return:

> Virgen de Guadalupe, I heard my mother cry, return my sons to me.
>
> Your sons will return safely, a gentle voice answered.
>
> Mother of God, make my fourth son a priest.
>
> And I saw the virgin draped in the gown of night standing on the bright, horned moon of autumn, and she was in mourning for the fourth son.
>
> (p. 43)

Similarly, the *la llorona* motif is echoed in the tolling of the church bells and in the imagery of the mourning, lonely women as they are called to mass on the morning following Lupito's death. "Crying the knell of Lupito," the bell "tolled and drew to it the widows in black, the lonely, faithful women who came to pray for their men." (p. 32)

La llorona emerges in the patterns of imagery that surround the episode at Rosie's on the day of the Christmas pageant and of Narciso's death. The "single red light bulb" which shines at the porch door over the "snow-laden gate of the picket fence" is "like a beacon inviting weary travelers in from the storm." Light shines through the drawn shades, and from "somewhere in the house a faint melody" seeps out and is "lost in the wind." Antonio knows he must get home before the storm worsens, yet he is compelled to linger "at the gate of the evil women." The music and laughter intrigue him. His ears "explode with a ringing noise," and he is paralyzed to flight. (p. 155) Instead, he must remain to learn that he himself has lost his innocence. The cry of the sirens prevails over Andrew, too, as the red-painted woman calls him from the back of the house:

> "Androoooooo. ..."
>
> (p. 156)

When Andrew is summoned by Narciso, it is the giggling girl, her voice "sweet with allurement" that holds Andrew back. He fails to assume the responsibility that would have meant help for Narciso. Instead he succumbs to the allure of the siren.

Wherever it emerges in the novel, the *la llorona* motif harbors ambivalence. *La llorona*

invites with music and warmth, and she offers security. Yet, like the mermaid in the hidden lakes, *la llorona* threatens death. For Antonio, his mother offers warmth, fragrance, security. But his own maturity demands that he deny it. To succumb would mean the death of his own manhood and who, like the fate of William Blake's Thel, unwilling to accept the consequences of the generative life of experience, withdraws to an original state of primal innocence. Yet this world holds an even darker fate for her because it becomes at once prison and paradise, a state of natural innocence and a state of ignorance.[3] This is the choice Antonio must make. He moves from the fragrance and the warmth and the security of his mother's kitchen, from the reassurance of her call, out into the world of experience, the world of school and his companions.

Antonio is introduced into the inferno of school life by Red, who leads him on the first day into the dark, cavernous building, its radiators snapping with steam and its "strange, unfamiliar smells and sounds that seemed to gurgle from its belly." (p. 53) Antonio races the Kid and Time across the bridge to and from school as the years pass and he matures chronologically. With the tutoring of Samuel he learns of the Golden Carp which is to provide apocalyptical knowledge and understanding, an illumination which burdens him with doubt and responsibility. Cico leads Antonio to Narciso's magic garden where he tastes of the fruit--the golden carrot--and to El Rito Creek where he at last experiences the Golden Carp, the "sudden illumination of beauty and understanding," an understanding he anticipated but later failed to find in the ritual of the Holy Communion. Coincident with his vision of the carp, Antonio doubts his own Christian God when he suddenly realizes that Ultima's power had succeeded in curing his Uncle Lucas where the Christian God had failed.

Antonio sees the powers of good and evil contend in Ultima, who serves as his guide through life, and in the dark, diabolic Tenorio. He experiences the deaths of Lupito, of Narciso, and of the angelic and heretical Florence. He sees his brother Andrew deny his responsibility at the summons of the girl at Rosie's, of *la llorona.* Andrew remains to indulge in pleasure, yet the knowledge that he has failed in his responsibility to Narciso drives him, finally, away into the death, the world of lost wanderings, of his other brothers, Eugene and Leon.

The experience at Rosie's is equally ambivalent for Antonio. He is at once lured and repulsed. It marks for him the beginning of a ritual death as he becomes abruptly aware of his own loss of innocence.

> I had seen evil, and so I carried the evil within me. ... I had somehow lost my innocence and let sin enter into my soul, and the knowledge of God, the saving grace, was far away.
>
> (p. 158)

The illness which follows is a "long night" as Ultima sits by "powerless in the face of

death."

> A long, dark night came upon me in which I sought the face of God, but I could not find Him. Even the Virgin and my Saint Anthony would not look at my face.
>
> ... In front of the dark doors of Purgatory my bleached bones were laid to rest.
>
> (p. 167)

But, unlike Andrew's death, Antonio's experience at Rosie's becomes one that leads to death and ultimate rebirth. Antonio recovers from his illness, and though the events of the spring, of catechism and first communion, do not provide the enlightenment he finds with the carp, Antonio is a new man. His life has changed; he feels older. He faces directly the question of the existence of evil, and he is ready to accept his father's explanation that "most of the things we call evil are not evil at all; it is just that we don't understand those things and so we call them evil. And we fear evil only because we do not understand it." (p. 236) Antonio learns to accept the greater reality of life, that he is both Marez and Luna, that he does not have to choose one but can be both. He accepts his father's explanation that the understanding he failed to find in the Holy Communion will come with life. He comes to realize that one's dreams are "usually for a lost childhood." (p. 237) More importantly, he learns from Ultima that "the tragic consequences of life can be overcome by the magical strength that resides in the human heart." (p. 237)

Antonio spends the summer working on the farms with his uncles in El Puerto. Finally, as he struggles to get back to Guadalupe and his family to warn Ultima of Tenorio's threat when his second daughter dies, Antonio encounters *la llorona* once more:

> With darkness upon me I had to leave the brush and run up in the hills, just along the tree line. ... Over my shoulder the moon rose from the east and lighted my way. Once I ran into a flat piece of bottom land, and what seemed solid earth by the light of the moon was a marshy quagmire. The wet quicksand sucked me down and I was almost to my waist before I squirmed loose. Exhausted and trembling I crawled onto solid ground. As I rested I felt the gloom of night settle on the river. The dark *presence* of the river was like a shroud, enveloping me, calling to me. The drone of the grillos and the sigh of the wind in the trees whispered the call of the soul of the river.
>
> Then I heard an owl cry its welcome to the night, and I was reminded again of my purpose. The owl's cry reawakened Tenorio's threat ...
>
> (p. 243-44)

Free of the call of *la llorona,* of the "dark *presence* of the river" which called to him, Antonio runs "with new resolution." He runs "to save Ultima" and "to preserve those moments when beauty mingled with sadness and flowed through [his] soul like the stream of time." Antonio leaves the river and runs across the llano feeling a new lightness, "like the wind" as his strides "carried [him] homeward." (p. 244) No longer does he feel the pain in his side, the thorns of the cactus or the needles of yucca that pierced his legs and feet. Yet Antonio knows his childhood is over as the report of Tenorio's rifle shatters it "into a thousand fragments." (p. 245)

Antonio has come home to himself. He has eluded the death call of *la llorona,* and as he buries the owl, Ultima's spirit, he takes on the responsibility of the future in which he knows he must "build [his] own dream out of those things which were so much a part of [his] childhood." (p. 248) Antonio has avoided annihilation on the sheer cliffs of the Wandering Rocks--the fate of his brothers--and he has moved through the narrow strait and evaded the menace of Scylla and Charybdis as he comes to face the reality of his manhood.

Notes

[1]Rudolfo A. Anaya, *Bless Me, Ultima* (Berkeley, Calif.: Quinto Sol, 1972), p. 23. All quotations from *Bless Me, Ultima* are from this edition; page numbers will henceforth be cited in parentheses within the text.

[2]Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology,* notes the association between the water image in mythology and "goddesses, mermaids, witches, and sirens," who may represent either the "life-threatening" or "life-furthering" aspect of the water. The use of water imagery to represent the theme of rebirth, Campbell says, is a "mythological universal" imprinted at the moment of birth when "the congestion of blood and sense, of suffocation experienced by the infant before its lungs commence to operate give rise to a brief seizure of terror, the physical effects of which ... tend to occur, more or less strongly, whenever there is an abrupt moment of fright. ... The birth trauma, as an archetype of transformation, floods with considerable emotional effect the brief moment of loss of security and threat of death that accompanies any crisis of radical change. In the imagery of mythology and religion this birth (or more often rebirth) theme is extremely prominent; in fact every threshold passage--not only this from the darkness of the womb to the light of the sun, but also those from childhood to adult life and from the light of the world to whatever mystery of darkness may lie beyond the portal of death--is comparable to a birth and has been ritually represented, practically everywhere, through an imagery of re-entry into the womb." (New York: Viking Press, 1959), pp. 61-62.

[3]See Harold Bloom's commentary on "The Book of Thel" in *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake,* ed. David V. Erdman, (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1965), pp. 807-

08.

Source: Jane Rogers, "The Function of the *La Llorona* Motif in Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima,*" in *Latin American Literary Review,* Vol. V, No. 10, Spring-Summer, 1977, pp. 64-69.

Source Database: Contemporary Literary Criticism

Rudolfo A(lfonso) Anaya

1937-

Entry Updated : 12/10/2004
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Birth Place: Pastura, New Mexico

Personal Information: Family: Born October 30, 1937, in Pastura, New Mexico; son of Martin (a laborer) and Rafaelita (Mares) Anaya; married Patricia Lawless (a counselor), July 21, 1966. *Ethnicity:* "Mexican American/Chicano." Education: Attended Browning Business School, 1956-58; University of New Mexico, B.A. (Education), 1963, M.A. (English), 1969, M.A. (guidance and counseling), 1972. Hobbies and other interests: Reading, travel, apple orchards. Memberships:

Modern Language Association of America, American Association of University Professors, National Council of Teachers of English, Trinity Forum, Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines (vice president, 1974-80), Rio Grande Writers Association (founder and first president), La Academia Society, La Compania de Teatro de Albuquerque, Multi-Ethnic Literary Association (New York, NY), Before Columbus Foundation (Berkeley, CA.), Santa Fe Writers Co-op, Sigma Delta Pi (honorary member). Addresses: Home: 5324 Canada Vista N.W., Albuquerque, NM, 87120. Office: Department of English, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM 87131.

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1981; honorary doctorates from universities including University of New Mexico, 1981, and 1996, Marycrest College, 1984, College of Santa Fe, 1991, University of New England, 1992, California Lutheran University, 1994, and University of New Hampshire, 1997; Corporation for Public Broadcasting script development award, 1982, for "Rosa Linda"; Award for Achievement in Chicano Literature, Hispanic Caucus of Teachers of English, 1983; Kellogg Foundation fellowship, 1983-85; ; Mexican Medal of Friendship, Mexican Consulate of Albuquerque, NM, 1986; PEN Center West Award for *Albuquerque,* 1992; Erna S. Fergusson award for exceptional accomplishment, University of New Mexico Alumni Association, 1994; Art Achievement award, Hispanic Heritage Celebration, 1995; El Fuego Nuevo Award, 1995; Tomas Rivera Mexican American Children's Book Award, 1995, for *The Farlitos of Chrismas* and 2000, for *My Land Sings;* Distinguished Achievement Award, Western Literature Association, and Premio Fronterizo, Border Book Festival, both 1997; Arizona Adult Author Award, Arizona Library Association, and De Coleres Hispanic Literature Award, both 2000; National Medal of Arts in literature, Wallace Stegner Award, Center for the American West, National Hispanic Cultural Center Literary Award, and Bravos Award, Albuquerque Arts Alliance, all 2001; National Association of Chicano scholar, and Champion of Change Award, both 2002.

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Author of unproduced play "Rosa Linda," for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting; author of unpublished and unproduced dramas for the Visions Project, KCET-TV (Los Angeles). Contributor of short stories, articles, essays, and reviews to periodicals in the United States and abroad, including *La Luz, Bilingual Review-Revista Bilingue, New Mexico Magazine, La Confluencia, Contact II, Before Columbus Review, L'Umano Avventura, 2 Plus 2,* and *Literatura Uchioba;* contributor to *Albuquerque News.* Editor, *Blue Mesa Review;* associate editor, *American Book Review,* 1980-85, and *Escolios;* regional editor, *Viaztlan* and *International Chicano Journal of Arts and Letters;* member of advisory board, *Puerto Del Sol Literary Magazine.* Anaya's manuscript collection is available at the Zimmerman Museum, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque.

Works in Progress: *Jamez Spring* (novel), *The Santero's Miracle* (children's book), and *Serafina's Stories* (young adult book), all expected 2004.

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"Jason's Indian": Mexican Americans and the denial of indigenous ethnicity in Anaya's Bless Me, Ultima. (Rudolfo Anaya)(Critical Essay) Caminero-Santangelo, Marta.

Although Rudolfo Anaya's Bless Me, Ultima is regarded as a classic of Chicano/Latino literature and even of ethnic American literature generally, (1) "ethnicity" is not a theme that is foregrounded in the novel. The resulting critical and pedagogical problem is no minor matter. The scholarship of ethnic literature typically not only expects but also assumes that ethnic American novels have something important to say about being "ethnic" or bicultural in the United States. Further, ethnic texts are often taught with an ey to what they might reveal--especially to monocultural students--about the specific cultura situation from which these works emerge. (2) Yet the narrative of Ultima, in the form of a bildungsroman, is driven by issues of personal identity that do not seem connected to the larger social and identity issues at the heart of the Chicano movement of the 1960s and early 1970s--a movement that strove to construct and celebrate an ethnic identity on the basis of mestizaje ("hybridity") and the recovery of an indigenous past. The struggle of UItima's young protagonist Antonio (or Tony) Marez to negotiate a dual inheritance, the elements of which seem incompatible if not mutually exclusive, may call to mind Gloria Anzaldua's description of the mestiza who also negotiates apparently incompatible aspect of identity: "The new mestiza copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to be an Indian in Mexican culture, to be Mexican fro an Anglo point of view. She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality [...]" (79). But, unlike Anzaldua's application of the theories of the postmodern subject to the particular sociohistorical situation of the Chicana, Anaya's representation of identity conflict appears highly personal--a family matter without larger implications for Chicano: The Marez men, Antonio's father's family, are associated with the freedom of the vaquerc ("cowboy") who roams the expansive llano ("plain"); the Lunas, his mother's family, are linked with the more stable life of farming. The conflict for Antonio is whether he will become a vaquero, following in the footsteps of the Marez men, or a farmer like his Luna uncles--or even a priest, his fervently Catholic mother's dearest wish.

These alternatives seem strikingly disconnected from the ethnic conflicts (Spanish versus indigenous, Mexican/Chicano versus Anglo) that served as the historical and contempora context for the Chicano movement. Genaro M. Padilla, looking back on the body of critic reaction to the novel more than a decade ago, observed "Many critics objected to Bless Me, Ultima (1972) on the grounds that it seemed non-referential even though it was set in a definable historical moment in a New Mexican village." (3) There was simply no

obvious connection to "the social contexts of the novel" (Padilla 128). (4) Unlike the muc earlier Chicano bildungsroman Pocho (1959) by Jose Antonio Villarreal that dealt with issues of assimilation and integration versus cultural preservation, Bless Me, Ultima contains no such struggles; no obvious or foregrounded "Anglo" influences are trying to Americanize Antonio at the expense of his Mexican roots. Passing references to Antonio' education in the English language and the "old people [who] did not accept the new language"(180) or to his discomfort when he brings a lunch of tortillas to school and is mocked by children with "sandwiches [...] made of bread" (58) seem tangential--perhaps even irrelevant--to the core identity conflict of the novel. As Juan Bruce-Novoa decisivel states, "Antonio is not torn between an Anglo and a Chicano world, but between two way of being Chicano [...]" (183). Furthermore, although the latter part of Bruce-Novoa's statement might evoke fissures in a collective Chicano/a identity that Antonio (much like Anzaldua's "New Mestiza") must negotiate, it is hard to see how the particular familial choices that are constructed for Tony (e.g., cowboy or priest, valley or plain) might serve this kind of "referential" capacity. (5)

Perhaps responding to the implied censure of the novel for not being "Chicano enough" (Cantu 13), some critics have focused on its ostensible ethnic "content"--those elements of Ultima that serve as "ethnic markers," including bilingualism and code-switching as well as folklore or pagan figures like la Llorona and the golden carp. (6) Indeed, it is by now a critical commonplace in Anaya scholarship that Bless Me, Ultima "draws deeply on Native American mythology" (Kanoza 160). (7) Such readings, however, are more concerned with the influence or traces of indigenous thought and belie systems than they are with the ways in which Ultima's storyline might comment on indigenous or Chicano ethnic identity. Yet a third strain of criticism sidesteps the questio of "ethnicity" by approaching the novel in terms either of "universal" or of specifically Western structures and influences. (8) Thus the thorny question of just what, if anything, the novel has to say about "ethnicity" and the matter of being Chicano continues to be elided.

Although I believe that the novel has much to say about Chicana/o ethnicity, I suggest tha a first and crucial step in interpreting the novel's commentary is to recognize that the subject is not dealt with openly. A submerged subtext concerning hybrid, mestizo identity lies beneath the plot of Antonio's family-based identity conflict, but obscuring this subtex within the narrative is thematically significant and has been overlooked too long. The novel actually concerns the cultural pressures that caused Mexican Americans to deny their Indian heritage in the decades--and even centuries--before the Chicano movement (after all Bless Me, Ultima is not set during the '60s and '70s of the Chicano movement bu during World War II). Structurally, Ultima mirrors those pressures by suppressing issues of Native American heritage and masking them with the father-mother conflict. (9) In a parallel to Antonio's learning process, readers must follow the traces of "Indian-ness" and unearth what has been repressed.

Perhaps the easiest way into the ethnic content of the text is not through Antonio's familia

identity conflict but through his religious struggles. As countless scholars have already noted, Antonio weighs the Catholic church against the golden carp, a pagan god vaguely associated with indigenous beliefs. One of the lessons that Antonio must learn on the roac to maturity is that elements of Catholicism and paganism can be combined to form a new hybrid religion. He rejects the colonialist imposition of Catholic conversion onto pagans that is mimed in the scene in which the other children demand that Florence, a nonbelieve confess his sins and submit to the Catholic faith:

> "Give him a penance! Make him ask for forgiveness for those terrib] things he said about God!" Agnes insisted. They were gathering behind me now, I could feel their presence and their hot, bitter breath. They wanted me to be their leader; they wanted me to punisl Florence.
>
> "Make his penance hard," Rita leered.
>
> "Make him kneel and we'll all beat him," Ernie suggested.
>
> "Yeah, beat him!" Bones said wildly.
>
> "Stone him!"
>
> "Beat him !"
>
> "Kill him !'"
>
> They circled around me and advanced on Florence, their eyes flashing with the thought of the punishment they would impose on the nonbeliever. (213)

When Antonio refuses to play the role of punishing priest in this scene, the children turn on him, shouting: "Give him the Indian torture!" (214). The scene's historical parallel is, c course, the efforts by Spanish colonizers to force conversion of the indigenous peoples of New Mexico. (The term "Indian torture" is wonderfully ambiguous; although the childrer no doubt believe that "Indian torture" is torture administered by Indians, their own acts serve as a reminder and distant echo of the torture exacted on Indians.) Antonio rejects th dogmatic imposition of religious adherence. As a result, Florence later tells him, "You could never be their priest" (215). Instead, by the end of the novel, Antonio opts for religious hybridity; he discovers that he can take "God and the golden carp--and make something new" (247).

Antonio fails utterly to recognize that the sort of religious syncretism that he envisions as solution to his dilemma has already taken place. A hybrid religion is a reality for Mexicar and Mexican Americans, who routinely incorporate aspects of belief systems inherited from Native American ancestors with the Catholicism imposed by the Spanish conqueror In one of Antonio's dream, the "ethnic" religious conflict is linked to the familial conflict

as he begs, "Oh please tell me which is the water that runs through my veins," and his parents give opposing responses:

> It is the sweet water of the moon, my mother crooned softly, it is the water the Church chooses to make holy and place in its font. It is the water of your baptism.
>
> Lies, lies, my father laughed, through your body runs [...] the water that binds you to the pagan god of Cico, the golden carp! (120)

The mother demands allegiance to Catholic rites in the dream, and pagan beliefs such as faith in the golden carp are here associated with the father. Later in the novel, Antonio's father Gabriel expresses preference for an Indian burial ceremony over a Catholic burial i a casket (233); and Antonio tells us that from his father (along with Ultima) he has learne an appreciation of the interconnectedness of man with the "noble expanse of land and air and pure, white sky" (228)--a lesson surely meant to be inflected by Native American spirituality. Yet the Marez family, the story insists more than once, is descended from conquistadors and would more logically be associated with Spanish Catholicism. Althoug Antonio's mother battles his father on Catholic versus pagan grounds in his symbolic dream, in actuality she holds Ultima, a curandera, in the highest regard and actually asks for her help in the matter of the curse on Antonio's uncle. For Antonio's mother, Catholicism and Ultima's pagan form of spirituality are not incompatible, regardless of how Antonio might represent her in his dream. What Antonio constructs as a simple eithe or dichotomy is infinitely more complicated, with each supposed "side" a hybrid and contradictory construction bearing traces of a creative syncretism that was part of the history of colonial New Mexico:

> Because the Indians were deeply religious anyway, they followed mar Christian teachings perfectly [...]. Only one God was placed before them, but the many Christian saints, and especially the Virgin de Guadalupe, found ready acceptance by a people accustomed to a pantheon. Baptism, rituals, ceremonies, prayers, fasting, confessions, heaven, hell, and purgatory were not new concepts to the Indians and were thus easily adopted [...]. When possible, missionaries incorporated Indian practices to teach Catholic dogma [...]. For example, in pre-Columbian times towns honored a patron deity with a processional. The clerics staged the affair on the already established day but replaced Indian idols with Christian saints; thus, a mixed Indian-Spanish ceremony evolved [...]. (Vigil 71-72)

It has been widely acknowledged that the synthesis Ultima advocates as a solution to Antonio's struggles points precisely toward the (already achieved) historical solution of syncretism and hybridity. What has gone virtually without commentary, yet is surely significant, is that Anaya represents this hybridity as obscured, so repressed that Antonio

does not see it; he understands each of his dual heritages as pure and nonoverlapping and "discovers" hybridity as though it were a new solution.

Particularly problematic, as I have been hinting all along, is that nowhere in the novel is Indian heritage explicitly mentioned as a part of Antonio's conflicted identity. Yet, as Roberto Cantu notes, Antonio's "conflictive genealogy" is "generally understood to be Spanish and Indian" (40). We can speculate that such a tacit understanding might come from readers' presumptions about Chicana/o literature generally or about Anaya specifically; it certainly does not come from the text. (10) Antonio's father's family identifies its ancestors exclusively as conquistadors; his mother also describes hers as "colonizers"--although, in her case, Mexican rather than Spanish: "They were the first colonizers of the Llano Estacado. It was the Lunas who carried the charter from the Mexican government to settle the valley" (52). It is certainly not the Lunas' Indian or evei mestizo heritage that is emphasized through this history. Mexican land grant policy after independence from Spain in 1821 was "to increase the size of land grants to individuals o groups who would settle on the dangerous frontiers, to enclose enclaves of [...] Indian nomads, and to drive others of them beyond the edge of a moving occupance line" (Cline 17). The Centralist Mexican government that took control in 1836, likewise, did not "recognize native rights to Mexican public lands; so far as they had a view at all, the government officials shared a developing Mexican opinion, current to the Mexican Revolution of 1910, that Indians were a drag on progress and the sooner they disappeared the better for the nation" (Cline 18). In other words, the Mexicans who colonized New Mexico, much as the Spanish before them, saw themselves as distinct from and in opposition to the Indians (despite their own mestizo inheritance). (11)

That sense of Indians as fully Other is surely what activates Gabriel's reaction to his children's use of "gosh" and "okay": "What good does an education do them [... if] they only learn to speak like Indians [?]" (54). The father's response is remarkable in that it displaces Anglo influence, identifying the "foreignness" of the words instead as "Indian" (perhaps to him a less threatening alternative than the pressing forces of assimilation to the dominant Anglo culture). All this suggests the degree to which Indian heritage, far from being represented as one of the competing aspects in Antonio's conflictive genealogy is actually so obscured that the characters understand "Indian" as "alien."

Even Ultima, generally understood by critics as deeply in touch with indigenous spirituality (from Ultima, for example, Antonio learns that "even the plants had a spirit, and before I dug she made me speak to the plant and tell it why we pulled it from its hom in the earth" [39]) apparently does not acknowledge a common ancestry with Indians. Antonio explains that Ultima "spoke to me of the common herbs and medicines we share with the Indians of the Rio del Norte. She spoke of the ancient medicines of other tribes, the Aztecas, Mayas, and even of those in the old, old country, the Moors. But I did not

suggestion is that Mexican Americans ("we") share herbs and medicines with those of native cultures, rather than having drawn their knowledge precisely from those cultures. I other words, the passage distressingly seems to imply that even Ultima, connected as she to Indian spirituality, fails to recognize a common heritage with Indians--until one realize that Ultima's words are reported through Antonio, who was so uninterested in the whole issue of any resemblance to Indians that he "did not listen" (and so is perhaps heating Ultima only incompletely). Antonio views Ultima's lesson about "ancient" tribes as absolutely tangential to his central concerns.

If Antonio's identity crisis is in fact meant to represent the tensions of being of both Spanish and Native American heritage, why did Anaya not make Antonio's Indian ancest more explicit? I suggest that Anaya supplies the cue for interpreting this silence in his bri but mysterious anecdote about "Jason's Indian": "He was the only Indian of the town, and he talked only to Jason. Jason's father had forbidden Jason to talk to the Indian, he had beaten him, he had tried in every way to keep Jason from the Indian. But Jason persisted" (10). Jason's Indian raises several critical questions. Given that the novel is set in Guadalupe, a New Mexican town inhabited at least in part by Mexican Americans (tha is, by a mestizo population), why does the narrative so strongly assert irreconcilable and absolute ethnic difference here ("the only Indian of the town")? Why is Jason's father trying so vehemently--indeed, so violently--to keep Jason from him? (12) What is the critical significance of Jason's persistence--never mentioned again in the novel--of talking to the Indian? In virtually the only critical discussion to date of this enigmatic passage (ye one that ignores the possible implications for Chicano mestizo identity), Roberto Cantu observes that, although it is said that the Indian speaks only to Jason, it turns out, contradictorily, that the Indian speaks to quite a few other characters. Cantu poses the additional question: "Why does Antonio affirm that the Indian talks 'only to Jason' [...] when obviously that is not the truth?" (17). (13)

As one of the two moments in the text in which the presence of Native Americans is mad explicit (the other, which I discuss later, concerns the curse laid on the ghosts of three murdered Indians), the apparently tangential and inconsequential passage about Jason's Indian actually reveals much. For one thing, it underscores that the Mexican Americans o Guadalupe (and for that matter, of Las Pasturas, the original home of the Marez family) have buried any memory of their Indian ancestry. They do not see themselves as Indian--- even in part--so Jason's Indian is regarded as the "only Indian of the town," (Perhaps this passage echoes the Mexican land grant policy toward Indians, which viewed them as quit separate and distinct from Mexicans.) In other words, the anecdote dramatizes Mexican Americans' deeply entrenched denial of Indian ancestry before the Chicano movement. B this denial of indigenous heritage is hardly unproblematic; the force necessary to maintai it is suggested by Jason's father, who beats Jason in an effort to "keep [him] from the Indian." Only through a violent act of repression can the connection of Mexican Americans to their Indian ancestry (symbolized here by Jason's intense desire to communicate with the Indian) stay buried. And as Cantu observes, the text elsewhere implies that Jason's Indian does talk to others in the town, specifically to pass on

information about the golden carp (Cantu 17); perhaps these hints suggest metaphorically that, through such oral transmission, fragments of Indian belief systems persist, despite denial and repression.

In their essay "Return to Aztlan: The Chicano Rediscovers His Indian Past," Guillermo Lux and Maurilio E. Vigil review the powerful pressures toward assimilation against which the Chicano movement reacted. (14) The denial of Native American heritage had it roots in the Mexican "colonial tradition of being pro-White (Spanish or other European) and anti-Indian" (96) and was given an additional dimension in the United States where Mexican Americans had to

> struggle to overcome pernicious, cruel and misleading stereotypes which have been created by Anglo society through motion pictures ar other mass media. [... T]he Indian [...] has been cast as savage, mean, and treacherous. [... N]ot only was the Mexican American impelled to shed his Mexican-ness [...], but he has not been able even to begin to consider his Indian origins." (94, emphasis added) (15)

Lux and Vigil further explain:

> For the person who may not physiologically appear distinctive or different it is relatively easy to pass for white. For the distinctive person, the mestizo, the recourse must be "my family descended from the conquistadores; we are Hispanos, Spanish." (97, emphasis added). (16)

That claim cannot help but remind us of Antonio's father, who is drawn to beliefs that the novel labels pagan yet insists that the Marez men were "conquistadores" (25).

It is important to note that although Antonio clearly knows about his conquistador ancestors (in the sense that he knows about his "past"), news of an even more distant past causes him great anxiety. Early in the novel Ultima attempts to give Antonio a history lesson:

> "Long ago," she would smile, "long before you were a dream, long before the train came to Las Pasturas, before the Lunas came to their valley, before the great coronado built his bridge--" Then her voice would trail off and my thoughts would be lost in the labyrinth of a time and history I did not know. (40)

This scene underscores the degree to which Ultima takes on the role of historical mentor for Antonio, hinting at a past of which he is ignorant. Antonio hears more about his histor from the people of Las Pasturas who come to Guadalupe for supplies:

> [A]lways the talk would return to stories of the old days [...]. The first pioneers there were sheepherders. Then they imported herc

> of cattle from Mexico and became vaqueros. [...] They were the firs cowboys in a wild and desolate land which they took from the Indians. Then the railroad came. The barbed wire came. The songs, the corridos became sad, and the meeting of the people from Texas with my forefathers was full of blood, murder, and tragedy. The people were uprooted. They looked around one day and found themselves closed in. The freedom of land and sky they had known wa gone. Those people could not live without freedom and so they packe up and moved west. They became migrants. (125)

The fascinating part of this history is what Antonio does not learn from it. The stories tha the people from Las Pasturas tell is about the history of their confrontation with Anglos, who take their land and obliterate their freedom. Yet the vaqueros themselves, the stories almost inadvertently reveal, took the land from the Indians, obliterating their freedom. Th historical lesson embedded in the stories is about the parallels between Anglo and Spanish/Mexican colonization, but neither the people of Las Pasturas nor Antonio hear th lesson. The taking of "their" land is belabored as a tragedy; the taking of the land from th Indians is mentioned only in passing, as a sort of "background" to the real story. On the other hand, Anaya, writing from the context of the Chicano movement with its renewed interest in the history of colonization and the violence done to indigenous peoples, is surely aware of, and intends, the historical lesson that his characters fail to apprehend.

This particular history surfaces again later in the novel, when Ultima is called to remove a curse plaguing the Tellez household. Explaining the curse's origins, Ultima narrates:

> A long time ago, [...] the llano of the Agua Negra was the land of the Comanche Indians. Then the comancheros came, then the Mexican with his flocks--many years ago three Comanche Indians raided the flocks of one man, and this man was the grandfather of Tellez. Tellez gathered the other Mexicans around him and they hanged the three Indians. They left the bodies strung on a tree; they did not bury them according to their custom. Consequently, the three souls were left to wander on that ranch. (227)

In the condensed historical narrative that opens this passage, the Indians are semantically supplanted first by the comancheros--traders from Spanish settlements who exchanged goods with Comanche camps (Anderson 231)--and then by the "Mexican with his flocks,' suggesting a gradual ceding of the land. Once again, the history of land takeover seems tc be told almost in passing, as "background"; but the background is more intimately connected to the main thrust of the story (the origins of the curse). The violence inflicted on the Comanche Indians is quite vividly metaphorized in the brutal hanging by Tellez's ancestor and is not justified within the text by the Indians' raid, which is itself only an outcome of their loss of land to Mexicans. The central focus in the passage is the violence and desecration of the hanging and improper burial, not the criminality of the raid.

Interestingly, the Indians who "haunt" Tellez's household are specifically identified in the

novel as Comanche, rather than Aztec or Mayan. (That is, they do not share a genealogy with the Mexicans who killed them.) As Lux and Vigil point out, the Comanches were enemies of Mexicans descended from Aztecs and were identified as "indios barbaros" (barbaric Indians); this identification provided ideological sanction to the cooperation of Mexican mestizos with Anglo settlers in their "campaigns against los indic barbaros" (95). Ultimately, of course, the Anglos did not draw fine distinctions between different native peoples: the "only good Indian was a dead Indian" (Lux and Vigil 95). Thus the Mexican identification of Comanches as "barbarians" became a factor in the suppression of Mexican "Indian-ness." Teresa McKenna observes that Alurista, one of the major early literary figures of the Chicano movement, "helped define and foster the notio of 'Amerindia,' which connotes the unification of all Indian peoples into one creative, political, and social force" (16). One aspect of the Chicano movement, then, was to reject the divisions and antagonisms among different indigenous peoples that from the beginnin had aided in their conquest and continuing suppression. It is notable that, although the spirits of the Indians are now wreaking havoc on the Tellez family (hot skillets and coffee pots fly in the air and burn them; rocks rain on their rooftop), Anaya takes great pains to shift responsibility for the "evil" from the Indians to the wicked Trementina sisters (the central antagonists and villains throughout the novel), who have placed a curse on them. The Comanche Indians of Anaya's text are not (counter to eighteenth--and nineteenth-century representations of them) barbaric or savage; they are simply responding to a threa to their way of life.

Because they have been unjustly killed and improperly buried, they do not stay dead but return to haunt their killers. As Kathleen Brogan writes about ghostly hauntings in ethnic literature, "To be haunted in this literature is to know, viscerally, how specific cultural memories that seem to have disappeared in fact refuse to be buried and still shape the present, in desirable and in troubling ways" (16). Read in connection with the anecdote about Jason's Indian, the scene of the three Indian spirits begins to take on a larger symbolic significance, along the lines of the "return of the repressed." The town continue to want to deny, suppress, and repress its Indian-ness, but that Indian-ness will not stay dead; Jason, for one, returns to rediscover it. Incidents of "cultural haunting," Brogan tell us, "figure prominently [in ethnic literature] wherever people must reconceive a fragmented, partially obliterated history, looking to a newly imagined past to redefine themselves for the future" (29). (17) Anaya's novel, published at the height of the

Chicano movement, is engaged in precisely such an endeavor; it provides the submerged pieces of a "fragmented, partially obliterated history" that must be constructed into the "newly imagined past" of indigenous identity that "redefined" Chicanos/as after the movement. In other words, it fully participates in the imaginative project of the Chicano movement: to lay the groundwork for an understanding of Chicanas/os as a "people."

Consequently, it is possible to read Anaya's novel as sharing the larger essentialism that often characterized the movement. As Michael Hames-Garcia explains, the push towards cultural nationalism in the 1960s and early 1970s "often resulted in an injunction for

Chicano artists to find artistic and liberatory truth in highly idealized visions of an authentic indigenous past. [... Images of an] essential (masculine) 'Indian-ness' represente the essence of Chicano identity" (466). However, although Anaya offers a renewed exploration of indigenous identity as a possible grounds for Chicano/a identity, what is dramatized in Bless Me, Ultima is the process by which identity--including ethnic identit -is a social construct that is continually being reconstructed. Indigenous identity has no part in the characters' understanding of their ethnic identity in the novel, despite the possibilities of genealogical ties, suggesting that what has determined their ethnic reality the pressure of specific social forces, rather than some sort of essentialism. From this point, it is no great leap to the observation that even the cultural nationalist "essentialism" that would privilege indigenous identity was a response to a particular social situation. Th history of native peoples subjected to dual conquests (by Spain and the United States) rendered indigenousness a powerful symbol and rallying point for a movement that grounded its struggles for economic and social justice in an oppositional (rather than assimilationist) stance.

In this way we can read, behind a boy's personal and individual bildungsroman of negotiating between his mother and his father, a complicated story of the recovery projec instrumental in constructing a Chicano consciousness. Just as Antonio's development to maturity is not complete by the novel's end, so also the process of identity (re)constructio is an ongoing process, rather than one that is fully accomplished at the novel's conclusion As Antonio comments, quite obliquely, after he has heard the story of the Indians: "And there is also the dark, mystical past, I thought, the past of the people who lived here and left their traces in the magic that crops out today" (229). Antonio is now paying more attention to a particular past that he had neglected before (for example, when he "did not listen" to Ultima's lesson about what "We" share with Indian peoples); and he seems to feel less lost in and threatened by "the labyrinth of a time and history I did not know." An explicit connection of "the people who lived here" to Antonio himself has yet to be made, but at least he now is watching for their traces.

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NOTES

(1.) Articles on Bless Me, Ultima are standardly included in anthologies of criticism on U.S. ethnic and U.S. Latino and Latina literature, such as Hispanic-American Writers (pa of the Chelsea House "Modem Critical Views" series edited by Harold Bloom) or Teaching American Ethnic Literatures (eds. John R. Maitino and David R. Peck). Delia Poey has noted that Anaya's Bless Me, Ultima and Sandra Cisneros's The House on Mang Street "have become 'representative' of Chicano and Latina/o literature" (202) and are often "the only Latina/o works assigned in [...] Multicultural Literature and Contemporary American Literature syllabi" (204).

(2.) See for example Jussawalla, who also discusses the teaching of Bless Me, Ultima, an

Dasenbrock, who treats as a given the idea that "Multicultural works of literature are multicultural [...] in having multiculturalism as part of their subject matter and theme" (18). In their introduction, Maitino and Peck focus on the "stories of assimilation and resistance, of immigration and oppression" and the themes "of marginality, identity, [and] alienation" found in ethnic literature--in other words, on those stories and themes that are explicitly about the situation of being ethnic (4).

(3.) Hector Calderon, a prominent representative of this line of criticism, has interpreted Bless Me Ultima as a "flight from history" to a nostalgic and innocent "Golden Age" ("Chicano Romance," 86, 88) in which mythic concerns substitute for--and erase--historical ones. Calderon also censured Anaya's novel on the grounds that it is "individualistic" in its concentration on the "Hispanic version of the Oedipal triangle of father, mother and son" ("The Novel," 112) at the expense of larger communal issues.

(4.) Horst Tonn is one of the few critics who disagrees with this assessment, claiming tha in fact, Bless Me, Ultima is centrally concerned with sociohistorical issues. Tonn argues that Anaya's novel is about the "pressing need for adaptation in the vision of the collectiv identity" in response to the dramatic changes occurring in both the novel's moment of representation and its moment of production (5). Although he reviews the specific historical events that form the backdrop for Ultima's plot (World War II and the atomic bomb) as well as those that constitute the immediate context for its publication (the Civil Rights Movement, the Chicano fieldworkers' strike, land ownership claims in New Mexico, and the "Chicano Moratorium"), he falls to elaborate on what specific sorts of adaptation are suggested by the novel or even what precise version of "collective identity' it invokes; nor does he provide any real explanation of the connection between the novel's moment of production and its themes. Thus he does not pose a strong challenge to readin Ultima as, at least at face value, divorced from the pressing issues of the Chicano movement.

(5.) Some critics nevertheless elide these difficulties by simply assuming some connectio between the familial struggle and the conflicting ethnic heritages that form Chicano identity. Thomas Vallejos, for example, moves seamlessly from the Marez-Luna clash to the "syncretic mestizo culture" of Chicanos (9). Enrique Lamadrid asserts that the family conflict is a "cultural" one on the grounds that the two families have different "cultures" (e.g., agricultural versus pastoral) and reads Bless Me, Ultima as a "dialectical exploration of the contradictions between lifestyles and cultures" (154), thus vaguely evoking the Chicano/Anglo (or perhaps Spanish/indigenous) context. Along the same lines, Paul Beekman Taylor asserts without textual explanation that the "blend of vaquero and farmer" in Anaya's Heart of Aztlan is "a matrix for an Anglo-Chicano mestizo culture" (26).

(6.) Robert Franklin Gish, for example, focuses on "la Llorona" and "curanderismo" to make his case that "Anaya's novels (especially Ultima) can be read as [...] affirming Anaya's belief in the poetic rendering of one's ethnic identity and heritage [...]" (128).

Willard Gingerich concentrates on Anaya's bilingual writing style as a key to the text's "ethnic" content: "the analysis of language style in Chicano literature [...] could provide, i short, the clearest window" to the writer's "unique vision of Chicanismo" (207-08).

(7.) See Bus, Lattin, and Parr.

(8.) See for example Holton, Hada, (who, despite the promise of its title, has nothing specific to say about Chicano/a or Latino/a culture), Taylor, and Kanoza. The latter, ironically, also takes for granted the novel's indigenous "content," pointing out that "Bles: Me, Ultima has earned acclaim for its 'cultural uniqueness' and is lauded for such distinctive Chicano features as its use of Aztec myth and symbol [...]" (160). Lamadrid is similarly contradictory in his approach, claiming that Anaya's writing "shows the greatest promise [in New Mexican literature] of transcending the limitations of narrow regionalisr and ethnic literatures" (151), yet simultaneously making reference to Anaya's use of "indigenous materials" (151) and to his treatment of "historical forces, from the colonization of Hispanic farmers and ranchers to the coming of the Anglos [...]" (154), thus obviously invoking what would typically be considered "ethnic" aspects of the novel From her title, Jane Rogers would seem to belong to the "indigenous influences" camp of scholars, but she is more properly placed in the "Western/Universal" camp, as the book uses an entirely Western frame of reference. She never mentions the possible indigenous roots of La Llorona; instead she reads this figure as another manifestation of the sirens in Homer's The Odyssey.

(9.) My use of the term "Indian" reflects the usage of both Bless Me, Ultima and Anzaldua's Borderlands / La Frontera. I also wish to respect recent efforts by the indigenous peoples of North America to reappropriate this term. Thus I use "Indian" interchangeably with "Native American."

(10.) In a striking misreading of the novel that testifies to how easily a Native American component to Antonio's identity crisis is taken for granted without an actual textual basis, Glen A. Newkirk writes, "The action of the novel centers on Tony's attempt to achieve self-identity in a world of conflicting forces. In his community he must synthesize his Hispanic roots with the 'magic' of the letters of the Anglo School and the legends told by his Indian friends, Cico, Samuel and Florence" (143). Newkirk simply assumes that any c Tony's friends who are atheist or worshippers of the golden carp--that is, non-Catholics-- are "Indian," although the novel explicitly states that "Jason's Indian [...] was the only Indian of the town" (10). Less egregiously, Feroza Jussawalla identifies Bless Me, Ultima as one of several bildungsromans in which the "main characters' essential knowledge" is "an awareness of their rootedness within their cultures"; specifically in Ultima, Antonio learns "that the rituals of the Native Americans provide more comfort than Anglo-American Catholicism and its education" (222). Such a reading ignores Antonio's striking lack of awareness of any Native American component to his own culture. To the degree t which he is made aware of Native American influences at all, it is as influences external t his culture, which he may or may not decide to adopt.

(11.) In many ways, earlier Spanish policy regarding land grants was more flexible towar Indians than subsequent Mexican policy. An Indian settlement with "claims and documents to show that it had existed under orderly government, and [which] indicated that its people would be loyal subjects" to Spain, could be granted a "royal merced, the land title of that town"; stable Indian settlements were distinguished from nomadic "hostile" Indians under Spanish policy (Cline 13-16). In contrast, when Mexico achieved independence, "Many of the distinctions among Indian groups which earlier underlay Spanish practices had been forgotten or were now generally disregarded" (Cline 17-18).

(12.) Roberto Cantu notes that although Jason, his father, and the Indian all reappear as characters in Anaya's Heart of Aztlan, the father's disapproval of the Indian has vanished (17)--and, I would add, with it the theme of repression of "Indian-ness" as an aspect of Chicano identity.

(13.) Cantu's rather unsatisfactory conclusion is that Antonio is an "unreliable narrator" (16).

(14.) Although denial of Native American heritage has historically been an aspect of Mexican culture as well, Lux and Vigil point out that strong pressures in the United State to assimilate to an Anglo model created additional, culturally specific forces acting on Mexican Americans. Whereas "[i]n Mexico of the 1930s, during the presidency of Lazarc Cardenas, the Indian origin of the Mexican people was accepted with pride" (94), differin political and cultural conditions ensured that an analogous cultural shift among Mexican Americans would have to wait until the Chicano movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

(15.) Here Lux and Vigil echo Armando B. Rendon's Chicano Manifesto, which declared in the year before Bless Me, Ultima first appeared in print, "We have hardly begun to investigate the fathomless inheritance that is ours from our Indian forbears [...]" (281).

(16.) Lux and Vigil cite Weiss 471.

(17.) Although, as I have suggested, Bless Me, Ultima fits perfectly with Brogan's thesis, she herself refers to the novel only twice and in passing, connecting it loosely with "La Llorona" (3) and with "ghosts who straddle boundaries" (16) and making no mention of the episode of the Comanche Indian spirits.

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"*Chicanismo* as Memory: The Fictions of Rudolfo Anaya, Nash Candelaria, Sandra Cisneros, and Ron Arias"

Critic: A. Robert Lee
Source: *Memory and Cultural Politics: New Approaches to American Ethnic Literatures,* edited by Amritjit Singh, Joseph T. Skerrett Jr., and Robert E. Hogan, Northeastern University Press, 1996, pp. 320-39.
Criticism about: Rudolfo A. Anaya (1937-), **also known as:** Rudolfo Alfonso Anaya, Rudolfo A(lfonso) Anaya, Rudolfo Anaya

Nationality: American

[(essay date 1996) *In the following excerpt, Lee explores the complex matrix of historical, geographic, and cultural legacies that underlies Chicano identity, as well as the significance of memory and remembrance in Chicano literature, particularly in* Bless Me, Ultima.]

To John J. Halcón and María de la Luz Reyes

> For those of us who listen to the Earth, and to the old legends and myths of the people, the whispers of the blood draw us to our past.
>
> --Rudolfo A. Anaya, ***A Chicano in China****A Chicano in ChinaChicano in China*

> Mexican, the voice in his deep dream kept whispering. Mejicano. Chicano.
>
> --Nash Candelaria, *Memories of the Alhambra*

> I'm a story that never ends. Pull one string and the whole cloth unravels.
>
> --Sandra Cisneros, "Eyes of Zapata"

> I might say that I studied Spanish and Hispanic literature ... because I had to know more about my past, my historical past.
>
> --Ron Arias in Bruce-Novoa, *Chicano Authors*

Four Chicano storytellers, four calls to legacy. No less than other American cultural

formations, *chicanismo* invites a play of memory coevally personal and collective. If one begins with the historical sediment, the substrata that have made up Chicano culture, it is first to underscore the human passage involved, those transitions from past to present that its novelists, poets, and dramatists have so remembered when making imagined worlds out of actual ones.

The Olmecs and Mayans provide a founding repository, passed-down legends, belief systems, alphabets, and an architecture. *Los aztecas* and the European intrusion of Hernán Cortés in turn bequeath the very memory of *mestizaje,* a first joining to be endlessly repeated through time. Mexican Independence in 1821, the Texas-Mexican War of 1836, the Mexican-American War of 1846-1848, and above all the Mexican Revolution of 1910-1917 again make for history as iconography, fact as also inward memory. Villa and Zapata, for their parts, supply the epic names, substance, and yet, as always, shadow. Seen from the 1960s and beyond, and to a population burgeoning by both birth rate and immigration, it comes as no surprise that *Aztlán* has found new currency, a term of rally and consciousness, yet always a remembrance, a reference back to *chicanismo*'s first homeland.[1]

Memory, thus, for virtually every Chicano/a, has meant a dramatic crossply, Nezahualicóyotl and Moctezuma invoked alongside *Los Reyes Católicos,* or La Malinche, La Llorona, and La Virgen de Guadalupe alongside Cortés, Coronado, and Cabeza de Vaca. It has meant overlapping *cuentos* of war and peace, from the *aztecas* to the conquistadores, or from the Alamo of the Mexican-American conflict to the Los Alamos of the atomic bomb. It looks to the transition whereby *Alto México* became the "American" Southwest of New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, California, and Texas. *Brujería* and *curanderismo,* likewise, carry a folk pastness into a later Catholicism of First Communions and Mass. So rich a human "text" has increasingly found its literary equivalent, memory as the pathway into a renaissance of Chicano word and narrative.

In the same way as a Chicano legacy invokes the rural, a *campesino* life of crops and herding and festival, so does it invoke the urban. Barrios from East Los Angeles to Houston, Albuquerque to Denver, bear witness to the history of an estimated 60 percent of Chicanos who have now moved into the cities. If Harlem for African Americans carries the residues of both Dixie and Manhattan, then an East Los Angeles or Houston for Chicanos looks back to both *el campo* and the exhilarations and losses of inner-city life.

One refraction lies in popular culture, whether mariachi bands or Los Lobos, mural art or low-rider cars, work songs or "Latin" rap. Memory, at times nostalgia, it can be admitted, runs right through the cultural rebirth of the 1960s, from the music of Ritchie Valens to the *actos* of Luis Valdez's Teatro Campesino, with, in train, the singing of Linda Ronstadt, the comedy of Cheech Marin, and the screenwork and directing of Edward James Olmos. In this latter respect, films like *La Bamba, Zoot Suit, The Milagro Beanfield War, Stand and Deliver, American Me, Blood In, Blood Out* (coscripted by

Jimmy Santiago Baca), and even television's once mooted *El Pueblo/L.A.*, for all their resemblance to the contemporary, could not have been more permeated by pastness, the appeal to shared recollection.

In like manner there has been the view of Chicano community, even in poverty, as in and of itself a kind of memorial art form, an inherited pageant of culture and custom. In this, Chicano foodways bear an especially ancestral insignia--a now familiar menu of *chile, frijoles, enchiladas, mole, chimichangas,* or *tamales.* If, however, a single token of legacy were needed, it would surely be found in the *ristras* hanging in almost every Chicano home.

In common with its *nuyorriqueño* and *cubano-americano* counterparts, *chicanismo* also involves a past held inside two seemingly parallel but actually deeply unparallel languages.[2] For under American auspices English has long emerged as the language of power, leaving Spanish as the assumed lesser idiom, a signifier of illiteracy or migrant outsiderness. Even so, this is anything but to suggest that the two languages have not been historically symbiotic. Chicano Spanish, for its part, may resort to the street or vernacular *caló* of *pachucos, vatos,* and *chulas,* but it also abounds with borrowed anglicisms like *watchar la tele* or *kikear* (the drug habit). American English has in mirror fashion long made its own borrowings, like *barrio* and the all-serving *gringo,* as well as farm or ranch borrowings, like *lasso, adobe, bronco, cinch,* or *sombrero.* Endless repetition on television and other commercials of food terms like *taco, tortilla,* and *nacho* has made quite as marked an impact, one language's "history" remembered (or more aptly misremembered) inside another.

In the case of anglicization, Chicano memory has been stirred in another way as well. In categories like Hispanic or, depending on the user, even the more generally favored Hispano or Latino, many have heard the carryover of a note of condescension. "Ethnic" likewise arouses suspicion, a WASP hegemony's self-appointed rubric for patronage of minority culture. The English Only campaigns, now under way in more than twenty states, recapitulate the same discriminatory process. Here, in all its historic loading, is but the latest effort to make the language as well as the general sway of Anglo culture the presumed standard for America at large. Does not, then, an accusing politics of memory lie behind a reaction like "English Yes, But Only, No"?

A *corrido,* or folk song, like "The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez," adapted for the screen by PBS in 1982 from Américo Paredes's version with Edward James Olmos in the title role, nicely points up the discrepancy.[3] The tale of a "Mexican" smallholder in the Texas of 1901 falsely accused of horse theft, it turns on how the word *horse* in English can translate into Spanish as both masculine and feminine, namely *caballo* and *yegua.* At issue, however, is infinitely more than a quirk of philology. The ballad speaks on the one hand to Gregorio Cortez's Mexican Chicano ancestry, and on the other, to the Anglo hegemony that lies behind the Texas Rangers who pursue him and the Yankee judge and

court that try him for the murder of the sheriff. What is involved here is the remembrance of two value systems, two misreadings across the cultural divide. Much as English and Spanish might seem to have been saying the same thing, the gap has been symptomatic, and in this case, fatal.

Similar discrepancies in fact underlie a whole array of "popular" versions of American history. No better instance offers itself than the Siege of the Alamo (1836), and in its wake, the defeat of Santa Anna at San Jacinto. Told one way, the Siege has come to signify Anglo triumphalism. Where more so than in John Wayne's 1960 Hollywood version with its "Lone Star State" hurrahs and featuring James Bowie and William B. Travis as the truest of patriot martyrs? Told in another way, did not Santa Anna's attack on the Alamo represent a timely resistance, a counterforce to Yankee expansionism? Such a perspective, going against the grain, appears in Jesús Salvador Trevino's television film of 1982, *Seguín.*

These splits and divergences in memory extend more generally to the American Southwest and West, not least when they double as *el norte.* From a mainstream viewpoint, the link is to Manifest Destiny, an *indigenista,* tribal-Chicano world preordained to be won and settled. A Mexican or tribal viewpoint, however, speaks of colonized land, stolen *tierra* or *patria.* Counterversions of the Mexican Revolution similarly arise, on the one hand the Red plot, the Bolshevism so warningly reported (and then not reported) by, say, the Hearst press, and on the other hand the heroizing popular revolution of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (known as the PRI) and leftist recollection in general.

Sleepy Lagoon and the Zoot-Suit riots of 1942-1943 also yield their twofold interpretations. Were the assaults of a largely white Southern navy in wartime Los Angeles "straight" racism or, more obliquely, the fascination of one uniformed group (Anglo, English-speaking, Bible-Protestant, military) with its also uniformed opposite (Latin, Spanish-speaking, sexually knowing, baroque)?[4] How, subsequently, should one remember 1960s movements like César Chávez's United Farm Workers, especially the 1968 grape boycott, José Angel Gutiérrez's La Raza Unida in Texas, and "Corky" Gonzales's Crusade for Justice in Denver? Do they best refer back to mainstream labor politics (in Chávez's case, on account of the alliances with Filipino and other Asian workers) or, when linked back into the wartime *bracero* programs, to a wholly more discrete Chicano politics?

Nor, however collective the memory, does *chicanismo* yield some unconflicted view of itself. The class hierarchy, for instance, created by the conquistadores who devastated Moctezuma's Aztecs, has had its modern footfalls, still based on blood, skin color, landedness, and, as often, family name. Old *chicanismo* plays against new, especially between certain New Mexico dynasties and those of a supposedly inferior birthright. Does this also not call up the disdain of Spanish-born *gachupines* for colonial-born *criollos* or Creoles, and theirs, in turn, for *los indios* (especially *genízaros*--Indians

forced to lose their tribal language and to speak only Spanish), for mestizos, and for *negros* (a distinct but Spanish-speaking black population)?[5]

Just as a missionary-begun Catholicism largely took over from Aztec and other cosmologies (though obliged to coexist with vernacular practices like *curanderismo*), so did evangelical Protestantism increasingly make inroads into that same Catholicism.[6] This, and the impact of Latin American liberation theology, has led to increasing doubts about the church's attitude to family, women, birth control, divorce, and authority in general. How are Chicanas, especially, to "remember" Catholicism? As spiritual sanctuary or as yet another patriarchy able to oppress with its gendered rules of conduct?

Another major contradiction lies in the continuing pull of California. It has, undoubtedly, promised betterment, the dream of *abundancia,* whatever the risk of repeated deportations by *la migra.* Somewhere in this persists the remembered myth of *el dorado,* the continuing lure of *Las Siete Ciudades de Cíbola.* But California has notoriously also flattered to deceive. Chicano unemployment has soared, as have high school dropout rates, *barrio* poverty and crime, and the wars of attrition with the police and courts. Yet as the continuing surge of cross-border migration bears out, and despite each amnesty over residence papers, California remains history both made and still in the making.[7]

Imagining and reimagining the past may well be, in L. P. Hartley's apt and rightly celebrated phrase, to visit a "foreign country"--especially in an America notoriously obsessed with the future. Yet Chicanos, no doubt having known the flavors of defeat as well as those of triumph, have had good reason to dwell there. Whether it was the conquistador regime, a border as redolent of human flight as *El Río Grande,* the history by which *Tejas* was reconstituted as Texas, or the duality of California as promise and yet denial, the prompt to memory has been always ongoing. For it is the memory that serves as solvent for each generation's telling of *la raza,* and nowhere more so than in the ongoing body of fiction of what rightly has become known as *chicanismo*'s literary renaissance.[8]

Certainly that has been the case for Anaya, Candelaria, Cisneros, and Arias, however differently they have styled their uses of memory. Indeed, the Chicano tradition can virtually be said to have thrived on the shaping energies of remembrance, a present told and reinvented in the mirrors of the past. This is true especially for one of the seminal novels of *chicanismo.* José Antonio Villarreal's *Pocho* (1959) not only offers the life of its writer-protagonist, Richard Rubio, as a portrait of the artist, it also locates that life within the history of migration from Mexico to southern California--thus memory as collective in scope yet specific, a single trajectory.[9]

In a story cycle as delicately imagistic as Tomás Rivera's *"... Y no se lo tragó la*

tierra"/And the Earth Did Not Part (1971),[10] another kind of memory holds sway, that of a single migrant-labor year of a Chicano dynasty headed for "Iuta" (Utah) in which all other similar years and journeys are to be discerned. Raymond Barrio's *The Plum Plum Pickers* (1971) makes for a linking memorialization,[11] this time set in the Santa Clara Valley during the Reagan governorship. Its very accusations of labor exploitation and racism lie in remembrance. In *Peregrinos de Aztlán* (1974),[12] Miguel Méndez takes a more vernacular direction--the memories of Loreto Maldona, car washer in Tijuana--as an anatomy of border life, of poverty and dreams, nationality and *mestizaje*. For his part, Alejandro Morales in *Caras viejas y vino nuevo* (1975),[13] translated as *Old Faces and New Wine* in 1981, transposes *barrio* Los Angeles into a kind of working archive, a city of inheritances and the present-day told in its own imaginative right as at once then and now.

In *Klail City y sus alrededores* (1976),[14] as in the rest of the "Klail" series, Rolando Hinojosa subjects Belken County to Faulknerian rules, a south Texas Chicano and white "mythical kingdom" invoked as through a lattice of multicultural (and bilingual) recollection. Daniel Cano's *Pepe Rios* (1991) attempts historical fiction of an older kind,[15] the Mexican Revolution as an epilogue to colonialism and yet a prologue to *chicanismo*. Arturo Islas looks to memory as myth in *The Rain God* (1984),[16] the portrait of a Tex-Mex dynasty descended in the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution from the escaping but always imperturbable matriarch Mama Chona. In all these different modes of using *chicanismo* as memory, fiction lays claim to a special kind of authority, a heritage of time and voice given its own dialogic measure.

Memory has equally shaped an increasingly emergent Chicana fiction, in whose ranks Sandra Cisneros has been little short of a luminary. Isabella Ríos's *Victuum* (1976),[17] through the psychism of its narrator, Valentina Ballesternos, renders womanist history as a kind of ongoing dream script. Ana Castillo's *The Mixquiahuala Letters* (1986) creates an epistolatory,[18] and teasingly self-aware, feminist novel of women's friendship that also explores the pasts of America and Mexico, a historic *mestizaje* again taken up in her fantasia, *Sapogonia* (1990), and in her New Mexico almanac-memoir, *So Far from God* (1993).[19] Cherrié Moraga's storytelling (and essay work), of which the anthology she co-edited with Gloria Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981), and her *Loving in the War Years* (1983) and *The Last Generation* (1993) can be thought symptomatic, yields another remembrance, that of the "silence" that, by historic writ, has surrounded lesbian life in a culture so given to patriarchy.[20]

Literatura chicanesca, non-Chicano writing about Chicano life and culture, affords another styling of memory in John Nichols's *The Milagro Beanfield War* (1974).[21]

However specifically set in the 1970s or local the story, its drama of contested water rights again calls up an inlaid older history of Indian, Mexican, and Anglo conflict that, across four centuries, took New Mexico from a Spanish colony to a territory to America's forty-seventh state. Joe Mondragón finds himself fighting Ladd Devine and his Miracle Valley Recreation Area Development for the right to irrigate his land. In fact, what Nichols portrays tacitly is the fight for the Chicano heritage in which the bean field acts as a trope for the very soil, the nurturing medium, of a whole people's history. Nichols's novel and the Redford-Esparza movie of 1988 (with its appropriately multiethnic cast of Ruben Blades, Carlos Riquelme, Sonia Braga, and Christopher Walken) can so play "fact" against *el mundo de los espíritus,* the historicity of the past as open to a figural or any other kind of access.

Chicano autobiography as a related kind of "fiction" has been wholly as various in its uses of memory, whether Oscar Zeta Acosta's rambunctious, Beatnik-influenced narratives of the 1960s, *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* (1972) and *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* (1973), or Richard Rodriguez's elegiac, if controversially assimilationist, *Hunger of Memory* (1981) and *Days of Obligation* (1992), or Linda Chavez's radically conservative manifesto, *Out of the Barrio* (1991), or Ray Gonzalez's El Paso "border" history, the lyric and pertinently titled *Memory Fever* (1993).[22]

For as these texts, too, "remember" (even those of an assimilationist bent) so, like the novels and stories they accompany, they inevitably contest and dissolve mainstream decreation of *chicanismo.* Perhaps, overall, Frances A. Yates's notion of "memory theatre" applies best--the forms of the past, however obliquely, always to be remembered and re-remembered in the forms of the present.[23]

"Some time in the future I would have to build my own dream of those things which were so much a part of my childhood." So does the narrator of Rudolfo Anaya's ***Bless Me, Ultima*** (1972) reflexively look back to the pending *cuentista* or authorial self who will write that childhood, that past, into being.[24] The note, for Anaya, is typical, one of retrospect, pastness, and memory as a textualized weave of events actual and imaginary, which, if less persuasively, also runs through his subsequent novels, ***Heart of Aztlán*** (1976), ***Tortuga*** (1979), and ***Alburquerque*** (1992).[25]

The novel typically begins in remembrance. "The magical time of childhood stood still," says Antonio Márez at the outset. He repositions himself as the seven-year-old raised in the 1940s Spanish-speaking New Mexico who finds himself pulled between the *vaquero,* herdsman, Márez clan on his father's side and the farmer-cultivator Luna clan on his mother's. But he also acknowledges the writer-in-waiting who will learn to appropriate as his own the shamanism, the *brujería,* of Ultima, the *anciana* and *curandera* invited by his parents to spend her last days with the family.

Anaya enravels each inside the other, a Chicano childhood as literal event, in Antonio's

case often the most traumatic kind, and a drama of inner fantasy and imagining. "Experience" and "dream," he rightly recollects, "strangely mixed in me." This blend makes the imagined landscape of ***Bless Me, Ultima*** not a little Proustian, a New Mexico there on the map and yet personalized and sacralized by personal remembrance.

One contour, thus, has the adult Antonio recalling his ill-matched parents, his sisters, Deborah and Theresa, and the three absentee brothers with their eventual disruptive return from the wars in Europe and Japan. It looks back to the Spanish of the home, the English of school, the latter having anglicized him from Antonio to Tony. It summons back his parents' competing hopes for him: his father's dream of a new beginning in California and his mother's hope that he will enter the priesthood. He sees, too, as he could not have done in childhood, the irony of a horseman father now asphalting the highways as if to seal in, to inhume, the very *tierra* his family once proudly herded.

Yet another contour remembers the dreamer child within, drawn to the *indio* myths of earth, mountain, and river and to the legend of the Golden Carp--a creation myth of a god-protector of the village--in which he comes to believe under the tutelage of his friends Samson and Cisco. The center of all these memories, however, has to be Ultima--ancient, as her name implies, midwife at his birth, explainer of his *pesadillas,* or nightmares, teacher of herbs and flora, and martyr who at the cost of her own death has brought down the murderer Tenorio Trementina. Her grave, whose secret celebrant he becomes, serves the novel in two ways: as a figuration of both his past and his future, his legacy and at the same time his destiny.

Antonio thus finds himself irresistibly drawn in memory to her bag of potions, her nostrums, her deific owl with its links to a Christly dove or an Aztec eagle, and her very aroma. But if she signifies for him as at once guardian angel, muse, and the very anima of *chicanismo,* he, for his part, plays the perfect apprentice, the word maker with his own eventual kind of *brujería.*

This double weave, the memory of the "facts" of his history and of his first prompts to imagination, determines the whole novel. He thinks back to the deaths he has witnessed: Lupito, who, unhinged by his Asian war experiences, shoots at the sheriff only to invite his own destruction; Narciso, the harmless drunk who, all too true to his name, is killed by Trementina; Florence, the drowned boyhood friend who first guided him to the Golden Carp; and Ultima herself. Each death "happens," or "happened," but each, equally, goes on "happening" in his own chambers of memory, to await transcription by the memoirist he will become.

The back-and-forth movement of memory also encloses Jason's Indian, the unspeaking sentinel to a pre-conquistador past; like the carp and the owl, he embodies the tribal and vernacular folk past as against the Holy Weeks, Communions, and Masses of Father Byrne's parish church. There is a sheen, a membrane, that also settles over the novel's place-names, notably Los Alamos, as indeed the Poplars, but also, the irony of which is

anything but lost on Anaya, as the atomic test site. More domestically, for Antonio, "El Puerto" ("refuge," "harbor") as the home of the Lunas and "Las Pasturas" ("pasture") as that of the Márez family resonate with equal effect--even as they pass into time past. Memory, in other words, in all its overlapping and coalescing kinds, also yields mixed emotional fare for the narrator-memoirist, pain and warmth, breakage as well as love.

But "build my own dream" ***Bless Me, Ultima*** does, a landmark portrait of childhood's dream itself told as a dream. The spirit of the dream derives, overwhelmingly, from Ultima, her creativity carried by the narrator from childhood to adulthood, from first associations to written word. For the memory of her, as of his family, of his land, and of all the voices and myths that have made up his legacy of *chicanismo,* cannot be thought other (such is Anaya's triumph) than Antonio Márez's memory--and memorialization--of himself.

Notes

[1]The following usefully address Chicano history and politics: George I. Sánchez, *Forgotten People: A Study of New Mexicans* (Albuquerque, N.M.: C. Horn, 1940); Carey McWilliams, *North from Mexico: The Spanish-Speaking People of the United States* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1948); Matt S. Meier and Feliciano Rivera, *The Chicanos: A History of Mexican-Americans* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972); Rodolfo Acuña, *Occupied America: The Chicano's Struggle Towards Liberation* (San Francisco: Canfield Press, 1972); Richard Griswold de Castillo, *The Los Angeles Barrio, 1850-1890: A Social History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979); Marcia T. García et al., eds., *History, Culture and Society: Chicano Studies in the 1980s* (Ypsilanti, Mich.: Bilingual Press/Editorial Bilingüe, National Association of Chicano Studies, 1984); Alfredo Mirandé, *The Chicano Experience: An Alternative Perspective* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985); Rodolfo O. de la Garza et al., eds., *The Mexican American Experience* (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 1985); and Renate von Bardeleben, Dietrich Briesemeister, and Juan Bruce-Novoa, eds., *Missions in Conflict: Essays on US-Mexican Relations and Chicano Culture* (Tübingen: Gunter Verlag, 1986).

[2]See Andrew D. Cohen and Anthony F. Beltramo, eds., *El Lenguaje de los Chicanos: Regional and Social Characteristics Used by Mexican-Americans* (Arlington, Va.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1975); also Dogoberto Fuentes and José A. López, *Barrio Language Dictionary: First Dictionary of Caló* (Los Angeles, Calif.: Southland Press, 1974).

[3]Américo Paredes, *"With His Pistol in His Hand": A Border Ballad and Its Hero* (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 1979).

[4]A persuasive interpretation of these events is found in Mauricio Mazón, *The Zoot-Suit*

Riots: The Psychology of Symbolic Annihilation (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 1984).

[5]For the implications of this nomenclature, see Alfred Yankauer, "Hispanic/Latino--What's in a Name?" and David E. Hayes-Bautista and Jorge Chapa, "Latino Terminology: Conceptual Bases for Standardized Terminology," both in *American Journal of Public Health* 77, no. 1 (1987): 61-68. I am grateful to Dr. Arthur Campa of the School of Education, University of Colorado at Boulder, for directing me to these references.

[6]A symptomatic publication would be Freddie and Ninfa García, *Outcry in the Barrio* (San Antonio, Tex.: Freddie García Ministries, 1988).

[7]Perhaps the most provocative history remains Acuña, *Occupied America.*

[8]For bearings on this achievement, see Joseph Sommers and Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, *Modern Chicano Writers: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Clitts, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1979); Juan Bruce-Novoa, *Chicano Authors: Inquiry by Interview* (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 1980); Juan Bruce-Novoa, *Chicano Authors: A Response to Chaos* (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 1982); Salvador Rodríguez del Pino, *La Novela Chicana Escrita en Español: Cinco Autores Comprometidos* (Ypsilanti, Mich.: Bilingual Press/Editorial Bilingüe, National Association of Chicano Studies, 1982); Charles M. Tatum, *Chicano Literature* (Boston: Twayne, 1982); Robert G. Trujillo and Andrés Rodríguez, *Literatura Chicana: Creative and Critical Writings through 1984* (Oakland, Calif.: Floricanto Press, 1985); Luis Leal et al., eds., *A Decade of Chicano Literature, 1970-1979: Critical Essays and Bibliography* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Editorial La Causa, 1982); Houston Baker, ed., *Three American Literatures: Essays in Chicano, Native American, and Asian-American Literatures for Teachers of American Literature* (New York: Modern Language Association, 1982); Luis Leal, *Aztlán y México: Perfiles Literarios e Históricos* (Binghamton, N.Y.: Bilingual Press/Editorial Bilingüe, National Association of Chicano Studies, 1985); Marta Ester Sánchez, *Contemporary Chicana Poetry* (Berkeley, Calif., University of California Press, 1985); Maria Herrera-Sobek, ed., *Beyond Stereotypes: The Critical Analysis of Chicana Literature* (Binghamton, N.Y.: Bilingual Press/Editorial Bilingüe, 1985); Julio A. Martínez and Francisco A. Lomelí, eds., *Chicano Literature: A Reference Guide* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1986); Cordelia Candelaria, *Chicano Poetry: A Critical Introduction* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1985); Vernon E. Lattin, ed., *Contemporary Chicano Fiction: A Critical Survey* (Binghamton, N.Y.: Bilingual Press/Editorial Bilingüe, 1986); Carl R. Shirley and Paula W. Shirley, *Understanding Chicano Literature* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1988); Francisco A. Lomelí and Carl R. Shirley, eds., *Chicano Writers First Series, Dictionary of Literary Biography,* vol. 82 (Detroit, Mich.: Bruccoli Clark Layman, 1989); Asunción Horno-Delgado et al., eds., *Breaking Boundaries: Latina Writing and Critical Readings*

(Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1989); Ramón Saldívar, *Chicano Narrative: The Dialectics of Difference* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990); and Héctor Calderón and José David Saldívar, eds., *Criticism in the Borderlands: Studies in Chicano Literature, Culture, and Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).

[9]José Antonio Villarreal, *Pocho* (New York: Doubleday, 1959).

[10]Tomás Rivera: *"... Y no se lo tragó la tierra"/And the Earth Did Not Part* (Berkeley, Calif.: Quinto Sol Publications, 1971).

[11]Raymond Barrio, *The Plum Plum Pickers* (Sunnyvale, Calif.: Ventura Press, 1969; rpr., with introduction and bibliography, Binghamton, N.Y.: Bilingual Press/Editorial Bilingüe, 1984).

[12]Miguel Méndez, *Peregrinos de Aztlán* (Tucson, Ariz.: Editorial Peregrinos, 1974).

[13]Alejandro Morales, *Caras viejas y vino nuevo* (México: J. Mortiz, 1975).

[14]Rolando Hinojosa, *Klail City y sus alrededores* (La Habana: Casa de las Américas, 1976); *Generaciones y semblazas,* trans. Rosaura Sánchez (Berkeley, Calif.: Justa Publications, 1978). Author's English version: *Klail City* (Houston, Tex.: Arte Público Press, 1987).

[15]Daniel Cano, *Pepe Rios* (Houston, Tex.: Arte Público Press, 1991).

[16]Arturo Islas, *The Rain God* (New York: Avon Books, 1984, 1991).

[17]Isabella Ríos, *Victuum* (Ventura, Calif.: Diana-Etna, 1976).

[18]Ana Castillo, *The Mixquiahuala Letters* (Binghamton, N.Y.: Bilingual Press/Editorial Bilingüe, 1986).

[19]Ana Castillo, *Sapogonia* (Houston, Tex.: Bilingual Press/Editorial Bilingüe, 1990) and *So Far from God* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993).

[20]Cherrié Moraga et al., eds., *Cuentos: Stories by Latinas* (New York: Kitchen Table/Women of Color Press, 1983); Cherrié Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Watertown, Mass.: Persephone Press, 1981); Cherrié Moraga, *Loving in the War Years: lo que nunca pasó por los labios* (Boston: South End Press, 1983); Cherrié Moraga, *The Last Generation*

(Boston: South End Press, 1993).

[21]John Nichols, *The Milagro Beanfield War* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, 1974). The rest of the trilogy comprises *The Magic Journey* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, 1978) and *The Nirvana Blues* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, 1981).

[22]Oscar Zeta Acosta, *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow, 1972) and *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow, 1973); Richard Rodriguez, *Hunger of Memory* (Boston: Godine, 1981) and *Days of Obligation: An Argument with My Mexican Father* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1992); Linda Chavez: *Out of the Barrio* (New York: Basic Books, 1991); and Ray Gonzalez, *Memory Fever* (Seattle, Wash.: Broken Moon Press, 1993).

[23]Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966). Some of these implications of "memory" I have explored elsewhere. See A. Robert Lee, "*The Mill on the Floss*: 'Memory' and the Reading Experience," in Ian Gregor, ed., *Reading the Victorian Novel: Detail into Form* (London: Vision Press, 1980).

[24]Rudolfo Anaya, *Bless Me, Ultima* (Berkeley, Calif.: Quinto Sol Publications, 1972).

[25]Rudolfo Anaya, *Heart of Aztlán* (Berkeley, Calif.: Editorial Justa Publications, 1976); *Tortuga* (Berkeley, Calif.: Editorial Justa Publications, 1979); and *Alburquerque* (Albuquerque, N.M.: University of New Mexico Press, 1992).

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Source Database: Contemporary Literary Criticism

Bless Me, Ultima

Terms and Words to Know

Provide definitions for the following:

llano

vaquero

curandera

atole

bruja

la llorona

hechicera

bildungsroman

epiphany

magical realism

ultima

QUIZ ON *BLESS ME, ULTIMA*
Please match the following terms with the correct definition

1.____ la llorona

2.____ curandera

3.____ llano

4.____ bildungsroman

5.____ Ultima

6.____ epiphany

7.____ Antonio

8.____ vaquero

9.____ atole

10.____ Tenorio

11.____ owl

12.____ Lupito

13.____ Narciso

14.____ The Golden Carp

15.____Gabriel

16.____ Cico

17.____ Florence

18.____hechiera

19.____Andrew

20.____Prudencio Luna

A. A coming of age novel

B. The magical fish that offers a different type of wisdom, comfort, and moral guidance.

C. Father of Maria and her brothers

D. Sorceress

E. A symbol of Ultima's spirit

F. gruel made of corn meal

G. The plains of New Mexico

H. He does not believe in God

I. One of Antonio's brothers

J. Literally, the wailing woman of the river

K. The wise, complex character of the novel who guides Antonio on his quest for knowledge.

L. A mentally disturbed war veteran who murders the sheriff.

M. The protagonist of the novel who makes the journey from childhood to adolescence.

N. the term used for a folk healer

O. Antonio's father

P. A cowboy

Q. an awakening; a realization

R. Malicious and vengeful saloon-keeper who plots Ultima's death.

S. Introduces Antonio to the golden carp.

T. The town drunk who has a high

QUIZ ON *BLESS ME, ULTIMA*
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R. Malicious and vengeful saloon-keeper who plots Ultima's death.

S. Introduces Antonio to the golden carp.

T. The town drunk who has a lush garden

QUIZ ON BLESS ME, ULTIMA

1. J la llorona
2. N curandera
3. G llano
4. A bildungsroman
5. K Ultima
6. Q epiphany
7. M Antonio
8. P vaquero
9. F atole
10. R Tenorio
11. E owl
12. L Lupito
13. T Narciso
14. B the Golden carp
15. O Gabriel
16. S Cico
17. H Florence
18. D hechiera
19. I Andrew
20. C Prudencio Luna

Bless Me, Ultima

Topics for critical thinking and writing

1. Rodolfo Anaya employs numerology in his novel, *Bless Me, Ultima.* In particular, the number three characterizes events and situations. In an essay, discuss the significance of the number three and identify at least three tripartites used in the novel. (Example/Illustration Essay)

2. Explain the function of the la llorona motif in the novel, *Bless Me, Ultima.* Remember to cite examples from the novel to support your contention. (Example/Illustration Essay)

3. Define the literary term bildungsroman. Through extended definition, explain how *Bless Me, Ultima* can be classified as a Chicano bildungsroman. (Definition Essay or Classification Essay)

4. In the novel, *Bless Me, Ultima,* Antonio is concerned about his loss of innocence. Discuss at least three effects that the onset of adolescence has on Antonio. (Cause/Effect Essay)

5. In the novel, *Bless Me, Ultima,* their exists a conflict between Maria's and Gabriel's attitudes regarding the process of maturation. Compare Maria's attitude with Gabriel's attitude regarding Antonio's coming of age. (Comparison/Contrast Essay)

6. Compare Antonio's first experience with the golden carp (Chapter 11) to his First Communion experience (Chapter 19). (Comparison/Contrast)

7. In the novel, *Bless Me, Ultima,* Anaya employs different motifs. The dream motif is recurrent. Define motif and explain what function(s) Antonio's dreams serve. (Definition/ Illustration Essay)

8. In the novel, *Bless Me, Ultima,* Antonio struggles to choose between his maternal and paternal heritages. Using instances from the novel as support, argue either for or against Antonio's becoming a priest. (Argumentative Essay)

9. In the novel, BLESS ME, ULTIMA, cultural conflict is a major theme. Identify three cultural conflicts in the novel, and explain how they influence Antonio's search for his identity. (Illustration Essay/Argumentative Essay)

Bless Me, Ultima

Topics for research

1. According to psychiatrist, Carl G. Jung, patterns of psychic energy originate in the collective unconsciousness and manifest themselves in dreams as archetypes or models upon which subsequent representations are based. Specifically, Jung has identified such archetypes as the Shadow or inherent evil, the Anima or the feminine principle of Earth Mother, Good Mother or Terrible Mother, and finally the Wise Old Man or the enlightener, the master, the teacher. The author of *Bless Me, Ultima,* Rodolfo Anaya, has been quoted (by Johnson and Apodaca in "Myth and the Writer") as saying, "One way I have of looking at my own work... is through a sense that I have about primal images, primal imageries. A sense that I have about the archetypal, about what we once must have known collectively." Using Jung's theory of archetypes, present an archetypal interpretation of the novel, *Bless Me, Ultima*.

2. Cognitive structural theorist, William G. Perry, sought to understand how students make meaning of the teaching and learning process. His theory of intellectual and ethical development provides a continuum of development that includes duality, multiplicity, relativism and commitment. In the novel, *Bless Me, Ultima*, as Antonio Mares gradually matures, he demonstrates the behavior found in Perry's scheme of intellectual and ethical development. Using Perry's theory of cognitive development as the framework, discuss the stages of Antonio's matruation as he seeks to make meaning of the world around him.

Jimmy Santiago Baca

January 2, 1952-

Name: Jimmy Santiago Baca

Nationality: American
Ethnicity: ChicanoMexican AmericanHispanic AmericanNative American

Genre(s): Poetry; Essays

WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR:

- *Jimmy Santiago Baca* (Santa Barbara, Cal.: Rock Bottom, 1978).

- *Immigrants in Our Own Land* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979); enlarged as *Immigrants in Our Own Land and Earlier Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1990).
- *Swords of Darkness,* edited by Gary Soto (San Jose, Cal.: Mango, 1981).
- *What's Happening* (Willimantic, Conn.: Curbstone, 1982).
- *Poems Taken from My Yard* (Fulton, Mo.: Timberline, 1986).
- *Martin and Meditations on the South Valley* (New York: New Directions, 1987).
- *Black Mesa Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1989).

Play Production

- *Los tres hijos de Julia,* Los Angeles Theatre Center, Spring 1991.

Other

- "Ancestor" and "So Mexicans Are Taking Jobs from Americans," in *New Worlds of Literature,* edited by Jerome Beaty and J. Paul Hunter (New York: Norton, 1989), pp. 176, 928.
- "6.00 A.M. awake ...," in *The Pushcart Prize XIV,* edited by Bill Henderson (New York: Penguin, 1989), pp. 153-155.
- "An Ear to the Ground," "Ese Chicano," "I Pass La Iglesia," and "Small Farmer," in *An Anthology of Contemporary American Poetry* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989), pp. 25-27.

Poetry and personal circumstance, each inextricably linked to the other in a complete and unbroken cycle, are indispensable elements in coming to know and understand the poetic voice and the artistic development of Jimmy Santiago Baca, an award-winning poet who is the author of two chapbooks and five larger collections of poems. Baca's work has been widely anthologized and has appeared in such respected literary publications as *Ironwood, Bilingual Review, Harbor Review, Confluencia, Las Américas, New Kauri, Quarterly West, Puerto del Sol,* and several others. In 1987 he was awarded a National Endowment for the Arts grant for poetry, and in 1988 he was the recipient of the Before Columbus American Book Award in poetry for his book *Martin and Meditations on the South Valley* (1987). He has been a poet in residence at the University of California, Berkeley, and at Yale University, having received the Berkeley Regents' Fellowship in 1989 and the Wallace Stevens Fellowship from Yale University in 1990. Recently he was awarded a prestigious Ludwig Vogelstien award in poetry. Baca has served on the poetry selection committee for the National Endowment for the Arts and has been invited to judge various poetry competitions, including the 1990 San Francisco State University Poetry Contest. With the publication of his 1987 book by New Directions, a press noted for having promoted the work of some of the most respected and enduring poets in world literature, including William Carlos Williams, Allen Ginsberg, Octavio Paz, and Denise Levertov, Baca has come to the forefront as one of the most widely read and recognized Chicano poets working

today. Not the least of Baca's contribution to Chicano literature has been to widen the critical attention directed by mainstream critics and publishers toward his own work and that of other Chicano writers.

Baca first began to write poetry while incarcerated on drug charges in an Arizona prison. At the behest of publisher-friend Will Inman and with the encouragement of fellow inmates, Baca sent three poems to *Mother Jones* magazine. He was rewarded a couple of weeks later with a check for his efforts. The poems caught the attention of Levertov, the magazine's poetry editor, who began corresponding with Baca, eventually helping to locate a publisher for his first full-length book of poems, *Immigrants in Our Own Land* (1979). In her introduction to *Martín and Meditations on the South Valley* , Levertov describes Baca's poetry as work that "perceives the mythic and archetypal significance of life-events."

The biographical file on Jimmy Santiago Baca might well be read as the working sketch or preliminary study for much of the autobiographical elements that infuse his poetry and in particular the long narrative poem *Martín*. Baca was born on 2 January 1952 in Santa Fe, New Mexico, an event he records in his poem "Bells," from *Black Mesa Poems* (1989):

> Bells. The word gongs my skull bone....
>
> Mamá carried me out, just born,
>
> swaddled in hospital blanket,
>
> from St. Vincent's in Santa Fe.
>
> Into the evening, still drowsed
>
> with uterine darkness,
>
> my fingertips purple with new life,
>
> cathedral bells splashed
>
> into my blood, plunging iron hulls
>
> into my pulse waves. Cathedral steeples,
>
> amplified brooding, sonorous bells,
>
> through narrow cobbled streets, bricked patios,
>
> rose trellis'd windows,
>
> red-tiled Spanish rooftops, bells
>
> beat my name, "Santiago! Santiago!"

Despite the joyous tone of celebration in "Bells," Baca's early childhood was not easy. His

parents, a Chicano mother and an Apache father, divorced when he was two. He was abandoned to a grandparent and later shuttled between relatives and orphanages. His mother died tragically at the hands of her second husband, and his father, with whom he had little contact, eventually died of alcoholism. When he was five, Baca was placed in St. Anthony's Home for Boys in Albuquerque, where he lived until he was eleven. During his teenage years Baca was in and out of detention centers and spent much of his time learning to survive on the streets of Albuquerque's urban barrios. After a couple of years on the road, wandering first to the southeastern states and then back west to Arizona, Baca at twenty was given a five-year federal sentence for possession of a controlled substance with intent to distribute. He refutes the charge made against him, explaining that his arrest was made on the basis of association, because he was present during a drug sale. Baca's sentence in Florence, Arizona, one of the toughest maximum security prisons in the state, was eventually extended to over six years.

Baca's experience in federal prison was marked by a succession of lockdowns, solitary confinements, electroshock therapy sessions, and beatings by prison guards, all of which would push him to the lowest ebb of his life. These experiences, he says, "reduced me, and whoever I thought I was, disintegrated and I fell into an incredible pit of humiliation where I began to disintegrate.... Nothing was being nourished to discover and create, and I finally destroyed myself in this huge cemetery called the prisons of America. When I went to prison I no longer existed. I was a non-entity." However, Baca began a prolonged process of self-discovery and education, which showed him that language could become a vehicle for bringing order to the chaos that surrounded him. In prison he eventually obtained his GED (General Equivalency [high-school] Diploma) and became fully literate, immersing himself in the world of books.

Initially drawn to poetry, Baca began to read the work of diverse poets. While teaching himself Spanish, he read the works of Pablo Neruda, Juan Ramón Jiménez, and Federico García Lorca; in English he read William Wordsworth, Mary Baker, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Robert Frost, Ezra Pound, Walt Whitman, Levertov, and Ginsberg. Baca began to exercise a natural and gifted ability to arch his circumstance into metaphor and sling forth his poems as personal responses to the lived experience of his early years. His first real triumph in poetry came as a short, powerful stanza that would sound out in his mind with the force of a mantra:

> Did you tell them
>
> hell is not a dream
>
> and that you've been there?
>
> Did you tell them?

As Baca recalls, the emotions emerged from deep within a wellspring of harnessed feelings: "And that was some sort of voice in me talking to another voice in me, saying, you've lived this: Did you tell them? Did you tell them? ... That was the most powerful five or six lines that got me going." Baca also became aware of a tremendous obligation, of a sense of responsibility and urgency that accompanied his newfound ability to write and to express his experience for others who could not do so.

Baca's poetry is to a large degree infused with elements drawn from his experiences, and the reader is struck by the recurrent themes of transformation, metamorphosis, and self actualization that have accompanied the poet's own trajectory as an individual and a writer. The most significant turning point in Baca's life was his discovery of language and poetry as a means of expression. Prior to this revelation Baca describes himself as "an illiterate Chicano, who knew more of a plumber's wrench than a pencil, more of rebellion than submission, more of the inside of a cell than of a book."

Shortly after his release from prison in 1979 Baca went to visit his sister and was awestruck by a picture she had kept of him at sixteen. His reaction was one of disbelief as he viewed the photograph, and the moment caused him to reflect on how he had changed. Recalling that visit and the photograph he says, "I knew it was me, but my mind had taken such cosmic leaps through language, and consequently those leaps entailed a sort of immolation, a sort of ritual burning of the past ... and language, the vowels, the consonants, the syllables all became a sort of pyre which the past was placed on, and burned in the flames of language."

Attuned to real-life circumstances, each of Baca's books represents a concrete step in the process of rebuilding his life from the point of nonexistence that he associates with the years spent in prison. Thus each book in turn marks a step in Baca's determination to move his personal and poetic endeavor toward full realization. His first published material is to be found in scattered anthologies, his chapbooks *Jimmy Santiago Baca* (1978) and *Swords of Darkness* (1981), and his two collections *Immigrants in Our Own Land* and *What's Happening* (1982). All contain poems centered on his experience in prison, which triggered Baca's often bitter and direct poetic introspection.

Baca's first chapbook, *Jimmy Santiago Baca*, consists of nine poems and a short essay on his thoughts on leaving prison. In a very telling way, these early poems became an essential scaffolding from which Baca began to address several key, recurring themes that he fully fleshed out in his subsequent works. His concerns are clear. He writes of the brutal harshness of prison, of regaining his own humanity, and of his personal and unbroken desire to reconnect to the world beyond the walls of his cell. The poetic style is terse but reveals the raw power of Baca's uncanny ability to create bold and forceful images, as in the poem "Just Before Dawn," which draws a clear bead on the desperation that inhabits the prison's world:

> And young prisoners hug their blankets
>
> like frozen carcasses strewn across
>
> timeless blizzard plains, and a few
>
> gnaw their hearts off
>
> caught in the steel jaws of prison.

Baca followed this slight and seminal collection of poems with the publication the next year of a major work entitled *Immigrants in Our Own Land*. This group of thirty-seven poems established Baca's potential as a serious and prolific new voice on the poetry scene.

The publication of *Immigrants* coincided with Baca's release from prison, and its central focus is a series of reflections spanning the years of his incarceration. The title of the book and of a central poem in the collection alludes to the alienation of prison for newly arrived inmates, as they become divested of any human capacity to respond to the institution's vindictive nature. This underlying theme, along with Baca's chronological look at his years in prison, draws the poems in the book together and structures a unity of intent. In a review, the *Virginia Quarterly* stressed that the work is "a book rather than a collection of poems," an opinion shared by Joseph F. Vélez, who in *Revista Chicano-Riqueña* points out that in the work there is "a detectable progression, [a] development of character."

Baca's chief concern in *Immigrants* is regaining a sense of self, which is obscured by the prison system's ability to strip the individual of dignity and self-worth. While the collection is centered on lucid and sustained images and metaphors, the work is ultimately more strongly conditioned by visceral and passionate impulses than by poetry as formalistic craft or incidental pastime. The sense of urgency that emanates from Baca's struggle to release a passionate and desperate cry for recognition, above all else, lends a deeply moving and enduring quality to the collection.

Baca's efforts to reconstruct his own psyche and sense of identity immediately move him to reflect upon his connection to family and community. Present in *Immigrants* is Baca for the first time rekindling a connection to the collective meaning and past of his ancestors. His search for personal meaning emerges in *Immigrants* as an ever-widening series of concentric connections that lead him to an individual and collective examination of his incarceration. Each poem in the work to some degree answers the question "Who am I?" in the context of present and past circumstances.

Baca's second chapbook, *Swords of Darkness*, was edited by fellow Chicano poet Gary Soto The poems were written during August and September 1977 and are about prison and about experiences--real or imagined--set in the outside world. Among these latter poems are vivid descriptions of a gaudy street atmosphere in which restless youths are caught in a surreal world of cruising, music, and weekend nightlife. The most inspired and intriguing poem of the collection is "Walking Down to Town and Back," in which the speaker walks along old and familiar rural roads that he remembers from his childhood. He recalls a visit he made with his father to the former home of an old widow. The incident, narrated in dreamlike fashion, includes the fantastic tale of how, after her husband's funeral, the old woman's small adobe house was beset by hoards of snakes and how she set fire to her adobe to rid herself of that plague, tossing gunpowder along with all her furniture and belongings into the fire. In the flames miraculously appeared an image of the Virgin Mary, which is held in reverence by all who come to know of it. The young man and his father visit the charred remains of the old woman's home, where they find people kneeling and praying. As the speaker passes by, the people begin to cry out "miracle, miracle," for they have seen a light surrounding him. The impression left by the incident is indelible, and the poem concludes with the speaker years later revisiting the scene of the apparent miracle, only to find that it is now a hangout where people come to drink. Despite its open-ended conclusion, the poem is pivotal in Baca's poetic discourse in many ways. From a stylistic point of view, it signals his ability to create well-structured and engaging narrative poems that suspend the reader in narrative time. The poem also clearly places the protagonist in a kind of literal search for meaning among the ashes and debris of familial and communal identity, and it forges elements of oral tradition into the poet's world of visions and dreams. As evident in subsequent works, Baca uses each of these constructs to shape and give form to his wider poetic vision.

The title of Baca's second book, *What's Happening*, should be taken as a declarative statement to the reader that what lies ahead is a chronicle of the poet's most immediate experiences. The first five poems in the book return to Baca's continuing need to explore the psychological wounds left by his years in prison. The remainder of the collection centers on his experiences after having left prison.

The recovery of a sense of self, which Baca began with his first incursions into poetry, continues to infuse much of *What's Happening* . The collection in many ways figures as a bridge that explores Baca's transition back into society at large. Just as Baca, now several years after his release from prison, returns to the world he literally left as a juvenile, his poetry, too, begins to reestablish meaning with familiar places of his childhood and adolescence. Thus the second half of *What's Happening* beings to map out his search for identity and reintegration into a wider community. In the latter half of this collection Baca begins to inscribe several key concerns into his work, themes he will ultimately come to embrace fully in his life and in his poetry. Drawing upon his mestizo roots in New Mexico, he discovers his connection to the earth. He traces his search for love through unfulfilled relationships and the bitter pain of breakups. In other poems he evokes the sensuous and enticing spirit of the city at night that compels him to live vicariously. And, in one of Baca's purest lyrical poems, foreshadowing his own fatherhood, he evokes the magical world of children and registers his deep compassion and sensitivity toward them. In "I think of little people" he expresses his awe and inspiration as "This enchantment they tuck in twenty folds / like a special coin, laid in cloth."

The eight-year hiatus between the publication of *Immigrants* and that of *Martín and Meditations on the South Valley* in many ways reflects a long period of transition and uncertainty for Baca. These years were filled with restless, unresolved dilemmas and ongoing struggles in his personal life. Baca explains that, although he continued to publish minor works, he all but abandoned poetry and writing: "I was trying to figure out whether I was going to live in prison forever or whether I could live in this world. I wanted to go back to prison, 'cause I couldn't live in this world and I was bored and I couldn't deal with the world out here."

After having left prison, Baca spent some time in North Carolina before returning to New Mexico, where he then spent some years living in Albuquerque working as a night watchman, janitor, and laborer, and at other odd jobs, as he redirected his life through what was to be a sustained period of bittersweet events. During these years Baca fought and eventually overcame bouts of drug addiction and alcoholism. He would eventually view marriage and family as vital and central in providing meaning to his life. Indeed he attributes much of his success to the love and support of his wife, Beatrice, and his children.

After the birth of their first child, Jimmy and Beatrice moved to Albuquerque's South Valley, a rural, Chicano barrio where they decided to gut and rebuild a small adobe home that came to symbolize the aspirations of many long-held dreams and promises. Baca fully embraced his past and found a personal affinity with the predominantly Chicano community. *Poems Taken from My Yard*, published in 1986, chronicles in deeply moving poems the winter of the year that saw the birth of his first son and the rebuilding of his adobe home. These two acts of creation are paralleled by the poems in the collection, of which Baca writes, in "Poem XVII,"

These are January poems--

dollar down payments

on an acre of sand dunes--

.....

What do they mean?

a song of a man on the run,

who uses each poem

to break the shackles on his legs.

In the years that followed, Baca realized personal as well as artistic endeavors. His most critically acclaimed book, *Martín and Meditations on the South Valley*, was published in 1987, for example. But the late 1980s were also marred by a personal setback when the Baca family home was razed by fire. Consumed by the fire were ten years' worth of Baca's poems.

On the heels of the publication of *Poems Taken from My Yard*, Baca completed the manuscript for the long narrative poem *Martín*, decidedly his most autobiographical work. Martín was published along with a second grouping of poems titled *Meditations on the South Valley*. Together each half forms a complementary volume spanning several years of new work. Inspired by Baca's own experiences, the *Martín* narrative employs certain liberties in its recanting and recasting of Baca's own life story. He uses fictive names, adding or omitting events from his own life in an effort to distill the plot to those essential elements that reproduce a journey of one man's ascent from personal devastation and through the bitter searching that leads to an eventual triumph of the spirit.

The long narrative poem tells the story of the tribulations of Martín, a young Chicano. After his birth at Pinos Wells, a decaying ranching community, Martín is abandoned by his mother at a very early age. He lives first with his grandmother and then is placed in an orphanage, where he remains until he runs away at age ten. He is witness to the chaos and the hardening of the spirit that permeates the street life of the urban barrios of Sante Fe and Albuquerque. Through news relayed to him by relatives and friends, Martín learns of his mother's life and tragic death at the hands of her second husband and of his father's decay due to alcoholism. As Martín reaches manhood he leaves New Mexico to travel. Trauma and turmoil take their toll on his psyche: "I gave myself to the highway / Like a bellrope in the wind / searching for a hand."

Martín's disaffection leads to wandering through Arizona, the Texas Panhandle, the southeastern coast, the Midwest, and finally back to New Mexico. Fully three-quarters of the poem recreates and explains the cause of Martín's discontent and of his inner sense of reflection and desire to understand the shattered fragments of his broken life. The last part of the poem narrates Martín's final return to Albuquerque, the scene of earlier misfortunes and the obvious locus of his intense need to rebuild his life. The catalyst for change in Martín life is Gabriela, the woman with whom he falls in love. Through Gabriela's love and

the birth of their child, Martín salvages his humanity and finds purpose and a reason to live. The poem draws to a close enthusiastically as Martín works to refurbish an old adobe home on a half-acre lot in the South Valley that will house the dreams of his new family. Martín's search and quest for the validation of his spirit and its connectedness to "all living things" moves him, in the last verse of the poem, to vow never to abandon his son.

Although complementary to the *Martín* narrative, *Meditations on the South Valley* should also be viewed as a self-sustaining work framed by two events drawn from Baca's life: the destruction by fire of the family home and the raising of a second house, an act deeply imbued with a phoenixlike promise of rebirth from the ashes of past tragedies. Julián Olivares, in his article "Two Contemporary Chicano Verse Chronicles," views these events as having the metaphorical function of marking the beginning of a new phase in Baca's poetry: "loosely structured around the loss of the family home and ten years of poetry, which is to be perceived as a mythic rite of passage or 'trial by fire.'"

The remaining poems in *Meditations* chronicle the time during which Martín's family is temporarily uprooted from the South Valley neighborhood and from the people they have come to know and love. Because of the fire, they are forced into the crowded and impersonal world of a suburban apartment complex for a while. The occasion is a time of reflection for Martín, who reaches back for the images of his neighbors and friends in the South Valley that will sustain his spirit in the sterile and anonymous surroundings: "To the South Valley / the white dove of my mind flies, / searching for news of life." Each poem in *Meditations* becomes a tribute and offering to the love and friendship that inspired Martín's return to the barrio. Present in the poems is the gallery of friends, neighbors, and acquaintances that populate the rich human landscape of Martín's South Valley. Baca paints with sharp and lucid details the *ancianos* (old folks), midwives, field hands, construction workers, "low riders," *cholos* (barrio men), longtime residents, village fools, and community activists, each of whom he weaves into a tapestry that reveals a people and a community living out the human saga of pain, joy, promise, and adversity.

With *Martín and Meditations on the South Valley*, Baca brings to closure that phase of his poetry that deals with loss, dejection, a searching for identity, and a sense of belonging. Baca deliberately chooses to omit any reference to a prison past for Martín and, in doing so, puts to rest the rage of some of his early poetry. Likewise absent are the self-destructive tendencies that typified Baca's earlier years of searching and wandering. In contrast, Martín's senses and aspirations are attuned to keeping the solemn pact he has made with life. The bond Martín has established with his community sustains itself through his period of alienation, and, as expected, *Meditations* ends with a return to the barrio, an act made easier since it includes the wisdom and inspiration Martín/Baca has found in his community.

Baca's 1989 book, *Black Mesa Poems*, can be seen as his ultimate and most complete recuperation and revindication of his barrio, of its Chicano, working-class ethos, and of the life that he has formed around his South Valley home. Baca has always acknowledged the tremendous significance of his return to the South Valley: "the human being that I was found a total and wholesome and fulfilling relationship to the people of the barrio and now I had language. I was a language person and I listened to people and I looked at their lives and I saw how they suffered and how they loved, my gift to them was to use who I was, interpreting them on the page, and their gift to me was to love me and let me live next to them."

Black Mesa Poems is by far Baca's most ambitious work to date. It essentially becomes the final staging for a new phase of his poetry, as suggested by the theme of rededication to life and community with which *Martín and Meditations on the South Valley* ends. Viewed in the context of a poetic ascent toward self-definition that began with Baca's first chapbook, *Black Mesa Poems* represents the culmination of a long process of recovery and vindication through language and poetry.

Black Mesa Poems becomes in effect his manifesto of complete reintegration and strengthened sense of identity with the Chicano community and its geospiritual homeland that is the Southwest. As the work chronicles the acquisition of Baca's second home, a hundred-year-old adobe atop the ancient volcanic tablelands south of Albuquerque, it derives much of its mythic and archetypal significance from the ancestral presence of his mestizo forebears--Indian, Spanish, and Mexican--whose spirits still echo in the land and the traditions of New Mexico. Baca focuses on the vivid, detailed descriptions of people, geography, and events that surround his new home on Black Mesa. He explores such themes as reconciling his broken past, the sacredness of the earth (figured in Black Mesa), the courage and dignity he is witness to in the ordinary lives of his neighbors and friends, his abiding commitment to family and home, the birth of a second child, and an exploration of the historical confluence of cultures--Indian, Spanish, Mexican, and Anglo-American--that form the human landscape of the Southwest. The book is underpinned by Baca's vision of a man moving from violence to peace and from personal turmoil to spiritual harmony.

The collection encases Baca's most complex poetic vision of life, for he at once explodes the narrative and autobiographical elements of his other poetry. Thematically connected to the reconstruction of a second house, *Black Mesa* opens with a poem that describes how the poet and his family came upon and eventually were fortunate enough to acquire the adobe house atop Black Mesa. The significance of the poem conceptually is that Martín is no longer identified as the poetic speaker. This disappearance of the fictive persona Martín implicitly signals a dismantling of Baca's use of autobiographical narrative as poetic scaffolding upon which life is staged by example and depiction; what remains is a freestanding synthesis of his inner and outer realities. With *Black Mesa Poems*, poetic discourse and life merge, and poetry and personal circumstance in metaphorical relationship redeem not only the individual but his people and culture.

Baca's works have gained both acceptance and praise beginning with an early note by critic Juan Rodríguez (*Carta Abierta*, 1978): "The man's poetry is worth reading más de una vez [more than once]." Rodríguez's recommendation was followed by more generous estimations of Baca's talents in such noted journals as the *American Book Review*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Lamar Journal of the Humanities*, *Revista Chicano-Riqueña*, and others. Noted Chicano novelist Ron Arias, in a review of Baca's *Immigrants*, was one of the first to point out the powerful appeal of Baca's style and imagery by comparing it to the art of the jazz musician: "when he finds it [a melody] he takes it wherever it might lead": Arias observed that a mainstay in Baca's poetry is a dynamic quality that "continually surprises by squeezing meaning out of ordinary sights" (*American Book Review* , September-October 1981). The latter is most apparent in Baca's lyrical voice; Arias laments that the weakest parts of the book are the "essay pieces" in which Baca employs a literal style. Levertov's interest in Baca's early work rings prophetic in her afterword to *What's Happening*: "I look on Jimmy Santiago Baca as one of the most naturally gifted poets I've ever known ...." Most reviewers have been of one mind when considering his work as far beyond anything that might be labeled as jailhouse ranting and frustration; in the estimation of Joseph F. Vélez, Baca's work "is not poetry of prison, but poetry of

life" (*Revista Chicano-Riqueña*, 1980).

Martín and Meditations on the South Valley represents a pinnacle in the progressive development of Baca's *ars poetica* and is to date the work that has drawn the greatest acclaim and review. The value of the book goes beyond the simple plot that tells the story of Martín/Baca's worst years and the realization of a personal quest; as with all inspired literature its value lies precisely in the manner in which the events are told--in the intensity of its language and in the transcendent, metaphorical significance of the events it depicts. Gary Soto, in a review for the *San Francisco Chronicle* (24 January 1988), wrote: "What makes the story succeed is its honesty, brutal honesty, as well as Baca's original imagery and the passion in his writing. Moreover, a history is being written, of a culture of poverty which except for a few poets like Phillip Levine, Thomas McGrath and the late James Wright, is absent in American poetry." As Levertov suggests in the book's introduction, Baca "writes with unconcealed passion: detachment is not a quality he cultivates." Critics and reviewers generally are in agreement regarding this aspect of Baca's work; their accolades resemble Liam Rector's. In the *Hudson Review* (Summer 1989) he noted that *Martín and Meditations on the South Valley* is "also a powerful orchestration and revision of narrative and lyrical admixture--both constructivist and expressionist in its execution--with an utterly compelling dramatic form fueling the entire vivisection and the pilgrim's progress which makes it so much more than another 'collection' of poems. Baca's book is a page turner, almost a novel in verse...."

The volume has also inspired debate and controversy. Olivares has suggested that the work is flawed by the facts that it is not the poem of epic stature that Baca seemingly intended to create, its publication reflects political opportunism on the part of a publisher intent on cashing in on a stereotyped, criminally prone minority experience, and Baca's writing depicts and promotes "a world of social misfits."

It is fair to say that by any measure *Martín* is not a poem of epic proportions that addresses an all-encompassing reality of the Southwest. What is clearly present is the story of a personal kind of redemption, but the redemptive act implies an interaction with the social forces that have shaped the individual. Any epic or definitive treatment of the Southwest as a geographical space that includes the confluence of many peoples and their histories may not be reducible to any one manuscript or any one voice. Taken as a new poetic agenda, Baca's suggestion "that the entire Southwest needed a long poem that could describe what has happened here in the last twenty years" makes ready sense if one considers that the evolution of his poetry in his last three collections does in fact begin the work of inscribing an epic, mythic, and archetypal significance to the confluence of the peoples and histories of the Southwest.

Those detractors who argue that Baca's work promotes the image of Chicano culture as a world of "social misfits" seem to have misread the work and to deny its intent by engaging in social typecasting that reduces the possibility of human potential to a predetermined and self-fulfilling prophecy of behavioral norms. As Baca registers the social world of his personal past, he is asking the reader, both Anglo-American and Chicano, to question his conditioned response, as Levertov suggests, by ascribing to the apparent social delinquency of Martín--the down-and-out wanderer--a complexity of impulse far beyond the surface reality that shapes his life: "Martín is a poet (and the reader--though not deliberately--is challenged: next time you see such a figure, remember that though his head may be filled only with quotidian banalities, and with crude and trivial wishes, it is also very possible that he is living an inner life at least as vivid as your own)."

At present Baca lives and writes at his Black Mesa farmhouse. He is at work on his first novel, "In the Way of the Sun," which he envisions as the first part of a trilogy on the peoples of the Southwest. His first play, *Los tres hijos de Julia*, was staged at the Los Angeles Theatre Center in 1991. Baca has recently completed a new collection of poems, titled "Healing Earthquake,"which is forthcoming from New Directions Press, which has also published a retrospective of his poetry, *Immigrants in Our Own Land and Earlier Poems* (1990). He has been invited to write the screenplays for two upcoming movies and is producing a documentary about Hispanic culture that will be filmed in eight states. Between writing projects, Baca dedicates himself to sharing the responsibility of raising his two young sons, Antonio and Gabriel, and running the small family farm atop Black Mesa.

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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- Beth Ann Krier, "Baca: A Poet Emerges From Prison of His Past," *Los Angeles Times*, 15 February 1989, pp. V5-V7.

- Denise Levertov, Afterword to Baca's *What's Happening* (Willimantic, Conn.: Curbstone, 1982).

- Levertov, Introduction to Baca's *Martin and Meditations on the South Valley* (New York: New Directions, 1987), pp. xiii-xviii.

- Julián Olivares, "Two Contemporary Chicano Verse Chronicles," *Americas Review*, 16 (Fall-Winter 1988): 214-231.

- Liam Rector, "The Documentary of What Is," *Hudson Review*, 41 (Summer 1989): 393-400.

About this Essay: A. Gabriel Meléndez, University of New Mexico

Source: *Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume 122: Chicano Writers, Second Series*. A Bruccoli Clark Layman Book. Edited by Francisco A. Lomeli, University of California, Santa Barbara and Carl R. Shirley, University of South Carolina. The Gale Group, 1992. pp. 21-29.

Source Database: Dictionary of Literary Biography

A review of *Black Mesa Poems*

Critic: Scott Slovic
Source: *Black Mesa Poems*, in *Western American Literature*, Vol. XXVI, No. 2, August, 1991, pp. 180-81
Criticism about: Jimmy Santiago Baca (1952-), **also known as:** Jose Santiago Baca

Genre(s): Poetry; Essays

[In the following favorable review of *Black Mesa Poems,* Slovic praises Baca's style, commenting that reading the collection "is an experience at once stirring and soothing."]

Black Mesa Poems is an impressive achievement, at once universal and thoroughly regional, even private. To read Jimmy Santiago Baca's poetry is to tramp across the uneven terrain of human experience, sometimes lulled by the everydayness of work or relationships, and then dazzled by a flood of emotion or vibrant observation.

Baca has a compelling fondness for contrasts. The moods and imagery of entire poems resonate against each other, like a medley of voices echoing in a canyon. One of my favorite pieces in this book is the brief, melancholy sketch called **"Hitchhiker."** Other poems, however, consider life with a mixture of humor and tenderness. **"Since You've Come,"** which was selected for the *Pushcart Prize: Best of the Small Presses 1989*, opens with the exaggerated complaint of an unappreciated parent. But the final couplet, sixteen lines later, expresses the inevitable truth: "We have never loved anyone more than you/ my child."

Poems about friends and family abound in this collection. But the presence of the landscape of Northern New Mexico is equally strong. Details of the natural world are, for

the poet, either invigorating or stabilizing, sometimes both. In the poem **"Spring"** he recalls watching new life "swell" above and beside a community irrigation ditch; in **"Picking Piñons"** he receives "murmur[s]" of a "stable world" from a tree. Many of the pieces in ***Black Mesa Poems*** suggest a fine line between dream and reality; in **"What's Real and What's Not,"** Baca regains contact with the elemental landscape during a two-day camping trip with an "ex-vet Nam grunt": "My singleness glimmers bright,/and my first time from home in months/makes the land glow, the sky bluer,/and the asphalt road/winding to the foothills ignites each nerve into a sacred torch."

"Black Mesa," the penultimate poem of the book, ties together many of the collection's prominent motifs, tracing the congruence between the "northern most Utip/of Chihuahua desert" and the poet's mind. Baca's poetry itself, like the land which inspires it, is life-sustaining, life-vivifying--it makes life seem "real." Reading ***Black Mesa Poems*** is an experience at once stirring and soothing.

Source: Scott Slovic, A review of *Black Mesa Poems*, in *Western American Literature*, Vol. XXVI, No. 2, August, 1991, pp. 180-81.

Source Database: Literature Resource Center

From Black Mesa Poems
by Jimmy Santiago Baca

A Daily Joy to be Alive

No matter how serene things
may be in my life,
how well things are going,
my body and soul
are two cliff peaks
from which a dream of who I can be
falls, and I must learn
to fly again each day,
or die.

Death draws respect
and fear from the living.
Death offers
no false starts. It is not
a referee with a pop-gun
at the startling
of a hundred yard dash.

I do not live to retrieve
or multiply what my father lost
or gained.

I continually find myself in the ruins
of new beginnings,
uncoiling the rope of my life
to descend ever deeper into unknown abysses,
tying my heart into a knot
round a tree or boulder,
to insure I have something that will hold me,
that will not let me fall.

My heart has many thorn-studded slits of flame
springing from the red candle jars.
My dreams flicker and twist
on the altar of this earth,
light wrestling with darkness,
light radiating into darkness,
to widen my day blue,
and all that is wax melts
in the flame-

I can see treetops!

From Black Mesa Poems
by Jimmy Santiago Baca

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Green Chile

I prefer red chile over my eggs
and potatoes for breakfast.
Red chile ristras decorate my door,
dry on my roof, and hang from eaves.
They lend open-air vegetable stands
historical grandeur, and gently swing
with an air of festive welcome.
I can hear them talking in the wind,
haggard, yellowing, crisp, rasping
tongues of old men, licking the breeze.

But grandmother loves green chile.
When I visit her,
she holds the green chile pepper
in her wrinkled hands.
Ah, voluptuous, masculine,
an air of authority and youth simmers
from its swan-neck stem, tapering to a flowery collar,
fermenting resinous spice.
A well-dressed gentleman at the door
my grandmother takes sensuously in her hand,
rubbing its firm glossed sides,
caressing the oily rubbery serpent,
with mouth -watering fulfillment,
fondling its curves with gentle fingers.
Its bearing magnificent and taut
as flanks of a tiger in mid-leap,
she thrusts her blade into
and cuts it open, with lust
on her hot mouth, sweating over the stove,
bandanna round her forehead,
mysterious passion on her face
as she serves me green chile con carne
between soft warm leaves of corn tortillas,
with beans and rice–her sacrifice
to here little prince.
I slurp form my plate
with last bit of tortilla, my mouth burns
and I hiss and drink a tall glass of cold water.

All over New Mexico, sunburned men and women
drive rickety trucks stuffed with gunny sacks

of green chile, from Belen, Beguita, Wllard, Estancia,
San Antonio y Socorro, from fields
to roadside stands, you see them roasting green chile
in screen-sided homemade barrels, and for a dollar a bag,
we relive this old, beautiful ritual again and again.

From "The Poetry of Jimmy Santiago Baca," *Masterpieces of Latino Literature*. Ed. Frank N. Magill. New York: Harper Collins, 1994. 398-401.

THE POETRY OF JIMMY SANTIAGO BACA

Author: Jimmy Santiago Baca (1952-)
Type of work: Poetry
Principal published works: *Immigrants in Our Own Land*, 1979; *Swords of Darkness*, 1981; *What's Happening*, 1982; *Poems Taken from My Yard*, 1986; *Martín; &, Meditations on the South Valley*, 1986; *Black Mesa Poems*, 1989

Many critics consider Jimmy Santiago Baca to be one of the most important contemporary Chicano writers. Although he has written essays, plays, and screenplays, he has received most of his praise and renown for his poetry. He was awarded a National Endowment for the Arts grant for poetry in 1987 and the Before Columbus Book Award for his poetry collection *Martín; &, Meditations on the South Valley*. He has served as poet-in-residence at prestigious universities such as Yale and the University of California, Berkeley.

In order to understand Baca's poetry, which is extremely autobiographical, it is essential to know at least the outlines of his life. Baca was born in 1952 in Santa Fe, New Mexico, to a Chicana mother and an Apache father. His parents were divorced soon after his birth, and Baca stayed with his grandmother and other relatives from the ages of two to six. He was placed in various detention centers and orphanages from the ages of six to twenty. He ended up living on the streets of Albuquerque's barrios. At the age of twenty, he was sentenced to prison for possession of drugs, and he remained in prison until 1979. It was only in prison that Baca became completely literate, received his high-school diploma (the General Equivalency Diploma, or GED), and began his interest in poetry. Baca's difficult background is like that of few other poets writing in the United States.

Through poetry, Baca has been able to forge a new life for himself, to transform himself, and to redirect his energy away from drug addiction and despair toward communion with others and dedication to his art. "In language," he says, "I have burned my old selves and improvised myself into a new being." His poetry, however, is not in any way simply therapeutic. His writing also bears witness to the suffering of his people and to the negating power of oppression and materialism. A modern Walt Whitman, he has "no use for the pampered poets of the academy, or the darlings of fashion. Real poetry comes from and expresses the common energy of the people." Baca's poems, written in free verse with passion and straightforward language, are dedicated to the people on the streets rather than the elites in universities.

Baca's first full-length collection of poetry, *Immigrants in Our Own Land*, written while Baca was still in prison and published in 1979, is filled with tremendous energy and passion. If these early poems do not show Baca's full powers as a poet, they make up for the occasional slack line or flat image with their incredible urgency and their convincing modulation between rage and compassion, despair and hope. Early in the collection, the poet admits that he is "Scared of what might become/ Of me, the real me,/ Behind these prison walls," but the book as a whole shows a progression as the poet reflects on the power of poetry to change his life. In his collection of personal essays *Working in the Dark* (1991), he comments on this situation: "They sent me to prison for drug possession. And there, out of suffering, I found a reprieve from chaos, found language. . . . I discovered a reason for living, for breathing, and I could love myself again, trust myself again, trust what my heart dreamed and find the strength to pursue those dreams."

The title of *Immigrants in Our Own Land* refers, at least in part, to the movement of convicts away from their old world, the barrios and ghettos and reservations, and their "immigration" into the world of the prison. This newfound land, in which the warden ignores "the blood of these cellblocks,

bucketfuls weekly . . . cutoff fingers/ caught in doors of cages, often, dead men thrown to the hoofed mud/ like chewed corn husks," provides a locale in which, remarkably, Baca establishes his identity and finds the power of compassion. He centers himself in this new world by writing poems about the land in which he grew up, his grandmother who reared him, and his father—the "child with a warrior's heart"—who offered Baca and his siblings

> to the wind,
> to the mountains, to the skies of autumn and spring.
> He said, "Here are my children! Care for them!"
> And he left again . . .

Baca remains committed in the poems to forming these links with his past as well as to forming strong bonds with the people in his present. He writes poems for fellow convicts, for Joe, his cellmate, who had been sent "to Vietnam to serve a country/ Whose heels only he had seen." He speaks of the power of drugs in "It Goes by Many Names," sympathizing with the people locked behind bars "for taking heroin/ But they are not criminals." To the addicts, he speaks as a brother and says, "I will . . . weep for you, be silent for you, assist you." It is in these poems that Baca offers his assistance. When he discovers that poetry can be a vehicle for anger and solidarity, he is able to offer himself as the voice of the people. In an interview, Baca said that he wrote the poems in *Immigrants in Our Own Land* as a "weapon against sterility, mental and spiritual and emotional sterility"; the poems can also be used by readers to fight a similar kind of emptiness and despair they might find in their own lives.

Baca continued his explorations into his prison experiences in the first five poems of *What's Happening*, a small book of only nineteen pages and ten poems published in 1982. The book's title comes from the first poem in the collection, in which "What's Happening" is not a question but a statement of current conditions in prison. What's happening is grotesque: Murders and beatings take place, and the dignity of the incarcerated men is stolen from them, all in the name of rehabilitation. The poem chronicles these abuses, but it too is a poem in praise of solidarity. The men are on strike, protesting conditions, and all through the prison "fires burn and burn before each cell,/ voices scream and scream, We Want Justice!" As usual, Baca is able to make something good come out of all this suffering. In "Who Understands Me But Me," he remarks that in "the midst of this wreckage of life . . . I have found parts of myself never dreamed of by me."

The last five poems of this collection leave the prison world, but Baca maintains his loyalty to the underclass, the oppressed. His career is focused on the marginalized, the poor, the ethnic minorities. In "There's Me," he attacks the upper-class world in which people make large amounts of money by using their brains and other people's bodies. Baca wonders, "What if there weren't no bodies/ to work for them? Huh?" He also decides that he and his friends are better off than the wealthy because, although he wakes up in the morning to curse cockroaches, he decides "it's a good/ life, better, because we know we're human beings. Know/ what I mean?" To some readers, Baca may seem to romanticize poverty and demonize the wealthy, but his voice is convincing even if the language of the poems is not particularly arresting. His heart is good.

Martín; &, Meditations on the South Valley (1986), Baca's most critically acclaimed book, joins two self-contained works that complement each other. *Martín*, the first section, is a fifty-page autobiography in verse in which Baca recasts his own life by employing fictive names and eliminating whole sections of his life story; in *Martín*, for example, no mention is made of the seven-year imprisonment.

The poem moves in time from the speaker's childhood to his adulthood, and in mood from despair and abandonment to hope and commitment. Martín, like Baca, recounts his years of hopelessness as he is abandoned in Pino Wells, New Mexico, by his sexually abused mother and his alcoholic father. He wanders between orphanages and relatives' homes, learning finally of his

mother's murder by her new husband and his father's death in a gutter from alcoholism. The death of his father, who had submerged his "feelings/ for forty years/ like embryos in whiskey bottles," hurts Martín terribly because he believes that "there is no reprieve/ from the pain/ from not having embraced each other,/ just once." After his parents' deaths, he takes to the open road, traveling by motorcycle across the United States. He eventually returns to Albuquerque, ready to begin again. He prays at Quaraí, a site of Indian ruins, and promises himself to "learn the dark red Apache words/ and wind burnished chants,/ the blazed red Spanish names of things/ that absorb centuries of my blood." He attempts to rebuild his life by attaching himself to his cultural past, and, most important, by finding love and establishing a family.

Thus, *Martín* ends on a triumphant note. Martín finds love with Gabriela, feels an attachment to "Mother Earth," builds a new home, and witnesses his wife giving birth to their son, Pablo. Martín promises his son that he, unlike his own parents, will never abandon the boy. He extends this promise to all living things, bringing to a very moving conclusion the almost mythic journey from a kind of chaotic hell to the constructed pleasures of domestic tranquillity.

In the second section of this linked collection, *Meditations on the South Valley*, the narrator, again Martín, begins in despair because the new house just completed in *Martín* burns to the ground, destroying hundreds of Martín's poems in the process. The book ends, though, with another birth, this time of a newly repaired house with Martín serving as a kind of mother. As he says matter of factly, "I gave birth to a house." The collection also ends with Martín's reintegration into his community.

Baca frames this collection with the story of the burned house and the new house rising, like a phoenix, out of the flames, but the majority of the poems are reflections about the South Valley in New Mexico. Because of the fire, Martín and his family are forced to move from their home temporarily to the section of town called the Heights. Martín cannot leave the barrio behind him. The Heights, a wealthy co nmunity, does not Martín; he hates the n wness, the impers and the empty perfecti n of the place, pre the warmth and perso ality of the South where his friends live. E ach poem in this se an attempt to recall the character of the Vall the characters who inha bit it with such gust

Because Baca is tryi ng to capture the au voice of the people in t e Valley, this sectio tains many examples of Chicano Spanish giving the poems an au henticity they woul erwise lack. Martín rec lls the "vatos," or g hung out with: one wh c died swimming dr the Rio Grande, and an ther, a janitor, who against land developers for the people's ri clean water. He rememb ers the "ancianos," people, who "slowly w an themselves/ fro life,/ and prepare for the next." He recalls Pa "the barrio idiot," who would always fill Ma heart with delight. He i agines the dreams immigrants from Mexic or thinks of the "vi the old men, who have e dured poverty and a rich dream land/ out of a small garden plot.

In *Black Mesa Poem* (1989), a collectio includes poems from t e previously publi chapbook *Poems Taken f om My Yard* (1986), drops the mask of Mart n and speaks of his wife and children, not th characters Gabriela Pablo. The book begins like *Meditations o South Valley*, with the r construction of a ho this one outside the valley at Black Mesa, in Mexico. The poems als follow a chronolo progression, as they di in *Martín*, but in volume the seasons, no the central charac growth and wanderings, loosely control the p ress of the book. In this collection, Baca be with the purchase and ref rbishing of the hous fall and winter, and then he chronicles his life a year, finishing the bo k with fall and wi again. Memories are int rspersed throughout book, so that the chrono ogical movement in collection is balanced n cely with a movem across time, back into the past.

In these sixty-five poe ms, Baca's prison ex rience is, once again, not mentioned. It is as if sweated out the poison of his previous life

writing the earlier collections of poems. In *Black Mesa Poems*, Baca focuses on the most basic aspects of life, and he revels in them: the seasons of the earth and the crops he grows; the animals that graze and give birth on the mesa; his wife and his second son, Gabriel, whose birth he celebrates; and his friends and neighbors, including Mr. Abaskin, "a gray-haired prophet in overalls" who is conspicuous in the collection because he is welcomed into Baca's circle even though he is a Russian immigrant rather than a Chicano or a Native American.

Although Baca has always had an attraction to the elemental aspects of life, in this collection more than in any other he pays special tribute to the earth, seeing it and the creatures on it as metaphorical emblems to be studied:

> I await the burning books
> of lilac buds
> to flame. This year I promise myself
> to read them
> as they are opening
> before they burn away.

Because of Baca's devotion to the forces of nature, anyone who allies himself with the "enemies of the earth" earns Baca's wrath. He distances himself from a former friend who "sells out" and becomes a weapons engineer at Los Alamos Laboratory. He gives the finger to a driver of a car with a bumper sticker that reads, 'Jet Noise, The Sound of Freedom."

The poems here, as in *Martín; &, Meditations on the South Valley*, pay special tribute to the courage, dignity, and humor of people who live lives that are rich in passion and commitment. Perhaps a third of the collection focuses on individuals who live lives not of quiet desperation but of difficult happiness. These characters, people from the barrio or the mesa, are praised in Baca's poems because of their tenaciousness, their ability to survive with dignity. Baca is no longer the poet of futile rage as he was in his earliest poems; he is able to mix his anger against the injustices of a system with fierce compassion for those who have suffered and have endured. He is the true poet of his people, one who sees their shortcomings (and his own) and still manages to sing a hymn of praise for them and for life. The reader has a sense that Jimmy Santiago Baca, despite the hardships he has endured, will never abandon his family, his people, his art, or the earth.

Baca, Jimmy Santiago | INTRODUCTION

Jimmy Santiago Baca 1952-

American poet, essayist, novelist, screenwriter, and playwright.

INTRODUCTION

An acclaimed Chicano poet, Baca is renowned for his richly lyrical and autobiographical verse. Baca's poetry mingles his experiences of rage and dispossession as a former convict with poetic narratives of spiritual regeneration and renewed connection with his community and ethnic heritage. In such notable works as *Martín and Meditations on the South Valley* (1987) and *Black Mesa Poems* (1989), Baca elucidates themes of self-actualization and personal metamorphosis by drawing upon his own transformation from an illiterate prisoner to a celebrated poet who delights in the discovery and expression of language. Featuring both realistic and mythologized portraits of himself and the Chicano community in his works, Baca helped bring widespread, national attention to the literary and cultural contributions of Chicanos in America, as well as to the plight of those who are poor and underprivileged. In addition to his work as a poet, Baca is also a noted novelist and screenwriter; his first film, *Bound by Honor*, was produced in 1993.

Biographical Information

Born in Santa Fe, New Mexico, to parents of Chicano and Native American descent, Baca experienced a troubled childhood. His parents divorced when he was very young, and his mother was subsequently murdered by her second husband. Raised by his grandparents until the age of five, Baca was then

relocated to an Albuquerque orphanage where he remained for six years. Dissatisfied with his life in the institution, he ran away at age eleven and survived on the streets and in juvenile detention centers until 1972. That year Baca was arrested and convicted for narcotics possession—charges he consistently denied. Nevertheless, he was sentenced to a seven-year term at the federal prison in Florence, Arizona, and reportedly subjected to electro-shock treatments for recalcitrant behavior. Functionally illiterate at the time he was incarcerated, Baca taught himself to read and write in prison, producing a journal and several short poems. With the encouragement of his fellow inmates he sent several of his pieces to *Mother Jones* magazine, attracting the attention of poetry editor Denise Levertov, who published three of the poems in the periodical. Baca's first collection of verse, *Immigrants In Our Own Land,* appeared in 1979 at approximately the same time as he was released from prison. Baca published several additional volumes of poetry in the 1980s, including his broadly successful *Martín and Meditations on the South Valley.* After the appearance of this work Baca's fame as a poet and spokesperson for Chicano culture rapidly developed. Soon he was lecturing and reading his works extensively across the United States, as well as hosting poetry workshops. By the late 1980s Baca had lived as poet in residence at the University of California, Berkeley and Yale University. Mainstream media coverage, the staging of his drama *Los tres hijos de Julia* (1991), and the production of the film *Bound by Honor* contributed to his growing celebrity in the Chicano community and on a national scale. In the 1990s Baca, now one of the most extensively read and respected Chicano poets in the United States, settled with his wife and two sons to the Black Mesa region in New Mexico and continued to write prose and poetry, including the novel *In the Way of the Sun* (1997) and the collection *Healing Earthquakes: A Love Story in Poems* (2001).

Major Works

The poetry of *Immigrants In Our Own Land,* Baca's first significant collection, is largely focused on his experiences in an Arizona prison. Detailing personal torment, thoughts on injustice and oppression, and his feelings of camaraderie with his fellow inmates, *Immigrants In Our Own Land* outlines a vision of hope and faith amid suffering. In addition to its title poem, which alludes to the impression shared by many Chicanos of being aliens in the southwestern United States despite their long history there, the collection also includes the powerful "So Mexicans are Taking Jobs from Americans," one of Baca's more political pieces. *What's Happening* (1982) also largely deals with Baca's prison experience, while additionally depicting the poet's attempts to reestablish his identity after incarceration, both in personal, psychological terms, and in relation to the wider community. *Martín and Meditations on the South Valley* represents a considerable development in Baca's poetic works. It takes the form of two complementary, semi-autobiographical narrative poems that detail in near-mythic terms the world of a poor, disestablished Chicano youth, Martín, as he grows up on the streets and

wanders through the American Southwest in search of identity, meaning, and stability. Eventually finding what he is looking for in Gabriela, Martín makes a home for himself, starts a family, and reconnects with his Chicano roots. Baca incorporated an earlier collection of lyrical works, *Poems Taken from My Yard* (1986) into *Black Mesa Poems* (1989), in which he once again evokes the working-class world of the barrio and emphasizes themes of regeneration and reconciliation brought about by a renewed connection with community, history, Chicano culture, and the landscape of the American Southwest. Among Baca's other works, his chapbook entitled simply *Jimmy Santiago Baca* (1978) contains several short poems and a prison journal, while the essays and autobiographical stories of *Working in the Dark: Reflections of a Poet of the Barrio* (1992) reveal his frequently expressed love of language and thoughts on the process of poetic composition.

Critical Reception

Despite certain limitations in terms of technique and theme, the lyrics of Baca's *Immigrants In Our Own Land* were heralded as the impressive first works of a new poetic voice from the American Southwest. While critics of his succeeding collections, especially *What's Happening,* expressed concern over Baca's potential inability to adequately modulate his passionate expressions, such unease was largely allayed when *Martín and Meditations on the South Valley* appeared several years later. Considered a breakthrough volume, *Martín and Meditations on the South Valley* earned Baca a National Endowment for the Arts grant and was honored with the Before Columbus American Book Award in 1988. Other critical accolades accompanied the volume, tempered only by a small minority of commentators who wondered if Baca had accurately rendered the realities of the southwestern barrio in his portrayal of Chicano life. Many such detractors were silenced with the publication of the follow-up book *Black Mesa Poems,* which is generally considered Baca's most impressive literary effort to date. Extending his themes of Chicano reintegration and communal strength, *Black Mesa Poems* evinces a continuation of Baca's epic reinterpretation of his own life and rediscovery of his ethnic heritage, critics have observed. Among his subsequent works, commentators acknowledge that *Healing Earthquakes: A Love Story in Poems* suggests a further expansion in Baca's poetic technique and thematic development, particularly in his strongly metaphorical representation of the feminine and nurturing qualities of Chicano culture.

Online NewsHour

JIMMY SANTIAGO BACA

August 9, 2001

Elizabeth Farnsworth talks with author and poet Jimmy Santiago Baca about two new books, "Healing Earthquakes" and "A Place to Stand."

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ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: The writer Jimmy Santiago Baca has two new books out this summer: "Healing Earthquakes" which is a collection of love poetry, and "A Place to Stand," a memoir of his childhood in new co-and his six years in a maximum security prison after being convicted, wrongly he says, of possession of drugs with intent to sell. Santiago Baca taught himself to read and write and published his first poetry while there. Since then his eight volumes of verse have won numerous prizes, including the American Book Award. In 1989 he held the Wallace Stevens endowed chair at Yale University.
Thanks for being with us.

JIMMY SANTIAGO BACA, Author, "Healing Earthquakes" and "A Place to Stand:" Thank you very much.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Why a memoir, prose, about your past after many years of writing poetry about it?

JIMMY SANTIAGO BACA: Well, there are some things that a writer has to do to move on, and this was one of those things where I had to... In order to go, to broaden out myself as a writer and to sort of expand my wings, so to speak, I had to go... I had to deal with a memoir because it kept getting in the way.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: It's an amazing story. You tell the story of your childhood. You were deserted by your parents. Your grandparents took care of you for a while. Then you ended up in a orphanage and finally in prison. Tell the story of how the... The specific story of how words and language entered your life and helped save you.

JIMMY SANTIAGO BACA: Well, you know, words... Words were like butterflies and I always had spring inside my heart. I speak metaphorically, of course. But words were magical prayers to me. They were single stars that were... That came out of people. In dark times it seemed that words were really special to me. We didn't really have a lot of books around the house when I was growing up except the bible, and I think that's about it. Then, of course, I never had any books until I was in county jail, when I took that one book.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Tell us what happened.

JIMMY SANTIAGO BACA: Well, I stole the book from the clerk, the desk clerk, and I took it up to my cell. Late at night I was tearing pages out of it so I could cook up some coffee. Everyone was yelling for their coffee. They were wondering why I wasn't coming because I was... I was on time most of the time, and what happened was I got... As the fire beneath the coffee can was flaring, I caught a couple of words that I recognized phonetically. As I read more and more, I quit tearing the pages out of the book and I began to read more and more. It was about a man who was walking his dog around a lake. And that triggered phenomenal memories in me of my grandfather and the love I had for him and how we went around the pond with our sheep and dog. Incidentally the man's name that I was reading later on that night I fell asleep enunciating the name words - words -- Wordsworth.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Then in prison you just kept loving words more and more and you started writing to somebody who sent you books. Eventually you had poetry published in Mother Jones Magazine even while you were in prison. How did you go from being almost illiterate to that?

JIMMY SANTIAGO BACA: It was really funny because I didn't know how to address a letter and I didn't know how to... I didn't know people paid for poetry. I'm not sure if that's a good thing. But a friend of mine came by. I think he was tired... I was charging people cigarettes and coffees to write letters to their mothers and write letters to their girlfriends and poems and so forth, for Mother's Day. He came by and said, hey, they're buying poems here. I asked how to address it. I took my shoebox and grabbed a bunch of poems that I had written on baby paper. And I sent them to a place called San Francisco -- never expecting to hear back from them. When $300 came in my books at the prison that I was in, I bought the whole cell block ice cream that day. Everyone ate ice cream.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: You love language, you say. I'm going to ask you to read a poem in a minute. First tell us how you love language and why. You've called it almost a physical thing for you.

JIMMY SANTIAGO BACA: Oh, I love language. I love language. Language, to me, is what sunrise is to the birds. Language, to me, is what water is to a man that just crossed the desert. I remember, as a boy, when grown-ups, they looked like huge redwood trees to me in a storm, or they looked like boats without a map in a bad storm at sea. And the grown-ups in my life were always caught up in dramas. And the one thing that they all had in common was they couldn't express that storm inside of themselves. And I was so caught up in that drama that I vowed one day I would grasp hold of the power that could evoke their emotions. For me, at least, I wanted to know how to say what was happening to them and I wanted to know. ..

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Go ahead. Sorry.

JIMMY SANTIAGO BACA: I just wanted to know... I wanted to name things.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Read a poem for us where you do name things. This is from "Healing Earthquakes," your new books of poetry.

JIMMY SANTIAGO BACA: Yes. This is number 18, part one. "Yesterday driving across the bridge with my friend the brilliant orange cottonwood leaves along the river made me think of love. And the red plum tree next to the bus stop bench of enduring resilience, and the brown leaves in the gutter became my disappointments. I imagined a ghostly specter visiting my bedside and piling those brown leaves on my tiny heart. That was when my friend asked me who or what did God give his unending blessings? He expected me to say the innocent, but I replied that God gives his blessings and miracles to what rots and is broken and is crumbling -- that which is decomposing. Blessings in the rot, in the dark matter that is breaking apart like a fractured wall, bricks falling to the ground because life wants opened fields, not separation - everything integrating into one black mass of decreation and creation -- birthing and dying. In the wound is freedom; in the young crippled boy struggling to step up to the bus, the imperfect. Walls everywhere. Every business has barred windows. Walls, walls. We admire the Mercedes driver with smoked tinted windows. His walls allow no intrusion. But the hitchhiker's walls have come down. The kid on the street corner with purple locks is saying look at my purple hair. It's my wall. But walls that fall are where life feasts on miracles or where God lives and does the work of true living."

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: I love this poem both for the language but also because it seems to express sort of the central theme of your work. Tell me if I'm right about this: The necessity of the walls to fall and the sort of holiness of what isn't perfect.

JIMMY SANTIAGO BACA: I think you're right, yeah. I have this passion for what's not perfect. I have a passion for opening up the heart to the world. I have a passion for people that have the courage to live with their souls on their skin, so to speak.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: And for bringing down walls of all kinds, prison walls. You do a lot of work in workshops, walls of racism. You not only write about this but you work on this, don't you? You teach literacy. You work with people who have been harmed by whatever.

JIMMY SANTIAGO BACA: Yes, yes. I just finished a big workshop at Chino Prison and I have an ongoing workshop at a dance studio here, and I do a lot of things but basically the impetus for the work that I do is generated from a passion that we all need to communicate. I think in the communication is our dance.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: You're writing pretty much alone now. I read that you've spent a lot of time in recent years alone. I guess you would have to spend a lot of time working to finish two books that both came out at the same time. Tell us about how you write and why it's important for you to be alone.

JIMMY SANTIAGO BACA: I think that loneliness really is my intimate companion. I used to try to avoid it. But now I embrace it. I write... I get up in the morning about 5:00 and 5:30 and then I sort of roust about, water the plants, read a little bit, maybe, go outside. I start writing and I write very eclectically. I'm sort of eccentric in the sense that I'll write a... ten minutes and get up, walk around, sit down, write five minutes, get up, walk around. I'll do different things according to what I'm writing. With this particular book of poetry, "Healing Earthquakes," I had a different approach. I sat down and just wrote passionately, a burst, a shower burst so to speak. When I'm writing something else like short stories or a novel, they each have their different approaches that affect me physically and that I follow physically. So that's how I do it.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Jimmy Santiago Baca, author of "A Place to Stand" and "Healing Earthquakes," thanks for being with us.

JIMMY SANTIAGO BACA: It's my pleasure. Thank you.

Notes on **Black Mesa Poems** by Jimmy Santiago Baca

Sixty-five poems that represent the most "complete recuperation and revindication of his barrio, of its Chicano, working-class ethos, and of the life that he has formed around his South Valley home" A. Gabriel Melendez, *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* Volume 122: Chicano Writers, Second Series.

"Black Mesa is the ancient volcanic tablelands south of Albuquerque. It derives much of its mythic and archetypal significance from the ancestral presence of Baca's mestizo forebears (Indian, Spanish, and Mexican) whose spirits still echo in the land and the traditions of New Mexico" *Dictionary of Literary Biography.*

"Dream Come Early"- The actual acquisition of his dream home comes sooner than Baca expects. It is his dream home because it is located in Black Mesa, it is surrounded by nature and it matches both his ideal and his wife's ideal of a home. It carries the history of the Chicano people, and therefore the spirits of the ages.

"Old Man"- Baca feels he will never become old because he will live on in nature and through nature's creatures.

"From Violence to Peace" - After witnessing the butchering of a bull, the narrator takes a drink to fuel his anger at what he perceives to be a desecration. In a drunken rage, and "to redeem the bull's blood with ours," he goes to settle a score with an enemy and is shot with pellets througout his thighs, belly and groin. During his recuperation, he comes to the realization that what he now wants is to "diffuse the immovable core of vengeance in my heart,/ I had carried as a child." When the curandero visits he interprets the narrator's rage at the killing of the bull. He tells him that "killing the bull is killing the intuitive part of yourself, the feminine part." That when "Jesus was raising Lazarus/he groaned in his spirit and that bull groaned/ and when you killed the bull, it was raising you./ The dying bull gave birth to you and now you are either/ blessed or cursed. The flood of that bull's blood,/ is either going to drown you or liberate you,/ but it will not be wasted."

"Dream Instructions" - This poem is the sequel to "From Violence to Peace." Baca reminds the reader that he has been advised by the curandero that the bull's blood "is either going to liberate" him or "drown" him....the "bull's blood will not be wasted." In his dream he revisits his experience of being in prison and the horror it instilled in him. He equates being in prison to being in hell. He awakens to find that it is the peaceful man who is speaking to the destructive spirit in him. He returns to his dream state and experiences a rebirth as a more positive, peaceful, knowledgeable man who is willing to experience "another way of life."

"Roots" - In this poem, the cottonwood tree is a symbol of strength. Its roots go deeply into the land. Likewise, the narrator feels that his strength, like the cottonwood tree's strength, is derived from his ancestral roots.

Black Mesa Poems

"Jaguar Head" - In this poem, again the branches of the cottonwood tree represents strength and power. The branch of the tree takes on the image of a jaguar's head, snarling, drooling sap; it has fresh-timber fangs. The tree's leaves are like molted fur.

"Leaps" - This poem reveres the power of memory. Despite the fact that change is inevitable, memory allows a person to freeze a cherished scene, moment or incident in time forever.

"The Other Side of the Mountain" - Although nature can sometimes present adverse conditions, nature is kind; however, life with its limitations can be cruel.

"Knowing the Snow Another Way" - This poem gives the nature of snow from three different perspectives. Nature seems to pay homage to the falling snow. To children, even those who are homeless, the snow can be beautiful and comforting. But to adults "Indios y Chicanos" know the ravages of snow to their livestock, their crop, their well-being, and ultimately their lives.

"Birthing Work" - This poem begins with giving instructions for making adobe brick. He proudly uses the brick to make a dwelling. This type of creation is compared to giving birth to a child. Like the child, the adobe has a life of its own. Similarly both are wrought from dust and to the earth they both return.

"Bells" - This poem records the birth of the poet. A celebratory tone is indicated by the use of bells to herald his entry into the world and his first trip through the streets of Santa Fe, New Mexico. His trip home takes him past the mundane and the miraculous. Later in life, when his mother gently reprimands him, she reminds him that he was "born of bells... they speak to you in dreams."

"Green Chile" - This poem begins with the celebration of green chiles as a great breakfast food, along with eggs and potatoes. However, red chiles are great for decorations and as reminders of historical grandeur. Baca remembers that his grandmother loved green chiles. He describes her holding, caressing and cutting into them. He associates green chiles with sensuality and the heat of passion. In fact, eating green chile con carne between tortillas becomes a pleasant ritual which he remembers often. To quell the heat of the green chile, he drinks a tall glass of cold water. Baca savors this ritual as he sees and smells the green chiles being roasted and sold at market.

Black Mesa Poems

" Work We Hate and Dreams We Love" - This poem draws the contrasts between the harshness or reality and the sweetness of dreams. A young worker abhors the monotony of making boards, but finds delight in dreaming of himself as a mighty hunter.

"Mi Tio Baca El Poeta De Socorro" - This poem pays homage to Baca's uncle, Antonio Baca, who was a rebel for the cause. He advocated land rights be restored to his people. As a result, he was massacred. He imagines walking and talking one last time with his uncle, ending with the uncle's kneeling in prayer at the alter. Although knows that he should believe, like his uncle that "faith, prayer, and forgiveness" will sustain us, he finds it hard to accept.

"Child of the Sun - Gabriel's Birth (Sun Prayer) - This poem records the birth of Baca's son, Gabriel. The sun seems to provide the light for the birth. The baby is greeted by sunlight; he is like "God descending from the sky. All three of them are engulfed and dazzled by the sunlight. He appears as a "child of the sun," and, therefore, Baca pays homage to the sun in thanksgiving for his safe arrival.

"Personal Prayers" - This poem tells gives the details of the ceremonial practice of burying the placenta after the child is born. On the night of the full moon, the blue spruce is decorated with "Kachina dolls, eagle and hawk feathers, and wooden figurines of mothers holding children." After the full moon, the placenta in placed in a fertilized hole on the north side of the house, and the spruce tree is added, roots first. Baca then bends down and whispers a prayer into the soil: "Mother earth, give my son deep/strong roots. Care for him/throughout his life, give him/ a path filled with light, give him/ the courage to bear himself/ upright, as corn, as his spruce tree/ gift I offer you in thankfulness,/ Mother earth."

"Since You've Come"- This anecdotal poem recounts the changed lives of new parents. The demands of the newborn son, Antonio, requires that they "stagger out of bed, guessing what you desire," and become "jugglers of toy bears and rattlers." And in response to all of this sacrifice, the baby is "bored, indifferent, and unimpressed with our performance." He simply shuts his eyes, burps, and goes to sleep. In spite of all this, Baca writes, "We have never loved anyone more than you my child."

Black Mesa Poems

"Black Mesa"- This poem, from which the collection takes its title, begins with the description of the poet's geophysical space. After describing the landscape of his property on Black Mesa, he is reminded of the memories which the land holds. He remembers that the earth below his feet holds the blood of a slain Chicano activist, Rito, who tried to stop the mine blasting on Black Mesa. While, remembering Rito as an Aztec warrior who taught history to the children, Baca is reminded of the history of the land on which he stands. He imagines himself on this same land 1000 years ago and compares this time to the brevity of the human life span. Through what he imagines life to be like at that time, he gains a view of life and death, and thus gains strength from these revelations. In his imagination, he finds himself in a future time and a distant place where someone thanks him for "the stone in my mind." The stone is the enduring memory of the past and history. Thus, "stone" becomes a metaphor for endurance, memory, history. Once back to reality, he is ready to face tomorrow, ready to live and learn from any "catastrophe."

Black Mesa Poems by Jimmy Santiago Baca

Topics for critical thinking and writing

1. The sixty-five poems of *Black Mesa Poems* unfold in a chronological pattern, that of the seasons of the earth. Beginning with the first poem "Dream Come Early" select at least four subsequent poems and explain how each one represents the progression from one season to the next. (*Beginning with "Dream Come Early = fall/winter; "Spring" "God's Coming" "Too Much of a Good Thing" "Matanza to Welcome Spring"=spring; "Wishes" "Family Ties" "Toward the Light" spring/summer; ending with "September" "Black Mesa" = fall/winter.* These are suggestions as students' responses may be different) (Illustration/Argumentation Essay)

2. In this collection of poems, Baca pays homage to the forces of nature. Using selected passages from selected poems, explain how Baca has demonstrated his reverence for nature. (*"Spring" "God's Coming" "Sweet Revenge" "A Good Day" "Roots"*answers will vary) (Illustration/Argumentation)

3. Black Mesa Poems not only pays homage to the forces of nature, but the poems also celebrate the people of the mesa or barrio. In an essay, explain how Baca sings a song of praise for his people. (*"The Other Side of the Mountain" "Green Chile" "Old Woman" "Perfecto Flores" "Mi Tio Baca El Poeta De Socorro"*answers will vary)

4. Compare the image of the bull's blood as seen in the poem "From Violence to Peace" and the same image of the bull's blood in "Dream Instructions." (*In the former, the bull's blood is a source of horror and disgust and in the latter, the bull's blood is a source of rebirth and peace.)* (Comparison/Contrast Essay)

A Place to Stand by Jimmy Santiago Baca

Topics for critical thinking and writing

1. The title of the novel is *A Place to Stand.* In an essay, discuss the significance of the title in terms of Baca's dreams. *(He wanted to have a home in the desert or in the mountains by a stream with all the wildlife. He wanted to help his family: give Grandmother medical help, father would get treatment for his alcoholism; sister and brother would live comfortably. He wanted to belong to a family. Ultimately, he wanted to be accepted or acknowledged by his mother and the community in general.)* (Illustration Essay or Argumentation Essay)

2. The cover of the novel pictures a vast, wide open space with a lone tree standing. In an essay discuss the significance of this picture in terms of Baca's life. *(Paradoxically, Baca loves open spaces, yet he is continually confined, e.g. playing in the yard as a child/ hiding under the house; beach/prison; New Mexico plains vs. prison)* (Illustration Essay or Comparison/Contrast Essay)

3. As a child, Baca was told the story of his mother's being bitten by a snake just hours before Baca was born. Based on this event, the healer man predicts that Baca will, like the snake who sheds his skin, will change many times in his life. Based on *A Place to Stand,* argue for or against the validity of this prediction. *(From the age of 5, Baca changes homes constantly; while in prison, his personality changes several times; literacy changes his live for the better.)* (Cause/Effect Essay, Illustration Essay)

Denise Chávez

1948–

Chicana dramatist, poet, and novelist.

INTRODUCTION

Chávez is widely regarded as a leading Chicana playwright and novelist of the American Southwest. She has written and produced numerous one-act plays since the 1970s; however, she is best known for *The Last of the Menu Girls* (1986), a poignant and sensitive novel about an adolescent girl's passage into womanhood.

Born in Las Cruces, New Mexico, Chávez was reared in a family that particularly valued education and self-improvement. The divorce of her father, an attorney, and her mother, a teacher, in 1958 was a painful experience for Chávez which led her to remark in retrospect that she "grew up knowing separation as a quality of life." She was raised in a household of women that included her mother, two sisters, and a half-sister, and has acknowledged that the dominant influences in her life—as well as in her work—have been women. From an early age Chávez was an avid reader and writer. She kept a diary in which she recorded her observations on life and her own "physical, spiritual, and emotional ups and downs." During high school she became interested in drama and performed in several productions. Regarding her discovery of the theater, Chávez has stated: "It was like a revelation for me. I told myself, this is it. I can extend myself, be more than myself." She wrote her first play while a senior in college: originally entitled *The Waiting*, it was renamed *Novitiates* when it was produced in 1971. A story about several persons in transitional periods in their lives, her play won a prize in a New Mexico literary contest.

From 1973 to 1984 Chávez composed and collaborated on some twenty-one dramas, ranging from one-act children's theater pieces to tragic dramas that explore religious or existential themes. New Mexico generally serves as the backdrop for her plays: "My work is rooted in the Southwest, in heat and dust, and reflects

a world where love is as real as the land. In this dry and seemingly harsh and empty world there is much beauty to be found." Although background is significant in Chávez's work, Martha E. Heard has contended that the "inner transformation [of characters] is more important than external setting." Critics have noted that Chávez's plays typically focus on the characters' self-revelation and developing sense of their place in the community. *Mario and the Room María* (1974), for example, is a play about personal growth: its protagonist, Mundo Reyes, is unable to develop emotionally due to his refusal to confront painful experiences in his past. Likewise, *Sí, hay posada* (1980) depicts the agony of Johnny Briones, whose rejection of love is the result of emotional difficulties surrounding Christmas. While Chávez's plays most often concentrate on her characters' inner lives, some deal with external and cultural elements that impede social interaction. In *Plaza* (1984) she contrasts two characters who have different impressions of life in the town square. Iris, a lonely and resentful woman who grew up "being told what to do, who to talk to, who to marry" because her parents were so "very Spanish," fears the plaza that she sees from her window, viewing it as a hangout for disreputable types; young Benito, on the other hand, finds it a stimulating place where he can converse and meet people. As he advises his friend Cris: "you don't get lonely here. There's always something going on. Someone to talk to. Someone you know. Someone you don't know. Whether old friend or new, one can help out." Though they range in age, the protagonists in Chávez's plays are frequently positioned at a pivotal period in their lives that calls for a decision or a leap in self-understanding. Critics have observed, however, that Chávez's characters defy conformity to any fixed pattern since she goes to great lengths to portray each figure as an individual. Her use of detailed descriptions, strong dialogue, and linguistic nuances taken from the lingo of the Chicano community help Chávez to delineate her characters and to distinguish one from another. "I feel," she has said, "that as a Chicana writer, I am capturing the voice of so many who have been voiceless for years. I write about the neighborhood handyman, the waitresses, the bag ladies, the elevator operators. . . . My work as a playwright is to capture as best I can the small gestures of the common people." Though some critics have censured the loose structure of her plays, most consider Chávez a perceptive and inventive dramatist.

Many of the themes pervading Chávez's plays are echoed and drawn together in her novel, *The Last of the Menu Girls*. Composed of seven related stories, it explores the coming of age of Rocío Esquibel, a New Mexico college student. In the opening story, Rocío goes to work handing out menus in a hospital, where she is exposed to many different people and experiences. Her impressions are shaped, in large part, by the ordinary individuals whom she daily encounters: the local repairman, the grandmother, and the hospital helper, among others. Confronted by the basic facts of hardship, pain, and death, she begins to plan her future. Rocío is especially attentive to women's voices and concerns, and questions the narrow roles assigned to them. Taking stock of her family and society, Rocío denounces feminine stereotypes and decides to become a writer so that she may, in the words of the noted Chicano author Rudolfo A. Anaya, "give meaning to the emotionally turbulent lives of the people she has known." The novel concludes with Rocío's mother challenging her to write another *Gone with the Wind:* "You don't have to go anywhere. Not down the street. Not even out of this house. There's stories, plenty of them all around. What do you say, Rocío?"

Commentators have admired the way in which Chávez has interwoven the seven stories that comprise the novel in order to emphasize the human need for *compadría*, or community. Although some scholars have found her style to be disjointed and flawed, most have lauded her lively dialogue, revealing characterization, and ability to write with insight. They have also extolled the way in which the novelist incorporates elements of American Southwest culture, such as traditional folk stories and poetry, into her work, helping to root her characters more firmly in their social and geographical context. Chávez does not look upon *The Last of the Menu Girls* as a novel, but as a series of "dramatic vignettes" which explore the mysteries of womanhood. In fact, she envisions all her work as a chronicle of the changing relationships between men and women as women continue to avow their independence. This assertion has led critics like Anaya to hail Chávez as a "feminine voice" that is contributing "a new vision and dimension to the literature of [the Chicano] community."

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

BEVERLY LYON CLARK

(essay date 1986)

[In the following review of *The Last of the Menu Girls*, Clark commends Chávez's literary debut, regarding her as a promising Hispanic novelist.]

Does [*The Last of the Menu Girls*] mark the emergence of a Hispanic woman writer of the stature of Toni Morrison or Leslie Silko? Not quite. Not yet. But Denise Chávez does show promise. The interrelated stories in this first collection sketch the coming of age of Rocío Esquibel, as the adolescent girl examines available models of womanhood, tries out roles, comes to terms with the clutter of her past and emerges as a writer. The stories are of two types: lyrical meditations on everyday objects and montages of dialogue that swiftly reveal character. The former strain too hard for lyricism. The latter, though, show Ms. Chávez's strengths in dialogue and in juxtaposing evocative scenes. The title story, for instance, shows 17-year-old Rocío working in a hospital delivering menus to patients, touched by the lives of those she encounters: a beautiful, bitter woman suffering something mysterious, something to do with sex; an illegal alien who has lost his nose in a barroom fight; a hunchbacked dietitian proud of his iced tea. **"Compadre"** tells of moments in the life of the neighborhood handyman, whose repairs are never quite right, but also of moments in the life of Rocío, from whose perspective, variously snobbish, exasperated and compassionate, the story is told. It concludes with Rocío's mother encouraging her to write another *Gone With the Wind*, which Rocío doesn't do, but also giving advice that she will follow in writing her own stories: "You don't have to go anywhere. Not down the street. Not even out of this house. There's stories, plenty of them all around."

Beverly Lyon Clark, in a review of *The Last of the Menu Girls*, in *The New York Times Book Review*, October 12, 1986, p. 28.

RUDOLFO A. ANAYA

(essay date 1986)

[Anaya is a prominent Chicano novelist and short story writer. In the following excerpt from his introduction to *The Last of the Menu Girls*, he praises Chávez's first novel and summons the reader "to enter the rich and imaginative world which she portrays with such feeling and insight."]

With the publication of *The Last of the Menu Girls*, Denise Chávez joins the ranks of writers who are rounding out the parameters of Chicano literature. The feminine voice adds a new vision and dimension to the literature of this community. Clearly, a new vanguard is here, and its name is woman.

In this collection, the reader will savor the poignant experiences and dreams of Rocío, a young girl whose rites of passage into womanhood give unity to the collage of stories. At the beginning of the novel Rocío cries out against the traditional serving roles which society has prescribed for women, and she opts for the life of the artist. By the novel's end she has found her calling, and that is to give meaning to the emotionally turbulent lives of the people she has known. It is Rocío's mother who wisely counsels and dares her daughter to write the story of their lives.

Denise's novel reflects her particular sense of place, revealing the depths of the world of women and the flavor of southern New Mexico. The central metaphor of the novel is the home. The family, the known neighborhood and the role of women in this context are Denise's concern as a writer. Her eye for detail is sharp; the interior monologues of her characters are revealing; and Denise's long training as a dramatist serves her well in creating intriguing plot and dialogue. In short, all the strengths of a writer are here.

Rocío's yearning is to write a great novel from the lives of those people she knows best. It is the same dream Denise Chávez has followed, challenging us to let go of familiar patterns and to enter the rich and imaginative world which she portrays with such feeling and insight.

Rudolfo A. Anaya, in an introduction to *The Last of the Menu Girls* by Denise Chávez, Arte Público Press, 1986, p. ix.

Principal Works

Novitiates (drama) 1971
Mario and the Room María (drama) 1974
The Flying Tortilla Man (drama) 1975
The Adobe Rabbit (drama) 1979
Nacimiento (drama) 1979
Life is a Two-Way Street (poetry) 1980
Santa Fe Charm (drama) 1980
Sí, hay posada (drama) 1980
El camino (drama) 1981
El santero de Córdova (drama) 1981
Hecho en México (drama) 1982
El más pequeño de mis hijos (drama) 1983
Plaza (drama) 1984
The Last of the Menu Girls (novel) 1986
Novenas narrativas (drama) 1986
Face of an Angel (novel) forthcoming 1994

RAYMUND A. PAREDES

(essay date 1987)

[In the following excerpt, Paredes describes *The Last of the Menu Girls*, noting flaws in Chávez's writing, but lauding her ability to realistically depict the human condition.]

Denise Chávez's *The Last of the Menu Girls* [is] a collection of seven related stories that chronicle, in several narrative voices and dialects, the experiences of a young New Mexico woman, Rocío Esquibel. In the title story, Rocío is a college student whose first job, in a hospital taking meal orders from patients, serves as her initiation into a human drama as acted out by a variety of hospital characters. The hospital is a microcosm of the larger world Rocío barely knows and it is here that she, confronted by the essential facts of pain and death, begins to plan her life.

Like [Chicano writer] Gary Soto, Chávez is attracted to the literary potentiality of ordinary events. She writes of summers in west Texas, of childhood games ɔund a willow tree. But whereas Soto's narratives are snapshots, Chávez's are more elaborated, "continual speculations" as she calls them, "into the mysteries of womanhood." As Soto celebrates the camaraderie of boys, Chávez celebrates her memories of "all those women, all of them . . . girls, girls, the bright beautiful girls. . . ."

[Chicana writer Ana] Castillo's narrator [in *The Mixquiahuala Letters*, 1986] never quite feels at home in either American or Mexican culture but Chávez's various narrators seem to settle comfortably on any part of her fictional landscape. Chávez assumes her various identities gracefully, whether Spanish or English speaking, Mexican American or Anglo. For her, to be a Mexican American implies not a haunting sense of marginality but an ability of move easily from one cultural environment to another.

Ultimately, Chávez offers her readers an expansive view of the human community, rich and poor and Anglo and Mexican alike: Chávez's literary technique—the suddenly shifting narrators and scenes—initially creates a sense of disjointedness but eventually characters and lives intersect and sometimes blend. This technique corresponds with Chávez's view of the human condition. We seem, at first glance, to be a world of many peoples in many communities with apparently little in common. But if we look beyond superficial differences, we find ourselves joined together by the inescapable facts of life and death and the awareness that loneliness is the least tolerable of human circumstances. Chávez's final story, **"Compadre"** — from the Spanish term that identifies the Mexican principle of the extended family—depicts the longing for community elegantly and poignantly.

Chávez is a young writer and a flawed one but her sense of herself as an artist is what the best Mexican American writing is about. Drawing from the resources of two cultures and languages, rooting her fictions in folk experience and belief, and defying traditional notions of gender, Chávez fashions stories that are at once distinctive and broadly appealing. (p. 128)

Raymund A. Paredes, in a review of *The Last of the Menu Girls*, in *Rocky Mountain Review*, Vol. 41, Nos. 1–2, 1987, pp. 124–28.

DENISE CHÁVEZ

(essay date 1987)

[In the following essay, originally composed in 1987, Chávez explores the familial, religious, and ethnic influences which shaped her writing.]

My first childhood recollection is of heat. Perhaps because I was born in the middle of August in Southern New Mexico, I have always felt the burningly beautiful intensity of my dry, impenetrable land. Land not often relieved by the rain—that wet, cleansing, and blessed catharsis. I remember as a little girl sitting waist-deep in the cool,

grassy water that had been channeled from the irrigation ditch behind our house. The heat, then the rain, and the water were my first friends.

My other friend was my imagination that invented an extended family of loving, congenial spirits who wandered with me nighttimes in my dreams—into the other worlds I inhabited as vividly and completely as I did my own waking existence as middle daughter in a family of three girls, one mother, Delfina Rede Faver Chávez, a teacher divorced by my father, E. E. "Chano" Chávez, one lawyer, long gone.

These friendships with spirits were real to me, and still are. The spirits were voices of people, people I'd known and not known, feelings I felt and couldn't at that time conceive of feeling. I had no way to explain my creative world to anyone, could not even explain it to myself. All I know is that my life was rich and deep and full of wonder.

I always felt advanced for my age, somehow different. I always thought I *thought* more than people of my own age. My imagination was a friend at first, and later a lover, a guide, a spirit teacher.

I grew up in a house of women. That is why I often write about women, women who are without men. My father divorced us early on; he was a brilliant lawyer, but an alcoholic. My mother was incredibly intelligent, with a keen curiosity and love of life and people. Their minds were compatible, their spirits and hearts were not. I grew up knowing separation as a quality of life—and this sorrow went hand in hand with extensions—for despite the fact my parents were apart, both families were an everpresent part of my life. So I grew up solitary in the midst of noise, a quality I didn't know then was essential to my work as a writer.

People always ask me how and when I started writing. The answer never varies. From an early age I kept diaries, some with locks, locks I kept losing or misplacing, others with no locks. I'm sure my mother read my diary. I'm positive my younger sister did. . . . Somehow, looking back on myself in these diary entries, I am aware of myself, even then, as an observer of life. Without my diaries, I don't think I'd ever have become a writer. I now see that 1958 was a hard year, the breakup of my parent's marriage, a devastating time for all of us. I see the order I began to put into my life, the need to account for, evaluate, assess. Time was of significance, my life of value. Religion was important then as spirituality is to me now. I wanted to grow up so badly, to be an adult, to understand. My life was rich then, I see that too, with much experience that was to feed me for years to come.

I see that I was not a good student, ever. I rarely did homework. I would study in bed, usually lying down, waking up the next morning, the light on, in my clothes, very hot and clammy, dry mouthed, Mother yelling for me to wake up, to find the History or Math book mashed into my face. I would race to school, then fly back to enter the latest news into my diary. Painful accounts were entered, then torn. Did *I* tear them, and if not me, who? My mother, my sister? Or that other girl, the me who wanted to be happy? I note with interest my early stream of consciousness technique (not a technique then), my disinterest in chronological time (critics take note), I see the roots of my still poor grammar and spelling, and observe the time I begin to sign my writing—Denise. The writing had become a statement for someone other than me. What I had to say, suddenly, to me "mattered."

I see also the many gaps between entries, and that too is of significance. I see that I wrote on sad, happy, elated, and depressed days. The regular days were entryless. Writing was a gauge of my personal life. It was a record of my physical, spiritual, and emotional ups and downs. I enjoyed writing, always have, the actual physical movement of pen or pencil across a piece of paper. I enjoyed/enjoy the mind-eye-to-hand-acting-out-delineation of internalness. I practiced my handwriting constantly.

I see now that I was training myself unconsciously to "write" efficiently, quickly. A sort of "scales" for the writing self/hand. Rolling letters, moving them through space, limbering up mechanically so that later I could use my hand like a tool, limbered, unrestrained. I still find myself practicing the alphabet on random sheets of paper, testing letter style, still looking for a more effective fluid line. Much flight time on the white canvas of my constantly emerging movement toward my work as a writer. I didn't know it then. I didn't know it when I got a notebook and started copying other people's poems, songs. But this was later, because first there were books, books, and more books to read, like my favorite childhood book called *Poems of Childhood* by Eugene Field, with scary-wonderful poems like "Seein' Things."

I was a voracious reader. Anything. Everything. I went on binges. My mother would hide our books in the summertime so we would help her with the housework. My sister would lock herself in the bathroom with a book, heedless of my mother's cries. It never occurred to me to do that. Everyday my book would be missing, I'd find it, read awhile, then find it missing. It went on like that. I read fairy tales. Mysteries. Nancy Drew. You name it. Later on it was Ian Fleming's James Bond, D.H. Lawrence, Thomas Mann, Thomas Wolfe, Chekhov, Eugene O'Neill, Samuel Beckett. Now it's the *Enquirer*. I love the scandal sheets and movie mags and bowling and soap operas in the middle of the day, and so much of what everyone else considers pedestrian, sub-mainstream culture. Director John Waters calls Baltimore the Hairdo capital of the world. New Mexico/Texas was and is Character Capital of the Universe. Unbelievable stories, lives. I have always been a talker, friendly to strangers, and so invariably people tell me about their lives. It's a gift to listen to so many of these stories. The *Enquirer* has nothing

over New Mexico/Texas or the world I see every day!

But this sense of wonder came early. I began to copy my favorite passages, poems. One of the earliest was a cowboy song. I loved the rhythm. Sang it to myself. Later on I copied Gibran and the Black poets, wrote angry poems to the nuns at Madonna High School, where I attended school for four years, poems they refused to publish in the *Mantle*, the school newspaper. Once, as a joke, I invented a quote for the "Quote of the Day" for World Literature class: "Christmas is the flowing of honey on a mound of cold, white snow." Mrs. Baker, lovely, frail, intelligent, and wispy-haired, loved it. I didn't know what the hell it meant. I was playing the rebellious know-it-all, making up my own poems and quotes. I didn't know writing was becoming a facile thing. Then it was just a joke. The other day I heard a writer say, "All those lies, writing all those lies—I love it!" I didn't say anything. For me, writing is no longer a facile joke, a prank to be played on a well-meaning and unsuspecting reader, nor is it a lie. I have said to writers I have taught: Don't lie. And to myself: You may lie in other things, but never in this. It's a sacred covenant I have with myself. Honesty. And no meanness. Sometimes it's been hard. Lies always surface, don't you know?

I never thought of lying in my writing. It would have been like hiding in the bathroom to read.

I could never lie to those voices, to those spirits, to those voices I hear clearly. Voices like my mother, who always spoke in Spanish, or my father, who mostly spoke in English. Mother grew up in West Texas, moved to New Mexico as a widow and met and married my father. My father, as a child, was punished for speaking Spanish in the school yard. He decided to beat the Anglos at their game. He went and got a law degree from Georgetown during the Depression. And he became, in his mind, more Anglo than those Anglos who had punished him. I remember my mother saying, "I never think of your father as Mexican." My mother was, though, in her heart and soul. She studied in Mexico for thirteen summers, was a student of Diego Rivera. She'd been widowed for nine years, all that time wearing black, when she met my father, just returned from the Big City. Both my parents were very intelligent, perceptive, sensitive people. My mother's grandparents were the first Spanish-speaking graduates of Sul Ross State College in West Texas. All of them became teachers. Both my grandfathers were miners, all-around men, carpenters, teamsters, fixer-uppers, workers with their hands. They used their brains and their hands to support their large families. The women were independent, creative, and did most of the child-rearing, alone. The Chávez men are painters now, artists with canvas and paint, or architects, builders of some kind. The Rede Family (my mother's men) are educators, fighters for human rights, communicators, and believers in the equality of all people.

I grew up between and in the middle of two languages, Spanish and English, speaking my own as a defense. My mother always said I "made up words." Speaking Spanish to the Redes or English to the get-ahead Chávezes and Spanish to the traditional Chávezes and English to my Rede cousins was all taken in stride. We went back and forth, back and forth. My mother taught Spanish and she was always correcting, in any language. When I asked how to spell a word, she would tell me to sound out the syllables, and to find a dictionary. "There she goes again," I'd think, "teacher-ing me." I was lazy, still am. My English needs work and so does my Spanish. I can't spell, punctuate or understand the possessive. My multiplication is a mess and I can't tell time. I was absent the day we kids learned the 7, 8, and 9 multiplication tables. I have gaps—huge ones. But I've taught myself what little grammar I know, what math I know, and how to type. I can take any vacuum cleaner apart and fix it and my pen hand is very fast at the draw. I really write according to what I hear—sometimes English, sometimes Spanish, sometimes both. As a writer, I have tried to capture as clearly as I am able *voices*, intonation, inflection, mood, timbre, pitch. I write about characters, not treatises, about life, not make-believe worlds. If my characters don't work, I will go back and make them work. Without them, robust and in the living flesh, there is no story for me. Readers should stop looking for traditional stories, ABC. Writing, to me, is an assemblage of parts, a phrase here, an image there, part of a dialogue.

Suddenly it occurs to me that Jesusita Real, the not-so-mousy spinster in my play, *Novenas Narrativas*, should wear green tennis shoes, and so I add them to the script. When she finally does walk, it will be in comfort, with support from the ground up. I work with my characters in the way an actress or actor assumes a role, slowly, carefully, with attention to physical, emotional, and spiritual detail. I may read the material out loud, speak it into a tape recorder, play it back, rewrite it, and then tape it again. My years as a theater person have helped me immensely. I have acted, directed, and written for the theater. I have done props, hung lights, performed for all types of audiences, young, old, handicapped, drunk, aging, for prisoners, in Spanish and English. My work has always been for alternative groups, the people who never get much, for the poor, the forgotten. My writing as well is about the off-off Main street type of characters. My short stories are really scenes and I come from the tradition of the traveling *cuentista*. I believe stories should captivate, delight, move, inspire, and be downright funny, in a way. The "in a way" is what I try to do with all my heart. But always, I go back to the characters and their voices. I see them: flat feet, lagañas, lonjas, lumps, spider veins, and all. From the feet up and back down and around the other side. And I love them. Dearly. But I don't excuse them nor will I lie for them.

I write for you. And me. And Jesusita with the green tennies, spinster owner of Rael's Tiendita de Abarrotes, active member of the Third Order of St. Francis, and for

An excerpt from *The Last of the Menu Girls*

In the hazy half-sleep of my daily nap, the plaster walls revealed a new face. Behind all the work of growing up, I caught a glimpse of someone strong, full of great beauty, powerful, clear words and acts. The woman's white face was reflected in the fierce, mid-day sun, the bright intensity of loving eyes. Who was that woman?

Myself.

I thought about *loving* women. Their beauty and their doubts, their sure sweet clarity. Their unfathomable depths, their flesh and souls aligned in mystery.

I got up, looked in the mirror and thought of Ronelia, my older sister, who was always the older woman to me. It was she whom I monitored last. It was she whose life I inspected, absorbed into my own.

It was my sister's pores, her postures that were my teachers, her flesh, with and without clothes, that was my awakening, and her face that was the mirror image of my growing older. To see her, was to see my mother and my grandmother, and now myself.

I recalled Ronelia standing with her back to me, in underwear. How I marvelled at her flesh, her scars. How helpless she was, how dear! It was she who grabbed me when I was fearful that I would never be able to choose, to make up my mind. One time she and another young married comered me, picked over me, my skin. Her friend hissed at me to tow the womanly line. "For godsakes, Rocío, stand up straight, and do *something* about your hair!" I felt hopelessly doomed to vagueness. Everything seemed undefined, my hair, my skin, my teeth, my soul. I'm incapable of making decisions, Ronelia, I thought. Leave me alone. Why are you attacking me? Go on with your babies and your fetid errands! But instead of crying out, I sat forward, bit my lip, and allowed these two young matrons to attempt a transformation of me, an indecisive girl with bumpy skin.

The charting of my sister's body was of the greatest interest to me. I saw her large, brown eyes, her sensual lips (always too big for her) soften and swell into dark beauty. At the same time, I checked myself, measuring *my* attractiveness and weighing it against my other models: Eloisa, Diana and Josie. Looking in the mirror, I saw my root beer eyes (my sister's phrase) in front of me monitoring flesh and its continuance.

I never spoke of growing old, or seeing others grow older with any sense of peace. It was a subject that was taboo, a topic like Death.

I knew that we grew older, but how could I imagine that all the bright young girls, the Jennies and the Mary Lous, the Eloisas and Dianas and the Josies, with their solid B-cups, their tangle of lovers, their popularity and their sureness, would one day become as passing shadows on the white canvases of late afternoon dreams?

The turning, plaster waves revealed my sisters, my mother, my cousins, my friends, their nude forms, half dressed, hanging out, lumpish, lovely, unaware of self, in rest rooms, in the dressing rooms, in the many stalls and the theatres of this life. I was the monitor of women's going forth. Behind the mirror, eyes half closed, I saw myself, the cloud princess.

I addressed my body, the faint incandescent loveliness of its earliest but not dearest blooming. Could I imagine the me of myself at age twenty-one and thirty-one and so on . . .

I turned the mirror to the light. The loveliness of women sprang from depthless recesses; I thought, it was a chord, a reverberation, the echo of a sound, a feeling, a twinge, and then an ache . . .

Always there is the echo of the young girl in the oldest of women, in small wrists encased in bulky flesh, in the brightest of eyes surrounded by wrinkles. There is beauty in hands tumultuous with veins, in my grandmother's flesh that I touched as a child, flesh that did not fall, but persisted in its patterning. Her skin was oiled old cloth, with twists and folds and dark blue waves of veins on a cracked sea of tired flesh. On my dream canvas my grandmother pats her hands and says, "Someday, someday, Rocío, you'll get this way."

Denise Chávez, in her *The Last of the Menu Girls*, Arte Público Press, 1986.

the people: Anglo, Hispanic, Black, you name it: anybody out there who doesn't know Jesusita is alive, inside her little store, swatting flies, and wondering aloud about Prudencio Sifuentes, the only man who asked her to marry him.

I write for the viejitas at the Save-And-Gain in black scarves, for the tall blond man testing tomatoes, for the Vietnamese cashier, and for the hot dog man outside the electric door. For me, it is a joy to carry my bag full of stories.

Naturally I write about what I know, who I am. New Mexico. Texas. Chicanismo. Latinismo. Americanismo. Womanismo. Mujerotismo. Peopleismo. Worldismo. Peaceismo. Loveismo.

Writing has been my heat, my accounting, my trying to understand; and rain has been my prayer for peace, for love, and mercy. August in Southern New Mexico is very hot, for many, unbearable. It has been my blessing in this life of mine to share that heat. And to remember the rain. (pp. 29–32)

Denise Chávez, "Heat and Rain (testimonio)," in *Breaking Boundaries: Latina Writing and Critical Readings*, edited by Asunción Horno-Delgado and others, Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1989, pp. 27–32.

From *Masterpieces of Latino Literature.* **Frank Magill, ed.**
New York: Harper Collins 1996.

THE STORIES OF DENISE CHÁVEZ

Author: Denise Chávez (1948-)
Type of work: Short stories
Principal published work: *The Last of the Menu Girls*

Denise Chávez is a public artist, devoted to creating works of fiction, drama, and poetry that both engage with and represent the Chicano/Chicana culture from which her writing stems. Chávez is best known for her short-story cycle *The Last of the Menu Girls* (1986), the title story of which won the Puerto del Sol fiction award for 1985, but she has always defined herself as a community artist, performing her plays and reading her poems in prisons and senior centers as well as directing writing workshops for children and adults. As Chávez commented, "It's not enough to write something. . . . The important thing is being able to communicate, making the connection between the writer and the audience." The rich, evocative style of Chávez's writing connects her to her community and to her role as a communal and public artist.

The Last of the Menu Girls connects writer and audience through the overlapping of different kinds of writing, through a style at once both engagingly simple and multifaceted, and through careful evocations of the New Mexico and Texas landscapes her characters inhabit. The collection is loosely bound by the narrator, Rocío Esquibel. The stories in *The Last of the Menu Girls* depict Rocío's movement toward maturity and wisdom, her search for a female role model, and her memories of her family, hometown, and community. Although Chávez's collection does not ignore the poverty, pain, and alienation of the world she describes, the overall tone of *The Last of the Menu Girls* is affirmative, for Chávez's characters find hope in the events of everyday life. In "Space Is a Solid," for example, Rocío prevents her nervous breakdown through the simple action of making tacos. The final story in the collection, "Compadre," tells a bleak history of families growing apart yet ends with a ritual, that of buying and eating tamales, that reestablishes kinship.

Moving back and forth in time and in and out of the lives and minds of various characters, *The Last of the Menu Girls* is a stylistically complex work reflecting Chávez's long training in drama and poetry. Much like a series of dramatic monologues, the collection arranges its vignettes thematically but not chronologically. Thus the collection begins when Rocío is seventeen, but the second story tells of Rocío's childhood, and the third tells of her adolescence. Rocío's maturation is presented imagistically and dramatically, rather than as a series of linear events. Stylistically, the collection also provides a collage of techniques, interspersing traditional narratives with, for example, a menu from a hospital and a young girl's journal entries, and moving back and forth between a lyrical, highly metaphorical and poetic style and more direct, straightforward language meant to capture the day-to-day musings of the people Chávez describes.

The title story, "The Last of the Menu Girls," begins in an unusual way, listing the first four lines of Rocío's employment application for her job at Altavista Memorial Hospital. It quickly moves to Rocío's thoughts on her only other experience with the sick and dying, the death of her great-aunt Eutilia. Chávez's stories often do not have traditional plots. In this first narrative, Rocío's application for employment is interspersed with the "events" of Rocío's summer employment as a menu girl (someone who writes down patients' food preferences). Rocío is seventeen, preparing to go to college, and she has difficulty seeing what this desolate world of pain and suffering has to do with her own youthful sense of joy and potentiality. Through her contact with those who are ill, Rocío learns much about herself and her world.

Rocío discovers, for example, that the pain she sees in the hospital is everywhere in the outside

world, and even everywhere in her own life. She also learns that life and death are interconnected, influencing and shading into each other. Rocío imagines, for example, dancing a dance of life that connects her youthful and sexual body with the decaying and decrepit body of her great-aunt. Chávez's rich and powerful style graphically captures both the beauty and the pain of such moments of growth and connection: "I danced around Eutilia's bed. I hugged the screen door, my breasts indented in the meshed wire. In the darkness Eutilia moaned, my body wet, her body dry. Steamy we were, and full of prayers. Could I have absolved your dying by my life? Could I have lessened your agony with my spirit-filled dance in the deep darkness?" Through her dance, Rocío comes to understand that her life and her great-aunt's are interconnected, and later she realizes that although dead physically, Eutilia lives on as a part of her consciousness.

Throughout the summer, Rocío has such moments of epiphany, moments that help her to understand pain, suffering, and death. Rocío also has moments of growth and self-realization, moments in which she begins to see some of the outlines of the self she wishes to become. Rocío makes a leap into herself and discovers that she does not want to spend the rest of her life serving people and being the Florence Nightingale of Altavista Memorial Hospital. Rocío rebels against traditional roles for women yet can formulate no alternatives. Perhaps this is why Rocío describes herself as continually angry.

The second story in the collection, "Willow Game," delves into an early stage of Rocío's childhood, perhaps to understand the roots of her teenage dissatisfaction. The story describes in loving detail three trees that hold a tremendous meaning for Rocío and the other neighborhood children. One tree, a willow, is destroyed by a disturbed youth who must later be institutionalized. The willow's destruction teaches the children important lessons about pain and loss, lessons that help the children mature. Looking back on these memories, Rocío realizes that through them she came to understand the way time and memory can both wound and heal. Through vivid imagery, Chávez evokes the texture of memory, the searing pain of loss, and the healing balm of time. "Time, like trees, withstands the winters, bursts forth new leaves from the dried old sorrows—who knows when and why—and shelters us with the shade of later compassions, loves. . . ."

Chávez's themes of time, memory, and feminine growth are articulated most clearly in "Shooting Stars," which describes Rocío's search for a role model through her friendships with a series of women. Rocío dreams of a beautiful and powerful female face, a face full of clear words and acts, and awakens to find that this face is her own. Finally she models herself on herself, rejecting the versions of femininity offered to her by other women. Rocío admires the women she sees and knows, women whose youth and beauty are destroyed by difficult marriages, multiple pregnancies, and poverty. Although Rocío chooses not to become like these women, she still loves them, cherishes them, and memorializes them in her writing.

The next two stories in *The Last of the Menu Girls*, "Evening in Paris" and "The Closet," continue to examine Rocío's maturation and her search for a feminine role model, but they focus more specifically on Rocío's relationship with her mother. In the first of these stories, a young Rocío buys her mother, Nieves, a Christmas gift of cologne and bath water. Rocío's mother and father are separated, and Rocío hopes the perfume will somehow compensate for her father's absence. Rocío's mother does not attach the same importance to the perfume; in fact, she never uses it. Rocío's dreams for her mother and for herself do not materialize, and she is left believing that she lacks the right words and the right gifts to compensate her mother for the emptiness that surrounds them, the emptiness that no bottle of cologne can ever fill.

In "The Closet," Chávez again examines the ways women attempt to fill the emptiness of their lives. In this story, the closets in Rocío's house become emblems and metaphors for the lives of the Esquibel women. At times, the closets represent the way women's dreams can be crushed by a

brutal world. Nieves' closet, for example, holds the shoes of a woman with furious bitter hopes, the shoes of a woman who has waited all her life for better things to come. The closets also take on more positive symbolism, becoming the realm of dreams, fantasy, religious ecstasy, and imagination. Rocío imagines that she travels through the hall closet to a world that is spacious, blue, and light. She exercises her imagination to create and define this alternative world, a space that is her own and does not confine her. Imagistically, she rejects the confined and limited closets of her mother and her older sister Ronelia (married and pregnant at the age of eighteen), seeking instead to define her own closet, her own psyche, her own model of self. Rocío tells her younger sister Mercy that everyone has their own rooms, their own house; in effect, Rocío is teaching Mercy that she need not be defined and limited by the rooms, the closets, the houses—the identities—given to her by the external world.

In "The Closet," space itself is embodied, taking on physical and metaphorical meanings. The closets of the house become characters, identities, personas that the women inhabit or choose not to inhabit. Rocío describes a house of women, a house in which women are defined and sometimes delimited by the spaces they inhabit. Space thus becomes a metaphor for self-definition, maturation, and the actual or symbolic possibilities of an individual's life. In the next story, space is again a metaphor for individual potentiality. "Space Is a Solid" is one of Chávez's most interesting and powerful stories. It uses "crossover" narration, telling the story from multiple points of view, but mainly switching between the perspectives of Kari Lee, a young schoolgirl, and Rocío Esquibel, now a struggling graduate student teaching drama appreciation classes. The story chronicles the growth of Rocío and Kari Lee's friendship, as well as Rocío's own attempt to find a space (again, an identity) that is her own.

Kari Lee and Rocío, although at different stages of their lives, are on parallel voyages of self-discovery. Kari Lee comes from a dysfunctional family, and it is only in Rocío's classes that she begins to explore who she is and what she wants. Rocío, too, is seeking a safe space in which to explore her psyche. When the story begins, she literally lacks any space of her own and is living in her boyfriend Loudon's spaceship-shaped room. Rocío moves in and out of a series of apartments, and as she does so her psyche splinters and fragments, leaving her on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Rocío does finally take control of her life, find a space of her own, and recover her equilibrium.

Throughout the story, various spaces are marked with different and often distinctly feminine images of physical and mental trauma. Kari Lee's home, for example, is dominated by her bitter and paranoid mother, Nita. Nita sees her radical mastectomy as a direct punishment from God, a direct punishment that she feels in her "female flesh." Rocío's pregnant and schizophrenic cat dominates and destroys Rocío's first apartment. Even Rocío's classroom is marked by disease. Kari Lee is often distressed by the presence of Arlin Threadgill, a boy who has no arms because his mother took thalidomide during her pregnancy. In the end, however, Kari Lee is able to stop seeing Arlin as a "cripple" and begin treating him as an individual, and Rocío is able to heal herself and her psyche. The images of disease and death recede as both Kari Lee and Rocío find spaces in which they can be whole and healed.

In "Compadre," the final story in *The Last of the Menu Girls*, Rocío moves closer to self-definition and integration, deciding to become a writer and chronicle the lives of her family and friends. This story also examines the relationship between Rocío's mother, Nieves, and her compadre, Regino Suárez. *Compadrazgo* is not a familial relationship but a relationship structured around affiliation. Regino, the neighborhood handyman, and Nieves have a protective and supportive relationship that spans their lives and even outlasts the ties between husband and wife, parents and children. More diffuse than Chavez's other stories, "Compadre" has themes that are more broad and universal, offering a fitting conclusion to the collection as a whole. Again, Rocío's maturation is an important focus,

yet Chávez places this theme in the larger context of difficult and often fragmented familial relationships. Regino Suárez's family abandons him, and Rocío's mother lives in the Southwest while her two daughters live in the North. The story is marked by alienation and loneliness but also by the enduring bonds of *compadrazgo*.

Stylistically and imagistically, the story is one of Chávez's most complex. Images of the Southwest landscape abound, but in this piece the landscape is presented as dry and desiccated, ancient like the people who inhabit it. The cultural world of this landscape is evoked through a blending of Spanish and English prose and by an effortless movement between these two languages. As in "Space Is a Solid," Chávez also moves in and out of different characters' minds, telling the story from the points of view of Rocío, Nieves, Regino, and other characters. The story presents a rich mixture of imagery and language, functioning as a strong encapsulation of Chávez's main themes of maturation, the search for feminine role models, the meaning of time and memory, and the vividness of Rocío's spatial and cultural worlds.

Chávez's later stories continued to explore the vivid worlds and themes of her earlier fiction. "The McCoy Hotel" (1990) returns to themes articulated in *The Last of the Menu Girls*: time, memory, and growth—especially female maturation. Other works by Chávez, however, explore new areas of perception and characterization. "Chata" (1992), for example, is a powerful and moving story that gives voice and dignity to those who perform "menial" labor, like the title character a cleaning woman. "The King and Queen of Comezón" (1988) is a descriptive excerpt that takes as its focus a male character, Arnuflo Olivárez. "Grand Slam" (1987), a powerful dramatic monologue, describes a middle-aged woman's attempts to come to terms with a faded romance from her past and with her own sense of loss and mortality. Stories such as these show that Chávez can extend her strongly evocative style and her optimistic and humorous tone in new directions. The beauty and strength of *The Last of the Menu Girls* will be retained as Chávez moves into new fictional spaces, making these spaces her own.

CHAVEZ, Denise (1948–)

With the publication of *The Last of the Menu Girls*, Denise Chavez joins the ranks of writers who are rounding out the parameters of Chicano literature. The feminine voice adds a new vision and dimension to the literature of this community. Clearly, a new vanguard is here, and its name is woman.

In this collection, the reader will savor the poignant experiences and dreams of Rocio, a young girl whose rites of passage into womanhood give unity to the collage of stories. At the beginning of the novel Rocio cries out against the traditional serving roles which society has prescribed for women, and she opts for the life of the artist. By the novel's end she has found her calling, and that is to give meaning to the emotionally turbulent lives of the people she has known. It is Rocio's mother who wisely counsels and dares her daughter to write the story of their lives.

Denise's novel reflects her particular sense of place, revealing the depths of the world of women and the flavor of southern New Mexico. The central metaphor of the novel is the home. The family, the known neighborhood and the role of women in this context are Denise's concern as a writer. Her eye for detail is sharp; the interior monologues of her characters are revealing; and Denise's long training as a dramatist serves her well in creating intriguing plot and dialogue. In short, all the strengths of a writer are here.

Rocio's yearning is to write a great novel from the lives of those people she knows best. It is the same dream Denise Chavez has followed, challenging us to let go of familiar patterns and to enter the rich and imaginative world which she portrays with such feeling and insight.

> Rudolfo A. Anaya. In the *The Last of the Menu Girls*, by Denise Chavez (Arte Publico Press, 1986), p. ix.

At this time, Chavez must be considered *the* chicana play-wright from New Mexico. Consistently active in the theater since the early seventies, she has written more plays and had more plays produced than any other Hispanic playwright. Her plays reflect different segments of New Mexican society; her characters talk and act like people familiar to all Hispanic New Mexicans. She celebrates the traditions and customs of Hispanic New Mexico. The *Sabor nuevomexicano* serves to root the plays in time and place. Yet there is a universal quality which makes these plays produceable outside of New Mexico. *Plaza* was a success at the Edinburgh Festival in Scotland). The inner conflicts of the characters are common to all humanity; so are their triumphs and defeats. Chavez' characters are masterful conceptions. They live on after the curtain has come down. For this reason, above all, Chavez is on her way to becoming an outstanding and original playwright. She is someone whose works are worth seeing and therefore deserves more recognition and support.

> Martha E. Heard. *The Americas Review*. Summer 1988, pp. 83–91.

In the introduction to Denise Chávez's *The Last of the Menu Girls* (1986), novelist Rudolfo Anaya states: "With the publication of *The Last of the Menu Girls*, Denise Chávez joins the ranks of writers who are rounding out the parameters of Chicano literature. The feminine voice adds a new vision and dimension to the literature of this community. Clearly, a new vanguard is here, and its name is woman." With these words Anaya alludes to the fact that Chicano literature written in the 1960s and 1970s, a literature that largely promoted the political agenda and ideals of a sociopolitical movement, was written primarily by men and manifested a male world view. This characteristic of the early stages of Chicano literature was to change drastically in the 1980s as the voices of Chicanas began to be heard and heeded as part of the corpus of Chicano literature. Denise Chávez's is one of the strongest female voices to speak with vigor and authority about the lives of Hispanic women, thereby contributing the missing brush strokes in the collective literary portrait of the Mexican American community. Of special importance is the fact that she writes about a region of the United States, Southern New Mexico, that has been virtually ignored at the national level. Its proximity to the Mexican–United States border makes this an area where two cultures meet, sometimes in violent confrontation but more often in an interdependent relationship. The use of Spanish in her English text brings to readers of American literature an acute reminder that ours is a nation comprised of racial, ethnic and linguistic diversity. . . .

Chávez's theater focuses on the quotidian aspects of life in small New Mexico towns. She blends Hispanic cultural imagery and folk traditions with motifs from mainstream popular culture to show the New Mexican Hispanic community struggling to maintain its ethnic identity vis-a-vis the swift and powerful currents of the dominant culture. But even as Hispanics resist the temptation, a process of cultural hybridization is apparent in Chávez's work. A sharp observing eye and a keen ear for colloquial speech allow Chávez to capture the richness that results from the clash and mingling of cultures that occur in the border contact zone where her stories and dramas unfold. While her dramatic themes are broad and encompass many aspects of Chicano culture, Chávez privileges female characters in her dramatic work, particularly in pieces such as *Novena Narratives y Ofrendas Nuevomexicanas* and *Hecho en México*. In this sense, her plays are the literary antecedents to her better-known work, *The Last of the Menu Girls*. . . .

Chávez's style, in both her drama and her narrative, is characterized by a persistent movement from exterior to interior reality. The poetic description of landscapes, for example, lead her to interior spaces where critical self-examination takes place. She explores the physical attributes of her characters as a means of revealing their psychological profiles. The enumeration and cataloging of cultural artifacts can turn abruptly to musings of a spiritual nature. Humor is also a mark of Chávez's work. The latter is most often achieved through the blending of Spanish and English and through the use of colloquial folk expressions intended as satirical barbs.

Memory is an important ingredient in Chávez's writing. In *The Last of the Menu Girls*, what Rocío Esquivel remembers most vividly from her past are family, place, and the many women who had an impact on her life. She recalls transcultural and cross-class relationships but she focuses most sharply on the intimate relationships between sisters and between mothers and daughters. The absence of the divorced father calls attention to the aching desire to fill the gap that he leaves in the family. But the presence of a bountiful and take-control mother, of aunts and Mexican maids, creates security for the growing daughters. This work fits well within the tradition of coming-of-age fiction in America. In keeping with this tradition, the text takes the reader on a journey to the narrator-protagonist's past to reveal gradually the discovery of selfhood. Those moments, events, places, objects and persons that

imprinted themselves upon the narrator's psyche become significant in the present not only through the act of remembering but, more important, through the act in inscription. As is commonly the case with coming-of-age narrative, the final pages reveal the remembering self as writing self as well. It is thus at the crossroads of memory and inscription that the possibility of self-discovery and self-construction lies.

A sense of place is central to all of Chávez's work, and in *The Last of the Menu Girls* it is the crucial organizing metaphor. In the broader geophysical sense, the space that Rocío remembers is the desert of Southwestern New Mexico, or what she calls "the arid tension of the desert's balance." The balance brings spiritual solace to Rocío Esquivel; the arid tension stirs desire. Female desire thus becomes another theme that Chávez explores as an important facet of the young girl's journey to maturation. The neighborhood is a special place where children begin to learn the intricacies of social interaction. As Rocío recalls the ditch bank of her neighborhood and the special trees of her yard, she is able to reconstruct those first social encounters that structured the early configuration of her gendered self. And finally, Chávez's sense of place can be private. Rocío Esquivel spends hours in her mother's closet, scrutinizing family photos, forgotten Christmas gifts, old wedding dresses, bottles of perfume as she searches for clues to the meaning of womanhood. The home, with all its secret niches, thus becomes a key to the unfolding of the self within the circle of family.

While it is her fiction that has brought Chávez national recognition, there is no doubt that she continues to see theater as an essential part of her life. The recent tour in the United States of her one-woman performance piece, *Women in This State of Grace,* is a dramatization of scenes from her narrative works. In this performance, the talents of writer and actor blend as the characters come alive to share with the viewers their profoundly human qualities, their strong belief in the primacy of human relationships— especially relationships between women—and their ability to survive social pressures with dignity.

Erlinda Gonzales-Berry. In *Reference Guide to American Literature, 3rd edition,* ed. Jim Kamp (St. James Press, 1994.)

In *Face of an Angel*, Soveida Dosamantes, the narrator and protagonist, unravels the lives of her family, her coworkers, her husbands, and her lovers. Agua Oscura (Dark Water), New Mexico, is one of those small towns where everyone knows everybody's ancestry, as well as their darkest secrets. "What stories I know about these people I will share with you. The stories begin with the men and always end with the women; that's the way it is in our family." Soveida views her world with a woman's eye, and the objectivity of a goddess. Rich in family gossip, the book is engrossing, amusing, and definitely one to be savored. The author's mordant wit is pervasive, the language is pithy, blunt, and explicit.

The novel's many characters are deeply flawed human beings who enmesh the reader in their complex lives. Soveida's Grandmother Lupita and her lifelong maid, Oralia, are the strong influences in this young woman's life. Her mother, Dolores, a seemingly weak woman, has been beaten down by Trancha, her strange and domineering mother.

Her Grandmother Trancha, until the day she died, remained a bitter woman whose words were "hard as a fist and painful as flesh doubled over." It was her Grandmother Lupita that Soveida called Mamá. Her mother was always Dolores or Dolly. Her father, whom she called by his first name, Luardo, had shown much promise: "If it hadn't been for his two loves—drinking and screwing—Luardo Dosamantes would probably have been a great man, maybe even governor of New Mexico." Soveida falls in love with good-looking men whom she marries. The first marriage ends in divorce; the second leaves her a widow. She then gets pregnant by her lover's brother.

For more than 25 years, Soveida works at El Farol Mexican Restaurant in Agua Oscura. The intimate details of the restaurant's life are related with humor and irony. The staff—chef Eloisa, "the Queen of Mexican food in Agua Oscura"; Larry Larragoite, the hard-working, anxiety-ridden owner of El Farol; Petra, the old waitress who could not add; and an odd assortment of busboys, salad chefs, and waitresses—delight the reader with their daily affairs. The funniest restaurant episode concerns the "the night of the cucas," when Chuy, the elderly custodian, decides to spray for roaches in the middle of the day rather than after the late evening closing: "Clumps of stunned and writhing roaches lay on the floor, or leapt from the moist walls, throwing their agitated bodies wherever they could. Others bounded past, feverishly driven, and under siege."

Soveida's legacy to her profession is *The Book of Service: A Handbook for Servers*, a 14-chapter handbook for waitresses. The theme of service is pervasive in the lives of Soveida and her female relatives, and is revisited throughout the novel through excerpts from Soveida's handbook. In the first chapter of her handbook, Soveida writes: "As a child, I was imbued with the idea that the purpose of life was service. Service to God. Country. Men. Not necessarily in that order, but lumped together like that. For God is a family man. . . . Life was, and is, service, no matter what our station in it."

The densely packed pages of this long novel made me laugh and nod in agreement. It left me wanting to read it again to catch the nuances I might have missed. Chavez has become a fine writer and a great storyteller. With *Face of an Angel*, her second book, her name can be added to the growing list of Chicana authors making their mark in contemporary American fiction.

Irene Campos Carr. *Belles Lettres*. Spring 1995, pp. 35.

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In 1986 she published *The Last of the Menu Girls* with Arte Público Press, then a small Chicano press which published many new writers. The structure of *The Last of the Menu Girls* puzzled many readers because they could not determine if it was a novel or a series of short stories. Many other Chicano and Chicana writers were playing with similar structures, utilizing short stories and linking them to a longer narrative form, writing novellas and mixing poetry, essays, and narrative: for example, Sandra Cisneros in *The House on Mango Street* (1984), Margarita Cota-Cárdenas in *Puppet* (1985), and Gloria Anzaldúa in *Borderlands/La frontera: La nueva mestiza* (1987). Renato Rosaldo has commented that, following Mary Louise Pratt's analysis of the short story, this particular short story cycle allows for marginalized groups to experiment and for the development of "alternative visions." He finds that Chávez's experimentation allows her to "cross over" into different voices, narrators, and ancestry (*Criticism in the Borderlands*, p. 89). Alvina Quintana, in her book *Home Girls*, contends that the important contribution that Chávez makes to literature in this text is not just that she "reconfigures Chicana silence and invisibility into recognition and empowerment" but also that she emphasizes "domestic orality," thus showing that even if women's voices are not inscribed into print writing this does not mean that they do not have ideas or creativity, or that they are silent.

At first glance, Chávez's *Last of the Menu Girls* appears to be a series of short stories, each one a self-contained narrative or what she calls "scenes." However, the central protagonist is Rocío Esquivel, a young woman whose growing-up story this is. In the first story, "The Last of the Menu Girls," we meet Rocío as an aide at Altavista Memorial Hospital. Although she dislikes hospitals, while working the lives of the patients she serves to detail their lives. Even as she fills out an employment form, her mind jumps back and forth to her family and community. Her employment at the hospital begins as a job, but when she leaves at the end of the summer to enter college, it has become a career. Her experiences with people who are healed, rude and indifferent and needy affected her and made her a different person. The needs of people have sucked her in but she can no longer remain indifferent to them. At work she reads patients' charts and studies medical book so she can better understand their illnesses.

The stories continue; in "Willow," Rocío reminisces about her neighborhood as she was growing up, but particularly about her neighbors Ricky and Randy, two boys who, it turns out, severe physiological problems. Ricky takes his anger out on a willow tree. Those trees that in childhood are magical landmarks. He cuts off the branches of the tree until it dies. In a moment of understanding young Rocío realizes that the pain Ricky felt around was vented on the tree. The tree will never really be replanted.

"Shooting Stars," the third story, recounts details her visits as a child and the visits to her family in Texas. She looks to the different women of her family and what she meets there for a role model, but does not fit what she is looking for. Perhaps, as Eysturoy suggests, what is important is the authenticity of a self-defined identity. The affirmation of selfhood Rocío is searching for (p. 122). Thus she will have to find her voice deep within herself, choose her own path and fulfill her own dreams.

In the fourth story, "Evening in Paris," Rocío examines the problematic relationship she has with her mother. Anxious to please her, she buys a bottle of *Evening in Paris* perfume, a special gift for her mother. On Christmas Day, explored in detail by Chávez, her mother opens the gift, unimpressed. As Rocío explains, hurt by her mother's indifference: "Later it seemed to me that perhaps Mother had thought the *Evening in Paris* had been given to her by one of her students" (p. 74). This indifference is one of the indications that there is something missing in Rocío's life. She says: "As usual, I felt unfulfilled, empty, without the right words, gifts, feelings for those whose lives crowded around me and who called themselves my family " (pp. 74–75).

In "The Closet," the fifth story, Chávez explores the secret heart of the house, the different centers where lurks all that which is not brought out to life. The closets have special meaning for Rocío because she was actually born in one of them, "a closet full of shoes, old clothes" (p. 84). Her mother's closets, where old photographs of her mother's first husband, home movies, and other memories were stored, beckon to Rocío as she tries to understand her mother's dreams and desires. But in the house are also the medicine closet, Rocío's closet, the hall closet, her older sister's closet, and the living room closet. Each closet holds its memories and secrets, inscribed in the material physicality of objects—an umbrella, a prom dress, shoes—and the smells associated with them.

Because she wants to discover and understand the mysteries that closets hold, she also has the necessity of creating closets of her own. And so as a child she imagines the gray closet and the blue closet. These are not stagnant, imaginary spaces but ones that change as the child has need for change. They represent the hopeful and the sad spaces of a child's life. As she tries to explain these spaces to her younger sister, Mercy, her sister asks, "Rocío, Rocío, if that's *your* room, *what's mine?*" Rocío answers, "I don't know, Mercy, everybody has their *own* rooms, their *own* house" (p. 93).

The next story, "Space Is a Solid," details the most difficult episode in Rocío's life as she leaves her community and family and becomes a teacher. She is alienated from family and friends, even her name is shortened to Miss E. This story is different from the other narratives in the book as different voices carry the narration: Kari Lee (a little girl in Rocío's drama class), Rocío herself, the Wembleys (Kari Lee's parents), Nita (Kari Lee's mother), and Loundon (Rocío's friend). Seen from different perspectives, we note Rocío's struggles in a world where she is not nourished or supported. She is alienated from the world surrounding her and especially from herself. In this environment she becomes ill, suffering from what one person calls "a nervous breakdown." Clearly she is depressed, as she is tired all the time. Yet even in this sad situation, she has one friend, her little student Kari Lee.

In the final story, "Compadre," Rocío has returned home and is known as a writer. Yet the story describes her childhood and her mother's relationship to Regino Suárez, a man who works for her and who is her *compadre*; that is, she is the *madrina* or godmother to one of Regino's daughters. Being a *compadre* or *comadre* in Mexicano culture involves giving and receiving mutual help and sustenance. It carries obligations that are strong and profound. For example, Regino comes whenever Nieves, Rocío's mother, needs him for anything, but it is also Nieves's obligation to help out her *compadre* when he needs help. Regino is not necessarily the most gifted worker; nevertheless, Nieves supports him and pays him for work, even if it is not well done. As she explains to Rocío, "I'm bound by the higher laws of compadrazgo, having to do with the spiritual well-being and development of one of God's creatures" (p. 168). Nieves is also a bit bound by self-interest. Having no husband to do the work of maintaining her property, it helps that her *compadre* is a handyman and can fix the things around the house.

Throughout the narrative, Rocío resists getting close to Regino and his family, yet we see

the passing of his life as he involves himself with another woman (known in Rocío's house as "La Puta," the prostitute), returns to his wife, has his wife leave to live with one of their children in Montana, and is left to live on his own. At the end of the story, Rocío sits down for the first time to eat with Regino, a symbolic act that emphasizes her growing up, her coming into her own self, and her understanding and compassion for her family and those that live around them. It is in this final paragraph that we learn she has become a writer, that she understands who she is and where she comes from. She has become complete, filled with family and the nourishment of tamales.

As a child, all Rocío wanted was a room of her own, a place to read and to think, but family and community life intruded on her space constantly. She is, as various critics have pointed out, "unformed," in an amorphous state of being. She receives things, ideas, sensations. But throughout the narrative, Chávez feels that Rocío moves "from self-absorption and selfishness toward a more caring stance" (Mehaffy and Keating, *Aztlán,* p. 144). At the end of *The Last of the Menu Girls,* Rocío is a writer, nourished by her mother, who tells her: "I say, Rocío, just write about this little street of ours, it's only one block long, but there's so many stories. Too many stories!" (p. 190). Later her mother decides that it would be enough to write only about the house. "Why not just write about 325? That's our house! Write about 325 and that will take the rest of your life. Believe me, Rocío, *at least* the rest of your life." The many houses we inhabit, both from the outside and from interior spaces like the closets, are truly the subjects of this narrative.

As Rudolfo Anaya says in his introduction to the book:

> Denise's novel reflects her particular sense of place, revealing the depths of the world of women and the flavor of southern New Mexico. The central metaphor of the novel is the home. The family, the known neighborhood and the role of women in this context are Denise's concern as a writer. Her eye for detail is sharp; the interior monologues of her characters are revealing; and Denise's long training as a dramatist serves her well in creating intriguing plot and dialogue. In short, all the strengths of a writer are here.

Mehaffy and Keating agree, writing that the frameworks of her narratives are based on dramatic performance (anyone who has heard Chávez read from her work would agree with this); thus there are many forms of dialogue between characters as well as chapters and sections which "require a different and shifting relation between a reader and the text" (*Aztlán,* p. 128).

In her chapter on this novel, "The Last of the Menu Girls: Learning from the Women," Eysturoy writes that the border, bicultural and bilingual, is the setting for Rocío to examine her "relationship to her environment, look for role models, and examine the lives of the women around her in search of her own identity, her own self" (p. 113). Eysturoy argues in her book, *Daughters of Self-Creation,* that Chicana writers have had to create their own growing-up stories and re-create the genre because they have no role models for the genre as their lives are outside the general pattern of the bildungsroman, or growing-up story. She believes that Chicana writers like Chávez, Sandra Cisneros, Isabella Ríos, and Estela Portillo Trambley have had to look to themselves and to other Chicana writers for a way to establish an authentic Chicana sense of self and self-identity for their characters. Of particular interest in Eysturoy's analysis of *The Last of the Menu Girls* is her description of the meaning of the closets in Rocío's home. We have already seen how the house is a central metaphor in this narrative, and how Rocío begins her examination of self with her job outside the home at the hospital. Eysturoy demonstrates that for Rocío, as she tries to understand her mother and her mother's dreams and desires, the closets of her home "correspond

to the interior, secret life of her mother that forms part of Rocío's memories and shapes her own concept of self" (pp. 115–116). It is in these closets that Rocío pieces together her mother's life. However, at the same time that she needs to connect with her mother, it is also necessary that she distance herself from her mother if she is to grow into her own person. As a child she created her own imaginary closets as a private space for herself, but as a growing young woman she needs to create her own house and to separate herself from her mother's house.

AnaLouise Keating, in "Towards a New Politics of Representation?" finds *The Last of the Menu Girls* an elusive text because of its fragmented scenes, its lack of resolution for Rocío's desires and longings, and her inability to articulate her experiences. Keating finds the solution to the critic's dilemma by emphasizing that it is precisely the loss and absences in Rocío's desires that she needs to accept. Keating sees this as a representation of the internal split, or divided self, that many Chicanas experience. Moreover, this absence becomes a "form of connection" (*We Who Love to Be Astonished*, p. 80) among Chicanas/Latinas as a whole as they have had the same experiences.

The Last of the Menu Girls is a first novel whose style and experimentation will be developed more fully in later novels. Here in the early stages we see techniques that Chávez utilizes more fully later on. Among these are her characterization of the chaos and instability—yet also nobility—in the lives of poor people; the interior monologues of characters who are trying to find solutions to their problem; the complex interrelationships among family members; and the love/hate aspects of adolescents toward their parents and their family. And finally we experience the acceptance of the complexity (both absence and loss as well as fulfillment) of human lives. Missing in this particular text are the humor and terrific exaggeration that will become a staple of her writing later on. However, *The Last of the Menu Girls* is a fine first narration, and a fine growing-up story/bildungsroman.

Her second novel, *Face of an Angel* (1994), is a text with a complicated and experimental form that has left readers puzzling as to how to read it. Because the narrative about the life of the heroine, Soveida Dosamantes, is interspersed with several other narratives, the book circles the narrative at the same time that it is elaborating it and opening it up. The main narrative details the life of Soveida, her family, her friends, her loves, and the people she works with at a restaurant, El Farol, in a small desert town in southern New Mexico. The book has been called a family saga, and it has all the characteristics of a saga, as Chávez explores the details and secrets of a vast family network. But it is also a saga of friends and friendships, of the lives of people Soveida works with, and it is filled with eccentric characters, sad and happy stories, domestic details, and day-to-day (but often strange) life in a small town. Because it is such a complicated narrative, it is impossible to enumerate every aspect of the book in the short space given here. However, some of the central themes in the book include the importance of the work of women and service workers, as well as how women are able to assert themselves in taking control of their lives and seizing their subjectivity—that is, becoming the subject and not the object of their lives and stories. It is also about identity, the meaning of a sense of place, masks and reality, and, of course, coming of age. It is also about the importance of the telling of the stories. At the beginning of the novel, Soveida's grandmother tells her:

> Soveida, you like to read. What you're reading is the story of the world. Everyone has a story, your mamá has a story, your daddy has a story, even you have a story to tell. Tell it while you can, while you have the strength, because when you get to my age, the telling gets harder.
>
> (p. 4)

Soveida accepts the challenge, saying: "I speak for them now. Mother. Father. Brother. Sister.

Vocabulary for **The Last of the Menu Girls**

Using the dictionary, provide definitions for the following words:

1. May Day (Holiday)

2. raze (d)

3. refrain (noun)

4. stoic

5. Osage

6. diadem

7. sporadically

8. resplendent

9. delineate(d)

10. histrionic(ally)

11. loquacious

12. odious

13. vehement

14. confound

15. perennial

16. labyrinthine

17. foray

18. myriad

19. audacity

20. stigmata

Vocabulary Quiz - **The Last of the Menu Girls**

Circle the correct answers

1. **stigmata**
   a. the last note of a musical score
   b. bodily marks resembling the wounds of the crucified Christ
   c. a fixed sum of money paid periodically

2. **diadem**
   a. crown; headband worn as a badge of royalty
   b. the point of a weapon
   c. stringed instrument

3. **myriad**
   a. a poisonous substance
   b. an immense number; innumerable
   c. a tent used in camping

4. **foray**
   a. a Scotch unit of liquid capacity
   b. the distance around a plane figure
   c. to make a raid or invasion

5. **resplendent**
   a. to place oneself in danger
   b. shining brightly
   c. the first of many discoveries

6. **delineate**
   a. to describe in sharp or vivid details
   b. to paint with long brush strokes
   c. to prohibit the entry of the military

7. **vehement**
   a. dangerous
   b. sacred; holy
   c. powerful; forceful

8. **loquacious**
   a. talkative
   b. penniless
   c. intelligent

The Last of the Menu Girls (continued)

9. **refrain**
   a. the regularly recurring phrase or verse
   b. to eat greedily
   c. to move into a primitive state

10. **odious**
   a. registered trademark
   b. incapable of being changed
   c. offensive; deserving hatred

11. **stoic**
   a. showing little or no emotion
   b. very talkative
   c. an enclosure made with stakes

12. **labyrinthine**
   a. having no written language
   b. intricate; complex in structure or arrangement
   c. any of the several plants with leaves resembling teardrops

13. **May Day**
   a. the last day of May
   b. springtime festival; religious season of veneration of the Blessed Virgin
   c. a court which has jurisdiction over criminal cases

14. **audacity**
   a. boldness
   b. kindness
   c. moderation

15. **confound**
   a. to confuse; to puzzle
   b. to establish a relationship
   c. to appoint a leader.

Quiz for The Last of the Menu Girls

Match the following:

_____1. Regino	A. Was sent to a home for disturbed youth
_____2. Ricky	B. Great aunt who dies a merciless death
_____3. Nieves	C. Setting for Rocio's life
_____4. Altavista	D. Created menus for the hospital patients
_____5. Mercy	E. Rocio's mother
_____6. Kari Lee	F. Rocio's sister
_____7. New Mexico	G. handyman; compadre
_____8. Eutilia	H. Rocio's student
_____9. Mr. Smith	I. Exotic perfume
_____10. Evening in Paris	J. Hospital where Rocio works during the summer

1-G; 2-A; 3-E; 4-J; 5-F; 6-H; 7-C; 8-B; 9-D; 10-I

The Last of the Menu Girls

Topics for critical thinking and writing

1. While working at Altavista Memorial Hospital as a menu girl, what epiphanies does Rocio experience? (*Pain in the hospital is everywhere, especially in the outside world; life and death are interconnected and her life is interconnected with others such as her great aunt)* (Cause/Effect Essay)

2. After having read the vignettes *The Last of the Menu Girls*, "Evening in Paris," and "The Closet" what common theme emerges? (*Rocio's maturation, her search for a feminine role model, and her relationship with her mother.)* (Comparison Essay)

3. What are the physical and metaphorical meanings embodied in the closets, e.g. the mother's closet, the medicine closet, Rocio's closet, the hall closet, her older sister's closet, and the living room closet, the gray closet and the blue closet? (*The closets of the house become characters, identities, personas that the women inhabit or choose not to inhabit; it holds the shoes of women with bitter hopes; the closets are the realms of fantasy, religious ecstacy and imagination.)* (Illustration Essay)

4. In the vignette "Space Is a Solid," what is the metaphorical meaning of space? (*Identity)* (Illustration or Argumentation Essay)

5. Based on your reading of the vignette "Compadre," define the word "compadrazco" and explain its importance in Rocio's liberating desire to write a great novel about the lives of those people she knows best. *(Compadrazco = not a familial relationship, but one structured around affiliation.... a protective and supportive relationship which outlasts the ties between husband and wife, parents and children. Rocio is able to offer an expansive view of the human community, rich and poor and Anglo and Mexican alike—out of disjointedness, she is able to illustrate how characters' lives intersect and sometimes blend)* (Definition/Illustration/ Argument)

6. The vignette, "Space Is Solid," represents the most difficult episode in Rocio's life. Explain why her life is now so depressing. Remember to use examples to support your contention.*(She moves away from family and community. Alienation from all including herself. Name is shortened to Miss E. No support, suffers a breakdown* (Illustration/Argumentation)

7. In the novel, *The Last of the Menu Girls*, Rocio experiences personal growth, or maturation. Focusing on the vignette, "The Last of the Menu Girls," explain the significance of the word "menu" and discuss its importance to her process of maturation. (*She views her life as one would view a menu, what are her choices in life, can she make a nontraditional career choice, or is she doomed to the choices of the traditional Chicana menu?)*(Argumentation Essay)