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Identity in Rudolfo Anaya’s Bless Me, Ultima

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Thesis Abstract

Rudolfo Anaya’s *Bless Me, Ultima* is a part of the Chicano literary canon. Like other genres of literature outside of the Western canonical tradition, *Bless Me, Ultima* tackles the complex identities faced by individuals who have two “homelands”—the United States, and the country of their specific heritage. The novel’s protagonist, Antonio, matures throughout the bildungroman style narrative, allowing the reader to witness his development of identity. Antonio’s developing autonomy, understanding of his cultural community, and understanding of the world outside of his immediate environment, are inextricably linked to his friendship with Ultima. Through his brief but significant time spent with her, Antonio realizes the importance of spirituality, as he sees how it is exercised in his mentor’s life. My thesis argues that spirituality is Anaya’s solution to the “borderlands,” dichotomies, labels, categorizing, and other problematic ways that we try to understand others inside and outside of our own cultural environments. Anaya posits spirituality as a means for the Chicana/o community, and all other communities for that matter, to appreciate their native culture, yet simultaneously embrace a concept of the world through a non-culturally specific lens. Through her commitment to live a spiritually grounded life, Ultima exemplifies a sincere respect and adoration for her community, God, those she interacts with, nature, and essentially, the universe. This mentality and outlook on life is what I argue to be both her “blessing” on Antonio and Anaya’s “blessing” on his readers.
Introduction

Canons of literature are inherently difficult to define. Time period, geographical location, and personal background of the writer act as indicators for how literature is categorized into certain labeled groupings. However, the process of identifying these works is still tedious, given that the acknowledgement of diverse bodies of literature is a relatively recent phenomenon, and the terms associated with these canons are often slippery and transient. Over the last century, and particularly since the 1960s, the face of literature has substantially changed. Individual voices on the periphery of the Western literary canon began to gain recognition, and diverse bodies of literature started to materialize. In her exploration of bildungsroman narratives outside of the Western literary canon, Dianne Klein says: “[m]any writers, silenced before, are now finding the strengths, the voices, and the market for publication to tell their stories” (21). One of such groups includes the Chicana/o literary canon, whose works did not publicly surface until the latter half of the twentieth century. Klein continues that “Chicano/a writers, like African Americans, Asian Americans, and others, are being heard; in autobiography and in fiction, they are telling their coming-of-age stories” (21).

Like other terminology used to characterize certain diverse bodies of literature, the terms Chicana/ Chicano are difficult to denotatively define. The word “Chicana/o” saw its genesis during the 1960s as a progression of the terms “Mexican-American” or “Hispanic American.” Opinions differ as to what qualifies an author and his or her work into this literary grouping. “Chicana/o” and what it signifies for
members and readers inside and outside of its community is an infinite conversation. This literary canon is defined as narratives of “an American of Mexican descent who attempts through peaceful, reasonable, and responsible means to correct the image of the Mexican-American and to improve the position of this minority in the American social structure” (Leal 2). Tomás Rivera adds to this definition: “what Chicano writers strive for most is the capturing of a fast-disappearing past-- the conserving of past experiences, real or imaged, through articulation” (22). He further argues that the Chicana/o literary canon is “one of total communion, an awesome awareness of the “other,” of one’s potential self” (19). Essentially, Chicana/o literature contemplates how members of its community must renegotiate their identity, and re-situate themselves in a complex relationship of cherishing their traditional heritage while embracing a progressive future.

Rudulfo Anaya’s *Bless Me, Ultima* is a clear example of Chicano literature. This novel is a bildungsroman narrative within the context of 1940s Mexican-American culture. Published in 1972 and set in New Mexico, the novel locates its narrative within the Chicana/o literary movement stemming from the 1960s. The novel primarily focuses on the life of its protagonist, Antonio, a young boy who has a sacred bond with Ultima, a wise curandera (healer). Antonio is forced to mature and forsake childhood naiveté when startling instances begin to occur in his small community. A family friend gets murdered, a schoolmate exposes him to “paganism,” and his perspective of the Catholic Church begins to unravel, all as his friendship with Ultima develops. While Antonio’s childhood perceptions of the traditions,
structures, and myths of his culture are being dismantled, his belief in autonomy and the human spirit arises. The reader gets snippets of commentary and insight from Antonio at different stages in his life. For most of the novel, it is evident that his story is seen through the lens of his eight-year-old childhood, though certain passages indicate perspectives from his adulthood. The novel ends with the death of Ultima, though not without assuring the reader that Antonio’s future will forever be affected and influenced by her spiritually grounded, non-traditional lifestyle. The reader never knows what becomes of Antonio in his adulthood, but we can speculate he continues to defy the rigidity of his culture, embrace its spiritual components and his own spirituality as an autonomous being.

_Bless Me, Ultima_ incorporates themes of Latino and Spanish culture, Mexican-American acculturation, Catholicism, myths, folklore, and particularly borderlands—all topics prevalent in the Chicana/o literary canon. Anaya, like other Chicano writers, “traveled to Mexico visiting archaeological sites such as Cholula in Puebla and Monte Alban in Oaxac.” This led him to “stage [Bless Me, Ultima] in the mythical town of Guadalupe, situated in the New Mexican llano east of Albuquerque in the actual county of Guadalupe with its towns, Pastura and Puerto de Luna” (Calderón 5, 35). Thus, given its setting and context, Anaya’s novel further reflects on the markings of the Chicano canon. The reader is already aware of the text’s Mexican-American mysticism and folklore through its detailed landscape and description of traditions. We engage in Antonio’s personal growth as an individual through a combination of lenses that make up his lifestyle-- geographical
environment, myths, legends, religion, and other social practices. Joseph Summers says the “critical approach [to Chicana/o literature] during the 1960s is based on the notion of cultural uniqueness. It aims to value Chicano literature precisely because in it one finds expression of the distinctive features of Chicano culture,” such as its “family structures, linguistic and thematic survivals, anti-gringo attitudes, pre Hispanic symbology, notions of a mythic past, and folk beliefs ranging from la llorona to the Virgin of Guadalupe” (146). As is the case with Antonio, literature of this canon commonly reveals a male protagonist who experiences self awakening and introspection. In this process, he typically comes to defy his cultural traditions and rituals, disassociating himself from the hegemonic and monolithic characteristics of his environment. Particularly, this defiance of cultural norms comes in the form of the protagonist denouncing his religion: “[D]oubts and rejection of religion evidence themselves […] especially in the better known Chicano novels [like] Bless Me, Ultima” (257). As an “intellectual writer of Chicano literature in the 1960s,” Anaya is known for his “spiritually oriented works grounded in the cultural matrix of New Mexico or a sense of ethics” as well as “personal exploration” in his novels, poems, and essays (Lomeli 91). Although the setting, characters, and cultural practices demonstrate how his novel is situated in the Chicana/o literary genre, Anaya also demonstrates his own personal literary ventures. He entertains spiritual issues, which is an undertaking not necessarily aligned with the dominant themes of Chicana/o literature. Thus, I argue that although Catholicism and the spirits and figures of legendary Latino and Spanish personas are often a part of Chicana/o literary themes,
Anaya’s depiction of spirituality is of another nature. In fact, spirituality seems to be an unusually dominant preoccupation in the novel. Anaya has been criticized for being more concerned with his own thematic topics rather than focusing on social activism in his novel. Critics question if, based on the criteria of qualities that define the “Chicano/a canon,” Anaya actually qualifies as part of this literary grouping (Leal 3). His emphasis on the spiritual journey of Antonio rather than his social activism is also concerning for some readers. However, I argue that the emphasis on Antonio’s spiritual journey is Anaya’s unique way of exemplifying how an individual develops the courage and autonomy to empathetically and peacefully depart from the hegemony of his/her culture while becoming progressive beneficiaries to their native community. What other Chicana/o authors choose to do through a defiance of religion and cultural structure and all things associated, like spirituality, Anaya does through a combination of defying and preserving. He demonstrates how to extrapolate the essence of his culture from the rigidity of its traditional structures.

I will argue that Anaya represents spirituality as a method for Chicana/o’s to re-define their relationship with their culture. In chapter one, I will provide further detail on the context of Bless Me, Ultima, and examples of how Anaya’s narrative is situated within the Chicana/o literary canon. I will consider the setting of Bless Me, Ultima and the cultural myths, legends, and ideologies associated with its context. One of the references I will be using is Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza by Gloria Anzaldúa, in which the “mestiza/o” identity is described as a life defined by borders and perpetually fluctuating notions of self. “Borders” is a ubiquitous theme in
this genre of literature, and is an element which must be acknowledged in order to recognize the many dichotomies and binaries present in the novel. Chapter one will also discuss magical realism and its relation to the Chicana/o genre. While some critics and scholars posit that Anaya’s treatment of spirituality is actually his inclusion of magical realism-- a common literary element of Chicana/o literature at the time, others agree that this was actually not Anaya’s intention. Chapter one will therefore further investigate magical realism and its ties to the Chicana/o literary canon. This will help me clarify that although Anaya does include this thematic element, his preoccupation with spiritual issues is of another nature.

Chapter two will primarily focus on spirituality as it informs Antonio, Ultima, their friendship to each other and to their community. Through a textual analysis, I will argue that Antonio’s spiritual journey is integral to his maturity, and how it contributes to his critical contemplation of his culture and self. I will specifically consider the dialogue between Antonio and Ultima, and how their conversations reflect an urgency to understand and better their local and universal environment. I will demonstrate how Anaya’s treatment of spirituality is different from other works of the Chicana/o genre, such as José Antonio Villarreal’s Pocho or Richard Vasquez’s Giant Killer, insofar as it does not altogether reject religion, but honors it as a part of his community’s identity, and therefore his own. Anaya incorporates spirituality as an intimately inward quality that is juxtaposed to an impersonal, external environment. To examine this complex binary in chapter two, I will
specifically consider the ideas of “extensive/intensive dimensionality,” and how these concepts apply to Antonio’s spirituality, community involvement, and world outlook.

By venturing to interpret Anaya’s text through this lens, I will be entering an ambiguous topic, seeing that conversations on spirituality and matters of the soul make up a very complex discourse in literature. When the term or topic of spirituality is entertained in literature, it is often associated with and sometimes even used synonymously with religion. However, Anaya craftily differentiates the two to demonstrate how the individual must define his or her relationship to religion and spirituality as separate entities. The Oxford Dictionary defines the term “religion” as “the belief in and worship of a superhuman controlling power, especially a personal God or gods” and defines “spirituality” as “of, relating to, or affecting the human spirit or soul as opposed to material or physical things.” Anaya engages both of these terms, characterizing the latter as the most crucial component to Antonio’s “coming-of-age.” Anaya does not go into extensive detail as to what Antonio’s life-long relationship with his religion will be, other than that the Catholic Church is a sacred part of his heritage and should be honored. Anaya ventures much further into the intricacies of Antonio’s spirituality, showing how it is essential to his emotional wellbeing, relationships, and autonomy. The following chapters will offer a reading in which cultural traditions are to be questioned and challenged, though ultimately, honored. In the conclusion I will contemplate how spirituality will influence the remainder of Antonio’s life, and his local and universal community at large. Anaya posits active, engaged spirituality as a means to soften the dichotomy between
autonomy and culture, and we will retrospectively consider how this contribution to Chicana/o literature has or has not manifested itself over the past several decades. Analyzing the text thus, I hope, will ultimately lead to a more informed understanding of the Chicana/o literary canon and its relationship to culture on a national scale, as well as provide insight into the complex nature of spirituality and how it is exercised in characters’ lives. Essentially, what the following chapters will investigate is how exactly Antonio was “blessed.”

Chapter One

Leal Luis explains that “[t]he simplest, but also the narrowest way of defining Chicano literature is to say that it is the literature written by Chicanos” (1). This definition, however, begs for clarity, leaving us curiously wondering, who, what, where, when, and why. What further complicates this already slippery term is the fact that many scholars within this community have discrepancies amongst themselves regarding its definition. Leal admits that “there is no consensus of opinion as to who is a Chicano,” and the meaning of this term in relation to literature rapidly changes. What we do know, however, is that “[t]hose critics who are aware of the difficulty of reaching agreement as to who is a Chicano have turned to a different approach,” that being “the identification of Chicano literature by its intrinsic characteristics.” “Intrinsic characteristics” are specified as “subject matter, [which] must reflect the Chicano experience and deal with Chicano themes” (Leal 1, 2). Emphasizing the drastic changes to the denotations and connotations of the word “Chicano,” Luis says: “[i]n 1971 [Edward Simmen] defined the Chicano as a dissatisfied American of
Mexican descent whose ideas regarding his position in the social and economic order are, in general, considered to be liberal or radical and whose statements and actions are often extreme and sometimes violent.” Leal continues that “[o]ne year later [Simmen] defined Chicano as an American of Mexican descent who attempts through peaceful, reasonable, and responsible means to correct the image of the Mexican-American and to improve the position of this minority in the American social structure” (1, 2). Thus, with all of its varied definitions, it is pertinent to establish an awareness of common Chicana/o themes and characteristics, to afford an interpretation of *Bless Me, Ultima* that is aware of its context and the conversations that surround it.

Chicana/o literature, though pegged as beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, is largely characterized by its complicated relationship with past centuries. Before the 1960s, the scarce published works which provided narratives of individuals of Latina/o descent living in North America were labeled “Mexican-American” and “Hispanic-American” texts. “Chicano/a” works are essentially written by the same demographics of people who wrote “Mexican-American”/ “Hispanic-American” literature, but with an altered perspective on their relationship to their community, to themselves, to the United States, and to the global community. While Mexican-American literature largely narrates the experiences of living in the United States while having heritage and “home” located in Latin America, Chicana/o literature primarily provides a narrative of characters who consider North America “home,” though not without the necessary juggling of also preserving their traditions and
native culture within themselves, and within their day-to-day practices. Essentially, in literary works, the term “Chicano/a” is different from “Mexican-American” or “Hispanic American” in that it implies the inevitable need to negotiate the self with past, present, and future, as it relates specifically to the binary opposition between native culture and the new culture. In this sense, we come to understand Chicano/a literature similarly to other marginalized groups of literature that began to flourish during the 1960s and 1970s. As Roland Hinojosa argues:

> [a]ll genres, then take off in different directions toward the same ultimate objective: a presentation of a heterogeneous people who form yet another distinct part of the United States. The year 1848 is a political starting point, as Luis Leal has pointed out, for prior to that date, Mexican-Americans did not exist in a legal sense-- instead they were Mexicans or Texans or Americans. But let no one attach a magical power to the year 1848; the literary tradition was already there before the date. (18)

Hinojosa reminds us that Chicana/o literature, though it flourished in the 1960s and 1970s, has long been in the making, and was not a totally new phenomenon. He also tells us how “Mexican-American literature” does differ from “Chicana/o literature,” in that the latter directly seizes representation of the individual and their community, and works to be recognized as a people within the United States (18). In the 1970s, Mexican-American literature was “written, published, and appraised at a rate which is truly phenomenal” (18). Once the “Modern Language Association for America
included a workshop on Chicano literature at its convention in 1970,” there became “a general increase of interest in Mexican-American literature, which has given true meaning to what Philip D. Ortego has called a ‘Chicano Renaissance’” (7). In summarizing his thoughts on this newly evolving canon of literature, Hinojosa says: “despite the Mexican influence, the Mexican-American writer lives in and is directly influenced by his life in the United States. To date, the one prevalent theme in Mexican-American writing is the Chicano’s life in his native land, the United States” (Hinojosa 8-9). Manuel M. Martin-Rodriguez further comments that Chicana/o literature:

extends as much into the past as it moves into the future. The generation of writers and scholars who first brought attention to this literature during the civil rights era was succeeded by others whose works opened Chicano/a literature up to new dimensions by experimenting with genres and topics; by addressing formerly unexplored or underexplored issues; and, to a certain extent, by undoing much of the work of their predecessors as they formulated new identities, new geopolitical understandings of culture, and new aesthetic parameters. The predominant nationalist drive of the 1960s and 1970s, whose preferred symbol was Aztlan, […] explores borderland identities and experiences [and] reclaims the hemispheric ramifications of cultural identity. (796)
“Hispanic-American literature” implies a divide between two lands, the homeland of the author, and his/her current residency—texts that happened to be written in the United States, though not typically acknowledging or implying an integrated relationship between the United states and the homeland of the author. Chicana/o culture, by definition, is that integrated relationship.

Héctor Calderón and José David Saldívar explain that:

[i]t wasn’t until after 1957 that Hispanic-Americanists began to carve out their own territory in Romance language departments [as] the offerings in the Hispanic-American literature were augmented by waves of Central and South American literary scholars who migrated to the United States and taught in U.S. universities. [Hispanic-American literature further evolved through] [c]ertain historical processes [that] were going on in [the United States] in the decade of the sixties, while the processes addressed the increase of enrollment of Americans of Mexican descent in U.S. colleges and universities, an adjunct to this was a demand for the hiring of Chicano professors and the teaching of college courses with reference and relevance to [an] historical presence in [what was now the] “native land,” the United States. (xii)

This inevitable negotiation of “native land” faced by the Chicana/o writer is what Anzaldúa refers to as the concept of “borders.” “Borderlands” is a prominent theme in
Chicana/o literature as it poses both literal and figurative boundaries for those of Latin American descent. There is the physical border between North America and South America, and also ideological “borders” of constant re-situating of the self in relation to one’s history, culture, and present “homeland,” with a constant sense of never really belonging to either “side.” Both as a literary theme and a cultural reality, the idea of “borders” and “borderlands” is inherent to the understanding of Chicana/o identity. Gloria Anzaldúa describes the concept of those in the “borderlands” as “la mestiza [the mixed race] floundering in uncharted seas.” She emphasizes Chicana/o culture and La Mestiza as entities “remaining flexible [and] able to stretch the psyche horizontally and vertically” because one “constantly has to shift out of habitual formations; from convergent thinking, analytical reasoning that tends to use rationality to move toward a single goal (a Western mode), to divergent thinking, characterized by movement away from set patterns and goals and toward a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes” (Anzaldúa 2213).

Anzaldúa explains borderlands as the epitome of Chicana/o culture. She tells us that for Chicanas/os, borderlands is an accepted permanency, one which defines Chicana/o identities collectively and individually. Anzaldúa, in “To Live in the Borderlands Means You” says:

[t]o live in the Bordlands means to put chile in the borscht,

Eat whole wheat tortillas,

Speak Tex-Mex with a Brooklyn accent;

Be stopped by la migra at the border checkpoints;
Borderlands for Chicanas/Chicanos or the “mestiza/o” is thus an accepted reality of contradictions and binaries. Anaya largely demonstrates this negotiation of borders and binaries, as there are constant juxtapositions and dichotomies in his narrative. Juxtapositions/binaries in *Bless Me, Ultima* include the two different backgrounds of Antonio’s father and mother, the two different destinies his family expects of him, and the two different outlooks on the spiritual world--paganism and religion, among many other examples. These serve as constant indicators of the binaries that are inherently threaded throughout the lives of Chicanas/os. Anaya facilitates the theme of borderlands in his novel, as many other works of Chicano literature do. Anaya does not simply entertain the implications of borderland themes on the Chicano community in his novel, but he craftily integrates a solution to it. Anaya’s use of spirituality is indeed a challenge to the borderlands. Borders, as Anzaldúa maintains, are rigid confinements that leave the individual in a sense of feeling constantly
displaced-- perpetually included, yet excluded. Ultima and Antonio also dwell in this state of binaries, yet their spirituality encourages peace and understanding of it. The “borderlands” that are engraved into Ultima and Antonio’s lives do not detract from their ability to preserve and appreciate their culture, while also seeking out their own identities. Ultima selflessly contributes to the wellbeing of her cultural community, but her commitment to spirituality keeps her unbound to its limiting binaries. This is the spiritual wisdom that Ultima eventually leaves with Antonio; an indication that he too will live a life not dominated by traditional cultural expectations. Antonio, reflecting on a previous conversation with his wise mentor, says: “Ultima says a man’s destiny must unfold itself like a flower, with only the sun and the earth and water making it blossom, and no one else meddling in it.” He continues that “in her company I found a great deal of solace and peace” (223).

Anaya’s undertaking of spirituality in *Bless Me, Ultima* allows for a positive engagement between characters and cultural shifts, ancient traditions, complicated histories, and “borderlands.” Antonio is still learning the ways of Ultima’s wisdom so we do not entirely get to witness his fully mature understanding of himself and his spirituality. Ultima, on the other hand, is at such peace with God, her culture, nature, and identity as a healer in life, that she embodies the delicate, complex state of borderlands with contentment. We can only assume that after spending quality time together and having such an eternal, sacred bond, Antonio goes on to live a life that exudes similar characteristics, granted only by a spiritual soundness that Ultima has taught him by example. Ultima says: “A curandera cannot give away her secrets, but
if a person really wants to know, then he will listen and see and be patient. Knowledge comes slowly” (34). Antonio listens to Ultima, and from their time spent together, begins to understand life as something much greater than simply his house, family, church, and town. He says:

[there is a time in the last few days of summer when the ripeness of autumn fills the air, and time is quiet and mellow. I lived that time fully, strangely aware of a new world opening up and taking shape for me. In the mornings, before it was too hot, Ultima and I walked in the hills of the llano, gathering the wild herbs and roots for her medicines. We roamed the entire countryside and up and down the river. [...]]. For Ultima, even the plants had a spirit. [...] Ultima intoned softly and I found myself repeating after her. (40)

The sections in the novel when Ultima and Antonio are alone are calm, reflective, and peaceful. Their conversations are inquisitive and contemplative. Neither is angered by their community’s troubles, and their thoughts are centered on the earth and its spiritual dwellings. When moments in the novel arise with other characters and circumstances, the reader senses the abrasiveness of conflict within the community and its imposing structural norms. This contrasts with the peaceful escape we sense in the midst of Ultima and Antonio and their calm demeanor. Anaya emphasizes the importance of nurturing the individual spirit throughout the novel, and even hints at this notion in the lives of the minor characters. Towards the beginning of the novel, Antonio describes the background of his father and mother. Antonio says: “[m]y
father had been a vaquero all his life, a calling as ancient as the coming of the Spaniard to Nuevo México. Even after the big rancheros and the tejanos came and fenced the beautiful llano, he and those like him continued to work there, I guess because only in that wide expanse of land and sky could they feel the freedom their spirits needed” (2). Antonio’s father, Gabriel, believes “freedom” to be a concept defined by physical location, which is why he repeatedly expresses his dissatisfaction with being settled in Guadalupe, New Mexico. Gabriel’s concept of freedom, therefore, contrasts to Ultima’s. While “freedom” to him is subject to one’s literal, geographical location, Ultima defines “freedom” as an inner, personal, spiritual wellness, recognizable through her actions. Gabriel, no longer a vaquero in the open lands of the llano, finds himself confined to the rituals of his community. Antonio says:

[my father and his “compadres”] went to work on the highway and on Saturdays after they collected their pay he drank with his crew at the Longhorn, but he was never close to the men of the town. Some weekends the llaneros would come into town for supplies and old amigos like Bonney or Campos or the Gonzales brothers would come by to visit. Then my father’s eyes lit up as they drank and talked of the old days and told the old stories. But when the western sun touched the clouds with orange and gold the vaqueros got in their trucks and headed home, and my father was left to drink alone in the long night.
Sunday morning he would get up very crudo [early] and complain about having to go to early mass. (3)

While Antonio’s father finds freedom determined by his literal surroundings, Antonio, with Ultima’s help, begins to understand freedom as an internal choice, rather than a concept defined by exterior circumstances. Anaya purposefully juxtaposes Gabriel’s and Ultima’s different connotations of “freedom,” which allows the reader to further witness how spirituality will forever alter Antonio’s perception of life.

Anaya’s narrative is unique in its portrayal of spirituality as a means to overcome the complications of a culture defined by traditions and binaries because such specific treatment of this topic is rarely evident in Chicana/o literary criticism or novels of that genre. Anzaldúa describes her personal perspective of borderlands much differently than Anaya does, and with much less ease and peacefulness in her tone. She considers herself “a border woman [who] grew up between two cultures (preface in Borderlands).” She explains that it was “not a comfortable territory to live in” because “[h]atred, anger and exploitation” are a part of the “borderland” experience” (preface in Borderlands). It is important to note that Anaya does not deny that these conditions of living in the “borderlands” exist. His description of Gabriel’s life, as well as the experiences that Antonio’s brothers face, among other references, remind the reader of the very real and often imposing “borders” that complicate the lives of those of Latin American heritage living in the United States. Anzaldúa describes the concept of borderlands as:
The U.S.-Mexican border es una herida abierta where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds, [...] the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country-- a border culture. Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. (25)

What Anzaldúa describes above is what Anaya depicts in his novel. Ultima and Antonio resist the borderlands altogether, refusing to be “prohibited and forbidden.” Having a spiritual awareness-- an awareness of something greater happening in the universe than what exists in one’s immediate community, helps dissolve the figurative borderlands, and allows them to conceive of themselves as liberated, autonomous individuals with a sense of personal agency. This certainly does not mean that Ultima and Antonio avoid all struggles with “borderlands,” but their calmness and serenity gives them agency over their situation. Spirituality is one of Anaya’s main contributions to the Chicana/o community, showing how it is a concept that transcends all boundaries without hesitation, because it is an inherently universal and unifying phenomenon. By prompting his reader to think about God, spirituality, and the soul, he emphasizes the agency of the individual in relation to greater phenomena allowing individual freedom and autonomy while still belonging to the community. With no intention of oversimplifying the complicated experiences that
many communities endure, I feel strongly that Anaya purposefully locates positivity, energy, and notions of a hopeful future within a space that is beyond the weight of cultural distinctions and divides—spirituality. Several years after writing *Bless Me, Ultima*, Anaya offered the following about the human spirit and spirituality, and how they apply to his work, and literature in general:

> We yearn for the written word to give meaning to our age. We sense that between the prior cycle of time and the time being born, there is a space of transformation. In that space we can use history and art to complete the flourishing of new consciousness. Themes in our literature must include a sense of this incredible age of transformation through which we are living. Conflicts and human emotions drive our stories, and we particularize those conflicts to character. But characters live in a context. Our context happens to be a time of great wrenching of the human spirit. (471-72)

Clearly, Anaya highly prioritizes the value of the human spirit and makes it his principle concern in his writing. His uplifting and positive tone in the above passage resides in his novel. It is a tone that reconfigures the anger that Anzaldúa talks about in Borders and replaces it with hope and possibility, and essentially, the peacefulness that spirituality brings. What becomes apparent is that Ultima does indeed bless Antonio—she blesses him with a sense of spiritual direction that will afford him a future different from those around him. While characters like his brothers, parents, other relatives, and community members remain static in the perfunctory rituals and traditions of their surroundings, Antonio now has the
insight to see life outside the confines of his inhibiting immediate surroundings. We can assume that “Bless Me, Ultima” is an utterance attributed to Antonio, as he reiterates it in the body of the text and literally speaks the phrase (260). However, it seems, Anaya also leaves this title as an anonymous proclamation in hopes that by the end of the novel, it is more than just Antonio who feels a sense of urgency to be a part of something universal, and thus partakes in the same request-- to embrace spirituality, and to be blessed.

Understanding the multifaceted dynamics of Ultima’s character is crucial to understanding her influence on Antonio, and the novel’s development of spirituality at large. To better understand Ultima’s character, it is important to consider not just her spiritual nature, but also the Latin American roles, legends, and myths that she arguably represents. The myth of “La Llorona” or the “Weeping Woman” is one of the most common themes associated with Chicana/o literature, and one that Ultima’s character is sometimes linked to. Arturo Ramirez explains that

[the story of La Llorona (the Weeping Woman) is clearly the most widely diffused and best-known legend, myth, and folktale in Mexican and Chicano culture and folklore. In terms of significance and relevance and prevalence of a legend, the United States has no equivalent. The significance, intensity and singular importance of the La Llorona legend are a distinctive element of Mexican and Chicano folklore. Over the last 500 years, with the emergence of the legend have come many versions and retellings as well as interpretations. [...]. La Llorona continues to hold the culture spellbound. (19)
Linking Ultima’s character to La Llorona, Anaya accomplishes a crucial component to the novel. The reader is thus encouraged to recognize Ultima as a sacred, loyal, native member of her community. By locating her in the foundation of Latin American folklore and myths, Anaya affords himself the liberty of engaging Ultima in more non-traditional behaviors like preoccupation with the human spirit and spirituality. The reader can then trust Ultima as a character who has Antonio’s best interest in mind, no matter how unorthodox her wisdom to him may be. In her essay “The Function of the La Llorona Motif in Rudolfo Anaya’s Bless Me, Ultima,” Jane Rogers explains that “[as Antonio] 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. […] The la llorona motif emerges in his experiences with nature [and] 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. (65)

Rogers goes on to describe how Antonio’s interaction with female characters in the novel demonstrates reference to La Llorona. La Llorona is a haunting entity in Latin American culture. The legend of La Llorona (also known as Maria), is told in many variations. One of the more common versions of the story is that Maria was a woman of Native Indian descent who fell in love with a Spanish nobleman when the Spanish first came to Latin America. The two had three children, but the Spaniard refused to marry her because she was not of “noble,” Spanish blood. The Spaniard married another woman, of Spanish descent, and in desperation to steal his attention back, La Llorona drowned their children. Realizing that her lover still wanted nothing
to do with her, La Llorona killed herself. She was stopped at the gates of her afterlife, and was told that she could never come in until she finds her drowned children. Since then, La Llorona has been in a perpetual state of wailing and weeping as she searches for her children. This myth is used to scare children into behaving properly, so as to not draw attention to themselves, therefore avoiding the “weeping woman” (Ramirez 19-26). The La Llorona motif often surfaces in Chicana/o narratives with mother-child relationships, specifically when the mother character must painfully depart from her child/children (Rogers 65). Such is the case with Antonio and his relationship to his mother, Maria Luna. Rogers explains, “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, “[m]y baby will be gone today” (65). [This leads me to believe that while Ultima is resonant of certain traditional Latin American myths and folklores, like La Llorona, other characters more substantially fulfill these traditional identities. She maintains an identity that is culturally relevant, yet simultaneously and distinctly different from her community]. This leaves room for her unorthodox, spiritual self. Ultima has such a unique, powerful influence on others that “[t]he force of [Antonio’s thoughts and dreams] derive[s], overwhelmingly, from Ultima, her spirit carried by the narrator from first associations to written word” (Lee 31). To have such a substantial, influential role in the narrative is a rare characteristic for a female character in Chicano literature. Judy Salinas writes:
the cultural and traditional roles and stereotypes of woman and the Hispanic woman in particular as depicted in literatures have been perpetuated through the centuries by authors reflecting their societies’ majority views-- male and female alike. There are two main categories or images of woman with variations and generalizations of these two. First, there is the “good” woman, symbolized by the Virgin Mary, who can think no evil, do no evil, is pure, innocent, understanding, kind, weak, passive, needs to be protected but yet has an inner strength which God granted her […]. Second there is the “bad” woman, symbolized by Eve, who is a temptress and seductress, representing evil through love and the perversion and excesses of its passions […]. A third gray-area category blending these two principal images occurs when they overlap and are synthesized into a duality presented in varying degrees of realism in individual female characters, although one image consistently dominates the other. The emphasis in most literature is on some evil or bad action of the woman-- be it a spiritual black thought or a blatant example of malice toward another. (Jiminez 192)

Ultima certainly seems to fit best within this liminal space. She is kind, compassionate, and caring. However, because her supernatural powers enable her to perform miraculous works, she is considered “bad” to some. It is essential for her to be a character who maintains this ambivalent space-- if she were a woman who
fulfilled a culturally stereotypical role, not only would her friendship with Antonio be entirely different, but her perception to her reader would be completely altered as well. We would feel compelled to interpret her as yet another character blended into the traditions of her surroundings, and would not fully grasp the unorthodox wisdom she has to offer and the esoteric yet refreshing nature of her spirituality. Ultima is also representative of another Latin American traditional identity; the role of the curandera. A curandera is a wise, usually elderly individual in the Latina/o community who cares for and heals people, but can be mistaken for a bruja or witch, because of “magical” practices. Antonio says:

I knew why [my father] expressed concern for me and my sisters. It was because Ultima was a curandera, a woman who knew the herbs and remedies of the ancients, a miracle-worker who could heal the sick. And I had heard that Ultima could lift the curses laid by brujas, that she could exorcise the evil the witches planted in people to make them sick. And because a curandera had this power she was misunderstood and often suspected of practicing witchcraft herself. (4)

Thus, we see that Ultima constantly negotiates the culturally influenced identities and stereotypes placed upon her. She will never escape the cultural confinements and borderlands that are steeped in her existence, so she consciously chooses not to focus on such factors-- a mindset that privileges the greater good of human kind over
appeasing the demands of society. Ultima holds fast to the spiritual world which includes not only her local culture, but an awareness of life beyond it.

Ultima’s role is particularly curious as it pertains to religion, especially considering that Catholicism is a large component to Latin American culture, and often surfaces in Chicana/o literature and art. While Ultima is undoubtedly a spiritual character, she is not necessarily “religious.” She demonstrates Christian virtues, such as selflessness and taking care of the sick, and also often expresses her belief in God, yet she is not particularly favored by the Catholic Church. The Church questions her seemingly magical healing abilities, and wonders if she may be a witch. Towards the end of the novel, the Church does take Ultima’s side against Tenorio, but they nonetheless remain skeptical of her practices throughout the narrative. This does not stop her from fully embracing her conception of spirituality and God, though. This is one of the many ways Anaya reveals how members of the Chicana/o community can still believe and cherish the roots of their cultural practices without necessarily embracing the traditions and structures that facilitate them. Catholicism is largely a part of Latina/o and Chicana/o culture. Much of Hispanic culture stems from its roots in Spain which was largely a cultural conglomeration of “Christians, Sephardic Jews, and Moslems” (Villarino 2). Each of these groups contributed to Spain’s “architecture, religion, agriculture, educational institutions, political science, folklore, and value systems” (3). For nearly “eight hundred years the Moors were in Spain,” and “Spanish culture was thus left with an Arabic influence— over four thousand words in the Spanish language are not actually Latin but Arabic” (2, 3). Other than
the influence of Arabic on the Spanish language, what remained in the Spanish
culture and what was brought to Latin America from the colonizing Spaniards was
Christianity and Catholicism. Although Spain saw a variance in religion at one point
before journeying to the America’s, Latin America has known no other religion as
mainstream and dominant as Catholicism, making it entirely a part of Chicana/o
culture, and therefore, very much a part of Antonio’s life. Given that Catholicism is
such a considerable, elaborate component to Latin American culture, we see why
Anaya and other writers of the Chicano genre incorporate it as a fundamental theme.
Thus, it is inevitable that Ultima and Antonio must navigate Catholicism in relation to
their identities.

Though very familiar and accustomed to the Church, they are also weary of it.
This in large part has to do with the fact that Anaya’s overall emphasis in the novel is
how spirituality applies to the individual, making it necessary that Antonio and
Ultima question their culture’s dominant religion, while also maintaining its presence
in their lives. During the time the novel was written, orthodox religious institutions
inside and outside of the Chicana/o community, were steadily losing appeal. What
was rapidly increasing, though, were the number of grassroots, non-institutional
groups in Latin America who continued seeking matters of spirituality based on their
cultural roots in Catholicism, though a part from the church itself. In Religion and
Political Conflict in Latin America, Daniel H. Levine says:
I want to stress the importance of the turn to the Bible and the
tremendous impact of the Old Testament prophets on the ideas of
leaders and followers in the Latin American churches. If there is one
characteristic that unites all grass-roots Christian groups in the region
it is that they read the Bible. They read the Bible regularly, discuss it
together, and seek inspiration and guidance from it. None of this was
true on any significant scale before the mid-1960s. […] Access to the
Bible also changes the link average believers have to authority figures
like priests, lessening their dependence. (10)

By using the term “grass roots” Levine refers to communities of people, either within
an organized Church affiliation or a “Christian group” of unorganized participants
whose interpretation of the Bible and its significance varies from traditional, orthodox
Catholic interpretations (10). This further illuminates how Anaya deploys spirituality
as a function in the characters’ lives which enables them to appreciate their native
culture, though in a more personalized, renewed form. Although Antonio seems to
heavily doubt and question components of Catholicism in *Bless Me, Ultima*, he
remains loyal to it insofar as he recognizes its substantial relation to his culture, his
family, and himself, as a Chicano. He may not become a priest like his mother hopes
for, and most likely will continue questioning rituals of the Catholic Church, but he
does not express any desire to ever abandon the institution and the significance it has
had on his life. Jimenez alludes to the complicated relationship between members of
the Chicana/o community and the Catholic Church when he says “doubts and
rejection of religion evidence themselves [...] especially in the better known Chicano novels” (257). Antonio and Ultima do not reject “religion” as it relates to the spiritual world and as it relates to their community. The two characters experience spirituality as an authentic, personal curiosity leading to autonomy, rather than a standardized cultural practice.

While some accredit Anaya’s attention to spirituality to his portrayal of magical realism, an element commonly found in Chicana/o literature, his own commentary on his thematic interests seems to say otherwise. Anaya is “a keen observer and witness of his times and his surroundings [which gives] further credence to his literary confabulations by taking time to reflect on specific issues that either parallel his literary production or simply serve to articulate a specific concern” (Lomeli 91). Anaya’s “specific concern,” it seems, is representing spirituality as a means for his characters to cultivate their own identity. Antonio is technically the only character who achieves independence, in the sense that he gains the ability to critically contemplate his surroundings. He is also the only character who over the course of the narrative introspectively contemplates his existence in relation to God, identifying himself with the subjective, spiritual world rather than his cultural context. Anaya demonstrates how a sense of personal spirituality aids departure from the hegemony of one’s own culture by providing a sense of strength and agency to the individual without mainstream affiliation and involvement. The individual feels involved in the wellbeing of the world, rather than just his or her specific community. Spirituality, as represented in Bless Me, Ultima, is a concept extricable to Religion,
yet without the character experiencing severed ties with his or her culture. Ultima is still an active member of her native community and demonstrates an appreciation and peace with it. She does not allow her non-traditional identity and perception of her culture to unravel her relationship to it. Essentially, this seems to be Anaya’s main point. He demonstrates how individuals from this background can evolve their culture rather than shun it. Anaya accomplishes this, specifically, through a spiritual lens.

Chapter Two

From the very beginning of the novel, Antonio and Ultima clearly share a special bond. The nature of this bond is best characterized when Antonio says:

[Ultima] took my hand, and the silent, magic powers she possessed made beauty from the raw, sun-baked llano, the green river valley, and the blue bowl which was the white sun’s home. My bare feet felt the throbbing earth and my body trembled with excitement. Time stood still, and it shared with me all that had been, and all that was to come. . Let me begin at the beginning. I do not mean the beginning that was in my dreams and the stories they whispered to me about my birth, and the people of my father and mother, and my three brothers-- but the beginning that came with Ultima. (1)

This description demonstrates the immense influence Ultima has on Antonio’s life. Ultima’s mentorship of Antonio helps him mature into a free-thinking, compassionate individual, and most significantly, awakens his senses to a spiritual world. With Ultima’s guidance, Antonio sees his native environment through an altered lens—
one that appreciates its raw beauty and prompts him to develop a spiritual connection
with it. From this moment, Antonio begins to develop a personal, spiritual
understanding of his surroundings, as his “bare feet felt the throbbing earth,” and
“[the earth] shared with [him] all that had been, and all that was to come” (1). This
experience is initiated by Ultima’s presence, because it is she who brings spiritual
awareness to Antonio’s life. Ultima introduces Antonio to the nuances and
ambivalence of life, beyond the traditions and normalcies of his culture. Antonio
emphasizes how integral Ultima’s influence on his life is, which is why he tells us his
“beginning” came with her (1). Ultima and Antonio’s immediate, supernatural bond
is a significant hint to the reader at the beginning of the narrative, which foreshadows
that Ultima will bring some sort of renewed outlook to his existence.

For this reason, Ultima and Antonio’s relationship is inherently complex.
Knowing that Antonio’s narrative “begins” with Ultima leads the reader to believe
that their bond is sacred, and was destined to happen. Antonio recalls a dream in
which he witnesses his own birth, and in this dream, he sees Ultima help his mother
in delivery. He watches Ultima tell the surrounding crowd of family members:
“[o]nly I will know [Antonio’s] destiny” (6). Neither Antonio and his family, nor the
reader find out what lies ahead in Antonio’s future. However, we do know his
“destiny,” which arguably is to become an autonomous individual who gains spiritual
understanding of himself and his environment. Antonio’s journey to maturity,
independence, and an understanding of his culture are qualities that clearly locate this
novel within the Chicana/o literary canon. However, what makes Anaya’s novel
unique from others of this genre is how he engenders Antonio’s “coming-of-age” experience. Before looking at specific passages in *Bless Me, Ultima* that evidence how spirituality functions as an integral part of Antonio’s maturity, I will consider how other Chicana/o novels address this topic. Carl R. Shirley and Paula W. Shirley explain that:

*Most critics agree that the first modern Chicano novel is *Pocho*, published in 1959 by California-born Jose Antonio Villarreal. Since that time the genre has grown and developed rapidly as readers and critics outside as well as inside the Chicano community are beginning to discover the most prominent novelists. [. . .]. Aside from folktales, historical narratives, diaries, and the like, there was no other literary prose in the American Southwest until about the second half of the nineteenth century. [. . .] *Pocho* is the earliest long prose piece by a Mexican-American to be issued by a major U.S. publishing company, and it is frequently hailed for its historical value as a reflection of Mexican-American life in what is termed the “assimilationist” period in their history. In the Bildungsroman (a novel of self-discovery) tradition, *Pocho* is the story of a young boy, Richard Rubio, and his attempt to find his place in the world. (93, 98)*

The novel, set in pre World War II, depicts Richard’s conflicts with his parents, religion, school, and cultural community. This narrative, like many other works of Chicano/a literature to follow, portrays a “sociocultural twist,” in which “Richard is a
Chicano, who gradually discovers that this fact makes a big difference in his life” (98). For this reason, “[t]here is much conflict between Richard and his parents, as broadening cultural differences between his mother and father eventually lead to a family breakup,” and as the novel ends, World War II begins, and Richard joins the military (98-99). Though there are striking similarities between Pocho and Bless Me, Ultima, there is also much that sets them apart. While Richard breaks from his family and Mexican-American community to find his own identity, Antonio finds new ways to understand his family and community without rebelling from them, which eventually leads to his self discovery and autonomy. He accomplishes this feat of maintaining his cultural ties while also developing autonomy with the help of his spiritually minded mentor, Ultima, who Richard is not so fortunate to have in his life. Shirley and Shirley continue that “in spite of [Poncho’s] shortcomings [and criticisms its received], it is the quintessential Chicano novel of self-discovery, matched only by Rudolfo A. Anaya’s 1972 masterpiece, Bless Me, Ultima, a vastly different work” (100). Anaya’s piece continues to be a “vastly different work” in comparison to other Chicano novels as well, as its emphasis on spirituality remains essentially unmatched.

Richard Vasquez, “another writer of the [1970s] whose novels have enjoyed popularity,” offers an additional example (Shirley and Shirley 101). After writing his first novel, Chicano, in 1970, Vasquez wrote Giant Killer in 1978. Both novels emphasize the Chicano experience of finding an identity somewhere between their Latin American heritage and current lifestyle in the United States. Also, both of Vasquez’s narratives address topics pertaining to border issues, citizenship, illegal
aliens, labor, and struggles with other ethnic groups. The themes expressed in these works clearly locate the novels within the Chicano literary canon, as is the case with *Bless Me, Ultima*. Yet, despite their similarities, Anaya’s work remains set apart from his contemporaries’ in that his protagonist is enlightened by a spiritual awareness of himself and his surroundings, which actually discourages what may have otherwise been a rebellion against his culture. While other Chicano protagonists are described as focusing their energy and concern on their physical, material surroundings and how those factors influence their identity, Antonio learns to channel his maturity process through a spiritual means, which allows for an awareness to notice and interpret life beyond his immediate environment. Other prominent novels of the Chicano canon include Ron Arias’ 1975 *The Road to Tamazunchale*, Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s 1967 *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Carlos Fuentes’ 1991 *The Death of Artemio Cruz*, and works by Rolando Hinojosa-Smith, who is “the most prolific Chicano novelist” (108, 109). This list is by no means exhaustive, but it offers some of the better known pieces of Chicano literature which also differ from Anaya’s portrayal of the spiritual world.

Anaya has specific intentions for his novel which fall outside of what is expected of him as a Chicano novelist, leaving his reader captivated by Antonio’s mystical, magical, spiritual childhood. Shirley and Shirley explain that

*[Bless Me, Ultima]* is narrated in the first person by Antonio, but the perspective is from a later time, when the narrator is older and more experienced. It takes place in the span of one year, during which
Antonio loses his faith in traditional religion but enters into a new, more profound spiritualism. He also witnesses four deaths; the first three are terrifying and cause him to question religion and his place on earth; the last, Ultima’s, leaves him soothed and confident. (104-105)

As mentioned above, Antonio certainly does “lose his faith in traditional religion,” and in fact, seems to lose faith in a lot of his cultural traditions and myths (105). These losses are not detrimental to his identity though, and in fact, are essential to his developing autonomy. His increasingly challenging and convoluted perspective of the Catholic Church does not deter him from continuing Catechism and attending Mass, nor does it detract from his “profound spiritualism.” Antonio accomplishes something very rare in the process of his maturity, and that is the ability to simultaneously embrace “old” and “new” culture, which essentially characterizes the Chicano/a experience. Antonio does not succumb to the weight of his complicated situation, but rather, is peaceably situated in his spiritually oriented outlook on life. For this reason, the tonal quality of Anaya’s work is uplifting and promising. Shirley and Shirley write:

[t]here is much good in this novel: the beauty and magic of a wonderful New Mexico landscape, the legend of the Golden Carp (a god who becomes a fish in order to help his doomed people), and dream sequences as presentations of other dimensions of reality or as a means of foretelling the future. [. . .] Anaya is adept at incorporating
the rich folklore of his region, an element that is particularly important in the development of Chicano literature. (105)

Embedded in this rich folklore we find a young and an old soul who discover a way to appreciate their culture while embracing a new life.

Catholicism plays a substantial role in the novel, and in Chicana/o literature at large. Like most other protagonists of this genre, Antonio begins to question the Church and his relationship to it. Also, he questions the characteristics of God and how humans relate to omnipotent, omnipresent power. Antonio’s mother, Maria, believes her son will become a priest, which furthers his confusion as to his identity in relation to the Church. While Antonio becomes less engaged with the doctrinal beliefs and practices of the Church, he becomes more inclined to question God and the spiritual world. Antonio’s continual pondering, contemplation, and interaction with the traditions of his religion are crucial to his understanding of himself, and how he chooses to situate his identity in relation to his culture. The night that Antonio witnesses Lupito’s death his contemplation of good, evil, and God truly begins. His spiritual journey with Ultima is also initiated. After seeing Lupito get shot, Antonio “turned and ran” (22). Antonio narrates his reaction:

The dark shadows of the river enveloped me as I raced for the safety of home. [. . .] The horror of darkness had never been so complete as it was for me that night. I started praying to myself from the moment I heard the first shot, and I never stopped praying until I reached home. Over and over through my mind ran the words of the Act of
Contrition. I had not yet been to catechism, nor had I made my first holy communion, but my mother had taught me the Act of Contrition. It was to be said after one made his confession to the priest, and as the last prayer before death. Did God listen? Would he hear? Had he seen my father on the bridge? And where was Lupito’s soul winging to, or was it washing down the river to the fertile valley of my uncles’ farms? A priest could have saved Lupito. Oh why did my mother dream for me to be a priest! How would I ever wash away a stain of blood from the sweet waters of my river! I think at that time I began to cry because as I left the river brush and headed up the hills I heard my sobs for the first time. (22-23)

At this moment, Antonio feels emotions that he has never yet experienced. The reader begins to see him critically think about his life and his relationship to his culture and upbringing.

Just as Antonio feels the weight of life’s confusion, Ultima finds him, and brings his burdened conscience to a serene state of peacefulness. After he “heard [his own] sobs for the first time,” he realizes:

[i]t was also then that I heard the owl. Between my gasps of air and my sobs I stopped and listened for its song. My heart was pounding and my lungs hurt, but the calmness had come over the moonlit night when I heard the hooting of Ultima’s owl. I stood still for a long time. I realized that the owl had been with me throughout the night. It had
watched over all that had happened on the bridge. Suddenly the terrible, dark fear that had possessed me was gone. I looked at the house that my father and my brothers had built on the juniper-patched hill; it was quiet and peaceful in the blue night. The sky sparkled with a million stars and the Virgin’s horned moon, the moon of my mother’s people, the moon of the Lunas. My mother would be praying for the soul of Lupito. Again the owl sang; Ultima’s spirit bathed me with its strong resolution. (23)

The presence of Ultima’s spirit and the calmness and freeness it represents immediately liberates Antonio’s troubled mind and sets him at ease with his circumstance. He quickly transitions from his troubled conscience, trying to process the gruesome scene he witnessed, to suddenly, an eased mentality. This juxtaposition of his feelings demonstrates particularly two things. Firstly, it demonstrates that while Antonio appreciates his culture and heritage, as indicated through his reference to the moon and its significance to the Luna family, its associated traditions with the Church trouble him. Secondly, what this juxtaposition reveals is that spirituality is the “cure” for his troubled soul, which is demonstrated by Ultima and her calming spiritual and physical presence. Her immediate presence reminds Antonio that his surroundings are sacred and beautiful, as her “spirit bathed [him] with its strong resolution” (23).

Ultima’s identity and beliefs are very rare in their community, in that she honors and cherishes the cultural traditions while simultaneously holding very non-traditional beliefs, and living her life accordingly. She is a curandera, and thus
occupies a very traditional role in Latino culture; yet her healing practices are exercised according to her own standards regardless of what others may perceive of her. Lee describes this complexity of Ultima’s identity thus: “[a] Catholic believer, Ultima nonetheless incarnates a oneness with a yet prior knowledge, the spirituality of the natural order” (32). It is this unique ability that Ultima has to be a part of her culture yet not let its traditions deter from her autonomous spirituality that is meant for Antonio to also embrace. By doing so, Anaya provides a template for how the Chicana/o community is able to maintain their Latin American roots while concurrently progressing autonomously in their North American home. Thus, it is integral that Antonio not only learn the ways of Ultima’s spirituality and lifestyle, but that he do so as an act of his own conscious decision. His “coming of age” does not rely on him becoming Ultima or investing in a life-long friendship with her, but rather, his maturity relies on locating his own sense of spirituality and establishing the ability to maintain and cultivate it after Ultima dies.

Ultima’s role in Antonio’s life is brief but substantial. He constantly questions her about existence, God, and their cultural traditions. He says:

[Ultima and I] walked together, [and I asked] what was it you gave me to make me sleep last night? And did you carry me to my room? There are so many things I want to know. [Then Ultima told me] a curandera cannot give away her secrets, but if a person really wants to know, then he will listen and see and be patient. Knowledge comes slowly.

(33-34)
Antonio indubitably takes Ultima’s advice and begins to “listen and see and be patient” as he witnesses her interact with nature. During one of their many occasions of spending time together, Antonio says:

[t]here is a time in the last few days of summer when the ripeness of autumn fills the air, and time is quiet and mellow. I lived that time fully, strangely aware of a new world opening up and taking shape for me. In the mornings, before it was too hot, Ultima and I walked in the hills of the llano, gathering the wild herbs and roots for her medicines. We roamed the entire countryside and up and down the river. I carried a small shovel with which to dig, and she carried a gunny sack in which to gather our magic harvest. [. . .] In the hills Ultima was happy. There was a nobility to her walk that lent grace to the small figure. I watched her carefully and imitated her walk, and when I did I found that I was no longer lost in the enormous landscape of hills and sky. I was a very important part of the teeming life of the llano and the river.

(39-40)

In this “new world” that Antonio enters, he realizes his individuality and significance. Anaya provides an image of Antonio literally configuring his posture to look like Ultima’s, which solidifies our indication that Antonio’s “destiny” is to attain a similar spiritual form as hers. Although he is learning from Ultima’s ways, Antonio still constantly faces the inevitable situations that come with his young age, and that he must confront in order to continue maturing. Whether he does not want to go to
school because it means being away from his mother all day, contemplates if God forgives everyone, or tries to decide if he should make his mother happy by becoming a priest or his father satisfied by learning to be a worker of the land, Antonio constantly wrestles and toils with cultural, community, and familial expectations. In nearly every instance of these struggles though, Ultima calms his anxiety and worry. Antonio says: “I felt Ultima’s hand on my head and at the same time I felt a great force, like a whirlwind, swirl about me. I looked up in fright, thinking the wind would knock me off my knees. Ultima’s bright eyes held me still” (55). Ultima and Antonio have developed a sincere connection at this point. Antonio, more perceptive to the spiritual world, is able now to sense it in Ultima’s eyes.

With this transition of seeing the world and his environment through an altered lens, influenced by Ultima, Antonio becomes increasingly and notably different from others in his family. His three brothers, Gene, Leon, and Andrew eventually come back home after serving in World War II. Antonio explains, “Finally the war was over,” and “[my brothers] were coming from the lands of the east to meet in a place called San Diego. They wanted to come home together; they had gone to war together” (60). The excitement the Marez family experiences when the three men come home initiates a celebratory dinner, at which Maria sobs because her sons our finally home. Meanwhile, Gabriel longs to hear their stories about the California landscape. Antonio describes the excitement of the occasion, of the family finally being together again, yet it does not take long for Antonio to realize he is far different from his brothers, and his life becomes much more complicated with their return. He
becomes cognizant of the fact that his brothers “were like lost men who went and came and said nothing.” He continues that he “thought that perhaps it was their way of forgetting the war, because we knew the war sickness was in them. Leon had shown the sickness most. Sometimes at night he howled and cried like a wild animal... Then my mother had to go to him and hold him like a baby until he could sleep again” (66). He also describes how his brothers mock him for thinking he may become a priest according to his mother’s wishes, and how they toss him on the roof of a chicken coop. His brothers’ bellicose attitudes and asperity display the effects that the war has had on them. Antonio is aware that this experience of war permanently separates his brothers from himself, but said separation concurrently leads him to notice a commonality between them all. When Leon had his violent dreams, “[i]t wasn’t until he began to have long talks with Ultima and she gave him a remedy that he got better. His eyes were still sad, as they had always been, but there was a gleam of hope for the future in them and he could rest nights” (66). Ultima’s spirit shares with Leon a sense of hope, as it has also done with Antonio. Antonio has a desire and willingness to yield to and foster the spiritually-oriented nature that Ultima exemplifies. Leon, however, does not share in this, which is what truly differentiates Antonio from his brothers. Antonio says: “I though perhaps [my brothers] were all sick with the war and trying to forget it. But with spring they became more restless. The money they had mustered out with was gone, and they had signed notes in town and gotten into trouble. It made my mother sad, and slowly killed my father’s dream” (66). Thus, Ultima does not get through to Gene, Leon, or
Andrew, and they remain stagnant in the perfunctory motions of their environment without much further thought. Ultima may especially “bless” Antonio with her spiritual wisdom and guidance, but it is ultimately up to him to embrace it and practice it himself. This conscious, personal decision is his true test of maturity.

Ultima and Antonio’s friendship develops in the beginning of the novel, mainly as the two quietly observe and interact with the outdoors. Antonio says: “Ultima and I worked in the garden every morning, struggling against the llano to rescue good earth in which to plan. We spoke little, but we shared a great deal” (83). As the narrative progresses, Antonio shares in more than Ultima’s conversation and outdoors work-- he witnesses her physically demonstrate her spirituality and healing. He witnesses her confront the evil Tenorio and also sees her heal the victimized Uncle Lucas. Though both overwhelming and even traumatic instances for him to witness, they are pertinent to Antonio’s maturity and understanding of Ultima’s spiritual ways. Antonio sees Ultima’s “magic” that so many claim is evil and identity as characteristics of being a witch. It is evident, however, that Ultima’s powers are products of her deeply rooted wisdom and spirituality, bestowed upon her by “el hombre valador” (94). Ultima admits that her power is under the authority of God, and that she uses her “magic” against the souls sold to evil, for the sake of the innocent people who are affected. Antonio has difficulty conceptualizing Ultima’s spirituality as it is manifested so powerfully. He says: “[t]he power of the doctors and the power of the church had failed to cure my uncle. Now everyone depended on Ultima’s magic. Was it possible that there was
more power in Ultima’s magic than in the priest?” (99). He tries to understand Ultima in relation to the roles offered by his cultural community, though she does not necessarily “fit” into any designated, preconceived identities or roles offered by their culture. The closest resemblance to a culturally specific “role” she exudes is that of a curandera. This is an occupation or “role” very specific to the Latin American culture, yet even then, she practices her independence and liberty of mind, actions, and spirit in a way that does not allow for “curandera” to define her identity. Arguably, her character is best defined as a spiritually-minded and empowered being. She hopes Antonio will mature into a person who also does not feel confined by cultural roles but individually decides how he wishes to situate himself within them.

Antonio constantly tries to understand the purpose behind legends, traditions, and practices in his community and constantly exercises his increasing ability to critically think about life. In reference to his experience of learning about the legend of the golden carp and how it relates to his own future, Antonio explains:

I went home and thought about what I had seen and the story Cico told. I went to Ultima and told her the story. She said nothing. She only smiled. It was as if she knew the story and found nothing fantastic or impending in it. “I would have told you the story myself,” she nodded wisely, “but it is better that you hear the legend from someone your own age...” “Am I to believe the story?” I asked. I was worried. “Antonio,” she said calmly and placed her hand on my shoulder, “I cannot tell you what to believe. Your father and your mother can tell
you, because you are their blood, but I cannot. As you grow into
manhood you must find your own truths.” (119)

It is soon after this that Antonio has a dream in which Ultima speaks to him. In the
dream Ultima says: “[t]he waters are one, Antonio,” as he “looked into her bright
clear eyes and understood her truth.” She continues: “[y]ou have been seeing only
parts,” and “not looking beyond into the great cycle that binds us all.” Antonio’s
dream concludes by him saying: “[t]hen there was peace in my dreams and I could
rest” (121). This dream is essentially Antonio’s moment of epiphany, upon which he
no longer feels the burden of the confusing practices, traditions, and beliefs in his
culture, but rather embraces them as part of something greater. This “something
greater” is afforded by spirituality— by being concerned with and aware of life
beyond one’s material, immediate environment.

From this point in the novel, Antonio and Ultima’s conversations become
more in depth, and the reader significantly notices a maturity in his demeanor.
Antonio admits to this change: “I was growing up and changing,” and “had plenty of
time to be by myself and to think and feel the magic these [summer] events
contained” (122). His independence and maturity progress, but his relationships to his
family members remain static, and even begin to unravel. Ultima and Antonio invest
energy and time into their spirituality, and it manifests itself in their lives and yields
peacefulness. Leon and Gene moved away, Antonio’s father started drinking more
heavily, and his mother is lonely and sad. During this time, he explains that
Ultima and I continued to search for plants and roots in the hills. I felt more attached to Ultima than to my own mother. Ultima told me the stories and legends of my ancestors. From her I learned the glory and the tragedy of the history of my people, and I came to understand how that history stirred in my blood. I spent most of the long summer evenings in her room. We talked, stored the dry herbs, or played cards.

(123)

For as much as Ultima emphasizes the importance of an autonomous, spiritual life to Antonio, she also emphasizes the importance of their cultural heritage. She demonstrates an understanding of God, omnipotence, and the spiritual world, outside of the Catholic Church, but nonetheless observes and upholds its practices in a respectful manner, and encourages Antonio to do the same. Although the Church has been weary of Ultima for her healing, the priest of their local church, Father Byrnes, defends Ultima by excommunicating Tenorio— the man who tries to blame Ultima for his daughter’s death. Anaya repeatedly shows his reader that although Antonio and Ultima may think and believe in things beyond their cultural orthodoxy, it is entirely important to still remain loyal to it. Ultima’s main hope for Antonio, and perhaps Anaya’s main hope for his readership, is for the individual to find autonomy and truth, which is made possible by a well-nourished spiritual life.

**Conclusion**

The reader is increasingly and constantly reminded of the importance of Antonio’s journey to autonomy and spiritual maturity. By the end of the novel, it is
noticeable how crucial these characteristics will be in his life. In the latter chapters, even as an eight year old, Antonio’s spirituality and sense of self are challenged and tested. Going through Catechism brings confusion and inquisition about his complex relationship to his Church and his culture, while he is confronted by his friend Florence’s denial of God’s existence and eventual death. It is in these situations that we see Antonio exercise his autonomy, as he critically contemplates the situations that face him. Presumably, Antonio will continually encounter challenging instances that will force him to negotiate his identity in relation to his culture, but, he will do so with Ultima’s “blessing.”

While Antonio is in the physical presence of Ultima, for about two years, he experiences her blessing through the wisdom she shares and through her caring and encouraging nature. Ultima “blesses” Antonio by awakening him to a spiritual world that recognizes his independence, the beauty of nature, the omnipresence of God, and a world outside his native environment. These are all qualities that will leave Antonio linked to Ultima, even after her death, because they are qualities not bound by material, corporal circumstances, but by the human spirit. While he frantically runs to warn Ultima of Tenorio’s intent to kill her, Antonio’s thoughts race through his head. He says “[f]or us Ultima personified goodness, and any risk in defense of goodness was right. She was the only person I had ever seen defeat evil where all else had failed. That sympathy for people my father said she possessed had overcome all obstacles” (255). He continues that he “ran with new resolution,” that he “ran to save Ultima and ran to preserve those moments when beauty mingled with sadness and
flowed through [his] soul like the stream of time” (257). Tenorio reaches the Marez house, and “[h]e cursed and fired. The thundering report of the rifle followed the flash of fire. That shot destroyed the quiet, moonlit peace of the hill, and it shattered [Antonio’s] childhood into a thousand fragments that long ago stopped falling and are now dusty relics gathered in distant memories” (258). Tenorio shoots and kills Ultima’s owl, which Antonio discovers is essentially her soul. Rushing to Ultima and kneeling by her deathbed shortly thereafter, Ultima tells Antonio:

[m]y work was to do good. It was to heal the sick and show them the path of goodness. But it was not to interfere with the destiny of any man. Those who wallow in evil and brujeria cannot understand this. They create a disharmony that in the end reaches out and destroys life-
- With the passing away of Tenorio and myself the meddling will be done with, harmony will be reconstituted. That is good Bear him no ill will-- I accept my death because I accepted to work for life--. (260)

Ultima’s final words carry a tone of saintliness and arguably martyrdom. She has sacrificed her time, emotion, and overall life for the greater good of others. The reader witnesses her reverent, selfless actions throughout the novel, but her pious, spiritually committed identity is confirmed on her deathbed. Antonio drops to his knees and says “[b]less me, Ultima--” (260). To that, Ultima replies, “I bless you in the name of all that is good and strong and beautiful, Antonio. Always have the strength to live. Love life, and if despair enters your heart, look for me in the evenings when the wind is gentle and the owls sing in the hills. I shall be with you--”
Ultima has established a spiritual connection with Antonio, and the end of her life on earth cannot change that. Her work in Antonio’s life is complete, and she can pass away knowing he has embraced her wisdom, and that will presumably remain with him for the duration of his own life. Through her time spent with Antonio, Ultima has instilled in him a legacy to value humanity and nourish his spirit which is connected to others, nature, and God, without the restrictions or guidelines that his culture may wish to enforce. In doing so, she does not encourage him to forsake or depart from his native culture and its traditions, but rather to renegotiate his relationship to it.

Chicana/o literature is largely about this act of renegotiation, where the protagonist must decide how the traditions and beliefs of her or his cultural heritage will interact with their present identity. Authors of the Chicana/o genre depict this transition varyingly, though almost all maintain that it is a rigorous and often burdensome process. In this process of situating one’s native past within a present and future in the United States comes a series of “borderlands.” Ricardo Garcia describes that:

[w]hat is needed in a multi-ethnic literature program is the literature that has been created by the members of the ethnic group. This is the literature of myths, legends, songs, the literature of unconscious self-portrayal through which a people prescribe parameters to their ethnicity. Literature of the folk, that literature that is transmitted orally from generation to generation is addressed to the essential ethnicity of
a people. Folklore conveys, indeed reflects, the multiple feelings and perceptions that have been the aesthetic and emotional experiences of a people. To know the Chicano experience, one must know the legends, the heroes, the dichos (sayings) that have emerged from the Mexican American imagination. [...] Ultimately, the folklore represents the Mexican American’s unconscious attempts at self-definition, and with this process, the Mexican American unfolds profound ethnicity, saddened by tragedy, enlightened by comedy, and balanced by self-criticism and parody. (83, 85)

Anaya wrote during a period of time that was crucial to the establishing of the Chicano genre and overall Chicano identity. Since its publication, this literature has continued to evolve, and so have its interpretations and criticisms. My argument is that Anaya had a specific intent in writing his novel, in addition to conveying the “the Mexican American imagination” and making a substantial contribution to his community’s heritage. What distinguishes him from most other Chicano writers is his effort to promote spirituality as a vital component to life. Daniel Testa helps describe Anaya’s dedication to spirituality and how he differs in this regard from other Chicano writers. Testa says: “If Bless Me, Ultima is a faithful manifestation of what will become its author’s artistic trajectory, Anaya may be that kind of Chicano who does not focus directly and explicitly on the confrontation between his own culture and an oppressive Anglo society.” He continues that “[t]he socio-economic problems or political concerns, although present in his work, do not seem to weigh directly or
heavily on Anaya’s literary mind, or at least they are submerged and subordinated to other [spiritual] matters,” (70). Testa describes Anaya as being “more attracted to” or more “susceptible to a freer fantasized mode of fiction,” which helps foster a space to explore sentiments regarding spirituality and the Chicana/o community (70). This freer mode is what enables his spiritual ventures, which is particularly evidenced through Antonio and Ultima’s relationship. Testa explores *Bless Me, Ultima* with a broad lens, with consideration of how it sits uniquely within the Chicano canon. Testa’s analysis supports my argument that Anaya’s novel is indeed much different than his contemporaries’ in that his “artistic trajectory” is focused on spirituality. Testa further elaborates:

Anaya moves beyond [a] borrowed type of scenario by giving symbolic value to places and objects. Thus, we have the house on the hill that is a place of refuge, the bridge that connects to the larger world, the river that becomes such a dominant presence in the lives of several of the characters, the open prairies, the closed valleys, the unproductive terrain that must be worked inch-by-inch, among others. Anaya adds to the texture of his narrative by tapping other sources of folklore, legends, mythologies, and cosmologies. [This all adds] to the suspenseful procedure [of Antonio’s] spiritual conflict. *Bless Me, Ultima* may also be seen as a Chicano bildungsroman, and in spite of the fact that Antonio, the boy hero of the story, is only eight years old
at the end of the novel, we are convinced that his character has been formed in a radically profound way. (71)

Testa’s passage affords clear support of how in his novel, Anaya accomplishes a sincere, authentic representation of Chicana/o culture, while simultaneously promoting how mightily spirituality works in the lives of people. To ask an even broader question, which Testa also touches on, why does Anaya feel so inclined to promote spirituality in his novel, and how does it relate to the literary community at large? Testa says:

in Anaya’s novel, [there is] a thematic dimension that runs throughout the whole work. What slowly emerges from the work is a view of the world in which evil plays a strong and constantly threatening role in the lives of people. This view of the world holds that life is a cosmic drama played out through individuals, and although some of the characters including Ultima suggest that it is essentially humans acting against humans, there persists the overpowering belief that supernatural or superhuman forces are everywhere at work. The actions of people are often interpreted from that perspective. (76)

Anaya is compelled to not only write about the traditions and legends of his culture, but also about thematic issues which happen to extend beyond the divides of different cultural communities. Spirituality is represented in the novel as a phenomenon which has no specific “cultural” restrictions. It is presented as a function which only the individuals themselves can choose to embrace and exercise, but is a function that is
not regulated by religious, cultural, or community institutions or traditions. It is a phenomenon which emphasizes the notion of autonomy, and how the individual alone is responsible for his or her relationship to others, God, and their overall environment. Arguably, Anaya’s depiction of spirituality largely contributes to the notoriety of Bless Me, Ultima, and its supernatural, fascinating nature, which simultaneously values the Chicana/o community and ideas outside of it. Anaya is committed to seeing people sincerely connect and live peaceably together despite cultural differences. Also, he is committed to encouraging individuals, inside and outside of his community, to embrace spirituality as a method to achieve peace and unity and nourish the human spirit. Anaya says: “[w]e live in a time of transition, a time in which the human spirit can either be crushed or in which it can be transformed into a new level of consciousness” (471). In his novel, he provides a model for how the human spirit “can be transformed into a new level of consciousness,” insofar as Antonio’s coming-of-age reveals. Antonio, “only eight years old at the end of the novel, [is a] character [who] has been formed in a radically profound way,” through his understanding of spirituality. What makes Anaya’s novel so engrossing and poignant is that it does not privilege the importance of either one of his main concerns over the other. Both Chicana/o culture and spirituality are interwoven, and both complement and counter each other throughout the narrative. I am not a part of the Chicano community by heritage, and there is much within Anaya’s novel that I do not relate to on a personal, intimate level; however, I feel included in his narrative, by his
depiction of spirituality. It is an element that crosses cultural barriers and welcomes the reader into *Bless Me, Ultima*.

To support my claim that Anaya prioritizes the preservation of cultural traditions and also spirituality, I consider his article “What Good is Literature in Our Time?” In this piece, he addresses literature not just as it relates to the Chicano/a community, but how it relates to the broader literary community. He says:

> [a]ccording to many prophecies an era of time is ending. Human history is being transformed. On the one hand postmodern history, by erasing our rituals and ceremonies, has forced us to enter a linear time, a time which promises no renewal, no rising from the ashes of a new awareness. We wonder if we can ever live again in the cycles of time that, though they ended, always held in their completion the promise of a new cycle. By time, of course, we mean not only the days accumulated on the calendar of history, but the spiritual evolution of humanity. Time and its consequences are incorporated into the human spirit; we are what we have created. [...] For linear-bound humanity, the coming into being of the new era will not be easy. Around the world we see the signs of disruption in the human spirit and nature, and we appear helpless. [...] As writers, we need to address this depletion of spirit. We need to include social and environmental problems in our stories. If we do not engage the issues of our day, then what good is literature as we face the chaos which threatens to engulf
us? Writers must provide a clear sense of meaning and direction in the stories we write. As postmodern humans we have lost the inherent sense of sacredness which literature once transmitted to us. This meaning is missing from life, and it is missing from much of our literature. (472)

Anaya’s “clear sense of meaning and direction” in Bless Me, Ultima is unequivocally demonstrated through Ultima’s “blessing” of Antonio, as well as his captivating portrayal of his Latin American heritage. Anaya claims that “[t]o give meaning and direction to our time should be the task of every writer” (472). Even though Bless Me, Ultima was written in a time and context that is much different from the moment I find myself reading it, Anaya’s narrative continues to give meaning and direction, to me personally, and presumably others. As Ultima best demonstrates herself, spirituality is a timeless, boundary-less endeavor in which the human is capable of partaking. She is so spiritually grounded and wise that her essence echoes supernaturally throughout the novel, and even her death does not seem to have put her spirit to rest. Spirituality is a concept and a phenomenon that knows no restrictions, except where it is decidedly not wanted. Antonio certainly is not the only one who has the benefit of Ultima’s blessing; Anaya’s illustration of how spirituality brings autonomy and peace to an individual is nothing short of a gift he has bestowed on his reader.

Chicana/o literature, like many other genres of non-Anglo canonized literature, is a relatively recent phenomenon. Because “[m]any writers, silenced
before, are now finding the strengths, the voices, and the market for publication to tell their stories,” there now exists an outpouring of substantially varying, “unorthodox” narratives of communities and people (Klein 21). The current literary climate inside and outside of the academy continues to expand, giving notice and recognition to works that for centuries went unacknowledged. Klein reminds us that the search for “I” has long been characterized as a journey meant for only a certain group of people. Klein says:

> [a]t birth, each person begins to search to know the world and others, to answer the age-old question “Who am I?” This search for knowledge, for truth, and for personal identity is written about in autobiographies and in bildungsroman fiction. For years though, the canon of United States literature has included predominantly [these] coming-of age stories [through a Westernized lens]. Where are the others-- [?]. (21)

Anaya, I argue, fields this question strikingly creatively, indirectly, and in an inquisitive, nuanced fashion. He does not answer the question, “[w]here are the others?,” but his novel responds to the troubling concept of “other”-ing altogether. What Anaya does in his novel that I find particularly noteworthy, and find to be my overall incentive to perform a close reading of his text, is to enforce the idea of an individual as an autonomous agent. By tackling the subject matter of how spirituality specifically liberates the individual from cultural hegemony, Anaya automatically sets himself apart from many other Chicano writers. He reminds us that there is a
multiplicity of voices even within very specific genres of literature. Anaya reminds his reader to not homogenize or oversimplify the voices within marginalized canons of literature. To finally have writers like Anaya receive public recognition and represent the Chicana/o community is a significant milestone in the progression of the United States. Anaya encourages us not only to realize this feat but also to realize the importance of the individual, apart from all defining labels, traditions and cultures. Spirituality is Anaya’s inventive means to showcase two things in particular. Firstly, he uses spirituality to demonstrate how each person is responsible for his or her own dedication and investment to themselves, others, the world, and God, encouraging his reader to recognize the importance and sacredness of autonomy. Secondly, he uses spirituality as a means to exhibit how individuals can create sincere, empathetic relationships, friendships, and understandings of one another without significant cultural bearing on said interactions. Anaya hints to his reader that voices on the margins of the Western literary canon cannot be generally defined or categorized, and that all voices are distinctive. *Bless Me, Ultima*, makes clear that within the autonomous voice there exists a human spirit, which, if nourished, engenders an appreciation for one’s native culture, and a hope for the individual in all “homelands.”
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