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Through the Eyes of Shamans: Childhood and the Construction of Identity in Rosario Castellanos' "Balun-Canan" and Rudolfo Anaya's "Bless Me, Ultima"

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THROUGH THE EYES OF SHAMANS: CHILDHOOD AND THE
CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY IN ROSARIO
CASTELLANOS' *BALÚN-CANÁN*
AND RUDOLFO ANAYA'S
BLESS ME, ULTIMA

by

Tomás Hidalgo Nava

A thesis submitted to the faculty of

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ABSTRACT

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This study offers a comparative analysis of Rosario Castellanos' *Balún-Canán* and Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*, novels that provide examples on how children construct their identity in hybrid communities in southeastern Mexico and the U.S. southwest. The protagonists grow and develop in a context where they need to build bridges between their European and Amerindian roots in the middle of external influences that complicate the construction of a new *mestizo* consciousness. In order to attain that consciousness and free themselves from their divided selves, these children receive the aid of an indigenous mentor who teaches them how to establish a dialogue

with their past, nature, and their social reality. The protagonists undertake that negotiation by transgressing the rituals of a society immersed in colonial dual thinking. They also create mechanisms to re-interpret their past and tradition in order to create an image of themselves that is not imposed by the status quo.

In both novels, the protagonists have to undergo similar processes to overcome their identity crises, including transculturation, the creation of sites of memory, and a transition from orality to writing. Each of them resorts to creative writing and becomes a sort of shaman who pulls together the “spirits” from the past, selects them, and organizes them in a narration of childhood that is undertaken from adulthood. The results of this enterprise are completely different in the cases of both protagonists because the historical and social contexts vary. The boy in *Bless Me, Ultima* can harmoniously gather the elements to construct his identity, while the girl in *Balún-Canán* fails because of the pressures of a male-centered and highly racist society.

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INTRODUCTION

The question of identification is never the affirmation of a pre-given identity, never a self-fulfilling prophecy—it is always the production of an image of identity and the transformation of the subject in assuming that image.

Homi K. Bhabha

Cultural identity is not something one can find, inherit, or receive as a final product. On the contrary, it is the result of both a negotiation and a construction that starts in the early years of childhood. This process is especially evident in hybrid cultures such as the Mexican and Mexican-American, which have developed and evolved within the interstices between European and Amerindian cultures and between the implementation of modernizing projects and the persistence of traditional ways of life. Mexican literature and Hispanic literature created in the United States have usually treated this topic since both literary traditions have developed in that context of “in-betweeness.” Mexican literature has been produced within a culture emerging out of the violent encounter between Spanish and Amerindian views and traditions. On the other hand, Hispanic literature of the United States has been composed in that same context of clash between

Spanish and Amerindian components; however, one needs to add to that problematic encounter the influence of Anglo culture, especially after the appropriation of Mexican lands by the United States between 1846 and 1848.

The main purpose of this research is to compare examples on how those two—and interconnected—literary traditions have depicted such a process of negotiation and creation of identity in individuals and communities. Rosario Castellanos' *Balún-Canán* (1957) and Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972) are novels presenting children who have grown up on the margins of political, social, and cultural borders and whose ancestors proceed from different cultures and ethnic groups. Those children daily confront the questions that, according to the Mexican Nobel-Prize winner Octavio Paz, developing peoples usually ask: “¿Qué somos y cómo realizaremos eso que somos?” (*El laberinto* 9). [“What are we and how may we fulfill our obligations to ourselves as we are?” (*The Labyrinth* 9)¹] A Ladino² girl in *Balún-Canán* and Antonio in *Bless Me, Ultima* experience the construction of their identity within specific communities. Their conscious or unconscious aim is to assemble all those pieces of themselves that are dispersed. In order for them to attain that goal, they have the aid of mediators or mentors who teach them how to establish a dialogue with their past, nature, and reality through tradition and the building of bridges to other cultural influences.

Although the Chicano novel *Bless Me, Ultima* is typically included in American literature, I will demonstrate that it shares similar concerns with Castellanos' novel

¹ Translation of the original is taken from Paz, Octavio. *The Labyrinth of Solitude: Life and Thought in Mexico*. Tr. Lysander Kemp. New York: Grove, 1961.

² The Real Academia Española defines the term *Ladino* as a synonym of *mestizo* (see www.rae.es). Both Olivia Gall and Julio César Pinto Soria concur as they use the term in that same sense. Gall mentions that during the Spanish colonial times in Chiapas, the Spaniards regarded Ladinos as inferior since according to the former it was degrading to have a part of Indian of blood (66). Pinto Soria indicates that during the seventeenth century the term *Ladino* was used in Guatemala to refer to the *mestizo* sector of the population in general (7).

regarding the persistence of racism, sexism, and colonialism in two “southern” regions where cultural, racial, and national boundaries are blurred by the displacements of peoples and ideas. In other words, I will prove that these two novels agree in their view of the results of such displacements and how they make it impossible to sustain or defend the notion of a fixed identity on the basis of origin and nation. Indeed, these circumstances necessitate the work of fiction-making, a kind of literary shamanism, to construct identities that pull together the different strains of the past that neither nationalism nor modernity adequately accounts for.

The protagonist children in these novels construct their identity through a series of processes. First, they need to recognize their incapacity to avoid their cultural hybridity. Despite the acculturating pressures of their national cultures and the similarly homogenizing impulses within their own families, they have to be aware that it is not feasible for them to affiliate with just one of the multiple components of their culture. Second, it is necessary for them to reinterpret and re-imagine their relationship with the past, tradition, and even nature, through a strategy of transculturation. In order to fulfill that task, they must transgress the rituals of institutions—such as family, the Catholic Church, and school—that have supported and promoted the perpetuation of some colonial vestiges that in part have provoked those children’s identity crises. Finally, the children choose an alternative way that deviates from the traumatic struggle caused by cultural oppositions occurring within them. Both the Ladino girl in *Balún-Canán* and Antonio in *Bless Me, Ultima* have chosen the written word and literary imagination in order to select and give coherence to those scattered pieces of themselves that reside in their memories.

The protagonists and other characters in the novels are evidently hybrid and multiracial. The Ladino girl in *Balún-Canán* and Antonio in *Bless Me, Ultima* are the result of the racial and cultural mixings of at least two peoples (i.e. the European and Amerindian) and their corresponding worldviews. In other words, the two children are *mestizos*,³ a people resulting from the still-unresolved first encounter—mutual discovery or clash—of peoples and ideas occurring on the tiny island of Guanahani on October 12, 1492. The discovery and subsequent conquest of the Americas was not only the milestone of a new era, but also the beginning of the *mestizo*'s construction of an identity. Throughout modernity, *mestizos* have often had to choose with which root—European or Amerindian—they should affiliate.

Although the protagonists live in different geographical contexts, they share a similar background since they have links with Mexico and its past. That fact is the main reason why I will turn to authors—such as Octavio Paz, José Vasconcelos and Gloria Anzaldúa—who have analyzed the creation of Mexican and Mexican-American identities. Although they offer different and even opposed perspectives on this issue, they concur that *Mexicanness* is in formation and *mestizaje*⁴ is still an unresolved process.

In his seminal work *El laberinto de la soledad* (1950), Paz pays attention to the contradictory character of Mexicans. According to Paz, just few Mexicans “tienen conciencia de su ser en tanto mexicanos” (11) [“are conscious of themselves (...) as Mexicans” (11)]. On the other hand, as Paz explains, their identity construction is highly

³ The Real Academia Española uses the term *mestizo* to refer to peoples and cultures “provenientes de la mezcla de culturas distintas” [“emerging out of the mixture of different cultures”] (see www.rae.es), while the online version of the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* (www.m-w.com) defines *mestizo* as “a person of mixed European and American Indian ancestry.”

⁴ I use the Spanish term *mestizaje* to refer to the cultural and racial intermixing of two different peoples, especially European and Amerindian.

problematic because they live on different historical levels. What is more, “Las épocas viejas no desaparecen completamente y todas las heridas, aun las más antiguas manan sangre todavía” (11) [“Past epochs never vanish completely, and blood still drips from all their wounds, even the most ancient” (11)]. This superposition of historical levels is evident in the lives of the Ladino girl and Antonio; they live in communities that are undergoing a transition from rurality to modernity and where ancient and colonial practices intermingle with ideas, systems, and structures that have more to do with the future. Thus, the characters of these novels face the conflict between tradition and modernization the Uruguayan Ángel Rama has perceived in Latin America. Rama argues that because of the consumerist societies’ pressure on the poor rural groups, Latin American rural societies have lost certain elements of their cultures, but at the same time have developed mechanisms to resist the influence of those external forces (74-75). In the cases of *Balún-Canán* and *Bless Me, Ultima*, those mechanisms have to do with the use of ancestral knowledge (e.g. traditional magic and oral tradition) to confront external influences and at the same time incorporate certain elements from them. It implies a creative process that leads the protagonists to gather the scattered pieces of their identity.

Another contradiction Paz observes in Mexicans is their divided nature as sons and daughters of the Spanish conquest and the Indian defeat. According to Paz, that conquest represents a symbolic and literal rape (77). In other words, that historical event has become a trauma and Mexicans, therefore, are confused about what they are and what their identity is. Paz says, “El mexicano no quiere ser ni indio, ni español. Tampoco quiere descender de ellos. Los niega. Y no se afirma en tanto que mestizo, sino como una abstracción: es un hombre” (78-79) [“The Mexican does not want to be either an Indian

or a Spaniard. Nor does he want to be descended from them. He denies them. And he does not affirm himself as a mixture, but rather as an abstraction: he is a man” (87)]. On the basis of such a view, one can conclude that the *mestizo* people’s tragedy is having a cultural countenance without features, just like a man or a woman whose face is a rock that has not been sculptured. Because of his/her abstract character, the *mestizo* is a being that feels inferior and is an orphan. Thus, his/her identification with other *mestizo* people is not founded on common features, but on their nonexistence. Paz’s view implies that Mexicans have not solved their past and are not really willing to do so since re-imagining, reinterpreting, and *re-presenting* that past would provoke a profound pain on account of the sensitive and still-open wounds caused by the conquest. Because of this attitude, most *mestizos*—and Mexicans in particular—live in a state of cultural inertia and lethargy. However, some *mestizos* of Mexican descent dare to undergo that process of reinterpretation, even though they are aware that healing one’s historical wounds could be painful. This potential pain is the situation the young protagonists of Castellanos’ and Anaya’s novels face. Instead of getting trapped in the trauma described by Paz, these characters follow a more creative way to establish and reaffirm their place within their culture and communities and before other peoples, although the Ladino girl is not finally able to complete the process. These children are conscious of their internal contradictions, but they do not try to deny their past; on the contrary, they endeavor to solve it by projecting it to the future. What is more, they are willing to sculpt their own countenance symbolically without letting others do it on their behalf. Such a view is linked to José Vasconcelos’ and Gloria Anzaldúa’s ideas with regard to the utopian potential of *mestizaje*.

Like Paz, Anzaldúa—a Chicana *mestiza* herself—recognizes the cultural collision and internal war implied in the *mestizaje* process; however, she implicitly counters Paz’s view of this phenomenon. Monika Kaup comments that instead of focusing on the unresolved past of Mexican *mestizaje* as Paz does, Anzaldúa pays more attention to its future. Kaup affirms, “[Anzaldúa] replaces the figure of the tragic mestizo, nostalgically looking back to a lost homeland, with the figure of a ‘new mestiza,’ who embraces the utopian potential of her hybrid identity” (195). In other words, Anzaldúa opposes Paz’s ideas and chooses instead those inherited from Paz’s precursor, the Mexican intellectual José Vasconcelos, in *La raza cósmica* (1925). Vasconcelos argues that the future of the human race depends on the creation of a fifth race, a mixture of all the races in the world. He considers the American continent—especially Latin America—to be the place where such a race will emerge. Besides, he affirms that the Latin peoples and not the Anglos are prepared to become the leaders who will guide the world into that transition to a utopian society where the fifth race—non-white, non-black, non-Indian, non-Asian, but a mixture of all of them—will promote unity and Christian love (58, 75). For Vasconcelos, *mestizaje* is a phenomenon that makes cultures stronger. That fact is the reason why he affirms that the Anglo culture of the United States is destined to disappear in spite of its political and military victories. He says that such decadence is a consequence of having destroyed the indigenous cultures of North America, segregated the Black people, and avoided *mestizaje*. In contrast, the Spaniards let their blood and cultures intermingle with the Blacks’ and Indians’ (57).

In *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), Anzaldúa uses Vasconcelos’ theory to propose that female Mexican Americans get rid of the dualisms

implied in the oppositions Spanish-Indian, male-female, and white race-colored race by creating a *mestiza* consciousness. With respect to this issue, Anzaldúa notes,

The answer to the problem between the white race and the colored, between males and females, lies in healing the split that originates in the very foundation of our lives, our culture, our languages, our thoughts. A massive uprooting of dualistic thinking in the individual and collective consciousness is the beginning of a long struggle, but one that could [...] bring us to the end of rape, of violence, of war. (80)

As a *mestiza* breaks such dualities, she is ready to develop tolerance for contradictions and ambiguity. “She learns to be an Indian in Mexican culture, to be Mexican from the Anglo point of view. She learns to juggle cultures” (Anzaldúa 79). In other words, the more flexible and open the *mestiza*'s identity is, the more she is able to be freed from the inferiority complex associated with the conception of *mestizaje* as a tragedy and a cultural rape.

Whereas Vasconcelos regards the Latin peoples as the leaders of that transition to peace, harmony, and social equality through *mestizaje*, Anzaldúa considers Latin *mestiza* women to be the vehicle to break the oppressive elements from their own culture and to build bridges to the male gender and other cultures in order to attain that desired harmony and stability. In *Balún-Canán*, the protagonist is precisely a *mestiza* who strives to develop a new consciousness of her hybridity and break ancestral and modern, oppressive elements by avoiding cultural inertia and benefiting from her multicultural origins. For her, the past is not a restricting element but a source of multiple components from which she chooses to solve the puzzle of their identity creatively. Hector A. Torres emphasizes

this creative way as he says, “[...] for the mestiza of which Anzaldúa speaks, identity is not a given but a matter of daily crafting from the experience of everyday life” (128). Although the Ladino girl starts awakening from her cultural lethargy and begins to identify with her Amerindian roots, she cannot finish developing her *mestizo* consciousness because her mentor’s influence vanishes and the Ladino one drags her back to the tragic impossibility of reconciliation between her European and indigenous cultural roots.

Although Antonio, the protagonist of *Bless Me, Ultima*, is not a female character, his mentor is a woman with a conscience of the hybridity of the culture in which she has developed. This woman guides Antonio to select those elements from the past and tradition that will help him establish bridges of understanding not only within himself but also with the Anglo culture. In short, Antonio learns to see his past, present, and future reality through that new consciousness that avoids the conflictual model of dualistic thinking.

As a matter of fact, if one compares Paz’s model of *mestizaje* with Anzaldúa’s and Vasconcelos’, it is evident that the main difference between them is that Paz’s describes mestizos’ impossibility of opening themselves to exterior influences on account of an inferiority complex, a complex whose roots can be traced to the trauma of the conquest. On the other hand, Anzaldúa and Vasconcelos propose a model based on openness to the exterior and the influence of other cultures. Especially in Anzaldúa’s approach, it is implied that such openness is feasible by breaking stereotypes. Hence, the new *mestiza*—and I would say every *mestizo* with a new consciousness—conforms to neither the deterministic and male-centered patterns of other *mestizos* nor the fixed ideas

and prejudices of the Eurocentric dominant culture. Therefore, the new *mestizo* needs to create his/her own image of himself/herself and keep that image flexible and open to changes. In short, openness and creativity is the key for *mestizos'* psychological decolonization and cultural survival.

Homi K. Bhabha, too, pays attention to the function of stereotypes and fixity as instruments to perpetuate colonial discourse and relationships based on binary thinking. This East Indian critic conceives the stereotype included in colonial discourse as a fetish. Bhabha says,

I argue for the reading of the stereotype in terms of fetishism. The myth of historical origination—racial purity, cultural priority—produced in relation to the colonial stereotype functions to “normalize” the multiple beliefs and split subjects that constitute colonial discourse as a consequence of its process of disavowal. (74)

As in Freudian terms, a fetish helps some people “normalize” their sexual pleasure, the stereotypes that circulate within a colonial—or even post-colonial—society help the colonizer justify his/her position as dominator and support racism. Such stereotypes are always based on superficial characteristics (e.g. the color of the skin) and cannot be sustained by real arguments but by myths of origin since they seek to deny the racial and cultural multiplicity of most colonial histories. The problem of stereotypes is that they have not only permeated the minds, discourse, and practices of the dominator, but also of the dominated. What is more, even though a particular colonial system has fallen, some vestiges persist and stereotypes survive. Therefore, Anzaldúa’s and Vasconcelos’ model of openness implies the awareness of those vestigial stereotypes and a re-evaluation of

the *mestizo*'s image of himself/herself. That re-evaluation should be founded on the extirpation of an imposed portrait that supposedly represents him/her, but that is indeed an alien. In other words, it is a kind of cultural exorcism that liberates the *mestizo* in order to construct a new and authentic identity freely. In opposition to the stereotypes of colonial discourse, this new, open identity is not primarily based on difference but on similitude. Thus, this new *mestizo* or *mestiza* is able to reaffirm his/her uniqueness and at the same time recognize his/her likeness and coincidences with respect to other cultures. As I will illustrate in each chapter of this study, the protagonists of the novels undergo that process of awareness, cultural exorcism, and destruction of stereotypes. Antonio succeeds in passing through all of the stages, whereas the Ladino girl's narration at the end of *Balún-Canán* reflects that she is still striving to get rid of certain colonial vestiges and make the image of herself coalesce. This difference is certainly founded on the national and historical contexts of the novels. In *Balún-Canán*, the contact between *mestizos* and Indians is constant, conflicting, and problematic; it even engenders violence and a lack of understanding. On the other hand, that contact is scarce in the New Mexican community described in *Bless Me, Ultima*. However, there is more identification between *mestizos* and Native Americans than between them and Anglos. Because of this situation Antonio can complete his apprenticeship by his indigenous mentor's side, whereas the girl suffers the pressures of a culture that wants her to break any harmonious and egalitarian relation with the Tzeltal Indians.

The idea of cultural closeness and openness I mentioned in previous pages is implied in Édouard Glissant's theory of root identity and relation identity. This Martinican poet explains that root identity "is founded in the distant past [...]" and "is

ratified by a claim to legitimacy that allows a community to proclaim its entitlement to the possession of a land, which thus becomes a territory” (143). On the other hand, Glissant affirms that relation identity “is linked to the conscious and contradictory experience of contacts among cultures [...]”; “[it] exults the thought of errantry and of totality” (144). In other words root identity has to do with cultural filiation and a willingness to attain the supposed destiny that is declared through certain myths of origin. Such a filiation provokes violence and conquest, and it emphasizes the difference of one specific people from another. Conversely, relation identity focuses on the necessity of exchange and does not link itself to a particular territory. In fact, relation identity regards land “as a place where one gives-on-and-with rather than grasps” (144). Because of that inclination to exchange—cultural, economic, and physical—relation identity should be seen as an open model, while the most conspicuous characteristic of root identity is exclusivity.

If one analyzes the socio-cultural context of *Balún-Canán* and *Bless Me, Ultima*, the conclusion is that the protagonists are experiencing a situation of liminality since they live in the interstices between root and relation identity. In the case of Antonio, he undergoes the clash of two kinds of root identity—the Chicano and the Anglo-American. Concerning the Chicano people from southwestern United States—the place where Antonio lives—they have appropriated the myth of Aztlán, the place Aztecs supposedly left in order to look for a promised land southward. Chicanos or Mexican Americans regard themselves as descendants of that same people who lived in Aztlán, so they have returned to that place that once belonged to their Indian ancestors. In that sense, Chicanos have embedded their identity on that myth that legitimates them as the true owners of a

territory that was annexed to the United States after the Mexican-American war of 1846-48. On the other hand, Anglo Americans have justified the appropriation of that territory on the basis of a competing root identity known as the Manifest Destiny or the idea that it is God's will that the United States expands democracy and freedom throughout the American continent. So as not to perpetuate the violence these competing claims initiated and could perpetually foster, Mexican Americans have maintained a relative openness to Anglo-American culture and have selected, and integrated several aspects from it in a very creative way. With regard to the protagonist of *Balún-Canán*, she belongs to a group of people, the Ladinos, who justify the possession of lands and their dominion over hundreds of human souls (i.e. Indians) on the basis of considering themselves the heirs of the Spanish conquistadors of southeastern Mexico, even though they descend from Indians as well. Although the protagonist of Castellanos' novel is immersed in this kind of society, she learns to build bridges to Indian culture and opens herself—with the aid of her Indian nursemaid—to the possibility of breaking colonial stereotypes and, consequently, to emancipation from fixity and racism.

Notwithstanding their relative openness or closeness, the *mestizo* character of the communities where the protagonists of the novels live implies the confluence of diverse—and sometimes contradictory—cultural elements. It is precisely in that concourse of elements where the richness of the *mestizaje* process explained by Vasconcelos and Anzaldúa resides. The clash of European and Indian cultures during the Spanish conquest and colonization of the Americas triggered a phenomenon of cultural negotiation that is known as transculturation. In his book *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar* (1940), the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz coined that term to

explain the emergence of a new culture out of the contact of two or more different human groups. As they enter into contact, it is possible that at least two of those groups suffer a partial *deculturation* (i.e. they lose part of their characteristics) and experience a *neoculturation* or the adoption of new elements (Ortiz 92-93, 96). This kind of cultural exchanges usually occur under circumstances of domination and oppression. However, this process is almost imperceptibly at first to the dominant culture. In fact, the dominators may think that their culture is completely absorbing and destroying the other's. Nonetheless, the culture that is apparently weaker is finally able to preserve many of its elements by mixing them with the dominators' culture.

Ortiz explains that even though the new creature (i.e. the resulting new culture) has certain features from both cultural "progenitors," it is always different from each of them (96-97). In order to illustrate that phenomenon, Ortiz refers to the various and sometimes concurrent transculturations of several groups of people occurring on the Cuban island. First, he describes the transculturation that took place when Neolithic Taino Amerindians conquered the Paleolithic Ciboney and Guanajabibe peoples. Later on, the Spaniards came, dominated and destroyed the aboriginal inhabitants, brought their cultures, and imported African slaves who were violently uprooted from their land and cultural environment. On the basis of productive activities such as the cultivation of tobacco and sugarcane, European and African cultures entered an exchange and negotiation of beliefs, values, and technology. Additionally, other groups immigrated to Cuba, including Amerindians from the continent, Portuguese, Jews, French, Anglo-Saxons, and even Chinese. The result, according to Ortiz, is the multiracial and multicultural people of Cuba.

One of the best examples of transculturation in Cuban culture is religious syncretism. It is not a secret that many of the Catholic saints that present Cubans revere are masked representations of ancient African deities. During colonial times, it was a way in which black slaves expressed supposed allegiance to the masters' religion without quitting their deeply rooted beliefs. Similar phenomena are described in Castellanos', and Anaya's novels; the protagonists witness and participate in syncretic practices and beliefs. As *mestizo* people, they are the result of an ancestral negotiation between European and Amerindian elements. As the protagonists develop that new consciousness referred to by Anzaldúa, they are able to benefit from those elements and use them to construct their identity and in some cases avoid both cultural inertia and acculturation.

As Peruvian critic David Sobrevilla mentions, Ortiz clearly distinguishes between acculturation and transculturation. The former implies a process according to which one dominated culture *passively* receives certain elements from the dominant culture. In short, a phenomenon of total deculturation (i.e. a complete loss of a culture) occurs. On the contrary, transculturation deals with an *active* process since one culture entering into contact with another incorporates some elements from the latter without completely giving up its own characteristics (21). In his *Transculturación narrativa en América Latina* (1982), Uruguayan Ángel Rama emphasizes such a creative component of transculturation and adds some ideas to Ortiz's theories in order to apply them to literary studies. Rama asserts that within the process of transculturation four main operations occur: losses, selections, re-discoveries, and incorporations. These operations are concomitant and their result is a general reconstruction of the cultural system. Such a reconstruction represents the creative climax within a process of transculturation (39).

Although a culture may lose certain elements as it enters in contact with another, there is a creative system that selects what to keep, what to incorporate from an alien culture, and what to re-incorporate from all of those values, beliefs, or practices that were previously lost.

Within the Latin American context, Rama has perceived a transculturation on account of the conflict between modernization and tradition. This phenomenon has been evident in the dichotomy between the poor rural groups and the urban consumeristic societies. He argues that because of the latter's modernizing pressure over the former, Latin American rural societies have lost certain elements of their cultures but at the same time have developed cultural mechanisms to resist the outburst of those external forces (74-75). Such dichotomy and conflict between modernization and tradition are present in *Balún-Canán* and *Bless Me, Ultima*. These novels offer several examples of the influence of modernizing projects over traditional cultures both in southeastern Mexico and southwestern United States. Although that influence jeopardizes the continuity and existence of certain values, institutions, and beliefs, the protagonists are able to benefit from some elements of modernization and incorporate them as pieces of their own identity. In other words, modernization should not be excluded from the model of *mestizo* openness. On the contrary, it could help hybrid cultures get rid of ancestral atavisms (e.g. male chauvinism and racism) and facilitate contact and communication with other cultures in order to create bridges of understanding and negotiation.

It could be argued that modernization often destroys the memories in which traditional rituals, practices, and beliefs are embedded. However, some communities and peoples have developed a mechanism to counteract the process of sweeping off memories

in the modern world. French critic Pierre Nora has analyzed that process and realized that when *milieux de mémoire*—the “settings in which memory is a real part of everyday experience” (1)—disappear, *lieux de mémoire* or sites of memory are established to play the role of reminders of events and myths from the past that give a certain society cohesion and coherence. Among those *lieux de mémoire* there are monuments, archives, museums, and even songs that help people link themselves with the past and be hopeful about the projection of their culture into the future. “When certain minorities create protected enclaves as preserves of memory to be jealously safeguarded, they reveal what is true of all *lieux de mémoire*: that without commemorative vigilance, history would soon sweep them away,” says Nora (7). Although he does not mention the possibility of creating *lieux de mémoire* linked to the natural environment, I argue that natural spots are precisely the most recurrent places that the protagonists of *Balún-Canán* and *Bless Me, Ultima* have transformed into symbols of important experiences and knowledge they are using to construct their identity. In comparison to most of the *lieux de mémoire*, which are conspicuous and well known by the public, those natural enclaves where the protagonists try to preserve their memories do not have any meaning to the population in general but to a reduced group or even just to a single person, that is, the protagonist himself/herself.

The way proposed in *Balún-Canán* and *Bless Me, Ultima* is a path that leads to unmasking *mestizo* individuals so that they realize they do not have to perpetuate those elements of their cultures that represent obstacles for them to become authentic and free from prejudices. After one is able to see his/her image clearly without the deforming glasses of imposed worldviews, the idea that identity is a feature that has only to do with

the past disappears. In fact, that awareness and new consciousness of both the atavisms and richness of the *mestizo* culture let both the Ladino girl and Antonio enter the route that leads to the re-appropriation of their own being and its projection into the future without disavowing their past and tradition. In the case of Antonio, he succeeds in transforming himself into a shaman who mediates between his people and the spirits from the past and who leads them across the threshold of the future. On the contrary, the protagonist of *Balún-Canán* does not completely get rid of those atavisms and imposed images of her surrounding reality. Therefore, her narration reflects a more desperate sense of urgency. Although both children develop within hybrid communities, Antonio's is more open to changes and negotiation because of its geographical and cultural location between the Hispanic and Anglo worlds. On the contrary, the Ladino girl's town is completely fragmented because of miscommunication between Ladinos and Indians. In addition, its geographical and historical contexts make those people live in a state of isolation with respect to the cultural mainstream of central Mexican—especially Mexico City. This closed society has developed a series of mechanisms to ensure its members will not abandon the colonial model of exploitation against Indian and women.

Gender is precisely one factor that pushes the protagonist of *Balún-Canán* to failure, whereas it propitiates Antonio's success in constructing his identity. The societies of Chiapas and New Mexico depicted in the novels are indeed male-centered. Therefore, it is probable that if Antonio had not been a boy but a girl, his situation would have been similar to the Ladino child's. Tony has to undergo the internal war provoked by the conflicting voices within him, but he does not need to struggle against the patriarchal

order. In contrast, the protagonist of *Balún-Canán* loses the battle as she cannot see herself unlinked to an order that makes her feel inferior because she is a girl.

BALÚN-CANÁN: WRITTEN NARRATION AS A SITE OF GATHERING

*No es posible vivir
con este rostro
que es el mío verdadero
y que aún no conozco.*

Rosario Castellanos

Racism and political, social, and religious conflicts have been a quotidian issue since the sixteenth century in Chiapas, Mexico's southernmost state. Although this situation is not new, the entire world has become more aware of it in recent years on account of the indigenous *zapatista* rebellion that began in January 1994. That same turbulent Chiapas is the scene for Rosario Castellanos' *Balún-Canán*, a novel that describes a society living not only in a political frontier between Mexico and Guatemala, but also in the interstices between Amerindian and *mestizo* cultures. Castellanos depicts in this particular work how, in the middle of a post-revolutionary period, Chiapas faces the transition from Ladinos' domination over Tzeltal Indians to a situation of supposed equality before the law. Neither Ladinos nor Indians have been able to assimilate those social and political changes that should have emerged from the reforms established by the regime of Mexican President Lázaro Cárdenas in the 1930s.

In Castellanos' novel, a seven-year-old girl becomes witness to those conflicts caused by racism, exploitation against Indians, and landowners' discontent with respect to the post-revolutionary agrarian reform in Mexico. Such conflicts are just the external expression of a more profound inner clash that occurs as Chiapas' people in general—and the protagonist of the novel in particular—try to construct their identity within a society that rejects its own Indian roots and where women are regarded as inferior before men. In other words, *Balún-Canán* presents how vestiges of colonial discourse and practices are still present in a bloody Mexico that spent more than ten years (1910-21) in a revolution that many hoped would defeat those same colonial legacies. Rosa María Alcalá Esqueda refers to the Mexican Revolution's failure in Chiapas and affirms that Castellanos' novel shows how colonial domination patterns are constantly repeated despite the fact that Mexico has been immersed in a trend of sociopolitical transformations (23). This assertion is related to Paz's idea about the superposition and intermingling of diverse historical epochs in Mexico. Paz says that many groups of people in Mexico live in a different historical level with respect to the others. For instance, he makes reference to populations living “antes de la historia” (11) [“in prehistoric times” (11)], whereas others—like Otomí Indians—exist “al margen de [la historia]” (11) [“on the outer margins of history”] (11). In the case of Mexico during the 1930s, as Paz also explains, revolutionary reforms, such as the introduction of socialist education in the schools, were implemented in a country where capitalism was still incipient. Concerning Chiapas, as reflected in *Balún-Canán*, a semi-feudal economic system and a masked slavery persist in spite of the progressive ideals included in the Mexican Constitution of 1917.

As mentioned in the introduction to this study, writing becomes an essential element for the protagonist of *Balún-Canán* partially to solve that inner conflict emerging from her own cultural hybridity and the interstitial state of a society that has been reluctant to abandon certain colonial practices and views. In this chapter, I will discuss how *Balún-Canán* is a novel presenting the construction of identity as a fiction-creating process. Therefore, it implies the selective inclusion and exclusion of memories and the protagonist's re-imagining of herself, other characters, and the events from the past. In the case of the Ladino girl, this process is also linked to a reinterpretation of her role as a member of the dominant class and as a woman. Such a reinterpretation leads to a breaking of conventions and consuetudinary rules that are embedded in the economic activities of the region (i.e. sugar and coffee plantation systems), institutions—such as family, the Catholic Church, and school—and ancestral, patriarchal traditions.

As a matter of fact, *Balún-Canán* has to do with the fissuring of the male-Ladino-centered authority and with the frustrated beginning of a harmonious relationship between Ladinos and Indians. The closeness established between the protagonist and her nursemaid—not free from certain conflicts—represents a hope of reconciliation for a society founded on the principles of caste and race. The girl could have become an agent of transition between two separate and apparently irreconcilable worlds. However, the mentoring figure represented by the Indian nursemaid could not complete her labor as a mediator between the girl and the historical past, indigenous tradition, and nature since their relationship is abruptly broken. Despite this premature separation, the child is able partially to fill the gaps of oblivion by re-creating herself and her nursemaid through an autobiographical narration. By recounting this abruption, the girl narrator is implying that

Ladinos—and every *mestizo* in general—will not be able to reconcile with their past and their present hybridity until they recognize Indians’ value as human beings and their wisdom. Otherwise, Ladinos and their descendants will constantly suffer a cultural rip as they try to rid themselves of their Amerindian roots.

Castellanos, *Balún-Canán*, and the *Indigenista* Movement

Although literary works become independent from their authors when they are published, some biographical and bibliographical elements concerning Castellanos will be helpful to better understand *Balún-Canán* and why this Mexican female writer was interested in offering a view of the conflictive relations in Chiapas’ society. Although Castellanos was born in Mexico City (May 25, 1925), she grew up in Comitán—the same city where the events of the novel take place, fifty-six miles from the Mexico-Guatemala border. She actually got imbued with Chiapas’ folklore, traditions, landscape, ethnical multiplicity, socio-political tensions, and cultural hybridity. Like the seven-year-old protagonist of *Balún-Canán*, Castellanos belonged to the Ladino privileged class. In the words of Joanna O’Connell,

Her family was part of the old elite that derived its status in Chiapas from its Spanish conquistador ancestors. Their local domination was built on the exploitation of indigenous labor and buttressed by a racist ideology that dictated the cultural and racial superiority of their class. (14)

According to O’Connell, Castellanos and her brother Mario Benjamín lived in a state of isolation during their childhood (14), although they were constantly traveling from

Comitán to their father's ranch El Rosario and vice versa. In an article entitled "Rosario Castellanos: rostro que ríe, rostro que llora," Elena Poniatowska concurs as she recounts that Castellanos was a kind of recluse and she only could have contact with the world through people who came to visit (496-97). That loneliness became yet more poignant after her brother died from appendicitis when he was still a boy. By that time, just like the protagonist of *Balún-Canán* did, Rosario confirmed that her parents—César Castellanos and Adriana Figueroa—had a preference for Mario Benjamín. One day, after her brother's death, she listened to her father say, "Ahora ya no tenemos por quién luchar" ["Now, we don't have anyone to fight for"⁵] (qtd. in *¡Ay vida...!* 91). Like the protagonist of her novel, Castellanos was marginalized because of patriarchal values deeply rooted in Chiapas society, including the idea that male children—and not female—represent the continuity of Ladino domination since they will be the heirs of their family lands and servants. Additionally, women are regarded in that society just as the vehicle to bear and raise those heirs.

As O'Connell recounts, during her early years in Chiapas, Castellanos had close contact with indigenous people. An Indian nanny named Rufina took care of her and Mario; in addition, a Chamula girl—María Escandón—was hired by Castellanos' mother to work as the children's "playmate and toy" (O'Connell 15). As a Ladino girl and despite those contacts, Rosario considered Indians to be inferior, even "part of the landscape" (qtd. in Allgood xxii). Throughout the years, Castellanos had to develop a consciousness of the cruelties Indians suffered at the hands of the landowners and the absurdity of the semi-feudal system in Chiapas.

⁵ Translation is mine.

Between 1952 and 1956, Castellanos wrote poetry, dramatic works, and short stories (O’Connell 21). She also started writing her first novel, *Balún-Canán*, after Mexican playwright Emilio Carballido suggested she recover her childhood memories (*¡Ay vida...!* 90). As Castellanos was creating such a novel, she began to be aware of her debt to the Indians of Chiapas. She enjoyed the commodities of a privileged life during childhood because of the sweat and exploitation of those Indians who cultivated her father’s lands and served her at home.

Castellanos’ narrative usually denounces the oppression of indigenous people in Mexico. Because of this characteristic, literary critics have situated her in the trend of *indigenismo*. With respect to this term, O’Connell says, “The word has been used since the twenties and thirties as an overarching label to characterize writing that shares the theme of the suffering and oppression of indigenous people in Latin America” (58). O’Connell refers to Jean Franco, who makes a clear differentiation between three literary *indigenista* approaches and periods. The first one is the Indianist period of the late nineteenth century; the second period is the social realist *indigenismo* from the early twentieth century to 1950, and the third is the new *indigenismo* after 1950 (O’Connell 58). María Luisa Gil Iriarte offers an explication of these categories; she says that the Indianist novel presents a Manichaean view since it depicts the Indian as a noble being, whereas the Spanish conquistador is described as a barbaric one. On the contrary, the *indigenista* novel cultivated during the first half of the twentieth century is more committed to offering a realistic and impartial view of the Amerindian. With regard to the new *indigenista* novel—or novel of anthropologic re-creation—it adds a social

critique to that realistic character and reflects the process of transculturation in Latin America (Gil Iriarte 122).

On the basis of this classification, *Balún-Canán* and other texts by Castellanos can be included in the new *indigenista* movement. More specifically, Castellanos' *indigenista* works have been considered part of a trend known as *ciclo de Chiapas*, which encompasses those narrative works—written between 1948 and 1962—that pay attention to Indian-Ladino relations and whose authors have a profound knowledge of the socio-cultural background of the region (Gil Iriarte 123). Among those novels and short stories included in that category, one can mention Ricardo Pozas' *Juan Pérez Jolote* (1948), Ramón Rubín's *El callado dolor de los tzotziles*, María Lombardo de Caso's *La culebra tapó el río* (1962), and of course Castellanos' novels *Balún-Canán* and *Oficio de tinieblas* and her collection of short stories entitled *Ciudad Real*.

No doubt, *Balún-Canán* evidences the profound knowledge and critical view Castellanos had concerning the indigenous world of Chiapas. On that note, I consider this novel to be inscribed in the *indigenista* movement. However, *Balún-Canán* goes beyond that depiction and analysis of the Indians' situation in that part of Mexico; indeed, I regard it as a novel of identity and exploration. Although some of the main characters in this work are Tzeltal Indians, the protagonist is *mestizo* and all the conflict centers on the discovery and exploration of her own hybridity. Therefore, *Balún-Canán* not only denounces the ignominious mistreatment and exploitation of the Indians, but also touches the bleeding cultural and social wound of *mestizos* in general and Mexicans in particular: a fear to establish communicating vessels between their European and Amerindian

elements in order to overcome internal division and construct a harmonious being on the basis of the exchange and negotiation of those elements.

Chiapas: Remoteness and Colonial Persistence

Chiapas, one of the southeastern states of present Mexico, has been one of the regions of this country where the problematic legacies of the Spanish conquest—including social and cultural division, racism, and ethnic conflicts—are most pronounced. It is ironic that the effects of the conquest have so strongly permeated Chiapas, a territory that did not represent a priority for the Spanish conquistadors after they defeated the Aztec empire in 1521. As Emilio Zebadúa mentions, such indifference had to do in part with the material poverty of the indigenous communities and their isolation because of the nature of the region—covered by high mountains and jungle (42-44). Nonetheless, the Spaniards finally subjugated the Indian peoples, which include three different ethnic groups: the Mayan family (Tzotzil, Tzeltal, Lacandon, and Quelquen Indians), the Zoque, and the Chiapanecas.

During the last third of the nineteenth century, Mexican President Porfirio Díaz's regime became interested in Chiapas' natural resources. Therefore, the government financed several projects that enhanced the infrastructure in the state and attracted foreign and national investments, especially in products such as sugar cane, coffee, cacao, and precious woods. As Zebadúa mentions, despite this economic growth, Chiapas continued to be a poor state and most of the population lived in deplorable conditions (131).

Additionally, Indians and peasants in general were still exploited by the Ladino economic elite.

The rise of the revolutionary forces led by Francisco I. Madero in 1910 made Díaz's regime collapse. Mexico entered, then, a phase of constant disputes between *caudillos*,⁶ and it took several years for the revolutionary parties to create a new constitution in 1917 and propitiate the equal distribution of the land, and the right to receive a free education and a fair salary. Jan De Vos affirms that the Indians were recruited by their Ladino masters in order to organize a guerrilla struggle and avoid the application of such reforms in Chiapas (191-92). In other words, the semi-feudal system continued unaffected and Chiapas became the most retrograde state of the country. As described in *Balún-Canán*, this situation began to change partially after General Lázaro Cárdenas assumed the presidency of Mexico in 1934. De Vos indicates that Cárdenas imposed the reforms by using the federal force. Hence, the benefits of the Revolution started reaching Chiapas' Indian population. Nonetheless, De Vos argues that Indians' independence and political autonomy were seriously compromised since they had to support a benefactor system that was founded on the subordination to a single party who governed Mexico from the late 1920s until the year 2000 (193).

By no means were the conditions of poverty, racism, and social inequality surmounted on account of Cárdenas' reforms. As a matter of fact, political, economic, social, and even religious interests of the Ladino elite—in addition to the convenience Indians found in partial benefits proceeding from the government—provoked an interruption of the revolutionary process.

⁶ *Caudillo*: Political and military leader who tries to impose his authority over a region or country.

One of the main reasons why the Mexican Revolution failed was the contradictory ideas that its protagonists had concerning the goals of this movement. Paz affirms that “Gracias a la Revolución el mexicano quiere reconciliarse con su Historia y con su origen” (132) [“Thanks to the Revolution, the Mexican wants to reconcile himself with his history and his origins” (147)]. However, one should ask to what origins is Paz referring? Because of the persistent division within every Mexican and his/her lack of clarity with regard to his/her origins, some opted to return to the communal economic system that Indians had before the Spanish conquest, whereas others focused their attention on dismantling the colonial and semi-feudal vestiges in order to open the door to foreign capitals—especially American investment—and the creation of a local bourgeoisie. In short, although Mexicans wanted to reconcile themselves with their past through the Revolution, this movement was poisoned by the affiliation with just the indigenous root and a fear to profoundly explore the uniqueness of the *mestizo* origins of Mexico. In addition, I argue that another factor that provoked the failure of this Revolution was its inability to destroy one of the most pernicious atavisms of the colonial era, that is, the concentration of power in one person or a few privileged people. Revolutionary *caudillos* resemble Spanish viceroys who governed without paying attention to the needs of marginalized people such as Indians and Blacks. They just were interested in sitting on the presidential chair to obtain benefits for their own faction.

In the case of Chiapas, the eventual alliance between Ladino landowners and Indians was possible because both groups were still living in colonial times; they were reluctant to change. Ladinos wanted neither to lose their privileges nor leave their lands so that people from central Mexico or even foreigners obtained benefits. On the other

hand, Indians feared punishment by their masters if they supported the Revolution; at the same time, they were not sure that their situation would be better if the revolutionary *caudillos* got the power. At least they knew their masters because their ancestors had served them.

The Ladino-Indian tensions—notably depicted by Castellanos in *Balún-Canán*—have their origins in the fear and hatred produced by “the other,” either Ladino or Indian, on the basis of the incompatibility of two different worldviews (Gall 62-64). In this respect, Chiapas is an atypical case since the *mestizo* population is a minority, while in other states of Mexico they represent a majority in comparison to Indians. Notwithstanding their minority character, the Ladinos have been the holders of political and economic power in Chiapas after the Spanish domination collapsed in the early nineteenth century. As it is reflected in *Balún-Canán*, despite their position of power and the fear and hatred they have cultivated against Indians throughout the years, Ladinos have not been immune to Indian cultural influence. Likewise, Chiapas’ Indians have not been able to resist the imprint of Ladino culture on theirs.

Viewing Differences; Setting Solidarity

Not having a name—being anonymous—is one of the symptoms of deprivation and placelessness suffered by marginalized individuals in a specific society. Such is the case of both the seven-year-old protagonist of *Balún-Canán* and her indigenous nursemaid. Neither has a name; neither is considered indispensable within the convergent and at the same time clashing worlds of Ladinos and Tzeltal Indians in Chiapas. Both the

girl and her nanny share a position as marginalized people in a society where vestiges of colonial discourse are still in force. The protagonist child is rejected within her own family because of her gender, whereas the Indian woman is perceived among the Ladinos as an inferior person on account of her ethnicity. Additionally, this Indian woman is not well accepted by other Tzeltal Indians since she “[quiere] a los que mandan, a los que poseen”⁷ (*Balún-Canán* 16) [“(loves) those that give orders and have possessions” (*The Nine Guardians* 19)]. As a consequence of that common position, both characters establish a solidarity that enables them to resist such a discriminatory situation and face the beginning of the collapse of a male- and Ladino-centered system.

Before the Ladino girl establishes a close relationship with her nursemaid, she needs to get rid of the colonial discourse she has learned from her parents and become aware of her own condition as a hybrid, discriminated individual. In fact, the protagonist’s evolution depicted in *Balún-Canán* goes from the complete contempt with regard to Indians to a development of compassion and love for them.

According to Homi K. Bhabha, “The objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction” (70). He adds that the creation of stereotypes is the major discursive strategy of colonialism (66). Such strategy and the conception of Amerindians as a degenerate race are two of the characteristics of the discourse the Ladino girl has primarily learned at home. Her parents treat Indians contemptuously. For instance, Zoraida—the girl’s mother—resorts to

⁷ Every time I cite from Castellanos’ novel in Spanish, I will use the twenty-seventh reprinting version published in Mexico City by Fondo de Cultura Económica in 2002. Translations from those quotes have been taken from *The Nine Guardians*, the English version of *Balún-Canán*, translated by Irene Nicholson and published by Readers International in Columbia, LA, in 1992.

stereotypes of the Indians to justify the right of Ladinos to possess the lands. As Zoraida talks about President Cárdenas and his reforms, she says,

¿Justo? ¿Cuando pisotea nuestros derechos, cuando nos arrebatara nuestras propiedades? Y para dárselas ¿a quiénes?, a los indios. [...] es que nunca se ha acercado a ellos ni ha sentido cómo apestan a suciedad y a trago. Es que nunca les ha hecho un favor para que le devolvieran ingratitud. No les ha encargado una tarea para que mida su haraganería. ¡Son tan hipócritas, y tan solapados y tan falsos! (46)

Fair? When he tramples on our rights, when he seizes our properties? And to give them—to whom? The Indians. [...] he's never been near and found out how they stink of filth and drink. He's never done them a favour and been rewarded with their ingratitude. He's never given them a job to do and taken the measure of their laziness. And they're so hypocritical, so underhand, so deceitful! (46)

That is the kind of words the protagonist hears at home. She has been taught that *every* Indian is filthy, lazy, deceitful, and a drunk. Stereotypes are founded on generalizations so the girl has internalized the idea that every Indian is ignorant. She refers to her indigenous nursemaid in these terms, “¿Sabe mi nana que la odio cuando me peina? *No lo sabe. No sabe nada. Es india,*⁸ está descalza y no usa ropa debajo de la tela azul del tzeq” (10) [“Does Nana know I hate her when she combs my hair? *No, she doesn't. She doesn't know anything. She's Indian,* she doesn't wear shoes, and has no other garment under the blue cloth of the *tzeq*” (14)]. It is clear that the protagonist does not only think that

⁸ Italics are mine.

ignorance is a characteristic of her nanny's particular ethnicity, but she also links the Indian woman's cultural practices and customs with her supposed lack of knowledge. As a matter of fact, one of the reasons for the girl's lack of understanding concerning Indian culture is her inability to communicate with them. As mentioned on the previous pages, as a Ladino the protagonist experiences fear of the "Other." She is even scared of the Tzeltal language, "a pesar de que [lo ha] escuchado tantas veces" (12) ["though [she has] heard [it] so often" (15)]. The Tzeltal world is then strange and alien to the youngster; she even considers being Indian a punishment—she stops desiring to drink coffee after her nanny jokingly tells her that drinking that beverage could make her an Indian.

Family is not the only institution where the Ladino girl has been permeated by vestiges of colonial discourse; school functions, too, as an important mediator between the protagonist and her reality. For example, she learns from her teacher Silvina a Eurocentric version of a historical event that represented the beginning of exploitation and discrimination against Amerindians—including Chiapas' ethnic groups. Silvina teaches the Ladino child that Christopher Columbus *discovered* the American continent, and the girl accepts this version without noticing that the ancestors of the Indians her family despises were the original, true discoverers and owners of that land before the Spaniards came.

In spite of such colonial influences, the child starts getting rid of her contemptuous attitude with regard to Indians as she begins to realize there are certain commonalities between her and the nursemaid. The protagonist finds out that her nanny has been rejected by her own people—as I had previously explained—just as the girl herself has suffered discrimination within the walls of her own home because of her

gender. In other words, the protagonist becomes aware of her “in-betweenness.” She belongs to the dominators’ class and ethnicity, but at the same time she belongs to the group of the disfranchised (i.e. women and Indian). Both the child and her nanny are invisible and anonymous to César and Zoraida Argüello, the girl’s parents. On one occasion, the protagonist is contemplating her mother after the latter has taken a bath. Zoraida does not notice the presence of her daughter and starts sharing confidences with the furniture around her. In fact, the youngster needs to keep quiet in order to not ruin the moment. She does not normally have the opportunity to establish such a close, tender approach to Zoraida. Therefore, she does not mind enjoying that false closeness as though she were but a piece of furniture. The girl confides, “Por eso yo apenas me muevo para que no advierta que estoy aquí y me destierre” (228) [“So I scarcely dare move in case she’ll notice I’m here and send me packing” (215)]. A few moments later, the nanny enters the room and—just like the girl—remains as quiet as an object. However, Zoraida finally notices her presence and gets extremely angry. “¿Por qué viniste? No te llamé” (229) [“Why did you come? I didn’t call” (215)], says the mother. Zoraida does not pay attention to the Indian woman; she completely ignores her until she dares to break the silence and tells Zoraida that her dear son Mario will die soon because some Indian shamans have bewitched him. At that moment Zoraida humiliates the nursemaid, beats her, and commands her to leave the Argüellos’ house forever. At that very moment the girl surreptitiously approaches her nanny to console her. That expression of solidarity is the result of having realized that she could have suffered a similar kind of ostracism if she had also broken her silence and invisibility. Indeed, the patriarchal order enforces women’s silence and invisibility in order to enhance men’s

voice and commanding presence. The girl is certain that she has a secondary place in her family since her brother Mario will be the heir of their father's properties and power.

Another factor that helps to change the protagonist's view of the Indian world is her awareness of the unfair and unequal relations between Ladinos and Tzeltals. She also starts seeing her father as the incarnation of that crushing power that has dispossessed Indians from their dignity. The protagonist remembers, "Ahora lo miro por primera vez. Es el que manda, el que posee. Y no puedo soportar su rostro y corro a refugiarme en la cocina" (16) ["I see him now for the first time. He's the one who gives the orders and owns things. I can't bear the look of him and run to take shelter in the kitchen" (20)]. When the girl gets frightened of her own kin, she opts to leave her own world, her false paradise, and explore the others'. She abandons her "natural" space—the patio where her father lies on a hammock and where she used to play—and enters the kitchen, a space where the disfranchised (i.e. Indian and women) are kept out of the sight of César, the patriarch. Therein, the girl sees her nursemaid serve a group of Indians who came to give César a report concerning his hacienda. The child recounts that her nursemaid is serving them with an extreme courtesy as though they were kings. However, "[los indios] tienen en los pies —calzados de caites— costras de lodo; y sus calzones de manta están remendados y sucios y han traído sus morrales vacíos" (16) ["On their feet they (the Indians) wear sandals—and thick cakes of mud; and their breeches of unbleached cotton are patched and dirty, and their food-bags are empty" (20)]. The girl then perceives the nobility of such race whose clothes are poor and whose food-bags are empty because of her kindred's thirst for power. This group of Indians is sitting in a circle as they drink

coffee in the kitchen. Then, as a symbol of her willingness to break the racial barrier, the girl enters the circle and takes a place.

As the protagonist starts connecting with the indigenous world, she begins to understand the suffering of these people. Because of the conflicts that originate on account of the government's land reform, one of César's Indian servants was killed. The girl suffers a nervous breakdown when she looks at the corpse covered by blood and wounds. She happens to have a similar shock some days later when she goes with her mother to clean a Catholic chapel. In that place, she sees an image of Christ on the cross, with blood over His pierced hands and feet. Suddenly, she links such representation of divine suffering to the dead body of that Indian who had been murdered. The girl says, "Es igual (digo señalando al crucifijo), es igual al indio que llevaron macheteado a nuestra casa" (43) [" 'It's like...' I say, pointing to the crucifix, 'it's like the Indian they brought to our house, all cut up with the machete' " (43)]. I consider that revelatory moment as a total collapse of the colonial conceptions and worldview the girl had learned at home and school. For the first time, she realizes that those Indians who have been used and treated as objects are capable of having the same kind of suffering that conquistadors' and Ladinos' white God experienced. It seems as if Jesus' words—"Verily I say unto you, inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (*King James Version*, Matt. 25.40)—were resounding within the girl. The stereotypes she had accepted from colonial discourse disintegrate at that moment, and she is ready to explore the world of those who have felt the Spanish and Ladino oppression since the sixteenth century.

Even before having this revelatory experience, the protagonist had accepted her nursemaid as a source of knowledge to understand Indians—and therefore the girl’s own Indian roots as a Ladino. As previously mentioned, at the beginning of *Balún-Canán* the protagonist regards her nursemaid as an ignorant being. This conception is transformed until the child sees the Indian woman as her main and most reliable source. She asserts, “Entonces, como de costumbre, cuando quiero saber algo, voy a preguntárselo a la nana” (27) [“So, as usual when I want to know anything, I go and ask Nana” (29)]. After the protagonist gets rid of contemptuousness, she becomes her nursemaid’s disciple and accepts her as a mediator.

Balún-Canán offers a contestatory and critical view of the status quo by contrasting that apprentice-mentor relationship to the association between César Argüello and his nephew Ernesto. As I have already mentioned, both the child and her nanny represent some marginal segments of society. Although their relation is not free from conflict, it is characterized by solidarity, appreciation, and love. As illustrated earlier, the protagonist’s relationship with the indigenous mentoring figure evolves from rejection to love and admiration. On the other hand, the relation between César and Ernesto goes the opposite direction (i.e. from admiration and hope to aversion). Ernesto is the illegitimate son of César’s brother and of a poor *mestizo* woman. Thus, while the girl represents the discriminated sector of women, Ernesto incarnates the suffering coming from that same discrimination in a phallogentric society where men and women comply with different standards of morality. In Mexican traditional culture—and by extension in Chiapas’—men are to *chingar* while women are to be the *chingadas*. Octavio Paz explains that the verb *chingar*—so popular in Mexican Spanish—is linked to the act of sexual humiliation,

rape, and deceit (70). In the case of Ernesto, he feels ashamed and inferior before his uncle because the latter's brother—also named Ernesto—deceived his mother. Therefore, Ernesto regards himself as a son of “La Chingada.” Paz says, “el ‘hijo de la Chingada’ es el engendro de la violación, del rapto o de la burla” (72) [“The *hijo de la Chingada* is the offspring of violation, abduction or deceit” (79)]. Notwithstanding his inferiority complex, Ernesto finds hope when César tells him that he does not care about his illegitimacy. In addition, he remarks his nephew's racial characteristics, compares him to his brother, and praises Ernesto's supposed intelligence: “Eres blanco como él, tienes los ojos claros. [...] Pareces listo, desenvuelto. Podrías aspirar a cosas mejores” (54) [You're as white-skinned as he was, you've got blue eyes. [...] You seem intelligent, advanced for your age. You should aim higher” (53)]. However, these eulogies are but a trap. César just wants to use Ernesto to be compliant with a new federal law establishing that landowners should provide a teacher for their Indians workers in ranches and haciendas; César regards that young man as a potential and innocuous teacher who does not speak the Tzeltal language and will not introduce radical ideas to his ranch in Chactajal. So one of the main differences between the girl's relationship with the Indian woman and the César-Ernesto association is that the child and her nanny have established a sincere link founded on equality—the girl identifies with her on account of their common marginality—and a mutual hope, whereas the relationship between César and Ernesto is based on César's egocentric purposes and Ernesto's false hope to become accepted as a real Argüello. In other words, the female association is presented as a kind of mutualism. In opposition, the male association is depicted as a parasitic relation.

In the second part of the novel, the fragile relationship between Ernesto and César deteriorates little by little. While the former considers his uncle to be a substitute for an absent father, César despises Ernesto because of his incompetence at horseback riding and cattle management. In addition, the landowner constantly reminds Ernesto about his illegitimate origin. In opposition to the solidarity and attraction experienced between the Ladino girl and her nursemaid, Ernesto and César start experiencing a mutual rejection. Both César and Ernesto are Ladinos, but this ethnic commonality is not sufficient to overcome Ernesto's stigma as a "son of La Chingada." Additionally, although Ernesto is condemned to a state of in-betweenness like the protagonist's, he never receives the aid of any mentor to overcome his internal division and confusion. What is more, César could have become such a mentor, but he is not capable of helping his nephew since he is immersed in that unsolved confusion as well. On the other hand, the girl and her nanny belong to different castes, but they are equal with respect to their condition as marginalized. Ernesto's words concerning this conflict and distance emerging between him and his uncle are very eloquent: "—Es la trampa de siempre —pensó Ernesto apretando los puños. Un poco de amabilidad, una sonrisa como la que se le dedica a un perro. Y, después, la patada, la humillación. No; no hay que tratar de acercarse a él [a César]. *No somos iguales*"⁹ (186) ["'The usual trap,' thought Ernesto clenching his fists. 'A bit of friendliness, the kind of smile one gives a dog. Then a kick and humiliation. It's no use trying to approach this man. *We're not equals*'" (175)]. Delusion of equality becomes disillusionment. Finally, this relationship tragically ends when Ernesto is killed during an Indian rebellion in Chactajal.

⁹ Italics are mine.

César's mentoring labor fails on account of his egocentric intentions. As he uses his disciple in order to maintain control over his Indian servants, César loses an opportunity to redeem a life his brother never took care of and to help this young man become a bridge of understanding between Ladinos and Indians. In contrast, the girl and her nursemaid establish an association that uplifts both in spite of conflict. Indeed, the presence of the Indian woman in the protagonist's life is so strong that physical separation cannot completely delete it.

Initiation and Transgression

In one article dealing with Castellanos' short story "Los convidados de agosto," Douglas J. Weatherford pays attention to the constant reference to the theme of female initiation in the works of this Mexican woman writer. Weatherford affirms,

In fact, one of the more remarkable aspects of her literature [Castellanos'] is a proliferation of vocabulary, thematics, and symbology that deal specifically with the critical moments of passage in a woman's life. Her protagonists are frequently liminal, neither here nor there. They gaze into mirrors, dream of the future, and are often associated with ceremonies and sacraments that define coming of age: baptism, new names, quinceañeras, First Communion, confessions, sexuality, menstruation, marriage, motherhood and widowhood. ("The Spinster's Journey" 95)

As a matter of fact, *Balún-Canán* is not an exception; several passages in this novel deal with rites of initiation. Indeed, such ceremonies—especially those that are not sanctioned

by the Ladino society—become an important ingredient in the construction of the protagonist's identity. As the girl starts overcoming the vestiges of colonial discourse and established a relationship with her nursemaid based on equality, she is prepared to be indoctrinated by the nanny and get acquainted with the Indian view of the past and nature. While the child is initiated in that knowledge through a series of unsanctioned rituals, the influence of Ladino culture irrupts. Throughout the novel the protagonist and the Indian woman are separated twice. The first occasion is when the Argüello family leaves Comitán to visit their hacienda in Chactajal—it represents a temporal, physical dissociation. The second time is when Zoraida fires the Indian nursemaid and she is obliged to leave the Argüellos' home forever. This second separation is definite and it is not only a physical one, but it implies, too, a partial spiritual dissociation since that is the moment when the Ladino social system starts pulling the girl back to the status quo. The protagonist, therefore, begins to experience an internal war because of the pressure of Ladino society over her. Such a pressure is represented by Zoraida's best friend, Amalia, a spinster who is completely devoted to the Catholic Church and its doctrine in spite of the terrible religious conflict between that church and Cárdenas' government during the 1930s. In fact, Amalia's devotedness to an organization that is the enemy of the regime represents the Ladinos' resistance to social and political changes. Amalia's influence over the protagonist becomes so strong that it competes with the Indian nursemaid's teachings, influence, and spiritual presence. As Amalia insists in preparing the girl and his brother Mario to receive their First Communion, she unconsciously is forcing the protagonist to abandon those beliefs that barely begin to flourish within the girl.

It is pertinent to emphasize that although Amalia's and the nursemaid's rituals are representations of different worldviews, both have the common characteristic of being the result of a process of transculturation. In both kinds of rituals, European and Amerindian features intermingle in a two-way negotiation. However, transculturating elements in Ladino rituals and culture play the role of supporters of the establishment. On the other hand, transculturating elements in Tzeltal rituals represent a sort of transgression and resistance. In short, the clash of those two kinds of initiations converging in the protagonist of *Balún-Canán* represents a crisis and confusion to the girl—the same crisis Mexican *mestizos* in general usually face as they strive to define who they are.

Several of the rites of initiation presented in Castellanos' novel are related to the process of narration. For example, as the Indian nursemaid is indoctrinating the girl, the former resorts to a story regarding the origins of men and women.¹⁰ The Indian woman refers to the four pre-Christian lords in heaven. They had already created the earth, the sea, and the wind, but they had not yet formed any human being so they decided to create him of mud. They realized that this kind of mud-man could not resist water. Therefore, they opted to use wood as the material to design a new man. This creature was able to resist water, but when he was tested by fire, he burned. Because of this inconvenience, the lords agreed to create a man of gold, but this being had a hard heart and did not praise the lords. Finally, the deities thought that they should use their own flesh as the material to create men. One of the gods cut his fingers and numerous, little men emerged. The lords were tired and fell asleep, whereas the little men started finding out how to survive among plants and animals. As these men were diligent in getting knowledge and

¹⁰ This story is comprised in pages 28-31 in the Spanish edition of the novel, and in pages 30-33 in the English version.

working, they found the man of gold. They fed him and took care of him so the man of gold's heart began to soften and he finally expressed his gratitude. The lords woke up when they heard the man of gold utter thanksgiving words. From that day on, the gods called the man of gold rich and the men of flesh poor. They then decreed that the rich always took care of the poor because of the benefits the former had received from the latter. Besides, the poor would become the advocate of the rich in heaven.

After the girl listens to this story, she has a change of attitude with respect to poor people—Tzeltal Indians included. Therefore, this narrating-listening act can be considered a rite of passage since, according to Weatherford, it implies a transformation in knowledge, world vision, and social role (“Initiation in Crisis” 11). The girl realizes one of her duties is providing help and assistance to those who were created from the gods' flesh. In consequence she asks her nursemaid, “¿Quién es mi pobre, nana?” (31) [“Who is my poor man, Nana?” (33)].

Those rites of initiation performed by the disfranchised—in this case the Tzeltal woman—present transculturating elements that transgress the status quo. Regarding this narrating-listening ritual, it is characterized by a syncretic version of the Judeo-Christian Genesis, including the formation of men from mud and the idea that the gods rested after they created the world, the animals, and the human beings. The presence of Mayan mythology is also obvious in this narration since there are some similarities to the story of the creation contained in the *Popol Vuh*, the book of the Maya-Quiches that was written after the Spanish conquest of Guatemala. In addition, the Indian nursemaid makes clear reference to the inclusion of Catholic figures in the Tzeltal pantheon. She says, “Al principio [...] antes que vinieran Santo Domingo de Guzmán, San Caralampio y la

Virgen del Perpetuo Socorro, eran cuatro únicamente los señores del cielo” (28) [“At first [...] before Santo Domingo de Guzmán and San Caralampio and the Virgin of Peptual Succour, they were only four in number, the lords in heaven” (30)]. The mixture of both Judeo-Christian and Amerindian elements in this narration is the vehicle the Indian woman uses to transgress and subvert the Ladino establishment based on the rigid system of castes. As O’Connell asserts, “The nana’s stories transmit indigenous cultural knowledge and memory as a means of cultural survival; they serve as well as the vehicle for the transmission of values, an education to counter the one the girl receives in school and from her parents” (80).

Another teaching moment like this occurs after the girl experiences a sort of epiphany when she accompanies her family to the plain of Nicalococ. There, while other children are flying their kites, she contemplates how the wind plays with the birds and it “neighs.” She realizes that the wind talks and she is able to listen to it. The protagonist says, “Ahora me doy cuenta de que la voz que he estado escuchando desde que nací es ésta. Y ésta es la compañera de todas mis horas” (23) [“Now I know that this is the voice I’ve been hearing since I was born. It’s my constant companion” (25)]. The girl has obtained a different view of nature; she becomes aware of its grandeur and the spirits living within it. Then, she recalls one of her nanny’s teachings and applies it. “Y me quedo aquí, con los ojos bajos porque (*la nana me lo ha dicho*¹¹) es así como el respeto mira a lo que es grande” (23) [“I stand here with lowered eyes because (*Nana’s said so*) that’s the way humility looks at bigness” (26)]. A sense of reverence and respect for nature has coalesced and the girl is willing to recount this experience to her nursemaid, who gets pleased when she listens to her disciple tell her about her encounter with the

¹¹ Italics are mine.

wind. The Indian woman seizes the opportunity to add a teaching and emphasize the personification of the wind: “Eso es bueno, niña. Porque el viento es uno de los nueve guardianes de tu pueblo” (23) [“That’s good, child. Because your people possess Nine Guardians,¹² and the wind is one” (26)]. This experience represents another step in the girl’s initiation; she now knows she may find refuge and protection in nature. These teachings the protagonist learns by herself and through her nursemaid counter the disrespectful attitude some Ladinos have with regard to nature. One example of disrespect is seen in Ernesto, who shoots a deer in its forehead for mere fun when he accompanies the Argüellos and a group of Indian servants to Chactajal. Nobody dares to take the deer’s carcass since the Indians consider it to be part of their shadow. Ernesto did not understand the indigenous view of nature and this lack of understanding will lead him to the same death the deer suffered. Almost at the end of the second part of the novel, Ernesto is ironically killed by a bullet on his forehead—supposedly shot by an Indian.

The most significant of the rites of initiation takes place just before the girl and the nursemaid are separated for the first time when the Argüellos are leaving for Chactajal. The Indian woman takes the girl to the oratory that is located in the child’s house. There, the nanny assumes her role as priestess and female shaman, subverting the idea that only men can become mediators between people and the God of Christianity. The Indian woman starts praying aloud to the Christian God and asks for blessings for her disciple. In her prayer, the nanny subverts the expectations the Ladino society could have had with respect to the girl. Actually, that prayer is not only a plea to God but also an outline for the girl to construct her identity. In a very symbolic language—full of

¹² Balún-Canán means “nine guardians” or “nine stars” in Mayan-Tojolabal language. Comitán, the town where Castellanos and the protagonist are from, was originally known as Balún-Canán.

similes linked to nature—the nursemaid teaches the girl principles such as meekness, humility, justice, thankfulness, charity, and frugality. In order to help the girl remember this initiation and the words pronounced, the nursemaid makes reference to her seven-year-old disciple’s body and transforms it into a symbol of the girl’s rebirth, into a reminder of the reconciliation she needs to propitiate between the Indian and Ladino worlds. The nanny asks God to bless the child’s eyes, hands, tongue, bowels, and mind, so that she may get rid of anger, arrogance, cruelty, and thirst for vengeance—characteristics of the traditional Ladino landowner of which César is an archetype. It is significant that although the girl is not the nursemaid’s biological daughter, the Indian woman considers the child to be her own “creature.” She prays, “Vengo a entregarte a mi criatura” (63) [“I come to deliver my child to thee” (62)]. Symbolically, the nanny raises the girl up to her face. This act manifests the equality between them. None of them is taller than the other, notwithstanding the Ladino girl is physically shorter. This rite of initiation—in addition to the narrative rituals I mentioned—leaves an imprint on the girl’s mind and spirit. Thus, although the child is in Chactajal and the Indian stays in Comitán, the protagonist is able to mentally re-create the presence of her nursemaid. The first night she spends in Chactajal, she sees a figure approaching as she is about to fall asleep. It is her nanny—or her internalized presence within the girl, the same presence that will start vanishing when the protagonist begins to face the influence of the Ladino culture represented by Amalia. Then, that internalized presence talks to the child and says, “Yo estoy contigo, niña. Y acudiré cuando me llames como acude la paloma cuando esparcen los granos de maíz” (74) [“I’m with you, child. And I’ll come when you call as the dove when the corn-seeds are scattered” (71)].

After the girl is physically separated from her indigenous nanny, she has the opportunity to witness another Indian transgressive ritual in which transculturation is definitely present. The result of such a process is evident in the religious ceremony the protagonist participates in after she and her family arrive in Chactajal—European and indigenous elements intermingle in a syncretic ritual. The protagonist narrates how Indians express their adoration in a chapel that is located in the Argüellos’ hacienda. Zoraida, her mother, begins to recite the mysteries of the rosary, and the Indians congregated in that building obediently follow the rite and respond to the recitation. However, as soon as the rosary ends, the indigenous servants start to perform their own rituals. An Indian woman—who could be regarded as priestess—passes a cup of *atole*¹³ to the entire congregation. This female vicar administers then a kind of Eucharist and all of the people—Ladinos and Indians—become one for just a few moments. “Todos hemos puesto nuestros labios en el mismo lugar” (72) [“We’ve all put our lips to the same spot” (70)], says the girl. A ritual combining dances and music within the chapel follows this unorthodox sacrament, and this activity continues all night long. Such a rite is an example of how Mexican religiosity is but the result of a superposition of religions. As Paz explains, Mexicans are so devout people and have profound experiences concerning the sacred. Nonetheless, Paz asks, “¿quién es su Dios: las antiguas divinidades de la tierra o Cristo?” (96) [“But who is his god? The ancient earth-gods or Christ?” (106)]. That is the same question one could formulate concerning this ritual. Although the Indians seem to adore Christ in that chapel, they break with the orthodoxy represented by Zoraida’s recitation of the rosary and incorporate dances and music (i.e. the way their ancestors

¹³ *Atole*: Mexican hot beverage that contains milk or water, maize flour, and either cinnamon, chocolate, vanilla, or any other flavoring ingredient.

used to praise their gods before the Spaniards came to Chiapas). One can compare this phenomenon occurring in the chapel in Chactajal with the superposition of religions that coalesced during the first years of the colony, when the Spanish conquistadors and missionaries constructed churches over the ancient Aztec temples. Although those edifices were covered by new structures, the beliefs which those temples were linked to did not vanish. Finding Aztec idols behind Catholic images was not a rare discovery during those times—and this situation was often tolerated by the Spanish priests. These kinds of rituals are examples of the creative character implied in transculturation. Although colonial power wanted to completely uproot non-Christian beliefs from the Indian population, the indigenous subjects have strived to preserve them by incorporating pagan elements to Christianity. Thus, Tzeltal Indians in *Balún-Canán* try to avoid the loss of their original culture by adapting it to the circumstances. In short, constructing and creating an identity is a matter of both creation and adaptation.

In opposition to the transgressive rituals of the Tzeltal nursemaid and the Indians of Chactajal—practices that are connected to nature and life—the Ladinos' rites have to do with fear and the total division between good and evil. After the protagonist's nursemaid is thrown out of the Argüellos' home in Comitán, the girl and his brother Mario started attending catechism lessons in Amalia's house. They began to prepare for their First Communion, one of the most important rites of initiation in the Ladino culture. In those lessons they learn a version of Catholicism that promotes fear instead of hope and faith. The first thing Amalia teaches them is the reality of hell. "Al infierno van los niños que se portan mal" (255) ["Children who behave badly go to hell" (239)], affirms Amalia. This assertion frightens the children, and their fears increase as they listen to a

couple of female servants tell the story of a boy who became the slave of a devil called Catashaná, who asked the boy to get a consecrated host and give it to him. If the child did not do what the devil had ordered, this evil being would kill his family. The boy then started preparing for his First Communion, but he did not have a sincere intent—he just wanted to obtain the consecrated host and give it to Catashaná in order to get freed from his curse. However, after the boy partook unworthily of the Holy Communion, he died. In order to avoid this same damnation, the girl and his brother rebel against her mother's will to have them partake of the Communion. The protagonist conceives the idea to steal the key of the oratory, which would be the place where the children would have this Ladino rite of initiation. She takes the key and with this action defies the patriarchal order. As Gil Iriarte says, the key is the phallic symbol *par excellence*. “La niña, que como mujer, ha sido educada para la inacción, roba el símbolo del poder y de la fuerza, debilitando, así, al poseedor, castrándolo” (Gil Iriarte 198) [“The girl, who as woman has been educated to be inactive, steals the symbol of power and strength, weakening then its owner by castration”¹⁴]. Finally, none of the children receives First Communion; the rite of initiation is frustrated and, therefore, the patriarchal system suffers another fissure. The protagonist, who had been born to comply with that system, exercises for the first time her free agency without restriction to do a rebel act. She realizes she is able to choose; consequently, she is now able to start gathering all of the pieces to construct her identity. However, one of the obstacles she needs to face is oblivion. Her mediator, her mentoring figure (i.e. the Indian nursemaid) is not physically present anymore and many memories are linked to her. In other words, the *milieux de mémoire* for the girl is vanishing, so she needs to establish what Pierre Nora calls *lieux de mémoire*.

¹⁴ Translation is mine.

Nora explains that *milieux de mémoire* are the “settings in which memory is a real part of everyday experience” (1). In the case of the girl, this *milieux* collapses as the mentoring figure disappears with all her oral tradition. Therefore, the girl creates sites where she wants to preserve memories that are threatened. As Nora says, *lieux de mémoire* “are illusions of eternity” (2), kinds of sanctuaries that arise when memory stops being spontaneous. On that note, such sites of memory help the protagonist keep alive her nursemaid’s teachings and presence, and the experiences they had together, in order to use them as pieces to construct her identity. Once more, imaginative re-creation of people, ideas, and experiences are crucial processes to avoid the sweeping and dividing force of colonialism and its prejudices.

The protagonist of *Balún-Canán* consecrates *lieux de mémoire* in three different moments. The first time occurs when she and her family have temporarily moved to Chactajal and her nursemaid did not accompany them. In a very critical instant of anguish, despair, and longing for her nanny, the child hides in the woods. The Indian woman had taught her to revere nature and establish a dialogue with it. Hence, she decides to find refuge in that place where memory could be well pinned and invoked. Therefore, that forest becomes a *lieu de mémoire*. Aunt Matilde—a relative who joins the Argüellos during their travel to Chactajal—finds the child in such a place and asks her what she is doing there. The child answers: “Quiero irme a Comitán. Quiero irme con mi nana” (142) [“I want to go to Comitán. I want to go with my nanny” (136)]. The girl looks for a refuge in that forest because it links her to her nursemaid’s presence and to that important moment—recounted in the first part of the novel—when she could hear the wind’s voice.

The second *lieu de mémoire* one can find in the novel is a wooden chest the Indian woman abandoned in the Argüellos' home in Comitán before she was obliged to leave the house. The girl often visits that place and takes care of the chest, which contains some of her nanny's clothes. Although it is not mentioned in the novel, it is obvious that those clothes are literally imbued with the nursemaid's presence through her sweat, smell, and shape, and are a sort of metonymy of her. For Peter Stallybrass, "cloth thus tends to be powerfully associated with memory. Or to put it more strongly, cloth *is* a kind of memory. When a person is absent or dies, cloth absorb their absent presence [...]. Clothes embody memories and social relations. [They are] richly absorbent of symbolic meaning" (30-31). The chest also contains a handful of stones from Chactajal—the land where that Indian woman had been born in. In order to take part of this *lieu de mémoire* with her, the protagonist grasps the stones and keeps them in her own blouse. She is trying to maintain alive those memories concerning her nanny by linking the latter to a "piece" of the place she comes from. This act reveals the symbolic and fetishistic character of certain *lieux de mémoire* since those little stones become a representation of the Indian woman *in absentia*.

The third *lieu de mémoire* which to I would like to refer is not connected to the nanny but the girl's brother. The protagonist feels guilty because she thinks God cursed and killed Mario to purge the girl's audacity to steal the key of the oratory. After Mario dies and is buried, the child tries to be reconciled with his brother's spirit by visiting his tomb. Then, the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice is reversed; the protagonist literally descends beneath the ground in order to get to the place where Mario's body lies beside several of his ancestors in a mausoleum. This feminine Orpheus wants to revive Mario—

or at least his memory. She realizes that all of their ancestors have their names engraved on memorial stones, but Mario's is not. The girl perceives the connection between name and memory; hence, she starts writing down Mario's name on many places such as the wall of the garden, her home's corridor, and a notebook. By doing so, the protagonist is creating *lieux de mémoire* that will help her maintain her brother's memory alive. She realizes that sporadic visits to Mario's tomb will not help her get reconciliation; she needs to keep the spiritual channel of memory opened. This would make her feel close to Mario, "Porque Mario está lejos. Y yo quisiera pedirle perdón" (291) ["Because Mario is far away, and I want to ask him forgiveness" (271)]. This desired reconciliation will eventually aid the girl in the process of identity construction; she needs to rid herself of the enmity between male and female that is promoted by the patriarchal order. If she is able to break that link that chains her to such an oppressive system, she will be free to incorporate the element of gender equality to her identity. In other words, as the girl is creating what Gloria Anzaldúa calls the "*mestiza* consciousness" (80) by establishing bridges of understanding with the Tzeltal world, she also must do so with the male gender represented by her brother. In that way she will be able to overcome dual thinking and exorcise the idea that man is the enemy rather than a companion.

From Orality to Reading and Writing

As it was previously explained in this chapter, the protagonist's nursemaid often teaches the girl through oral narration. Therefore, orality becomes the most important method by which the Indian woman offers the girl a view of the past, of nature, and of

reality in general. This learning based on orality only represents one step in the formation of the protagonist, who also needs to enter the realms of reading and writing.

One of the most significant moments when the protagonist acquires important knowledge about her ancestors is linked to reading. On a certain occasion, the girl enters her father's office and finds a manuscript that contains her genealogy and a history of her forbears. The girl takes the text and surreptitiously leaves the office, goes to the patio, and starts reading the record in the shade of a fig tree.¹⁵ This act represents a transgression of the rules established by the patriarchal order. The girl is not supposed to "invade" the space where the patriarch and lord, César, keeps the relics and objects from the past that in part support his power—photos, letters, books. In addition, she is not supposed to read the record either since it will not belong to her but to Mario, the heir of the patriarch's power. The girl partakes of the forbidden fruit by reading this manuscript whose author is ironically a Tzeltal Indian writing in Spanish. I say that this text represents an irony because Indians were not supposed to speak Spanish—and much less to write it—since "El español es privilegio nuestro [de los Ladinos]" (39). What is more, although the addressees of this transculturated text are supposedly Indians, they could not have understood it because the colonial system depicted in the novel let them neither write nor read in Spanish. Concerning the content, this record includes some details concerning the Argüellos' genealogy and a description of their deeds. As the protagonist reads it, she finds out that her ancestors forced Indians to be Christianized and to rid themselves of their original names. She became aware of some atrocities the Indians

¹⁵ The figure of the fig tree may be connected to the fall of Adam and Eve and their knowledge of good and evil: "And the eyes of them both [Adam and Eve] were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons" (Genesis 3.7).

faced on account of the Argüellos' power. In addition, she realizes that her forefathers did not only commit crimes against humanity but also against nature, that sacred, living being the girl had learned to revere. "Por orden suya [de Josefa Argüello], muchos árboles de caoba y cedro fueron talados. En esa madera hizo que se labraran todos los muebles de la casa" (59) ["By her orders [Josefa Argüello's] many mahogany and cedar trees were felled, and she caused all the furniture of the house to be made in these timbers" (57)]. Thus, her family did not only appropriate the Indians' lives; they humiliated nature and transformed a part of it into objects to be used by the dominators. In other words, the Argüellos considered themselves superior to nature since they were supposedly able to take over it.

Although the testimony recorded on the referred manuscript originally belonged to the Tzeltal people since its author considers himself his tribe's memory, the Argüellos appropriated the text—and consequently that memory—in order to justify the possession of their lands and their position as dominators. Additionally, they wanted to demonstrate and emphasize their separation from the Indians and, by so doing, they deny their own hybridity. They resemble those Spaniards of the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries who tried to emphasize their nobility by demonstrating that no Jew or Moorish was included in their genealogy.

As the girl reads the manuscript, she confronts her ancestor's adhesion to the root identity model described by Glissant.¹⁶ Many peoples found their identities on narratives describing their origins. However, in this case, the Argüellos are not the authors of the narrative contained in the text; actually, they are stealers of their own identity. On the other hand, the protagonist represents the model of relation identity, which has to do with

¹⁶ A brief explanation on that model is provided in the introduction.

an open exchange between cultures. She adopts this model as she becomes aware of the similarities between her and the Indian culture represented by her nursemaid.

Another thing the young reader learns from the Indian manuscript is that one may gather all of his/her scattered memories by means of writing. She reads on the record, “[...] es aquí, hermanos míos menores, donde nos volvemos a congregar. En estas palabras volvemos a estar juntos, como en el principio, como en el tronco de la ceiba sus muchas ramas” (60) [... it is here, my young brothers, that we meet again. In these words we are once more joined together as in the beginning; just as many branches unite at the trunk of the silk-cotton tree” (58)]. Thus, past—or at least a re-creation of it—is made present through emplotted memories, which become a virtual gathering site where memory is triggered every time one reads the text. Indeed, the manuscript is one of Nora’s *lieux de mémoire* since it is intended to preserve Indian memory from official history and “situates remembrance in a sacred context” (Nora 3). What is more, the record read by the girl refers to emotion and magic, which according to Nora are two characteristics of memory. Thus, I affirm that most alternative histories—those written by the disfranchised—should be regarded as *lieux de mémoire* since they are frequently composed on the basis of emotion, magic, and myth in order to maintain memory alive in the present when the sources of oral tradition have disappeared. As Nora says, “[memory] is capable of lying dormant for long periods only to be suddenly reawakened” (3). That is exactly what happens with that Indian text. It was kept dormant by those who have dispossessed its true owners. However, once the girl has read it in the context of the knowledge she has acquired from her nursemaid, the text becomes one of the multiple pieces the child is gathering to construct her identity. Thus, narration convokes all of

those “spirits” who were dispersed. It means that the intent of the Indian author was to remind his people who they were and what strife their ancestors had to undertake. In that way he would help them create an identity.

While the girl is reading beneath the fig tree, her mother comes and grabs the manuscript out of her hands. Zoraida claims that those papers belong to the child’s brother: “Son la herencia de Mario. Del varón” (60) [They are Mario’s inheritance. The male child’s” (59)]. Then, the youngster faces a patriarchal rule establishing that even memory is the male’s inheritance. But she decides to row against the stream and follows the same way taken by that indigenous memory keeper who composed that record. Therefore, she dares to cross the bridge between reading and writing. However, since she is deprived of that documentation, she needs to cross that bridge by resorting to fictional narrative in order to reconstruct the hybridity she has been denied.

Although at the very beginning of *Balún-Canán* one realizes that the main narrator and protagonist (i.e. the Ladino girl) in the first and third parts of the novel is just seven years of age, some formal aspects of the text indicate that the narrator is relating the story not from childhood but from adulthood. The reader might criticize Castellanos’ novel—and some critics do—for presenting a seven-year-old who speaks like an adult. Nevertheless, that is precisely the point. Castellanos has created a character that is constructing an identity through writing from adulthood. As Catherine Grant explains,

The first indication that the text could be read as autobiographical fiction comes with the disruption of this realist first-person voice by the introduction of complex syntactical and lexical elements untypical, in terms of literary realism, of the register of a seven-year-old child. This

might lead the reader to assume that the story is being “secretly” related by an adult narrator, using a retrospective judgmental voice characteristic of the conventions of autobiographical narratives (90-91).

As this adult voice narrates in present tense the facts she lived and witnessed in childhood, she is conveying a sense of contemporaneity that characterizes memory according to Nora (3). Even though that adult woman is relating her story in a time posterior to her childhood, she is making not only that remote time come back, but she also brings back representations of all of those people who influenced her in a certain way, including her nursemaid and the anonymous Indian, “el hermano mayor de [su tribu]” (57), who wrote that record mentioned on previous pages. This technique emphasizes the writer’s creative role as a shaman that makes the spirits from the past come to the present. In that sense, *Balún-Canán* is a novel that represents the construction of identity as a fiction-creating process. And of course such a process is not a teleological one for identity is neither a fixed nor an unchanging result, but it is ever evolving. In this case, the protagonist has had several experiences she has internalized after they have been mediated by figures pertaining to Indian and Ladino cultures. As an adult storyteller herself, the protagonist organizes those many voices and influences through the cathartic and liberating activity of writing. According to the girl-adult’s narration at the very end of the novel, she starts that activity after feeling guilty for her brother’s death—as I have already mentioned.

Through writing, the Ladino girl convokes all of the spirits from the past, including her nursemaid and Mario, and makes a selection of the experiences that are significant to her. This process is pretty obvious in the phrase opening the second part of

the novel: “*Esto es lo que se recuerda de aquellos días*” (75) [“*This is what is remembered of those days*” (73)] It means that this autobiographical exercise—as any other—is not a copy of reality but just a representation. Many things have vanished or blurred. For instance, the influence of Ladino culture and the premature separation from her nanny have made the protagonist forget even the face of one of the most important people in her life (i.e. the Indian woman). The girl-adult recounts that one day she is walking down the street with Amalia. Suddenly, the child sees an Indian woman who comes from the opposite side. Then, the protagonist releases herself from Amalia’s hand and runs in direction to the Indian woman. However, the latter does not seem to recognize the girl. Actually, that person is not her nursemaid. “Nunca, aunque yo la encuentre, podré reconocer a mi nana. Hace tanto tiempo que nos separaron. Además, todos los indios tienen la misma cara” (291) [“Even if I see her, I’ll never recognize her now. It’s so long since we’ve been parted. Besides, all Indians look alike” (271)], says the girl. This penultimate passage in the novel is symptomatic of the failure the protagonist is facing as she is constructing her identity. Some of the pieces are missing and she needs to resign herself to partial and inaccurate recollections to conform her identity. Therefore, she is not ready to become a bridge between Ladinos and Tzeltals since she has begun to see Indians as she did before she was “indoctrinated” by her nanny. Now, the protagonist has lost some understanding concerning the Tzeltal culture. Consequently, she does not feel as close to them as she used to be. Thus, some of the spirits from the past have failed to be gathered in the site created by the protagonist’s writing.

In the next chapter—that is dedicated to Rudolfo Anaya’s *Bless Me, Ultima*—I will present the example of another child who also strives to construct their identity in a context where hybridity provokes confusion and disorientation. However, in opposition to the protagonist of *Balún-Canán*, Antonio seems to succeed in completing their discipleship beside his indigenous mentor. As it happens with the Ladino girl and her nanny, Antonio is separated from his guide. Nevertheless, before death causes that physical dissociation, Antonio has collected all of the spiritual pieces he needs to construct their identity.

After offering a context about the author, and the historical and geographical settings referred in the text, I will analyze how Antonio follows a path so similar to the Ladino girl’s. He needs to become aware of the elements of his own hybridity as a Mexican-American rural boy in New Mexico, where he does not only experiences the influence of both Spanish and Indian cultures, but also of Anglo-American one. Thus, Antonio has to evaluate such elements and establish bridges between them in order to overcome his internal division. Those bridges are constructed through creative processes, including transculturation and creative writing—like in the case of *Balún-Canán*’s protagonist. The comparison offered in the next chapter will trace then a relation between the concerns Castellanos and Anaya have regarding a process that becomes highly problematic in those societies and communities that have developed in a situation of in-betweenness.

BLESS ME, ULTIMA: THE SHAMANISM OF LETTERS

The laws which would provide meaningful patterns to guide and some kind of harmony to exist are constantly being suffocated by chaos. It is out of this chaos that the artist would bring some order, some meaningful pattern, reinstitute some harmony.

Rudolfo Anaya

Making choices is one of the most difficult tasks during children's transition to adulthood, especially in hybrid communities, where several and even dissimilar cultural influences take place. "Growing up is not easy sometimes"¹⁷ (*Bless Me* 222), expresses Antonio Juan Márez y Luna—nicknamed Tony—the child protagonist in Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972). This Hispanic boy from New Mexico faces not only the difficulties of being a Chicano in the United States of America, but also the pressures of opposite and contradictory family traditions and views of life within his own home.

As Castellanos' *Balún-Canán* does, Anaya's first novel offers an example on how constructing an identity within a hybrid culture implies an internal debate. Any individual in formation living in a hybrid community must choose between imitating his/her

¹⁷ As I quote from *Bless Me, Ultima* I will be using the Warner Books edition of 1994. From this moment on, I will not indicate the title of the novel but only the page where the quote could be found.

ancestors' ways, yielding to the trend of dominant culture—in Antonio's case the Anglo one—and creating his/her own alternative way on the basis of a personal interpretation of past and tradition. In other words, such an individual has to re-create his/her past according to his/her view on the future. With respect to Antonio, he decides to take the alternative way after he has undergone several social, cultural, and even mystical initiations within different and interrelated contexts—home, Church, school, and friends. In this process, he receives the aid and direction of a mentor, Ultima. As her name indicates, Ultima¹⁸ represents the last link to indigenous and *mestizo* past in New Mexican communities of Las Pasturas and Guadalupe. She is at the edge of a moment of transition between a rural world and an industrialized one (Núñez Villavicencio 111). As a mediator between the reinterpreted spirit of the past and the people of the present, she can be regarded as a shaman sharing guidelines to help people to establish a harmonious relationship with past and nature, which has become an archive where myths are kept alive.

This chapter is committed to demonstrate that *Bless Me, Ultima* is a novel that presents identity neither as a final product to be found, nor as a system of traditions, beliefs, and views of the past and future that are automatically transmitted from one generation to another. On the contrary, in this work by Anaya, identity is regarded as an open-ended process of construction, as a result of a negotiation within the individual and with all of those influences around him. In contrast with Castellanos' *Balún-Canán*, Antonio's construction of identity develops in a less problematic—although not less complex—context because it is easier for him to accept his Amerindian roots than it is for the Ladino girl. Antonio lives in a society where he and his family are part of a minority;

¹⁸ In Spanish, "Ultima" means "the last one" in a series or even "the most recent."

they belong to the dominated segment of the American population. Therefore, accepting and assuming their Amerindian roots does not imply a loss of power. In fact, they do not have any power. On the contrary, the Ladino girl belongs to a majority that holds dominion and control over Indians. On that note, if Ladinos accepted their own hybridity, this would represent a collapse since their power is based on their affiliation with their European roots.

In the novel, Tony, the seven-year-old protagonist, learns to construct his destiny freely and avoid the determinism of heritage and blood within the context of a particular hybrid community (i.e. the Chicano one). This construction is necessary for individuals belonging to a minority such as Tony because it is one of the most effective ways to create a resistance to the dominant culture, and at the same time it allows open dialogue with that culture. In other words, as Tony succeeds in constructing his identity, he can feel more confident to have contact with the Anglo-American culture influence since he has a clear conscience of what makes him unique and at the same time similar to the Anglos. Such a construction is possible because Tony gradually realizes that although society tries to link him to a certain version of the past, he is able to create an alternative way by reinterpreting the past and his relationship to it. In *Bless Me, Ultima*, such a reinterpretation is formed through religious syncretism, transculturation, and a transition from orality to writing. Such transition is the main parallelism one can trace between Anaya's novel and Castellanos' *Balún-Canán*. Both protagonists make use of the autobiography model and creative writing to organize the elements to construct their identity. In addition, both narrate events linked to their childhood from adulthood. However, the main difference is that the Ladino girl subverts the patriarchal order since

writing is an activity relating to Ladino men and not women. In contrast, Antonio is expected to develop his reading and writing skills and become a hope for his family. Additionally, if one compares the narrations of both children, it is evident that the Ladino's reflect a sense of desperation and chaos because of the disruption provoked by the Ladino in the construction of her identity. Even the structure of the novel evidences that chaos on account of the gaps one may find between certain segments. On the contrary, Antonio's narration reflects a sense of hope and a fulfillment of his role as shaman-writer. The fluidity of the narration is also a signal of that harmony.

Prior to proving the validity of such assertions I will provide some biographical information about Rudolfo Anaya and a socio-cultural and historical context regarding the novel. After this background has been set, and in order to demonstrate the arguments previously mentioned, it will be necessary to analyze all of those individuals and institutions playing the roles of mediators between Tony and his cultural, social, and natural environments. Additionally, I will explain how religious syncretism, a deification of nature, and the appropriation of indigenous and colonial myths offer the protagonist and other characters in the novel a way to express and construct a hybrid identity. Finally, I will explain the process by which writing becomes a vehicle to gather the scattered pieces of memory and to reconcile Tony with all those opposing and contradictory forces influencing him. Throughout this exposition, I will refer to *Balún-Canán* in order to compare and contrast both works and how the identity construction is represented in both. Creative writing represents in both novels a shamanic activity since it is the moment when the character-author invokes the "spirits" from the past (i.e. memories) and makes them reconcile. As Zimmerman explains,

The artist is seen as a kind of shaman, recreating the communal space or its surrogates and winning a war against chaos. [...] You cannot restore old Mexico or bring back *Aztlán*, but you can win creative space ritualistically, artistically, through creative reconstruction and projection. The space of the printed page becomes the communal writer's space of victory. (24-25)

The Novel and Its Context

Like Castellanos' novel, one can find several autobiographical references in *Bless Me, Ultima*. Rudolfo A. Anaya himself, the author, recognizes that as he says,

I think my first three novels [*Bless Me, Ultima* (1972), *Heart of Aztlán* (1976), and *Tortuga* (1979)] are the most autobiographical because there I am in settings that I know intimately, and I'm using people I know as models for characters (Chavkin 165).

According to a chronology published in Dick's and Sirias' *Conversations with Rudolfo Anaya*, this author was born on October 30, 1937, in Pastura, New Mexico, the same town that is mentioned in the novel as Las Pasturas and where Antonio, the protagonist, was born. However, Anaya did not live long in that place since his family moved to Santa Rosa, New Mexico. As Anaya mentions, he appropriated some Santa Rosa's settings to create the stage for *Bless Me, Ultima*. "I can't think of very many things that I have written that do not have a reference to those natural forces and that earth and people which nurtured me," affirms Anaya (Bruce-Novoa 185).

Just like the protagonist of his novel, Anaya faced a double, contrasting cultural influence at home. His mother, Rafaelita Mares, comes from a family of farmers who settled in Puerto de Luna valley, a place that is called El Puerto de los Lunas in the novel. On the other hand, his father, Martín Anaya, was a cowboy, “a man who preferred to ride horses and work with cattle rather than settle the land” (Fernández Olmos 2).

In 1952, when Anaya was fifteen, he and his family moved to Albuquerque, where he graduated from high school. Then, after spending two years studying business, he decided to major in English and graduated from the University of New Mexico in 1963.

Anaya continued his studies in literature so in 1968 he completed a Master of Arts degree in English from the University of New Mexico too. In 1971, Rudolfo Anaya received the second Quinto Sol national Chicano literary award for his first novel *Bless Me, Ultima*, which was published in 1972. As Anaya relates in an interview with Juan D. Bruce-Novoa, he had been working on that text since the early 1960s, when he began to create some characters and a story that would coalesce as *Bless Me, Ultima* after making six or seven drafts of the novel between 1963 and 1970 (187).

Bruce Dick and Silvio Sirias indicate that Anaya has been considered the “Godfather and guru of Chicano literature” (ix), whereas César A. González-T. affirms he is “a founder of the canon of the contemporary Chicano literary movement” (xv). Besides *Bless Me, Ultima*, he has published the novels *Heart of Aztlán* (1976), *Tortuga* (1979), *The Legend of La Llorona* (1984), *Lord of the Dawn: The Legend of Quetzalcoatl* (1987), *Albuquerque* (1992), *Zia Summer* (1995), *Rio Grande Fall* (1996), and *Shaman Winter* (1999). In addition, he has produced a collection of short stories (*The Silence of*

the Llano, 1982), a mock epic (*The Adventures of Juan Chicaspatas*, 1985), a travel journal (*A Chicano in China*, 1986), a couple of picture books for kids (*The Farolitos of Christmas*, 1995, and *Maya's Children: The Story of La Llorona*, 1996), a novella (*Jalamanta: A Message from the Desert*, 1997), various drama works, including *The Season of La Llorona* (1987) and *Billy the Kid* (1995), and several critical articles contained in academic journals and anthologies.¹⁹

Concerning *Bless Me, Ultima*, the critic Manuel de Jesús Hernández-Gutiérrez has considered it to be an example of “narrative of self-identity” (39-40), a sub-genre that, according to him, emerged out of the Chicano literature of the 1970s. Hernández-Gutiérrez mentions other works that can be included in that category: Tomás Rivera’s ...y *no se lo tragó la tierra* (1970), Miguel Méndez’s *Peregrinos de Aztlán* (1974), Ron Arias’ *The Road to Tamazunchale* (1975), Rolando Hinojosa’s *Generaciones y semblanzas* (1976), and Nash Candelaria’s *Memories of the Alhambra* (1977). One common characteristic of these authors is that they belong to a generation that witnessed and experienced the transition from the rural to the urban life. As a consequence of their moving to the cities, they had the opportunity to attend college and develop a consciousness with respect to the necessity to defend their culture and people through writing. It was a time when Chicano intellectuals started promoting the formation of Mexican Americans and Mexican community in the United States. As Antonio creates his identity to writing, these authors sculpt and invent a Chicano identity by organizing

¹⁹ The biographical information about Anaya’s works was taken from various sources: Dick’s and Sirias’ *Conversations with Rudolfo Anaya* (p. v), Fernández Olmos’ *Rudolfo A. Anaya: A Critical Companion* (p. 149-155), and Patricia Portales’ *The Chicano Literature Index* <<http://www.accd.edu/sac/english/portales/anaya.htm>>.

and selecting the myths, traditions, and experiences they have had during their years of formation and through the influence of their ancestors.

Hernández-Gutiérrez affirms that the main concern he perceives in all of those works (novels, poems, short stories and dramas) belonging to that sub-genre is a *search* for identity (41). In order to support his assertion, he quotes Tomás Rivera, whom he considers to be the founder of that sort of narrative. “I think it is imperative that those Chicanos who need it, immerse themselves in the profound and satisfying intent of *finding*²⁰ their identity,” (qtd. in Hernández-Gutiérrez 40) said Rivera as he received the first Quinto Sol award for *...y no se lo tragó la tierra*. As I explain throughout this study, I agree neither with Hernández-Gutierrez nor Rivera concerning the idea that identity is to be found. On the contrary, as I have already stated, identity is the result of a process of construction and negotiation. In spite of such a disagreement, I do accept the narrative of self-identity as a sub-generic category not only within Chicano literature but also within other traditions. However, I assert that the narrative of self-identity deals more with the active process of construction rather than the passive one relating to inheritance or finding identity as a ready-to-go product. In fact, Mexican American authors like Anaya have been so influential in the definition of the Chicano identity, which is not something they inherited but constructed.

The story narrated by Antonio, protagonist of *Bless Me, Ultima*, takes place in New Mexico during the 1940s, in the middle of the uproar of World War II. Those times represent a transition for Mexican American population in the United States since many Chicano communities were moving out from the country to the cities. In addition, several

²⁰ Italics are mine.

Mexican Americans were recruited to participate in the active military service. In order to replace all of those people who had left the rural areas either to work in the military industry or to fight on the battlefield, the United States and Mexico established a wartime labor program that placed Mexican farm workers in at least twenty-four states. “The numerous importations of Mexican workers spelled difficulties for the Mexican-Americans. Kaye Briegel found that the coming of the *braceros*²¹ into agricultural work forced many Mexican-Americans into the urban areas,” comments Robert Fitzgerald Scott (136). Both war and migration represented a real challenge to Mexican Americans wishing to preserve their traditions and memory. Those events weakened the cohesion of the Mexican American family—one institution that usually protects and promotes tradition—because some members had to go to the battlefield and others to look for a job in the city. Additionally, migration to cities made the Anglo influence become closer and stronger. For that reason Mexican Americans tried to cohere as communities in *barrios* or neighborhoods where they tried to reconstruct the cultural environment they lost because of their migration.

In *Bless Me, Ultima*, Antonio’s family is enduring that transition. For instance, Tony’s father does not work as a cowboy anymore. He has been hired to help construct and maintain highways. On the other hand, Tony’s three older brothers left home to serve in the Pacific as many other Chicanos did during that period. Scott mentions, “between three hundred seventy-five thousand and five hundred thousand Mexican-Americans served in the armed forces during the war” (137). Scott adds that people from that ethnical background constituted less than 3 percent of the total population of the United

²¹ Alma M. Garcia explains, “Bracero became the word used to refer to contract laborers recruited from Mexico under specific legislation” (30-31).

States by that time, which in 1940 was about 131,669,275 million.²² Therefore, according to these data, about 10 percent out of that 3 percent were involved in the military active service.

As it is reflected in some passages from Anaya's novel, the history of people of Mexican descent in the United States—and particularly in the current territory of New Mexico—should not be only traced to the twentieth century but several centuries back also. Chicanos see themselves as the original inhabitants of the Southwest since according to archeological evidences their Amerindian ancestors settled in that region as a distinguishable culture around 8,000 B.C. (Chávez 9). Concerning Chicanos' Spanish forebears, after defeating and conquering the Aztec empire in 1521, they started looking for the mythical land of Aztlán, which for the Aztecs was their land of origin and may be located farther to the north. "Sedentary villages located in ecologically rich environments were identified as possible colonization sites. New Mexico in particular became the favored site," Martha Menchaca says (72). She informs that such a settlement started in 1598 as Juan de Oñate guided 400 men—130 of them were accompanied by their wives and children—to New Mexico (81). These colonizers began to establish villages and Catholic missions in the region. In order to accomplish this enterprise, they fought against several Indian peoples and subdued them by the force of the arms.

Despite the efforts of those settlers to extend and make the Spanish culture and civilization throughout those lands flourish, the viceregal government in Mexico City paid more attention to development in central and southern New Spain.²³ As Chávez

²² Information taken from *The Reader's Companion to American History* (http://college.hmco.com/history/readerscomp/rcah/html/ah_070400_populationof.htm).

²³ New Spain is the name of the viceroyalty established by Spain in a territory comprehending present Mexico and U.S. Southwest.

explains, the Spanish crown considered the borderlands to be valuable just as defensive outposts (23). This situation changed on account of the Mexican Independence war against Spain between 1810 and 1821. Mexican federal government opened its borderlands and issued a General Colonization Law in 1824, according to which “all heads of households in the Southwest who were citizens of or immigrants to Mexico were eligible to claim land” (Menchaca 187). Contrary to the original expectations, this law, political chaos, and the commercial opening of the region prepared the way for the annexation of these territories to the United States since several Anglo-American immigrants started to buy lands and settled in the region. Besides, as Chávez explains, it was easier to have access to New Mexico by way of the plains from Missouri rather than through mountains and deserts from Mexico City (27).

As a matter of fact, the Chicano community legally and formally appeared as a territorial minority on account of the treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, which was signed by Mexico and the United States after the war between these two countries ended in 1848 and several territories were annexed to the U.S. (Maciel 13). In his article “Chicano Ethnicity, Cultural Hybridity, and the Mestizo Voice,” Rafael Pérez-Torres asserts that the signing of such a treaty represents one of the three historical events Chicanos have appropriated to define their racial and cultural *mestizaje*²⁴ (164). The other two events are the Spanish conquest of the Aztec people in 1521 and the ongoing migratory stream of Mexican workers to the United States throughout the twentieth century.

References to at least one of those historical events are distinguishable in *Bless Me, Ultima*. For instance, Antonio is aware that his father’s ancestors were Spanish

²⁴ The Internet version of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (www.oed.com) defines *mestizaje* as “interbreeding and cultural intermixing of Spanish and American Indian people (originally in Mexico, and subsequently also in other parts of Latin America).”

conquistadors. In addition, he mentions, “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” (123). It is not clear what glory and what tragedy Antonio is talking about. He may refer to either the summit of the Aztec empire and its fall provoked by the Spanish conquest, or to the creation of independent Mexico in 1821 and the subsequent loss of territory on account of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo. Or perhaps he is referring to both historical moments; it is possible that he considers that Spaniards, Indians and *mestizo* Mexicans are all his people. This ambiguity is a sign of Antonio’s unwillingness to devote himself to just one root because it would imply the rejection of the rich legacy of the other two roots.

With regard to Pérez-Torres’s list of historical events appropriated by Chicano community, I would add the 1910-1921 Mexican Revolution. This conflagration that extended throughout Mexico pushed hundreds of thousands to cross the border to escape from violence, political persecution, and war. Many of those immigrants permanently established their residence in the Southwest and their children were born therein. Since there are no accurate immigration records for that period, it is difficult to know how many Mexicans crossed the border and stayed to live in the United States. However, according to data gathered in the 1930 U.S. Census, “the total population of Mexican immigrants actually grew from 367,510 in 1910 to 700,541 in 1920” (qtd. in Garcia 16). Regarding the time frame within which Antonio’s story takes place (i.e. the 1940s), the U.S. Bureau of Census and the Immigration and Naturalization Service report that the total Mexican-origin population in the United States was 1,077,000 in 1940 (qtd. in Glick

and Van Hook 573), including 700 thousand people of Mexican-origin who were born in the U.S.

In the case of Antonio's family and ancestors, they have resided in the U.S. southwest for several generations. For example, the forebears of Antonio's mother were the original settlers of Las Pasturas town. Thus, his family has been strongly rooted in that land that once belonged to New Spain and more recently to independent Mexico.

With regard to the term "Chicano," it is not mentioned even once in Anaya's novel. Nonetheless, Antonio, his family, and most of the characters can be considered Chicanos since they are people of Mexican descent who were born in the United States. So when I refer to the term Chicanos in this study I am referring to Mexican Americans, specifically to those who recognize themselves as such, are aware of their *mestizo* character, and link themselves to the historical and mythical narratives of their Mexican ancestors. Chicanos perceive themselves as citizens of Aztlán (i.e. the U.S. Southwest), the mythical place from whence the Aztecs supposedly emigrated in 1168 to settle in Tenochtitlan—present Mexico City—in 1325 (Chávez 8). Thus, Chicanos see the Southwest as their *motherland*, as a territory from which their forebears were dispossessed. With regard to this issue Alfred Arteaga explains, "Aztlán is the home where Chicanos are indigenous; it is the land of forefathers and a gringo²⁵ invasion" (13). In a certain way, Chicanos have shown a preference for their Amerindian roots and emphasized their connection to their dominated ancestors on account of empathy; they feel identified with the Aztecs because they were colonized by white people invading their lands, just like Anglo Americans did with Chicanos' Mexican ancestors in the

²⁵ The Internet version of the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* (www.m-w.com) defines *gringo* as "a foreigner in Spain or Latin America especially when of English or American origin." In this case, Arteaga is of course referring to the annexation of former Mexican territory to the United States in 1848.

Southwest. Mexican Americans daily experience the effects of their internal colonization and they have opted for solidarity with their raped Indian mother—"La Chingada," as Paz would say—and rejection for their abusive father (i.e. the Spanish conquistadors).

In the case of *Bless Me, Ultima*, there is no explicit mention concerning Antonio's preference for either his Spanish or Amerindian roots. As mentioned before, ambiguity helps him remain open to the influence of both cultures mingling within himself. The situation is completely different and opposite in *Balún-Canán*. According to Castellanos' reconstruction of the characteristic of Chiapas' society, where *mestizos* are a minority and Indians the majority, the former completely reject their Amerindian roots and feel more identified with their white Spanish ancestors. In fact, the relations between Ladinos and Indians depicted in *Balún-Canán* are characterized by contemptuousness and racism. The reason for that rejection of the Indian component is based on Ladinos' desire to identify themselves with the dominator and trace a direct line of authority from present to past. If Ladinos admitted they have links of blood and culture with Indians, they would place themselves on the side of the dominated and lose their power.

In a similar way Antonio connects himself to land, history, and myth. This linking process is mediated by a couple of institutions—the Catholic Church and public school—and several characters such as his parents, three older brothers, the members of his gang, and Ultima—the prevalent influence on him.

Mediation as Constraint or Emancipation

As the subtitle of this section indicates, in *Bless Me, Ultima* some mediators—or filters—between Antonio and his cultural, social, and natural environments tend to constrain his decision making capacity and consequently his ability and right to construct an identity. On the other hand, some others help him expand his view and liberate him from imposed conceptions of himself. This difference is based on the objectives aimed by each kind of mediator. Thus, constraining mediators such as Antonio’s parents, the Catholic Church, and elementary school are supporting continuity, whereas mediators connected to emancipation—including Ultima and Samuel—are committed to promoting change. In fact, constraining mediators contribute to the functionality of a system that maintains Mexican Americans as a colonized and dominated minority. On the other hand, emancipating mediators subvert that system and promote an awareness of the necessity of determining whether one’s image has been imposed from the system or is the result of the individual’s free will.

In order to illustrate the previous opposition, I will contrast the mediator function of Tony’s parents with Ultima’s role. Antonio’s father, Gabriel Márez, descends from Spanish conquistadors who crossed the ocean and became *vaqueros*²⁶ in a land where they could not develop roots. That is the reason of his last name, Márez. “Mar” is sea in Spanish, and “-ez” is a suffix meaning “son of.” Then, the last name Márez is connected to the restless character of the sea; this natural metaphor represents Gabriel’s instability and flexibility as he is more interested in imagining and planning his arrival to the next harbor rather than exploring the glories of the past. In other words, Antonio’s father is

²⁶ Cowboys.

always chasing the future and at the same time hoping not to catch it. In addition, for him land is not a possession but a vehicle to reach the next stage in his crossing.

On the other hand, Antonio's mother—named María Luna—comes from a family who had an important role in the colonization of New Mexico. At that time, the conquistadors had already subjugated the indigenous peoples and New Spain's territories, a land that lately became independent Mexico. After such an enterprise was completed, the colonizing process started. María Luna's ancestors were part of that settling effort and as farmers they complied with the moon's²⁷ cycle to till the earth and developed strong roots on New Mexican land. "It was the Lunas who carried the charter from the Mexican government to settle the valley. That took courage" (52), says María Luna. In opposition to the metaphor of the sea, the connection between Maria's family and the moon has to do with fixity. The moon has a stable, foreseeable cycle that is linked to processes of fertility. Despite such opposition, the moon and the sea are also related since the former has a direct impact on the level of tide in the oceans.

Gabriel is interested in raising Antonio as a *vaquero*, a man of the *llano*,²⁸ whereas María would be very glad to see her son become either a farmer or a Catholic priest. Thus, each of them is trying to co-opt Antonio's freedom and force him to choose a certain way of life, either Márezes' or Lunas'. In other words, each of them is pushing the child to get trapped in a form of "triangular desire" as René Girard calls it (3). The French critic analyzes Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quijote de la Mancha* and mentions that the bizarre knight who left his home to look for adventures and help the needy has

²⁷ *Luna* means "moon" in Spanish.

²⁸ The Internet version of the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* (www.m-w.com) states that *llano* means "an open grassy plain in Spanish America or the southwestern U.S."

become a kind of mimic of Amadís de Gaula,²⁹ a literary character who according to Don Quixote was the most remarkable knight errant in the history of chivalry. Consequently, “Don Quixote has surrendered to Amadis the individual’s fundamental prerogative: he no longer chooses the objects of his own desire—Amadis must choose for him” (Girard 1). Thus, one of the lines of the triangle goes from Don Quixote to Amadis. The latter is then the *mediator* while the former is the *subject*. And between the *mediator* and the subject one can find the *object*, that is, the desire to become a perfect knight (Girard 2-5). However, as Girard explains, Don Quixote has at least a primordial and ephemeral flash of freedom for he decided to choose Amadis as his mediator. In *Bless Me, Ultima*, Antonio’s parents are attempting to force Antonio by pushing him from Gabriel’s triangle to María’s and vice versa. On the basis of these circumstances, the model within which Antonio and his parents are operating is not mono-triangular but bi-triangular. It means that Antonio is a common vertex for the two triangles, whereas Gabriel represents the vertex of the mediator in his own triangle, and María does the same in her own triangle. Since the desires included in each triangle are different, Tony faces a terrible confusion. He loves both his parents and he does not want to displease them. However, he is not interested in following a way someone else has traced for him. Such tension and pressure upon Tony are internalized and present even in one of his ten dreams described in the novel. In that particular oneiric experience, Antonio sees his parents argue about which blood—either Márez’s or Luna’s—should have preeminence in his life. Tony’s mother would like him to be attached to the land like her family, while his father wants him to avoid developing roots on the land. In such a dream, Antonio sees a tempest provoked by

²⁹ Amadís de Gaula is a chivalric character whose adventures are narrated by the Spanish author Garcí Núñez de Montalvo and constantly referred in both parts of Cervantes’s *El ingenioso hidalgo don Quijote de la Mancha*.

“the cosmic struggle of the two forces [...]” (120). *“Oh please tell me which is the water that runs through my veins, I moaned,”* says Antonio (120), and then a Christlike Ultima appears in that same dream to appease the storm and lightings representing such a clash of contraries. Finally, Ultima helps Gabriel and María understand that differences among them are but aspects of a same cycle. *“You both know, she spoke to my father and my mother, that the sweet water of the moon [symbol of the Lunas] is the same water that gathers into rivers and flows to fill the seas³⁰ [symbol of the Márezes]”* (121). In other words, an internalized Ultima is stressing the complementarity that is present in Antonio, who needs to construct his identity and future by himself. *“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,”* recalls Tony later on (223). Ultima’s words reflect the idea that the individual’s formation has to do more with experience and change than with imposition and passive acceptance of a certain worldview. One can compare Ultima’s ideas with Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire’s, who considers education to be a liberating process founded on personal experience. Sonia Couto summarizes Freire’s theory thus: *“O importante não é transmitir conteúdos específicos, mas despertar uma nova forma de relação com a experiência vivida”* (148) [*“The important thing is not conveying specific contents, but awakening a new way of relation with lived experience”³¹*].

Antonio’s parents are trying to “invade” the boy’s right to learn from his own development as individual. On the other hand, Ultima is just propitiating the situations in order for Antonio to learn from experience. Thus, Ultima is encouraging Gabriel and

³⁰ The narration of Antonio’s dreams is always presented in italics.

³¹ Translation from Portuguese is mine.

María to prepare the “soil” so that his son may develop and construct his own way. In short, no one can force any seed to germinate; however, one can water and manure the soil. On the other hand, Ultima is leading Tony to exert his action on reality and not just conform to the models passing from one generation to another; she is motivating him to end his ingenuous view of reality in order to transform it. With regard to this issue, Couto asserts, “A visão ingênua que homens e mulheres têm da realidade faz deles escravos, na medida em que não sabendo que podem transformá-la, sujeitam-se a ela” (149) [“The ingenuous view that men and women have about reality makes them slaves as long as they do not know they can transform it rather than just being its subjects”³²]. Ultima is not pulling Antonio to a path he does not want to walk on. On the contrary, she is just endeavoring to open his eyes to the stream of the past so that he can appropriate the narratives of their ancestors. She is not imposing a certain model or way of life, but she is preparing Antonio to make all of those narratives fit in his view of the future.

With regard to the imposition of models on the protagonist of *Balún-Canán*, the situation is completely different if one compares it to Antonio’s. The Ladino girl is free from any “triangular desire” within her family since her parents do not pay attention to her. Nevertheless, her brother Mario is trapped in that triangle because both his parents want him to imitate his father and assume the role of patriarch as landowner. Thus, the girl does not face the same kind of conflict as Antonio, although she does strive to liberate herself from an ingenuous—and therefore passive—view of reality. In addition, both the protagonist of *Balún-Canán* and Antonio receive the aid and guidance of indigenous mediators who play a liberating role. Although both mentors—the Tzeltal woman and Ultima—represent the indigenous component of the story, their position

³² Translation is mine.

within the community they interact is completely different. The Tzeltal woman is rejected by the Ladinos and her own people, while Ultima is respected by most of the people of the region. Because of the influence of these mediators on their lives, the Ladino child and Tony have established a closer relationship with their mentors than with their own parents. “I felt more attached to Ultima than to my own mother,” expresses Tony (123), whereas the protagonist of *Balún-Canán* is aware that their parents are more interested in helping her brother Mario attain the imposed desire to become a new patriarch. For instance, as the Ladino girl is worried about being punished by God because she took the key of the oratory,³³ she asks, “¿Quién iba a defenderme? Mi madre no. Ella sólo defiende a Mario porque es el hijo varón” (278) [“Who would come to my rescue? Not Mother. She only protects Mario because he’s the male child” (259)³⁴]. Notwithstanding this similitude between the both children, there is a clear difference with respect to their families. The Ladino girl’s family is completely dysfunctional since her parent’s relationship is based on convenience. On the other hand, Antonio’s family is founded on values such as solidarity, love, and concern.

As Tony’s narration goes on, one can perceive an evolution in the way in which his parents try to raise him. For instance, almost at the end of the novel Gabriel Márez establishes a frank dialogue with Antonio while they are traveling to Las Pasturas. In that conversation, Gabriel clearly manifests the idea that even though the past has such a tremendous influence on one’s life and decisions, one needs to evolve and rewrite that past. “Ay, every generation, every man is a part of his past. He cannot escape it, but he may reform the old materials, make something new,” affirms Tony’s father (247).

³³ See chapter 1.

³⁴ As I did in chapter 1, I am using Irene Nicholson’s translation of *Balún-Canán* entitled *The Nine Guardians*.

Therefore, Gabriel has given up the triangular desire; he has realized that he and his wife must reconcile their difference. Actually, Tony may constitute the perfect vehicle to do it since he is aware of the possibility to incorporate the Márezes' and Lunas' influences in his own identity by reinterpreting them. "Then maybe I do not have to be just Márez, or Luna, perhaps I can be both" (247), says Tony.

In addition to that dilemma imposed by his parents at the beginning of the novel, Antonio has to confront the loss of innocence on account of violence and death in his own town. Before that uproar has devoured lives and peace in Guadalupe, Antonio regards the *llano* and his home as places of refuge from the influence of urban life. Every time he has a difficult and dangerous experience, he longs for the idealized sites of the *llano* and home. A river separates the safety of that Edenic locus from the turbulence of Guadalupe town. "I felt somewhat relieved as we crossed the storm-wept bridge. Beyond was home and safety, the warm arms of my mother, the curing power of Ultima, and the strength of my father," relates Antonio (167). However, violence and death cross the river at least three times and defile Antonio's shelter. His innocence vanishes little by little as he is acquiring knowledge. In this process, Ultima plays a key role since she helps Antonio learn to hear nature and the voice of his ancestors through stories and legends. "She [Ultima] taught me to listen to the mystery of the groaning earth and to feel complete in the fulfillment of its time. My soul grew under her careful guidance," remembers Antonio (15). As long as Antonio learns the language of nature and past, he is able to understand that his relation to them should be of dialogue; hence, he realizes that every element of nature has a spirit just like him and even he is part of its cycles. The first time Antonio and Ultima connect he experiences a kind of epiphany, an awakening from

a quotidian lethargy. Although he has daily contemplated the *llano* and river surrounding him, he has not realized the power, beauty, and harmony that reside in nature. Antonio remembers,

She [Ultima] took my hand, and I felt the power of a whirlwind sweep around me. Her eyes swept the surrounding hills and *through them*³⁵ I saw for the first time the wild beauty of our hills and the magic of the green river. [...] The four directions of the llano met in me, and the white sun shone on my soul. The granules of sand at my feet and the sun and sky above me seemed to dissolve into one strange, complete being (12).

Additionally, Antonio becomes aware of his links to his ancestors and starts dialoguing with them in order to reinterpret, appropriate, re-imagine their stories, and not to accept an imposed and alien version of history. This issue is related to Freire's idea that dialogue is an effective way to construct knowledge. As one establishes a dialogue, one can unveil some aspects of one's own reality that he/she had not perceived before (Couto 150). Ultima states, "Antonio, [...] I cannot tell you what to believe. Your father and mother can tell you, because you are their blood, but I cannot. As you grow into manhood you must find your own truths [...]" (119). Thus, Ultima is helping Tony understand that he needs to walk on the path to construct knowledge and no one can do it for him. Ultima's role is just opening Tony's eyes to a mythical universe and helping him understand his own reality and circumstances on the basis of that knowledge embedded on myth and folklore.

In speaking about Anaya's narrative, Jean Cazemajou refers to Ultima's mediating function. He compares it—and other characters' in Anaya's works—with the

³⁵ Italics are mine.

Caribbean *santero*, a priest or priestess who mediates between the syncretic gods of *Santería*³⁶ and common human beings. He asserts that those mediators are not natural leaders in a community but just mentors who “are merely there to inspire or guide potential leaders or future mediators” (56). I partially agree with Cazemajou because although Ultima is part of a minority in a country where Anglo culture is predominant, on the local and communitarian level she is so important a leader that many people in Guadalupe and Las Pasturas look for her in order to obtain some cure for their spiritual and physical sicknesses. She is venerated as a woman who has never sinned (104), just as Virgin Mary according to Catholic tradition. Therefore, I do consider Ultima to be a sort of *santera* and also a natural leader in her community notwithstanding her gender. What is more, she represents the contradictoriness of Hispanic culture where vestiges of matriarchy commune with and even support the patriarchal order. It is not coincidental that the main religious figure for Mexican and Chicano Catholics is the Virgin of Guadalupe, “la Madre de los huérfanos [orphans’ Mother],” as Octavio Paz calls her (77). And even Ultima is a representation of that Virgin as I will explain on the subsequent pages.

In addition to Antonio’s parents and Ultima, Tony is exposed to the influence of his three older brothers, Andrés (Andrew), Eugenio (Eugene), and León, who come back home after having fought in World War II. Their function as mediators is completely opposed to Ultima’s. While Ultima teaches Tony to venerate past and tradition, to rewrite them and reinterpret them in order to construct an identity, Tony’s brothers are

³⁶ *Santería* is a traditional religion practiced in some places in the Caribbean, including Cuba and Puerto Rico. It is a mixture of Catholicism and African indigenous beliefs.

committed to utterly rid themselves of their roots and be assimilated into Anglo-American culture. Bernard Wong defines assimilation as

a process whereby immigrants discard the culture traits of their land of origin and acquire the culture of their host country through marriage, citizenship, participation in the institutions of the host society, internalization of the values of the larger society and adoption of their behavior and attitudes (193).

The case of Tony's brothers does not perfectly fit into Wong's definition since it does not include the idea that assimilation is not only a phenomenon relating to immigrants but also to communities—living in their own territory—that were occupied by an external agent. Then, Antonio's parents and siblings are not immigrants, although they could be seen as such by Anglo community. The United States is not their host country either; it *is* their country—all of them were born here—, and therefore a de facto multicultural one, where nevertheless Anglo influence and culture are still the most prevalent.

Having clarified these issues, one could apply the second part of the definition to Antonio's brothers. Although they have not married any Anglo woman, they have participated in the American army, a strong institution of the country. They have stopped valuing the *llano* where they helped his father erect their current family's house, and they prefer to flee and find a job in the uproar of the city. Such a decision provokes an argument and rupture with their father, although Antonio's brothers are actually following the way of the Márezes; they decide to become nomads, just like his father, although they avoid being classic cowboys and prefer to play the role of city cowboys. At that moment, the cohesion of Antonio's family is seriously compromised. In short,

Antonio's brothers have discarded *familismo*,³⁷ one of the most important values and characteristics in Mexican American and Hispanic communities in general.

For Tony, his brothers are giants, but this image will change very soon. He admires them and he even internalizes their presence in his dreams. However, as they express their desire to break their parents' dreams and to get a car, "money, booze, women" (67) in a place like Las Vegas, Denver or San Francisco, Tony feels disappointed. After having realized their plans, Antonio says, "There was an empty feeling inside [...] because they would be gone again. [...] They would be lost again. [...] I remember when they built our house. They were like giants then. Would they always be lost to me?" (69). Antonio's brothers have chosen to look for their own American dream and to satiate their thirst for material possessions and pleasures.

Among the institutions that certainly have an effect on Tony's formation, the Catholic Church and school should be considered the most outstanding. Even the buildings wherein such institutions have their activities are symbols of the power and influence they have in Guadalupe. Throughout the novel it is pretty obvious that both the Catholic Church and school compete in disseminating their ideologies and worldviews. Antonio recalls, "Towering above the housetops and the trees of the town was the church tower. [...] The only other building that rose above the housetops to compete with the church tower was the yellow top of the schoolhouse" (7).

In an interview with González-T., Anaya talked about his idea concerning the Catholic Church. He considers it to be "an institution [that] has been repressive in the lives of people" (87-88). This idea is well depicted in *Bless Me, Ultima*, although one

³⁷ *Familismo* refers to a prevalent Hispanic practice according to which individuals are always connected to their extended families and should procure and support the well-being of the family group. Therefore, in Hispanic cultures, family is more important than the individual.

cannot deny that the Catholic Church helps to keep cohesion in Antonio's community through certain rituals such as Sunday mass and catechism for children who are about to partake of their First Communion. In fact, the Catholic Church has been one of the institutions that have propitiated the liminal character of the U.S. Southwest since the time the first Spanish missionaries came to this region; it has represented a way of resistance against the Anglo protestant world. Additionally, Catholic rituals does not only keep the people of Guadalupe connected to tradition—or at least to the institutional version of it—but also help them preserve their mother language (i.e. Spanish) because of the bilingual character of religious services in that particular parish. For example, although mass is surely celebrated in Latin in Antonio's town, for such was the official language of the Catholic Church throughout the world until the 1960s, from Tony's narration one can discover that at least sermons are uttered in Spanish and kids are accustomed to pray in English in that parish—except Antonio, who seems to consider Spanish his spiritual tongue.

Although bilingualism is promoted in religious services and practices within that particular Catholic temple in Guadalupe, the priest in charge of that ecclesiastical unit—namely Father Byrnes—is not Hispanic. At that time Irish priests and bishops were more numerous in the American Catholic Church than any other group such as Italians or Mexicans. Concerning Father Byrnes, it is not mentioned in Anaya's novel what his origin is. However, according to genealogical data, all the Byrneses can trace their roots to Ireland, specifically to Leinster ("The Origin and History of Byrnes"). As Raoul E. Isáis-A. explains, "[...] the American Catholic Church must be understand in terms of its dominant cultural group, the Irish Catholic" (11). He adds that within Catholicism in the

Southwestern United States, the Irish tradition has clashed against the Chicano one. The former has many similarities with the Puritan ethic (Isáis-A. 11-12) and has adopted the idea that Catholic Church must get Americanized if it wants to survive in the United States. “To be Catholic meant to be Irish. To be Irish meant to be ‘American.’ To be American meant to be white,” says Isáis-A. (14). In opposition, the Chicano Catholic tradition is more related to a syncretic view based on its Spanish and Indigenous roots.

The absence of Mexican clergy in the Southwestern United States—and particularly in Antonio’s town—may be also due to the religious conflict between the Mexican government and the Catholic Church in the 1920s and 1930s. Juan Hurtado affirms that such a conflict provoked a shortage of Mexican priests traveling to the United States in order to minister the Mexican-American flock (28).

On account of that shortage of Mexican clergy and Irish priests’ compliance with a program of Americanization, parishioners often disagree with the priests’ ideas and attitudes in places such as Guadalupe. In *Bless Me, Ultima*, the Catholic Church is presented as an institution that supports bilingualism, but at the same time it rejects and does not understand Chicano Catholics, characterized by unorthodoxy and a belief in spirits, witches, and the healing power of *curanderos*³⁸ (Isáis-A.). Such a divorce between clergy and parishioners is also evident in Ultima’s words as she says to one of Antonio’s uncles, “The priest at El Puerto did not want the people to place much faith in the powers of la curandera. He wanted the mercy and faith of the church to be the villagers’ only guiding light” (97). This situation of misunderstanding between clergy and parishioners is not so different from that depicted in *Balún-Canán*. Although some sectors of the

³⁸ A *curandero* is a folk healer who performs certain rituals relating to Moor, Spanish, and Amerindian traditional medicines (Torres 6).

Catholic Church in Chiapas have defended the Indians since the sixteenth century, this characteristic is not shown in the novel. In addition, the clergy rejects popular beliefs such as witchcraft and the existence of beings pertaining to pre-Columbian mythology. For example, when the protagonist's mother asks one priest to help her son Mario obtain protection against the power of certain Indian sorcerers, the clergyman felt offended and expressed,

Eso es todo. Debí figurármelo. Brujerías, supersticiones. Me traen a las criaturas para que yo las bautice, no porque quieran hacerlas cristianas, pues nadie jamás piensa en Cristo, sino por aquello del agua bendita que sirve para ahuyentar a los nahuales³⁹ y los malos espíritus. (249)

That's all. I might have guessed. Witchcraft and superstition. They bring me the little ones to be baptized and it isn't because they want to make them Christians, because nobody thinks of Christ, ever, but only so the holy water can help to ward off the werewolves and evil spirits. (233)

In the case of Antonio, the Catholic Church becomes an ideological filter trying to make him perceive reality in a rigid way. Such a worldview will gradually change in him as he learns about tolerance from Ultima and undergoes several spiritual experiences. For instance, Tony initially seems only to accept the validity of Catholic beliefs: "I am a Catholic [...] I can believe only in the God of the church," expresses Antonio when one of his friends teaches him about an ancestral god called "the golden carp" (107).

³⁹ Alfredo López Austin defines *Nahualism* as "the ability to change form; a power which belongs to a few individuals, who are considered supernatural; the possibility of the individual to transform himself into different beings" (qtd. in Bauder 47). On the basis of this definition, I affirm that Nicholson's translation of this same passage of *Balún-Canán* is not completely accurate. A *nahual*—whose roots are embedded in Nahuatl mythology—could transform himself/herself into any animal or being, not just into a werewolf.

Nevertheless, later on he mentions that he believes in the Judeo-Christian God because he has to (107). In other words, his Catholic beliefs are more a cultural reflex than a conviction. Additionally, after enrolling in catechism, Tony is indoctrinated according to an educational model that restrains pupils and does not let them ask questions. They are just to give memorized answers without reflecting on them. “I knew most of the answers but I never raised my hand, because I often wanted to ask questions and I knew it would displease father [Byrnes] if I did,” recalls Antonio (200). Therefore, a relationship of dialogue between clergy and young parishioners is excluded since the former conceive religion more as a way of control than as a guide to the souls’ freedom. One of the main doctrines taught on the basis of this constraining model is the existence of punishment for sin. “It was frightening to think of missing mass on Sunday, then dying, and for that one mortal sin to go to hell forever,” says Antonio (200). This model of indoctrination resembles that presented in *Balún-Canán* when Amalia is teaching the Ladino girl and her brother Mario catechism lessons. “No sabe nada de religión ¿verdad?” (254) [“You know nothing about religion, that’s true, isn’t it? (238)], asks Amalia. “Entonces es necesario que sepan lo más importante: hay infierno” (254) [“Then you must learn the one most important thing. There is hell” (238)], she affirms.

In contrast to Church, school certainly promotes a more reflective thinking in Antonio. It is there where he learns “the magic in the letters” (58). Nevertheless, school represents an ideological filter promoting the dominant culture of the United States (i.e. the Anglo-American one). Tony’s elementary school does not include a bilingual curriculum; all of the classes are taught in English and speaking Spanish is forbidden although the educational institution is located in a Hispanic community. “She [Deborah,

Antonio's sister] said that in school the teachers let them speak only in English. I wondered how I would be able to speak to the teachers," recounts Antonio (32).

When Tony attended school for the very first time, he considered English to be "a foreign tongue" (57). He also relates that he just understood and spoke Spanish before enrolling in school, and he mentions that his sister Deborah does not speak Spanish anymore, but she exclusively communicates in English after having attended elementary school for two years. This kind of situation provokes a miscommunication within Antonio's family since he can understand neither Deborah nor his sister Theresa. Besides, it is an example of an educational model based on acculturation and a lack of vision concerning the multicultural character of the United States. As the education system is making new generations substitute Spanish, their mother language, with the language of the dominant culture, it is erecting a wall dividing young and older people. In that way, the bridge to communicate oral tradition is broken and the process of assimilation is accelerated. "All of the older people spoke only Spanish, and I myself understood only Spanish. It was only after one went to school that one learned English" (10), remembers Antonio.

Tony's first day at school is an example of the shock Mexican Americans used to suffer before the creation of the Bilingual Education Act of 1968, which was not a definitive solution but at least a start to solve the problem of isolation and discrimination of students whose first language is not English. With regard to his experience, Tony recalls,

The strangeness of the school and the other children made me very sad. I did not understand them. [...] I yearned for my mother, and at the same

time I understood that she had sent me to this place where *I was an outcast*.⁴⁰ I had tried hard to learn and they had laughed at me (59).

As it is perceived in Anaya's novel, although the Catholic Church is open to bilingualism and school is completely closed to it, neither of those two institutions are bicultural. David Ballesteros insists on this distinction: "Knowing the language of the people does not guarantee that one understands their way of life, but knowing about a culture is not enough either. To be bicultural one must feel, experience, and be part of it" (152). This lack of cultural understanding at school is seen in the attitudes of Antonio's classmates. For instance, they scorn him for bringing Mexican food for lunch while others have sandwiches. "I had opened my lunch to eat and again they had laughed and pointed at me," relates Tony (59).

No doubt Antonio's school is an important mediator for him. On the one hand, it presents to him a view of reality where being a Mexican American and speaking Spanish do not fit in. On the other hand, as I had already mentioned, school expands Tony's possibilities since he learns to write, and writing will be an important element to construct his identity. In order to not feel as an outcast, Antonio associates with other kids who are in the same situation. "We [Antonio and two more boys] banded together and in our union found strength. We found a few others who were like us, different in language and custom, and a part of our loneliness was gone," says Tony (59).

In Castellanos' novel, the case of school as a mediating institution is quite different. The protagonist attends an unofficial school for girls where teachings are not based on a well-structured curriculum but on improvisation. This school does not support assimilation to a national culture promoted by the Cárdenas' regime. On the contrary, its

⁴⁰ Italics are mine.

aim is perpetuating women's submission to the patriarchal order and countering the model of socialist education implemented throughout Mexico by the federal government in the mid 1930s and founded on the ideals of the Mexican Revolution and the Soviet model (Quintanilla). It is precisely on this difference that the goals of both educational views converge. In the case of Antonio's school, it tries to disconnect Mexican Americans from the stream of traditions, knowledge, and experiences that would eventually let them establish bridges between their indigenous and Spanish origins. On the other hand, the Ladino girl's school disconnects students from the nation. In other words, it reinforces the idea that Ladinos' ancestors are the Spanish conquistadors and not the Amerindians. In short, both models discourage the construction of a *mestizo* identity.

Another contrast between the protagonist of *Balún-Canán* and Antonio is the latter's fervent interest in learning the principles of Catholicism. As Antonio starts taking catechism classes, he focuses more on the study of religion than in school. "Very little else mattered in my life. School work was dull and uninspiring compared to the mysteries of religion," expresses Tony (204). Even his contact with Ultima and parents diminishes because he is completely focused on the salvation of his soul. "I saw very little of Ultima, or even of my mother and father. I was concerned with myself," he says (204). As I have already explored, in the Hispanic culture there are several rites of initiation connected with the passage from childhood to adulthood; one of them is the First Communion. While Castellanos' Ladino girl wants to avoid partaking of that sacrament, Antonio yearns to do so. Nevertheless, he realizes that the knowledge that was supposed to come after partaking of the Holy Communion for the first time did not come. Such a

disappointment makes him turn to Ultima again and look forward to completing those rites of initiation relating to the mythic knowledge of his ancestors and nature. Thus, Ultima prevails as the most important mediator in Tony's life. "I had more time to spend with Ultima, and in her company I found a great deal of solace and peace. This was more than I had been able to find at church or with the kids at school" (223), Antonio admits.

Among those kids Antonio meets at school, Samuel and Florence become important influences for Antonio. Both are mediators between him and two alternative systems of beliefs. Like Ultima, Samuel shares with Antonio some of the beliefs of their indigenous ancestors, including polytheism. Actually, with the help of another boy named Cico, he initiates Tony in the religion of the golden carp. In opposition to this system, Florence represents the way of atheism and makes Tony ask himself several questions about the nature of God, the reasons for the existence of evil in the world, and the final destiny of the human spirit. In fact, all those questions popping up in the mind of Tony lead him to doubt God's existence. Antonio says, "Sometimes, in moments of great anxiety and disappointment, I wondered if God was alive anymore, or if He ever had been" (236). Even though Tony manifests this sort of doubt, he never gets rid of the idea that there is a superior power ruling human beings, nature, and the whole universe. As he tries to answer Florence's question about why evil is allowed to exist, Tony mentions the possibility that there could be a comparison between God and nature. Just like the latter comes in cycles, the former does. And Tony even speculates that some other gods may reign while the Judeo-Christian God is absent or hidden.

A similar idea is present in Aztec mythology and worldview as explained by Paz. He affirms that the Spanish conquest coincides with the climax of the cult of two male

deities—Quetzalcoatl and Hutzilopochtli. As the Spaniards destroyed their temples and vanquished the Aztec empire, the indigenous people thought a new cosmic cycle was about to begin and new gods—actually goddesses—were going to reign (Paz 76). That is why it was relatively easy to introduce the cult to the Virgin Mary. There is a likeness to such an idea in Antonio’s words as he says to Florence, “[...] but what if there were gods to rule in his absence? [...] What if the Virgin Mary or the Golden Carp ruled instead of—!” (198). Antonio is not only accepting the viability of polytheism, but he is also subverting the Judeo-Christian idea that two of the *sine qua non* characteristics of the Deity are masculinity and humanlikeness. Such an idea represents a return to pre-Columbian mythology, which promoted the adoration of Mother Earth and the personification of natural forces (Báez-Jorge 94, 165). This same personification is present in *Balún-Canán* as the protagonist believes the wind talks and deserves to be revered.

Antonio’s hypothesis concerning religion is the result of an imaginative negotiation and a refusal to choose between Florence’s atheistic view and the religion preached by Samuel and Cico, which is founded on the legend of the golden carp, a fish god that supposedly saved the ancient people who used to live on the New Mexican plains. The other gods were going to kill them because they had no respect for the carps of the sacred river and ate them. However, one of the gods loved those people and convinced the other deities to pardon their lives. Finally, they agreed but transformed the people into carp. After this decision was made, the one god who interceded for the people manifested his desire to become a golden carp and take care of those who now lived in the waters of the sacred river. Some days after Tony learned this story from Samuel, his

friend Cico took him to the river and showed him the golden carp. In one of the most magical realistic passages of the novel, Antonio witnesses and accepts the meddling of mythical time in the supposedly real time of the story without questioning it. As Seymour Menton explains, “El realismo mágico puede reconocerse por la aparición inesperada de un personaje o de un suceso en un ambiente predominantemente realista, provocando asombro en los lectores [mas no en los personajes]” (205) [“Magical realism may be recognized because of the unexpected presence of a character or event within a predominantly realist ambience, situation that provokes the amazement of the reader (but not of the characters)”].⁴¹ As Antonio narrates his encounter with the golden carp and does not mention any doubt about its existence, he becomes an example of the assumption of myths as true stories. In other words, at the time Antonio recounts this experience, he has already incorporated it into its identity as something that really happened—although perhaps it never occurred.

In addition to Antonio’s encounter with the golden carp, several passages are examples of the use of magical realism, including the intervention of Ultima’s owl to protect and take care of Antonio, the miraculous cure of Lucas Luna, and the fall of huge rocks coming from the sky over Téllez’s house. This characteristic is one of the main elements that differentiate Anaya’s novel from Castellanos’. Although *Balún-Canán* makes constant references to Indian and *mestizo* folklore as *Bless Me*, *Ultima* does, Castellanos’ novel is more committed to show a realistic portrayal of the socio-political situation in Chiapas during the 1930s. Even though witchcraft is also mentioned in *Balún-Canán* as an instrument to do evil, it is not implied that sorcery is really the cause of Mario’s death. In fact, as it was indicated in the chapter devoted to *Balún-Canán*,

⁴¹ Translation is mine.

Castellanos' work complies with the model of realist *indigenista* novel, whereas Anaya's text offers a view of some aspects of Chicanos' indigenous roots in a mythical context. This difference between both novels could be founded on their goals. On the one hand, it seems that *Balún-Canán*'s main goal is to denounce the social, material, and economic disadvantages the Indians suffer in Chiapas on account of a Ladino elite that refuses to accept any racial and cultural link with those same Indians. On the other hand, *Bless Me, Ultima* is committed to warn Mexican Americans about the spiritual danger they face if they do not resist assimilation and acculturation by incorporating the myths of their ancestors into their identity.

With regard to Antonio's religious crisis, it becomes more acute because he is exposed to both the atheistic and indigenous polytheistic beliefs through the mediation of his friends. Nevertheless, he finds a way to solve such a crisis. Antonio does not want to reject the Judeo-Christian God like Florence does, but he agrees with his friend on the idea that it is impossible to reconcile God's justice with the presence of evil in the world. On the other hand, although Tony holds to the God of his Spanish ancestors, he accepts the polytheistic beliefs of the Amerindian people who originally lived in the Southwest. In other words, he has entered the way of syncretism in order to solve his religious conflict and construct his identity.

Transculturation and Nature

After having analyzed each of the most important mediators the reader may find in *Bless Me, Ultima*, the next step is to focus on how Antonio harmonizes the knowledge

he has obtained through those mediators. In order to attain such a purpose, Antonio recurs to transculturation, syncretism—which is a result of transculturating processes—and the transformation of nature into *lieux de mémoire* and sites where transculturation occurs. Certainly some of the mediators playing the role of filters between Tony and the knowledge about past, myth, religion, nature, and human relations will also lead him on those mentioned paths. For sure, Ultima is again the most remarkable guide.

In the case of the Mexican-American community represented in Anaya's novel, one needs to regard it as the result of at least three transculturating processes. The first one occurred during and after the conquest of the Aztec empire in 1521, several miles away from the present territory of New Mexico, when Spaniards, Amerindians, and black slaves got their bloods and cultures mixed. In comparison to the Cuban context presented by Ortiz in *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar* as he explains his theory about transculturation,⁴² Amerindians were not completely exterminated in Mexico. On the contrary, the Amerindian component in Mexican hybrid culture is by far stronger than in the Caribbean. “Es cierto que los españoles no exterminaron a los indios porque necesitaban la mano de obra nativa para el cultivo de los enormes feudos y la explotación minera. Los indios eran bienes que no convenía malgastar” (Paz 92) [“It is quite clear that the reason the Spaniards did not exterminate the Indians was that they needed their labor for the cultivation of the vast haciendas and the exploitation of the mines. The Indians were goods that should not be wasted” (101-102)]. In addition, the Spaniards found more developed civilizations in Middle America than in the Caribbean area. Concerning the importation of black slaves, it was not as numerous in Mexico as in Cuba.

⁴² See the introduction to this study in order to get an overview regarding transculturation.

The second transculturation implied in the context described by Anaya in *Bless Me, Ultima*, is the encounter between settlers—including Spaniards, Mexican *mestizos*, Indians from Southern Mexico and some black slaves—and the Pueblo Indians of New Mexico (Menchaca 83-88). The third transculturating process started when the Anglo-Americans began to settle in New Mexico and finally conquered those lands by winning the Mexican-American war in 1848.

Antonio is in a certain way the result of those processes. On account of those three transculturations, a particular hybridity was formed in the New Mexican society, whose characteristics are completely different from the nature of Caribbean culture. For Monika Kaup, a peculiar sort of hybridity characterizes Mexican-American communities in the United States. In order to support her assertions, she refers to Edouard Glissant's term "poetics of relation," according to which there are communities whose identity is not based on the model of nation but on the openness to other cultures. Several examples of this kind of open, unfinished identity may be found in the Caribbean—including Ortiz's Cuba—where marine geography facilitates multicultural contact, and at the same time insularity places colonial forces at a relatively safe distance. On the basis of these arguments, Kaup affirms that Chicano discourse fluctuates "between the poetics of nation and the poetics of relation" (190). In other words, since "cultures situated on a large land mass are more vulnerable to annexation and invasion than hybrid cultures located in islands" (Kaup 191), Chicano community has been committed to searching for "a lost time" and a resistance against oblivion, whereas according to Glissant's idea of "pure"

hybridity, Caribbean cultures “must embrace the pain of oblivion to remain open to the creolization”⁴³ (Kaup 191).

As Glissant compares the root identity and the relational identity, one can conclude that Chicano identity is being constructed in a space in between both. Glissant mentions that root identity “is founded in the distant past in a vision, a myth of the creation of the world,” while relation identity “is linked not to a creation of the world but to the conscious and contradictory experience of contacts among cultures” (143-144). For instance, as it was explained in the contextual part of this chapter, Chicanos have appropriated the Aztec myth of Aztlán. At the same time, they have selected and integrated several aspects of Anglo-American culture in a very creative way.

One of those creative manifestations of transculturation is religious syncretism. Such a phenomenon is present throughout Anaya’s novel. In fact, Antonio begins to solve his religious crisis through forming a syncretic path to spirituality. Even at home he gets involved in some practices resulting from the confluence, exchange, and negotiation of Spanish and Amerindian cultures. One of those practices is the veneration of the Virgin of Guadalupe, who represents the synthesis of two religiosities, Spanish Catholicism—characterized by giving Virgin Mary a preeminent place at the altars—and the Aztec adoration of Tonantzin, a goddess of fertility (Paz 76). Antonio’s mother, María, is a devotee of that icon that has become a symbol of resistance in Chicano communities. María has an altar at home and it is dedicated to such a Virgin represented as an Amerindian woman whose image contains several pre-Columbian elements. “My mother

⁴³ Paraphrasing Edward Kamau Brathwaite, Rebecca Tortello defines creolization “as the cultural changes that occur when people of two different backgrounds come together in a new environment and are so affected by interactions with each other and the environment that a new culture is born” (“Lady Nugent’s Journal”). On the basis of such a definition, one can conclude that Brathwaite’s “creolization” and Ortiz’s “transculturation” are related—if not synonymous—terms.

said the Virgin was the saint of our land, and although there were many other good saints, I love none as dearly as the Virgin,” affirms Tony (44).

The myth of the Virgin of Guadalupe has evolved throughout the centuries since 1648, when priest and theologian Miguel Sánchez re-elaborated the oral tradition concerning this religious symbol and produced the first text narrating the apparitions of such a Virgin. According to those stories, the Virgin appeared to an Indian Catholic convert named Juan Diego on December 12, 1531. She commanded him to visit the ecclesiastical authorities in order to ask them to erect a temple dedicated to her on that same place, known as Tepeyac hill, located in present Mexico City. In fact, a sanctuary was built on that hill where the Aztecs used to revere Tonantzin (Zires 291-293).

During the colonial period in New Spain, the myth of the Virgin of Guadalupe was both an instrument to Christianize and an instrument to control Indians who were still attached to their religious beliefs. Actually, as Margarita Zires comments, the Spanish missionaries let Indians establish identifications between Catholic saints and specific indigenous gods in order to propitiate conversion to Christianity. As they teach the neophytes about the Virgin Mary, priests used to call her Tonantzin (282-283, 285). A similar process occurred in Cuba and other parts of the Caribbean, where black slaves apparently revered the Catholic images of saints and even Christ, but they were really worshipping their African deities. However, this syncretism did not represent an instrument of control over the slaves; on the contrary, it was a way of resistance against the Spanish dominator. Additionally, as Ortiz mentions, Spaniards adopted some practices coming from African religiosity such as consulting a black sorcerer who used

seashells to foretell the future (222). Those practices performed by both Spaniards and black slaves led to the formation of a new religion known as *Santería*.

The interpretation of the myth of the Virgin of Guadalupe evolved and it got changed into an anti-Hispanic emblem. Fray Servando Teresa de Mier's adaptation of the myth contributed to that change. In December 1794, Teresa de Mier gave a sermon explaining that the Apostle Thomas himself came to the Americas before the Spanish conquest and he taught Indians the basic principles of Christian religion. Teresa de Mier also affirmed that Saint Thomas—supposedly the god Quetzalcoatl—had the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe imprinted on his cloak. Then, in opposition to the Spaniards' idea that the conquest prepared the way to the Virgin's apparitions, Teresa de Mier argued that conquistadors did not prepare any way because Christianity had been already introduced to the Indians (Zires 296-297). On the basis of such transformation of the myth, Mexican *criollos*,⁴⁴ *mestizos*, Indians, mulattoes, and blacks adopted the Virgin of Guadalupe's image as a literal banner during the Independence war against Spain in 1810.

From that time on, the myth kept evolving not only in Mexico but also in other countries, including the United States, where it permeated Chicano culture, art, and literature. In the case of *Bless Me, Ultima*, Antonio appropriates and narrates the story of the apparitions. However, he deviates from the original story as he says that Juan Diego was a boy (43) while the original story indicates he was an adult. By re-interpreting the myth in such a way, Tony seems to reinforce his desire to propitiate and have a similar experience. "And so I dreamed that I too would meet the Virgin. I expected to see Her

⁴⁴ *Criollo*: "A person of pure Spanish descent born in Spanish America" (*Merriam-Webster Online* www.m-w.com).

around every corner I turned,” recalls Antonio (187). If an Indian boy had had such a magnificent experience, why couldn’t he have a similar one?

Another way in which Antonio appropriates the myth of the Virgin of Guadalupe is by linking it to Ultima and her magic powers. At the beginning of the novel, the protagonist boy mentions that an owl always accompanies Ultima. In fact, throughout the novel the reader realizes that the owl is a representation of Ultima’s soul and magical powers. “The owl was her soul!” says Tony (255). In one of his mystic dreams, Antonio subverts the myth once more since he sees Ultima’s owl sustain and lift the Virgin of Guadalupe on its wings. On the image venerated in the basilica dedicated to that Virgin in Mexico City, a winged cherub—and not an owl—sustains her. Therefore, Antonio adds one more syncretic element to an image that was already syncretic. The owl is present in the mythologies of many indigenous peoples in Middle and North America. For instance, the Aztecs considered it to be a bad omen and was related to witchcraft. Thus, sorcerers and people dedicated to necromancy were called Tlacatecolotl or owl-men (Fernández 89). For Ojibwa people of the Great Lakes, “the owl has a multifaceted personality” (Pomedli 47). As in the Aztec mythology, the Ojibwas think the owl is connected to bad luck and bad medicine. However, Michale M. Pomedli explains that the Ojibwas also believe that owls are protective beings too. In his dream, Tony counters every negative properties of the owl such as its connection to bad omens and black witchcraft. In fact, Antonio makes reference to the protective character of that animal throughout his narration.

Since the owl serves the Virgin and is a representation of Ultima, one can conclude that Antonio regards the *curandera* as the Virgin’s servant on the earth. Such a

link between Ultima and Guadalupe-Tonantzin strengthens Antonio's trust in his mentor and makes her completely reliable.

Another obvious connection between the Virgin of Guadalupe and Ultima is that both propitiate fertility and life. As a *curandera*, Ultima has the knowledge to serve as a midwife. Indeed, she helped María bear all of her children, including Tony. Hence, since the Virgin of Guadalupe is identified with Tonantzin—the goddess of fertility—, Ultima can be considered one of her priestesses.

The myth of the golden carp is another example of syncretism. According to the story told by Samuel to Antonio, such a myth has its origins in Native American traditions since an Indian shared it with Samuel's father. Although the cult of the golden carp deviates from Catholic monotheism, it keeps some links with Christianity since the god who became a carp is a Christlike figure. Because of the fall of the people who anciently inhabited the land, it was necessary that a kind god interceded for them, just like Jesus Christ does for all humanity. That interceding god even condescended to live with that fallen people in the river and take care of them. In other words, he abandoned the realms of the gods and descended to a less dignified level just for love's sake. Thus, this appears to be a syncretic version of Jesus Christ as He left His Father's presence and came to earth in order to teach and redeem every human being.

Antonio's response to this new knowledge is to ask questions whose answers would help him obtain a spiritual stability and construct his religious identity. "If the golden carp was a god, who was the man on the cross? The Virgin? Was my mother praying to the wrong God?" asks Tony to himself (81). In order to establish a harmony within this internal uproar and confusion, Antonio creates his own theology based on the

figures of the Judeo-Christian God, the Virgin of Guadalupe, and the golden carp. He compares them to each other and wonders why both the God about whom he has learned in church and the golden carp are willing to punish sinners. Antonio has internalized a jealous and vindictive image of the Judeo-Christian Deity; even before knowing about the golden carp, he affirms, “God was not always forgiving. [...] The Virgin always forgave” (44). At the same time he regrets that the golden carp is supposedly going to drown the town because of its inhabitants’ sins. Then Antonio asks and concludes,

[...] why couldn’t there be a god who would never punish his people, a god who would be forgiving all the time? Perhaps the Virgin Mary was such a god? She had forgiven the people who killed her son. She always forgave. Perhaps the best god would be like a woman, because only women really knew how to forgive (137).

Therefore, in Antonio’s theology the Virgin gets a preeminent position. However, he is still amazed about the beauty and peace the golden carp represents. As he contemplates its magnificence, every doubt dissipates and he accepts it as a true god. “He was beautiful; he was truly a god,” he expresses (237). While looking at the fish, Tony experiences a harmonious relationship with natural elements. Then, Ultima’s teachings about nature are not theory anymore but a profound and living experience that permeates Tony’s soul. “Seeing him [the golden carp] made questions and worries evaporate, and I remained transfixed, caught and caressed by the essential elements of sky and earth and water” (237).

Such an experience deals with a process of deification of nature—so common in Amerindian religions. While Catholicism is offering to Antonio a deification of man

through Jesus Christ, the cult of the golden carp makes Tony see an example of the divine character of nature, an issue about which he has already learned from Ultima. *Balún-Canán* also offers examples of this kind of subversion of rites and the adoption of animistic beliefs in a transculturating context. For instance, the protagonist does not show any respect as the consecrated Eucharistic bread is exposed before a group of people in Amalia's house so the Ladino girl and her brother are chastised. "Más respeto, niños, que está expuesto el Santísimo" (246) ["Have more respect, children. You're in the Holy Presence" (231)], says Amalia. Conversely, the protagonist honors and reveres a natural element such as the wind, for she considers it to be a powerful sovereign. "Pasearemos por el llano hasta no dejar más presencia que la suya [la del viento], cuando todos se hayan rendido a su calidad de rey. Oiremos su gran voz, temblaremos bajo su fuerza" (245) ["He'll (the wind) stroll across the plain until he possesses it all to himself, because everyone will give way before his kingly state. We'll hear his great voice and will tremble because of his strength" (230)], confides the Ladino girl.

Another parallelism between Castellanos' and Anaya's novels is that both the anonymous girl and Tony regard nature as a sort of temple, a stronghold where they feel near to their spiritual mentors (i.e. the Tzeltal woman and Ultima) and their teachings. In the case of the Ladino child, she decides to find refuge in the forest when she yearns to come back to Comitán and be by her nursemaid's side. On the other hand, Tony considers the creek called El Rito (i.e. the rite) to be sacred because that is the place where the golden carp appears. "We had been whispering since we arrived at the pond, why I didn't know, except that it was just one of those places where one can communicate only in whispers, like church" (113), he remembers.

Tony's reverence for nature does not start at that very moment. It happens some time before, when he accompanies Ultima to look for medicinal herbs. She teaches him that even plants have a spirit and deserve respect. "[...] before I dug [a plant] she [Ultima] made me speak to the plant and tell it why we pulled it from its home in the earth" (39). Such an ecological learning is reinforced as he sees his uncles till the soil in silence, like monks who contemplate the beauty and sacredness of nature. "I watched closely how they worked the earth, the respect they showed it, and the way they cared for living plants. Only Ultima equaled them [...]" (249), he recounts.

A dialogue between different religious views and beliefs is established within Antonio's soul. Actually, as theologian Carl Starkloff asserts, "syncretism can be interpreted as a form of dialogue" (150). Tony realizes that only through that internal dialogue and negotiation he will be able to attain religious harmony. As he talks to his father about this topic, Antonio said to himself, "Take the llano and the river valley, the moon and the sea, God and the golden carp—and make something new" (247). By making that conclusion, Tony figures out that religion is not a sclerotized phenomenon but an ever-opened one. Actually, no religion is free from syncretism, and this process will continue as long as human civilization exists (Starkloff 17). Antonio gains this liberating knowledge and he finally gets rid of the remorse he felt about doubting the God of Catholicism. "If the old religion could no longer answer the questions of the children then perhaps it was time to change it," Tony concludes (248). The case of *Balún-Canán's* protagonist differs from Tony's since the girl is not able to overcome her remorse and fear of God's punishment. One of the reasons for this unsuccessful result is the constant state of confinement she experiences in his home. Consequently, the girl seldom has real

contact with nature although she lives in one of the most exuberant places in the world with regard to nature. In addition, she has been deprived from her mentor's presence, which has been substituted by Amalia, a supporter of the patriarchal order and the status quo.

As I have argued, one important component in Antonio's religious ideas is nature. However, nature is not only a spiritual and sacred place for him, but it is also a living archive for memory. Several events relating to Antonio's experiences are connected to either natural spots or elements. In other words, those objects and beings in the environment are transformed into what Pierre Nora would call *lieux de mémoire* or places of memory. According to Nora, "When certain minorities create protected enclaves as preserves of memory to be jealously safeguarded, they reveal what is true of all *lieux de mémoire*: that without commemorative vigilance, history would soon sweep them away" (7). Antonio is aware of that sweeping, defiling character of official history. He knows that all those memories relating to his childhood and people that have been extremely relevant to him could vanish in a few years. That is why he learns to inscribe and read into nature those events and people that helped him evolve and develop. For instance, as the boy, his father, and Ultima travel through the plains, Tony meditates on a conversation between his dad and the *curandera*. At that occasion, Antonio's father expresses that the *llano* represents freedom and power while Ultima says that in addition it represents beauty and faith. These two reflections on the meaning of the *llano* eloquently show two different models of approaching nature. Gabriel Márquez's approach has more to do with some characteristics of his conquistador ancestors. As Paz mentions, the conquistadors "Son aventureros, esto es, gente que se interna en los espacios abiertos

y se arriesga en lo desconocido” (88-89) [“They were adventurers, that is, men who opened up new lands and risked the unknown” (98)]. In opposition to Gabriel Márquez’s view—that is more related to future than to past—, Ultima represents the Amerindian attitude with regard to nature, an attitude of contemplation and reverence. In his narration of that moment, Antonio adheres to Ultima’s view as he links nature to memory. He affirms, “And there is also the dark, mystical past, I thought, the past of the people who lived here and left their traces in the magic that crops out today” (229). He is able to read the traces of past on the plains and keep it alive.

Two other examples of nature as *lieu de mémoire* are a river and a juniper tree nearby Antonio’s home. Concerning the first one, it is the place where Lupito, a World War II veteran who suffered a mental disorder, was killed by a mob. Every time Tony sees such a place, he remembers what happened there. He connects the flowing waters to Lupito’s blood. “How would I ever wash away the stain of blood from the sweet waters of my river!” he wonders (24).

With regard to the juniper, he considers it to be sacred since that was the place where Narciso, a friend of his family, was murdered when he was about to warn Ultima that Tenorio Trementina was coming to kill her. Antonio eyewitnesses Narciso’s death and from that moment on he thinks that Narciso passed the gift of life into the earth (177). For Antonio, that juniper was not only a crime scene, but also a place where he helped a hero pass away in peace. In such a place, Antonio heard Narciso’s confession as though this boy had been a priest. “The tree’s huge, dark branches offered protection, like a confessional” (169), recalls Tony. Thus, that place is sacralized by him and triggers memory.

Those memories connected to the deaths of Lupito and Narciso are terribly important for Tony's identity construction because they are linked to negative values—such as injustice on account of human beings' animalization and hatred provoked by the eagerness to do good—and positive ones, including sacrifice as a way to protect life and express both love and gratitude. In other words, Lupito's blood that spiritually stained the river reminds Tony that he must avoid the irrationality of those who shot that insane man. Additionally, the juniper and its surrounding land make Tony think of the fruitful legacy a man or a woman could leave for future generations as he/she sacrifices.

Antonio's memory would not only reside in nature, but also in his own writing. As a matter of fact, the most important moment in Tony's identity construction has to do with a transition from orality to writing. The boy is trained by Ultima to become “a man of learning” as the old *curandera* prophesied. (56). She orally shared with him her knowledge concerning nature, the history of his ancestors, and rituals linked to life and health. As a man of learning he was ready to become a *curandero* just like Ultima. Nonetheless, he chooses the “magic in the letters” (58) rather than the magic of herbs and orality.

Although in the novel it is never explicitly mentioned that Antonio becomes a writer, his narration is presented in the model of a written autobiography. In addition, Tony relates—quoting his mother's words—that when he was just a baby Ultima showed him several “objects of life” and he chose “the pen and the paper” (54). As Núñez Villavicencio comments, *Bless Me, Ultima* deals with Antonio's initiation not just as a person but also as an artist, a writer who narrates from adulthood that same process of initiation. In the middle of confusion and chaos, Tony is able to establish harmony

through creative writing (152). Because of his love for the letters and his devotion to Ultima's teachings, Antonio represents a connector and translator between two different realms: the world of oral tradition and the world of the written word. Thus, he becomes a sort of shaman who mediates between the spirits from the past that are disseminated through oral tradition and the many readers who would become his disciples or protégés. As that kind of shaman of the letters, Tony has developed some of the main characteristics of the *curandero*. As Eliseo Torres explains, “[the curandero] is awake rather than in trance and is himself—that is, has not assumed the being of another” (9). In short, Antonio can liberate himself from any imposed model and he creates his own; he is able to invoke the spirits and beings from the past and give them voice through writing without giving up his own self.

This is the same path the protagonist of Castellanos' novel took; she opts for the written word to organize all those experiences she had during childhood and re-create those passages that the social and cultural mainstream of a highly racist, sexist, and male-centered society has been trying to make her forget. However, in contrast to Tony's, the written record of the Ladino protagonist of *Balún-Canán* does not reflect any realization of harmony. As a matter of fact, her words imply an incomplete initiation and an unsolved search for liberation. Conversely, Tony is able to complete the process of identity construction through writing. Nonetheless, as it happens with the Ladino girl, Antonio's progression is not linear at all. As he faces the internal war caused by the multiple voices resounding within him, he tries different and contradictory paths before creating his own alternative way to construct his identity. Sometimes he seems to affiliate with his Lunas' roots, but he soon disaffiliates; he wants to comply with the Catholic

doctrine, but later on he feels appealed by non-Christian beliefs. In addition, Tony's spiritual fulfillment does not aim social integration. In fact, as Antonio creates his alternative path, he builds the mechanisms to resist the pressures of the dominant culture and, at the same time, keep his identity open in order to establish a constant dialogue and negotiation with external influences.

As Antonio grows and develops on the margins, he realizes that memories are just fragments or interpretations of past that should be ordered and gathered. That is what he precisely would do in the future as he himself confides, "Sometime in the future I would have to *build*⁴⁵ my own dream out of those things that were so much a part of my childhood. [...] Ultima said to take life's experiences and *build* strength from them, not weakness" (261). In this statement, Antonio chooses the verb "to build" instead of "to find" in order to describe the experience of solving the puzzle of his own identity.

In conclusion, as Tony creates a plot of his own story, he selects certain events, experiences, and memories from his childhood in order to reinterpret them through the eyes of adulthood. As it has been described throughout this chapter, people and institutions such as family, church, school, friends, and a mentor (i.e. Ultima) have filtered most of those cultural, social, and religious experiences and knowledge. However, such a filtering process does not imply that Antonio passively and uncritically accepts every idea coming through his mediators. On the contrary, he demonstrates a high capacity of discernment as he establishes an internal dialogue and formulates several questions regarding those ideas—especially those relating to religion. Such a capacity enables him to trace an alternative path in between Catholic and non-Catholic worldviews, attachment to the land and freedom on the land, and Mexican American and

⁴⁵ Italics are mine.

Anglo cultures. Antonio chooses the “magic in the letters” to understand and express his own hybrid identity mainly in English, the language of those who occupied the lands of his ancestors, and also in Spanish, his mother tongue. In fact, Antonio’s text could be regarded as the product of the transculturating process he and his community have gone through. *Bless Me, Ultima* is, therefore, a representation on how writing is capable of helping the individual reconcile with the contradictory voices from the past.

CONCLUSIONS

Rosario Castellanos' *Balún-Canán* and Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima* are novels that depict the conflict *mestizo* individuals face as they try to define who they really are in a context where several cultural influences converge. Despite this common feature, the main difference between these novels is the results of the protagonists' strife to construct their identity. In the case of the Ladino girl in *Balún-Canán*, she is not able to overcome the trauma resulting from the clash and cultural rape represented by the Spanish conquest and depicted by Paz; she cannot overcome the tragic situation of a society that rejects a part of itself (i.e. its Amerindian roots) and consequently lives a kind of incompleteness. In contrast to her, in *Bless Me, Ultima* Antonio can successfully create bridges between the several components and voices that resound within him.

This difference is mainly due to the influence of the social and historical contexts of the novels. On the one hand, the wounds of the conquest are constantly reopened and bleeding in Chiapas' society because many of the colonial economic structures have persisted throughout the centuries; the Ladinos have assumed their role of dominators and heirs of the colonial power, whereas the Indians have not been able to be freed from their position as dominated people because a cycle of racism, lack of opportunities, and poverty prevails. On the other hand, although the Chicano society described by Anaya also has suffered on account of the conquest's wounds, the clash between its European

and Amerindian roots is just internal and is not a source of physical violence like in Chiapas as described by Castellanos.

Despite the different results of both protagonists' identity construction, they follow similar paths to organize the elements they have gathered and the experiences they have undergone. Both children have established a relationship with the past, tradition, and nature with the aid of their indigenous mentors. The Tzeltal nursemaid and Ultima represent a link between the children and the oral tradition of their ancestors. However, the Ladino girl and Antonio need to surpass orality and enter the realm of creative writing in order to re-imagine their past, re-evaluate the contradictory influences intermingling within them, and reinterpret their position in their respective communities. In that sense, each of them becomes a sort of shaman since he/she invokes the "spirits" from the past to find reconciliation between them. In spite of this commonality, Antonio's written narration reflects a sense of harmony and hope, whereas the Ladino girl's evidences desperation and frustration—a chaos deriving from a premature separation from her mentor and the increasing influence of the Ladino culture over the child, a pressure that pushes her to break her identification with the Indians. In other words, the Ladino girl's role as shaman is not completely fulfilled since, according to Zimmerman, one of the functions of a shaman is "winning a war against invading forces of chaos" (24).

By creating bridges between the conflicting elements within him through writing, Antonio overcomes dual thinking. He does not have to choose anymore between the conquistadors' nomadic way of life represented by his father and the attachment to the land represented by his mother. In fact, he opens an alternative way as a writer, as a guide himself of other Chicanos who would read his fictitious autobiography in the future. On

the contrary, the Ladino girl is still trying to break that dual thinking that obstructs the development of a new *mestizo/a* consciousness. Indeed, she has not been able to avoid the shadow of the patriarchal order; she still is trapped in the male-female opposition.

Writing is not the only way the protagonists of *Balún-Canán* and *Bless Me, Ultima* follow to construct their identity; they also enter a process of transculturation by taking part of rituals that subvert the status quo and encourage a dialogue between the children's European and Amerindian roots. Both novels depict rites of initiation that represent alternatives before the rites supported by the cultural and social mainstream in their communities (e.g. the First Communion). Those alternative rituals offer a syncretic means for the protagonists of the novels to overcome their religious crisis. Both children experience a kind of detachment from the Judeo-Christian God so they start constructing a theology based on elements coming from European and Amerindian beliefs; in addition, they enter a process of deification and adoration of nature. Nevertheless, their relationship with the natural environment differs because of their social and economic situation. In the case of the Ladino girl, her link with nature is scarce, indirect, and often founded on re-creation and imagination since she lives in a state of confinement in her home. As a female individual, she is not allowed to freely roam everywhere and alone; her assigned space is the patio and she does not leave home without anyone who escorts her. On the contrary, Antonio's space is the *llano*, a plain that he perfectly knows and where he usually plays and meditates about important matters.

Nature is not only the place connected with the transculturating rituals referred in both novels; the protagonists also establish links between it and memory. Thus, nature becomes a kind of archive where the children build *lieux de mémoire*, sites of memory

that preserve those elements they need to construct their identity. The forest nearby the Argüellos' hacienda in Chactajal and the juniper tree on the *llano* are two examples of those sites the Ladino child and Tony have consecrated as archives relating to relevant events, knowledge, and values that could be endangered on account of the transition to modernity and the pressures of Ladino and Anglo cultures. In contrast with Antonio and because of the confinement the Ladino girl suffers, most of the *lieux de mémoire* she creates do not deal with nature (e.g. her nursemaid's wooden chest and the words the girl writes on the walls).

Another important parallelism between the novels is the presence of institutions that mediate between the protagonists and their historical, social, and cultural realities. In both cases, the Catholic Church plays a preeminent and contradictory role as it creates mechanisms of control over the people and at the same time offers some alternatives to resist the outburst of modernization. In the case of *Balún-Canán*, the Catholic Church opposes the revolutionary regime in Mexico and defies the government by performing clandestine rituals. The contradictory character of this church is even more pronounced in Antonio's community, where this institution encourages bilingualism and at the same time reproves any manifestation of syncretic beliefs.

With regard to school, the goals of this institution are completely different in each novel. Thus, whereas in *Bless Me, Ultima* it supports a project of modernization, acculturation, and assimilation to the Anglo-American culture, in *Balún-Canán* it reinforces certain colonial values such as a Eurocentric view of reality. In other words, Antonio's school tries to homogenize students without paying attention to their cultural

origins, while the Ladino girl's school wants to encourage the Ladino-Indian and male-female dualisms.

In the cases of both children's families, they encourage dual thinking and often create confusion in the protagonists with respect to what they are. Nonetheless, the changes these families undergo throughout the narration go to opposite directions. The attitude of the Ladino girl's parents with respect to the protagonist goes from discrimination to a complete rejection because of her gender. On the other hand, as Antonio starts narrating his story, it is obvious that his family pushes him to accept an imposed project of life, but later on they realize that the boy needs and is prepared to construct his own path. Hence, Antonio's freedom to choose expands, whereas the Ladino girl's is constrained.

Regarding the way the events are presented in the protagonists' narrations, one can conclude that although both novels make constant reference to magic, myths, and mysticism, *Balún-Canán* follows the trend of realism, while *Bless Me, Ultima* includes several examples of magical realism. The reason for that difference is the goals of each novel. As long as *Balún-Canán* is connected to the new *indigenista* movement, this work focuses on denouncing a situation of social and economic injustice founded on a centuries-long racial conflict. Conversely, although any reader may understand the generalities and message included in *Bless Me, Ultima*, it seems that Anaya addresses this work to a specific group—the Mexican Americans—and invite them to incorporate the myths of their ancestors into their lives, make them part of their daily reality, and use them as a means of resistance against the predominant culture and as a feature of their uniqueness. That incorporation of the myths into quotidian life is precisely a factor that

could let a minority group such as Mexican Americans open to other influences without any fear to break their identity into pieces.

Balún-Canán and *Bless Me, Ultima* present the protagonist's formation as a process of construction that is permanently open to change. Hence, the construction of identity in these novels has to do with the building of cultural and psychological bridges between the roots and elements that have been divided within the *mestizo* individual because of imposed views of both the past and the future.

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