

PERFORMING MASCULINITY, PERFORMING THE SELF:
RUDOLFO ANAYA'S *BLESS ME, ULTIMA*
AND *HEART OF AZTLAN*

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how *Bless Me, Ultima* and *Heart of Aztlan*, the two earliest novels by acclaimed Chicano writer Rudolfo Anaya, problematise and negotiate Chicano masculinity issues. I will focus on the main characters of the novels, who, at different vital moments of their lives, question the meaning of manhood amidst important socio-economic changes and conflicting cultural traditions. Anaya reveals the complexity of being “mestizo” in American society, and exposes how hegemonic standards of masculinity are Manichean, restrictive and reliant on gender inequality. I will finally examine whether the novels challenge hegemonic gender orders, successfully negotiate non-heterosexist ideals of manhood, and ultimately contribute to the advancement of egalitarian gender relations for the Chicana/o community.

KEY WORDS: Masculinity, hegemony, power relations, machismo, gender (in)equality, Chicana/o literature.

RESUMEN

Este artículo explora cómo *Bless Me, Ultima* y *Heart of Aztlan*, las dos primeras novelas publicadas por Rudolfo Anaya, autor clave en la literatura chicana, problematiza y negocia conceptos hegemónicos de masculinidad. Me centraré en los dos personajes principales de las dos novelas, quienes, en distintos momentos vitales, cuestionan el significado de ser hombre a raíz de profundos cambios socio-económicos y tradiciones culturales en conflicto. Anaya expone la complejidad intrínseca a ser mestizo en la sociedad estadounidense, y descubre cómo los ideales hegemónicos de masculinidad socialmente aceptados y celebrados son maniqueos, restrictivos y anclados en la desigualdad de género. Finalmente, cuestiono el grado en que las novelas desafían y desestabilizan el orden de género hegemónico, negocian modelos de masculinidad no heterosexistas y contribuyen al avance de relaciones de género igualitarias en la comunidad chicana.

PALABRAS CLAVE: masculinidad, hegemonía, relaciones de poder, machismo, (des)igualdad de género, literatura chicana.

Usually referred to as one of the “founding fathers” of Chicano literature, Rudolfo Anaya’s prolific *oeuvre* comprises several novels, short stories, children’s books and essays. His novel *Bless Me, Ultima* was awarded the Quinto Sol National Chicano Literature Award in 1972, and it is nowadays part of the curricula in American high schools, along with Sandra Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street*. Now in his mid-seventies, Anaya is about to publish yet another novel, in which issues of masculinity, aging, life and death are explored once more.¹ These themes, recurrent in Anaya’s work, were also present in his first novel, *Bless Me, Ultima*, which narrates the story of Antonio Márez y Lunas, a seven year old boy who attempts to make sense of himself in society, first as a boy and then *as a man*. This topic appears as well in his second novel, *Heart of Aztlan*, an account of several male characters going adrift in the midst of social, geographical and economic changes that make them wonder about their performance of masculinity within the context of gender relations. Forty years after the publication of these two novels, the same issues seem to still hunt Anaya since his new work deals with the experience of an elderly man who further questions the definite or defining character of his manhood through the prism of age, among other elements. Nevertheless, if one brings together Anaya’s early and latest work, there seems to be a constant leit-motiv in his male characters: the need to find a place in the world, to define oneself in it and *in relation to it* as men, as well as the desire to find fulfilment and belonging as part of a whole. From this starting point and while awaiting the publication of Anaya’s forthcoming novel, I will go back to the roots, or to borrow Anaya’s words “let me begin at the beginning [...] the beginning that came with [*Bless Me,*] *Ultima*” (*Bless* 1). I will also look at *Heart of Aztlan*, a less widely acclaimed novel that nonetheless offers an interesting textual and referential space from where to explore and unravel the gender dimension of Anaya’s early universe.

Most of the literary criticism about Anaya’s work effectively addresses these issues: the religious and spiritual worlds in his novels, the role of the “curandera” or shaman that provides spiritual guidance, and the use of myth/mythology and archetype to explore the dynamics between individual and collective identities, among others.² However, the gender perspective in these analyses is somehow opaque.³ In other words, much of this research revolves around female characters, most prominently *Ultima*, but it does not analyse the protagonists in the novels,

¹ I am thankful to Prof. María Herrera-Sobek for mentioning this new publication to me.

² See Roberto Cantú, Enrique Lamadrid and Robert K. Anderson for a discussion of these issues.

³ This is clearly a result of the time in which that criticism was produced, a moment in which “gender” analyses were mostly women-related, as early as the 1970s-1990s. However, with the rise of masculinity studies and its inclusion as part of gender studies, I believe an analysis of these issues will add to the gender discussion of Anaya’s novels, illuminating new ways of looking at his work and enhancing previous critical scholarship. As an example of insightful criticism on masculinity issues within the tradition of magical realism and postcolonial writing, see Köhler.

who are men, as inevitably marked by their gender configuration.⁴ The sense of loss and their fight for social justice are inextricably linked to the search for self-fulfilment, being all this clearly determined by the fact that they are “men” and, “as such,” expected to socially function according to hegemonic ideals of manhood. This gendered organisation of society and the notion of hegemonic masculinity have been thoroughly theorised by Raewyn Connell, who analyses men as gendered social subjects within a matrix of power relationships that define their very sense of self.⁵ Connell has pointed out that men’s identity choices, allegiances and disengagement from specific roles or models of manhood function in relation to very specific ideals of masculinity populating the social imaginary. These masculine ideals work in terms of binaries, being either socially celebrated or rejected, and are shaped by specific discourses on race, ethnicity, class, sexuality and religion—to name a few—that measure the level of privilege and access to it that men enjoy. In this respect, men strive to embrace hegemonic ideals of masculinity that constitute what normative masculinity represents. Men who conform to a given pattern receive a greater social, economic and political privilege, independently of a wider range of choices available to them on a regular basis. However, as Connell has underlined, neither all men have access to that ideal nor can they fully perform it, since by definition, hegemonic masculinity is a standard of masculinity only available and “enjoyable” by a few. In effect, hegemonic masculinity is defined along normative discourses, and is therefore restricted to those men who fully comply with them, if this is ever possible.⁶ In this regard, there are higher or lesser degrees of compliance and therefore, access to socio-economic privilege. This is part of the very workings of hegemony and hegemonic masculinity, since it represents an ideal that hardly any can embody, but as a disembodied ideal, it is a regulatory “tool” that grants or restricts access to those economic and political privileges for men in general. This implements a hierarchical distinction between hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculinities that perpetuates social inequality. Problems and anxiety arise when this performance of hegemonic masculinity is unsuccessful. My aim in this essay will be, therefore, to explore the tensions and problematisation of the standards of hegemonic masculinity that populate both texts, as well as to question the discursive and socio-economic contexts in which the characters function.

As inferred from above, gender issues permeate and are constitutive of social dynamics that intersect with other discourses that have a bearing on identity formation processes (cfr. Anzaldúa; Butler; Castillo; Sandoval. This intersectional

⁴ For a gender-focused analysis of the novel see Robert K. Anderson.

⁵ See Connell’s *Gender and Power* for an early formulation of this idea, which has been a seminal concept in the study of masculinities world-wide. See also Connell and Messerschmidt for a recent discussion and revision of the concept in an attempt to elaborate on it, in light of the criticism that followed its initial formulation. Hondagneu-Sotelo and Messner’s article about the “new man” and the Mexican immigrant man is also relevant to understand how the notion of “hegemonic masculinity” has been applied to the study of power relations among men from different ethnicities.

⁶ For a detailed discussion of this issue see Connell’s *Masculinities*, or *The Men and the Boys*.



approach is crucial for understanding Chicana/o writing as forged by and out of the tensions that emerge through Chicanas/os' non-hegemonic experiences and socio-political situation, which the characters confront and negotiate from multiple and self-contested positioning. The novels themselves work as discursive and textual arenas in which processes of identification and "disidentification" take place, and in which new identity practices can potentially emerge. In effect, *Bless Me, Ultima* and *Heart of Aztlan* portray the main characters' struggle to achieve and/or restore their manhood, and document their spiritual, mental and physical journey towards self-fulfilment. In this respect, *Bless Me, Ultima*, usually approached as a "bildungsroman," revolves around Antonio's rite of passage from childhood into adolescence in his way to adulthood.⁷ As Angelika Köhler explains, Antonio's transition into adulthood is marked by the realisation of his hybrid condition which is also part of his parents' heritage. Even though "Anaya constructs his story of Antonio Márez on the basis of a binary opposition of indigenous and Western culture[,] [...] he dissolves this dichotomy by creating the boy's father and mother, the apparently competing elements, as incorporating a hybrid cultural heritage themselves" (Köhler 205). According to Köhler, this is the way in which Anaya transcends the limitations of the traditional western genre to suit a post-colonial and cross-ethnic/Chicano experience (Köhler 205).⁸ Nevertheless, it is indeed the "hybrid" character of the novel that Marta Caminero-Santangelo finds problematic. In her opinion, this paradigm in the novel is rooted in the opposition between the Spanish/Mexican and the Anglo, which reduces the *indigenous* background to a subtext that is constantly overlooked. In Caminero-Santangelo's view, the fact that both parents adhere to either their Mexican or Spanish ancestry and favour them over their indigenous roots—embodied by Ultima and a few other characters—does little to recover and vindicate the indigenous element in Antonio's sense of self. This is problematic because it ultimately fails to make a powerful statement about Chicano/a identity politics and ends up reproducing Manichean identity practices that do not transgress a powerful/powerless dynamics. As a result, "the historical lesson embedded in the stories is about the parallels between Anglo and Spanish/Mexican colonization, but neither the people of Las Pasturas nor Antonio hear that lesson" (Caminero-Santangelo 122). What is more, it ultimately validates two frameworks of reference (Spanish and Mexican cultures) that have traditionally enjoyed privilege at the expense of racial and cultural "others."

⁷ For further discussion on the use of the "bildungsroman" in Chicano literature see Tomás Vraukó.

⁸ Köhler further elaborates on this and adds that "in Mexican American cultural history, the experience of being confronted with the power of colonization has primarily developed from Chicano life in contemporary American society. Against this background, the Spanish, although the culture of the Western European conquerors, established a framework for identification as Chicanos/as which, as the Luna-Márez family demonstrates, easily mingles with indio heritage" (205). This destabilises and transcends the limitations of a genre that has mostly suited hegemonic experiences of identity politics.

However, what neither Köhler nor Caminero-Santangelo tackle in their respective analyses is the fact that Tony's process of "growing up Chicano" is clearly gendered: It is not only a matter of becoming an adult and abandoning the safety of the domestic realm, or negotiating ethnicity and vindicating different traditions. It is all of it at once in a process constantly defined in the novel as "becoming a man" (*Bless* 53), as being recognised as such by your peers (i.e. men in the family, friends etc), as well as achieving the respect and social validation this entails.

Anaya's work, set in the village of Guadalupe in New Mexico, engages in a discussion of tradition and gender relations through a seven-year-old character that apparently carries the very dichotomy of "the masculine" and "the feminine" in his own surname: Antonio Márez y Luna finds himself in the quandary of whether to follow his mum's dreams, firmly rooted in his potential future as a priest and spiritual guide of a Catholic farmer community (Lunas) or to fulfil his father's frustrated aspirations of a life in Las Pasturas as a "vaquero" with no strings attached, who would like for his son to move with him to California and work in the vineyards. Being a Luna or a Márez symbolises the ideals of masculinity at Tony's disposal to embrace and follow. This dilemma of the self and Tony's journey towards self-discovery are presented through his experiences and most symbolically, his dreams, at times prophetic, at times accounts of his past and present. Antonio's anxiety about his future as a man is introduced from the very beginning of the novel in a dream about his birth. In a ceremonial scene, Antonio says:

Now the people who had waited patiently in the dark were allowed to come in [...] I recognized my mother's brothers, my uncles from El Puerto de los Lunas. They entered ceremoniously [...] This one will be a Luna, the old man said, he will be a farmer and keep our customs and traditions. Perhaps God will bless our family and make the baby a priest.

And to show their hope they rubbed the dark earth of the river valley on the baby's forehead, and they surrounded the bed with the fruits of their harvest so the small room smelled of fresh green chile and corn, ripe apples and peaches, pumpkins and green beans.

Then the silence was shattered with the thunder of hoof-beats; vaqueros surrounded the small house with shouts and gunshots, and when they entered the room they were laughing and singing and drinking.

Gabriel, they shouted, you have a fine son! He will make a fine vaquero! And they smashed the fruits and vegetables that surrounded the bed and replaced them with a saddle, horse blankets, bottles of whiskey, a new rope, bridles, chapas, and an old guitar. And they rubbed the stain of earth from the baby's forehead because man was not to be tied to the earth but free upon it.

These were the people of my father, the vaqueros of the llano. They were an exuberant, restless people, wandering across the ocean of the plain. (*Bless* 5)

Dreaming about his first gasps of life, Antonio becomes aware of the duality and the conflicting values inherent in his name, and that he will later identify as characteristic of his world. As Robert K. Anderson explains, this initial dream sets the tone of the novel as "[Tony] witnesses his birth and the consequential spirit of



contention between his parent's families as each unit seeks to guarantee—via its respective folk rituals- his future allegiance” (96). Tony is placed at a crossroad of either choosing one set of values over the other, or reconciling those values and transcend them. Undoubtedly, these competing principles permeate the divergent ideals of masculinity that the characters embody and/or negotiate, and which would serve to measure their compliance or deviation from traditional notions of “masculinity” and “femininity.” The Márez, in Antonio’s words, are men as restless as the sea, in constant movement, wandering around *las llanuras* and earning a living out of raising cattle. They are trustworthy, have a strong sense of honour and male bonding. However, they are men who value their independence above all. In effect, Tony’s father is a descendant of “men of the sea, the Márez people, they were *conquistadores*, men whose freedom was unbounded” (*Bless* 23). As a “conquistador,” Gabriel, Antonio’s father, learned how to be a man by “conquering” “el llano,” as he declares:

A man cannot struggle against his own fate. In my own day we were given no schooling [...] Me, my father gave me a saddle blanket and a wild pony when I was ten. There is your life, he said, and he pointed to the llano. So the llano was my school, it was my teacher, it was my first love— [...] Ay, but those were beautiful years [...] The llano was still virgin, there was grass as high as the stirrups of a grown horse, there was rain—and then the tejano came and built his fences, the railroad came, the roads—it was like a bad wave of the ocean covering all that was good.” (*Bless* 51)

This extract echoes the masculine ideals of the interior frontier man and the “vaquero.” As Alberto Varón and Michael Kimmel have discussed, the attraction towards the “unknown” and the desire to control nature characterised these and similar models of masculinity, which populated 19th-century American culture and played a key role in U.S. expansionist politics to the West. However, this fragment also evokes the same idea of “conquest” that Amerindian territories experienced in the 15th century. Spanish conquistadores’ craving for the unknown, the undiscovered, the “virgin” lands of the far away world parallels the Márez’s desire to explore, to run free, to “conquer” the llano. Therefore, masculinity is measured against nature and its wilderness: Mastering and taming it is part of the process of growing up into a man, and becoming a successful one. On the contrary, the Lunas are people from the earth, working and sowing the land in perfect harmony with Nature and the universe, having solid roots, scarce words but a great sensitivity. As said in the novel, “it is the blood of the Lunas to be quiet, for only a quiet man can learn the secrets of the earth that are necessary for planting—They are quite like the moon—And it is the blood of the Márez to be wild, like the ocean from which they take their name, and the spaces of the llano that have become their home” (*Bless* 38). As Tony explains, “the men of the llano were men of the sun. The men of the farms along the river were men of the moon” (*Bless* 25). According to Anderson, Köhler and Lamadrid, the archetypal and symbolic level of the novel, rooted in Manichean categories of masculine-feminine, catholic-indigenous, good-evil, right-wrong etc., call into question the way Western societies are organised while simultaneously

highlighting the intrinsic problems to being “interstitial” and “mestizo,” which are defined according to the less privileged element of the binary.

In addition, Tony’s father also symbolises the sense of loss and displacement (both mental and spiritual) that seems to grow in Anaya’s male characters at this early stage of his career. In a similar fashion as in *Heart of Aztlan*, the head of the family experiences intense alienation when he cannot relate to the elements that have traditionally defined his masculinity. In the case of *Bless Me, Ultima*, it is life in “el llano,” which needs to be abandoned for the sake of marriage and raising a family. In Tony’s words:

My father worked half a day on Saturdays at the highway and so in the afternoon he drank with his friends at the Lopnghorn Saloon in town. If he drank too much he came home a bitter man, then he was at war with everyone. He cursed the weak-willed men of the town who did not understand the freedom a man of the llano must have, and he cursed the war for taking his sons away. And if there was very much anger in him he cursed my mother because she was the daughter of farmers and it was she who kept him shackled to one piece of land. (*Bless* 26)

Although Tony’s father controls a sphere of power as a provider and head of the family, thus enjoying recognition among his peers, his masculinity is rearticulated as non-hegemonic and subordinated when he becomes a blue-collar worker in the monstrous American economic grinding. This also rings true of *Heart of Aztlan* (1976), in which Clemente witnesses his own psychological, spiritual and physical deterioration after moving from his rural home town to the barrio of Barelás, in Albuquerque. Anaya’s second novel continues the discussion of masculinity and gender politics begun in *Bless Me, Ultima* by displaying a wider network of male characters who experience intense anxiety when having to negotiate their position and privilege—as *men-* in society. If *Bless Me, Ultima* conveys the beauty of “el llano,” “las pastures” and its lyricism, as well as the negotiation of old and new values in the face of industrial changes, *Heart of Aztlan* explores and tackles the perils of city and barrio life, which is swiped away by the exploitation of the Mexican American workers in the factories (the shops) and stirred by the “pachuco” culture of the 1940s and 1950s border cities.

Bless Me, Ultima, reflects on the meaning of life, the trials and tribulations of being Chicano and becoming a man amidst socio-economic changes, conflicting faiths and cultural traditions. In addition to this, *Heart of Aztlan* deals in detail with the disintegration of the Chicano nuclear family, as well as the challenge of growing up Chicano and Chicana in an urban environment in which gender identities are constantly redefined and “resituated.” The brutal impact that city life has on the Chavez family (notice here the allusion to Cesar Chavez as leader of the United Farm Workers) badly strikes its men, who seem to go adrift in a world where steel has replaced land, the claustrophobic factories have overshadowed the openness of “el llano,” and the lawless streets have driven away the simplicity of “pueblo” life. It is at this particular crossroad that the family structure and gender dynamics are to be reconfigured and reshuffled. As such, Clemente Chavez, the head of the fam-

ily, falls apart when he realises that everything that has given meaning to his life is at a loss. In a way that recalls María Amparo Ruiz de Burton's *The Squatter and the Don*, and its narration of land dispossession after the Mexican American War (1845-1848) (cfr. Aranda), the opening pages of *Heart of Azlan* portray the crisis experienced in the rural areas after World War II, which forced farmers to sell their lands and relocate to the cities for survival. This moment is conveyed in the novel in great detail, emphasising the transcendence and the impact it will have on the lives of the family members. It also projects a notion of masculinity as intimately tied to the earth and its rhythms, which nurtures a sense of manhood both in Anaya and Ruiz de Burton's work.⁹ In Clemente's words

"There is no justice in dealing in land," Clemente shook his head. "You offer me Judas money for my three acres, for a home I built from this very earth with my bare hands, for a well basted a foot at a time out of the hard earth so that I might have water for the jardín and the animals—You offer me nothing, just enough to pay off my debts [...] When I sell my land I will be cast adrift, there will be no place left to return to, no home to come back to." (*Heart* 3)

Land works as a metaphor for belonging, for a way of life related to traditional values, and in the case of *Heart of Azlan* and *Bless Me, Ultima*—and the same with Ruiz de Burton—to a patriarchal organisation of society. The land represents a paradigm that has traditionally defined masculinity as trustworthy, reliable, solid, down to earth, enduring and strong, and linked to the role of breadwinner. In effect:

[Clemente's] soul and his heart were in the earth, and he knew that when he signed he would be cutting the strings of that attachment. It was like setting adrift on an unknown, uncharted ocean [...] He looked at his sons and knew there would be nothing left to pass on to them. Without the land the relationship a man created with the earth would be lost, old customs and traditions would fall by the wayside, and they would be like wandering gypsies without a homeland where they might anchor their spirit. But he had to go because there was no work in Guadalupe, and because he had to be the leader in helping to create a new future for his familia. (*Heart* 3-4)

⁹ In the case of Ruiz de Burton, I have explained elsewhere how land plays a central role in the development and reconfiguration of masculinity politics in the novel, which are intimately connected to the socio-economic hegemonic order implemented in the U.S. over the 19th century. In this respect, "land [...] works as a metaphor for manhood, as both characters' masculinities, William Darrell's and Don Mariano's are dependent on it. The former claims land in order to provide for his family, earn his living and be economically independent, which would eventually prove his manhood, measured by his breadwinner role and his capacity to successfully work the land (thus working/crafting his masculinity). The latter was dependent on the land he has inherited (which bear witness to his individual and collective history); in his capacity to keep and enrich it rests the survival of his family and their way of life" (1240-1241).

Land stands as a witness to the history of those men who worked it and bears the memory of peoples, as it also happens in *Bless Me, Ultima*. Once being sold for capitalist purposes, men feel dispossessed, adrift, as Clemente says, overwhelmed by the sense of being uprooted and “unrooted,” which will shape the construction of masculinity and gender in the novel. Still, Clemente experiences a “descend to the underworld” soon after his arrival in Barelás, whose pace and values he finds strange and alien. In addition, working in the railroad neither allows him to gain pride in his work nor to be valued for it, since he is considered another faceless worker. Traditional spheres for Clemente’s notion of manhood, such as work and the family unit, seem to “fail” the Mexican American man, who is at the expenses of unions and the interests of the capital. Accordingly Clemente feels that

Somehow he had lost command over his life and destiny [...] A world he once ruled had suddenly slipped away from him, and a wedge had been driven between himself and his family. First he blamed the city and the alienation he felt in it, and he cursed the politics of the shops which were splitting the men into different camps, and tonight he lashed out against his wife [...] He saw her plotting with the forces that were set on destroying his position as head of the family. She had grown stronger since their arrival in the city, while he had grown weaker. She was now in control of the finances of the family, and he had to beg or steal from her just to buy a drink [...] Maybe he had been too weak; he had to rule with an iron hand. He would make the rules, and they would obey! For a moment he felt a surge of *power* [my emphasis] fill his body [...] [h]e would control again, he would rule again! (*Heart* 74)

Like Gabriel in *Bless Me, Ultima*, Clemente resents his wife and family for the alienation he experiences in the new social environment. To his eyes, they are the reason why he abandoned rural life and with it, the environment that gave meaning to his identity. Since “the process of becoming a man is a process of striving for power” (Hurtado 94), Clemente’s identity/masculinity crisis is connected to a wider crisis of the gender order which destabilises his *power to rule* within and outside the private sphere. This is aggravated by the fact that he loses his job after confronting the corruption of the workers’ union, which has an impact on his role as breadwinner and head of the family. In addition, this adds to his loss of “authority” over his wife and daughters, who become increasingly anglicised and economically independent, as well as the real family providers. Nevertheless, Clemente regains his manhood by becoming the head of a bigger family and the leader of the workers. As stated in the novel “[t]he familia without a strong father soon falls apart, and [...] a pueblo without a good leader is not united in its effort to serve the people, and a country without a good, strong man to guide it is soon overrun by its enemies” (*Heart* 83). In effect, after a cathartic moment in the novel in which Clemente dreams of Aztlán and journeying to its very heart, he becomes the spiritual and political leader of his community. In so doing, he leads them in face of poverty, unemployment, exploitation and discrimination in a similar fashion to César Chávez and the United Farm Workers. Therefore, there is an identification of the community with the nuclear family, an idea that was strongly celebrated by the Chicano Movement. The novel

also makes a statement in defence of civil rights, highlighting the fight against racism and class discrimination that the Movement sought. Therefore, Clemente's masculinity is "healed" and transformed by his political and social activism, as well as his sense of responsibility and pride in his cultural roots. In effect, Clemente's strong moral values, which are clearly identified as those of "el llano," are the ones that will stand in face of racial and class abuse. Indeed, it is his role as political and spiritual leader of the community which will help him regain his position as father and head of the family.

Bearing this in mind, it is necessary to ponder on whether Anaya's novels actually transgress hegemonic ideals of masculinity and whether they work towards a reconfiguration of gender relations in non-heterosexist grounds. In the case of *Bless Me, Ultima*, the dichotomy between sun and moon, which in appearance looks as "male and female," seems to be at odds throughout the novel, but apparently comes to a resolution in Tony with the help of Ultima, a "curandera" who moves with Tony's family in her old age and will help the child to understand the following truth

[t]he sweet water of the moon which falls as rain is the same water that gathers into rivers and flows to fill the seas. Without the waters of the moon to replenish the oceans there would be no oceans. And the same salt waters of the oceans are drawn by the sun to the heavens, and in turn become again the waters of the moon [...] The waters are one, Antonio [...] You have been seeing only parts, she finished, and not looking beyond into the great cycle that binds us all. (*Bless* 113)

In gender terms, this passage may work as a metaphor for more fluid notions of gender identities, which set aside polarised visions of gender (e.g. Márez and Lunas, the sun and the moon) and advocate for a more balanced and inclusive vision of masculinity. The connection between the moon and sea waters represents the relationality of gender, the fact that both masculinity and femininity are interdependent and involved in a constant process of redefinition.¹⁰ Since "the waters are one" (*Bless* 113), what has been traditionally associated as masculine or feminine comes to be presented as part of both, thus dismantling the naturalisation of gender dichotomies according to heterosexist practices. Gender can be negotiated, making gender identities more egalitarian and integrative of each other. Values traditionally defined as masculine and/or feminine should be cultivated by both genders, such as the Lunas' nurturing of the land, and the Márez's freedom of mind. As Antonio's father explains, "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" (*Bless* 237). Therefore, the novel seems to point to the need of finding and cultivating a new

¹⁰ In fact, without this understanding of gender in such terms, men and women are destined to be stagnated in polarised gender identities and subject positions that will impair the existence of more egalitarian gender practices. This is illustrated by Antonio's parents and their relationship, as well as the gender dynamics reproduced in the family unit. Both Gabriel and María seem to be at odds, inhabiting very different worlds and spheres and lacking any deep understanding of each other.

masculinity, connected to the past but free to grow into a more just and hopeful future by nurturing this process in the present.

However, it should also be questioned the extent to which the novel pays heed to Ultima's words. If gender relationality and a new sense of manhood are advocated, it should be questioned whether the novel conveys such a reflection in Antonio as a character. Even the description of Lunas and Márez as patterns of masculinity along the lines of traditional gender ideals seems to be further obscured from the moment in which *los Lunas*, by association with the feminine and priesthood, are dismissed by Gabriel and his three oldest sons as embodying an invalid ideal of masculinity.¹¹ The supposed connection with "feminine" values potentially makes that form of masculinity an alternative to more ossified ideals, but the fact that the Lunas are described as a patriarchal family, in which women are nearly absent and/or silent, and decision making processes are carried out by men, actually reveal that what seemed a more flexible standard of masculinity, relies, in the end, on polarised gender dynamics that end up reinforcing heterosexism and patriarchy.¹² The fact that Antonio realises that "I was growing up and becoming a man and suddenly I realized that I could make decisions" (*Bless* 72) stands as one of the most important defining traits of hegemonic masculinity in the novel, a characteristic that defines both Lunas and Márez alike, despite other differences. This idea is confirmed at the end of the novel, when Antonio orders his own mother to take her sisters indoors after Ultima's death. "'Take them to their room,' I said to my mother. It was the first time I had ever spoken to my mother as a man; she nodded and obeyed" (*Bless* 246). Antonio's words are recognised as bearing authority and the mother's reaction further legitimates that. As a result, his transition into a heterosexist notion of manhood is completed.

Therefore, although both novels reflect a crisis and a reevaluation of normative standards of masculinity for the Chicano community, the characters seem to embrace values that rely on ossified notions of gender. In truth, *Bless Me*, *Ultima* and *Heart of Aztlan* advocate masculinity ideals that respond to heterosexist hegemonic orders, with a clear distinction between "the masculine" and "the feminine." Even though

¹¹ Indeed, Tony's three brothers yet represent other models of Chicano masculinity that rely on assimilation into Anglo culture and the American dream. As Debra A. Black has pointed out, "it is clear that after experiencing the Anglo world at large, the brothers reject the old ways of their culture. Not only do they not intend to become part of an extended family, with their plans to move to Denver, San Francisco, Santa Fe, Las Vegas, or Albuquerque (62), they also reject their father in several important ways" (148). In effect, the novel points to this betrayal of the father figure when the three brothers decide to leave and make a life away from home, leaving their father alone with his dreams of moving to California together to work in the fields. As the novel points out, "the restlessness of his [the father's] blood had destroyed his dream, defeated him" (*Ultima* 67).

¹² See Debra A. Black work for a discussion of gender roles in Anaya's work. In addition, Köhler also points out that "Anaya establishes a binary opposition of social values derived from biological sex [...] The author does not challenge gender stereotypes; on the contrary, he emphasizes that dichotomy by asserting goodness with the Lunas, the feminine, and evil with the Márez, the masculine" (203).



both novels successfully capture the “readjustment” that male characters undergo when moving to a different geographical region (*Heart*) or to new linguistic and cultural spaces (*Bless*), that process culminates in a repositioning of men in spheres of power and a celebration of the same values of yore.

In conclusion, neither *Bless Me, Ultima* nor *Heart of Aztlan* put forward a new type of man who would question himself as such and articulate a more egalitarian, just and transformative gender identity in terms of standpoints and life choices. Even though both novels have the potential to flesh out characters that would perform non-hegemonic masculinities, they end up reinforcing and privileging male authority over other social subjects as leaders of the family and the community at large. We will have to wait, until the 1990s and the early days of the 21st century for Chicano/a writing to timidly but unapologetically produce male characters that can actually take the pulse of Chicana feminist thought and subvert heterosexist masculinity performances in Chicano culture.

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