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EL GUIÓN AND BEYOND:
HYBRID IDENTITY IN LATINO-AMERICAN COMING OF AGE NOVELS
by

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A Thesis

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ABSTRACT

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This essay utilizes three Latino-American coming of age novels, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, Bless Me Ultima,* and *Call Me Henri,* to examine the ways in which Latino protagonists and novels defy cultural expectations and create an independent identity for themselves or itself. It examines the process of identity creation by looking at the choices and life events that encourage the individual to break from expectations. Additionally, the essay will demonstrate that the individual has ultimate power in creating and dictating an identity for his or herself. The essay concludes with a demonstration of how the authors of these three novels create a work of art independent of cultural expectations for Latino writers.

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FOREWORD

Writing an essay about novels connected to each other only by a similar native language is a dangerous task. The writers, the protagonists, and the cultures in the novels discussed in this essay differ greatly from one another, so much so that grouping them under one heading (Latino-American) does them a severe injustice. However, for the sake of this thesis, the term “Latino-American” is the most expedient way to discuss them in the context of other novels and novelists in a Spanish-speaking cultural context.

I have, however, done my best to choose three novels different enough from one another to represent a large, if not complete, image of the complexity of the Latino-American experience and literature. In his introduction to *En Otra Voz: Antologia de la Literatura Hispana de los Estados Unidos*, Nicolas Kanellos divides the Latino-American experience into three “identidades generales”: The native, the immigrant, and the exile. I begin my essay with an examination of the experience of Oscar, a political exile from The Dominican Republic in Junot Díaz’s novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Then, my focus shifts to Tony, a native of New Mexico in Rudolfo Anaya’s *Bless Me Ultima*. Finally, my essay concludes with a look at Enrique (or Henri), a Chicano immigrant in Lorraine López’s *Call Me Henri*.

This essay attempts to explore the complexity of the Latino-American hyphenated experience by examining Latino-American coming of age novels. I will examine how the protagonists in these novels work against cultural and maturational expectations to form an independent and unique identity. However, not only do the novel’s protagonists defy stereotype, but the novels themselves challenge the

structural and thematic expectations superficially imposed upon Latino works. It is my belief that an examination of these novels will not only uncover the complexity of the novels and their protagonists but also the beauty and complexity in the Latino-American experience. While no essay could ever fully capture the complexity of the Latino culture or literature, it is my hope that this essay at least does not diminish it.

INTRODUCTION

Julia Alvarez's essay, "Entre Lucas y Juán Mejía," is the ultímate foundation for this thesis. She writes: "I've discovered … that this in-between place is not just one of friction and tension but one that offers unique perspectives, visions, energy, choices. And our stories chart these" (Alvarez 1748). The "in-between place" Alvarez discusses in her essay is her experience as a Dominican-American woman, which she describes as a hyphenated experience. My essay, while noting and appreciating unique perspectives, visions, and energy in Latino-American novels, focuses on the choices available in an in-between, hyphenated, Latino-American literary identity.

Society places expectations on individuals based on the color of their skin, the language or accent they speak with, and the country they originate from. These expectations derive both from outsiders and from members of the same groups. However, no individual can be or should be simplified into a stereotype or list of cultural expectations. In protest of these restraints, Latino writers have created protagonists and unique styles of writing that break stereotypes and defy expectations.

The post-colonial custom for examining literature also explores "hybrid forms" (Bhabha 2357), and like Homi Bhabha, I would agree that man "requires … such forms of contention and contradiction in order to enhance his vision of the inherently progressive and evolutionary bent of *human* judgment" (Bhabha 2358). The hyphenated experience, as Alvarez elucidates upon, does help the individual see the world in a new light, and to recognize the cultural discords felt by the exile, the native, and the immigrant. This hyphenated identity does lend the Latino-American a tool for progress and for the creation of an independent identity.

However, my examination is not entirely congruent with traditional post-colonial criticism. Peter Barry describes the aim of postcolonial theory as creating an "emphasis on identity as doubled, or hybrid, or unstable" (188). However, while I do see hybridity in the identity formation of the individuals in these novels, I do not see the final realized identity, the created identity, as an unstable element. Each of the protagonists in these novels do something that post-colonial critics would deem impossible; they break free from the hybridity and create an identity, a definition of self, that is durable. Of course, the individuals always have the freedom of choice or change, but the creation and alteration of identity is always within the power of the individual. Individually defined identity is not "fluid and unstable" (Barry 189) but rather the result of conscious decisions on the behalf of the protagonist, author, or individual.

Anzaldúa describes the Latino as "undergo[ing] a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war" (78). It is precisely these tensions that this essay focuses upon. While conflict often breeds a negative connotation, it need not be a negative experience. Alvarez celebrates her hyphenated existence and the ability it has given her to create something new and beautiful. Anzaldúa suggests the answer to the racial conflicts between Latino and Anglo culture is to destroy the traditional cultural duality and create a new identity free of conflict.

The protagonists in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao,* Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me Ultima,* and Lorraine López's *Call Me Henri* similarly face cultural and maturational conflict. Each of them chooses to take the dual pressures on his identity to create something new, an identity that represents his own

personality and individual needs. They too use the "friction and tension" of the hyphenated experience to create "unique perspectives, visions, energy, and choices" (Alvarez 1749). Their stories are not tales of woe but of individual choice and self-creation.

Defying stereotypes for traditional Latino writers does not, however, mean assimilating into an American or Western tradition: "The attitude of not assimilating or melting, however, has characterized Hispanic immigrant culture" ("Recovering" 439). The idea behind defying stereotypes is not to assimilate into another. Kanello describes the cross-pollination of language and culture for Latino-Americans as, "Permit[iendo] … el desarollo de distintas posturas culturales, preferencia de lenguas y construcción de identidades individuales" ("Panorama").[1] It is the construction of individual identities that concerns this essay most. When Alvarez discusses the choices available in Latino-American literature, she means the freedom and ability to create something new, completely separate from the expectations of either the individual's natural culture or the American culture. Junot Díaz, Rudolfo, Anaya, and Lorraine López all use their novels to demonstrate how the Latino-American protagonists are faced with the opportunity and necessity to choose a unique identity for themselves precisely because of the conflicts they face.

The novels above are all about Latino children coming of age with familial and American cultural expectations enticing them in opposing directions. However, neither of these inducements defines the protagonists. Each individual chooses an identity separate from these expectations and, as an integral part of reaching

[1] "Permit[ting] … the development of different cultural attitudes, language preference, and the construction of individual identities."

adulthood, must forge his own character. In these novels, it is in this independent choice that the other characteristics named by Alvarez, “perspectives, visions, energy” come to light.

The breaking of cultural expectations and forging a new identity does not end with the journeys of the characters. The three novels listed above break traditional expectations of Latino form and genre in literature. Critic, Frederick Aldama argues for an examination of Latino Literature that focuses on a work’s structural aspects: its language and aesthetics. He says that language is all one has when reading a work of literature, and language should be the tool for analyzing it. However, language is not just the tool of the critic; it is first and foremost the utensil of the author. And these three authors wield their tools, expertly crafting works of literature that defy cultural stereotypes and expectation to create something independent, unique, and novel. This essay will, thus, not only examine the ways the protagonists break free from expectation to forge a new identity, but also the ways the text performs the same task.

CHAPTER 1

A CONFLICTING CONVERSATION:

A BRIEF DISCUSSION OF *OSCAR WAO*

"Anything you can dream (he put his hand up) you can be."

-- *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, 322

Monica Hanna describes the novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao,* as a conflicting conversation between two cultures. She writes, "*Oscar Wao* self-consciously engages with Caribbean literary and historical discourses, with a heavy emphasis on Afro-Carribean literary tradition, while also adopting narrative structures and references particular to United States literature and popular culture" (Hanna 499). Díaz's narrator, Yunior, skillfully weaves Dominican culture and history together throughout the novel. The first footnote in the novel states, "Trujillo (also known as El Jefe, the Failed Cattle Thief, and Fuckface) came to control nearly every aspect of the DR's political, cultural, social and economic life … He was our Sauron, our Arawn, our Darkseid, our Once and Future Dictator" (Díaz 2). Yunior is a Dominican-American man, and, as such, it should come as no surprise that his discourse relies so heavily on both cultures or that his discussions of the two create a dialogue reminiscent of his own cultural conflict. He takes both cultural attractions and uses them to create his own, individual narrative voice.

Oscar De Leon is a young, Dominican-American man living in New Jersey during the 1980s and 1990s. Ramón Saldívar describes Oscar as, "The first generation Dominican American, a product of two nations. This duality is, however, doubly fraught, not doubly comforting as Oscar is not at home in either Santo Domingo or

Paterson, New Jersey" (Saldívar. 586). Oscar has no place geographically or socially where he belongs. Saldívar describes Oscar's situation as "homelessness" (586). I will expand his description to include loneliness. Oscar is in a fight to find not only a home, but also a sense of social belonging, something he can only realize by conforming to social normatives.

In Oscar's case, the answer to finding a social sense of belonging means making the step from adolescence into adulthood; it means having sex. From the cover page on, the audience is told that Oscar's life will be both brief and wondrous. While this might seem like a depressing frame for a novel, Oscar's journey into manhood and into cultural independence has a joyous conclusion.

As a Dominican man, Oscar is expected to live up to a high level of machismo. The members of his cohort tell Oscar that there is no way he can be Dominican: "The kids of color, upon hearing him speak and seeing him move his body, shook their heads. You're not Dominican" (Díaz 49). Later in the novel, Oscar asks Yunior, "I have heard from a reliable source that no Dominican male has ever died a virgin. You have experience in these matters—do you think this is true?" To which Yunior replies, "O, it's against the fucking laws of nature for a domincano to die without fucking at least once" (Díaz 174). Culturally, Oscar has been programmed to be a man's man and to have sex, but realistically, Oscar finds it difficult to assimilate to these cultural ideals.

Unfortunately, Oscar has become Americanized and not in a way that epitomizes masculinity. He is interested "in Genres! … synonymous with being a loser with a capital L" (Díaz 17). O'Brien writes, "Oscar's multiple outsider

statuses—as a Dominican-American, an otaku, and morbidly obese—complicate his stifled love life, leading to an obsession with having his first sexual and romantic relationship with a woman" (75). Oscar belongs to no cultural identity and has no place in society. Yunior states, "You couldn't have torn him away from any movie or TV show or cartoon where there were monsters or spaceships or mutants or doomsday devices or destinies or magic or evil villains … Dude wore his nerdiness like a Jedi wore his light saber or a Lensman her lens. Couldn't have passed for normal if he'd wanted to" (Díaz 21). Oscar incorporates himself into the loneliest sector of American culture; he becomes a nerd. This status seems further to isolate Oscar from his goal of having sex and reaching manhood. It prevents him from successfully conforming to an American or Domincan culture.

Oscar's nerdiness is a sort of double edged sword. While it does prevent Oscar from blending in socially, it is also his means of escape from his miserable life. Ramon Saldívar, working with a definition created by Rosemary Jackson, describes fantasy as a means of escaping reality: "From W.H. Auden, C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, T.H. White, and other modern fabulists of fantasy, a literary tradition has emerged that claims the transcending of reality, the possibility of escaping the human condition, and constructing alternative realities" (586). For Oscar, fantasy is comforting and presents him with the opportunity to hope for a different world and to dream of his own heroism. However, it is also preventing him from successfully assimilating into society, making the need for escape even greater and driving him further toward fantasy. In fact, when Oscar hits the lowest points of his life, it is the creation of fantasy that helps bring him out of his depression.

Because Oscar isn't masculine, he does not fit well as a Dominican man. Because he is a nerd, he does not fit in as an American man. As such, Oscar does not fully belong to either of what should be his cultural identities. Unfortunately for Oscar, the very aspects of his personality that inhibit him from being culturally accepted by Americans and Latinos alike also prohibit him from reaching the milestone that, to Oscar, would mark his emergence into adulthood. Yunior describes, "After a spate of parties that led to nothing but being threatened by some drunk whiteboys, and dozens of classes where not a single girl looked at him, he felt the optimism wane, and before he even realized what had happened he had buried himself in what amounted to the college version of what he'd majored in all throughout high school: getting no ass" (Díaz 50). Oscar's virginity is a central theme throughout the novel because it is a monumental part of Oscar's life. It is the representation of Oscar's status outside of both the cultural and temporal normatives. A Dominican-American, post-pubescent man should be having sex, but Oscar just cannot seem to get laid.

Losing his virginity becomes Oscar's sole quest in life. Yunior says, "The real irony was that you never met a kid who wanted a girl so fucking bad. I mean, shit, I thought *I* was into females, but no one, and I mean *no one,* was into them the way Oscar was" (Díaz 173). Oscar continuously asserts himself toward girls he finds attractive. When Oscar meets Ana in an SAT class, he does not hesitate to talk to her: "Incredibly enough, instead of making an idiot of himself as one might have expected, given the hard fact that this was the first girl he'd ever had a conversation with, he actually took it a day at a time" (Díaz 37). He and Ana go to the movies and

have long conversation on the phone: “He was totally and irrevocably in love with Ana” (Díaz 44). However, when he does make his move, saying “You have beautiful breasts” (Díaz 49) and professing his undying love, Ana cuts him short and reminds him she is with Manny, who is abusive, macho, and cool, everything Oscar is not.

Oscar’s ability to assimilate does not improve when he begins college. He tries to talk to girls on busses, at parties, in his classes, but no one returns his affections. Eventually, Oscar’s efforts seem to be rewarded. He meets Jenni, La Jabalese, and begins his usual tirade of advances. Yunior says, “He didn’t let up. He just kept hitting on her with absolutely no regard for self. In the halls, in front of the bathroom door, in the dining hall, on the buses, dude became *ubiquitous”* (Díaz 183). Miraculously, Jenni begins talking back to Oscar: “[B]y the end of February she was actually treating him all civil and shit. Before I could wrap my brain around that one I saw them hanging out together! In public! I couldn’t believe my fucking eyes” (Díaz 183). Like with Ana before, Jenni’s feelings for Oscar are not romantically inclined, and he soon finds her in the arms of another man. However, Oscar does not take this more recent let down as well as the former: “[H]e went beserk. Called her a whore and attacked her walls, tearing down her posters and throwing her books everywhere” (Díaz 187). Following this episode, Oscar jumps off a bridge in an unsuccessful attempt to commit suicide. In other words, Oscar’s failure to incorporate himself into cultural depresses him to the point of suicide. He feels isolated and without identity; he is unable to cope.

Oscar’s utter lack of traditional masculinity makes him an easy mark for girls who just want a sensitive guy to be friends with, but it also prohibits him from

moving beyond friendship into a sexual relationship. Oscar and Yunior both remark on numerous occasions that had he been a typical Dominican man, having sex would have been as easy as watching *Akira* for the hundredth time. Without sex, Oscar is doomed never to become a man and never to find a cultural sense of belonging. Without sex, Oscar's life could not be called wondrous, but neither would it be called brief. It is Oscar's first sexual encounter, the achievement of his life-long quest, which forever alters and ends Oscar's life.

The turning point in Oscar's cultural identity and his quest for manhood is his relationship with Ybon: "[A]fter he spent one week writing and (ironically enough) turned down his male cousins' offer to take him to a whorehouse like fifty times, Oscar fell in love with a semiretired puta. Her name was Ybón Pimentel. Oscar considered her the start of his *real* life" (Díaz 279). From the start, things with Ybón are different than with Ana or La Jabalese. Oscar does not have to beg for Ybón's attention. He does not even have to start the conversation. She initiates their first meeting: "And the third time they saw each other—here, folks, is where the miracles begin—she sat at his table and said: What are you reading? At first he didn't know what was happening, and then he realized: *Holy Shit!* A female was talking to *him.* (It was an unprecedented change in fortune)" (Díaz 280). For Oscar, this encounter means the end of his virginity and the start of a life he can consider all his own.

At the beginning of the relationship, there is no sexual contact. They are friends: "It seemed to Oscar that he was one of her few real friends" (Díaz 290). Their friendship draws the unwanted attention of a corrupt police officer, Ybon's boyfriend, the capitán: "Seems he'd heard about Oscar and wanted to meet him. He's really

jealous" (Díaz 291). The first part of their relationship is reminiscent of Oscar's other relationships. Ybon has an abusive, macho, cool boyfriend, just wants to be friends, and Oscar still isn't having sex.

The end of this first part of their relationship also comes to a dramatic conclusion: "[H]e realized that the two plainclothes who had pulled them over … were beaming their flashlights into the car. And who was standing behind them, looking in on the scene inside the car with an expression of sheer murder? Why the capitán of course. Ybón's boyfriend!" (Díaz 294). Her boyfriend threatens, "If you ever touch my mujer again I'm going to kill you, parigüayo" (Díaz 296), and he has two of his goons drag Oscar into the canefields for a vicious beating: "The only reason he didn't lay out in that rustling endless cane for the rest of his life was because Clives the evangelical taxista had had the guts, and the smarts, and yes, the goodness, to follow the cops on the sly, and when they broke out he turned on his headlights and pulled up to where they'd last been" (Díaz 300). He finds Oscar singing in the canefields, "[u]nconcious and bleeding out of both ears and looking like he was one finger tap away from dead" (Díaz 300). After recuperating, Oscar is dumped by Ybón and dragged back to New Jersey by his mother.

If Oscar's relationship with Ybón had been the same as his with Ana or Jenni, he would have sunk into an inescapable depression and would have given up on life. But Oscar's relationship with Ybón is anything but ordinary. This change is not due to Ybón's nature or the strength of their previous relationship. The change is in Oscar's willingness to face his pain and his depression and fight for his masculinity, for his sense of belonging. Oscar finally realizes that if he follows the cultural rules

imposed upon him—don't date the puta, be masculine, have sex, run from danger, don't be so nerdy—and if he follows the rules imposed upon adolescents—obey your mother, stay safe, take no risks—he will never find a true sense of identity. He will never become a man.

The turning point for Oscar comes with a dream: "Six weeks after the Colossal Beatdown he dreamed about the cane again. But instead of bolting when the cries began, when the bones started breaking, he summoned all the courage he ever had, would ever have, and forced himself to do the one thing he did not want to do, that he could not bear to do. He listened" (Díaz 307). From his experiences in the cane field, Oscar learns a valuable lesson; he learns to face his fears and stand heroically for what he believes in: This turn in personality is first evident in the quote above. When Oscar faces the most terrifying event of his life replaying itself in his memory, he does not run into the safety of waking up. He forces himself to face his fears.

Following the dream, Oscar finds a new sense of bravery within himself. He does not stay in New Jersey; he does not stay in hiding. Oscar flies back to The Dominican Republic, stands in front of Ybón's house, and loudly declares his love for her. As one might expect, the capitán hears about Oscar's return and about his audacity. Also, as one might expect, he again orders his goons to take Oscar to the cane fields. This time, however, Oscar does not simply accept the beating. He reasons with his attackers and stands for himself and his love for Ybón:

> He told them that what they were doing was wrong, that they were going to take a great love out of the world. … He told them about Ybón and the way he

> loved her and how much they had risked … He told them that it was only because of her love that he'd been able to do the thing that he had done, the thing they could no longer stop … Because anything you can dream … you can be. (Díaz 322)

When the goons have had enough of listening to his rant, Oscar faces his death head on, giving the cue for his assassination: "They waited respectfully for him to finish and then they said, their faces slowly disappearing in the gloom, Listen, we'll let you go if you tell us what *fuego* means in English. Fire, he blurted out" (Díaz 322). Oscar dies alone, professing his love for Ybón.

Oscar's end, while sad, is not tragic. It is valiant and heroic. Oscar embarks on a journey at the beginning of the novel, to have sex. With Ybón, Oscar's dream comes true: "For one whole weekend they hid out on some beach in Barahona while the capitán was away on 'business,' and guess what? Ybón actually *kissed* him. Guess what else? Ybón actually *fucked* him" (Díaz 334). Saldívar says "Oscar has finally consummated something approaching love" (Saldívar 590). However, it is not sex or love that, in the end that makes Oscar a man, although it does push him in the right direction. Lola says, "But if these years have taught me anything it is this: you can never run away. Not ever. The only way out is in. And that's what I guess these stories are all about" (Díaz 209). Oscar cannot find happiness or belonging by running away. He can only do so by facing the pain, confronting his problems, and creating an identity for himself.

Oscar changes when he faces the pain in his dream: "Something had changed about him. He had gotten some power of his own" (Díaz 319). His mother is no

longer able to drag him home, and the threat of death no longer has the power to scare him. Oscar does not allow himself to be pushed into a category. He does not have to be a machismo nor does he have to settle for the social isolation that often accompanies nerdiness. He fights for love, and, yes, sex. It is this willingness to fight that makes Oscar's brief life wondrous. He transcends cultural expectations and even the fear of death, and Oscar enters manhood.

Oscar does much more than overcome his own social troubles. His family has suffered underneath the reign of Trujillo and the curse (fuku) that accompanies defying him. His grandfather is imprisoned; his grandmother and aunts all die; his mother is beaten in the cane fields, and Oscar returns to those same fields for his death. The curse follows the family around, often taking the form of a mysterious, faceless man. In the novel, the counter to the man is a magical Mongoose: "He stared out into the night hoping that maybe there would be some U.S. Marines out for a stroll, but there was only a lone man sitting in his rocking chair out in front of his ruined house and for a moment Oscar could have sworn the dude had no face" (Díaz 298). The faceless man always precedes monumentally terrible events. He represents the curse and the corrupt side of Dominican politics.

However, for every curse, there must be a counter-curse, Yunior's Zafa. In the novel, it is represented by the golden Mongoose: "Oscar remembers having a dream where a Mongoose was chatting with him. Except the Mongoose was the Mongoose" (Díaz 301). Hanna describes the Mongoose as, "not only a figure whose roots cover some of the same paths of Carribean ancestry, but also as a resistance figure. The Mongoose is an "enemy" to the powerful and a proponent of freedom" (Hanna 510).

Yunior describes the Mongoose as, "an enemy of kingly chariots, chains, and hierarchies" (Díaz 151). In other words, in the novel, the Mongoose is the enemy of Trujillo, of corrupt government, and by extension, Fuku. The faceless man and the Mongoose represent two influences on Oscar, and according to Yunior, on every Dominican, much in the same way that the two cultures draw Oscar toward their ideals. Hanna writes, "A ruling principle of the historical trajectory presented by Yunior is that of love, while a ruling principle of the Trujillan model is that of violence" (Hanna 504). The two symbols represent his being flanked between cowardice/corruption and bravery/love.

The faceless man has followed the De Leon family for generations, and it is only when Oscar decides to stand against him that the curse is broken. In Oscar's dream following his first beating, the Mongoose asks, "What will it be, muchacho? … More or Less? And for a moment he almost said less. So tired, and so much pain—Less! Less! Less!—but then in the back of his head he remembered his family … More, he croaked" (Díaz 301). This scene is very similar to Oscar's later dream when he chooses to listen to his own painful cries instead of "bolting up when the cries began" (Díaz 307). Oscar chooses love, and he chooses to fight. He does not choose less pain, and he does not choose to do the traditionally accepted thing and place his comfort over his creation of self. He runs back into danger, risks his life, and dies, despite warnings by his family and friends to leave Ybón alone and live his life as the same old nerd in New Jersey. However, it is only through Oscar's willingness to defy normatives and the demands of his loved ones that the curse is broken and he is able to create an identity for himself.

While Oscar's coming of age experience does differ from that of Tony and Enrique, it is no less a tale of reaching maturity and defining one's own identity, no matter the cost: "Something had changed about him. He had gotten some power of his own" (Díaz 319). His Dominican culture would have him find power by being a machismo, and his American culture would have him disconnect from fantasy and nerdom. His family would have him obey and find a nice, non-puta to start a family with. But Oscar cannot and does not change who he is to meet these expectations. He tells his killers that "over there he wouldn't be no fatboy or dork or kid no girl had ever loved; over there he'd be a hero, an avenger. Because anything you can dream … you can be" (Díaz 321-322). Oscar confronts his killers and through his final act and death, he becomes what he has always wanted to be, what society has always told him he is not: a hero.

The end of *Oscar Wao* is not entirely positive. The protagonist must sacrifice his life to create his identity, but even though he must make this grave sacrifice, Oscar is able to create an independent identity for himself. However, Díaz does not paint a positive image for the future of the De Leon family: "Behold the girl: the beautiful muchachita: Lola's daughter … [O]n a string around her neck: three azabaches: the one that Oscar wore as a baby, the one that Lola wore as a baby. And the one that Beli was given by La Inca … Three barrier shields against the Eye" (Díaz 329). It is clear, Lola wants to protect her daughter from the fuku, from the curse that has plagued her family and murdered her brother. But "the Circle will fail … and for the first time she will hear the word *fuku.* And she will dream of the No Face Man" (Díaz 330). It is clear that Oscar's triumph over cultural expectations and fuku will

not cover the future generation. These lines are a message that the fight to disrobe one's self of cultural expectations cannot only be fought by one generation: it must be a continuous and repeated effort by every individual. In other words, the fight against contradictory societal expectations will likely always be a part of the Latino-American experience, just as it will always be a part of the De Leon family experience. Each individual must create an identity for himself and not rely on the successes or failures of his ancestors when they did the same.

CHAPTER 2

A PART OF HIS PAST:

A READING OF *BLESS ME ULTIMA*

"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 Me Ultima*, 247

At the center of Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me Ultima* is Antonio Juan Márez y Luna ("Tony"). Like Oscar and Enrique, Tony, is torn between cultural expectations that he does not feel represent who he is or who he wants to be. In order to define himself and reach maturation, Tony must navigate these cultural dissimilarities and create and independent identity for himself. However, also like the other protagonists, Tony finds the inspiration to define himself according to his own beliefs and personality from another individual: Ultima. Ultima is a curandera who encourages Tony to create an identity for himself that is separate from that of his mother, father, and his religious leaders.

At the beginning of the novel, Tony is only six years old, but he already feels pressured from many directions. Attila Kárai writes,

> The novel presents almost exactly two years of the protagonist's life, years which are crowded with events of the most extraordinary kind. By the end of this period, a greater awareness of the contradictions, inherent in his social and physical environment, has grown in Antonio/Tony along with an identity maintainable against these contradictions. (268)

Tony faces the evil and injustice he sees in the world and tries to find a way to conquer it. His parents present two distinct options for dealing with these issues, and Tony must make the seemingly impossible decision of which parent he will follow and how he will live his life. The events alluded to in the above quote and the cultural influences of Tony's parents help him discover what it means to become a man. Tony's maturational quest, like those of Oscar and Enrique, will be triumphant when he separates himself from cultural expectations and creates a new identity for himself.

His father dreams of moving west to California with his sons and living the life of a vaquero again. He bemoans, "[W]e should have gone to California when we were young, when my sons were boys" (Anaya 51). Tony's father, Gabriel, wants a son to move with him to California, and after his brothers leave their father behind, Tony is Gabriel's only hope.

However, Tony's mother insists he become a priest and farmer to carry on her family's traditions. Later in the novel, Tony becomes disillusioned with the Catholic Church and must face pressure from opposing religious directions as well. Tony believes that his destiny lies in selecting the correct choice amongst the options presented to him. He says, "Now we have come to live near the river, and yet near the llano. I love them both, and yet I am of neither. I wonder which life I will choose?" (Anaya 41). For Tony, making these decisions means becoming a man. As such, Tony must navigate his cultural incongruities in order to reach adulthood.

Tony's parents, while both New Mexico natives, represent two different cultural standards. Antonio says, "Why two people as opposite as my father and my mother had married I do not know" (Anaya 29). His father is a Márez. Ultima says,

"And it is the blood of the Márez to be wild, like the ocean from which they take their name" (Anaya 41). Gabriel's ancestors were conquistadores from Spain who came to the Americas on a ship. At Tony's birth, his father's friends and family say, "*He is a Márez, … His forefathers were conquistadores, men as restless as the seas they sailed and as free as the land they conquered*

[1]" (Anaya 6). His name derives from the sea, and he attributes his family's need to roam and be free to his ancestors. His father also feels connected to the llano. He tells Tony, "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" (Anaya 54). It represents the freedom of his family, but it also represents times gone by and his youth. He says, "Ay, but those were beautiful years … The llano was still a virgin, there was grass as high as the stirrups of a grown horse, there was rain" (Anaya 54). Gabriel's longings are always for a more idyllic time and for the freedom he has lost in his journey into adulthood, and he wants his sons to fulfill his dreams.

Despite Gabriel's veneration of the llano, he must admit that the llano no longer represents all that he once prized about it. He laments, "[T]hen, 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" (Anaya 54). Gabriel's dream is not realistic. His older boys have left him to make lives of their own, and even his precious llano cannot sustain the lifestyle he desires any longer. As such, Gabriel has no other choice but to put all of his hope into Tony.

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[1] Tony's dreams are italicized in the original text and remain italicized within this thesis.

The decline of the llano is not the only reason Gabriel has abandoned his beloved life as a vaquero. Tony is both his mother's and his father's last hope of fulfilling their dreams. His mother despises the llano and the life of the vaquero. Her dream is for Tony to become a farmer and a priest. She tells Tony, "You will be like my brothers. You will be a Luna, Antonio. You will be a man of the people, and perhaps a priest" (Anaya 9). Tony explains,

> My mother was not a woman of the llano, she was the daughter of a farmer. She could not see the beauty in the llano and she could not understand the coarse men who lived half-past their lifetimes on horseback. After I was born in Las Pasturas she persuaded my father to leave the llano and bring her family to the town of Guadalupe where she said there would be opportunity and school for us. (Anaya 2)

Tony's mother prizes a life exactly the opposite of that valued by his father. The conflict between the cultures of his parents is best demonstrated in Tony's dream about his birth. Both sides of the family come together to celebrate Tony's birth. Both seek to claim Tony for their way of life. Tony's mother's family is called Luna, and they are farmers. Her family

> *entered ceremoniously. A patient hop stirred in their dark, brooding eyes. 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* (Anaya 5).

However, his father's friends and family shout,

> *[Y]ou 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 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* (Anaya 6).

The two families then proceed to fight over where to bury Tony's afterbirth. The Lunas state, "*We must take the blood that comes after the birth. We will bury it in our fields to renew their fertility and assure that the baby will follow our ways*" (Anaya 6). However, the vaqueros have a different plan: *"[I]t will stay here! We will burn it and let the winds of the llano scatter the ashes*" (Anaya 6). Tony's family feels he must choose one family to follow as he grows, and it is this binary influence from both his mother and his father that Tony must address if he is ever to become a man (Testa 73).

While it is clear Tony must choose a path to follow, he does not know which path he will choose. When his mother tells him he will become a priest, he responds, "perhaps" (Anaya 9). In one of his dreams, he cries, "*Oh please tell me which is the water that runs through my veins, I moaned; oh, please tell me which is the water that washes my burning eyes"* (Anaya 120). He says of Ultima, "She understood that as I grew I would have to choose to be my mother's priest or my father's son" (Anaya 41). Part of growing into adulthood is for Tony to find out who he is and where he belongs in life.

This quest for Oscar means losing his virginity, but for Tony, it means choosing which of his parents he will follow. Ultima holds the answers for Tony's cultural decision. At Tony's birth, she mediates between the two sides of Tony's family. She proclaims, "Cease! … I pulled this baby into the light of life, so I will bury the afterbirth and the cord that once linked him to eternity. Only I will know his destiny" (Anaya 6). However, unlike Tony's parents, Ultima does not dictate a path for him to follow: "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" (Anaya 119). Ultima has already taken Tony's parents' right to choose his destiny by burying the afterbirth herself, so while they do have the right to tell Tony what to do, they really have no power to choose his destiny: "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 with it" (Anaya 223). By not dictating Tony's destiny to him and telling him he must make his own choice, she puts Tony's destiny back into his own hands.

That does not mean she does not give Tony guidance. She advises,

> [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 are drawn by the sun to the heavens, and in turn become again the waters of the moon. Without the sun there would be no waters formed to slake the dark earth's thirst. The waters are one … You've been seeing only parts … and not looking beyond into the great cycle that binds us all. (Anaya 121)

Gabriel later reaffirms Ultima's assertion, stating "I became a man. After that I did not depend on my mother to tell me what was right or wrong, I decided on my own" (Anaya 246). They want Tony to realize that he does not have to choose between his parents. Ultima's point is that despite what seems like their differences, deep down both sides of his family are the same. Ultima makes the point that the waters that represent the Márez family and fill the sea are the same waters that represent the Luna family and fill the rivers and water the fields. Additionally, both are needed for human survival. Similarly, the farmers cultivate the land and provide produce to feed the people, and the vaqueros herd cattle and provide meat for the same purpose. Tony's destiny does not lie in one side of his family or the other; it lies in finding independence and creating his own identity.

Tony is not only torn between the cultures of his parents, he is also torn between religious views. He has been raised to be a good Catholic man. His mother's dream for him is to be a priest, and he is trained as a child to live up to this dream. He attends catechism and looks forward to his first communion. Even when faced with the religion of the Golden Carp, Tony risks never knowing its story and affirms his faith in God: "'I am a Catholic … I can only believe in the God of the church.' … I was sorry because now he would not take me to see the golden carp" (Anaya 107). However, his mother's religion does not live up to his expectations. He expects to experience God and find answers to his many questions, but he is disappointed when nothing changes afterward: "A thousand questions pushed through my mind, but the Voice within me did not answer. There was only silence … I again called to the God that was within me, but there was no answer. Only emptiness" (Anaya 221). Tony

does not end his devotion with this disappointment, however: “After Easter I went to confession every Saturday and on Sunday morning I took communion, but I was not satisfied. The God I eagerly sought was not there” (Anaya 222). While Tony has been raised to be a good Catholic man, he cannot help but to feel dissatisfied with the religion to which he has been trained to adhere, and this dissatisfaction results in Tony separating himself from these traditional beliefs and creating an independent belief system for himself.

Tony disconnects from his family’s religion in part because he sees the priests as being impotent. When Tony’s uncle becomes ill, the priest is unable to heal him: “Even the holy priest at El Puerto had been asked to exorcise el encanto, the curse, and he had failed” (Anaya 84). Later, his other uncle tells Ultima, “The priest came and blessed the house, but you know that priest at El Puerto, he does not want to pit his power against those brujas! He washes his hands of the whole matter” (Anaya 84). To which, Tony replies, “I also wondered why doesn’t the priest fight against the evil of the brujas. He has the power of God, the Virgin, and all the saints of the Holy Mother Church behind him” (Anaya 84-85). After Ultima heals his uncle, Tony wonders, “I had been thinking how Ultima’s medicine had cured my uncle and how he was well and could work again. I had been thinking how the medicine of the doctors and of the priest had failed. In my mind I could not understand how the priests of God could fail. But it had” (Anaya 106). Tony has been taught his entire life that the priests are the servants of God and carry his power with them. However, he is dismayed and surprised when their attempts at making any real difference are futile. They are powerless against evil and the magic that accompanies it, and Tony cannot

reconcile his beliefs regarding God and people with the powerlessness he sees in the priests.

The priests are again helpless to aid Téllez's family. His home is cursed: "The pots and pans, the dishes lift into the air and crash against the walls! We cannot eat! The skillet full of hot grease badly burned one of my children. … I reached for the coffee pot and it jumped up and spilled the scalding coffee on me" (Anaya 225). Tony's mother immediately suggests Téllez call a priest, and Téllez responds, "The priest from Vaughn came and blessed the entire house. It did not help. Now he will not come anymore. He says no evil can withstand the blessing by holy water, and so we must be making up stories" (Anaya 225). Tony responds by thinking, "So again the power of the priest has failed. … Why can't the power of God work against the evils that beset the family of Téllez? Why is it allowed to continue?" (Anaya 226). Ultima again comes to the rescue, and again her power prevails where the priests have failed. This incident only serves further to isolate Tony from his mother's religious beliefs:

> I was still concerned with the silence of God at communion … I wondered if God was alive anymore, or if he ever had been. He had not been able to cure my uncle Lucas or free the Téllez family from their curse, and He had not been able to save Lupito or Narciso. And yet, he had the right to send you to hell or heaven when you died. 'It doesn't seem right—' I said aloud. (Anaya 236)

Following this outburst, Tony remarks that he only goes to church because his "mother believes;" he goes "to please her" (Anaya 237). By the end of the novel,

Tony begins to assert his independent belief-system, and he begins to separate his own belief-system from his mother's. He takes the advice of Ultima and begins clearing his own path instead of simply following those of his parents.

The priests are further portrayed as impotent when they fail to help Florence. Florence does not believe in God, and when Tony asks why, he responds, "My mother died when I was three, my old man drank himself to death, and … my sisters are whores at Rosie's … So I ask myself, … how can God let this happen to a kid. I never asked to be born. But he gives me birth, a soul, and puts me here to punish me" (Anaya 196-196). However, instead of lovingly leading Florence to the Catholic religion, the priest punishes and humiliates Florence for the meanest of offenses. On one occasion, both Tony and Florence are late for catechism, but only Florence is punished: "Florence's punishment for being late was to stand in the middle of the aisle with his arms out-spread. … I felt sorry for him, and I felt bad that he had been punished while I had been excused" (Anaya 198). Tony does not comprehend the lack of compassion the priest has for Florence, and he cannot understand why neither God nor the priest does anything to better Florence's circumstances.

Later, when the children pressure Tony to play priest and hear their practice confessions, the children are appalled when Florence cries, "I have not sinned! … It is God who has sinned against me! … I say God has sinned against me because he took my father and mother from me when I most needed them, and he made my sisters whores" (Anaya 213). They then demand that Tony give Florence severe penance: "'Make him kneel and we'll all beat him' … 'Yeah, beat him!' 'Stone him!' 'Beat him!' but Tony refuses to comply: "'No!' I shouted back, 'there will be no

punishment, there will be no penance! His sins are forgiven! … Go in peace, my son'" (Anaya 214). As a result of his mercy, Tony draws the violent anger away from Florence and onto himself: "'You are a bad priest, Tony! … We do not want you for our priest! … Punish the priest!' they shouted and they engulfed me like a wave. They were on me, clawing, kicking, tearing off the jackets, defrocking me" (Anaya 214). The children follow the example of their priest. When Florence falls short of their expectations, i.e. arriving late for church or saying he does not believe in God, the priest and his flock demand punishment. The priest makes him stand with his arms in a crucified position, and his young flock attacks him. By choosing compassion and forgiveness over justice and condemnation, Tony sets himself opposite of cultural normatives and draws the anger and vengeance of society's representatives.

No other scene in the novel displays Tony's disunity with the Catholic system of belief better than does his scene playing priest. Tony refuses to bow to traditional standards of conduct. He will not force penance on someone who does not deserve it, and he chooses mercy over retribution: "I was facing the angry kids and I could see that their hunger for vengeance was directed at me, but I didn't care. I felt relieved. I had stood my ground for what I felt to be right and I was not afraid. I thought that perhaps it was this kind of strength that allowed Florence to say he did not believe in God" (Anaya 214). Unlike his priest and his classmates, Tony does not see Florence's disbelief as a failure. Instead, Tony empathizes with his friend and admires his ability to stand against his friends and culture and declare boldly what he does and does not believe in. Tony learns from Florence to do the same. Florence tells Tony, "You

could never be their priest" (Anaya 215), and Tony agrees. Tony sees the flaws with his mother's cultural and religious views, and on these pages, he demonstrates a willingness to reject them and forge his own identity. It is a sign of Tony's maturation into manhood.

Tony feels further disassociated with his mother's religion when he is told that growing older means sinning and losing innocence: "My own mother had said that losing your innocence and becoming a man was learning to sin" (Anaya 119). Losing innocence is a direct result of gaining experiences, an inevitable part of life. Ultima says, "'The ways of men are strange, and hard to learn,' … 'Will I learn them?'" Tony asks. "'You will learn much, you will see much'" (Anaya 25), responds Ultima. Seeing life, having new experiences, is an inevitable part of life, and it means letting go of innocence. For Tony's mother, maturation means sinfulness and is a negative aspect of life. She says, "[W]hat a sin it is for a boy to grow into a man" (Anaya 31). She continues, "[L]ife destroys the pureness God gives" (Anaya 31). However, not everyone agrees that life experiences are a negative part of life. Tony's father remarks, "It does not destroy … it builds up. Everything he sees and does makes him a man" (Anaya 31). Eventually, Tony comes to agree with this assertion: "I was growing up and becoming a man and suddenly I realized that I could make decisions" (Anaya 77). This ability to make decisions is the power Tony needs to forge an independent identity. He must realize he can create an existence for himself before he can ever do so.

Later, Ultima tells Tony, "[L]ife is filled with sadness when a boy grows to be a man. But as you grow into manhood you must not despair of life, but gather

strength to sustain you … You are growing, and growth is change. Accept the change, make it a part of your strength" (Anaya 245). With Ultima's help, Tony comes to realize that maturation does mean losing innocence, but it also means the ability to make decisions, a realization crucial to his ability to choose his path in life and forge his own identity. He realizes it is not necessarily a negative aspect of life.

This realization only comes, however, as Tony faces major life events. While many of these events are normal milestones many young boys face, i.e. starting school and receiving communion, a few experiences are extraordinarily traumatic and leave a large impact on Tony's life. Four of these experiences orbit around deaths that Tony witnesses. The first death Tony sees is the shooting of Lupito. The men are appalled that Lupito has murdered the sheriff in cold blood. They call him "an animal" (Anaya 19) and insist "[h]e has to be shot" (Anaya 19). Narciso and Gabriel argue differently, "That is not an animal down there, that is a man … You know that the war made him sick" (Anaya 20). Narciso and Gabriel beg the men to show Lupito compassion, empathy, and mercy, but like the children playing confession, these men prefer vengeance and justice over forgiveness and understanding: "The frightened men responded by aiming their rifles over the side of the bridge. One single shot sounded then a barrage followed it like the roar of a cannon, like the rumble of thunder in a summer thunderstorm … I saw Lupito lifted off his feet and hurled backward by the bullets" (Anaya 22). Tony is baffled by the violence and lack of compassion shown by the men he should admire and mimic. It is in this scene that Tony first sees that his beliefs do not always align themselves with the majority of men.

Lupito does not immediately die, however, and runs "limping and crying" (Anaya 22) toward the hiding Tony. He turns to Tony for the mercy denied to him by the men in the mob, crying, "Bless me" (Anaya 22). However, before Tony has time to react, the men send another volley of ammunition toward the already injured man: "He fell forward then clawed and crawled out of the holy water of the river onto the bank in front of me. I wanted to reach out and help him, but I was frozen by my fear. … I had started praying to myself from the moment I heard the first shot, and I never stopped praying until I reached home" (Anaya 22-23). When his parents and Ultima debate whether experience is sinful, Tony can only think, "I saw Lupito murdered" (Anaya 31). At this point in the novel, Tony has not discovered his ability to make decisions for himself, and he still accepts his mother's assertion that to experience life is to sin, and he feels guilty for witnessing the event. It is this guilt, however, that begins to drive Tony toward creating an identity different from the societal expectations placed upon him.

He further feels guilt over the actions of the men, and his own inability to show Lupito the mercy or give the absolution he begs for. Realizing Tony is troubled by this situation. Ultima tells Tony, "Knowledge comes slowly" (Anaya 34). Tony can only come to understand Lupito's death and life in general by gaining more experiences and maturing, a slow process. This first traumatic experience troubles Tony for the remainder of the novel, but it is an experience and a part of the slow process of gaining knowledge for Tony. It is a part of the maturational experience and an integral part of the creation of Tony's independent identity.

The second death Tony witnesses is the murder of Narciso. Despite his status as town drunk and lecher, Narciso represents goodness throughout the novel. Narciso is, of course, one of the few men who stands up against the mob trying to kill Lupito. Surprisingly for Tony, Narciso also has the most beautiful garden in the town: "Everywhere I looked there were fruit-laden trees and rows and rows of vegetables" (Anaya 109). What surprises Tony even more is the secret of Narciso's garden: "In the spring Narciso gets drunk … He stays drunk until the bad blood of spring is washed away. Then the moon of planting comes over the elm trees and shines on the horde of last year's seeds—It is then that he gathers the seeds and plants … He scatters the seeds by moonlight, and they fall and grow—The garden is like Narciso, it is drunk" (Anaya 109). Tony thinks, "I had always thought farmers were sober men. I could not imagine a drunk man planting and reaping such fruits!" (Anaya 109). Narciso does not live up to society's standards of acceptable behavior. Most in the town dismiss him as a drunk. However, throughout the novel, Narciso is portrayed as the man who always stands up for his fellow man and always does what is right. In fact, Narciso is the only person who shows up to warn Ultima that Tenorio is coming to kill her; even Tony's uncles do not stand with her. Furthermore, nature in the novel is associated with goodness, and Narciso is connected with both. It is, in fact, Narciso's willingness to defy societal expectations that makes him a heroic character. Thus, in the novel, independence is celebrated and encouraged.

When Narciso dies, he dies doing what is right and what no one else is willing to do. Following a brawl, Narciso threatens Tenorio, "[I]f you seek to do evil to la Grande I will cut your heart out!" (Anaya 162). Undaunted by the threat, Tenorio

responds, “I shall find a way to get to the bruja, and if you get in my way I will kill you!” (Anaya 162). Narciso knows Tenorio’s words are not empty, and he decides to help Ultima: “That devil is up to evil, I must warn La Grande,” he says (Anaya 162). He begs the upstanding men of the town and even Tony’s brother, Andrew, to help him save Ultima, but everyone refuses. Only Narciso, the outsider, is willing to take a stand.

Not willing to let Tenorio kill Ultima, Narciso walks through the blizzard to warn her himself, and is ambushed and murdered by Tenorio in the process of doing so: “I knew now what Tenorio had done, and I hated myself for not having guessed it, and I hated Andrew for not listening to Narciso” (Anaya 168). Narciso is the character looked down upon most by the other characters in the novel. Even the evil Tenorio is able to convince men to form a mob with him to face Ultima. Narciso has no one on his side, and yet he always stands for good. Like Florence, Narciso is condemned by society, but represents a goodness that no one accepted by society possesses. Tony feels the injustice of Narciso’s death: “I wanted to cry out into the storm that it was not fair that Narciso die for doing good” (Anaya 170). Again, Tony is faced with the injustice of life and the lack of benevolence of society. He again realizes things do not always go as they should. Florence does not deserve to lose his family and live in misery, and Narciso does not deserve to die because he is brave and selfless. However, as Tony comes to learn, all too often the good are the ones who suffer, but he also realizes the importance of standing up for what he believes in, even if he will be condemned by society or his family for doing so.

Tony again feels helpless when, as Narciso dies in his arms, he begs Tony to hear his confession: "I placed my ear to his mouth and heard his mumbled confession … I prayed … [and] made the sign of the cross over him" (Anaya 170). Again, Tony feels inadequate for the task of accepting the dying confession, and again, he begs God to accept the man's confession. However, this time, he receives an answer: "*Forgive Narciso I cried to God. I will, the terrible Voice responded, if you also ask me to forgive Tenorio"* (Anaya 173). Tony wants justice; he feels Tenorio should be punished for his actions, but it seems that only Narciso suffers. However, it is this compassion that Tony does eventually learn when he refuses to force penance upon Florence, a lesson that would not have been learned had he not experienced the death of Narciso and felt the need to give unwarranted forgiveness to Tenorio. It helps Tony become a compassionate, independent man.

Tony also learns to stand for himself because of Narciso's example. Before this moment, Tony always hides from danger and only observes others' bravery. However, after witnessing Narciso's sacrifice, Tony is forever changed. When he next encounters Tenorio, he does not hide or run from him. Tenorio threatens Ultima, and Tony responds, "I will not let you!" (Anaya 188). When Tenorio continues his threats, Tony resonds, "You are a murderer! … My father will stop you if you try to harm Ultima, and the owl will scratch out your other eye" (Anaya 188). Because of Narciso's continued example of benevolence and bravery, Tony learns himself to be benevolent and brave. While this horrific incident does mark a decline in Tony's youthful innocence and ignorance, it does not mark an increase in his sinful nature.

Instead, it gives Tony the tools to make moral decisions and stand for his own beliefs. Again, experience leads to maturity and a sense of one's own identity.

The next death that Tony experiences is that of his friend, Florence. Hoping the golden carp would give Florence hope and something to believe in, Tony begs Cico to tell Florence of the god: "It was not right, I thought, that Florence did not know. Florence needed at least one god, and I was sure he would believe in the golden carp. I could almost hear him say as he peered into the waters, 'at last, a god who does not punish, a god who can bring beauty into my life" (Anaya 238). However, Florence is never able to hear about the golden carp, and he is never given happiness or hope.

When Tony catches up with Florence to tell him about the carp, he finds his friend is drowning in another part of the river: "[H]e's dead for sure. He's cold and heavy, like death" (Anaya 240). Again, Tony tries to save his dead friend's soul: "I dropped to my knees beside the bronzed, wet body. I touched his forehead. … I crossed my forehead and prayed an Act of Contrition like I had for Narciso, but it was no good. Florence had never believed" (Anaya 241). Once again, Tony experiences an event that shakes his belief that goodness and justice come from God. Florence drowns having experienced no hope or joy in life and without any chance of redemption in death. The last lingering hope of hanging on to his family's religious and cultural views is destroyed, and Tony realizes he can no longer live his life by them.

Following Florence's death, Tony feels that he has lost everything he held to be true. He dreams that "*the priest desecrated the altar by pouring the blood of the*

dead pigeons into the holy chalice" (Anaya 244). The communion has failed to provide Tony with answers, God does not seem to be doing anything for Tony or to preserve goodness, and the priests in his life are ineffective at best and cruel at their worst. In his dream, the blood of Jesus has been replaced with something as mundane as the blood of a pigeon. It is powerless and ordinary. In the next part of his dream, Tony sees "*Cico lay in wait for the golden carp. When the golden carp appeared Cico struck with his spear and the water ran blood red*" (Anaya 244). Even though he is swimming in the carp's river, Florence cannot escape death. Despite representing mercy and forgiveness, the carp is still powerless to save Florence and give him the hope he so desperately needs. With Florence's death, Tony realizes that the religions of his forefathers, of his society, are worthless when dealing with the horrible realities of everyday life. The first three deaths witnessed by Tony serve to sever his reliance on his mother's culture and the native culture. They force him to think independently about how he views reality and make his own decisions regarding his life.

In the end of Tony's dream, he comes to the conclusion that Ultima is the only thing left. Ultima, while representing goodness, does not represent God or the church. In fact, she is condemned by the priests as a bruja. When Tony's uncle falls ill, and the priests are unable to help him, the family is reluctant to ask Ultima for help:

> 'The church would not allow your grandfather to let me use my powers. The Church was afraid that—' She did not finish, but I know what she would have said. 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. (Anaya 97)

However, “the magic of Ultima [is] stronger than all the powers of the saints and the Holy Mother Church” (Anaya 97). She is consistently able to defeat evil when the church is powerless to do anything. She tells Tony, “[G]ood is always stronger than evil … The smallest bit of good can stand against all the powers of evil in the world and it will emerge triumphant” (Anaya 98). While neither she nor Tony explicitly makes this connection, the implication is that if the priests were good, even slightly good, they would easily defeat Tenorio and stop his evil. Ultima, therefore, possesses a goodness that is absent in the church. She, like Florence and Narciso, stands against societal expectations and serves as a heroic example for Tony, encouraging to also stand for what he believes in and forge an independent niche for his life.

Atiila Karai writes, “As the novel unfolds, these conflicting influences [religious and cultural] gradually invade all aspects of Tony's life from education to his friendships and family relations, building up into a full-fledged crisis of identity” (268). The trajectory of the novel and Tony’s maturation leads to his rejection of his familial and cultural norms and accepting that his path lies in standing against these normatives and standing for what he sees as good, even when this puts him in danger and at odds with his loved ones: “Somehow everything changed. The priest had changed, so perhaps his religion could be made to change. If the old religion could no longer answer the questions of the children perhaps it was time to change it” (Anaya 248). Tony learns to take agency, make decisions, and define his own identity from the guidance he receives from Ultima as well as his innate ability to observe the world around him and express his discontent or amazement with it.

With the final traumatic death of the novel, Tony learns that his stance will take sacrifice: “I realized the evil Tenorio had found a way to hurt Ultima, and that he would do anything to hurt her” (Anaya 255). Tenorio shoots Ultima’s owl and, with this action, he also murders Ultima. Ultima’s final words to Tony are that he should “take life’s experiences and build strength from them, not weaknesses” (Anaya 261). Earlier, Tony says, “And that is what Ultima tried to teach me, that the tragic consequences of life can be overcome by the magical strength that resides in the human heart” (Anaya 249). Tony learns from Ultima that good must be stood for at all costs, and that doing good, standing for good, is the only way to overcome the evil he sees in the world: “For us Ultima personified goodness, and any risk in defense of goodness was right. She was the only person I had ever seen defeat evil where all else had failed. That sympathy for people my father said she possessed had overcome all obstacles” (Anaya 255). Tony must define his own identity and work hard to change the problems he sees in this world. Like Ultima, he must represent goodness, even at the risk of losing everything.

This pursuit for his own conscience is how Tony chooses to define himself; it is his chosen identity. He would not have come to this decision without the opposing cultural expectations for his life, the experiences he has during his childhood, and the guidance of Ultima. Tony uses all of these tools provided to him, and cuts a new path for himself, separate from the expectations of everyone but himself.

CHAPTER 3

THAT OTHER UNITED STATES:

UNDERSTANDING *HENRI*

"You will learn French. You are a fighter, yes? So you will fight to learn."

-- *Call Me Henri*, 63

The title and first sentence of the novel, *Call Me Henri,* serve to immerse the readers of Lorraine López's novel immediately in the crisis of identity experienced by the protagonist, Enrique Suarez. The novel begins with a seemingly simple request by Enrique, "*I want to learn French"* (López 1). We quickly learn, however, that this desire is no fickle, childish whim. Enrique is persistent and dedicated to learning French. In his ESL class, Enrique emphasizes his desire repeatedly in his journal entries: "*My favorite foods is French … My favorite music is French … I go to visit Paris for the vacations. … My hobby is French,… Why cannot I take French instead of ESL?*[1]*"* (López 3). While most of the above statements are not true, they represent a truth for Enrique; they represent a profound desire on Enrique's part, a desire to create a new identity for himself.

Enrique does much more, however, than write about his desire in a journal. He actively, if sometimes inadvertently, appeals to the administration to be allowed to take French: "In Beginning ESL, Mr. McGrath had given the class an assignment to write a business letter … Enrique had written a somewhat unfriendly letter to the principal for permission to take French in place of ESL. He remembered addressing an envelope, but he had no idea that McGrath would put a stamp on it" (López 17).

[1] When Enrique speaks in English in the novel, his words are italicized. The italics remain in this thesis.

News of his request also reaches the guidance counselor's office, and in this conversation, the counselor, Dean Hardin, tells how hard Enrique has been fighting to take French: "You put in a request to Mrs. Schubert last year to take French instead of English-as-a-Second-Language … Then you wrote a letter to the principal … Mrs. Byers told me you are still trying to take French" (16-17). Enrique wants to learn French, which defies all social and maturational expectations placed upon him. Therefore, to obtain his goal, Enrique too must create an identity for himself that defies the constraints placed on him.

Enrique tells us:

> Why should he have to study an ugly language like English (and to his ear nothing sounded worse that English) … Why should he have to sit in those babyish classes and practice words and phrases he already knew? … They say this is a free country, but they make you learn a language you don't want to know. It's like Spanish and French aren't good enough. (López 17)

Enrique does not identify with the English language. He finds it ugly and unappealing, but in Enrique's school (and in The United States), immigrant children must learn English: "In this country, we speak English, Now what would happen if everyone decided, like you, to speak any language they felt like speaking?" (López 8). Enrique does not want to be forced to learn a language he is not interested in simply because cultural expectations dictate that he should. He answers Dean Hardin's question, "People here would learn a lot more languages" (López 18). Enrique rejects the confinement of cultural expectations placed upon him because of

his immigrant status. He, instead, sees a positive future, not only for himself, but for every person, if these constraints were lifted.

Unfortunately, Enrique is continually told “no” when he asks to learn French. Enrique states that Mrs. Schubert “said I couldn’t take French until I had two more years of ESL” (López 16). His request is also denied by the principal and Dean Hardin. Like Oscar’s journey to have sex and Tony’s search for religious meaning, the fight to learn French is, for Enrique, a quest for identity and adult independence.

The fight to learn French means so much more than learning a new language for Enrique. It means developing an identity that is not dictated to him. The first line of the novel is, “*Call me Henri”* (López 1). Enrique is asking for a new name, a new identity, a French identity. Enrique does not feel that he belongs to the Norteamericano culture that he is expected to assimilate into. However, what seems less obvious, but is nevertheless evident in the text, is that Enrique does not feel he belongs to the Latino culture he was born into.

Enrique does not state he wants to stay connected to his Chicano heritage or stick with the Spanish language. As such, he is not choosing his mother’s culture as an ideal; he is not connected to it. Also, he does not long to move back to Mexico, where he was born. Instead, Enrique dreams of moving to Canada: “One day he would move to France or Canada and only speak the language he wanted to speak” (López 17). Enrique is so disassociated with both of the cultures he *should* belong to that he dreams of physically leaving them both behind.

The reason Enrique feels disassociated with the North American culture is obvious. The narrator says,

> Enrique wondered if he could reach that *other* United States, the one on the television, by running far enough in the right direction. Would there be some kind of border with patrol officers like the one in Tijuana? Or would the litter and graffiti just gradually thin out, disappearing as the new houses and neat lawns began to appear? And what would happen to him if he did reach the other U.S.? The police might stop him, he thought, or maybe a homeowner would shoot him for trespassing But maybe he might meet up with one of those big joking families, like the ones in the shows he enjoyed. Maybe he could make friends with one of the kids, and the whole family would take to him. Since they had so many rooms in their house and since they were so friendly and funny, maybe they would ask him to live with them. (López 30)

Enrique is not a recipient of the "American Dream" he sees so often on television. He lives in a one-bedroom apartment with his mother, step-father, and triplet baby brothers:

> The one-bedroom apartment was so cramped that he could see the entire living room area and bathroom from the kitchen …The worst thing about this apartment … wasn't its closet-sized rooms or the ticking and dripping refrigerator. The worst thing by far was the busted air conditioner. (López 36)

Enrique's mother works tirelessly to care for him and his brothers, but they still have very little to eat, and his family must rely on the charity of his step-father's church to provide furniture and clothing for the family. Dr. López states, "There is a real discrepancy between what he sees in the media and what he sees in his own neighborhood. So, he is trying to figure out where is that other place? … How do I

get there? … I think this is the germ of the idea of how do I get out of here to somewhere better. So undergirding it is dissatisfaction" (López Interview). This dissatisfaction is a direct result of Enrique's situation in between the life he wants and the life that has been forced upon him. Enrique lives in inescapable poverty, and he feels isolated from what television purports as American culture and the American Dream.

Enrique's isolation from his Chicano heritage derives from the same feeling of isolation and poverty as his disassociation with American culture. Enrique's status as an immigrant is one of the primary reasons he is unable to assimilate into the idealistic version of American culture he longs for: "Sometimes Enrique thought his mother was the real tourist, staring from the window of the tortilla factory, and the *norteamericanos* were the curious sights to enjoy" (López 44). Enrique's disassociation from American culture stems from his perception that his family is on the outside looking in at the American ideal, this life he sees on the television and in the tourists who visit his mother's factory, but can see no way of accessing. Additionally, Dr. López remarks that Enrique is very put off with the machismo of the Chicano culture. His step-father's aggressiveness, abusiveness, and alcoholism create very real problems for Enrique. He is also disgusted by the violent gang-life outside of his home" (López Interview). As such, Enrique does not feel a real sense of belonging with the Chicano culture of his mother. For Enrique, learning French is a way of finding an identity separate from the "ideal" constantly dangled out of reach but in front of his face.

For each of the protagonists in these novels, it only takes one person to change the trajectory of the protagonists' lives and to help them fulfill their quests. For Oscar, this person is Ybon. For Tony, it is Ultima. For Enrique, it is Monsieur Nassour. When Nassour first meets Enrique he says, "Your teacher tells me you want to learn French … But you cannot take the class because you must first learn English … You will learn French. You are a fighter, yes? You will fight to learn" (López 63). Dr. López states that Nassour and Enrique have more in common than may at first be evident. Nassour is from North Africa and, like Enrique, has faced the choice of choosing a cultural identity for himself. Also like Enrique, he does not choose to adapt himself to cultural expectations, and instead of being French or being African, he is simply Mr. Nassour, the French teacher living in America. Perhaps this is why he feels a connection to Enrique, or more likely, he is just a good man who sees something strong and persistent in Enrique (López Interview). Either way, it is clear that Nassour's influence in Enrique's life gives him the tools, encouragement, and opportunity to forge the identity he chooses for himself.

The obstacle Enrique must overcome to reach his goal of cultural independence is his primary connection to his Latino heritage: his mother. Enrique feels very attached to his mother: "He longed to put his head on her shoulder, breathe her fresh *masa* smell, and feel her soft arms around him like a blanket" (López 89). One primary reason, beyond the normal love a son has for his mother, for Enrique's attachment to his mother is that he feels obligated to take care of her. When his stepfather attacks his mother, it is Enrique who locks him in a closet and helps his mother escape. When she has to be at work, it is Enrique who rushes home from

school to watch his infant brothers, and when his brother becomes ill, it is Enrique who calls an ambulance and ensures his safety. Enrique, of course, loves his mother and wants to be around her. He cannot escape his current reality, and he cannot achieve independence while still depending on her. Enrique, thus, must grow up at a very young age and break free from his mother. Of course, this is not an easy task for many grown men to accomplish, and it is even more difficult for a child like Enrique to do so. However, in order to reach maturity and adulthood, Enrique must separate himself from his mother and create his own identity.

In the novel, a series of circumstances serves to direct Enrique toward independence. The first event is Monseur Nassour's taking an interest in Enrique and offering to help Enrique participate in an exchange program in Quebec. However, while Enrique is excited about this offer, he does not commit to the program: "A year was a long time to Enrique. Who would watch the triplets? Who would help his mother?" (López 170). Enrique cannot fathom leaving his family for an entire year, but he can only obtain independence and create his own identity by doing just that.

Enrique's mother also cannot imagine allowing him to leave. When Enrique hypothetically mentions the trip, his mother responds, "You wouldn't go anywhere. You wouldn't leave me, she said. I love you! I wouldn't let you go" (López 177). However, after Enrique's stepfather hits his mother, and his mother decides to return to him anyway, Enrique is hurt and decides to live with his aunt: "Right now, I never want to go back and live in that apartment if Juan is there" (López 188). Living with his aunt helps prepare Enrique for the possibility of living without his mother. It teaches him not only that he can survive without her, but also that she can survive

without him. It provides him with a significant tool for separating himself from the dominant societal forces in his life.

However, it is only when Enrique witnesses the gang-related murder of his good friend, Horacio, and Enrique's life is threatened that he is able to cut ties with his mother, his heritage, and his home and forge a new identity in Canada. The threat on his life provides Enrique with the push to take the step his has been fearful to take, to leave his family and familiar surroundings behind to forge a new future for himself. It allows him to reject the expectations keeping him contained in a culture within which he does not feel a sense of belonging.

The power structure and traditional cultural expectations would require Enrique to tell who murdered his friend. Mr. Toro asks, "When is it going to stop, if people like you don't step up and take responsibility?" (López 219). His mother would have him come home to her, even if they need to find a new home together: "We will move. I will borrow money from Ceci, and maybe from Glen too, and we will move back to Mexico" (López 220). However, Enrique cannot find the independence he seeks by following the path of his mother or the American power structure.

Enrique's independence from racial, societal, and familial expectations can only come by leaving his home and familiar surroundings. Dean Hardin tells Enrique, "I think you have a chance … I think you can be one of the ones who gets away from here" (López 190). She realizes that Enrique is much more than a stereotype, and she knows that the only way for Enrique to live up to his potential is to leave home.

Monsieur Nassour presents Enrique with the opportunity to do just that when he offers Enrique a chance to live in Quebec.

However, Enrique’s mother has difficulty letting him go: “I cannot be without my son. He belongs with me. We are a family” (López 222). She has been programed to believe that her son must be with her: “Mothers who do not love their sons are those who send them away” (López 223). However, despite the societal insistence that this is reality, Enrique’s mother must do the opposite out of love for her son: “This is a chance for him to learn a language he loves and to experience a new life away from danger, away from fear. Every parent wants this for his or her child. You want this for your son. You want him to learn” (López 223). Enrique’s mother must also put her ideas about how a mother properly cares for and loves her son as a result of the threat on Enrique’s life. However, when she accepts that loving her son means letting him go, letting him forge an identity for himself, the only obstacle between Enrique and the identity he has chosen for himself is removed. He is no longer bound by cultural constraints and can break free of the expectations surrounding him.

For Enrique, the trip to Canada is not simply about learning a new language. Dr. López remarks that she does not see Enrique ever returning to his previous life. Enrique has taken a permanent step toward creating a new future for himself (López Interview). Enrique’s trip will immerse him not only in a new language, but also in a new cultural identity. It is the grail of Enrique’s quest. Nassour describes it as the chance to “experience a new life” (López 223), but I argue that Enrique is not simply a passive experiencer of life; he is, as Nassour points out early in the novel, “a fighter” (López 63), and he will dictate the terms of his identity and life. Enrique tells

his mother: “I will be changed” (López 235), and without a doubt, he will be. He will be a man independent of cultural ties and expectations; he will determine his own identity and life.

CHAPTER 4

THE HYPHEN

I am a Dominican, hyphen, American. As a fiction writer, I find that the most exciting things happen in the realm of that hyphen—the place where two worlds collide or blend together"

– *Entre Lucas Y Juan Mejia*, 1748.

Alberto Fuguet and Sergio Gómez's essay, "Presentación del País McOndo" describes an unfortunate but true story about young Latino men who were invited to submit their work for publishing in America. However, when the publishers saw their work, they reacted poorly: "Pues bien, el editor lee los textos hispanos y rechaza dos. Los que desecha poseen el estigma de 'carecer de realismo mágico' … El editor despacha la polémica arguyendo que esos textos 'bien pudieron ser escritos en cualquier país del Primer Mundo[1]'" (1). These men, like other American readers, have expectations of Latino literature, in this case, magical realism. However, it is a mistake to reduce the artistic work of an entire people to one genre or style. The experiences of Latinos are as wide as that of their "first world" counterparts, and there is no reason to assume their works of art should be any less diverse or complex. Fuguet, with this essay, sparks a rejection of traditional Latino literary traditions. He writes," McOndo[2] se centran en realidades individuales y privadas" (3). The focus, for Fuguet, is on the individual writer and his idiosyncratic artistic experience.

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[1] Well, the editor reads the Hispanic texts and discards them both. 'They lack magical realism' … The editor dispatched the polemic, arguing that these texts "could well be written in any First World country."

[2] "McCondo centers on individual and private realities." McCondo is a play on "Macondo," the fictional town in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's novel, *One Hundred Years of*

Too often, Anglo readers view Latino literature as a stereotype, assuming that all Latino writers should write magical realism, have a Latino setting, or utilize code switching. Aldama argues for an examination of Latino literature, however, that focuses solely on the novel's use of "language and aesthetics" (139). He also suggests that the form and content, while reliant on each other, should be considered separately. In other words, the value of a work should not depend on whether it submits itself to cultural or literary expectations. The worth of a novel is located in its linguistic and aesthetic value.

The novels discussed in this essay do more than present protagonists rejecting expectations and forging new identities. They are more than just content. The form, genre, and style of these novels break free from literary stereotypes and demonstrate the complexity in the Latino experience. Kanellos describes Latino-American literature as,

> Esta literatura incorpora las voces del conquistador y del conquistado, del revolucionario y del reaccionario, del nativo y del desarraigado de su tierra. Es una literatura que proclama un sentido de lugar y pertenencia en los Estados. Unidos mientras que también elimina fronteras y es transnacional en el sentido más posmoderno posible. Es una literatura que trasciende conceptos de etnicidad y raza, mientras que lucha por una identidad chicana, nuyorriqueña, cubanoamericana o simplemente hispana o latina ("Panorama"). [3]

Solitude. It is the name of Fuquet's literary movement that rejects Magical Realism and traditional Latino literary traditions.

[3] "This literature includes the voices of the conqueror and the conquered, the revolutionary and the reactionary, the native and the uprooted from their land. It is a literature

The history, tradition, content, and form of Latino literature is complex; it represents many unique experiences and voices.

This stylistic complexity is evident in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao.* Oscar's character is not the only part of the novel that, while being lured in contradictory directions, creates a new identity for itself. The structure and form of the novel also denies expectations and creates an original identity for itself. Hanna writes, "This model of magical realism allows Yunior to recover experiences that might not fit within the bounds of traditional European models of realism. Seemingly supernatural forces have *real* effects and power in these stories and histories" (Hanna 510). The novel does not, however, fit entirely in the traditional model of magical realism either. The fantastic elements in the novel are not presented as mundane or natural. They are obviously astonishing to the characters and the narrator. The first time Oscar sees the Mongoose, "[t]hey stared at each other—it serene as a Buddhist, he in total disbelief" (Díaz 190). Oscar is shocked when he sees the Mongoose.

However, the novel does not quite stretch into the realm of pure fantasy either. The idea of Fuku and Zafa, the novel's magical curse and counter-curse, are generally accepted by the Dominican community, and eventually accepted by Oscar and Yunior. As representatives of these two forces, the Mongoose and the faceless man do not seem purely fantastical elements for the story; they are simply powerful parts of Dominican life.

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that proclaims a sense of place and belonging in the United States while also eliminating borders and is transnational in the most postmodern sense possible. It is a literature that transcends concepts of ethnicity and race while fighting for a Chicano, New York Rican, Cuban-American identity or simply the Hispanic or Latino."

Furthermore, the characters have no supernatural abilities to aid in their struggles. They are ordinary people fighting against extraordinary circumstances. Unlike Frodo, Oscar has no ring; unlike the comic book heroes, Oscar has no super powers. He is an ordinary man facing extraordinary villains. As such, the novel, like its protagonist, does not forge an existence within a traditionally defined structure. Instead, it creates its own literary structure and forges a new place for itself. Hanna suggests that the novel acts as a counter-discourse to the corrupt Trujllian power structure. In other words, like its protagonist, the structural aspects of the novel defy cultural expectations, i.e. the Trujillian dictated culture.

Just as Oscar must step outside of his socially and temporally assigned role, so must the novel step outside of traditional narrative structures. For example, the work does not follow a linear narrative progression. For example, the middle of the novel is dedicated to the Cabral de Leon family history from even before Belicia's birth. Also, the title page is a premonition of the novel's conclusion. Additionally, the narration shifts point of view between Yunior and Lola without warning. In chapter one, an unnamed narrator (Yunior) is discussing Oscar's childhood and in the next, an unintroduced female narrator (Lola) begins discussing her mother's cancer.

The narrator even admittedly includes incorrect information in the novel to better his story. Yunior writes, "Leonie was also the one who informed me that the perrito (see first paragraphs of chapter one, 'Ghetto Nerd at the End of the World') wasn't popularized until the late eighties, early nineties, but that was the detail I couldn't change, just liked the image too much. Forgive me, historians of popular

dance, forgive me!" (Díaz 132). Yunior, thus, does more than step outside of traditional narrative structure; he steps out of the realm of truth and reality.

The narrator admits his own unreliability, freely confesses knowingly lying to better the story. Yunior does not even limit himself to one cultural frame of reference. José David Saldivar describes Yunior's footnotes as "hip hop cultural nuance and decolonial theorizing tumble over each other for the reader's attention" (125). Yunior describes Trujillo using American/European references (i.e. Trujillo is Sauron and Fuku is Morgoth) (Díaz 2-3). The mixing of cultural references is representative of how the characters live their lives.

Yunior does not limit himself to one culture or structure because his own experiences are not so limited. Yunior, Oscar, and the novel forge for themselves a new cultural experience because no one culture is competent enough to house their reality. Hanna writes,

> Yunior thus stages a narrative resistance in his recounting of history. He refuses to allow the subsuming elements of history deemed irrelevant to the national story, instead rescuing them from oblivion and tracing an alternative trajectory and understanding of history from the fragments he collects and imagines. Yunior asserts the power of imagination as a disruptive force against the violence—both physical and representative—of the regime. (505)

A culture's history plays a large role in creating and determining its cultural identity. By resisting the customary mode of relating history, Yunior and the novel thus reject the cultural expectations created by that history. Yunior states in his introduction, "Even as I write these words I wonder if this book ain't a zafa of sorts. My very own

counterspell" (Díaz 7). In other words, Yunior is creating this story as a counter discourse to the conventional historical discourse of his native and home nations.

Often, Díaz intentionally deletes information from important sections of the novel. Some of these omissions come in the form of lines and blank spaces in the place of words and ideas. However, some omissions are in the plot, with gaps left open for the reader to guess and wonder what happens in those plot holes. The omission of pertinent plot information is not a typical element of a novel's plot. O'Brien discusses the effect the erasures present throughout the novel have on the text and the reader. The omissions work with the other aspects of the novel to create a feeling of disassociation and discomfort for the reader. O'Brien writes,

> With the intertextual knowledge bases, each reader must decide how much outside research to do to supplement his or her prior knowledge—and which references to research—but with the erasures, reader subjectivity is placed in even sharper focus because readers must create or choose an answer, rather than "simply" researching one. (O'Brien 82)

Díaz's readers thus play a role in constructing meaning for the text. The novel works not only to demonstrate how the Latino protagonist can break free of cultural expectations but also how the novel itself can break free of literary expectations. Instead of presenting the audience with a preset story and list of moral lessons, *The Brief Wondrous Life* opens itself up to individual interpretation and creation of meaning.

The purpose of this novel is precisely to step away from traditional discursive structures. It also steps away from a traditional Western context, for which Díaz

receives criticism: “The idea that a novel like Díaz’s might willfully explore areas of reader ignorance without providing exhaustive contextual support is still unusual for some” (O’Brien 76). The fact that Díaz’s novel relies so heavily on traditions so far outside the Anglo-American frame of reference further sets it as an individual entity, its identity defined only by Díaz and his personal aesthetic taste. The fact that the novel makes the Anglo reader feel uncomfortable should not and is not a deterrent for the Dominican cultural aspects of the protagonist and narrator’s lives to be present in the novel. O’Brien argues, “*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* forces readers to deal with the challenges of intertextuality and the cultural knowledge it requires by prominently alluding to a variety of cultural knowledge bases and glossing them in very uneven ways” (77). Like its protagonist, the novel steps outside of cultural (in this case, literary) expectations and forges its own existence in a stand against the corrupt and ineffective means of expression considered acceptable by the masses.

Bless Me Ultima was written in 1972, just following the American Civil Rights Movement. However, the novel is not focused on the racism faced by Latino natives in 1940s New Mexico. There are references to the hardships Tony faces surrounded by white children: “The strangeness of the school and the other children made me very sad. I did not understand them … We found a few others who were like us, different in language and custom, and a part of our loneliness was gone” (Anaya 58-59). However, it is not the focus of the novel. In fact, Tony is not a sad, pathetic, stereotypical character, and the novel does not focus on the hardships he faces. Instead the focus is on Tony’s maturation and his triumph.

The form of the novel, however, does seem to follow a much more traditional formula. Karai describes the structure of the novel as lacking in complexity, and the tale is in first-person, narrated by an adult Tony in the past tense. He is limited to his own experience and is not omniscient. It is even structured linearly. Additionally, there is no reason to suspect the narrator of being unreliable, other than normal issues of the protagonist-narrator. Looking simply at the form, this novel does not seem to break any stylistic boundaries.

However, the simplicity of the novel-form does not detract from its value: "The obvious result of this seeming lack of complexity is a greater awareness and sensitivity on the reader's part towards the rare instances of retroversions and anticipations, ellipses, slow-downs or pauses, repetitions, and iterations" (Karai 270). The simplicity of form allows Anaya to draw attention to the aspects of the novel he finds important and wants his audience to connect with.

One element the simplicity of the narrative form helps bring forward is the temporal duality of the setting. Karai remarks that the setting of the novel is not completely traditional. He divides the novel into two separate time-settings: sacred and profane time. Sacred time is the narration that takes place in memory and dreams. Profane time includes the actual events of the story. The best example of this is the beginning of the novel. It starts with the announcement of Ultima's arrival at Tony's home: "Ultima came to stay with us the summer I was almost seven" (Anaya 1). However, on page five, the narration switches to Tony's dream of his birth: "I could make out the face of the mother who rested from the pains of birth" (Anaya 5). The division in temporal setting represents the division between the natural world of

everyday life and the Catholic Church and the magic of the golden Carp and Ultima. Furthermore, it serves to illustrate textually the cultural and temporal draws Tony faces throughout the novel. The reader is forced to navigate textual duality much like Tony must face cultural duality.

However, like *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, Bless Me Ultima* rejects traditional genre labeling. Lamadrid describes the novel as, "These seeming contradictions [in the novel's plot and form] invite a reexamination of the relation of myth and social consciousness, often defined as antithetical, incompatible categories which erode and undermine each other" (496). He argues for the creation of a new mode of reading the text, one that does not view the unique aspects of the novel as corrosive or undermining. Instead, we should look for how the novel creates a new identity for itself and demonstrates the complex possibilities of Latino literature.

By the time *Bless Me Ultima* was written, realism had already become the popular novel form. However, this novel clearly rejects conventional realism. Ultima is a curandera and perhaps a bruja. She does not solve her problems by ordinary means. When Tony's uncle falls ill, Ultima does not give him medicine and hope for the best. She does mix herbs for him to drink, but she also seems to connect Tony and his uncle together telepathically: "I saw his convulsions and my body too was seized … I felt that somehow we were going through the same cure" (Anaya 99-100). She also uses clay dolls, like voo doo dolls, to represent the witches who have created the curse and to destroy them. Ultima performs several other miracles just as magical as the first. In the end, we learn that her soul is contained in the owl that follows her around. Also, beyond the obvious miracles, there are hints of magic in the legend of

the golden carp, and a foreboding foretelling of apocalyptic doom for Tony's home. None of these would be characteristic of an example of realism.

The novel also does not fit as an example of magical realism. Tony is obviously astounded when he sees Ultima perform these miracles: "Ultima's cure and the Golden Carp occupied my thoughts the entire summer" (Anaya 122). The effect of seeing these miracles astounds him so much that it alters his perception of his traditional religious and cultural belief. It spurs him to forge a new identity for himself. Tony's perception of what is reality and what is extraordinary is conventional. As such, it clearly rejects magical realism, but it also rejects a pure fantasy genre. Tony, while obviously special, has no magic of his own. Tony faces remarkable challenges from witches, but his biggest obstacles come from ordinary, vindictive men and the cultural/religious conflicts every adolescent faces.

Anaya's rejection of tradition may not be as obvious or extreme as Díaz's, but his novel nonetheless depicts a character living his life free of societal constraints. The novel too creates its own individual niche and does not rely on convention or stereotype. Aldama's insistence on the importance of form and content, the aesthetic value of the work, would clearly support Anaya's place in the literary cannon. Anaya carves out a unique existence for his work and his reliance on or rejection of the norm are irrelevant. He does not conform his novel to expectations from either side of the cultural discordancy, rebellion and conformity. He makes a novel that represents his individual artistic identity, much like Tony's creation of an individual religious identity.

Like *Bless Me Ultima, Call me Henri* appears to follow a more traditional literary form. Unlike the other two novels, it falls neatly into the genre of realism. The novel is far removed from a tradition of magical realism, or magic period. It is firmly rooted in a tradition of realism. There are no extraordinary forces interceding to change Enrique's life: there are only normal people, like Nassour, who have the compassion and strength to stand up and sacrifice to help a child. Dr. López's novel is a badge of the complexity of the Latino artistic experience. In Fuguet's essay, the men are criticized for writing novels that seem too American, too Anglo. However, the perception of the publisher is narrow and false. The Latino novel does not need magic or fantasy to be great or to capture a Latino experience. However, the mere fact that it falls into this category serves to set it apart from a stereotyped, magical-realism form. Dr. López remarks that she wanted her novel to break free from the binary and that it is Enrique, as the protagonist, by choosing to defy the cultural normatives and expectations that drive the structure and themes in the novel to defy literary expectations ("Interview…). The novel rejects the idea that a Latino novel must be different or separate from other American genres or works.

Dr. López says she sees a tendency on the behalf of readers to expect Latino literature to pity the protagonists. However, she says her novel is not written to focus on the hardships of the Latino protagonist but rather to celebrate the ability of the protagonist to overcome his hardships and to defy expectations; it is a celebration, not a cause for mourning. Additionally, she remarks that her novel deals with problems universally prevalent. It deals with friendship, abuse, poverty, maturation, and success. She says there seems to be an expectation that Latino-writers can only write

about “Latino themes,” but the experience of the Latino-American is as diverse and multi-faceted as that of any other American. It only makes sense, therefore, that the themes and structures of Latino-American novels would be just as diverse and multi-faceted (López Interview). And Dr. López’s novel is just that.

Dr. López has received criticism because Enrique does not tell who is trying to kill him. Cultural expectations dictate he deals with his problem by telling the truth, risking his life, and turning the bad guy over to the police. However, Enrique does not solve problems in a certain manner simply because he is expected to do so. He is a fighter, but he fights his battles with his own weapons. He chooses to escape, not just the dangerous situation, but the cultural expectations placed on him. Enrique is not a stereotype; he is a complex adolescent who chooses to use the danger of losing his life as the push to creating his own identity.

CONCLUSION

"One can create fictions—narrate fictionally—about everything that exists in the world—and the world is full of everything."

-- A User's Guide to Postcolonial and Latino Borderland Literature

Lamadrid sees the failure of cultural and literary studies as "analyz[ing] culture and its values as something eternal and independent of history, instead of the dynamic product or actual embodiment of history, conflict, and change" (497). We cannot view Latino-American literature in a vacuum. Instead, we must examine the cultural and historical influences that help create the individual and the work in order to see and appreciate the new entity that is created from the conflict.

"The tools and approach [in Latino-American literature] remind us that postcolonial and Latino borderland fictions do not imitate reality but rather create a reality that uses as its building blocks *anything* in reality" (Aldama 644). This may seem to be common sense: of course Latino writers can write about anything, but time and ignorant criticism has consistently displayed the lack of common sense for many critics. Just as in Fuguet's tale, many individuals assume Latino writers can only or should only discuss "Latino" topics and use "Latino" form, but the authors in this essay show exactly why this is not true. If anything, the complex experiences of Latino-American writers present them with more, not less, opportunities and topics for creating literature.

In a form of rebellion against these illogical expectations, even the young protagonists in Latino-American coming of age novels demonstrate that the Latino-American is not limited by stereotypes or cultural expectations; he or she is capable

of breaking away from these expectancies of lifestyle and behavior and create a new identity for his or her self. These novels and these characters are a celebration of the Latino creativity and independence. They are a commemoration and a reminder that no individual should be restrictively placed into a category and that any individual can break from expectation and create something vibrant and new.

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