Growing Up Chicana in the Heart of Anaya’s Aztlán

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As I write this essay, a great sadness fills my heart. Rudolfo Anaya is the padrino of Chicano literature and maestro of New Mexican magical realism, but he was also my dear friend and fellow paisano. Long before I sat at Mr. Anaya’s dining room table drinking vino tinto and talking about his manuscripts, our writing projects, and the importance of Southwest studies, I was a hapless middle-school student discovering *Heart of Aztlan: A Novel* (1976). I can only speculate as to how I came across Anaya’s novel, but I was reading it when he was teaching in the English Department at University of New Mexico, the department I now call my academic home. My experience as a Chicana faculty member in the English Department where Mr. Anaya labored before my time gives me pause and makes me ponder my position in la academia.

This essay has been difficult to write. I feel that I never did enough during his lifetime to honor Mr. Anaya, one of Albuquerque’s most adored citizens, who put the city on the map of Chicana/o and Southwestern literature. I set out to create a plática about his work, but instead found myself self-reflecting, in search of a rhyme and a reason for this essay.

I grew up in Albuquerque’s South Valley, graduated from Albuquerque High School (1996), and earned my degrees from the University of New Mexico (BA 2001, MA 2003, PhD 2010). Anaya also graduated from Albuquerque High School (1956), attended the University of New Mexico (BA 1963, MA 1968 and 1972), and taught for nearly twenty years (1974–93) in the university’s English Department, where I am now an associate professor. From this position I pay tribute to Anaya’s maestría, and I find myself looking back at the pattern of identity he laid down for growing up Chicana in Albuquerque.
My Growing Up Story: Thirty Years from Albuquerque to Aztlán

When I first read Heart of Aztlan, I was a bookish student at Washington Middle School who read all the classics for young girls: Beverly Cleary, Judy Blume, the Baby-Sitters Club series. I then advanced to Stephen King. These books are not Chicana in content, but I cannot deny their part in my becoming a Chicana reader. I read other books in middle school, but the one I remember most is Heart of Aztlan, especially its attention to the urban landscape, mapped onto my mind after many years of traveling across the Río Grande from the South Valley to get to school. The Barelas neighborhood hugs Washington Middle School on one side and the Albuquerque Country Club on the other, sister spaces that set the stage for Anaya’s novel. In a pivotal scene in the Sandía Mountains, the patriarch Clemente Chávez discovers the mystery of history and self when he declares, “I AM AZTLAN!” (Anaya 1981, 131). I was moved by this scene, even without understanding its finer details. Aztlán is in the heart, a romantic concept my youthful mind could grasp, though my youth was no romance. Soon I would become a teen mother, like my sister and mother before me, and my grandmother and great-grandmother before us. We lived the realities of growing up Hispanic and female in Albuquerque, not so much in the Aztlán of Anaya’s fiction.

New Mexico has one of the highest teen pregnancy rates in the country. To make matters worse, the state ranks fiftieth in the nation in education and fiftieth in overall child well-being (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2020). These statistics are not unrelated and they are not simply empirical facts. Albuquerque Public Schools has seen a rise in graduation rates over the past three years, but the problem of poor education remains close to home. I was the first of my siblings to graduate from high school, but my high school graduation party became a backyard wedding once news broke that I was pregnant. During finals week in my first semester as a college freshman, I gave birth to my beautiful daughter, Adelina, and then later welcomed my precious son, Alejandro. My daughter broke the cycle of teen pregnancy, but my son became a teen dad and has since given me three grandchildren, spunky Aviana and twin boys Leonardo and Sebastian.

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The patterns of history are sometimes unpredictable while you're living in the moment, but predictable when you reflect back on your life. My kids are only now finding their way back to college. Their becoming is still in the making, but what is crystal clear to me now is how my own academic growth followed a path that Anaya set down in the university over the span of thirty years.

In spring 2020 I adopted Anaya's *Curse of the ChupaCabra* (2006) in my upper-division Chicana/o literature course and themed the class around young adult fiction. We began with foundational novels before moving into contemporary works, from Pam Muñoz Ryan's *Esperanza Rising* (2000) to Erika Sánchez's *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* (2017). These novels chart a pathway toward a Chicana collective consciousness in young adult fiction that is traced back most directly to Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* (1984), but we see glimpses of this consciousness in José Antonio Villarreal's *Pocho* (1959) and Tomás Rivera's . . . *y no se lo tragó la tierra* (1971). Anaya's *Curse of the ChupaCabra* is unique because it features a Chicana protagonist, and it offers an alternative to male-centered narratives that leave little room for female character development.¹ This tribute to Anaya thus looks back at the thirty years that separate *Heart of Aztlán* from *Curse of the ChupaCabra*, with my own academic growth at the center but with Anaya’s work as the roadmap to the development of my Chicana identity.

After thirty years, I have come a long way from that young Hispanic girl who was in search of Aztlán. At the same time, geographically speaking, I have not gone anywhere at all, and it took me a long time to figure out how place moves me, having never left Albuquerque and having grown up Chicana in Anaya's Aztlán. In “Growing Up Chicano: Tomás Rivera and Sandra Cisneros,” Erlinda Gonzales-Berry and Tey Diana Rebolledo unpack the importance of the bildungsroman and “growing up stories” in Chicano literary history, “part of a chain of searching for moments of insight into what made the Chicano what she/he is that forms a general theme in Chicano literature” (1985, 109). In contrast to the male hero, who “comes into a complete sense of integration and freedom, the female adolescent is carefully schooled to function in society, to lose her freedom and her sense of individuality in order to become a loving wife and mother” (110). Gonzales-Berry and Rebolledo compare Rivera to Cisneros and note how the latter focuses on domestic scenes more than on classroom spaces. Cisneros's Esperanza comes to realize that her place as a girl means coming to terms with the knowledge of sexual exploitation and gender oppression
inside and outside the home. Rivera’s work also points to the uncertain refuge that the home-space offers, but Anaya’s *Heart of Aztlan* does not (and perhaps cannot) explore the uncertain outcomes that the home itself (re)creates for the young women who must bear the burden of healing the community. The reality is that many young women do not go off to college, as Esperanza did, much less graduate from high school, as I did. Indeed, the many young Hispanic women who never break away from the institutions that bind us to our foremothers may never learn to identify as Chicana at all. Breaking away is necessary, but how does one break away when you cannot leave the place that binds you, when you take on a female tradition before having a choice to do otherwise?

The school, classroom, and library are critical sites of abnegation as well as self-discovery in Chicana/o growing-up narratives. These spaces offer the acquisition of knowledge, promising access to power and unlimited success, but their effects are not always positive. As Américo Paredes shows in *George Washington Gómez* (1990), the classroom is also a space of linguistic and institutional bias, where national loyalties override ethnic identity and condition the ethnic student to shed all markers of difference in speech and identity. The school and home are companion spaces fraught with ethnic and national tensions that create moments of linguistic bullying and violence, a theme spanning the breadth of Chicana/o literature. Anaya’s first two novels, *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972) and *Heart of Aztlan*, explore the dilemma of education through the son as they depict growing up Chicano in rural and urban New Mexican spaces, respectively. *Heart of Aztlan* has a dual growing-up story that pairs the son’s coming-of-age with the father’s coming-to-consciousness. It opens with the Chávez family moving to the city of Albuquerque from Guadalupe, a fictional community in rural eastern New Mexico where some of *Bless Me, Ultima* is set (and in close proximity to the place where Anaya was born in 1937). More than his first novel, Anaya’s second mirrors his own family history and his experience of growing up Chicano in Albuquerque. The fictional son, Benjamín/Benjie, navigates a new school—Washington Middle School/la Washa—while the father battles the railroad company in a labor strike. Unlike the son in *Bless Me, Ultima*, whom we see developing into a young man, the son in *Heart of Aztlan* remains incapacitated at the end of the book and under the care of a curandera, inverting the conclusion of the first novel.

The final scene in *Heart of Aztlan* mirrors the civil unrest in US cities, then and now, as Clemente faces community demands to avenge his son’s assault. Before the father rises up as a community leader, the curandera
Adelita reminds him, “Our women have a long history of marching beside their men” (Anaya 1981, 206). Adelita is an aptly named healer, taking the moniker for the women who fought alongside of and assisted soldiers during the Mexican Revolution (1910–21). Heart of Aztlan localizes Adelita’s place and positions the son’s recovery in her faithful hands, not in her sacrificial death. The sense of collective unity is unmistakable, and Clemente gains the strength to organize an angry mob into a peaceful movement, taking up the “fire of love” rather than the torch as they march toward the railroad company to demand fair wages and better labor conditions (208). The reading public does not have to imagine mass protests, neither then nor now, and there is no resolution to the labor strike, only its escalation at the end as the community mobilizes to march. With sirens blaring in the background, the novel signals an ominous near-future that will most likely end in violence and arrests, as is indeed happening in this country now. Anaya leaves much to be imagined about what actually takes place in the streets of Barelas. But the novel leaves us with a certain hope about the Chicano home, knowing that women healers like Adelita are there to guide young men in matters of the heart and spirit so they may confront and overcome the ways of the (Anglo) world in the streets.

Anaya casts women in a complex of characters: Anglo and Chicana, the desirable and not-so-desirable love interests, the devoted mother and wife, the curandera. Still, the future of the community depends upon the son, who must lean on and learn from an older, wiser woman. Adelita stands in for all the young and old women in the novel: she is the center of the heart of Aztlan, offering hope in the face of impending doom. The power of community to overcome oppression is a longstanding theme in all of Anaya’s novels, which obey genre conventions but leave much unresolved at the end. By his third novel, Tortuga (1979), Anaya plots out an even more explicit Chicano coming-to-consciousness, and his quartet of Sonny Baca novels (1995, 1996, 1999, 2005) signals a crossover into mainstream mystery fiction. Lucha Corpi introduced her own Chicana mystery novels with Eulogy for a Brown Angel (1992), the first in a four-part series centered on the detective work of Gloria Damasco. Corpi’s first novel in the series preceded Anaya’s Zia Summer (1995), and Anaya’s first victim, Gloria Dominic, is a Malinche-like figure who shares a striking similarity to Corpi’s Chicana detective, in name if not in spirit. Anaya and Corpi both explore the mystery of Mexico’s fallen mother, but Corpi provides more detail about Mexico’s past while Anaya moves back in time to revisit New Mexico’s Spanish colonial forefathers. Through Sonny Baca, Anaya revises
and recasts Chicano myths to address the environmental injustices using the regional sights, sounds, and signs of New Mexico, with a Chicana body as the material evidence of historical crimes with real-life repercussions.

The Sonny Baca mystery novels are “postmodern” in their conflation of time and space, and they become increasingly speculative in the way they take to time travel (R. Sánchez 2016, 223). Rosaura Sánchez both praises and critiques the works for being heavily nostalgic, yet genuinely innovative portraits of history that recast the mystery novel, locating the protagonist in the high-gloss New Mexican settings familiar to (Anglo) tourists. As for the main female characters, they are “there to support and serve the needs—professional and personal—of Sonny” (229). If we look for deeper insight into the multidimensionality of Anaya’s female characters, we will be sorely disappointed. The Sonny Baca mystery novel has room for only one multidimensional character, Sonny Baca himself. In Zia Summer, the state symbol becomes a navel-gazing sign that forces us to objectify Gloria. The serial killer carves the New Mexican state symbol into Gloria’s navel, and the novel uses the Spanish word ombligo to describe her desecrated body (Anaya 1995, 29). The word emphasizes the female body’s reproductive power and underscores the sacrilege of two sacred symbols, one indigenous and one female. In Anaya’s hands, Gloria is both matter and mater, a maternal body of evidence and an allegory for what Joseph Masco (2006) in another context calls the “nuclear borderlands.” While the metaphor is provocative, it does little to provoke deeper thought about Chicana subjectivity.

Anaya’s deeper portrayal of a Chicana psyche comes in his ChupaCabra series for young adults, which also encodes metaphoric critiques of the Southwest through the regional sights, sounds, and signs of New Mexico. Curse of the Chupacabra (2006) introduces the folklore of the goat-sucking monster and a sleuth-like protagonist, Rosa Medina, a Chicana anthropologist who reads Lucha Corpi novels and is trying to get her dissertation published (sounds familiar). With Rosa as his Chicana avatar, Anaya interweaves the tripartite themes of drugs, education, and community building across the greater Southwest, with a supernatural monster caught up in the mix. Anaya dedicates the novel to the Chicano youth “from California to Texas” who fall victim to drugs and prison, and he calls on educators to “get the young back into the fold of their history and culture” (2006, n.p.). Rosa herself has overcome the educational deficit: with a PhD from the University of California, Santa Barbara, which had “the best Chicano Studies faculty in the country,” Rosa is hired at California.
State University, Los Angeles, where she splits her time between teaching on campus and working with at-risk youth at Self Help Graphics & Art in Los Angeles’s Eastside (3). But her life takes a detour when she and her graduate student assistant, José Bustos, head to Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, to investigate some mysterious goat killings and José ends up dead, the first human victim of the ChupaCabra.

With her education and her challenge to conventional female roles, Rosa appears as a threat to the Chicano community, not unlike the monster itself. She is caught between the promise of education and the violence of conquest. Like her Chicana literary counterpart, Gloria Damasco, Rosa carries the stain of colonization, and she herself becomes like the brain-draining monster as news of José’s death spreads quickly to the village people. The villagers “turned away when Rosa passed. They believed she was cursed by the monster from el lago, el ChupaCabra” (22). Toward the end, when Rosa discovers the caged monster in the basement of a cruise ship, “an instinctive, primitive energy coursed through her body. Something told her this is how her ancestors must have felt a million years ago when they encountered a dangerous predator in the jungle” (126). This passage underscores the 500 years of conquest that Rosa carries across international borders, imparting a lesson about the hidden legacy of Chicanaidad, a legacy so ugly it takes the inhuman form of a monster and lurks in the shadows of Rosa’s dreams.

Curse of the ChupaCabra reimagines the Chicana’s place within the Chicano extended family and signals a fleeting, formative moment of Chicana collective consciousness in the Chicano master’s literary oeuvre. In its concern with the dilemma of education, the novel resembles other Chicana/o coming-of-age stories, but this particular narrative is especially salient to a Chicana who follows in el maestro’s footsteps. In the end, Rosa watches the final act of a barrio theater production and thinks about her romance with Bobby, a Chicano cop in Los Angeles. Here the novel turns to the pedagogical and spiritual questions of Chicano culture:

Like two actors on the stage of life they had shared an adventure, and thus found each other. So different, and yet so alike. But that’s the way it was, Rosa had discovered. Every single moment changed your life, revealing truths you could never imagine. Yes, she and Bobby were like actors on a stage moving back and forth toward an evolving destiny.

Community theater at its finest, thought Rosa. There’s a lot of talent in the barrio, and it could blossom if only the resources were available. The unleashing of all that positive energy could counteract the cancer of illegal drugs. (164–65)
Anaya lays bare the drama and structure of his own novel, where the question of education frames the story and community theater takes the place of the classroom. Rosa must learn how to use her education to solve the mysteries of history, and the novel restores community order and resolves the gender conflict that looms large and turns on the uncertain power of a Chicana with a PhD. The novel ends with a cross-regional romance, as Bobby becomes a means to erase the threat Rosa poses to the Chicano community. In Anaya’s novel, the monster is tied to the international drug trade that claims the lives of young Brown people on the streets, but in a deeper way, the monster is in the hearts of all of us who look to uncover historical truths and ideological conflicts.

As in his first novel, Anaya borrows from Native American story-cycles and rituals, an approach that Native American students often critique when discussing Bless Me, Ultima. The appearance of these rituals and traditions is unnerving for some, especially given the Anglo appropriation of everything Indian and the mystical quality of Anaya’s New Mexico. As anthropologist Barbara Babcock once declared, “The Southwest is America’s orient,” a region where the tourist industry consumes Indigenous people and places (1990, 406). In Curse of the ChupaCabra the tourist industry is global in character, and Diné/Navajo traditions offer an antidote to the curse that follows Rosa home from Puerto Vallarta. The character Indio connects Rosa to Dinétah, the Navajo homeland, where his grandfather sets Rosa on a path toward solving the monstrous mystery. Here, Rosa the PhD takes a lesson from Indio, an at-risk Navajo youth whom she counsels at Self Help Graphics. Although Indio is something of a stock character type in cultural anthropology, Anaya restructures the anthropology trope through the space of Self Help Graphics and inverts the teacher-student dynamic. He reveals the importance of the student’s lessons to the teacher, just as Anaya took lessons from his own students and other people throughout his lifetime. Mr. Anaya taught numerous undergraduate students in the department where I now work, as well as celebrated writers such as my retired senior colleague, Diné/Navajo Nation poet laureate Luci Tapahonso (2013–15), and US poet laureate Joy Harjo (2019–22). In “Skradena and the Candles” from Blue Horses Rush In, Tapahonso tells an Acoma version of how luminarias originated in New Mexico and pays tribute to “renowned writer Rudolfo Anaya” (1997, 73).

Yet Anaya learned as much from his students as they learned from him, as Indio’s teaching to Rosa shows us. The lesson I gather here is not to glorify Anaya’s mastery, but to read his work as a critical regional corpus of Chicana/o consciousness that reveals
the colonial underbelly of our collective identity, as well as the creative rebirth of the spirit that *Heart of Aztlan* and other fictional works encourage. *Curse of the ChupaCabra* returns to the rural traditions and indigenous rituals that preoccupy the first novel. In this way, Anaya’s young adult novel shares a supernatural quality with his first Chicano classic, but *Curse of the ChupaCabra* also shores up the calculated drama of its narrative with a Chicana protagonist whose pedagogical lesson is rooted in community teatro. *Curse of the ChupaCabra* imparts a valuable lesson about drug abuse, but the deeper questions of education and colonization align it with other Chicana/o texts looking to solve community problems. Rather than begin with her death or kill her off at the end, Anaya has Rosa tap into her deeper animal instincts, which open a path to historical insight. The novel becomes like community theater, plotting out the drama of everyday life and resolving both internal and institutional tensions that threaten to divide the Chicano extended family. We come full circle with Anaya’s work, from *Heart of Aztlan*, where a woman’s place is in the home and the cops are on the other side of the (racial) picket line, to *Curse of the ChupaCabra*, where Rosa is rarely home and travels across international borders just as easily as the monster. Bobby crosses over to help Rosa solve the supernatural mystery and get the bad guys, while Rosa ends up with the good guy, a handsome brown son of Los Angeles with a gun. True (Chicano) romance.

**The Final Act: Anaya’s Living Chicana Theater**

Mr. Anaya’s novels plot out a trajectory for becoming Chicana that hits close to home. My own reading and teaching of his work has given depth to my experience at the University of New Mexico and more insight into the pedagogical lessons of his literary oeuvre. Thirty years after I first read Mr. Anaya’s work, I found myself sitting at his kitchen table, platicando about the Rudolfo and Patricia Anaya Lecture on the Literature of the Southwest, a series he launched from retirement in 2010. I began organizing the Anaya lecture series in 2013, the year we hosted Indigenous writer N. Scott Momaday, and the same year Carl Franklin released the film adaptation of *Bless Me, Ultima*. On October 18, 2018, we hosted Héctor Armienta, composer of the libretto to *Bless Me, Ultima*, an Opera Southwest production that premiered in February 2018 and played to five sold-out audiences at the National Hispanic Cultural Center (NHCC) in Albuquerque. That fall, the NHCC ran a series of community programs that brought renewed attention to the novel and hosted *La Ultima Exhibición,*
an exhibition featuring visual interpretations of Bless Me, Ultima, curated by Augustine Romero. I taught the novel in my intermediate Chicana/o cultural studies course, and many of my students signed up to read Bless Me, Ultima at NHCC’s community read-in on October 14. That evening, Christina Chávez, Carrie Lujan, Rigina Wright, and I read from the novel’s last pages. It was a moment of puro teatro Chicana. I owe that moment to the three Chicanas who showed up with their families in tow, and to Mr. Anaya, for inspiring new art forms and new forms of community.

Let me end this tribute to Mr. Anaya with his own words, which uncannily speak to his death and the philosophy of life he adopted over the years. In the summer of 2019, I postponed our annual plática when a spider bit me and I suffered a serious reaction. In one of his last emails to me, Anaya turned my unfortunate experience into a didactic one: “Getting bit [by] a spider is like being accepted into a clan, painful at first but full of new wisdoms and new perspectives, a new way of seeing the world. Thank Spider Woman. / Orale! Rudy / PS: ‘En el aire anda, en el aire mora, / en el aire teje, esta trabajadora.’ Qué es? La araña [‘In the air it glides, / in the air it hangs, / in the air it spins, / this working woman.’ What is it? The spider]” (September 23, 2019). Again, Spider Woman returns in his final email to me: “The spider that bit you was weaving a ‘dream-catcher’ when you disturbed it. The dream catcher was for you. A new way. I know the story but can’t tell it now” (October 8, 2019). We never met again.

Imagine Mr. Anaya weaving this untold story of mine, dream-catching his “Last Wish”:

When I am to my death
most driven,
Blame me not if I go
unshriven.
Dress me in gaudy suit &
light the fire,
I’m done with all that
tasted of desire. (Anaya 2015, 69)

Rest in peace, maestro Rudy.
Notes

1. I taught Anaya’s *Curse of the ChupaCabra* after our mutual friend, Teresa Márquez, noted its unique perspective, that of a Chicana academic. Teresa is a pioneer and foremother of Chicana/o studies, and I thank her for the guidance, wisdom, and insight she has given me over the years. La aprecio mucho.

2. Joy Harjo will deliver the tenth annual Anaya lecture on October 5, 2021, fulfilling Mr. Anaya’s last request. Harjo’s homecoming in 2021 will also serve as a tribute to Rudolfo Anaya’s spirit on the eve of his October 30, 1937, birthday and the celebration of All Saint’s Day (November 1), when the dead return to visit the living. RIP.

Works Cited


