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RUDOLFO A. ANAYA

A Critical Companion

Margarite Fernández Olmos

CRITICAL COMPANIONS TO POPULAR CONTEMPORARY WRITERS
Kathleen Gregory Klein, Series Editor

Greenwood Press
Westport, Connecticut • London

practices of a curandera are intertwined with religious beliefs and respect for nature. Disharmony and imbalance cause a disruption of health; healing is a return to oneness and harmony with nature.

These alternative healing values have endured for centuries and continue to provide contemporary answers to age-old questions. *Bless Me, Ultima* demonstrates that myth criticism and a culturally specific approach to a work of literature need not be mutually exclusive. Anaya's novel is historically relevant and magical, both ancient and contemporary.

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Heart of Aztlán (1976)

After the success of *Bless Me, Ultima,* the first-person recollection of a young Hispanic boy in the rural New Mexico of the mid-1940s, Rudolfo Anaya's second novel addresses the displacement of this same group of people from the *llanos* (plains) of New Mexico to the urban *barrios* (neighborhoods) of Albuquerque. The second novel of his New Mexico trilogy (see chapter 2 in this book), *Heart of Aztlán,* further develops a favored Anaya theme that connects the spiritual well-being of the Chicano community with its ties to the land and to myth—in this case the myth of the legendary Aztlán.

Critical response to *Heart of Aztlán* was less favorable than that to Anaya's first novel. The attempt to blend a sociopolitical theme with mystical elements was perceived as contrived and simplistic. Critics viewed the work as disjointed, unconvincing in its characterizations, less polished than *Bless Me, Ultima,* and lacking the depth and meticulous prose style of Anaya's earlier work. The novel's redeeming qualities were not overlooked, however: "its treatment of the urban experience and the problems inherent therein, as well as . . . its attempt to define the mythic dimension of the Chicano experience" (Lewis, "Review" 74). The novel is fittingly dedicated to the people of the barrio of Barelas, Anaya's own neighborhood as a young teenager in Albuquerque, and to all those who struggle for justice and dignity.

POINT OF VIEW AND LANGUAGE

Heart of Aztlán is narrated in the third person, a departure from Anaya's use of the first person in his previous novel. Unlike first-person narration, which is limited to the perspective of a central character, a third-person omniscient (all-knowing) narrator has unrestricted knowledge of events, thus broadening the scope of a work. Written in English, this novel is interspersed with words and phrases in standard Spanish and the language of the "pachucos,"* thereby characterizing the social and linguistic realities of the barrio culture depicted in the work. As in *Bless Me, Ultima,* Anaya's linguistic patterns take shape from the very beginning of the novel, which explains that the characters speak either in the Spanish language of their home and community or in the English of their educational environment: "they moved in and out of the reality which was the essence of each language" (2).

While most of the novel is narrated in standard English, scholar Roberto Cantú notes that on occasion the narrator undermines the distance usually afforded by third-person narration by adopting a pachuco "discourse" ("The Surname" 299). In the first chapter the words spoken by the pachucos are described as a "strange, mysterious argot" (10), unfamiliar to the rural Chávez family. With time, however, pachuco vocabulary begins to permeate the narrative. Cantú gives the example of one scene in which the young men from the barrio, the *vatos locos* (literally "crazy guys" or "crazy dudes"), get high on *mota* (marijuana) (41). The narrator gradually employs pachuco language as if from within—that is, as if identified with the characters themselves—without recourse to translation or explanation for the reader.

Although Spanish and pachuco words are not translated, this not does significantly hinder the reader's appreciation. On the contrary, it provides an authentic tone and flavor to the work and conveys a sense of community. Anaya is sensitive to the oral tradition and the everyday spoken idiom (it should be noted that Anaya does privilege Spanish-speaking readers with an "insider's" appreciation of certain words, usually in the form of profanities and common expressions). The author's

*"Pachuco" is a term that was originally applied in the 1940s to zoot-suited Chicano youths in large urban areas. It has become a more generalized term to describe Chicano "dudes" from the barrio, with their characteristic form of language, dress, and behavior.

use of Spanish stems from his desire for authenticity and his bilingual and multicultural experiences.

In some cases the inclusion of Spanish words conveys an even more profound significance. In the first chapter, for instance, the land that the Chávez family must leave behind is described as "sacred," repeated in Spanish and italicized: "*La sagrada tierra*" (4). The multiplicity of connotations of *tierra* in the Spanish language—property, the soil, the nation or motherland, and the planet—are far-ranging and reveal the complex and intimate relation of Hispanic cultures to the land (similar to that of other traditional peoples). For some, the fact that Anaya has written his novels in English to transmit these ideas means more than simply adding another contribution to the body of American letters: the author "validates [English] as a transmitter of Chicano lore. Anaya is, quite simply, giving the old myths a new home" (Taylor, "The Mythic Matrix" 203).

PLOT DEVELOPMENT

In the first chapter of *Heart of Aztlán* the reader confronts a group of people in transition. The Chávez family—Clemente; his wife, Adelita; and four of their five children, Jason, Benjie, Juanita, and Ana—are leaving the small town of Guadalupe, New Mexico, for Albuquerque. Away from the deserted pueblos and llanos, past the mountains, they are headed for "a new time in a new place" (2). The reaction of each member to the move varies. The work opens with young Benjie's perspective, an excited anticipation of adventure in the big city, away from the small-town monotony of Guadalupe. His older brother Jason is more thoughtful, aware of the disturbances the move will produce in his father, Clemente, who was forced to sell the land settled by his ancestors in order to pay his debts. The move produces a pain in Clemente compared to having "the roots of his soul pulled away" (3).

The first chapter situates the Chávez family within a wider sociohistorical context. The Chávezes and their neighbors are part of a widespread internal migration from the rural areas of New Mexico to the urban centers of the state and as far away as California. All vow to return home one day but are rarely able to do so. Clemente recalls the process of losing the land as an event that began much earlier with the arrival of the *tejano* (Texans) and the new laws imposed by the Anglo settlers. From their origins on the plains, then on to a small town, and now to

the city, the Chávez family searches for a better life with more opportunities for their children. They will carry with them their memories of the past and a coffee tin that Adelita fills with earth to remain in touch with their origins.

The family's destination is the Chicano barrio of Barelas, a crowded, dusty section of Albuquerque. Their married older son, Roberto, already lives in Barelas and has prepared for their arrival. In Barelas they encounter old friends and neighbors from home and make new acquaintances, among them Crispín, an old blind poet/seer whose blue guitar plays "magical" music (14). References to magic of a different sort emerge as well. A neighbor warns of an old witchlike woman with a *piedra mala* (evil stone) that can make predictions and "sing" the secrets of the heart.

Allusions are also made to a character from Anaya's first novel, in which Jason was a minor character. In *Bless Me, Ultima,* Jason had an Indian friend who revealed mystical secrets to him, including that of the magical golden carp of the river (see chapter 3). Jason's old Indian friend, who had related the power of magic stones to him back in Guadalupe, is mentioned in *Heart of Aztlán* as having been a friend of Crispín. His prior mystical experiences in Guadalupe will follow Jason to Barelas, where they will continue in his relationship with Crispín; the magic stone will play an important role in his family's life later in the story.

The family's first day in Albuquerque ends on an ominous note. The youngest son, Benjie, has already been introduced to gang life and drug use; and a police siren, recalling the wailing sound of the legendary La Llorona, the fearful destroyer of children, cries through the barrio as it searches for young lawbreakers, mixing with the roaring sound of the railroad yard, a constant rumbling of trains that "thrashed about like snakes in a pit" demanding service (18). Clemente will be among the workers who provide that service in a workplace described as a hellish labyrinth; the black steel water tank inscribed with the railroad name of Santa Fe (Holy Faith) looms over the barrio, surrounded by serpentine trains that writhe around and, when coupled, give "unnatural birth to chains of steel" among thunderous blasts of steam, spewing soot on the workers, houses, and trees nearby (22). Jason hears a worker refer to it as the "devil's place" when he delivers his father's lunch to him at work.

On Clemente's first day on the job Jason witnesses a terrible accident that claims a worker's life in a scene compared to an ancient blood sacrifice to the gods (23). Responsibility for the frequent workplace accidents is placed on uncaring, exploitative bosses and on a corrupt union that

defends the company's interests over those of the workers. Unable to accept such sudden and violent death, Jason searches for Crispín, recalling an Indian belief in the power of song to "touch the stream of life and death" (26). Crispín helps the young man face his shocked grief and narrates the origins of his blue guitar, accompanied in the novel with an italicized mythic version of the same tale. The origins of the land of Aztlán are combined with Crispín's mission to sing the songs of past and future, joining his songs with those of others.

Clemente's authority as head of the family begins to erode as a result of the move to the city and as his children gain greater independence from their father. His two daughters defy him openly, demanding a freedom that they believe should accompany their new economic self-sufficiency, and Benjie becomes increasingly more involved with illegal drug and gang activities. Adelita has adapted more easily to the changes of city life, seemingly more flexible and unafraid than her husband; Clemente begins to resent her and drinks to soothe his hurt pride. The stresses sharpen during a wedding party at which Jason confronts two gang members, Frankie and Flaco, who threaten Benjie. Although Jason's status in the neighborhood increases due to his valorous defense of his brother, Clemente reacts violently to Benjie's gang activities, beating his son as never before in an attempt to recapture his eroded parental authority. Even as he does so, however, he realizes his error: "a cleavage had come between father and son. He cursed the city and blamed himself for even having come to it" (43).

Jason has now formed his own group of friends, a gang of young men that includes "crazy Willie," who, despite his nickname and his strange family background, is among the more thoughtful members of the group. Their conversations revolve mostly around girls, usually from a sexist perspective, and their summer experiences will include a visit to the local brothel, the "Golondrinas," and a party at Cindy Johnson's, a gabachita, or rich white girl, from the "County Club district" of the city who is infatuated with Jason. Whereas in Chapter Three a Hispanic wedding celebration is described with the traditional music and customs, in Chapter Five Cindy's party reflects a parallel Anglo culture that exists outside the barrio in Anglo society. Cindy teaches Jason bebop dance steps to the music of Bill Haley and Little Richard as she represents her world of privilege and wealth. Despite Cindy's tempting advances, Jason is attracted to Cristina Sánchez, the daughter of the man whose death he had witnessed in the railroad yard. She has attended Cindy's party with Sapo, a violent young man who leads a rival gang and has vowed to

confront Jason. A later meeting with Jason will only frustrate Sapo's plans, however. Jason deftly manages to escape harm to himself and his friends by kicking a gun out of Sapo's hand and fleeing from his enraged aggressor.

On the same day, Jason visits Willie's home and his eccentric family, a reclusive group that includes Rufus, his junk-collecting father, and an abnormal brother, Henry, who remains separated from the rest of the family and chained to a tree to avoid being institutionalized. Feared and shunned by their neighbors, Willie's family members have retreated into themselves, causing Jason to reflect on his own father's loneliness, separated from his roots and his people.

Clemente's family problems continue throughout the fall as his younger daughter, Ana, decides to drop out of high school. Both daughters feel trapped in a hopeless situation in which the only way out appears to be dead-end jobs. Ana is attracted to the pachuco lifestyle and identifies with their open, defiant view of the world, even tattooing a blue ink dot on her forehead. However, her older sister, Juanita, disagrees that the pachucos are completely free from rules, observing that their sexist attitudes toward women are simply an alternative version of oppressive ideas (70).

The person least able to adapt to Barelas is Clemente. His increased drinking has estranged him further from his family, and he now unjustly blames his wife for usurping his dominant place in the home, permitting the children to become more independent. Frustrated in his family life, Clemente has also lost his economic security since he and some other workers have been precluded from working in the railroad yards by the corrupt union leader, Kirk. The men had attended an unauthorized workers' meeting to elect their own union president and have therefore been blacklisted; jobs are closed to them throughout the city. Through all their problems Adelita remains loyal to her husband, recalling their youth in Guadalupe, where her husband proudly walked his lands. Separated from his circle of support, she describes him as "a man lost in a foreign land" (78).

Clemente's and his coworkers' employment problems are worsened by the corrupt union representation of Kirk, who has illegally ratified a new contract after fixing the workers' votes. Lalo, a radical dissident union leader, organizes an unsuccessful wildcat, or unofficial, strike. The striking workers are quickly replaced by other men desperate for any work, regardless of the poor wages and conditions. Unemployed and dejected, the former workers strive desperately for solutions. All agree

that a legitimate leader must be found to organize their efforts for justice, but Lalo is not to their liking. He preaches armed revolution for a radical change in the social system, but he lacks the workers' trust. The meeting ends with Crispín's songs, the *corridos* (ballads) of past revolutions and ancient heroes. His songs remind them of the "mythical land of Aztlán" (83), the legendary place of their Aztec origins in the U.S. Southwest, and of the need for a renewed leadership. Fascinated by Crispín's story, Clemente still cannot make a connection between the myth and his own reality. Some of the men had looked in his direction at the mention of a new leader, but Clemente is not prepared for the position yet; he must first search for something to relieve his personal inner anxieties.

His thoughts turn to the old woman and the strange power of the evil stone as a possible solution. Clemente searches for her in the darkness, wandering in circles near the river. Frightened and lost, he comes upon the bizarre figure of a naked man dancing and praying to the moon (Willie's brother, Henry). He finally meets up with the old woman and enters her house, a foul ominous hut filled with herbs and rotted animals. The "ancient and divining stone" (88) beckons, but Clemente is not prepared to meet its conditions: he must sell his soul for its power. An attempt to grab the rock gives him a shock and burns his hands. Clemente has not yet reached the point where he can accept the power of the stone.

In Chapter Nine two rival youth factions, the Hispanic pachucos and the young Anglo cowboys, will fight each other at the state fair. Even their girlfriends join in. Winter is fast approaching, and Rita, Clemente's daughter-in-law, has given birth to a baby boy. The traditional baptism is held in the church, but the fiesta that follows is given equal importance as it represents the baby's entrance into the love of the community (100). Admiring glances toward the baby are considered a threat; they can cast the "evil eye," a long-held superstition. The men discuss the boy's future, believing he will follow in his father's footsteps in the railroad yard.

Roberto wants more for his son, however. He dreams of a formal education for the baby, trusting that in that manner he will return one day to the barrio to improve conditions there. Others disagree. They have seen those who have become alienated from their people by an education and fear it can destroy their way of life. Clemente proposes that perhaps his grandson will become the leader for whom they are searching. Crispín is asked if indeed the Chávez baby is the one who will lead his people. Touching Clemente's shoulder, Crispín whispers an ambiguous reply: "It is true, this Chávez will lead" (102). Clemente is shaken by the

possible meaning of the old man's words—which Chávez is he referring to?—while the men continue to reflect on the past: the loss of the old traditions and their communal lands, their dispersal to the slums of the city. In the evening, after all have left, the baby falls ill. His sickness is in fact caused by the evil eye, cast inadvertently by the character Dorotea, who insists on curing the child herself in the traditional manner. She does so, using "the remedies of faith" (105).

Chapter Eleven opens with a reflection on life, death, and "deer moons" in late autumn. Jason and his friend Chelo remark on the size of the enormous autumnal moon when they suddenly notice that Henry has freed himself from his chains and is headed for the irrigation canal, leaping for joy at the moon. Henry is reaching out dangerously at the moon's reflection in the water when the current drags him under. Chelo prevents Jason from attempting to save Henry, knowing that Henry's strength would cause them both to drown.

Henry's drowning is followed in Chapter Twelve by an introductory italicized mythic passage in which his death is compared to a mystical sacrifice: "*South of Aztlán the golden deer drank his fill and tasted the sweet fragrance of the drowned man's blood. That evening he bedded down with the turtle's sisters and streaked their virgin robes with virgin blood*" (112). Henry's body is discovered by a fisherman in the river. The coroner tries to prevent Rufus from claiming his son's sparse remains, and the priest refuses to grant him a traditional *velorio* (wake), but Rufus stubbornly carries the heavy casket home on his back. News of the tragedy spreads, and slowly Rufus's neighbors, who had formerly shunned him, follow him in a sad procession through the streets of the barrio. They help prepare the house for the traditional gathering with gifts of food and drink, and the old man Lazaro arrives to recite the prayers. According to the narrator, the velorio celebrates life's brevity and reaffirms shared humanity (118).

With half of the men out of work, the winter season is harsh in the Barelas barrio. Some neighbors return to their villages, but most remain in the city, where those who still have jobs suffer in the dangerous railroad shops. Clemente's drinking and despair have led him to hit bottom; he trips and falls into a gutter, where he welcomes the thought of death. Called to Clemente's side by an inner voice, Crispín struggles to carry Clemente to safety. He urges Clemente to seek his life's purpose in the "heart of Aztlán" (122). He tells Clemente the legendary story of Aztlán and speaks of the magical "singing rocks" and their secrets. Clemente's journey will take him back to the old woman and the piedra mala. With the help of the stone's magic and with Crispín's guidance, Clemente

voyages to a land of ancient gods, sacred lakes, deserts, and mountains, to a river of suffering people, and finally to the "dark womb-heart of the earth," where he is empowered by his vision to cry out, "I AM AZTLÁN!" (131), feeling himself one with the masses that surround him, transformed by his mystical experience.

When Clemente returns to the barrio, ill and speaking of having been "touched by the heart of the earth," people believe him to be mad. His wife and children are also at pains to understand him. Clemente resolves to find a leader to help his people and seeks the advice of the Catholic priest, Father Cayo. Although the priest had not supported the workers in the past, Clemente hopes to convince him to attend the workers' meeting and help end the injustices. Father Cayo consents to meet with Clemente, but he does not respond in the manner Clemente had anticipated. The priest first admonishes Clemente fiercely for having sought the old woman's magical powers and then adamantly refuses to speak out against the abuses of the railroad bosses. The Church must care for souls, he explains, and not engage in political struggles. It is a part of the status quo, the social hierarchy that is comprised by "the government, the banks, the military," and each of these elements must support the others to remain in power (143).

At the workers' meeting Lalo encourages the men to fight abuse with armed struggle, but they are wary of the dangerous consequences. Clemente calls for unity based on their mutual bonds, "el alma de la raza," the soul of the people. Unsure of his own words, Clemente calls for a "rekindling" of their spirits, but his message is misconstrued. The men take to the streets with torches against the railroad; they set fire to an old shack. The police respond, killing several of the men. Clemente's next move is to approach a successful Chicano grocery store owner, Mannie Garcia, referred to as "el Super," in hopes that he can be persuaded to lead the people. El Super is not interested, however; he disdains his own people, and no money can be made in what Clemente offers. Envy, he claims, will eventually destroy any leader who rises to the top, and he wants no part of it.

In Chapter Sixteen Jason and his young friends get together and analyze, in their own words, the situation in the barrio from their perspective. The same message of the lack of support by the Church and the business community, as well as the need for Chicano unity reflected in the previous chapter, is repeated in the discussions of the younger characters, with an additional antiwar sentiment expressed by Jessie Martínez, a Korean War veteran they encounter in Conio's café. Suffering

from post-traumatic symptoms, Jessie had been considered a war hero upon his return to Barelas, but he was demoralized by his war experience. Jason's friends begin to think of their own futures of marriage and settling down. The reader also learns that a rumor has spread in the barrio that Cindy is pregnant and Jason is the father, a rumor he denies. Jealous of Jason's relationship with Cristina, Cindy has vengefully invented the story.

In the following chapter Willie informs the gang of an attempt by the business community, with el Super and Father Cayo as its spokespeople, to bribe Clemente. Fearing his growing influence in uniting the people, they offer Clemente money and threaten to have him arrested if he will not accept their terms. Clemente angrily refuses, magically setting their money to flames with his touch. As a result of this encounter, Clemente's influence among the people grows even greater.

It is the Christmas season, and Jason and his friends head for the church where the girls are assisting in the decorations. Jason goes there to be with Cristina, but el Super's wife, a meddling gossip referred to as "la Lengua" (the tongue), spreads the word that Jason is the father of Cindy's child. Cristina's mother and the priest unfairly denounce Jason, who is forbidden to see the girl. Cristina later runs into Sapo, who reveals the truth regarding Cindy's baby: Benjie, Jason's brother, is actually the father. Jason sees Cristina and Sapo at a dance, and a fight breaks out. Sapo grabs Cristina and takes off, first shooting Frankie, who is saved from death by Crispín's magical music, and then vowing to kill Benjie, who he forces at gunpoint to climb the steel water tank at the railroad yard. Jason attempts to stop Sapo from shooting his brother, but Sapo fires nonetheless, shattering Benjie's left hand before he falls to the ground. Benjie is left alive but paralyzed.

The final chapter opens with an italicized passage in which a golden deer stands still and then leaps to the north toward his people; the passage is followed by a parallel paragraph of narrative describing a deer in the pink forests seeking protection while the new moon smiles in a colorless, threatening sky. The people of the barrio are now aware of the tragic events that have affected Clemente's family, and one of them, Manuel, relates Clemente's reaction to his son's misfortune. Clemente has vented his rage on the railroad water tank, slamming it repeatedly with a sledgehammer and his fists, going into shock as a result.

Slowly his story spreads throughout the barrio, and the people begin to gather in support at his home. Strengthened by their solidarity, Clemente calls Crispín to his side and asks him to play a drumming sound

on his guitar as he addresses the people. Clemente raises a torch and speaks of the true fire that will defeat their exploiters, "the fire of love that burns in each man and woman and child; it is the fire of the soul of our people which must serve us now!" (208). The novel concludes with Clemente leading an emboldened procession singing revolutionary songs and fearlessly shouting, "¡Adelante!" (Forward!) (208–209).

NARRATIVE STRATEGIES

As in *Bless Me, Ultima*, Anaya utilizes italics to distinguish the differing levels of time and space in the narrative. Whereas italics were used in his first novel primarily to describe the protagonist's dreams, the numerous italicized segments of *Heart of Aztlán*, which vary in tone and rhythm from the rest of the narration, link the story to an alternative, spiritual reality. The ongoing actions of the plot are thus tied to an enduring, mythical past. When Adelita fills a coffee can with earth from her old home to remind the family of the land they are leaving, for example, the italicized passage that follows underscores an ageless indigenous myth: centuries earlier, we are told, an Indian woman performed the same ritual as the people "*wandered across the new land to complete their destiny*" (7). These passages provide a mythical-symbolic dimension that amplifies and enriches the focus and emotional impact of the novel.

As the second novel of a trilogy, the expected references to an earlier work are present in *Heart of Aztlán*. Antonio Márez from *Bless Me, Ultima*, referred to as Anthony in *Heart of Aztlán*, is mentioned as Jason's young friend; and "the old woman who could fly" is a reference to Ultima (14). The town of Guadalupe and Jason's Indian friend are among the additional setting and character references that link the two books.

Mythical motifs (reiterated themes or patterns) in *Bless Me, Ultima* are also repeated in *Heart of Aztlán*, most notably, the legendary wailing woman figure of La Llorona, who evolves from a terrifying female force of destruction in *Bless Me, Ultima* to a more contemporary destroyer of Chicano males. In *Heart of Aztlán*, La Llorona takes the form of the piercing whistle of the railroad yards and the sound of police sirens. But *Heart of Aztlán* includes literary references from beyond the Anaya repertoire as well. An admirer of the poet Wallace Stevens, Rudolfo Anaya fashioned the character of Crispín from Stevens's "The Man with the Blue Guitar," itself an allusion to a painting by Pablo Picasso. The name Cris-

pín is also that of a Stevens character from another of his poems, "The Comedian as the Letter C."

Heart of Aztlán presents part of the first year of a family's new life in a new city. The novel begins with the family's move from a rural home to an urban barrio in the summer season. Their problems increase in the "dying" season of autumn, only to culminate during the stresses of winter (Clemente's personal crisis, Jason's romantic relationship, the workers' joblessness), a season of darkness when the illumination of the sun is at its weakest. Clemente's spiritual journey to a mountain in the north corresponds to the Native-American myth of man's beginnings; the seasonal division of the novel—which has among its themes the lack of spiritual leadership in the Chicano community—suggests the Hopi ceremonial year, which is void of spiritual beings (leaders) from August to January (Gerdes, "Cultural Values in Three Novels of New Mexico" 244).

THEMES

Heart of Aztlán is a story of the changes that the displacement from a rural to an urban life have brought about in the life of a Chicano family. An explicitly political novel, the work nevertheless shares on another level the mythological themes that characterize most of Rudolfo Anaya's writing (see chapter 2 herein). It reconciles a people's legends and myths with their daily lives. Some critics consider the novel's blending of legend and myth with social critique an important contribution to the tradition of Chicano novels; negative criticism of the work stems precisely from the challenges of combining these two approaches in a plausible manner. Some have found the novel to be simplistic and didactic, lacking the harmonious cohesion of *Bless Me, Ultima,* in which there is more organic unity between myth and reality, mystical message and plot development. Among the novel's messages or themes are the following.

Displacement and Disintegration

The need to adapt to a hostile urban environment effects a change on each individual member of the Chávez family in various and diverse ways (see the "Characterization" section below), but, in general, the move to Barelas has consequences that are profoundly experienced by all: the need to forge new urban identities, the fragmentation and disruption of family life, moral disintegration, the loss of paternal authority, the negative influence and brutality of drugs and gang culture, the lack of employment and educational opportunities, social neglect, abuse and discrimination, the erosion of traditional values. Their original reasons for moving were based on larger economic factors beyond their control, and the problems they must face as a result are not entirely of their own making. Although presented from the point of view of an individual family, the novel is clearly understood to reflect a larger historical, collective process affecting an entire ethnic group in a particular place and time.

Social Exploitation

From the first chapter of the novel it is clear that a central focus of the work is the struggle for workers' rights. The Chávez family will confront the death and abuse of workers from the very beginning, and, indeed, Clemente's struggle will be to find a means to inspire his neighbors to liberate themselves from these conditions. The barrio of Barelas is impotent, however, paralyzed by the oppression of its employers and the corrupt unions that misrepresent the people. The towering steel water tank that overlooks the railroad yard ironically proclaims a new "Holy Faith," the technology of modern U.S. society that looms ominously over the barrio reminding its inhabitants of their lack of power and control. Other culprits are Mannie, "el Super," who has learned how to benefit from the capitalist system while he egotistically ignores the plight of his own Chicano people, and Father Cayo, who dismisses the everyday needs and suffering of his parishioners, claiming that his role as a priest is purely spiritual as he sides with their abusers.

The mainstream society of the United States does not escape criticism, however; Barelas has been the victim of its neglect as well. The problems of Chicanos and Hispanic peoples are not limited to a single barrio. The novel's criticism of social discrimination and the lack of educational and employment opportunities, as well as the condemnation of the traumatic effects of war on young poor men who have fought for liberties abroad that they do not enjoy at home, among other issues, crosses geographic boundaries.

The solutions to some of the issues described above are implicit: more educational opportunities for Chicanos, better worker representation, a church more attuned to social injustice, and so forth. Yet these sociopo-

litical problems require changes that, according to the novel, are not simply political or ideological. Change also requires spiritual growth on a personal and a communal level for social struggles to succeed. One example is the problem of corrupt union representation. The more radical, violent proposals represented by Lalo are rejected as futile responses to the technological power and control of the capitalist oppressors. *Heart of Aztlán* proposes another solution, in keeping with Anaya's vision of the power of myth and culture. To better understand Anaya's mythical message, one must first become familiar with the myth of Aztlán from which the title of the work and its ideas are derived.

The Myth of Aztlán

As noted in chapter 2 of this book, the era of the 1960s was one of heightened analysis and self-awareness within U.S. ethnic and racial minority groups. As the Chicano people demanded social justice for their communities, they also demanded their rights to reclaim lost cultural identities and affirm the validity of their roots in U.S. society. In many cases this task meant the articulation of values that were in contrast and opposition to Anglo culture. Part of the articulation of countervalues extended to the construction of countermyths, such as the promotion of the mythological Aztlán, the ancestral home of the Aztecs, or *mexicas*, in the U.S. Southwest (a geographic area approximately stretching from present-day Texas, Colorado, Utah, and California to the Rio Grande). Aztlán was considered not only a territorial challenge but also a symbol of Chicano cultural origins, unity, and self-determination. The presence of the Chicano ancestors in the area preceding that of the Anglo Americans gave the former a moral right to these lands.

Significantly for our understanding of *Heart of Aztlán*, the legend revives Native-American myths and symbols rooted in Aztec lore, considered a part of the collective Chicano history. According to this legend, seven tribes left their seven mountain caves in Aztlán because they were told in prophesy to migrate south, where they would discover a place in which they could establish a new civilization. That place was Tenochtitlán (present-day Mexico City), a spot they would recognize by a sign: an eagle perched on a nopal cactus with a snake in its claws.

Anaya interprets the legend as a hopeful lesson for his community, a lesson that involves tapping further into human potential, creating a world without limitations and man-made borders. "This is the legacy of Aztlán: it is a place where seven tribes of humankind came to a new awareness of their potential, a new sensitivity in their relationship to earth and cosmos. [They] took their destiny into their own hands, they were born into a new prophesy, and they moved to complete it. Can we do less?" ("Aztlán" 383).

Ancient Legends and Modern Solutions

How does a legend like the myth of Aztlán apply to contemporary issues? While such ideas have been utilized as a unifying device in political struggles, for Anaya myths can also serve a more profound, spiritual purpose: the healing of a community and a culture. Thus, though events in the novel may originate in ancient legends, Anaya adapts these to present-day circumstances: an italicized segment about ancient sacrificial rites follows the death of a Chicano worker in the railroad yard (25); the eagle and serpent of the Aztec culture are reinterpreted in Crispín's call for a leader who will rise like an eagle to conquer the "steel snakes" of the railroad (184). From where will such power emerge? From the heart of Aztlán, not an actual place (Clemente's magical pilgrimage will teach him that lesson), but the healing power of discovering the purpose of one's life, in spiritual union with one's people, whose social paralysis and collective suffering must be cured if their culture is to survive.

It should be noted that Anaya has not confined himself to Aztec myths in this novel for his reinterpretation of ancient legends. The Llorona legend of the Hispanic tradition is repeatedly found in one form or another in many of his works. In *Heart of Aztlán* her frightful cries, as noted earlier, become the piercing whistles at the railroad shops and the sirens of police cars. The golden deer mentioned frequently in its race across the sky combines the solar symbolism of Aztec myths with the totemic animal of Native-American Pueblo culture.

The shamanic motifs found in most Anaya novels are present here as well. Clemente's symbolic ascent to the mountain is arrived at through an encounter with a powerful object (the evil stone) in the hut of an old witch. Crispín is the shaman and guide who will assist Clemente in linking reality with myth, the problems of the barrio with the vision of Aztlán. Clemente's classical mythological journey or quest is not necessarily to the past, however, but to his own heart, where he will find his purpose and be reintegrated with the people he will lead.

CHARACTERIZATION

The challenges and changes confronting Clemente Chávez control most of the action in this novel. In Albuquerque Clemente will be tested as father and husband; indeed, his very identity will be called into question. The alienating environment of the city and the condition of unemployment will lead him to drink and degradation. He will lose respect and authority within his family and arrive at the brink of total ruin. From the beginning he is the family member least able to adjust to the new environment.

His dependence on the land and the rituals of the past fail to acknowledge the potential of his new life in the city. Lacking the resources to prevent his own decline, he will reach the ultimate point of despair and even embrace the possibility of death before his "rebirth," assisted by Crispín (122). Clemente will emerge nevertheless, albeit reluctantly, as a community leader. His quest is not for personal power but, rather, is the result of an intense process of heightened social consciousness and cultural identification. (Several critics believe that the character is suggestive of and may in fact be Anaya's homage to the well-known Chicano labor organizer César Chávez.)

For Heiner Bus the character of Clemente represents a universal ideal:

> In *Heart of Aztlán*, the defeated, once powerful individual is reconstructed in the context of an ethnic myth, with the assistance of the tribal bard [poet/singer], and the cooperation of the barrio people gradually acknowledging their common past, present, and future. . . . The Barelas concept of brotherhood and community is ethnic and regional, but it is also universal as an example of aspiration to social reorganization based on positive values and a meaningful reconciliation of past and present. ("Individual Versus Collective Identity" 126)

Others consider the character of Clemente unconvincing, moving through the novel with no direction until his moment of revelation. They question whether the reader can accept that all of Clemente's subsequent behavior is strictly based on his "vision" (Lewis, "Review" 76). For Cordelia Candelaria, all the characters of *Heart of Aztlán* are not realistically developed but are instead "*raza** literary types" ("Rudolfo A. Anaya" 43) with little pretense of depth.

*"Raza" is literally translated as "the race"; it is used by Chicanos to refer to their ethnic/cultural group.

Jason Chávez is another main character in the novel. Like Clemente, Jason is one of the more developed characters and exhibits similar qualities. Jason also respects the land and the ancient customs of his people. He is portrayed as a sensitive young man who is open to the teachings of his elders (his friendship with the Indian in *Bless Me, Ultima* is mentioned in *Heart of Aztlán*, and he is portrayed as seeking similar guidance from the poet/seer Crispín). Similar to Clemente, Jason has leadership potential, in this case with the youth, having organized a local gang. The two heroes are usually portrayed in separate chapters, only appearing simultaneously in Chapters One, Two, Three, and Nineteen. Also like his father, Jason tends toward reintegration and unity; he understands such unusual characters as those in Willie's family and attempts to arbitrate between them and the other gang members. Finally, like Clemente, Jason must experience his own rites of passage, from adolescence into manhood, from his breakup with Cristina to the temptations and the physical dangers in the challenging environment of the Barelas barrio.

Crispín is a familiar character within the Anaya repertoire: the spiritual guide or mentor. In *Heart of Aztlán* this favorite Anaya character is portrayed as a barrio poet, a blind seer who sings the history and reality of the people and gives guidance. He teaches Clemente the meaning of the concept of Aztlán; and after saving Clemente's physical life he assists in his rebirth into a new spiritual one. As in the case of similar Anaya characters in other novels, Crispín possesses magical healing powers: his guitar can play life-giving music (recall the scene in which Frankie cheats death with the sounds of Crispín's blue guitar [196]).

Other characters in the novel are less developed and represent barrio social types: the unfeeling priest, the greedy businessman, the radical dissident. Certain Chávez family members also fall into this category: Benjie is a young, foolhardy victim of the dark side of pachuco culture, embodied by his own paralysis at the end; Juanita and Ana also flounder in this culture, becoming unskilled workers in a society that offers them few alternatives. The somewhat more complex female character of Clemente's loyal wife, Adelita (her name recalls that of the anonymous "Adelitas," or camp followers, who devotedly followed the troops during the Mexican Revolution of 1910–1920), is a strong mother figure who takes risks, is open to change for the betterment of her family, and stands faithfully at Clemente's side during his worst moments. She represents stability even as she recognizes the need for and helps to effect change within the domestic sphere. At the novel's end she will emerge from the

domestic realm and join Clemente in the general social struggle for change, adapting once again as proves necessary.

ALTERNATIVE READING: A MARXIST VIEW OF *HEART OF AZTLÁN*

Although the German social philosopher Karl Marx (1818–1883) did not produce a systematic theory of art or literature, a body of criticism has emerged that is derived from the core of Marx's economic and political philosophies. Marxism holds a fundamental premise: that the history of society is a history of "class struggle," a battle between economic classes competing for power. In the capitalist economic system, the capitalist class—those who control the wealth, the financial institutions, and the means of producing the necessities of life—flourishes by extracting profits from the commodities produced by the working class. Economic demands shape the social relations among people; social inequality arises when those in control, who do little of the actual work, benefit from the labor of the workers who are usually inadequately compensated. As a result, the world that the workers themselves create does not belong to them but, rather, to those who exploit them. Marx condemned capitalist societies, believing that ultimately the working class would revolt against the inequalities and injustices of the system and seize control of the means of producing the wealth. He envisioned a classless society in the future, characterized by a more rational economic cooperation among its members, thus eliminating poverty and economic inequality.

Marxist literary criticism generally holds that literature is related to class and the economic conditions under which it was created; that truth is not eternal and unchanging, but institutionally created, a social practice like language itself; and that art is a commodity that is guided by these same social practices. This brand of criticism insists on a view of literature inseparable from other products of human activity or from history itself. For Marxist critics, art and literature reflect the inevitable class struggle of history and are the products of the cultures in which they originate.

A Marxist approach to *Heart of Aztlán*, then, focuses on the contradictions of an exploitative society. Anaya leaves no doubt as to who the exploiters are or their motive—economic gain. The historical forces that affect the characters' lives are the result of economic changes in society; the conflicts they confront are also largely based on material conditions

created by the capitalist exploitation of the working class. The Chávez family is forced to leave their llano land, like many other families, as a result of socioeconomic factors; the beginning of their loss began long ago when the Anglo invaders/settlers took over the area and changed the laws to favor their own economic expansion. Among the changes the new settlers brought with them was barbed wire, the fencing in or privatization of property that prevented traditional cattle ranching on open plains. Few of the Hispano families could accommodate these economic and legal changes, which were created to benefit the Anglos.

With meager opportunities for economic survival, families were suddenly converted from small landowners (many had lived on the land for generations, benefiting from the original Spanish land grants and communal lands held for centuries) into members of the urban working class. The growth of urban centers in the 1940s was a beacon of hope for these families, hopes that were quickly dashed by the conditions they encountered in the rural ghettos they were forced to inhabit: inferior housing, precarious working conditions, racial and ethnic discrimination, lack of educational opportunity for their children, drugs and gang violence. Separated from their extended family and village networks, many lacked the reliable safety nets they had established back home. *Heart of Aztlán* examines the particular forms of exploitation that affect the Chicano working class of the novel: the anonymous technological giants of the railroad industry reflected in the corrupt puppet union leader, Kirk, the Catholic Church as represented by Father Cayo, and the capitalist business class in the form of the character of Mannie Garcia.

The main source of income for the men of Barelas is employment in the Santa Fe railroad yards. That no care is taken to protect the workers from exposure to dangerous working conditions is made clear from the beginning when a worker dies due to cutbacks that leave crews shorthanded. Stories of men losing fingers and limbs are tied to company neglect and to the corrupt union leaders who defend the interests of the owners over those of the union members. Although the railroad owners are not specifically mentioned by name, and although the author occasionally presents the industry in a mythical manner (for example, comparing the trains to serpents), Anaya leaves little doubt that the workers are exploited for economic reasons, and the "evil" that the railroad yard represents is of a very human kind based on monetary greed.

Father Cayo is a cynical priest who represents the Church, not as a spiritual entity, but as a social institution of power that is a vital player in the maintenance of the status quo. It is an ideological institution, part

of the "superstructure" that, with the banks and the military, supports the dominant capitalist economic system. Father Cayo is clear on this point when he explicitly defines the Church's role to Clemente (142). According to Cayo, the Church ensures that the people will resign themselves to their poverty and abuse as a way of gaining eternal salvation. It is part of a hierarchy of power that maintains the social stability required by the capitalist system in order for it to survive and flourish; without the stability of the Church, the military, the financial institutions, and the moneyed classes, the entire system would collapse. Father Cayo clearly sees the role of the Church and its very survival as dependent on the continuation of things as they are, regardless of their negative effects on the Chicano working class.

The capitalist mentality at its worst is embodied in Mannie Garcia, who has learned how to manipulate the system to his best economic advantage, even as it destroys his faith in humanity. El Super has learned how to negotiate with the Anglo world and is not above some corruption of his own; *la mordida*, or the bribe, is a way of life he espouses. When asked to help his people, he adamantly refuses, spurning other Chicanos as "ungrateful scum" (153). Mannie is familiar with the intricacies of bank credit and profit, but he has lost his cultural identity, his soul. As Marx suggested, the focus on the attainment of money for its own sake does not necessarily make someone happy. It can drive a wedge between people, as demonstrated by el Super, who speaks of envy and distrust as natural outcomes of economic success; others will always envy those who succeed, he claims, and try to tear them down (154–155). He accuses Clemente of being a communist (154) and has alienated himself from his own community.

If art is indeed a symptom of social conditions, as Marxist critics hold, then *Heart of Aztlán* embodies the alienation and class conflicts that result from an exploitative system. The work exposes the corrosive effects of the Anglo capitalist system on Mexican Americans. Their disintegration is portrayed on an individual level—the poverty, drinking, and hopelessness of Clemente Chávez and his loss of authority and stability within the family—and on a societal level, as the workers are beaten down by their experiences, unable to defend their rights, paralyzed by powerful institutions and circumstances beyond their control. The initial step toward the utopian society envisioned by Karl Marx is not, however, the armed violence preached by the radical union leader Lalo; *Heart of Aztlán* advocates a change that starts from within, where the answers to the problems described must first be discovered.

5

Tortuga (1979)

A traumatic experience during Anaya's adolescent years inspired the third novel of his New Mexico trilogy. One day while swimming with friends in an irrigation canal, Anaya dove in, hit bottom, and fractured two vertebrae in his neck (see chapter 1 in this book). He was paralyzed instantly. Saved from death by his friends, Anaya then had to undergo the painful process of physical therapy and healing. The fear and anguish he faced as a result of this event, and the solutions he forged to heal his battered body and tortured psyche, found their way into *Tortuga*. There the teenaged protagonist must conquer fear and doubt as he attempts to understand and overcome the limitations of his condition.

Linked to *Bless Me, Ultima* and *Heart of Aztlán* in the repetition of certain motifs and the extensive use of myth, symbolism, and dreams, *Tortuga* continues Anaya's message of healing and hope through self-awareness and the power of love.

NARRATIVE STRATEGIES

As in *Bless Me, Ultima*, *Tortuga* is narrated in the first person; in other works of this type the reader's perspective is limited to the point of view of the narrating voice. In this particular work, however, that point of view has specific physical limitations. From the first paragraph we are