



Pentecost, Rose Anna. "Indigenous and Spanish Transculturation: Becoming Mexican American." *Plaza: Dialogues in Language and Literature* 5.1 (Winter 2014): 39-47. PDF.

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### **Indigenous and Spanish Transculturation: Becoming Mexican American**

Religion is an integral part of most Mexican-American narratives, not by way of a simple theme or motif, but as a means of cultural identification. The religious transculturation of the Spaniards and indigenous peoples of Mexico began with the conquistadors and colonization through a process in which a syncretic religion of indigenous worship and Catholicism emerged that continues into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Native people embraced the practices and symbols of the Catholic Church while incorporating many indigenous features. Myths, beliefs, practices and symbols fueling the current religious practices of the Mexican-American culture have been forged from practices of Mexico's indigenous and Spanish colonizers, creating a unique system of beliefs and worship. It is this cultural identity of the Mexican American that authors like Rudolfo Anaya, Tomás Rivera, and Reyna Grande attempted to capture in literature from just after the mid-1950s and into the present. Each author interweaves the lives of their protagonist and that of their families with religion, spiritualism, myth, and mysticism. The young protagonists I wish to discuss are attempting to understand their Mexican-Americanism through the historic culture of their families and community. Their religion becomes a popular religion "concerning not only the religious practices," but also the "cultural practices, symbols, and beliefs that occur outside the confines of religious institutions and orient the cultural and religious world of Chicanos," writes Alberto Pulido in "Chicano Religions through Chicano Literature: Reinscribing Chicano Religions as a Hermeneutics of Movement" (79). A syncretized religion, acknowledgement of the past, and shared cultural practices are necessary components establishing commonality among a colonized and displaced people to create an identity that is uniquely Mexican-American.

In the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, Hernán Cortéz travelled to what would be called New Spain and with him came the Franciscans to ensure that the colonized people would become Christian as well as obedient subjects. The Church was not only to Christianize the indigenous, but also to keep them loyal to the crown. The monks were first charged with the task of ridding the spiritual practice of idol worship; however, the people found ways to hold onto their sacred practices while incorporating those of the Catholic Church. The clergy ultimately realized the futility of their original goal and were forced to allow some aspects of indigenous worship to be incorporated into their religious practices.

Tonantzin, Earth Mother, became the equivalent of the Spanish Catholic's Virgin Mary. In *The Inordinate Eye: New World Baroque and Latin American Fiction*, Lois Zamora writes, "The early eighteenth-century chapel in Santa María Tonantzintla, in the state of Puebla, demonstrates the Church's tacit sanction of syncretic ideologies of visual knowing" (24). The indigenous required visual representation of the familiar along with the new. Although Tonantzin is not mentioned specifically in the literature I am covering, authors have chosen to

include a revered figure with many of the traits and beliefs figuring prominently in Mexican-American worship, one of the most enduring icons of Mexican worship, the Virgin of Guadalupe.<sup>1</sup> According to Zamora, “That this preferred Spanish Virgin should make an appearance in Mexico is not surprising, but that her image and identity should be so completely revised—as a dark virgin who appeared to an Indian, and whose image was almost certainly painted by a *tlacuilo*—is nothing short of astonishing” (43). She clarifies the significance of this event with a quote from Jacques Lafaye, a cultural and religious expert, “[T]he change of images was the first forward step of Mexican national consciousness . . .” (43-44). The Virgin of Guadalupe acquired meaning as culturally and spiritually unique to the indigenous people whose practices were being quickly abolished by the Franciscans. The *tilma* provided added meaning in that it embodied the spirit of the Virgin, another aspect of worship the Franciscans wished to eliminate. The Virgin figures significantly in Anaya’s *Bless Me, Ultima*, and Tomás Rivera’s ... *And the Earth Did Not Devour Him*.

In Rudolfo Anaya’s *Bless Me, Ultima*, the reader is first introduced to the Virgin in conjunction with a dream Antonio, the protagonist, has about Ultima’s owl. “La Virgen de Guadalupe was the patron saint of our town . . . . In my dream I saw Ultima’s owl lift la Virgen on her wide wings and fly her to heaven” (12). She immediately becomes connected with the spiritual mysticism of the owl that is said to carry Ultima’s spirit. Antonio’s reverence for Ultima becomes syncretized with his feelings for the Virgin merging the mystical and the religious. Tomás Rivera introduces the Virgin in a fervent prayer of a mother for her soldier son’s protection. “Jesus Christ, Holy God, Virgen de Guadalupe, bring him back alive, bring me back his heart,” notice that the mother addresses the indigenous along with the Christian deities which offers a further example of the melding of indigenous and Christian religious beliefs (90). In the eras represented by these novels, and that of Reyna Grande’s *The Distance Between Us*, “[r]eligion as popular religion concerns the religious and cultural practices, symbols, and beliefs that occur outside the confines of religious institutions and orient the cultural and religious world of the Chicanos” (Pulido 79). The mysticism of Ultima and her owl, the healing power and practices of Reyna Grande’s grandmother, myths like *la llorona*, prayers to the Virgin, and the recognition of a healing spiritual collectiveness for Rivera’s protagonist all serve as examples of popular religion as defined by Pulido. Refusal by the indigenous to become fully acculturated into the religious practices imposed by the Franciscans allowed them to retain those religious practices, symbols, and beliefs which were meaningful to their society. The melding of the religious, mythical and spiritual demonstrates the manner in which Mexican Americans have established a culturally unique system of beliefs, practices, and symbols.

The inclusion of the Virgin de Guadalupe as part of the Mexican-American novelists’ narrative often serves as a symbolic gateway to the pilgrimage. Pilgrimages associated with the Virgin become symbolic of the pilgrimages of discovery depicted by authors in Chicano literature. Alberto Pulido quotes Virgilio Elizondo’s explanation of the importance “A theological perspective on pilgrimage within the Chicano context suggests that Chicano history is understood as the narrative of a community that has embarked on a quest for orientation and meaning within its struggles for human dignity, equality, identity, survival, and happiness” (69). Although the young Mexican-American protagonists in Anaya’s *Bless Me, Ultima*, Rivera’s

<sup>1</sup>The historical narrative has the Virgin of Guadalupe appearing to an Indian, Juan Diego Cuatlatotzin on December 9, 1531 in Tepeyac. She speaks to him in Nahuatl (indigenous Mesoamerican language) asking for a church to be built. The Virgin imprinted her image on Juan Diego’s *tilma* (a typical Indian blanket) as proof for the Bishop that she had truly appeared to him. The beginnings of her requested church were erected in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century at the site where the Virgin appeared to Juan Diego. The Old Basilica of our Lady of Guadalupe, completed in 1709, held the original *tilma* (a typical Indian cloak) of Juan Diego until being moved to the New Basilica in the mid-1970s. The Basilica continues to be a sacred pilgrimage site to millions of visitors each year. The appearance of what would become the revered patron saint of Mexico, The Virgin of Guadalupe, was critical to the formation of a new collective religious experience.

...*And the Earth Did Not Devour Him*, and Reyna Grande's *The Distance Between Us* do not engage in traditional pilgrimage, each experiences a journey, a form of pilgrimage or discovery, that will lead them closer to self-identity as understood through a syncretic lens of past and present. They achieved higher plains of spiritual understanding, not under the guidance of a priest, elders, formalized practices, or corporate worship; instead, their experienced spirituality occurs through a sense of community and self that cannot be achieved in the traditions of their parents. These protagonists suffer devastating experiences that leave them unable to blindly rely on an all-powerful God. The prayers, rituals, and beliefs of the older generation seem ineffective against the tragedies endured by these individuals. Instead Antonio senses power in the mysticism of Ultima, Rivera's protagonist becomes self-reliant, and Reyna relies on the spirituality and mystical healing powers of her grandmother.

Formal religion and the Catholic clergy are portrayed fairly negatively in Anaya and Rivera's novels. Their protagonists are conflicted about whether Catholicism and God are the means by which they can achieve salvation. Rivera's protagonist feels abandoned by God when he watches his community suffer repeated abuses and death due to the awful conditions in which they live and work. His father and his younger brother suffer from sunstroke working long hours in the fields without sufficient water to drink. The protagonist tells his siblings, "If you start to black out, stop working...Just drink plenty of water every little while. It don't matter if the boss gets mad" (110). Ultimately, he turns away from God and decides his only recourse is self-reliance. As he is carrying his ill brother home, "He cursed God...He looked at his brother, he no longer looked sick...By daybreak his father was doing better" (112). The lack of retribution from God, the miraculous recoveries of his father and brother, and the earth's failure to swallow him seem to debunk the long-held fears instilled by his parents of a wrathful God demanding reverence under all circumstances. He reveals that he feels at peace and on the way to work the following morning, "for the first time he felt capable of doing and undoing anything that he pleased" (112).

On the other hand, Antonio seems more conflicted. He has witnessed death, the departure of his brothers, and the evil of Tenorio's daughters. In "Myth as the Cognitive Process of Popular Culture in Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*: The Dialectics of Knowledge," Enrique R. Lamadrid explains, "Antonio discovers the contradictions in Christianity and realizes that the scope of his mediations would include the 'pagan,' animistic forces implicit in the very synthesis that he will be a part of" (499). He has been exposed to the spirituality of Ultima, the mysticism of the golden carp, and the Mexican Catholicism of his mother. Antonio is plagued by unanswered questions, "If the golden carp was a god, who was the man on the cross? The Virgin? Was my mother praying to the wrong God?" (75). He, unlike Ultima, does not understand that a syncretic religion can embody multiple systems of practices, beliefs, and symbols. In "The Evolution of Chicano Literature," Raymund Paredes writes that ultimately, "Antonio discovers that Ultima's greatness derives from her accumulation of cultural knowledge, her understanding of her people's experience, their values and customs . . . Ultima retains an unshakeable sense of identity and purpose" (102). She is not simply Meso-American, Indian, Mexican, Catholic, Christian, or pagan. By incorporating history and culture into her sense of being, she achieves harmony and identity. According to Daniel Testa in his article, "Extensive/Intensive Dimensionality in Anaya's 'Bless Me, Ultima,'" "He [Anaya] has . . . succeeded in projecting into the collective Mexican-American experience an harmonious and coherent cultural base" (78). He does so through the character of Ultima. She refuses to be bound by definitions imposed on her by others. Anaya and Rivera's protagonists struggle to break free from the traditional religious bonds of the older generation because the religion of their parents seems inadequate and untrustworthy of their devotion. These protagonists' experiences, Antonio through Ultima and Rivera's protagonist in a newfound sense of self-

reliance, seem more effective to them than the apparent lack of response to their kneeling mothers' prayers to God.

Each boy attempts to follow the religious traditions of his parents by attending catechism, first confession, confirmation, and communion. Although Anaya and Rivera include details of their protagonists' first confession, neither has a positive experience. Rivera's nameless protagonist strives to determine an exact count of the number of sins he has committed, but "all I told him [the priest] was two-hundred and of all kinds" (116). Like Rivera's protagonist, Antonio attends his first confession in the course of the novel. Although he reverently completes his confession, he too has a traumatic experience prior to entering the church. His friends dress him as a priest and force him to hear confessions and dole out penances. He finds both his confession and first communion dissatisfying. He craves answers for all the evil he has witnessed but instead, he thinks "the voice within me did not answer" (211). Each boy is dissatisfied with what is supposed to be a spiritually-cleansing process and finds himself searching for spiritual revelation.

While Antonio finds himself increasingly drawn to a golden carp and the mysticism of Ultima, Rivera's protagonist curses God. In "A Silvery Night," the boy goes out into the darkness by himself to summon the devil. After calling out, he concludes there is no devil and by extension, "*there is nothing*" [author's emphasis] (106). His faith is further challenged by the suffering of his father and siblings in the fields, "Then his anger swelled up again and he vented it by cursing God" (111). Although he is initially afraid, he stays awake late that night thinking. "He felt at peace as never before" (111). He initially finds no outside source of spirituality while Antonio finds his spiritual connection through Ultima. When Antonio prepares to travel, it is not a priest who is asked to bless him and his family, but Ultima. "I felt Ultima's hand on my head and at the same time I felt a great force, like a whirlwind . . ." (51). Just as their ancestors, the boys must find spiritual fulfillment through other avenues. In Vernon Lattin's article, "The Quest for Mythic Vision in Contemporary Native American and Chicano Fiction," he writes, the protagonist in Rivera's story "rejects Christianity as an inadequate religion of fear and injustice and discovers . . . a sense of freedom in a more pagan, naturalistic view of existence" (626). Both boys experience a contentedness they have been unable to find within the confines of the Church.

Reyna Grande never attends catechism classes or experiences first communion; instead, she finds peace in mysticism and spirituality. She does not attend corporate worship, nor does she participate in the traditional rites of passage, but relies on the spiritual strength of her grandmother as her religious compass. Although she writes, "Without Abuelita Chinta to remind us to pray and to keep God in our hearts and minds, we lost our religion," she does not appear to struggle spiritually as have the protagonists of Anaya and Rivera (261). She, like Antonio, gains most of her spiritual experience from her grandmother's *curandera* practice and, although her exposure to her grandmother's beliefs and practices does not have the impact of Ultima on Antonio, she is affected by the powers and knowledge her grandmother exhibits and her devotion to her community: "Money wasn't the reason she tended to the sick of body and mind," remembers Grande (113). She is respected and provides her community with the compassionate treatment we do not see demonstrated by Catholic clergy in any of the novels. When Grande's mother returns home after an extended absence, she is inconsolable at the loss of her boyfriend. It is Abuelita Chinta who conducts the ceremony to restore the mother's spiritual peace. The *curanderas* are revered individuals in the more traditional Mexican-American communities. The protagonists' relationships with their *curanderas* exposes them to the compassion similarly demonstrated by the figure of the Virgin de Guadalupe. This compassion leads to a sense of peace that appears significant to the individual as a member of a community that strives for a

self-defined religious communal experience outside of a less than satisfying corporate experience.

These Mexican-American healers become compassionate spiritual figures to those communities whose shared cultural heritage provides relief not found in confession, the Act of Contrition, or the priests' blessings. Both Grande's grandmother and Ultima engage in practices grounded in the mystical, such as the use of an unbroken egg rolled over the body or an elixir that expels evil. Like Abuela Chinta, Ultima also engages in traditional Catholic rituals, but neither allows herself to be restricted by the Catholic doctrine. The *curanderas* "faith is never dictated by [religious] dogma," explains Theresa Kanoza in "The Golden Carp and Moby Dick: Rudolfo Anaya's Multi-Culturalism" (166). Both maintain altars in their homes and attend Catholic mass, but can also be found praying to the Virgin of Guadalupe and engaging in spiritual and mystical practices. Enrique Lamadrid explains, the *curanderas* serve "as a kind of repository for the wisdom and knowledge invested in Indo-Hispanic culture" and by extension, the connection of the people to their ancestry (497). They serve in a capacity in which priests, who were often of direct Spanish descent, cannot because they do not share a cultural heritage. Although Rivera's novel is devoid of healers, the narrative is not without an individual who attempts to fill the void of unfulfilling corporate practices.

In *...And the Earth Did Not Devour Him*, Rivera's protagonist serves as the common thread among the families whose stories he tells, creating a sense of communal experience even though the community is fragmented. He is disenchanted with the power and manipulation of the Church, the hypocrisy of the priests, and the lack of spiritual fulfillment. Unlike Reyna or Antonio, he finds himself adrift in a community that is victimized and betrayed by their spiritual guide. In a vignette, he begins, "Before people left for up north the priest would bless their cars and trucks at five dollars each" (135). In essence, these poverty-stricken individuals finance the priest's trip to Barcelona, Spain. This exploitation negates the power of the one person who might bring solace to the community. There are no healers or mystics in Rivera's novel, except perhaps, the young protagonist who becomes the repository for their stories, experiences, beliefs, fears, and practices. In the final story, "Under the House," he thoughtfully reviews all of the stories he knows and thinks, "I would like to see all of the people together. And then, if I had great big arms, I could embrace them all" (151). Although he and these families have suffered abuse and loss, he seems to think that if he can simply bring them together, he can provide relief from their suffering. Although he is powerless, his desire becomes representative of the healing function of the *curandero*.

In addition to the mysticism of the *curanderas*, Mexican-American communal spiritual heritage is built upon folklore and myth. The mythical character of *La llorona* (The Weeping Woman) appears in Anaya and Grande's narratives in a role similar to that of the boogie man or any other character invented to deter children from disobedience or bad behavior. Her depiction ranges from the ominous, to evil, or to the spectral, but always with intent that she represent a negative spiritual presence. *La llorona* is said to have first appeared in Mexico City in 1550. She is often depicted as crying or calling out for her children whom, in some versions, she drowns. Though the accounts of her actions vary, parents routinely use the legend to frighten their children into obedience. In *Bless Me, Ultima*, Antonio's brothers call her a "witch who cries along the river banks and seeks the blood of boys and men to drink" (23). In the Mexican culture, she is most often associated with water. In *The Distance Between Us*, Reyna's brother, Carlos, is frightened about crossing the bridge over the canal to walk his mother home. Abuelita Chinta does not refute the existence of the legendary figure, but tells him to "pray a Hail Mary and an Our Father" (87). Later, as Reyna and her sister sit near a bridge waiting for their brother, Reyna will not venture far from her sister for fear *la llorona* might get her.

Although *la llorona* is not mentioned by name in . . . *And the Earth Did Not Devour Him*, I wonder if she might be a more present threat in the form of someone like Doña Bone in “Hand In His Pocket.” “She’d grab me [the protagonist] from behind and laugh, and me, I’d jump, I was so scared” (99). Paredes explains, “A true synthesis of Spanish and Indian traditions, *la llorona* has become an important cultural symbol and the prototype of numerous female figures in Mexican and Chicano fiction” (72). The protagonist is mentally and emotionally scarred by his time with her. He is haunted by his part in the burial of a man the Doña and her husband murder and the fear that he will have to see them again. Even though *la llorona* is symbolically represented consistently as a source of evil across Mexican-American cultures, other symbols have dissimilar effects on the protagonists and their families.

Although land holds significant symbolic and spiritual meaning in the culture, that meaningfulness morphs post-conquest, colonization, subsequent wars, and displacement experienced by Mexican people. This meaningfulness affects the self-perception of the characters in each novel. Antonio’s mother and father look at the land from different perspectives, in *Bless Me, Ultima*, but both revere the earth. The earth is like a living being to be worshipped. For the Márez family, the land represents a sense of shared past with their ancestors. Antonio’s father is a former vaquero who relishes the stories of the llano on which he and his Márez family used to freely ride. His mother is part of the Luna farming community. Her brothers are said to “[speak] to the earth with their hands” (44). Ultima is a blend of both the communities and teaches Antonio to listen to and speak to the earth. Ultima’s belief in the sacredness of the earth dates back to the indigenous people who worshipped numerous deities representing all aspects of creation and nature. She believes that the earth and plants possess spirits. “Before I [Antonio] dug she made me speak to the plant and tell it why we pulled it from its home in the earth” (36). She is teaching Antonio to commune with nature. “Historic continuity and spiritual harmony are recurrent strains in much of Anaya’s work as he often laments man’s weakened connection to the earth, to the past, and to the myths that reveal the proper balance of the cosmos” (Kanoza 159). Through Antonio, Anaya ensures that the reverence for earth, history, and legends is passed into future generations. He allows Ultima to instill a desire in Antonio to become the receptacle of her knowledge.

In Rivera’s . . . *And the Earth Did Not Devour Him*, the land is a source of bondage for the protagonist. His impoverished migrant family along with his community work for the landowners harvesting crops. One of the sources of his outrage is the accepted abuse of the workers by their bosses. When the protagonist’s father becomes ill with sunstroke, he says to his mother in regards to his father’s labor, “All the time feeding the earth and the sun, only to one day, just like that, get struck down by the sun” (109). The title of the book, as well as that of one of the stories, “. . . And the Earth Did Not Devour Him,” reveals Rivera’s rancorous attitude against the land. He associates the horrors of his life with abandonment by God and by extension with the land. He ultimately curses God and later “look[s] down at the earth and kick[s] it hard” and says, “Not yet, you can’t swallow me up yet” (112). He detests the subjection of his parents and members of his community to the landowners for whom they work. Ralph Grajeda explains the behavior of the older generation in “Tomas Rivera’s “. . . y no se lo tragó la tierra”: Discovery and Appropriation of the Chicano Past,” “These are the parents who through years of deprivation and all the self-denying effects of colonialism have learned to stay in their place” (73). While they are resigned to their circumstances, the young protagonist rails against a God and the land that enslaves these people.

In *The Distance Between Us*, the land is a symbol of hope for Reyna Grande’s family. Her Abuelita Evila owns property, Reyna’s father travels to the United States with the dream of earning enough money to build a house on that property, and Reyna’s mother desperately attempts to stake a claim when the Mexican government releases land to the public. Reyna’s

mother tells the older sister, “Your father says a man must have his own house, his own land to pass down to his children” (12). Landownership becomes a mark of success. Although the father does not achieve his dream, he never becomes antagonistic against the land itself. By far, Anaya’s *Bless Me, Ultima* is the most grounded in the communal spirituality of nature through the reverence for the land, the belief in the power of Ultima’s owl, the mysticism of the golden carp, Ultima’s requirement that Antonio speak to the healing herbs and plants before digging them out of the ground, and his growing sense that the river was a presence capable of speaking to one willing to listen. Anaya continues this blending of Catholicism, mysticism, and spirituality in the depiction of Ultima’s owl.

Anaya’s inclusion of an owl as spirit and protector for Ultima is by far the most syncretic image in any of the Chicano narratives I have read. “As Cordelia Candelaria observes, Ultima’s spirit, embodied in the owl which always hovers near her, suggests at once Christ as dove and Quetzalcoatl as eagle” (Kanoza 165). The Christian and the pagan and the God of peace and the god of war are one in Ultima’s owl. The owl figures prominently in the battle between good and evil waged by Ultima with Antonio’s assistance. The owl watches over Antonio as well as Ultima. It is the owl who provides comfort after Antonio witnesses the death of Lupito. “Ultima’s spirit bathed me with its strong resolution,” Antonio tells the reader of the owl’s song (21). The owl provides a sustaining strength when Antonio is at his weakest. The owl also becomes war-like when Ultima appears to be in danger during a confrontation with Tenorio regarding the death of one of his daughters. “It [the owl] hurled itself on Tenorio, and the sharp talons gouged out one eye from the face of the evil man” (127). There is a duality to the owl just as there is with Ultima; both embody the peace and nurturing of the dove and the strength and fierceness of the eagle. After the owl and Ultima’s death, Antonio thinks, “Sometime in the future I would have to build my own dream out of those things that were so much a part of my childhood” (248). Antonio, as well as Reyna and Rivera’s protagonist, will forge an identity unique to their Mexican-American communities.

These bildungsroman narratives follow the struggles of the young people as they attempt to navigate between cultures and forge their new identities. They are at odds with their religion, their histories, and the homogenous American culture in which they are attempting to establish an identity. Thomas Vallejos praises both Rivera’s and Anaya’s narratives in “Ritual Process and the Family in the Chicano Novel,” saying “[T]hey attest to the richness and vitality of Chicano familial and communal values” (5). Regardless of the struggles and competing desires within these young people, they ultimately come to recognize and accept themselves as part of their culture. Antonio, Reyna, and Rivera’s protagonists are affected by struggles within their families. Antonio is torn between the restless wandering of the Márez men and the quiet contemplation of the Lunas. Reyna battles her feelings of inadequacy brought on by the repeated abandonment by both parents. Rivera’s protagonist is at odds with what he interprets as his parent’s resignation to their circumstances. By the end of each narrative, these individuals have come to terms with the cultural identity that ties them to their community.

Antonio comes to understand that he is a collection of people and histories. His father says, “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—” (236). Antonio is freed by the idea that he can retain his shared identity while creating one for himself. “*Bless Me, Ultima*, forges a ‘collective identity’ that reveals a search for a distinctive identification and a recognition of cultural differences,” writes Debra Black in her article, “Times of Conflict: *Bless Me, Ultima* As a Novel of Acculturation” (161). Antonio is Márez and Luna, pagan and Christian, dove and eagle, priest and *curandero*. Rivera’s protagonist comes to the idea of collectiveness when he hides underneath a house to think about the past year of his life. He mulls over the stories of his family and those in his community which he has previously shared in the narrative. Rivera

structures the last story as a stream of consciousness. The continuous flow of memories from one story to the next leads to an epiphany. He is part of something larger than his own experiences. His ability to think freely and make sense of all that he has seen and heard is his alone. He is set free by this revelation. Antonio and Rivera's protagonist "discover themselves only by rediscovering the traditions preserved by their families and communities" (Vallejos 14). Although the boys seem to achieve this understanding while they are still young, Reyna is in her mid-30s before she can reconcile who she is. Reyna battles the demons of abandonment, physical abuse, and alienation. She struggles to set herself free from the past, but comes to realize she is the product of all her father represents. "You made me who I am, I thought as he took his last breath" (322). She too is a collective representation of her community even though that community may be as small as a single family.

For the Mexican American, establishing a shared identity involves the ability to come to terms with and embrace oneself as a product of transculturation. The Mexican American achieves a unique identity by becoming a composite of their syncretic past. They are neither uniquely Spanish, nor uniquely indigenous. The Spanish culture was obviously dominant, but the indigenous did not simply become a product of acculturation. While they did embrace certain Spanish practices, they retained many aspects of their own culture or created modified representations of beliefs and practices resulting in a new identity. With the *mestizo*, came the necessity of further blending the cultures to establish a communal experience. Because this blending was a result of conquest and colonization, I don't believe it can appropriately be called an evolution. The process is not a peaceful transition, but an accelerated realignment necessitated by the collision of cultures with very different histories and beliefs. The Mexican American must first come to terms with the results of his or her ancestry before tackling the more immediate issue of determining who he or she is currently.

Religion figures prominently in defining this identity. While the Spanish sought to eliminate all elements of what they believed to be devil worship, the indigenous sought to retain those representations of deity which embodied the spirit. Because the indigenous "pagan" worship could not be eradicated, the Franciscans were forced to make allowances for the visual image as a part of religious worship. The dedication of a chapel to the Virgin of Guadalupe built on the site of the former temple for the goddess, Tonantzin, did not prevent the people from continuing to visit to worship the goddess. Although there is much scholarly debate, popular belief establishes the etymology of Guadalupe's name in the Nahuatl word, *coatlxopeuh*. Although I could not find a definitive translation, the most common seems to be crushing the serpent. Keep in mind that Quetzalcóatl always appeared in the form of a serpent. The multiple connections of the La Virgen de Guadalupe to the indigenous worship would explain the devotion of Mexicans to the Virgin. Their religion became a Mexican Catholicism. Chicano literature almost exclusively represents the religion of the Mexican-American people under the umbrella of Catholicism, but in the narratives I include here, the protagonists must search outside of the Church for spiritual fulfillment. This fulfillment is achieved in multiple ways, but always with an eye toward capturing what is meaningful to the individual. For Antonio, it is the mysticism, paganism, and commune with the earth he learns from Ultima that provides him with satisfaction. Grande finds peace when she reconciles her identity through her relationship with her father. Rivera's protagonist achieves understanding when he recognizes that he can make sense of all things by thinking and rethinking the meaningfulness of his experiences. Each achieves their identity by connecting with a communal past to pull forward those aspects of history and culture that define them as unique; neither wholly indigenous, nor wholly Spanish, but Mexican.

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