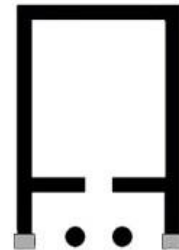


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The Afterlife in Chicano Literature: Children as Priests and Totemic Animals in *Bless Me, Ultima* and “The Moths”

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Introduction

The afterlife has been conceived of in countless ways throughout history. In the case of Mexico, traditions such as the Day of the Dead are still (ironically) alive nowadays, having survived the influence of colonisation. Childs and Altman claim that ‘it is apparent on close scrutiny that much “Catholicism” of contemporary Indian communities is pre-Hispanic in origin, especially the beliefs and customs related to death and the dead’.¹ In this community, the afterlife is presented as part of ordinary life, and Mexicans ‘accept it as an unavoidable phenomenon, which is an implicit consequence of life; and for that reason, the Mexican tries to ingratiate himself with death, be death’s friend and accept death with the naturalness that this phenomenon bears’.²

The perception the Mexican community has of the afterlife, as it happens with many other cultural and social features, is present in every artistic representation and has been transmitted to or adopted by other communities, like the Mexican-American and the Chicano. In Chicano literature, the afterlife is clearly related to the Mesoamerican cultures and ‘[t]he topological elements [...] are life and death, the archetypical universal antinomies, ultimately determined by life, within the space in-between being and nothingness’.³ Thus, the relevance of the Aztec’s cycle of life and death and the connection between the past, the present and the future, usually associated with it, are intermingled with the natural and supranatural worlds—so commonly used in Chicano novels of the seventies—and are usually interpreted as a way of seeking the connection of Chicanos to their roots in the years of the Civil Rights Movement.

For Ramón Saldívar, who follows poststructuralist and Derridean ideas, the texts of the first Chicano writers, such as Villareal’s *Pocho* (1959), Rivera’s *...y no se lo tragó la tierra* (1971), Acosta’s *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* (1972) and Arias’s *The Road to Tamazunchale* (1975), ‘deconstruct [...] essentialist notions [such] as [...] the absolute ontology of life and death. According to Saldívar, these narratives opt for producing their own meanings instead of accepting truths that various discourses claim to be universal’.⁴ Following this same idea, this paper will analyse Rudolfo Anaya’s

¹ Robert V. Childs and Patricia B. Altman, *Vive Tu Recuerdo: Living Traditions in the Mexican Days of the Dead* (Los Angeles, CA: Museum of Cultural History, University of California at Los Angeles, 1982), pp. 6-7.

² Miguel Limón Rojas, ‘The Concept of Death in Mexico’, speech delivered on 25 October, Museo Nacional de Artes e Industrias Populares, Instituto Nacional Indigenista. Excelsior (2 Nov. 1984).

³ Juan Bruce-Novoa, *Chicano Poetry: A Response to Chaos* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1982), pp. 4-6, the translation is mine. See César A. González-T, ‘La Novela Chicana: Arena de Creencias y Valores’, *Confluencia*, 8,2 (1993), 145-154 (p. 149).

⁴ Attila Kárai, ‘The Postmodern Use of Mythopoeia in the Narrative Temporality of Rudolfo Anaya’s “Bless Me, Ultima”’, *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*, 14, 2 (2008), 265-285 (pp.

novel *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972) and Helena María Viramontes's short story "The Moths" (1985), paying attention to how in both works the ontology of life and death is deconstructed. Death is presented as an essential part of the cycle: nothing dies but it remains in those who are brave enough to take what they have learnt and do something new with it.

Myths, beliefs, practices and symbols are said to have served as an inspiration for Chicano writers, who have 'interweave[d] the lives of their protagonist and that of their families with religion, spiritualism, myth, and mysticism'.⁵ For this reason, scholars have paid attention to the Native American, non-Christian and Christian elements in novels like *Bless*, analysing myth and culture.⁶ Moreover, Anaya himself recognises the influence of these in his work:

I [...] studied the history and mythology, because I have made a great deal of use of mythology in my work. I like myth, I like the oral tradition that comes from the people and works its way into the novels. So, I was reflecting on the importance of that indigenous experience, whatever it is about me that is Mexicano. I filled myself up with those experiences, bringing them back with me to New Mexico where I was writing my novels.⁷

Within this mystic atmosphere, what both works, *Bless* and "The Moths", have in common is the relation that exists between the narrator of the story: the boy Antonio in *Bless* and the girl—we do not know her name—in "The Moths", as well as an old woman representing the figure of the grandmother, the curandera "healer" Ultima in *Bless*—who acts as a mentor and grandmother to Antonio—and Abuelita, "grannie", in Viramontes's story. The fact that these relationships are much deeper than the reader would expect is significant; these women do not only look after the children, teach them and connect them to the natural world that surrounds them but, more importantly, help them through the more important steps in their lives.

Van Gennep's, and later on Turner's, interpretations of the ritual initiation included three stages: separation, transition (the liminal phase), and reintegration or reassimilation.⁸ Following their theory, *Bless* has been frequently studied as a bildungsroman, a novel in which the narrator experiences a rite of passage from childhood into adulthood. In the same way, the story "The Moths" has been usually presented as a rite of passage for the female adolescent character. However, the definition for the rites of passage highlights they 'are associated with any life crisis,

265-66; Ramon Saldívar, 'A Dialectic of Difference: Towards a Theory of the Chicano Novel', *MELUS*, 6.3 (1979), 73-92.

⁵ Rose Anna Pentecost, 'Indigenous and Spanish Transculturation: Becoming Mexican American', *Plaza: Dialogues in Language and Literature*, 5.1 (2014), 39-47 (p. 39).

⁶ See Carol Mitchell, 'Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*: Folk Culture in Literature', *Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction*, 22, 1 (1980), 55-64; Jane Rogers, 'The Function of the La Llorona Motif in Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*', *Latin American Literary Review*, 10 (1977), 64-69; Jean Cazemajou, 'Mediators and Mediation in Rudolfo Anaya's Trilogy: *Bless Me, Ultima, Heart of Aztlán* and *Tortuga*', in *European Perspectives on Hispanic Literature of the United States*, ed. by Genevieve Fabre (Houston, TX: Arte Publico, 1988), 55-65; and Frederick S. Holton, 'Chicano as "Bricoleur": Christianity and Mythmaking in Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*', *Confluencia*, 11, 1 (1995), 22-41.

⁷ R. S. Sharma, 'Interview with Rudolfo Anaya', *Prairie Schooner*, 68, 4 (1994), 177-187 (pp. 179-80).

⁸ See Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (London: Routledge, 1960); Victor Turner, *Rites de Passage. The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967); Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago, IL: Aldine, 1969); Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, in *What is Liminality?*, Charles La Shure (2005 [1974]). (PhD thesis, Seoul National University).

such as birth, puberty, marriage, death'.⁹ In most analyses of the stories, the character of the grandmother was only accompanying the narrators in their rites of passage into adulthood. What scholars have for the most part ignored, however, are the other rites of passage that take place in these stories. Hence, this paper will pay attention to the death passage and to the fact that 'the final stage of the process brings enlightenment and rebirth'.¹⁰

For analysing the representation of the afterlife in Chicano Literature in Anaya and Viramontes's texts, I will here be considering two important mechanisms that are directly related to this rite of passage: the role of children as priests and the connection of animals to the grandmothers' souls.

Children as priests

Bless is a mythical novel where elements of different religions are mixed. Catholicism, Native American and Mesoamerican beliefs are presented through figures such as the Virgin of Guadalupe, the Golden Carp and La Llorona. The narrator of the novel, the six-year-old boy Antonio, openly states his doubts and fears in relation to religion and myth. Nonetheless, as the novel moves forward, Antonio grows and learns about these different beliefs. The development of Antonio's analytical attitude towards religion begins when Ultima moves to his house. She is presented as the beginning of Antonio's realisation of life; in fact, in the very first page of the novel the narrator tells the reader about 'the beginning that came with Ultima'.¹¹

Through this process of combining religions and myths, Antonio will have to confront his mother's desire of him becoming a Catholic priest; for her, Antonio 'will be a man of the people' (*BMU*, 9). All the family knows about Maria's obsession with her son becoming a priest, and the story of the origins of her family is repeated several times along the novel:

the man who led the colonization was a priest, and he was a Luna. That is why my mother dreamed of me becoming a priest, because there had not been a Luna priest in the family for many years. [...] A community of farmers ruled over by a priest, she firmly believed, was the true way of life. (*BMU*, 29)

Despite the fact that Antonio is not satisfied with the idea of becoming a priest, it is his interpretation of this role which becomes a key mechanism in the death passages within the novel. Antonio will confront the fact of witnessing the deaths of friends and acquaintances and, in so doing, he will develop a crucial role in their death passage to the afterlife.

The first violent death Antonio witnesses is Lupito's death. Lupito is a neighbour whose war traumas lead him to kill the sheriff; unable to distinguish fiction from reality he is chased by some men from the village—including Antonio's father—and he hides near the river. Antonio, who follows his father to the bridge, witnesses Lupito's death and

⁹ Thomas Vallejos, 'Ritual Process and the Family in the Chicano Novel', *MELUS*, 10, 4 (1983), 5-16 (p. 6).

¹⁰ Vallejos, 'Ritual Process and the Family in the Chicano Novel', p. 6.

¹¹ Rudolfo Anaya, *Bless Me, Ultima* (New York, NY: Warner Books, 1994), p. 1. Henceforth cited in text as (*BMU*, page number).

becomes the last person to whom he speaks: 'Many shots found their mark. I saw Lupito lifted off his feet and hurled backward by the bullets'. The most significant part of this scene is the fact that Lupito asks Antonio for confession: 'he got up and ran limping and crying towards the bank where I lay. "Bless me –" I thought he cried, and the second volley of shots from the bridge sounded' (*BMU*, 22). At this point of the novel Antonio is too young for having seen somebody die and he is afraid of what could happen to him if somebody saw him, or even if he was confused with Lupito and therefore shot. He is, thus, not able to react.

I wanted to reach out and help him, but I was frozen by my fear. He looked up at me and his face was bathed in water and flowing, hot blood, but it was also dark and peaceful as it slumped into the sand of the riverbank. He made a strange gurgling sound in his throat, then he was still [...] I turned and ran. (*BMU*, 22)

It is significant, though, that on his way home, Antonio finds himself praying, and the prayer he is repeating as a litany is none but 'the Act of Contrition. [...] It was to be said after one made his confession to the priest, and as the last prayer before death'. In his role as a priest, Antonio is unable to complete his duty of helping Lupito in his passage; however, he shows his concern with 'where was Lupito's soul winging to [...]?', and cannot avoid asking himself if he should have confessed him (*BMU*, 23).

The second death Antonio has to confront is the death of a good friend of the family, Narciso. Considered the drunkard of the village, Narciso risks his life to prevent Ultima from the attack of her enemy, Tenorio. Despite one of Antonio's older brothers does not believe Narciso's concerns, Antonio follows him in a terrible storm. Once again, probably due to his young age, Antonio feels unable to help:

I heard a pistol shot just ahead of me [...] The devil Tenorio [...] had waited to ambush Narciso under the juniper tree. I looked for help, but there was none. [...] I stood frozen, watching the deadly scene, unable to do anything. Then I heard the second shot [...] a moan from the dying man called me, and I walked to Narciso and knelt at his side. (*BMU*, 168-9)

Finding himself once more near a man who is about to die, all the elements that surround Antonio seem to foster his role as a priest: 'The tree's huge, dark branches offered protection, like a confessional. [...] He made the sign of the cross, leaving dabs of blood where he touched his forehead, his chest, and the sides' (*BMU*, 169). Moreover, Narciso asks him for confession and, despite that, this time, Antonio is able to react, he initially rejects to act as a priest: 'There would be no time to go for the priest [...] I am not a priest' (*BMU*, 170). Nonetheless, he ends up praying for Narciso's soul and later on confesses him:

I knew what I had to pray. I had to pray an Act of Contrition for his departing soul, like I prayed for Lupito [...] 'Confess me – ' I placed my ear to his mouth and heard his mumbled confession [...] I prayed [...] Then I made the sign of the cross over him. (*BMU*, 170).

Death and the reflection on the idea of dying have been, along history, an essential dimension of human existence. Jacques Derrida delved into the idea and, above all, into the experience of death, questioning himself: 'What (...) is it to cross the ultimate border? What is it to pass the term of one's life (...) ? Is it possible? Who has ever done it and who can testify to it?'¹² Prior to him, it was Martin Heidegger who claimed, as

¹²Jacques Derrida, *Aporias* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 8.

Iain Thomson collects, that '[e]xpectance implies a being-ahead-of-oneself. [...] Expectance means understanding oneself from out of one's own *ability-to-be*. [...] This approaching oneself in advance, from one's own possibility, is the primary ecstatic concept of the future'.¹³ The relation that can be established between these two ideas, the unknown experience of death and the concept of the future in relation to one's own death, causes for many a feeling of anxiety. Because '[o]ur existence is forever shadowed by the knowledge that we will grow, blossom, and, inevitably, diminish and die',¹⁴ human beings develop strategies to escape from the anxiety of death. This can be applied to the deaths of Lupito and Narciso, who, following a Catholic interpretation of life and death, believe in the idea of cleaning their souls through confession before passing to the afterlife. In this way, they beg Antonio to confess them and therefore the afterlife is presented as a paradise for those who have repented. On the opposite side, the novel deconstructs this idea of cleaning the soul and presents the reader with two more characters, Florence and Ultima, who do not seem to need Antonio's services as a priest. Even though he is aware of this lack of necessity, Antonio still acts as a priest with both of them, although not always following Catholicism. This inclusion of different traditions—Native American and Mesoamerican—in his role as a priest entails a deconstruction of the idea of death and of the passing to the afterlife present in the Catholic religion. The idea of what human beings need to reach the afterlife, what they can expect to find, the future they foresee, changes, as the concept of time and the cycle of life and death do no longer follow a Catholic construction but a Mesoamerican one.

Antonio's school friend, Florence, does not believe in God and rejects participating from other children's games when these were related to religion. On one occasion, while the children of the village are waiting for their first communion, they start a new game which consists on confessing their sins to one another. They all agree to choose Antonio as their priest, as he 'knows more about religion and stuff like that than anyone' (*BMU*, 208). When the children consider it is Florence's turn to confess, he calmly and clearly states he does not need to play:

"What are your sins?" I asked. "I don't have any," Florence said softly. [...] "Tell me one sin," I pleaded with Florence. [...] I saw a frightening truth in his eyes. He was telling the truth! He did not believe that he had ever sinned against God! "Oh my God!" I heard myself gasp [...] "I have not sinned! [...] It is God who has sinned against me! [...] He has punished all of us without just cause." (*BMU*, 212-3)

Antonio's reaction to Florence's explanation highlights his insecurities about religion. He cannot understand how Florence is able to be so resolute with his beliefs. Florence does not believe in God, and therefore he is sure he has not sinned against him. Thus, the death anxiety present in other characters and Antonio's role as a priest who helps them in their death passage makes no sense when Florence dies:

"He drowned, he drowned," [...] We looked and saw the body come up through the water [...] I crossed my forehead and prayed an Act of Contrition like I had for Narciso, but it was no good. Florence had never believed. (*BMU*, 239-41)

¹³ Iain Thomson, 'Can I die? Derrida on Heidegger on Death', *Philosophy Today*, Spring (1999), 29-42 (p. 32).

¹⁴ Irvin Yalom, *Staring at the sun: Overcoming the dread of death* (London: Piatkus Books, 2008), p. 1.

The last death in the novel, Ultima's, does not follow the theory of the death anxiety. In this case, it is Ultima the one who 'with her touch calmed' Antonio (*BMU*, 260). She did not ask Antonio to confess her, but on the contrary, she blessed him for the last time. With her passing, she will mark the end of Antonio's own rite of passage. Hence, Antonio, although physically still a child, acts resolutely and completes Ultima's request to take her owl and bury it following a non-Catholic tradition.¹⁵

It is quite significant that the only characters who do not need Antonio to act as a Catholic priest are the ones that seem to begin the journey to the afterlife in a more peaceful way. Florence did not have the opportunity to ask for confession, but the game with the other children showed he did not need to either. In the case of Ultima, she does not confess, and the favour she asks Antonio of burying the owl has nothing to do with a Catholic burial. In this way, Anaya subverts the Catholic act of burial and emphasises Native American and Mesoamerican traditions, presenting them as a valid option and as strongly connected to the death passage.

Similarly, in Viramontes's story "The Moths", the female narrator also has to confront death at an early age. In this case it is her grandmother the one who is dying and the girl decides to stay at her house during the last days of her life. As it happened in Anaya's story, the grandmother has always taken care of the girl, so now it was the girl's turn to take care of Abuelita:

[I]t seemed only fair that these hands she had melted and formed found use in rubbing her caving body with alcohol and marihuana, rubbing her arms and legs, turning her face to the window so that she could watch the Bird of Paradise blooming or smell the scent of clove in the air.¹⁶

The narrator details the last moments of her grandmother, how she 'toweled her face frequently and held her hand for hours [while ...] her gray eye beaming out the window, staring hard as if to remember everything' (*M*, 28-9). Although in this story death is not preceded by a violent act—but is, rather, due to an illness—'the description refuses to downplay the horror of death'.¹⁷

The room smelled of Pine Sol and vomit, and Abuelita had defecated the remains of her cancerous stomach. She had turned to the window and tried to speak, but her mouth remained open and speechless (*M*, 31).

The girl, just like Antonio, plays the role of a priest and prepares Abuelita for her death passage. In this case she performs a double role, taking care of Abuelita's soul—talking to her and calming her down (even though she is already dead)—and preparing her body, as well:

I heard you, Abuelita, I said, stroking her cheek, I heard you. [...] From the cabinet I got a tin basin, filled it with lukewarm water [...] I went to the linen closet and took out some modest bleached white towels. With the sacredness of a priest preparing his vestments, I unfolded the towels one by one on my shoulders [...] I toweled her puzzled face, stretching out the wrinkles, removing the coils of her neck, toweled her shoulders and breasts. [...] I covered her with a thin blanket and went into the bathroom [...] turned on the tub faucets

¹⁵ I will pay attention to Ultima's relation to the owl in the section "Animals and the soul".

¹⁶ Helena María Viramontes, *The Moths and Other Stories* (Houston, TX: Arte Público Press, 1995), p. 28. Henceforth cited in text as (*M*, page number).

¹⁷ Renato Rosaldo, 'Notes toward a Critique of Patriarchy from a Male Position', *Anthropological Quarterly*, 66, 2 (1993), 81-86 (p. 85).

[...] When it was full, I [...] undressed. Then I went to get Abuelita [...] I stepped into the bathtub [...] slowly so I wouldn't scald her skin. (*M*, 31-2)

Most of Viramonte's stories, above all in *The Moths and Other Stories*, are said to 'revolv[e] around young girls reaching womanhood and discovering the paternal restrictions imposed upon them due to their sex'¹⁸. In fact, in this story, Viramonte's female protagonist performs acts which, although small, are subversive and can be presented as 'heroic acts of resistance' for Chicanas.¹⁹ By preparing the towels and getting into the bathtub with Abuelita as if she was baptising her, the girl is playing the role of a priest, and therefore helping her grandmother's death passage. In so doing, she defies both Catholic religious roles and patriarchy at the same time.

Similarly to *BMU*, the past and the present are connected in this story through the figure of the grandmother and the grandchild. In her description of the atmosphere that preceded her grandmother's passage, the narrator emphasises the cycle of the sun, an explicit reference to the Mesoamerican belief in the cycle of life and death:

There comes a time when the sun is defiant. Just about the time when moods change, inevitable seasons of a day, transitions from one color to another, that hour or minute or second when the sun is finally defeated, finally sinks into the realization that it cannot with all its power to heal or burn, exist forever, there comes an illumination where the sun and earth meet, a final burst of burning red orange fury reminding us that although endings are inevitable, they are necessary for rebirths, and when that time came, just when I switched on the light in the kitchen to open Abuelita's can of soup, it was probably then that she died. (*M*, 31)

Once again, the death of the grandmother will determine the end of the rite of passage into adulthood for the narrator. But more importantly, these narrators, through their acts as priests, help the dying characters in their own rite of passage to the afterlife. It is significant, though, the relation established between the endings and the rebirths, which deconstructs the Catholic interpretation of life and death. By recovering the image of the sun, commonly present in Mesoamerican traditions, a connection between the passing to the afterlife of the grandmothers and the new beginnings of the grandchildren is established. In this sense, Viramonte's comparison of the death of the sun with the death of the grandmother leads the reader to the idea that, after the sun sets, it will rise again.

Animals and the soul

As we have previously seen, the role of the grandmother in both stories is that of taking care of the narrators in every possible way, helping them confront the new phases in life. Nevertheless, these characters function in a much deeper way: they are responsible for teaching their grandchildren how to connect to nature and hence to their roots and traditional beliefs. Moreover they can be considered as the representation of the past, as the ones who keep the Chicano familial values—threatened by the Anglo society—and as the ones who encourage the new generations to find an identity of their own. Hence,

¹⁸ Carmen Flys-Junquera, 'Helena María Viramonte: Social and Political Perspectives of a Chicana Writer', *Arizona Journal of Hispanic Cultural Studies*, 5 (2001), 223-238 (p. 223).

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 223.

grandmothers are the connection to the Mesoamerican culture, and therefore the vehicle for these Chicano authors to include it in their texts.

In *BMU*, Ultima is connected to the earth and to nature. Scholars link the novel's mythic elements to pre-Columbian roots,²⁰ and 'Ultima's belief in the sacredness of the earth [...] to the indigenous people who worshipped numerous deities representing all aspects of creation and nature'.²¹ As her apprentice, Antonio accompanies Ultima to the llano "prairie" and helps her 'gather herbs and roots for her medicines [...]. She taught [him] to listen to the mystery of the groaning earth and to feel complete in the fulfilment of its time', and more importantly, Antonio learns that his 'spirit shared in the spirit of all things'; finally, Ultima also teaches Antonio the history of their people and through her words Antonio's 'thoughts would be lost in the labyrinth of a time and history [he] did not know' (*BMU*, 15, 40). In this sense, apart from connecting Chicanos to nature, *BMU* incorporates 'a dynamic, even dialectical awareness of historical forces, from the colonization from Hispanic farmers and ranchers to the coming of the Anglos and World War II',²² to establish a connection to a historical past usually subdued by the melting pot of the USA.

Similarly, in "The Moths", Abuelita also teaches the narrator how to take care of plants and to create medicines with them. The same as Antonio, the girl is eager to learn from the natural world, so she 'gladly go[es] help Abuelita plant her wild lilies or jasmine or heliotrope or cilantro or hierbabuena' (*M*, 28). In her description, Abuelita resembles Ultima, as they both use natural elements in their curandera role: 'Abuelita made a balm out of dried moth wings and Vicks and rubbed [the girl's] hands' (*M*, 27). Interestingly, they also share a calm, wise image that helps the children 'feel [...] safe and guarded and not alone. Like God was supposed to make you feel', what once again connects the children to their roots and ancestral beliefs and establishes a contrast with Catholicism (*BMU*, 27).

The natural elements present in this novel and the connection to nature and the roots the grandmothers have and transmit to the children are intermingled with other elements which seem to belong to the world of magic. Anaya's novel is said to 'contain characteristics of the fantastic but also ha[s] much in common with the exponents of magical realism [...] attempt[ing] to discover the mystery and magic of their surroundings'.²³ Characters like the curandera Ultima—usually addressed by part of the community as a witch—and the Golden Carp, among others, 'cannot be logically explained'.²⁴ Within this magical or mythic atmosphere, the reader is presented with totemic animals that seem to be connected to the souls of the grandmothers.

In the case of *BMU*, the owl is the animal chosen by Anaya to represent Ultima's soul. Some scholars like Holton, Kanoza and Pentecost, analyse the role of the owl in relation to the European and Catholic concept of birds, claiming that '[f]or the Greeks, it was the bird of wisdom [...] and f]or the Christians, the owl became a symbol of the light of the

²⁰ See Vernon E. Lattin, 'The Quest for Mythic Vision in Contemporary Native American and Chicano Fiction', *American Literature*, 50, 4 (1979), 625-640.

²¹ Pentecost, p. 44.

²² Enrique R. Lamadrid, 'Myth as the Cognitive Process of Popular Culture in Rodolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*: The Dialectics of Knowledge', *Hispania*, 68, 3 (1985), 496-501 (496).

²³ Marvin A. Lewis, *Introduction to the Chicano Novel* (Spanish Speaking Outreach Institute: University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1982), p. 52.

²⁴ Manuel Villar Raso and María Herrera-Sobek, 'A Spanish Novelist's Perspective on Chicano/a Literatura', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 25, 1 (2001), 17-34 (p. 27).

Holy Spirit [...] or of Christ'.²⁵ Although Holton recognises that the owl 'heightens the sense of [Ultima's] mysterious and supernatural powers',²⁶ and Theresa M. Kanoza assures 'Ultima's spirit [...] suggests at once Christ as dove and Quetzalcoatl as eagle',²⁷ I consider that in this novel the connection of the owl to Mesoamerican myths is more relevant than that to Catholicism.

It has already been established above how Anaya strengthens the importance of Native-American and Mesoamerican myths in his novel, presenting Chicanos with a past and roots most of them are no longer familiar with. In this sense Ultima is connected to Mesoamerican myths where '[s]orcerers were believed to be able to transport themselves magically back to mythic times and places. They could see into and influence the future, stupefy and cast illusions, and transform themselves into birds, dogs, and owls'.²⁸ Although the origin of the belief in the Alter Ego Anima is not clear,²⁹ the concept of "tonalism"

belong[s] to the indigenous ideology [...] present in various forms in Mesoamerica since prehistoric times [...] indicating the belief in a particular relation between a person and generally an animal [...] expressing physical and spiritual identity, a coessence unifying the individual to a particular animal [...] for the whole life.³⁰

Despite Antonio's awareness of the Anglican connection of owls with witches, Ultima's owl is presented as a positive element and '[i]ts soft hooting was like a song [that ...] lulled us to sleep. Its song seemed to say that it had come to watch over us'. Moreover, the owl is present every time Antonio needs company or guidance. When Antonio saw Lupito's death at the river, 'the terrible, dark fear that had possessed [him] was gone' at the realisation of the owl's presence (*BMU*, 13, 23). Nevertheless, not until the end of the novel does he realise the importance of the owl:

it had blinded Tenorio the night he came to hurt Ultima, the owl had driven away the howling animals the night we cured my uncle, and it had been there when the misery of the Téllez family was removed. The owl had always been there. (*BMU*, 256-7)

Although Antonio is unconsciously responsible for Tenorio's comprehension of the importance of the owl and of the fact that it 'was the protective spirit of Ultima [...] The owl was her soul!', the bird is still loyal to the child and protects him the moment Tenorio is about to kill him (*BMU*, 255).

"¡Espiritu de mi alma!" ["My soul's spirit"] I heard Ultima's command ring in the still night air, and a swirling of wings engulfed Tenorio. He cursed and fired [...] "Ultima!" I cried [...] He jumped up and waved the dead body of Ultima's owl over his head [...] "I have killed the owl [...] The witch is dead, my daughters are avenged!". (*BMU*, 258)

²⁵ Holton, p. 28.

²⁶ *ibid.*

²⁷ Theresa M. Kanoza, 'The Golden Carp and Moby Dick: Rudolfo Anaya's Multi-Culturalism', *MELUS*, 24.2 (1999), 159-171 (p. 165).

²⁸ Wayne Elzey, 'A Hill on a Land Surrounded by Water: An Aztec Store of Origin and Destiny', *History of Religions*, 31, 2 (1991), 105-149 (pp. 108-9).

²⁹ See Josef Paz, 'The Vicissitude of the Alter Ego Animal in Mesoamerica. An Ethnohistorical Reconstruction of Tonalism', *Anthropos*, 90, 4/6 (1995), 445-465.

³⁰ Paz, p. 445.

Since the owl is Ultima's spirit, Antonio is afraid of what could happen to Ultima now that her soul is dead; Ultima, however, claims that the owl is '[n]ot dead [...] but winging its way to a new place, a new time [...] the owl was my spirit, my bond to the time and harmony of the universe' (*BMU*, 260). Once again, the Mesoamerican and Native American elements overtake the Catholic ones, subverting the idea of the afterlife and solving questions that address the 'possibility of impossibility' discussed by Heidegger and Derrida.³¹

In the case of Viramontes's story, the animals that represent Abuelita's soul are the moths. The moths are a symbol usually connected to the tradition of Magic Realism. They are called "birds of death" as the drawings on the wings resemble a skull, but at the same time they also represent Mexican culture and they are used in traditional medicine, as we have previously seen in the cream Abuelita prepared to heal the girl's hands.

References to the moths and their grey colour are present along the whole story, and just as Ultima was said to have 'owl-eyes', Abuelita's grey eye is present in every description of the character; even her hair is said to 'spread across the water like eagles' wings' (*BMU*, 39; *M*, 32). But it is when the girl is holding her Abuelita in the bath, helping her in her death passage, that

the moths came. Small gray ones that came from her soul and out through her mouth fluttering to light, circling the single dull light bulb of the bathroom. Dying is lonely and I wanted to go to where the moths were, stay with her [...] I wanted to rest my head on her chest with her stroking my hair, telling me about the moths that lay within the soul and slowly eat the spirit up; I wanted to return to the waters of the womb with her so that we would never be alone again. [...] The bathroom was filled with moths, and for the first time in a long time I cried, rocking us. (*M*, 32)

Death is therefore presented in both texts as a part of life, but not as an end of it. The description of the passing of the grandmother in Viramontes's text presents the moths as her soul, but also as the destruction of the spirit that leaves this world to enter the afterlife. Although the owl and the moths may be portrayed in different ways, both Anaya and Viramontes establish the connection of these winged animals to the soul. In this way, the authors challenge the Catholic idea of death and the afterlife. Furthermore, Viramontes's narrator describes how her 'sobs rippled into circles and circles of sadness and relief' while she tried to comfort both her grandmother and herself: 'There, there, I said to Abuelita, rocking us gently, there, there' (*M*, 32). This significantly addresses the idea of the cycle of life and death. Moreover, by emphasising the link between the past, the present and the future the authors recover the ontology of life and death present in Mesoamerican cultures, which leaves aside the anxiety of death and, as established above, seems to answer some of the questions posed by Derrida and Heidegger.

³¹ See Derrida, pp. 23-78, and Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1996), pp. 232-315.

Conclusion

In the analysis of these stories as rites of passage to the afterlife, the knowledge of the grandmothers will not leave with them, but will transcend time, that is, it will be transmitted generation after generation. Ultima and Abuelita experience the different stages that van Gennep and Turner established: the separation stage is represented by death itself, which separates them physically from the community; in the transition stage, Ultima claims the owl is moving to another time and place, whereas the moths that abandon Abuelita's body fly away—leaving the girl wanting 'to go where the moths were' (*M*, 32). Finally, in the reintegration stage, we find how Abuelita will stay alive in her teachings to her granddaughter, how '[t]he Chicana matriarchal lines of succession make no attempt to deny human mortality in the name of eternal life itself'.³² In the case of Ultima, this reintegration stage proves she will remain both in the knowledge Antonio acquired as well as through the owl, as her last words to Antonio state that 'if despair enters your heart, look for me in the evenings when the wind is gentle and the owls sing in the hills. I shall be with you' (*BMU*, 261).

In *BMU*, Antonio establishes the importance of the relation between the past, the present and the future, acknowledging how 'from [his] father and Ultima [he] had learned that the greater immortality is in the freedom of man' and wishing he could always 'feel like the eagle that floats on its skies: free, immortal, limitless' (*BMU*, 228). The past is kept alive in the present along the novel, the same as the idea of the Aztec's cycle of life and death, sadness and relief, is present in the girl's narration in "The Moths".

Both stories deconstruct the ontology of life and death and present death as another step in a never ending circle. At the beginning of *Bless*, Antonio assures Ultima: 'You will never die [...] I will take care of you' (*BMU*, 12). As a premonition, this idea is connected to a dream Antonio has afterwards, where he 'sees his own death, and the blasphemous deaths of Ultima and the golden carp'.³³ Nonetheless, at the end of the dream 'he decided that everyone should survive, but in new form [...] A new sun to shine its good light upon a new earth' (*BMU*, 176). This idea is connected once again with Heidegger's idea of 'the primary ecstatic concept of the future'³⁴, although in this case Antonio's notion of the future is not ecstatic but dynamic, following the Mesoamerican cyclical symbology.

As James Hardie-Bick astutely states, 'Sartre insisted [that] all people are inalienably free to choose and are therefore responsible for their own life projects'.³⁵ In this sense, Antonio develops, at the end of the novel, a mature attitude through which he finally understands that there is no need to choose between one religion and the others, as 'every generation, every man is a part of his past. He cannot escape it, but he may reform the old materials, make something new' (*BMU*, 247). In "The Moths" the female narrator insists on the importance of knowing about the past, as '[t]he scars on her [grandmother's] back [...] made [her] realize how little [she] really knew of Abuelita' (*M*, 31). Moreover, reckoning the cyclical component of time and history in the

³² Rosaldo, 'Notes toward a Critique of Patriarchy from a Male Position', p. 85.

³³ Dianne Klein, 'Coming of Age in Novels by Rudolfo Anaya and Sandra Cisneros', *The English Journal*, 81, 5 (1992), 21-26 (p. 24).

³⁴ Thomson, p. 32.

³⁵ James Hardie-Bick, 'Transcendence, Symbolic Immortality and Evil', *Human Studies*, 35, 3 (2012), 415-428 (pp. 415-16).

Mesoamerican cultures, it is relevant to consider how the past was expected to be somehow reproduced in the present and in the future, what presents it as a fundamental element for the community.³⁶

In the political fight for their Civil Rights, the Chicano authors Rudolfo Anaya and Helena María Viramontes challenge the American society of the melting pot. By recovering Native American and Mesoamerican beliefs, the death passage and the afterlife in both stories are deconstructed and presented as a new beginning, encouraging Chicanos to recover their roots and to follow the idea of the cycle towards the future.

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³⁶ See Elzey, p. 107. See also Charles Gibson, 'Prose Sources in the Native Historical Tradition. A Survey of Middle American Prose Manuscripts', in *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, ed. by Robert Wauchope (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1964-76), 16 vol.s, p. 15.

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