

Ready or Not: Antonio Márez y Luna Is Thrown into the World of Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*_____

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“Men will do what they must do,” [Ultima] answered. . . . “The ways of men are strange, and hard to learn,” I heard her say.

“Will I learn them?” I asked. I felt the weight on my eyelids.

“You will learn much, you will see much,” I heard her faraway voice.

(Anaya, *Bless Me, Ultima*)

In *Being and Time* (1927), German philosopher Martin Heidegger depicts the human subject as “thrown” into human society. With the premise that “without personal choice, with no previous knowledge” (Steiner 87) the human subject finds himself or herself cast or thrust into what Heidegger calls “Being-in-the-world,” Heidegger conceptualizes human existence and experience in terms of a random, arbitrary entry into a social world that “was there before us and will be there after us” (Steiner 87). Particularly potent about the figure that Heidegger offers are its connotations of the human subject’s potential traumatization. As noted, for example, by George Steiner, Heidegger’s account carries an overtone of violence in its suggestion of the human subject’s profound unpreparedness for Being-in-the-world (xii). Indicating as much, when Heidegger asserts that “Being-in-the-world [is the human subject’s] way of Being” (174) and that it is thus that the human subject “finds itself in its thrownness” (174), he emphasizes, “The expression ‘thrownness’ is meant to suggest the *facticity of its being delivered over*” to and into Being-in-the-world (174). Once Heidegger describes the human subject as haplessly “delivered over” to Being-in-the-world, a sense of this subject’s fundamental vulnerability, if not victimization, begins to emerge.

Curiously, in the course of discussing thrownness as the primal fact of human life, Heidegger devotes no specific attention to or concern with children or childhood. Given the consonance between his figu-

ration of thrownness and the nature of childhood, such inattention is conspicuous to say the least. After all, to be a child is to be new to the world and forced to come to terms with the alienating, unfamiliar, baffling, and even frightening experiences, ideas, circumstances, and people that one encounters for the first time. If anything, childhood actually seems to epitomize Heidegger's idea that the human subject is "'delivered over' . . . to an actuality, to a 'there,' to a complete, enveloping presentness . . . [and] must take up this presentness . . . [and] assume it into its own existence" (Steiner 88). For this reason, thrownness could be said to pertain especially acutely to children.

While Heidegger thus overlooks childhood as the site par excellence for grasping the fundamental human conditions of thrownness and Being-in-the-world, we can find in literary representations compelling portrayals of what Mary Galbraith calls "the existential predicament of childhood in an adult-dominated world" (200). As Galbraith rightly notes, "Literature . . . has been the real pioneer in presenting the [existential] experience of individual child [selves]" (194). Among other things, we can find in various texts the specific applicability of Heidegger's conceptualization of human ontology to childhood as a dramatic if not unnerving initiation into the social world. Works ranging from Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) to James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) to J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* books (to name just a very few) effectively depict young people confronting and negotiating thrownness in different ways and working through the disorientation, frustration, and anxiety that, as Heidegger explains, thrownness necessarily precipitates.

Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972) provides a particularly intriguing dramatization of a child for whom coming of age entails the negotiation of the conditions of existence that Heidegger describes. In this classic novel, Anaya portrays a notably stressful year in the life of six-year-old Antonio Márez y Luna. Encapsulating the density of the tight timeframe that Anaya covers, Ramón Saldívar says, "In the year of narrative time, Antonio experiences in rapid succession the

brutality perpetrated by man against man and man against woman, the loss of childhood innocence, the horror of evil, [and] doubts about his traditional Catholic faith” (105). By portraying a childhood challenged and haunted by an assortment of existential realities, Anaya’s novel most obviously extends twentieth-century acknowledgments of children and childhood as far more complex and conflicted than traditionally recognized and allowed, for instance, by earlier romantic figurations.¹ In fact, owing to Anaya’s willingness to portray a palpably stressful childhood that is not so safely divorced or even buffered from the corruption and brutality of the “adult world,” *Bless Me, Ultima* exemplifies Patricia Pace’s observation of “a contemporary trend in the popular imagination: the child-self . . . and childhood itself, as a beleaguered and endangered space” (233). Importantly, as *Bless Me, Ultima* depicts some of the moral, social, and ontological conflicts that child subjects must negotiate as their experience of the world broadens beyond the immediate confines of the home—which is to say, as they find themselves Being-in-the-world—it ends up enabling an important respect for children and childhood and the conditions (namely, the duress) under which children come of age. To be sure, Antonio is only six years old, which makes him seem young for a coming-of-age narrative. However, through Antonio, Anaya manages to portray coming of age as a process that is jumpstarted in early childhood. In the process, the text recovers not just the complexity, but the relatable pathos of the child’s subjectivity and existential condition. By thereby disputing the traditional—and patronizing—reduction of children and childhood to a state of unadulterated, unaware, even blissful simplicity, the novel presents the child as a very human subject whose coming-of-age experience merits a more nuanced understanding as well as greater respect.

The Denial of a Pastoral Childhood

As occurs with any coming-of-age narrative, the setting of *Bless Me, Ultima* is integral to understanding and appreciating the growth that Antonio experiences. Initially, the grandeur of the rural New Mexico

landscape might suggest an idyllic stage for Antonio's childhood.² A number of references early in the novel to Antonio's developing relationship to the awe-inspiring landscape certainly entice a reader into expecting this novel to be a Southwestern American version of Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* (1911). In the opening sentences, Antonio relates,

Ultima came to stay with us the summer I was almost seven. When she came the beauty of the llano unfolded before my eyes, and the gurgling waters of the river sang to the hum of the turning earth. The magical time of childhood stood still, and the pulse of the living earth pressed its mystery into my living blood. She took my hand, and the silent magic powers she possessed made beauty from the raw, sun-baked llano, the green river valley, and the blue bowl which was the white sun's home. My bare feet felt the throbbing earth and my body trembled with excitement. Time stood still, and it shared with me all that had been, and all that was to come. (1)

In this beautifully rendered passage Antonio twice refers to the sensation of existing outside of time. Such references, coupled with the exuberance with which the boy intimates his communion with nature, immediately suture a reader into Antonio's excitement over the possibility of living harmoniously with and within nature, utterly outside of civilization and free from the trappings of modernity. Shortly thereafter, Antonio, again in the presence of Ultima, narrates yet another alluringly transcendent moment:

[Ultima] took my hand and I felt the power of a whirlwind sweep around me. Her eyes swept the surrounding hills and through them I saw for the first time the wild beauty of our hills and the magic of the green river. My nostrils quivered as I felt the song of the mockingbirds and the drone of the grasshoppers mingle with the pulse of the earth. The four directions of the llano met in me, and the white sun shone on my soul. The granules of

sand at my feet and the sun and sky above me seemed to dissolve into one strange, complete being. (11)

At once Antonio feels himself not only alive, but a fully live, integrated part of the grander fabric of life. Because of this and other moments in which Antonio thrillingly experiences himself as “a very important part of the llano and the river” (Anaya 37), Theresa Kanoza remarks that Antonio “comes to luxuriate in the synchronized workings of the world” (168).

Soon enough, however, it turns out that “the beginning that came with Ultima” (Anaya 1) is not solely the inauguration of some idyllic communion with nature for Antonio. What eventually predominates in Antonio’s experience is the Heideggerian realization that Being-in-the-world means coming to terms with all that the world actually contains, which includes not just the inspiring beauty of nature (a delimitation which Kanoza inadvertently performs when she refers to “the world” in the quotation above), but social reality and the conflict, stress, confusion, and even danger that it entails. For this reason, Heidegger explains, “As thrown, [the human subject] has indeed been delivered over to itself and to its potentiality-for-Being, *but as Being-in-the-world*. As thrown, it has been submitted to a ‘world’, and exists factually with Others” (435). Antonio himself quickly realizes the impossibility of a pastoral childhood due to Being-in-the-world as an immutable fact of life when he states that “through [Ultima] I learned that my spirit shared in the spirit of all things. But the innocence which our isolation sheltered could not last forever, and the affairs of the town began to reach across our bridge and enter my life. Ultima’s owl gave the warning that the time of peace on our hill was drawing to an end” (14). Especially noteworthy is Antonio’s statement that “the affairs of the town began to reach across our bridge and enter my life.” With a touch of worry and latent helplessness, Antonio recognizes the impossibility of a pastoral existence, which shows him to be on his way to

learning and accepting both the inevitability and the ramifications of existing “factually with Others.”

Thus, as much as the setting might at first point toward the possibility of a pastoral childhood, such an idea turns out to be untenable. As Kanoza points out, Antonio’s childhood is indeed “set in a sacred place imbued with a spiritual presence and long inhabited by indigenous people,” and it stands as “a world where the Anglo is of little consequence to its strong Chicano characters” (160). Yet geographical seclusion does not guarantee utopia. This becomes clear as soon as we consider that “Guadalupe, an isolated village that is set apart from the greater New Mexican landmass by a river which encircles it, is at once . . . insular and internally diverse” (160). With internal diversity comes interpersonal conflict, which Kanoza highlights in her description of the social backdrop for this year in the life of Antonio:

A varied constituency . . . comprises Antonio’s world. Besides the stark differences in the mores and temperaments of the peaceful farmers who are his maternal relatives and his raucous, rootless paternal uncles who ride the *llano*, Antonio finds sharp contrasts among his friends. Catholic and Protestant classmates taunt each other in the schoolyard about their conflicting beliefs of heaven and hell, while those secretly faithful to the cult of the golden carp, such as Cico, Samuel, and Jason, are contemptuous of these arcane concerns. Children of no particular religious persuasion, some of whom are eerily animal-like in appearance and endowed with preternatural strength and speed, watch the squabbles in amusement. All are terrified by the three Trementina sisters, who are legendary for practicing black magic. (162)

Surrounded by diverse people and ideologies, Antonio finds himself immersed in (or thrown into) an environment (or world) characterized by suspicion, division, resentment, and fear.

At this point, it is worth considering that Antonio’s immediate environment is, microcosmically, a reflection and product of the larger

world and historical moment within which he lives. To be sure, history seems to work in subtle ways in *Bless Me, Ultima*—so much so that the novel has drawn criticism from some scholars for what they perceive as an irresponsible lack of interest on the part of the author in broader socio-historical issues—yet it plays an important role both in the novel as a whole and in the experience of Antonio specifically.³ The novel is set during World War II, and while the war itself is terribly destructive and psychically devastating, the atomic testing underway in the New Mexican desert frays nerves even more. Consequently, when Antonio begins to ask his father, “Papá, the people say *the bomb* causes the winds to blow—” (184), although the boy means to inquire literally about the potential meteorological effects of the atomic testing, there is actually a powerful symbolic truth to the concern in terms of the anxiety that is “in the air” due to the arrival of the atomic age. Antonio gleans firsthand the scary, almost apocalyptic uncertainty of the times from the distress of the people around him.

When a dust storm blows up one day, Antonio relates that the local people nervously attribute the unusual weather to “the new bomb that had been made to end the war. ‘The atomic bomb,’ they whispered, ‘a ball of white heat beyond the imagination, beyond hell—” (183). On another occasion, Antonio overhears his father “solemnly” reflecting on the war: “Now the people are scattered, driven like tumbleweeds by the winds of war. The war sucks everything dry, it takes the young boys overseas, and their families move to California, where there is work” (3). Later, Antonio’s maternal grandfather similarly frets: “A sad thing, a tragedy. . . . This war of the Germans and the Japanese is reaching into all of us. Even into the refuge of the Valle de los Luna it reaches, we have just finished burying one of the boys of Santos Estevan. There is much evil running loose in the world—” (46–47). While the massive conflict and mass anxiety of World War II thereby impinge on Antonio’s subjectivity, the stress of the times finally becomes all too real for him through the breakup of his family. First, his brothers leave home to fight in the war. Then, although they physically return, they

never really return to the family. According to Antonio, “The war had changed them. Now they needed to lead their own lives” (62). Insisting to their parents, “We have to go! We have to go!” (66), Antonio’s brothers eventually leave home again to pursue a new life in Santa Fe. For Antonio, this wrenching loss only amplifies his increasingly lonely and difficult experience of Being-in-the-world at this moment in history.

With the world teeming with conflict and stress and otherwise in flux on global and local levels, Antonio himself becomes increasingly distressed by the fact that Being-in-the-world places him in the position of having to adjudicate and negotiate a proliferating range of painfully indeterminate ideas, issues, and realities. Incidentally, this burden is set in motion at the boy’s birth. In one of Antonio’s seven dream sequences, the opposition between the families of his father and mother is revealed, with each side claiming Antonio for itself. Upon the birth of the boy, members of the Márez clan first exclaim to Antonio’s father, “Gabriel . . . you have a fine son! He will make a fine vaquero!” and they insist on burying the afterbirth “in our fields . . . to assure that the baby will follow in our ways” (5). But in the same instant, the Lunas interrupt: “No! . . . He must come to El Puerto and rule over the Lunas of the valley. The blood of the Lunas is strong in him” (5–6). These rival declarations then give way to an intense scene in which “Curses and threats filled the air, pistols were drawn, and the opposing sides made ready for battle” (6). As Antonio grows up, the rival claims of the Máreces and the Lunas continue to hold sway over him, leaving him struggling to resolve the false dilemma of his identity at different points in the novel.⁴

Above all else, in the course of his coming of age Antonio finds himself wrestling with the various contradictions and breakdowns that he begins to see in his Catholic faith. In numerous instances, he finds the faith that he has been taught to be more rickety than he would like it to be. When he sees Ultima heal his uncle Lucas, he says, “I had been thinking how Ultima’s medicine had cured my uncle and how the medicine of the doctors and of the priest had failed. In my mind I could

not understand how the power of God could fail. But it had” (98). His incertitude becomes especially intense as he approaches his First Communion, which he hopes will (somehow) provide the answers to the various moral and philosophical questions that have increasingly troubled him (and which at one point prompt him to think, “Oh, it was hard to grow up. I hoped that in a few years the taking of the first holy communion would bring me understanding” [69]). In church one day, he mentions, “I sat on the hard, wooden pew and shivered. Man tries to know and his knowledge will kill us all. I want to know. I want to know the mysteries of God. I want to take God into my body and have Him answer my questions. Why was Narciso killed? Why does evil go unpunished? Why does he allow evil to exist?” (184). Ultimately, regarding the questions that occur to him and that his peers also pose in the rather savvy theological debates and discussions in which they engage, Antonio concedes, “Yes. There seemed to be so many pitfalls in the questions we asked” (189).

But as commonly occurs in coming-of-age narratives, it is precisely Antonio’s confrontation with the daunting questions and difficult situations that arise that shows and enables his developing selfhood. For example, when he begins narrating the events leading up to the arrival of Ultima, he recounts the conversations his mother and father had about her, including their concern with having a curandera (an herbal healer) in the house. In this moment, Antonio reveals that he already understands more than his parents assume he understands. When his father asks Antonio’s mother, “And the children?” Antonio reveals,

I knew why he expressed concern for me and my sisters. It was because Ultima was a curandera, a woman who knew the herbs and remedies of the ancients, a miracle-worker who could heal the sick. And I had heard that Ultima could lift the curses laid by brujas, that she could exorcise the evil the witches planted in people to make them sick. And because a curandera had this power, she was misunderstood and often suspected of practicing witchcraft herself. (4)

In this passage, readers see a certain sophistication on the part of Antonio that belies popular expectations for children. He knows what his father has in mind even though his father does not explicitly state it; he is fully aware of the controversy that surrounds Ultima and the bases for the controversy; and he understands the faulty ambivalence with which the people in the community regard curanderas such as Ultima.⁵

At the same time, Antonio proves himself to be a boy moving above and beyond the egocentrism and naïveté typically ascribed to children through his evolving capacity for understanding and empathizing with other people. In the above example of his description of the circumstances surrounding Ultima, he is attuned to his father's worry as well as to the reasons people fear curanderas. Elsewhere, reflecting on his mother's situation in life, he remarks, "As long as I could remember she always raged about the Márez family and their friends. She called the village of Las Pasturas beautiful; she had gotten used to the loneliness, but she had never accepted its people" (8). Shortly thereafter, he spends some time thinking about Jasón, and carefully concludes, "Jasón was not a bad boy, he was just Jasón. He was quiet and moody, and sometimes for no reason at all wild, loud sounds came exploding from his throat and lungs" (9). Through these observations, Antonio shows that in spite of his young age, he is fully capable of contemplating other people and arriving at insightful and empathetic understandings of them. Even more importantly, he can skeptically sift through the beliefs that circulate within the larger community and formulate his own viewpoint. All of this, it must be noted, is part of his ongoing process of sorting out and making sense of the world into which he has been thrown. Little by little he puts everything and everyone into perspective so as to ultimately figure out his own relationship to it all.

Unsurprisingly, however, Antonio's capacity to put everything and everyone into perspective is tested as the range of his movement away from home expands. Of course, in a coming-of-age narrative, such a correlation is standard stuff. At first we see how home stands as a place of familiarity and security for Antonio when he introduces it in terms

of its comforting order: “The attic of our home was partitioned into two small rooms. My sisters, Deborah and Theresa, slept in one and I slept in the small cubicle by the door. The wooden steps creaked down into a small hallway that led into the kitchen. From the top of the stairs I had a vantage point into the heart of our home, my mother’s kitchen” (1). While home thus functions for him as a safe and stable space, he finds that stepping away from it and out into the world literally and figuratively takes him into strange, new territory that challenges him in different ways. Going to school for the first time is one such experience. In anticipation (or dread) of the first day of school, he reveals, “My heart sank. When I thought of leaving my mother and going to school a warm, sick feeling came to my stomach” (6). When the day actually arrives, he then says, “On the first day of school I awoke with a sick feeling in my stomach. It did not hurt, it just made me feel weak. The sun did not sing as it came over the hill. Today I would take the goat path and trek into town for years and years of schooling. For the first time I would be away from the protection of my mother. I was excited and sad about it” (48).

Among other things, in this passage Antonio indicates a disruption of what had been his beautiful connection with nature: under the stress of his social reality of having to go to school, he does not experience the sun singing as it formerly did. Moreover, wracked as he is by nerves and dread, the boy experiences anxiety as an intrusion on the transcendent embodiment that he previously enjoyed. Basically, as the terms of Being-in-the-world become more real for him, the unsustainability of a pastoral existence becomes more pronounced. In response to the stress posed by the specter of going off to school and away from his home and mother, Antonio adds, “I wished that I could always be near her, but that was impossible. The war had taken my brothers away, and so the school would take me away” (30). Once he arrives at school, he faces the stark loneliness that initially greets one when one enters the larger social world: “I had come to the town,” he says, “and I had come

to school, and I was very lost and afraid in the nervous, excited swarm of kids” (53).

Discussing Antonio’s coming of age vis-à-vis his first day of school, Robert Anderson reads the boy’s movement away from home in terms of a “ritual of an agony, a death, and a resurrection” (98). In Anderson’s reading, Antonio follows the descent “down the hill in a *descensus ad infernos* trajectory. Once in the valley he must cross the archetypal bridge, *the dividing line* between the ‘quiet peace of the hills of the llano’ and ‘the turbulence of the town and its sin’ . . . and venture into the underworld scenario of his initiation and eventual metamorphosis” (98–99). For Antonio, the world across the bridge and away from home is specifically replete with dangerous belief systems (in the form of Florence’s atheism), violence (in the form of the murderous Tenorio), and sex (in the form of Rosie’s brothel).

Perhaps the best example of both the difficulty of Being-in-the-world and the resilience that it requires of Antonio is his witnessing of the death of Lupito. When Chávez arrives at Antonio’s home to inform Gabriel that Lupito has killed the sheriff, Antonio finds himself having to process the concepts of danger, death, and violence. As his father reaches for his rifle so he can go with Chávez and others to look for Lupito, Antonio remarks, “Now he too was armed. I had only seen him shoot the rifle when we slaughtered pigs in the fall. Now [he and Chávez] were going armed for a man” (15). Shortly thereafter, we see Antonio’s mother and father literally try to shelter the children from danger, death, and violence. When Antonio’s father tells his wife, “Keep the doors locked,” Antonio narrates, “My mother went to the door and shut the latch. We never locked our doors, but tonight there was something strange and fearful in the air” (16). Despite the efforts of his parents, Antonio’s curiosity is piqued by this first real encounter with the hitherto unknown reality of murder and the specter of danger. Consequently, he decides to follow his father and Chávez to gain some understanding of these unfamiliar aspects of the world. Notably, with the statement, “I slipped out the kitchen door and into the night” (16),

Antonio actually says a great deal. At once we see him moving beyond the order and security of the home that is specifically epitomized by the kitchen and into the disorder and literal and metaphorical darkness of the world outside. What he encounters outside the home ends up alternately shocking and terrifying him. Stumbling across Lupito, he says, “What I saw made my blood run cold” (16). Once the pursuing men discover Lupito and shine a light on him, Antonio explains that he saw “a face twisted with madness. I do not know if he saw me, or if the light cut off his vision, but I saw his bitter, contorted grin. As long as I live I will never forget those wild eyes, like the eyes of a trapped, savage animal” (16–17). That Antonio perceives Lupito as “wild,” “savage,” and “mad” bespeaks the extent to which the sight and condition of Lupito is outside of the realm of Antonio’s experience. Wildness, savagery, and madness all signify a perceived aberration from social order and normalcy. Through this encounter with Lupito, then, a very unprepared Antonio gets a disturbingly more expansive glimpse of the world that is “out there.”

As occurs when Carroll’s Alice lands in Wonderland and when Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus heads to boarding school, Antonio’s venture into the greater outside world almost immediately prompts in him a desire to return to the safety of home. With his sense of the order, coherence, and safety of the world profoundly shaken by the sight of the breakdown and death of Lupito, the boy desperately wishes to return to the place that, for him, literally and symbolically embodies stability and comfort. Interestingly, the details of his return home underscore the traumatic nature of the evening. Antonio explains, “I turned and ran. The dark shadows of the river enveloped me as I raced for the safety of home. Branches whipped at my face and cut it, and vines and tree trunks caught at my feet and tripped me. In my headlong rush I disturbed sleeping birds and their shrill cries and slapping wings hit at my face. The horror of darkness had never been so complete as it was for me that night” (20). On one level, the sensation of being overwhelmed by darkness obviously captures the epistemological break-

down wrought within Antonio by what he has just witnessed. Basically, what he sees explodes his capacity for knowing the world and for knowing people, plunging him into the abyss of what could be called “an epistemic deficit.”⁶

On another level, the narrative attention to the physical distress that Antonio suffers in the course of the episode with Lupito completes the intense subjective dimension of the scene and brings to mind Pace’s discussion of the physical as well as psychic dimensions of trauma. Invoking Kai Ericson’s reminder that the medical usage of trauma refers to “a blow to the tissues of the body” (Ericson qtd. in Pace 240), Pace opens up a more encompassing consideration of trauma, one that goes beyond the popular “therapeutic usage wherein trauma has come to mean a state of mind” (Pace 240). She foregrounds trauma as an experience that devastates the entirety of the self by registering on physical and psychic levels alike. To think through this idea, the work of Judith Herman provides a useful addendum. In *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), Herman delineates the interaction of the psyche and the body in times of acute distress: “The ordinary human response to danger is a complex, integrated system of reactions, encompassing both body and mind. Threat initially arouses the sympathetic nervous system, causing the person in danger to feel an adrenalin rush and go into a state of alert” (34). In a move incidentally relevant for a consideration of Antonio in traumatized terms, Herman proceeds to illustrate the imbrication of the mind and the body by quoting Abram Kardner’s description of the pathology of combat neurosis: “When a person is overwhelmed by terror and helplessness, *‘the whole apparatus for concerted, coordinated and purposeful activity is smashed. The perceptions become inaccurate and pervaded with terror, the coordinative functions of judgment and discrimination fail. . . . The functions of the autonomic nervous system may also become disassociated with the rest of the organism’*” (35).

As the scene with Lupito unfolds in *Bless Me, Ultima*, readers see Antonio in a hyperaroused state that resonates with the emotionally

turbulent conditions described by Herman and Kardner. As Antonio becomes “frozen by [his] fear” (Anaya 20) only to turn and desperately attempt to flee what has transpired, his feeling of being overwhelmed by terror and helplessness becomes apparent. That he is tripped, scratched, and otherwise beaten and battered on his way back home—all of which is caused by the selfsame nature which had previously provided him a joyous sense of connection and vitality—implies the impossibility any longer of any return to safety and stability. Once privy to the underside of human society, there is, to his dismay, no returning to the safety and stability he associates with earlier, “innocent” states of ignorance and naïveté. Such are the nonnegotiable implications, it turns out, of coming of age.

From Pity to Respect

To say that Antonio experiences a lot in *Bless Me, Ultima* would be an understatement. At one point we even see him teeter on nihilism because of all that he has seen, heard, and endured over the year of narrative time. Near the end of the novel, the various moral, philosophical, and theological doubts and questions that have arisen within him boil over into a dream in which an assortment of fears are articulated. Describing the ending of his dream, Antonio narrates: “‘What is left?’ I asked in horror. Nothing, the reply rolled like silent thunder through the mist of my dream. . . . Everything I believed was destroyed. A painful wrenching in my heart made me cry aloud, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me!’” (233). Apparently, Antonio feels unable to believe in or hold onto anything anymore. Within this selfsame dream, however, a way of putting into perspective Antonio’s verging on an existential breakdown appears. When the boy asks, “Why must I be witness to so much violence!” he hears a voice answer, “The germ of creation lies in violence” (232). As regards Antonio, we might say that the germ of his coming of age, the germ of his selfhood, lies in violent thrownness. Each new experience and situation and idea that presents itself to him jolts his consciousness into new areas. He has

to figure out, among other things, how to understand Lupito, the men who shoot Lupito, Ultima, his brothers, Rosie's place, and of course his Catholic faith and God. Although the stress of thrownness compels him at one point to remark, "I knew I had to grow up and be a man, but oh it was so very hard" (55), we might bear in mind Heidegger's claim that "in anxiety there lies the possibility of a disclosure which is quite distinctive; for anxiety individualizes" (235). As summarized by John Haugeland, Heidegger's idea is that "in anxiety, a person's individuality is 'brought home' to him or her in an utterly unmistakable and undeniable way" (64) via a sharpened sense of consciousness and, by extension, an evolving, sharpening experience of selfhood vis-à-vis the self's experience of and relation to the world.

Some (if not most) scholarship on *Bless Me, Ultima* reads Antonio as having resolved by the end of the novel the various issues that arise in the course of the novel. Kanoza, for instance, says of Antonio, "In tune with the cosmic harmonies, Antonio joins together diverse and discordant beliefs, temperaments, and values, for he realizes that he can 'take the llano and the river valley, the moon and the sea, God and the golden carp—and make something new'" (168). Likewise, with the premise that "Antonio learns to accept the greater reality of life" (68), Jane Rogers posits that "Antonio has avoided annihilation on the sheer cliffs of the Wandering Rocks . . . and he has moved through the narrow strait and evaded the menace of Scylla and Charybdis as he comes to face the reality of his manhood" (68). But a consideration of the narrative arrangement in which the adult Antonio is recounting his childhood complicates the semblance of resolution which Kanoza, Rogers, and many others foreground. One might question, When is Antonio telling this and why? In answer to the first part, it appears that Antonio narrates the novel as a grown adult. As to why he indulges in this recollection at this point in his life, we might consider Pace's words on trauma-centered autobiographies: "The memoir as a testimony of traumatic event[s] returns to childhood in an effort to restore meaning to the subject, to mend the tear in the body by rehearsing the

losses, mourning, and healing by which we measure our psychic life” (244). In a discussion of remembrance and mourning as a stage in the recovery process for trauma survivors, Herman similarly posits: “In the second stage of recovery, the survivor tells the story of the trauma. She tells it completely, in depth and in detail. This work of reconstruction actually transforms the traumatic memory, so that it can be integrated into the survivor’s life story” (175). Along these lines, we might see Antonio as a traumatized subject who finds himself compelled to revisit his own distressing childhood. By “choosing to confront the horrors of the past” (Herman 175) and narrativizing them, he seems to be working to piece back together this one particular year so as to somehow, finally, come to terms with it.

Although the novel closes with Antonio seemingly accepting all that occurred, including the death of Ultima, a sense of incompleteness remains. After all, Antonio has narrativized his past but makes no gesture toward how this has been integrated into his present evolving self. A sense of how this past fits into the present self seems to be the next step for him to take, but as he finishes, “Ultima was really buried here. Tonight” (248), he seems unsure of how to take this step or really where to go from the finality of death, be it the concept in general or Ultima’s death specifically.

Consequently, we might go so far as to say that the novel presents coming of age—and the subject formation that this involves—as a process that begins when one is young and remains ongoing. Caminero-Santangelo points toward this kind of an idea when she proposes, “Just as Antonio’s development to maturity is not complete by the novel’s end, so also the process of identity (re)construction is an ongoing process, rather than one that is fully accomplished at the novel’s conclusion” (124). That Antonio shows signs of traumatization adds, it must be noted, an important layer to Caminero-Santangelo’s proposal. Once we bear in mind Being-in-the-world and thrownness as the fundamental terms upon which subject formation in general and childhood in particular turn, it emerges that coming of age and subject

formation involve the struggle to resolve the existential traumas that are part and parcel of Being-in-the-world. Interestingly, because the example of Antonio suggests that these traumas linger into adulthood, we might borrow from trauma theory and conceptualize coming of age as a lengthy movement through “a spiral . . . in which earlier issues are continually revisited on a higher level of integration” (Herman 155). In turn, Antonio can be seen as occupying a position beyond childhood but having to return to it, still working to integrate his childhood experiences into his life’s story and sense of self as he advances into and through adulthood. Anaya’s text thereby begins to challenge the compartmentalization of childhood and adulthood.

Working with a spiral model of coming of age and subject development that is informed by trauma theory leads us to Pace’s point that “In the painful, excruciating repetitive recounting of childhood as traumatic event we find a . . . meaning of childhood performed as radical doubleness; the meaning of childhood is performed as profoundly liminal—not child and not adult—but one and both wounded and commemorated” (240). In the process, a respect for the child and for childhood is encouraged that carries the potential to counter the dismissal of the child as an “other.” The radical otherness of children has been uttered by individuals in various contexts and ranging from “We do not know childhood” (Rousseau xlii) to “Given sufficient information, one can always find a way to understand an idiot, a child, a person from a so-called primitive culture, or a foreigner” (Sartre 43) to “While child specialists inform on stages of development and historians document the cultural record, we know little about the yeastiness of being young in the world” (Lundin 126). Remarks such as these end up denying the child subjectivity and respect by rendering him or her into a kind of “other.” *Bless Me, Ultima* challenges this alienated status of the child by Antonio as a child with a complicated subjectivity. Granted, acknowledgement of the complicated if not traumatizing nature of childhood runs the risk of reinscribing the otherness of childhood by rendering it the object of a patronizing pity. However, Anaya’s text seems to secure for the child

respect over pity by validating him as a fully complicated, and thus fully human, subject. Inspiring such a reading is Anderson's suggestion that "in its articulation of fundamental human experiences, *Bless Me, Ultima* transcends ethnicity, time, and space. Rudolfo Anaya's portrayal of the initiation, which is so effectively done by means of archetypal patterns and images, proves itself to be an extraordinary exploration of mankind's deepest and most intimate thoughts and feelings" (104). It is precisely this universality—in which children share in "mankind's deepest and most intimate thoughts and feelings"—that offers to lift children from the status of "an overlooked underclass" (Griswold 54) to that of fellow subjects with whom adults share the permanent condition of subject formation and Being-in-the-world.

Notes

1. Two essay collections edited by James Holt McGavran, Jr. (*Romanticism and Children's Literature in Nineteenth-Century England* [1991] and *Literature and the Child: Romantic Continuations, Postmodern Contestations* [1999]) provide useful overviews and examinations of romantic constructions of childhood and subsequent figurations.
2. One might look to Pat Mora's picture book *The Desert Is My Mother* (1994) as an example of a text that portrays a joyously liberated childhood enabled by its setting in an untouched desert space.
3. In their respective pieces, Genaro Padilla and Marta Caminero-Santangelo take different approaches to the criticism that *Bless Me, Ultima* has received for its handling of history. While Caminero-Santangelo echoes this criticism by re-indicting the narrative's lack of an "obvious connection" to socio-historical matters (116), Padilla offers a more sympathetic and strategic reading of the ways that "Anaya's mythic concerns . . . [seem] to overwhelm the social contexts of the novel" (128). In his own essay, Horst Tonn offers the excellent postulation—upon which I build here—that "a historical dimension is structurally embedded in the narration" (65). He convincingly contends that "the lack of historical context should not be regarded as a flaw of the novel. Instead, it can be seen as an inherent limitation in the choice of narrative voice which is highly effective in re-creating an approximation of the protagonist's world. The perceptual limitations of the young boy restrict the use of historical material in the text" (65).
4. In her reading of the identity dilemma that Antonio struggles to resolve, Caminero-Santangelo invokes Gloria Anzaldúa's discussion of border identity: "The struggle of Ultima's young protagonist . . . to negotiate a dual inheritance,

the elements of which seem incompatible if not mutually exclusive, may call to mind Gloria Anzaldúa's description of the new mestiza who also negotiates apparently incompatible aspects of identity" (115). The problem with this reading, however, is that it appeals to the surface notion of split identity while disregarding the specific cultural and gender politics at stake in Anzaldúa's discussion and the more existential identity stakes involved in Antonio's situation.

5. The essay "The Representation of Curanderismo in Selected Mexican American Works" by Melissa Pabón with Dr. Héctor Pérez, as well as Matthew Alschbach's master's thesis *Misogyny, Women, and Witchcraft: The Curandera in Mexico Before and After the Conquest* (2008), provide useful introductions to the tradition of curanderismo and the different ways that curanderas have been regarded. Ambivalence toward curanderas has been so entrenched within Mexican/Chicano culture that Gloria Anzaldúa takes it to task (and rewrites it) in her picture books for children. In *Friends from the Other Side* (1993) and *Prietita and the Ghost Woman* (1995), the curandera Doña Lola serves as a wise mentor for Prietita, the young protagonist of the two stories. Another, more recent example of the undoing of this ambivalence can be found in Monica Brown's *Clara and the Curandera* (2011).
6. I borrow here the phrase "epistemic deficit" from Chris Meyers and Sara Waller's discussion of horror texts in which the source of horror is absent. In their words, "The epistemic deficit offers us a glimpse of something worse than anything we could describe . . . or depict . . . , because if it could be described or depicted then it would at least be within the limits of what we can grasp" (121). For Antonio, the dramatic horror of the incident with Lupito lies in the fact that what he witnesses is overwhelmingly outside of what he can grasp. In effect he is left radically disoriented and, therefore, in a panic.

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