

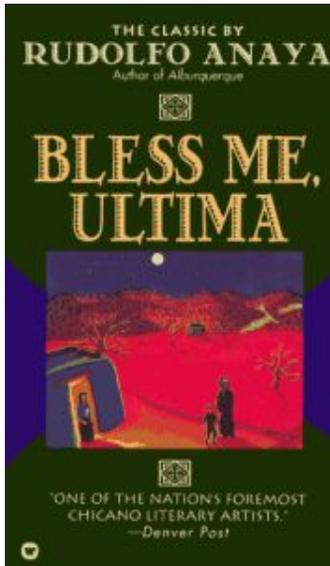
# **The Limits of the Representative Text: Women on the Margins in Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima***



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In my research, I explored the representations of women in the 1972 novel *Bless Me, Ultima* by Rudolfo Anaya to show the limits of using texts as representations of diversity.

## **Ultima as a Representative Text**



Jodi Melamed: literary studies “has been persistently defined within postwar orders as a privileged tool that white Americans can use to get to know difference—to learn the supposed inside stories of people of color.” (*Represent and Destroy*, 2011, pp. XVI)

Image Source: <https://mainehumanities.org/event/lets-talk-about-it-220/>

I became interested in the way teachers represent *Bless Me, Ultima* when a teacher at my high school told me that he let his students choose between reading *Bless Me, Ultima* and reading *Ceremony* by Leslie Marmon Silko. These two books are very different from each other except that they both bring “diversity” to a traditional canon dominated by white, male authors. But why are they interchangeable? In her 2011 book *Represent and Destroy*, Jodi Melamed argues that, after the canon wars of the 1980s, educational institutions began using texts by people of color as cultural representatives. These methods of literary studies continue to exist within secondary education. For example, the National Endowment for the Arts Big Read Program created a teaching guide for *Ultima* that treats the novel as a repository of cultural information and invites students to compare their own cultures to the protagonist Antonio’s without considering differences in privilege. In effect, it encourages teachers to use *Ultima* to teach students about difference as a concept, rather than considering the novel holistically as a literary text. *Ultima* is a wonderful novel, one of my favorite books, but like any text, it can not represent an entire culture.

## Gender in *Ultima*



Image Source: <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/bless-me-ultima-2012>

I began to think about the gender politics of *Ultima* as a representative text when I decided to revise my research for this symposium. One of the main issues of using *Ultima* as a representative text is that the book's women are stereotypical characters who support the growth of the male protagonist, Antonio. Therefore, representational readings of *Ultima* reify stereotypes about Chicano machismo and erase Chicana women.

"It was very sad to see my father cry, but I understood it, because sometimes a man has to cry. Even if he is a man" (15).

"The ways of men are strange and hard to learn..." (25).

"...my father had often said that a man of the llano does not run from a fight" (37).

"The sons must leave the sides of their mothers..." (53).

"...every man is delivered of woman and must be fulfilled by a woman..." (70).

"Ay, María Luna [Antonio's mother]," Ultima interrupted, 'you leave Antonio alone, please. Last night was hard for many men..." (30).

"...what a sin it is for a boy to grow into a man...life destroys the pureness God gives..." (31).

"...a quiet man can learn the secrets of the earth that are necessary for planting..." (41).

"I wished for my mother, but I put the thought away because I knew I was expected to become a man" (57).

"I was growing up and becoming a man and suddenly I realized that I could make decisions" (77).

"Take them to their room,' I said to my mother. It was the first time I had ever spoken to my mother as a man; she nodded and obeyed" (259).

*Ultima* centers on Antonio becoming a man, and manhood takes up a huge amount of space in the novel. These are just a handful of examples of the text's preoccupation with manhood. Women exist on the margins.

**“When [Ultima] came the beauty of the llano unfolded before my eyes...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...Time stood still, and it shared with me all that had been, and all that was to come” (1).**

Antonio says this quote when Ultima, a curandera or spiritual healer, first arrives and begins to guide his journey into manhood. Her knowledge helps him to become a self-sufficient man, and attaining manhood opens up vast physical and temporal spaces for his exploration and existence.

In *Ultima*, men possess and conquer the feminine in order to become men. The novel characterizes the land as female. Antonio’s father Gabriel, a vaquero, refers to the llano as a “virgin” and believes that “man was not to be tied to the earth but free upon it” (6). But both Gabriel and the Antonio’s uncles, the Lunas, use the land for their livelihoods and in order to define their competing visions of manhood. Similarly, Antonio learns about medicinal plants and the llano from Ultima, and uses her spiritual knowledge to gain wisdom that helps him to make decisions “like a man.”

**“I usually spoke very little to my two sisters...They usually spent the entire day in the attic, playing dolls and giggling. I did not concern myself with those things” (7).**

By contrast, women in the novel are constrained spatially and narratologically. They mostly inhabit domestic spaces, particularly his mother Maria, who spends almost the entire novel in the kitchen. Women also inhabit stereotypical roles. They represent either purity and goodness or temptation and evil, playing the roles of mother, prostitute, and witch. Put simply, Antonio does not think women are as important as men.

**“For us Ultima personified goodness...I dropped to my knees. ‘Bless me, Ultima—’ Her hand touched my forehead and her last words were, ‘I bless you in the name of all that is good and strong and beautiful, Antonio...’” (255, 260-61).**

The one woman Antonio pays much attention to is Ultima. Ultima has agency and space for most of the novel, but she finally sacrifices her life for Antonio. This quote comes from the end of the novel, a scene in which Antonio realizes that he has left his childhood behind, takes action, and takes control of a dangerous situation, giving orders to his mother for the first time “as a man.” At this point, Antonio no longer needs Ultima as a guide, and she sacrifices herself so that Antonio’s transition to manhood can be complete. This renders her, finally, into a supporting character in service of Antonio’s growth. She literally spends her last breath complying with Antonio’s command that she bless him. *Ultima* functions as a bildungsroman or coming of age story, and the patriarchal nature of that form is so strong that in order for the male protagonist to thrive, the woman must die.

## Machismo and Stereotype

- Montye P. Fuse: “Mexican American women’s lives have revolved around their roles as wives, mothers, homemakers, or...evildoers bent on destruction” (46).



Image Sources: <http://felipediaz.net/watch-this-bless-me-ultima/>, <http://art-meets-world.com/2013movies/bless-me-ultima/>

In 2003, Montye P. Fuse published an article called “Culture, Tradition, Family: Gender Roles in Rudolfo Anaya’s *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972).” Fuse accepts the gendered premises of this novel: he assumes that Anaya’s female characters lack depth and exist mainly in domestic realms because that is how Mexican American culture is. Fuse assumes that *Ultima* is an accurate representation of all “Mexican American” women, and says we ought to “appreciate” that Anaya includes at least one empowered character, Ultima, since he would have so few models for empowered women in his life (Fuse 46). The assumption that *Ultima* reflects cultural truths perpetuates stereotypes about machismo in Chican@ culture. Reading *Ultima* as a source of cultural information reifies the novel’s representations of a fictional boy’s experience of a time and place specific form of Chican@ culture as accurate representations of all Chican@ people’s experiences of their culture.

## Conclusion



Image Source: <https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/2013/05/14/a-year-in-the-life-of-librotráficoante/>

We say that the “canon wars” of the 1980s are over. And yet. Within higher education and scholarly work, *Ultima* is unlikely to be treated as a blatant representative text. But the fight to even include *Ultima* and other Chican@ texts in high school classrooms continues. In 2010, Arizona passed HB 2281, a law aimed at prohibiting a Mexican American Studies (MAS) class in the Tucson Unified School District (TUSD) that eventually led TUSD to end its entire Social Justice Education Program and ban 84 books in 2012. The books banned in Tucson include *Bless Me*, *Ultima* and another prominent book by a Chican@ author, Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street*. The book ban is no longer in place, but the law is still being fought in court. Compared with other literature written by and about Chican@ people and lives, *Bless Me*, *Ultima* does not substantially threaten gender hierarchies in the United States, but students are still fighting for the most basic right to read *Bless Me*, *Ultima* in the classroom, let alone be taught curricula that engage the text in a holistic rather than representative way.

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