

Anaya, Rudolfo - Author

ESSAYS ON ANAYA'S WORK

# GENRE

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## CONTENTS

- ...ers Tale of Melibee: "A Litel Thyng in Prose" 263  
DANIEL KEMPTON
- ...Book of the Duchess as a Philosophical Vision: The 279  
Argument of Form  
KATHRYN L. LYNCH
- ...of Biculturalism in Southwestern Literature: 307  
The Work of Rudolfo Anaya and Leslie Marmon Silko  
REED WAY DASENBROCK
- ...Mikhail Bakhtin's Place in Genre Theory 321  
EVELYN COBLEY
- ...Pragmatism, Postmodernism, and Critical Style: 339  
The Case of Burke and Derrida  
PAUL JAY

## REVIEWS

- Charles R. Cooper, ed., *Researching Response to Literature 359*  
*and the Teaching of Literature: Points of Departure*;  
Hans Robert Jauss, *Aesthetic Experience and Literary*  
*Hermeneutics*; Kathleen McCormick, Gary Waller, and  
Linda Flower, *Reading Texts: Reading, Responding,*  
*Writing*; Steven Mailloux, *Interpretive Conventions: The*  
*Reader in the Study of American Fiction*; Janice A. Ra-  
dway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and*  
*Popular Literature*; Peter Ruppert, *Reader in a Strange*  
*Land: The Activity of Reading Literary Utopias*; Gary  
Waller, *English Poetry of the Sixteenth Century*,  
by Robert R. Hellenga
- M. M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays,* 369  
by W. G. Regier

Forms of Biculturalism  
in Southwestern Literature:  
The Work of Rudolfo Anaya  
and Leslie Marmon Silko

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One of the important issues in the consideration of any work by "minority" or "ethnic" writers is the question of categorization: in what category does one place the work? Even more basically, what does one call the work? Should one, to use the examples that will concern us here, consider the work of Rudolfo Anaya as Chicano literature and Leslie Marmon Silko as Native American literature? Or are their works more usefully considered as part of American literature? Such questions are often dismissed as trivial by those committed to the notion that we should (and can) approach works of literature in themselves, that the categories with which we organize literature don't really matter and are only an administrative or institutional convenience. My sense—in contrast—is that categories are never neutral or simply instrumental, that the categories we use help shape the phenomena we perceive. So these questions are not simply questions for booksellers or librarians. The assumption that such categories are unimportant depends upon the prior assumption that we can perceive and describe literary works in some neutral way. But as critical descriptions are always generic descriptions and, as I hope to show, generic descriptions are culturally grounded, we therefore need to reflect critically on the categories we use in our criticism if those categories are to enable—not disable—our criticism.

In this context, though there is a good deal that could be said in favor of considering the work of writers such as Anaya and Silko in either the broad, inclusive category of American literature or the narrower or more precise one of ethnic identity, Chicano or Native American, I want to argue that both such rubrics are likely to prove at

least partially misleading. I would want to call them Southwestern writers instead. This doesn't mean that the term Southwestern literature refers to a group of works with a specifiable set of features. There is no genre of Southwestern literature. Nevertheless, as I hope to make clear, the term can retain a certain utility despite—or perhaps because of—its lack of precision. There is a characteristically Southwestern generic (or perhaps cross-generic) space.

The term Southwestern literature is, of course, not a neutral descriptive term. By naming a literature by reference to a region, it immediately places the phenomenon it seeks to describe within the context of American regionalism: we have had the New England local color movement of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman and Sarah Orne Jewett, the Midwestern regionalism of Hamlin Garland and later Willa Cather, the Southern Renaissance of Faulkner, the Fugitives, Eudora Welty, and others, and now yet another region finds its voice in the work of Frank Waters, Edward Abbey, N. Scott Momaday, Simon Ortiz, Anaya, Silko, and others.<sup>1</sup> To be a region of American literature is to be interesting because different from the rest of the country and yet not so different as not to seem part of America. The interest and tension of regional literature is that of a part-whole relationship, and historically speaking the literature of a given area has ceased to flourish when the part became enough like the whole that the tension between them ceased or at least ceased to be interesting. There is thus a tradition of regional literatures within American literature but no one regional literature has really created and sustained a tradition of its own. The history of regional literature in this country is that of a continual dying away or perhaps dying into the mainstream tradition.

Southwestern literature looked far more like these other regional phenomena before the explosion over the last fifteen years of Native American and Chicano writing.<sup>2</sup> The standard line about the Southwest is to call it tricultural, as all of the tourist brochures do, yet in the very way they say it, like Catholic theologians they seem to make the three into one, implying that a harmonious convergence has taken place producing a unified culture with tricultural origins. It was probably possible to maintain this view as long as Anglo writing about the area predominated: it is no accident that the tourist brochures sound like the primitivistic rhapsodies of Mary Austin and Mabel Dodge Luhan. But the emergence of Chicano and Native American writing has clearly established that the three cultures haven't harmo-

niously converged; the perspectives and voices of the different communities remain radically distinct. This does not imply that they have had no effect on each other; just the contrary. The Southwest is less a region with a culture of its own than a zone of cultural contact, as it has been at least since Coronado. But, as the mention of Coronado should remind us, cultural contact in the Southwest has meant above all cultural conflict. So I would say that Southwestern literature has less a single tradition than a heritage of conflict and contact. But this could be put the other way: by now its tradition is this heritage of conflict and contact.

In what follows, I would like to make these general considerations with which I have begun more precise, and I would like to do so by discussing the work of Rudolfo Anaya and Leslie Marmon Silko, arguably the best Southwestern Chicano writer and the best Southwestern Native American writer. This is admittedly only a small portion of the rich panorama of contemporary Southwestern writing, but it is an apposite one in that their work seems at the very center of contemporary Southwestern literature, affording many rich examples of such cultural conflict and contact. For example, Antonio Marez, the protagonist of Anaya's first and best novel, *Bless Me, Ultima* (1971), is caught among the conflicting authorities of the *curandera* (or curer) Ultima, the Church, and school, and it is easy to see these three as figures for the Indian, Spanish and Anglo cultures. But of course Ultima is Spanish speaking, one sign of the synthesis between Spanish and Indian culture that has formed Mexican and Mexican-American culture.<sup>3</sup> But that Chicano culture is not completely unified in itself, as Anaya shows in the novel by the conflicts between the priest and Ultima, between the *vaqueros* of the *llano* (or plains) and the farmers of the valley, and finally between the more traditional and the more Americanized members of the community.

Tayo, the protagonist of Silko's masterpiece, *Ceremony* (1977), is of mixed blood, half-Laguna and half-white. His fellow Indians, particularly Emo, his *bête-noire*, taunt him by calling him a half-breed, but as the story evolves, it is Emo who is revealed to be the real half-breed, poisoned by white ways, while Tayo turns or returns to his native traditions. And though *Ceremony*, like *Bless Me, Ultima*, is predominantly about two cultures, the missing third enters in, if somewhat schematically, as if the authors feel they need all three. The cattle whose purchase by Josiah and rescue by Tayo are so central to the novel

are Mexican; a Mexican woman plays an important role in Tayo's maturation; and Betonie, the Navajo medicine man who guides Tayo during his cure, is also of mixed blood, with a Mexican grandmother.

Thus, if we take these two novels as representative—which I think we can—Southwestern literature is a literature of cultures still in a contact which involves conflict. Even where a melding of cultures has taken place, that only sets up new conflicts in turn, as the Anglo influence on Indian culture creates anti-traditional Indians like Emo who then enter into conflict with more traditional Indians. The analogous theme of the *pocho* is a central theme in Chicano literature and is a major source of tension within the world depicted by Chicano writers.<sup>4</sup>

So I would insist that no unified culture or voice has emerged that we can call Southwestern; the essence of the Southwest is a diversity that does not comfortably co-exist, and there is in fact great diversity and conflict within each community as well as across the three major communities. But that is paradoxically one reason why the term Southwestern remains of use: we need a term to describe the literature that emerges from the cultural contact situation of the Southwest. Anaya's work can indeed be considered within Chicano literature; Silko's within Native American literature. But we need a term to show what these works have in common with, say, the work of an Anglo writer like John Nichols who has depicted in his work exactly the same conflict of cultures.<sup>5</sup>

I would therefore say that the term Southwestern literature remains a useful term if we use it, not to suggest an unequivocal, local colorist tradition, but to mark out a zone, existing in social life and depicted in literature, in which these differing traditions come into play. There is thus no single Southwestern literary tradition, but there is a space we can usefully call Southwestern.

Now, what use is there in calling that space Southwestern as opposed to dissolving these works into the constituent and far more precise categories of Native American, Chicano, and Anglo literature? One use we have already seen is that these works are profoundly about these cultural contacts and conflicts, so thematic analyses of these works should profit from keeping the larger Southwestern context in mind. But what I would also like to suggest is that formal or generic analyses of these works have only to gain as well. For

example, something that has troubled readers of Anaya's collection of short stories, *The Silence of the Llano*, and Silko's collection, *Storyteller*, is that they reprint without alteration parts of Anaya's and Silko's earlier novels. (In Silko's case, the evolution is even more complex, as independently written poems and tales were woven into *Ceremony* and then published separately in *Storyteller*.) The reaction of an Anglo reader to this is easy enough to sketch: since Aristotle, a central notion of Western aesthetics has been that a work of art ought to possess organic unity or coherence, what Stephen Dedalus after Aquinas called *integritas*. It ought to be of one piece. From an Aristotelian perspective, taking material from one work and putting it in another is a failure of design and coherence. The integrity of each work is violated by such reuse. But Silko and Anaya have a rather different notion of coherence, I think, and they give us in their works the terms with which to understand their practice. We need to understand their cultural context before we can understand the generic identity or coherence of their works.

These writers were born into societies with rather different notions and forms of narrative from that implicit in the tradition of the novel. Antonio in *Bless Me, Ultima* loves to go to his uncles' in El Puerto because there he can sit and listen to *cuentos* all night long. The Hispanic culture in New Mexico has a rich tradition of *cuentos* and *cuentistas*, tales and storytellers, and some of the *cuentos* that have been collected in rural New Mexico are in origin medieval Spanish, even Moorish, stories that have been transmitted orally across the centuries.<sup>6</sup> In such an oral tradition, material is of course freely reused, by one *cuentista* combining stories or by another retelling a *cuento* he has heard. T. S. Eliot wrote, "Immature poets borrow; mature poets steal," and Eliot's dictum perfectly expresses the attitude towards "originality" expressed by an oral tradition such as that of the *cuentistas* except that Eliot's use of the term steal betrays his own consciousness of the normative Western attitude he is opposing. Anaya has himself gestured towards the importance of the *cuento* tradition for his work, not just in Antonio's occasional references but in his having translated a collection of *cuentos*.

This emphasis on the *cuento* form explains a number of formal characteristics of Anaya's work. The stories abstracted from his novels to form *The Silence of the Llano* are in fact much less *cuento*-like than many other self-contained narrative units of his novels, the passages

about the Golden Carp in *Bless Me, Ultima* and the visions of Crispin in *Heart of Aztlán* and of Salomon in *Tortuga*. These take place in a frankly other-worldly realm in which cosmic/mythic powers reveal themselves to the protagonists and direct their actions in the "this world" of the rest of the novel. These are far more self-consciously written or literary than the *cuentos* and they don't tend to work within the orthodox Catholic landscape of the *cuentos* but they share with the *cuentos* a sense that another more fundamental spiritual realm is out there waiting to be encountered and that this encounter can powerfully shape and redirect our actions in this world.<sup>7</sup> And the manner in which these *cuento*-like narratives interpenetrate with the rest of Anaya's more conventionally novelistic narratives is a reflection of the way the realm of the spiritual interpenetrates the world of the ordinary both in the *cuentos* and in Anaya's own fiction. The formal discontinuities and lack of Aristotelian coherence in Anaya's long works of fiction can thus be traced to the fact that another, *cuento*-based sense of narrative is operative in his novels.

Leslie Marmon Silko has been even more explicit about her culture's sense of narrative and how that informs her fiction. Her most recent work, *Storyteller*, revolves, as the title suggests, around storytelling and the figure of the storyteller, but *Ceremony* does this as well. Stories shape our lives, in her account, both by giving form to events and by suggesting in advance the form events will have. In a flashback at the beginning of *Ceremony*, Tayo is trying to inspire an Anglo soldier to keep going in their attempt to carry out the wounded Rocky, Tayo's cousin:

Tayo talked to the corporal almost incessantly, walking behind him with his end of the blanket stretcher, telling him it wasn't much farther now, and all down hill from there. He made a story for all of them, a story to give them strength. The words of the story poured out of his mouth as if they had substance, pebbles and stone extending to hold the corporal up, to keep his knees from buckling, to keep his hands from letting go of the blanket. (11)

And despite the "as if" in this passage, Silko's view is that stories do have substance. We all script our actions in advance or else have them scripted for us, and the stories we hear and tell are these scripts. The climactic action (or rather non-action) of *Ceremony* is when Tayo doesn't kill Emo in order to save his friend Harley. Tayo presents his choice as

that between two stories, one plotted by the "witchery," the other by the ceremony Tayo has undergone:

It had been a close call. The witchery had almost ended the story according to its plan; Tayo had almost jammed the screwdriver into Emo's skull the way the witchery had wanted, savoring the yielding bone and membrane as the steel ruptured the brain. Their deadly ritual for the autumn solstice would have been completed by him. He would have been another victim, a drunk Indian war veteran settling an old feud; and the Army doctors would say that the indications of this end had been there all along, since his release from the mental ward at the Veterans' Hospital in Los Angeles. . . . He had arrived at a convergence of patterns; he could see them clearly now. The stars had always been with them, existing beyond memory, and they were all held together there. . . . Accordingly, the story goes on with these stars of the old war shield; they go on, lasting until the fifth world ends, then maybe beyond. (265-66)

And Tayo survives where the other Indian war vets do not because he has this faith in the old stories and ceremonies. He follows their plot; the others fall prey to white plots and die according to the end of the story they have chosen.

We thus get a far more explicit sense of the storytelling tradition and what it means for the characters from Silko's work than from Anaya's, even from *Ceremony* alone without the later volume *Storyteller*. This is because while Anaya is content to allude to the *cuento* tradition and put *cuento*-like stories, visions and dreams in the minds and speeches of his characters, Silko runs much greater risks with the coherence of her work by putting her versions of traditional stories directly into *Ceremony*. Running throughout *Ceremony*, set off from the rest because printed as poetry and not given as the thoughts or speeches of any one character, are a number of traditional mythic stories, primarily about drought and how to end it.<sup>8</sup> These are the stories that we find in *Storyteller* as well, and each story is printed in a self-contained unit in *Storyteller* whereas it may be dispersed through the narrative in *Ceremony*. The dispersal is far more powerful, especially when one recognizes the coherence of the dispersed story, because then one starts to look for (and find) connections between Tayo's story and the more explicitly mythical stories. Thus Silko violates any Aristotelian notion of *integritas* because stories don't work that way in the world she is depicting. Precisely the opposite of the Western tradition of closure and boundedness obtains: stories are valued for their overlap, for the way they lead to new stories in turn.



Thus both Anaya and Silko tell us something about how they should be read, and it is important to listen for such clues, for if we approach their work with expectations based solely on Anglo-American cultural and narrative forms, we will misread because we will not understand their reliance on the different norms of their own culture. Forms and genres are culturally embedded, and the first step towards a proper appreciation and understanding of these Southwestern literary works is to recognize that we cannot impose our own cultural norms and forms on work with a different cultural context.

That is the first and perhaps most important step. Yet it is crucial not to stop there, with a recognition of the otherness of these texts, for if we concentrate exclusively on their otherness, on their roots in a culture foreign to us, then we may misread them in another, subtler way. First, we are much less likely to read them at all, as we will have categorized them as belonging to others, with little to say to us unless we are especially interested in that particular other. Second and more importantly, though one must recognize the heritage of the literary forms of their own cultures in the work of Anaya and Silko (and other Chicano and Native American writers), it would be absurd to claim that such formal inheritances explain everything about the forms of these works. These works are after all novels with a fair number—if not all—of the typical characteristics of that Western form. *Bless Me, Ultima* is a classic *Bildungsroman*, the account of a young boy's passage from innocence to experience. More specifically, it might be titled "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Boy in a New Mexican Town," as it shares with Joyce's *Bildungsroman* the voyage through the Church and an emerging—though in Anaya's case, far less explicit—sense of the protagonist's deeper vocation as an artist. *Ceremony* represents a later, equally inevitable stage in the development towards maturity, which is the stage at which one has to cope—or at least try to cope—with the stresses and even disintegration experience can bring. This has been an important theme in American literature, and it has traditionally been the war novel (or, more precisely, the after-the-war novel) that has depicted this. *In Our Time* provides one familiar and apposite example of the kind of work I am referring to. Other works of Native American fiction have worked within this mode, which is unsurprising given the bleak landscape that Native American writers have to depict: D'Arcy McNickle's *The Surrounded* and James Welch's first two novels, *Winter*

in *the Blood* and *The Death of Jim Loney*, are comparably naturalistic novels in which protagonists try—but fail—to cope with the stresses of their lives. And *Ceremony* clearly has generic affiliations with this naturalistic tradition of American literature.

*Ceremony*, however, is not entirely of this genre, for it breaks with it precisely where Tayo breaks with the story plotted by the witchery discussed above. The two breaks, in fact, are the same, for the story plotted by the witchery was a thoroughly naturalistic narrative of a war vet's failure to cope, of "a drunk Indian war veteran settling an old feud." Like Hemingway's Nick Adams or D'Arcy McNickle's Archilde but more violently, Tayo would have succumbed to the forces of disintegration, and *Ceremony* would have ended in a fitting manner for a naturalistic novel. But *Ceremony* invokes that kind of story only in the end to swerve deliberately away from it: the naturalistic mode is a representation of precisely what Tayo (and Silko with him) must transcend in order to achieve the wholeness of the ceremony. And Silko revises the naturalistic mode precisely to show Tayo's victory over it. Yet, that naturalistic mode has structured our experience of the novel for a long time, and that generic affiliation is therefore an important part of the book's meaning.

Moreover, it is important to realize as well that these works are in English, are part of English language literature simply by virtue of the language in which they are written. It is this fact more than any other that indicates the distance between them and their cultural roots: Silko is no traditional storyteller, Anaya no *cuentista*. Silko is certainly aware of this, as a major theme in *Ceremony* is how the ceremonies and stories must change in order to keep up with the changing circumstances the people find themselves in. The medicine man Betonie and the protagonist Tayo don't do things the old way, nor are they completely of the traditional culture, but their argument is that they are truer to the spirit of the old ceremonies than are the traditionalists who keep exactly to the letter of the old ways. As Betonie tells Tayo:

The people nowadays have an idea about the ceremonies. They think the ceremonies must be performed exactly as they have always been done . . . But long ago when the people were given these ceremonies, the changing began, if only in the aging of the yellow gourd or the shrinking of the skin around the eagle's claw, if only in the different voices from generation to generation, singing the chants. You see, in many ways, the ceremonies

have always been changing. . . . things which don't shift and grow are dead things. They are things the witchery people want. (132-133)

In passages such as these, Silko is implicitly commenting on her own work, arguing that though she may not be a storyteller in the old way, she is nonetheless keeping that spirit alive in a new shape and form.

Anaya seems less alive to the difference between his situation and that of a *cuentista*. In his introduction to the volume of *cuentos* he translated, he argues for the continuous vitality of the *cuento* tradition:

Because the cuentos are alive! We hear them in the wind which sweeps across our mountains and deserts. We sense them in the work of the people—in the sweat of summer when the gurgle of muddy water brings life to the fields and at harvest gatherings when groups sit around the fire nibbling the fresh roasted nuts of the pinon. The stories are in the people as they work and dance. They are in the vision of beauty and art which has been kept alive in the craft of the *santeros*, the colors of the painters, in the songs the native poets sing, and in the *colchas* and rugs the women weave! (8-9)

I find no note of irony in the passage, but it is hard to imagine it being written seriously in the 1980s. How many *santeros* are there today? How many *colchas* and rugs are woven in New Mexico? How many people are working and dancing in the fields while they nibble fresh-roasted pinon nuts? The society Anaya celebrates here is indeed the society from which the *cuentos* came, but I am afraid that Anaya's nostalgic celebration of it here doesn't manage to bring it back to life. And in general Anaya has had more difficulty in finding an appropriate modern equivalent for the *cuentos* than Silko has for the ceremonies. The blind singer Crispin, in *Heart of Aztlán*, could perhaps be seen as a contemporary recreation of the traditional *cuentista*, but Crispin isn't integral to the novel in the way Betonie is. Crispin at most comments on the story; Betonie is in the best storyteller tradition in that he helps to *make* the story, not just to record it or comment on it. And it may be that it is Silko's awareness of the vast gap between her and her traditions that helps her to find a way to bridge them; Anaya, seemingly oblivious to the existence of any such gap, is less successful at bridging it, at finding contemporary equivalents to the traditional forms he reveres.

I hope that by now I haven't undermined my earlier analysis of the debts each writer owes to his or her cultural roots as much as put that analysis in its proper perspective. Neither writer is unproblematically

or unequivocally the voice of a cultural community. Both are in their very situations between two cultures, neither completely one nor the other, and they show this by their choice of protagonists, the bilingual Antonio who learns so well at school and with Ultima and Tayo, the mixed-blood war veteran who nonetheless turns back to Indian ways. Both writers seek ultimately to use the language of the one culture, the dominant Anglo culture, to speak for and represent their own. But I think that Silko has been more successful in this endeavor to date because she realizes more acutely the situation she is in. To communicate in a language is at least partly to be caught in its forms, and so neither writer can be understood simply in terms of their own native cultural forms. But Silko relies upon Western forms only finally to have her protagonist break free of them and perceive them as Anglo forms: his perceptions are hers and should be ours as well. But if we feel by the end of *Ceremony* that she has recreated the narrative forms of her own culture, she has nonetheless done so in English, in a form communicable to us. She is still speaking to us in our language, even if in her own voice.

The temptations in studying such bicultural writers is to deny their biculturality, to privilege one of their formative cultures in the name of authenticity or the other in the name of universality. And the temptation is stronger when the cultures are so obviously not fused but still separate and in a state of tension and interaction. But finally we have to resist such a temptation and try for an analysis that sees these writers and others like them as a product of both cultures. If genres are cultural constructs, these bicultural writers create works of mixed genres as a way to represent that biculturality. These writers are where their formative cultures meet, and it is precisely for their representation of that meeting ground which can be a battle ground that these writers are Southwestern, Southwestern in the sense of representing through that very conflict the meeting and battle ground that is the Southwest.

#### NOTES

1. No one history of American regionalism has been written, though the topic cries out for a book-length treatment. The best studied regional tradition is probably the Southern; for some of the classic studies, see Rubin, Rubin & Jacobs, and Holman.

2. This can best be seen by looking at a book like Gaston's 1961 study, which assumes a far more coherent and univocal tradition that one could do today and disposes of "non-Anglo-American literature" about the area (that in Indian languages, French and Spanish) in a single long footnote (16-17). Even Powell's 1974 book

completely ignores non-Anglo literature, whether contemporary or traditional. A good survey of contemporary Native American writing can be found in Wiget (70-120), of contemporary Chicano writing in Tatum (50-166).

3. This statement might have been challenged some years ago, for Chicano activists tended to stress the Indian roots of Chicano culture, as indeed Anaya has. But Elizondo puts the current consensus well: "Out of the ancient cultures of Spain and Mexico a new and distinct *person* has been formed, being neither 'pure' Spanish nor Mexican, but *Mestizo*." (17)

4. See, most notably, the "first Chicano novel," *Pocho* by José Antonio Villarreal and, for a discussion of the theme of the pocho in Chicano literature, Tatum, "Contemporary Chicano Prose Fiction," 245-248.

5. This is not to say that all Southwestern writers see things the same way. There is a tendency for Anglo writers to see the Southwest as the site of a conflict between man and nature; Chicano and Native American writers never lose sight of the cultural conflict. For a good reflection of this see Lensink, especially the contrast between Anaya's essay, "An American Chicano in King Arthur's Court" (113-118), and those by a number of Anglo writers, including Nichols's "The Writer as Revolutionary" (101-112). This means, in terms of the special sense of the term Southwestern used here, that all writing by Chicano and Native American writers in the area is Southwestern; much Anglo writing, however, is more part of the thematic landscape of traditional Western writing, which is in important respects different. For a longer treatment of this issue than we have space for here, see my review of Lensink, forthcoming in *Rocky Mountain Review*.

6. See, in addition to Griego y Maestas, Espinosa (7-19).

7. For another, more orthodox Catholic body of fiction based on the *cuento* tradition that may have helped Anaya see the relevance of the *cuentos* to his art, see the stories of Fray Angelico Chavez, now most accessible in Padilla.

8. See Wiget (88-89).

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