

Anaya, Rudolfo - Author

ESSAYS ON ANAYA'S WORK

GENRE

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

Reed Way Dasenbrock
New Mexico State University

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.¹ 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.² 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.³ 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.⁴

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.⁵

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.⁶ 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