

Essays in Anaya's work

[Return to article page](#)

This story was printed from LookSmart's FindArticles where you can search and read 3.5 million articles from over 700 publications.

<http://www.findarticles.com>

Transnationalizing Aztlan: Rudolfo Anaya's Heart of Aztlan and US proletarian literature. (Critical Essay)

MELUS, Spring, 2002, by Jamil Khader

Despite the recent interest in the intertextual dimension of Rudolfo Anaya's *Heart of Aztlan* in relation to US literary traditions (Gish) and classical European literature (Taylor), Anaya's intricate referencing of US proletarian fiction remains surprisingly unexamined. Indeed, the discursive strategies of proletarian literary production abound in this text: work hazards, unemployment, the indictment of capitalism and other power structures, sadistic bosses, corrupt union leaders, mentor characters, strikes, and conversion narratives. But above all, Anaya's second novel satisfies the major criteria in the definition of proletarian literature: social realism and the expectation that literature must prefigure "revolutionary optimism" (Murphy; Aaron; Foley).

Contrary to the critics who contend that Anaya's rewriting of pre-Cortesian millennial prophecy is incompatible with his vision of radical politics, (1) I maintain that the tension between "form, content, and overall meaning" (2) in *Heart* can be productively analyzed and its radical politics be discerned only when examined in the context of the thematic and structural strategies that typify US proletarian discourse and its global links to leftist, socialist, and Marxist literary movements. (3) In his novel, Anaya de-couples Aztlan from its nationalist and racial subtext in the Chicano Movement, proposing instead to interpret cultural memory through a class analysis. I argue here that by embedding Aztlan within the contemporary structures of global capitalism, not the history of ethnic oppression in the US, by intertwining myth and the international division of labor, Jung and Marx so to speak, Anaya manages to turn the mythic homeland into a transnational topos that decenters ethnocentric narratives of identity and envisions a politics of love and solidarity which will lead towards a radical affirmation of the human will.

US proletarian literary production, however, constitutes an immense body of texts. I have chosen, therefore, to juxtapose Anaya's *Heart* (1976) with Tillie Olsen's *Yonondio: From the Thirties* (1974) for three main reasons. First, both texts were completed and published in the same historical context of the social and intellectual struggles for civil fights in the US among Chicanos (the Chicano Movement) and women (the second wave of feminism). This period in US history witnessed the rise of radical politics; the affirmation of identities, be they racial, sexual, or ethnic; the struggle for civil fights, equality, and justice among diverse marginalized constituencies; as well as the student, anti-American and anti-war global protest movements. Second, these novels utilize the cultural memory of the First Nations of the Americas to represent the voices of the dispossessed proletariat. And finally, *Heart* and *Yonondio* share astonishing similarities in form and content because of their grounding in proletarian realism. (4)

In their introduction to the influential anthology, *Aztlan: Essays on the Chicano Homeland*, Anaya and Francisco Lomeli posit that "Through Aztlan we come to better understand psychological time (identity), regional make-up (place), and evolution (historical time)," without which Chicano/as would be "contemporary displaced nomads, suffering the diaspora in our homeland" (iv). *Heart*, however, further shows that through Aztlan, Chicano/as come also to appreciate an ideology (international socialist and Marxist politics and aesthetics) that connects the Chicano struggle for civil rights with other revolutionary movements at home and abroad. *Heart* was conceived in the context of the popular spread of Chicano/a cultural nationalism and the Chicano/a struggle for civil rights in the late 1960s, which is usually referred to as *E1 Movimiento*, or the Chicano Movement (Meier and Ribera; Fox). This national social movement protested and fought against Anglo-American racism, oppression, and

exploitation of la raza. Chicano/as suffered from extreme levels of poverty, deplorable housing and working conditions, police brutality, and limited access to higher education (Klor de Alva).

As a movement based on an ideology of cultural nationalism, the Chicano Movement adopted the neoindigenist aesthetics prevalent in Latin America in the twenties and thirties by appropriating the Aztec myth of Aztlan as the unifying symbol of political struggle for Chicano identity and rights. (5) This Aztec motif gained much currency after the First National Chicano Youth Conference in Denver in 1969 and their manifesto *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlan*, which, as Juan Bruce-Novoa notes, celebrated Alurista's vision of a common cultural heritage through "a mythic Amerindian philosophy that can reunite Chicanos back to Nature through a preColumbian heritage based on the harmony of all life, which would serve as the foundation for a new nation" (81). The Chicano Movement, therefore, aggressively promoted a national/racial consciousness among Chicanos in their struggle for national self-determination. Unfortunately, in their passionate valorization of national and racial consciousness, the Chicano Movement not only disparaged Chicano proletarian culture, by obliterating the elitist and bourgeois origins of the myth in Mexico, but also "placed too great an emphasis on race and racism and thus obscured the real sources of socioeconomic exploitation that victimize Latinos along with other oppressed groups" (Klor de Alva 70).

Written in the context of the Chicano Movement's struggles for civil rights, *Heart* refracts this social and political force in the thinly disguised presence of Cesar Chavez, the leader of the United Farm Workers of America (UFW) as the novel's protagonist Clemente Chavez and in the reproduction of the sexual politics of the Chicano Movement. What distinguished Chavez from other leaders and elevated him to the national status of a hero and a saint is that he restored the dignity of the farm workers of la raza and reaffirmed their worth as human beings. He recognized their cultural memory and celebrated their daily practices of survival and cultural strength (Oboler 61). Moreover, in contrast to a long history of Mexican American militant labor and union organizations, Chavez renounced violence as a strategy of struggle. In "*El Plan de Delano*," Chavez states: "Our revolution shall not be an armed one, but we want the order which now exists to be undone, and that a new social order replace it" (qtd. in Alurista 26). His philosophy of nonviolence had a tremendous impact on the way the American public responded to his tactics. As Geoffrey Fox writes, his insistence on passive resistance made the farm workers "appear more sympathetic, if not simply pathetic," and made Chavez "seem a close parallel" to Dr. Martin Luther King, who "had already won support from liberal white Americans across the country" (118-19). The historical Chavez is also important for Anaya's novel because he offers another link to internationalizing Aztlan. The slogan, *La Huelga Coninua* (The Strike Continues), used in his strikes, as Fox points out, "echoed a revolutionary slogan from the third world, originally from Mozambique, *A Lutta Continua* (The Struggle Continues), which had become an international symbol of tenacity" (118).

Yonnonidio was also completed in the context of radical politics and the struggle for civil rights and equality. However, this novel has a unique double historical investment in these struggles, an investment that spans four decades and two eras of revolutionary ideologies, the Depression and the 1960s/70s. Olsen, then a member of the Young Communist League, originally began writing *Yonnonidio* in 1932, but abandoned it a few years later because of her involvement with the Communist Party USA. As Mickey Pearlman and Abby Werlock explain, the completion of the novel was interrupted, or disrupted, because Olsen was charged with vagrancy (being a Communist) and was sent to jail (39). The major part of the first chapter, however, was published as a short story, "The Iron Throat," in *The Partisan Review* in 1934. But as "A Note about this Book" clarifies, four decades later, "odd tattered pages, lines in yellowed notebooks, scraps" were uncovered. Working through these "scrawls and fragments," Olsen had to selectively reconstruct the text from "two to fourteen versions." Thus, the recovered and belatedly completed *Yonnonidio* emerged in the context of both the radical politics of the 1930s, mainly the Communist Old Left and the socialist and anarchist heritage of the previous decades (Rosenfelt, "From" 136), as well as the contemporary movements of the 1960s/1970s, mainly civil fights and feminist.

To this extent, reading Anaya with Olsen underscores the differences in these authors' ideological positionings

regarding issues of gender and the sexual politics underpinning both the Chicano Movement and the CPUSA. Indeed, Anaya and Olson take diametrically opposed views on these matters. Anaya's *Heart* seems to reproduce the sexist machismo of Chicanismo, as evident in the subordinate role that the mother Adelita plays in the novel. The Movement insisted that the Chicana woman does not need to be liberated and simply affirmed the traditional values and power structures within the Chicano communities. Notwithstanding his encouragement of women's participation in the movement, Chavez was quoted as saying: "If you haven't got your wife behind you, you can't do many things. There's got to be peace at home" (Oboler 73). In their rush to promote cultural nationalism through the exaltation of male supremacy, the Chicano Movement and UFW obliterated completely the triple oppression of subaltern Chicanas and their victimization as poor women of color. Thus, in its androcentric viewpoint, Anaya's novel can be easily aligned with other masculinist proletarian fiction, most notably John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), with its representation of the women in the novel's interchapters as well as of Ma Joad, notwithstanding her hysteric "revolt," as either behind their husbands or somewhere in the back, performing their traditional subordinate roles to keep the "fambly" together.

In contrast, Olsen abrogates any political dictates in her representation of women and their roles in society. The historical irony here is that it was Olsen who, as early as 1934, addressed the issue of oppressed Chicana in her first published poem, "I Want You Women Up North to Know." Interestingly, Olsen links the Chicana dream of a better world to the proletarian international struggle that was signaled by the Bolshevik revolution in Russia in 1917 (Burkom and Williams). As has been noted by critics, Olsen critically engages the dominant gender politics informing CPUSA and "reveal[s] starkly the destructive interactions of class and sex under patriarchal capitalism," in Rosenfelt's words ("From" 171). In her brilliant analysis of Olsen's problematic position within CPUSA, for example, Rosenfelt identifies three contradictions that emerge from Olsen's affiliation with radical politics of the thirties: the conflict between participation in the movement as a writer or as an activist, an academic or an organizer; the paradox in the left's tendency to foster art and social consciousness while impeding artistic freedom; and the problem of sexual politics of the CPUSA, although the party was consistently concerned with the Woman Question. Olsen's novel, therefore, constitutes a proletarian feminist text, which is firmly grounded in women's narratives of desire and affliction: pregnancy, maternity, domestic terror, rape, miscarriage, and sterilization (Rabinowitz). Nevertheless, as Rosenfelt remarks, Yonnonidio falls short of asserting women's sexual freedom per se (169) when compared with other radical socialist feminist texts such as Agnes Smedley's *Daughter of Earth* (1973) or Meridel Le Sueur's *The Girl* (1978).

Besides the similarities in the context of their production, and despite their opposite views on gender and sexual politics, *Heart* and *Yonnonidio* invoke in their titles a hemispheric Native American cultural memory: the Aztec cultural memory and the Iroquois vernacular tradition of the dirge, respectively. (6) The appeal to Amerindian culture in these novels constitutes a radical discursive strategy at a time when the US public was still recovering from the ramifications of the Oglala Sioux incident in 1973, when two members of the American Indian Movement were shot and killed by federal marshals, after the failed attempt of AIM to declare the Wounded Knee reservation as the "Independent Oglala Sioux Nation." Anaya's utilization of the myth of Aztlan reminds us that the indigenous culture and history that were destroyed by colonial holocaust continue to suffer under the US government's policies of land expropriation and pauperization of contemporary Native American communities. The annihilation of the Aztecs and the oppression of the Indians intertwine in *Heart* with the adverse conditions of the Chicano/a proletariat in capitalist America.

As such, Anaya's deployment of hemispheric American Indian myth should not be simply conflated with the appropriation of Aztlan and the neoindigenist aesthetics, which were designed to disseminate national and racial consciousness among Chicano/as. Anaya, for one, transforms the myth in a manner that ultimately avoids reducing Aztlan to a referent for ontological plenitude. (7) Instead of romanticizing the mythic homeland as the center of the Chicano race and nation, Anaya grounds the mythopoetic structures of Aztlan in a nuanced reading of the class contradictions in US capitalism that renders the oppressed and exploited Chicano workers at the bottom of US society. Deconstructing the primacy of national consciousness in favor of foregrounding class

divisions, Anaya proves to be, as Jorge Klor de Alva writes, one of those "individuals with vision and imagination [who could] interpret, articulate, and clarify, through the discourse of art and myth, the objective bases of class struggle in a way that would be intelligible to the community" (73). By associating Heart with US proletarian literature and its international connections, Anaya dispels the cultural nationalism of the Chicano Movement, asserting instead the primacy of class struggle in the lives of the subaltern Chicanos that, in turn, renders them part of the international socialist movements.

For Olsen, referencing Native American oral tradition is an act of aligning herself with the subversive and counter-hegemonic tradition in American literature and its democratic as well as egalitarian foundations. Drawing on Walt Whitman's poem "Yonnonidio," Olsen uses Whitman's referencing of the Iroquois dirge as the epigraph to her text, setting the author's tone toward the future of her working-class characters. The "lament for the aborigines" is employed as a metaphor to register Olsen's own dirge for the proletariat who, like the Native Americans as Whitman wrote, "unlimn'd they disappear." Nonetheless, there remains a discursive tension between this dirge and the revolutionary elfin with which Olsen concludes her novel. The distant intimations of the revolution will ensure that proletarian literature will, in Whitman's words, "[pass] them to the future." (8)

In addition to the analogous contexts of their production and their appeal to hemispheric Native American cultural memory, these novels grapple, in an almost uncanny way, with similar themes and motifs. For the purposes of this article, I have divided them into three sets: a) themes that provide the background of the narratives: displacement and relocation of working-class families, unemployment, poverty, and the family as a site of violence; b) themes that relate to problems on the job: the siren motif, oppressive work conditions, the representation of malicious managers and corrupt union leaders, and the indictment of various institutional practices that discriminate against the proletariat; and c) themes that refract proletarian realism: strikes and the articulation of revolutionary optimism.

The first set of themes furnishes the background of these texts. Yonnonidio traces the constant displacement of the destitute working-class family, the Holbrooks, and their relocation to a mining town in Wyoming, a farm in South Dakota, and a slaughter house in Nebraska. Similarly, Heart narrates the displacement of the Chavez family from their ancestral ranch, their relocation to a farm in Guadalupe, and to barrio Barelás in the city of Albuquerque. Obviously, the Holbrooks and the Chavezes echo in their narrative the epic displacement of the Joads on their way to California on Route 66 in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. Despite these relocations, both Clemente and Mazie Holbrook remain nostalgic for a vision of plenitude and wholeness in the land. For Clemente, selling the land is equivalent to the loss of ontological security and to the collapse of social and cultural certainty, and he continues to evoke his attachment to the land in his desperate attempts to ward off the debilitating effects of urban alienation. Similarly, the farm provides a great source of happiness to Mazie who feels connected to the "aura... of timelessness, of vastness, of eternal things that had been before her and would be after her" (Yonnonidio 33). Although the land for Mazie never achieves its mythico-poetical dimension as it does for Clemente, both characters ground themselves in a vision of the earth that emanates meaning and value. The same sentiments appear also in the figure of Grampa in Steinbeck's novel. After Grampa's death on the road, the preacher Casy informs the family that, actually, the old man died once he was forced out of his land: "He's jus' staying with the lan'. He couldn' leave it" (187).

The displacement of the Holbrook and Chavez families can be attributed not only to their search for employment and a decent living, like the Joads, but also to their search for a better future for their children. In the three texts, moreover, these desires are specifically linked with the mother. Although Ma Joad does not raise the question of education, she occupies a paramount role in preserving the "famby" and keeping them together. Maternity produces structures of feelings and agency for women that the patriarchy is unable to contain. Anna Holbrook had a great faith in the possibility of a new beginning, "a new life" (Yonnonidio 16), and she dreams of education for her children. For Anna, imparting a good education to her children promises narratives of progress and class mobility: "An edjication is what you kids are going to get. It means your hands stay white and you read books and

work in an office" (Yonnondio 3). Adelita is likewise dreaming of "build[ing] a new home..., and with it will come a new future" (Heart 7). The mother's role of ensuring the unity of her family and the theme of education for the children are also explicitly linked to the Chavez's family first displacement to Guadalupe: "So to save her familia Adelita had forced Clemente to salvage what little he could and move to Guadalupe where there was schooling available for her children" (Heart 6). The agency and desires of the maternal narrative underscore the dissolution of patriarchal authority that marks the masculinist narratives of Jim Holbrook and Clemente Chavez.

Olsen and Anaya seem to represent the crisis of masculinity as an index to socio-economic instability, poverty, and unemployment. To compensate for their emasculation, both Jim and Clemente resort to violence against their wives and children and blame their wives for undermining their authority. Living under a constant state of tension and fear in the "bowels of the earth," Jim loses his affection for his children. He stops telling them "ghost stories," physically abuses them, and returns home "dead drunk" every night. Moreover, he beats Anna "too often to remember" (Yonnondio 6). Domestic abuse and alcoholism have turned the household into a space of terror. But he is still capable of showing his love and sympathy for the children, especially after Mazie was attacked by Sheen McEvoy, when he felt remorse, terror, and shame for abandoning them. When Anna attempts to start laundry work to help support the family, Jim realizes that his masculinity will be undermined and tries to dissuade her: "Forget the laundering, Anna. We'll get by. We ain't starved yet" (Yonnondio 93). Not to aggravate his situation, Anna suggests she was just helping, relegating the value of her work to that of a supplementary role.

Similar patterns of violence and blame can be discerned in Heart. The Chavez family appears to be a site of unity until Clemente begins to lose his control and vent his anger on his daughters, Juanita and Ana, and son, Benjie. He slaps Juanita when she demands that he stop calling her Juanita and call her Jan instead, (9) and beats Benjie with "an old leather strap" (43). Clemente understood that the challenge to his authority stripped his manhood away, and he resorted to alcoholism and to blaming his wife. But like Jim, Clemente is also capable of remorse and shame. After whipping Benjie, Clemente "stumbled out of the shack, trembling from the rage and fear he felt, and ashamed of himself for what he had done" (43). Unemployed and living the angst of urban alienation, Clemente tries desperately to regain his masculinity and power over his family. Coming back drunk one evening, Clemente shakes his fist in Adelita's face for permitting Juanita and Ana to go a dance, and he accuses her of "plotting with the other forces that were set on destroying his position as head of the family" (74). He actually contrasts his impotence with her agency and growing power in the family: "She was now in control of the finances of the family, and he had to beg or steal from her just to buy a drink" (74). But when his pathetic attempts to intimidate his daughters fail, Clemente attacks them with a meat knife, but it was Jason, the younger son, who was almost stabbed. Clemente collapses, and Adelita takes care of him in her role as supporter and nurturer.

The second set of themes depicts specific problems and power structures intended to suppress the proletariat. Yonnondio opens with the eventful blow of the whistle, which Mazie knows is an announcement of death in "that fearsome place below the ground, the mine" (Yonnondio 1). The whistle has a devastating psychological impact on the workers and their families, who, when the whistle shrieks, begin to run toward the mine and scream, praying that it is not one of their loved ones. Similarly, the whistle heard in Barelás is that of the infernal shops, "the devil's place" (Heart 22). The "shrill blast" of the whistle functions also here as an instant evocation of death which alerts "the women of the barrio that death had taken one of their men" (Heart 25). However, in Heart, the shop whistle serves as more than a harbinger of death. It actually becomes part of intricate matrix of whistles and sirens that interrupt the life of the barrio, especially the police sirens and the cries of la Llorona (Heart 18). Appealing to the same ghost imagery that Jim used, Willie explains to Jason the transformation of a supernatural entity into a threatening reality: "It used to be that la Llorona was a ghost, a shadow, a cry one heard in the brush of the river or near la cequia. Now it's becoming more and more real, now it's the cop's siren, now we can see it, we actually see it eating up the men of the barrio--"(Heart 49). Instead of the shadow of la Llorona, the Chicano workers now have to deal with the "real monsters" of their urban condition.

The whistle motif, moreover, evokes the oppressive work conditions under which these workers toil in the "bowels of the earth." In both works, as in all other proletarian texts, whether it is in the bar as in Le Sueur's *The Girl* or on the farm in Steinbeck's *Grapes*, work conditions are depicted to represent the dehumanization-work conditions are depicted to represent the dehumanization and the enslavement of the workers. The workers in *Heart* suffer in the steel shops, the "devil's place," because of hellish heat and unsafe work conditions. Anaya uses images of chains and servitude to describe the dehumanization of the workers who are treated like animals (*Heart* 24). Likewise, Olsen describes the young Andy Kvaternick who has been employed in the mine after the death of his father in a passage replete with animal imagery:

And no more can you stand erect. You lose the heritage of man, too. You are brought now to fit earth's intestines, stoop like a hunchback underneath, crawl like a child, do your man's work lying on your side, stretched and tense as a corpse. (Yonnondio 5)

The work conditions in the packing houses of Nebraska are equally oppressive. The scorching heat, the stench, and the unhygienic factories make the workers vomit and their clothes "portable sweat baths" (Yonnondio 124). Worst of all is the Beedo speed-up system, which turns the workers into "component part, geared, meshed, timed, controlled" (Yonnondio 114). Unable to keep up with the extra speed, the workers begin to fall down one after the other.

Under these horrible, dehumanizing conditions, Anaya and Olsen represent the owners, managers, and corrupt union leaders as pitiless and ruthless sadists. In *Heart*, the management is clearly responsible for the two recent fatal accidents on the job, for they have been downsizing but demanding the same production levels from the workers. These managers also have a lot of influence on other work places in the city and can thus close all opportunities for jobs for these workers that they fire. Moreover, Anaya implicates the union leader in this negligence and apathy toward precious human life. Instead of protecting the workers' interests, the new union leader, Kirk, makes sure to "keep the workers in line" (77). When the workers then convened to elect their own union president, Kirk mistreated the workers and threatened to fire them all. Worst of all, though, both managers and corrupt union leaders are accused of splitting the workers (80).

Olsen's representation of the pitiless managers focuses on their (mis)treatment of and apathy toward the workers' capacities for production. One contractor demands that the workers dig twelve feet in a "road of concrete," without any consideration for their humanity (Yonnondio 60). Another "straw boss," worrying about the company's profits, would not consider the workers' requests to slow down production in the Beedo system. Instead, he called them a "bunch of lazies" (Yonnondio 114), and he fined them for carelessness when the conveyor belt got jammed (Yonnondio 125). Moreover, the managers are condemned for pitting the workers against each other by playing on their racial anxieties and paranoia. Jim is informed, for example, about a big contractor by the name of Mulcahev who "dont hire niggers or furriners when there's white men begging" (Yonnondio 52). Later, Kryckszi tells Jim that he could have been hired in a minute, if he were a "nigger," because blacks are believed to "scab if there is strike" (Yonnondio 71).

The brutality of the managers in their mistreatment of the workers reflects deeply entrenched institutional practices that oppress and dehumanize the working classes. Anaya, however, seems to be more far-ranging in his indictment of these institutions, which has probably to do with the multiple oppression of Chicano/a workers, including their ethnic difference as well. Whereas in her universal representation of a poor family Olsen foregrounds the abuse of the poor by capitalism, medicine, and education, Anaya underscores the conspiracy of the civil administration, religion, education, welfare offices, capitalism, US imperialism, and technology against oppressed ethnic workers. Olsen emphasizes the capitalist ethos of the "fat bellies" by comparing their wealth to the destitute condition of the workers. Mazie is constantly growing aware of class differences between her impoverished family and the wealthier bosses: "Pop, does the boss man honest have a white shiny tub bigger than

you and he turns somethin and the water comes out? Or is it a story? And does he honest have a toilet inside the house? And silk on the floor" (Yonnonodio 9). Besides the indictment of capitalism, Olsen exposes the classist structures underlying the educational system in the United States. The teachers are seen as very good at humiliating Mazie and Will because they come from different backgrounds: "Mazie and Willhollbrook--have come from the country where they grow the corn and wheat--and all our milk comes from say hello to Mazie and Will children" (49). Moreover, Olsen indicts the medical institution for complete disregard for the value of poor peoples' lives and insensitivity to their destitute condition. After Anna was raped, she suffered a miscarriage. The doctor who came to check on her turns out to be a classist eugenicist, for he believes that "they ought to sterilize the whole lot of them after the second kid" (77). Then, he refers to the Holbrooks as animals and to their house as a pigsty (77).

Because of his attention to the intersectionality of ethnicity, class, culture, and US power hierarchies, Anaya's indictment of dominant structures emphasizes that complicity of the civil administration, capitalism, religion, technology, education, US imperialism, and welfare agencies in suppressing and exploiting the workers. Early on in the novel, Anaya invokes the racist ordinances of City Hall, which is clearly passing laws to prevent the workers from developing independent forms of economy in order to ensure the supply of cheap labor for the local industries. While the politicians prohibit raising animals under the pretext that the smell of cattle is "a nuisance to public health" (17), these politicians do not complain about the decision to keep the sewage plant in South Barelás. Similarly, Anaya exposes the racism underlying the welfare agencies toward differently able people in the neighborhood. Thus, instead of providing adequate care for Willie's brother, Henry, the "welfare quacks" had only given "tranquilizers and [made] him dopey as hell" (67). Now Henry spends his days naked with a chain tied to his ankle (66). (10) Like the welfare agency, the educational system deals with these workers and their children in terms of stereotypical and prejudiced representation that ultimately produces misfits and pariahs in the system. Willie, for example, ended up in special education classes simply because he told the school administration that he was from Barelás (92). When a teacher did manage to reach these neglected students, "The principal came along and told the teacher he didn't have any discipline over us cause we were too excited and noisy" (92). As such, the dominant culture can justify its neglect of minority students by shifting attention to their alleged character flaws.

Moreover, Anaya unravels the capitalist exploitation of the barrio workers by the local entrepreneur Mannie Garcia, el Super, whom the people refer to as el patron. Garcia has accumulated his wealth by charging fees for every little favor he does to the neighborhood: "he charges the people on welfare a dime to cash their checks. He gets a man a job, and he takes a bite. He gets someone out of jail, or helps someone apply for welfare or social security, and he gets a small cut" (35). Anaya departs from the tendency of the cultural nationalists to romanticize the race, opting instead to expose the internal heterogeneity of the community and the people's shifting positionality at the intersection of ethnicity, gender, and class as exploiters and exploited.

Religion also plays a major role in the oppression of the Chicano/a workers in a capitalist US. Anaya shows how the religious authorities, represented in the novel by Father Cayo, try not only to mitigate the discontent of the oppressed workers but also to naturalize the power structures for his congregation. In fact, Clemente attributes the people's loss of revolutionary spirit to the French and Irish priests who were brought to keep "the people down" (137). In response to Clemente's exhortation "to speak out against the tyranny of the shops" and to act like the "fiery men who wrote [the gospels]," Father Cayo could only threaten to excommunicate him (140). Father Cayo then attempts to contain Clemente's rebellion by contending that "there is peace only in stability," adding that "No one profits from times of revolution" (142) and that Clemente needs to understand "the intricate rules that keep the giants in balance" (143). Later, it is revealed that Father Cayo, el Super, and the businessmen went to Chavez and tried to dissuade him by bribing him: "They told him the pile of money was his if he got out of town, left for good and forgot the strike" (169).

Finally, Anaya indicts the oppression of the Chicano/a workers by the military and the police. He criticizes US

imperial wars like the Korean war which entrap the deprived minorities into fighting to save the world from communism but not to save themselves from the false promises of liberal democracy. As one of Jason's friends says:

Maybe we saved the world from communism, but it didn't do us any good. What good is saving the world if you can't even get a job, huh? Our carnal fought and died there, and we got our heroes like Jessie, but that don't cut ice with the man. All he says is drop outta school and join the army, we'll find another war for you to fight. (164)

These power structures collaborated, with the help of the police, to maintain the status quo in the barrio. Nowhere is the police's double role of humiliating the workers and protecting the capitalists' interests more obvious than in Steinbeck's *Grapes*. Law enforcement officers in California harrass the Oakies, arrest any trouble maker with charges of vagrancy, crush protests, and protect the scabbies as well as the property of the big owners. As Lalo, the violent workers' organizer in Anaya's *Heart* says, "The company union was in cahoots with the railroad officials and the worker was at the bottom of the pile when it came to having any rights" (80).

The last set of overlapping thematics between *Yonnonidio* and *Heart* concerns the ideological content that reflects the proletarian realism of revolutionary writings. Although in its current form, *Yonnonidio* lacks any representation of a strike, the original plan of the novel contained scenes in which Jim Holbrook participates in a long strike in a packinghouse that eventually leads to the politicization of Anna and the children (Rosenfelt "Introduction"). Other proletarian texts like Steinbeck's *Grapes*, Le Sueur's *The Girl*, and Smedley's *Daughter of Earth* are complete with protest activities, organizing, and strikes at both the national and international levels.

Nonetheless, Olsen remains committed in her novel to the articulation of revolutionary elfin as she keeps pointing toward future strikes and, ultimately, revolution in didactic and non-didactic passages. In the didactic sections, Olsen both envisions the coming of a revolution that will give the workers their humanity back and that celebrates human will. For example, the narrator warns Tracy not to stage an "individual revolt" on the job. Rather, Tracy should have waited "till the day millions of fists clamped in yours, and you could wipe out the whole thing, the whole goddamn thing, and a human could be a human for the first time on earth" (64). In the non-didactic passages, Olsen offers images of a brighter future through union with nature. Anna and Mazie, for instance, experience a deep mystico-cosmic happiness in their outdoors trip to pick up dandelions. As she loses herself in the grandeur of nature, Anna walks around "dreamily" (98) with a "remote, shining look ... on her face ... as if she had become someone else" (*Yonnonidio* 100). Nonetheless, *Yonnonidio* still concludes with a thinly-disguised didactic affirmation of human will and an articulation of a promise of the coming revolution. The former is seen in baby Bess's banging of a fruit jar lid, which assures her of her power to do: "I can do. bang! I did that. I can do. I" (132). This emphasis on agency and selfhood is ironically set at odds with the narrator's warning against individual rebellion and advice for collective revolt. From the radio that Will brings home, nevertheless, Mazie can detect a far sound, the distant sound of the marching revolution, which is "human and stellar, pulsing, pulsing" (132).

In contrast to Olsen, Anaya's *Heart* is more didactic in its vision of the coming revolution. The novel is therefore replete with the celebration of human solidarity as well as strikes and the articulation of revolutionary optimism. While Olsen only warns against individual rebellion and advises redemption through collective action, which is not carried out in her novel, Anaya is more interested in that communal resistance in his exploration of the formation of community bonds in the barrio. Although he lost his land in relocating to Barelás, Clemente soon realizes that he becomes a member of a new, larger community that interweaves different barrios in the city, a community reminiscent of the government camp in Steinbeck and the tenement building in Le Sueur. Moreover, the broken realities of urban life make these communities nostalgic for the old communal ways, which they recreate to support each and every person in the community in the spirit of one family. Thus, one character laments that: "We didn't need welfare, we helped each other; and our people were not put in nursing homes, they

occupied a role of respect in la familia" (Heart 103). And this communalism is celebrated in the scene of the baptism of Clemente's grandson which was an "affirmation of faith in the community of people" (99).

Moreover, Anaya presents various strategies typical of didactic proletarian fiction. The urgency of the strike is brought up early in the novel, after the tragic deaths of Juan Loco and Sanchez in the shop: "A wildcat strike had been called to protest conditions at the shops and within the union itself" (33). As expected, the shops managed to split the workers and lay off half the men of Barelás. However, the workers did not give up, and another wildcat strike was planned for the fall. In addition, like Le Sueur's novel, which ends with both the birth of the girl's daughter and the milk demonstration, Anaya concludes his novel with the promises of revolution and the people marching for a better future: "The people began to move, marching to a new step, singing the songs of the revolution which would create their destiny" (Heart 208).

In contrast to Olsen's protagonist Mazie, a young artist who may become a CP organizer and a revolutionary writer, Clemente understands the exact nature of the revolution that would end the tyranny of the shops and bring justice and freedom to the workers. He realizes that this revolution is grounded in an ideology of class struggle, the struggle to "throw off the chains of oppression" (Heart 140). Nonetheless, Clemente, like preacher Casy in Steinbeck, insists on fighting for justice through inculcating a vision of "universal brotherhood" that abrogates violence and constructs instead a politics of coalition and love between human beings:

The space between us can be bridged, a bond can unite us all! If we are to survive as a people, and if we are not to become like the americano, then the soul of the people must rise above that hell of individual alienation! Each man and woman must give up his movida.

(Heart 147)

This reconfiguration of traditional radical politics depends on the realization of the complexity of an individual's subject positions and of the need for a new language of communication that can transform human relations, namely the language of love that "gushes from the soul of our people, from the foundation of our history--Only that fire can burn down the temple of the false gods!" (Heart 207). Thus, Clemente asserts that the future will be better as long as "a single man dared to look for his humanity in the corners of his heart" (Heart 208).

Yonnonidio and Heart not only share overlapping themes but they also deploy similar formal characteristics: narrative focalization, mentor characters, and conversion structure. Barbara Foley defines narrative focalization as the predominance of "one character's interests ... over those of other characters--regardless of narrative point of view" (267). In Yonnonidio, focalization shifts among four different narrative voices: Mazie, Jim, Anna, and authorial intrusions. Similarly, in Heart, narrative unfolds from the vantage points of Benjie, Jason, Clemente, Adelita, Crispin, and narrative interpolations. In Mazie's and Jason's cases, focalization functions to underscore the attitudes and feelings of young and sensitive individuals who will grow to be a revolutionary writer and a radical leader, respectively. (11) In Anna's and Adelita's narratives, focalization foregrounds these women's silent struggles to prevent their families from collapsing any further. While Olsen consistently evokes the readers' identification with Anna's tribulation, Anaya is more concerned with readers' identification with Clemente's crisis of machismo and the radicalization of his class consciousness.

Besides narrative focalization, Yonnonidio and Heart employ mentor characters: Old Man Caldwell and Crispin as well as the curandera. Unlike the common mentor figures in proletarian fiction who are either socialist ideologues or CP organizers like Amelia in Le Sueur's *The Girl*, Olsen and Anaya use their mentors to inculcate a faith in Mazie and Clemente in themselves as well as to suggest the urgent need for revolution. Old Man Caldwell, an educated and influential figure among his illiterate neighbors, introduces Mazie to classical knowledge, Greek astronomy, and playful rhyming; he urges her to keep on questioning the status quo and wanting to know. Most importantly, Old Man Caldwell teaches Mazie the necessity for rebellion: "'Better,' your mother says, 'to be a

cripple and alive than dead, not able to feel anything.' No, there is more--to rebel against what will not let life be. Your mother thought to move from the mine to the farm would be enough, but ..." (37). The mentor here thus contributes to the intellectual growth of the protagonist and plants the seeds of revolutionary consciousness in the young artist.

The mentors in Anaya, on the other hand, play a central role in directly pushing Clemente to accept not only a radical political vision but also his leadership among la raza. Crispin teaches him that a radical vision of humanity depends on his willingness "to search to the very core and essence of [his] being" (86). Thus, Crispin presents him with the need of transcending violence in a politics that aspires to "establish a civilization of peace in the new world" (123). Then, with the help of the curandera, Clemente embarks on a mythic journey to touch "the soul of my people!" (128). By the end of his quest, Clemente understand the bonds he shared with humanity, which he describes as "a thin bond of comradeship to the masses that floated down the river of time into a new beginning" (131).

Instruction on the need for revolutionary politics prefigures the conversion narrative that many proletarian writers utilized to assert the emergence of revolutionary agency and trace "the development of growing class consciousness" (Rabinowitz 82). The original plans of Yonondio mention the politicization of Anna and her older children, and Mazie becomes a revolutionary writer as well as a CP organizer. This unfulfilled conversion narrative is actually foreshadowed, as discussed above, in the last image of the stellar sound that Mazie detects coming from the radio. Avoiding overt didacticism in the present form of the novel, Olsen only signals the development of Mazie's revolutionary class consciousness.

In contrast, Anaya's depiction of the growth of the revolutionary proletariat is dialectically embedded in Clemente's experience of oppression. Clemente, like Steinbeck's Tom Joad, changes throughout the narrative from an observer of the miseries inflicted on his fellow workers to an involved person committed to the workers' fight for justice. Thus, early on, Clemente tries to avoid getting involved in the strike and Lalo's radical politics: "Well, anyway it's none of my business. I stay clear of things like that, do my work and keep to myself. I don't understand their politics, so there's not much I can do to help" (34). But after he joins the workers' meeting, where the workers were planning to strike and demand the election of a new union leader, Clemente began to comprehend the oppression of the workers and their dehumanization. Adelita informs her children about the transformation in Clemente's politics: "Clemente is not a troublemaker, he is not a politician, but he is a man that knows that to live he must remain free in his own heart. He began to see how mistreated the workers were, and he did not like that" (Heart 77).

Clemente was experiencing a process of radicalization and revolution, as evident in his conversation with Father Cayo. There he talks about the "struggle to throw off the chains of oppression" (140), about the need to "unite the workers" (141), and about "the struggle for justice that sweeps across the land" (141). The climactic moment of his conversion comes when Clemente tells the priest:

I cannot let things remain as they are, because then I would not be free. If I cease to act because I fear the future, then I create a worse enslavement for myself. That much I know. While my people are not free, I am not free. If the freedom and justice I seek loose destruction upon earth, then I accept that responsibility, but it seems to me that that the real responsibility must be borne by those who keep me from my freedom. I must act. (Heart 142-43)

Acting upon such conviction, Clemente ended up in jail for instigating public disorder. This transformation is thus rendered not in an evasive, mystic vision, but in political terminology drawn from radical politics. The people in the journey call upon Clemente: "Deliver us from this oppression! Strike down injustice" (129; emphasis in original). As such, the realization of revolutionary class consciousness in Clemente's narrative is not external to

the manifest content of the novel at all, but rather an accumulation of intertextual strategies and internal dialectics of the text.

Although they embed their novels within complex forms of narrative drawn from proletarian literature, both Olsen and Anaya ultimately transcend the dictates of didacticism and tendentiousness in favor of the radical transformation of human relations. (12) Olsen, as Pearlman and Werlock write, is a "passionately committed humanist," whose perspective is "not simplistically polemical, but as complex as humanity is broad" (34). To this extent, Olsen refused to valorize either class or gender identity in her writings. During the Depression, she declined to valorize class over gender, as expected from a Communist writer, whereas in the 1960s and 70s, she avoided downplaying the effects of class on gender identity, despite the urgency of affirming the primacy of (sexual) difference in the second wave of the feminist movement. Olsen endorsed the heterogeneity of proletarian as well as feminist writings and their shifting positionalities across discrepant identity narratives and power structures, refusing thus to be the mouthpiece of either the party line or universal womanhood.

Similarly, Anaya has expressed his reservations about the dogmatic imperative that literature should serve instrumentalist and propagandist functions. Believing in the artist as a "person in constant rebellion," Anaya argues that the artist cannot be "committed to any narrow ideology" (Bruce-Novoa, Chicano 191), so he denounces those "Marxist-Leninist" Chicano critics "who want to see the art of the contemporary Chicano movement serve only a social and a political purpose" (Bruce-Novoa, Chicano 192). In fact, Anaya considers all literature to be revolutionary, not only in the political sense, adding that

[Literature's] most interesting aspect, what will make it a revolutionary literature, will be whether or not the writers commit themselves to a new literature, one which will mirror or give some intimation of our world view, our values, the core values of our culture. (Bruce-Novoa, Chicano 197)

Anaya as a visionary writer is not on a quest to find practical solutions to the problems of the (ethnic) proletariat under contemporary conditions of global capitalism. (13) Although he admits to writing this novel to explore "how people take a political system in hand, one that is oppressing and using them" (Bruce-Novoa, Chicano 192), Anaya's narrative does not function to "suggest political platforms and theses, but to portray the life of the workers and to inspire them with solidarity and revolt," as Mike Gold stated (qtd. in Foley 138). Distancing themselves from crude forms of didacticism and tendentiousness, both Anaya and Olsen privilege intricate forms of narrative to articulate a vision of revolution that seeks to transform the nature of human relations into what Paul Gilroy calls "the politics of transfiguration" (38).

In *Heart of Aztlan*, Anaya grounds ancient Aztec myth within the context of proletarian revolution and class consciousness. He interrogates the implications of the intersection of ethnicity, nation, cultural memory, and class discourse in a manner that internationalizes Aztlan by fusing pre-Cortesian cultural memory with radical proletarian cultures. The transnationalization of Aztlan, therefore, rids Anaya's mythic structures of any ethnic distinction and effectively sutures Clemente's ethnic experience to a theory of radical politics that opens up a space for a more inclusive collective struggle for social justice and solidarity. Anaya remaps cultural memory and its ethnocentric underpinnings within a broader ideological framework that privileges the radical aesthetics and politics of international proletarian culture "so that it could more confidently create the future" (Anaya and Lomeli 1989).

Notes

(1.) Hoffman, for example, denounces it because its mythic and archetypal subtext is not "a real tool to correct social injustice" (113), and Candelaria contends that "the novel's [revolutionary] conclusion and overall meaning are hard to gauge" (29), while Kopp dismisses the novel for failing to make us "believe totally in Clemente

Chavez and in the efficacy of his struggle" (62).

(2.) Marvin Lewis (qtd. in Candelaria 29) rejects Heart for a "conceptual disparity between form, content, and overall meaning."

(3.) Murphy discusses how the debate in the international proletariat literary movement shaped the issues and controversies in both *The New Masses* and the *Partisan Review*. Murphy thus argues for the need to examine the history of leftism in the US as part of an international whole, which requires attention to various centers of proletarian literature movements in pre-Hitler Germany as well as in the Soviet Union such as *International Literature*, "the organ of the Soviet-based International Union of Revolutionary Writers, with which the *New Masses* and the John Reeds Clubs were affiliated" (14). See also Chapter 2 in Foley.

(4.) For a full discussion of the form and content of US proletarian literature, see Foley.

(5.) Goldman and Ybarra-Frausto analyze this neindigenist consciousness in the Chicano artistic movement and compare it to the Latin American, especially Mexican, indigenist movement in the 1920s and 1930s (87-89).

(6.) Olsen references the Native American dirge through one of Walt Whitman's poems, "Yonnonidio" (1887), in which he writes a dirge, in the tradition of the Iroquois dirge, to lament the destruction of the Native American population by the forces of colonization and progress. The word itself is Iroquois for lament for the dead. For more discussion of Whitman and Native Americans, see Folsom.

(7.) For a full discussion of the complex appropriation of Aztlan in Chicano cultural production, see Perez-Torres.

(8.) As Rosenfelt writes, Olsen's recuperation of the suppressed voices of the Indians in *Yonnonidio* resembles her reclamation strategies in *Silences* and "Requa I," which "simultaneously theorized the effects of silencing in writers' lives and that pay a special respect to writers who have rescued the otherwise invisible and silent lives of others from oblivion" ("Introduction" 10).

(9.) The pressures of assimilation that Juanita undergoes at work and her insistence on becoming Americanized are echoed in Olsen's description of Jenilla, whose fantasies of love function as an escape from her Polish mother's "ugly ... foreigner sound" and a repudiation of her former self, the Polish Gertrude (127).

(10.) *Yonnonidio* also includes a portrayal of a differently able character, Erina, whom Olsen uses not only to show Mazie's capacity for compassion but also to underscore the scapegoating of the Other in times of crisis: "On her way home--where she will be beaten for having been gone, for having been born, for having been born crippled and epileptic, for being one more mouth to feed and because out of sheer nervousness and exhaustion there is a need for someone to beat" (*Yonnonidio* 126).

(11.) This focalization through Mazie can help interpret the precise referent of the voice speaking in the narrative intrusions of *Yonnonidio*. In a sophisticated interpretation of these intrusions, Coiner argues that these narrative intrusions represent the "voice of a group of [enlightened and collectivized] workers" (190), even though such a voice remains external to the manifest content of the novel as well as its original plan. As such, I propose that this voice is actually Mazie's own voice, whose future as a revolutionary writer was plotted in the original plans for the novel.

(12.) On the art/propaganda debate in *El Movimiento*, see Perez-Torres, and see Chapter 4 in Foley regarding the debate in CPUSA circles.

(13.) Candelaria, for one, blames Anaya for not offering practical solutions: "If the ending is genuinely uplifting, what practical solutions explain the affirmation?" (29).

Works Cited

Aaron, Daniel. *Writers on the Left*. 1961. New York: Oxford UP, 1992.

Alurista. "Cultural Nationalism and Xicano Literature." *MEL US* 8.2 (1981): 2234.

Anaya, Rudolfo A. *Heart of Aztlan*. Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1967.

Anaya, Rudolfo A., and Francisco Lomeli, eds. *Aztlan: Essays on the Chicano Homeland*. Albuquerque: Academia/El Norte Publications, 1989.

Bruce-Novoa, Juan. *Chicano Authors: Inquiry By Interview*. London & Austin: U of Texas P, 1980.

-- *Retrospace: Collected essays on Chicano Literature, Theory, and History*. Houston: Arte Publico, 1990.

Burkom, Selma, and Margaret Williams. "De-Riddling Tillie Olsen's Writings." *The Critical Response to Tillie Olsen*. Ed. Kay Hoyle Nelson and Nancy Huse. New York: Greenwood P, 1994. 33-53.

Candelaria, Cordelia. "Rudolfo Anaya." *Dictionary of Literary Biography* 82: 24-35.

Coiner, Constance. *Better Red: The Writing and Resistance of Tillie Olsen and Meridel Le Sueur*. New York: Oxford UP, 1995.

Foley, Barbara. *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in US Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941*. Durham & London: Duke UP, 1993.

Folsom, Ed. "Whitman and American Indians." *Walt Whitman's Native Representations*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge UP, 1994. 55-98.

Fox, Geoffrey. *Hispanic Nation: Culture, Politics, and the Construction of Identity*. Tucson: U of Arizona P, 1997.

Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993.

Gish, Robert F. *Beyond Bounds : Cross-Cultural Essays on Anglo, American Indian, and Chicano Literature*. Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1996.

Goldman, Shifra, and Tomas Ybarro-Frausto. "The Political and Social Contexts of Chicano Art." *Cara, Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation*. Ed. Rich ard Griswold del Castillo, Teresa McKenna, and Yvonne Yrabor-Bejarano. Los Angeles: Wright Art Gallery and U of California P, 1991. 83-95.

Hoffman, Maria L. "Myth and Reality in Heart of Aztlan." *De Dolores* 5 (1980): 111-14.

Klor de Alva, Jorge. "Aztlan, Borinquen, and Hispanic Nationalism in the United States." *The Latino Studies Reader*. Ed. Antonia Darder and Rudolfo Torres. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998. 63-82.

Kopp, Karl, and Juan Bruce-Novoa. "Two Views on Heart of Aztlan." *La Confluencia* 3 (1977): 61-63.

Le Sueur, Meridel. *The Girl*. 1978. Albuquerque: West End P, 1990.

Meier, Matt, and Feliciano Ribera. *Mexican Americans/American Mexicans: From Conquistadores to Chicanos*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1993.

Murphy, James. *The Proletarian Moment: The Controversy Over Leftism in Literature*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1991.

Oboler, Suzanne. *Ethnic Labels, Latin Lives*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1995.

Olsen, Tillie. *Yonnonidio: From the Thirties*. Reissue edition. New York: Delta, 1979.

Pearlman, Mickey, and Abby Werlock. *Tillie Olsen*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1991.

Perez-Torres, Rafael. *Movements in Chicano Poetry: Against Myths, Against Margins*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1995.

Rabinowitz, Paula. *Labor and Desire: Women's Revolutionary Fiction in Depression America*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1991.

Rosenfelt, Deborah. "From the Thirties: Tillie Olsen and the Radical Tradition." *Tillie Olsen's Tell Me a Riddle*. Ed. Deborah Rosenfelt. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1995. 133-176.

-- "Introduction." *Tillie Olsen's Tell Me a Riddle*. Ed. Deborah Rosenfelt. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1995. 3-25.

Smedley, Agnes. *Daughter of Earth*. Old Westbury: Feminist P, 1973.

Steinbeck, John. *The Grapes of Wrath*. 1939. New York, Penguin, 1988.

Taylor, Paul B. "The Chicano Translation of Troy: Epic Topoi in the Novels of Rudolfo A. Anaya." *MELUS* 19.3 (1994): 19-35.

Whitman, Walt. "Yonnonidio." *Leaves of Grass (1891-92)*. *Walt Whitman: Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*. New York: Library of America, 1982. 626.

Jamil Khader is an Assistant Professor of English at Stetson University where he teaches postcolonial literature and theory, Third World feminism, and transnationalism. He has published on the works of Louise Erdrich, Tsitsi Dangaremba, and the Palestinian poet Al-Mutawakkel Taha, and his article on Puerto Rican feminist writers Aurora Levins Morales, Rosario Morales, and Esmeralda Santiago is forthcoming in *FS: Feminist Studies*.

COPYRIGHT 2002 The Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States in association with The Gale Group and LookSmart.

COPYRIGHT 2002 Gale Group