

QUERIDA ULTIMA

Melissa Coss Aquino

SHORT PREFACE

In his introduction to a later edition of *Bless Me, Ultima*, Anaya wrote: “The truly magical moment in the creative process was when Ultima appeared to me and instructed me to make her a character in the novel. Suddenly a boy’s adventure novel became an intense exploration of the unconscious. For me, Ultima la curandera, is a healer in the tradition of our Native New Mexico. She is a repository of Spanish, Mexican, and Native American teachings....With the arrival of Ultima, Antonio begins a journey into “the world of spirits”, the realm in which the shaman operates. Antonio enters a new reality.”

I have been teaching *Bless Me, Ultima* at Bronx Community College for ten years now, and it is a student favorite that inevitably elicits student stories about their own *curanderas*, *bruja*s, *santeras*, and other healers from their traditional cultural backgrounds. In essence, they read about Ultima and tell me origin stories of their own. We also meander through the *llanos* till they lead us to the open sky across the Grand Concourse in the Bronx, the vista from our historic landmark campus, and finally to our own connections to other places of nature and beauty in the dense urban environment in which we live. The Bronx in New York City is a place very different from the *llanos* of New Mexico, but the sky is a place we can look to imagine the *llanos* in some vast and open way. This is a letter to Ultima, and ultimately Anaya, about all the ways Anaya’s novel, Ultima’s story, and Antonio’s journey, take us back into our own stories and journeys in ways that do more than expose us to literature or diversity. Ultima is more than repository, as Anaya called her; to her readers she is light shed into corners and stories long hidden and

buried. Most of my students are from the Caribbean, many of them are Dominican and Puerto Rican. Some are from various countries in Africa or African Americans born in the U.S., many with links to traditional healing practices in the south or in the Bronx. My students are immigrants and U.S. born, but they all have ancestors tied to the land in some way. Ultima gives them access to their own lost histories and in this letter, that is both a thank you and a love letter, I share some of their, and my, recovered stories with her.

Querida Ultima,

Tus manos catch babies, braid secrets, knit dreams, trace worlds of lost history; each finger a direction on the map we thought lost, but find hidden in the lines carved deep in your palms. Might we tell you stories your story reminded us we knew, but had forgotten to value? Or no, actually, forgotten is not the right word, forced to devalue is more the truth. More the truth. Pura verdad is your biggest gift. There is no magic without truth at its very core. We are the magic, you remind us, from the moment of our birth. Our very beings are magic and you the witness. There are not many places that tell us this. No books we have read in school proclaim it, and yet, here we are in school, in a literature class, and you quietly arrive, just as you arrived at Antonio's door step, to affirm that our ways of knowing are real.

You get us started talking about our dreams, and the abuelas who play numbers based on who appears in our dreams or where it takes place. The girl who sits quietly in the desk closest to the door in the front row, and has not yet spoken all semester says, "I have a tía who said my cousin was pregnant when she walked in the room. I looked at her like she was crazy and then my cousin says it out loud five minutes later. I ask her 'Tia, how did you know?' She laughed and said, 'I dreamt it last night.' I didn't believe her and was like 'No, you didn't.' She looked at me and said, 'Why would you ask me if you aren't going to believe my answer?'" This story, that the quiet student tells with little provocation, gets us going into the realm of why we believe who and what we believe and if any of it is true. Who taught us to mistrust our own wisdom?

"Do you really think Antonio remembers his own birth?" one student asks, and another answers, "Of course his personality doesn't, but his dreams do." The room opens in ripples as it becomes safe, because

you, Ultima, have made it safe, to talk about dreams not through a Freudian lens, but through our own lived experience in a college class. You are in a book assigned by the teacher, so it opens doors to what can be said and how. Yet, it only takes seconds before Freud arrives in the room as the next student says, “I learned that in psychology, Freud and dreams and the unconscious. Like we know shit we don’t know, but we actually use it to make decisions, mostly bad ones, I think. I can’t remember that part.” They laugh knowingly, bad decisions form a common language they have been taught to use to refer to their struggles to survive. Usually, they apologize if they let a curse slip, but once the room is open for truth telling the language seems scarcely to matter; poetry, like curse words, enter and exit without fanfare.

“Sueños, mi abuelita likes to say, are the place where our exhaustion and our poverty disappear, and we can actually be who we really are and know what we really know. Todo el mundo es libre en sus sueños, así que sueñate algo bueno.” That is what she would say to us when we complained about a nightmare.” My student says this in a classroom too small for the twenty-five students crammed into it, that was once a dorm room for maybe two students when the Bronx Community College campus was NYU. For them it was dorms, and for us a room for twenty-five desks. There are windows with spectacular views we can’t see because of some film that has obscured the glass permanently. The student, Milagros, reminds us that the confines of our physical reality rarely reveal the truth of our grandeur in much the same way the trappings of the wealthy hide all manner of flaws and criminality.

“I’m good with the dreams and everything Miss,” some of them still call me Miss even though I am fifty years old and a Ph.D. and they try to fix it, but it comes from years of school training and is hard to shake. We make jokes about my eternal youth in their eyes and let it slide, as there is so much else to do and care about.

“What I really love is all that talk about the sky and the *llanos* and the river.” He is sitting in the back row in the seat closest to the window through which no sky is visible, unless you open it. The transition from winter to spring gets the windows cracked open. From a good window that opens you can see our beautiful campus built atop the highest elevation in the Bronx, the sunset over the Harlem River and Manhattan just beyond. The sky is blue and gold and generous

when the window can be opened. Many are shut beyond repair. Not ours. In this room, we count ourselves lucky. The boy with the black hooded sweatshirt takes every chance to open the window and stare outside at sky and the river that reminds him of the *llanos* he can't quite even imagine, but can feel.

"Do you want to say more about that?"

"Not really, I just like it. Wide open space. It sounds like the rios and campos in Puerto Rico my grandfather was always talking about." He said more, he said everything, without even meaning to. This is the effect you have on us.

Querida Ultima, can we tell you our visions of you walking alongside us on the streets of the Bronx, far from the land you love, but under clear skies you would recognize? How the very ground beneath our feet and the river that runs just outside our windows becomes fertile and new as we contemplate yours. One student writes to you:

Dear Ultima,

I apologize for the un-called for hatred and lies –

I apologize for those who couldn't see the love inside of your eyes –

I apologize for them not recognizing the wisdom you would always provide –

I apologize for the deaf who are still living - and the blind who have long ago died-

If they would've looked deep inside of your eyes –

They would have seen the moon starting to set – and the sun starting to rise –

You were the seed and the soil –

True disciple of the Lord-

You were the doctor and the nurse –

The cutter of the cord-

Mother of nature –

Definition of patience –

Helper –

Healer -

Deliverer of many creations –

I APOLOGIZE

Sincerely,

- Joseph White

Then, after weeks of struggle to finally get into the flow of writing for the class, the same student, Joseph, engages with both literature, and himself, in ways only the best stories, the best characters ever make possible. He offers his own story, uses in text citation and does all the things I have asked. Ultima, often your story works miracles from across the vast mystery of inspiration.

Antonio was almost 7 years old when Ultima enters into his life, and the author writes, “When she came the beauty of the Illano unfolded before my eyes, and the gurgling waters of the river sang to the hum of the turning earth. The magical time of childhood stood still, and the pulse of the living earth pressed its mystery into my living blood” (Anaya 296). That statement alone expresses how much Ultima enlightened and opened Antonio’s eyes to a new world. From reading the story I recognized that Ultima wanted Antonio to know that he could depend on the land for many, many things. Ultima was passing down traditions that she believed have been forgotten by many of her Mexican people. Without verbally saying it out loud, I believe that Ultima thought that if she kept little Antonio close, she could equip him with knowledge and information that would be with him for the rest of his life. As much as Ultima was great for Antonio’s life, he, Antonio, was great for the remainder of Ultima’s life. Ultima was a teacher, a healer, and one of the bravest individuals in the county. “Many times late at night I was to see Ultima returning from the Llano where she gathered the herbs that can be harvested only in the light of the full moon by the careful hands of a curandera (Anaya 196). It shows how brave Ultima was and how far she would go to help her people. Many of the elderly people I grew up around have always been some of the most fearless people I’ve known. Mami Luz (aka The mother of the Block) is a feisty 77 year old Panamanian lady who I love and adore, and consider her to be my Panamanian mother. She is a tough old lady who always reminds grown men that if she catches them out of line, she will pick up anything that she can use as a weapon and beat them with it. Like Ultima, Mami Luz would always come up with these concoctions that would make a cold, upset stomach, fever, ear ache, or pink eye disappear. And what would always make many of us laugh is that out of nowhere she would just pull these concoctions right out of her big pocketbook. Mami Luz speaks in a hard aggressive Spanish, so when she tells you to do something you do it

whether you wanted to do it or not (Lol). Mami Luz has fed the whole block more times than anyone can count, and that is why until this day she walks the streets without a care in the world because she knows that she is safe and protected by the people she has impacted on the block and that she has mothered on many occasions.

Whether we know it or not, there is no country in the world who doesn't have an Ultima. Mami Luz is my very favorite Ultima, but we also had several other wise and elderly women who would sit in their 5th floor window watching over us, informing us, and taking care of us. As they did for me, I do for others.

- Joseph White

Es esto, Ultima, that I most want you to see. The students opening the path of a classroom with their own ways of knowing validated. The years of 2020 into 2021 have been hard ones for all of us. I lost both parents, three months apart, in the spring semester of 2020. I taught your work and tried to float above the grief with the wisdom you left Antonio that all you gave him would remain, but also that what must be buried had to be buried, and quickly. I had no owl, but I had Cardinals in my backyard in the Bronx and they came and sang to me every day. There has been so much death, so much fear and so much isolation. We “meet”, if you can imagine us, on a computer screen, a series of little black boxes and a face or two in between. Children, pets and family come in and out of view. Students work from beds, and often it is easy to forget that may be the only space they have to call their own. There is no sky or river or windows to open. There is no classroom, only the screen and words. Yet, you invite us forward, and students I will not meet in person share their spirit and their stories through yours. I am relieved to discover you can still work your magic, even through Zoom and Blackboard. I am not surprised, but I am thrilled. One such post arrives like this:

Isabel Alfonso Rojas Friday, March 26, 2021 2:15:35 PM

The traditions in places like our countries, or the foreign lands that host us, are beliefs and celebrations that connect us with our environment and our roots. In the story *Bless Me, Ultima* the boy Antonio is with Ultima and they are around the river and they are feeling the breeze and enjoying the tranquility of that moment, then Ultima tells him “the river

can talk to you, what can you hear?”. He answers her “What does she say?” and she answers, “You want to know a lot and you are too small for that”, in this we could see how Ultima transmitted her love of nature, land, and river to Antonio. This reminded me a lot of when I was a girl. My family took me to the beach and we stayed calm there and enjoyed all day. When night came, we made a bonfire and enjoyed the beach called Boca Chica in Santo Domingo. I remember my parents saying “Can you hear that wind and the sound of the waves?” and we answered “yes”, my father told us “that sound is called tranquility.” Also, Ultima made him a remedy with natural leaves to heal the scratch that he had on his face. This reminded me a lot of my grandmother who always, when I was sick, had a remedy or a natural tea to calm my pains. In fact, my grandmother went out to the patio of our house in Santo Domingo and asked permission from the trees for her to take their leaves and make me tea, she always told me that “if you are going to touch a tree in the night you always have to ask for permission to be able to touch them since they are asleep”. I was so surprised to see Ultima do the same thing. I don’t believe in that, but I really think that our tradition keeps us alive, and it does no harm.

This question of harm and critique does emerge, always. The students defend you from the shunning you received both within the book from the daughters in Antonio’s house and from the people at church, but also form the critics who see you as simplistic or stereotypical. The students acknowledge that in our communities we are not of one mind about such things, nor should we be, and that we are allowed, encouraged even, to have different beliefs. One beautiful mind, whom I have never met in person, adds this to the conversation about how we handle the critics of what some would call superstitions or backwards, even primitive beliefs.

Ana Escano

In *Bless Me, Ultima* the tradition being lost is that of curandera and all it means. The connection between the spirit and the earth, and the secrets behind Ultima’s herbs and remedies were dying because she was dying, and they would leave with her. It wasn’t just the curandera traditions that were being lost, but that of helping each other living as a community and respecting our elders and the traditions they try and pass on. We Latino’s have great faith, and we are spiritual. I come from

the Dominican Republic and I have seen many women like Ultima who have the “Don” to see past the spiritual veil, who walk around and help others with their herbs, remedies and wisdom. I have seen people *que se montan* as spirit invades their body and they lose control over themselves. I have also seen people offering you the heart of the one you desire for a special price and it’s a subscription thing, so you pay monthly, so he can keep on loving you obviously, like lay away love.

I believe the Latino’s would be split about Ultima being a curandera and her role in the community. Some would believe and understand it was not anything evil but beautiful, others would condemn her and maybe accuse her of being a witch. This is also based on faith as defined by the faith in God that proclaims any worship that is not to a certain God is evil and devil worship. Yet, are they not the same? Wanting to do good and help others? “And I heard that Ultima could lift the curses laid by brujas, that she could exorcise the evil the witches planted in people to make them sick. And because curanderas had this power she was misunderstood and often suspected of practicing witchcraft herself” (Anaya 298). When Deborah said “isn’t she a witch” (Anaya 302), it angered her mother because even her family thought these horrible things about Ultima, the mom was angry because she knew Ultima and what she represented. Ultima dying would mean the loss of traditions, culture and therefore, identity.

I’m Catholic, but I have strong connections with my Latino culture and its traditions. One such tradition being Santeria, which in some parts of the Latino community tends to have a negative connotation. Yet, if you really took the time to read and learn about Santeria, you would see how it plays a great part in our culture and history. We were force fed centralized religion and denied our own spiritual roots. You will see so many connections in the saints that are worshipped by the Catholic faith and those worshipped in Santeria, some might even be the same.

This student, Ana, is always prepared to speak with clarity and truth. She takes up the critique and holds space for it, even as she affirms that “we have been denied our own spiritual roots.” Finally, Roglenys, a student learning English and attending college as a returning adult student, offers us this:

Roglenys Perez Santos Romero Friday, March 26, 2021 12:28:50 AM
This reading reminded me of my grandmother. She always used plants and herbs to make remedies to cure me when I was sick. "It was because Ultima was a curandera, a woman who knew the herbs and remedies of the ancients, a miracle -worker who could heal the sick" (Anaya 298). I remember one day I had bad stomach pain, I could not sleep, I was crying because of the pain, I spent the weekend with my grandmother in the "campo" (farm). She went outside in her garden picked some herbs. She made a tea for me, which was strong and bitter and had a weird flavor. I felt content that my grandmother cured me with her natural herbs.

It is this that stands out. The gifts of reclamation your story continuously invites. Gracias.

Con Mucho Cariño,
Grateful readers in the Bronx