# Rudolfo Anaya, Mentor, Maestro y Camarada

*A. Gabriel Meléndez*
Distinguished Professor, University of New Mexico

In New Mexico's mestizo and hybrid Spanish, the word *camarada,* like the word *querencia,* has taken on a local color that denotes notions of friendship, of family, of homeland. In this useage *camarada* does not connote a political or revolutionary meaning, rather, when first spoken, it is given to a friend, a neighbor or a relative, those who need not knock at the door to enter one's house. And *querencia,* a word which has been appearing with more frequency of late and being further defined in books and commentaries, is that land of the coexistence among *camaradas.*

Before I had the pleasure of meeting Rudolfo Anaya in person, like many of us, I came to know of him by encountering his first novel, *Bless Me, Ultima*. I was in the last stages of finishing my undergraduate degree. This was around 1973 when I ran into another student who was a poet and the radio host of "Raíces" our Chicano hour on the campus radio station. My friend told me —this was before social media and when what traveled by word of mouth was gold— that in Colombia, Gabriel García Marquez was just finishing *A Hundred Years of Solitude.* Now I see that gold can arrive late, and come polished by what had just been overheard in a literature class. I don't know why I put so much stock in this friend as a source of information. It had to do with youth or with being *camaradas.* The information was late being that *A Hundred Years of Solitude* had been in publication for six years and it was early since also mentioned in the class was a novel in the genre of "magic realism" that had to do with our impoverished and forgotten *querencia,* New Mexico. The novel had been written by someone named Anaya. My friend couldn't

remember that first name of the writer and he hadn't taken notes. This information was important but incomplete and I immediately made my way to the card catalogue and found the entry: Anaya, Rudolfo, *Bless Me, Ultima,* Berkeley, Quinto Sol, 1972. Not bad, I was coming to the information with only a two year delay. I jotted down the details and ran to the stacks and searched them from one end to the other only to learn that the three copies owned by the library had been checked out and were held by a professor and two graduate students. This gold was being held hostage.

Some time later I found a copy of the book at John Randall's bookstore which he famously named "Salt of the Earth." I have never come upon a single reader who has not been taken in by the first words Rudolfo Anaya published, "The magical time of childhood stood still and the pulse of the living earth pressed into my living blood." I was not different. I devoured the book and read it a second and third time.

I came to know Rudolfo some time later and after I had started my graduate studies in Hispanic literature and after I had become involved with Mesa Chicana, a graduate student organization supporting Raza graduate students through the publication of a newsletter and through monthly meetings. Rudolfo sponsored us as a faculty member and came to our monthly luncheons to support our work and share his experience with us. This was a time of great unity and of coming together, a time which saw an increase in Chicano/a graduate students across a number of programs on campus. I came to appreciate Rudolfo as a mentor given the key role he had in literary studies and the special concern he had for our development as Chicano/a students. This was also when I had some first poems published in *El Noticiero de la Mesa Chicana.*

I quickly came to view Rudolfo as a role model and guiding light for all of us. He was always generous with his time, even-handed in his comments and congenial in interactions with us, his students. We all waited with anticipation for his next novels to appear and they soon did. Anaya completed his first trilogy with *Heart of Aztlán (*1976) and *Tortuga* (1979). A few years would pass before Anaya brought forth another novel, a point that might interest some bio-bibliographers, but these was a very active time for Rudolfo, years in which he with Antonio Márquez published two edited volumes of short stories:

*Cuentos Chicanos* (1980 & 1984). This was also when Anaya invested a great deal of time and effort in support of a new generation of Chicano/a writers. In no small way he became the senior editor of a generation of emerging voices and published early works by Denise Chávez, Ron Arias, Ana Castillo, Juan Felipe Herrera, Alberto Ríos, Juan Bruce Navoa, Francisco Jiménez and many other young writers.

I recall the afternoon when Rudy, Genaro Padilla and I met for lunch at the Frontier Restaurant just across the street from the University of New Mexico. At the time I was living in Oakland, California, teaching at Mills College and was on a visit back home. By then and by all measures, Anaya was the most widely recognized Mexican American writer around and yet he kept to his usual routines and expressed his genuine fondness in getting together as he would say "con la plebe." I took to calling him by his more familiar name "Rudy." Over lunch, Rudy, who we continued to appreciate as a mentor, raise his eyebrow (as only he could do) and turned to us and cajoled, "hey vatos, I'm your editor." This was certainly true since he had accepted two of my short stories for publication, the first appearing in *Voces* (1988) and the other in *Tierra* (1989) and he had also published an essay by Professor Padilla in *Aztlán* (1989).

The Chicano conference in Torredembarra, Spain in 1989 convened an energized group of students, writers and critics of Chicano Literature that included a large contingent of participants from outside the United States. Within a first cycle of European conferences, I believe Torredembarra was the first to take place in Spain following those of France and Germany. It became a transformational event for me personally and professionally and I believe this was the case for all the participants in as much as it stands out as the moment when a mirror was held up to us that was external to our experience of living in the United States and the reflection it provided came through from a whole different perspective. Thinking back on that meeting one can appreciate how it included a standout group of promoters of Chicano/a literature, then a still emerging field of endeavor. And I cannot over emphasize how important it was that the work of the conference was nested in collaborations with international participants. It was also important that we were able to gather there with our mentors and *maestros,* those writers who had been engaged in the work of creating a new and dynamic new

literature and who were creating an engagement with it, right there, standing at our side. The leading figures at Torredembarra were Rudy Anaya and Alurista given the high number of papers delivered at the conference dedicated to their work.

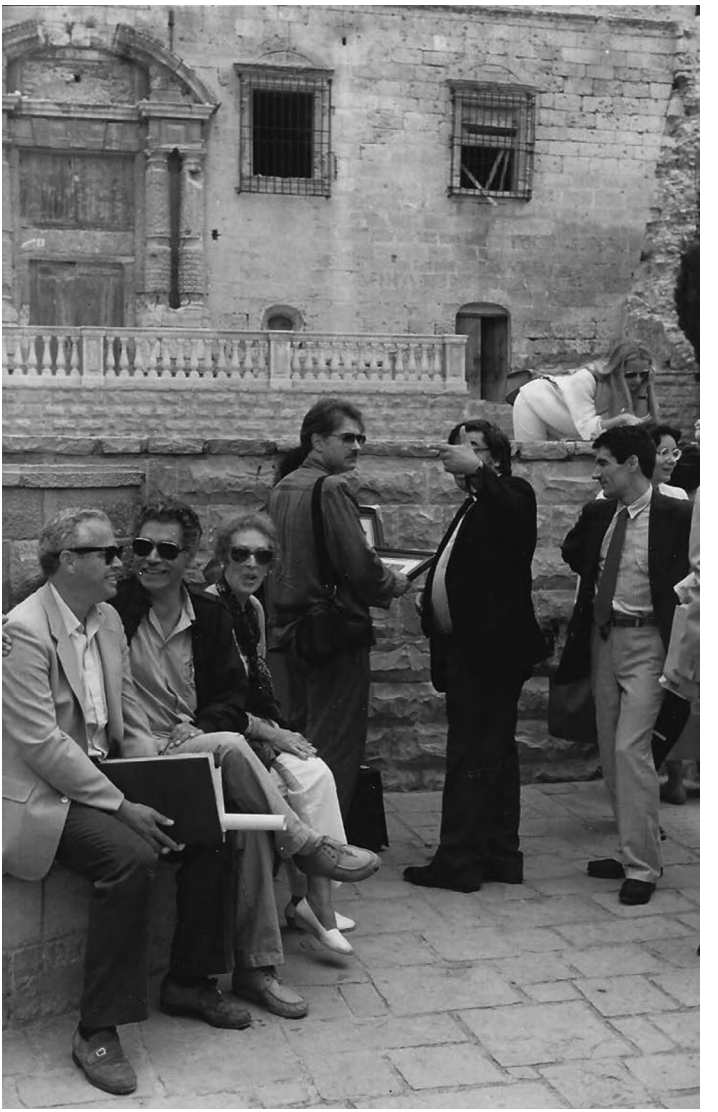

**Image 1. Torredembarra Conference, 1989,**
**Rudy and Patricia Anaya with Richard Griswold del Castillo.**

In Rudy we had the seasoned writer who had managed to open up the space of Chicano literature over the course of the prior two decades and in Alurista we had the writer standing at the crossroads of new and uncharted creative possibilities. All this made for a rich exchange of ideas and fellowship throughout the days of the conference. The energy was contagious and took the form of exuberant conversations during the panels and at the social exchanges that followed. The photographs I have of Torrdembarra confirm the enthusiasm of the participants. One photograph is of Rudy and Patricia Anaya sitting next to the historian Richard Griswold del Castillo. Rudy, his arm thrown over Griswold del Castillo, is saying something that causes a great deal of joy and laughter. Walking about in other photographs are a number of notables figures in Chicano/a literature and cultural studies: María Herrera-Sobek, Francisco Lomelí, Gary Keller, Juan Bruce-Navoa, María Teresa Márquez, Aída Hurtado, Salvador Rodríguez del Pino, Sylvia Rodríguez, Alejandro Morales, and Tino Villanueva. That I was there had everything to do with Rudy in his role as mentor and editor setting forth a pathway for us.

These were years when I often kept in touch with Rudy through conferences and colloquia. I recall that we extended an invitation to him from Chicano Studies at the University of Utah to be our keynote speaker for our annual Chicano Scholarship Banquet. He accepted and came one spring day and as always he was gracious and lifted our spirits by sharing his gift for humor and laughter with all those present. He chose to read from *The Adventures of Juan Chicaspatas,* a parody in verse about the camaradas Juan Chicaspatas and Al Penco, two "Chicano boys," who leave their life on the streets and enter into a series of adventures across time and space that will lead them back to Mexico, Tenochitlán. There they meet and talk with la Malinche on a plaza in Anahuac. Rudy got up to podium in a room filled with parents, students and faculty and began:

> Arms of the women, I sing,
> arms of the women I have known,
> women I have left behind
> as I , a proud Chicano boy set out
> to find Aztlán.
> To these women I sing:
> Malinche,

Madre de los mestizos
Mother of all Chicanos,
To her I return.

During the time the poem lasted Rudy modulated his delivery in the voice of a camarada, a streetwise pachuco and a son of barrio Barelas where Rudy had spent his teenage years. But also present in the reading was the well-read literature professor and the consummate storyteller, the author of a hybrid poem that held something of the old Nuevomexicano *colloquios* or dialogues, a sharp-edge parody of Whitman and a reckoning with historical identity. If I remember correctly it was the parents of the students who cheered the reading on with appreciative whistling and laughter. Later in a session with my students, Rudy asked me, "Do you know what a chicaspatas is?" This was a term in caló that I was not familiar with and when I said as much, Rudy answered, ,"Chicaspatas, you never heard that, it's the Chicanos, hijos de la movida chueca. We used to say it in Barelas all the time."

I also keep a photo of Rudy taken at a reception I hosted for my students in the Bread Loaf Writers program at Middlebury College who were taking summer courses in New Mexico. Rudy had agreed to come visit the group at my home after they had been to an exhibit at the National Hispanic Cultural Center, located in Barelas and after having read Rudy's novel *Alburquerque.* Rudy was please to learn that they had gotten to see his beloved Barelas. The photo catches Rudy in front of a painting by María Baca, who also had grown up in Barelas and who in this period was painting exuberant scenes of her youth in vivid, dramatic and bold colors. Rudy is visibly alive and accents his speech by raising an eyebrow and gently waving his hand as if he were painting with graceful brush strokes.

Later that summer and in others that followed, Rudy accepted my invitations to come to do readings for my summer students. These turned out to be special moments, in part because they took place outside Santa Fe and at a place that had once been a working vaquero ranch. The ranch was on a stretch of the Pecos, the same river that runs through Puerto de Luna where Rudy spent his childhood and the scene of the first ten years described in *Bless Me, Ultima.* For a split second reality stood at the doorway to fiction and from where one could literally breath in the fragrance of the fields. Rudy would

come into the room after having walked past the piñón trees, the sage bushes and other plants. Rudy's readings took the form of synesthesia recalling a moment in the novel: "As Ulitma walked past me I smelled for the first time the trace of the sweet fragrance of the herbs that always lingered in her wake" (11). And if it happened that an afternoon wind, mysteriously shut a door or the shadow of a crow crossed over a nearby hill, Rudy torque up his reading by looking up, raising an eyebrow and saying, "Must be that Ulitima is nearby. Must her owl."

**Image 2. Rudy at my home. Summer, 2005.**

Just about then I sent Rudy some pieces I was writing which I later published in *The Book of Archives/El libro de los archivos*. There was no internet then, and as some of as will remember, everything needed to sent by mail, knowing that there would be a lag time in getting a response. I remember that one day an envelope from Rudy showed up in my mailbox at Mills College. The ten pages I had sent him had come back and where marked up by the hand of a careful editor and included a final comment from Rudy, "this needs work." I wasn't disappointed to learn the draft required more polishing, to the contrary, I was very grateful that Rudy had given of his time and attention and this was not the reason it took so much time for me to finish my book of short stories. Other projects and teaching duties intervened and I didn't return to the book until I was able to return to it when I received a Fulbright teaching award to Hungary.

Once again I was made aware of the impact Anaya's work beyond the United States when I and several Hungarian professors, decided in 2014 to convene "La Frontera: A Borderlands Multidisciplinary Symposia." The colloquia was part of my residency at Ezterházy Károly College in Eger, Hungary. To be honest, early on I had doubts that the meeting would draw participants given that Eger is two hours from Budapest and where perhaps a handful of people concerned themselves with Latinos in the United States. Still, we steeled our resolve by relying on Gloria Anzaldúa's insights on the borderlands and sent out our call. Folks responded, like the professor from the University of Miskolc who had been a Fulbright scholar to the University of Texas at El Paso and shared a presentation on muralism at the border between El Paso and Ciudad Juárez. Well, I thought at least we are nearing the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. The most unexpected paper was delivered by Professor Zoltan Abádi Nagy of the University of Debrecen which he titled "Analysis of Intercultural Information Processing in a Multicultural Borderland: Rudolfo A. Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*. Even though Professor Nagy had presented his paper on prior occasions it shown again as an intuitive, agile and well-argued analysis. Here was a scholar who had plumbed the depths of the novel and connected with it on a personal and collective level. I suspect that some of the attraction to Anaya's work in that part of the world stems from Hungary's rural life and villages with their own abuelas who know the medicinal arts or from Hungary's Roma

enclaves or from the Hungarians heroic resistance to the Russian tanks in the streets of Budapest in 1956. The connections made by Nagy's presentation are a testament to how much Anaya sowed the seeds of mutual and shared understanding leading to unexpected exchanges in unexpected places.

Having taught Rudy's works throughout my career I welcomed the opportunity to analyze the long-awaited film adaption of *Bless Me, Ultima* in 2013, but the film opened as my book *Hidden Chicano Cinema* was headed to press. As the trailers for the film began to appear I had to reconcile myself to the idea that I was not going to be able to include a discussion of the film in my book and so I noted, "I have seen the YouTube trailers and premiers of the film are being planned for El Paso and Santa Fe. If ever there was a film to include in my study, this would be the one. […] For now it must stand as an example of how difficult it is to close a book on film (viii, 2013)." Some time later, I came back to this work and managed to place an article on the film in CHIRICÚ. I used the opportunity to reflect on how we might understand the lapse in time between the publication of the novel and its adaptation to film after some four decades. I also wanted to point out how important it was that film now provided a way for many more people to come to know Anaya's masterpiece. As I researched the article I came upon Rudy's comments and views on the film. The movie had resulted from a positive collaboration with the production team made up of Carl Franklin, an African- American director, Cindy Walton, the executive producer and Santiago Pozo, a Spanish film producer and promoter. Their work pleased Rudy and he said as much at the film's premier when he told the audience, "You are going to see beautiful faces that are Nuevomexicanos, part of our culture, our traditions, the landscape and it all comes together. It's a very moving, well-made, excellent film."

In 2014, following the release of the film, Professor John Nieto-Phillips sought to invite Rudy to the Second Latino Film Festival at Indiana University that was also hosting Edward James Olmos, who was featured "In the Time of Butterflies," the Julia Alvárez novel that had also just been turned into a film. I took the idea to Rudy and hear back from him by email after a few days. He wrote that he appreciated the invitation but that he no longer traveled much. Rudy's reply caused me no small amount of sorrow, akin to what Sancho felt when he asks

Don Quixote to take up another adventure and the maestro replies that times have changed and things are different. Rudy and I talked about getting together for lunch soon and not long after that Rudy called to say that we should plan to meet at his house because he no longer went out to restaurants in town. Rudy was experiencing some health troubles, maladies some persisting since the days when he was hospitalized at the Children's Hospital in Truth or Consequences, New Mexico and the days he wrote so poignantly about in *Tortuga* had returned. When President Obama awarded Rudy a National Humanities Medal in the Arts, Rudy traveled to Washington but had to make use of a wheel chair. Still his voice was as strong as when he encouraged us as students to seek our dreams. He let out a grito, strong and clear as he left the stage, "¡Viva Obama!"

And so I come to pay tribute and acknowledge the many wonderful things Rudy taught over his lifetime. I am truly grateful that he was there for us as a mentor, maestro and camarada. Viva Rudolfo,"Rudy" Anaya!

## REFERENCES

Anaya, Rudolfo, *Bless Me, Ultima.* Warner Books Editon, 1999.

Meléndez, A. Gabriel. *Hidden Chicano Cinema: Film Dramas in the Borderlands.* Rutgers University Press, 2013.