

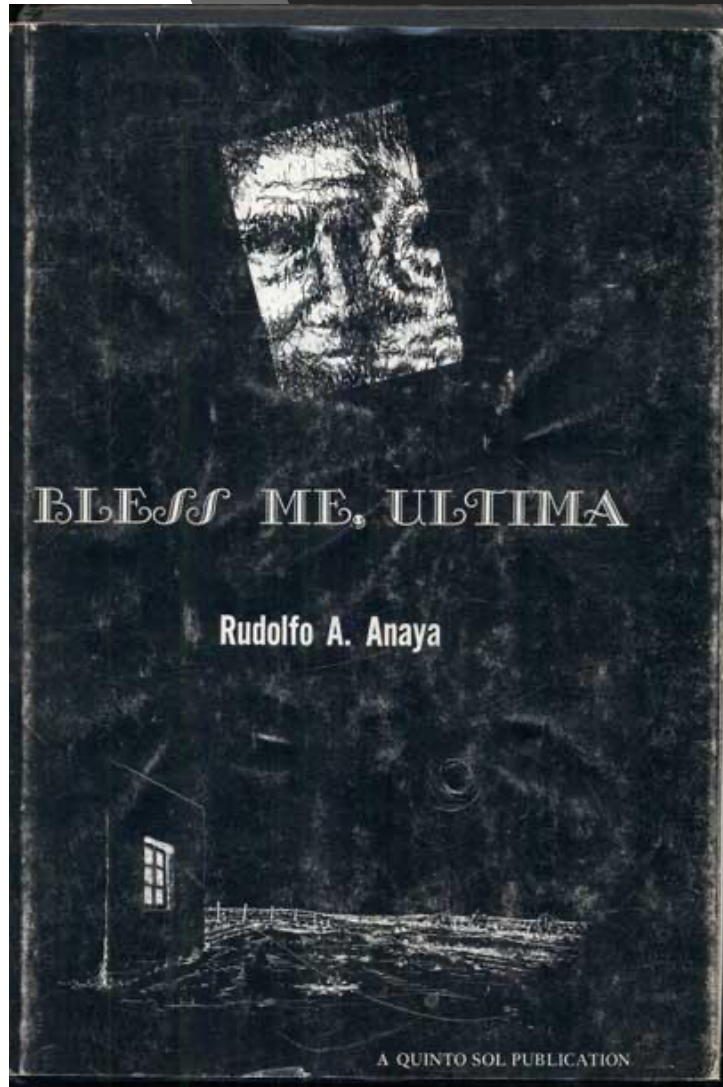


SPAN322: “North of the Río Grande” US Latino/Chicano Literature

Bless Me, Ultima II
March 19, 2020

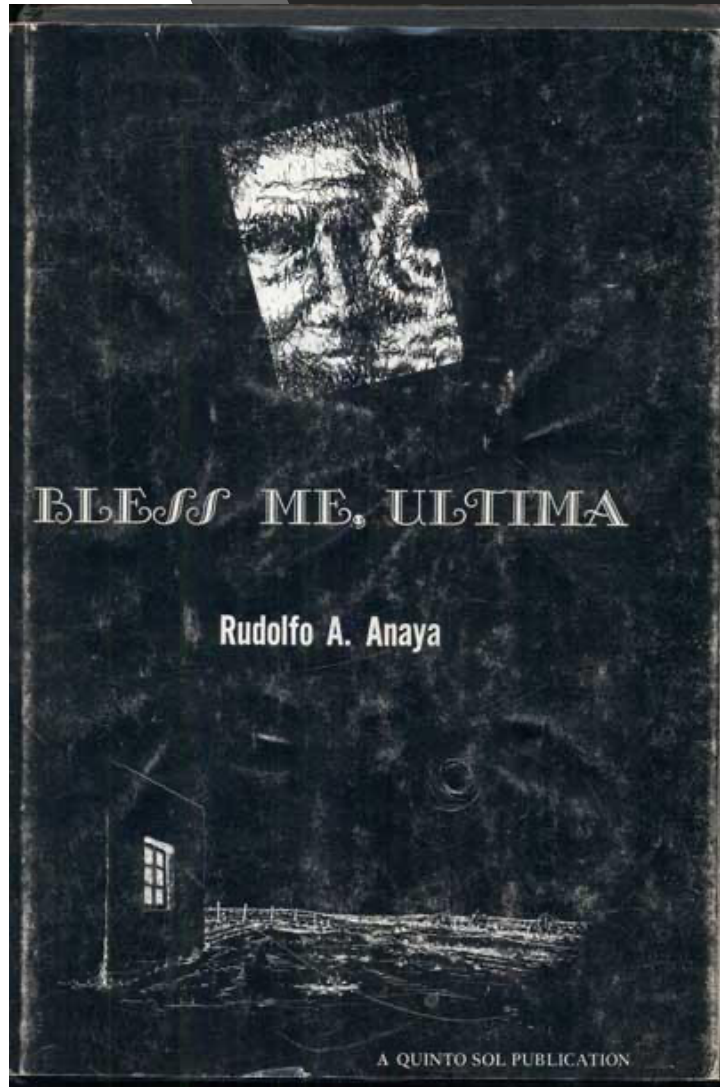
BLESS ME, ULTIMA

Bless Me, Ultima



- By Rudolfo Anaya (1937-)
- An autobiographical coming-of-age novel set in rural New Mexico in the 1940s; published 1972
- The best-selling Chicano novel of all time, but also controversial and subject to censorship
- An “eloquent presentation of Chicano consciousness in all its intriguing complexity”

Bless Me, Ultima



- What does a child's perspective give us?
- What are its narrative possibilities?
- How is identity constructed in this book?
- How are mother and father opposed?
- How does Ultima complicate that split?
- What are the gender politics here?
- How is Antonio like/unlike his classmates?
- What is the role of belief? Faith? Religion?
- What is the role of dreams?
- How are destiny and agency presented?

“The first pioneers [on the llano] were shepherders. Then they imported herds of cattle from Mexico and became vaqueros. [. . .] They were the first cowboys in a wild and desolate land which they took from the Indians.

“Then the railroad came. The barbed wire came. The songs, the corridos became sad, and the meeting of the people from Texas with my forefathers was full of blood, murder, and tragedy. The people were uprooted. They looked around one day and found themselves closed in. The freedom of land and sky they had known was gone. Those people could not live without freedom and so they packed up and moved west. They became migrants.”
(125)

“I am not a God of forgiveness! The Voice roared

“Hear me! I begged.

“I hear no one who has not communed with me! God answered. Your brother has sinned with the whores, and so I condemn him to hell for eternity!

“No! I pleaded, hear me and I shall be your priest!

“I can have no priest who has golden idols before him, God answered, and the flames roared and consumed everything.

“In the cracking, frolicking flames I saw the face of Narciso. His face was bloody, and his eyes dark with death.

“Forgive Narciso! I cried to God.

“I will, the terrible voice responded, if you also ask me to forgive Tenorio.” (173)

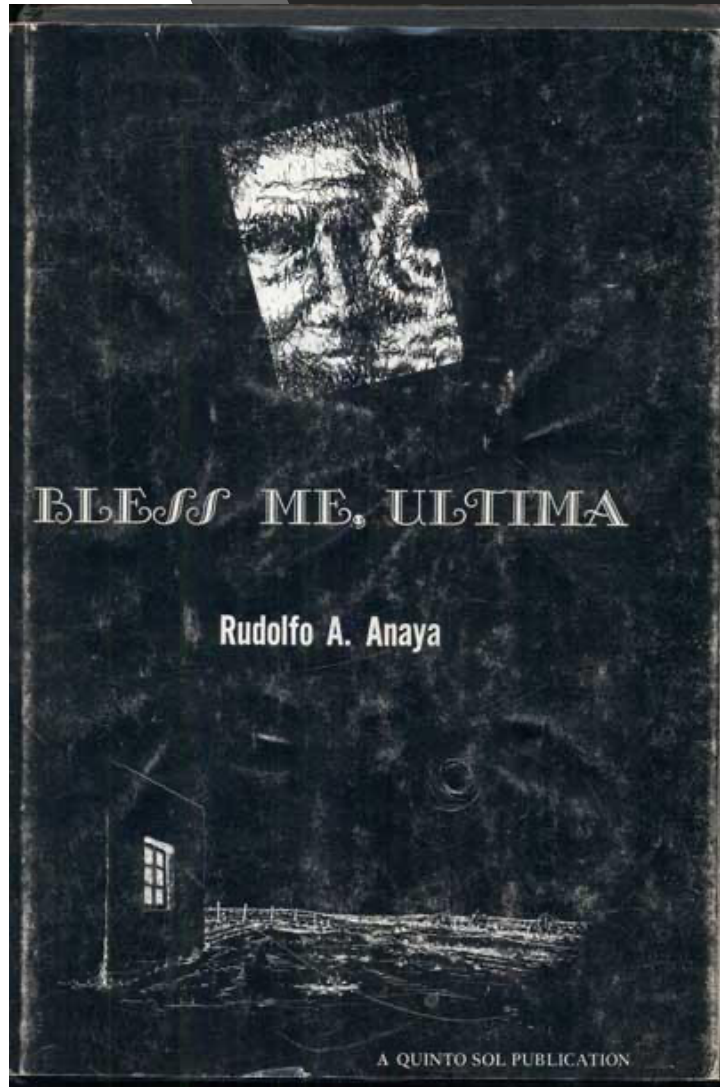
“‘Tony be the priest! Tony be the priest!’ they began to chant.

“‘No, no,’ I begged, but they surrounded me. Ernie took off his sweater and draped it around me. ‘His priest’s dress!’ he shouted, and the others followed. They took off their jackets and sweaters and tied them around my waist and neck. I looked in vain for help but there was none.

“‘Tony is the priest, Tony is the priest, yah-yah-yah-ya-ya!’ They sang and danced around me. I grew dizzy. The weight of the jackets on me was heavy and suffocating.

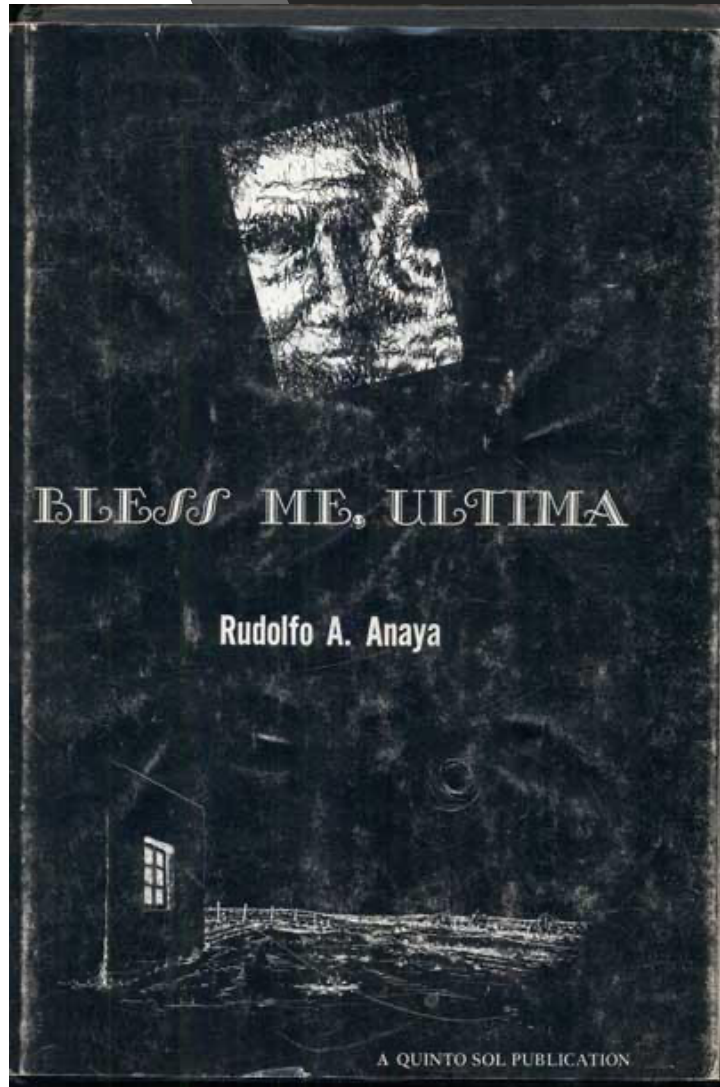
“‘All right!’ I cried to appease them. ‘I shall be your priest!’” (209)

Bless Me, Ultima



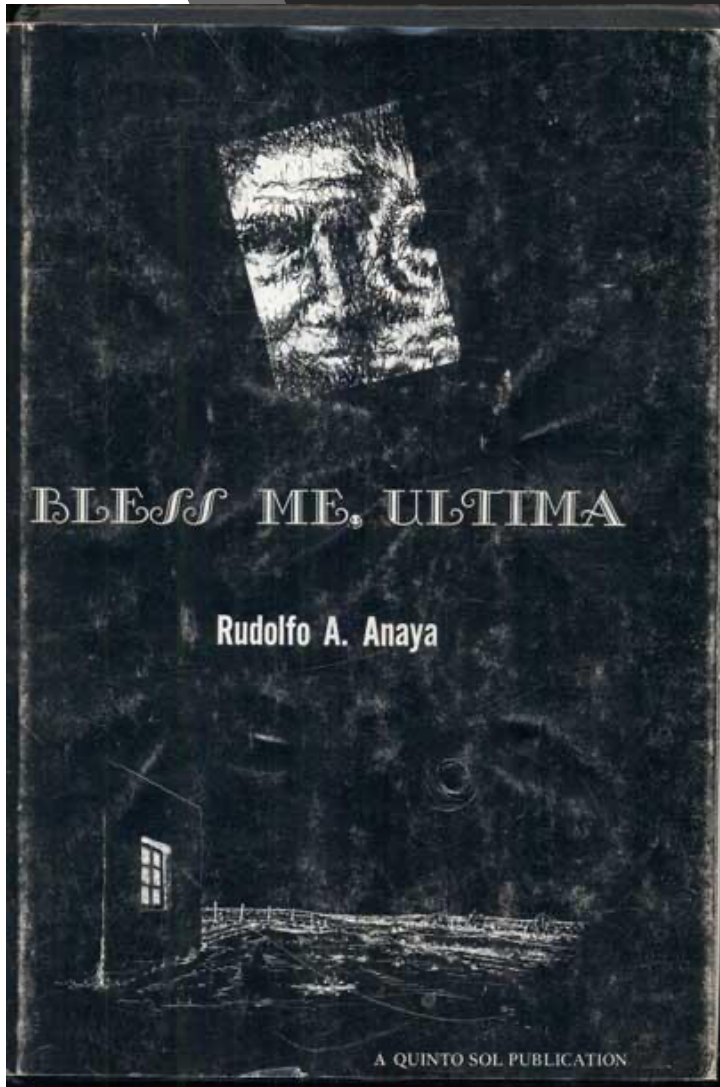
- How does Ultima complicate the split between Antonio's two heritages?
- Ultima is also in some ways childlike.
- She offers the wisdom of age, but also a distance from the "adult" world.
- Hence her bond with Antonio.
- She, however, is able and entitled to intervene in ways in which Antonio cannot (yet).
- She is neither Catholic/farmer nor Nomad/hunter, but a supplement (or corrective?) to both.
- Her ties are to nature, magic, dreams, and indigeneity (as well as childhood).
- Yet in the end she has to die for Antonio to grow.

Bless Me, Ultima



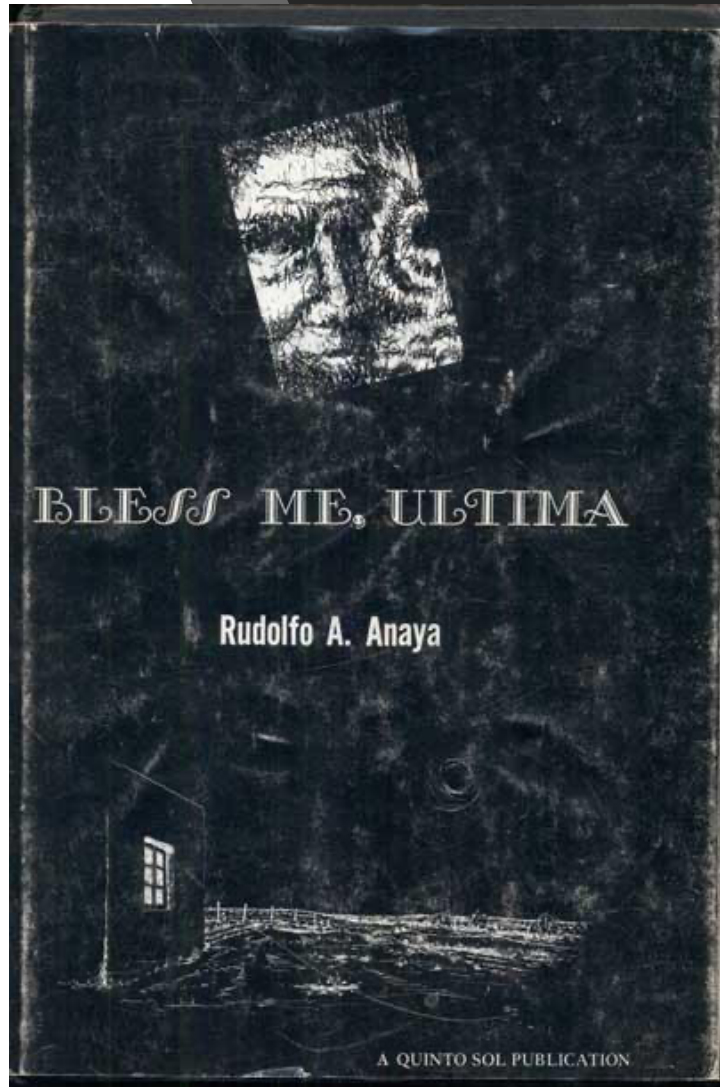
- What are the gender politics here?
- In many ways, this is a very traditional household.
- The father goes out to work (and drink); the mother looks after the home.
- The brothers are the repository of family ambition; the sisters barely count.
- Women who don't fall in line are denounced as "witches."
- And yet neither Antonio's father nor Ultima quite fit this model.

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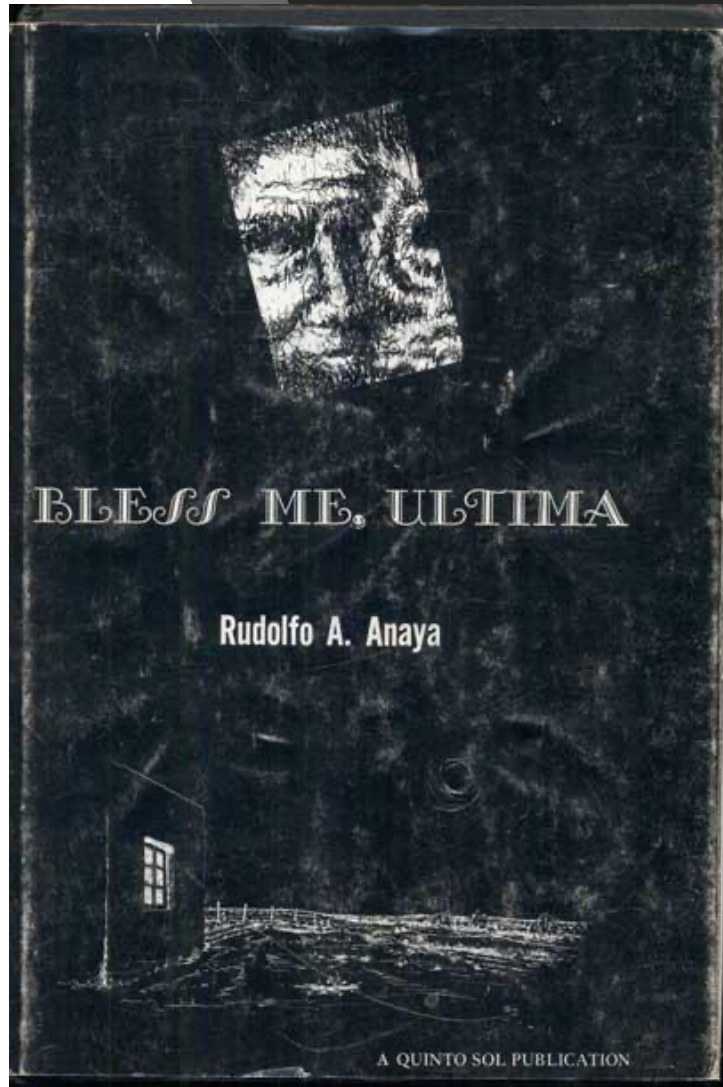
- How is Antonio like / unlike his classmates?
- He sees more: he witnesses five deaths over the course of the book.
- His growing-up is both more traumatic and profound.
- Though we know far less about the other kids.
- Even so, they seem by the end to see him as special: a priest in waiting.
- But the episodes with the kinds also tend to me light-hearted (the play) until Florence dies?

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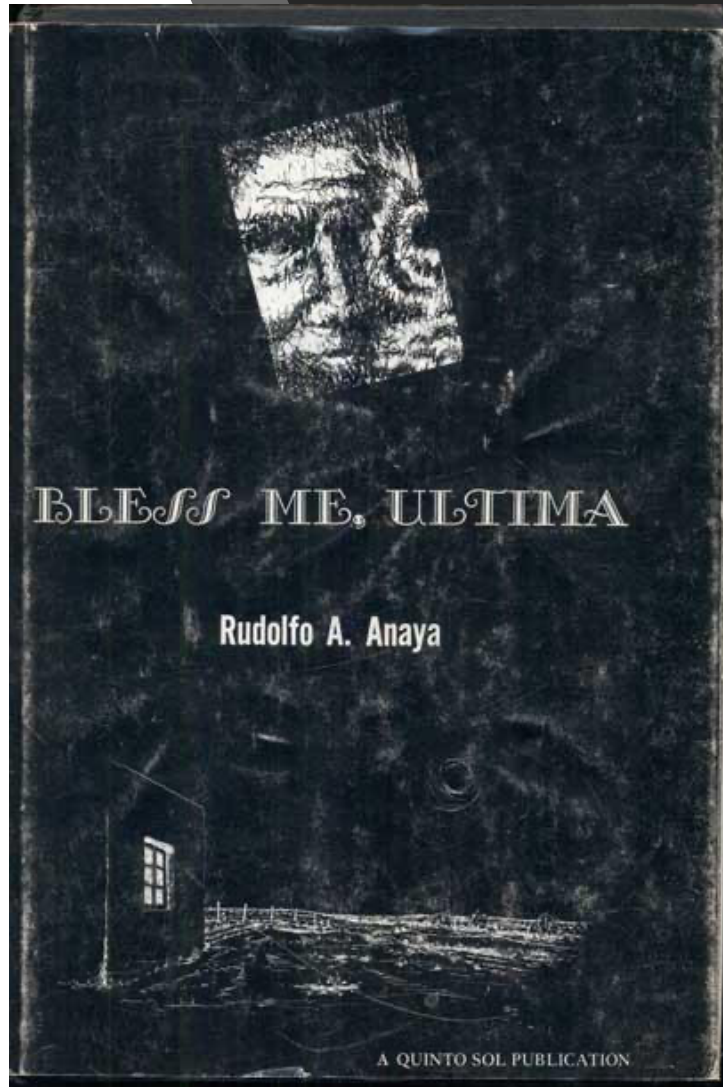
- What is the role of belief? Faith? Religion?
- What is the role of dreams?
- How are destiny and agency presented?
- These questions are all connected.
- Faith anchors identity but also tells of future reward or punishment.
- Dreams indicate possible futures (and pasts) and present anxieties.
- It is unclear whether destiny can be altered; perhaps it simply has to be understood.

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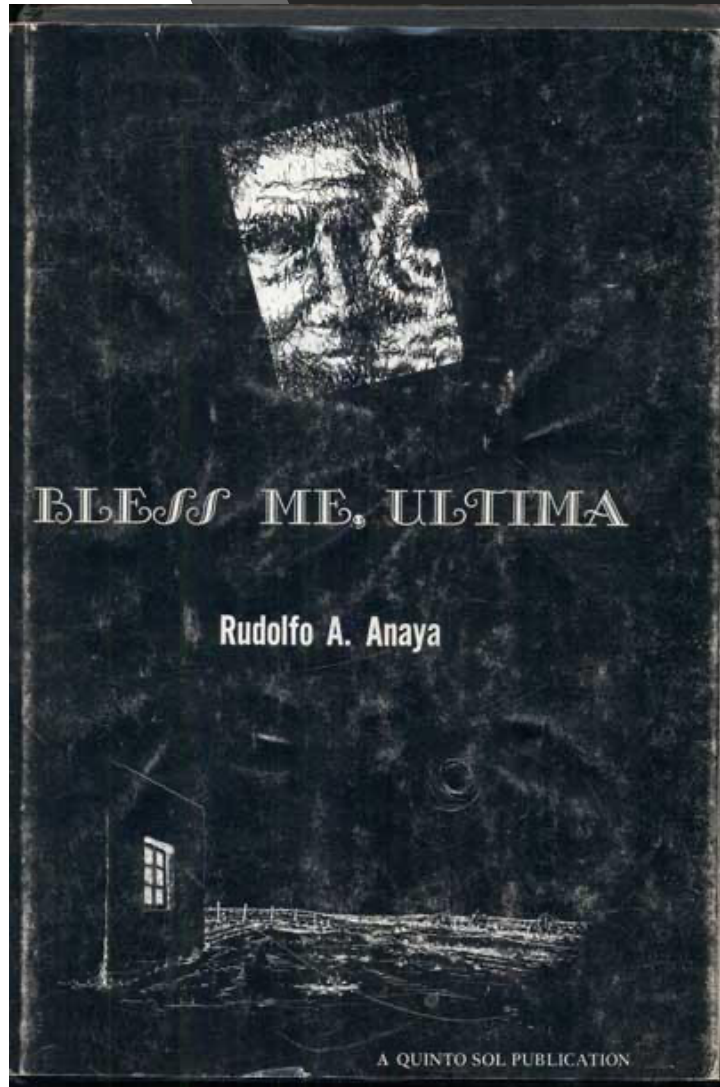
- Other themes...
- Writing
- Magic
- Learning
- Violence
- Space
- Time
- History
- Rebellion

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- What are the “kinks” in this book?
- Ultima as kink? Changing the course of Antonio’s life?
- Antonio as kink? Unable to fit into to any pre-determined fate?
- The book as kink: a non-Chicano (?) book at heart of Chicano canon?

Bless Me, Ultima



- What does this book (or the others we are reading) have to say to our current condition?
- We see the reassertion of borders and the prohibition of mobility, on both global and local scales.
- Fear and anxiety have become dominant affects, almost overwhelmingly.
- There is a fear of contamination, of infection, from both people and objects.

NEXT STEPS

For Tuesday

- Read *The House on Mango Street*.
- Write a blog post (c. 400 words) about your reading, and publish it Monday evening.
- We will nominate our Wikipedia articles by Tuesday at midnight.