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Fonseca, Vanessa

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CHAPTER 9

La Tierra

Sense of Place in Contemporary Chicano Literature

CARMEN LYDIA FLYS JUNQUERA

The landscape changes man, and the man becomes landscape.

—RUDOLFO ANAYA

THE IMPORTANCE of the land in Chicano literature cannot be overestimated. A sense of place is a key factor in both personal and cultural identity, as well as being a cornerstone in current environmental rhetoric. Being anchored in the local seems to be the first essential step to a more planetary appreciation of nature and environmental understanding. Yet this is one of the crucial and destabilizing elements of modernity, where rootedness seems to give way to alienation in nonplaces. Although there is debate around what a new concept of sense of place might be that would respond to our current more cosmopolitan character,¹ it seems that Chicano identity is still firmly rooted in the land. This essay explores this sense of place in three Chicano authors: Rudolfo Anaya, Ana Castillo, and Jimmy Santiago Baca.²

The first consideration is to evaluate the meaning of sense of place, and precisely the bilingual condition of Chicanos makes this concept more fluid. Even in English, the expression “sense of place” is deceptively simple. For geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, place can be defined as a “center of felt value” (Space and Place 4). According to Edward Relph, sense of place is a conscious, cognitive process, “a learned skill for critical environmental awareness that is used

1. See Heise, Plumwood, Thomashow, Tuan Cosmos and Hearth, and Flynquera “Wild Cosmopolitan Gardens.”
2. The research for this essay was funded by the project "CLYMA” Ref. 2011-009 of the Franklin Institute.
to grasp what the world is like and how it is changing” (208). In Setha Low’s anthropological understanding, “place attachment” is “the symbolic relationship formed by people giving culturally shared emotional/affective meanings to a particular space or piece of land that provides the basis for the individual’s and group’s understanding of and relation to the environment” (2). Sociologist David Hummon emphasizes the subjectivity of sense of place, being people’s subjective perceptions of their environments and their more or less conscious feelings about those environments. Sense of place is inevitably dual in nature, involving both an interpretive perspective on the environment and an emotional reaction to the environment. . . . Sense of place involves a personal orientation toward place, in which one’s understanding of place and one’s feelings about place become fused in the context of environmental meaning. (6; emphasis in the original)

As we see in these diverse definitions, sense of place entails the relationship to the land itself as well as to the community; yet, depending on the definition, one or the other is privileged. In the question of language, English seems to privilege the aspect referring to the physical place. Yet the expression “sense of place” does not translate well into Spanish. In Spanish the closest term would be sentido de arraigo, emphasizing rootedness and belonging to a community over the physical land. For Rudolfo Anaya, the relational quality of sense of place is what the Spanish term la tierra underscores. He argues that the term la tierra conveys a deeper relationship between man and his place, and it is this kinship to the environment which creates the metaphor and the epiphany in landscape. On one pole of the metaphor stands man, on the other is the raw, majestic and awe-inspiring landscape of the southwest; the epiphany is the natural response to that landscape, a coming together of these two forces. (“Writer’s Landscape” 98–99)

Moreover, according to Anaya, the Chicano worldview “was centered in community and its relationship to the earth” (“Aztlán” 234), and he traces the origin of this worldview to the Pueblo Indians, considering “the recognition of the Earth as mother (la sagrada tierra)” (“Aztlán” 239). So much as Anaya claims the Spanish word la tierra has deeper implications for the relationship of humans to the land, likewise the Spanish version of sense of place, or arraigo, also emphasizes the rootedness in both the land and the community, the close intertwining of landscape and the humans who inhabit it.
A chosen, albeit mythical, place lies at the heart of the creation of Chicano identity, Aztlán. This place is imbued with symbolic, interpretative, and emotional characteristics, as Low and Hummon mention in their understanding of sense of place. Thus, one could argue that much of Chicano identity is enacted in the relationship with both the mythical and physical land, and this becomes evident in some of the texts analyzed. This deep relationship also gives way to an environmental awareness in many cases, in particular in the texts of Anaya and Castillo seen here. However, there also seems to be a generational shift in the interpretation of that relationship, which will be further explored.

The relationship with the land and its meaning is highlighted in Jimmy Santiago Baca’s title story “The Importance of a Piece of Paper.” The story sets out with the inheritance of the land at the parents’ death. One of the three siblings, Adan, wants to sell his part of the land but Pancho refuses to even talk about the issue because “It’s everything we stand for. Mom and Dad, their parents, and back generations all said—never sell the land!” (53). Adan realizes the effect his proposal will cause since he too knew that “it had always been understood that the land was never to be sold or broken up” (52), but he needed the money and felt he was entitled to do what he wanted with his share of the inheritance. This contrast of views creates a wall between Pancho and Adan, which Marisol tries to negotiate. Despite Pancho and Marisol’s efforts to find money to buy Adan’s share and thus keep the land in the family, Adan sells to an Anglo professor, deepening the rift.

The story also emphasizes the connection between the land and the community. As a result of Jaylen’s neglect to close a gate, Pancho’s prize racehorse, Zapata, runs out and gets killed in a storm. Pancho argues that the obligation of closing gates, stated in the charter of the land grant, makes Jaylen responsible. Jaylen contests the obligation, claiming that he has not seen the legal documents of the charter and that he only understands private property, underscoring once again the sharp contrast between cultural values: handed-down tradition versus modern written legal documents; communal property and the commons versus private property. Jaylen takes the issue to court, and since no one can find the papers, the whole community stands to lose their rights to the land. Despite the family rift, the community appeals to their tradition and asks Adan, a lawyer, to intervene. They will only accept one of their own and ask him, appealing to his sense of community. All the older women go to his office and tell stories of how they helped him as a child. “They didn’t ask him, they didn’t accuse him or make him feel bad or put him under duress to do something—each simply gave her story with a smile” (Importance 93).

3. When referring to the fictional works analyzed, the first word of the title of the novel or collection of short stories is indicated in a parenthetical note. Likewise for critical works.
Adan tells Marisol that he can’t defend them because there is “a conflict of interest” (94), something she cannot understand. She tells him that it is about “the survival of the village. I don’t understand how to fight them, law is confusing, it’s not English or Spanish, it’s a foreign language. And it’s not about you or me anymore, but about all our relatives who came before us, and those who will come after” (94). Adan finally shows up for the community meeting, but only to give advice, clarifying what is at stake if they don’t find the charter of the land grant:

You’ll probably have to file individual titles to your land. There’ll be litigation in court . . . some people will say it’s not your land, you won’t be able to afford lawyers to prove that it is, those with money will win. . . . Developers will offer you money and some will sell. Land taxes will go up, you won’t be able to afford them. Everything will change . . . (96; ellipses in the original)

The land means all to the community, and their history, lifestyle, and identity are linked to that land. As a result of the impending loss of the land, Mr. Torrez, the oldest man in the village, has a heart attack and dies. At the end of the story, tradition and community prevail. As tradition dictates, the family looked for Mr. Torrez’s old suit to bury him in, and in the box they found the original land grant papers. The funeral turns into a celebration of life and tradition, while the judge dismisses the case.

Despite the victory, inevitably, the sense that things are changing is there. Marisol is conscious that once the papers are found, she needs to record the titles at the county office and adapt to modern times. The story highlights the breach between the individual rights that predominate in the Anglo tradition and community rights handed down from the land grants. Adan claims, “It’s not a personal thing, not against you or anyone, I’m just selling what’s mine in the will, what I inherited from our parents” (Importance 51). The cultural clash of communal versus private is similar to the attempts of “Americanizing” Native peoples with the Land Allotment Acts in the early twentieth century.

In the story we see that Marisol, who had left the farm to study, comes home at the death of her parents and finds herself emotionally tied to the land despite the difficulties: “The farm didn’t yield much money, and with the hundred acres they had inherited and the little money their parents’ insurance had left, they barely made it month to month” (Importance 48). Yet she rises early to sit in the apple orchard and watch “the morning sun slowly crest the Manzano peaks to the east” (47) and to hear “a flock of Canadian geese somewhere overhead. In the arroyo sage tree to her left, a red-tailed hawk swooped down and perched” (48). The detailed observation of nature and its
presence presides over all her actions. Even her romance with Jaylen begins with their walks along the cottonwoods along the riverbank, and their hikes up the mesa. The peace felt in nature, “mesmerized by the river, whose tiny wavelets enfolded seamlessly into one another in a dance of oneness” (69), marks their relationship. Yet the clash of cultures underlies the whole story as Pancho disapproves of Marisol’s relationship with Jaylen, just as his father would have: “The two cultures seldom mixed. Whether anyone admitted or talked about it openly, the ill feelings between Hispanics and gringos were real and present. The differences went deeper than mere cultural customs: there was long-standing, deep resentment toward Anglos for what they had done to Chicanos in the past” (71). At the heart of this resentment is the loss of the land, as is repeated in so many authors.

The threat of losing the land also figures in Ana Castillo’s *So Far from God*. Sofia faces innumerable challenges with her four daughters and a husband who abandoned them and only returns when they are already grown. She works hard at her butcher’s shop and eventually tries to improve things for the economically depressed community. Her efforts are directed to living off the land, as had their ancestors. Their tradition had been the land but that is changing: “All we have ever known is this life, living off our land, that just gets más smaller y smaller. You know that my familia once had three hundred acres to farm and now all I got left of my father’s hard work—and his father’s and his father’s—is casi nada, just a measly ten acres now, nomás, comadre! Barely enough for my family to live on!” (*So Far* 139). The changes Adan had warned the villagers about in the previous story were taking place here. Anglos and people from other parts of the country were coming and buying up land that had belonged to original families, who were being forced to give it up because they just couldn’t live off of it no more, and the taxes were too high, and the children went off to Albuquerque or even farther away to work, or out of state to college, or out of the country with the Army, instead of staying home to work on the rancherías. The truth was that most people had not been able to live off their land for the better part of the last fifty years. Outsiders in the past had overused the land so that in some cases it was no good for raising crops or grazing livestock no more. (139)

Among the different ideas for revitalizing the community, the one project that unites the neighbors is that of returning to the land. They agree on “starting a sheep-grazing wool-weaving enterprise” (146). Ana Castillo bases this on the actual initiative of many women’s associations in the Southwest, which she briefly mentions in the acknowledgment to the novel. The whole commu-
nity participates whether “skilled as ranchers or not, many began working in some way for the cooperative—by learning an aspect of the business of sheep grazing, wool scouring, weaving, administration, and selling the wool products” (147). A year later, the wool-weaving cooperative provided the needed outlet for the women: “as cooperative owners of their wool-weaving business they had paying jobs they could count on and were proud of and the mothers among them didn’t worry so much about their babies and childcare because they could bring their ‘jitos to work” (147). Also, the cooperative gave the women pride in their traditional arts, since the local college began to recognize their skills and award college credits for them. The business also taught them that there was “a growing demand for their hormone-free meat” (147), which encourages them to expand the business of the Carne Buena Meat Market that Sofia had sold to the cooperative. These successes inspire the local people to continue to respond to their traditions. “Above all, to stay on their land, to work it as their families had for many generations, was the desire of everyone who joined in and became everyone’s dream” (148).

However, much of their dream is threatened by ACME International, which is hiring women as assemblers and offering a good salary with the possibility of pay increases. The company was subcontracted to chemically clean parts for high-technology weapons for the Pentagon. The women working there begin having nausea and miscarriages, although the company doesn’t explain to them the risks of the job, nor does it give them adequate protection. The people of the area didn’t understand what was happening but begin to question the industry when they find “dead cows in the pasture, or sick sheep, and that one week late in winter when people woke up each morning to find it raining starlings . . . that dropped dead in mid-flight” (So Far 172). And the “Land of Enchantment” of their ancestors becomes the “Land of Entrapment” (172) as their land increasingly fails to produce, given the toxic contamination. The impending loss of the quality of their habitat makes them feel physically and culturally threatened, and they “spoke on the so many things that were killing their land and turning the people of those lands into an endangered species” (241–42).

By the end of the novel, even Sofia loses her land. Years ago, Domingo had bet away the land her father had left her and so she told him to leave. And now that he had returned, he had “given up the deed to the house” (So Far 215). The little land she had left and “the house of mud and straw and stucco and in some places brick—which had been her mother’s and father’s and her grandparent’s, for that matter, and in which she and her sister had been born and raised—that house had belonged to her. The law, however, based on ‘community property,’ stated that the house also belonged to her legal husband”
She discovers that Domingo, once again, had caused her ruin and she “was notified by the bank that her home, along with one measly acre next to her property which she had not given up to the Tome collective so as to keep Loca’s horses, was being transferred over to a certain Judge Julano” (215). After working so hard and losing her four daughters, she realizes that “when it came to retirement time for herself, Sofia would no longer even have the satisfaction of knowing that she would die in her own home. And that really was the final straw for her” (217). The Chicano tragedy has always been the loss of the land. As Comadre Rita commiserates with Sofia:

You know that my great-great-grandparents were the direct grantees of a land grant from King Felipe II, the very land I grew up on as a child. Except that what I grew up on was barely enough to plant a little corn, some calabashes, chiles, nomás, and graze a few goats and sheep to keep us alive.

First the gringos took most of our land away when they took over the territory from Mexico—right after Mexico had taken it from Spain and like my vis-abuelo used to say, ‘Ni no’ habiamo’ dado cuenta,’ it all happened so fast! Then, little by little, my familia had to give it up ‘cause they couldn’t afford it no more, losing business on their churros and cattle. (217)

The loss of the land also appears in Rudolfo Anaya’s novels. This loss haunts Clemente in Heart of Aztlán, making him lose his identity and self-worth. He anticipates that “When I sell my land I will be cast adrift, there will be no place left to return to, no home to come back to. . . . His soul and his heart were in the earth, and he knew that when he signed he would be cutting the strings of that attachment. It was like setting adrift on an unknown, uncharted ocean” (Heart 3). When he signs the contract, he feels that “the roots of his soul pulled away and severed themselves from the earth which had nurtured his life” (3). Many of the townspeople had sold out of necessity, and it broke their souls. Although Clemente swears to return, he is reminded, “They all say that, Clemente, but they don’t return. I bought Baca’s rancho by the river and he moved to Santa Fe and drank himself to death, I hear” (4). In a later novel, Alburquerque, when Abrán meets Lucinda’s father, Juan Oso reflects on the importance of the land and the betrayal of the Anglos. He still keeps a copy of the document that General Kearny read to the people of Las Vegas, New Mexico, when he took the city in 1846. In that document Kearny promises friendship, protection, and respect for their traditions:

I shall not expect you to take up arms and follow me, to fight your own people who may oppose me. But I now tell you, that those who remain peace-
ably at home, attending to their crops and their herds, shall be protected by me, in their property, their persons, and their religion: not a pepper, not an onion, shall be disturbed or taken by my troops, without pay, or by the consent of the owner. (Alburquerque 173)

Yet, as Juan Oso adds: “Not an onion, huh. In a few years the Maxwells and Catrons would take most of our land. And it didn’t stop there. Remember that onion when you think of our history, they promised not to take it, but they stripped it away, layer by layer, until all we have left is what you see here. El corazón, the core of the onion. They can’t strip the heart, it’s all we have left” (173). The loss of the land implies the death of the soul for many, unable to adjust to an uprooted life in the city. Others live in resignation or hate. The deep resentment between the Anglo and the Chicano community lies largely in the betrayal over the land.

For an older generation of Chicanos reflected in literature, not only working the land but a close relationship with nature is essential. In Jimmy Santiago Baca’s story “Matilda’s Garden,” when the protagonist gets married, his most severe doubt is whether Matilda will love the land. As he describes the house he plans to build, he is “afraid she might be having reservations” (Importance 3), yet watching her he is “awed by the familiar sensation that she seemed more an extension of nature’s trees, grasses, and wild flowers than the offspring of humble parents” (4). Matilda’s lips tasted of “the fragrance of sage,” and her “fingers smelled like wild honeysuckle vines” (4). Matilda shared his “same wonder and love for farm life, and he couldn’t express in words the immense satisfaction that welled up in him when he was in the field with her, shovels in their hands, soil under their sneakers, sweat pouring down their brows and backs” (11). Fifty years later, he still cherishes her memory linked to nature. The “old adobe house creaked like an ancient, Mexican ornament, built more for flowers to inhabit than humans; the heady aroma of Matilda’s gardens swaddled him in a blanket of heavy, humid sweetness. She was right, of course, she had made the whole farm her garden and nurtured him with her love” (5). As he remembers her last breath, it

became wild purple lilac in his mind, their vines curling out everywhere, so real to him he was certain that one day the driveway would brim with them. Wild purple lilacs swinging in the wind, seeds blooming at the front door, tendrils shaking against the window glass, nestled in the crevices, purple petals cascading off the roof. Maybe it was her spiritual self working through these images, creating a bridge from her world to his. All he knew was that
somehow she was communicating with him in the way that she loved most, through flowers. (8)

As in all the previous cases, working the land is what grounds this protagonist, and his place is that real and emotional garden created by his wife. For this older generation, an intimate relationship to the land, developed as a result of working and depending on it, is central to their identity. Without the land they are uprooted, something that threatens their identity and self-worth, at many levels: individual, community, and culture.

In contrast, most of the younger characters portrayed by these authors are presented initially as uprooted and with no sense of place or arraigo. In fact, several of the stories, such as “The Valentine’s Day Card,” “Enemies,” or “Runaway,” in Jimmy Santiago Baca’s collection *The Importance of a Piece of Paper* highlight the plight of orphans, having no ties to family or land and not knowing how to anchor themselves in any meaningful relationship. In the case of *So Far from God*, despite Sofia’s attachment to the land, her daughters suffer different fates, all marked by gender violence, an essential theme of the novel. Esperanza adopts the Anglo values, becoming a professional journalist. Yet the only way she can progress is by accepting a position as an embedded war reporter during the First Gulf War, where she, together with the soldiers, is taken prisoner and dies. Her body is never found and so cannot return to her land, not even in death. The second daughter, Fe, also buys the “American Dream” wholesale and, in order to purchase her dream house and appliances, accepts a job at ACME, developing cancer and dying. Neither seems to show a deep sense of place. Caridad, after having been brutally attacked by men, does embrace nature, her horses in particular, and turns to herbal remedies. In the end, in a rather mysterious sequence, she does return to the land when she jumps off a cliff and at the bottom witnesses only find the “spirit deity Tsi-chtinako calling loudly with a voice like wind, guiding the two women back, not out toward the sun’s rays or up to the clouds but down, deep within the soft, moist dark earth where Esmeralda and Caridad would be safe and live forever” (*So Far* 211). Sofia’s fourth daughter, La Loca, is the only one who had always remained closer to the land and animals, shunning contact with humans. Yet, she dies of AIDS, leaving Sofia alone. The sense of place and community attachment so strong in Sofia is not passed on to her daughters, each of whom meets a negative and premature death.

However, the best illustration of the attempt to restore a sense of place to a younger generation is that of Rudolfo Anaya in his Sonny Baca detective series. Where in his previous work the traditional land-based lifestyle (or its
loss) is dominant, in this series Anaya portrays a more contemporary society. In this series, Sonny Baca, a barrio homeboy, but urban nonetheless, has to learn the importance of the land. The four volumes of the series, centered on the four seasons, *Zia Summer, Rio Grande Fall, Shaman Winter,* and *Jemez Spring,* trace this learning process, one of valuing the relationship with land and nature as an integral part of one’s identity.

The environmentalist Mitchell Thomashow analyzes the importance of developing a sense of place in this modern world. In *Bringing the Biosphere Home,* he argues that focusing on the local is the first step toward understanding the global: only by exercising a place-based perceptual ecological vision can we begin to understand or fully appreciate the whole biosphere; the global appears by making connections between daily lives and the global political economy (loc. 208). He also argues the need to explore the cultural past with an eye to the landscape, to relate the living experience of the present to that past and to the concerns of the future (loc. 946). Thomashow considers that perceptual ecology entails the need to cultivate sensory awareness and that a sense of place implies considering home, community, ecology, history, landscapes, and ecosystems. Linking one’s ideological identity to the lifecycles of community and biosphere is a necessary step (loc. 1036–40).

Similarly, the ecofeminist project of Val Plumwood also tries to articulate the possibility of a sense of place in the modern world. Plumwood strives to establish a “materialist spirituality of place,” to describe a culture that would be place-sensitive. She acknowledges that although “mobility rules modernity,” in order to understand the “language of the land,” a deep acquaintance with some specific place is necessary (231). She advocates an ecological spirituality that would be materialist in that it is based on the material and ecological bases of life, and dialogical in that it would be “communicative, open to the play of more-than-human forces and attentive to the ancestral voices of place and of earth” (229). Plumwood suggests that in traveling, the trip be viewed as an end, not just as the means to another holiday or for professional purposes. She advocates orienting journeying as a project of multiple place encounters in a dialogical manner, as “a communicative project to explore the more-than-human as a source of wonder and wisdom in a revelatory framework of mutual discovery and disclosure” (233). By doing so, we can avoid the monological mode of perceiving the earth, and we can try to address the earth as an agent with a voice, a history, and power. Clearly Plumwood’s ideas reflect the attitudes of Anaya’s spiritual guides, Eliseo and Lorenza, in these novels.

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Thus, with these ideas in mind as ways to develop a sense of place in a modern world, one can read Anaya’s series as the process of reconnecting with the land in different ways that would not entail necessarily working the land as the older generation of Chicanos, but finding a deep connection with multiple places. In Anaya’s earlier works, the few characters from the “outside” were always misplaced, restless, and lost. In this series, the effort to reconnect is one of the most important aspects where Don Eliseo is teaching Sonny to develop a deep relationship with the land. Sonny Baca is well integrated into modernity but has a weak sense of place, and precisely one of his “lessons” is finding his roots in the land, not his own land but that of the whole region of New Mexico, in order to rehabit it. The whole series continues with the issues of identity, personal and very significantly cultural, historical, and spiritual. Through his fiction Anaya illustrates what Neil Evernden affirms, that story, geography and self are inextricably bound together (102–3), much the same as Thomashow’s insistence of sense of place being the confluence of history and habitat (loc. 2262). Thomashow asserts that the interpenetration of species, people, and landscapes is the basis of any local language and that thus the stories of inhabitation provide the necessary knowledge of habitat and history (loc. 2430), which ground us and shape our identity. Anaya, despite his hybridization of genres and modes, detective fiction, classical bildungsroman or personal essays, incorporates as an essential aspect the intense relationship of humans to nature, intertwining history, stories, and inhabitation. Anaya clearly stated his commitment to his home place in 1977:

The landscape can always expand. At this point in time I can choose whether or not to expand my landscape. In many ways I already have, but I find that which is honest to me and therefore to my writing comes from my deepest felt experiences, so I choose to stay at the center of the place which is providing me energy, and whose energy is healing me because the exploration into my world is a process through which I come to know myself and my earth better. For the moment, I am content to continue with this exploration, and to convey to my reader the center of my universe. (“A Writer’s Landscape” 102)

Anaya’s feelings express the same thing as the abovementioned quote from Plumwood when she speaks of place being a source of mutual discovery and disclosure. Yet this deep feeling is not the same as that of Pancho and Marisol, nor Clemente and Sofia for their farm or family land grant. Anaya refers to New Mexico, a broader experience of land, and in this series Sonny learns to connect to this larger landscape. In the first novel, Zia Summer, the Zia
sun and the summer solstice constitute the chronotope of the novel, a space responsive to history, land, and plot. The approach of the summer solstice has both real and symbolic meaning, both for the detection of the crime and for the learning and initiation of Sonny as a future brujo. Don Eliseo, Sonny’s guide, teaches him to pray to the sun every morning. As Sonny prays to the sun, he feels its energy and, “if he learned the way of his abuelos, he was sure the light would enter his soul” (Zia 204). Precisely Sonny’s increasing awareness of natural cycles and of the relationship of humans to nature and with it, of his Chicano heritage, constitutes the central theme of the novel, displacing the narrative plot of solving the murder mystery and preventing the sabotage.

Another nature motif interwoven into the novel and whose development is parallel to the criminal investigation is that of Don Eliseo’s cottonwood tree. The novel begins with Sonny dreaming that his leg is being cut off, only to awaken and hear a chainsaw searing into the branches of the cottonwood that has been tagged dead and ordered to be cut down. The parallels are very clear. Don Eliseo is reluctant to cut it and decides to nurse it back to health, “his ear pressed against the tree, like a doctor to the heartbeat of a patient” (Zia 5). Eliseo feels “like that old tree . . . dry, but still alive” (66), and he points out to Sonny that “the raices, Sonny, beneath the earth the roots of all these trees stretch far, connecting to other trees, until the entire valley is connected. You can’t kill a tree and not kill the past. The trees are like the gente of the valley, sooner or later we’re all related. . . . How can I cut down my history?” (75). This clearly illustrates that sense of arraigo as place and community attachment as well as Thomashow’s confluence of habitat and history. At the end of the novel, as Sonny returns home to tell Eliseo that he has defeated the criminal Raven and solved Gloria’s murder, Eliseo runs out crying “My alamo! A branch put out leaves. Little green leaves, moist and tender. . . . It’s a miracle! The tree is alive!” (383). Both victories take place on the summer solstice, but in case a distracted reader forgets what is more important, the murder or the tree, Anaya ends saying that that summer might be remembered as that of Gloria’s cult murder, “But the viejecitos of the valley would remember it was the summer when Don Eliseo’s tree recovered miraculously and offered forth its green leaves” (386).

In the second novel, *Rio Grande Fall*, nature comes alive, and the spirit world lying within nature provides the clues both to Sonny’s past, his values, and to the detection of the new murder he is confronted with. The process of learning that takes place in this novel is precisely one of identifying with his nagual, his animal spirit—part of the Pueblo Indian cosmology—and thus being able to not only attain harmony with nature but also be a part of it. Lorenza, his guide together with Eliseo, tells him that nature is the key to
the past, to one’s heritage and identity, the “world of nature is our world. . . . Our nature is linked to that of our ancestors, to their beliefs” (Rio 121). In his dream-visions he learns to enter that world through a lake and to meet the coyote, his nagual. In these visions, he seems to become a coyote; “their energy flowed to him, filling him with lightness, exuberation. He was running, close to the ground, close to the scents of other animals, running with the coyotes, free, flying” (129). Identification with the coyote is essential, as he must learn its trickster ways in order to defeat Raven, another trickster figure that changes guises but represents evil. The sacredness of the land and the earth is made explicit: it is “full of ancient spirits. Full of knowledge” (26). It “was the meeting ground of spiritual ways. Hispanics and Mexicanos had learned the Pueblo ways” (124). Once again, the intimate relationship between nature, land, history, roots, community, and identity is made patent. Moreover, throughout the series Anaya also stresses the importance of community attachment. In this sense he subverts the generic formula of detective fiction with the lone individualist detective. In all the novels, Sonny clearly enlists the help of the community to solve each murder. To a degree, one could suggest that it is the community who solves the crimes in the present as an effort to redress the crimes of the past, something made evident in the third novel.

_Shaman Winter_ deepens the relationship between history and habitat. The novel, despite the detective plot, delves into more typical Anaya concerns and literary modes such as the rewriting of history and a magical real play of time and alternative realities. In this novel, precisely the awareness of the past and its effects, both cultural and ecological, on the present permeate the plot. Thus Anaya highlights four significant historical periods, the Spanish conquest and Oñate’s incursion into New Mexico in 1598, the American conquest of New Mexico by General Kearny in 1846, the lifestyle of the Wild West with Billy the Kid and Sonny’s grandfather, and law enforcer Elfego Baca with the present. These moments symbolize Sonny’s bloodlines, through his imagined foremothers, tying his present together with that of the community, represented by the four kidnapped girls. Although this novel has this significant aspect of rewriting history in a magical realism mode, the past episodes he links to his present survival have to do not only with political conquest but, rather, with the conquest of the land and the displacement and oppression of indigenous peoples, a kind of ecological imperialism, to use Alfred Crosby’s term. Therefore, both the cultural and the ecological aspects of the past are made patent and Anaya forces his characters, and readers, into this awareness, precisely one of the challenges that Thomashow pointed out for attaining a place-based perceptual ecology, necessary for understanding the biosphere. For Sonny,
solve the kidnappings of the present he needs to understand the history of the land and the power relationships inscribed upon it.

The Rio Grande valley could be viewed as the central chronotope of all of Anaya’s fiction. The whole valley is viewed as a special, sacred land—a motif repeated throughout the different novels of the series—but it also figures prominently as part of the local economy, and of the tourist and bohemian attraction of New Mexico. In the last of the series, Jemez Spring, water takes on special relevance. Anaya continuously portrays the river as inspired, having eyes, voices, faces, moods, and soul: “at each turn the river put on a different face” (Jemez 70), but he also comments on the environmental issues connected to the river. The environmentalists, in real life and in the novel, are concerned about the extinction of the silvery minnow in the Rio Grande and how the lack of flooding has negatively affected the cottonwood bosque, a habitat for a number of species. The paradoxical effects of the Cochiti Dam and reservoir are discussed, as are the historic water rights of the local people. Before the dam, the floods used to arrive like “the herd of brave bulls, a thundering whoosh of hooves roaring down the streambed to fertilize the cities with life-giving waters” (44), but no longer. The “river was the alchemist of the valley. The water was the gold rush that swept away the compost,” but “now the river was dying. Too many cities siphoning off the water. Too many needs for too little water” (45). This novel clearly takes the step advocated by Thomashow of perceiving the global from the local. Anaya ties the specific problems of the Rio Grande valley to global disputes over water. “It’s all about water. Without water our fields die, we die. We become the West Bank Palestinians” (133). Sonny’s mentor Eliseo, now a spirit, tells Sonny:

Future wars will be fought over water, not oil. Sure, the GIs beat Saddam’s ill-equipped army, and the first thing they took were the oil fields. But just wait till Turkey says it can build dams on the Euphrates. Then you’ll see a real fight. Same on the Jordan, in Africa, and here on the Rio Grande. Wherever a river or an aquifer crosses borders, that equals war. Every nation has to feed its people. Corn, soy, and wheat need water. (177)

Thus, Sonny’s sense of place, anchored in the local, allows him to link to a more global perception and concern for the biosphere. And with Sonny’s awareness comes that of the reader, who inadvertently learns from the novel. Different characters in the series have the impulse to try to reinhabit their home place—not always successfully—some of them flounder in a faux new age, while others try to go back to indigenous traditions and lifestyles. Sonny, the protagonist, continues his discovery of his deep rootedness in his home
place and traditions, nevertheless trying to balance them with contemporary lifestyles. For Anaya, valuing place, of both the human and the more-than-human-world and their mutual dependence, is a constant feature. He also shares in the freeing of the self from excessive rationalism, similar to Plumwood’s materialist (as in the physical, tangible world) spirituality. His magical real strategies attest to a spiritual world and alternative belief systems, which are anchored in nature, particularly in the characters of Lorenza and Eliseo. Sonny Baca begins to enlarge his ethics of proximity to imagining a greater community, one of the whole world, particularly in Jemez Spring. Although he does not travel and his dialogic project of communication with multiple places is limited to New Mexico, he does engage in a place-based perceptual ecology like that espoused by Thomashow, a way to value a sense of place without necessarily having to work the land.

In conclusion, la tierra and a sense of place are essential components in Chicano identity and traditions. While this rootedness was clear in older generations who worked the land, a change is necessary for contemporary Chicanos, most of whom no longer work the land. As Kate Rigby argues, perhaps we need to conceive of dwelling as “an achievement, something which we have to learn again and again, something which involves conscious commitment” (11), and Anaya’s strategy in this series addresses this idea. Sonny clearly learns to reconnect with the land. Anaya himself has expressed his deep sense of place in New Mexico without working the land. In a similar way, urban Chicanos, and indeed all human beings, could learn to listen to their traditions and the voices of the land in order to cultivate a meaningful relationship with the earth that would ground them, personally and culturally, and enable them to attain a place-based perceptual ecology, linking their local reality to our globalized planet. Our identity, humanity, and survival lie in recognizing our embeddedness in the lifecycles of history, community, and habitat. In that sense, as the epigraph of the essay states, we are indeed one with the landscape.

WORKS CITED


