CHAPTER 5

The Cultural Border, Magic, and Oblivion in *Bless Me, Ultima* (2013), *Obaba* (2005), and *Un embrujo* (1998)

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THESE THREE FILMS originate from three regions of the Hispanic world with an important, albeit conflictive, history of linguistic and cultural politics: *Bless Me, Ultima* (*Bendícame, Ultima*), by Carl Franklin (U.S., 2013), based on the 1972 novel by Rudolfo Anaya; *Obaba* (Spain, 2005), directed by Montxo Armendariz, based on Bernardo Atxaga’s novel *Obabakoak* (1989); and *Un embrujo* (Mexico, 1998), directed by Carlos Carrera. The three films, and the novels on which they are based, contain an evocative sensation of cultures in which the haggard flame of tradition wanes. The local linguistic expressions in the mountains of New Mexico, in the towns of Basque Country, and in the natural wells of Yucatan appear to fall into oblivion—or at least to transform themselves—behind a magic veil, in addition to being associated with certain social groups. In these films, there emerges a reality, not original by any means, but present, all the while fading away as a result of perennial transformations from social pacts, words, and desires. The last curanderos, or healers, disappear from the New Mexico of *Bless Me, Ultima* and the Yucatan of *Un embrujo*, carrying with them their language and part of their tradition—Hispanic or Maya—in *Obabakoak* the last narrator forgets the words—in Basque—at the end of the book. The narratives by these creators of discourses

1. I thank José Flores, affiliated with Arizona State University, for the work he put into the translation of this essay into English.
are obliterated in the cultural borders of the Hispanic world, and their words remain in the barren wasteland of the (de)political linguistics of nationalism.

In past decades, an increasingly decentralized cultural production has sustained the realities on the border with the Hispanic world. From profoundly divergent worlds like the United States, Mexico, and Spain, each with strongly centralized cultural traditions as a result of their national entertainment industry, alternative worlds and voices are produced. The spaces where these voices and images are composed rely significantly on persecuted and outlawed minority languages. As represented in these films and texts, these languages’ vitality is admirable, considering that for centuries they’ve remained present in the complex structural frameworks of colonization, assimilation, and globalization. In literary terms, the magic of the shaman and the magic of tradition that embody the words of the minority languages are an expression of this maravilla (wonder) for the senses, in the purest Baroque sense of the word.

The (non)curative magic that permeates the fictions of social anguish along the borders can be seen as a continuation of magical realism’s identity formations, in the manner that Harvey describes in Bless Me, Ultima. It may, in fact, be a ploy by the weak as a way of living in a hostile world; according to Caro Baroja, with respect to the power of the healer—elder woman, marginalized, and disappointed—who fashions herself as a fearful image to salvage the limitations of a hypertrophy self (402–3). With their way of viewing the world and expressing it, healers could see themselves as expiatory victims, whereby their passing allows them to enter a different phase, extrapolating the ideas of René Girard about the relationship between social violence and sacred sacrifice (Girard 36–39). More so, the rupturing of the laws of physics in Hispanic border cultures, both internally and externally, is also accompanied by a linguistic factor that tends to be omitted or, at best, mentioned in passing. One of the foremost representations of violence is the annihilation of an entire culture, silencing its people and forcing them to contemplate their own decimated culture. It is thus argued here that the traditions of the past, marginalized by other central cultural forces, express themselves as a linguistic code that contradicts the history of the linguistic policies of a nation, and that these languages, with their magic, fade in the plots of the analyzed films.

2. The topic of multilingualism seems to be whisked away, and ignored, on occasion. For instance, with respect to Un embrujo, there is bewilderment regarding the little attention paid to the presence of Mayan culture in the film: “Revisé algunas reseñas en el internet y me llamó la atención que en todas las que encontré no se mencionara ni por casualidad la presencia de la cultura maya. Muchos personajes secundarios claves inclusive hablaban en maya y no en castellano,” even though the beginning of the film portrays a shaman’s ritual by the sea, and Lupita’s reaction to Eliseo’s indifference. Lupita, an indigenous girl, decides to employ the shaman’s magic to allure Eliseo (Forns-Broggi 139).
all within the complex processes of atonement and prevention of cultural violence along the border.

Here it is referred to as (non)curative magic because nothing gets resolved; the vanishing of the shaman in the pools of the Yucatan, the last healer woman fading into the mountains of New Mexico, and the last word devoured by a lizard in Basque Country within the mind of a narrator of stories that sought the creation of a literary cannon in Basque. However, in the three films, there exists a nostalgia that resides in the magic of the language of a border identity: Mayan, Spanish, and Basque—or varieties of these. Languages are extremely stigmatized in many ways and in different contexts within the borders where their speakers reside. Yet, the nostalgia that the speaker may feel toward a marginalized language, seeing the representations of his culture in another, not only serves as a site of negotiation of cultural binaries or of bilingualism but may also operate as a convincing aspect and intermediate space in which the spectator can sympathize with the minority.3

Despite all the differences in *Bless Me, Ultima*, *Obada*, and *Un embrujo*, as these fictions come to a close, so do the language and the magic fade. Would this then mean a movement toward equilibrium? That is, toward a symbolic union of the mainstream culture and the spectator after the short-lived presence of Spanish, Basque, and a Mayan dialect, as if to enact a comfortable *code-switch* for the monolingualism operating in the nation, in a condescending gesture of the plurality of *ethnolinguists*. It is no coincidence that the core nationalism of a language and a territory appear to operate within the large groups in the three countries. These three fictions emerge from a system organized by a monolingual cultural identity that is reminiscent of Herder and with an incontestable geographic demarcation—the principle of Wilson or Stalin (Hobsbawm 132–33)—as an expression of cultural and linguistic borders that the reductionism of an agrarian and marginal *volk* has not completely dispossessed of its presence and continuity. Those languages of the borderland *volk* are accompanied in the three films of this study by a strong presence of magic, the atavistic, at the same time irrational and pure, products of the towns.

With respect to Girard’s theory on scapegoats—the necessary public sacrifice for the preservation of a hegemonic society—there exists in these films an element of the magical and the marvelous that mirrors a cathartic ritual. In the three fictions, there is a sacrificial closing—Ultima dies, the Yucatan shaman descends to the subterranean caverns, the lizard devours the linguist—

3. This leads me to think about the existence of nostalgia—illness caused by the desire to return to one’s country of origin—and sympathy—the capacity to feel hurt or suffer together—as effects of the same cause in these productions of the linguistic borderlands.
tic abilities of the narrator—and as a result, the scapegoat cleanses the threats that sympathy and nostalgia arouse in the spectator. All ends in a return to the comfort and security of the rationalism of modernity. Nothing is as destabilizing as the flight of transformations that Alejo Carpentier offers to his readers as the reaffirmation of the power of voodoo in The Kingdom of This World (El reino de este mundo) during the edification of Haiti onward from the colonial and dictatorial ashes, or the paradoxical linguistic cornucopia of Jorge Luis Borges’s short story “Funes the Memorious.”

The question, then, is how to interpret the reoccurrence of these rational nonmythical endings from the perspective of myth and language in conjunction with national linguistic policies. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, there was a well-known effort to create a vernacular language that encompassed all branches of knowledge and that would be concomitantly comparable to prestigious languages, like Latin and Greek. These academic and aesthetic efforts emerged in conjunction with the creations of empires, nations, and, of course, immense groups of minorities. The expressions that manifested from these instruments of monolingual globalization reached the most remote places and genres. For instance, in recent academic texts, the role of biographies from members of convents has been discussed as aiding in the formation of a transatlantic and global reality.4 The production of these hagiographies and biographies would have helped to create some global imitations of behavior.

During these centuries, those models that compose the behavior have been expressed, consumed, and discussed in Spanish within the Spanish-speaking world. In the last decades, however, the increasing emphasis on linguistic minorities in connection with postcolonial theories has generated local expressions that fracture these global constructions. As Serge Gruzinski indicated, occidentalization is a complex process; it “includes all tools of domination employed in the Americas by Renaissance Europe: the Catholic religion, market mechanisms, cannon, books, and images” (53).5 Although occidental globalization is a reality that is dominated by the phenomenon of the market, in the legacy of both Hispanic worlds it is not unreasonable to think about the instruments of globalization and mestizaje set up during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Four of these instruments of domination that the Iberian world set in motion in the creation of globalism are present in the

4. See Bilinkoff and Molina and Strasser.

5. Gruzinski works with this theme of occidentalization and globalization in various books. What interests him is the creation of a decentralized cultural history beyond the local historiographies, rhetoric of alterity, national historiographies, World History, European history, in short, that type of provincialism called Eurocentrism (Gruzinski, Las cuatro 40–43).
three films of this essay. As previous critical works have established, aspects of religion and magic are fundamental in the cultural dichotomies of Bless Me, Ultima, and are obviously the attractive aspects of Un embrujo, as is the silence related to the nature of the lizard and childhood that make up Obaba and its image. With regard to the texts, two films are based on foundational texts, one from the Chicano Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, and the other from the “Basqueness” of democracy in the 1980s, literate and international. Ultimately, it is obvious that these three films are a visual product. For this reason, the three films are pluralingual products within a market accustomed to the consumption of products in the hegemonic languages in the history of globalization.

The three films are products that do not completely converge with nationalist essentialism, except with the fluidity of identity on the linguistic borderlands of our nations, which on occasions are omitted. Likewise, some critics observe that Bless Me, Ultima, Obaba, and Un embrujo share the characteristic of being asocial and ahistorical (Caminero-Santangelo 116, Lamadrid 496, Rodríguez). There has been an academic discussion with respect to this because on many occasions there is an impression that their plots are woven into a fabric that could well be located in remote corners of the planet and in other time periods. However, when one reflects on the political-linguistic campaigns in the North American Southwest and in Basque Country, it is difficult to accept without a doubt that works of art that employ a minority language have an apolitical essence. For instance, with regard to the book Obabakoak, it was said to not be a political text, which in turn explained its success in Spain and abroad. Yet, linguistic policy and literary canons interlace with the endemic problems of the language; the language and tradition in which Atxaga writes (Gil-Osle). In fact, the use of Basque is a top concern in cultural production, not just for this author but for many Basque intellec-

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6. See Lamadrid, Harvey, Martinez-Cruz, among others.
7. Elena Grau-Lleveria also mentions the imposed silences, by lizards or institutional dynamics. She says, “in Bless me, Ultima y Felices días tío Sergio, the plots present a peculiar structure in which there are a series of gaps that are suggested to be related to the historical silence imposed by the system of power” (72). Obabakoak concludes with the senseless babbling of the silenced narrator in the section titled “Azken hitza,” “The Last Word.”
8. “Rudolfo Anaya’s Bless Me, Ultima is regarded as a classic of Chicano/Latino literature and even of ethnic American literature” (Caminero-Santangelo 115).
9. For example, Néstor E. Rodríguez, concerned with showing that Atxaga has not a political agenda but an exclusively artistic one in Obabakoak, writes a study about the implications of the Spanish translation of the book. He does this by way of the affirmations Atxaga makes in the epilogue of the Spanish translation, and comments: “I would like to propose that the gesture of Atxaga to make language the core of his literary project is a result of a dissuasive act that consists in deflecting the Spanish reader’s attention from the ideological reading of the novel emphasizing on the contrary the literary project that has inspired it” (178, 183).
tuals. Atxaga describes in these words the barren land that the Basque island has become:

Denbora batean lekhu hau delizios izan zen, eta egungo egunean, berriz, mortu dago, antzinako gauza gehienak bezalaxe. Hargatik iduritzen zaitzu hain eskas eta labor. Ordea egin izan balitz eskuaraz hanbat liburu nola egin baita frantsesez edo bertze erdara edo hizkuntzaz, hek bezain aberats eta konplitu izanen zen eskuara ere. (Obabakoak 331)

There was a time when this place was delicious, while in the present, in turn, it is arid and lifeless. For this reason, the island appears to you as diminutive and limited. However, if there had been as many books written in Basque as there have been written in French or any other language, Basque too would be a rich and perfect language.

Nevertheless, the concern over a production in the Basque language is not only one of Basque art for art’s sake, but the writing—including the quotidian use of the language in private and public—is today a political act, just as it was in the time of its prohibition, because it is a minority language in Basque Country, and is marginalized and stigmatized in other geographic and political spaces as well.

In Bless Me, Ultima, similar affirmations have been made that would explain its success beyond the market of Chicano readership in the United States. However, from the book’s beginning it is noticeably clear to whom and where Spanish is spoken, as it is with English. It is a constant metalinguistic reference in which the narrator conveys that the characters live within two languages: “‘Jason no está aquí,’ (Jason is not here) she said. All of the older people spoke only in Spanish, and I myself understood only Spanish” (Anaya 9). In addition, in the beginning, the author establishes the Anglophone effect carried out in the schools that the community children attend (10). Schooling is the threshold of bilingualism and probably of the diglossia of literate Anglophones and illiterate Spanish-speakers:

[Deborah] had been to school two years and now she spoke only English. She was teaching Theresa and half the time I didn’t understand what they were saying. (9)

I wished that I could always be near her, but that was impossible. The war had taken my brothers away, and so the school would take me away. “Ready, mama,” Deborah called. She said that in school the teachers let them speak only in English I wondered how I would be able to speak to the teachers. (30)
In the movie, it would seem that the linguistic aspect is less relevant, except that Ultima speaks to her young curandero (healer) apprentice in Spanish, and all things in nature are specifically named in Spanish. The plants, the herbs, the places retain their Spanish names and some indigenous ones as Ultima gathers them in the fields (Anaya 45–48), a terminology that surreptitiously penetrates the spectator, as in the memories of the lost Basque words in the beginning of Soinujoilearen Semea (The Accordionist’s Son) and in the closing of Obabakoak.

Without language there is no margin for identity; each lost word of the cultural heritage is like each one of those young girls who do not speak the language of their parents in Bless Me, Ultima, or like the synonym of the word butterfly, “tximeleta” in Basque, that in reality is never a synonym but more like a different variety of butterfly. This wealth begins to fade as the imperialist push for globalization and nationalism has for centuries undervalued the human cultural mosaic.

WORKS CITED


