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review

'God, Too, Has His Jests': The Postsecular Role of Humor in Luis Alberto Urrea's *The Hummingbird's Daughter*

Mary A. Sobhani
University of Arkansas-Fort Smith

Abstract

This article examines the relationship between humor and spirituality in Mexican-American author Luis Alberto Urrea's transnational novel *The Hummingbird's Daughter*, a fictionalized account of 19th century Mexican folk saint Teresita Urrea. In his novel, Urrea takes spirituality outside the realm of mainstream religion and uses humor to undermine both institutionalized religion and resolute disbelief. As this article shows, in *The Hummingbird's Daughter,* Urrea incorporates humor in the text through his use of the incongruous, the value of which lies not only in an increase in the reader's aesthetic enjoyment of the novel, but also in the function of humor as a bridge for spanning religious, cultural, and ethnic differences. This work is heavily indebted to the postsecular critical theories of Jürgen Habermas and John McClure, as well as John Morreall's works in humor theory.

Novels which are threaded through with mystical energies and extranormal occurrences offer particularly rich insights when read through a postsecular lens. In this article specifically, we examine the relationship between humor and spirituality in Mexican-American author Luis Alberto Urrea's *The Hummingbird's Daughter*. Urrea's historical novel addresses spiritual themes in a way which reveals a new trend in twenty-first century Western culture: postsecularism. In *The Hummingbird's Daughter*, Urrea takes spirituality outside the realm of mainstream religion and uses humor to undermine both institutionalized religion and resolute disbelief.

The term postsecular is first coined by Jürgen Habermas in "Faith and Knowledge," his acceptance address for the 2001 Peace Prize offered by the German Booksellers' Association. As Michael Reder and Joseph Schmidt summarize in "Habermas and Religion," in "Faith and Knowledge" Habermas develops the idea of postsecularity, calling for a reconsideration of the relationship between the religious and the secular in present-day society, concluding that the secularization narrative has failed (6). Habermas explains in his later article "Secularism's Crisis of Faith" that postsecularity boils down to a "change in consciousness" that is occurring in modern societies, an awareness that "the secularist certainty that religion will disappear worldwide in the course of modernization is losing ground" and that society's new challenge is discovering how to maintain civil social relations "despite the growth of a plurality of cultures and religious worldviews" (21).

In *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison*, a pioneering work in postsecular literary studies, John McClure translates Habermas' sociopolitical theory into literary theory. In so doing, he identifies three features common in postsecular fiction: the presentation of spirituality as a progressive sociopolitical act, the resistance of fundamental prescriptions for social well-being, and the disruption of secular states of reality (3). In *The Hummingbird's Daughter,* humor plays an important role in actualizing these features in the narrative.

Urrea's novel positions indigenous spirituality in a place of prominence. *The Hummingbird's Daughter* affords us with a representation of spirituality that is integral to the text; the novel, after all, is about Teresita Urrea, a young girl with extraordinary curative powers who becomes a folk saint in Mexico.[1] In this *Bildungsroman,* Terresita Urrea, the illegitimate daughter of ranch owner Tomás Urrea, becomes the apprentice to Huila, the ranch *curandera* or healer. Through Huila, Teresita learns to heal using the plant lore and spiritual knowledge of the Mayo people, the indigenous population of which she and Huila form part. Later recognized by Tomás and accepted into his household, Teresita become a favorite on the ranch, but at nineteen, she is attacked by one of the ranch-workers, raped, and killed. During her wake, to everyone's astonishment, she comes back to life. It is after this wondrous event that Teresita's healing powers intensify. She performs miraculous healings, and word of her resuscitation and healing powers draws masses to the Urrea ranch. From the front porch, she heals and preaches for the rights of the indigenous people. In this way, she comes to the attention of the populace, the newspapers, and the Mexican government.

Urrea presents his protagonist Teresita's spiritual paradigm as sociopolitically progressive and colossally disruptive, and humor is employed in its portrayal as such. The humor-spirituality relationship serves the postsecular function of enabling a more positive reception of the protagonist's spiritual reality. At the same time it subverts religious dogmatism and secular states of being, the narrative avoids the creation of a totalizing narrative–one which posits this religious paradigm as superior to all other religious paradigms–around *curanderismo* spirituality. In keeping with a postsecular perspective, this article seeks to look at the narrative's interweaving of the mystical with the practical not as a narrowing "turn to religion" but rather, to borrow Justin Neuman's phrase from his postsecular study on postwar novels "Faith in Fiction," "as a response to the inadequacies of binary understandings of secularism and religion" (33). In so doing, what is revealed is the narrative's subversion of institutionalized religion and dogmatic unbelief through its masterful integration of humor in the unfolding storyline.

Curanderismo is a healing art that combines indigenous Latin American and European Catholic beliefs and practices. The *curanderismo* that the novel portrays is rooted in the indigenous beliefs of the Yaqui and the Mayo, tribes traditionally located in the northern states of Mexico.[2] Although both the Mayo and the Yaqui appear in the novel, Urrea does not distinguish between their spiritual or cultural beliefs, underscoring instead the differences between the People, the name by which the indigenous populations in the novel – either Mayo or Yaqui – re-

1 Teresa Urrea, the protagonist of *The Hummingbird's Daughter*, is based on the true historical figure of the same name, ancestor of Luis Alberto Urrea. Various fictional, historical, and anthropological works have been written regarding this true-historical figure. Previous novelistic accounts of the life of this personage include Brianda Domecq's *La insólita historia de la Santa de Cabora* (1990), published in English with the title *The Astonishing Story of the Saint of Cabora* (1998). In terms of nonfiction, Carey McWilliams' chapter "The Niña from Cabora" is published in *North from Mexico* in 1968–a brief but important chapter for Urrea as it is the first document that he encounters which proves his "mythical" great-aunt is not a myth after all ("Chattahoochie"), and William Curry Holden's book-length biography *Teresita* appears ten years after McWilliam's text in 1978. There are various shorter accounts of Teresa Urrea's life, including David Dorado Romo's "Teresita Urrea: The Woman Who Stirred Things Up" in *Ringside Seat to a Revolution* (2005), as well as references to her in such well-known works as Jean Franco's *Plotting Women* (1989).

2 The Yaqui have been the subject of a number of valuable studies, including those by Edward Spicer, David Delgado Shorter, Paul Vanderwood, and Kirstin Erickson. Spicer's *The Yaqui* (1980) provides an important view of indigenous spirituality that informs curanderismo, as does David Delgado Shorter's *We Will Dance Our Truth: Yaqui History In Yoeme Performances* (2009). Kirstin Erickson's studies of Yaqui narrative and identity – "'They Will Come from the Other Side of the Sea': Prophecy, Ethnogenesis, and Agency in Yaqui Narrative" and *Yaqui Homeland and Homeplace: The Everyday Production of Ethnic Identity* (2008) – are also particularly important for the emphasis of female agency and identity in Yaqui communities.

fer to themselves, and the *Yori*, the name the People have for the white or nonindigenous Mexican population. Although neither Yaqui nor Mayo culture as a whole is explicitly described in *The Hummingbird's Daughter*, the *curanderismo* informed by it forms a central aspect of the text.

Mexican American *curanderismo* has been the object of academic interest in the United States since the late 1960s, but Trotter and Chavira's *Curanderismo: Mexican American Folk Healing*, first published in 1981, is one of the first anthropological studies to examine *curanderismo* as a legitimate cultural practice, rather than as a superstition-based and "backwards" method of dealing with health and well-being in communities of mixed European and Amerindian roots.

According to Trotter and Chavira, *curanderos*

> are recognized by themselves and by their community as having a special ability to heal. The *don*[3] is the basic difference between the healer and the non-healer, especially with regard to the practice of the supernatural aspects of curanderismo... [curanderos] are aware of and make use of the theoretical knowledge of curanderismo. (60)

Part of the "theoretical knowledge" that Trotter and Chavira describe in their ethnography includes the *curandero*'s knowledge of how to "manipulate the supernatural world as well as the physical one" (9). Thus, a true *curandero* has knowledge that ranges from the material world of herbal remedies to the spiritual world of nonmaterial cures.

The roots of present-day *curanderismo* lie in a matrix composed of at least six major historical influences. Trotter and Chavira identify them as follows:

> Judeo-Christian religious beliefs, symbols, and rituals; early Arabic medicine and health practices (combined with Greek humoral medicine, revived during the Spanish Renaissance); medieval and later European witchcraft; Native American herbal lore and health practices; modern beliefs about spiritualism and psychic phenomena; and scientific medicine. (25)

With such a mix, it should come as no surprise that *curanderismo*, although still viable today, has not been without its critics. Speaking to this, Trotter and Chavira describe the position of fundamentalist religious organizations towards *curanderismo*: "[the *curandero*'s] healing powers, their magical powers, their source of knowledge, are all believed to be part of a cult or false religion and in direct opposition to the tenets of various churches, especially fundamentalist sects" (19). Yet many *curanderos*, according to Trotter and Chavira, consider themselves as "agents doing the work of God" (23), and this attitude is reflected in Urrea's novels quite clearly. Indeed, in *The Hummingbird's Daughter*, the indigenous healer figures – Huila, Manuelito and Teresita – are all presented in the narrative as possessing a greater degree of wisdom and knowledge in matters of the spirit than other characters.

Oppositional stances to the practice of *curanderismo* in the novel take shape through the characters of the priests, Father Adriel and Father Gastélum, as well as the character of Tomás Urrea, an avowed atheist. In the novel, these two oppositional stances–complete disbelief on the one hand and an exclusive dogmatic Catholicism on the other–are countered through the use of humor. The novel thus undermines both narrow religiosity and dogmatic atheism, at the same time that it makes the spiritual belief system of *curanderismo* amenable to a Western reading audience through humor.

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3 The *don,* literally "gift," is the name given to the ability *curanderos* have for working on the spiritual level (Trotter 102).

Notwithstanding E. B. White's remark on the nature of the study of humor–that "[a]nalyzing humor is like dissecting a frog. Few people are interested and the frog dies of it"–the intent here is to examine the relationship in the narrative between humor and spirituality in light of McClure's definition of postsecular thought, without the death of the frog. Since the year 2000, various scholars have published analytical studies of humor in the fiction of such authors as Flannery O'Connor, Jorge Luis Borges, and Jane Austen.[4] This suggests a new path is opening in contemporary literary criticism, for humor itself has a history of being ignored as trivial. As early as the mid-1980s, however, attention was drawn to the lack of regard humor receives in critical analyses. In his 1985 article "American Humor," Arthur Power Dudden laments that in the United States, humor, "in spite of the genius of many of its practitioners, has received little serious attention from critics" (7). Specifying ethnic humor in particular, John Lowe's 1986 article, "Theories of Ethnic Humor," echoes Dudden's observation: "For a country so rich in native humor, we have a paucity of truly analytical treatments of it…Much of the best recent work in humor research has been done by psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists, not by literary critics" (449).

For this reason, perhaps it should not come as a surprise that although Urrea's novel received generally positive reviews upon its debut, humor has been undervalued by most critics as a significant element of analysis in Urrea's narrative. Even quite positive reviews of *The Hummingbird's Daughter*, such as Alan Cheuse's piece in *NPR*, overlook it. Cheuse praises Urrea's writing for possessing a "vividness reminiscent of the masters of the trade" and calls the work a "broad and marvelously rendered" novel, but no mention is made of the humor that pervades its pages. Likewise, although Sandra Dijkstra, in her review in *Publisher's Weekly*, calls Urrea's storytelling "effervescent" (44), the novel's humor is only alluded to in passing in the last sentence of the review; she calls Urrea's use of humor "considerable" and leaves it at that. The effective use of narrative humor is a sophisticated technique which requires dexterity with many novelistic elements, among which are creativity, timing, and language itself. The generalized critical disregard of humor, however, may explain why Lawrence Olszewski's review of *The Hummingbird's Daughter*–one of the few resolutely negative ones – does not see the creative virtuosity behind the work and insists that the novel is "more a novelized biography" where "more research seems to have crept in than creativity" (109); or further, why he might relegate Urrea's dialogue–through which the narrative humor shines–to the category of "stilted" (109).

There have yet to be any extended studies dedicated to postsecular thought and its relationship with humor. Citing William Connolly's "A Letter to Augustine," McClure does examine how moments of "impious comedy" mitigate forms of dogmatism in the works of such authors as Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo. Analyzing DeLillo's *White Noise*, for example, McClure argues that DeLillo's "wildly funny and troubling" narrative offers a spiritually "modest alternative" to consumerism's "consumption and electronic chatter" (93). But although McClure refers to *White Noise* as "wildly funny," his focus is not on how humor accentuates or drives home the novel's message. Rather, McClure's analysis concerns itself with how the novel criticizes secular consumerism as the replacement for religion's role in helping people "assuage the terrors of the self" (90). In other words, a focused analysis of humor itself is not McClure's concern. For this reason, we turn now to humor studies to look at the overall function of humor and how it can be

4 See, for example, J.P. Steed's "'Through Laughter We Are Involved': Bergsonian Humor in Flannery O'Connor's Fiction" (2005); Holly Cadena's "Lo absurdo somos nosotros: el humor en los personajes de Borges" (2005); and Jill Heydt-Stevenson's "'Slipping into the Ha-Ha': Bawdy Humor and Body Politics in Jane Austen's Novels" (2000).

seen to imbricate with a postsecular analysis of Urrea's historical novel, a novel whose aesthetics resides, not insignificantly, in its ability to make the reader laugh.

In his study of humor, *Comic Effects*, Paul Lewis writes that the "humorous experience originates in the perception of an incongruity" (8). In "The Rejection of Humor in Western Thought," John Morreall terms this the "Incongruity Theory" of humor (428). For Morreall, the Incongruity Theory of humor refers to "the incongruous experience or thought…which violates our conceptual patterns, which clashes with the mental framework into which it is received" (248). In his "Funny Ha-Ha, Funny Strange and Other Reactions to Incongruity," Morreall discusses three reactions to incongruity: negative emotion, reality assimilation, and humorous amusement. The first two, he writes, are negative in the sense that the incongruity produces uneasiness due in part to feelings of a loss of control. In contrast, with humorous amusement, the situation that violates our expectations does not cause distress. As Morreall puts it, in these cases, "we *enjoy* the incongruity" (195). This is the type of humor found in Urrea's *The Hummingbird's Daughter,* as will be seen shortly.

Although in "Funny Ha-Ha, Funny Strange and Other Reactions to Incongruity," Morreall opines that humor can be based on unresolved incongruities, in his later work, he concedes that in order for one to find an incongruous instance humorous, the incongruity needs to be at least partially resolved: "it is the joyful click of something making sense that had been briefly puzzling that sparks a humor response" ("Rejection" 11). To be sure, the narrative of *The Hummingbird's Daughter* is filled with incongruous moments for Urrea's readers, whom we may assume to be a predominantly English-speaking, Western audience. One of the principal ways this is done in the novel is by portraying the world of *The Hummingbird's Daughter* as both divinely touched and unapologetically practical. The *curandera* Huila's lecture to the child Teresita encapsulates this perspective:

> 'We are always looking for rays of light. For lightning bolts or burning bushes. But God is a worker, like us. He made the world – He didn't hire poor Indios to build it for him! God has worker's hands. Just remember – angels carry no harps. Angels carry hammers.' (94)

These images of God's worker hands and of angels with hammers set the tone for the novel. Teresita's life is consistently presented as a combination of the practical and the otherworldly, a delightful mix that plays with the incongruity of readers' experiences and expectations.

The humor born from these incongruities preserves *The Hummingbird's Daughter* from being a sermonizing hagiography and creates what Urrea, in an interview about this novel, refers to as a "new paradigm" for spirituality:

> We are bombarded with events and hubbub, but true and mysterious stories of spirit and sacredness seem rare. And when I realized that the story was also deeply funky, it seemed like a new paradigm of holiness that people like me could relate to. ("A Conversation" 5)

This new paradigm presents spirituality as not what happens within the walls of a church, within the confines of dogmatism, but rather in the smell and muck and grit of a rural ranch, amidst hogs and chickens, cowboys, *curanderas* and farmworkers.

For instance, when Tomás relocates his ranch from Sinaloa to Sonora, the ranch inhabitants are temporarily without a priest. Huila solves this difficulty, relegating the duties of priest to the engineer Lauro Aguirre, friend to Tomás and the only literate person on the ranch in Tomás's absence (181). Aguirre is far more secular than devout and has never once claimed to be a Catho-

lic. Urrea layers on the irony here, for Huila's "heathen ways" have already been decried by Father Adriel (114), and Aguirre is a bastion of secularity more interested in changing the world through revolution than through spiritual conversion. Urrea thus uses irony to play with the notions of religiosity, and does so by blurring the lines of what can be considered the purview of traditional institutionalized religion. We can see this playfulness in the following passage:

> Thus did the Masonic Methodist Aguirre temporarily become the priest of Cabora. The People gathered on benches and rocks and they sat cross-legged in the dirt if they lacked a seat. Aguirre read to them from the twenty-third psalm, which comforted the People, though they asked him to put it in cattle terms, since so few of them knew sheep. Aguirre, abashed by the prospect of rewriting scripture, though he did not accept the scripture as a strictly infallible historical document, gamely bellowed, 'The Lord is my buckaroo!' (181).

Thus, Urrea take the traditional phrase "the Lord is my shepherd" and modifies it with a twist that is funny precisely because it is both unexpected and logical. Aguirre's version of scripture certainly is, as the narrative notes, the scripture put in "cattle terms": calling the Lord "buckaroo," an Anglicized variant of the Spanish word "vaquero" or cowboy, is certainly incongruous, but the incongruity, to borrow Morreall's phrasing, "clicks into place." The joke works on a linguistic level, too, as a reference to mistranslation and perhaps Anglo religious influence in northern Mexico, often considered by those in central Mexico to be a *pocho,* or Americanized, region. In short, the rigidity of literality is unhoused by humor, even as the essence of the scripture's meaning is maintained.

This unhousing deserves some further comment. In this scene, the enclosing structure of a church or chapel is replaced by the open-air ecclesiastical instruction of a non-ordained, non-Catholic engineer, who is really quite nonreligious and yet intent upon his responsibility to the edification of the community in which he lives. The enclosed walls of religion are unbounded figuratively and literally, reminiscent of McClure's "open dwelling." For McClure, the symbol of the open spiritual dwelling is emblematic of the postsecular project; it is a space beneath a "sacred religious canopy" and yet one which "does not close the door onto otherness, shut the windows on the larger world, or cut off all questioning and innovation within the house of belief" (192-3). In Urrea's narrative, the open spiritual dwelling–the above being a prime example thereof–has a consistent literary presence. Communication with the divine, prayers, and religious talk, as in the above scene, happen outside of the confines of traditional Catholic structures. In fact, it is significant that the only time the narrative offers up the words spoken within the walls of a church, they are Father Gastélum's sermon. We remember that Father Gastélum is threatened by Teresita's growing fame, and he considers her evil incarnate. The words of his sermon, then, reflect his personal vitriol against Teresita, even as they are couched in terms of fanatical religious thought:

> *This young woman is an infernal abortion. She is Satan incarnate, for who is better to portray Satan than a rebellious woman? Her practices are diabolical. Her healings are an empty work of the devil! Nothing more! Proof that this young woman is Satan in the flesh? She preaches against the teachings of Jesus Christ and his apostles!* (421; emphasis in the original)

The priest's words are thus portrayed as religious perversion, and by situating these words

within the confines of church walls, the author undermines traditional religion's exclusive authority in matters of truth, for although Teresita is certainly unorthodox, the narrative never questions her goodness.

I make the assumption in this study that *The Hummingbird's Daughter* was not written solely for a U.S. Latino reading audience. I base this supposition on a number of facts. First, although *The Hummingbird's Daughter* takes place in Mexico, it is written in English; and although there are Spanish words incorporated into the narrative, a monolingual English speaker has no difficulty understanding the text. This use of the language is in keeping with Urrea's other works–such as *Into the Beautiful North* and *Queen of America*. In his May 2013 interview with Monica Ortiz Urbe on "Fronteras: A Changing America," Urrea identifies his job as a writer as one of "try[ing] to explain that there is a long history of love, cooperation and brotherhood" between the United States and Mexico. His self-proclaimed focus as an author is thus on the humanity that unites us, not the differences that separate. Jack Riggs, in his introduction to Urea's talk at Georgia Perimeter College, speaks to this, calling attention to Urrea's narrative skill of "transcend[ing] the world built upon the page and enter[ing] into the universal"; he notes Urrea's "innate ability to connect us all to the landscape that cannot be walled off or kept separate; it is a human landscape as colorful and diverse as Urrea's Mexico itself."

The Hummingbird's Daughter was first published in 2005 by Little, Brown and Company. This publishing house, first established in Boston in 1837 has a history of being, according to its website, "committed to publishing fiction of the highest quality." Unlike publishing houses like Quinto Sol, designed as outlets for Latino voices, Little, Brown and Company has a record of publishing a wide range of authors–such as the undeniably mainstream Nicholas Sparks and Sandra Brown–with no specific mission to publish Latino narratives. This seems to suggest that Urrea's novel was selected in the hope that it too would be a text for a wide American reading public.

I make a point of this because there is a further contextual reason why humor is a particularly effective element to use in the creation of this transnational historical novel. Not only is the contemporary North American reading public outside of the Southwest largely ignorant of the nature of Mexican and Mexican-American *curanderismo*, but this same public is also bombarded with negative media concerning Latino immigrants to the United States. As Francine Segovia and Renatta Defever's 2010 article confirms, the Latino immigrant population–particularly of Mexican origins–has attained new levels of cultural stigmatization in the eyes of a mainstream population. According to their "The Polls—Trends: American Public Opinion on Immigrants and Immigration Policy," in the years from 2001 to 2007, there was a significant increase in the percentage of Americans "greatly" concerned over illegal immigration (379). Although the concern is specifically with illegal immigration, as opposed to immigrants who are in the nation legally, the matter is complicated by the fact that by 2007, nearly 80% of Americans believe that the majority of immigrants are in the nation illegally (Segovia and Defever 380). Thus, even though the extant negative feeling is towards undocumented immigrants, anyone who "looks Mexican" can be the target of anti-immigrant sentiment.

With this social context as the author's contemporary backdrop, humor becomes a tool of significant consequence in a book about a young woman who, by the end of the novel, is en route to the United States. Urrea himself comments in his 2012 lecture at World Beat Center in San Diego, "I feel like laughter in particular is a virus that infects everybody with humanity. If we sit down together and laugh about something…it's impossible for the people who dislike you to then say, you know, 'You're subhuman. I don't like you anymore.'" Morreall echoes this sen-

timent in his study on humor, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, noting that laughing together has the function of uniting people (115). This effect of humor is of profound import in *The Hummingbird's Daughter,* where humor positively orients the reader towards Huila and Teresita, and by extension and of significance in this study, towards the nonmainstream spirituality they represent. We can see this value of humor in the following example.

When the wizened *curandera* Huila teaches the child Teresita that "God is in everything" (95), Teresita finds the notion odd, and she asks Huila if God is in a taco. The excerpt below illustrates how the text connects two such apparently unlinked and incongruous entities–God and a taco–in a way which is both humorous and revealing of Huila's spiritual worldview, a worldview in which Teresita, and consequently the reader, is being educated.

> Huila was irked. A tortilla, made of holy corn, corn made of rain and soil and sun, that tortilla, round as the sun itself! Was God not in the rain? Did the corn not come from God? What of the sun? Was the sun simply some meaningless accident in the sky? Some ball of light meaning nothing, signifying nothing? No! Only a heretic would fail to see God in the sun!...and the chiles in the salsa, and the guacamole, and the hands of the fine woman who slapped the tortilla into shape then laid the sizzling meat into it, and the fire, and the fire ring, and the house in which the fire ring burned, and the ancestors who raised the generation that led to the woman making the taco. Only an idiot would fail to see God in a meal!
> 'If you are too blind to see God in a Goddamned taco,' she exclaimed, 'then you are *truly* blind!' (95; emphasis in original)

The narrator, through Huila's thoughts and words, plays with the definition of who precisely can be defined as spiritually "blind." Here, heretic describes those who fail to see God in the sun or in a taco. This twist on mainstream Christian notions of what connotes heretical belief is presented through a line of reasoning that makes Huila's position seem eminently logical, since it is based on the idea of God as the source of the universe, a familiar notion for the mainstream reader. A mainstream reader may even end up in silent and bemused agreement: of course God is in a taco.

These moments of instruction in the text serve to reinforce the reader's engagement with Teresita. The reader and Teresita coincide in their ignorance of the beliefs and practices of *curanderismo*. Huila, for whom humor is no stanger, is Teresita's teacher, as well as a "teacher" for the reader. Both Teresita and the reader inhabit the same level of novice student of *curanderismo* and indigenous religious history. The following example from the text serves to illustrate this. Huila instructs the child Teresita in the religious history of her people, specifically the first time the Virgin Mary appeared to the Mayo people. The story beings as one would expect: "The Mother of God appeared to a group of warriors who were out in the desert, hunting. And they looked up, and there she was, descending from the sky" (92-3). Huila's words are a concrete example of *curanderismo*'s incorporation of Catholic religious thought and iconography into an Amerindian context; this description calls to mind the familiar Catholic representation of a robed Virgin of Guadalupe standing upon a crescent moon, a field of blue sky or clouds behind her, a solemn and benevolent expression on her face. Teresita's gasp of wonderment comes immediately after this description; possibly she too is imagining just such an image. But then comes the twist, the incongruous moment; Huila continues: "Well, she had an accident...She landed on top of a cactus...Oh yes. The Mother of God was stuck on top of a huge cactus" (93). Suddenly, then, the

story clashes with pre-existing concepts of the Virgin Mary as sacred, solemn and beyond such silly mistakes as getting "stuck" on a cactus.

Through the voice of Huila, the author keeps layering on the incongruities that redefine the concept of the religious. Huila recounts that, instead of falling down in proper awe before the Virgin Mary, "the warriors started throwing rocks at her and shooting arrows at her" (93). Here, the narrative suspense is heightened, as reflected in the actions of Teresita: she covers her face with her hands and cries out, "'And then what?'" (93). At this point, the reader, too, is hanging upon Huila's words. Did the Virgin Mary freeze them all with a glance? Did she turn their arrows into flowers? Did she ask God to rain lightning bolts upon them? Not at all. She may be sublime, but her response is practical, as Huila recounts:

> 'Then the Mother of God spoke to the warriors from atop her cactus.'
> 'What did she say? What did she say?'
> 'She said – 'Get me a ladder!''
> Teresita said, 'What!'
> 'Get me a ladder, that's what she said. Holy be her name.'
> Teresita burst out laughing. So did Huila. (93)

For both the reader and Teresita, the story is funny because of the juxtaposition of what one expects–the female divine who can wield mystical and mighty powers–and the very practical request for a physical means of descent from the cactus. The ephemeral and the practical are thus delightfully combined in Huila's story, and the system of belief underlying Huila's worldview is likewise shown to be far from daunting or intimidating. We see here humor's postsecular function; it is used to portray the belief system underlying *curanderismo*, this mix of Catholic and indigenous beliefs and traditions, as safe and palatable.

As mentioned above, seen through a postsecular lens, humor can also function to undermine dogmatic thought, whether religious or secular. In the novel, this specifically refers to institutionalized Catholicism and dogmatic atheism. We will begin with an analysis of the former. The repudiation of religious dogmatism and fundamentalist prescriptions for well-being in the novel is perhaps best evident in the representation of the two Catholic priests in the novel, Father Adriel and Father Gastélum.

Shortly after the narrative has established Huila as revered by the People–the name the indigenous population calls itself–as a "great one" and a "holy woman" with "sacred hands" (47), Father Adriel approaches the child Teresita with the following accusation: "'Are you consorting with Huila, my child?" (114). When Teresita answers in the affirmative, Father Adriel issues the following warning:

> 'Beware, child' he admonished, 'The heathen ways are fraught with danger. Many have thought they walked with angels and have awakened with devils...You see, Satan is not a monster. We don't see him when he comes, because he has disguised himself in beauty... The devil is, after all, an angel of light. The Morning Star. Do not allow yourself to be seduced by the beautiful side of evil.'
> 'Huila is evil?' she [Teresita] asked.
> 'Huila is beautiful?' interrupted Tomás. (114)

The passage illustrates the priest's religious hardline against Huila and, by extension, against anything that deviates from orthodox Catholicism, but since the narrative has just identified Huila as wise and esteemed by others, Father Adriel's warnings come across as profoundly

inane. At the same time, since physically, Huila is anything but beautiful–her name, we are told, means "Skinny Woman" (15)–Tomás' interjection pokes fun at the further preposterousness of the priest's words. The humor produced by these incongruities dissipates the priest's fear-provoking warnings for Teresita, who "skip[s] away" when dismissed by Tomás (115). Humor serves to subvert the notions of the Church's exclusive authority on matters of truth.

Another example serves to crystalize the way in which Urrea incorporates into his narrative the humor produced by the incongruous. When Tomás asks Father Adriel if he ever tires of religion, "Padre Adriel considered him [Tomás] for a moment. He crossed his arms then put a finger to his lips. 'My friend,' he said, 'no one is more tired of religion than a priest'" (116). The candor of the response is significant. Paradoxically, we like the priest better for his honesty even as he undercuts his own religion by admitting that it can be a great bore. Yet this is not the only instance in which religious dogmatic thought is undermined by humor. Urrea does as much through the treatment of the character of Father Gastélum, presented in the novel much more harshly than Father Adriel.

Urrea constructs Father Gastélum as treacherous, petty, and an object of ridicule. Father Gastélum considers Teresita a heretic and a danger. The narrative recounts his sermon against her, in which Father Gastélum calls Teresita "Satan incarnate" and an "infernal abortion" (421). Conspiring with the political chief of Guerrero and the governor of Chihuahua, Father Gastélum agrees to help steal treasured religious canvases from the church of the Tomóchic Indians, who are in the priest's ill graces for favoring Teresita. But despite his essential part in the scheme, Father Gastélum's own co-conspirators hold him in contempt: the governor of Chihuahua calls him a "[n]asty priest!" (417). To be sure, the narrative is clear in depicting Father Gastélum, foil to Teresita, as less than the epitome of spiritual health, a depiction notably reflected by the priest's physical condition. During his meeting with the officials, Father Gastélum takes off his boots to set his infected toe before the fire in the hopes that the seeping will dry out. The narrative exposes the scorn in which Father Gastélum is held through the political chief's journal entry:

> *The noxious plume of Father Gastélum's richly spoiled flesh wafted downwind to, no doubt, drive bears and coyotes into a panic – great fleeing migrations could probably have been heard if we had listened!* (418; emphasis in original)

Gastélum appears even more ridiculous when one imagines that even the animals are stampeding to get away from his stink. Further, the narrative depicts Gastélum as completely blind to his co-conspirators' contempt as he is to the odors from his feet. In fact, when Gastélum's infected toe necessitates the governor's gifting him of a pair of fresh socks, the priest takes it as a sign of his being in God's good graces: "freshly socked, well fed, smoked, half-drunk, and warmed by good coffee, Padre Gastélum felt the Holy Spirit near to him" (419). The irony of this moment is evident. Far from meritorious, Gastélum's plottings are as rotten as his toe, and as a consequence, the narrative seems to argue for a separate spiritual space away from an institutionalized religion whose representatives can be so noxious.

Just as the text undermines religious dogmatism through its representation of the two priests, the subversion of dogmatic secularism is also a thread that runs through the novel. This is perhaps best exemplified through the narrative's treatment of Tomás, Teresita's larger-than-life father. Tomás is adamant in his atheism. He believes there is a "*reasonable* reason" for Teresita's resurrection from death (340), telling Teresita that "God is a fairy tale!" (397) and that Teresita's conversation with God is merely "a hallucination" she experienced (397). Although the narrative has sided with Tomás in his regard of the priests as "irritating papists" who promote distorting

"propaganda" (114), the narrative now doubles back and, through humor, undermines Tomás's inflexible incredulity.

For instance, when mobs of reporters arrive at the Cabora Ranch to interview Teresita, who is garnering a reputation as a healer and a saint through her miraculous healings, Tomás yells at the reporters, "'There is no fucking saint on this ranch!'" (353). To stress his point, he declares that the day he believes his daughter is a saint is the day she causes hair to grow on the bald lead reporter's head (354). The incident concludes with an unexpected twist:

> [T]he part of the story that the People most delighted in was the part about the bald reporter. Before he left the ranch, he sought out Tomás. He didn't say a word to him. He only bent toward the patrón and rubbed the peach fuzz that had appeared on his head and laughed. (354)

As the passage indicates, the People–devotees of Teresita–find this funny, as does the now not-so-bald reporter. For the reader, the humor of this account is rooted in two elements in particular. First, a bald reporter's suddenly banished alopecia is incongruent with the realities of life itself–everyone knows that once one goes bald, the only remedy, and a modern one at that, is cosmetic surgery; the fact that the reporter has "peach fuzz" on this head can have but one logical explanation in the novel: Teresita is indeed a saint. If this latter notion is accepted, then the incongruity is resolved. But, as per the Superiority Theory of humor, a theory which presupposes that humor is antagonistic and caused by the perceived inferiority of another (Morreall, "Rejection" 243-44), this account is made even more humorous by the delectably atheistic Tomás having to eat his words as a direct consequence of his previous invectives. Tomás is too likable a character for the author to handle with too much harshness, but this is not to say that the narrative refrains from poking fun at Tomás' lack of belief.

By means of Urrea's delightful violation of literary realism through miraculous happenings–of which the reversal of alopecia is one–we see what McClure refers to as the "enchantment" of the world of the enunciated text (31). McClure alludes to Max Weber's view of the universe as an "enchanted cosmos" that is "indelibly mysterious and meaningfully ordered" as opposed to a "disenchanted" cosmos where the magical and mystical are denied and everything is deemed explainable by scientific calculation (31-33). Having created an "enchanted" world, Urrea exercises what Lewis refers to as "the use of humor to exercise power" (13). In other words, through humor, the author encourages the reader to believe in Teresita's healing powers as miraculous, the only "logical" resolution of such an incongruity as a bald man suddenly growing hair. And indeed, as Stacey D'Erasmo's review affirms regarding the author's narrative: Urrea is "unstintingly, unironically, and unselfconsciously tender. He is a partisan"; with such a depiction of the character of Teresita and her amazing abilities, "one wishes to believe."

The text's subversion of dogmatic secularism, however, is much milder and tempered with a gentleness that is lacking in the narrative's harsher treatment of institutionalized Catholicism as represented by Father Gastélum. The reason for this is suggested in the text itself. Huila tells the child Teresita: "'Faith, like Grace, is a gift, you see. It's one of those riddles nobody can *understand*. Niña–God gives you the gift of believing in God. If you cannot believe in God, then how can God punish you for your lack of Faith?'" (270; emphasis in original). Through Huila, then, the narrator offers the reason behind the narrative's much softer approach to Tomás's atheism. Tomás is worthy of praise and admiration despite his unyielding secular-mindedness, the same of which cannot be assumed of Father Gastélum, who has been given the "gift" of faith but does wrong despite it. This is not to say, however, that the narrative presents Tomás' atheism as born

of wisdom; there are too many presented-as-fact spiritual occurrences–astral travel, dream visions, and miraculous healings–to warrant atheism as carrying veridical weight in Urrea's novel. But neither is Tomás damned for not believing.

McClure, in discussing the world depicted in postsecular fiction, writes that enchantment means an awareness of the universe's gifts to humankind (31). This notion of an enchanted world that provides gifts is reflected early in the text when Huila discovers that the six-year-old Teresita, covered in pig feces and beaten severely, possesses abilities outside the ordinary. Huila is taken aback and thinks: "One never knew where the gift would appear. God, too, has His jests" (78). Huila's comment is significant, because it reflects the meaning of enchantment as it pertains to postsecular thought. In this case, God is a present force, but he can also play jokes, and the narrative is far from clear about who is the butt of them. Indeed, the enchantment that postsecular thought promotes is one that recognizes the presence of the deific at the same time that it acknowledges uncertainties and complexities. As McClure puts it, in postsecular fiction "characters are not conducted from the barren confinements of a secular universe into a temple of ultimate truths or a great hall of light" (129). Just because a character is spiritually "enlightened" does not mean they get to abide within some bucolic setting, where all questions are answered, all life events are glazed with ease, and no one is the butt of jokes. On the contrary, as seen in *The Hummingbird's Daughter*, the postsecular meaning of enchantment allows both the indubitable mysteries of the ineffable as well as the complexities and difficulties of material existence. The one does not eliminate the other.

For instance, Teresita's greatest healing gifts go hand in hand with the complete disruption of life on the Cabora Ranch and her eventual imprisonment and exile from the land of her birth and rebirth. Divine favor is not a prediction of comfort. Teresita recognizes this at the end of the novel, as she and Tomás ride the train towards exile and the possibility of death in the canyon where rebelling indigenous warriors await in ambush: "'I have ruined us'" (488). By 'ruining' them, Teresita is referring to their loss of the Cabora Ranch, to their exile in poverty from Mexico, and to the possible death that awaits them in Ambush Canyon as they ride the train northward. Yet, now it is Tomás who offers an encouragement couched in faith, and he does so with humor.

> He offered her one of the People's sayings: 'No bad can befall us
> that does not bring us some good.'
> 'Do you believe it?' she asked.
> 'Why not!' (488)

Thus, Tomás seems to recognize that the bad, too, can bring gifts. Even if he does not believe it, for love of his daughter, Tomás is willing to temporarily disavow his own disbelief in an enchanted universe that offers gifts to humanity.

In short, *The Hummingbird's Daughter* presents an enchanted narrative worldview where the spirituality-humor relationship is as pervasive as air. Humor functions to subvert both secular and religious dogmatisms at the same time that it helps to make the *curanderismo*-spirituality of the novel palatable for a wide reading audience.

In *The Hummingbird's Daughter,* Luis Alberto Urrea incorporates humor in the text and evokes humor in his readers through his use of the incongruous, the value of which lies not only in an increase in the reader's aesthetic enjoyment of the novel, but also in the function of humor as a bridge for spanning cultural and ethnic differences. Humor, in short, has the ability to make safe and palatable something foreign and unfamiliar. Indeed, this overall positive effect seems to be reflected in the accolades which the novel received upon publication. As the back

cover of the novel indicates, *The Hummingbird's Daughter,* a national bestseller, is selected upon its debut as one of the best books of the year by the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Washington Post*. Urrea's narrative humor transforms what might be regarded as threatening manifestations of transnational differences to a fascinating expression of human diversity, no less true for being different.

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