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Transnational Historical Fiction in a Postsecular Age: A Study of the Spiritual Theses in the Works of Luis Alberto Urrea and Bahiyyih Nakhjavani

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Transnational Historical Fiction in a Postsecular Age:
A Study of the Spiritual Theses
in the Works of Luis Alberto Urrea and Bahiyyih Nakhjavani

Transnational Historical Fiction in a Postsecular Age:
A Study of the Spiritual Theses
in the Works of Luis Alberto Urrea and Bahiyyih Nakhjavani

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies

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Abstract

This study, employing a postsecular theoretical prism, analyzes the spiritual theses given expression through the historical fiction of Mexican-American, or Chicano, author Luis Alberto Urrea and exiled Persian Bahá'í author Bahiyyih Nakhjavani. This study examines three novels: Nakhjavani's *The Woman Who Read Too Much*, Urrea's *The Hummingbird's Daughter*, and its sequel *Queen of America*. These novels express world-views in which the spiritual has particular importance, not as a supersession of quotidian reality but in an integral partnership with it, the baseline upon which postsecular thought is built. This study concludes that such an expression of world-views signals towards the change in socio-political philosophy which philosopher and scholar Jürgen Habermas iterates in "Faith and Knowledge," his acceptance address for the 2001 Peace Prize awarded by the German Publishers and Booksellers Association. As per Habermas, a significant change is occurring in twenty-first century Western society; this change, I argue, is evident in the spiritually charged transnational historical fiction of Urrea and Nakhjavani.

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Dedication

For my students, past and future; and for my dear family and friends in Arkansas, Oklahoma, Louisiana, Florida, Ohio, Texas, New Mexico, Costa Rica, Bolivia, and England.

This is for you. Alláh-u-Abhá!

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Chapter 1: Introduction: Postsecularism and Transnational Historical Fiction

This study, employing a postsecular theoretical prism, will analyze the spiritual theses given expression through the historical fiction of Mexican-American, or Chicano, author Luis Alberto Urrea and exiled Persian Bahá'í author Bahiyyih Nakhjavani. My purpose is to demonstrate how the postsecular theory is a favorable mode of criticism for works of contemporary, spiritually-charged transnational historical fiction. I choose to use the historical fiction of these two authors because of the distinct religious traditions from which their stories emerge. Both Urrea and Nakhjavani weave their historical tales so as to underscore spiritual aspects of human reality. Spirituality is a loaded word. Often conflated with religion in general, spirituality in this study refers to all matters pertaining to the qualities of the soul and the practices of belief, including prayer, faith, altruism and world-views which privilege these aspects over purely material or worldly ones. I will compare how these authors approach spirituality in their novels and problematize traditional ideas of the religious and the secular.

I find the similarities in the authors' powerful representation of spiritual aspects of reality particularly striking precisely because of the patent differences between the two authors and their styles: Urrea, a male Chicano writer, a Christian of bicultural heritage and poor economic background, writes fiction in the U.S. Latino tradition; Nakhjavani, on the other hand, is a female Persian writer of self-proclaimed postmodern leanings, a Bahá'í, raised in Uganda, and educated in Great Britain and the United States. Yet both authors' historical narratives express world-views in which the spiritual has particular importance, not as a supersession of quotidian reality but in an integral partnership with it, the baseline upon which postsecular thought is built. This study concludes that such an expression of world-views signals towards the change in socio-political philosophy which philosopher and scholar Jürgen Habermas iterates in "Faith and Knowledge," his acceptance address for the 2001 Peace Prize awarded by the German Publishers

and Booksellers Association. As per Habermas, a significant change is occurring in twenty-first century Western society; this change, I argue, is evident in the spiritually charged transnational historical fiction of Urrea and Nakhjavani.

If we are to examine, as this study intends, Urrea and Nakhjavani's historical novels through a postsecular lens, the next step is to define what I mean by the term *postsecularism*. The term postsecular is first coined by Habermas in "Faith and Knowledge." 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. In this speech, Habermas concludes that the secularization narrative has failed (6). The secularization narrative is defined by postsecular scholar Manav Ratti in *The Postsecular Imagination* as follows: it is a theory which posits that "as societies become more modern – from agrarian to industrial to post-industrial – they become more secular, relying less and less on the narratives of religion for a sense of security, increasingly pushing the presence and power of religion into the private sphere" (5). Habermas, then, sees this secularization narrative as proven false, that society is not moving towards the extinction of religion, and that "religion and the secular world always stand in a reciprocal fashion" (Reder and Schmidt 6). In "An Awareness of What is Missing," Habermas extends these thoughts, stating that two requirements must be fulfilled in order to attain the fruitful dialogue between the secular and the religious which the postsecular seeks:

[t]he religious side must accept the authority of 'natural' reason as the fallible results of the institutionalized sciences and the basic principles of universalistic egalitarian in law and morality. Conversely, secular reason may not set itself up as the judge concerning truths of faith, even though in the end it can accept as reasonable only what it can translate into its own, in principle universally accessible, discourses. The one presupposition is no more trivial from a theological perspective than the other is from that of philosophy. (16)

Habermas addresses social and political issues, and his writings on postsecularity, as Ratti affirms, are “some of the most perceptive theorizations” on emerging postsecular thought (5). 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). John McClure takes these socio-political considerations and transfers them to the realm of literary theory, as do such scholars as Tracy Fessenden, Magdalena Maczynska, Justin Neuman and Manav Ratti. We will examine postsecular literary criticism in closer detail below.

This dissertation argues that Urrea and Nakhjavani’s historical novels address spiritual theses in a way which reveals a new trend in twenty-first century Western culture: postsecularism. Writing *The Woman Who Read Too Much* against the backdrop of nineteenth century Persia and the Bábí/Baha’í religion, Nakhjavani is intent upon underscoring the spiritual implications of the most mundane of acts: reading. To read is more than to decipher words on a page; it contains within it the heart of being human, inextricably both a material and a metaphysical act. In *The Hummingbird’s Daughter*, Urrea takes spirituality outside the realm of main-stream religion and uses humor to undermine both institutionalized religion and resolute disbelief. In so doing, curanderismo beliefs and practices take center-stage, actualizing the subversion of both hegemonic secular *and* religious thought. In *Queen of America*, this take on reality coalesces into a more serious critique of fanatical ideologies, be they religious or secular. I argue that in this novel the marvelous and magical-realist serve as tools of the subversion for the divide between the scientific and the mystical. What is revealed are spiritual affirmations

and counter-affirmations which problematize faith, magic, and science, but leave space for all of them to coexist.

Allan Megill, in “History, Theoreticism, and the Limits of ‘the Postsecular’,” makes the point that before one can speak of postsecularity, one must identify the type of secularism to which it stands in contrast. Referencing Linell Cady’s “Secularism, Secularizing, and Secularization: Reflections on Stout’s *Democracy and Tradition*,” Michael Kaufmann’s “The Religious, the Secular, and Literary Studies: Rethinking the Secularization Narrative in Histories of the Profession” offers the following definition of the secular:

[A]s part of the progress towards modernism and liberalism in the nineteenth century, the story of secularization narrates a triumph of empiricism over superstition, reason over faith, and the emancipation of all spheres – science, knowledge, the market, the state – from the oppressive and authoritarian ‘yoke of religion.’ (607)

And yet, the definitions of secularity are multiple and often in competition. In *The Postmodern Condition and the Meaning of Secularity*, Hendricus Johannes Prosman reviews these competing ideas from a postmodern framework and offers a history of secularity in the West. Historicizing the concept of the secular, Prosman rightly observes that “in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, secularism is a standard assumption for virtually every intellectual” (5). To illustrate, he references José Casanova’s *Public Religions in the Modern World*, which analyzes the history of the secularization thesis in the social sciences. Casanova argues that assumptions, whether stated or not, of virtually all the founding fathers of the Western social sciences adhere to the theory of secularization, and lists them as follows:

from Karl Marx to John Stuart Mill, from Auguste Comte to Herbert Spencer, from E. B. Tylor to James Frazer, from Ferdinand Toennies to Georg Simmel, from Émile Durkheim to Max Weber, from Wilhelm Wundt to Sigmund Freud, from Lester Ward to William G. Sumner, from Robert Park to George H. Mead. (17)

The secularization thesis, in other words, is largely uncontested in the last two centuries.

Casanova explains this lack of critical attention thusly: “as long as there is consensus within the community of practitioners that they already possess a coherent, consistent, and convincing explanation of the phenomena in question, there is no reason why one should look for alternative explanations when the available ones seem to work” (29). This is not to say that there were no scientific minds which felt something was lacking in the secular ideologies of the time. In “The Basics of Analytical Psychology,” from 1933, Carl Jung has the perspicuity of vision to question this state of affairs, lamenting the “modern preference for physical grounds of explanation” for all things, including the soul or “psyche” (179); he bemoans the fact that “[t]o grant the substantiality of the soul... is repugnant to the spirit of the age” (176). Still, the secularization thesis itself was not collectively contested until, as Casanova indicates, the second half of the twentieth century. The decade of the 1960 saw, for the first time, the separation of

the theory of secularization from its ideological origins in the Enlightenment critique of religion and to distinguish the theory of secularization, as a theory of the modern autonomous differentiation of the secular and the religious spheres, from the thesis that the end result of the process of modern differentiation would be the progressive erosion, decline and eventual disappearance of religion (Casanova 19)

The new thesis of secularization that develops – which Casanova calls “functionalist” and attributes to Thomas Luckman’s *The Invisible Religion* – postulates religion’s loss of its “traditional societal and public functions” as well as the “privatization and marginalization of religion” (19). This reformulated thesis of secularization held sway until the 1980s, after which the dramatic increase of the public role of religion made obvious the fallacy of the new formulation (Casanova 19), a state of affairs which, as mentioned above, Habermas addresses six years after the publication of Casanova’s work, in his 2001 acceptance speech “Faith and Knowledge.”

Postsecularism, then, offers a reframing of the secular/spiritual binary against a 200-year tradition of a “spirit of the age” in which the notions of “spirit” are better left unaddressed or, if broached, best done so from the Sunday pulpit. Although Casanova and Prosman focus on European and American secularism, in *The Postsecular Imagination*, Manav Ratti analyzes of the works of Salman Rushdie¹ and Michael Ondaatje and offers a definition of secularism through his focus on the relationship between secularism and the range of religious belief manifested in the writings of diasporic Eastern authors. Ratti observes that

[s]ecularism is the name for the *ideologies* that emerge alongside or as a result of secularization, such as the ideology that people should confine their beliefs to what they can observe in the material world, or that to have a secular outlook, including the belief that state and religion should be separate, is to be modern, progressive and rational. (5)

Contributing to the body of postsecular criticism which addresses works of fiction which incorporate spaces outside Europe or North America, this study expands the analysis of spirituality to include the marginalized spiritualities of curanderismo and the Bábí/Bahá’í Faith. Although there has been literary criticism which examines the points of juncture between postsecularism and American Jewish culture, as well as between postsecularism and U.S. Native American fiction, Hinduism and Buddhism, at the writing of this dissertation, there has yet to be any serious treatment of the intersections of curanderismo-spirituality or the Bábí/Bahá’í Faith with postsecular thought, as revealed through works of historical fiction.

Curanderismo is a Mexican folk-healing system which blends indigenous Latin American and European Catholic beliefs and practices. Robert T. Trotter and Juan Antonio Chavira’s ethnographic study *Curanderismo: Mexican American Folk Healing* provides a thoughtful description and examination of curanderismo in the Mexican-American borderlands. Their study

¹ Interestingly, as Darius Kadivar documents in *Payvan Iran News*, both Rushdie and Nakhjavani are recipients of the prestigious *Doctorats Honoris Causa*, the Honorary Doctorate awarded by the University of Liege in Belgium.

is significant as it is the first such study which seeks to understand curanderismo from an insider's perspective. A more detailed description of curanderismo, and how it relates to the Mayo/Yaqui indigenous belief, will follow in Chapter 3. The Bahá'í Faith, the other system of belief with which this study engages, is an independent world religion with currently over six million adherents globally, the second most wide-spread religion after Christianity. The religion has its foundations in Persia, modern-day Iran, in 1844 with the teaching of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, the "Twin Founders" of the Bahá'í Faith. Considered heretics by adherents of Islam, the Bábis (followers of the Báb) and Bahá'ís (followers of Bahá'u'lláh) were victims of pogroms led in Persia by the Islamic clergy and state government. Further details can be found in Moojan Momen's *The Bábí and Bahá'í Religions, 1844-1944*, a compilation of contemporary western accounts from newspapers and official documents, as well as Shoghi Effendi's *God Passes By*, and Adib Taherzadeh's four-volume history *The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh*. Chapter 2 offers further details concerning this system of belief.

This study argues that, although the spiritual theses of Urrea and Nakhjavani's novels are distinct, all are enabled by the authors' attention to elements that contribute to a reframing of the secular and the sacred in the narrative. These elements include the incorporation of narrative humor, the transformation of the act of reading into a spiritual endeavor, the delinking of religion from power with the texts, the rejection of fanaticism in all forms, and not least of which, the choice of constructing these texts as works of historical fiction.

Urrea, Nakhjavani, and the Historical Novel

This study situates itself within the heightened interest in historical fiction that emerged at the start of the new millennium. Miriam Elizabeth Burstein's "The Historical Novel and Contemporary Criticism: A Bibliographic Survey, 1990-2004" is particularly helpful in situating the sea-change – or what she calls "historical fiction's spectacular return to both popular and

literary prominence” (56) – that occurs in the subgenre’s critical landscape within the last two decades. Focusing primarily on English-language studies and critical texts of the United States and Great Britain, Burstein concedes that her article skews towards studies of Anglophone literature. To be sure, the subgenre of U.S. Latino historical fiction is missing in her survey, although she does offer a handful of titles which treat Latin American historical fiction, such as Seymour Menton’s *Latin America’s New Historical Novel* and Kathy Taylor’s *The New Narrative of Mexico: Sub-Versions of History in Mexican Fiction* (53). Nonetheless, her survey successfully makes the point that by 2004, the Western historical novel can be considered “well into the academic mainstream” (45).

Suzanne Keen’s article “The Historical Turn in British Fiction” reinforces the ideas presented by Burstein. Her study is in disagreement with earlier twentieth-century critics like Linda Hutcheon² who identify historical fiction as undervalued. On the contrary, Keen observes that the British historical novel is “flourish[ing], enjoying popular success with a devoted readership, undergoing energetic feminist and postcolonial revisions, garnering significant prizes, inspiring film and television adaptations, and commanding significant and critical attention” (167), a state which breaks with a past tradition of exclusion and neglect in the realm of literary criticism, a tradition dating back to the split of serious from popular forms which occurred in the 1890s (Keen 168). While writers of British historical novels in the past, Keen asserts, had to make do with “sales, circulation, and no respect” (168), the new millennium sees an upsurge in critical attentiveness to the form.

Elisabeth Wesseling, in *Writing History as a Prophet: Postmodernist Innovations of the Historical Novel*, dedicates significant space to the discussion of the development of historical

² Hutcheon’s *A Poetics of Postmodernism* posits her theory of historical fiction as paradigmatic of postmodernist creative expression, arguing against Fredric Jameson that postmodernist fiction is not essentially ahistorical.

fiction in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In her study of the historical novel and its innovations in postmodernist fiction, Wesseling offers the “broad” and the “narrow” definitions of the term *historical novel*. The “broad” definition identifies historical fiction as “a fictional narrative which incorporates historical materials, without further qualifications” (27). This broad definition, however, is broad almost to the point of being meaningless and certainly contrary to the orthodox view propounded by Marxist critic Georg Lukács’ *The Historical Novel*, which marks the emergence of the historical novel as an independent genre with Sir Walter Scott’s 1814 publication of *Waverly*. Lukács defines the historical novel as demonstrating the effects of history on the characters themselves and lauds its realistic conventions, since the primary importance of this subgenre of fiction lies, for him, in its revolutionary ability to present history as a process that is “the concrete precondition of the present” (21). While Lukács defines the historical novel as one in which history is written and read as a process, a process with political and social ramifications in the present (21), the definition of historical novel that I use in this dissertation is more closely aligned with the one that Wesseling offers.

For Wesseling, the historical novel is defined by the *complementary* position it holds with respect to historiography (32):

The historical novel became the companion of historiography by presenting itself as a vehicle for conveying historical knowledge. At the same time, it explicitly distinguished itself from historiography both in matter and mode. The proponents of the historical novel did not seek to cloak its fictionality, but they held that the use of invention in the service of vivification, embellishment, and the fleshing out of details where historiography only offered rough outlines was a highly desirable compensation for the shortcomings of a stylistically unattractive historiography. (33)

One of the results of this vivification, Wesseling demonstrates, is the radical ability of historical fiction to subvert traditional historiography by bringing to light the stories of minority demographics. Although the latter part of Wesseling’s work focuses on postmodernist “uchronion” fiction – or fiction with explicitly apocryphal historical realities – the definition she

proposes of what characterizes historical fiction as a whole is key to the current study, for it answers the traditional critical objections held through most of the twentieth century against historical fiction as being “inferior.”

The far-from-prestigious regard in which historical fiction was held in the twentieth century – what Burstein refers to as the historical novel’s then-residence in a “scholarly backwater” (45) – is a topic also covered by such scholars as Diana Wallace and Samantha Young. In *The Women’s Historical Novel*, Wallace marks the beginning of the twentieth century as a clear moment when “legitimate” male authors turn away from writing historical fiction in the West (3). As per Wallace, “in both 'history' and 'literature', the historical novel has always been regarded as a hybrid, even a 'bastard' form” because it is neither fully factual nor fully fictional, and its connection with “non-serious” historical romances further served to lower its critical stature (3). Young, in her article “Based on a True Story: Contemporary Historical Fiction and Historiographical Theory,” discusses past tendencies to view historical fiction as “impure and subsequently deficient” and argues the merits of historical and fictional narratives in providing access to the past. Providing access to the past is certainly function of the narrative form in general – as opposed, for example, to the chronology – as Hayden White discusses in his studies on historical narratives, including fiction, and historiography. With his *Tropics of Discourse* and *The Content of the Form*, White narrows the perceived chasm between “true” history and “false” fiction, certainly an appealing argument for partisans of historical fiction. Indeed, Burstein attributes the “major fault lines” which opened up in the critical consensus about historical novels to White’s scholarship (45). Concerning historical narrative, in “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact,” White writes:

In point of fact, history – the real world as it evolves in time – is made sense of in the same way that the poet or novelist tries to make sense of it, i.e., by endowing what originally appears to be problematical and mysterious with the aspect of a recognizable, because it is familiar, form [i.e, the narrative]. It does not matter

whether the world is conceived to be real or only imagined; the manner of making sense of it is the same. (98)

Additionally, in *The Content of the Form*, White expounds upon the thesis that the meaning with which history is imbued depends upon the meaning that a human being's own consciousness or narrative imagination gives to it. He argues that rather than possessing inherent meaning, history is invested with meaning by the way in which it is narrated; this being so, a correlation can be drawn between this and the way in which narrative imagination can create the "truth" in fiction. Or as White himself puts it, "[o]ne can produce an imaginary discourse about real events that may not be less 'true' for being imaginary" (57). If narrative (either fictional or historical), as White explains, seeks to "[fill] in all the gaps, ...[to] put an image of continuity, coherency, and meaning in place of the fantasies of emptiness, need, and frustrated desire that inhabit our nightmares about the destructive power of time" (11), then objections to historical fiction for being somehow inferior seem significantly less effectual. Indeed, I would add, there may be no better way of filling-in the historical gaps of the narratives of marginalized or under-represented "foreign" religious demographics than in historical fiction.

A final general point to introduce: historical fiction predicates a distance from the present. Avrom Fleishman's study *The English Historical Novel: Walter Scott to Virginia Woolf* speaks to this: "a work of historical art generates an esthetic distance from the present as well as from the past; it allows us to see not only others but ourselves in history" (xii). This is significant. It suggests that a certain clarity of vision is accessed through historical fiction, because, to put it simply, the historical fiction subgenre eliminates the proximity which might impede the reader from seeing the forest for the trees. To be sure, with Urrea and Nakhjavani's novels, it is this distance which, I argue, enables readers to more easily accept as viable the non-mainstream spirituality expressed in the novels as well as to re-envision the relationships between the secular and the spiritual which the authors' texts propose.

We move now to a more narrowed subset of the subgenre: transnational historical fiction, a category of historical fiction which offers particularly fertile ground for postsecular literary criticism. In *Re-framing the Transnational Turn in American Studies*, John Rowe gives a history of transnational American studies and dedicates a chapter to Chicano fiction, including the works of Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Gloria Anzaldúa. Of particular importance for this study, however, is Rowe's characterization of transnationality. Calling attention to issues of subversiveness and hegemonic co-optation of narratives of resistance, he argues that an important function of transnational fiction is the "prevent[ion of] the closure of a nation" (5). He further writes: "Inherently relational, the transnational involves a double move: to the inside, to core constituents of a given nation, and to an outside, whatever forces introduce a new configuration" (5-6). To Rowe's explanation of transnationality, we add De Groot's observations in *The Historical Novel*: "From its inception as a recognisable genre, arguably, the historical novel was an international form; indeed, its success on a transnational scale meant that the novel in general became predicated upon a kind of cultural translatability" (93). By taking these two points together, we can see an exciting synergy between transnational fiction and historical fiction.

Transnational historical fiction takes transnationality's inherently relational "double move," to use Rowe's words, and applies it to a historically fictionalized context. If, as Rowe writes, transnationality opens the spaces of the national, then introducing history into the picture likewise serves to widen the radius of critical appraisal. In transnational historical fiction, we see manifested a combination of the "inside" and the "outside" of a nation, at the same that that the historical aspect of the novel predicates a distance from the present *and* establishes a link with it. These relationships and points of juncture are particularly important when topics revolve around marginalized religions, because, unless individuals have chosen to study various spiritualities on

their own, many Western readers are ignorant of systems of belief outside Christianity.

According to the Pew Forum's "U.S. Religious Landscape Survey" published in 2008, for instance, 78.4% of the population of the United States is Christian. Pew Forum's 2010 "Who Knows What About Religion" survey demonstrates that the knowledge which Christians in the U.S. possess of world religions – specifically, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam – is quite dismal. With the exception of Mormons, who scored an average of 75% on the questions accessing knowledge of world religions, Christians on average scored a failing grade: 45%.

What this means, then, is that transnational historical novels with spiritual themes offer a big, beautiful bay-view window into not only the past, but also into the essence of what it is to inhabit a space on the inside *and* outside of the nation and religious cosmology of the implied reader. Most importantly for this study, it provides the experience of spiritual paradigms, which in the case of Urrea and Nakhjavani's novels, are far outside the experiences of the average United States inhabitant (in the Pew Forum's "U.S. Religious Landscape Survey," for instance, Native American religious believers and members of the Bahá'í Faith comprise less than .3% of the U.S. population, respectively). After all, as De Groot affirms, historically, a novel's foreignness has never been an obstacle for the reader of historical fiction: "the innate alienness of historical fiction serves to suggest that having any prior awareness [of the novel's historical content] is of little consequence [for the reader]" (97). Thus, the unique nature of transnational historical fiction as distanced from the reader in space and time suggests a possible increased sense of comfort for the implied reader, one which can lead to opening fully that big bay window to the unknown and unfamiliar – and maybe even knocking out the screen.

In short, transnational historical fiction, as this dissertation will show, can be considered a favorable subgenre for the analysis of notions of religion and secularity, of spirituality and reason, of how they intertwine and refuse categorical classification, precisely because

transnational historical novels provide an illusion of distance – in both space and time – which functions to lessen the reader’s affective barriers to the unfamiliar, uncomfortable, or possibly contentious.

Urrea, Nakhjavani, and Postsecularism

In his pioneering work *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison* (2007), McClure explores the application of postsecular thought to literary analysis. Drawing from the postsecular theory of Habermas, McClure defines literary postsecularism as “a mode of being and seeing that is at once critical of secular constructions of reality and of dogmatic religiosity” (ix). Analyzing the fiction of Toni Morrison, Michael Ondaatje, Charles Johnson, Alice Walker, and Salman Rushdie, McClure proposes the following as typical characteristics of postsecular fiction: the “dramatic disruptions of secular structures of reality,” the “repudiation of fundamentalist prescriptions for social well-being,” and the “insistence on the need to articulate the religious with progressive political projects” (3). These characteristics, as will be seen, are key to the analysis of Urrea and Nakhjavani’s novels as they mark the places in the texts where traditional notions of secular and sacred are queried.

Later scholars, like Magdalena Maczynska, problematize the definition that McClure presents. In “Towards a Postsecular Literary Criticism,” Maczynska observes that nailing down one single definition of postsecularism is complicated by the divergent ways that the term has been conceived across various disciplines. She writes, for instance, that sociologists of religion, such as Rodney Stark, Hent de Vries, and Peter Clarke, see postsecularism as a revision of the secularization narrative of twentieth-century social sciences with the purpose of “widening the analysis of the role that religious discourses and practices play in the construction of modern sociocultural space” (74). Paul Cloke and Justin Beaumont’s “Geographies of Postsecular Rapprochement in the City,” a study of urban spaces of partnership through faith-based religious

organizations in the United Kingdom and The Netherlands, is an example of this sort of scholarship; they affirm that postsecular thought "acknowledges not only that modern societies should expect religions to persist, but also that society should enter into constructive dialogue with those religions" (37). In contrast, contemporary theologians, such as John Milbank and Philip Blond, regard postsecularism as a "possible opening towards a new, transcendent (Christian) theology returned to its pre-modern roots" (Maczynska 74).

This comparative dissertation, however, with its focus on marginalized spirituality of minority demographics – the curanderismo-spirituality of an indigenous Mexican woman, and the revolutionary spirituality of the Bábí beliefs of a woman in Islamic Persia – obviously differs from Milbank and Blond's Christian-specific take on the postsecular and follows most closely the definition summarized in Michael Kauffman's "Locating the Postsecular":

[P]ostsecular thought stems from a desire to resist any master narrative – whether it be a supersessionary narrative of secularization, or a triumphal narrative of the return of religion. Postsecularism attempts to qualify these master narratives in several ways: (a) complicating our understanding of the terms 'religious' and 'secular' by deepening our awareness of the ideological, cultural, and historical valences of those terms; and (b) complicating our understanding of the relationships between the religious and the secular by moving beyond any model that posits too stark a binary opposition and towards models based on co-existence and co-creation. (68-69)

The attempt at "qualification" which Kauffman signals corresponds to Ratti's definition of postsecularism as a "*negotiated* term" (21). By this, Ratti means that the postsecular is not an attack on progressive or Enlightenment thought or a substitution for the secular; it more properly denotes, according to Ratti, a "negotiated relation with the secular" in which both secularism and religion can be critiqued without resorting to modes of violence in the name of secularism or religion (21).

Although I do not mean to impose an original postsecular intent upon Urrea and Nakhjavani, a postsecular reading of their historical novels results in surprising consistency

between their works and postsecular thought – or perhaps not so surprising, considering these novels are the products of societies which cohere with the characteristics that Habermas, in “Secularism’s Crisis of Faith,” has proposed as representative of postsecular society. Besides the change of consciousness attributed to the “perception that cultural and social modernization is not indisputably linked to the foreseeable disappearance of religion,” Habermas also indicates two other important characteristics extant in postsecular society: “the knowledge that religion is gaining influence within public spheres” and “the understanding that social integration of immigrant populations with different and variant religious practices and traditions is vital for advancing civilization (“Crisis” 20-21). These features are generally in harmony with Urrea and Nakhjavani’s historical fiction, as will be shown in subsequent chapters, and although there are some points of departure as well as variations in the manifestations of postsecular qualities in the novels, the authors of these works do not fail in creating worlds where the dividing lines between religion and science, spirituality and reason, blur, where among other things, one can detect, to use Ratti’s terms, “non-religious religion” and “non-secular secularism” (xx).

In this moment of cultural transition from a secular to a postsecular culture, a postsecular focus even now risks the danger – except perhaps in Religious Studies departments – of raising flags in the academy, since a suspicion of religious discourse is still extant in some arenas of literary study. Laura Levitt confronts this state of affairs in her article “What is Religion, Anyway? Rereading the Postsecular from an American Jewish Perspective”: [I]n literary studies there is a great deal of suspicion surrounding engagement with any expression of religion whatsoever. Religion continues to carry the taint of abjection. It is primitive, outmoded, and dangerous” (110-111). Certainly, there is a set of understandable reasons for this, one of which is, as Dennis Taylor elucidates in “The Need for a Religious Literary Criticism,” an article published by the journal *Religion and the Arts*, the “God question”:

“God” is the place in the discourse when scholarly neutrality slips into something else, negative, positive, evasive. It is the place where historical scholarship meets major issue [i.e., ontological belief in an Omnipotent Creator], and steps back so that the historical structure will not be endangered (often a good move). It is the place where the critic... is most embarrassed, most exposed, most naked. It demands talk about ultimate questions, indeed the ultimate question. Yet if such talk is excluded, we miss the pith and core and “Ahnung” [idea/ notion] of the literary drive in many cases.

Taylor posits that, by ignoring the God issue, we become “poor readers” because the God question itself is part of the works we study. It would be anachronistic to identify Taylor as a postsecularist – his article, after all, was not published until 1996, five years before Habermas coins the term – however his arguments seem to foreshadow the thoughts articulated in postsecular theory. Taylor’s “God question” points to the impasse which postsecular inquiry seeks to solve: the lack of a discourse with which to more fully and richly address the sacred in a field of study which, as well it should, honors reason and logic.

Taylor makes the argument for a “great critical need” in contemporary western criticism for a discourse by which spirituality in literature can be addressed with all its intricacies. He identifies the 1996 lay of the land in literary studies as one in which religious critical discourse is not yet one of the major discourses in academia, something he notes does a disservice to texts that “cry out for sophisticated critical treatment” from a perspective of religious critical theory (he provides examples from the works of Sandra Cisneros, William Butler Yeats, and Flannery O’Connor):

We live in an age of critical discourses that are expert in discussing the dimensions of class, gender, textuality, and historical context. Yet an important part of the literature we read goes untouched by our discourses, or is deconstructed, historicized, sexualized, or made symptomatic of covert power relationships.... There is a need in our time for religious interpretations that are substantial enough to enter into a productive and competitive relation with the reigning critical discourses.

Although this dissertation does not presume to develop the sort of wide-ranging critical religious discourse that Taylor calls for, it does offer postsecular criticism as a possible answer to the

need, a position which Justin Neuman also offers in his 2008 dissertation “Faith in Fiction: Postsecular Critique and The Global Novel.”

In “Faith in Fiction,” Neuman provides an explanation of how postsecular thought differs from contemporary modes of thought embodied in postcolonialism and postmodernism. He begins by tracing the history of religious discourse in Western criticism: “Religion has so long wielded the sword of empire – or been appropriated by colonial adventures – that postcolonial criticism is anathema to hegemonic religiosity in general, and to Christianity in particular” (20). Indeed, Edward Said’s *The World, The Text and The Critic* is exemplary of this logic. In *The World*, as both Neuman and McClure note, Said’s take on religious discourse is anything but favorable, for according to Said, Orientalism and religious discourse share the nefarious attributes of “serv[ing] as agents of closure, shutting off human investigation, criticism, and effort in deference to the authority of the more-than-human, the supernatural, the other-worldly” (290). Neuman, however, argues that Said’s position fundamentally misrepresents religious discourse as the antithesis of secular criticism, a key point in postsecular thought:

Said’s argument, and those like it, offers a poignant call for ethical politics and inquiry, but is a reductive and ultimately dangerous restriction of religiosity, one that fundamentally misrepresents “religion,” artificially posits it as the antithesis of a “secular” critical methodology, and contributes to the occlusion by which “religion” – and with it concepts like belief, faith, and universality – have become sites of exclusion from critical consciousness. (22)

Neuman goes on to cite a number of consequences to this exclusion: “By deploying religion as a negative limit against which liberal critique constitutes itself, critical theory unintentionally perpetuates the myth of secularization” (22). Reminiscent of Taylor’s position, Neuman notes a further consequence: “the critical community abdicates its role in contesting the terms, texts, and ideologies of religious debate” (22). To be sure, this is not to say that discussions on religion in literature are inexistent. There are many journals – *Literature and Theology*, *Religion and Arts*, *The Journal of Bahá’i Studies*, *Christianity and Literature*, *Bahá’i Studies Online*, *Religion and*

Literature – in whose pages are found precisely such discussions. What a postsecular perspective has to offer, however, and what critics such as Neuman argue, is a reconceptualization of the spiritual and the secular as intricately connected and co-existent. At the same time, postsecular theory seeks to foster a re-engagement with religious thought and discourse, while emphatically rejecting religious rigidity or fundamentalism which, in terms of a literary context, is often manifested in the representation of inflexible religious institutions of power.

In *The Postsecular Imagination*, Manav Ratti's understanding of the relations between postsecularism and postcolonialism varies somewhat from Neuman's. Ratti formulates a less oppositional relationship between postsecularism and postcolonialism, emphasizing postsecularism as a natural extension of postcolonialism: "postcolonial postsecularism" (xxii). According to Ratti, the work of postcolonial postsecularism involves "the interactions and collisions between at least two different worldviews" and how these can lead to an

imagining and re-imagining of some of the greatest ideas of our times: what it means to be secular, religious, a citizen, minority, a majority – and, by implication, an intellectual, a writer, an artist, each committed to making a difference in the world... (xxiii)

As Ratti rightly observes, the postsecular act of imagining and re-imagining functions to expand, among others, postcolonial discourses of literary criticism.

What of the relationship between postmodernism and postsecularism? Citing Fredric Jameson, Jean-François Lyotard, and Linda Hutcheon, Neuman notes that these critics "emphatically align postmodernity with a culture of simulacra, vertiginous secular pluralism, and capitalism, while relegating religiosity to the status of anachronistic metanarrative" ("Faith" 13). While new religious movements thrive in postmodernity, he continues, they are regarded as "productions of material culture" (13). As such, although postmodern interpretations of works of fiction may certainly touch upon religious matters, they treat such matters as epiphenomenal.

For Neuman, postsecular interpretations have the advantage of allowing the religious a certain priority of status lacking in postmodernism's framework for literary analysis. I would agree, yet always with the caveat that – unlike trends in many Christian theological studies which use postsecular discourse to reinforce Christianity (Ratti, xxv) – the use of postsecular literary theory which this study employs is not about the reinforcement of Christianity but rather a querying of the ways in which secularity and religiosity are represented in marginalized spiritualities.

Sarah Rivett explores postsecular thought specifically in the context of a paradoxical American Protestant secularism. In “Early American Religion in a Postsecular Age,” Rivett addresses the turn towards a critical analysis of the borderlines between the religious and the secular in literature and literary history, and she acknowledges the work of postsecular thinkers as important to understanding what might otherwise appear to be baffling contradictions in early American literature. Her study promotes the postsecular reframing of the study of early American literature by means of “forg[ing] new links between these two founding moments [the Enlightenment and evangelicalism]” which coexisted and prospered over the eighteenth century (993). She writes, in fact, that without the reframing that a postsecular perspective enables, such coexistence is “puzzling and seemingly paradoxical” (993). Although Rivett's study engages with the specific question of religion in early American literature, her observations on what she calls the “resurgence of interest in religion” are helpful in clarifying the trajectory of interest that has been developing in academia over the last decade and upon which this dissertation builds:

In the wake of 9/11 and the political revival of the religious right, Americanists were surprised at the intense and exceptionally religious nature of the United States. Given the religious and political inflections of the war on terror to follow, the academic study of religion could not remain the ‘invisible domain’ that it had been in American and literary studies throughout the 1990s. (989)

Using a survey of the journal *Early American Literature* spanning from the mid-1980s to the date of the publication of her article (2013), Rivett concludes that the interest in religion which

reappears in the journal beginning in the year 2000 coincides with the problematization of narratives of secularization which exemplify what she calls the “postsecular phase of criticism” in which Western scholars now find themselves (990). I emphasize this because it is within this new questioning of narratives of secularization that this study is situated.

Through a postsecular analysis of Urrea and Nakhjavani’s historical fiction, I compare and contrast the manifestations of spirituality in the novels, and I argue that, by writing historical novels which feature minority and under-represented religious traditions – curanderismo and the Bábí/Bahá’í belief systems respectively – the authors open spaces where non-mainstream religiosity and secularity exist in fluid, complex entanglements. In doing so, their narratives shed light on the contemporary desire expressed in postsecular thought to move beyond the constructed opposition of secularity and spirituality. If, to quote Ratti, “imagining the postsecular is provoked by the real historical embeddedness in which we find ourselves” (xxv), then where better than the exploration of these authors’ historical narratives to engage with a new vision of contemporary life, one in which the secular and the spiritual are not mutually exclusive but rather enduringly reciprocal.

Urrea and Nakhjavani’s Historical Novels in Context

If one holds with the tradition exemplified in Avrom Fleishman’s *The English Historical Novel*, that novels are best examined within their national contexts, one is presented with certain complexities in approaching transnational novels in general and those of Urrea and Nakhjavani in particular. Both authors live in the West and are familiar with Western ideologies valuing Enlightenment thought. Both, for instance, attended university in the West, Nakhjavani in the United States and Great Britain, and Urrea in the United States. Both have held and currently hold positions in education: Urrea taught at Harvard and currently serves at the University of Chicago, and Nakhjavani taught European and American literature in Belgium and currently

teaches in France. Nakhjavani, writing from Europe, presents the Middle East from a transnational vantage, while Urrea does the same for Mexico and the United States. They both write from the West about spiritualities located, from a Western perspective, on the peripheries. This vantage is further complicated, in terms of the non-Protestant spirituality expressed in both authors' works, since it further removes them from the recognized Western "center" of Protestant Christianity.

As a Chicano writer, Urrea writes in English for a mainstream English-speaking North American audience. In a sense, both *The Hummingbird's Daughter* and *Queen of America* follow in the tradition of U.S. Latino fiction of the 1990s, as delineated by A. Robert Lee's "Outside In: Latino/a Un-Bordering in U.S. Fiction." In his overview of U.S. Latino writers of the latter half of the twentieth century, including such authors as Rudolfo Anaya, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, and Sandra Cisneros, Lee marks ventures into the supernatural as key elements of Latino/a fiction in the 1990s and thereafter (19). Although Lee does not include Urrea in his survey of authors (Urrea's first historical novel was not published until 2005, and Lee's article is concerned specifically with late twentieth century novels), one of Urrea's obvious and most fascinating departures from the typical realist novel – his integration of the mystical and spiritual into his historical fiction – is certainly in keeping with this characteristic of U.S. Latino fiction as Lee describes it. Theresa Delgadillo's "The Criticality of Latino/a Fiction in the Twenty-First Century," published in 2011, does cite Urrea's *The Hummingbird's Daughter*, however, among the works she identifies as carrying forward an emphasis on spirituality in U.S. Latino fiction during the first decade of the twenty-first century. Further, she calls attention to what she identifies as "the new distinguishing feature" of U.S. Latino spiritual representations: "a heightened focus on the feminine divine and the female healer, saint, shaman, clairvoyant or visionary" (611).

Delgado further dedicates a number of pages specifically to twenty-first-century U.S. Latino historical fiction including Ana Menéndez's *Loving Che* (2003), Julia Alvarez's *In the Name of Salomé* (2000), Sandra Cisneros's *Caramelo* (2002), Alex Espinosa's *Still Water Saints* (2007), and Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007).³ She notes, for instance, that this newest generation of fiction is "particularly attuned to cultural conflict" and "creates multilayered histories of the Americas" (602), two aspects to which Urrea's novels certainly adhere. What is significant about Urrea's novels, however, is the resistance evinced in the text against strict demarcations of the sacred and the profane. His narratives signal towards the spiritual features of a material existence and question the borders thereof.

In this same transnational vein, Nakhjavani writes in English for a Western audience, setting her historical novel in Persia. Yet categorizing her fiction is fraught with complexities. As an Iranian living in and writing from the West, Nakhjavani's works can be examined in comparison with such western writers as Iranian-American Anita Amirrezvani, author of two historical novels set in ancient Persia: *Equal of the Sun* (2013) and *Blood of Flowers* (2008). If, as expressed in her interview with *The Australian*, Amirrezvani hopes "to broaden outsiders' perspectives of Iranian culture" through her narratives (*The Face*), this is a hope likewise reflected in Nakhjavani's novel, as well as many of the works within this tradition, including the newly published collection of short fiction and prose, *Tremors: New Fiction by Iranian American Writers* (2013), edited by Anita Amirrezvani and Persis M. Karim, and published by

³ Although Delgado identifies these texts as historical fiction, to be more precise, many of them actually fall into the subcategory of metahistorical fiction. As described by Ansgar Nunning in "Crossing Borders and Blurring Genres: Towards a Typology and Poetics of Postmodernist Historical Fiction in England since the 1960s," this type of historical novel often presents a contemporary character interacting with the novel's historical past: "Metahistorical novels ... highlight the process of historical reconstruction and the protagonists' consciousness of the past rather than a represented historical world as such. Instead of portrayed a historical world on the diegetic level of the characters, metahistorical novels are generally set in the present but concerned with the appropriation, revision and transmission of history. Such novels typically explore how characters come to terms with the past" (223-4).

University of Arkansas Press. Editorial reviews of *Tremors*, like the following by Zara

Houshmand, note this aspect of the work:

This marvelous anthology celebrates something far beyond arrival for Iranian-American writing, introducing a chorus of voices with an exceptionally broad range of experience and stylistic mastery. *Tremors* shakes up any easy assumptions that the reader may hold about Iran, and claims a new territory in the global landscape of literature.

This collection touches also upon the human rights violations endured by Iranians in Iran, both before and after the Islamic Revolution. Omid Fallahazad's "Sabzeh," however, is the only contribution in which the Bahá'í Faith plays a central, if undefined⁴, role, a curious fact since Bahá'ís are currently the largest non-Muslim religious minority in Iran. Indeed, while Amirrezvani's novels put social and gender issues at the fore of her historical novels, and *Tremors* explores such complexities as those of being Muslim-Iranian in Christian America, Nakhjavani's novels privilege the spiritual-secular interactions through their Bahá'í subtext. Not to say that issues of gender, colonialism, and power relations are ignored; rather they are contextualized in the ever-present if silent spiritual orientation of Nakhjavani's religious beliefs. What this study reveals, then, is how Nakhjavani's narrative does this, and what it discloses of twenty-first century postsecular culture in the West.

This brings us directly to the other tradition within which we can situate Nakhjavani's historical novels: Bahá'í scholarship. Based on the authoritative writings of the founders of the Bahá'í Faith, the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, this tradition is concerned with promoting universal inclusivity and unity in diversity. Bahá'í writers have produced works ranging from literary

⁴ As indicated in *Tremors*, "Sabzeh" is an excerpt from Fallahazad's novel entitled *So Lifts the Eyelid of Life*. Whereas the novel itself may indeed go into more specifics about the Bahá'í Faith, the excerpt chosen for *Tremors* fails to identify it as more than one of Iran's religious minorities, although it does reveal the fundamentalist Iranian prejudice against Bahá'ís being "dirty spies" (85) and conveys the impotence of two of its Bahá'í characters in attempting to attain reparations from the Iranian government for "what we had lost as Bahá'ís" (85).

analyses to social treatises⁵ with a Baha'í world-view underlying these scholarly and creative endeavors. Ideas of global unity, universal education, gender equality, and the elimination of prejudice are some of the concepts that motivate and give shape to texts of Bahá'í scholarship, be they historical, sociological, or literary. Although one cannot simply equate Bahá'í scholarship with Bahá'í fiction, these underlying concepts are shared.

Using Bahá'í religious writings to formulate a framework for scholarship is a relatively young academic practice, considering the quite recent date of the religion's founding (1844) compared to other world religions such as Islam, Christianity, Buddhism and Judaism. Bahá'í scholarship is given impulse in the United States and Canada by the establishment of the Association of Bahá'í Studies, founded in Canada in 1975 under the auspices of the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada. Its stated purpose is "to promote the systematic study of the Bahá'í Faith and its application to the needs of humanity" (ABS). The Association of Bahá'í Studies' peer-reviewed scholarly journal, *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, provides a forum for academic research concerning the application of Bahá'í concepts to such diverse areas of study as economics, sociology, psychology, religious studies, ecofeminism, history, literature, art and race relations.⁶ Nakhjavani herself, before her debut as a historical novelist, was already participating actively in the field of Bahá'í scholarship, with such works as *When We Grow Up* (1979), *Four on an Island* (1983), and *Asking Questions: A Challenge to Fundamentalism*

⁵ Biographies include, for instance, Adib Tahherzadeh's *The Revelation of Baha'u'llah* (1974), Janet Ruhe-Schoen's *Rejoice in My Gladness: The Life of Táhirih* (2011), and H. M. Balyuzi's *'Abdu'l-Bahá: The Centre of the Covenant of Baha'u'llah* (1971). Examples of literary analyses include John S. Hatcher's *Adam's Wish: Unknown Poetry of Táhirih* (2008) and Nader Saiedi's monograph *Logos and Civilization* (2000), as well as shorter works such as Bret Breneman's "Socrates'/Plato's Use of Rhetoric: A Bahá'í Perspective" (1991) and Phyllis Sternberg Perrakis's "Spiritual Oppression in *Frankenstein*" (1999). Paul Lample's *Revelation and Social Reality* (2009) and Hooper Dunbar's *Forces of Our Time: The Dynamics of Light and Darkness* (2009) fall into the category of social treatises.

⁶ Past issues of *The Journal of Baha'í Studies* starting with its 1988 issue can be accessed through *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* website at <http://www.bahai-studies.ca/journal/>.

(1990). This is significant because it demonstrates the importance of religion in Nakhjavani's literary production. In light of Nakhjavani's oeuvre, then, why the deliberate absence, in the narrative content of *The Woman Who Read Too Much*, of any mention whatsoever of the Bábí Faith? This would be a puzzling twist, particularly since the protagonist of the novel is a heroine in the history of the religion, if it were not for the perspective that postsecularism offers. What a postsecular analysis of the novel reveals concerning this absence is not the insignificance of the protagonist's religion, but rather the focus on sacredness unbounded by labels and unfettered by fanaticism.

In comparison with Nakhjavani, Urrea's interest in spiritual matters is less obvious in his own creative trajectory but is nevertheless at the forefront of his two Teresita novels and, perhaps even more tellingly, in his own statements about the spiritual nature of his writing. In his 2012 interview with Adrian Florido, he admits that writing has become "a spiritual thing for me. When I'm writing, I'm praying." Further, Urrea notes that in his research for *The Hummingbird's Daughter*, he went from having a "Western mind that couldn't wrap itself around all this mystical stuff" to "believ[ing] that my dirt-street *abuelas* knew more than all those snarky [Harvard] PhDs" ("For True Healing" 8). He concedes that his fieldwork with spiritual healers "opened floodgates of experience" for him ("A Conversation" 4).

In "For True Healing To Begin, Simply Turn Off Your Western Mind," an autobiographical essay published at the end of *The Hummingbird's Daughter*, Urrea discusses one of these moments of revelation during his research into curanderismo and Teresa Urrea. Writing of his apprenticeship with Esperanza, a knowledgeable medicine woman descended from the Mayos, Urrea recalls: "[O]ne of the first lessons she gave me was this: 'White people think what we do is magic. It's not magic. It's science'" (9). This comment is echoed in the pages of the narrative, as we shall see in Chapter 4, and is particularly telling in light of

postsecular thought. In point of fact, such an observation resonates with this dissertation's postsecular focus on the relationship between the spiritual and the secular, between what might be considered supernatural and what is considered scientific, and signals Urrea's consciousness of a reframing of the spiritual and secular that his novels subsequently reveal.

Chapter Overviews

This introduction has presented a review of literature, a definition of key concepts such as *historical novel* and *postsecular theory*, and has placed the novels within their transnational context. An outline of the argument of each of the dissertation chapters follows below.

Chapter 2 examines Nakhjavani's historical novel *The Woman Who Read Too Much* (2010).⁷ This novel is based upon the life of the Persian scholar and poet Táhirih Qurratu'l-Ayn, a woman born in the nineteenth century and a heroine of the Bahá'í Faith. Nakhjavani's *The Woman Who Read Too Much*, as the title suggests, is densely woven with metaphors that underscore a link between the secular and the sacred through the written word. Thus, Chapter Two analyzes the narrative's reading motif in light of postsecular literary theory. Through the novel's reading metaphors, the protagonist's beliefs are shown to be socio-politically progressive, and a cause of disruption for the secular state of reality reflected in the author's portrayal of the Persian court. Likewise, through the reading motif, the protagonist's religion is presented as a repudiation of the fundamentalist prescriptions for well-being promoted by the Persian clergy. Chapter Two owes a significant debt to John McClure's *Partial Faiths:*

Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison, in which McClure defines dominant

⁷ Although written in English, this novel's first English-language publication will be through Stanford University Press, with the estimated publication date of spring 2015 (existing publications include Spanish, French, and Italian). Therefore, this dissertation works with the Spanish-language edition translated by Pepa Linares and published by Alianza under the title *La mujer que leía demasiado*. For purposes of consistency, however, all references to this novel will use the English-language title, and all direct citations, unless otherwise indicated, will be from the English manuscript, conveyed to me through direct correspondence with the author.

characteristics of postsecular fiction. His thoughtful characterization of postsecular fiction enables this chapter's insights into how the novel resists secular ideologies through its portrayal of act of reading and its ramifications.

Chapter 3 examines how humor studies shed light on a postsecular reading of Luis Alberto Urrea's *The Hummingbird's Daughter* (2005). Based on the true-historical figure of nineteenth-century Mexican folk saint Teresa Urrea, a distant relative of the author, *The Hummingbird's Daughter* introduces the reader to the child Teresita. Following the structure of a *Bildungsroman*, the reader becomes invested in this little girl who grows up to possess miraculous healing abilities and is called, as Urrea notes, the "Mexican Joan of Arc" ("For True Healing" 8). Humor combines with the mysterious energies of Teresita's world to preserve this novel from being a dry hagiography. Utilizing both postsecular literary theory and humor studies by such scholars as John Morreall, this chapter argues that the humor found within *The Hummingbird's Daughter* functions to undermine exclusive authority in matters of religious truth, as well as to make more palatable for a Western reading audience the non-mainstream curandera spirituality, based on Yaqui and Mayo indigenous traditions, that is the pivot of Urrea's novel.

Chapter 4 analyzes the postsecular thematic in Urrea's *Queen of America* (2011), with special attention to the novel's presentation of secular and religious fanaticism, the delinking of religion from projects of power, and the examination of the magical elements of the text. This historical novel is a sequel to *The Hummingbird's Daughter* and resumes the story of Teresita in her exile in the United States. This chapter analyzes how Urrea's narrative follows in the postsecular tradition of querying the borderlines between the sacred and the secular, the mundane and the magical. In this chapter, further, I examine the claim that *Queen of America* is a magical-realist text, and I argue that although it is not categorically a magical realist novel, the

appearance of elements which can be argued as magical-realist underscore the resistance of binary thinking that characterizes postsecular fiction.

The study concludes with an Epilogue. The Epilogue offers some afterthoughts on the nature of the study as well as avenues of further research. These include, for instance, the possibility of examining these novels' representations of death through a postsecular prism, as death can be read as the most evident dividing line between the worldly and the spiritual. Furthermore, despite the many similarities which I discovered in the course of my research between postsecular theory and Bahá'í theory, I found no research which compares and contrasts these two. An examination of the parallels between them may be conducive to further insights into the sacred and the secular in a twenty-first century global society and the literature it produces.

Chapter 2: A Postsecular Look at the Reading Motif in *The Woman Who Read Too Much*

Introduction.

This dissertation as a whole seeks to demonstrate how postsecular theory is a privileged mode of criticism for works of contemporary transnational historical fiction whose texts in some way engage with matters of a sacred or a spiritual nature. In this chapter, concretely, we will show and establish, as one aspect of our conclusion, how the spiritual thesis in Nakhjavani's historical novel *The Woman Who Read Too Much* is manifested through the reading motif. As we examine the novel in light of a Bahá'í subtext, moreover, we will also assess how the characteristics of postsecular fiction that the narrative reveals – specifically an "insistence on the need to articulate the religious with progressive political projects," the "repudiation of fundamentalist prescriptions for social well-being," and the "dramatic disruptions of secular structures of reality" (McClure 3) – are manifested through the act of reading; in doing so, we

will argue that Nakhjavani's narrative restores the voice of a religious martyr Táhirih Qurratu'l-Ayn while, at the same time, avoiding the construction of a religious metanarrative in the form of Bahá'í cosmology.

In "The Literary Motif: A Definition and Evaluation," William Freedman argues that "[t]he writer performs a worthwhile function when he attempts no more than to elucidate what he sees in the work, when he seeks to increase the reader's understanding of a work of art" (128). Although this position is never more relevant than when analyzing a work with the density of Nakhjavani's *The Woman Who Read Too Much*, in this chapter, I expand upon reading as a motif with spiritual implications in order to demonstrate how Nakhjavani's narrative reflects Jürgen Habermas' belief that twenty-first century society now find itself in a new postsecular condition. To be sure, Nakhjavani's novel is set over a hundred and fifty years ago, yet historical fiction, we recall, is inevitably connected to the present. As Diana Wallace affirms in *The Women's Historical Novel*, "[a]lthough readers are often attracted to historical novels because they believe they will learn about the past time recreated in the novel, any historical novel always has as much, or perhaps more, to say about the time in which it is written" (4). The time in which Nakhjavani's novel is written sees the burgeoning of postsecular thought in Europe and America, as indicated by the studies which emerge in the first decade of the new millennium in both literary and socio-political arenas concerning the postsecular project; to name but a few: Jürgen Habermas's "Faith and Knowledge," Manav Ratti's *The Postsecular Imagination*, and John McClure's *Partial Faiths*. In the present moment, a Google-search with the keyword postsecular yields over 158,000 results. JSTOR yields 394 entries. This is significant considering that barely 13 years have passed since the term postsecular was first coined by Habermas.

Nakhjavani's narrative hearkens back to McClure's definition of postsecular fiction in *Partial Faiths* as a literary "mode of being and seeing that is at once critical of secular

constructions of reality and of dogmatic religiosity” (ix). This “mode of being and seeing” is best evinced through *The Woman Who Read Too Much*’s subversive protagonist and its Bahá’í-rooted insistence on universal education that emphasizes the education of women. Unfamiliarity with Bahá’í cosmology, however, may lead critics to suppose that this novel – because of the lack of definition of the protagonist’s spiritual creed in anything but the vaguest of terms – is resolutely secular in focus, with its primary concerns social ones: female literacy and gender equality, for example. Although it is true that the text foregrounds the injustice of women’s inequality and illiteracy during nineteenth-century Persia, Nakhjavani’s narrative recalls what Manav Ratti affirms in *The Postsecular Imagination*: the postsecular imagination is often conveyed in contemporary literature through representations of “non-religious religion” and “non-secular secularism” (xx). An understanding of Bahá’í cosmology and religious history serves to clarify how this is actuated in the novel.

Nakhjavani’s novel polemicizes against the erasure of the voice of a marginalized religious demography. This ability of historical fiction to restore or rescue the voices of those erased by history is not a new function. In *The Historical Novel*, De Groot identifies this type of fiction specifically as “revisionist” historical fiction. One of the purposes of revisionist fiction writers, he notes, is to rewrite history: they “bring their subjects from darkness to light” (70). Ansgar Nunning’s “Crossing Borders and Blurring Genres: Towards a Typology and Poetics of Postmodernist Historical Fiction in England since 1960s” gives a flowchart typology of historical fiction. Although his focus is primarily on postmodernist British historical novels, he makes the point to note that revisionist historical novels “are inspired by the wish to rewrite history, particularly from the point of view of those all too long ignored by traditional historiography” (222). This wish is certainly apparent in Nakhjavani’s choice of writing about a protagonist based upon Táhirih Qurratu’l-Ayn, not a well-known figure in the West. Even in

Iran, historical sources about Táhirih Qurratu'l-Ayn are silent or skewed. Farzaneh Milani – who dedicates a chapter to Táhirih Qurratu'l-Ayn in her study of women's authorship *Veils and Words: the Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers* – confirms that, generally speaking, Muslim sources either criticize this historical figure or, until quite recently, “relegated her to oblivion” (97).

Just as revisionist historical fiction seeks to rescue voices from oblivion, postsecular fiction is also involved in a type of rescue. In “On the Possibility of Elsewhere: A Postsecular Reading of Lois Lowry's Giver Trilogy,” Graeme Wend-Walker argues that, as opposed to purely religious readings or purely secular ones, postsecular readings avoid critical reductionism. The merits of postsecular fiction (or, I would add, a postsecular analysis of fiction) lie, for Wend-Walker, in its ability to create a “productive critical ambivalence” through which “delegitimized modes of interpretation may be reclaimed as tools for thinking of selfhood and otherness” (139). In Nakhjavani's novel, the narrative seeks to rescue a delegitimized religious history through its treatment of the Poetess, and it does so by constructing literacy as the metonymic placeholder of spirituality.

As a novel about a woman and a religion which have been the target of state-sponsored persecution – written by a female author of the same religious persuasion – *The Woman Who Read Too Much* can certainly be read as emerging from a history of delegitimized voices. In terms of religious persecution, this unfortunate state of affairs has yet to be resolved. At the time of the publication of Nakhjavani's *The Woman* (and continuing today), Bahá'ís – Iran's largest non-Muslim religious minority – are persecuted in Iran for their religious beliefs, a violation of human rights which has come to the attention of the international community. According to the March 18, 2013 report “Persecution of Baha'is in Iran Extends Across All Stages of Life,” published by the Bahá'í World News Service, UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or

Belief Heiner Bielefeldt declares that “[t]he attacks against Baha’is in Iran represent one of the clearest cases of state-sponsored religious persecution in the world” and that this persecution extends through “all areas of state activity, from family law provisions to schooling, education, and security.” Within the United States, House Resolution 109, introduced in March 2013, condemns Iran for its “intolerable state-sponsored persecution of its Baha’i minority and its continued violation of the International Covenants on Human Rights” (H.Res.109). Likewise, Senate Resolution 75, also in the 113th Congress of the United States, “condemns the Government of Iran for its state-sponsored persecution of its Baha’i minority” (S.Res.75). This, then, is part of the contemporary setting against which the novel is created and published. As such, the author’s recreation of Táhirih Qurratu’l-Ayn’s story can be read as serving a political purpose: to bring to the sympathetic attention of Western audiences an Eastern tale, and by so doing, to expose to reading audiences the ideologies (religious or secular) within a historical setting which may still exist today.

With this in mind, the wisdom of a narrative perspective which emphasizes points of commonality between the pro-literacy beliefs of the protagonist and those of the modern Western reading audience becomes clear. Through such a point of reference, the narrative downplays the foreign-ness of the Poetess’s religious beliefs and avoids possibly alienating descriptions of a foreign-sounding “Eastern” religion. The purpose is clear: if the essence of the story is communicated, what matters the name it is given? This narrative technique is supported by the author’s avoidance of proper names in the novel. No one, not even the protagonist, is accorded a name; rather, the characters are designated by their political and social functions or relationships; ie, the Mayor’s Wife, the Shah’s Sister, the Corpse Washer, the Poetess.

Before continuing, however, a brief summary of the novel is in order. *The Woman Who Read Too Much* presents a non-chronological fictionalized account of the life of the true-

historical figure Táhirih⁸ Qurratu'l-Ayn, referred to as the Poetess of Qazvin in the novel. Meticulously crafted, the narrative is composed of four “books,” each book taking its title from one of the four traditional roles of women in Persian society: mother, wife, sister, and daughter. Each book, narrated primarily from the points-of-view of the novel’s female characters, is then divided into 19 chapters, which alternate in time over a span of approximately fifty years. Each book begins with the murder of a man in power: a king, a mayor, a prime minister, and a religious leader. The character of the Poetess of Qazvin takes shape primarily through what other characters reveal about her, such as the Queen Mother, the Corpse Washer, and the Sister of the Shah. The events recounted in the novel consistently tie back to the Poetess of Qazvin, as the trajectory of her life is revealed through the fragmented chronology: her passion for learning and literacy, her accusations of heresy by the religious hegemony, her imprisonment and her strangulation. The narrative does not end upon the death of the Poetess, however; rather, her words and her legacy remain a warning or a source of inspiration for the other characters of the novel.

The Poetess’s religion (she is a Bábí) is never stated in the novel, and her beliefs never explained. While the Islamic society of Persia forms the background for the novel – the Qur’an, for instance, is mentioned and quoted – even broad explanations of the Poetess’s heresy (the belief that Islam’s promised Qa’im, or the Hidden Imam, has returned in the figure of the Báb), remain absent. The murdered Mullah and his son, representatives of dogmatic religion, are portrayed as vitriolic fundamentalists, but the Poetess, who represents the spiritual alternative, is a mystery. Although the text reveals that the Poetess commits such provoking acts as teaching women to read and removing her veil, the reader is never apprised of the particulars of the

⁸ Táhirih’s name has various spellings in the West, including Tahereh and Tahirih. For consistency, this study utilizes Táhirih, as this is the form that appears most often in Bahá’í scholarship.

Poetess's religious philosophies which lead to these revolutionary acts. In this way, and in true postsecular fashion, the narrative stops shy of, as McClure would characterize it, a triumphal "return" of religion. Instead, Nakhjavani leaves a space open for the reader to investigate the historiography behind the story – for those who, as she notes in her Epilogue, wish to distinguish truth from creative writing (511) – a historiographical investigation which Nakhjavani further encourages through the bibliography she provides at the end of the work.

The novel challenges the reader to make sense of the Poetess's death and the repercussions of her life, for there is no happily-ever-after for the Poetess. She dies by strangulation at the hands of drunken soldiers after years of house arrest. Although the end of the novel offers us her voice in poetry, coming to us from the other side of death, it is not a song of joy, a declaration of triumph, a confirmation that something better awaits on the other side.

Rather it is a call to remembrance:

¿Dónde está mi madre para que me acune la cabeza/ para que me amamante y me apriete contra su pecho?/ Porque el hombre con el que me casé fue siempre un niño/ y el niño que amé es ya un espectro./ ¿Dónde está mi hermana para que lllore a mis pies/ y advierta al mundo de las razones de mi muerte? [Where is my mother to cradle my head/ to suckle and hold me close?/ For the man I married was always a child/ and the child I loved is a ghost./ Where is my sister to weep at my feet/ and warn the world why I died? ⁹]. (496)

Nakhjavani answers this call, constructing herself as this "sister" who communicates the Poetess's voice from a vantage point of 150 years from the time of her passing. The narrative, however, does not present the Poetess's death as an easy return to an idyllic existence. Although the narrative offers the reader the voice of the dead Poetess through her poetry, there is no joyous afterlife presented, and none of the soul's mysteries are revealed. This is not to say that a blissful afterlife is unequivocally denied, rather that the narrative emphasizes the hardships and

⁹ This English version is quoted in Nakhjavani's lecture "Novels and Iranian History: Beyond Diaspora." Unless otherwise indicated, all other translations of Nakhjavani's text into English are from her original manuscript communicated to me via personal correspondence.

uncertainties endured on an earthly plane without giving us a religious space that is familiar and well-defined in which to find solace.

Nakhjavani avoids the totalizing religious narrative, which is anathema to postsecular thought, through the text's overt silence concerning details about the Bahá'í Faith – particularly striking in a novel based on a woman universally regarded by Bahá'ís as a heroine. In fact, the picture of spirituality that the narrative offers the reader takes shape by the holes its absence causes, rather like a shadow cut-out or a stenciled portrait. In this way, the narrative purposefully presents an indeterminate spirituality, and avoids the appearance of, to use McClure's words, "the triumphant reappearance of a well-mapped, familiar, religious cosmos" (4).

Viewed through the lens of a postsecular analysis, Nakhjavani's *The Woman Who Read Too Much* enjoins the reader to acknowledge the preeminence of the faith-based and mystical as inherent to earthly existence and intimately related to the socio-political, progressive act of reading. In other words, the reading motif in Nakhjavani's novel functions to narrow that distance between the secular and profane, a reframing of the secular/sacred binary, which as discussed in the Introduction, is a significant contribution of postsecular thought to literary and socio-political studies (Habermas, Ratti, Cavasos, Kaufmann, Neuman, Maczynska). At the same time, in keeping with postsecular distrust of dogmatic rigidities, Nakhjavani's narrative employs the reading motif to underscore the rejection of fundamentalist prescriptions for social well-being, specifically in the case of Nakhjavani's novel, hegemonic powers' relegation of women to illiteracy and silence.

Historical Context and Bahá'í Subtext

As Hayden White succinctly observes, "every representation of the past has specifiable ideological implications" (*Tropics* 69). Thus, an understanding of the religious ideological basis

of the novel is important in a postsecular analysis of the reading motif that pervades the narrative. A familiarity with the history and some key elements of Bahá'í cosmology serve to deepen insight into, and enjoyment of, Nakhjavani's historical novel, as well as make clear how Nakhjavani's historical fiction effectively presents a spiritual thesis while avoiding the totalizing narrative of triumphalism. An understanding of the author's religious background clarifies how Nakhjavani's novel points to the spiritual responsibilities enmeshed in goals and values, such as gender equality and women's education, that have modern secular connotations.

We turn first to the historical context of the novel. The action in *The Woman Who Read Too Much* takes place from 1847 to 1896 c.e. during the Qajar dynasty. As detailed by Peter Avery in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, the rise of the Qajar dynasty in Iran begins with Agha Muhammad Khan, in the struggle for power that follows the death of Karim Khan Zand in 1779 c.e. The Quyunlu clan of the Ashaqa-bash branch of the Qajars provides the ruling dynasty of Iran from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth century¹⁰. The novel focuses specifically on the time period centered on the reign of Nasiru'd-Din Shah (also spelled as Nasir al-Din), the Qajar ruler who succeeds Muhammad Shah, and who rules Iran for nearly fifty years, from 1848 to 1896 c.e. (Avery 174-198). Historically, as Peter Smith records in *A Concise Encyclopedia of the Baha'i Faith*, four years previous to Nasiru'd-Din Shah's reign, in 1844, a new religion begins in Persia, founded by a young Persian from Shiraz, born Siyyid 'Ali Muhammad but called the Báb, a title meaning "the Gate" (206). This new religion grows by the thousands during Nasiru'd-Din Shah's government and thus comes to the attention of the hegemonic powers of Persia (206).

Although in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, Avery calls the story of Bábís "incidental to the main themes in the religious history of the period" (729), Smith notes that the growth of the

¹⁰ For more information on this historical period, see Peter Avery's *The Cambridge History of Iran*, volume 7.

Bábí religion in Iran in the nineteenth century was in fact substantial: “the Bábí missionary endeavor gain[ed] converts widely amongst the settled population,” and soon after 1844, had “some 100,000 adherents” (206). Although Avery dismissively describes the challenge presented by the Bábís to the hegemony of Iran in the nineteenth century as “never profound” (729), the mass killings and pogroms against the Bábís that begin in the nineteenth century, and continue today, indicate they were (and are) regarded as a threat by the ruling order.

Historically, these pogroms suggest that the Bábís were considered a destabilizing force, for even after Nasiru’-d-Din Shah’s government ordered the Báb’s death in 1850, the killings of Bábís continued. This historical context is significant because Táhirih Qurratu’l-Ayn, upon whose story Nakhjavani’s novel is built, is one of the first eighteen disciples of the Báb, one of the young religion’s most vocal leaders, and one of the victims of the mass killings of 1852.

Moojan Moomen’s *The Bábí and Bahá’í Religions, 1844-1944: Some Contemporary Western Accounts* provides an interesting if harrowing collection of first-hand accounts of these persecutions. Independent observers document, in the form of Western newspaper articles as well as state and civil correspondence, eye-witness accounts of the persecutions of the Bábís. The following excerpt is from Momen’s compilation and helps clarify the historical setting in which Nakhjavani’s novel occurs. The excerpt is from a letter written by Captain Alfred von Gumoens, witness to the persecution of Bábís, a letter published in *Oesterreichischer Soldatenfreund* on October 12, 1852:

They will skin the soles of the Bábís’ feet, soak the wounds in boiling oil, shoe the foot like a hoof of a horse, and compel the victim to run... the body cannot endure what the soul has endured; he falls. Give him the *coup de grâce*! Put him out of his pain! No! The executioner swings the whip, and – I myself have had to witness it – the unhappy victim of hundred-fold tortures runs! (133)

Captain von Gumoens ends his letter with the affirmation that he never leaves his house, in order to not “meet with fresh scenes of horror,” for after being killed the Bábís are “hacked in two and

either nailed to the city gate, or cast out into the plain as food for the dogs and jackals” (134).

Thus begins the state-sponsored directive to eradicate the Babí religion in Persia, a state of affairs that forms the background of Nakhjavani’s novel.

It is important at this point to clarify the connection between the Báb and the Bahá’í Faith, not an inconsequential clarification as Nakhjavani is a Bahá’í author writing about a Babí woman who is regarded as a heroine by Bahá’ís throughout the world. As Smith explains, Bahá’ís recognize a two-fold nature of the station of the Báb: first, he is considered as possessing the same authoritative station as other founders of world religions, such as Jesus, Moses, or Muhammad; he is also recognized as the forerunner and herald of Baha’u’llah, the prophet-founder of the Bahá’í Faith, much in the same way that John the Baptist heralds the coming of Jesus (58-59). As Bahá’í sociologist Nader Saiedi explains in his introduction to *Logos and Civilization*, his study of Bahá’í cosmology as revealed through Bahá’í cannon: “The Báb spoke of the appearance of the Promised One, ‘Him Whom God shall make manifest (*Man Yuzhiruhu’lláh*) as the supreme focus, meaning, and intention of all His writings. He defined Himself as the herald of the Promised One” (3). Thus, Bahá’ís recognize the Báb’s writings not only as sacred, but also as central to Bahá’í belief.¹¹

Milani, approaching the story of Táhirih Qurratu’l-Ayn through a slightly different perspective, discusses her significance in the context of women’s authorship in Iran. Despite the overall lack of historiographical documentation of Persian women, Milani writes that “[h]er life is probably the best documented of nineteenth-century Iranian women, although it is fact and fiction compressed into one” (80). Táhirih, Milani continues, is still a controversial figure in Iranian history: “She is saint, whore, sorceress, martyr, and murderer. Invented and reinvented,

¹¹ For a thorough and detailed account of Babí and Bahá’í religious history, see also Shoghi Effendi’s *God Passes By*, Nabíl Zarandí’s *The Dawn-Breakers: Nabil’s Narrative of the Early Days of the Bahá’í Revelation*. and Adib Taherzadeh’s *The Revelation of Baha’u’llah*.

she is honored and dishonored” (80). Milani ascribes the controversy surrounding Táhirih to a number of interrelated points, not least of which was her education: “First taught by her father [an influential Islamic high priest of his province], and later by a tutor, [Táhirih] continued her studies in theology, Qor’anic exegesis, jurisprudence, and Persian and Arabic literature, an education quite unusual for a women in those days” (83). Perhaps even more significant than this extraordinary education, Milani continues, is the fact that her father often allowed her to participate in his classes and debating sessions, always, of course, behind a modesty curtain to separate her from the men (83). This is significant because although women might be allowed opinions within the home, in the public sphere, to quote Milani, “interpretive power was strictly a male prerogative” (79). Prayer books and book of religious instruction were allowed to women, but women were not permitted “sermons” or “doctrinal statements” (Milani 79). As Milani further describes, women’s public discourses on religious issues were taboo: “In the society of mid-nineteenth-century Iran, knowledge, like a child, was only legitimized if properly fathered by a man. In the hands of a woman, it became an unnecessary tool, a dangerous tool, even a sign of the end of time, of apocalypse” (77-78). Thus, Táhirih’s reputation as “a thinker in her own right” (Milani 83-84) was a dangerous reputation to have.

To complicate matters, and as Milani affirms, Táhirih is the first woman in Iranian history known to have publically unveiled (27). The import of this crystalizes when one considers that veiling is much more than a religious ordinance in Islamic countries. Even today in Iran, veiling is a “cultural trait” that makes clear the “disjunction between the private and the public” (Milani 23). The virtuous woman is one who maintains “Sharm,” or traditional propriety, by remaining hidden from the outside world; Milani explains:

Traditional propriety, *Hojb-o-Haya*, or *Sharm*, demanded that a woman’s body be covered, her voice go unheard, her portrait never be painted, and her life story remain untold. Public disclosure of any of these aspects of a woman’s life was considered an abuse of privacy and a violation of societal taboos. (46)

In other words, a woman's place, as symbolized by the veil, is in the private sphere, and a woman's silence in public necessary for keeping her good name.

Táhirih, however, not only spoke publically, argued with male classmates and mullahs, advocated literacy, and spread the teachings of the Báb; she also unveiled herself at the meeting of Bábís at the Conference of Badasht in 1848. As Janet Ruhe-Schoen recounts in her biography *Rejoice in My Gladness: the Life of Táhirih*, Badasht was a small town in Persia where Táhirih and Bahá'u'lláh met with approximately 80 other Bábís, all guests of Bahá'u'lláh, and all men except for Táhirih and her maid (231-2). In *God Passes By*, a history of the Bábí religion, Shoghi Effendi discusses the purpose of the meeting, planned in collaboration with the Báb: it was to implement the new dispensation of the Báb through a “dramatic break with the past – with its order, its ecclesiasticism, its traditions, and ceremonials” (31). In effect, Táhirih's unveiling has a religious pulsion, something which Milani's chapter understates. In unveiling, Táhirih shocks not just those present but scandalizes the nation.

Milani draws a connection between women's literacy and unveiling in her study of Iranian women's authorship. She writes that traditional Persian culture maintained an interdiction to any form of female public self-exposure, be it physical, written or spoken: “Just as a wall of fabric surrounds [a woman's] body, so a wall of silence encloses the details of her life. She is the personal, the private. She is the secret” (23). The traditional Persian ideal woman of the nineteenth century, Milani continues, is “solemn and silent” with the “body” of her writing, just like her physical body, hidden from the outside world (50-1). This culturally-rooted confinement of women's bodies and women's voices has a long history. The male thirteenth-century Persian poet Owhad ed-Din Owjadi, for instance, prefers a woman's death over her literacy: “The shroud her paper, the grave her inkpot/ They should suffice if she insists on knowledge./ Keep away from the pen woman's obstinacy/ You write, why should she?” (qtd in

Milani, 54). What can be more disturbing to secular or religious nineteenth century society, then, than a woman who unveils her face even as she refuses to stay silent?

Considering the taboo of unveiling in public that existed in nineteenth-century Persia, coupled with Táhirih's extraordinary education and her public reputation as a thinker and orator, it is perhaps not such a surprise, then, that many conservative Persian historians characterize Táhirih as a "symbol of spiritual and moral wickedness" (Milani 81). As a woman who desired to speak publically, to voice her opinions, to transgress into the traditionally male realm of religious interpretation, Táhirih was, as Milani notes, labeled promiscuous; after all, she refused to be confined by Persian gendered conventions of what a virtuous woman should be and the silence in which she was expected to live. In point of fact, Milani cites her as the precursor of Iranian women's literary tradition:

By her conduct, she subverted not only the established religion but the whole fabric of androcentric society... She eschewed the feminine virtues of submissiveness, domesticity, absence from the public view, and silence. Articulate rather than silent, transgressive rather than obedient, mobile rather than walled in, she challenged the prevailing values of the established order. (94)

As Milani points out, Táhirih disrupted the established religious and secular order of Persian society, offering new interpretations of past traditions (94). She enjoined others by her words and actions towards the Báb's innovatory teachings.

In historical and biographical documents, Táhirih's subversion of societal norms is underscored by both her advocates and her critics. Ruhe-Schoen's biography recounts Táhirih's public unveiling at the Conference of Badasht as the embodiment of the "liberating reality of her religion" (233). Conversely, in the introduction to *Baha'ism, Its Origins and Its Role*, Táhirih's actions necessarily prove her a "prostitute" of whom "history is ashamed to relate" (qtd. in Milani 81). Milani notes that Táhirih's leadership position among men would be revolutionary "even today" when "no woman in Iran occupies her position – that of a teacher and a leader in

centers of higher religious learning for men” (84). It is understandable, then, that Táhírih is a problematic figure in Islamic-Iranian historiography. She is, however, acclaimed by Bahá’ís as a “great heroine,” admired for her courage and certitude, and equated in Bahá’í scholarship with such honored women of previous religious dispensations as Sarah, the Virgin Mary, and Fátimih (Effendi 75).

This being the case, one might assume that in *The Woman Who Read Too Much*, Nakhjavani – herself a Bahá’í – would present a strongly religious image of her protagonist. This, however, is not the case. Rather than a focus on the details of the protagonist’s religious beliefs – details one might expect from a Bahá’í author writing about a character based on Táhírih – Nakhjavani focuses on literacy as the metonymic vehicle for the Poetess’s spiritual subversiveness. As such, the reading motif becomes central to the novel, both in term of the literal act of reading, as well as in reading’s metaphorical meaning as an act of spiritual discernment.

The incorporation of such a metonymic relationship between reading and religion is more than a deft narrative manipulation, however. Research into Bahá’í cosmology reveals that universal education, and the gender equality it implies, are key concepts in Bahá’í belief. In *Promulgation of Universal Peace* – a collection of the discourses which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the son of Bahá’u’lláh, gives during his travels in the United States and Canada at the turn of the last century – universal education is consistently presented as a spiritual principal. In the November 15, 1912 talk in New York City, recorded in this collection, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states that “[Bahá’u’lláh] has...proclaimed the principle that all mankind shall be educated and that no illiteracy be allowed to remain” (435). In his May 6, 1912 speech in Cleveland, he affirms that “[n]o individual should be denied or deprived of intellectual training...none must be left in the grades of ignorance, for ignorance is a defect in the human world” (108). In his September 1,

1912 talk in Montreal, he makes clear that “[u]niversal education is a universal law” (300). To be sure, in the Bahá’í sacred text, the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, Bahá’u’lláh writes that every “son and daughter” must be taught “the art of reading and writing” (par. 48). Beyond this, however, there is the special emphasis on women’s education in Bahá’í cosmology. In the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, for example, “Note 76” clarifies that the education of girls must take precedence: “If it is not possible...for a family to educate all the children, preference is to be accorded to daughters since, through educated mothers, the benefits of knowledge can be most effectively and rapidly diffused throughout society” (199-200). In reference to Nakhjavani’s narrative, then, understanding the Bahá’í subtext is revelatory of the metonymic role of literacy as a sacred and spiritual endeavor.

The author plays with two meanings of the act of reading throughout the text: on the one hand, it is the literal decoding of symbols on a page; in light of the cultural taboo against women’s education, this is in itself a potentially revolutionary act; at the same time, reading is the interpretation of extratextual signs, the spiritual ability to “read” the truth of the world, to read the past, present, and future and understand their spiritual implications. Literacy thus incorporates both a material and a mystical meaning, and in this way serves to blur the secular/sacred binary.

The mystical notion of reading signs is not a new concept for Western readers. Appearing in the Gospel of Mark (16:3) as well as, more recently, in the writings of the Second Vatican Council – “the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing *the signs of the times* and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel” (emphasis added) – it also resonates with Islamic cosmology, a relevant observation considering the background against which the novel unfolds. According to Mohja Kahf’s lecture “The Qur’an,” in Arabic, the word “sign,” or “aya,” specifies a sign that reveals God in His creation. As Kahf affirms, in the Islamic paradigm, an aya is a

self-revelation of God, regarded as ontological proof of the existence of God, found both in the Qur'an and in nature. Likewise, Bahá'í writings contain many references to reading spiritual signs in the material world. For example, in *Gleanings*, considered by Bahá'í part of their sacred scripture, Bahá'u'lláh writes: "He hath endowed every soul with the capacity to recognize the signs of God" (252). In short, Nakhjavani's reading motif points to the sublime – the Poetess, after all, teaches that "[l]eer es rezar [to read is to pray]" (498) – revealing the reality of the text to be, to use McClure's words, "shot through with mysterious agents and energies" (2).

With the above examples in mind, some might assess the reading motif to be a religiously multivalent symbol in Nakhjavani's narrative, particularly since the Poetess's religion is never identified by name. Care must be taken, however, not to base this assessment on the assumption that all religions are fundamentally distinct, a notion contrary to Bahá'í cosmology. As Paul Lample discusses in *Revelation and Social Reality*, an exploration of the Bahá'ís social and spiritual paradigm, Bahá'ís regard all world religions as facets of one ever-evolving religion; as a consequence, Baha'is whole-heartedly acknowledge the "divine origin and truths" of other religious communities (223). As Lample further notes, Bahá'í cosmology does "not assume a position of superiority to judge, criticize, or define the beliefs of others" even as it is "incompatible with a form of religious relativism," because Bahá'ís "do not believe that the diverse religious perspectives are incommensurable" nor that "all contemporary teachings of all religious communities can be accepted at the same time" (223). Thus, the religious language with which the reading motif is treated in *The Woman* may indeed resonate with various religious traditions, yet as the author is a Bahá'í, these resonances are symptomatic of the inclusive Bahá'í religious paradigm which emphasizes the unity underlying the teachings all world religions. In *Islam and the Bahá'í Faith*, Moojan Momen clarifies this relationship among religions as per Bahá'í belief. He notes that religious founders – called "Manifestations of God"

is Bahá'í writings – such as Jesus, Moses, Mohammad, the Buddha, the Báb, and Baha'u'llah, are understood as “confirming and expanding upon the teachings” of those who came before them, a principal called progressive revelation (18-19). Thus, although the act of reading in *The Woman* is religiously-inflected and evokes the language of the Qur'an, the Bible and the Torah, it can be regarded as an inflection specifically evocative of a Bahá'í cosmology.

This is further evidenced in the language with which the author describes literacy in the novel. Paraphrasing the lessons she was taught by the Poetess, the Corpse Washer says:

El analfabetismo es sólo miedo. Ella no nos quería miedosas, sino capaces de ver con nuestros ojos, de oír con nuestros oídos y de leer los libros de la creación y la revelación por nosotras mismas. Nos enseñó a arriesgarnos [Illiteracy is fear. She wanted us to be fearless, to see with our own eyes, hear with our own ears and read the books of creation and revelation for ourselves. She taught us to take risks]. (498)

Although no specific religion is mentioned, we see an obvious allusion to religious scripture in the reference to “books of creation and revelation.” The passage resonates even further with scriptural phraseology as it continues. To “see with one’s own eyes” and “hear with one’s own ears” is imagery present in the sacred texts of the Bahá'í Faith, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.¹² Thus, as this passage illustrates, reading in the narrative is not meant to be seen as a purely material or secular act; it is couched in language that evokes the sacred and alludes to more than one religion’s scripture. In the novel, literacy, therefore, is both understanding words on a page *and* reading the world and one’s place in it; and doing so with an eye to the ineffable, to the spiritual.

¹² Just a few examples: in the Torah, see Yeshayahu (Isaiah) 32:3; in the Bible, see the Gospel of Matthew 13:14-17; in the Qur'an, see Sura 7:179. I include full citations from Bahá'í texts due to the more limited accessibility: in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán: The Book of Certitude*, Bahá'u'lláh writes “Notwithstanding the divinely-inspired admonitions of all the Prophets, the Saints, and Chosen ones of God, enjoining the people to see with their own eyes and hear with their own ears, they have disdainfully rejected their counsels...” (164). In the “Tablet of Ahmad,” Bahá'u'lláh likewise writes “...For the people are wandering in the paths of delusion, bereft of discernment to see God with their own eyes, or hear His Melody with their own ears” (210).

Reading imagery is ubiquitous and powerful. For instance, it is central to the description of the Poetess when she first appears in the narrative: “una mujer velada como un libro cerrado [a woman in a veil was like book with covers closed]” (139), she looked like “una mancha de tinta en la nieve [a stroke of ink against the snow]”¹³ (140). The reading motif, as this description illustrates, infiltrates the author’s narrative vocabulary as well as Nakhjavani’s commentary on her novel. In her interview with Pars Times, for example, Nakhjavani explains that her novel is about “the crisis and challenge posed by one woman [the Poetess] who decided to *read* life, to *read* history, to *read* herself and others around her” (emphasis added). As the above suggests and as we shall see below, in *The Woman*, the author estranges the act of reading and emphasizes that reading is pervasive, infiltrating all aspects of life, infusing mundane activities with metaphorical and metaphysical meaning, for it is no purely secular act; it is rather resonant with mystical implications.

The Reading Motif: Cloaked Spirituality

In keeping with the ambivalence common in postsecular fiction, the exact nature of the protagonist’s religion in *The Woman* is never revealed beyond a very clear advocacy of women’s education. This study does not assume that Nakhjavani set out to write a work of postsecular fiction; however, a postsecular analysis of her novel yields insights into how a novel about a heroine of a marginalized religion in Persia can maintain the richness of a spiritual message without pushing a religion onto the reader. Nakhjavani accomplishes this feat by making the act of reading a fluid metaphor, symbolizing spiritual acuity at the same time it is invested with secular transgressive power.

In this section, then, we turn first to John McClure’s *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison* in order to illustrate precisely how the act of reading

¹³ Both of these English citations are from Nakhjavani’s podcast, from her UCLA lecture “Novels and Iranian History: Beyond Diaspora.” See bibliography for full citation.

functions in a postsecular capacity throughout Nakhjavani's novel. Published in December of 2007, *Partial Faiths* is the first book-length study dedicated to contemporary postsecular fiction. In his overall positive review of McClure's *Partial Faith*, Timothy Aubry's begins by voicing the most common objections to postsecular thought, namely its apparent "explicit return to religiosity" which can appear as a "dangerously anti-intellectual development." For this reason, he asserts, "of all the cultural trends announced by neologisms containing the prefix 'post,' postsecularity may well be the most unpalatable to twenty-first century scholars." In "History, Community, Spirituality: Keywords for Rethinking Postmodernism," Daniel Grausam presents the counter-position, justifying the usefulness of postsecular theory. Grausam affirms that one of the merits of postsecular analysis lies in its ability to "[recover] the textual content that has largely been obscured by canonical theories of the postmodern" (401). Postmodern theories, Grausam clarifies, although useful in the questioning of grand narratives, have left us with "an impoverished sense" of the work of authors whose novels are animated by profound spiritual questions (399). This echoes McClure's position that postsecularism is an alternate framework to an unnecessarily limiting secularized postmodernism, as described by such as scholars as Frederic Jameson. For example, in his analysis of Thomas Pynchon's *Vineland*, McClure writes that unlike Jameson, Pynchon maintains "the postsecular sense that spiritual resources, as well as rational ones, will be needed to check the onslaught of capitalist institutions, technologies, and ideas" (49).

Wend-Walker articulates this tension between religion and critical discourse as the "genesis" for many of the postsecular readings which are recently emerging in critical theory:

Criticism bound to the Western philosophical tradition...tends not merely to the secular but to the *ideologically secularist*. Necessarily operating, as George Steiner puts it, by virtue of 'secular presuppositions,' such criticism is liable to 'usurp' religious metaphor even where attempting to engage it, displacing it with language that better approximates 'the order of remove most appropriate to clarity' (445, 437, 423). (138)

Thus, Wend-Walker argues the merits of postsecular analysis, particularly when one analyzes novels whose textual realities are rife with issues of a spiritual nature, where God is more than an exclamatory phrase, and where ordinary life is shot through with the mystical and miraculous, sometimes with great fanfare, other times through magnificent understatement. Nakhjavani's *The Woman* is an example of the latter, where the narrative's spiritual themes are both consistently extant and magnificently understated – one could almost say 'cloaked' in reading imagery.

The narrative's descriptions of the Poetess's beliefs purposefully avoid details of Bahá'í theology, and this is germane to a postsecular reading of *The Woman*, for as McClure's survey of contemporary novels point out, postsecularism is set apart from fundamentalist fiction and from fiction of triumphant religious return by an "insistence on stubborn spiritual obscurity" (6). Maczynska agrees with McClure and notes that there exists the tendency in postsecular fiction to value "ambiguity over certainty" (81). This element is evident in the novel when the Poetess teaches the women of the court to read; the narrator describes this as instruction in how to "discernir el futuro e interpretar el pasado [discern the future and interpret the past]" (307). There is no direct mention of progressive revelation – to which, arguably, this could be a reference – and no negation of specific religious traditions beyond the encouragement to read. Indeed, even though the narrative informs us that the Poetess "clamaba justicia...rechazaba ciertas tradiciones" [called for justice...she rejected certain traditions¹⁴] (180), the exact traditions this rejection encompasses are left unsaid. This purposeful vagueness harkens back to the predilection of the postsecular movement in fiction for privileging opaqueness, even as it points to spiritual realities.

¹⁴ Translation mine.

De Groot writes that the subgenre of historical fiction, from its beginnings, “has queried, interrogated and complicated fixed ideas of selfhood, historical progression, and objectivity” (137). He goes on to specify that historical fiction contains within it the potential of a “disruptive genre,” which “destabilizes cultural hegemonies and challenges normalities” (137). This potential feature of historical novels functions in tandem with postsecular fiction, which specifically, as McClure affirms, is characterized by its twin rejection of the “stifling routinization of the sacred” and the “fiercer enclosures of fundamentalism” (6). Further, the sense of removal inherent in historical novels – and with the novels studied in this dissertation, the doubled distance of transnationality – serves to enable, not a frontal-attack on hegemonic structures, rather a stealthier one; De Groot’s potential for disruption enters cloaked in the passage of time, in the garb of other lands, a fertile matrix for the estrangement of such an ordinary act as that of reading.

The narrative’s estrangement of the act of reading is evident in the following passage.

The Poetess, arrested for a heretic and forced to travel to the capital, teaches her captors to read:

Al principio, [los soldados] se ruborizaban cuando la prisionera los hacía silabear con la lengua, y no creían, como aseguraba ella, que las letras volverían a juntarse en un abrir y cerrar de ojos. Se rascaban la cabeza, maravillados de retener las palabras en la mente al tiempo que las dejaban marchar [They {the soldiers} reddened, at first, when she showed them how to pull the syllables apart with their tongues; they did not immediately believe her when she assured them that the letters would come together again, in a blink of an eye. They scratched their heads in wonder at the thought of holding words in their minds even as they let them go]. (66)

With this passage, Nakhjavani effectively estranges the act of reading, even as she constructs it as worthy of amazement. This will play into, as we will see below, the mystical quality which the act of reading possesses in the novel.

Indeed, in *The Woman*, reading is understood as possessing profound transformational potential. As such, it challenges cultural hegemonies – both of the state and of the clergy – even

as it blurs the lines between the spiritual and the secular. For instance, when the Poetess teaches the soldiers who hold her captive how to read, the narrative stresses the materiality of the act by describing reading as “pull[ing] syllables apart with their tongues” (66); yet immediately thereafter, the author renders the act of reading as imbued with nearly magical powers, for reading effects a transformation on the brutish soldiers: they go from calling the Poetess a “puta [whore]” and “bruja [witch] (63)” to lauding her as “una maestra... magnífica [an excellent teacher]” (66). To be sure, the narrative underscores the soldiers’ transformations in language that hints at the mystical: “la escolta se había rendido a su hechizo cautivador [the escort had fallen under their captive’s spell]” (66). The author, in this way, coheres the ability to read with powers that goes beyond deciphering words on a page.

Recalling the characteristics which McClure identifies as central to postsecular fiction, Nakhjavani’s narrative upholds a spirituality that is progressive and which results in the disruption of secular states of reality. Reading is the place-holder for this spirituality, and as such, it is fraught with the danger inherent in the anti-hegemonic status it possesses in the novel. Because of her passion for literacy, the narrative reveals, the Poetess is not safe, and neither are those she teaches to read. For example, the Poetess is cognizant of the peril in which her reading lessons have placed the soldiers; upon reaching the capital, she refuses the soldiers’ request to be her honor guard while she is under house arrest. She tells them: “Ya había puesto en peligro su porvenir enseñándoles a leer el pasado; así pues, debían protegerse en el presente [She had jeopardized their future by teaching them how to read the past so let them protect themselves, for the present]” (66). This passage is significant because it suggests that reading lessons encompass more than the deciphering of words on a page; it is a reading of “the past,” (a suggestive allusion to Bahá’í progressive revelation). Thus, in *The Woman*, the narrative creates an alignment

between spiritual discernment and reading, and links progressive politics to it by portraying literacy as such a progressive act that it can illicit drastic reprisals from hegemonic powers.

Reading as a place-holder for a progressive and subversive spirituality in the text is further evidenced in the antagonism of the state government and the *úlema* towards the Poetess. When the narrative tells of the rumors circulating about the Poetess's arrest, no mention is made of the religious beliefs which occasion – as documented by such scholars and historians as Milani, Smith, and Effendi – the true-historical arrest. Instead, the narrator tell us that “[c]uando detuvieron a la poetisa de Qazvin, se hizo patente que la alfabetización, sobre todo en el caso de una mujer, era un delito en sí misma. [When the poetess of Qazvin was taken captive, it was evident that literacy itself, especially among women, was a crime]” (258). In other words, although the historical figure is taken captive for her role as a *Bábi* in Persian society, in the novel, it her literacy that is criminalized.

The narrative, however, in its representation of state powers, avoids oversimplification and sexual binarism by presenting a powerful female, rather than one of the men of the novel, as the first and most vehement of the Poetess's critics. The Queen Regent, pondering the state of civil affairs, is disturbed by rumors of the Poetess, whom she calls “un auténtica amenaza [a serious threat]” and a “rebelde [rebel]” (21). The queen sees in the Poetess a threat to her own regency and to her son's reign, but what the narrative demonstrates is that this judgment is a projection of the queen's own ambition. Perhaps most significant to this study, however, is the way religious vocabulary and the reading metaphor intertwine in the queen's criticism of the Poetess: “Predicaba subversiones peligrosas y enseñaba nuevos modos de interpretar las leyes con un ideario que se propagaba a toda velocidad. [She had been preaching dangerous reversals; she had been teaching new ways to read the rules, and her gospel was spreading rapidly]” (21).

The queen worries about the spread of the Poetess's "new ways to read the rules" as central to the Poetess's "gospel," but no mention of any religious points of contention are made.

McClure emphasizes postsecular fiction's resistance towards serving as an "agent of closure," referencing Edward Said's criticism that religious discourse functions to shut off human investigation and critical thought in deference to an other-worldly authority (101). Nakhjavani's narrative, as the above passage exemplifies, consistently resists any formulation as an agent of closure by making no explicit religious claims on the nature of spiritual truth. A further example: the queen later mentions that the Poetess is "una mujer peligrosa... con una herejía perfidia [a dangerous woman... with a perfidious heresy¹⁵] (332) and whose "influjo de la lectura era sutil y se extendía de un modo imperceptible [influence of reading was subtle and had a way of spreading undetected¹⁶]" (332); once again, heresy and literacy go hand-in-hand, but the specifics of the Poetess's heretical ideas remain cloaked in obscurity.

Ratti describes the postsecular imagination as engaging in a "negotiation with the secular" (21). Nakhjavani's narrative contains a harsh criticism of those unable to negotiate the secular and religious without resorting to violence in the name of one or the other. The queen is a perfect example: her greatest joy and exultation comes from ordering the death of the Poetess (379-380). If the queen, ambitious and power-hungry, is a foil to the poetess, then it is not surprising that the narrative points to her illiteracy. As the narrative makes clear that the queen can read and write, the queen's illiteracy is, more properly identified as that of a spiritual nature. Upon the death of the queen, the queen's daughter washes the royal corpse for burial and witnesses that

la reina estaba opaca y llena de mugre, con todas sus transgresiones incrustadas en la piel... Si ahora resultaba ilegible, tal vez se debía al hecho de haber sido analfabeta toda su vida [the queen was opaque with neglect; her transgressions

¹⁵ Translation mine.

¹⁶ Translation mine.

were ingrained... but it was evident from her mottled skin that though she was long-versed in dying, she had never learned to read her wrongs]. (377)

The filth encrusted on the queen's skin can be read as symbolic of the effects of her spiritual illiteracy, the depredations of her soul. The body of the queen is noxious and soiled, but the narrative meaning is crystal clear: the narrative critiques the systems of belief which resort to violence in the name of ideologies. This line of criticism continues in the narrative's depiction of all institutionalized authority, whose secular and religious representatives are, significantly, consistently portrayed as spiritually illiterate.

For example, the Prime Minister – who initially orders the Poetess's arrest and spearheads “reforms” in the capital which fill the city's prisons with “intelectuales, visionarios y poetas [visionaries, scholars and poets]” (258) – is another wielder of secular power. Until the moment of his death, he is blinded by his desire for power, prestige and position, a blindness which his wife characterizes as follows:

A pesar de su inteligencia, la esposa se dio cuenta de que en material de intuición [el Gran Visir] era un analfabeto... Había sido incapaz de leer los signos del peligro que tenía delante [Despite his intelligence, she {the wife} realized he {the Prime Minister} was illiterate when it came to intuitive matters... He had been unable to read the signs of danger lying ahead]. (308)

The wife of the Prime Minister realizes that her husband's death is the direct result of his illiteracy, his inability to “read the signs” around him, for the Prime Minister takes a royal pardon at face value and is unable to discern the death warrant behind it. As this passage reveals, the narrative utilizes religiously-inflected language to denote this lack of discernment. Likewise, the Mayor, in whose house the Poetess is imprisoned and in whose basement many have been tortured, is portrayed as unable to read the signs of his demise. Despite the Poetess's prophesy that the Shah will betray him, the Mayor is not only blind, he is deaf to his wife's reminders of the Poetess's warnings, or as he carelessly admits, he “no siempre distinguía las profecías de las recetas cuando hablaba su esposa [found it hard to distinguish prophecies from recipes when his

Wife was talking]” (237). Indeed, his inability to heed the warnings result in death; the Shah has him strangled to death, the scapegoat for the Tehran bread riots.

In *The Woman*, literacy is a progressive act and a destabilizing force in terms of the secular status quo, yet it also serves as a tool to critique narrow religiosity. This crystallizes in the analysis of the narrative’s treatment of the Mullah. It is significant, for instance, that the Mullah criticizes his brother – the Poetess’s father – for allowing the Poetess to learn how to read and for giving her leave to study with her brothers and male cousins:

Ya se equivocó bastante permitiendo que aprendiera a leer desde su más tierna infancia, pero el colmo fue dejar que se sentara entre sus hermanos y sus primos y que estudiara filosofía y jurisprudencia... Era ilógico e indecoroso. [He had already erred enough allowing her to read from such a young age, but worse was that he allowed her to sit with her brothers and cousins and study philosophy and jurisprudence... It was illogical and unseemly¹⁷]. (389)

Besides encapsulating the general attitude held in nineteenth-century Persia regarding the education of women – “it was believed that education was useless for women as well as an agent of corruption” (Milani 55) – the passage is illustrative of the narrative’s criticism of the dogmatic religiosity which postsecularism stands against. After all, to quote McClure, postsecularism warns against “turning [the] cosmic house of the spirits into a prison house of religious dogma” (100). Indeed, the narrative is quite scathing in its presentation of the vitriolic cleric. When the Mullah denounces the Poetess from the pulpit, the narrative presents the Mullah’s words as noxious and corrupt – his sermon, the narrator affirms, makes “de la execración un arte [execration an art¹⁸]” (390). There is no move to create sympathy towards this character, for the Mullah is the embodiment in the text of fundamentalist forces too blinded by hatred, greed and envy to discern any merit in the words of the Poetess. It is important to note, however, that Nakhjavani’s criticism of the Mullah has everything to do with his narrow religiosity and his

¹⁷ Translation mine.

¹⁸ Translation mine.

disdain for the Poetess, not his adherence to Islam per se. To be sure, the text does not uniformly vilify Islam; on the contrary, the narrator presents the Poetess's own father, an Islamic religious scholar himself, as kind and honorable, known for his sincere "piedad religiosa [religious piety¹⁹]" (440). The religious villains in the text are, like the Mullah and his son, those who harbor beliefs of a fanatical or fundamentalist nature.

McClure discusses the "repudiation of fundamentalist religious prescriptions of social well-being" as a key feature of postsecular fiction (3). He further defines religious fundamentalism as a form of religious resurgence interested in protecting the "purity" of its community through exclusivist doctrines and practices, and as such, is intolerant to other world-views (8). In *The Woman*, the Mullah and his son are the characters which most strongly express an exclusivist directive against the Poetess. Once again, it is not religion, but literacy that receives the brunt of these characters' criticism. The Mullah, for example, rants regarding the Poetess's education and insists that "una mujer no debe salirse de su puesto [a woman should stay in her place²⁰]" (390). This phrasing is not arbitrary. Through the Mullah's clichéd objection to gender equality, Nakhjavani emphasizes the positive value of literacy, a secular point of commonality between the beliefs of the protagonist and of the majority of the contemporary Western reading audience. In so doing, the author builds upon the sympathies of a Western audience in the telling of this Eastern tale and, by aligning the reader with the Poetess, legitimates the voice of this religious historical figure.

To be sure, the author never condones a fundamentalist stance. Just as the Mullah is vociferous in his condemnation of women's education, the narrative consistently portrays the Mullah as deficient in noble qualities, quickly offended and slow to forgive (390). In this way, the narrative can be seen to follow the postsecular thematic as discussed by Jonathan Bowman.

¹⁹ Translation mine.

²⁰ Translation mine.

In his article “Extending Habermas and Ratzinger’s *Dialectics of Secularization*: Eastern Discursive Influence on Faith and Reason in a Postsecular Age,” Bowman reviews Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger’s²¹ call for the recognition of the contribution of spiritual world-views to social solidarity, and explores the repercussion of postsecular thought through the Eastern spiritual traditions of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. Although not based in literary analysis, Bowman’s study is useful for clarifying the postsecular position in regard to dogmatic religiosity. In his study, Bowman reiterates Ratzinger’s stance that “religion unchecked by sustained rational critique can become ideological to the point of inducing wide-scale social pathology” (40). This idea is significant for the analysis of Nakhjavani’s novel, for the author constructs the Poetess and her passion for literacy as precisely this “rational critique,” this “check,” to the Mullah’s pathological religious ideology.

By juxtaposing the Mullah’s fanatical thinking to the Poetess’s spiritual discernment/literacy, the narrative rejects spirituality’s function in service of fundamentalist religiosity. Indeed, through the Mullah, Nakhjavani’s text implies that fundamentalism itself is a betrayal of religious ideals, once again suggestive of Nakhjavani’s Bahá’í world-view which defines the purpose of religion as being “to promote the unity of the human race, and to foster the spirit of love and fellowship” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings* 29). By doing so, the narrative demonstrates postsecularism rejection of religious fundamentalism. In an apparent paradox, then, through the Poetess, the narrator both re-enchants the world of the text – the character teaches a literacy that is mystical and spiritually-inflected, reading signs and prophesying the future – as well as provides a rational critique to narrow religious directives.

Conclusion

²¹ Pope Benedict XVI

The argument that transnational historical fiction focusing on marginalized spiritualities is a privileged subgenre for postsecular analysis is based on a number of elements, not least of which is the fact that historical fiction provides a sense of removal from the events portrayed in the written text even as it reveals aspects of contemporary thought. In fact, many of the novels which McClure himself analyzes in his examination of the postsecular sensibilities in fiction, such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, are works in the subgenre of historical fiction. As Justin Neuman points out in his review of McClure's *Partial Faiths*, this is quite evocative of the special role that historicity plays in postsecular fiction, although Neuman leaves it to others to further develop the connection (225).

One of the challenges in studying novels written in the twenty-first century is that the contemporary moment – the time from which the authors write – has yet to be defined historically. Jaap Den Hollander examines this issue from a historiographical standpoint in his article “Contemporary History and the Art of Self-Distancing.” According to Hollander, if first-order observation is seeing the world, then second-order observation is seeing the world with ourselves, as observers, included in the picture. Consequently, second-order observation, “shows the contingency and relativity of all our knowledge” (Hollander 62). Literary criticism in general, as modern historiography, follows in this mode of observation.

Because postsecularism is a novel phenomenon, one which has only received detailed attention as a literary phenomenon in the last two decades, it shares the problem that Hollander sees for contemporary history: “historians are able to discern historical ideas or forms only from a certain distance in time” (66). As Hollander notes, observation does two things at once: draws a distinction and indicates one side of the distinction (61). The use of historical fiction, then, to express postsecular thought is vital to the enterprise because it provides a temporal space – even if obviously a constructed one – from which distinctions can be drawn. De Groot would agree,

writing that “meditation upon the past” already has a history of being used as a tool for the understanding or “reconceptualization” of the present (101). Through historical fiction, the new postsecular consciousness of the twenty-first century, one that rejects religious fundamentalism *and* recognizes the need for critical discourse to engage with the existence of the non-quantifiable in the universe, finds a mode of expression. It is a mode of expression that, due to the sense of removal inherent in historical fiction, allows for engagement with religious concepts with a sort of safety-valve present.

In Nakhjavani’s novel, what emerges through the historical imagination is an awareness of reading couched in religious terms, an act that is explicitly material yet which consistently points to the mystical and the ephemeral. This coheres with the text’s substrata of Bahá’í belief without imposing it upon the reader with heavy-handed religiosity. At the same time, with historical fiction as the vehicle for the narrative, the author relieves any tension implicit in the otherness of the marginalized spirituality communicated in text. In *The Woman*, the act of reading transgresses the lines between secular and religious, between material and mystical, between a primarily physical activity and one charged with spiritual implications; the effectiveness of reading as a spiritual place-holder is increased since the motif appears in a historical context which permits the reader a level of distancing, or estrangement, from the act of reading. This process of the estrangement of reading, which likewise facilitates a reconceptualization of the religious/secular binary, as well as the “reading of the past” itself, can be seen in the Poetess’s lessons, as remembered by one of her pupils, the Corpse Washer:

Para leer la palabra siguiente, nos decía la poetisa, hay que llegar hasta la última; para saber lo que viene después, hay que amar y dejar lo que viene antes. Una lavadora de cadavers debe saberlo todo en material de despego, pero no se puede negar que leer es un negocio arriesgado [To read the next word, the poetess used to tell us, you have to let go the last one; to know what lies ahead, you have to love and leave what came before. A corpse washer has to know everything about detachment. But there is no denying that reading is a risky business]. (502)

The mystical and mundane connotation of reading are contrasted and juxtaposed, not to affirm one over the other, but to mark that an easy separation of these two meanings is impossible; and just as the Poetess teaches the characters in the novel how to read, Nakhjavani structures her novel so as to call attention to the reader's own reading of this work of historical fiction. In the above passage, for example, the Corpse Washer shares with the reader the lessons about "reading" that she herself was taught. The lesson transfers from this character who inhabits a distant land in a distant time to the present reader, a lesson as solid as a book yet as ephemeral as the spiritual truths that the novel never reveals beyond a call to literacy, a lesson as much remembered by the Corpse Washer as directed to the reader of the present.

To conclude, the reality expressed in *The Woman* can be seen to revolve around reading as a progressive socio-political act which undermines both the secular and religious hegemony at the same time that it is equated with spiritual discernment. Reading within this transnational work of historical-fiction is an act that can result in imprisonment and death. In this way, reading is estranged from the mundane and safe act in which it is regarded in the West. The estrangement of the act of reading functions to support a postsecular interpretation of the novel, where reading brims over its secular meaning and flows into the mystical. This interpretation of the reading motif also points to the rejection of narrow religiosity. This analysis, in short, shows how Nakhjavani's narrative rescues the delegitimized voice of a Bahá'í heroine by affirming the act of reading as a vehicle for and expression of spirituality.

Chapter 3: ‘God, too, has his jests’: The Postsecular Role of Humor in *The Hummingbird’s Daughter*

Introduction.

In the current period of literary studies where academic attention to spirituality and religion are far from in-vogue outside religious studies departments²², historical novels which are threaded-through with mystical energies and extranormal occurrences²³ offer particularly rich insights when read through a postsecular lens. In this chapter specifically, we examine the relationship between humor and spirituality in *The Hummingbird’s Daughter*. Although a parallel can be drawn between Urrea’s novel and Nakhjavani’s *The Woman Who Read Too*

²² The following scholars have touched upon this dilemma. Dennis Taylor’s “The Need for a Religious Literary Criticism” argues for the need of a sophisticated religious critical discourse that is currently manifested in what he calls a “present scholarly void.” Writing specifically about the work of Gloria Anzaldúa, AnaLouise Keating’s “Shifting Perspectives: Spiritual Activism, Social Transformation, and the Politics of Spirit” notes the academy’s “resistance to exploring the overtly spiritual dimensions of Anzaldúa’s work” due to what Keating refers to as its “overemphasis on rational thought, coupled with the mind/body dualisms pervading western cultures” (242). Likewise, Laura Levitt’s “What is Religion, Anyway? Rereading the Postsecular from an American Jewish Perspective” observes that in literary studies, “the taint of faith remains dangerous” and that “literary studies remains especially suspicious of any engagement with this other, the religious.” (111)

²³ The extranormal occurrences of *The Hummingbird’s Daughter* have led some critics to refer to the novel as a work of magical realism. Magical realism, Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, is characterized by the representation of the supernatural as “an ordinary matter, an everyday occurrence – admitted, accepted, and integrated into the rationality and materiality” of the enunciated text (3). Although there are some instances in which the supernatural is normalized, there are also many cases in Teresita’s miraculous abilities are regarded as precisely that: miraculous. The other characters in the text regard Teresita as extraordinary, as evidenced in the masses of pilgrims who arrive to be healed by her. Furthermore, she is acclaimed as a saint by the Yaqui Indians precisely because they view Teresita and her abilities *not* as everyday occurrences and ordinary matters. A more detailed treatment of magical realism and the marvelous will follow in Chapter 4.

Much – they are both based on nineteenth-century female historical figures who had unique positions in religious history – *The Hummingbird's Daughter*, unlike Nakhjavani's *The Woman*, is more explicit in the marginalized spirituality it depicts. Since it is filled with references to the divine, dream visions, astral travel, miraculous healings and indigenous spiritual symbolism, all things that fall outside the realm of the scientifically calculable, Urrea's novel positions indigenous spirituality in a significantly more overt place of prominence than that of the Bahá'í Faith in Nakhjavani's *The Woman*. As such, *The Hummingbird's Daughter* affords us with a representation of spirituality that is integral to the text – the story is about a young girl with extraordinary powers who becomes a folk saint in Mexcio.

Teresa Urrea, the protagonist of *The Hummingbird's Daughter*, is an 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 non-fiction, 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 ("Chatahoochie"), 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). One of best recent accounts of Teresa Urrea's life, however, can be found in Paul Vanderwood's *The Power of God Against the Guns of Government* (1998).

Vanderwood documents the life of Teresa Urrea in the context of the religious upheaval in Mexico at end of the nineteenth century: Teresa is born on a ranch in 1873 in the Mexican state of Sonora to Tomás Urrea, the ranch owner, and the indigenous daughter of one of his ranch workers (165-6). Upon the ranch's relocation to Cabora, Teresa's relationship with Huila, the indigenous curandera of the ranch, deepens, and the young girl is eventually accepted and recognized by her father (Vanderwood 166-7). Strange occurrences and Teresa's ministry of healing bring her fame both in Mexico and internationally, particularly after January 1890; and she is eventually proclaimed a saint by Yaqui, despite her disavowal of such a title (168-170). Feared by President Porfirio Díaz for her ability to "incite religious enthusiasm" in an indigenous population already stirring for revolution, the Mexican government gives her the choice of prison or exile; she, along with her father Tomás, chooses exile (227-8). In *The Hummingbird's Daughter*, Urrea takes these broad strokes of Teresita's life and fills in the details with, as he confesses in Georgia Perimeter College's "Chattahoochee Interviews," an eye towards "bring[ing] the readers into her soul." Although he has been generally faithful to most of the historical documentation, he also admits that "it was more important to me to orchestrate the feelings and the emotions" than to stick with just the given facts ("Chatahoochee").

As noted in the previous chapter, McClure identifies certain features common in postsecular fiction: the presentation of spirituality as a progressive socio-political act, the resistance of fundamental prescriptions for social wellbeing, and the disruption of secular states of reality. Humor in *The Hummingbird's Daughter* plays an important role in bringing about these features in the narrative. Before examining how humor does this, let us pause here to clarify these points. Urrea presents his protagonist Teresita's spiritual paradigm as socio-politically progressive. In her sermons from the porch of the Cabora Ranch, for instance, Teresita preaches opposition to the Mexican government's acquisition of Indian lands as well as

to institutionalized Catholicism: “For the governors and the soldiers, the priests and the presidents, they are spiders, falling upon you, drinking the blood of your children!”(361).

Further, Teresita’s divine gift of healing disrupts not only her life, but converts the Cabora Ranch into an over-run and chaotic campground for the masses. Urrea ends the novel with Teresita riding a train northward to the United States, sent into exile by the Mexican government. The protagonist’s life is disrupted in its totality.

This chapter posits that, in *The Hummingbird’s Daughter’s* narrative, the humor-spirituality relationship serves the postsecular function of enabling a more positive reception of the protagonist’s spiritual reality, while at the same time subverting religious dogmatism and secular states of being and avoiding the creation of a totalizing narrative – one which posits this religious paradigm as superior to all other religious paradigms – around curanderismo spirituality. *Curanderismo* itself refers to the indigenous art of folk healing that is practiced in Mexico and in the southwest regions of the United States traditionally by individuals of Mexican descent. Curanderismo is practiced by individuals called *curanderos* or *curanderas*, who incorporate spiritual remedies with herbal ones in the healing of the sick.

In keeping with the postsecular perspective, this chapter 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, “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 incorporation of humor.

Curanderismo

The plot of *Hummingbird’s Daughter* is linked to Yaqui spiritual beliefs and practices as they pertain to curanderismo. In “A Conversation with Luis Alberto Urrea,” the author identifies the protagonist of his story as based upon “my ‘flying Yaqui aunt’” (3), and as such, a brief

description of the Yaqui is in order, so as to contextualize the curanderismo practices depicted in the novel.

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. 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.

Historically, the Yaqui inhabited the river valleys in the area of the present-day Mexican state of Sonora. The Jesuit conversion of the Yaquis to Catholicism is successful in that, as Erickson observes, "Yaqui people today exhibit a tremendous pride in being Catholic; Christianity has become an integral part of their identity as a people" ("They Will Come," 474). And yet Yaqui religious belief is not replaced by Christianity. Spicer's in *The Yaquis* (1980), a thorough study of Yaqui spiritual beliefs and practices, affirms that "the distinctive orientations of Yaqui religious life as a whole...justifies calling it a new religion" (60). To be sure, in terms of practices and world-views, anthropological studies, such as those of Erickson, Spicer and Shorter, show that Yaqui identity and spirituality are highly syncretic: they preserve a cosmology which includes "a conception of interdependence between the natural world and the world of Christian belief" (Spicer 60). Yaqui cosmology, as Shorter describes, incorporates other realms, such as the *sea ania* (flower world), *yo ania* (ancient world), and *huya ania* (wilderness world),

into geographic reality (39). In fact, as Erickson affirms in “Lonely Ranchers, Solitary Students, and Angry Governors: Personal Vulnerability and Community Conflict in Yaqui Emotion Talk,” the Yaqui are one of the few indigenous groups in Mexico who have maintained their religious beliefs even into the twenty-first century (28).

Concerning the Yaqui religious paradigm, Spicer uses the term “oppositional integration” to describe the continuing interaction of Christian and Yaqui belief; or as he terms it, “two opposing conceptions of the universe within a common framework of religion expression” (70). Shorter’s *We Will Dance Our Truth: Yaqui History in Yoeme Performances* expands Spicer’s study. Shorter notes that there exists no direct translation in the Yaqui language of the word religion, and presents the Yoeme (Yaqui) world-view as follows:

In conversations with Yoeme deer singer and language specialist Felipe Molina, I asked why the Yoeme language did not include a word for “religion” as an aspect of society. He responded that for traditional Yoemem the entire world is related: each rock, each planet, and each bug. As I understood his comment, Yoeme religion is a causal reality that deals with activities, ideas, and relationships between humans and other-than-human persons. For some Yoemem at least, one’s work, culture, environment, and family relationships could be considered religious. (19)

As interesting as this is, perhaps even more important for the postsecular analysis of *The Hummingbird’s Daughter* is Shorter’s further observation that, “[i]f the Yoeme have no indigenous word for the cultural category of religion, then in precontact times and still for some, they have not understood their world as having split into sacred and profane realms” (19). The holistic nature of a world that is both sacred and profane is certainly evident in Urrea’s narrative and, as we will see below, dovetails with the postsecular shift in contemporary twenty-first century reality as expressed through works of literature.

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 –

refer to themselves, and the *Yori*, the name the People have for the white or non-indigenous Mexican population. The lack of differentiation, one might well assume, is a consequence of, as sociologist Alejandro Figueroa Valenzuela explains in his comparison of the Yaqui and the Mayo, “Organización de la identidad étnica y persistencia cultural entre los yaquis y los mayos,” the cultural and historical affiliation between these two tribes indigenous to northern Mexico (127). In Urrea’s representation of the Yaqui and the Mayo in the text, the terminology which the author uses follows what anthropologists such as Erickson have previously recorded as proper to the Yaquis. For example, Erickson notes that “[t]he indigenous term for a Yaqui individual is *Yeome* (or *Yoreme*): a “human being.” The plural form, *Yoemem*, means “people.” *Yeome* is contrasted most strongly with *Yori*, the Yaqui term used to identify a non-Yaqui Mexican” (“They Will Come,” 478), and which Urrea first presents through Huila, the Mayo curandera of the ranch.

Yaqui culture as a whole is not explicitly described in *The Hummingbird’s Daughter*, but the curanderismo informed by it forms a central aspect of the text. Curanderismo is a healing art that combines indigenous Latin American and European Catholic beliefs and practices. Although Mexican American curanderismo has been the object of academic interest in the United States since the late 1960s, 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. As Luis León documents in his Foreword to the second edition of the text, there are two waves of curanderismo studies that come about after the Immigration Act of 1965, a seminal moment for legal Mexican immigration to the United States (ix). The first wave of anthropological studies of curanderismo examines the healing art “using positivistic academic

discourse” which result in curanderismo’s portrayal as “a Mexican social pathology” most likely existing among “a poor and superstitious population” (x-xi). The second wave, León continues, comes after the 1976 Twenty-ninth World Health Assembly, during which the World Health Organization requests research on the traditional health practices in the Americas (xi). Trotter and Chavira’s study forms part of this second wave of research, which turns from the previous position’s emphasis on “reason and science” (x) to an approach that emphasizes understanding religious and spiritual beliefs and practices from the believer’s perspective (xi). In other words, to use León words, Trotter and Chavira represent curanderismo “from a position of structured empathy” (xi).

The purpose of Trotter and Chavira’s study, in other words, is neither to discredit nor to validate curanderismo, but rather, as they themselves define it, to provide a perspective as close as possible to that of the curanderos (6). According to Trotter and Chavira, curanderos

are recognized by themselves and by their community as having a special ability to heal. The *don*²⁴ 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 non-material 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

²⁴ The *don*, literally “gift,” is the name given to the ability curanderos have for working on the spiritual level (Trotter 102).

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. For example, Huila representation as a wise teacher is evident throughout the text. In the following excerpt, for instance, Urrea offers the words of Huila as she teaches the child Teresita, now her apprentice, how to recognize a dream that is more than a dream, one that takes a person to a spiritual plane of existence²⁵:

When you wake up crying, Huila said, you have been there. When you wake up laughing. When the dead come to you. When you have miscarried, and you dream that you have met a strange young person who might often reach for you and touch you, you have been there. Not only have you been there, but you have met your child’s soul. When you dream of hummingbirds. When your lover is far from you, and for a moment you open your eyes and you can see the room where he sleeps, you have gone. When your ancestors come for you, and you travel with them to another town. When your dead father forgives you; when your dead mother embraces you. When you wake up and smell a foreign odor in your bedroom, a strange perfume, or smoke, or a scent of mysterious flowers, then you have been there. (126)

Nonetheless, Trotter and Chavira identify various categories of critics to curanderismo.

Among fundamentalist groups and pentecostal churches, the belief is that the healing works of

²⁵ For a deeper understanding of Yaqui/Mayo views of dreaming, see anthropologist Jane Holden Kelley’s *Yaqui Women: Contemporary Life Histories*. See bibliography for full citation.

curanderos “are inspired by the Devil” (33) and as such, any healing that occurs is a lure to draw the naïve to the dark side. Among the more secular-minded, curanderismo is rejected as the work of “frauds and quacks” who prey upon the gullibility of the sick (19). These two oppositional stances are portrayed in *The Hummingbird’s Daughter* through various figures, principal among them, Father Adriel and Father Gastélum, Catholic priests, and Tomás Urrea, an avowed atheist; and in the novel, both of these perspectives are countered, as this chapter will show, 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.

To Laugh, Divine: Humor in *The Hummingbird’s Daughter*

In *The Hummingbird’s Daughter*, humor deflates fundamentalist religious and secular dogmatisms and encourages the acceptance of Teresita’s spiritual paradigm on the part of the reader. In *Partial Faiths*, McClure, in discussing characteristic elements in postsecular fiction, writes that humor can be regarded as possessing a postsecular directive when it functions “to make the reintroduction of the religious palatable to secular-minded readers and to check the tendency of religious speculation to drift towards dogmatism and intolerance” (16). In Urrea’s *The Hummingbird’s Daughter*, this function of humor is prevalent, both in the way humor is evoked in the positive presentation of curanderismo as well as in the much more negative presentation of institutionalized Catholicism. Further, the narrator uses humor to subvert attitudes of adamant secularism, best represented by the character of Tomás. If postsecular novels are concerned with avoiding a return to religion that leads to “mental and cultural enclosure within too rigidly formulated traditions” at the same time they attempt “to render tradition itself more spacious and accepting of difference” (McClure 135), then as we will see below, humor serves these postsecular tasks in Urrea’s *The Hummingbird’s Daughter*.

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 in this section 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.²⁶ 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, 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 the 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 *World Literature Today*, 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

²⁶ 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).

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).

What is the significance of looking at humor and spirituality together, specifically, in a postsecular reading of this novel about a Mexican girl who has divine curative powers? If historical fiction serves to provide a space for understanding a text with the minimizing of affective barriers, as discussed in the opening chapter of this study, then humor may work in a corollary and supportive capacity. In *Taking Laughter Seriously*, Morreall argues for this value of humor:

At the most general level, the value of humor is that it liberates us from practical and even theoretical concerns, and allows us to view the world from a higher, less entangled perspective, as a kind of aesthetic field. This change from our more ordinary frames of mind is a luxury, to be sure, but in creatures like us, with our seemingly infinite capacity to worry about the past, present, and future, perhaps a necessary luxury. (204)

This "liberating" value of humor corresponds to the "distancing" value of historical fiction. Just as with historical fiction, with humor we attain, to use Morreall's words, "a more objective view" (*Taking* 106) which Morreall later terms specifically humor's "cosmic perspective" (*Taking* 124).

An obvious example of humor's cosmic perspective is found in the following scene. Teresita has died and her spirit appears in the afterlife, in a green land of flowers and deer²⁷. The Virgin Mary greets Teresita, but not with words of welcome, comfort or consolation for the violent rape that has caused Teresita's death. Rather, the Virgin Mary makes a joke and they both laugh and embrace (326). In a moment punctuated by laughter, Teresita has quite literally risen above the world's concerns, its entangled perspective. The cosmic perspective which enables and is enabled by humor in Urrea's *The Hummingbird's Daughter* can be equated with what I call a "positive detachment." Positive detachment in the novel allows for an open reception of the elements which might be difficult or challenging to accept. This definition of detachment is in keeping with the one used by Phyllis Sternberg Perrakis in her article "The Four Levels of Detachment in Doris Lessing's *Shikasta*." Detachment, Perrakis writes, "involves gaining knowledge and perspective" with the purpose of discovering "toward what goals our emotions and attention are directed" (81). With detachment, she continues, we can more effectively interact with our environs, choosing "to direct our newly freed energy and interest toward the investigation of the claims of our deeper self" (81). Detachment in this sense does not possess the negative connotation of "not caring," but rather that of "caring in a better way."

The narrative evokes detachment, or this cosmic perspective, extra-textually, as can be seen in the scenes where the narrative uses humor to provide the reader with the luxury of a less encumbered perspective of what could normally be anxiety-provoking events. One need only recall the moment when Tomás's wife Loreto brings all their children and the priest Father Gastélum from the city to Cabora Ranch for the first time. Already estranged from her husband,

²⁷ As anthropologists such as Spicer and Shorter have documented, flowers and deer are key symbols in Yaqui cosmology. For instance, the spirit of huya aniya, as Spicer notes, is manifested in the form of "Malichi the fawn" (94).

Loreto tells Tomás she is there “to see if you had moved your whores into the house” (235). As this statement indicates, the scene is about to explode with drama worthy of a *telenovela*:

... Loreto slapped Tomás.
He sputtered an obscenity.
He raised his hand.
Aguirre rose.
Huila, watching, clenched her hand – this was even better than she’d hoped!
Tomás dropped his hand.
Aguirre sat.
Loreto took up a coffee cup and hurled it.
Tomás snarled as the saucer sailed into the wall.
He took both her arms in his fists and shook her once.
Aguirre rose.
Huila sat down.
Loreto wrenched her arms out of his grasp, reached for a clay pitcher full of lemonade, and threw it in great swirling arcs of pink fluid into the glass-fronted hutch, where Urrea antique chinás exploded.
She laughed.
Aguirre sat.
Huila stood. (238)

The staccato sentences of the above passage underscore the high energy of the scene. Huila and Aguirre bopping up and down in response to Tomás and Loreto’s actions are a humorous counterpoint to the intensity of the action, for Urrea has them standing in implicit protest at different moments in the argument. We notice, for instance, that Aguirre’s gentleman’s instincts cause him to stand when Loreto seems threatened. Huila, on the other hand, rises when the china gets broken. Still, the fact that the author shows Huila finding enjoyment in the upheaval – the fight is “better than she’d hoped!” – gives the reader implicit permission to also enjoy the mayhem. The author thus enables a perspective above the negativity of the scene. The cosmic perspective is invoked for the reader; the scene is funny.

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, I turn now to humor studies to look at the overall function of humor and how it can be 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*, Peter 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 mainstream, predominantly English-speaking, Western audience. One of the main ways this is done in the novel is by portraying the world of *The Hummingbird’s Daughter* as both divinely-touched and unapologetically practical. 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 other-worldly, 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 farm-workers.

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 Catholic. 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 with an eye to 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 takes 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 Morrell'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 literalism 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 non-religious 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.

This leads us back to the author's use of incongruity in the novel, the presence of which does not go completely unnoticed by reviewers. Stacey D'Erasmus's review of the novel, for instance, draws our attention to how Urrea mixes "bodily functions with deep and mysterious stirrings of the soul." To be sure, these very combinations are the creative matrix from which Urrea's humor is born; we see it reflected in the description of Huila. She steals and smokes

Tomás's own "good rum-soaked tobacco" in front of him, and her medicine pouch is made from the leather of "a rapist's ball sack" which Huila herself is said to have collected (15). In other words, wise and revered, the curandera is cognizant of the secret workings of the universe; yet she is also as earthy as they come.

We can examine other ways in which the novel uses humorous amusement caused by the incongruous as an effective tool. In "Belief and the Basis of Humor," Hugh LaFollette and Niall Shanks examine this aspect of humor. They describe Morreall's "joyful click" as a "flickering" in which the individual experiencing the humorous moment takes an active role:

Unless the listeners [or, for our purposes, readers] have the ability to view a subject matter from multiple perspectives, then they cannot experience humor... This 'flickering' in the focus of attention – this active oscillating between these different but related belief sets – is humor. Humor is not something passively witnessed. Like thinking, it is something in which the subject participates. (332-33)

Because narrative humor is something in which the reader actively participates, one can argue that it is a powerful narrative tool. Humor in *The Hummingbird's Daughter* in this way promotes engagement with the marginalized spirituality represented by Huila, the curandera of the ranch, and Teresita, who becomes her pupil. For example, when Teresita asks the meaning of the glass of water on Huila's altar, Huila explains to her that "It is the soul, cleansed of sins." Moments later, Teresita examines the water glass carefully in the sunlight and sees small flecks of dirt floating in it. She tells Huila, "I think you missed some sins" (82). The notion of an altar with a clear water glass representing the pure soul may be foreign to a Protestant, English-speaking reading audience, yet the metaphorical meaning clear. The narrative, however, plays with Teresita's literal understanding of the soul as equal to the water glass to create a moment in which the reader is involved. This connection is due to the very nature of humor as explained by LaFollet and Shanks above.

This said, it is important to remember that this very engagement with the narrative produced by humor is at the same time mediated by the effect of positive detachment which humor evokes. Because of the narrative humor produced by the incongruous moment, the reader can engage with the story without constructing defensive barriers against the non-mainstream spiritual paradigm the novel valorizes. The following excerpt from the novel serves to crystalize this point.

Once again calling to mind the notion of the open spiritual dwelling, this scene presents us with Huila teaching the child Teresita how to pray. With indigenous practices incorporated into the act of prayer, Huila instructs Teresita on how to offer up the smoke from incense grass to the four cardinal directions, how to break the “bolillo,” or bread, in halves and leave it out on a rock for “Itom Achai” at the “sacred spot” (83). Achai, as Spicer notes, is one of the words for “father” in the Yaqui language (22); thus Itom Achai, “Our Father,” may very well be a blended reference to Our Father the Sun (Yaqui) and God Our Father (Christian). This blending subverts the preeminence of Christian cosmology, as it references the Yaqui/Mayo practice of the feeding of the deity, a practice which Shorter discusses in detail in his ethnography of the Yaqui. When Teresita asks if they should also have brought God coffee to go with the bread, the reader experiences humor. It is a moment of reframing; after all, one *can* logically wonder, if the characters bring God bread, why shouldn’t they bring coffee? The moment of incongruity – “everyone” knows God doesn’t drink coffee – is followed by the resolution that comes of understanding the logic that leads Teresita to assume that God would. In this way, the incongruous moment is at least partially resolved and humorous amusement is produced.

The narrative heightens the humorous effect produced by Teresita’s question by describing Huila as “caught up short,” and then by her analysis of the child’s query: “Did God take coffee? And if He did, would He want it black, or did He enjoy sugar and milk – all items

He, in His own wisdom, had made in the first place?” (83). The author does not have Huila dismiss the question. Rather than assume Teresita is ignorant of the “right” way of praying, Huila pauses to consider Teresita’s questioning. In this way, Urrea effectively provides a model for the extra-textual reception of spiritual differences: not to disregard from a position of superiority but to weigh with thoughtful consideration. Huila’s conclusion that “coffee would require study” (83) certainly seems to suggest as much.

This passage also serves to underscore Urrea’s dexterity in combining the divine and the practical. The orthodox is given a new twist. Huila’s serious consideration of coffee as an appropriate divine libation is exemplary of the narrative’s ability to produce humor through the “flickering” that DeFollet and Shanks describe. The humorous amusement caused by the incongruous juxtaposition of the practical and divine enable the presentation of marginalized religious practices in a way that avoids arousing a negative reaction from readers who, otherwise, might consider leaving an offering to Itom Achai as smacking of heathen practices.

Humor makes safe the foreign practices of a foreign religion which calls God by some foreign name, just as it softens the critique of the non-indigenous practices to which *curanderismo* stands in contrast. This is crystalized in the lessons which the medicine man Manuelito gives to Teresita:

‘Christians don’t like the left side, but Indians do. Christians have forgotten their hearts. When a medicine woman hugs you, if she means it, she will move you to the side and put her heart on yours... Have you noticed,’ he asked, ‘how the Yoris hug?’ he used the word from her own language. ‘They never put their hearts together. They lean in and barely touch the tops of their chests, and they hang their asses out in the wind so none of the good parts touch. Then they flutter their hands on each other’s backs. Pat-pat-pat! One-two-three! Then they run away!’

From that day forward, Teresita always hugged people with the left side of her chest pressed to them, and she let the good parts touch if they had to. (218)

As this passage illustrates, the narrative uses humor both to drive home the criticism and to mitigate the critique of Yoris – the non-Indigenous Mexican Christians – who have “forgotten

their hearts.” As a consequence, through Urrea’s humor, the passage offers up the marginalized religious practices and beliefs of Amerindian curanderismo as superior in their ability to invoke spiritual truths forgotten by those outside the Amerindian spiritual paradigm.

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.²⁸

²⁸ Further evidence: In the 2011 article "Economic Dynamics and Changes in Attitudes Towards Undocumented Mexican Immigrants in Arizona," Priscila Diaz notes that since 2001, the concern of Americans over Mexican immigration has escalated (303) and reports that in the four years under study – 2006 through 2009 – there is a significant increase in the negative perception of undocumented immigrants in Arizona (308). Likewise, in the article "Constructing Mexican Immigrant Women as a Threat to American Families," Mary Romero examines the short-lived Arizona group Mothers Against Illegal Aliens (MAIA) as an example of the hostility towards a demographic previously regarded as innocuous. Nicolas Valentino's 2013 article also notes a marked increase in white ethnocentrism in regards to the Latino population of the United States. In "Immigration Opposition Among U.S. Whites: General Ethnocentrism or Media Priming of Attitudes About Latinos?," Valentino finds that the mention of Latinos in news coverage of immigration outpace other immigrant groups beginning in 1994 and that "while ethnocentrism dominates economic concerns in explanations of Whites' immigration policy opinions, attitudes

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 sentiment in his study on humor, noting that laughing together has the function of uniting people (*Taking* 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 non-mainstream 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 world-view, a world-view 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)

toward Latinos in particular account for nearly all of the impact of ethnocentrism since 1994" (149).

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 main-stream 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. The reader may even end up in silent and bemused agreement, having experienced DeFollet and Shank's "flickering" of perspective: of course God is in a taco. Because the reader can "flicker" between the traditional Western dismissal of a taco as a sign of God *and* Huila's logic that indeed it *is*, humor is produced.

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, as Teresita's teacher, also becomes a "teacher" for the reader. Both Teresita and the reader, then, 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 Mayos. The story begins 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 world-view 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.

Seen through a postsecular lens, humor’s other function is 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 appears. On the steps of the church, Father Adriel approaches the child Teresita: “Are you consorting with Huila, my child?” (114). When Teresita answers in the affirmative, Father Adriel spews out 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’s interjection pokes fun at 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). It also serves to subvert the notions of the Church’s exclusive authority on matters of truth.

Another example serves to crystallize the way in which Urera 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 both treacherous and petty, and as 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), an act reminiscent of the Mullah’s sermon against the heresies of the Poetess in Nakhjavani’s *The Woman*. 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 the original)

To make the figure of Gastélum appear even more ridiculous, the narrative depicts Gastélum as completely blind to his co-conspirators’ contempt. The humor that the narrative evokes in Gastélum’s descriptions falls within the “Superiority Theory” of humor, a theory which presupposes that humor is antagonistic and caused by the perceived inferiority of another

(Morreall, "Rejection" 243-4).²⁹ 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:

²⁹ Originating in the writings of Aristotle and Plato (Morreall, "Rejection" 243-4), this is also Thomas Hobbes's view of the nature of humor, as delineated by Lewis in *Comic Effects* (3). Henri Bergson also holds to this view of humor, focusing of mockery as the social corrective function of humor (Morreall, *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* 117).

[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 both in the Incongruity Theory and the Superiority Theory of humor. In the first place, 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, this account is made even more humorous by the delectably atheistic Tomás having to eat his words as a direct consequence to his previous invectives. Tomás is too likeable 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's 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 (31-3). 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 D'Erasmus 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). 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’s atheism as born of wisdom; there are too many presented-as-fact spiritual occurrences – astral travel, dream visions, miraculous healings – to warrant atheism as carrying veridical weight. 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 come 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 world-view 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.

Conclusion

In *The Hummingbird's Daughter*, the author 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, as mentioned above, in the function of humor to enable positive detachment and thus serve 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*. It can be said, then, that 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. The value of this lies, in a contemporary context, in a narrowing of the distance between the spiritually-charged world of the written text and that of English-speaking Western audiences. These functions of humor, however, become of secondary importance in *Queen of America*, Urrea's sequel to *The Hummingbird's Daughter*, as will be seen in the next chapter.

Chapter 4: Religion, Fanaticism, and Magic: A Postsecular Analysis of *Queen of America*

Introduction

This dissertation argues that postsecular thought is an illuminating framework for the analysis of transnational historical novels whose plots occur within a spiritually charged cosmos. In this chapter, specifically, we turn our attention to Urrea's second Teresita novel, *Queen of America*, a story rooted in the life of the true-historical figure and folk-saint Teresita Urrea and continuing with the tale the author initiates in *The Hummingbird's Daughter*. Through an analysis of the way the author represent religion and fanaticism in the text, followed by an exploration of the ways in which Urrea addresses the science/magic binary, I argue that *Queen of America* presents a narrative of spiritual affirmations and counter-affirmations which portrays an ontological belief system as something quite complex and nuanced, in keeping with the notion of postsecular fiction's negotiation with the secular as discussed in Manav Ratti's *The Postsecular Imagination* and the characteristics of postsecular fiction as proposed in John McClure's *Partial*

Faiths. Throughout this chapter, I will map out these assertions and counter-assertions in order to show that Urrea refuses a unilaterally beatific representation of the realities of the written text in order to disavow a supersessionary spiritual narrative, while at the same time underscoring the existence of the divine, the extraordinary and the supernatural.

The major focus of Ratti's *The Postsecular Imagination* is the fiction of Michael Ondaatje and Salman Rushdie and how both query secularism and religion in their works. Using postsecular theory as the theoretical framework of his analyses, Ratti identifies postsecularism as follows:

[The] commitment to faith and belief is, in my conception, a marker of postsecularism, in which the 'post' signals a form of commitment that risks moving beyond the 'secular,' defined in this context as 'unbelieving,' without falling prey to the ideology of the secular that defines such belief as irrational, intolerant, and unmodern. (18)

This form of commitment is evident in the characteristics which McClure pinpoints as features of postsecular fiction, even though McClure seems somewhat less concerned with questioning binaries than with establishing definitional guidelines for determining postsecular manifestations in contemporary fiction.

McClure utilizes the paradigm of partialness to underscore the non-totalizing role of spirituality in the texts he explores. In his study *Partial Faiths*, McClure affirms that postsecular fiction is interested in opening up spiritual possibilities without identifying itself with religion's "more articulated and institutionalized domains" (5). For McClure, the rule of thumb in works of postsecular fiction is the portrayal of ontological systems of belief as complex, resistant of "totalizing ideologies" but also of "untutored immersion in cacophonous 'differences' and the new" (61). McClure identifies the three primary goals of his study. These are

to survey the contemporary popular and philosophical movement that is sometimes called postsecularism; to show that a surprising number of eminent contemporary novelists are engaged in this moment; and to offer, by so doing, a new way of configuring the terrain of contemporary fiction. (ix)

Postsecularism is a new form, writes McClure, of “religiously inflected seeing and being” (ix), one which does not dismiss the sacred or the religious as epiphenomenal.

Scholars such as Justin Neuman maintain that a postsecular prism is productive for analyzing literatures stemming from various national and religious backgrounds. In “Faith in Fiction: Postsecular Critique and the Global Novel,” Neuman examines post-war novels and argues the literary is an “essential site of ethical and spiritual thought” (ii). Reminiscent of Ratti, he maintains that the “static and binary conception” of what is religious and what is secular ought not to lead to the reductionist thinking that religiosity is the “natural antagonist of dialogism” (12-13). Making reference to Lukács’s argument on the nature of the novel, Neuman notes that Anglophone novels in the twentieth century have a tradition of being read as “express[ing] the existential loneliness of the striving hero in an ironic mode that reflects freedom from God” (11). However, rather than seeing the novel as a genre that, by Lukács’s definition, offers a reality that “has been abandoned by God” (*Theory* 203), Neuman posits the need for a criticism that addresses questions of religiosity in order to best illumine “the contours of postsecular culture – with its unique tensions, concerns, and collective imagination” (25), as revealed in novels. For Neuman, and key for this study, the spiritual nuances in fiction are an important area of literary exploration, not just for what they convey in the written text, but also for the boundaries between the spiritual and the secular that such an analysis makes visible and analyzable.

Although Neuman does not focus on U.S. Latino Literature, his analyses of post-war global fiction emerges from the distinctions he makes between postsecularism and both postmodernism and postcolonialism, common approaches to literary analytical discourse. Neuman asserts that postmodernism and postcolonialism, as two of the predominant modes of contemporary literary analysis, are insufficient to do justice to works which engage deeply with

spirituality, that articulate a “sacred/secular nexus” (ii). Neuman makes his point cogently, citing works including Fredric Jameson’s *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* as well as Edward Said’s *The World, the Text and the Critic*. Referencing Jameson, Neuman points out that spirituality and traditional religiosity are included in the idealism that postmodernism has effectively sought to eradicate (13). Neuman also recognizes the distrust, not unmerited, with which postcolonialism regards religion, noting the “obvious complicity and interdependence of evangelical religion and the logic of imperialism” as the “indisputable ground from which postcolonial critical theory has and continues to engage questions of religion” (19).

In response to the discourses of postcolonialism and postmodernism, Neuman presents the reductionist pitfalls involved in secular criticism and postmodernism’s abdication of the realm of critical religious discourse. Although not a postsecular scholar, Dennis Taylor voices similar concerns in “The Need for a Religious Literary Criticism.” Both Taylor and Neuman identify a need for sophisticated critical treatment of, as Taylor puts it, the “nagging spiritual questions about . . . man, about the worth of his life.” Neuman argues that the way in which post-war global fiction “mediates between and within secular and religious sensibilities” is a foundational aspect “of a global re-enchantment³⁰ of literature” (1). Neuman’s stance is reiterated in his positive review of McClure’s *Partial Faiths*, in which he calls attention to what he identifies as “the current importance of religion in the popular and geopolitical imagination” (255).

McClure’s work, however, has provoked concern in such scholars as Laura Levitt. In her article “What is Religion Anyway? Rereading the Postsecular from an American Jewish

³⁰ John McClure writes that this “enchantment” of literature plays off of the theories of Max Weber, who wrote in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904-5) of the “disenchantment” of a world in the industrial age, where science, technology and industry create a matrix hostile to anything that cannot be mastered by calculation. McClure calls this “enchantment” within postsecular literature “demystification in reverse” (31)

Perspective,” Levitt seeks to denaturalize what she sees as the invisible hand of Christianity in McClure’s study by offering a Jewish take on postsecular literary analysis (107). Although McClure never claims that his study is an exhaustive analysis of postsecular fiction in all its religiously-inflected permutations, Levitt certainly has a point in wishing to examine McClure’s theory of the postsecular in light of a Jewish religious tradition. Her analysis of the postsecular from a Jewish perspective leads her to conclusions very much in keeping with Ratti’s, namely “a postsecular stance can enable a new appreciation for the ways that the religion/secular binary was never so absolute... porousness has always been with us, despite modern efforts to render it otherwise” (115).

This porousness is made manifest in *Queen of America* through a spirituality rooted in the curanderismo traditions of the protagonist’s past. Urrea’s research into the life of Teresa Urrea leads him from the rationality of Western thinking, as perhaps best symbolized by his time in the halls of Harvard where he first discovers Teresita to be a real historical figure, to an intense immersion in the world of Mayo healers, of herbs and miracles, both in the United States and Mexico. In his interview with Terry Hong, Urrea admits that in writing his novels, his “marching call” becomes the belief that “the Western mind is a fever, it will pass.” Although Urrea does not claim to be a postsecular thinker or to have set out to write postsecular fiction, his self-described expansion in world-view to include the mysterious and amazing, as expressed in this interview, can certainly be described as a new form of seeing the world that refuses to dismiss what science cannot explain:

Amazing, mysterious connections happened during writing these books. As my kids say, ‘W-T-F!’ I had a lot of WTF moments, more than I could ever imagine! These were definitely non-Western frame-of-mind experiences – indigenous experiences...

With this insight into the author’s base-line of production, what is of particular interest for this chapter is how Urrea’s historical narrative also questions this spirituality, problematizing what it

means to be a saint, and probing the dividing lines between the what is regarded as magic and what is science in the geographical and cultural context of the United States.

Of note in Neuman's review of McClure's work is his call to further study "the role of historicity" in contemporary postsecular fiction (255). To a certain extent, Sarah Rivett embarks upon this endeavor in "Early American Religion in a Postsecular Age." In her article, Rivett analyzes the Protestant influences on modern American secularism; she posits that the reciprocity of "faith and empirical certainty, reason and revelation, natural and supernatural, sacred and profane" is often made invisible by the ideologies of secularism which have "long depended on a retrojection of our modern categories of knowledge" (994). A postsecular perspective allows for the correction of what Rivett characterizes as a historical misperception of each side as "irreconcilable or at least fundamentally contradictory" to the other (994). Literature, as a site of creative imagination, has the potential to make these binaries visible, and historical narratives even more so, as they possess the advantage of, to quote Jerome DeGroot's comprehensive study of the historical novel *The Historical Novel*, "problematizing...the contemporary self in the face of the historical" (137).

Rivett further characterizes the twenty-first century literary/cultural/socio-political moment as one in which "across disparate fields and disciplines, scholars and critics have revisited religion as a serious topic of intellectual inquiry" (989). Considering that Urrea publishes *Queen of America* at the start of the second decade of the twenty-first century, his narrative seems a timely literary venture into the ways United States' secularism and non-Protestant spirituality imbricate as reflected in the fictionalized history of Urrea's protagonist.

Desirée A. Martín dedicates a chapter of *Borderlands Saints: Secular Sanctity in Chicano/a and Mexican Culture* to a discussion of the image of Teresita Urrea as a manifestation

of what she calls, as the title offers, secular sanctity. Discussing secular saints of the borderlands between the United States and Mexico, Martín writes:

By straddling the divide between divine and mundane, saints both underscore the gulf between the two realms and paradoxically blur the line that separates them. The counterpoint between accentuating and erasing the boundary between human and divine reflects the ambivalent essence of secular sanctity. (10)

Although Martín fails to mention the term postsecular in her study – not surprising considering the newness of the field – the postsecular project’s interest in querying the distinctions between the religious and the secular, seeing them as coexistent and not mutually exclusive, are obvious in her work, as this excerpt demonstrates. More concretely, in “Saint of Contradiction,” Martín’s chapter on Teresa Urrea, the author draws attention to the various images of this true-historical figure in literature, including Teresita’s portrayal in Urrea’s *Queen of America*. The representation of Teresa Urrea in literature, Martín writes, is consistently constructed as a combination of apparently contradictory elements: saintly *and* fallible, human *and* divinely touched (36). This understanding of Teresita, however, is not unique to Martín or Urrea.

Although Paul Underwood’s *The Power of God Against the Guns of Government* is a historical account of the events and people surrounding the armed indigenous Tomochic rebellion in Mexico, and not an examination of borderland saints per se, Vanderwood’s text discusses Teresa Urrea’s inspirational and political role in the conflict as well as her eventual exile to the United States on accusations of instigating revolution. As Vanderwood affirms, she was regarded by both the Mexican government and her followers as the inspiration for the social and political upheaval of the region (159-201). In his account of Teresa Urrea living in exile in the United States, Vanderwood further signals her life as characterized by “a mix of show business, revolution, and religiosity” (295), a description which highlights the imbrication of secular and sacred which makes a novel about this portion of Teresita’s life so particularly suited to a postsecular analysis.

Matters of a religious or supernatural nature are not foreign to U.S. Latino fiction. One need only think, for instance, of the mystical Última in Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me Última*, the dead grandmother who adds narrative commentary in Sandra Cisneros's *Caramelo*, or the notes of supplication and gratitude in Cisneros's "Little Miracles, Kept Promises." In "The Criticality of U.S. Latino Fiction in the Twenty-First Century," Theresa Delgadillo identifies the late twentieth century's critical engagement with spirituality as "continuing to bloom" in Latino/a fiction of the new millennium (611). Spirituality, as Delgadillo asserts, is an important part of U.S. Latino fiction's "new millennium project of reimagining an America and American history with Latino/as in it" (608). I argue, however, that in *Queen of America*, Urrea's historical narrative upholds a spirituality that is, as McClure would describe it, partial. Partial spirituality neither provides all the answers nor assumes it is the only way to truth. Urrea's novel contains representations of magic, belief, and the scientifically incalculable: there are miraculous healings, including that of Jaime Rosencrans (231-4); letters to Teresita from the Angel Gabriel (411); and the protagonist's deployment of powers to immobilize her and her daughter's assailants (456). Yet along with Urrea's presentation of the extraordinary and the supernatural in the novel is his perhaps more unexpected subversion of Teresita's own spiritual formulations.

As in *The Hummingbird's Daughter*, *Queen of America* offers a protagonist with intimate connections with the scientifically inexplicable. *Queen of America*, like the other novels studied in this dissertation, fits uneasily into analyses that see religion as epiphenomenal, as merely a product of human culture. In contrast to *The Hummingbird's Daughter*, however, in *Queen of America* humor is no longer the primary mechanism through which a postsecular thematic can be perceived or is expressed. The first novel seeks to valorize curanderismo and the marginalized practices and beliefs it encompasses through humor in order to open the possibility of Teresita's sainthood; this second novel alters course, focusing instead on the protagonist's struggle to

maintain her concepts of God and spirituality in a foreign land where miracles are commodified, letters from heaven do not provide much if any heavenly guidance, and the protagonist admits that “very little, now, ma[kes] her laugh” (78). In short, Urrea presents a much more problematized portrayal of reality and no easy answers to the hardships of life, not even for a bona fide curandera and acclaimed saint.

Religion’s Disempowerment and the Critique of Fundamentalism

A postsecular framework opens the possibility of critical religious discourse without being limited to one totalizing religious metanarrative. It commonly does so in two ways: first through its concern with the relationships between what is identified as sacred and secular, and how each of these “antithetical” realities codetermine each other; secondly, through its emphasis on religion as partial or open. According to McClure, in order to portray a “partial” spirituality, it is incumbent to delink it from projects of power (13). With *Queen of America* as the novel’s title, the reader might justifiably expect the contrary: a tale of the protagonist’s success and fame in the United States. Urrea, however, negates this expectation with a portrayal of the hardship that exile brings to Teresita, and in so doing underscores the irony in such a monolithic expectation.

The narrative methodically and systematically undermines the assumption that the protagonist’s divinely-given healing abilities automatically afford her the status and power to make her immune to life’s sufferings. Directly recalling the title of the novel, as well as the historical accounts which affirm that her followers called her “Queen of the Yaquis” (Vanderwood 199), the narrative provides various references to Teresita throughout the narrative as the “Queen of the Yaquis” (187, 254, 336, 439) and “Queen of America” (187, 439). Urrea, however, uses these appellations ironically to emphasize Teresita’s powerlessness in the geographic and cultural context of the United States. Even though the author constructs

Teresita's exile from México as a success in *The Hummingbird's Daughter* – after all, she is not killed by Mexican soldiers and she and her father are exiled to safety – in the United States, she is defeated by life and set adrift in a world that she is never quite able to master. As the protagonist herself declares, “I am the queen of nothing” (439).

Urrea drives home this point at the end of the novel with a further twist. Teresita does become the queen of something at the end of her stay in New York: she wins a small charitable beauty pageant and gets to bring home her prize, a purple gilt ribbon. The irony of the moment is not lost on her: “*Queen of New York*,” she thinks, “How funny after everything” (454). The “after everything” is a loaded phrase: it recalls the loss of her family, the loss of her friends, the loss of her home, the loss of the roots that connected her to her spiritual energies as a curandera. It points to her recognition in the privacy of her own thoughts that, in becoming the pet of rich New Yorkers, she has failed in ministering to those who truly need her: “I am no one now” (447).

McClure writes that “while it may be accurate to speak of the project of [postsecular] texts as one of reenchantment, this process also must be seen as fraught with risk and uncertainty and these texts as emphasizing...the profound difficulties of any life, including that lived within the mysterious precincts of the spirit” (7). One could very well apply McClure's description of postsecular fiction to Teresita's life in *Queen of America*. To be sure, Urrea builds a character who, despite possessing the ability to channel God and heal incurable diseases, can in no way be seen as possessing the gift of ultimate conviction, unqualified faith, or absolute power.

Indeed, the narrative's darker, less whimsical tone is evident from the opening pages of the novel. In Arizona, Teresita may be somewhat safer from the Mexican government, but she has not found success, peace or spiritual solace:

She could not, could not in any way, imagine a life trapped in their little vale, in their little country house, with no one for company. No friends. No

conversation. Just their own remorse and anger. She was furious daily, and sometimes she trembled with anger and could not pray, for her quiet moments when she was alone with God were afire in her head with flame and ruckus and fighting... Angry every time she looked in the mirror. Oh! She could hit herself in the face. (27)

These are not the sentiments of a young woman filled with divine sovereignty, basking in the glory of a successful escape from the clutches of a Mexican dictatorship. Teresita feels “trapped” and powerless, and although her place of domicile changes throughout the novel as she journeys through the United States, this feeling persists. Teresita’s helplessness and anger bring attention to the novel’s interplay between secular expectations for fame and power, and the spiritually-inflected alternatives that fall far short of the peace and divine clarity one might anticipate for a woman who can heal with a touch and knows heaven is “breezy” and death is “cooler than Texas” (171). In fact, the narrative divulges Teresita’s secret desire no longer to heal the masses but “to be forgotten” (45):

All she [Teresita] could do was sip tepid water and wait for dawn to come, praying, hoping God would see fit to lift His blessing from her and allow her...silence... ‘Remember me, dear Lord,’ she prayed. ‘Remember to forget me.’ (45)

In Teresita’s prayer to be forgotten, we can detect what McClure would call the “sense of human limitation” which characterizes postsecular fiction (20). On the one hand, Teresita is faithful and believes; the immediacy of this is underscored by the narrative’s direct presentation of the words of her prayer. On the other hand, the content of the prayer signals her state of discontent and strain, but more importantly, her questioning of the wisdom of the divine gift she was given in the first place. She doubts. These are not the thoughts generally ascribed to someone possessed of divine curative powers or bearing the title, however unsolicited, of “saint.” They are, however, a key aspect of, to use Martín’s words, “secular sanctity.”

If, as Martín affirms, secular sanctity is “necessarily ambivalent” (10), it is ambivalent with a purpose not to be underestimated. A contradiction, Martín argues, “always transcends the

sum of its opposed parts” (12). Despite the lacunae of postsecular references in Martín’s work, this phrase encapsulates the power of a postsecular analysis of fiction: the power to transcend the opposed binaries which the ideologies of secularism have long ascribed as preordained, and to offer a new conceptualization of these integral parts of human existence.

Postsecular fiction’s most characteristic strategy is “at once to reassert and to weaken religious conceptions of reality” (McClure 7). In Urrea’s novel, the call for miracles is a recurrent theme, yet miracles are as likely to be unanswered as to be fulfilled, an element of the novel that reiterates precisely this notion of partial or weakened religion. This is perhaps most clearly seen through the protagonist herself. In *El Paso*, Teresita is feeling bored and exhausted, and she prays for a miracle: “Please, Father. A sign. Won’t You offer one small miracle for Your poorest daughter?’ She heard crickets, but that’s all she heard” (174). Teresita’s very private prayer for guidance, for a sign, to be relieved from her burden of divine healing, is recorded fully with no textual distance separating it from the reader. It is immediate and present. It also goes unanswered. This instance emphasizes a theme extant throughout the novel: the protagonist must navigate her world without clear guidance and with a surprising silence from God precisely when divine intercession would solve countless problems. Any divine decree direct from God is consistently deferred.

Indeed, this silence is underscored with a certain dark irony at the moment when Teresita is giving birth to her first child in a New York City hospital. Having delivered countless babies, having soothed countless mothers-to-be, Teresita finds herself powerless, strapped to a hospital bed, so she can be made to have her baby, as the doctor tells her with galling callousness, “in the modern way” (421). Rather than a miraculous description of childbirth, the narrator presents a horrific combination of the “modern” science of giving birth with Teresita’s physical pain, her sense of powerlessness, and her spiritual agony of feeling abandoned: “She told God she needed

help. But God knew. God knew it all, didn't He?... *God knew and didn't care*. Worse, God had made it that way. 'Why do you hate us?' she asked the empty air. God did not answer" (421). There is precious little space for the mysterious and the divine amidst the sterile conditions of the modern hospital maternity ward. This reading is underscored by Teresita's feelings of abandonment: for the protagonist, communion with God has become, as the narrative's italics stress, futile and unproductive. God is not dead, but one would do well to acknowledge that no one, not even a saint and the "Queen of the Yaquis," as Tomás sarcastically calls her in one of their arguments (187), is exempt from a reality where divine meaning is in constant danger of being displaced by modernity, where God is silent.

Although the world in which Teresita lives and moves is an enchanted one – miracles happen – and Teresita herself is marked with extranormal powers, life remains jam-packed with difficulties and disasters. Teresita is seduced by the abusive and manipulative Lupe Rodriguez; she becomes estranged from her father Tomás; she gets involved with John Van Order, an alcoholic; the list continues. In this way, Urrea's narrative successfully delinks the religious from projects of power, but that is only part of the project of postsecular thought. The next is addressing how the novel engages with the flip-side of the coin: fundamentalist thinking.

In "Faith and Knowledge," Jürgen Habermas introduces the term postsecular and, in the same speech, links fanatical religious belief with violence. Habermas makes reference to the Islamic fundamentalists who caused the tragedy of 9/11. Some scholars, however, question the use of the term fundamentalism itself in the context of postsecular studies. David Harrington Watt's "Losing Our Religion," for example, argues against the use of the term fundamentalist in postsecular literary analyses. He notes that the word fundamentalism was invented in the 1920s to refer specifically to an early-twentieth-century Christian movement which focused on reading the Bible in a certain way (123). Watt argues that applying the term fundamentalist across a

broad religious spectrum or even to early Christians is “wildly anachronistic” (122). Although Watt is correct in the epistemology of the term fundamentalist, it would be wrong to deny the evolution in the word’s meaning. Current standard definitions of fundamentalism identify it as “a movement or attitude stressing strict and literal adherence to a set of basic principles” (Miriam-Webster). Urban Dictionary takes the meaning into the twenty-first century, defining fundamentalist as “[a] person who takes their religion so literally and to such extremes that they contradict the very basis of their faith.”

With the understanding that different religious fundamentalisms (Islamic, Jewish, Christian, etc.) should be studied within their own historical context, in this study the definition of fundamentalism in relation with postsecular analysis is very much in keeping with Habermas and McClure. In *Partial Faiths*, for instance, McClure writes that atavistic fundamentalist beliefs and practices are antithetical to the importance which postsecular thought places on “the need to articulate the religious with progressive political projects” (3). He further identifies the positive qualities of the postsecular project with a “repudiation of fundamentalist prescriptions for social well-being” (3).

In *Queen of America*, Urrea may depict Teresita embarked upon a ministry of divinely-ordained healing, yet he consistently refuses to condone fanatic religiosity. The author’s portrayal of the Teresistas, Teresita’s followers in México, crystalize the dangers inherent in extremist thinking, even extremists who claim to follow the teachings of the protagonist herself. Urrea makes the point, early in the novel, of describing the religious madness that overtakes Teresita’s followers in Mexico, transforming normal and presumably good people into a mass of fervent fanatics as likely to kill as they are to pray:

[The Teresistas] were children abandoned by their mother, and their joy carried rage within it; their exultations let to fire and smashing glass. Her calls for peace seemed to coalesce in the night, accumulate mass like icicles, and then be found

on tables in the morning glowing dull yellow, made brass, but for some, transformed into bullets... (31)

In this manner, Urrea refuses to depict the results of devoted belief – even belief in Teresita’s teachings – as unilaterally safe and good. There are dangers that emerge when people go, as the narrative puts it, “mad with love” (31). When a priest tries to stop the Teresistas from fighting over Teresita’s pictures, “they fell upon him with love and they beat and kicked and pummeled him and left him prostrate before the altar as they burst from the door and infected the passing citizens with Joy” (31). Urrea, then, portrays the Teresistas as individuals who have allowed religious fervor to obliterate their sense of moderation and morality, who have become mindless in their faith in Teresita, who have become fanatical in their belief. If the narrow religiosity of fundamentalist thinking results in violence, it is never a paradigm of belief that the novel seeks to justify or support. As such, the narrative’s critique against the Teresistas can be understood metonymically as an overall critique of religious extremists. This critique establishes the narrative’s perspective in distinguishing between “crazy” religion and that faith which is worthy of value. In other words, by including the fanatical Teresistas in the narrative, Urrea complicates the notion of belief and resists reductionist classifications of indigenous religious faith.

The belief in Teresita that the Teresistas hold – ““She will bless our bullets to fly true. Her holy face will stop the enemy’s rounds from killing us”” (166) – does not bring them victory in the raid on Nogales. The narrative pulls no punches: “Teresita’s face,” the narrator tells us, “did not stop a single round that day” (168). All the photograph-wielding warriors are killed and their bodies lined up on the sidewalk, to be kicked by passersby and gawked at by children: “One who had been shot through the jaw had a comical rag tied around his face and looked as if he were waiting for a barber to pull an aching tooth. People pointed at him and laughed” (169). Thus, devout believers are *not* necessarily delivered into safety. As this instance shows, belief can be both tragic and abysmally absurd. This again implies a difference between the

pathological faith that the Teresistas have and the faith, sometimes wavering but always present and never harmful, that Teresita herself holds.

Religious fanaticism, however, is not the only focus of critique. Ideological fanaticisms can include those labeled strictly secular. The critique of such crystalizes in the novel's representation of Lauro Aguirre. The character of Lauro Aguirre first appears in *The Hummingbird's Daughter* as a friend of Tomás's, expert engineer, and fomenter of political unrest. In *Queen of America*, Urrea invests this character with a heightened, if somewhat veiled, political fanaticism for revolution that mimics the extremes of religious fundamentalism, even as he is continually portrayed as a man steeped in the secularism of the age: he is an engineer by trade as well as a newspaper businessman. This positioning disrupts an easy binary between religious and secular obsession. Both can be pathological, but secular fanaticism hides behind a veil of reason and therefore can be more easily overlooked.

This is perhaps most clearly evident through the narrative link between Aguirre's political writings and the Teresistas's raid on Nogales. The Aguirre-Teresistas connection in *Queen of America* provides a historically-grounded space for the novel's spiritual/secular assertions and counter assertions, including specifically and simultaneously the power of belief and its absurdity when taken to fanatical extremes. Urrea constructs Aguirre as the epitome of political expediency. To the extent he is able, Aguirre uses Teresita as a religious figure-head to catalyze a revolt. The pictures over which the Teresistas fight, for instance, are ones Aguirre himself, without the protagonist's knowledge, has had printed and distributed. This representation of Aguirre reveals the narrative's critique of the secular manipulation of spiritual belief in the promotion of political ideologies. Although there is no doubt in the novel that Aguirre cares for Teresita, in *Queen of America*, his desire for a Mexican revolution outweighs his regard for the protagonist.

The narrative clearly identifies Aguirre's thumb in the pie of Teresita's difficulties, and yet, although Aguirre is presented as a secular fanatic complicit with the violence of the Teresistas, the engineer/newspaperman gets away with it. While the Teresistas are killed, Aguirre suffers no consequences except for acute disappointment that his revolution is yet to begin. The narrative in this way makes visible the double-bind: secular manipulations may be complicit in religiously-driven fanaticism, but they are symbolically preserved, condoned, or given a wink. Indeed, if, as Ratti affirms, "[p]ostsecularism challenges secularism as ideology, where only secularism is seen as the preserve of reason and progress" (144), then in the case of Aguirre, through a postsecular prism, we can see that the narrative shines a light on how Aguirre's "reason and progress" is as conducive to violence as the beliefs of the "crazy" religious fanatics. In this manner, the narrative does double-duty: it opposes fundamentalist religious thinking, but also through Aguirre's lack of accountability in the novel, underscores and criticizes secular and political fanaticism in Western society.

Postsecular Abracadabra and the Disappearing Binary

If the secular resists manifestations of the supernatural, as Ratti contends, then in *Queen of America*, Urrea counters this resistance with instances of the marvelous and magical realism, thereby opening a space for wonder for the implied reader, a place to resist "normal" reality. Although one can well argue that Urrea's historical fiction evolves from the realist tradition – the author's years of research attest to his concern with the facts of the historical account – one of Urrea's obvious and most fascinating departures from the typical realist novel is his integration of the mystical and magical, of dream-visions, and of miracles in his narratives. In interviews about his work on the Teresita novels, Urrea talks about the magic within his stories; surprisingly, however, Urrea stresses the "real-ness" of what would generally be considered the fabricated elements of his novels. He observes, for instance, that "[t]he miracles happened. They

are all documented and seen. The ‘real stuff’ like what her bedroom looked like is what was made up. The ‘magical realism’ is what really happened” (Donovan). Such statements underscore Urrea’s redefinition of reality to include the magical, an attitude that permeates his Teresita novels.

Before continuing, however, we should define the notions of “marvelous” and “magical realist.” Irene Guenther’s “Magic Realism in the Weimar Republic” gives a historical account of the trajectory of the concept of magical realism – the term coined by Franz Roh in 1925 – from its start in the German art world to its racination in Latin America. In their *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, a work that establishes magical realism as a viable literary mode on the world stage, Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris identify magical realist texts as follows: “for the characters who inhabit the fictional world, and for the author who creates it, magic may be real, reality magical” (3). This naturalizing attitude of the magical within the text is significant. Steven M. Hart’s definition of the term in “From Realism to Neo-Realism to Magical Realism: the Algebra of Memory” centers on precisely this aspect of magical realism; he defines it as a narrative technique “in which the supernatural is presented in a natural, matter-of-fact manner” (260). Likewise, in *Rediscovering Magical Realism in the Americas*, Shannin Schroeder affirms that magical realism is characterized by the non-problematic portrayal of the supernatural, achieved through a narrative voice that never questions or judges the veracity of what might be regarded as extraordinary or impossible in the “real” world (14). This naturalization of the magical is the pivotal point for determining which expressions of magic in *Queen of America* could be identified as magical realist.

Although magical realism has been the subject of significant interest in twentieth century Latin American literary studies (thanks of course, to the genius of such authors as Gabriel García Márquez, Jorge Luis Borges, and Julio Cortázar), it is a literary mode which can in no way be

considered as limited to Latin America. Susan J. Napier's "The Magic of Identity: Magic Realism in Modern Japanese Fiction" as well as John Erickson's study of the magic realism in French North African narratives, "Metoikoi and Magical Realism in the Maghrebian Narratives of Tahar ben Jelloun and Abdelkebir Khatibi," testify to this fact. As Schroeder has argued, however, many novels which include magic have been erroneously lumped into the magical-realism category. She states the problem thusly:

Magical realism [in North American literature] has become such a buzz-word for novels containing any aspect of magic that most authors writing in the Americas (including many mainstream authors, as well as marginalized writers not of Latina/o descent) who draw upon the supernatural are inevitably labeled as magical realists. (71)

Thus, in order to determine if Urrea's text should be classified as magical realist – a valid question, as reviewers including Margaret Flanagan have called attention to the "magic realism" of *Queen of America* – the two overlapping categories of magical representation in *Queen of America* should be closely examined in light of the above definition.

The first category of magical representation in Urrea's novel, and the most prevalent, is the portrayal of supernatural events as surprising and worthy of awe: the healing of tumors, the seeing of auras, the musk of roses that Teresita emanates. Rather than magical-realist, these elements correspond to what Tzvetan Todorov, in his *The Fantastic*, would call the "marvelous" narrative (25), one in which the supernatural appears to the amazement and/or consternation of the characters within the enunciated text. This would include, for instance, the account of Teresita stopping her assailants by immobilizing them with a burst of power "...that came from some invisible sea and crashed into her hands and eyes" (456). Teresita responds to the immediate threat against herself and her daughter: "Both men were caught in midstep and became wooden. Their hands up. Their eyes wide. They squeaked and made horrible spastic faces and drool flew from their lips..." (459). The narrative does not present Teresita's response

as a normal instance of everyday life in America. Overall, in *Queen of America*, it is precisely because Teresita's abilities are considered miraculous, or "marvelous," by the characters in the novel that she is hounded by reporters, besieged by pilgrims, called a witch, and proclaimed a saint.³¹

At the same time, intertwined with the interest, fear, and awe that Teresita's powers inspire, Urrea also creates another perspective on the supernatural. This second mode does indeed reflect the nature of magical realism in which extranormal occurrences are portrayed as a natural and normal facet of reality. A prime example of this is the account of the appearance of Angel Gabriel's letter on Teresita's front stoop. Typical of magical realism, Urrea's narrative makes a point to avoid the description of such an extraordinary correspondence in extraordinary terms. The archangel's letter does not arrive by dove to the amazement of all, with a choir of angels singing in the background, nor is it delivered by a mystical apparition in a halo of sublime light, alarming all who witness it. On the contrary, Teresita finds the letter on her front stoop of her home in El Paso and initially mistakes it from an editorial response to one of her newspaper articles.

Urrea presents this intrusion of the supernatural as supremely commonplace to Teresita's reality: once she realizes the letter is from heaven, Teresita is neither amazed nor awestruck. Rather, she admires the archangel's penmanship: "Gabriel had lovely penmanship. His words lifted into curlicues..." (171). The prosaicness of penmanship takes center stage, as does the

³¹ Zamora and Faris reprint Alejo Carpentier's essay, "On the Marvelous Real in America" in *Magic Realism*. Carpentier's definition of Latin American magical realism is what he calls "lo real maravilloso." As Zamora and Faris note, for Carpentier, "improbable juxtapositions and marvelous mixtures exist by virtue of Latin America's varied history, geography, demography, and politics – not by manifesto" (75). This term, like the Todorov's "marvelous," however, is not interchangeable with magic realism, as the experience of "lo real maravilloso" provokes wonder and amazement. In contrast, magical realism is perceived intertextually as an everyday manifestation of reality, with nothing marvelous or unusual about it.

form of the letter. Teresita observes, for instance that “[h]e signed it *The Angel Gabriel*. It didn’t say *Sincerely*. There was no PS” (171). In short, the letter from heaven – the narrative never questions that it is indeed a divine missive – may be unexpected but the author presents it as by no means worthy of astonishment.

One can conclude then, that calling *Queen of America* a magical realist novel is a stretch, although moments of magical realism do appear in the text. What is of significance for a postsecular analysis, however, is the function of the magical-realist mode in the novel. As authors like McClure and Ratti note, magical realism is not an uncommon aspect of the postsecular fiction and is exemplified in the writings of Salman Rushdie and Toni Morrison. This presence has much to do with magical realism’s ability to reject an antithetical mode of understanding the real and the fantastic. As Jesús Benito, Ana Maria Manzanar, and Begoña Simal note in their forward to *Uncertain Mirrors*, their collection of essays on magical realism in U.S. ethnic literature, magical realism

yanks us out of the comfortable complacency that assesses the real as an either-or kind of argument, placing us in an alternative intellectual landscape, one where the real is neither stable nor static nor subject to rigorous determination and measurement. (3)

The ability of magical realism to relocate the reader outside an either-or paradigm coincides with the project of postsecularity to problematize the narratives of secularization which depend on binary thinking, narratives which posit the sacred as opposed to the secular, the scientific as opposed to the magical. Ratti, for example, affirms in his study of Rushdie that the literary device of magical realism often becomes “the secular equivalent of the religious miracle, as a kind of secular enchantment” (163). Magical realism, as Ratti notes, “problematizes the realist mode through which it is so easy to read” (146).

As for the presence of the marvelous in narratives, De Groot explains the effects of investing narratives with magic. He writes "the infusing of narratives with mystical and mythical

elements is often deployed by writers of historical fiction with a view to undermining mainstream models" (133). If we apply this concept to *Queen of America*, the mainstream model which Urrea's narrative undermines can be identified as the one in which the scientific and the mystical are separate and unconnected. Urrea plays with secular ideology's distinctions of what is "normal" in order to shake up oppositional thinking. The following interchange clarifies this point. Teresita's father Tomás exclaims upon the latest newspaper reports concerning the discovery of a wondrous thing called X-rays with the ability to "allow doctors to peer into the human body," to which Teresita replies: "Medicine men can do that already" (135). This is a jewel of a comment, as it plays with contemporary attitudes about the scientific and the mystical. Whereas the implied reader is altogether familiar with the common science of X-rays, with her retort, Teresita naturalizes the ability of medicine men to see inside the human body. By enacting this flip in conceptualization, the protagonist is made to underscore the disappearing binary with a wave of the proverbial – or we could perhaps say postsecular – wand.

The narrative further crystalizes this point in bringing together two individuals who can be read as representatives of the traditional separation between science/reason and religion/magic: a reporter and a saint. In the interview with newspaper reporter Helen Dare, Teresita voices the binary which she – as well as Urrea's novel as a whole – resists:

‘What malady was it that so affected the Rosencrans child that you healed?’ She [Dare] was hoping for a mystical response, some real Indian zinger to cap off her story.

But Teresita simply replied: ‘Cerebrospinal meningitis.’

Helen was taken by surprise and sat back with her eyebrows raised.

Teresita grinned.

‘You think it is magic,’ she said. ‘This is my science.’ (305)

Thus, Teresita offers Dare – and Urrea offers the implied reader – a reframing of the constructed dichotomy of magic and science. This is the rethinking of secular/spiritual binaries, of the esoteric and the profane, that postsecularism seeks.

The letter from the archangel is also particularly intriguing from a postsecular perspective in that it is lacking specific divine guidance for Teresita. At a time when the protagonist is struggling with her healing powers, feeling that “holiness crashing down on her every day... was a crashing bore” (172), there is no illuminating guidance that will help Teresita set her life to rights. In this way, the narrative offers and then disrupts a possible chain of divine guidance leading from heaven through Angel Gabriel to Teresita. McClure emphasizes in his introduction to *Partial Faiths* that “the break with secular versions of the real” – in our case, this would coincide with the appearance of a letter from heaven – “does not lead in postsecular narrative to the triumphant reappearance of a well-mapped, familiar, religious cosmos” (4). In other words, whereas traditional stories of religious return might provide a letter from heaven as a sort of blue-print or manual for right action, in Teresita’s case, the letter she receives has an inexplicit if threatening warning to “follow me” and no well-mapped or clear alternative to Teresita’s current problems as she acculturates to life in the United States. In true postsecular fashion, the narrative refuses to resolve the question of divine intent, but does afford rich ground for a magical-realist interpretation.

Although it would be reductive to categorize *Queen of America* as a novel of magical realism, it is important to note that there do exist magical-realist moments in the novel, even if it is not the primary mode extant therein. These moments, interwoven with instances of the marvelous, are significant because they establish a textual reality that rejects binaries, even within the category of “magical” itself. The magic manifested in the novel counters a realist mode of reading, but can be further understood as a *postsecular* magic in that the emphasis still remains on the rejection of religious or spiritual totalizations, as well as the subversion of the dividing lines between that which is considered mundane and that which is considered extraordinary.

This is of further significance in terms of Urrea's historical fiction because it exemplifies the narrative dexterity that enables the imbrication of, as mentioned above, the fabricated ordinary with the documented marvelous, and leaves the implied reader enjoying the richness of the world of the enunciated text where both coexist. If, as Diana Wallace writes in *The Woman's Historical Novel*, historical fiction "at its best and most inventive, brings together past and present in a dialogue which creates an 'energetic space' which allows us to imagine a better future" (201), then perhaps it is not such a stretch to imagine that the better future which Urrea's novel suggests is one where the designation "real and true" does not automatically preclude the scientifically incalculable.

Conclusion

The import for Urrea of the true-historical aspect of his writing process is something which emerges time and again in the author's interviews. Facts are important but equally so is the "truth" he wants to convey. In his interview with Terry Hong, Urrea confesses, "I originally thought I might write a well-footnoted nonfiction history book." Urrea adds, however, that "[i]n my punkier moments, I used to say that you can't footnote a dream... but in reality, you can't footnote a dream." At the same time, Urrea reiterates his need to be as historically-accurate as possible: "I had to follow the story carefully and honor it." Urrea's two seemingly contradictory views come together in the narrative of Teresita, views which combine to underscore the reframing of the world of the enunciated text as resistant to the oppositional thinking that pits the secular against the sacred.

This reframing of oppositional thought is at the heart of what makes historical fiction of a spiritually-charged nature so appropriate for postsecular analysis. The distance inherent in historical fiction provides a wide space in which to broach the subject of faith in fiction and to query the notions of constructed secular/religious binaries. As Habermas discusses, in the socio-

political arena, this querying consists of reconsidering the religious and secular as mutually constitutive and mutually enriching. A postsecular reading of Urrea's *Queen of America* deconstructs the secular/spiritual binary by exploring how the narrative delinks religion from projects of power, rejects all forms of fanatical thought, and reframes science and magic through the words and actions of the protagonist.

At the end of the novel, the narrator reveals Teresita's decision no longer to employ her miraculous powers to heal others; as she tells Segundo, "This is a new century. Let doctors do God's work" (471). She cedes her role as miracle-worker to the science of the new twentieth century, but, the narrative seems to suggest, this is not an end to ontological belief, merely a temporary reframing, in light of history, until a time can come when science and the scientifically incalculable can coexist. With an exquisite sleight of hand, Urrea's narrative suggests that that time is now. It may not be such a stretch to think so: after all, as Urrea himself notes, for him, the hands-on, practical, everyday act of writing is also inextricably metaphysical: "I try to do writing as part of my spiritual life...it's a spiritual thing for me... When I'm writing, I'm praying."

Chapter 5: Epilogue: Some Concluding Thoughts

In “Theses on the Philosophy of History” Walter Benjamin writes that “[h]istory is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now” (261). There is no doubt that this is also the case for historical fiction. White would certainly concur, having written that “every representation of the past has specifiable ideological implications” (*Tropics of Discourse*, 69). In terms of the authors studied in this dissertation, Urrea and Nakhjavani’s historical narratives express ideologies which reject both religious and secular fanaticism, espouse the progressive nature of spirituality, and shine a light on the mysterious energies harbored within “secular” states of reality.

Scholars of historical fiction such as Avrom Fleishman have expounded upon historical fiction’s esthetic function “to lift the contemplation of the past above both the present and the past, to see it in its universal character,” even as it is inevitably “engaged with the present” (14). Operating in tandem with this appraisal of the function of historical fiction, Tessa Morris-Suzuki’s *The Past is With Us: Media, Memory, History*, focuses on historical novels from Japan, Russia, and Great Britain. In her study, she affirms that certain settings of the past are chosen not because of their “intrinsic position in national history” rather because “they suggest implicit analogies with contemporary political or social concerns” (46). With reference to Urrea and Nakhjavani’s historical novels, I would add analogies with contemporary spiritual concerns.

Postsecular literary theory can be fruitfully paired with an array of approaches, from close readings to humor studies to the exploration of the constructed binaries emerging from twentieth century secularism. Although this study does not pretend to be exhaustive, it offers a

variety of postsecular approaches to three transnational historical novels rich in spiritual nuances to underscore what scholars and philosophers identify as a new trend in contemporary culture: an emergence of the reframing of the spiritual as found in postsecularism.

In his now famous 2001 acceptance speech for the 2001 Peace Prize awarded by the German Publishers and Booksellers Association, "Faith and Knowledge," Habermas argues for the societal value of religious thought as an agent of positive social change in the twenty-first century. As Paul Cloke and Justin Beaumont indicate in "Geographies of Postsecular Rapprochement in the City," for Habermas, "postsecular society is based around issues of how public consciousness is changing as an adjustment to the continued existence of religious communities in a supposedly secularized societal setting" (36). This twenty-first century change in public consciousness can be seen reflected in the historical fiction of Nakhjavani and Urrea, as the historical novels studied in this dissertation can be seen as questioning the ideologies of secularism.

The function of exposing and subverting ideologies extant in contemporary moments is not a new function of the historical novel, as Peter Green notes in his 1962 "Aspects of the Historical Novel." In his article, Green comments upon how the content of a historical novel reflects the present and can be used to subvert the hegemonic status quo or, to use his own words, "to assail contemporary institutions" through the assumption of a "historical mask" (38). Diana Wallace, in writing about the function of the historical novel and its relationship to the present – the moment in which a novel is written – is in agreement. She asserts that the historical novel has often been used as a political tool for just such a task: "A historical setting has frequently been used by women writers (as by male writers) as a way of writing about subjects which would otherwise be taboo, or of offering a critique of the present through their treatment of the past" (2). What is exciting about a postsecular interpretation of historical novels, however,

is the richness that ensues from such a framework in terms of the subversion of secularist ideologies which held sway in the twentieth century.

Based on the premise that a parallel exists between the historical text and a current present moment, this study concludes with what Urrea and Nakhjavani's historical novels imply about the twenty-first century. The historical novels studied in this dissertation can be understood to actualize a new postsecular understanding of the world, one in which the sacred and the secular are no longer as separate as twentieth-century secularism posited. This reading is strengthened by the distinct backgrounds of the authors. In other words, reflecting the ideas put forth by such scholars as Habermas and Ratti, postsecularism is not *only* a Chicano phenomenon or an Indian one, or a diasporic-Iranian one, but rather a global condition.

Diana Wallace, in *The Woman's Historical Novel*, writes that "at its best and most inventive, [the historical novel] brings together past and present in a dialogue which creates an 'energetic space' which allows us to imagine a better future" (201). Through a postsecular analysis of *The Woman Who Read Too Much*, *The Hummingbird's Daughter* and *Queen of America*, this energetic space takes shape. It is a space characterized by disappearing binaries and a renewed attention to matters of the spirit without fundamentalist religiosities. Through the analysis of works rooted in the spiritual traditions of curanderismo and the Bábí/Bahá'í Faith, this dissertation finds that a postsecular analysis of transnational historical texts yields readings rich in spiritual nuances without falling into the abyss of totalizing metanarratives that posit too strong a binary between the mystical and the mundane.

Avenues of Further Research

Finally, in terms of future research, far be it from this dissertation to contend that these three novels have been plumbed to their depths. For those interested in the postsecular analysis of the representation of death in literature, both of Urrea's texts as well as Nakhjavani's *The*

Woman Who Read Too Much contain untapped possibilities in terms of the treatment of mortality and what it means to transcend one world into the next. In *The Hummingbird's Daughter*, Teresita dies and comes back to life. In *Queen of America*, the protagonist dies at the end of the novel, and the last pages of the story recount her initial moments in the afterlife. *The Woman Who Read Too Much* gives the dead Poetess a voice in a multi-stanza poem at the end of the novel, the voice of the Poetess speaking from the other side of death. In short, life beyond death is acknowledged.

In researching this dissertation, I also found astonishing points of juncture between the postsecular project and nascent Bahá'í social and literary theory. The postsecular perspective that considers spirituality, religion and science as integral parts of one another, as mutually constitutive, is likewise found in Baha'í thought. For instance, as the Bahá'í philosopher 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains in his April 25, 1912 speech in Washington D.C., "religion and science are in complete agreement" and "every religion which is not in accordance with established science is superstition" (*Promulgation of Universal Peace*, 63). Likewise, postsecularity's emphasis on religion as a progressive element of society can be easily linked with Bahá'í religious teachings, as listed in Shoghi Effendi's history *God Passes By*, which mandate gender equality, the elimination of extremes of wealth and poverty, universal education, and the injunction against all forms of national, racial and economic prejudices (281-2).

Sociologist Nader Saiedi's *Logos and Civilization* would be an excellent starting point for a comparison of Bahá'í theory and postsecular thought. In it, Saiedi discusses the materialist approach to spirituality and differentiates it from a Bahá'í orientation. Saiedi notes, for instance, that although the religious fundamentalist and exclusivist approach to religion is obviously not one advocated by scholars, the materialist approach resonates with the explicitly empirical spirit redolent of the twentieth century; according to Saiedi, the materialist approach

rejects all religions as a set of superstitions and/or reduces them to nonreligious phenomena like society (for Durkheim), the father figure (for Freud), an alienated human nature (for Feuerbach), a linguistic habit of animism (for Müller), an ideological apparatus for control of the masses (for Marx) or for the control of elites by the masses (for Nietzsche), ignorance of the causes of natural phenomena (for Russell), and so on. This approach, while denying the existence of an ultimate supranatural spiritual reality and ignoring the complexity of human beings and of religion itself, at the same time (often unconsciously) elevates some other principal – whether science, reason, nature, society, community, nation-state, sex, or race – to the status of the sacred or the ultimate cause. (11-12)

Certainly many of the metanarratives of the past, as evidenced by Saiedi’s list of renown thinkers, lay claim to this approach and, as such, this orientation is one not unfamiliar to students of literature in general. For such an approach, utilizing a critical framework based on sacred texts is nothing if not absurd. And yet, how is the materialist approach useful in helping the reader discuss such things as the relationships between social justice and spiritual growth? How does it help us answer those “nagging spiritual question[s]” (Talyor) that are often provoked by the best of literature? And how is this orientation similar and dissimilar to postsecularism?

In terms of how this comparison might be applied to historical fiction, it is fascinating to note that Bahá’í theory constructs history as successive stages of human development, sometimes linear and sometimes cyclical, but over the long-term and globally-speaking, as progressing towards a global unity which at the same time celebrates diversity. In his analysis of Bahá’u’lláh’s *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, Saiedi makes precisely this point, observing that

human history in its totality can be seen as the progressive realization and unfoldment of ...primordial unity and dignity in the form of social relations, cultural institutions, and spiritual orientations which, in ever more complex and complete ways, express and reflect the characteristics of unity and integration. (166)

With this in mind, further analyses of transnational historical fiction might therefore find a valuable perspective in the way historicity is addressed in the writings of Shoghi Effendi and ‘Abdu’l-Baha, as well as Nader Saiedi.

Finally, using postsecular theory for analysis, *The Hummingbird's Daughter* and *Queen of America* could also be studied as a process of spiritual maturation reminiscent of Gloria Anzaldúa's process of becoming a nepantlera. Anzaldúa's concept of becoming a nepantlera is, like postsecularism, very much a concept born of the contemporary moment. In "Shifting Perspectives" Ana Louise Keating observes the proliferation of spiritual concepts in Anzaldúa's writings, what she calls "the overtly spiritual dimensions" of Anzaldúa's body of work (242). These overtly spiritual dimensions resonate with the postsecular project, as can be seen in *Borderlands* as well as in Anzaldúa's later essay "now let us shift."

Even though Anzaldúa never mentions postsecularism in *Borderlands* – nor would she have reason to, as the term postsecular is coined by Habermas in fourteen years after the original 1987 publication of her work – Anzaldúa's definition of the essence of the human being as incorporating both the mystical and the scientific, as well as her assertion of the need to eliminate dualistic thinking for social change, suggest a shared essence between her ideas of nepantla and the postsecular pulsion to question constructed binaries of the spiritual-religious and the secular-scientific. In *Borderlands*, for instance, Anzaldúa adopts the Nahuatl term nepantla and uses it to describe the space in-between; nepantla is a space where binary thinking is set aside in favor of reaching for something more, a space that transcends borders (100). Speaking of what it means to have a mestiza consciousness, Anzaldúa expresses her vision of the mestiza soul's work as follows: "*Nuestra alma el trabajo*, the opus, the great alchemical work; spiritual mestizaje, a 'morphogenesis,' an inevitable unfolding" (103). In Anzaldúa's formulation of mestiza consciousness, she combines the spiritual – as signaled in the words "alma [soul]," "alchemical work," and "spiritual mestizaje"³² – with hard science: Anzaldúa

³² Theresa Delgadillo's *Spiritual Mestizaje: Religion, Race, and Nation in Contemporary Chicana Narratives* expands upon Anzaldúa's concept of spiritual mestizaje. Analyzing the writings of various Chicana authors such as Denise Chavez and Kathleen Alcalá, Delgadillo

footnotes “morphogenesis,” explaining it as a term borrowed from chemist Ilya Prigogine’s theory of dissipative structures, a theory which describes how “unpredictable innovations” result from the combination of substances (120). We can detect a fascinating intersection with postsecular thought here. Although in the rest of *Borderlands*, the duality of the scientific versus the spiritual receives little specific attention, in this key sentence, Anzaldúa exalts the potential of the mestiza by combining notions of the spiritual-mystical and the scientific.

The mental nepantlism, or state of perpetual transition, which Anzaldúa presents in *Borderlands* is further developed in her later essay “now let us shift...the path of conocimiento...inner work, public acts.” In this essay, published as part of her last anthology *this bridge we call home*, Anzaldúa develops the steps towards becoming a nepantlera. If nepantla is a privileged position to inhabit, as it is “the point of contact where the ‘mundane’ and the ‘numinous’ converge, where you’re in full awareness of the present moment” (549), then the nepantlera is one who makes this space of nepantla home (574). In “Shifting Subjectivities: Mestizas, Nepantleras, and Gloria Anzaldúa’s Legacy,” Martina Kogeler-Abdi examines the shift in Anzaldúa’s writing from a focus on mestiza consciousness to that of becoming a nepantlera, noting that the process of becoming a nepantlera is “an extension of the process individuals begin by working towards a mestiza consciousness” (73). The path towards

offers a working definition of spiritual mestizaje as “the critical and conscious process of transformation in all aspects of being” (12); it “recognizes spiritual pluralism in the palimpsest of the borderlands and undertakes an investigation of it” (14) and it “embraces the materiality of the body, the presence of the intellect and psyche, and the grace of the spirit” (24). Delgadillo’s fleshing-out of Anzaldúa’s spiritual mestizaje stresses the process of critical investigation of spiritual causes and effects as they relate to both spiritual and material reality, both inter and extra-textually. For Delgadillo, this process of spiritual mestizaje is not merely a neutral element of social functioning, rather it is a positive indicator of human progress; according to Delgadillo, the questioning of, and critical engagement with, one’s spiritual framework is a resolutely positive social indicator of progress, a “sign of health, growth, survival and change” (160). This recalls McClure’s description of the characteristics of the postsecular as described in *Partial Faiths*: postsecularity in fiction manifests itself through a consistent portrayal of religion as a progressive socio-political act (3).

becoming nepantlera is also the path towards *conocimiento*. By *conocimiento*, Anzaldúa means “a way of knowing” that is skeptical of reason and rationality’s devaluation of matters of the spirit (“now let us shift” 541-2). *Conocimiento* is what Koegeler-Abdi refers to as Anzaldúa’s “alternative form of relational, spiritual knowing and acting that is based upon intuition, the body, its ‘intellect of the heart and gut,’ and spirituality” (80). The nepantlera, as Anzaldúa herself explains, is the individual who has progressed through stages of growth towards *conocimiento*, rejects victimhood and recognizes spirituality as “a port you moor to in all storms” (“now let us shift,” 572).

Immediately evident in the above descriptions of nepantleras and *conocimiento* is the overlap between the material and the spiritual extant in Anzaldúa’s theories. This echoes the central concern of postsecular thought, which to borrow Kaufmann’s words, is interested in “complicating our understanding of the *relationships* between the religious and the secular by moving beyond any model that posits too stark a binary opposition [of religious and secular] and towards models based on co-existence and co-creation” (68-69).

In “From Borderlands and New Mestizas to Nepantlas and Nepantleras: Anzaldúan Theories for Social Change,” AnaLouise Keating examines nepantla as part of Anzaldúa’s spiritual activism. Nepantlism is, according to Keating, the way in which Anzaldúa “represent[s] psychic/spiritual/material points of potential transformation” (8). The iteration of “psychic/spiritual/material” with slashes highlights Keating’s understanding of the holistic nature of Anzaldúa’s spiritual activism and underscores Keating’s understanding of Anzaldúa’s resistance of constructed distinctions among these elements. Although Anzaldúa is well-studied and often-quoted in feminist and border studies, her engagement with matters of the spirit has been relatively ignored in academia until quite recently. In “‘I’m a citizen of the universe’: Gloria Anzaldúa’s Spiritual Activism as Catalyst for Social Change,” AnaLouise Keating uses

the term “academic spirit-phobia” to refer to this tendency of critics to avoid Anzaldúa’s “politics of the spirit”:

Although they [scholars] celebrate her groundbreaking contributions to feminist theory and her innovative formulations of the Borderlands and the new mestiza, they rarely examine the important roles Anzaldúa's spiritual activism plays in developing these theories and many others. In some ways, this avoidance of Anzaldúa's politics of spirit probably seems like common sense. After all, those of us working in academic settings are trained to rely almost exclusively on rational thought, anti-spiritual forms of logical reasoning, and empirical demonstrations. (54)

Keating seeks to remedy this lacuna of scholarly attention as she develops Anzaldúa’s concept of spiritual activism. As she affirms in “Shifting Perspectives,” to ignore the spiritual concepts embedded in Anzaldúa’s writings “unnecessarily limits understanding of her work” (242).

Although Keating does not mention postsecular theory in her analysis of Anzaldúa, the above passage echoes the need identified by such postsecular scholars as John McClure, Justin Neuman, and Michael Kaufmann for a discourse that allows for the inclusion of matters of the spirit. To be sure, Keating’s definition of Anzaldúa’s spiritual activism resonates with certain aspects of the postsecular project. As Keating notes, Anzaldúa spiritual activism “embraces the apparent contradiction [of ‘spiritual’ versus ‘activism’] and insists that the spiritual/material, inner/outer, individual/collective dimensions of life are parts of a larger whole, joined in a complex, interwoven pattern” (“I’m a citizen,” 54). This embracing of apparent dualities recalls Habermas’s socio-political postsecular stance, namely that “the boundaries between secular and religious reasons are, after all, tenuous” (“Faith”). Indeed, Anzaldúa’s spiritual activism is a world-view based, as the very name implies, on spirituality in the public sphere, and as such resonates with Habermas’s initial call to rethink the secularization thesis. In short, there appear to be interesting connections between postsecular thought and Anzaldúa’s Nepantлизм which could be worthy of further development.

To conclude, an epilogue, we are taught, is the end of a story, presenting the fates of those encountered within the earlier pages of the text. Although it may be too soon to predict the fate of postsecularism in the trajectory of human history, to determine the long-term significance of the role of postsecularism in literary studies, I believe that the exploration of spiritual theses which postsecular literary theory enables is a valuable contribution to academia. Useful for its transnational applicability as well as for its opening of the spaces of marginalized spiritualities to non-reductive study, postsecular interpretations of contemporary historical fiction, as showcased in this dissertation's analysis of the texts of such culturally-diverse authors as Urrea and Nakhjavani, offer a literary alternative to secularist ideology's sometimes dogmatic dismissal of spiritual value.

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