

The Uses of Humor in Native American and Chicano/a Cultures: An Alternative Study of Their Literature, Cinema, and Video Games

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Resumo

Os usos do humor nas culturas nativa americana e chicana: un estudo alternativo da súa literatura, filmes e videoxogos

Esta tese estuda o rol do humor en textos contemporáneos chicanos e nativos americanos individualmente e de xeito comparativo: dous textos narrativos de Gordon Henry (1994) e Michele Serros (2000), dous poemarios de Natalie Diaz (2012) e David Tomas Martinez (2014), os filmes *Quinceañera* (2006) e *Smoke Signals* (1999) e os videoxogos *Never Alone* (2014) e *Guacamelee!* (2013). O meu obxectivo é avaliar a importancia da comicidade nas obras de dúas comunidades minorizadas nos Estados Unidos para producir críticas, defender a resiliencia, fomentas as relacións inter-étnicas e dar valor ás súas culturas. O meu marco teórico estará composto polos estudos de humor de Mijail Bajtín, Henri Bergson, Sigmund Freud, Linda Hutcheon e Siro López, entre outros. Ademais, os casos de estudo amosan unha profunda preocupación por temas de etnia, polo que incluirei Estudos multiétnicos e de Literatura comparada e un contexto sociocultural e histórico. Ante a novidades dos Estudos de videoxogos, proponho un sistema de citas para que se poida utilizar no futuro este medio. Agardo que o diálogo entre textos humorísticos de diferentes comunidades en E.E.U.U. alente máis estudos comparados de humor que muden o estereotipos dos grupos étnicos como vítimas pasivas de procesos de asimilación.

Resumen

Los usos del humor en las culturas nativa americana y chicana: un estudio alternativo de su literatura, cine y videojuegos

Esta tesis estudia el rol del humor en textos chicanos y nativos americanos contemporáneos individualmente y de forma comparativa: dos textos narrativos de Gordon Henry (1994) y Michele Serros (2000), dos poemarios de Natalie Diaz (2012) y David Tomas Martinez (2014), las películas *Quinceañera* (2006) y *Smoke Signals* (1999) y los videojuegos *Never Alone* (2014) y *Guacamelee!* (2013). Mi objetivo es evaluar la importancia de la comicidad en las obras de dos comunidades minorizadas en Estados Unidos para producir críticas, defender la resiliencia, fomentar las relaciones inter-étnicas y poner en valor sus propias culturas. Mi marco teórico está compuesto por los Estudios de humor de Mijail Bajtín, Henri Bergson, Sigmund Freud, Linda Hutcheon y Siro López, entre otros. Dado que los textos tratan asuntos relacionados con la etnia, incluiré Estudios multiétnicos y de Literatura comparada y una contextualización sociocultural e histórica. Ante la novedad de los Estudios de videojuegos, propongo un sistema de citas a fin de que pueda utilizarse en el futuro este medio. Espero que el diálogo entre textos humorísticos de diferentes comunidades en E.E.U.U. aliente más investigaciones comparadas sobre el humor que cambien el estereotipo de los grupos étnicas como víctimas pasivas de procesos de asimilación.

Abstract

The Uses of Humor in Native American and Chicano/a Cultures: An Alternative Study of Their Literature, Cinema, and Video Games

This dissertation studies the role of humor in contemporary Chicano/a and Native American texts individually and comparatively: two narratives by Gordon Henry (1994) and Michele Serros (2000), two books of poems by Natalie Diaz (2012) and David Tomas Martinez (2014), the films *Quinceañera* (2006) and *Smoke Signals* (1999), and the video games *Never Alone* (2014) and *Guacamelee!* (2013). My goal is to evaluate the importance of comicality in the works of two minoritized communities in the United States to criticize, support resiliency, encourage inter-ethnic relations, and celebrate their own cultures. My main theoretical frame is Humor Studies by Mikhail Bakhtin, Henri Bergson, Sigmund Freud, Linda Hutcheon, and Siro López, amongst others. Furthermore, these case studies are concerned with issues of ethnicity; consequently, I include Multi-Ethnic Studies and Comparative Literature, and a social, cultural, and historical contextualization of the texts for a better understanding. Due to the newness of Video Game Studies, I propose a citation system that could be used in the future for this medium. I hope that a dialogue between humorous texts from different groups in the United States will encourage comparative studies of humor and change the stereotype of ethnic communities as passive victims of assimilation processes.

Sinopsis

A pesar de ser dos grupos nativos del continente americano, las comunidades chicanas y nativas americanas han sido objeto de siglos de colonización y actos imperialistas, que han evolucionado en actitudes neocolonialistas en la actualidad. Por tanto, sus experiencias pueden resultar representativas a la hora de estudiar la situación de grupos étnicos a nivel global. Ambos grupos han sido y siguen siendo objeto de representaciones en la cultura popular que los humillan o los victimizan: por una parte, los/as nativos/as americanos/as han sufrido la imposición de una imagen de seriedad e impasibilidad que no se corresponde con muchas de las manifestaciones culturales en las que el humor es una herramienta vital; por otro lado, los/as chicanos/as han sido repetidamente utilizados como objeto de burla. En este proyecto, estudio el papel del humor en las creaciones artísticas de estos dos mal llamados grupos minoritarios en los Estados Unidos para sobreponerse a una imagen de víctimas pasivas y convertirse en agentes activos en sus propias representaciones.

Los estudios académicos han reconocido el potencial de rebelión de la ironía, la capacidad del humor para transgredir definiciones impuestas y la posibilidad de emplear la comicidad para fomentar una actitud de resiliencia frente a las dificultades. Por lo tanto, una lectura de textos literarios y audiovisuales de grupos minorizados, como los/as nativos/as americanos/as y los/as chicanos/as, desde el punto de vista del humor puede mostrar una faceta de su realidad poco conocida, cambiar estereotipos y ofrecer nuevas respuestas a las potencias imperialistas. Sin embargo, el potencial de rebelión de lo cómico también puede utilizarse para justificar el status quo, por lo que todo estudio del humor debe tener en cuenta ambas vertientes: la conservadora y la insurgente. Así pues,

este proyecto estudia e interpreta la comicidad en la producción artística de los dos grupos mencionados anteriormente, que en ocasiones puede resultar paradójica.

Para comprender las manifestaciones artísticas de chicanos/as y nativos/as americanos/as examinaré no solo sus producciones de narrativa y poesía, sino también películas y videojuegos. Cabe subrayar que he diseñado un corpus lo más equilibrado posible: estudio el mismo número de textos de ambas comunidades étnicas, de hombres y de mujeres, de autores conocidos y de noveles. Las dos obras de prosa incluidas en esta tesis son la novela *The Light People* (1994), del autor nativo americano Gordon Henry, y el libro *How to Be a Chicana Role Model* (2000), de la chicana Michele Serros. Además, se estudian dos colecciones de poesía: *When My Brother Was an Aztec* (2012), de la escritora nativa americana Natalie Diaz, y *Hustle* (2014), del chicano David Tomas Martinez. También se analizan el clásico de cine nativo americano *Smoke Signals* (1999), del director Chris Eyre y el guionista Sherman Alexie, y la película de temática chicana *Quinceañera: Echo Park* (2006), de los directores Richard Glatzer y Wash Westmoreland y que cuenta con chicanos/as en el reparto. Finalmente, se tratan dos videojuegos, debido al potencial narrativo de este medio más joven y cada vez más popular: *Never Alone* (2014), fruto de la estrecha colaboración entre nativos/as de Alaska y profesionales de la industria lúdica, y *Guacamelee!* (2013), un polémico juego sobre la cultura mexicana. Este corpus multidisciplinar permite evitar una clasificación rígida de comunidades y obras en categorías separadas e inconexas.

Mi interés por los Estudios de humor en las comunidades chicanas y nativas americanas nace como respuesta a varias realidades. En primer lugar, al racismo, clasismo y las condiciones de vida en ocasiones tercermundistas que sufren muchas personas de estos grupos étnicos, cuyos ancestros caminaban por el continente americano mucho antes de que los europeos llegasen. La segunda, la tendencia de los Estudios poscoloniales a

centrarse en aspectos trágicos que, aun sin pretenderlo, contribuyen a reforzar el rol de los grupos étnicos como víctimas y el de los poderes imperialistas como agentes. De este modo, se reproduce una imagen de debilidad y falta de autoridad que repercute negativamente en la descolonización de estas comunidades. La tercera es la escasez de estudios teóricos sobre el potencial del humor para las comunidades minorizadas, especialmente en el caso de la Literatura comparada. Es cierto que autoras como Adele Marian Holoch y Christina Oesterheld, entre otras, han abierto la puerta a un análisis de lo cómico en la literatura de grupos étnicos; sin embargo, se limitan al estudio de obras literarias dentro de un único grupo. Resulta curioso que un rasgo universal de la especie humana como es el humor no se haya utilizado más como medio para fomentar el entendimiento entre culturas. Es por ello que, con esta investigación, me gustaría poder ampliar el alcance de los Estudios de humor étnico, sumando a la literatura otros medios narrativos contemporáneos, como el cine y los videojuegos, para demostrar que el humor puede ser el hilo conductor de la comunicación interétnica.

Recogiendo todas estas ideas, esta tesis se estructura en cuatro capítulos en los que los textos chicanos y nativos americanos se estudiarán tanto individualmente como de forma comparativa. En todos los casos, se buscarán rasgos de humor universal, (como la parodia, la ironía o la burla, entre otros) y otros a nivel más concreto en cada una de las dos culturas estudiadas, como el *political humor* chicano (Dickinson 63), el uso de nombres cómicos de nativos/as americanos/as (Gruber 89), etc. Además, cada capítulo valora el papel del humor en cada tipo de texto en particular y en cada grupo étnico de forma concreta: el valor del humor en la narrativa nativa americana y la importancia de lo cómico en la chicana; la poesía cómica e irónica de chicanos/as y nativos/as americanos/as; el papel del humor en las representaciones de estos grupos étnicos en el

cine comercial e *indie*; y el rol de lo cómico en los videojuegos, especialmente para estas comunidades minorizadas.

En la introducción, explico que sigo el camino propuesto por Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak o Bill Ashcroft en los años 1980, cuando se preguntaban si las comunidades subalternas podían hablar y de qué forma contestaban a los poderes imperialistas en su literatura. Tras varias décadas, estas cuestiones han sido respondidas y debatidas, por lo que ahora analizo la posibilidad de que los grupos minorizados respondan mediante el uso del humor. Además, aclaro algunos problemas de los estudios críticos actuales, centrados, como ya he explicado, en analizar a estas comunidades fundamentalmente desde la victimización y en estudiar una cultura en concreto sin observar las alianzas con otras.

También aclaro en este punto inicial cuestiones terminológicas que pueden resultar controvertidas. Evito hablar de comunidades minorizadas, ya que en muchos casos esta denominación no se corresponde con la realidad; por ese motivo, empleo ‘comunidades étnicas’ o ‘grupos étnicos’. Si bien es cierto que todos los individuos se identifican con una etnia, en mi caso opongo estos grupos a la cultura hegemónica occidental o angloamericana. Soy consciente de que esta contraposición puede considerarse problemática, dado que la cultura occidental no es homogénea, sino que incluye a muchas otras. Sin embargo, hay ciertos rasgos identificativos de la cultura occidental como una entidad hegemónica global. Además, defino claramente los términos *humorous* y *comic* para hablar del humor a nivel general, a diferencia de ironía, humorismo, sátira o comicalidad, que responden a estrategias de humor concretas, según Linda Hutcheon o Siro López, entre otros/as.

Tras estas aclaraciones, recojo los objetivos del humor relevantes para mi investigación. El primero, cuestionar las jerarquías del mundo contemporáneo al permitir que los grupos étnicos respondan a la autoridad imperialista (Holoch 24) en términos subversivos debido al carácter universal de lo cómico (Bergson 10) y su potencial para desmitificar temas solemnes (Oesterheld 64). El segundo propósito consiste en dar voz a grupos étnicos que suelen quedar excluidos del canon; de hecho, el humor se ha vuelto cada vez más significativo para los individuos alienados (Dunphy y Emig 7), puesto que encarna la transgresión (7) y crea espacios donde discutir ideas no-canónicas (209). En tercer lugar, el humor es un síntoma de resiliencia que permite superar la imagen de victimización, curar heridas y lidiar con experiencias traumáticas (Luna Estévez 59-60). Por último, muchos/as los/as autores/as defienden la función mediadora del humor (Erichsen 40) al revelar de forma positiva las diferencias (Bowers 247), liberar tensiones (247) y salvar distancias (Erichsen 40) entre grupos. Sin embargo, Holoch aconseja estar alerta del riesgo de homogeneización que el humor puede acarrear (212).

El primer capítulo recoge el marco teórico de esta tesis, explicando las cuestiones fundamentales sobre la situación actual de los grupos étnicos en general, así como de chicanos/as y nativos/as americanos/as en particular. En primer lugar, expongo que los grupos étnicos pueden relacionarse con la categoría de Cuarto Mundo. A pesar de los matices imperialistas de esta clasificación, resulta interesante para definir la situación de los grupos étnicos, como chicanos/as y nativos/as americanos/as en Estados Unidos. En concreto, los/as latinos/as son el grupo étnico más numeroso del país, dentro del cual una mayoría tiene orígenes mexicanos ("Hispanic" 1, 2). Por otro lado, los/as nativos/as americanos/as son la comunidad étnica más escasa, contando a los nativos/as de Alaska y Hawái ("QuickFacts). No obstante, ambos grupos étnicos tiene un vínculo importante,

ya que sus ancestros habitaban el continente americano desde mucho antes de que se iniciara el proceso de colonización.

Además, se delimita, en la medida posible, una definición de ciertos rasgos del humor. El humor es fundamentalmente subjetivo y ambivalente en muchos aspectos, pero determinar sus contradicciones nos puede ayudar a entender de qué hablamos cuando hablamos de humor. Para empezar, el humor puede provocar risa o no y, al mismo tiempo, la risa puede estar provocada por el humor y por otros estímulos que nada tienen que ver (Billig 181). Esto destruye una idea preconcebida y amplía nuestro concepto de lo que se puede considerar humorístico. Lo cómico es, al mismo tiempo, universal, puesto que está presente en todos los grupos humanos, y particular, ya que cada comunidad lo emplea de una forma específica (175). El humor es social y antisocial al mismo tiempo, porque puede crear una comunidad y también expulsar a ciertos individuos de ella (234). Por último, el humor se resiste a ser analizado (todavía no hemos llegado a una teoría global que explique todas las facetas del humor) pero es comprensible en el sentido de que hay varias teorías que lo interpretan parcialmente (189).

Estas teorías de humor fundamentales explican tanto las formas de humor (ironía, parodia, burla, juego de palabras, etc.) y sus funciones en los casos de estudio. Las diferentes técnicas cómicas de las obras se analizan según estudios de distintos/as autores/as y de acuerdo con los rasgos de humor empleados en cada una de ellas; por ejemplo, la obra poética de Natalie Diaz tiene como técnica fundamental la ironía mientras que la película *Quinceañera* emplea la sátira. Tres críticos de humor resultan fundamentales para estudiar las funciones de lo cómico en los textos analizados. El primero de ellos es Mijaíl Bajtín, cuya teoría de lo carnavalesco revela el potencial del humor para desestabilizar estructuras jerárquicas. Los textos también se interpretan desde la teoría de Henri Bergson sobre la burla como elemento de corrección ante conductas

antisociales. Por último, se incluye la interpretación del humor de Freud, particularmente de lo obscuro y lo grotesco, como arma para liberarnos de las restricciones de la vida en comunidad.

La última cuestión de este capítulo se ocupa de argumentar una perspectiva interétnica a la hora de leer los textos estudiados en esta tesis. Es necesario defender la capacidad del humor para aproximar culturas diferentes y para ayudar a aliviar tensiones entre grupos enfrentados. Por ese motivo, otras dos teorías que empleo en mi tesis son los Estudios multiétnicos y la Literatura comparada, que me permiten justificar el posible uso del humor para fomentar la comunicación entre culturas. A este fenómeno le llamo comunicación interétnica, y en este capítulo justifico mi elección de este término frente a otros como ‘transétnico’ o ‘multiétnico’.

El segundo capítulo, que es el más extenso, está dividido en dos partes y recoge cuatro obras literarias, dos de narrativa y dos de poesía. En la sección 2.1., se estudia el uso del humor en *The Light People*, de Gordon Henry, y en *How To Be a Chicana Role Model*, de Michele Serros; finalmente, se desarrolla una comparativa de ambas obras, pertenecientes a la cultura nativa americana y chicana respectivamente. La sección 2.2., investiga el uso de técnicas como la ironía y la sátira en las recopilaciones poéticas *When My Brother Was an Aztec*, de la nativa americana Natalie Diaz, y *Hustle*, del chicano David Tomas Martinez, para plantear nuevamente una comparación del uso del humor en ambos textos.

De este modo, llego a la conclusión de que cada uno de los autores incluye en su obra características cómicas específicas de su cultura y utiliza un tipo de humor diferente. Henry utiliza el sarcasmo, característico de la literatura humorística nativa americana (Gruber 15-16) y la figura del *Trickster*; sin embargo, Serros prefiere otras estrategias de

humor como la burla o los juegos de palabras que algunos autores identifican especialmente con el humor chicano. Por otro lado, Diaz incluye diversos ejemplos de intertextualidad, el “*comic reversal*” (Gruber 80) y el uso cómico de los nombres de los personajes (89). Martinez utiliza el “*engaged humor*” que es especialmente relevante para autores/as chicanos/as (Gutierrez-Jones 113).

Sin embargo, todos ellos emplean el humor con objetivos muy similares. Todos/as los/as autores/as muestran una clara intención de manipular formas canónicas para adaptarlas a su propia experiencia, ya sea alterando la línea temporal, utilizando un género poco reconocido por la crítica, tratando temas tabúes o mezclando diferentes géneros. El objetivo es cuestionar el canon literario y, por extensión las jerarquías subyacentes que representa. Todos los textos incluyen episodios o poemas en los que los/as escritores/as revisan los discursos históricos oficiales para, de nuevo, evaluar los sistemas jerárquicos socioculturales y para dar voz a individuos cuyas versiones rara vez se escuchan en los discursos oficiales. Este sería el caso de las referencias a Wounded Knee en *The Light People*, el poema “*Jimmy Eagle’s Hot Cowboy Boots*” de Diaz (*When My Brother* 33) o la composición “*Forgetting Willie James Jones*” de Martinez (*Hustle* 65). Por otra parte, Henry trata temas como la violencia, Serros habla de sus experiencias personales por la muerte de su madre, Diaz reflexiona sobre la drogadicción de su hermano y Martinez recapacita sobre el machismo y la delincuencia en su juventud. Al hablar de estos y otros temas traumáticos y difíciles que los personajes son capaces de verbalizar a través del humor, se demuestra la capacidad de resiliencia que los/as autores/as tratan de fomentar. Además, tanto en la narrativa como en la poesía, los/as escritores/as fomentan el entendimiento interétnico al crear personajes cuya identidad está conformada por elementos de distintas culturas. Sin embargo, las relaciones entre culturas se exploran tanto para apoyarlas como para criticar el riesgo que conllevan.

El tercer capítulo recoge las dos obras cinematográficas de esta tesis: la película *Quinceañera* (2005), cuyos directores son ajenos a la cultura chicana pero que cuenta con una activa participación de este grupo étnico; y el clásico nativo americano *Smoke Signals* (1998) de los aclamados Chris Eyre, director Cheyenne y Arapaho, y Sherman Alexie, escritor Spokane y Coeur d'Alene. Al igual que en el caso de la literatura, estas obras se estudian primero individualmente, estudiando los ejemplos particulares de comicidad en cada película, para posteriormente realizar una lectura conjunta que permita identificar los rasgos similares y diferentes de estas obras, cada una de las cuales es representativa de su grupo étnico.

A pesar de que el humor parece escaso en *Quinceañera* a primera vista, la película se puede entender como un anticuento, una sátira de los cuentos de hadas que permite cuestionar valores de la cultura hegemónica occidental representados por los cuentos de hadas, criticar y celebrar al mismo tiempo la cultura chicana y demostrar que la mejor actitud ante las dificultades es la resiliencia. Echo Park, en California, será el equivalente satírico de un castillo. En este cuento, la protagonista, Magdalena, nada tiene que ver con las típicas princesas de cuento, ya que pertenece a una comunidad étnica, pasa por dificultades económicas y está embarazada. Todos estos aprietos hacen que Magdalena pase de desempeñar el rol de princesa pasiva a representar a una heroína luchadora. El rol del príncipe tampoco es canónico, ya que Carlos, el primo homosexual de Magdalena, con una imagen de cholo y una conducta delictiva, será quien cumpla esta función al madurar y ayudar a Magdalena en el cuidado de su hijo. Para ayudar a los protagonistas, aparece el hada madrina, el tío abuelo de Magdalena y Carlos: Tomás. Tío Tomás es un personaje ambivalente en muchos aspectos, desde su masculinidad hasta su espiritualidad, que acoge en su casa a los marginados por la familia. En este cuento tan atípico también aparecen el rey y la reina, los padres de Magdalena, y los villanos, una pareja homosexual

que compra la casa de Tío Tomás para desahuciarlo y que se aprovecha sexual y emocionalmente de Carlos. También se analizan en esta sección elementos como la música y distintas estrategias de humor (p. ej., ironía y juegos de palabras) que apoyan la sátira de Glatzer y Westmoreland.

Por otra parte, estudio la película nativa americana *Smoke Signals*, todo un clásico del cine nativo americano. El humor en esta película se basa, principalmente, en la deconstrucción de los estereotipos que Hollywood ha creado de los/as nativos/as americanos/as de modo que la audiencia nativa se dé cuenta de que son absolutamente irreales y la no-nativa aprenda a ver a este grupo étnico fuera de esos estereotipos. Para ello, antes de hablar en profundidad de la película, hago un repaso de la representación de este grupo étnico en la gran pantalla. En esta película, seguimos a dos jóvenes nativos americanos, Victor y Thomas, que tienen que viajar a Phoenix para recoger las cenizas del recientemente fallecido padre de Victor, quien también era una figura paterna para Thomas. Los protagonistas encarnan estereotipos sobre los/as nativos/as americanos/as muy diferentes: Victor representa al indio adusto y duro, mientras que Thomas es el *storyteller* cuya faceta espiritual está muy arraigada. Ambos han adquirido sus modelos de conducta de Hollywood, a pesar de que ellos mismos se burlan repetidamente en la película de los estereotipos del cine popular. A medida que la película se desarrolla, los dos protagonistas aprenden a expresarse al margen de dichos estereotipos y aprender a valorar sus propias identidades.

Por último, el cuarto capítulo se centra en el estudio de dos videojuegos. En esta ocasión, se adjunta una introducción en la que se explica la inclusión de videojuegos en esta tesis. Por un lado, las conexiones entre literatura, cine y videojuegos no resultan obvias a día de hoy; por otro, los videojuegos suelen considerarse medios que sustentan la cultura dominante y dejan de lado la representación de grupos étnicos. No obstante, mi

análisis desafía estas consideraciones mediante el análisis de dos títulos que demuestran las posibilidades de los videojuegos en la narrativa de grupos étnicos. Me gustaría subrayar que he ideado un sistema de citación que podría servir como modelo para el reciente campo de Estudios de videojuegos.

Never Alone (2013) ha sido desarrollado por nativos/as americanos/as de Alaska preocupados/as por cuestiones de transmisión del conocimiento tradicional y el cambio climático. En este juego se utiliza fundamentalmente la ironía, ya que el juego manipula las expectativas de los jugadores porque parece que *Never Alone* sigue el modelo y la estructura tradicional en las historias y los videojuegos occidentales, mientras que llegado un momento, se desvela que la narración sigue el patrón de las historias nativas americanas. Es decir, habitualmente los jugadores identifican al jefe del videojuego y, cuando se mata a este jefe final, el juego termina. En cualquier caso, en *Never Alone* se hace pensar a los jugadores que el jefe final es Manslayer cuando, en realidad, el causante de los problemas de los protagonistas es Blizzard Man. Además, el juego no consiste en matar al jefe final, ya que, reproduciendo la ideología tradicional de los/as nativos/as de Alaska, el mal no se arregla utilizando la violencia para eliminar a un individuo sino restableciendo el equilibrio del mundo.

A continuación se presenta *Guacamelee!*, cuyos creadores, a pesar de no pertenecer a la cultura chicana, han hecho un ejercicio de respeto que demuestra que no todos los videojuegos sobre grupos étnicos deben considerarse como apropiaciones culturales. Este juego ha sido muy polémico, ya que muchos/as críticos/as consideran que la utilización cómica de la cultura mexicana en el juego promueve estereotipos negativos y se apropia de esta cultura. A pesar de que solo uno de los creadores del juego es mexicano, en esta sección justifico que no debe catalogarse *Guacamelee!* como un caso de apropiación cultural tan ligeramente. El uso de elementos tradicionales mexicanos, la

dignificación de tareas tradicionales (y habitualmente femeninas), la inclusión de figuras mitológicas poco conocidas, etc. se utiliza para tratar preocupaciones contemporáneas como el machismo. Hay una gran variedad de estrategias de humor: juegos de palabras, parodias, ironía e intertextualidad, entre otras. Todas ellas tienen un objetivo primordialmente crítico, por una parte, hacia los elementos negativos de la cultura mexicana y, por otra, a los de la cultura popular occidental.

La diferencia entre estos dos juegos es que *Never Alone* es un claro caso de lo que Siro López llama humorismo, es decir, una forma de humor que, en lugar de buscar la risa, pretende establecer relaciones de empatía entre el público y los personajes (López 20-21). Contrasta el tipo de humor utilizado en *Guacamelee!*, que se aproxima más a una combinación de comicalidad y sátira explicadas por López. La comicalidad sí busca abiertamente la risa del público (14-17) y la sátira tiene como objetivo denunciar una conducta de la sociedad o de un grupo (19). A pesar de estas diferencias, ambos juegos utilizan el humor para reinventar la mitología nativa americana y chicana, de manera que demuestran que estas culturas tradicionales pueden utilizarse para tratar temas actuales como el cambio climático o el machismo.

Para cerrar mi investigación, en la conclusión evalúo conjuntamente el uso del humor en todos los textos analizados de y sobre chicanos/as y nativos/as americanos/as. A pesar de que estas narrativas poseen, innegablemente, rasgos locales y específicos de cada comunidad, podemos hallar ciertos objetivos y características universales que demuestran la preocupación de los grupos étnicos por asuntos de ámbito global. El rasgo que nos sirve como hilo conductor entre estas obras es su tono humorístico. El humor sirve a chicanos/as y nativos/as americanos/as para mostrar una actitud de resistencia ante fuerzas imperialistas, de modo que pueden denunciar las injusticias de las jerarquías socioeconómicas y políticas y criticar la situación actual de las comunidades étnicas. Sin

embargo, sus críticas no solo se dirigen hacia el exterior, sino que, mediante una forma de humor resiliente y catártico, también se juzgan las actitudes de los propios grupos étnicos. Por otro lado, el humor permite destruir el estereotipo de estas comunidades como víctimas pasivas, permitiéndoles ser dueñas de sus propias representaciones dada su actitud de resiliencia ante las dificultades. Gracias a este tipo de textos cómicos audiovisuales, los/as chicanos/as y nativos/as americanos/as encuentran un nuevo espacio donde dar voz a sus inquietudes. En cualquier caso, es importante aclarar que estos dos grupos no solo hacen un ejercicio de humor para responder a sus propias necesidades, sino que en todo momento intentan crear alianzas y tender puentes con otros grupos. Para ellos, es fundamental favorecer la comunicación interétnica.

No obstante, no debemos olvidar que el humor siempre es un arma de doble filo, como ya he apuntado: mientras que por una parte puede resultar belicoso y transgresor, como defienden Bajtín y Freud, también puede perpetuar el status quo y defender los intereses imperialistas (Bernárdez Rodal 15). Lo cómico siempre está sujeto a la interpretación del público, por lo que un mismo texto puede leerse desde perspectivas muy diferentes. Los distintos objetivos del humor que se han encontrado en los textos aunque en diferentes formas (fundamentalmente, humorismo, comicidad, y sátira, siguiendo la clasificación de López) no deben entenderse como compartimentos separados. Un ejemplo de ironía en un mismo texto puede responder a la vez a una intención autocrítica y a una dignificación de la cultura que se está criticando, por más contradictorio que pueda resultar. Por esto, los objetivos críticos, interétnicos y resilientes tienen una relación simbiótica y se alimentan mutuamente.

Por último, la tesis incluye varios apéndices. El primero de ellos sugiere una guía para la compleja estructura de la novela *The Light People*, de Gordon Henry, que se analiza en el capítulo 2.1.1. Debido a su entramado y estructura de *myse en abyme*, la

tabla y el esquema que se incluyen ayudan a seguir el orden cronológico de los acontecimientos de la novela, así como a comprender las relaciones entre los distintos personajes. El segundo apéndice contiene los carteles de las dos películas analizadas. En el tercero se recogen imágenes de los personajes principales del videojuego *Never Alone*, que se estudia en el capítulo 4.1., y en el cuarto y último se incluyen los personajes principales que se mencionan en el capítulo 4.2. sobre *Guacamelee!* Ambos apéndices (3 y 4) muestran ilustraciones extraídas de las páginas web oficiales correspondientes a cada video juego.

A lo largo de toda la tesis trabajo de manera comparativa e interdisciplinar con la esperanza de que una lectura humorística de los textos, tengan el humor como tono general o de forma puntual, favorezca el diálogo entre personas al fomentar una actitud crítica y resiliente. Dado su alcance universal, creo que el humor es una herramienta excelente para crear alianzas entre comunidades, aunque su ambivalencia hace que debamos manejarlo con sumo cuidado. En cualquier caso, el humor se presenta aquí como un formidable instrumento para crear relaciones interétnicas desde la resiliencia, la humildad y la igualdad.

Introduction

“Laughter has the remarkable power of ... drawing [an object] into a zone of crude contact where one can finger it familiarly on all sides, turn it upside down, inside it, peer at it from above and below, break open its external shell, look into its center, doubt it, take it apart, dismember it, lay it bare and expose it, examine it freely and experiment with it. Laughter is a vital factor in laying down that prerequisite for
fearlessness”

(Bakhtin 328)

In the 1980s, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak wondered whether the subaltern could speak, and Bill Ascroft studied how the empire wrote back, both searching for a response to how ethnic communities expressed their concerns, if they were able to do it at all; today, around thirty years later, I am resolved to discover if the subaltern can laugh back. Four literary pieces, two movies, and two video games will allow for an insight into the humor forms of Chicano/a and American Indian artists who explore ethnicity, sexuality, cultural assimilation, the canon, and many other problematic issues that ethnic groups must confront. I will study, both individually and comparatively, Gordon Henry’s novel *The Light People* (1994), Michele Serros’s collection of anecdotes and reflections in *How to Be a Chicana Role Model* (2000), Natalie Diaz’s poetry in *When My Brother Was an Aztec* (2012), David Tomas Martinez’s collection of poems *Hustle* (2014), the films *Quinceañera* (2006) and *Smoke Signals* (1999), and the video games *Never Alone* (2014) and *Guacamelee!* (2013). By analyzing and comparing those groups’ narratives from different media and genres, I will evaluate the importance of comicality in the cultural expressions of two minoritized communities in the United States, acknowledge their

culture through their artistic manifestations, and promote respect for different cultures that have been subjected to assimilation.

More often than not, the study of the literature and other cultural pieces of ethnic groups in postcolonial stages is mainly focused on establishing a dichotomy of victim versus perpetrator. As M^a Felisa López Liqueste, points out, “when the colonized are given voice they start by focusing on themselves as victims and some do not seem to be able to go any further” (25). First, this polarization is considered by many scholars simplistic and narrow (Gutierrez-Jones 115), and, second, it hinders any possibility of overcoming traumas, healing wounds, and opening up to productive inter-ethnic¹ exchanges. In fact, many artists from minoritized groups choose to explore their identity and experiences from a humorous perspective that liberates them from that petrified image of the passive victim, allowing them to take action in their own portrayal. It is important to claim the place of humorous texts in the context of ethnic groups because comicality, as a universal trait of human societies (Bergson 10), helps bring people closer and see the other as an equal. However, it is also important to point out that humor can be ambivalent or alternatively liberating and oppressive (Bernárdez Rodal 15), as will be explored throughout this dissertation.

There also are recent studies, usually focused on the use of humor in the works of particular ethnic groups, such as those by Adele Marian Holoch in the sub-Indian continent; still, these are usually limited to a specific ethnicity, ignoring the potential of comparative studies to shed light on the common traits of the comic in minoritized cultures. This individualist approach is, nonetheless, contrary to one of the multiple sides of humor that fosters communication across cultures and the creation of a community

¹ This concept is expanded upon in section 1.3.

beyond ethnicity and nationhood. That is why I intend to contribute to this field of Ethnic Humor Studies and expand its current scope.

Throughout this dissertation, I will be employing the terms ethnic group or ethnic communities to talk about peoples with a different national or cultural tradition from the main population in the United States. It is frequent to refer to these communities as ethnic minorities; however, I find the designation problematic both in the factual and the symbolic realms. To begin with, many of the groups that are labeled as ethnic minorities are not minorities at all, as is the case with Chicanos/as, who make up to almost 36 million people in the United States (United States Census Bureau, “Hispanic” 1-2); thus, talking about minorities is not completely accurate in all cases. Furthermore, this factual inaccuracy, to put it mildly, has consequences in the symbolic space because the image that is created for these groups is one of being small, insignificant, and pushed into the past, as some of the case studies will reflect (Henry’s *The Light People*; Diaz’s *When My Brother Was an Aztec*; *Never Alone*; and so forth). Nevertheless, I do use minoritized groups or cultures to refer to these ethnic communities in order to underline that their culture and identity are subject to assimilation and acculturation processes by mainstream Western culture.

Precisely, Western (or Anglo) culture² is another expression that might carry difficulties, as it reflects the idea of this culture as a unified set of referents when, actually, it is a rather general label to cover a variety of national folklores and customs that share certain traits but not others. This general classification is useful in this investigation as the oppositional figure of ethnic minoritized cultures, but I acknowledge that it must be

² In this dissertation, I will be using Western culture, Anglo culture, and mainstream culture to refer to the currently predominant culture in the United States.

understood in a broad context; ethnicity is a feature that all humans, and not only those whose cultures are endangered, have. Similarly, I will use the words Native and non-Native to identify ethnic groups and Western culture respectively; though it is true that everybody is native to a place, this terminology is useful for my purposes. These issues will also be addressed in the dissertation, particularly in the chapter about Serros's *How to Be a Chicana Role Model*.

The question of humor might also bear terminological complications, as not all the words that are usually employed with the same meaning are perfect synonyms. I will be using humor and humorous as major labels to cover different typologies, together with comic as a synonym of the latter for lack of a more accurate one. Accordingly, I will employ humorism/humorist, satire/satirical, and comical/comicality to talk about specific types. Siro López defines humorism as a type of humor that intends to create empathy between audience and characters (20), while satire aspires to make the audience condemn the behavior of the characters (18), and comicality aims to make people laugh (14), as will be explained in depth later.³ Thus, comical, humorist, comic, and humorous should not be confused. To that differentiation, we might add other terms like irony, which is a specific humor strategy that can be found in the two categories above, or laughter, which might not always be the response to a humorous discourse.

By means of a comparative study of Chicano/a and Native American literature, cinema and video games, I evaluate how humor helps these communities, as well as

³ Although López suggests that comicality arouses laughter without a moral or pragmatic aim, just concerning itself with fun (14), I do not completely agree with the definition. As argued by other critics, “even the most lighthearted, escapist piece of fun inevitably implies serious values” (Mast 17); thus, although López characterizes comicality as a frivolous type of humor, I will prove that comical texts can also have a didactic and moral objective. The fact that a humorous work lacks a straightforward moralist critical interpretation must not be understood as missing values.

others, to fulfill certain decolonizing goals.⁴ The first decolonizing goal of humor in the literary and audiovisual texts of ethnic communities is to call into question the mainstream contemporary socioeconomic world order. From an undeniably Bakhtinian perspective, In Holoch's words, humor is the channel that allows for "a process of communication between the upper and lower strata of society" (24). The comic is able to introduce "destabilizing and subversive possibilities that more ostensibly serious forms of writing do not share" (33), as it demystifies solemn topics and engages people in a universal form of communication (Oesterheld 64). Through the humorous texts of ethnic groups, humor achieves to make changes in the symbolic spaces that can become a reality (91) by stirring readers' feeling and helping them participate in the texts' acts of rebellion against authority figures.

The second goal is to give voice to ethnic groups whose culture and claims are usually excluded from the canon. As developed by Graeme Dunphy and Rainer Emig, "Among the many forms of expression which speak to and out of [alienation], humour has become increasingly significant" (7), as comedy embodies transgression (7) and contempt (Luna Estévez 90). Thus, ethnic communities find in humor the way to create spaces where alternative perspectives of life can be heard (209). Olga Luna Estévez points out that when ethnic groups are able to coordinate the rupture of silence with the creation of humor, they are truly causing a twofold revolutionary act (86).

In the third place, humor is important for ethnic groups to contest power structures because it catalyzes resiliency as a way to overcome victimization. Coming from Latin,

⁴ It must be mentioned from the beginning that not all the texts included in this dissertation are produced by individuals from these two ethnic groups. For instance, one of the movies and both video games have been directed and developed by non-Chicanos/as and non-Natives; still, they count with the active participation of those communities. The issue of representation and appropriation will be addressed in depth below.

the concept of resiliency (or resilience) has the connotation of “to rebound, recoil”, from the prefix *re-*, for repetition, and the verb *salire*, meaning “to jump, leap” (“Resilience”, *Etymology Online*). Though it can be metaphorically applied to people who have “the ability to be happy, successful, etc. again after something difficult or bad has happened”, and it is also employed in sciences to talk about “the ability of a substance to return to its usual shape after being bent, stretched, or pressed”. Luna Estévez elaborates on both the physical and spiritual capacity of humor, as a tool of resilient individuals to heal wounds and help cope with traumatic experiences (59-60).

Lastly, humor is employed to establish relations between ethnic and mainstream groups, comprising all the previous aims, to support inter-ethnic relations. Many authors, such as Maggie Anne Bowers and Ulrike Erichsen, state that humor fulfills a mediating function (Erichsen 40) for it “plays with the frictions and differences between peoples” (Bowers 247); however, they also acknowledge that this role of the comic, beyond just pointing out cultural differences, has a positive outcome, as it allows to release tensions (247) and bridge gaps (Erichsen 40) between groups. However, Holoch advises scholars and readers to beware the risk of homogenization that humor can also convey (212).

In order to evaluate how and to what extent these objectives are present in Native American and Chicano/a humorous literature, films, and video games, this dissertation will be divided into four chapters. The first one is devoted to introducing the two ethnic groups whose texts will be analyzed and the theories that will conform the basic theoretical frame. I will explore the historical and current situation of Chicanos/as and Native Americans in the United States, as well as the means of expression they use to rebel against their circumstances; I will also give an overview of my theoretical

framework, based on Humor Studies (fundamentally, the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, the Bergsonian mockery, and the Freudian grotesque) and Multi-Ethnic Studies.

The second chapter is divided in two sections. It deals with the use of humor in the selected literary texts, balanced concerning ethnicity and gender: two of them by American Indians and two by Chicanos/as, two of them by women and two of them by men. The first part includes a comparison between Henry's novel *The Light People* and Serros's *How to Be a Chicana Role Model*. Being the first section in which humor techniques in particular will be discussed, chapter 2.1.1. also serves as a catalog to study comical devices such as irony, satire, etc. The second part will be focused on the poetic texts of Diaz's *When My Brother Was an Aztec* and Martinez's *Hustle*.

The third chapter is devoted to a film recorded with the participation of the Chicano/a community, *Quinceañera*, and an American Indian movie, *Smoke Signals*, and in the fourth chapter, the video games *Guacamelee!*, inspired in Chicanos'/as' cultural background, and *Never Alone*, produced by a Native Alaskan tribe, are studied. Each of these chapters, which contains a work from each ethnic group, includes an analysis of the use of humor in the works both separately and comparatively. Thus, the narratives, poems, movies, and video games are examined in these two ways to shed light on the similarities and differences of humor in the cultural manifestations of each group.

This dissertation counts with an appendix which tries to clarify the complex structure of *The Light People*, by Gordon Henry, the novel that is analyzed in chapter 2.1.1. Due to its interweaving plots and its *mise-en-abyme* structure, the outline and chart included in this section help follow the chronological order of the events in the novel and also understand the relations between the characters. In the second appendix, readers can find images of both movies' posters. In the third there are images of the main characters

from the video game *Never Alone* that is studied in chapter 4.1, and the fourth and last appendix includes the most important characters that are mentioned in chapter 4.2 about *Guacamelee!* Both latter appendixes (3 and 4) gather illustrations from the official websites of each video game.

I might add two notices: first, the following written and audiovisual texts are, to a certain extent, meant to disturb readers and audience in different ways. They might make people cry with laughter, cry with sorrow, they can cause offense and will definitely demand an effort to distance from one's own culture in order to see the other's point of view. More importantly, humor in the following prose, poems, films, and video games will prove that the subaltern can actually mock the colonial center and that they can also laugh as they fight back. Second, as I mention in the epigraph of chapter 1, "analyzing humor is like dissecting a frog, nobody enjoys it" (Erichsen 27). Thus, if one's objective is to enjoy and have a laugh, it might be better to read the books, watch the movies or play the games; nonetheless, if one's aim is to understand how and why to laugh with ethnic communities, I invite you to continue reading.

1. **Humor and ethnic groups: nonviolent resistance**

“Analysing humour is like dissecting a frog: nobody enjoys it”

(Erichsen 27)

In this chapter, I will introduce the theories that will be used in this research project: Humor Studies as the primary field of work, and, to a lesser extent, Multi-Ethnic Studies, regarding the two ethnicities I will focus on: Chicanos/as and Native Americans. First of all, I will develop some of the existing theories of humor, while concentrating on their link with resiliency, criticism, and inter-ethnicity for ethnic communities. I will also briefly present the two groups that are analyzed in this dissertation, and I will argue that their research can be beneficial to develop global readings about the employment of humor by other ethnic groups. Lastly, I will provide a succinct explanation of Multi-Ethnic Studies and a reflection about why they prove useful in this dissertation. Bonding these ideas together, I will provide a rich background for analyzing the creative works of Chicanos/as and American Indians.

1.1. **Exiles in their own land: Chicanos/as and Native Americans**

While the triumphant First World is prospering, the socialist Second World has disintegrated, and the Third World is dramatically enlarging, the reality of the Fourth World⁵ flourishes right in the core of many developed countries. Fourth World theory

⁵ Fourth World peoples are the original indigenous inhabitants before colonizers invaded, settled, and exploited their homelands, but the meaning can be extended to cover a wide range of ethnic groups. The expression was coined in 1972 when the World Council of Indigenous Peoples (WCIP) was created (Rao and Reddy 276). As Heidi Bruce states (61), Fourth World activism supports the interests of ethnic groups and encourages a reorganization of geopolitical borders to mitigate conflicts derived from the current world

basically reflects upon the tensions between the concepts of state and nation⁶ that have been inherited, in many cases, from the colonization era (Nietschmann 227, 237). Sometimes the term nation-state is used to whitewash the domination of an imperialist power over an ethnic group, but the truth is that only less than five percent of the states in the world can be considered nation-states (Bruce 62; Nietschmann 229). Actually, the key to the conflict between Fourth World nations and the states dominating them comes “not from diversity alone, but when certain groups are systematically excluded from power” (Bruce 64). In the words of Heidi Bruce, “much of the challenge that Fourth World nations face is ... their own internalized connection to—and dependence upon—the state entity that occupies them” but that they also try to challenge (63). This can be applied to Native Americans and Chicanos/as in the United States. In the following pages I will delve into the situation of internal colonialism⁷ of these two groups; at the same time, I will discuss the power of comical creative expression to give voice to Chicanos/as and Native Americans.

By the year 2015 the percentage of U.S. people who considered themselves “White alone” was 77.1%, which means that the remaining 30%—which is a considerably high rate—are supposed to belong to an ethnic community (“QuickFacts”). People from Latin American heritage are the largest group with 56.6 million (17% of the U.S. population) according to the United States Census Bureau (“Hispanic” 1) and more than

division (Nietschmann 225, 226). Nevertheless, many authors consider that Fourth World is a category derived from a Western construction of the world with “more than a slight tinge of superiority” (Henry, “Some questions” 2).

⁶ A state is defined as a territory contained within a political border with a centralized political body recognized by other states (Nietschmann 227); a nation is a sociocultural group with “a common language, common territory, common culture, or common heritage” (Bruce 61), as well as the relationship between those people, their land, and their cosmos (Nietschmann 226). In short, nations are self-identifying and do not have a birth date, but states are born on a particular day and need external reaffirmation (226); “states come and go—nations remain” (242). While we can count over 200 states (Bruce 62), there are between 5000 and 8000 politically unrecognized Fourth World nations (Nietschmann 225).

⁷ The origin of this expression can be traced back to 1957 in Leo Marquard’s pamphlet entitled *South African Colonial Policy* (see Walls).

half of whom have a Mexican origin (2) that can be traced back to pre-Columbian times. The other extreme is represented by Native Americans who, in spite of being the indigenous dwellers of the continent, only represent 1.4% of the population, including Native Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders (“QuickFacts”). Both Chicanos/as and American Indians have lower income and education rates than the country’s average (United States Census Bureau, “Hispanic” 4; United States Census Bureau, “American Indian” 3-4) despite having the longest histories in the United States, as they had been living in the American continent centuries before its countries were even born (Manfredi 27; Oliva 35).

Although the United States is one of those countries which are built on the idea of a melting pot of cultures, the truth is that such metaphor is more of a literary trope than a reality (Manfredi 93). According to the previous data, Fourth World peoples live in the United States without being entirely recognized and accepted. Chicanos/as and Native Americans can be considered representatives of Fourth World people whose mere existence questions ideas such as the legitimacy of political borders, the validity of states, and the imaginary notions of nation and nationhood. This happens as they are exiled in their own land.

It seems urgent to comment on the Chicano/a experience as evidence that the Fourth World is a reality in the United States (Villar Raso and Herrera-Sobek 10). Around the 1960s, the world started hearing about an ethnic group called Chicanos/as. Other names for these community include La Raza, Mexican Americans (Villanueva 15), Latin Americans, Spanish Americans, Spanish-speaking, Spanish surnamed (16), Hispanic,

Spanish,⁸ or Latins (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 84). Tino Villanueva asserts that, from the beginning of the twentieth century and until the 1960's, Chicano/a used to be a negative way (9) to talk about lower-class Mexicans in the United States. Usually, Chicanos/as were identified as people who came from Mexico, while Pochos/as had already been born in the United States (7); the former were not adapted to the new country while the latter had been assimilated (10).

From the Chicano Movement in the 1960's until nowadays, Chicano/a has been a name for U.S. citizens of Mexican heritage (Villanueva 11) who do not accept either US-American rules (15) or internal colonialism (22, 40). Nevertheless, the group is politically, socially and racially heterogeneous (Meier and Ribera 6). As has already been mentioned, Chicanos/as have an older origin than the current United States: they are also natives to the American continent. Gloria Anzaldúa evaluates the importance of indigeneity for this community and says that Chicanos/as “compose the largest single tribe or nation of Anishinabeg (Indians) found in the United States today” (*Borderlands* 23). Chicanos/as live with their *mestizo/a*, Mexican, Hispanic, indigenous, and U.S.-American identities mostly in harmony (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 27; Meier and Ribera 4; Villar Raso and Herrera-Sobek 15). Moreover, they are multiracial, transnational, and multilingual (Castillo 69). However, this community has been subjected to U.S. imperialist attitudes for a very long time; for example, Anzaldúa's poem “We Call Them Greasers” (*Borderlands* 156-57) reflects raping, lynching, threats, exploitation, and genocide. These attitudes have evolved into the current situation of marginalization

⁸ The designations Latin Americans, Spanish Americans, Spanish-speaking, Spanish surnamed and Mexican Americans have been proposed by official institutions, but only Mexican Americans is successful within the community (Villanueva 16). The word Spanish only works as a linguistic classification, but it cannot be used to express ethnicity (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 84).

(Meier and Ribera 4), violence, discrimination, and exploitation (Villar Raso and Herrera-Sobek 9) that many Chicanos/as face.

Very few literary works by Chicanos/as are currently written in Spanish (Villar Raso and Herrera-Sobek 21) because not many of them can read or write in this language, although its use may be common in their daily lives (33). Hence, Gabriele Pisarz-Ramírez points out that Chicano/a literature “stands for a sociolinguistic reality, a lived practice of bi- and interlingual speech” (68). The polyglossic discourse of Chicanos/as can be understood as a reflection of their *mestizo* identity or “linguistic *mestizaje*” (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 80). Anzaldúa remarks that Chicanos/as express themselves in many languages because they are “a complex, heterogeneous people” (*Borderlands* 77) who speak a wide variety of languages (77) and have an Indian voice too (81). Their relationship with language, thus, creates a kaleidoscopic universe perfectly reflected in their literary texts and movies as a metaphor for Chicanos/as themselves and their situation in-between two cultures.

Native Americans are the other group to be studied in this dissertation. Known as American Indians, Indians (Miller et al. 14), Aboriginal Americans, Amerindians, Amerinds, First Americans, First Nations, Native Indians, Indigenous, Original Americans, Red Indians, Redskins, or Red Men (35), they are also a Fourth World community. Native Americans used to call themselves “the people” in their respective languages (Harris 68); therefore, the difference between tribes, as well as the recognition of their individuality, sprung from the encounter with another group. This situation was probably taken to the extreme with the arrival of European colonizers. From that moment onwards, they were no longer “the people” but “the Natives”, a word that soon crystallized the prejudices of the Old Continent (Ramone 127).

Nowadays, in the United States there are continental Native Americans, Alaskan Natives, and Native Hawaiians (Miller et al. 14) gathered in an enormous number of tribes whose cultures have been systematically jeopardized since the 15th and 16th centuries through severe assimilation and acculturation processes (15, 23). In theory, the tribes currently survive as intact political communities (14), but cultural conflicts and integration are still critical problems for American Indians in their U.S. reservations.⁹ There are 562 Native American tribal governments recognized by the United States (and even more with no official acknowledgement) that should be granted institutional freedom (29). However, their sovereignty falls short more often than not (29), and the relationship between the Natives and the government of the United States is completely unique (15). There are studies that confirm the “disproportionate rates of disease” and the “significantly lower health status” of Native American people compared to other US-Americans, apart from other conditions that dramatically reduce life expectancy (31).

Practices such as violence, genocide, acculturation, forced migration, slavery, internal wars, European illnesses, etc.¹⁰ (López Liqueste 24) have been mixed with the violation or irregular negotiation of treaties. Some rights have been granted to Native Americans since the 1960's and 1970's, although racism, abuse, and inequality are current issues (United States Census Bureau, “American Indian” 3-5). American Indians suffer

⁹ According to the United States Census Bureau, 5.2 million people in the country consider themselves American Indian or/and Alaskan Native (“American Indian” 1), 22% of whom live in reservations or Alaskan Native villages (5). That makes an approximate total of 1,144,000 Native Americans living in reservations; thus, around 4,056,000 American Indians live outside reservations.

¹⁰ These situations are addressed by most contemporary Native American writers, such as the prominent novelist Louise Erdrich in her book *The Round House*. The novel features the rape of a Native American woman by a white man and the few consequences of his crime. Louise Barnett argues that the plot of the novel might be slightly influenced by the historical rape of Jancita Deer Eagle by the politician William Janklow (Barnett 00:14:34). The man was never prosecuted and he became the longest-serving Governor of South Dakota (00:15:26), even though the subject was public and well-known (00:15:32).

from being seen as static figures from the past instead of an existing ethnic group with their own socioeconomic problems (Emmons 8; López Liqueste 10).

In the United States, indigenous responses have already started to appear (Bruce 65) because this country has inherited “a privileged position as a new steward over the ownership of intellectual production” but has also developed an incompetence to relate to ethnic diversity (Rao and Reddy 278). In fact, the United States has sometimes been identified as the capital of the Fourth World (276)—for instance, in the cases of Chicanos/as and Native Americans—although the situation is actually more complicated and long-standing. As Gordon Brotherston proposes:

On being labeled the New World, America entered into a story of depredation for which the planet has no parallel ... In the course of a just a few centuries its original inhabitants, though settled here for millennia and countable in any millions, have come to be perceived as a marginal if not entirely dispensable factor in the continent’s destiny (1).

In other words: ethnic groups in the United States are considered as non-tolerated people with “unpleasant colors and discredited languages” (Posse 10) who “arrive late to the feast of civilization” (Ludmer 10) and, nowadays, globalization as well. Native Americans and Chicanos/as have not yet experienced anything remotely similar to a complete decolonization process (López Liqueste 10, 23), but they are not the most glaring example of colonization either (22). Chicanos/as and Native Americans today cannot be understood without discussing the “continued legacy of imperial violence and ... resistance to the forces of material and discursive colonialism” (A. Aldama 3) that they have lived in their own home (3).

One of the ways these two ethnic groups show resistance towards and react against their situations of exclusion is through creative work (Posse 11). As Sreenivasa Rao and Sreenivasulu Reddy explain, literature reflects “the social, economic, literary and cultural circumstances that affected the lives of Natives” who share their experience looking for universal understanding and inter-ethnic enrichment (277). Their literary expressions need to “gain attention and legitimacy” (278), given the intellectual marginalization of these peoples due to their oral traditions that can make their literature hard to understand for Western cultures (Brotherston 4; Hopkins 196). The mere concept of Fourth World texts and literatures—such as scrolls of the Algonquin, Inca *quipus*, Navajo dry paintings, or the encyclopedic pages of Mesoamerica’s screen fold books (Brotherston 4)—were considered a dangerous proof of civilization and literacy before the Western conquest (4), and they are threatening testimonies of Fourth World voices. As Diana Taylor asserts, if Fourth World groups “could be reduced to the exotic, to feathers, wide hats, and mariachi bands, there would be no current intellectual debates about protecting the Western canon” (101). This means that the attempts to justify Western cultural supremacy are proof of the cultural, social, and economic richness of Fourth World cultures.

These two communities use creativity to resist, oppose, and decolonize imperial and globalizing subjection attempts, and their creative pieces should be approached from an inter-ethnic point of view (Taylor 17) in order to promote communication between different cultures. Chicanos/as and Native Americans reflect the reality of neocolonialism, internal colonization, and the problematic of race, class, and gender which is palpable in the United States with devastating results (17). Their creative production stands as a testimony of oppression in the 21st century under the power of Western imperialist powers who simply changed their name to “Americans” (18). Furthermore, they prove that a humoristic approach on the part of creators, readers, and

audiences can be more productive than victimization for the purpose of inter-ethnic understanding (López Liqueste 25).

1.2. **Humor: a weapon of mass creation**

The artist Justin Kameron, also known as Angryblue, created a series of posters based on the Weapons of Mass Creation Fest celebrated in Cleveland, Ohio, in 2011. The posters, ranging from literature to cooking, celebrate the strength of culture and art to challenge the status quo and peacefully rebel against it (“Weapons of Mass Creation”).¹¹ Humor springs in many of Kameron’s posters because of its paradoxical imagery: he uses the silhouette of a weapon to criticize destruction and violence, but at the same time he fills those images with artistic elements to emphasize the power of culture to create a different, fairer world. Those weapons—art and humor—are precisely the ones used by many artists from minoritized groups to destabilize hierarchies and subvert prejudices, as the comic can be more successful than solemnity (Holoch 33). Its goal is to achieve a decolonization of the mind (Gruber 228), both the creator’s and the audience’s, choosing dialogue over hostility. That is the case of Chicanos/as and Native Americans, who employ humorous approaches in their creative works in order to confront the hegemonic world order and its neocolonial discourse (Fellner and Heissenberger 164).

The same contradictions and paradoxes of construction and destruction in Kameron’s work are usually involved in most humorous experiences. Humor, therefore, is a *nepantla*, a place inhabited by the contradictions and misunderstandings when

¹¹ The images can be accessed at <http://angryblue.bigcartel.com/product/weapons-of-mass-creation-literary-canon>.

different realities collide.¹² Nevertheless, this collision can bring about understanding and enrichment, not necessarily destruction. Being present in all human societies (Billig 200), humor can play different functions that make it a specially enriching medium of expression for ethnic communities.

The first question that might arise has not an easy answer: what is humor? Humor is a complicated, puzzling concept because it is transient and highly subjective (Holoch 17). What we ignore about it is much more than what we can say, but most theorists agree that the comic is caused by any oral or written message, any image or sound, which provokes laughter or a smile (Bremmer and Roodenburg 1). However, it is a false assumption that humor always creates laughter, and, from the physical point of view, laughter can be a bodily response to other stimuli, such as nervousness. Apart from the physical reaction, laughing involves psychological, cultural, ideological, mental, and imaginative connotations (Billig 181; Bremmer and Roodenburg 58). Thus, humor might trigger a variety of reactions in the audience other than, precisely, laughter (Holoch 19). In fact, sometimes it brings up “unlaughter” (Billig 192), the absence of laughter when it is expected, which can also be considered a response to humor. Siro López offers an explanation for this phenomenon: it is comicality, based on mockery, which seeks laughter (14-17); however, humorism, concerned with resiliency, promotes empathy instead (20-21). Furthermore, when humor provokes laughter, there is no agreement whether the former is the cause, the process or the consequence of the latter (Holoch 17).

Michael Billig gathers three other paradoxes of humor that might clarify a possible definition: it is both universal and particular, it is social and antisocial, and it is resistant to analysis but at the same time understandable (184-89). First of all, humor has

¹² *Nepantla* is a *Náhuatl* word that literally means the space between two bodies of water, but which metaphorically refers to a space between two worlds in constant transition (Luna Estévez 77).

been found in all human societies, therefore it is a universal trait of humankind; however, it is local or particular in the sense that each community has its own particular sense of humor, which must be shared by the entire group (Billig 4, 175). Hence, humor is meant to be experienced within a group that shares certain cultural referents, but this social function very often clashes with the fact that we mock the people around us (Bergson 11; Billig 234, 235). Some experts consider that humor needs more than one person, but this is not entirely true: while humor can be meant to be experienced in society, this does not mean that it necessarily has to involve more than one individual (Holoch 18). As any other process of communication, humor requires a speaker and a receiver; nevertheless, these roles might be performed by two different people or by the same person. In other words, humor is, at the same time, personal and collective (Luna Estévez 61).

Despite these contradictions, humor is clearly useful for human societies; otherwise, it would not be universal. Its functions can be classified into different ways, but it can be agreed that humor may serve as a corrective, a mirror of society, a form of entertainment, a creator of community, a critical tool, a challenging discourse, a relief strategy, a mediator in cultural conflicts, and a sign of resiliency. One of the main theorists of humor, Henri Bergson, developed a theory according to which the victims of humor are those whose behavior is too rigid or non-human (i.e. mechanical) to be accepted in society and who deserve to be mocked and corrected (44). For instance, in many comedies certain characters are identified by catchphrases they repeat again and again; the repetition is comical because it points out a mechanical trait of the character that should be criticized by society. Therefore, humor is a social corrective for Bergson (46), George Meredith (Díaz Bild 129), and also Michael Billig, who argues that the embarrassment caused by humor is a control mechanism of social life (202). Instead of using harder techniques to impose order, a humorous punishment maintains social balance while

saving the participants' face. Other theorists investigate the role of humor from an anthropological perspective, concentrating on what humor represents in a particular society. Humor is deeply interwoven in the threads of culture, and it provides information about what is important for a community and how the individuals engage with each other (Driessen 227; Holoch 22). The study of humor trends in a particular group is an important tool to understand the idiosyncrasy of a society from yet another point of view (Gutierrez-Jones 120).

Due to its potentially recreational dimension (Díaz Bild 101-3), humor is present in narratives of all times including traditional and contemporary oral and written stories because it grants the survival of their lessons. In literature, humor often works as a strategy to transform the hard, strange, deformed events of everyday life into something entertaining that can be handled (Díaz Bild 97; Holoch 22). This amusing function is, to some extent, related to the incongruity theory of humor proposed by the philosopher John Locke in the eighteenth century: humor produces similarities where otherwise there would only be differences, as can be exemplified by puns, reflecting the polyhedral reality of language and social life (Billig 61-65; Díaz Bild 11), together with the necessity to find alliances between points of view, cultures, and groups.¹³

At this point, it is obvious that humor is a rather revealing feature of any society, precisely because it can help secure social relationships and strengthen the feeling of belonging to a group (Bowers 249; Erichsen 39; Luna Estévez 82). Humor is used to engage with other people, both in a friendly way or in order to attack and mock. This is

¹³ Carolina Núñez-Puente proposes that different feminist and queer groups form coalitions based on the commonalities inherent to difference ("Epilogue"), an idea which should be expanded to ethnic communities. That is, some ethnic groups have joined "from brotherhood to nationhood" (Rao and Reddy 276), as in the case of the Pan-Indian and Chicanos'/as' movements of the 1960s. Nonetheless, forming inter-ethnic coalitions, which would certainly make their demands stronger, is still a pending subject for most of them.

actually the basis of superiority theories formulated by the philosopher Thomas Hobbes,¹⁴ who studies the tradition of humor in ancient Greece and Rome, the Middle Ages, and the European Renaissance (Billig 50-53). This theory is related to other functions of humor such as correcting, mirroring society, and criticizing, among others.

Thus, humor can help people be part of a community, but it can also make a person be expelled from it (Luna Estévez 63) because, on the one hand, it might create a firm bond between people (Gillotta 6) and, on the other, it can also detonate this connection. In this sense, humor plays an important role in the building of tribalism or associations of ethnic groups because it backs up engagement and connection between the participants (Williams 95) against supremacist discourses (Gutierrez-Jones 113). Furthermore, it does not only engage native peoples, but also non-Natives in intercultural and inter-ethnic exchanges (Bowers 247), creating communities beyond ethnic borders. In addition, humor, which can be considered a strong element of critique and taboo-breaking, can also unite a group by means of producing a space for social criticism (Díaz Bild 11, 12; Gutierrez-Jones 117-18; Oesterheld 70, 75).

When the criticism caused by humor is taken seriously, it can become a challenge for “the authority of elite figures” (Gutierrez-Jones 118), especially if it comes from oppressed groups rebelling against authority and homogenization (Holoch 22, 212). The importance of challenging through humor is not the subversive act of rebellion by itself, but the richness of a space to share alternative inter-ethnic perspectives (Erichsen 30; Holoch 209). The most skeptical would say that humor, like art, cannot change the

¹⁴ Hobbes argues that humor is based on mocking other people in order to develop a feeling of superiority towards them; this feeling would be at the very core of humor and of human nature, and it relates to competitiveness and selfishness (Billig 51). Therefore, Hobbes understands that the laughter of the public reflects their feeling superior (faster, more intelligent, more flexible, etc.) to the person being mocked. Nevertheless, superiority theories seem partial, as they ignore the positive social purposes of humor.

world through this kind of subversion; however, ethnic groups wisely use this weapon of mass creation to fight oppression with both relaxation and effectiveness (Luna Estévez 82). That fight is not just symbolic, since it has an influence in life and in the creation of countercultures and counter canons (Proaño-Gómez 180; Luna Estévez 91).

As Ulrike Erichsen notices, the rebelliousness of humor does not necessarily lead to a clash, but it can also “defuse cultural conflict” and set people free from “ossified ideologies” (30). The debates humor can create are not always destructive, but can also regulate society, open up a dialogue (32) to celebrate difference “in a non-conflictual way” (39), and cultivate empathy. The rebelliousness of humor as a constructive strategy has been the object of study of relief theory¹⁵ and Mikhail Bakhtin’s carnivalesque humor.¹⁶ Scott Gutierrez-Jones recovers a Bakhtinian perspective to justify the engagement of contemporary Fourth World cultural creators with humor to break the pyramidal power structures between ethnic groups. Although “humor can look like an escape valve”, it also allows minoritized communities to rethink victimization, rewrite history, and challenge oppressive institutions and the cultural canons they support (Gutierrez-Jones 112-13, 117).

Nonetheless, irony is a different question altogether (Hutcheon, *Irony’s* 25): not all ironies are amusing, though some are; not all humor is ironic, though some is (26).

¹⁵ In relief theory, Herbert Spencer argues that humor helps expel the excess of nervous energy in the body of a person through the movement of laughter, which would respond both to humor and excitement. Alexander Bain puts forth that humor is related to an increase in the vital functions of the body when being released from some kind of constraint (Billig 95-98). Both scholars expand upon Freud’s theory of humor as a relief from social impositions (Billig 146-49; Díaz Bild 157, 160).

¹⁶ Bakhtin interprets carnival as a way to subvert social hierarchies (Bajtín 14-15). For Bakhtin, humor is choral, anticanonical, subversive, liberating (Díaz Bild 17), universal, social (21), and paradoxical; it also has a deep philosophical dimension and provides a utopic understanding of the world (22). The best example is carnival in the Middle Ages, when peasants would disguise as clergymen or noblemen to break taboos and impositions. Like carnival, humor represents the spirit of a world that is real, ideal, and degrading (22, 25) at the same time that it helps humankind in its search for freedom and happiness (26). However, carnivalesque humor can only be limited and ephemeral; otherwise, it would be banned from society (26).

Critics and scholar agree that irony can be positive and negative (27) in form and aim but is always destabilizing (32); consequently, it becomes an extremely useful humor technique for ethnic communities to problematize authority and subvert colonialist attitudes (184, 197). In this highly politicized context, irony can criticize, show different feelings with skepticism (amused surprise, recognition, sorrow or pleasure), tease, detach oneself from a painful topic, and destabilize power structures (Barbe 79). Usually, the type of irony that is targeted to sociopolitical criticism is both innocent and aggressive, against the power of the oppressor (95), with a saving-face objective (96), but clearly centered on causing a division (99). With those clear features and aims, it seems that irony is a straightforward phenomenon, but that is actually far from true: irony is full of ambiguity (95) because whether an utterance is ironic or not depends on the interpretation of the audience (15) and, therefore, their cultural background (Hutcheon, *Irony's* 89).

Ultimately, the most important aims of humor for the purposes of my study can be summarized into the concepts of resiliency and criticism. Resiliency is a humorous outlook in the face of life's adversities (Allen 158; McCloskey 56) that can be linked to catharsis (Díaz Bild 71-87) and the healing properties of humor (Díaz Bild 59, 60, 69; Gutierrez-Jones 118; Luna Estévez 59). Olga Luna Estévez explores in depth its curative potential against stress, fear, and distress (60). Therefore, humor can be used to reevaluate damage and regenerate the self, as Native Americans, Chicanos/as, and other ethnic communities do in their creative works (Díaz Bild 11, 12; Gutierrez-Jones 123; Luna Estévez 66) by creating a comic distance with traumatic events (Díaz Bild 62-63; Luna Estévez 62). On the other hand, sociocultural and political criticism is one of the main purposes of humor in the creative pieces of Fourth World communities. Furthermore, as I have already mentioned, the materialization of humor as a rebellious weapon can join ethnic groups together and lead to a coalition that might make a real change.

Many authors, such as Adele Marian Holoch and Christina Oesterheld, acknowledge the power of humor texts “to question, critique, and rebel against colonialism and its after-effects” (Holoch 27; Oesterheld 57), a power which might be absent in narratives of victimization (Holoch 32). As Oesterheld maintains, in precolonial times humor was a relief from political and religious powers; later on, during colonization, it challenged both the colonizer and the colonized to take action; and in the postcolonial era, humor is still relevant to underline the legacy of imperialism (85). Somehow, humor translates suffering, rage, and sadness into survival (Ferguson 97): people can “bend instead of break” (96). Ethnic groups use humor as a healing strategy and a coping mechanism to come to terms with their past and present (Allen 158; Emmons 146, 201), an honest criticism or a subtle complaint (Aguilar Melantzón and García Núñez 283; Díaz Bild 126), and a rich exchange of ideas (Dunphy and Emig 7). This is especially important because sometimes the colonized revolve around a discourse that categorizes people as either victim or perpetrator (Gutierrez-Jones 115; López Liqueste 25). Then, it is humor, through resiliency, that gives them a chance to go beyond that dichotomy and construct a space for discussing and rewriting their history (Bowers 251; Gutierrez-Jones 117).

On the other hand, Fourth World humor is also enriching for the witnesses (readers, gamers, etc.), as it offers a valuable understanding of the concerns and life conditions of ethnic communities, and the acknowledgment that difference does not necessarily involve conflict (Erichsen 29, 39). Humor, probably more than drama, engages the reader, encourages the audience to build a bridge across ethnic or national boundaries (39) and provokes thought (Emmons 131). Even the humor that is meant to shock can have a positive effect (171). Nonetheless, if misunderstood, humor can also reinforce racial, sexual, and genocidal prejudices (Aguilar Melantzón and García Núñez

283) and contribute to the naive idea that life in the Fourth World is not such a harsh experience as it can actually be (Bowers 247). As Maggie Ann Bowers puts it, sometimes the “celebration of humor as ethnic glue breaks down under the weight of suffering” (255).

Jose R. Reyna argues that *picardía*—the Spanish word for cunning—is a defining trait of Chicano/a identity (9). Their humor and *picardía* can be traced back to pre-columbine times in Mexico.¹⁷ The type of humor used by Chicanos/as is called frontier humor by Ricardo Aguilar Melantzón and Fernando García Nuñez, who consider that its ultimate objective is to pinpoint differences with other groups (278) and to encourage the revision of myths (Reyna 256). In spite of its frontier origins, *picardía* has spread all over the United States and Mexico (Aguilar Melantzón and García Nuñez 278). This type of humor involves a rebellious criticism against oppression and colonization (Aguilar Melantzón and García Nuñez 280, 282; Luna Estévez 67); however, it is difficult to make generalizations about frontier humor because its dynamic nature fits the necessities of Chicanos/as over time in different places (290). Almost all of the Chicano/a artistic production has been embedded in this form of humorous critique from the birth of the Chicano Movement until today (Gillotta 155; Gutierrez-Jones 119, 120), but it has also become a strategy to heal the wounds of exploitation (Gutierrez-Jones 123).

The situation of Native American humor is slightly different because American Indians have traditionally been represented as stern and melancholic, although that representation does not do justice to the importance of humor in their culture (Bowers 248; Emmons 1; McCloskey 40). The truth is that humor plays a central role in tribal

¹⁷ An excellent example of the modern origin of Chicano/a *picardía* is portrayed by Cantinflas, a Mexican actor who used the figure of the cunning *peladito* in his movies (Urquijo-Ruiz xiv, 19-20).

ceremonies and practices (Emmons 10). The problem when analyzing Native American humor, hand in hand with its spiritual implications, is that it holds vital differences with Western humor (Bowers 252; Gruber 8, 9; Emmons 4). Important evidences of those differences are the tradition of Pueblo clowns (Emmons 17), the Katsina cult (18), the Cherokee Booger Dancing (22), Zuni clowns (Díaz Bild 35), Jemez clowns (37), the badger and coyote stories, etc.¹⁸ Humor is also present in other aspects of Native American life, such as oral storytelling (McCloskey 43) and teasing, two practices employed to build group identity, reduce social conflict, and teach values (Gruber 205; McCloskey 42).

Contemporary American Indian authors use humor to present a realistic portrayal of their culture (Emmons 122), destroy stereotypes (Emmons 149; Gruber 131), challenge Western imperialist impositions (Gruber 117, 157, 172, 184), and try to make sense of their place in the world's structure (10). The truth is that nowadays humor is a fundamental feature in most Native American texts (Bowers 248) of every genre (Gruber 14-16). In many of them, authors recover the Trickster,¹⁹ a traditional figure of Native American humor (Emmons 11; Radin xxiv).²⁰ This comedic spirit does not just serve an entertaining function but “augment[s] the spiritual well-being of the community” (Emmons 17) and represents reinvention and reordering of the world (Díaz Bild 32, 169;

¹⁸ The above can represent spirits who maintain spiritual balance, make fun of outsiders and integrate foreign elements into Native American culture through humor (Emmons 21; Gruber 2).

¹⁹ Although trickster-like figures can be found in different cultures throughout the world since ancient times, the Native American Trickster has a very particular significance and mythology. American Indian tricksters are mythological characters constrained by no morals or values, as they are only moved by passion and instincts (Radin xxiii) and express themselves through humor, laughter, and irony (xxiv). The Trickster has the power to be at once “creator and destroyer, giver and negator, he who dupes others and who is always duped himself” (xxiii). These mythological figures can symbolize different realities, but they always represent “everything to every man—god, animal, human being, hero, buffoon, he who was before good and evil” (169). The Trickster has always epitomized a Native American challenge against the establishment (Jung 211), and this rebellious dimension joins traditional tricksters with those in modern native literature. For contemporary American Indian writers, the Trickster provides a message of catharsis, adaptation (Ferguson 2) and cultural pride (64).

²⁰ The practice of contemporary authors who recover the Trickster is called “the second coming of the Trickster” (Hultkranz 84).

Lape 57-58). Apart from that, the Trickster sends the ultimate message of resiliency for Native Americans to adapt to the modern world (Ferguson 2). Although I will later devote some time to explain the character of the Native American Trickster, it must be clarified that the Aztecs—the predecessors of contemporary Chicanos/as—also used to have several mythological figures that can be related to humor, such as Huehuecōyotl and Tezcatlipoca.²¹

In most cases, authors from ethnic communities who protest through humor “challenge the audiences to think about the ways in which ethnicity is defined and/or performed” and “are willing to view contemporary ethnic identity as malleable, not as a frozen artifact of historical trauma” (Gillotta 19). Humor is a powerful tool for any human being in any social group in terms of creating community, balancing social order, correcting inappropriate attitudes, making criticism, and relieving tension; moreover, its potential is even more effective for ethnic groups. These communities also use humor to canalize resiliency, mediate in intercultural conflicts, and heal physical and spiritual wounds.

1.3. **Inter-Ethnic Studies: combining forces**

As Arnold Krupat argues, there is an increasing “need to listen to different voices, ... producing dialogic and polyphonic texts ... to *include* (somehow) the other’s point of view or, rather, to *adopt* (somehow) the other’s point of view” (8). This author, as well

²¹ Huehuecōyotl (translated as “old coyote”) is a deity embodied as a coyote or a lizard that represents sexual instincts, war, and corn. He seduced the goddess Xochiquetzal and fathered Contéotl, god of corn. The birth of the child caused gods to fall on the Earth, the arrival of sexuality and sin, and the creation of war (Valadez et al. 15). Tezcatlipoca, the creator, has different shapes (a coyote, a bundle of ashes or a skunk) and functions as the antagonist of Quetzalcōatl, with whom he created the world (Stocker 1, 5).

as others like Werner Sollors (Marcus and Sollors xxiv) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (4), supports a way of reading texts by minoritized groups in interaction with others by other ethnic groups or by the mainstream dominant culture (Krupat 232). The journal *Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States (MELUS)*²² also encourages scholars to “expand the definition of American literature” (Raina et al. 10) “through the study and teaching of Latino American, Native American, African American, Asian and Pacific American, and ethnically specific Euro-American literary works, their authors and their cultural contexts” (Miller 1). All those stances, and others like multi-, trans-, and inter-ethnicity, share the common goal of producing a transaction (Krupat 204) with ethnic groups in the United States in this case. Dialogue between cultures, polyphony, the globalization of local cultures and an expansion of American literature and mainstream Western literature, Krupat continues (210), are the foundations of Multi-Ethnic Studies.

The aforesaid necessity of “a cross-ethnic ‘dialogue between selves’” (Simal 9) in American literature, pointed out by scholars like Sollors, would not only give voice to marginal literatures, but it would also cross-read and interpret those texts in combination with the works of other ethnic groups (10), avoiding “intra-ethnic” blindness (12). Because of intra-ethnic approaches, much has been written about ethnic groups as isolated communities, but there are very few comparative studies about their intersections—or their differences (Winter 1). A multi-ethnic approach is particularly enriching in a context of globalization and internationalization.

On the other hand, Multi-Ethnic Studies reveal a dialogue (7) between selves and cultures beyond the borders of geography, race, ethnicity, and culture from the perspective of Comparative Literature. However, such an approach in American literature

²² To know more about MELUS, see their official website “Multi-Ethnic Literatures of the United States”.

can also be criticized as threatening, because it questions the core of what it means to be American (Fischer-Hornung and Raphael-Hernandez xi; Winter 28). In any case, the key issue is to what extent American literature can be represented without a canon that includes a myriad of ethnicities (xi). Scholars of Multi-Ethnic Studies are thus making an effort to create a common ground (Bhattacharjee 44) and an internationalization to promote dialogues (Chabram-Dernersesian 95). Therefore, developing comparative Multi-Ethnic Studies is not only enriching in the contemporary world, but necessary to fully understand it.

A multi-ethnic approach is a way to develop the study of literatures beyond “the old postcolonial model” which “will not serve now as the master model for transnational to global cultural studies on the way to planetarity” (Spivak 85). Postcolonialism has been deployed to the point that a substitute model and a new vocabulary are necessary (López Liqueste 10) because they refer to events from the twentieth century; however, nowadays the global situation of the world is very different and new strategies to approach the cultural creations of ethnic groups are necessary (López Liqueste 10). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak also reflects on the idea of a crisis in Postcolonial Studies with the birth of a globalized world that substitutes the traditional Empire, which has caused a profound transformation in the imperialist field (85). In this globalized world, “cultures and ethnic traditions inevitably engage in either an oblique or an overt dialog(ue) with one another” (Simal 7); hence, a multi-ethnic perspective favors a better understanding of those texts. Nowadays, postcolonialism might make more sense as a historical marker than as a discipline to study the world (Wilson et al. 2), while Multi-Ethnic Studies, among other ongoing phenomena, (7) can address cultural differences, globalization, and cosmopolitanism.

For some time already, Comparative Literature has been addressing the discipline of Ethnic and Multi-Ethnic Studies (Spivak 26), such as “cultural amalgamation” or “racial essentialism” (Marable 56). There is a special interest in literary texts maybe because, as Native American writer Leslie Marmon Silko states, stories “aren’t just entertainment” (Takaki 11). Reading the literature of ethnic communities is not the only way of making the audience aware of the situation of other people, and “Literary reading is not even the most promising method” (Spencer 41); however, the main point of reading literature is to search for a critical understanding of other people (41). To put it more poetically, “literature has to do with the soul” (Bona and Maini 1), and it allows to put oneself in other people’s shoes.

In addition to literature, Mary Jo Bona and Irma Maini acknowledge the importance of the Internet in the relations between different cultures today. Technology reshapes and creates new meanings for the texts and it also helps spread their message (17), as well as encouraging “multilinearity, nonhierarchicality, multivocality, and collaboration” (Durso 199). This assertion can be extrapolated to any kind of new media since the last decades of the 20th century. For instance, video games can have an enormous power to transmit inter-ethnic values and give voice to ethnic groups. In fact, the ways in which many video games are produced might be compared to Native American and Chicano/a traditional ways of life—communitarian, circular, collaborative, bifurcated, interstitial, and border-crossing (214). Fortunately, the inclusion of newer cultural products like cinema and video games will allow me to expand my focus from literary texts to other contemporary narrative and creative works.

Though I entirely agree with the goals of Multi-Ethnic Studies and I will keep them in mind as a frame to develop my research project, I find a few problems concerning

this nomenclature. Interactions among cultures can be developed by transculturalism, multiculturalism, and interculturalism; however, the choice of one word or another is not just a stylistic question, but a declaration of intents. Transculturalism proposes that cultures should come together to try to create a completely new culture not by means of integration but through syncretism (Hidalgo Hernández 73). This is a commendable effort, but it does not seem to take into account the risk of assimilation (Crotty 91) of ethnic groups. In short, transculturalism/trans-ethnicity could be linked to the metaphor of the melting pot (Crotty 91; Laubeová 8). Multiculturalism “simply acknowledges the existence of more than one culture” in a space (Crotty 1) and, though it encompasses notions of equality, respect, and tolerance, it does not really seek mutual collaboration (2). Thus, it can be associated with the idea of the salad bowl (Laubeová 8). Lastly, interculturalism creates the urge of mutual learning, productive communication, and “shared responsibility” (Crotty 1) in the encounters between different cultures. Its main aim is to encourage diversity and to appreciate difference (Hidalgo Hernández 73), not by creating a completely new culture but by integrating different cultures (Crotty 2). Therefore, interculturalism would be represented by an “ethnic stew” (Laubeová 8).

It has been argued that Multi-Ethnic Studies must not be confused with Multicultural Studies. According to Sukalpa Bhattacharjee, multi-ethnic approaches can succeed where Multicultural Studies have failed (43). She asserts that multiculturalism in the United States has been developed so as to make sense of the different ethnic communities, recognize them, and give them value (43). Nevertheless, it has not achieved the goal of creating a social identity based on collectivism in the United States; rather, it has “otherised” (43) ethnic groups. In other words: while Multi-Ethnic Studies celebrate diversity (Simal 12) and universality (Bhattacharjee 44), multiculturalism seems to

encourage a particular conception of difference that ultimately leads to exclusions (43).²³ Notwithstanding, though this distinction between multiculturalism and Multi-Ethnic Studies has been clearly addressed, I consider that, for the sake of consistency, inter-ethnicity represents more accurately the cultural exchanges that I discuss in this dissertation.

Consequently, although I will be drawing from Multi-Ethnic Studies, as they follow the path of Postcolonial Studies and update them to the necessities of ethnic communities in the 21st century, I will employ inter-ethnicity to deal with the relations among them. With this theoretical frame, I will concentrate on contemporary concerns and include transmedia and multimodal works to encourage inter-ethnic communication in order to enrich global and local cultures, and to support an inclusive understanding of difference. This approach is not utopian, but highly realistic because it would be impossible to interpret American literature and globalization as a homogeneous matter instead of as an inter-ethnic quilt.

²³ Difference can become a very complicated concept, according to Dean A. Harris. It can be understood in an essentialist, oppressive way that classifies people by opposing them to a normative group, usually the dominant one, to create a mainstream standard. This dichotomy, which lies at the core of racism, judges all people according to a fix set of values, thus creating oppositions such as rich/poor, civilized/uncivilized, good/bad, etc. (14). However, difference can be understood from another point of view, categorizing groups of people as naturally having similarities and dissimilarities, but not as completely oppositional. In this explanation, there is no standard group and no fix set of values to judge cultures, and difference does not lead to exclusion and groups are not seen as heterogeneous entities (15-16).

2. To laugh or not to laugh: different humor techniques in the literature of Native Americans and Chicanos/as

2.1. Fun and playful narratives

2.1.1. Gordon Henry's *The Light People* and comicality

“Thank the great mystery, for the gift of humor”

(Henry, “Some questions” 6)

The Light People is a novel written by the Native American author Gordon Henry, winner of the American Book Award in 1995.²⁴ The author himself acknowledges to have written a book “party humorously and ironically” (Flys Junquera 125) in order to survive trauma, rewrite the canon, and achieve spiritual healing. Therefore, a novel by an American Indian author awarded for its relevance in an inter-ethnic approach to American literature and with a humorous intention can shed light on the use of comicality and resiliency in the literature of ethnic communities of the United States. Nevertheless, what is overtly funny about this novel and why? What is not exactly funny, but humorous nevertheless? What is the purpose of comicality in the novel? With the analysis of humor strategies and their purposes, I will explore *The Light People* as a satirical narrative that encourages a resilient attitude in Native American groups²⁵ and supports the possibility of inter-ethnicity.

²⁴ Gordon Henry, Jr., is an enrolled member of the White Earth Chippewa tribe (Minnesota). He has written mainly novels, poetry, and short stories involved with traditions and the problematic of native needs in the United States, which he also tries to deal with in his personal life (Martínez Falquina and Pascual 223-25).

²⁵ Aitor Ibarrola-Armendáriz studies Native American humor and resistance in Thomas King's novel *Green Grass, Running Water*. He claims that American Indians, as well as other "human collectiv[ies] on the verge of extinction" (67), have recovered humor as a way to resist imperialism. For them, humor helps

Henry confirms that the novel is written in “an attempt to break out of the official canon and dialectic” (Flys Junquera 128). He wrote this novel as part of his dissertation, in an attempt to show that he could handle different genres and atypical structures, thus creating quite a complex work (Callahan 187). Apart from that, his intention was also to provide a reflection of the thought process of a person, whose structure is not always linear and organized (Flys Junquera 124). That is why the novel has a complicated structure, telling stories inside other stories over and over again, and combining narrative, essay, drama, and poetry (Callahan 189). Henry intertwines all these ideas to design an innovative yet traditional narrative aimed both at native and non-native audiences. However, due to its structural pattern, its parody of Western preconceptions, and its link with Native American concepts of storytelling and cyclic²⁶ frameworks, the novel can be confusing for non-Indian readers (Callahan 187, 189).

The novel is built as a *mise-en-abyme* narrative, which engages with other ethnic groups and other books (for instance, *One Thousand and One Nights*)²⁷ while keeping the local essence of Native American stories built by the entire community.²⁸ This idea is particularly interesting if joined to the concept of humor in American Indian peoples, also

bound people with different cultural backgrounds, criticize colonial powers, and display a resilient attitude (67-68). However, American Indian authors also acknowledge in their humorous texts the difficulty of creating harmony between Natives and non-Natives

²⁶ The circle in American Indian cultures symbolizes the sun, the movement of nature, human life, etc. and it is a reference to the sacred hoop: a symbol of dynamism, change, harmony, resiliency, and a continuous repetition of events (Allen 9-10, 56). Circularity still has influence in contemporary native writers (Ruoff and Brown 10) and is crucial to the structure of *The Light People*. In fact, cyclic time is explicitly mentioned: “a hemisphere / in which a great many inhabitants / built ... values around the round, / the concept of the circle” (Henry, *The Light* 209) and “But still the world is round. No matter which direction you go” (210). Cyclic structures are a conscious reference to traditional Native American values, although Henry tried to go a step further and reach a spiral structure, not exactly a circle (Henry, “Some questions” 2). Henry uses broken cyclic structures too, a circular structure that is not complete in order to fracture and mock circularity, thus laughing at himself too.

²⁷ The relation between *The Light People* and other books such as *One Thousand and One Nights* (of Arabic literature) proves, as I will study later, that Henry’s novel fosters inter-ethnic exchanges by incorporating foreign elements in its original Native American tradition. Hence, identities, particularly nowadays, are constructed following the design of a quilt, gathering pieces from different cultures and finding connections between one’s culture and others.

²⁸ This is reminiscent of the explanation about Native American storytelling by the writer Leslie Marmon Silko: “Within one story there are many other stories coming together” (3).

aimed at group building (Bowers 249; Emmons 10; McCloskey 40). The book constructs a story through the suspended narratives of different members of the same community (Henry, “Some questions” 4), each of them adding pieces of information to the first story and diverting from it at the same time.²⁹ Therein, Henry wants to get involved in traditional storytelling, in which “what matters is to have as many of the stories as possible and to have them together” (Thompson 22).

In order to contextualize the novel and study its humorous features, I will first comment upon the novel’s literary tradition. Then, I will focus on Henry’s novel itself, studying both the context (the title and the chapter’s titles) and the content. To do so, I will summarize the plot, although the decentralization of the protagonist and the non-linear structure challenge a traditional summary. After that, I will focus exclusively on the humorous strategies of the novel (parody, irony, incongruity, grotesque, etc.), providing examples and interpretations. Finally, I will mention some humor theories that can shed light on particular passages of the book and some specific functions of humor particularly relevant to the text.

Native American narratives and humor

The literary background of contemporary Native American literature can be traced back in history to a point when dire wolves, mammoths, and saber-toothed tigers still inhabited the current United States. At that point, around 30,000 b.C.,³⁰ the ancestors of

²⁹ According to Jean-François Lyotard, in Native American literature “people do not exist as a subject but as a mass of millions of insignificant and serious little stories that sometimes let themselves be collected together to constitute big stories and sometimes disperse into digressive elements” (qtd. in Vizenor, “A Postmodern” 3).

³⁰ This date is highly disputed, as some authors refer to later periods of time, around 13,500 years ago. For more information, see White; and Wells and Read.

the Native Americans arrived in the continent in several waves, carrying certain metaphysical knowledge and interpretations of the universe (Wiget 1). Ideas of cyclic time and spherical space, an intelligent and dynamic universe, the unity of the material and spiritual world, the link between all living beings and the earth, etc., were spread all over America and created the core of Native American cultures (1).

All that knowledge was transferred through orature³¹ for centuries. Though popular orature and the myths associated to it are usually linked to ignorance and foolishness in Western culture (Erdoes and Ortiz xii), for American Indians oral storytelling is a realistic and pedagogical account of commonplace experiences. As Paula Gunn Allen argues, "myth acts as a lens through which we can discover the reality that exists beyond the limits of simple linear perception" (116). With the arrival of European settlers, the whole Native American cosmogony changed, and the Indians started writing in the European manner (Wiget 44). Their first texts were of religious and political content (some letters and a few historical documents). Later, autobiographies written by Native Americans and "as-told-to" autobiographies (narrated by an American Indian to a non-native scrivener) started appearing, preserving oral features. There were also historical and ethnographic communal writings by Native Americans who told their history (44-57).³²

³¹ The word "orature" was coined by Pio Zirimu, who wanted to give oral stories the same importance as the written ones (Thiong'o 72). Orature is present in all cultures as classical or contemporary literature. It usually shows the importance of nature and the place of humans in the universe. Storytelling and performance are central to it.

³² For instance, William Apes's *Eulogy on King Philip* (1836) belongs to the first category; *A Son of the Forest* (1829) by Black Hawk and *From the Deep Woods to Civilization* (1916) by Charles Eastman belong to the second; and *Sketches of Ancient History of the Six Nations* (1827) by David Cusick represent the last category (Wiget 44-57).

At the turn of the 19th century, Native American authors were writing novels about different topics: frontier romances³³ and books by John Joseph Mathews, D'Arcy McKnickle, and Zitkala-Ša (Wiget 63-97). After World War I, Native American literature started to be presented in a few compilations (Krupat 115). By the end of the sixties, the Pulitzer Prize was awarded to N. Scott Momaday, the first Native American to win that award. After the grant of a few rights in the 1970s (118),³⁴ an increasing interest in American Indian culture caused a group of non-native writers to adopt an idealized conception of the Native's world, though it was usually a romanticized image (120-21).

The Native American Renaissance includes American Indian and non-native writers who adopt Native American topics (Allen 77).³⁵ Contemporary Native American narrators are spreading their interests into new areas (poetic narrative, drama, science fiction, etc.). Despite the increasingly growing number of Native American authors, their literature is far from being accepted in the canon. Nonetheless, the exploration of Native American topics by non-native authors and the opening of American Indian writers to new literary forms show how much they value cultural exchanges (Krupat 9).

The use of humor helps many Native American authors create a community with common interests, concerns and styles. Some of them, apart from Henry, are Carter Revard and Gerald Vizenor (Blaeser 39), together with Sherman Alexie. Henry

³³ Such as *Kogewea, the Half-Blood* (1927) by Mourning Dove, and *Wild Harvest* (1925) and *Black Jack Davey* (1926) by John Milton Oskinson (Wiget 63).

³⁴ After the American Indian Movement was founded in 1968, American Indian groups developed a series of actions to denounce the situation of Native American tribes in the United States (the occupation of Alcatraz, the National Day of Mourning at Plymouth at Thanksgiving, the Trail of Broken Treaties, etc.). Native Americans gained a spirit of political militancy thanks to which the Indian Education Act of 1972, the Indian Health Care Act in 1976, and the Indian Child Welfare Act in 1978 were passed. During the decade of 1970 there were some improvements in sovereignty and tribal self-government and the recovery of certain lands. For more information, see "The Native American Power Movement".

³⁵ An example of this trend is *The Man Who Fell in Love with the Moon* by Tom Spanbauer (1991), a non-Native American writer who tells the story of a mixed-blood boy who is trying to discover his father's identity at the beginning of the 20th century.

acknowledges the importance of many of the previous Native American authors in his literary career in general and in *The Light People* in particular (I.E. Momaday, Silko, and Erdrich); nonetheless, he likewise admits inter-ethnic influences from “Faulkner, Joyce, Proust, Woolf, Borges, García-Márquez, Pablo Neruda, Joe Donoso, Julio Cortázar and Alice Walker” (Henry, “Some questions” 1) that can be found both in his poetry (Henry, *The Failure* 22, 59) and in his narrative, as will be discussed below.

What happens in *The Light People*?

As many authors maintain, in many Native American novels it is impossible to tell the plot, because it is made of different stories without a hierarchical structure (Allen 79; Averbach 78); therein, it is difficult to decide which story is the most important. In this case, the novel starts and ends with Oskinaway’s narrative, and the rest of the narrations add information to it, and so I will assume that he is the main character.³⁶ For a better understanding of the plot, I will divide the novel into four story lines: Oskinaway’s,³⁷ Arthur’s, Rose’s, and Oshawa’s; nevertheless, this division does not follow the structure of the book, full of flash-backs, flash-forwards, digressions, and suspended narratives. Due to this complicated structure, the table and outline in Appendix

³⁶ The question of the main character is highly debatable. I assume that Oskinaway is the protagonist, but the role could also be played by the whole community, by his parents, or by other characters. For instance, David Callahan maintains that he does not consider it Oskinaway’s story (189). Actually, it is strange that a story about a child’s growth (Callahan 188) is not about that boy’s life but about his community’s experiences. According to Rudolfo Anaya, “growing up is one of the universal themes in literature” because “we acquire many of the basic skills we will use later” (5). In *The Light People*, the reader meets Oskinaway as a child with many questions and Oskinaway as a man (Callahan 188); nevertheless, his evolution is not directly addressed. Anaya also points out that “our growing-up stories provide a history of our past, and in doing so they illuminate the present” (5). In that context of personal history as an individual process, it makes sense to concentrate on the person’s evolution, but Native American people are more involved in history as a community process (Owens 9; Ruoff and Brown 2; Velie 126; Vizenor, “A Postmodern” 3). Thus, the stories of the people in the reservation must be told to illustrate Oskinaway’s evolution.

³⁷ Henry references Oskinaway and Oshawanung in some of his poems (Henry, *The Failure* 39, 115).

I can clarify the chronological order of the stories and the relation between them.³⁸ As advances, given the plot's complexity, providing clarifications is already an analytical exercise.

Oskinaway is a young boy whose parents run away; then, he decides to ask the reservation shaman, Seed,³⁹ to help him find them. Seed sends his apprentice, Arthur Boozhoo,⁴⁰ to talk to the boy and tell him "the meaning of certain things" (Henry, *The Light* 10). From this first chapter⁴¹ onwards, the reader loses sight of Oskinaway until the ending (181-226), when he, as a man, is studying veterinary science at university. One night he dreams about one of the light people⁴² as an indication that his life is about to change (Callahan 196); then, he finds a wounded bird and tries to heal it. He looks for assistance from his teacher, but healing a wild animal has no use regarding academic purposes.

At this point, Oskinaway realizes that the university is not where he belongs and decides to head back to the reservation.⁴³ He heals the bird and tries to teach it the Constitution of the United States, although the bird only learns the first words: "We, the people" (Henry, *The Light* 203). In the reservation he has to face his past (he learns about his father, he meets a former lover, etc.), the problems of the community (the gradual

³⁸ As Allen claims, achronological time in contemporary Native American narratives can be considered a form of ironic reverse acculturation for non-native readers who need to accommodate to American Indian traditional cosmogony (149).

³⁹ Stuart Rieke suggests that Seed bears that name because the moment of his encounter with Oskinaway is the element from which the rest of the novel arises (7). However, in terms of fatherhood, he can be the seed of Arthur's training as a shaman. This name makes a clear reference to nature and growth (the novel tells the story of Oskinaway's life and he is Arthur's master).

⁴⁰ Boozhoo is an Anishinabe greeting which also echoes the trickster hero Nanabooshoo (Callahan 189).

⁴¹ In the novel, the different sections are not explicitly named chapters, but I will use that designation to avoid misunderstandings.

⁴² The light people were introduced to Henry in a story told to the author by an Odawa man (Henry, "Some questions" 2) about the first bringer of light; therefore, Henry decided that the novel would follow the descendants of that first-light person.

⁴³ Oskinaway follows the journey of the hero and the return to the reservation, which is common in Native American myths (Averbach 84).

disappearance of all the young people who are leaving to go to a house full of neon lights)⁴⁴, and the clash with the life out of the reservation (some politicians visit the village but their understanding of Native life and problems is impossible). Finally, Oskinaway releases the bird⁴⁵ and remembers his ancestors, bringing the story to a close in a circular way (Averbach 87).

The next story is Arthur Boozhoo's, the shaman's apprentice who tells Oskinaway how he left the reservation to go to the city and learn magic (prestidigitation, basically) until his sister became very sick and he had to return. He also fell ill and discovered a new type of magic from Seed, which he decided to learn. After a ceremony full of incongruous visions, he becomes Seed's apprentice and meets Seed's daughter, Rose. Boozhoo disappears until chapter 26 (Henry, *The Light* 167-72), in which Seed is ill, and Arthur occupies his place when a child is looking for his assistance. The apprentice finds a group of children around two dogs "stuck together" (168) and suggests leaving the dogs alone, but the children insist, and he tries to make some magic. Unfortunately, nothing works, and another man finally shoots one of the dogs. Still, the dogs do not split, and Arthur takes them to Seed's place. Seed whispers some words to the dead animal and the dogs are easily separated. Then, Arthur stops his story and tells Oskinaway to visit Seed four days later.

In chapter 2, Arthur meets Rose Meskwaa Geeshik, Seed's daughter, who tells her story in chapter 3 (Henry, *The Light* 25-34). Rose was a painter until her partner died in the Vietnam War and she lost her inspiration. She is desperate to paint again until one day

⁴⁴ The building with neon lights should be interpreted as a symbol of the big city (Averbach 86; Henry, "Some questions" 3), though it could also be a casino. In any case, it represents the turn of young Natives to modern life.

⁴⁵ After the attempt to tame the bird, the animal takes only what it needs from the mainstream U.S. discourse and freely leaves, wiser and stronger, after his rebellious action (Averbach 84).

someone breaks a window of her house with a painted stone. That night, a dream about the stone gives inspiration back to her. Some days later, a little boy, Oshawa, apologizes for having thrown the rock and tells how he received the powerful stone from his uncle. In chapter 25, “Rose Meskwaa Geeshik’s After-image Dream” (165-66) Rose returns the stone to Oshawa because it has already given her what she needed. Rose starts painting again until Seed becomes ill and she goes to his house.

I will include the rest of the stories in Oshaway’s account because his story opens the last Chinese box that will be closed in chapter 24. From now on, the *mise-en-abyme* structure will be broken. Oshawa admits that he stole the stone from his uncle’s room in a burst of anger due to his classmates mocking him. After many stories within Oshawa’s, he confesses that he intended to throw the stone at one of the children who teased him, but he missed the shot and crashed a window instead. Years later, he tells his family that he took the stone back from Rose, creating another circular structure.

The space between chapter 4 and chapter 24 is full of stories by different characters related to the ones already presented. We learn that Oshawa’s uncle should have buried a leg but a blizzard made him retreat, leaving the leg on a tree to fulfill his duty the next day. He took shelter in a library where he started reading a book by Bombarto Rose. Bombarto starts his novel with a reflection on his first book about blood purity and his second book about his father, a Christian priest with whom he poetically debates: while Bombarto defends Native American culture, his father supports Western ideas. Then, Bombarto writes the story of how he came to know the story of Elijah Old Crow. The writer tells the story of the man, who had been sent to a mission school and, forbidden to talk in his native language, became mute. Elijah could only express himself

through haikus,⁴⁶ some of which appear in Bombarto's book. Bombarto describes Elijah's death and how he took the corpse to Elijah's mother.

Old Woman Cold Crow dedicates a poem to his dead son and pays Bombarto with a story about a man who makes sculptures—Abetung, who is found to be Oshawanung's father in chapter 27 (Henry, *The Light* 173-80). After the old woman's payment, the readers learn how Abetung met Mary Squandum in a car accident in which Franklin, Mary's brother, died and how she got pregnant. In the minutes previous to his death, Franklin has a dream in the form of a drama in which a white man and some native people dispute the possession of land.⁴⁷

In this last story line, Oshawa, now a man, goes to a museum and finds a leg that perfectly fits the description of the one his uncle had left in the tree. Oshawa tells this to his uncle and to the family of the man whose leg should have been buried. The family decides to bring a lawsuit in order to recover the limb.⁴⁸ From here, the narration becomes a trial report of the lawyer's arguments, the witnesses' accounts and the judge's verdict. Oshawa's uncle tells that after the blizzard he lost the leg but was unable to confess it to the family. An anthropologist who found the leg frozen on a river bank continues with the story. Finally, the judge⁴⁹ returns the leg to the family. Oshawa, moved by his uncle's testimony, gives the stone back to him. Then, the story returns to chapter 24, Oshawa's

⁴⁶ Songs are very important in both ceremonial and non-ceremonial activities of Native American life (Ruoff and Brown 24). In this case, a dream song is sung in a ceremony to enter a person's mind while asleep, according to some tribes that believe in songs' healing powers (35).

⁴⁷ The Native Americans in the novel relate the legal possession of a land to those who inhabit it and know it instead of the person who has paid for it, because the land cannot be bought or sold. Meanwhile, the white man states that his father is the owner of the area because a paper confirms his purchase (Henry, *The Light* 98-101). From the Western point of view, the white man possesses the territory legally; however, Western law does not fit the Native American world view, which means that the paper is useless for the Natives.

⁴⁸ In the story, the museum is a synecdoche of the cultural appropriation of native cultures by these entities and by U.S. society as a whole (Blaeser 40). This idea is related to Anzaldúa's explanation of Indian items in American museums as a display of something that "becomes a conquered thing, a dead 'thing'" (*Borderlands* 90). The Native American writer Wendy Rose develops these questions of displaying American Indian artifacts and remains in museums, turning the Natives into exhibition pieces (Dreese 21).

⁴⁹ Curiously enough, the judge is a Latina, as will be commented upon later.

explanation of why he threw the stone. That way, the Chinese boxes are closed, the circles are sealed, and the questions are answered.

***The Light People*: paratextual and structural matters**

Although *The Light People* was not the original title of the novel (Henry, “Some questions” 3), it was eventually chosen for its reference to “people who possess wisdom and the capacity to heal and teach” (Callahan 192). That is one of the aims of the novel: healing through humor (Rieke 37) and teaching a lesson. In the novel, the light people are visibly mentioned or perceived as a mysterious entity. Furthermore, the title indicates that this is going to be the story of different people because “the book’s title refers to a plurality” (Callahan 189). Such representation of different people and cultures fits one of the most outstanding themes of the book: cultural clash; but it also matches what I understand as an intention to support multiple representations of the world as a way of settling conflicts between cultures.

Humor is present in the titles of the chapters: some of them are incongruous, some paradoxical, some plainly confusing, and some even recursive. For instance, “Rose Meskwaa Geeshik’s Monologue on Images” is not a monologue since other voices are present—the stone’s and Oshawa’s—and “Rose Meskwaa Geeshik’s After-image Dreams” has no dreams. As Henry states, these cases are examples of how he adapts the Euro-American canon to Native American ideas to mock the mentality of the colonizer and, thus, detraumatize the colonized group (Henry, “Some questions” 5). The case of

“Requiem for a Leg”⁵⁰ is even more curious, because it is a reference to Faulkner’s “Requiem for a Nun” (3), showing an intention to create a web of knowledge beyond ethnic barriers and a one-to-one dialogue with authors of the Western canon. Furthermore, these cases respond to the typically Native American comic technique of intertextuality (Gruber 80).

From a Western point of view, “Old Woman Cold Crow’s Story as Payment to Bombarto Rose” might seem paradoxical, because a story cannot be a payment.⁵¹ Nevertheless, from a Native American point of view this chapter recovers the past habit of some tribes to pay with a story and teaches a lesson about the value of orature. Others, such as “The Prisoner of Haiku”, make the reader confused due to a person being the prisoner of a poetic composition. Although strangeness and distance with the reader might seem opposite to inter-ethnicity, they are actually quite enriching because they insist on the acceptance of difference. Instead of forcing sameness, Henry creates a distance that leads the reader to abandon the comfort zone, to acknowledge otherness and to respect it.

Recursive structures appear in “Oshawa’s Uncle’s Story”, “Old Woman Cold Crow’s Monologue on the Death of Her Son”, and “Old Woman Cold Crow’s Story as Payment to Bombarto Rose”. Although these characters repeatedly appear in the novel, the writer reinforces their bond with people the reader already knows in an exercise of commonality that adds complexity to the relations between the characters and insists on the vitality of creating a community.

⁵⁰ “Requiem for a Leg” also subverts the Western division of genres. The idea of a requiem devoted to a leg follows American Indian beliefs, according to which a part is integrally essential to the whole (be it a body or a community).

⁵¹ Strangeness to non-Native readers happens as well in “Franklin Squandum’s Death Dream: A Mini-Drama for Native Dancers”, “The Anthro’s Tale”, and “After the Requiem”. In the first case, it is illogical to mention a dream while a person is dead, even more when that dream acquires the form of a drama. The second is not a tale but a testimony in a trial. The last one refers to a requiem that does not exist.

The Light People: laughing out loud—or not

There are many different techniques to trigger humor in the reader that respond to diverse reasons. One of the strategies that provides this novel with a satirical frame (Blaeser 44)⁵² is parody (Knight 6); thus, the satiric intention of the story materializes through parodies, as it happens in an important group of Native American texts (Gruber 60). The difference between satire and parody can be tricky, and sometimes it is not easy to distinguish one from the other. As “satire frequently deploys parody” (Holoch 40) they tend to appear together, and occasionally the boundary between them is quite hazy. Despite that, it is imperative to identify these two forms of humor in the novel. On the one hand, “satire is a frame of mind” (Knight 6), usually considered “a literary form or genre” or a “mode” (Holoch 35) with a “morally corrective” judgment, juggling playfulness and aggression (36). On the other hand, “parody refers to the characters” and their behavior (Knight 6) and is based on the imitation (203) of “something that exists beyond it” (Holoch 26). Its main purpose is “highlighting the possibilities of other approaches” (26), and it does not always aim at moral correction (40). In other words, satire is focused on the moral criticism of a particular target (a person, a period of time, a vice, etc.) while parody tries to provide a new understanding of a reality from a different perspective through critique of the establishment (40-41).

Parodies in *The Light People* are intended to make the reader think about the *status quo* of Western culture, and they employ humor to propose an alternative interpretation of the world (Gruber 63, 65). Some of these parodies try to ridicule stereotypes to make the reader understand their lack of logic (Emmons 116, 149; Vizenor, “A Postmodern”

⁵² I define satire as a frame of mind following Charles Knight's explanation. According to him, satire is a parasitic form that needs to be expressed through parody or other genres (203); it is a way to produce a moral judgment using different humoristic forms: irony when it manipulates the language, parody when it works with characters and situations, etc. (6). Siro López also studies parody as a type of satire (19).

11). Parodies can also fulfill the function of destroying preconceptions about American Indians as people from the past, providing them with a modern identity and a contemporary lifestyle (Callahan 188; Henry, "Some questions" 5). For instance, there is a criticism on the stereotype of Native Americans as producers of crafts that are sold to white people. This is the case of the man with whom Oskinaway's mother leaves: "The man in the van was a trader, a bookseller, a purveyor of supposedly mystical weavings and other metaphysical hangings, which were marketed as Native-produced spiritual crafts" (Henry, *The Light* 4).⁵³ This description shows cynicism towards the image of the craftsman as a synecdoche for the stereotype of Native Americans as producers of crafts.

Native American traditional storytelling continues being parodied when Oskinaway says that "he questioned the old people about diviners and healers, and they answered each time with long stories" (Henry, *The Light* 7). The boy reduces these answers to a ridiculous, unimportant, and old-fashioned understanding of the world; nonetheless, he realizes its importance as an adult. Another example in which Henry uses literary genres to create a parody is Oskinaway's speech about the celebration of Columbus's discovery of America, in which the speaker uses poetry to confuse the senators about the real message he wants to express. Thus, the mockery is not just applied to the literary form which is considered unclear and tricky, but to the senators who are unable to understand its meaning in a clear allusion to the difficulties of communication between Natives and non-Natives.

A different type of parody is found in the process of naming (Gruber 89). Although many of the names of the novel have a meaning in Anishinabe language, there are comical

⁵³ Another example can be found in "Haiku and Dream Songs of Elijah Old Crowd", with the following statement: "Travelers come out / of sun looking for Indian- / made real crafts real cheap" (Henry, *The Light* 70).

names in several excerpts, which is an important Native American comical strategy according to Gruber (89). For example, in “The Autobiographical Profile of Bombarto Rose: An Essay on Personal Origins” the protagonist, Bombarto, explains the origins of his name in quite incongruous terms: “When I unfolded into this human form, screaming with a violet face for more air, an old woman named Nawgoom sang over me and named me Kin gooshis Ishpeming (Son of Sky)” (Henry, *The Light* 59). However, he receives a second name, Bombarto, because a bomb was accidentally dropped over the reservation but never exploded (59). He even received a third name, Rose, because someone left that flower for his mother when he was born (60). This literal and material explanation substitutes the stereotypical spiritual Native American way of naming, thus mocking the romanticized image of American Indians in Western culture (Gruber 89).⁵⁴

Most parodies in the book are related to ceremonies, one of the clearest stereotypes of Native American people, which are here taken to the extreme.⁵⁵ Ceremonies are exaggerated⁵⁶ in two ways: first, with the of the constant presence of ceremonial practices; second, with events that are not subject to ceremonial practices but that are treated as such. For instance, in the first chapter Oskinaway’s grandmother prepares food for Boozhoo in a very ceremonial way (Henry, *The Light* 10); Rose Meskwaa describes painting as a ceremony too (28); Oshawa also talks about carrying the Virgin in “proper timing to the proper places” (35); etc. All of these events mock the stereotype of Native

⁵⁴ Abetung’s name goes back “to the earliest inhabitants of this place” (Henry, *The Light* 89), an exaggeration of Native American names passing from parents to children. The names of Four Bear’s daughters, Willow, and Esther represent a stereotypical American Indian and a Biblical name that I interpret as an encouragement of inter-ethnicity.

⁵⁵ Native American ceremonies are not only stereotypes, since, as Henry acknowledges, they are crucial parts of the Native American life experience (Henry, “Some questions” 2) that he references in his novel and in his poems (Henry, *The Failure* 49, 91, 105, 131). Notwithstanding, it is also true that ceremonies have been used as a stereotyping element by non-Natives. In this case, the abuse of ceremonial practices and the permeation of ceremonies in all the aspects of daily life can be interpreted as a stereotype of the stereotype. That is, Henry mocks the Western idea that Native Americans perform ceremonies all the time.

⁵⁶ Vladimir Propp lists exaggeration as a fundamental humor strategy to reveal a flaw in a culture or an individual (64). Thus, the intention of repetitions and hyperboles can be considered comic.

American rituals and their influence on all aspects of daily life. This exaggeration helps limiting these practices to their sacred realm, acknowledging their value in Native American spirituality while demarcating the space in which they must be used.

The Light People also contains ironic criticism⁵⁷ (Emmons 173) because, according to Gruber, it is one of the main strategies of Native American humor (55). Irony is basically a strategy to create humor by saying something but implying the opposite, “the interstice between what is said and what is unsaid” (Attardo 797; Holoch 78), usually with the aim of judging a situation that is considered negative (Attardo 817). At the beginning of Arthur's story he says that Seed “told [him] to come every day and he would decide if he could teach [him]” (Henry, *The Light* 16), which is obviously ironic because the master would decide if Arthur could be taught after teaching him every day, and not before. This scene reflects the different perspectives of Native American and Western cultures, in this case towards wisdom and learning,⁵⁸ thus triggering a shift in perspective (Gruber 56).

When Rose recovers her inspiration, she paints “a stone bust of every American president, and each bust had Indian clan symbols emerging from the back of the president's heads” (Henry, *The Light* 31). The ironic identification of American presidents, many of whom passed laws related to the oppression of American Indians, with tribal symbols criticizes the attitude of official government bodies—after all, the symbols are behind the presidents' busts, where the men cannot see them. Irony allows peripheral cultures to protest when a frank criticism is not an option (Gruber 57). Another example would be “a Taiwan-made Navajo-style earring” (Henry, *The Light* 49),

⁵⁷ For a more thorough explanation of irony, go to chapter 2.2, as it is the most important humor strategy in the poetic compositions of the said chapter.

⁵⁸ According to Linda Hutcheon, Native American ideas of wisdom are deeply related to myths and legends, while in Western culture the latter are linked with superstition (*Irony's* 104-5).

which questions ideas about cultural purity and authenticity, and, once again, the stereotype of American Indians as artisans of traditional crafts.⁵⁹

Another kind of irony involves linguistic puns. When Franklin Squandum is having a dream at the moment of his death, two of the dancers in the dream mention Wounded Knee.⁶⁰ One dancer comments “Looks like Wounded Knee...”, and the other answers “Which one?” (Henry, *The Light* 108). Although the most famous massacre in Wounded Knee took place in 1890, there was another incident in 1973, not as renowned but equally brutal regarding culture.⁶¹ Irony comes from the misunderstanding between the two events and also from the lack of awareness of non-Indian readers. However, having the two American Indians sharing knowledge and humor about these events helps creating a bond between them (Emmons 181). Thus, this scene updates the Native American fight against imperialism and rewrites Indian history (Martínez Falquina and Pascual 231).

Apart from that, in “Seed’s Journey to the Cave” Oskinaway hears a song that contains a curious line: “cranes rise again” (Henry, *The Light* 180). The word “crane” has two meanings: a bird or a building machine. In the first case, the bird crane in some Native American cultures signifies leadership, peacemaking, and good luck (“Native American

⁵⁹ Other examples of irony can be found, for instance, when a tribal member talks about “some big rez in California, I think it’s called Los Angeles” (Henry, *The Light* 211); hence a Western element is adapted to fit the world view of Native Americans.

⁶⁰ Wounded Knee is a stream in the Sioux Pine Ridge reservation in South Dakota. In 1890, 29th December, after a group of Sioux warriors decided to fight against the U.S. Government to claim their cultural heritage, there was a moment of confusion in which soldiers killed 300 Indians and warriors killed 30 soldiers. It is considered the last battle of the conquest of Indian America. For more information, see Martin Gitlin’s *Wounded Knee Massacre*.

⁶¹ In 1973, activists and leaders of the American Indian Movement (AIM) occupied Wounded Knee to protest against the administration of the tribal chairman, the government’s failure to respect treaties with American Indian nations, and the murder of AIM activists. The Government sent armed FBI agents, who surrounded the town. Eventually, after a negotiation, the government agents agreed to enter without any armed escort; however, the deal was broken and the AIM members had to surrender. More on this topic can be found in B. D’Arcus.

Crane Mythology”);⁶² on the other hand, a building crane represents capitalism and the city. Therefore, this homonymous word changes the entire meaning of the sentence: it could stand for the rebirth of American Indian culture, but it could also point to complete assimilation. In “Franklin Squandum's Death Dream: A Mini-Drama for Native Dancers”, traditional forms such as “Ya wey ya ya hey ya ya” or “away hey yey yey hey yey yey” (Henry, *The Light* 102) are mixed with contemporary music, like “she said hey”, “you say nah” (103); these expressions link the sound of American Indian languages with contemporary popular music (pop, rock, etc.).

The use of obscene humor was studied by Bakhtin, Freud, and the theorists of the grotesque (Gruber 103). The grotesque involves the “use of profane language, references to bodily fluids and functions, and explicit depictions of sexuality” to rebel against social impositions (Holoch 32). However, the other side of the grotesque’s coin represents a celebration of life, regeneration, and renewal of a community and its rules (32). Apart from that, the grotesque shows how everybody shares the same bodily needs and experiences (32) while defying conventional morals (Gruber 107). At some point, the scattered pieces of the glass broken by the stone in Rose's house contradict the stereotyped portrait of women as beautiful: “one of her eyes appeared larger; part of the shadow on the bridge of her nose whirled out wider and darker; the closed part between her lips opened a bit more” (Henry, *The Light* 29). In this case, the rupture of the normal dimensions of a face are a way of inspiration for Rose, thus breaking the limitation of the establishment through a grotesque image.

Another example can be found in “Oshawa's Uncle's Story”, when “the cut-off part of the leg sat across the room in a wooden box on a wooden chair” (Henry, *The Light*

⁶² More on the symbolism of this and other animals can be found online: *Native Languages of the Americas*.

42) and when the dead part of the body is dressed, transgressing the limits of Western behavior towards a dead limb. More dead bodies appear later in “Bombarto Rose: A Note to Hold the Eyes”, when “Cold Crow had no lips; these two were taken by the voracious birds in a thousand bloody painful kisses” (81), and in “Abetung's Story”, when Mary stayed in the car with her brother's corpse on top of her (92). Franklin Squandum's corpse comes back in “Geeshis” (96). In “Arthur Boozhoo: Two Dogs Stuck Together” there are references to the coitus between two animals (168). These examples show the difference between life and death in Native American and Western cultures, and, more importantly, challenge cultural impositions and show that alternative behaviors are possible.

Humor is often employed in the novel to express paradoxes and incongruities and, once again, ridicule stereotypes. For instance, in Rose's dream, all of a sudden, her guest starts breaking her furniture (Henry, *The Light* 31) and a completely illogical situation follows. As I said above, this scene represents the outbreak that Rose needs to recover from her trauma, which, in a symbolic way, represents that the rupture of social rules is sometimes necessary to overcome problems. In another chapter, Bombarto Rose says that he “designed a history” (49), which is a paradoxical way to understand historical accounts, usually related to the supposedly objective narrative of a collective of specialized people, not to the subjective design of an individual. Nevertheless, this assertion responds to the necessity of Fourth World peoples,⁶³ in this case Native American authors, to rewrite history from their own perspective (Callahan 187).

When Oskinaway returns to the reservation and to his grandparents' house, there is a mixture of ornaments with no coherence at all:

⁶³ As mentioned in chapter 1, Henry does not agree with the category of Fourth World, arguing that it echoes a Western division of the world (Henry, “Some questions” 2).

the faces of the dead still on the walls, the missing marines, the ballplayers, the trophies, the cat clock, the broken radio, the Jesuses on crosses and in pictures, the red-willow basket, the birchbank winnowing basket, the old man's buffalo plaid hat, the blue chair, the mirror where he saw himself for the first time, the old woman's shawl, her sewing tin. (Henry, *The Light* 194)

This apparently unrelated collection makes complete sense in a second reading if the elements are categorized as belonging to a community's past (the photographs, the missing marines, etc.), a person's past (the trophies), Western influence (the cat clock and the Jesus figure), and Native American culture (the baskets and the buffalo head). These objects form a collage in a wall to symbolize the construction of an inter-ethnic identity.⁶⁴ Apart from this representation of Native American quilt-identity, there is a direct reference to communication: the radio (Henry, *The Light* 194). Therefore, this excerpt is one of the most important and clearest examples that confirm the novel's support to inter-ethnicity.

In the first chapter there is an incongruity when Oskinaway says that his education is a mixture of his grandparents' beliefs and the mission school (Henry, *The Light* 6), two completely different entities whose lessons more often than not collide with each other. In any case, the protagonist proves through incongruity that they can be coordinated. Some incongruities come from misunderstandings, such as the already mentioned scene of Franklin's dream, when the dancers and the white man cannot understand each other's

⁶⁴ Allen supports that "American Indian novelists use cultural conflict as a major theme" (79) and that the protagonists "are in some sense bicultural and must deal with the effects of colonization" (79); in any case, each character also participates in a ritual tradition that gives their individual lives shape and significance (79). The wall Oskinaway is talking about is, at the same time, a physical and metaphorical representation of this inter-ethnic construction of identity for American Indians.

idea of ownership. The same kind of misunderstanding happens when the senators talk to the woman from the reservation in the last chapter (231-314) and, when the politicians try to empathize with the woman, there is a complete lack of understanding too. Therefore, Henry acknowledges through these examples that communication between Natives and Western people presents problems when the relationship is based on Anglo hegemony and imperialism. The last form of incongruity is a sudden change that shocks and disorients the reader and, sometimes, the characters as well. The best example is the sudden appearance of Franklin's deer pet in his funeral (117-19), a scene that leaves both the readers and the guests of the funeral completely confused. The deer⁶⁵ removes the flag from Franklin's coffin, merging the two elements (animal and flag) into one single being made of the two cultures at once, undressing Franklin (since the American flag was covering him) in an unpleasant but beautiful way.

In the novel there are some direct references to characters laughing, which help me to analyze this use of humor. For example, in the first chapter there is a moment in which Oskinaway's hands are stuck in the river and, on the opposite shore, he sees a boy laughing at him that can be interpreted as a trickster spirit. Actually, "he laughed for a long time" (Henry, *The Light* 5) because he thought that Oskinaway was trying to fish. When the protagonist is finally released, he hears the boy laughing somewhere, but he cannot see him. Apart from the obvious reference to the Trickster, this scene could be linked to superiority theories and Bergson's interpretation of laughter as a social corrective (Bergson 46). Those theories can as well be used to interpret Oshawa's story. During Arthur's ceremony, he hears a bird laughing. Given the fact that humor supposedly

⁶⁵ In certain Native American cultures from the South of the United States and the North of Mexico, deer are the parents of humankind and, therefore, sacred animals. For these tribes, deer usually represent the human race. In other parts of the United States and Canada, deer are seen as messengers and symbols of peace ("Native American Deer Mythology").

is an intrinsically human feature (Bergson 10), laughter humanizes the bird; therefore, this personification suits the Native American ideas of communication between humans, animals, and nature. As Allen puts it: “We are the land” (119).

One of the most traditional techniques to build humor in American Indian communities is the character of the Trickster (Gruber 95-103; Velie 121; Vizenor, “Trickster” 187). Hence, it is inevitable to find tricksters in Gordon Henry's novel (Martínez Falquina and Pascual 236-37). The Trickster can also be related to Bakhtinian theories of clowns⁶⁶ and the carnivalesque (Owens 226; Velie, “Trickster Discourse” 121) as beings that put forth a temporary challenge to imposed social hierarchies. This attitude helps easing the difficulties derived from injustice and creating new rules (Rieke 39; Vizenor, “Trickster” 204). For instance, trickster figures appear in the previously described scene when Oskinaway is stuck in the river and a trickster spirit in the form of a boy mocks him (Henry, *The Light* 6). Arthur's description, at first, seems to imitate a Trickster in some respects (10), just like the little man in his initial ceremony (17) and the one in Rose's dream (32). All of them are typical irreverent tricksters who appear in crucial moments to help the main character. The use of tricksters is important because it encourages adaptation, healing, and resiliency (Ferguson 64).

Sally Emmons contends that “making fun is alternately a way of making sense, criticizing, and uniting Indian people in their shared experience and concerns” (132). For ethnic groups with an experience of exclusion, such as Native Americans, comical criticism improves resiliency and shows the possibility of different cosmogonies (108). This illustrates why American Indian authors make use of humor strategies to fulfill many necessities of the tribes: uniting a group of people, criticizing dominant cultures,

⁶⁶ Henry mentions clowns in some of his poems: “the clown mocking their / steps behind them” (*The Failure* 58) and “Enter the Clown Spirit” (93).

challenging stereotypes, modernizing the mainstream idea of the Indian, and healing the spiritual wounds of the community (Henry, "Some questions" 3).

Henri Bergson describes three strategies that trigger humor and which can be located in *The Light People*. The first one, called the "Jack-in-the-Box" (38),⁶⁷ is present in different scenes of Henry's novel. In Franklin's dream, the Native American dancers insist that the white man on a horse is wrong to consider himself the owner of the land (Henry, *The Light* 98-101) until, finally, the white man decides to give in the debate and call the police. The mechanical behavior of the dancers makes the white man feel impotent and is humorous to the reader. Another form of the Jack-in-the-Box is repetitions (Bergson 47), as in Elijah Old Crow's haikus: "A boy painted himself / white and ran into a river / A boy painted himself black / and fasted out in the sun / A boy painted himself / yellow and rolled in the mud / A boy painted himself / red and white and black and yellow" (Henry, *The Light* 75).⁶⁸ These kinds of repetitions are present in most of the poems of the book (17, 18, 21, 22, 30, 39-40, 83, 86, 102-4, 185, 209-10); nonetheless, not all of them respond to a comic intention because repetitions are characteristic of most Native American cultural productions of all times.

Another structure systematized by Bergson is the "Snow-ball".⁶⁹ That is the case in "Oshawa's Story" (Henry, *The Light* 35-40), when the celebration at school is completely destroyed by the boy falling. The situation comically expands to total disaster and Oshawa

⁶⁷ This is a mechanism by which a constant repetition "between two stubborn elements" (Bergson 38) results in a humorous outcome until one of them gives in.

⁶⁸ The colors from the passage have an important meaning in Native American cultures. Particularly black, white, red, and yellow are the colors of the Circle of Life or the Medicine Wheel that represent the life of both human beings and the world. Red is the color of birth, the East (where the Sun rises), and spirituality; yellow stands for growth, the South, and emotions; black symbolizes maturity, the North, and the physical life; and white represents death, the West (where the Sun sets), and the intellect ("Color Meanings and Symbolism" 13-14).

⁶⁹ An event grows "by arithmetical progression" (Bergson 42), so that an insignificant situation at the beginning can unexpectedly end up becoming enormous.

is finally mocked by his classmates (39). In more general terms, the whole novel can be considered a “Snow-ball” in which little stories accumulate little by little until they narrate the life of an entire community. The third strategy, the “Dancing-Jack”,⁷⁰ is clearly associated with the figures of the puppet and the puppeteer. In the case of *The Light People*, it is difficult to find a clear example; however, in chapter 27, “Seed’s Journey to the Cave” (173-80), Abetung expounds that, somehow, “tomorrow’s people” (176) knew what was going to happen to Oskinaway and it seems that everything was meant to happen according to a “prophecy” (176). Therefore, Oskinaway’s life and the characters’ stories have always been determined by tomorrow’s people.

Freudian theories are useful to read some passages of *The Light People* too. In “Arthur Boozhoo on the Nature of Magic” (Henry, *The Light* 13-24) there is a moment in Arthur’s ceremony in which he has some kind of hallucination and sees a little man urinating and defecating in front of Arthur’s face, verbally abusing the apprentice, kicking dirt into his face, hitting him, etc. (17-18). The little man does not stop until Arthur accepts his behavior and stops fighting against it. This is a perfect example of Freud’s discourse of humor and the use of the obscene as a release of social impositions (Díaz Bild 156), because the little man does all kind of reprehensible actions until Arthur stops being scandalized by them. Somehow, the little man can be interpreted as the wildest part of Arthur: a side of his human nature that rebels against what is considered right by social rules.

Before closing this section, I would like to underline two functions of humor that I consider particularly relevant to understand comicality in the novel and its contribution to the messages that can be drawn from the book. The first one is the creation of a community beyond ethnicity in an attempt to encourage inter-ethnicity (Erichsen 32). For instance, in

⁷⁰ It happens when a character thinks he/she is acting freely but, when the focus changes, the reader realizes that someone else is secretly directing all the decisions (Bergson 41).

Arthur's first scene (Henry, *The Light* 10-11) he wears clothes of both Indian significance (the eagle, the beaded design, and the T-shirt with the slogan "Save a tree / tell a story") and Western tradition (denim trousers and cowboy boots). A little later, Arthur starts recalling the ceremony he had to endure to become Seed's apprentice. In that ceremony, there are Biblical references when the shaman's disciple acquires the ability to understand the language of animals (16), which evokes the Apostles' Gift of Tongues.

There is also an attempt to link Native American culture with Asian traditions through Elija's haikus (Henry, *The Light* 64-65) and references to the Classical myth of Narcissus in Old Woman's Cold Crow story about Abetung:⁷¹ "A young man's father / liked to look at himself when he was young" (87), "He went to see himself / reflecting on the surface of water" (87). The points of contact between contemporary Native Americans and Latinos/as developed in this dissertation are mentioned in the story of the trial in which the judge is a Latina who allows the Native American community to perform a ceremonial song in the courtroom (125-26). The judge, therefore, belongs to another ethnic group who understands, against the will of the museum's lawyer, the importance of tradition and culture even in a modern institution. As Henry himself asserts, it allows for justice in a multicultural context (Henry, "Some questions" 3).

The second outstanding function of humor is the resiliency of ethnic groups to deal with imperialism. It is difficult to find this attribute in particular passages of the book; however, it pervades Henry's entire works (E.G. Henry, *The Failure* 93). Resiliency comes from the attempt to rewrite history (Henry, "Some questions" 3) and challenge the

⁷¹ Although there is not a direct reference to Oskinaway's father, Abetung, in Old Woman Cold Crow's story, there are clear parallels: the appearance of a river, the fact that both men make sculptures, and the mention of the sculptures appearing after he was gone (in "Seed's Journey to the Cave", when Abetung explains that he put his figures in the river so they would arrive at the village). Besides, given the intricate web of relationships in the novel, it seems clear that her story talks about Abetung.

established paradigm of mainstream Western society (Erichsen 30). For instance, the story of the trial in which the museum's administration considered themselves the legitimate owners of a part of the body can be extrapolated to the attitude of Western cultures which believe in the necessity to assimilate ethnic communities and to display their historical objects as curiosities. Nevertheless, in the end, the leg is given back to the community where it belonged, thus rewriting a history of oppression.

Furthermore, the multiplicity of genres and narrators to create a choral narrative challenges the tradition of the Western literary canon, showing that there are different ways to do things (write a book, in this case) out of the Euro-American perspective (Owens 29). This carnivalesque inversion of roles—Native American commonality as the norm and Western literary genres as the assimilated element—helps valuing the culture of American Indians and their ability to relate to the world in their own way, overcoming imperialism through humor.

Closure

The Light People's satirical intention is deeply related to resiliency in Native American communities (Henry, "Some questions" 6) and to the support of inter-ethnic understanding. Thanks to techniques like satire, parody, incongruity, irony, etc., humor helps this ethnic group overcome a position of victimization in an ongoing imperialist situation (Henry, "Some questions" 5), build community beyond ethnic borders, challenge stereotypes, denounce inequality, and modernize the image of the Indian. Apart from that, the humor strategies in this particular text prove that resiliency is a truly valuable function of humor for American Indians to heal historical and spiritual wounds. Moreover, Henry's

text, by disrupting the official canon and mixing different cultures, approaches inter-ethnicity and establishes links between Native Americans and other groups based on mutual respect instead of assimilation.

Most of the strategies are used by Henry to make a strong social criticism both towards Natives and non-Natives, which might make *The Light People* look like a postcolonial novel focused on the dichotomy of victims and perpetrators already mentioned. However, it is precisely thanks to the use of humor, balanced critique, and inter-ethnic understanding that the novel overcomes that polarization. It provides readers with a portrait of Native American life in the 21st century in which traditional tribal elements (storytelling, cyclic structures, ceremonies, etc.) are still important. Henry, as other Native American writers, also mocks his own culture, a mixture of native beliefs, Western genres, US-American culture, and even Asian literature.

Henry's first step to make readers aware of the possibility of cultural exchanges is to recognize the enormous cultural differences between Western and Native American values; anyhow, beyond the critique and the opposition, there is a core idea of learning from other people's traditions (Erichsen 40; Henry, "Some questions" 4). It is necessary to take the humor of the novel seriously because, while reflecting inequality and injustice, it gives Native Americans the agency to rewrite history and to wield resiliency as one of the healthiest approaches to trauma.

2.1.2. How to laugh at a role model with Michele Serros

“I’d like to be placed in the canon of comedy”

(Serros, “An Interview” 14)

According to Tey Diana Rebolledo, Chicana writers are witnesses (117), translators (125), and cooks (130), thanks to their role as storytellers who create and transmit stories that can help fight hierarchies (207). At the end of this chapter, it will be clear that all those roles are perfectly embodied by Michele Serros, a Chicana writer and performance artist.⁷² In this study of *How to Be a Chicana Role Model*, it will be demonstrated that Chicanos/as reflect in their literature their own experience of humor as a resiliency tool that allows them both to fight prejudices and to adopt an inter-ethnic perspective.

Serros, a Californian writer deceased in 2015 (Ulin 1), reflects the experiences of young Chicanos/as in South California (Ibarraran Bigalondo, “How” 99) who accept U.S. mainstream culture as part of their identity (Ibarraran Bigalondo, “Sandra” 149-51). Serros as a writer is intrinsically linked to the concept of contact zone, described by Mary Louise Pratt as a space “where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (34) to produce tensions, on the one hand, but also negotiations and exchanges, on the other. She accepts U.S. popular culture and fosters understanding between cultures and respect towards difference instead of

⁷² Since the author represents herself in this book, from now on, I will use the writer’s surname, Serros, to refer to the author and Michele to talk about the protagonist of the book.

uniformization; for that reason, she has been criticized by arguing that she “[lacks] some of the ‘basic’ ingredients of what it takes to be a ‘Chicana writer’” (101).

In her works, she shows an enlightening attitude of tolerance (Serros, *Chicana Falsa* 55) different from traditional Chicano/a writers who consider the influence of U.S. mainstream culture a threat and from people obsessed with linking difference to impenetrability (22, 44). Together with other young Chicano/a writers, she is considered part of the “Generation Mex” (Quintero-Flores 5), a 1990’s literary group that always made her feel like an outsider in the Chicano/a literary scene (6). Actually, she felt “unworthy of the title” of Chicana writer (8) and a “Chicana without a cause” (Serros, *Chicana Falsa* 6), an ironic way to state that she was not welcome in the most conventional Chicano/a circles that consider exchanges between cultures a threat.

In spite of her resistance to be included in the canon of Chicano/a literature, Serros fits the comical literary tradition of the group (Barco). When asked about her literary affiliation, she acknowledges feeling very comfortable with comedy and short story writing (Quintero-Flores 8); her “wisecracking, bicultural/bilingual, self-deprecating, post-Valley Girl” literature (Ibarraran Bigalondo, “How” 1) is a reflection of the Chicana experience in South California, influenced by traditional heritage as well as pop culture (Barco; Ulin 5). Serros soon started writing haikus and poems about her daily life in Oxnard, such as about her breakfast cereal, the city’s graffiti and “drivers with thumping sound systems” (Barco; Serros, *Chicana falsa* 57), but also about traditional Chicanos’/as’ experiences as eating *chicharrones* (Serros, *Chicana falsa* 8).

Olga Luna Estévez affirms that Serros follows the literary path of her Chicano/a predecessors while approaching identity in an innovative way at the same time. By using a satirical and ironic tone, she portrays the paradoxes and tensions between her Mexican

traditional heritage and the influence of Western mainstream culture (Ibarraran Bigalondo, “How” 100; Luna Estévez 228, 236) in a contact zone. *How to Be a Chicana Role Model*, published in 2000 (Ulin 8), is one of Serros’s favorite works (Quintero-Flores 16) and blends *Künstlerroman*⁷³ with a parody of self-help books (Luna Estévez 236). Serros aims her parodies at every character in the book, starting with the protagonist, but her mockery responds to a conciliating and non-conflictive attitude (236). Still, her humor always has a darker side (Ibarraran Bigalondo, “How” 1) when addressing the central issues of racism, identity, dislocation, failure, and clashes between different cultures (Ulin 3). At the same time that Serros portrays life in her community, she covers topics with which a non-Chicano/a reader can easily empathize, such as love, friendship, family relations, life goals, failure, etc. (Luna Estévez 246).

In the following lines, I will make a succinct revision of the Chicano/a narrative tradition to which Serros belongs, giving special consideration to comedic works. Then, I will move on to analyze questions of humor specifically regarding *How to Be a Chicana Role Model*’s structure, titles, etc. I will next delve into how humor is employed by Serros, considering comicality both in the form and the plot of the short stories. My approach will mainly concentrate on the comical methods (parody, irony, the grotesque, the carnivalesque, etc.) used by the author to achieve her aims: denouncing racism, destroying stereotypes, defending inter-ethnicity, and displaying resiliency. Finally, I will provide diverse interpretations of the book based on Bakhtinian, Bergsonian, and Freudian theories, among others. Thus, it will be proved that Serros, as an exponent of Chicano/a literature, understands humor as a catharsis but, at the same time, a rebellious practice.

⁷³ According to Annie Eysturoy, a *Künstlerroman* is a typical model of Chicano/a literature, as it joins the process of a *Bildungsroman* (a novel of self-development) and the idea of creativity as a catalyst for self-discovery (Ibarraran Bigalondo, “How” 101).

Chicano/a narrative tradition and humor

Chicano/a literature gathers influences from European literature (especially Spanish), Latin American trends, U.S. mainstream culture (Augenbraum and Fernández Olmos xiv), a Mexican background, the indigenous tradition, and the experience of other Latino communities in North America (Augenbraum and Fernández Olmos xii; Castañeda Shular et al. 279, 327). In short, it can be said that “Chicano literature ... has two faces: one looks toward the long literary tradition of Mexico and the other toward the United States” (Villar Raso and Herrera-Sobek 11). In spite of the attempts to propose an origin and a periodization of Chicano/a literature, there are heated debates about these questions (12).⁷⁴

Humor has always been a very important component of Chicano/a literature since comicality “has been the indispensable companion of endurance” (Castañeda Shular et al. 123) and resiliency. Sarcastic jokes, laughter, puns, and parodies have contributed to reinforce inner strength, to poke fun, to ridicule other people and themselves, to surmount injustice, etc. (123). In short, humor is a coping mechanism; however, it can also inflame ethnic and gender conflicts sometimes (123). In any case, humor for Chicanos/as is a weapon of vital importance, for it allows them to strike back against the oppressor (124) in the form of *relajos*, *choteos*, *chistes*, *burlas*, and *vaciladas* (124).⁷⁵

Manuel Villar Raso and María Herrera-Sobek propose a division of Chicano/a literature into four phases (12-13). The first period, from 1530 to 1848, responds to the literature of Spanish colonizers (12) like Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca (Leal and Barrón

⁷⁴ For example, some critics establish its starting point with the Spanish conquest in the 16th century (12), while others trace its origins back to Nahuatl orature (Castañeda Shular et al. xxiv, 5, 192).

⁷⁵ These are different types of jokes in Spanish, usually based on wit (Castañeda Shular et al. 124) and puns (Reyna, qtd. in Urquijo-Ruiz 48; Ybarra-Fausto, qtd. in Urquijo-Ruiz 22).

16). At this point, Spanish literary tradition was adapted to the Mexican and Indian reality (17). Literary forms like *romances*, *corridos*, *mañanitas*, *tragedias*, *verso*, *coplas*, folk tales, religious plays (*pastorellas*), etc. (Villar Raso and Herrera-Sobek 13) appeared at the time. The year 1848, with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, might be considered the starting point of the next age, until the upsurge of World War II. The end of World War II was important for Chicanos/as, as many fought in the U.S. army and, hence, demanded mainstream recognition from 1945 onwards (Paredes 55-58).

The last period emerges in 1960 (Villar Raso and Herrera-Sobek 28) and goes from the Chicano Renaissance (16) until today. This stage starts with the publication of *Pocho* (by José Antonio Villareal in 1959), which is considered the first Chicano/a *Bildungsroman* (14) although actually the first novel, *Who Would Have Thought It?* by María Amparo Ruiz de Burton—ignored by canonical studies—, was published at the end of the 19th century (Sánchez and Pita 12). This period was also important due to the creation of the first printing house run by and devoted to Chicanos/as, Quinto Sol (Paredes 60). Literary works at the time kept in mind questions of community, identity, family relationships (Villar Raso and Herrera-Sobek 15, 24), and the importance of the land (22-23) using language mixture (21) and combining pre-colonial mythology and Christianity (24). Chicano/a narratives usually include social protest, references to an Indian heritage, an optimistic attitude to fight stereotypes (Leal and Barrón 13-15), special attention to the topic of migration (Castañeda Shular et al. xxi-xxii), and historical revisionism (xxii).

At the same time, in this period many Chicana writers were able to see their works published: Norma Alarcón, Gloria Anzaldúa, Angie Chabram, Sandra Cisneros, Barbara Harlow, María Herrera-Sobek, Teresa McKenna, Cherríe Moraga, Elizabeth Ordóñez, Alvina Quintana, Isabella Ríos, Sonia Saldívar-Hull, Rosaura Sánchez, and Helena María

Viramontes (Rebolledo 3-4), among others. Before this moment, the number of Chicana writers was very limited because only women from wealthy families could read and write⁷⁶; besides, while oral storytelling was intrinsically related to women, they were not considered serious authors (11).

How to Be a Chicana Role Model: structure

How to Be a Chicana Role Model has sometimes been compared to Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* because of their jumbled composition that does not follow chronological order ("*How to Be*").⁷⁷ In this case, Serros mocks self-help books through the use of anecdotes and stories, most of which apparently happened to her and which she considers enlightening for her readers. The protagonist is Michele, a Chicana who struggles with becoming a writer while she also suffers from socio-economic exploitation and mutual racism between ethnic communities and mainstream U.S.-American culture. Throughout the book, the reader becomes familiar with Michele at different stages of her life and observes the changes resulting from her growth.

The book is not only an assortment of autobiographical events or a cumulative narration, but a collection of pieces of advice for young Chicanas through the experience of Michele, a young Chicana herself. Although the essential aim is to parody role models, the chapters address serious life issues (family relationships, racism, self-esteem,

⁷⁶ From 1848 to the 1960s, only a few Chicana writers have been identified: Fabiola Cabeza de Baca Gilbert, Nina Otero-Warren, Cleofas Jaramillo (Villar Raso and Herrera-Sobek 29), and María Amparo Ruiz de Burton (Sánchez and Pita 12).

⁷⁷ Although constructed through the collection of (semi)autobiographical stories, Serros employs a frame (the self-help book) and a form of humor (satire) which make the book very difficult to classify. In this sense, I can only agree with the comparison between *How to Be a Chicana Role Model* and *The House on Mango Street* to a certain extent—while the structure is similar, their genre, language, tone, and perspective are very different.

exotization, exploitation, inter-ethnic communication, growth, morals, friendship, and self-discovery, among others) that should not be underestimated in account of Serros's humorous approach. Some of these ideas link Serros with traditional Chicano/a literature that critically depicts the life of Chicanos/as in the United States; others prove that the author writes for a universal audience due to her understanding of identity as a mixture of influences from different cultures.

How to Be a Chicana Role Model revolves around three different narrative lines related thematically but not chronologically. The frame story contains thirteen rules through which the author gives what she considers vital advice for a Chicana—but, are they? In fact, those lessons are actually nonsensical rules that allow Serros to prove that perfection does not exist and that no one should tell anybody how to live. At the same time, the author employs the rules to ponder over the problems of Chicanos/as in the United States and question the concept of Chicano/a identity. Furthermore, the fact that there are precisely thirteen rules is highly symbolic: though sacred in pre-Hispanic America (see Akkeren; Grande), thirteen was demonized by Christianity (Scheu 7), so this number symbolizes the transgressive intention of the text and the ambivalence of the role model.

The rest of the book puts together two sets of insert stories linked with the previous frame story. One of them recounts Michele's problem with a man, Ernesto, who organized a reading of Chicano/a literature, in which the protagonist participated and for which she should have been paid. After more than twenty phone calls, Michele does not receive her money and is given excuses by a secretary to not talk to Ernesto. Nevertheless, there is a rupture in the last section, "The Plaintiff, the Poet" (Serros, *How* 205), when the poet sues the man and finally receives her payment of twenty-five dollars and the ironically high

amount of two thousand dollars for punitive damages. In this plot line, Serros criticizes internal racism⁷⁸ within the Chicano/a community, a recurrent idea in other chapters. The last narrative line collects different lessons and experiences that changed the life of the protagonist. These chapters are independent and their titles do not have any direct interconnection. They also display humorous techniques, most of them coming from the paradoxical or ironic relation between title and content.⁷⁹

The only two chronologically related chapters are the first and the last one, “Special Assembly” (Serros, *How* 1) and “Special Assembly, Part 2” (211). The circular end of the book contradicts attitudes that the protagonist shows at the beginning with a revisionist purpose that reinforces Michele’s personal growth. Circularity creates a humorous turnaround and surprises the audience; however, in other chapters circularity is broken, as they start and finish at the same point but with a different outcome.⁸⁰ As with full circularity, broken circularity causes a surprising outcome at the end. Almost every chapter begins *in media res*, that is, the narration starts in the middle of the action, while the previous events are told afterwards, and it is not until the preceding events are told that readers can fully understand the story. The initial confusion causes irony, strangeness, and, hence, incongruity.

⁷⁸ Anzaldúa theorizes internal racism as a form of internal oppression that can be compared to the external oppression of the colonizers (“En Rapport” 143), “a kind of civil war among intimates” (144). She considers that this behavior turns anger against oneself instead of working to fix the origin of that anger (143) and claims that it is time to “get out of the state of opposition” (145).

⁷⁹ For instance, “Passport to Cross Overboard” (Serros, *How* 41) is a reference to the process of becoming through three different plot lines. The chapter discusses the topic of migration, which is recurrent in Chicano/a literature, to explain different processes (passports) to become a different person (cross overboard) in different moments of life.

⁸⁰ For instance, in “Let’s Go Mexico!” (Serros, *How* 101-22) Michele travels to Mexico and, though she is not very excited at first, she eventually learns to love the experience. However, at the end, Michele realizes that her trip is nothing special but just a routine thanks to which the citizens of the village can make money.

How to Be a Chicana Role Model as an attack on racism

Serros, as many other Chicano/a writers, intends to attack the roots of racism by destroying stereotypes (Leal and Barrón 13-15; Luna Estévez 243). Therefore, the writer reproduces several scenes in which Michele or someone from her family are subject to preconceptions by non-Chicanos/as, especially white people from the United States. As a child, Michele has a friend who mocks her because she looks “more from Mexico than California” (Serros, *How* 16) and her nose seems too Indian. Her friend’s comments make her start pressing the sides of her nose to make it thinner (13-20). At the end of the section, the narrator reproduces Michele’s voice: “I might be too skinny. My chest might be too flat. But God forbid I look too Indian” (19). This remark seems clearly ironic as, from an adult perspective, it is clear that being ashamed by an Indian nose is absurd; nonetheless, the point of this story is to denounce the pressure that beauty standards impose on Chicanos/as (especially on the latter) and to reflect the shame they might feel for having a physical appearance that links them to an indigenous past. While Serros sends the message that stereotypes are nonsensical and irrational, she also criticizes how harmful they can be for young girls.

Another chapter advises readers to “Respect the 1 percent” (Serros, *How* 69-72). This idea comes from Uncle Charlie, a Chicano actor who complained about the treatment of Chicano/a and Latino/a characters in Hollywood, as they were played by white people and only made up one percent of the films. Thus, he decided to boycott those movies by not watching them. Notwithstanding, at a certain point at Christmas, Madonna plays the main role in the movie *Evita*, and all the family watches it except for Michele, who refuses to betray Uncle Charlie’s memory. Although Latinos/as make up 17% of the U.S. population, more than half of whom have Mexican origins (United States Census Bureau,

Hispanic 1-2), the story reflects the poor representation of this group: “you never hear our stories, see our lives on the big screen. We’re almost the largest minority in this country and we barely make up one percent on film!” (Serros, *How* 71). In this chapter, Serros denounces cultural appropriation and the U.S.’s attitude towards one of its largest ethnic groups. The criticism is wrapped up with incongruity: although the family seems to respectfully support Uncle Charlie, they easily break the promise when a celebrity plays the role of a Latin-American woman. Therefore, this section reflects upon the ironic lack of interest from the Chicano/a community towards the inappropriate depiction they receive in Hollywood as well.

In another incident, Michele goes with her father to the “take our daughters to work’ day” (Serros, *How* 171). She is really proud and happy as her father’s job at the airport is the most glamorous one, but she finally realizes that he is, as many Chicanos/as, invisible to everyone (Serros, *Chicana falsa* 15; Serros, *How* 173). Even Michele acknowledges later that “I skipped asking my father why his friends at work didn’t know who he was ... I knew the reason. It was as though he was a ghost, the brown ghost in green, unnoticed, not seen” (Serros, *How* 174), despite doing the job that other people refuse to do. Unfortunately, Michele learns this lesson too painfully at a very early age: her future, her options, and her worth as a person are limited by racism (174). Serros uses irony to confront Michele’s infantile beliefs with her father’s harsh reality, which causes in non-Chicanos/as the sudden realization of how life is for many of them.

Most of the time, as it has been said, prejudices come from white people who misjudge Chicanos/as; however, Serros also reproduces the racist attitudes and stereotypes that Chicanos/as project on people with other ethnicities. In “Role Model Rule Number 9, Any Press Is Good Press” (Serros, *How* 139-45), Michele is going to give a

speech at a university and stay in the house of a woman who works there. The protagonist is concerned about not being able to iron her clothes and look smart before speaking in public because, if the woman is white, she will not have an iron: “as everyone knows, white people don’t iron” (140). In “The Big Deal” (59-68) Michele is going to introduce her boyfriend to her family and her aunt Alma starts questioning their relationship because he is white (60), agnostic (61) and, especially, a vegetarian (63). Alma can accept his long hair, white skin (59-60), and tattoos (61); the bottom line is the boy’s vegetarianism, as she cannot understand “where he get[s] his *ganas* from” (64).⁸¹ Eventually, Michele surrenders to her family’s stereotyped ideas and, when the boy arrives, nobody opens the door.

Serros does not only reflect presumptions that Chicanos/as have of other people, but she deliberately mocks those preconceptions and their lack of logic. The writer does not intend to underestimate the racism that affects Chicano/a communities; instead, she wants to leave aside the position of victim. The objective, thus, is not to demonize Chicanos/as whatsoever, but to use humor in order to move her ethnic group from the position of targets to a position of agents who suffer from stereotypes but create them as well.

How to Be a Chicana Role Model as a defense of inter-ethnicity

One of the main functions of humor in the book is to show cultural convergence in the world of Chicanos/as, which can be positive if difference is regarded as inclusive

⁸¹ This stereotype does not only involve ethnicity and sexuality, but also a very particular concept of masculinity, “manhood” (Serros, *Chicana falsa* 57) and “real men” (12): “what kind a man ... doesn’t eat meat?” (Serros, *How* 64). Sergio de la Mora argues that “*Un macho* is aggressive and fearless ... capable of inflicting violence on others ...” (122), so a man concerned about hurting animals is not a *macho*.

and not essentialist. Serros's humor works at a risky space, between the traditional Chicano/a authors who denounce U.S.' influence on their culture on one side and the so-called ethnic subjects who assimilate the mainstream culture on the other. She is interested in fostering the coexistence of ethnic groups because she has grown up in that *nepantla*. Nevertheless, she is not so naive as to portray cultural clash as always amicable; on the contrary, more often than not it takes place in a context of conflict. Serros reflects how Chicanos/as are influenced by other cultures at the same time that they influence other groups, accepting difference but working with similarities: "it didn't matter what class or race one may be, we all have our faults and problems" (Serros, *How* 167).

In the book, there are explicit references to mainstream Western culture⁸² interwoven with elements of Chicano/a tradition⁸³ and a combination of people from multiple ethnic groups, like Puerto Ricans (Serros, *How* 23), Asians (35), Salvadorians (111), and Native Americans (115). All those elements shape Michele's identity and reflect her local and global environment. On the one hand, Michele reproduces the cultural mixture that defines Chicanos/as (influenced by Mexican roots as well as U.S. mainstream culture), which makes her representative of her local community. On the other, due to globalization, cultures constantly converge, and everyone has a diverse background just like Michele's; hence she is also global.

The second role model rule, "Seek Support from Sistas" (Serros, *How* 21-32), is set in a television studio where Michele works as a page. She tries to make friends with a dancer on the basis that they are both Latinas and should support each other: "A brown

⁸² The TV series *General Hospital* (Serros, *How* 1), Pee-Chee folders (5), Pringles, and Dr Pepper (15), the Lollapalooza festival (129), Elton John (24), Cher (59), the movie *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (129), etc.

⁸³ *Buñuelos* and *champurrado* (Serros, *How* 8), *pijones* (116), *chicharrones* (207), and the concept of *la Raza* (2), among others.

woman supporting another brown woman in a black world” (23). Nevertheless, the dancer is unfriendly because “she knows you’re Latina and maybe she thinks if someone sees you guys talking, it’s gonna make you both look the same” (27). Nonetheless, an African-American actress teaches the protagonist that solidarity crosses ethnic barriers: “Take it from one sister to another” (31). At first, Michele assumes that sisterhood comes from people of one’s own ethnicity, ironically responding to racism with more racism. She regards her community as the only possible shelter, avoiding inter-ethnicity or mingling with different people, only to be proven wrong at the end by the African American woman, who treats her with respect and complicity.

There are more examples of inter-ethnic relations in the text. In the last advice, “Answer All Fan Mail” (Serros, *How* 207-10), Michele receives a letter that praises her poems and offers a friendly advice: “You need to ... concentrate on making your poems more universal ... Instead of using a colloquial word such as *chicharrones*, why not just pork or ham?” (207). While the entire book is targeted to supporting understanding between cultures, Serros decides to include this letter, contradicting her previous claims. Furthermore, this is the only letter in the chapter from an unknown character, and, thus, the fact that Serros exceptionally includes it has a special significance: she uses it to mock and criticize an attitude of assimilation disguised as universalization that some people openly wield. Therefore, the writer’s position, opposite to the one expressed in the letter, stands for understanding between cultures and for respect towards difference, but against uniformization.

Serros also writes about the tensions that arise from the encounter of different cultures that coexist in a contact zone. In “Let’s Go Mexico!” (Serros, *How* 101-22) Michele fully realizes that she is too Mexican for the United States and too American in

Mexico, providing the readers with an accurate portrait of what it means to be a Chicano/a. In another excerpt, the main characters talks to a police officer who tells her that working in California must be tough, because “you got your Orientals and your Mexicans and you gotta talk to them and some of them don’t speak English good, and that’s stressful, ... no wonder you just wanna beat the shit out of people” (133), a clear overreaction to the coexistence of different ethnic groups in the United States that is blatantly racist. The case of the police officer is one of the most outrageous in the book, as he does not only exhibit a racist conduct, but he even justifies racial violence. His pushes the limits of incongruity and and is consequently satirized.

Racism, sisterhood, violence, and dislocation are consequences of different cultures living together that Serros explores through humor. Sometimes, Michele is mocked and ashamed by the things that make her different from other Chicanos/as: not speaking Spanish fluently, missing American food, not liking Mexican boys, etc. Anglo classmates in Mexico make fun⁸⁴ of her because of those reasons, displaying feelings of superiority (Hobbes 51) and, clearly, racism, which make Michele feel out of place both among Mexicans and US-Americans.

All things considered, can we assert that Serros fosters inter-ethnicity? Inter-ethnicity celebrates diversity and universality (Bhattacharjee 44) at once, but always keeping in mind the risk of assimilation and the problems that might arise from cultural encounters. In short, inter-ethnicity accepts difference as natural, and while it harmonizes similarity and dissimilarity, it does not seek uniformity or a forced coexistence that could lead to exclusion and resentment (Harris 15-16). I consider Serros’s book as inter-ethnic

⁸⁴ As mentioned before, the theories of mockery proposed by Bergson and Billig attempt to correct improper behaviors in order to make people follow the rules (Bergson 44; Billig 202); therein, what Michele’s classmates try to do is to erase difference when they face it.

because she not only explores the positive aspects of cultural encounters, which she does for sure, but also reflects the difficulties when trying to handle difference. Due to Serros's consideration of ethnic encounters, she approaches writing in a way different from other Chicana writers, such as those who look down on Michele for not speaking Spanish (Serros, *Chicana falsa* 1, 31; Serros, *How* 8). Serros displays an attitude that might collide with certain members of the Chicano/a community who see cultural exchange as a dangerous practice. Therefore, she creates links with authors from different traditions⁸⁵ and expresses ideas about inter-ethnicity and globalism although they might cost her distancing from her own Chicano/a community.

How to Be a Chicana Role Model as an evidence of resiliency

As previously explained, resiliency is the capacity to face life's adversities like injustice, fear, distress, etc. with humor (Allen 158; Luna Estévez 60; McCloskey 56) as a cathartic strategy. This is one of the main goals of humor in Serros's book when she writes about the lives of Chicanos/as from a perspective of healing and conciliation (Fellner and Heissenberger 162). In different episodes, Michele develops a resilient attitude, proving that when one cannot cry any more, one can only afford to laugh (Castañeda Shular et al. 124). Through resiliency, Michele tries to overcome personal traumas and problems that affect other people, both in and out of her community.

⁸⁵ Serros follows the trend of other writers who explore cultural mixture. For instance, her reflection of inter-ethnicity can be associated with Salman Rushdie's warning: "of all the many elephant traps lying ahead of us, the largest and most dangerous pitfall would be the adoption of a ghetto mentality. To forget that there is a world beyond the community to which we belong to, to confine ourselves within narrowly defined cultural frontiers" (19).

For instance, in “Role Model Rule Number 4, Discard Discontinued Text” (Serros, *How* 49-57) Michele lives the most traumatic event of her life. The narrator recounts that Michele has been wearing sunglasses since adolescence, when she read that a mature person should not cry in public. Hence, as Michele wants to become a mature adult, she decides to wear sunglasses even during her mother’s burial. In spite of the dramatic events, the section is told with a comical incongruous tone that allows readers and protagonist to deal with such a traumatic experience. Incongruity comes from Michele’s obsession to wear sunglasses all the time; in fact, when she forgets them at the hospital she has to return to pick them up because she cannot manage the situation without them. While sad, Michele’s obsession with not crying when her mother has died is exaggerated as well. Another incongruity is related to the structure of the chapter, which begins with a funny childish experience and shocks the reader by culminating with a tragic situation.

Serros repeatedly uses humor to confront the pain produced by her mother’s death, a topic she develops in other works (*Chicana falsa* 79). One conversation reminds the protagonist of the last birthday she spent with her mother and how the protagonists wished it would not be the last one when she blew the candles. The wish did not come true, and Michele tries to ironize about the infantile belief that she “must’ve shared [her] wish with someone ‘cause it didn’t come true” (Serros, *How* 157). In another scene, a colleague asks her about her physical health, and Michele answers talking about her psychological pain when she is reminded of her mother’s death. Although these two scenes reflect how miserable Michele feels, they are ironic too: she answers the man’s question about her physical health by talking about her mental state and links a childish belief with a devastating event. Thus, the protagonist plays “between what is said and what is unsaid” (Holoch 78) in order to cope with a negative situation (Attardo 817).

Serros's humor also gives readers a lesson about self-esteem. Although she shows Michele's many flaws, the author provides the protagonist with moments of self-awareness when she learns to love herself in spite of her imperfections. This is a very important advice for young Chicanas, the piece of guidance one expects from a role model. Therefore, Serros comically addresses Michele's defects and makes the character adopt a resilient attitude to overcome her faults and appreciate her good qualities. For instance, in "Role Model Rule Number 3: Remember, Commerce Begins at Home" (Serros, *How* 35-40), Michele's poetry book has been published, and she needs to sell it; however, the full boxes sit around her apartment until their presence becomes too uncomfortable for the protagonist, who starts turning them into furniture so she does not "have to see them ... [or] deal with them" (37). The situation becomes ironic because Michele does not really want people to forget that her boxes are there although she has hidden them to pretend she does not care about them. There is a humorous process until Michele faces her mistake. Serros resorts to two incongruous paradoxes to show Michele's struggle: first, the pride of finally publishing her work contrasts with her decision of hiding it; second, she gets angry when her flatmate uses the boxes like the pieces of furniture they are supposed to be. These humorous paradoxes awake Michele, make her realize her mistake, and push her to mend it.

Another case in which Serros practices humor to cause Michele's self-criticism and to teach her to love herself despite her mistakes can be found at the very end of the book, in "Special Assembly, Part 2" (Serros, *How* 211-22). Michele reads her poems at a school, but children do not really like them; in any case, the protagonist finds out that the cook loves her poetry, which makes her feel as an authentic role model. Again, it is ironic that the person inspired by Michele's literature is precisely the one who was not supposed to be listening, which transforms Michele into a role model for someone she did not

expect to influence at all. This final lesson that one can only aim to momentarily inspire people provides the book with an optimistic ending that encourages self-esteem and resiliency.

Humor theories applied to *How to Be a Chicana Role Model*: Bakhtin, Bergson, Freud, and company

Humor in *How to Be a Chicana Role Model* challenges Western hegemony in diverse ways, which can be interpreted from the point of view of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque.⁸⁶ Even though the carnivalesque could be understood as banal, it is actually rooted in a deep philosophical reflection that tries to provide an interpretation of society (Díaz Bild 22). According to this theory, humor is a liberating tool in the search for happiness, but it can only be ephemeral as it is dangerous for the status quo (26). For ethnic minorities, the carnivalesque is a strategy to break the hierarchies that push them to the background of the social, artistic, and economic canon (Gutierrez-Jones 112-17).

At the beginning of Serros's work, two epigraphs introduce the writer's aim to parody role models (Luna Estévez 228) and to subvert the power structures they represent. The first one illustrates the social pressure that famous Latinos/as have to face when they become role models for their communities; the second criticizes the hierarchies built through the use of role models. These ideas address the pressure put on such paragons, particularly in oppressed groups, but they also help us to reflect upon the pressing need of ethnic communities to find exemplary individuals other than the canonical mainstream white prototypes. At the same time, the personality of the individual who sets an example

⁸⁶ The carnivalesque is constructed on the basis of subversion, liberation, and paradox (Díaz Bild 17), and it has the goal of subverting social power structures (Bajtín 14-15).

can be eclipsed by an unreal image of perfection. The protagonist herself is presented as a role model who, nevertheless, gives many bad examples,⁸⁷ and so she feels an enormous pressure when introduced as a “role model ... for all Hispanic children” (Serros, *How* 215).

At the same time, Serros acknowledges the necessity of positive role models for young Chicanos/as in their own community. In the end, Michele realizes that a role model is not the same for everyone and that it does not imply being perfect, which challenges the idea of an example of behavior accepted by all society. It seems that the most important requirement to be a role model is to believe that you are one; therefore, the main difference between the Michele at the end of the book and the one at the beginning is that she has become aware of her potential to set an example. Through the carnivalesque mockery of the role-model figure, the writer criticises the underlying ideas of socioeconomic hegemony of gender, race, etc. behind a particular model of behavior. Furthermore, Serros encourages people to find inspiration in themselves and on those around them instead of looking up to distant and impossibly perfect figures.

Perhaps, the clearest case of carnivalesque inversion is the scene in which Michele is offered a modeling job because of her nose (Serros, *How* 83). Although she used to hate her nose as a child and an adolescent (19), it is precisely that facial feature that allows her to take profit from a white artist. The ironic inversion of the traditional economic roles of Chicanos/as and U.S.-Americans implies a criticism of social and economic hierarchies. Still, the heroine also acknowledges the exploitation she is suffering: “This woman was totally *exotizing* me. It was plain and simple. I read about this type of behavior, this particular form of racism” (82). Therefore, although Michele has achieved

⁸⁷ For instance, Michele constantly lies to friends (Serros, *How* 9), customers (77, 83), classmates (116), readers (116), bosses (148, 150), boyfriends (179), and school teachers (214).

to reverse economic power structures, the exoticization of her physical aspect proves that the white artist exploits Michele even when the latter also takes profit from it. Beyond Michele's attempt to alter the socioeconomic order, this scene is rather ambivalent because exploitation is mutual.

There are more cases of carnivalesque role-reversal in the book. For instance, after the main character tries to befriend her co-worker Jennifer and is mocked by trying to do so (Serros, *How* 27), Michele imagines herself in the future as a famous writer who meets Jennifer, as a waiter who tries to make friends with her (28-30). Although imaginary, the inversion of roles helps the protagonist unwind her frustration when she realizes that socio-economic hierarchies can actually block the empathy based on a shared ethnicity.⁸⁸ Nonetheless, as in any carnivalesque scene, the destabilization of hierarchies can only be temporary, and in spite of Michele's effort to subvert economic, social, and ethnic orders, the working space is structured according to a pyramidal structure. Furthermore, when Michele tries to create a bond between her and Jennifer (26), the crew laughs at her for trying to skip the norms. These examples prove that, though Serros can be said to employ a Bakhtinian inversion of roles, she is aware that breaking the order in this way is usually an unsuccessful task that will be condemned by society.

One of the most important objectives of Serros's work is to criticize racism, especially in the case of the recurring question of origins. In several situations, Michele is asked where she is originally from; unfortunately, people do not accept "American" as

⁸⁸ When Michele is rejected by another Latina because they belong to different social classes in their working space, Serros criticizes that very often class matters are more important than ethnicity when it comes to building relationships with people. This idea is repeated in other passages, such as in the phone calls between Michele and Ernesto that have already been discussed. It is in the tenth call that Michele's friend's boyfriend explains the protagonist that her problem "is not about brown, black, or white, it's all about green" (Serros, *How* 86). While he literally talks about colors, he is really using irony to disapprove that, as important as ethnicity might be, money is often a more important question. When Michele sues the man, the judge criticizes brown-on-brown economic exploitation (206).

a valid answer due to her appearance. Michele appeals to carnivalesque humor in many occasions; here are some examples: “EL OTHER: Well, my mother is French-Canadian and my father, his family’s actually from Iowa. Wait, no, they’re from Idaho. ME: So what’s your father’s ethnicity? EL OTHER: American. ME: No, ethnicity. Not nationality... You don’t know? EL OTHER: Uh, no, not really” (Serros, *How* 125), and “ME: So where are *you* from? EL OTHER: me? ME: Yeah. EL OTHER: Oh, I’m from ... here, *here* ... You know what I mean. ME: No, what do you mean, really? Where you from? EL OTHER: Oh, I—I don’t know. ME: So what’s your ethnicity? EL OTHER: Oh, I don’t got no ethnicity. ME: Everyone has an ethnicity” (124-25).

Michele, facing the fact that she cannot give the answer people expect, chooses to create confusion through an inversion of roles (Bajtín 14-15), in which she shows her superiority by questioning the other person’s ethnicity. The protagonist tries to unsettle people in order to make the inquirers, and not her, uncomfortable about ethnicity. At the same time, this upturn makes some of the inquirers realize how little they know about themselves and about what ethnicity means, as in many cases they are not even aware that they belong to an ethnic group at all. Since the first rule of the carnivalesque is transience (Díaz Bild 26), although Michele achieves to reverse the racist situation and make people aware of their own bigotry, the superiority feeling vanishes, and Michele is still bothered.

Serros also makes use of grotesque humor, or at least, obscene and politically incorrect behaviors to make the reader uncomfortable, a common strategy in Chicano/a culture (Urquijo-Ruiz 28). This strategy destroys the possibility of Michele becoming a role model and helps build a general mood of transgression and rebelliousness (Gruber 107) linked to Freud’s theory of humor. For instance, Michele sticks wet toilet paper to the tiles of her aunt’s bathroom, which is a both childish and impolite behavior, which

she uses to mock the rules her family is trying to impose on her. It becomes even worse when the paper's capacity to stay clinging is a metaphor for Michele's persistence to reach her goals. According to Freud, obscene humor is related to the instinctive attempt to transgress the social rules that constrict the individual (Billig 143, 146), especially those in a situation of weakness (168). Therefore, obscene jokes imminently reverse the social order, allowing the person to use taboo behaviors to criticize a certain sense of morality (161-62).

As Maritza Wilde remarks, the Catholic legacy imposed by the Spanish colonizers in Mexico supported the idea of the valley of tears and of guilt as the appropriate response to dramatic events (103); nonetheless, a comic approach that blooms from the human instinct to respond with humor is another strategy to deal with unfair power relations (104). Wilde proposes a change of the subordinating rules and referents of power in a given society through humor (106) and the carnivalesque spirit, which is enacted by Michele.

Laughter is explicitly portrayed in the book with different intentions. For instance, in the first chapter, "Special Assembly" (Serros, *How* 1-3) an ironic "ha ha" (2) is used to express that the main character does not find something funny. In the same chapter, the principal of the school is said to have "NO sense of humor" (3) when a guest, Anthony Rivera is asked whether he has any children and he answers "Not that I know of!" (3). The girls laugh as they find the comment funny and ironic; however, the adult man realizes that it is a sample of misbehavior. Although the first case is a straight forward

example of laughter, the second one shows a moment of “unlaughter” (Billig 192)⁸⁹ to boldly illustrate the principal’s discontent.

Very often laughter has a humiliating purpose, following Bergson’s theory of humor as a punishment to someone who breaks social rules. Bergson’s ideas support humor to mock people with an anti-social behavior in order to produce embarrassment and correct their wrong conduct (Bergson 44). Many scenes in which characters are mocked, especially Michele, can be read from this point of view. For example, she is mocked by the White Socks (a group of Anglo girls who study Spanish in Mexico with the main character) because she cannot speak Spanish, an unacceptable behavior for a Chicana (Serros, *How* 106, 109), and she lampoons them in return. Michele also mocks other people at the Lollapalooza, criticizing teenagers who imitate the dressing code of the 1970s (132) and act in the same way, showing an outdated behavior based on repetition instead of originality. Mockery happens again when the protagonist confesses inventing complicated names when she goes to a hotel in order that the employees find her name hard to pronounce (139), which is a punishment to a white-dominant mentality.

Michele’s attitude towards the question about her origins can be read according to Bergson’s theory of humor as well. Mockery is used to punish an individual who displays an antisocial or inadequate behavior (Bergson 44); in consequence, the protagonist scorns people who make her feel uncomfortable by rudely questioning her ethnicity. As a matter of fact, Bergson considers repetition one of the main mechanisms to produce corrective mockery, and that is exactly why scenes involving the mentioned question are repeated

⁸⁹ Unlaughter, the absence of laughter when it would be expected, is an interesting phenomenon with a meaning that transcends that of simply not laughing (Billig 192). While people spend most of their lives not laughing, unlaughter is typically used to express disapproval (192) as in the case of the principal of Michele’s school. The fact that social order can be maintained through humor, according to Bergson, and through unlaughter, as Billig defends, is another contradictory feature of humor.

up to seven times in the book. Nevertheless, the objective of Bergsonian mockery is to correct improper attitudes (46), and that does not always happen — some people, like the man whose father’s ethnicity is unknown, realize their own ignorance, but many others do not even appreciate the criticism.

The three humor strategies documented by Bergson (the Jack-in-the-Box, the Snow-ball, and the Dancing-Jack) are developed in *How to Be a Chicana Role Model*. The first one is used when the narrator describes mothers who buy materials for their children’s school projects at the last minute. At first, they always threaten the children not to help them but they end up yielding (75). The second resource can be appreciated in the phone calls between Michele and Ernesto—the phone calls begin with the demand for a small sum of money and, after several months, there is a lawsuit for a much bigger quantity (205-6). The section in which Michele reads her friend’s diary forms another snow-ball: it starts with the protagonist reading her name in the diary and considering it unimportant, yet she keeps growing more and more anxious about it (90). The last technique is not especially repeated in the book, but it can be noted, for instance, when Michele meets another Latina in Mexico who wears sunglasses too (113). Though both women consider that wearing sunglasses is their own choice, it actually is a subtle cultural imposition for people to hide their emotions in public (51).

Closure

The narrative strategies in *How to Be a Chicana Role Model* prove that Serros is part of a group of Chicana writers who use humor to struggle against racism, stereotypes, and marginalization. The book also shows that Serros manages to find a balance between

Chicano/a and mainstream U.S. culture, which shows a tolerant attitude that differs from that of other authors in her community (Barco). Thus, she provides readers with an innovative point of view based on comicality to face the problems of young Chicanos/as. Serros employs humor in a risky space, between more traditional authors from her community on one side and U.S. mainstream media on the other, a mixture that results in the author's defense of inter-ethnicity.

Through different comic techniques, Serros proves that Chicanos/as wield humor and resiliency as one of the most suitable strategies to rebel against inequality and overcome it. Nonetheless, the author does not only attack other communities but also the people from her Chicana side, including herself. Serros reflects upon Chicano/a identity as an inter-ethnic construct, dignifies the individuals from her community, denounces racism and marginalization from mainstream historical discourse, and demolishes stereotypes and hierarchies. Thanks to humor, the writer develops painful topics that she could not manage from seriousness, and she attempts to rewrite the everyday of Chicanos/as (Erichsen 28, 32; Fellner and Heissenberger 162). Moreover, while satire responds to the social responsibility of subverting power relations between Chicanos/as and whites (Knight 52, 78), it creates a strong bond between writer, character, and readers "against the enemy under attack [U.S. mainstream mentality]" (Connery and Combe 9). Even if some the critical load of the book is serious and highly defiant in itsf content, Serros always uses comicality to present her ideas as constructive criticism.

Returning to Rebolledo's definition quoted at the very beginning of this chapter, Serros has been proven as belonging to the literary tradition of Chicana writers: she witnesses the life of young Chicanos/as in the United States, translates the encounter of different ethnic groups into common human experiences, and cooks those shared events

seasoning them with humor. By means of comic literature, the author becomes an observer, a translator, and a chef—in short, a writer for a new generation of Chicanos/as.

2.1.3. Opposite poles: Gordon Henry's and Michele Serros's approaches to humor

The different cultural backgrounds of Gordon Henry and Michele Serros influence their style and their understanding of humor. As has already been mentioned, in the case of American Indians, humor has always been an important piece of their culture (Gruber 9), although sometimes misunderstood by colonizers (8). For Native Americans, comicality is characteristic of their ethnic identity and helps them cope with the difficulties of life, particularly Euro-American assimilation processes (10). Consequently, humor pervades all their cultural forms of expression (14) to the point that it has become a defining feature (17), especially in the case of sarcastic humor (15-16). For Chicanos/as, the experience of humor might be slightly different, as they usually prefer ridicule (Alvarez Dickinson 43), mockery, self-satire (46), parody (141), misunderstandings, and puns (299), as well as irony (45) to express their comicality. Humor in Chicano/a communities has a cathartic function for the members in and out of the community because it encourages cultural mediation (51-55). All in all, apart from these particular issues that differentiate Chicanos/as and Native Americans, there are also parallelisms that bring them closer, since their humor coincides in many aspects and responds to similar aims, as I will develop below.

The objectives of Serros and Henry meet those of other authors from ethnic communities who make use of humor: mainly, to defuse cultural conflict (Erichsen 30),

to destabilize hierarchies (Fellner and Heissenberger 164), to overcome ethnic barriers (Bowers 247), to revise history (Gutierrez-Jones 117), and to encourage resilient attitudes (Díaz Bild 59, 60, 69; Luna Estévez 59). Asun Bernárdez Rodal mentions the potential of humor for women to conquer spaces of symbolic change due to its capacity to provoke a liberating laughter (18); similarly, this use of humor can be applied to ethnic communities as a strategy to become active subjects in the deconstruction of Western impositions and the creation of a counter-culture (Proaño-Gómez 179). In fact, it has been confirmed that the employment of comicality by ethnic groups to fight oppression, displacement, alienation, and inequality has “become increasingly significant” (Dunphy and Emig 7). In many passages from Serros’s and Henry’s texts, common strategies can be found because the authors resort to similar humor techniques, despite cultural peculiarities. In the next paragraphs a comparison between the humor of the two writers will be made in order to prove that, in Siro López’s words, while Serros’s comedic humor makes the reader laugh out loud, Henry’s humorism draws mainly from irony and parody to provoke a cynical smile.

First of all, I will study formal similarities, such as the genre choice, the treatment of identity and growth as the main topic of the books, as well as the rupture of linear temporality. Afterwards, I will move on to compare the humor strategies chosen by Serros and Henry: the titles of their works and the techniques that they employ to produce critiques, destroy hierarchies, create a community of readers, support inter-ethnicity, and encourage resiliency. Finally, I will provide a comparative reading of the two works from the point of view of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, the Bergsonian mockery, and the Freudian grotesque.

Similarities between Henry's and Serros's works start from questions of style and plot. For instance, the two texts are daring in their composition, as the authors choose non-canonical styles. In the case of Henry, he decides to mix different genres in order to create an innovative piece of writing; Serros embraces self-help books, a literary category usually set aside by academia. The employment of such uncommon forms is not accidental, as they support the messages sent by each writer. The variety of literary types in Henry's novel matches the plurality of voices and the fragmentariness of the plot; Serros uses self-help publications with a mocking intention and as a way to connect with young Chicanos/as who share Michele's (the protagonist's) problems. Henry's parody of literary genres is a challenge to traditional Western literature, and the fact that he allows himself to play with them implies an active position of revisionism and rebelliousness (Henry, "Some questions" 5, 6). Bakhtin theorizes on the novel's capacity to absorb other literary genres and parody them (Bakhtin 5) as a means to introduce humor and reflect ideas of flexibility (7) and liberation (39), a theory which fits Henry's goals in *The Light People*.

Serros's choice is rebellious in a different way, as she opts for an underrated genre in order to oppose those who stand in a judging position and to show that being different does not imply being inferior. Furthermore, her choice also implies a severe criticism in terms of gender. According to Mary Eagleton, genre and gender are intimately related, not only to create artificial masculine and feminine literary standards, but also to destroy them (250-52). Usually, when characters or narrators have an active personal voice they are related to masculinity (251); this is the case of Serros, who presents a declamatory and confident voice far from the traditional feminine one. What is more, she blends topics that are usually considered to belong to the masculine sphere, such as socioeconomic issues of public life, with others from the conventional feminine domain in the domestic

space. She chooses to tell semi-autobiographical stories in a parodic self-help book, an undeniably underestimated genre that is usually considered marginal and feminine, which reflects the author's experience of double alienation as a Chicana and a female. Telling her life story from her childhood, Serros even develops a "female appropriation of the *Bildungsroman*" (253).

In all *How to Be a Chicana Role Model* destabilizes the male-female division in literature and the alienation of ethnic communities. In this sense, Serros follows other Chicana peers (Urquijo-Ruiz 109) like Gloria Anzaldúa, whose "mixing of genres is intended both to celebrate mestizaje and to escape classifications of all kinds—such as those of races, sexualities, genders, or nationalities" (Núñez-Puente, "From Genealogies" 43). Consequently, although both Henry and Serros employ genre to destabilize imperialist impositions and Western preconceptions, each one of them decides to use it differently.

The Light People and *How to Be a Chicana Role Model* deal with the search for identity in the context of an ethnic community and in relation to others, an idea to which most readers can easily relate. Still, Serros and Henry take advantage of the form of their works in different ways to reflect their understanding of identity. In this sense, Henry constructs Oskinaway's story as a collage of the community members' narratives (ceremonies, memories from the past, a return to the reservation, stories from other members of the community, etc.) because the protagonist's identity cannot be understood in isolation from his group. On the other hand, the fact that Serros's multigeneric work is told from Michele's point of view implies that her community has a limited influence in her growth and that she experiences tensions in it. Ironically, she feels more connected to

people with different ethnic backgrounds, which is reflected in several chapters, like “Role Model Rule Number 2, Seek Support From Sistas” (Serros, *How* 21-31).

Other points of connection include the destruction of temporal linearity by means of fragmentariness. Serros breaks temporal linearity because she is not trying to write an autobiography; rather, she gathers anecdotes to illustrate experiences in Michele’s life that teach Chicanos/as *not* to do as she does instead of providing a role model. The chapters intertwine a variety of topics (racism, stereotypes, beauty standards, etc.) in a sketchy disordered way. Henry uses flashbacks and flash-forwards, and he coordinates different narratives to create a story built by many people in which the whole community stands together, as a tribute to traditional American Indian storytelling. As reflected in Appendix 1, temporality is a complicated question in his text. Thus, the two authors link the rupture of linearity to the fragmentariness of their narratives, made of the accumulation of insert stories in an atemporal order.

Although the titles of *How to Be a Chicana Role Model* and *The Light People* do not share a purely comical intention (Serros’s is clearly ironic, while Henry’s does not employ humor), the titles of the chapters do in most cases. Serros’s chapter titles obey the comical style of the book’s title; however, in Henry’s case they contrast with a more serious and traditional novel title. For both of them, using humor in this way responds to their intention of introducing a tongue-in-cheek tone. Very often, Serros creates a misunderstanding between the expectations that readers have from the chapters’ titles and their content, and Henry’s choices are overtly ironic and ambiguous.

Next, I would like to focus on the use of humor and the techniques that Henry and Serros put to work in order to create comical works. The writers intertwine different strategies (parody, irony, incongruity, paradox, etc.) to reach certain targets; many

parodies show an ironic tone, and a subject like racism can be addressed through incongruity, irony, and parody, among other ways. Hence, the texts should not be understood as catalogs of comical mechanisms, but as stories that combine different aspects of humor to send messages mainly about community, cultural value, inter-ethnicity, mutual understanding, and resiliency.

The Light People and *How to Be a Chicana Role Model* contain high doses of criticism towards many different aspects of society: racism, stereotyping, beauty standards, justice, pyramidal power structures, and cultural appropriation, among others. Henry chooses satire as a way of correcting morally wrong behaviors and irony—a popular comical tactic in the literature of American Indians (Gruber 55)—to make readers produce their own critique by reading between the lines. In the case of Serros, her main objective is mocking improper behaviors and beliefs, also from an ironic point of view, but using many incongruities as well. Most part of their critical load is directed at racism and stereotypes. Serros shows that these attitudes come from either side and in each community as much as against other groups (Chicanos/as and non-Chicanos/as). Otherwise, Henry parodies prejudices specifically against American Indians: the process of naming, the figure of the craftsman, and, especially, the idea that Native Americans belong to the past.

Another purpose of these authors is the destruction of hierarchical structures in society. Probably, the clearest case of parody to subvert hegemonies in Henry's novel is the scene in which a group of Native Americans question the validity of a legal document to prove the ownership of a piece of land by a white man. The character of the white man is repeatedly caricatured and the situation reaches an incongruous point. Serros, nonetheless, directs her mockery mainly at the notion of role models, but secondarily to

concepts such as cultural appropriation, “ghetto mentality” (Rushdie 19), and racism. Although Serros and Henry criticizes different subjects, both try to challenge hierarchies through the reversal of roles (particularly, those related to ethnicity) by means of the carnivalesque, which allows ethnic groups to subvert the status quo that relegates them to an inferior socio-economic level.

One of the most important results of humor is the creation of a community, not according to racial or ethnic features, but by means of shared socio-cultural references in a common imaginary space (Bowers 249; Emmons 10; McCloskey 40). For Henry, this is a very important aim in *The Light People* because it does not tell the story of a single character and the figure of the protagonist is highly decentralized; thus, the novel cannot be separated from the concept of community. Apart from that, Henry, as other American Indian authors, embraces humor to unite people in their shared criticisms and healing processes. Serros does not aim so clearly for the creation of a group. Her book is addressed to both Chicano/a and non-Chicano/a readers, but it also reflects the protagonist’s personal experiences in a rather individual way. Michele continually learns from her interaction with other people from different ethnic backgrounds, but the sense of community is not as strong as in Henry’s novel. In any case, the point in common in these works is that the creation of a group is not necessarily limited to the borders of a particular community, as they encourage the communication between individuals regardless of their nationality and ethnicity.

Precisely the idea of inter-ethnicity is repeatedly addressed in a humorous way by Henry and Serros, and, in fact, it is one of the most important topics they write about, although it is never explicitly mentioned. One of the most powerful images to illustrate inter-ethnicity appears in *The Light People*, when the protagonist returns to his

grandparents' house and describes a wall in which a variety of objects from very different cultures coexist in harmony. This is a metaphorical way to express that Native American identity, like the identity of any individual in the contemporary world, is not impermeable and contains elements and influences from more than one source. Such images can also be found in Serros's *How to Be a Chicana Role Model*, in which she includes traditional elements of Chicano/a tradition in dialog with U.S. mainstream culture. The authors agree that inter-ethnicity is not free from tensions and conflicts (Henry, "Some questions" 3), and reflect that finding one's place in a contact zone is troublesome; nevertheless, they actively defend the understanding among people beyond ethnicity, and support the celebration of difference as a positive way to achieve mutual learning.

Although both authors encourage inter-ethnicity and a positive understanding of difference, each of them addresses the concepts differently. Henry pays closer attention to the distance between native and non-native characters; Serros shows that Michele finds alliances in and out of her ethnic group, and she is sometimes more distanced from Chicanos/as and closer to non-Chicanos/as. This means that Henry's support of inter-ethnicity resorts to the acceptance of cultural difference in the first place, whereas Serros is concerned with individuals regardless of their origins, and she even shows the destructiveness of preconceptions based on ethnicity.⁹⁰

The fundamental aspect in these narrative pieces might be their defense of humor as the main tool to adopt a resilient attitude. Henry and Serros belong to two ethnic communities in the United States that have suffered from a long history of racism, exploitation, and appropriation; therefore, these authors send the message that, while

⁹⁰ For instance, in one of the chapters, as has already been mentioned, Michele is excluded from the community of Chicana writers because she cannot speak Spanish fluently (Serros, *How* 8). This is one of the many examples from *How to Be a Chicana Role Model* in which issues about purity of ethnicity and uniformity are criticized. For Serros, this mentality only achieves division instead of union.

criticism is a necessary step to defend oneself, humor is vital to move from the position of victimized object to active subject; furthermore, humor lets them heal their wounds. For Michele, resiliency is, in the first place, indispensable in her personal life to heal the trauma caused by her mother's death and to teach other Chicanos/as how to improve self-esteem. Nonetheless, she also employs humor, particularly incongruity, to help her community overcome inequality and injustice. Henry uses irony to rewrite history, bringing to light the violence perpetrated against American Indians. For instance, some characters remember the tragedy at Wounded Knee (Henry, *The Light* 108) and the unfair treatment of tribal members as beings from the past in the trial scene.

Resiliency is also embodied by the figure of the Trickster. Many different characters in Henry's novel can be considered tricksters: the boy who mocks Oskinaway by the river (Henry, *The Light* 6), Arthur (Callahan 189; Henry, *The Light* 10), the little man who teases Arthur in his initiation ceremony (Henry, *The Light* 17), the man in Rose's dream (32), etc. These trickster figures stand out because, given the novel's predominantly dramatic tone where irony and parody produce humorism, these characters create amusement being more fearlessly anarchic, irreverent and funny. None of them are main characters, but secondary ones that teach lessons of rebelliousness, adaptation and healing to the central figures of the stories. Serros, on the other hand, does not include actual tricksters, perhaps because she is not so acquainted with Native American mythology.⁹¹ However, Michele shows certain trickster-like features too: she lies, she contradicts society (Serros, *How* 179) and her family (70), she repeatedly exercises humor to improve resiliency (157), and she also mocks other people (109). Nevertheless, just

⁹¹ As mentioned in Chapter 1, Chicano/a culture has traditionally included important trickster figures in their mythology; this could be related to the fact that the ancestors of current Chicanos/as were also part of the native groups in the American continent (Alvarez Dickinson 45). In spite of that, the survival of the Trickster has been stronger in Native American tribes than in the Chicano/a community.

like the Trickster, Michele is also contradictory because she lets other people's opinions influence her (67) and she recognizes the ambivalence of cultural encounters (82).

The Bakhtinian carnivalesque is a useful comical strategy for ethnic minorities, such as Chicanos/as and Native Americans, due to its rupture of the hierarchies imposed on them—for instance, the fact that their literary production is out of the canon (Gutierrez-Jones 112-17). Consequently, both Serros and Henry offer examples of the carnivalesque that represent a destabilization of the status quo and an escape valve against racist attitudes, although the former adapts to Bakhtinian humor to a greater extent. The carnivalesque theory explains the inversion of roles in *How to Be a Chicana Role Model* in order to subvert power structures, to unwind Michele's frustration, and to show a cathartic approach against injustice and inequality. Serros knows that this kind of carnival cannot last and that the inversion of hierarchies can only be temporary; that is, in spite of the main character's effort to overcome economic, social, and ethnic limitations, the world in which she lives cannot be changed easily. The Bakhtinian reversal of social roles in *How to Be a Chicana Role Model* shows at the same time that questioning the canon can sometimes be unsuccessful and socially reprehensible, but also that the effort to change society must be made. In Henry, the Bakhtinian theory of the carnivalesque is deeply linked with tricksters (Owens 226; Velie, "Trickster" 121) who employ grotesque humor as a temporary challenge to hierarchies and social rules.

The use of grotesque humor, as studied in Freudian theories, is justified as a release from social impositions that contradict instinctive behaviors (Díaz Bild 156), which makes sense in the context of Henry's novel. Grotesque, obscene, and politically incorrect behaviors are shown in many scenes of *The Light People*, usually in association with tricksters. These humor strategies perfectly match tricksters' behavior, taking into

account their traditional features as characters that follow their instincts instead of social norms; thus, in the novel, they teach the main characters to release themselves from social constrictions in order to survive, which is a double lesson on rebelliousness and resiliency. Serros also makes use of grotesque and obscene humor with many impolite behaviors both to show Michele's inability to be a traditional role model and to provide the book with a transgressive tone. All in all, although the Freudian theories about the grotesque take different forms for each writer, the authors' main intention is the same: to encourage a rebellious attitude whenever necessary.

Laughter and "unlaughter" (Billig 192) are explicitly portrayed in Serros's work. According to Bergson's theory of humor, very often, laughter has a humiliating purpose: it serves as a punishment to someone who breaks social rules. Hence, mockery is repeatedly practiced by Michele, who lampoons people who make her feel uncomfortable by rudely questioning her ethnicity in many different situations to condemn their impolite and unfriendly attitude. In spite of reflecting the corrective dimension of humor, Serros also challenges the effectiveness of Bergsonian mockery: although it seeks to correct improper attitudes (Bergson 46), most of the people represented as characters do not realize they are being criticized. Therefore, correction is unsuccessful for them but successful for the readers who understand Serros's criticism, learn from and laugh with it. In *The Light People* there are also some direct references to trickster characters laughing that can be read according to superiority theories and Bergsonian interpretation of mockery as a social corrective (Bergson 46). As discussed above, Bergson describes three strategies to trigger humor (the Jack-in-the-Box, the Snow-ball, and the Dancing-Jack) that Serros and Henry include in their works together with other humor strategies (irony, parody, etc.).

As suggested at the beginning of this chapter, Serros prefers incongruity, puns, and mockery against a particular character or group, whereas Henry is keen on more subtle sarcastic and ironic scenes with a satirical objective. Therefore, Serros's writing triggers laughter and Henry's novel makes readers raise an eyebrow with a cynical attitude that requires them to read between the lines. Nevertheless, as already explicated, although the writers take different paths regarding humor, they share common goals and comic strategies in their works.

In the chapter devoted to *How to Be a Chicana Role Model*, I commented upon Rebolledo's definition of Chicana writers as witnesses, translators, and cooks—in short: storytellers. I also mentioned that Serros perfectly fits this characterization; this facilitates her relocation in the canon of Chicano/a writers that has sometimes been denied to her due to the controversial reception of her work. I can now argue that this definition of Chicana writers can be extended to storytellers from other ethnic groups, whose writing is partly based on their experiences. Thus, both Serros and Henry can be identified as witnesses of the challenges and accomplishments of their communities; translators of their ethnic particularities for an audience with a different background; and cooks who add a tablespoon of resiliency, a cup of criticism, and a handful of humor to their works.

2.2. **Ironic mode on: poems of Aztecs and hustlers**

2.2.1. **Natalie Diaz's poetry and humor: *When My Brother Was an Aztec***

“Humor is a survival mechanism. Humor is the thing
that allows you to say ... *this* will not kill me”

(Diaz, “This Life”)

Many aspects of Natalie Diaz's life influence *When My Brother Was an Aztec*, a book of fifty-one poems published in 2012. Diaz belongs to the Mojave and the Gila River Indian communities and has links with the Hispanic world, as well. Though she acknowledges the influence of American Indian writers on her literature, she rejects being included in the canon of American Indians because “when people talk about [it], ... what they are often trying to talk about is assimilation” (Diaz, “This Life”). This reflects Diaz's intention to create a piece of work that transcends the local by mixing native cultures with other traditions. For instance, the religious imaginary from the Spanish Catholic family on her father's side (Menten 1) is combined with the Native American and U.S. cultures on her mother's side (1) and her own upbringing in Fort Mojave Indian Village (*Blue Mesa Review* 14; Diaz, *When My Brother* 103).

A variety of traditions are reflected in Diaz's compositions, since her work as a professional basketball player in Europe and Asia (Diaz, *When My Brother* 103) introduced her to a great variety of people. Spanish culture is particularly important in this book, partly because of the Spanish origins of her father (Menten 1) and partly due to her literary background that includes many Spanish-speaking writers (Diaz, “This Life”). She is currently directing a language revitalization program with the last speakers

of Mojave (Diaz, *When My Brother* 103), which proves her concern with tribal issues (Larrimore). Together with the problems of her community, her oeuvre also explores her intimate feelings and personal anecdotes (Diaz, “An Interview”; Diaz, “This Life”), many of which relate to her unnamed brother’s drug addiction (Diaz, “Conversation”; Diaz, “This Life”). These ideas are spiced up with humor, another detail that adds authenticity to the autobiographical poems because it portrays Diaz’s personality: “Humor is what makes me, *me*” (Diaz, “An Interview”).

Surprisingly, very little has been written about comical American Indian poetry, in contrast with humorous Native American narrative; thus, to gather information about the topic one should be content with characteristics of humorous American Indian literature in general. Taking into account the importance of both humor (Emmons 1; McCloskey 111) and poetry for this ethnic group, it is shocking that they have not been studied together yet. Research has been centered on comical prose, but, as American Indian culture does not differentiate genres (Huntsman 6; Swann 5),⁹² humorous poetry should be fairly similar to humorous narrative texts. Hence, this chapter will test whether the generic features of comical American Indian literature and narrative can be extrapolated to poetry.

In order to achieve my goals, I will review Native American poetry from traditional compositions to contemporary poets. Then, some information about the structure and the rhetorical devices of *When My Brother Was an Aztec* will be introduced, followed by an analysis of the humor techniques and aims of Diaz’s poetry. In addition, I will study in depth four poems that I consider particularly representative of her work’s

⁹² Diaz herself agrees with the understanding of literary genres as a whole: “You could call some of the things I’m writing prose poems or flash essays or short lyric pieces or whatever people decide. For me the modes don’t feel very different” (Diaz, “This life”).

topics, images⁹³, and goals. The reading of the book and the analysis of those particular poems will be examined through the theories of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, the Bergsonian mockery, and the Freudian grotesque. In all, I will, first, prove the importance of humor in American Indian poetry through Diaz's compositions; second, check whether the features of comical native literature are useful in the reading of poetry; and third, encourage further studies on humor in this group's lyrical compositions.

Native American poetry and humor

As previously mentioned, contemporary Native American literature draws from traditional ritual and secular orature (Porter 59). Perhaps, the most similar traditional compositions to contemporary Native American poetry were songs, related to personal emotions and usually accompanied by music (Wiget 26). These compositions used to address love, historical events, wars, loss, praise, death, etc. (Wiget 26-28) and they were employed by the Eskimo tribes of North America as well as by the Aztecs in Mesoamerica (26).

In 1972, the publication *The Whispering Wind: Poems by Young American Indians* collected the lyric compositions of students from the Institute of American Indian Arts, in response to Paula Gunn Allen's encouragement to recover traditional American Indian poetry.⁹⁴ Though a couple of anthologies had already been published,⁹⁵ the success of this particular one boosted new poetry programs in different schools and new collections

⁹³ As noticed by several critics, and as Diaz herself admits, images are a very important device in her work, as she constructs some of the poems by dismantling a particular image ("An Interview"). Her brother, for instance, is linked to the figure of the magician as a distorter of reality is related to the effects of drugs.

⁹⁴ Andrew Wiget defends that many poets from the aforesaid anthology were Allen's pupils at the IAIA, where she had exhorted them "to draw upon traditional poetic forms" (98).

⁹⁵ *The New Trail* (1943), for example (Wilson 149).

(Wiget 98). At that time, Vine Deloria, Jr. alleged that the new wave of poets was a “bridge” between the “glorious past ... and the desperate present” (Wilson 149). The number of authors grew exponentially from the 1960s and in the 1980s and 1990s (149).⁹⁶

According to Wilson, those Native American authors who recovered the poetic tradition of their tribes in the 1960s influence most poets from the following generation at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century (Wilson 157); nonetheless, the aforesaid poets from the 1960s Native American Renaissance did not have a recent background to inspire them (145). At the beginning of the 20th century, the curiosity of non-native poets⁹⁷ for Native American poetry, which was considered exotic (98), allowed a few educated native poets to publish.⁹⁸ Unfortunately, this native group is not a model for the poets in the 1960s because their style, matching their formal education, was European, and, though they encouraged respect for Native Americans (Wilson 145), most of them did not identify themselves as “Indian” poets (Wiget 99).

Today, Native American poets are revising ancient mythologies, the history of migration, and tribalism to create unique lyrical texts in English that are also influenced by Western literary traditions and forms (Wilson 145). In general, American Indian poetry holds a concern with language and form (Wiget 100), and a number of native poets focus on their relationship with the land, “homing” (Roemer 17), as a reflection of the cultural significance of environment (Wiget 108). Ludmila Martanovschi emphasizes the

⁹⁶ Some of the poets since the 1980s are: Charles Ballard (Wiget 120), Peter Blue Cloud (108), Lew Blockolski (120), Joseph Bruchac (114), Grey Cohoe (120), Hedge Coke (Wilson 155), Stephen Crane (Wiget 104), Crystos (Wilson 166), Anita Endrezze (166), Paula Gunn Allen (Wiget 118), Joy Harjo (116), Patty L. Harjo/Ya-Ka-Nez (120), Linda Hogan (118), Harold Littlebird (120), Alonso Lopez (120), Janet McAdams (Wilson 166), Duane McGinnis Niatum (Wiget 106), N. Scott Momaday (100), Simon Ortiz (108), Thomas Peacock (120), Carter Revard (Wilson 149), Leslie Marmon Silko (Wiget 108), Liz Sohapp (120), Gerald Vizenor (Wilson 150), Anna Walters (Wiget 120), James Welch (103), Roberta Hill Whiteman (120), Ramona Wilson (120), Ray Young Bear (114), etc.

⁹⁷ Namely, Mary Austin, Eda Lou Walton, Alice Corbin Henderson, etc. (Wiget 99).

⁹⁸ For instance, John Rollin Ridge, Jane Johnston Schoolcraft, E. Pauline Johnson, Alexander Posey, Zitkala-Ša (Wilson 145), Frank James Prewett, Louise Oliver (148), and Lynn Riggs (Wiget 99).

importance of the decolonization of the self through “memory, language and cultural experience” (11), political sovereignty and resistance (12), and the importance of storytelling and “remembering, connecting, restoring” (12). There is also a relevant feminist branch of American Indian poets that explores traditional native women figures to offer alternatives to Western gender roles (Wiget 118). However, we might still wonder, where is humor?

Comic examples of Native American poetry have not been much discussed apart from a few references to individual authors.⁹⁹ For instance, Martanovschi mentions irony in Joy Harjo’s poems (187), considered “gritty” by Wiget (116), humor scenes and moments of laughter in Ortiz’s compositions (Martanovschi 117, 125), as well as the Trickster in the poetry of both writers (52, 189). Wiget enlists irony and wordplay in the poetry of Wendy Rose (102), James Welch (103), Duane Niatum (107) and Linda Hogan (119). Apart from that, he also explores the technique of utilizing a sardonic tone that mixes harsh events of life in the reservation (120) with irony and paradoxical comicality (Roemer 15). We can extrapolate other features of Native American poetry from American Indian literature in general; for instance, Kenneth Lincoln mentions “dark red humor” (qtd. in Bowers 248)¹⁰⁰ and Eva Gruber lists irony, sarcasm (55); satire, parody (60); wordplay (68); comic reversal, intertextuality (80); historical allusions and naming (89) as common characteristics.

⁹⁹ Humor in Native American poetry is found more often in recent works (from the 1970s onwards). At the beginning of the 20th century, poets were not prone to experiment with literary conventions due to the possibility of being rejected either because of their ethnicity or for appearing to hold a rebellious attitude. The work of some contemporary Native American women authors can be found, for example, in Allen (155-64).

¹⁰⁰ Dark red humor, according to Lincoln, responds to a necessity to exorcise one’s pain and attack the enemy through humor in order to defend one’s culture (Bowers 248).

Some of these features have only been documented in the poems of individual authors, while others are mentioned in studies of American Indian literature in general, but most of them reflect a hostile comical style deliberately aimed to discomfort (Emmons 8) and shock (171). That is a typical trait of the aforementioned dark red humor and the aforesaid humorous strategies reveal an intention to, as developed by Siro López (20), use satire, irony and laughter to denounce injustice. Let us now compare this list of humor traits, which comic contemporary Native American poetry is supposed to have, with Natalie Diaz's work.

Humor and its goals in *When My Brother Was an Aztec*

The question of humor in *When My Brother Was an Aztec* can be complicated because, at a first reading, the poems might appear distressing for the reader. However, this is due to Diaz's intention to create a work that is humorist but not comical. For Siro López, humorism addresses the reader's feelings, and so the author takes a risk to cause unlaughter (20). Therefore, Diaz's work takes a humorist approach to deal with a subject (her brother's addiction) that is adequate for this kind of humor: a problem that seems unsolvable but is eventually sorted out and that teaches a lesson of resiliency (20).¹⁰¹ In this strategy, the author tries to arouse the solidarity of the reader, who will probably smile with empathy but not laugh with superiority (21).

When My Brother Was an Aztec is structured into three sections, preceded by an introductory poem that shares the title of the collection and advances many of its

¹⁰¹ Allen explicitly defends the necessity on the part of Native American authors to reconcile "the opposites of life and death, of celebration and grief, of laughter and rage" (163) by employing the comic as a catalyst for endurance.

fundamental topics, as well as some recurrent elements of Diaz's poetry. The first part of the book gathers fifteen poems that ponder, basically, over ethnicity: racism, cultural clash, and the life of American Indians in the reservations (Teitman). Eleven poems form the second part, which is focused on the author's brother (Diaz, "This life") and his addiction problems from different perspectives. The third and last part contains sixteen poems about Diaz's personal experiences, mostly love-wise, but also about other topics: sexuality, identity, growth, religion, terrorism, war, and imperialism. Though the sections do not seem intimately related, Diaz maintains that drug use is relatively common in the reservation ("Conversation"); thus, from the general problems of the community (Bowers 247), the book moves on to explore a specific family issue with echoes for American Indians (McCloskey 43). It is the third and last part of the book that might seem more independent; nevertheless, Diaz argues that the last poem of the second part, about her brother's funeral, is followed in the third section by day-to-day events because that is how life goes on. Therein, this section is a message of resiliency which shows that painful experiences are never forgotten but can be handled in order for one to survive.

The coexistence of different cultures¹⁰² in these poems echoes the inter-ethnicity in Diaz's identity (Diaz, "An Interview"; Menten 1), and in Native Americans' lives in general (Menten 5, 7). In her poems from the book *When My Brother Was an Aztec*, inter-ethnicity is fostered from the very beginning, as the lyric writings are preceded by an epigraph with a Spanish proverb: "*No hay mal que dure cien años, / ni cuerpo que lo resista*" (n.p.). Apart from making clear that resiliency will be one of the most important

¹⁰² Diaz repeatedly mentions figures from a wide range of cultures: Judas (Diaz, *When My Brother* 46), Merlin, Borges, El Santo (48), Jesus (50, 66), Sisyphus, God, Lionel Richie (52), Geronimo, Jimi Hendrix, the Tribal Police (53), the Exodus (57), Thais, Alexander the Great, Lorca, Zacateca culture (60), Gethsemane (64), Antigone, and Houdini (66). Such a wide collection of characters creates incongruous and surrealist scenes that produce an ironic atmosphere in contrast with the dramatic subject-matter of the compositions, but also encourage the collaboration between elements from different cultures.

ideas in the work, this ironic quotation alludes to the poet's intention to link her poems with her Spanish background and to defend inter-ethnic understanding.

The concurrence of different cultures in the same poem is in itself a technique that supports inter-ethnicity. If the author had decided to eliminate the risk of assimilation by censoring cultural exchanges in the poems, the pieces would lose their universalizing dimension that can only be expressed through the incorporation of elements from local and foreign cultures (Allen 161). Diaz's cultural combinations are especially noteworthy in "When My Brother Was an Aztec" (Diaz, *When My Brother* 1), "Downhill Triolets" (52), and "The Red Blues" (11); all these pieces make references to American Indian, Spanish, mainstream U.S., and Anglo cultures, together with Christian beliefs, to emphasize their points in common with Chicano/a culture. "Mariposa Nocturna" (60) mixes references to a poem by Federico García Lorca¹⁰³ with Greek and pre-Columbian mythology and lines in Spanish. Apart from that, Diaz finds inspiration in very varied sources, e.g.: the Qur'an ("The Elephants" 94), the literature of Wisława Szymborska ("Why I Don't Mention Flowers When Conversations with My Brother Reach Uncomfortable Silences" 96), and Henrich Heine ("A Wild Life Zoo" 101). This cultural mixture permeates the poems with an incongruous, tongue-in-cheek atmosphere.

The combination of different traditions is a double-edged sword: it demonstrates that mutual understanding is possible, but it employs dialogue to display an open criticism of racism, inequality, oppression, etc. (Bowers 247; Emmons 109). When Diaz uses inter-ethnic intertextuality, the most common humor strategy is incongruity, as the resulting poem will most probably have a surprising and unexpected relation with the original text. This happens in "Why I Don't Mention Flowers When Conversations with My Brother

¹⁰³ References to Lorca's poetry also appear in "Lorca's Red Dress" (Diaz, *When My Brother* 87), as well.

Reach Uncomfortable Silences” (Diaz, *When My Brother* 96), a title that evokes innocence and does not fit with Szymborska’s quotation until the whole poem is read; eventually, the naivety of the title becomes ironic as the flower is a symbol for blood in a very harsh scene of lapidation witnessed by her brother.

Diaz explores the potential of humor to help create a resilient attitude, in both her experience as a tribe member and her personal life. The first part of the proverb from the epigraph that introduces the book is a lesson on resiliency and optimism, as it expresses that the bad moments in life are temporary (Diaz, “This Life”); however, the ironic second half acknowledges the difficulties to overcome troubles (Diaz, “This Life”), mocking resilient attitudes. Again, the epigraph reflects the general mood of the book, in which optimism and perseverance are celebrated (Menten 3), but also treated with ironic skepticism. As a speaker of her community, Diaz collects the problems of Native Americans in the reservation and reflects about them showing a positive attitude and humor but never oblivion and superficiality (Bowers 247). In this manner, she does not avoid writing about racism, injustice, and poverty from a comical perspective whenever possible (Diaz, “Conversation”). This attitude is part of the process of leaving the role of victim to become an active producer of criticism (Emmons 147), not for the sake of conflict but as a way to heal wounds by overtly addressing their causes (Bain; Emmons 109-10).

Many poems from the first part of the book cope with the promotion of a resilient attitude in the Native American community. The very first poem, “Abecedarian Requiring Further Examination of Anglikan Seraphym Subjugation of a Wild Indian Rezervation” (Diaz, *When My Brother* 5), is the clearest example of how humor allows the author to explore difficulties in the reservation, denounce them, and regard them with irony. An

abecedarian is usually meant for children (“Abecedarian”); nevertheless, Diaz writes an abecedarian that is clearly meant for adults. By adapting a childlike composition to condemn the hard situation of Native American reservations, she creates a shocking incongruity between form and content. Moreover, the purposefully humorous misspelling of certain words (“Anglikan”, “Rezervation”, etc.) shows a rebellious goal.

The second part of the book introduces humorous images without which Diaz would possibly be unable to explore tragic personal anecdotes.¹⁰⁴ An example can be found in “Black Magic Brother” (Diaz, *When My Brother* 62), with the ironic figure of a magician that represents one of the brother’s facets. The magician, a persona constructed by Diaz to symbolize her brother, and the poetic voice’s brother distort reality in different ways: while the former uses magic, the latter employs drugs that cause hallucinations and allow him to transform his perception of reality. One of the key elements that underline this identification is the word “dependable” (Diaz, *When My Brother* 60, l. 14), which can mean both that her brother is a good magician that you can trust and that he *depends on* drugs because of his addiction. His tricks are ironic, because in the fantastic world of a magician they represent mere illusions, but for the family they are cruel and vicious: he makes the teeth of the girls who use drugs with him vanish (60, l. 10), saws his father into two (60, l. 24) and hides her mother in one of his pockets (60, l. 29-30).

As well as resiliency, the destabilization of hierarchies is an important goal in Diaz’s poetry, especially in relation to the criticism of unfair rules and standards from Western society. On the one hand, sometimes the inversion of power structures deconstructs beliefs regarding racism and ethnicity; on the other, some poems show a non-mainstream version of a particular historical event. The first case can be identified in

¹⁰⁴ Similarly to Michele Serros’s, Diaz’s humor works as a resiliency tool in order to talk about extremely harsh family events that would otherwise be too painful (Diaz, “This life”).

“A Wild Life Zoo” (Diaz, *When My Brother* 101), a good example of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque in which the victim becomes the attacker and the oppressor is punished. A lion caged in a zoo devours a man who had been bothering it while it had been trying to sleep; although the visitors panic and the lion is sedated, the poetic voice identifies itself with the lion instead of the victim.

The poem has tinges of parable to show the situation of American Indians (Menten 3): Native Americans are put in restricted spaces by an alien authority who keeps on disturbing them; nevertheless, if they decide to rebel against it, this authority wields its power to stop and punish the Natives. This metaphorical allusion comes back at the end of the poem, when the poetic voice is revealed not as a zoo visitor, but as another animal who witnesses the scene from its own cage. Humor here is produced by the fable-like qualities (for instance, the lion’s ability to speak) that do not fit with the terrible incident. Moreover, the actions of the man and the lion can be read through Bergson’s Jack-in-the-Box, in which two stubborn elements repeatedly push each other until one of them either gives up or attacks.

Bergson’s theory of mockery as a social corrective can be useful to read many poems that condemn racism, like “Hand-Me-Down Halloween” (Diaz, *When My Brother* 6), in which humor is aimed at criticizing the attitude of a neighbor with a Native American child. In “The Last Mojave Indian Barbie” (26), the poetic voice narrates the story of a Mojave girl, Barbie, and her family, Ken and Skipper (the family of the Barbie doll, as well). Although all the typical accessories of the Barbie doll are included (a toy car, a dog, the Dream House, etc.), they are old, broken and rusted to reflect poverty in the reservation (McCloskey 126). By ironically reversing the readers’ expectations about a Barbie doll, the poem addresses alcoholism, diabetes, assimilation, culture clash,

poverty, sexism, and so on. Furthermore, Diaz's poem is also reminiscent of Michele Serros's concern with the lack of positive role models for girls in ethnic communities. Parody and irreverence fulfill a double function through the image of Barbie¹⁰⁵ as an element of satire and mockery (Larrimore): this Barbie denounces Western beauty standards and gender rules by being punished for exhibitionist behavior. Still, the criticism is quite ambiguous and the readers should elaborate their own interpretation, which adds richness to the poem—is the criticism directed at Barbie, the rules imposed by society, or both?

Apart from Bergsonian mockery, the already mentioned Jack-in-the-box can be identified as well as the figure of Sisyphus in “Downhill Triolets” (Diaz, *When My Brother* 52); this figure, based on a toy, is explicitly mentioned in “Dome Riddle” (79), where it is also compared to the poetic voice's skull, creating a very comical image that is at the same time incongruous and obscene. The Snow-ball can be found in “Formication” (57), in which five definitions of such condition are given, each one more shocking and abrasive than the previous, starting with “speed bumps” (Diaz, *When My Brother* 57, 1) and finishing with “meth sores” (57, l. 49). Every entry is accompanied by an illustrative example from her brother's personal experience. Snow-balls are fairly common in Diaz's book, appearing also in “As a Consequence of My Brother Stealing All the Lightbulbs” (54), a poem that clarifies what happens when her brother steals the light bulbs in the house in order to take drugs. The consequences of the theft are worse and worse in each stanza. “Dome Riddle” (79), apart from the Jack-in-the-box, includes a Snow-ball to describe how the poetic voice is gradually feeling more and more jealous.

¹⁰⁵ The image of Barbie has already been used by other writers from ethnic communities to criticize the imposition of a particular beauty canon. For instance, Sandra Cisneros's short story “Barbie-Q” employs the famous doll to denounce its influence as a negative role model and its relation to capitalist hierarchies and imperialism (see Cisneros, “Barbie-Q”).

The last technique, the Dancing-Jack, is very common in some of these poems since Diaz's brother seems to be a puppet of drugs. A conspicuous case is "Mariposa Nocturna" (60), in which he is described as a victim of the mythical Thaïs, a personification of drugs: "You march behind Thaïs anyway" (60, l. 8).

The rewriting of historical events in order to give voice to silenced accounts is reproduced in "Jimmy Eagle's Hot Cowboy Boots Blues" (Diaz, *When My Brother* 33). The poem is introduced by a piece of news from the 1970s that recounts the case of Jimmy Eagle, who was followed by the FBI into the Sioux reservation where he lived because he had stolen a pair of boots. This piece of news could have gone unnoticed in a newspaper; in any case, Diaz chooses it because of its importance regarding ethnicity and sovereignty¹⁰⁶; Jimmy Eagle's theft would be a minor offense compared to the illegal action of the agents who were not allowed in the reservation. The form¹⁰⁷ of this poem matches the parodic intention of its content, as it imitates the structure and style of a song instead of a journalistic article, following the examples of popular pieces like *corridos* and blues music.

Diaz's fundamental strategy to destabilize hierarchies matches the Bakhtinian carnivalesque. Besides direct references to carnival in "When My Brother Was an Aztec" (Diaz, *When My Brother* 1), in "Hand-Me-Down Halloween" (6) costumes are used to reverse stereotypes when the protagonist, a Native American child, dresses up as Tonto. Ironically, the "*In-din / girl is a / fake / In-din*" (6, l. 11), which questions issues of identity

¹⁰⁶ In the United States, in theory, police officers and FBI agents cannot arrest a person inside a reservation if the tribal police do not allow them to do so. This question has been widely discussed and is still a controversial topic (see Bulzomi).

¹⁰⁷ Diaz allegedly plays with form to destabilize canonical constructions as a response to feelings of rebelliousness and freedom (Futhey 11-12; Teitman).

and representation and suggests that the stereotyped Natives in mainstream movies and comic books are not faithful depictions at all (Emmons 116, 122, 149; Menten 2).¹⁰⁸

The carnivalesque destabilization of hierarchies is present in other contexts as well; for instance, in “Tortilla Smoke: A Genesis” (Diaz, *When My Brother* 17), in which myths about the creation of the world are reinterpreted through the parodic figure of a tortilla god. In general, the carnivalesque creates a parallel world in which hegemony is temporarily reversed (Bajtín 11-14) to show a world free from domination (15). This parodic (25) poem elevates a typical Mexican and Native American dish¹⁰⁹ to the category of divine in order to ridicule certain creation myths, but also to reflect the carnivalesque’s demand for self-criticism and laughing at oneself (Bajtín 17; Menten 3). Its references to Christianity match the topics, intentions, and motifs of “If Eve Side-Stealer and Mary Busted-Chest Ruled the World” (Diaz, *When My Brother* 25), which will be analyzed later, and attack one of the main targets of carnivalesque humor: religion (Bajtín 12).

Freud’s theory of humor is intimately linked to the Bakhtinian carnivalesque in Diaz’s poetry due to the lyric voice’s attitude of transgression of social rules in the entire book. In general, both theories share the common aim of transgressing social rules, but they offer two paths: if Freud’s studies deal mainly with the grotesque, Bakhtin’s work with incongruity and carnival scenes to destroy hierarchies. However, these two theories can be read together to interpret poems like “How to Go to Dinner with a Brother on Drugs” (Diaz, *When My Brother* 46). In this and other poems, carnivalesque scenes go

¹⁰⁸ This poem represents a pivotal moment in the life of the author, because she acknowledged that “Perhaps [she] became a writer the very night [she] became an Indian dressed as a fake Indian named dumb-dumb” (qtd. in Menten 2).

¹⁰⁹ Although tortillas are typically associated with Mexican food, they are also a basic element in Native American cuisine in general and are called the same name, frybread and others like Hopi bread, for example (Crowley 207).

hand in hand with grotesque and obscene elements; therefore, the analysis of these pieces necessarily requires a combination of Freudian and Bakhtinian ideas.

In many cases, Diaz decides to include subjects that are grotesque and obscene, or treated as such, and taboo topics (principally drugs, but also sexuality and illness). For instance, “A Woman with No Legs” (Diaz, *When My Brother* 16), “How to Go to Dinner with a Brother on Drugs” (46), “Formication” (57), “No More Cake Here” (68), “Why I Don’t Mention Flowers When Conversations with My Brother Reach Uncomfortable Silences” (96) and “The Beauty of a Busted Fruit” (98) include topics that are usually censored by society in an effort on Diaz’s part to give voice to people who are frequently silenced. A perfect example of this effort that can be examined by putting the Freudian grotesque together with the Bakhtinian carnivalesque is “When My Brother Was an Aztec” (1).

An introduction to Diaz’s poetic world: diamonds and filthy clothes

“When My Brother Was an Aztec” (Diaz, *When My Brother* 1),¹¹⁰ the opening poem of the collection, introduces the hybrid tone of the book, comical and tragic, and binds together the humor strategies that will be reproduced in the following pieces. Thus, a deeper examination of this poem will further explicate the aforesaid humor strategies and their aims. This lyrical text looks into Diaz’s brother’s addiction problems and, from the very beginning, readers realize that the collection deals with a taboo topic towards which the author decides to prove her resiliency. Several recurrent motifs are introduced in this

¹¹⁰ The second and third lines in each stanza are successively indented to imitate the shape of a *zigurat* (Larrimore) leads into the image of an Aztec, one of her brother’s personas.

poem, like the animalizations of the “dog-women” (Diaz, *When My Brother* 1, l. 28),¹¹¹ the “peacock” (l. 39, l. 42),¹¹² and the metaphor of the “zoo” (1, l. 37).¹¹³ Apart from that, the main humor theories that can be applied to better understand the piece indicate some interpretations that can be applied to the collection of poems as a whole.

Inter-ethnicity is evident from the Aztec of the title, a persona of Diaz’s brother and often a symbol of brutality linked to sacrifices and violence (Diaz, *When My Brother* 1, l. 22-4).¹¹⁴ Other references to Aztec culture are “*la Avenida de los Muertos*” along which the brother stumbles (1, l. 4), and “*Cenotes*” (1, l. 22) where the parents are “dropped ... from cliffs, / punched holes into their skulls / broke[n] ... to pieces and fed ... to gods ruling” (1, l. 23-4). Christianity, which is also part of Diaz’s cultural background (Diaz, “This Life”), is present in her parents, who “kept coming / back for more” (Diaz, *When My Brother* 1, l. 2-3),¹¹⁵ look like “effigies in a procession” (l. 5), and “pick [their son] up when he died” (l. 7). They light “*novena* candles” (l. 40), a Christian ritual, to pray (l. 45) for their son; nevertheless, their prayers are ironic, as they want him to come back home and to die near them. In any case, the parents are always subordinated

¹¹¹ The dog-women, another allusion to a different culture through Aztec mythology, use drugs with Diaz’s brother and provide him with them; thus, they are actually leading him to death. According to the Aztec myth, dogs take the soul of a deceased person to the underworld, which is ruled by a deity that is half-man half-dog: Mictlantecuhtli (Read and González 258-64).

¹¹² In lines 38-39, the poetic voice says that “The Aztec held court in a salt cedar grove / across the street where peacocks lived ... / He always came home with turquoise and jade / feathers and stinking of peacock shit”. The place described is probably a drug exchange spot, so the peacocks would be other addicts, which is highly ironic due to the conventional association of this animal with wealth and aristocracy. Turquoises and jade are semi-precious stones typical of American Indian jewelry, and the feathers can only be carried by honorable warriors (“Meaning of Feathers”). Thus, though it seems ironic that her brother is allowed to wear feathers, the poetic voice considers him a warrior even if he is defeated by drugs.

¹¹³ The image of the zoo is repeated in other poems (1, l. 45, l. 101), when the parents complain about “their house turned zoo” (1, l. 37). Animalizations, again, let the brutality of the brother take place.

¹¹⁴ The brother is compared to Huitzilopochtli (Diaz, *When My Brother* 1, l. 14), the Aztec god of war and the Sun that has the body of a hummingbird, to whom ritual sacrifices were offered (Read and González 193-95). He metaphorically devours his parents in psychological terms (Diaz, *When My Brother* 1, l. 13-15) and has a cohort of drug addict “slave girls” (l. 34) to whom he sells drugs—“*maize*” (l. 35) that they “ate out of his hands” (l. 35)—and “dirty-breasted” (l. 9) “dog-women” (l. 28) who “made him their leader” (l. 10) and provide him with drugs—“sparkling spoonfuls” (l. 28) of “crushed diamond and fire” (l. 12).

¹¹⁵ This attitude reminds of the Christian precept of turning the other cheek.

to their son, who is sometimes even personified as Jesus: “My parents / at his feet” (l. 14-15).

The atmosphere described in the poem is grotesque;¹¹⁶ nonetheless, that setting contrasts with the ironically luxurious description of drugs as “sparkling” (Diaz, *When My Brother* 1, l. 28) “diamonds” (l. 12) and “maize” (l. 35),¹¹⁷ and the brother as a “king” (l. 29). This ironic relation points to the Freudian obscene that responds to our rebellious instincts against social repression (Díaz Bild 156). In the case of Diaz’s poem, the grotesque is blatantly aggressive, as it expresses feelings of hostility (157). Sometimes the Freudian grotesque can be confusing due to its violent features that might distance the readers and create unlaughter.¹¹⁸ Thus, although the poem could be considered non-humorous by some readers because of its taboo topics, it challenges censorship through its use irony (157).¹¹⁹

The lyric voice mentions “a carnival of dirty-breasted women” (Diaz, *When My Brother* 1, l. 9). Although the dominant tone of the poem is tragic, the carnivalesque scene introduces a moment of ironic joy. The comparison between the brother’s situation and a

¹¹⁶ There are “acrobats, moving, twitching like snakes” (Diaz, *When My Brother* 1, l. 11), “flea-ridden dogs ... licking their asses” (19), “ratty crotches of street fair whores” (1, l. 25), “flophouses with no electricity” (1, l. 26), “filthy clothes smelling of rotten peaches and matches” (1, l. 27), etc.

¹¹⁷ Maize was extremely important for the native tribes of America in general, not only as food but also for its religious connotations and economic importance; for more information on the topic, see Taube.

¹¹⁸ There are cases like “How to Go to Dinner with a Brother on Drugs” (Diaz, *When My Brother* 46), in which the brother is compared to Dantesque figures that become humorous together—Judas with a cord around his neck (Diaz, *When My Brother* 46, l. 23), a Cheshire cat (49, l. 108) and Borges’s bestiary (49, l. 110)—and he is also said to have a jaw that seems to be alive (49, l. 112-5). In this case, it is not the particular examples that seem comical since they are quite harsh. However, the accumulation of those figures creates a caricature that portrays her brother’s instincts (repressed by society because they are shameful), as when he scratches his skin with a fork at a restaurant (50, l. 135).

¹¹⁹ Irony is utilized, for instance, in the lines “Neighbors were amazed my parents’ hearts kept / growing back—It said a lot about my parents, or parents’ hearts” (Diaz, *When My Brother* 1, l. 20-1). On the one hand, the poetic voice reproduces the discourse of the neighbors who, according to social correctness, mention the loving attitude of Diaz’s parents but avoid the taboo topic of drugs. As irony works between the said and the unsaid, the idea of the loving parents is used by the neighbors to avoid the uncomfortable topic of drug addiction. On the other hand, the poetic voice’s skeptic tone suggests that many things are said behind the family’s back and that the neighbors not always are sincere.

carnival celebration makes the poem subversive and liberating (Díaz Bild 17) from the man's point of view. It is certainly subversive; in fact, the brother's attitude not only contradicts social rules, but is recklessly unhealthy and dangerous. As for liberating, he might be temporarily free from certain rules and impositions while using drugs, but, as any carnivalesque scene, it is a brief escape that only drags him deeper into his addiction.

The carnival scene is particularly ambiguous, as the joyful description might respond, on the one hand, to a change in the focalization that would give voice to the brother and, on the other, to an ironic mockery of the poetic voice towards the brother's alternative reality when using drugs. This mixture of harsh events with a sarcastic tone and carnivalesque features is characteristic of the entire poetry collection as a way to suspend reality and introduce a criticism. In any case, humor is utilized by Díaz, in this passage and in the entire poem, to face her brother's difficulties and to mock his incorrect behavior. The former aim responds to a resilient attitude, and the latter can respond to the Bergsonian theory of humor. Accordingly, the poetic voice's mockery is aimed at her brother, a person whose attitude is hazardous and negative. However, the man does not seem to respond to the author's critique, as he is too absorbed by his own world to realize it, here and in the rest of the poems.

Native American Biblical females

If *When My Brother Was an Aztec* includes a piece that is daring, revolutionary and ironic, it is "If Eve Side-Stealer & Mary Busted-Chest Ruled the World" (Díaz, *When My Brother* 25). The title contains explicit Biblical references that pervades the entire poem, though the Biblical figures have nothing to do with the characters of the poem. In

it, Eve, the mother of mankind according to Christianity, steals Adam's role in the first stanza of the poem, and Mary, the mother of Jesus, is associated with violence and poverty, and she never gives birth to God's son. This poem explores issues of culture, religion, race, and exploitation throughout the two first stanzas, but the last two look into femininity from an American Indian perspective that destabilizes Western ideas through rhetorical questions. Again, the form of the poem is revealing, as each stanza, all of which are right-aligned, is one line longer than the previous one, giving the reader a feeling of strength and growth (Bain).

In the first stanza, Eve is identified with an Indian, a refreshing description that becomes even more unexpected when she is said to have stolen Adam's place as the first human being. This concept defies gender roles and sexist ideas that stem from and are justified by Christianity. Furthermore, Eve is not said to be "kneaded from the earth" (Diaz, *When My Brother* 25, l. 2-3), but to be the Earth itself, returning to traditional myths from Native American tribes and other cultures in which females were linked to divine recreations of the Earth in opposition to the male Sky.¹²⁰ By saying that "ribs were her idea all along" (25, l. 4), Eve becomes a goddess, an active creatrix that decides to give birth to herself. The gender implications of this poem are obvious from the first lines; notwithstanding, the poem could be read in terms of race as well. Accordingly, Diaz's claim is double: for a religion in which women have a protagonism of their own and for abused ethnic groups to become independent from imperial forces.

The second stanza is devoted to Mary, who is also an Indian woman, which is even more interesting because Jesus would be an Indian as well, visited by the archangel

¹²⁰ An example from the American Indian Pueblo mythology can be found in Gutierrez (3-5, 13-18), although the myths in which Mother Earth and the Sky Father complement each other are also present in other Native American communities (see Hays-Gilpin, and Henry and Pene) and other cultures throughout history, as explored by Stookey.

Gabriel in her wigwam. Through Mary's story, Diaz shows that, although Christian and American Indian beliefs are different, they can be compatible. The problem comes when Mary "was away at a monthly WIC clinic" (Diaz, *When My Brother* 25, l. 7)¹²¹ to receive some food: Mary never meets Gabriel and, hence, loses the opportunity to be the mother of Jesus. In a way, the ironic expression "receiving eggs, boxed cheese / & peanut butter instead of Jesus" (25, l. 8-9) prioritizes the material (food) over the spiritual (Jesus), implying that in a situation of extreme poverty (McCloskey 126), the real concern is survival. This event reflects the tragic conditions of poverty in Native American communities and criticizes questions of economic dominance.¹²² Therein, to the critique of Western gender roles and cultural impositions, Diaz adds a criticism to a colonial system based on religious justifications and economic superiority.

In the following stanza, the poem explores the possibility of God being an Indian, an idea that attacks the core of Christian beliefs and, extensively, Western culture. This God, who is also androgynous, is characterized by "turquoise wings & coral breasts" (Diaz, *When My Brother* 25, l. 11), a return to traditional American Indian mythology that, furthermore, amalgamates earth (coral) and sky (blue wings). Although it seems that the poem cannot be more rebellious, the poetic voice explains that this God "invented a game called White Man Chess / played on silver boards with all white pieces / pawns & kings & only one side, the white side / & the more they won the more they were beaten" (25, l. 12-15). Therefore, not only did this God create Western civilization, but he gave it

¹²¹ "Women, Infant and Children" is a federal program in the United States that provides food, health care and education to low-income women and children ("What is WIC?"). The fact that Mary in the poem goes to this place is an example of the situation of poverty in some reservations, now and in the past.

¹²² According to Anzaldúa, "people of color suffer economically for not acculturating" (*Borderlands* 85). Thus, Mary's economic condition is a punishment for her rejection to forget her culture and adopt the lifestyle of the imperial power (for instance, she lives in a wigwam); nonetheless, her situation of poorness that can somehow be improved by the WIC program that is also controlled by that imperial power who forces her to acculturate.

an ironic fate of self-destruction, which shows a clear positioning of God on the Natives' side and against imperialist Anglo culture.

The last and longest stanza personifies the whole world as an Indian woman (Diaz, *When My Brother* 25, l. 18-9), a synecdoche to demonstrate that the world is not defined by those who have power as much as by those who are oppressed. This idea acknowledges the different understanding of the world for Natives and non-Natives;¹²³ at the same time, it implies that humankind is only one big ethnic community despite the physical and imaginary borders that we might build. Once more, the protagonist is described in traditional mythical terms as flat (according to old Western beliefs) because it had been “strapped / to a cradleboard” (25, l. 17-18) as a Native American baby. The nightmares of this Indian world involve Western colonizers: “she had nightmares lit up by yellow-haired men & ships / scraping anchors in her throat” (25, l. 19-20). The violent invasion of the land is directly linked to the fierce exploitation of a female body that, furthermore, belongs to an oppressed group. This idea, linking again ethnicity and gender, employs irony to harshly criticize the brutal consequences of colonization for ethnic individuals and the land.

The Bakhtinian carnivalesque offers a rich interpretation of this poem's ironic and incongruous suspension of canonical hierarchies that place Western culture and Christianity at the top and traditional Native American beliefs at the bottom. In this poem, both cultures' cosmogonies are balanced to create a mythical world from bits and pieces of the two. Consequently, the poem is a perfect example of the comic reversal documented by Gruber (88). In this context, a carnivalesque attitude becomes an example

¹²³ Culture clash is directly addressed in the last words of the poem, “over the edge of the flat world” (Diaz, *When My Brother* 25, 28), suggesting a drastic change in the image of the colonizer's and colonized's worlds when they met.

of active creation and rewriting of history (Bowers 251; Emmons 8) to fight victimization, oppression, and an unfair representation. Another important vehicle for humor is naming, one of the traits of comical Native American literature (Gruber 89). Traditional native names are parodied to describe ironic physical and spiritual traits of the people who carry them. For instance, Eve is marked by a reminder of her stealing Adam's place, and Mary's name suggests that her chest has been violently damaged, which perfectly summarizes the poem's goals.

Clouds that are buffalo that are Natives

"The Clouds Are Buffalo Limping Towards Jesus" (Diaz, *When My Brother* 39) might be the most mysterious poem in the collection. It only takes five words, scattered throughout three lines in a page, including some gaps between them for the reader to fill in, to create a poem in which the reader's contribution is as important as the author's. Actually, the title is part of the poem, completed by those five words (Erin).¹²⁴ This is a piece with a single sentence—"The clouds are buffalo limping towards Jesus[,] / weeping blooms / of white / smoke"—that recalls traditional Native American songs. Once again, the disposition of this poem on the page is curious: as already said, the first part of the sentence is in the title, and the rest is divided into three lines successively indented forming the shape of a cloud.

Were readers unaware of Diaz's cultural background (Bowers 249), they might not pay attention to the symbolism of buffalo for American Indians. Apart from supplying food, clothes and tools, the history of the decimation of buffalo by European colonizers

¹²⁴ This strategy is also utilized in "As a Consequence of My Brother Stealing All the Lightbulbs" (Diaz, *When My Brother* 54), in which each stanza finishes the first part of the title's clause.

echoes Native American experiences. The buffalo clouds are limping, advancing slowly, as these animals do when attacked or injured, the same as Native Americans when demanding improvements of their rights. The Natives/buffalo/clouds move towards Jesus, further up in the sky. On the one hand, Jesus could be a symbolic representation of Western culture, and thus would represent an inevitable assimilation of American Indians (McCloskey 120). On the other hand, it could represent rebirth, as the efforts to empower Native American culture are growing stronger (126); hence, the poem would celebrate the reinforcement of native cultures. With all, the use of “limping” and “weeping” suggest a tragic tone that seems more suitable to the former option.

These clouds are “weeping blooms of white smoke” (Diaz, *When My Brother* 39, l. 1-3), which means that Native Americans are crying. Inevitably, smoke in this context suggests smoke signals,¹²⁵ which are sent in order to communicate and to ask for help. Nevertheless, the resulting smoke is white, which might seem logical, as clouds and smoke are usually that color; however, in this case, white can be read as another reference to Anglo culture. Consequently, this one-sentence poem’s meaning denounces the assimilation of Native American culture.

In only twelve words, Diaz gathers a collection of cultural symbols that hinder a straightforward interpretation. To interpret the description of the movement of the clouds and reach the core of the poem, readers need to be aware of Native American’s cultural background, as well as to make an effort to assemble the pieces of Diaz’s puzzle—symbols, puns, and ironies in the three levels of the poem. The first and most straightforward level is the one that describes clouds; the second deals with buffalo; and

¹²⁵ The image of the smoke signals appears also in one of the movies that will be later analyzed, *Smoke Signals*, by Chris Eyre. In the film, smoke signals are, again, a symbol to point out life-changing moments of understanding, as we will see.

the third and deepest is related to Native American tribes that are not even mentioned. Such a composition implies a rebellious intention of playing with the rules of traditional Western poetry to create an elegant piece of criticism rooted in traditional American Indian literature.

A claim for resiliency

In contrast with the previous one-sentence poem, “Downhill Triolets” (Diaz, *When My Brother* 52) is a long poem that summarizes the most important concerns in the book through comicality: the combination of different cultures is presented by means of the incongruous connection of disparate figures; the mixture of different cultures (Greek mythology, U.S. mainstream culture, Christianity and Native American characters), which destabilizes the power relation between them; and Diaz’s ability to talk about her brother’s addiction from a humorous perspective, which is an evidence of resiliency. The form of the poem is an object of play, as triolets¹²⁶ are adapted to the author’s style: each one of the poem’s three parts questions the relation of her brother with Sisyphus; God and Lionel Richie; and the tribal police, Geronimo, and Jimi Hendrix.

The first stanza pays attention to Sisyphus, a mythical figure identified with Diaz’s father and whose rock symbolizes the brother. In the poem, there is a sense of regularity of the brother’s crimes and his father having to rescue him that matches the eternal task of Sisyphus carrying a rock to the top of a mountain without ever reaching it. This image is furthermore supported by parallelisms (Diaz, *When My Brother* 52, l. 4) and repetitions (52, l. 8), and it perfectly illustrates Bergson’s Jack-in-the-Box. The second part portrays another of the brother’s crimes, this time in his grandmother’s house. In this case, there

¹²⁶ A triolet is an originally French poem, usually written in a single stanza of eight lines and a rhyme scheme of AbaAabAB, although many variations can be found (“Triolet”).

are direct references to drugs (Diaz, *When My Brother* 52, l. 10), whose effects, basically hallucinations, are the piece's main topic. Again, to support the feeling of repetition Diaz creates some parallelisms (lines 10, 15 and 19). Irony is also used in this stanza through rhetorical questions (52, l. 16) and the treatment of imaginary people as real (52, l. 21-3).

The last part of the poem includes the tribal police, Geronimo and Jimi Hendrix to narrate a criminal event in the family house. Police jargon is used in sentences (Diaz, *When My Brother* 53, l. 24-5) that are incongruous for the reader at first, but that will be interpreted throughout the stanza by the poetic voice, who is so familiar with the police code that it can understand this code, implying, thus, the regularity of the event. Her brother is said to be a "Geronimo wannabe" (53, l. 26) who thinks he is struggling when he is just "giving in so easily" (52, l. 42). The figure of Jimi Hendrix represents yet another hallucination of her brother "playing backup for Jimi" (53, l. 27). Diaz also includes intertextuality, a recurring humor strategy in Native American literature (Gruber 80): some of Hendrix's lyrics are adapted to portray the event. The mixture of those elements creates a frantic scene that, though tragic in content, seems ironic and comic in form.

Closure

Diaz's *When My Brother Was an Aztec*, tough and comical, reflects a variety of humorous devices which, as in the case of Gordon Henry's *The Light People*, help the author distance from the events that are being portrayed; hence, while the readers will not burst out laughing, humorism is present in almost every single poem. The carnivalesque and the obscene are two common strategies that allow Diaz to deal with taboo topics such as drugs, racism, illness, etc. Her poems feature both communal and personal events,

trying to exhibit a resilient attitude in the familiar and communitarian space, exploring her brother's addiction with humor, revising historical events and ironically denouncing tribal concerns. Inter-ethnicity causes the interaction and dialogue between different cultures in response to Diaz's own patchwork identity. In order to create humor out of taboo issues, imperialist attitudes and cultural clashes, Diaz repeatedly unbalances power structures, reverses social rules, retells historical accounts and reinvents cultural hierarchies to change preconceptions about her community.

I would like to come back to the beginning of this chapter, where I gathered a list of features that comical Native American poetry might have according to the limited studies that have been carried out until now. These include irony, references to laughter, sarcasm, satire, parody, trickster figures, comic reversal, linguistic puns, intertextuality, historical allusions, naming, and a sardonic tone that mixes harsh experiences with ironies and paradoxes. Throughout my analysis of Diaz's poetry, I have found extensive examples of the employment of irony, sarcasm, satire, parody, intertextuality, historical allusions, and the sardonic tone; a few illustrations of references to laughter, naming, and puns; and a single but very relevant example of comic reversal. Nonetheless, curiously enough, there is no direct reference to tricksters,¹²⁷ which contradicts many studies of Native American literature that enlist this characteristic as indispensable. These comical strategies, far from showing a friendly tone, reflect the belligerent attitude of the author and reveal Diaz's satirical intention to denounce injustice through humor.

¹²⁷ Although her brother could sometimes be related to trickster figures from a metaphorical point of view, there is not a single poem that directly mentions it.

2.2.2. Humor and *Hustle*, by David Tomas Martinez

“Humor takes intelligence. Poetry takes intelligence.

I like intelligence”

(Martinez, “Prose”)

Once David Tomas Martinez had to face a blank page, he decided to capture in his poems autobiographical episodes of a young Chicano with a wide experience in gangs and hustling. The result was *Hustle*,¹²⁸ a *Künstlerroman* in verse published in 2014, in which Martinez meditates on his personal experiences in San Diego during his childhood in the *barrio* and his adolescence in a gang (Martinez, “Author Q&A”). The poems address different topics that portray Martinez’s growth; teenage fatherhood, drug-dealing (Martinez, *Hustle* 4), violence, crime (2), gender issues (“David Tomas Martinez”; Martinez, *Hustle* 11), and family problems are intertwined with the creative impulse and the exploration of intimate feelings, such as love, lust, friendship, death, second chances and trauma (Dietrich).

The poems are always enhanced by humor, as Martinez continuously navigates between “saying something critical ... and striving to entertain [his] readers” (Martinez, “Author Q&A”). Even though “humor can be misinterpreted or missed altogether, particularly when the reader is contemplating such weighty topics as victimization and social justice” (Alvarez Dickinson 45), humor transforms a painful reality into a scene

¹²⁸ At age 21, Martinez went to college (Martinez, “Author Q&A”) thanks to some student loans that, eventually, had to be paid off. In order to earn some extra money, he rewrote the poems of his MFA thesis and published them (Martinez, “Poetry”). The title of the book already advances the activities that will be explored in it, such as prostitution in “California Penal Code 266” (Martinez, *Hustle* 35) and car theft in “Calaveras 1” (5). In addition, common topics in Chicano/a literature like cultural nationalism, subjectivity, origins, identity, traditions, history, and resistance (Pérez-Torres 4) are also present in Martinez’s work.

that can actually be examined (Bernárdez Rodal 28). Martinez does not give so much importance to comicality *per se* as to “the greater function it serves in a poem or book, which is set tonal variations [sic.] within an established theme ..., introducing the surprising, ‘making it new’” (Martinez, “Prose”). However, what he values above all is how “humor embraces both the intellectual [and the] emotional facets of our personalities” (“Martinez, “Prose”). The use of humor to engage readers also allows him to denounce the situation of Chicanos/as and to look for solutions, which is what Jennifer Alvarez Dickinson calls “political humor” (63) in Chicano/a literature.

Gutierrez-Jones explains that engaged humor is an important technique for ethnic communities to denounce oppression, which is what Chicano/a artists often do in their literature, cinema, and other artistic disciplines (Gutierrez-Jones 113). Engaged humor lets artists like Martinez explore their sociopolitical concerns with an attitude that joins criticism with dialogue. In this sense, according to Gutierrez-Jones, Chicano/a literature is focused not only on reflecting problematic situations and putting the blame on someone but also on finding a solution (123-24). This is the context in which Martinez writes his lyrical pieces: he points at people and institutions both in and out of his community, changing the role of Chicanos/as as passive victims and allowing them to have a voice in order to prompt dialogue.

In this chapter, I will first explore the historical development of Chicano/a poetry and its link with comicality. Then, I will discuss humor in *Hustle*, providing particular examples from different poems to find out which strategies are employed by Martinez, especially from the point of view of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, the Bergsonian mockery and the Freudian grotesque. These analyses will be developed in depth in three particularly illustrative poems. As his literature deals with very personal experiences and

taboo topics that are not usually the subject of poetry, it will be checked whether Martinez's humor strategies are different from canonical humorous poetry. All in all, I expect to confirm that the comical aims of this poet match those of the previous authors I have studied: first, to support inter-ethnic communication; second, to denounce attitudes of oppression; and third, to encourage a resilient attitude against life distress.

Comicality and Chicano/a poetry

The ancient Aztecs believed that poetry and truth allowed them to communicate with the divine and to connect *topan*, the world of gods and spirits, with *mictlán*, the world of the dead (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 91). Thus, poetry in Chicano/a culture seems to be unquestionably important, and so is humor, which sometimes is the only way to explore painful truths (Díaz Bild 97; Holoch 22). The integration of poetry and comicality has an almost mystical transcendence for Chicanos/as (Castañeda Shular 123). Though the seed of Chicano/a poetry dates hundreds of years back in time, according to Juan Bruce-Novoa such denomination should not be applied to texts written before the Chicano Movement in the 1960s (3). However, poetry is said to have been “by far the most popular form of literary expression” (Baker 46) for Chicanos/as even before the 1900s. José E. Limón gathers texts by Mexican-American writers (1) to document three stages of Chicano/a poetry: *corridos*,¹²⁹ before and after the 1900s (9); political poetics (45); and poetry since the 1960s (80).

¹²⁹ Also known as *mañanitas*, *tragedias*, *versos*, *coplas*, and *exempla*, these ballads adapt the Spanish romance (Villar Raso and Herrera-Sobek 13) to the story of Mexican heroes and Anglo oppressors (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 83). *Corridos* became widely used along the border during the early conflict between Chicanos/as and Anglos, narrating history, bringing news of disputes, entertaining, and creating modern myths (83). In the second half of the 19th century, *corridos* covered a variety of subjects: war, love, horse racing, railroad derailments, automobile accidents, tequila smuggling, bandits, crimes, political events, natural disasters, social, and historical events, etc. (Villar Raso and Herrera-Sobek 13). *Corridos* are alive nowadays, particularly in relation to drug smuggling, in the form of *narco-corridos* (13). In

Limón argues that the Chicano writer Américo Paredes linked the traditional ballads and the politicized poetry of the 1960s and 1970s (1) and employed humor in *With His Pistol in His Hand: A Border Ballad and Its Hero* (1958) to “rewrite the history of the United States/Mexico border by tracing the trail of jokes and satire that recorded ... a view of events radically different from those penned by Anglo historians” (Gutierrez-Jones 117). Humor in Paredes’s work represents a healing practice (118) and a strategy to create a group identity (117); hence, comicality became a vital feature of La Raza and the Chicano Movement from the very beginning. Together with Paredes, some other poets before the sixties started to encourage political and ethnic activism, preceding the poets of the Chicano Movement (117). Apparently, the interest of Chicano/a writers in poetry, a genre that did not seem particularly attractive, grew in the 1960s, especially in the case of political poetry.¹³⁰

In the 1960s Chicano/a literature experienced two major events: Luis Valdez’s *Teatro Campesino*¹³¹ and Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales’s long historical poem “Yo soy Joaquín” (1967). Gonzales’s poem explores Mexican history to teach Chicanos/as their heritage of struggle for justice. These two literary milestones coincided with the creation of the ideology of the Chicano Movement. At the time, Alurista, a young poet from Southern California, perceived another vision of the Chicano’s/a’s past and future that originated the ideology linked to Aztlán. Other artists and intellectuals created contemporary poetic models like José Montoya’s *pachuco* (Villar Raso and Herrera-

corridos, the difference between history and myth is not as relevant as the creation of community (Castañeda Shular 57).

¹³⁰ Felipe Maximiliano Chacón, Vicente J. Bernal, and Fray Angélico Chávez wrote poetry among other genres, but did not make explicit critical purposes or references to Chicanismo (see Leal and Barrón).

¹³¹ As a young man, Valdez joined the United Farmworkers Organizing Comitee (UFOC) led by César Chávez in California. Valdez’s decision was motivated by his politicized vision of art and theatre in particular; hence, he aimed to create a popular theater that dealt with social problems and supported the interests of the rural workers when they went on strike. Those were the roots of *Teatro Campesino*, a movement in which satire was a fundamental weapon; to know more about it, see Hernández.

Sobek 14-5). Though poetry was a vital protest form, other aims apart from sociopolitical criticism were also pursued (15) by authors like José Montoya and Ricardo Sánchez (Villar Raso et al. 52-8), Raúl Salinas, Gary Soto, Jimmy Santiago Baca, Benjamin Alire Sánchez, Alfonso Rodríguez, Ray González and Francisco Alarcón among others (64-97). Thence, Chicano/a poetry of the 1960s and 1970s fed the ideology of the Movement and was fed by it at the same time.

Together with this abundance of male names, women have also played, and continue to play, an important role in Chicano/a poetry. For instance, although Esteban Arellano argued that no women had published poetry in Spanish-language newspapers at the beginning of the 20th century (Rebolledo 21), Juanita Lawhn has been able to collect poems both by famous and non-famous women writers (21-23).¹³² Among the last group, most poetry conformed to romantic ideals of women's literature (elegies, poems for Mother's Day and patriotic holidays, tributes to relatives, etc.), according to the socially accepted literary conventions (21). Eventually, the ethnic claims of the Chicano Movement were paired with gender issues, as a group of Chicana writers started demanding recognition. The process was started by Gloria Anzaldúa, Bernice Zamora, Alma Villanueva, Lorna Dee Cervantes, Evangelina Gil-Piñón, Ana Castillo, Angela de Hoyos, Carmen Tafolla, Alicia Gaspar de Alba, and so forth (Villar Raso et al. 61-78). Later, in the 1970s and 1980s, they were joined by Natasha López, Marie Elise Wheatwind, Sandra Cisneros, Pat Mora (82-96), and many other Chicanas (e.g. Norma Cantú) who still claim their place in the Chicano/a canon.

¹³² The former include María Enriqueta, Rosario Sansores, Carmen Celia Beltrán, and María Esperanza López de Padilla; some of the latter are María Guadalupe Valero and May Stadden Rojas (Rebolledo 21).

Humor in *Hustle*

If *Hustle* had to be described in only one word, it should be resiliency. The author reviews his development from a teenager who exchanged high school for a gang and a criminal life into a man who reformed his lifestyle, went to university and pursued a literary career (Martinez, “Author Q&A”). The mere fact that the author decides to introduce humor in his book shows a resilient attitude, as comicality balances the serious tone of most of his pieces in order to “mitigate slogging the reader with doom and gloom ... through a chuckle” (Martinez, “Prose”).

The book is divided into four parts that contain a varying number of poems with different topics, styles, and length (Dietrich). Those sections are preceded by a poem, “On Palomar Mountain” (Martinez, *Hustle* 1), which introduces the tone and topics of the book. The first and second sections basically follow the ideas expressed in “On Palomar Mountain” (Sherwood), mainly questions of upbringing in Southeastern San Diego, and of his life as a gang member. Part 3 displays a different intention, as it is more self-examining, portraying the author’s reflexion about his life (8). In the last section, probably the most introspective one, Martinez explores his past, his present and his identity (10), as proved by the poem of self-discovery “Scientifically Speaking” (Martinez, *Hustle* 82).

Resiliency is not only described by people’s actions, but also by the landscape they inhabit.¹³³ Martinez’s poetry assimilates a very important influence from the city (Martinez, “Author Q&A”; *Villa* 4), which can behave like a character, a symbol, or the

¹³³ The importance of space is fundamental for Chicanos/as: their history has always been characterized by the trauma of land loss, border crossing, urban development, and displacement from their original homeland (*Villa* 1-2). Famous Chicano/a writers, such as Helena María Viramontes, Willie Herrón, Jesús Velo, Gil Cuadros, Luis Alfaro, and Gloria Alvarez, have discussed the importance of the urban in their works, particularly in Los Angeles (113). These writers talk back to the contemporary metropolis that at the same time feeds and alienates ethnic groups (113).

poetic voice's tone. Place is especially important in the poem "In Chicano Park" (Martinez, *Hustle* 37),¹³⁴ an ode in which Martinez gives Chicano Park a philosophical relevance, linking its decay to human life and to people's resiliency: "No matter if all the murals decay / and the statue of Zapata falls, / ... / We all eventually submit, are arched over / ... / as we smile now and cry later" (*Hustle* l. 11-12, 23, 26, 37-38). Throughout the poem, the place is described as decadent; however, at the same time, Chicano Park is imbued with a profound dignity in spite of its deterioration. Although these two ideas about the same place can seem ironic and incongruous, its union represents an attitude of strength in the face of adversity.

Humor allows the writer to distance himself from traumatic family events (Gutierrez-Jones 122), as Michele Serros does when she writes about her mother's death. For example, in "Calaveras 2" (Martinez, *Hustle* 8) Martinez compares families to circuses (l. 1), both chaotic and carnivalesque, but he also encourages readers to "Accept" their families (l. 2). Such an environment is subject to a parodic reinterpretation in which the problems of the family members are treated as circus performances. For instance, an aunt is the invisible lady (l. 9) because people avoid looking at her, as she is obscenely "naked in the yard, / mustached and fat" (l. 9-10). A mother "juggles meth and late rent fees" (l. 14), which relates an entertaining performance with drug addiction and poverty. Other family activities include "Knife throwing with your uncles" (l. 15) and children "jump[ing] through a flaming hoop / to avoid the insult of a whip" (l. 18-19). These examples demonstrate Martinez's use of comical responses to manage domestic violence and family hierarchies. In "Calaveras 2" and other poems, the author portrays the ability to "transcend the difficulties that [he and other children in his *barrio*] had growing up"

¹³⁴ Chicano Park was built on the area of Logan Heights in Los Angeles, once the core of the second largest district of the West Coast. Due to urban development from the 1950s, it became a wasteland squeezed under two roads, and a symbolic place of the struggle of Chicanos'/as' for their rights over the land (Villa 172).

(Martinez, “Author Q&A”); however, he also acknowledges that sometimes it is impossible succeed no matter how resilient one is (6).

“Calaveras 2” also introduces another aim of Martinez’s humor: challenging power structures through the carnivalesque. One of the reasons why humor creates resilient individuals is that comicality helps renegotiate “unequal power relations” (Gutierrez-Jones 116), fulfilling a cathartic function against an unfair authority figure (Fellner and Heissenberger 162). A comic discourse allows Martinez to produce a direct or subtle criticism to the system (Aguilar Melantzón and García Núñez 283) and to hegemonic relations of dominance.¹³⁵ As each one of the family members¹³⁶ has vices and grotesque features in their own undignified way, their authority disappears; therefore, the humorous scenes are introduced to “try to remove the hierarchy” (Martinez, “Author Q&A”). Perhaps one of the main foundations of a cultural system is the family’s hierarchy; consequently, the use of the carnivalesque and the grotesque¹³⁷ make the poem an allegory in which the criticism of the family order questions the entire system.

In Martinez’s work, humor is a “liberating reaction to official traditions or ossified ideologies” (Erichsen 30). However, his employment of humor to reverse power relations demands the articulation of different discourses (Fellner and Heissenberger 173), and the author of *Hustle* decides to attack different strategic power institutions¹³⁸ in his poems:

¹³⁵ Carmen Valero-Garcés suggests that the criticism towards families and family pyramidal power structures in certain cultures can be interpreted as a critique of the entire system because families are symbolic cultural manifestations of higher social orders (79).

¹³⁶ Another comical reference to the destabilization of family hierarchies can be found in “Innominatus” (Martinez, *Hustle* 41), when the iconic figure of the father, which should be the model of a Chicano *macho*, is deconstructed according to the carnivalesque: “They wish the motherfucker / was there—in a thong, a tutu, in more makeup than RuPaul, / picking them from school, as long as they knew him” (l. 18-20).

¹³⁷ Like in Natalie Diaz’s poems, the Bakhtinian carnivalesque and the Freudian grotesque together are also useful to understand Martinez’s work as the destabilization of hierarchies is reinforced by obscene and grotesque humor.

¹³⁸ Martinez plays with poetry’s forms as a challenge to Anglo poetry: sometimes he chooses a narrative style, while other poems are written in very short lines that provoke a feeling of fracture and make the reader stumble with the verse. Such a playful attitude responds, according to Martinez himself, to a rebellious attitude that mirrors his intention to break the hegemony of normative and traditional poetry and

the family, as has been said before, but also political bodies and gender roles. As explored above, the Bakhtinian carnivalesque justifies the potential of humor in the destabilization of the socioeconomic world order, which is a fundamental strategy in many Chicanos’/as’ texts (Gutierrez-Jones 119; Limón, qtd. in Alvarez Dickinson 54). Particularly in *Hustle*, Martinez questions the establishment to “shake up the status quo” (Martinez, “Author Q&A”) from different points of view.

Martinez mocks political institutions represented by monarchy in “The Sofa King” (Martinez, *Hustle* 53), a poem in which aristocratic elements are ironically applied to a gang. For instance, the king is a boy who plays video games all day (l. 4), his throne is a sofa (l. 19-20), his crown is made of the smoke from cigarettes (l. 19), and his entourage feasts on pizza (l. 7-8). Apart from that, there are other references to particular conventional behaviors when “the cheese genuflects / in staggered curtsies” (l. 11-12). Even swords make an appearance (l. 15), adding reminiscences of medieval knights. Although the elements from monarchy are serious, the point of view of the poem is intelligibly ironic, as aristocracy is put down to match the level of an urban gang.

Gender roles are also a target of criticism (Martinez, “Author Q&A”) from an openly ironic point of view. Usually, the author relies on the reader’s ability to recognize a parodic character (Alvarez Dickinson 141), with sexist attitudes and identified with the *macho* mentioned by Michele Serros, in order to ridicule the character’s behavior (143).¹³⁹ The representation of an absurd yet socially accepted form of masculinity in the poems implies an also unreal model of femininity (Mora 2). For instance, at a certain

write in the margins of what is considered right, according to his own anti-normative identity (Martinez, “Prose”).

¹³⁹ In “Apotropaic” (Martinez, *Hustle* 54), Martinez writes: “And isn’t that what men are? / Heavy balls and heavier heads” (l. 34-35), and in “Calaveras 11” (23) he affirms that a “*macho*’s rest” (l. 7) is not disturbed by remorse for his crimes, but he also ironically links hit to a baby “sucking ... thumb” (l. 10).

point, a carnivalesque scene questions the author's own masculinity when "I wear her underwear to hear her laugh" (Martinez, *Hustle* 83, l. 17) in order to show the fragility of both the *macho* stereotype and gender roles.

In "Apotropaic" (Martinez, *Hustle* 54) some lines read "To be mad at women, / women to be mad, / mad to be women" (l. 37-39). This pun connects violence against women with a desire to be a woman. In consequence, Martinez suggests a relation between the subordination of women and men's jealousy of-femininity, pointing out the necessity on men's part, as well as women's, to be freed from gender impositions. "Shed" (Martinez, *Hustle* 29) treats the protagonist's sexual experiences with nameless¹⁴⁰ girls (l. 27-28). Even when "love marked me" (l. 34) the unnamed girl is only described in carnal terms: "a woman who walked with tumultuous hips" (29, 35). In both poems, women are again objects of sexual desire, and a sexist mentality that objectifies women is overtly criticized. Martinez is primarily denouncing a patriarchal attitude of society as a whole, but also his own behavior when these events happened, and he acted in a profoundly sexist way (Martinez, "Author Q&A").¹⁴¹

For Chicanos/as, and for writers from other ethnic groups (Gutierrez-Jones 115), the rewriting of historical events in a comical tone questions the role of victims (115) and challenges the normative discourse (113). As Martinez asserts, he wrote *Hustle* partly to "allow some of the people I grew up with, many who have been silenced ... to have a voice" (Martinez, "Prose"). Perhaps, the clearest example of historical rewriting in *Hustle* is "The only Mexican" (Martinez, *Hustle* 39), a poem about Martinez's grandfather and his nostalgic and angry feelings of displacement as an immigrant in the United States.

¹⁴⁰ When women are named during sexual intercourse, as in "Rebecca's Use" (Martinez, *Hustle* 57), they are objectified in an exaggerated and obscene way, which provokes criticism in the readers.

¹⁴¹ Other Latino/a authors, like Junot Diaz, also denounce *machismo* and hope that a new model of masculinity will be possible for Latinos/as (see "Junot Diaz").

The grandfather's longing shows one of the stereotypes for Chicanos'/as' jokes according to Ricardo Aguilar Melantzón and Fernando García Núñez: the United States is focused on the future and Mexico looks back to the past (291). Another example is "Forgetting Willie James Jones" (65), in which the poetic voice questions the official version of history by mixing personal episodes with murders that have had transcendence in modern times. Moreover, the poetic voice narrates the deaths of Willie James Jones, JFK, Tupac, his friend Maurice, etc. from his own point of view, reflecting on the impact they had on his life instead of their historical weight: "That's when I thought trouble could be run from" (l. 16), "When we heard about Tupac's murder, / we soccered in conversation, / a few wearing shirts with his face" (l. 136-38), etc. These versions of historical events from non-canonical points of view, especially due to their employment of humor, endorse the creation of a counter-culture that challenges the normative discourse (Proaño-Gómez 179).

Martinez directly addresses topics like racism and violence in many poems. He debates a criminal life in "On Palomar Mountain" (Martinez, *Hustle* 1) and "California Penal Code 266" (35), drug addiction and poverty in "Calaveras" (8), and rape in "Forgetting Willie James Jones 8" (78) as if young people in his community were fated to that kind of lifestyle (Martinez, "Author Q&A"). He denounces that the situation in certain *barrios* drives young people towards delinquency due to the lack of positive role models. Those topics seem to be the opposite of the comic, because "a story is not at all humorous if we feel empathy for the person targeted" (Williams 89); nonetheless, dark humor allows Martinez to trigger comicality. For instance, grotesque places in "Calaveras" (Martinez, *Hustle* 9, l. 12-6) ironically describe flourishing spots worthy of admiration and pride. While dark humor seeks laughter in hopeless situations, it also claims awareness and strength in the face of oppression (Holoch 118). Thus, while

Martinez acknowledges the difficulty to solve his problems, he still demonstrates a belligerent attitude.

As has been argued before, different poems in *Hustle* can be read from the Freudian grotesque, a humor strategy that is always linked to transgression through the description of places and people with obscene behaviors. In “Calaveras 3” (Martinez, *Hustle* 9) the poetic voice describes the canyon where some boys and girls from his *barrio* meet, a decadent wasteland¹⁴² that parallels their social status and prospects: “Nothing ... / grows along the freeway but trash” (l. 4-5). Such descriptions, in response to a critical attitude towards the environment and fate of some Chicano/a communities, might seem too tragic to rouse laughter; nevertheless, readers not always laugh at the uneasy topics of the Freudian grotesque because civilization breeds a censor inside our minds that makes us reject this type of humor sometimes (Díaz Bild 157). “Shed” (Martinez, *Hustle* 29) touches on the taboo topics of the protagonist’s sexual awakening due to the accidental discovery of certain magazines (l. 1-17) that caused the boy “to see sex everywhere” (l. 21) and have his first sexual experiences (l. 27-28, 34-38). The same question is explored in “Apotropaic” (54), in which Sigmund Freud is directly mentioned (l. 1-2). Both poems display a sexist mentality to denounce the sexual objectification of women through the use of grotesque¹⁴³ features that parody the patriarchal attitude the protagonist used to have at that age.

¹⁴² “This beach / of rocks is where furniture / and mattresses swim to die” (Martinez, *Hustle*, 9, l. 13-15), “the canyon flourishes with cenotaphs / of reddened tin and grey wood / ... crops / of bottles and chicken bones, / thrown from the freeway” (l. 18-22).

¹⁴³ Another example can be located in “Calaveras 1” (Martinez, *Hustle* 5), after a car theft and a murder attempt, the protagonist spends “four hours of needles / shooting from the skin / and holding the faucet like a gun” (l. 54-56) after running away from police across a field of cactus “cut[ting] away skin and spines” (l. 43). In this painful scene, the protagonist causes empathy but also a critique from the readers, who find the scene harsh and funny at the same time.

The author does not always address criticism directly, but by means of rhetorical figures. According to Siro López, in many cases animalizations respond to a satirical intention and a critical aim (19). In “Of Mockingbirds” (Martinez, *Hustle* 80), the author uses animalization,¹⁴⁴ presenting a variety of birds (crows, pigeons and mockingbirds) and other animals (cats and dogs) that represent the people who live in the violent environment that Martinez denounces like in a fable. Some forensic pigeons, possibly representing Anglo people, investigate the murder of a few crows, likely members of a rival African American gang, in the *barrio*. While these events unfold, there is a mockingbird,¹⁴⁵ representing a Chicano/a,¹⁴⁶ ironically singing as if the crime was a familiar scene. This poem criticizes the violence and hostility with which several Chicanos/as, and other ethnic communities in the United States, experience since childhood.

In spite of that, the coexistence of different cultures does not have to be problematic, as *Hustle* also includes poems in which different cultures are literally or metaphorically put together to cooperate. The poems in which the main topic is inter-ethnicity encourage intercultural communication and understanding by offering a context to approach conflict from the point of view of comicality and assertiveness (Erichsen 30). To begin with, language mixture is a way to claim Martinez’s pride for his ethnicity

¹⁴⁴ Martinez expresses the importance of the identification between people and animals: “We are animals ... It’s just that we happen to live in a ‘civilized’ society” (Martinez, “Author Q&A”). This idea is used in “Small discoveries” (Martinez, *Hustle* 51), in which the poetic voice declares that “Sometimes I count the animals I’m not” (51, l. 1). In “Motion and Rest” (47), Martinez watches the behavior of animals to learn life lessons. Martinez is particularly keen on birds as metaphors of himself, e.g. “Motion and Rest” (47), “Of Mockingbirds” (80) and “This Bird Chest Holds a Bird’s Heart” (83).

¹⁴⁵ A possible reference to the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* due to the possible connections between their aims and topics.

¹⁴⁶ In the poem, the mockingbird sings in a language “away from the origins / of the bird’s own tongue” (l. 25-26), alluding to Chicanos/as use of the English language. Moreover, this bird wears “saggy pants” and “homemade tattoos” (l. 28), just like Martinez himself in “Calaveras 6” (15).

(Martinez, "Author Q&A").¹⁴⁷ Martinez acknowledges that "[it's] a beautiful idea ... love, inclusivity, thoughtfulness, fellowship, and harmony" (Martinez, "Prose"). Those values are examined in certain poems, like "To the Young" (Martinez, *Hustle* 27), in which the author presents different ethnic stereotypes: the "black male" (l. 1), the "Chicano rocker" (l. 19), and the "white boy" (l. 23).¹⁴⁸ Although they believe that their life experiences are very different, they ironically share more than they think: "black male dressed / like a punk rock / hipster club kid ... / Only Chicano rockers ... / and white boys ... / can know / your pain. / And their mothers, / too" (1-3, 19, 23, 27-30). That is, ethnicity undoubtedly influences one's life, but in the end all human beings share commonplace experiences.¹⁴⁹ Thence, by transcending ethnic barriers, differences can be approached in a bold way. With this idea in mind, Martinez demonstrates that humor in inter-ethnic contexts is "productive rather than [simply] subversive" (Erichsen 32).

In any case, this autobiographical book does not only concentrate on the protagonist's growth, but also on the people around him. Consequently, mockery is directed at himself as much as to other people, following the Bergsonian interpretation of humor to correct a socially reproachable behavior. In that sense, Martinez mocks his own family, as has been mentioned, in "Calaveras 2" (Martinez, *Hustle* 8). The author even reproduces shaming laughter in "Calaveras 5" (12), when police agents laugh at some boys from his *barrio* that had just been arrested: "cops talked into their shoulders / ... / laughing as they nudged / the boys against / the hood of their cars" (l. 50-56). This is a

¹⁴⁷ For example, in "The Cost of It All" (Martinez, *Hustle* 56) Mexico is written as "Mejico" (9), employing the Spanish spelling.

¹⁴⁸ Martinez talks explicitly about the social problems between these three groups in particular. The cultural appropriation and lampoon of Chicano/a and African American cultures by certain individuals of Western origins is a way to "escape from their whiteness" and imply their superiority in a subtle but efficient way (Martinez, "Author Q&A").

¹⁴⁹ This idea is also explored by Gloria Anzaldúa in her narrative poem "To Live in the Borderlands Means You" (*Borderlands* 216), in which she reproaches a closed-minded Chicano Movement and encourages people from different ethnicities to find a common ground. Michele Serros also reflects about this question in *How to Be a Chicana Role Model*, as we saw above.

case of Bergsonian mockery from an authority figure to a person whose behavior needs to be corrected; withal, mockery also responds to a feeling of superiority, which has been considered another source of humor throughout history. The introduction of humorous criticism and self-criticism responds, like for other Chicano/a artists, to an open-minded intention that seeks to reconcile ethnic difference^S (Gutierrez-Jones 121), as will be explored in depth later.

Other resources from the Bergsonian theory of humor can be useful to read Martinez's poems. The Jack-in-the-Box strategy appears in "The Only Mexican" (Martinez, *Hustle* 39). This poem describes Martinez's grandfather's behavior as an old man whose actions become mechanical. For Bergson, mechanical actions are the source of humor. However, Martinez describes his grandfather's behavior, typical of old age, as mechanical; these automatic attitudes of old age represent the decay of a strong man, which is inevitably sad (l. 13-20) but also comical due to the constant repetitions. The Snow-ball is present in "Calaveras 1" (5), among other poems, when the car theft becomes a murder attempt. Finally, the Dancing-Jack can be located, for instance, in "The Mechanics of Men" (90), in which Martinez describes men as machine-like elements driven by instinct and social expectations, denouncing gender roles once again. Actually, the author states that most characters in his book are fated to behave in a certain way due to their socioeconomic situation (Martinez, "Author Q&A"); thereby, they are all Dancing-Jacks.

Probably, the most fruitful source of humor in *Hustle* is irony, because it involves a hint of skepticism that Martinez includes in most poems. Though irony could be considered the general point of view of the book, it is explicit only sometimes. Irony's capacity to play with the said and the unsaid is present in "California Penal Code 266"

(35), a piece that discusses prostitution without ever mentioning it. Sometimes, irony comes from incongruity, like the cars that want to be stolen¹⁵⁰ in “Calaveras 1” (5, l. 1), which conveniently free the protagonist from his responsibility in the theft. The lack of involvement in the crime is also emphasized by recounting different methods to break into a car in an impersonal way that would not involve the protagonist: “A window will always wink, / to be broken by bits of spark plug / or jimmed down the glass / ... / a dent pulled ignition and a toothbrush for a turned key / easily swoon the inner workings of a Ford” (l. 6-8, 13-14). Irony is materialized in “The Cost of It All” (56), in which the value of money is exemplified in the important details of life that do not have an economic value. Irony, as well as the previously mentioned humor strategies, can be found in all the poems of the collection, setting the overall tone of the book. Let us now look at the particularly representative poems of Martinez’s work and their particular comic forms.

Martinez’s dialogue with Neruda

“Calaveras 7” (Martinez, *Hustle* 17) is an ironic reinterpretation of Neruda’s “Poema XX” in which, while the latter deals with a transition moment after a failed relationship, Martinez’s explores his feelings of anger while he is in the hospital. Martinez is not the only writer who has reinterpreted Neruda’s poem;¹⁵¹ nevertheless, while other authors maintain the main topic of the original text, Martinez changes it completely and copes with violence. His playful intention to rewrite a famous poem is clear in the first

¹⁵⁰ Sometimes animals and objects are attributed human features and agency (Martinez, “Author Q&A”). These personifications are employed in the opening poem, “On Palomar Mountain” (Martinez, *Hustle* 1), in which “pockets grieve” (l. 3) and trees, stones, and bushes are “staring back at me” (l. 7-10). This rhetorical device is also present in many elements in “Calaveras 1” (5).

¹⁵¹ For instance, the Uruguayan-Spanish writer Cristina Peri Rossi in “*Una canción desesperada*” switches between Neruda’s “Poema XV” and “Poema XX”, employing irony to change the message of both love poems.

line, “Tonight I can write the most violent lines” (l. 1), but also in other verses that imitate some of its most famous stanzas: “Write, for example, the eyes are starry, / when fists blue and shiver off the distance. / ... / On a night like this, on a hospital bed, I squinted / under the upmost light, stitched and stitched again, / .../ Tonight I write from a foxhole of hate” (l. 6-13).

Parodic intertextuality is not a unique feature of this poem. The practice of utilizing references to other cultures and other literary pieces is fairly common in Martinez’s *Hustle*. Although probably not as obvious as in “Calaveras 7” and “Midterm Answers for English B” (Martinez, *Hustle* 85), as will be examined. Even when Martinez does not specifically mention literary works, he includes elements from other cultures: contemporary and past popular Western items¹⁵² are combined with different traditions like spilling salt as a superstition (13), celebrating Christmas (14) and Halloween (39), using shibboleths (41), admiring the pope (72), etc. Mythological characters from Greek culture, like Perseus (55, 78), Athena and Medusa (55) are mentioned together with the Mayan game of *tlachtli* (32) and personalities such as Freud (54) and El Che (56). Similarly to all the previous authors, this collage of people, cultures and elements might create a sense of incongruity in some readers, who approach the collection from a humorous perspective because of the irreverent world of the poems. Though Eva Gruber documents intertextuality as a comic device of Native American literature (80), Martinez proves that it is not exclusive of that ethnic community, as he also includes it in his poetry. Yet this comical appearance hides a formal intention to foster inter-ethnic communication, following the same strategy as the authors discussed previously in this dissertation.

¹⁵² Bongo (Martinez, *Hustle* 12), Chuck Taylor sneakers (15), Shirley Temple (20), the band New Edition (27), Ru Paul (41), Joe Montana (72), Tupac (73), and the popular video game *Clash of Titans* (54).

In “Calaveras 7”, the author produces a satirical reinterpretation of a famous work by Pablo Neruda in order to parody the literary canon. By rewriting a famous poem of the Western tradition, he is employing a lyrical piece from the highest cultural level to mirror the experiences of a particular sector of Chicano/a youth, an ethnic group whose life is rarely depicted in Western poetry. Moreover, the change of topic from the despair caused by unrequited love to the consequences of violence express the real preoccupations of Martinez and his community. In fact, the parody of the original poem is completely acknowledged by the author, who claims that “Tonight I can write the most violent lines, / maim the beautiful, misprision the sublime, / decapitate rhyme with chiming execution, / kidnap with the prolonged rip and break of poems; / tonight, in the rain, in anger, I violence lines” (Martinez, *Hustle* 17, l. 1-5). The modification of the subject matter of the poem responds to the author’s different inspiration sources: Neruda’s lyric voice explores his love feelings, but Martinez’s reality is too brutal and violent to continue in this line. Both authors reflect their environment, but the radical change of themes of the poems underlines the violent world in which Martinez lives.

Martinez’s self-talk: reviewing his life and criticizing his community

Humorous criticism in *Hustle* is not only addressed to other people, but also to the author himself by means of self-mockery, a pivotal aspect of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque (Bakhtin 12). It is crucial that ethnic communities balance their critical attitude with the acknowledgment of their own responsibility, because accepting one’s faults is as important as denouncing other people’s behavior (Gutierrez-Jones 120). Comicality allows Martinez to produce criticism in the context of an oppressed community because “we have to [attack] white supremacy, but we also have to [work] on ourselves to explain

what's wrong and what's problematic" (Martinez, "Author Q&A").¹⁵³ Following the same logic, he criticizes himself in order to put him and his community at the same level and avoid a feeling of superiority.

Self-criticism is slightly introduced in "Calaveras 4", when he mocks his naivety as a child: "When ice cream was / the only bribe needed ... / I should have asked / for a soda, too" (Martinez, *Hustle* 10, 1-8). In "Calaveras 5" he remembers a scene from his childhood, when he mocked the outfit of the boys from a gang (12, 33-37), ironically laughing at his future self. In "Forgetting Willie James Jones" (78) there is an important example of ironic self-criticism that responds to profound guilt. In the summer of 1994, he is with a girl in a bedroom and he stops a group of boys from his own gang from raping the girl. Withal, he feels that he has not done enough and mocks himself: "How strong I felt in '94, when the most chivalrous / thing I could do was block a door, / stop a rape" (l. 22-24). This attitude is important to understand that, as an individual and as part of a community, "I'm always trying to indict myself ... and not just indicting other people because we're all complicit" (Martinez, "Author Q&A").

"Sabbath Fe Minus" (Martinez, *Hustle* 32) is probably the best example of self-criticism. In this long poem, Martinez describes a typical weekend with his group of friends (32, l. 13, l. 29). Nonetheless, what this piece really explores is sexism and the lifestyle of a boy from a gang through puns. Mock etymologies¹⁵⁴ are the main source of humor in the poem, like the one in the title that explores the Latin origins of the word

¹⁵³ For instance, in "Calaveras 4" Martinez writes one of the clearest criticisms towards Chicanos/as: "The fence ... / had no place to go, / if it no longer liked where / it lived, could not move / to my neighborhood / where we were racist neighbors, / suspicious of strange faces" (Martinez, *Hustle* 10, l. 18-25). These lines are a clear evidence of Martinez's standpoint when he defends that "it is not right to think that people of color can do no wrong" ("Author Q&A").

¹⁵⁴ The first allusion to etymology is in the first stanza. The poetic voice expresses through alliteration why the meaning of the word *weekend*, usually related to joy, has changed to reflect his domestic life: "The word *weekend* / must come from *weaken*, / long estranged from *wedded*, / from the language of late bars / and early living rooms, / originally meaning, / before distortion, / to have fun" (l. 1-8).

female (*feminus*) but playing with its form to underline *minus*, which is linked to women's subordination. This pun reveals the main topic of the poem: the criticism of sexism. Although the title implies religious resonances, it is focused on the women, the protagonist and his friends meeting on Sunday with no devout intentions.

For the poetic voice, Sunday is a very active day, although not in a religious sense: "If not for Sunday barbeques after basketball / we would surely honor the Sabbath" (Martinez, *Hustle* 32, l. 11-12) because "Sundays are less prayer / than fights with strangers" (l. 22-23). Along with fighting and hustling, the protagonist and his "family of weekends" (l. 29) spend the day practicing sports,¹⁵⁵ going to the gym (l. 25), drinking, taking drugs (l. 30), and exchanging photos of women they are involved with. At this point, the sexist reification of women becomes clear, as they have "their heads truncated, but bodies round and supple" (l. 33-34). Although the lyric voice admits that he, like his friends, fantasizes with these women, he says that he has no similar stories, detaching himself from his friends; while he shares all the other attitudes and activities of the group, he distinctly separates from this sexist behavior.

The protagonist's silent critique causes the lampoon of his group, "my boys are laughing and say I care too much" (l. 43), an example of Bergsonian laughter as a social corrective as the friends consider the protagonist attitude to be wrong, proving the ambivalence of humor to be liberating and also oppressive. Still, the poetic voice does not want to follow his friends and, instead of going out, he decides to go back home with his partner even when she is "a stranger" (l. 53) to him. This poem does not only condemn

¹⁵⁵ The boys seem particularly interested in sports that "have bats, engines, or darts" (l. 16) but, above all of them, the "ones with balls, / ... where the object is to score" (l. 17-18). At this point, Martinez establishes a parallel between the sports he plays with his friends and the Mesoamerican ballgame (*Hustle* l. 19-21), which combines the references to the Hebrew Sabbath with Aztec and Mayan cultures; this is, again, a reference to inter-ethnicity.

the situation of women who suffer from sexism, but also of the men who feel socially encouraged to display a male-chauvinistic attitude in order to be accepted.

A failed exam as a declaration of intent

“Midterm Answers for English B” (Martinez, *Hustle* 85) might be the most humorous poem in Martinez’s book, reminiscing “Theme for English B” by Langston Hughes. Both poems cope with academic assignments answered in personal terms, giving details about the lives and opinions of the poetic voice. The topic of irreverent responses to a test appeals to the reader as a commonplace experience. Furthermore, it does not seem the typical subject for a poem, which reveals Martinez’s playful attitude towards literature (Martinez, “Prose”); the verse explores the poetic voice’s (readers never know whether it represents a student or a teacher) feelings and thoughts. On top of that, the incongruous answers to the exam represent a challenge to the hierarchical structure of educational institutions¹⁵⁶ and the literary canon.

For the most part, the poem discusses literary criticism and the poetic voice’s opinions about literary figures, works and movements: Emily Dickinson (Martinez, *Hustle* 85, l. 13), Shakespeare (l. 24), *The Great Gatsby* (l. 37) and *The Catcher in the Rye* (l. 41), among others. The controversial and mocking opinions of the poetic voice about these elements echoes the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, in which authority figures are

¹⁵⁶ This idea is literally expressed in the last lines of the poem: “22. If only I could climb myself out from under this grave of papers / to grade” (l. 44-45), in which the poetic voice breaks with the previous tone and topic of a literature exam to produce an ironic criticism against the education system that overwhelms both students and teachers.

openly questioned by their grotesque bodily functions,¹⁵⁷ personality features that are unconnected to their writing¹⁵⁸ or ironic comments, for instance, about gender issues.¹⁵⁹ In any case, these incongruous value judgments are important not for what they explicitly say, but because they humiliate prestigious literary figures in order to discuss power structures and canonical literature.

The lyric voice asserts the necessity to broaden the canon to other artistic forms, like video games (Martinez, *Hustle* 85, l. 32); transmedia collaboration is also encouraged in “the battle for best modern poet is between / Lil Wayne and Lady Gaga” (l. 35-36). On the one hand, this apparently nonsensical statement can question the canon and its critical attitude against popular culture. However, it is open to interpretation whether the criticism is also targeted to the attitude of a public that does not take art seriously enough.

If mockery is an important rhetorical device in the poem, self-mockery is, again, a fundamental part of the poem that encourages the revision of one’s attitude. Mostly, self-criticism is wielded against a poetic voice that tries to prove its intelligence but dramatically fails. For instance, in one answer the poetic voice uses particularly complex and confusing vocabulary to put on airs; nevertheless, those complicated words do not really mean anything: “4. Furthermore, superlogical prewised the poststupidity in my metamatrix of ineffability” (Martinez, *Hustle* 85, l. 7-8).

¹⁵⁷ This happens to Gerard Manley Hopkins: “to [him], and many other writers, salivation / was a gift from God” (l. 17-18); this writer’s spiritualism is mocked in this ironic criticism of his religious justification for a bodily function.

¹⁵⁸ T. S. Eliot is said to only use his first initials due to laziness, since “his / glasses scream procrastinator” too (l. 25-26). Whitman is also criticized in positive terms that are obviously ironic. The lyric voice asserts that he was “wonderful” (l. 27), not because of his works but because he was “the type of man a butterfly or bambi / is drawn towards” (l. 27-28), in reference to Whitman’s ecopoetry.

¹⁵⁹ This is the case with Emily Dickinson, who: “should have worn more make-up; she might / have liked marriage” (l. 13-14). This condescending sentence is overtly ironic. Martinez utilizes the prestigious image of a famous writer to deconstruct the social constraints imposed on women. The problematic of gender roles is also mentioned when the poetic voice talks about John Donne, who “understood we have had a war between the sexes / since the 1800s” (*Hustle* l. 19-20). Again, irony is wielded in these lines, because the author died in 1631.

Some lines afterwards, California is judged as “the greatest” (Martinez, *Hustle* 85, l. 9) state, an opinion based on traveling to Wyoming (l. 9) which mocks the poet’s ignorance. Besides, the exam doer is also wrong in saying that there are 52 states (l. 10), reflecting the so-called Mandela Effect but also the lack of knowledge of one’s country. In any case, the most important case of self-criticism as a synecdoche of the general attitude of society can be found at the beginning of the poem: “For several years now different races blamed other races for the / problems they face” (l. 3-4). As Martinez has acknowledged in many interviews, it would be irresponsible to blame only part of society for the problems of the whole (Martinez, “Author Q&A”); thence, he sends a message of collaboration and not a simple accusation.

Closure

Possibly, the most important lesson in Martinez’s book is the importance of self-criticism, an attitude that he develops thanks to self-mockery. Self-mockery legitimates the author’s critique of other ethnic groups and other people by accepting the responsibility of his own community. In this manner, self-critique and, especially, self-mockery accomplish the three basic aims that the comical literature of ethnic communities fulfills, according to my study. First, such an attitude accepts one’s mistakes at the same time that it criticizes other people’s, supporting a critical attitude. Second, accepting that one’s people are also blameworthy for some of the problems of society encourages inter-ethnic understanding and the possibility of a productive communication. Third, by means of self-mockery the author exhibits an attitude of resiliency: by accepting one’s faults and coping with them with a positive attitude, it is possible to start to make a change for the better.

As mentioned above, Gutierrez-Jones points out engaged humor as a fundamental strategy for Chicanos/as to challenge imperialist institutions and assimilation. According to him, Chicano/a artists have consistently worked on this type of humor to address the identity and social, political and economic problems of their group in the United States. The comical strategy employed by Martinez in the book exemplifies his commitment to the kind of humor that Gutierrez-Jones theorizes about. Engaged humor can adopt several aspects (being overtly funny, sarcastic, parodic, etc.) and it does not specifically aim for the creation of laughter; accordingly, Martinez's book is an example of this use of humor through humorism in which the pieces sometimes cause more discomfort than amusement.

Even so, that does not mean that *Hustle* is not humorous. In general, Martinez follows the basic traces of Chicanos'/as' humor that had been mentioned at the beginning of this chapter: his humor is tough, full of irony, sarcasm, parodies, etc. Precisely that crudity might cause problems for readers, as the comical pieces touch sensitive topics (e.g., sexuality, violence, family problems, sexism) with an overtly joking intention. This means that Martinez's humor distinguishes from Michele Serros's, who employs a more cheerful attitude. The difference between these authors is that Serros allows readers to laugh out loud, while Martinez's poems do not seek laughter but solidarity from readers, who may cinically smile because they empathize with the author's experiences. In that sense, Martinez's poems are more similar to the movie *Quinceañera* that will be studied later on: both mirror the reality of a *barrio* in which the only possible point of view to touch on economic problems, violence and sexuality is humor. Martinez's life experiences cause his literature to review taboo topics, like Natalie Diaz's work, which can function as an example or a counter-example for young people in his community, like Michele Serros's (anti) role models. Therefore, although Martinez deals with

unconventional topics in HIS poetry, he shares some fundamental aims with other writers from ethnic communities who use humor in order to improve their and other people's lives.

2.2.3. Natalie Diaz's and David Tomas Martinez's poetry face to face

Although Natalie Diaz's and David Tomas Martinez's works are directly influenced by their own personal backgrounds, their commitment to inter-ethnicity is a defining feature of *When My Brother Was an Aztec* and *Hustle*. Thus, the use of humor in their poems responds to a tradition of comicality inherited from their ethnic groups. Chicano/a authors have included a variety of humor techniques in their works of poetry, as well as prose and drama, with different aims. This humorous tradition, which David Tomas Martinez follows in *Hustle*, includes irony, parody, incongruity, puns, etc.; all of them are examples of "engaged humor" (Gutierrez-Jones 113), a procedure used by ethnic communities to denounce and criticize injustice in a comic way.

Likewise, Natalie Diaz is inspired by her Native American background in which humor has a very strong spiritual meaning;¹⁶⁰ however, the comic was excluded from the written literature of American Indian authors until the 1960s Renaissance, as Native American poets needed to offer an image of seriousness to their reading public. Diaz incorporates diverse humor forms that are typical of Native American communities: irony (Gruber 55), satire, caricature (60), puns (68), comic reversal, intertextuality (80), reinterpretations of history, comical naming (89), and so on. Due to these culturally

¹⁶⁰ Tricksters, Pueblo clowns (Emmons 17), the Katsina cult (18), the Cherokee Booger Dancing (22), Zuni clowns (Díaz Bild 35), and Jemez clowns (37) among other spiritual entities perform rituals based on humor (Emmons 21; Gruber 2).

specific strategies and each writer's personal style, *Hustle* and *When My Brother Was an Aztec* become unique representations of the writers' experiences, but they also pursue common aims as other authors from diverse ethnicities.

Throughout this section, I will compare Diaz's and Martinez's books in order to analyze their similarities and differences regarding the use of the comic in form and content. I will also contrast the humor strategies chosen by Diaz and Martinez and interpret their lyrical pieces according to the theories of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, the Bergsonian mockery, and the Freudian grotesque. I will particularly focus on the critical intention, the challenge of hierarchies, the encouragement of inter-ethnic communication, and the encouragement of a resilient attitude. Finally, I will also delve into both poets' aims in order to verify that the two have common sociopolitical concerns.

Resemblances between Diaz's *When My Brother Was an Aztec* and Martinez's *Hustle* appear in the more general details. For instance, they seek inspiration in experiences from their personal life and family backgrounds, but they also explore the concerns of Native American tribes and the *barrios* where Chicanos/as live respectively. In the context of their life events, Diaz and Martinez address non-canonical topics that can be considered taboo: most of her poems are related to drug addiction, and his lyrical pieces consider different types of violence and crime. In order to express their feelings and concerns, both writers create an expressionist poetry, scarce in rhetorical figures¹⁶¹ but with a really powerful message.

A playful attitude with form is another common trait of their literature. Diaz mixes prose with verse, challenges traditional poetry, and matches form with meaning by means

¹⁶¹ Diaz and Martinez include animalizations, symbols, and metaphors, but leaving those aside, rhetorical figures are scarce in their writings.

of calligrams; likewise, Martinez also uses different genres (essays and parables, for example) and intersperses very long verses with extremely short ones. Diaz writes poems “that [do not] outline the borders of the different genres” (“This Life”), similarly to Martinez when he asserts that “a few people told me that a lyric essay/prose poem couldn’t go in my collection. I never understood why” (“Prose Feature”). For both of them, this shared concern with the flexibility of their poetry responds to an attempt to question the rules of traditional literature and the status quo (Martinez, “Author Q&A”).

Martinez and Diaz include humor in their books, but they do so in a way that is closer to humorism than comicality, according to Siro López’s classification alluded to in the previous chapters. López declares that humorism does not directly intend to lampoon a target (although it can sometimes do it) but to show a positive attitude towards a problem that seems impossible to be fixed but is eventually solved (20). Since the focus of humorism is generally oneself, it is deeply linked to self-mockery, an attitude that is usually related to the members of ethnic communities for whom humor represents catharsis (21). Due to its form and objectives, this trend is normally associated to strategies like irony and parody, as can be observed in *Hustle* and *When My Brother Was an Aztec*.

Martinez’s poetry is full of examples of self-mockery and self-criticism (both towards himself and his community), and Diaz repeatedly employs irony. Nevertheless, certain examples in *Hustle* and *When My Brother Was an Aztec* appeal to comicality because they seek the reader’s laughter; nonetheless, the general mood responds to a humorist intention that does not intend to ridicule a target but to display a positive attitude against a problem (López 20-21). The use of a humorist approach is the key element to

understand the combination of humor and tragedy in their books, and to explain a possible response of unlaughter on the part of readers.

In spite of these similarities, *When My Brother Was an Aztec* and *Hustle* also have notable differences in the humor strategies they utilize; some of them respond to the aforementioned inherited comical traditions, while others depend on the personal choice of each author. For instance, though both writers employ humor to produce historical rewritings, each one does it differently. On the one hand, Martinez's poems deal mostly with what Miguel de Unamuno called *intrahistoria* or intrahistory (145) and Jean-Françoise Lyotard named *petit histoire* (15, 60), in the sense that they explore subjective accounts of historical events in poems like "The Only Mexican" (*Hustle* 39) and "Forgetting Willie James Jones" (65). On the other hand, Diaz employs a carnivalesque destabilization of hierarchies to retell historical episodes, giving voice to non-canonical revisions of particular happenings, like "Jimmy Eagle's Hot Cowboy Boots Blues" (*When My Brother* 33). In any case, both poets offer their literature as a space to include voices that are traditionally ignored due to racism and classism so that an anti-canonical perspective of History, or metanarrative (Lyotard 34), can foster a criticism of normative discourses.

Such historical rewriting takes a very peculiar form in Diaz's work, inherited, according to Eva Gruber, from traditional American Indian humor: the comic reversal (80). This strategy reinvents the world by inverting binary oppositions and power structures of gender, ethnicity, and class in an attempt to free readers from their cultural preconceptions (88). Diaz follows this comic method in "If Eve Side-Stealer & Mary Busted-Chest Ruled the World" (*When My Brother* 25), in which she takes historical rewriting one step further by subverting the core ideas of the Western Christianity.

Another question explored by both Martinez and Diaz in different ways is sexism. Martinez depicts men's traditional perspective and the social impositions males are subject to, especially the *macho* stereotype. He, thence, employs many parodies to produce critical poems, in contrast with Diaz, who does not usually include parodies and satires in her book. Even when Martinez approaches women's situation, it is always focalized through a male perspective, addressing men's attitude towards women. Most of the time, women are unnamed, which exemplifies the author's intention to denounce *machismo* in his community and his own attitude in the past. Diaz, on the other hand, explores gender from the perspective of women in many poems, like "Reservation Mary" (*When My Brother* 19) and "The Last Mojave Indian Barbie" (26) among others. Many of Diaz's verses about the role of women in society include references to Christianity from an ironic point of view in order to question gender division in Western culture.

In contrast with Diaz, for Martinez self-mockery and self-criticism are vital tools in *Hustle* to distribute responsibilities for social problems with other ethnic groups (Martinez, "Author Q&A", "Prose Feature"). Self-mockery is a fundamental aspect of carnivalesque humor for ethnic groups that seek to produce critical texts that examine responsibility instead of putting the blame on the other. In *Hustle*, for instance, Martinez questions his and his community's concept of masculinity, as previously affirmed, as well as his behavior in the past. Apart from this self-indictment in gender issues, the protagonist's behavior regarding race is also questioned. Hence, by accepting his mistakes, the author legitimates a critique of other people's errors and, at the same time, removes Chicanos/as from a position of victims. Although self-criticism might seem servile when denouncing oppression, the truth is that it puts the oppressed at the same level as the oppressor instead of maintaining the polarization of victim and prosecutor.

In spite of differences, Martinez and Diaz share common reasons to include a humorous perspective in their works: both foster a resilient attitude, an inter-ethnic approach and a combative spirit to condemn injustice. Thanks to humor, they are able to question stereotypes about their ethnic groups, put Western hegemony to the test, and create a community of readers that transcends ethnicity. Though these aims are pursued by both poets in a humorous way, each one of them approaches their goals with different methods.

Martinez's resiliency pervades the characters, settings and topics of *Hustle*. The author employs comicality to alleviate tragedy in many poems about his past, violence, delinquency and the lack of opportunities for young people in his community. The landscape is also an important materialization of resiliency in Martinez's "In Chicano Park" (Martinez, *Hustle* 37), in which a decadent place is described from an ironic and comical point of view that allows the setting to preserve its dignity in spite of abandonment. In such cases, the landscape, a metonymical figure, represents the people living in it and, thus, the resilient attitude is transferred from the place to its inhabitants.

For Diaz, on the other hand, resiliency is a more complicated issue. As can be understood by the epigraph at the beginning of the book,¹⁶² she supports a positive attitude to face problems. At the same time, she is also skeptical about the effectiveness of endurance and resiliency: first, staying resilient for a long time is proved very difficult; second, because sometimes dying is the only way to finish a problem. Besides, the proverb has an ironic intention because, although it might seem optimistic at first sight, it has a deeply pessimistic side: no tragedy lasts for a hundred years because only a few people live so long. Diaz portrays the ordeals of American Indian people who live in

¹⁶² "No hay mal que dure cien años, / ni cuerpo que lo resista" (Diaz, *When My Brother* n.p.).

reservations through irony and satire in order to display a cynical attitude toward their attempts to face difficulties without fear. Resiliency is not easy to maintain in her personal life either, as she gives up on faith when she portrays the problems of her unnamed brother. Although in many poems she also employs simpler forms of humor, the tragic perspective of the author eventually invades the poems, particularly those about her brother.

For both authors, inter-ethnicity is one of the fundamental objectives of their books, as has been mentioned before. The two authors include references to diverse cultures in *When My Brother Was an Aztec* and *Hustle*. The mere fact of mixing elements with different origins in a single lyrical piece demonstrates that the poets consider inter-ethnic exchange as an enriching experience and, thus, that they support communication across ethnic barriers. However, they also introduce a critical tinge, as they look into the difficulties of inter-ethnic understanding. The result of such poems is often an incongruous humorous work that resembles reality as much as a collage would. Nonetheless, both writers acknowledge that inter-ethnic encounter tends to produce criticism between the groups involved, given the centuries of conflicts; hence, inter-ethnic communication requires a humble collaboration in order to avoid resentment.

In order to support an inter-ethnic concern, the authors employ strategies like intertextuality. For instance, Diaz references writers from different cultures, especially the Spanish poet Federico García Lorca in “Lorca’s Red Dresses” (Diaz, *When My Brother* 87) and “Mariposa Nocturna” (60). For his part, it has already been mentioned that Martinez also includes many writers from American literature and other countries, but he seems especially interested in disjuncting one of Neruda’s most famous lyrical pieces. Whereas Martinez mocks Neruda’s poem in order to question canonical literature,

Diaz does not display such a parodic intention towards Lorca, who inspires her to explore her most profound feelings instead. Therefore, Martinez's poem employs the critical potential of parodies and Diaz explores the cathartic function of inter-ethnic communication. Either way, these poets acknowledge the importance of exchanges between cultures in their writings.

Intertextuality is not the only way to create inter-ethnic exchanges. Martinez and Diaz include references from popular culture in their poetry as well in order to bring their writing up to date. In the case of Martinez, he includes Lady Gaga, Lil Wayne (*Hustle* 86), Joe Montana (72), Tupac (73), John Lennon (56), and so forth. Probably the two first references are the most polemical ones as, since apart from updating the poem, they criticize the canon of literature with a carnivalesque inversion of roles in which pop and rap singers are placed at the top of contemporary poets. In the case of Diaz, elements from popular culture such as the Lone Ranger (6), Jimi Hendrix, Lionel Richie (52), and especially Barbie dolls (26) create incongruous and ironic images with a similar critical purpose to Martinez's. However, it is also important to notice that both authors show a doubtful attitude regarding inter-ethnic encounters. In many poems, they realize the difficulties of putting together their minoritized groups and the imperial power, as it can reinforce racism, resentment, violence, etc.

The deconstruction of stereotypes about American Indians and Chicanos/as is a mutual concern of Diaz and Martinez, although it is Diaz who addresses this issue more often in her poetry. For instance, the carnivalesque is employed by Diaz to ironize about Native American identity and how non-native people perceive it in "Hand-Me-Down Halloween" (*When My Brother* 6). Besides, she includes both historical and contemporary depictions of American Indian individuals, which openly attacks the idea

that Native Americans belong in the past (Emmons 8; López Liqueste 10). The most important stereotype against which Martinez fights in his poems, ironically, does not come from outside but from within his community: the image of the *macho* and the social construction of gender in Chicano/a culture. Nonetheless, he also challenges preconceptions between different ethnic groups in poems like “To the Young” (*Hustle* 27) in order to show similarities beyond ethnic differences.

For both poets, a fundamental procedure to change negative stereotypes is the destruction of hierarchical structures in general, although challenging hierarchies can have other aims, too. As already mentioned, the Bakhtinian carnivalesque demonstrates the capacity of humor to destabilize stratified structures, which is a vital approach for ethnic communities (Gutierrez-Jones 119; Limón, qtd. in Alvarez Dickinson 54). In *Hustle*, Martinez attempts to “shake up the status quo” (Martinez, “Author Q&A”) by attacking all sort of ranked social structures: the authority of the family, the monarchy and the literary canon are continuously mocked and questioned. This comical approach masks a criticism of the power structures of Western culture and the relations of dominance that perpetrate injustice.

Diaz’s attack to Anglo hegemony in “A Wild Life Zoo” (*When My Brother* 101) builds a metaphorical parable-like piece in which the roles of victim and oppressor are inverted. Apart from the carnivalesque scenes in “Hand-Me-Down Halloween” (6) and “When My Brother Was an Aztec” (1), Diaz’s employment of the aforementioned comic reversal produces a parallel world that challenges the Anglo canon (Gruber 80) in “Tortilla Smoke: A Genesis” (17) and “If Eve Side-Stealer and Mary Busted-Chest Ruled the World” (25). Diaz’s portrayal of harsh events with carnivalesque features and from a

sarcastic point of view permeates the entire book as a way to suspend reality, introduce criticism and show that other interpretations of the world are possible.

In her poems, Diaz reinvents hierarchies that demand a reconsideration of the Anglo canon, while Martinez attacks all types of power structures from diverse perspectives in order to “try to remove the hierarchy” (Martinez, “Author Q&A”). The main technique utilized by him in his denounce of unfair power relations is engaged humor (Gutierrez-Jones 113). Thanks to it, Martinez is able to produce a critical discourse against the canon, society, imperialism, and so on by means of sarcasm, parody, irony, mockery, etc.

All the humor strategies used by Martinez and Diaz in their collections can be read according to Bergsonian mockery as social correctives, which can help interpret many poems that condemn racism, like Diaz’s “Hand-Me-Down Halloween” (*When My Brother* 6). Diaz also critically mocks her brother, trying to punish him for his wrong behavior. In the case of Martinez, he does not only use mockery from a perspective of superiority against other people, but also against himself and his own community, as in “Calaveras 2” (*Hustle* 8). Furthermore, he even demonstrates that mockery is employed as a social corrective by certain groups, but not always righteously, as the police agents and his friends do in “Calaveras 5” (12) and “Sabbath Fe Minus” (32) respectively. Thus, while Diaz employs Bergsonian mockery in order to punish people who make mistakes, Martinez does not seem to consider this technique really successful. According to the strategies identified by Bergson, the two authors include the Jack-in-the-box, the Snowball and the Dancing-Jack to different extents. Curiously, both Martinez and Diaz utilize the Dancing-Jack, which is the least common of the three techniques, because it perfectly

illustrates the behavior of Diaz's brother and the fated destiny of many young Chicanos/as according to Martinez.

In their most critical pieces, both poets include numerous obscene topics and grotesque descriptions that can be interpreted according to Freudian theory as the outcome of rebellious instincts against social impositions (Díaz Bild 156). In the case of Diaz, the grotesque she uses is hostile and violent because it mirrors a feeling of anger for her brother's situation, which might cause unlaughter in the audience due to the taboo topics she discusses. Good examples of Diaz's grotesque are "When My Brother Was an Aztec" (*When My Brother* 1), "A Woman with No Legs" (16), "How to Go to Dinner with a Brother on Drugs" (46), "Formication" (57), "No More Cake Here" (68) and "The Beauty of a Busted Fruit" (98). Similarly, Martinez links the grotesque with transgression in the description of places and people, like "Calaveras 3" (*Hustle* 9). Besides, the Chicano poet wields the grotesque against authority figures, which suggests a critical attitude that, as happens with Diaz, might seem too mordant to rouse laughter in the reader, but succeeds in his attempt to fight hierarchies (Martinez, "Author Q&A").

In these books, the Freudian grotesque cannot be separated from the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, as Diaz and Martinez make use of both the carnivalesque and the grotesque as well as obscene attitudes, topics, and descriptions. In *When My Brother Was an Aztec*, Diaz persistently portrays her brother's addiction by means of grotesque descriptions of incongruous carnivalesque elements in order to destroy the socioeconomic world order and introduce socially repressed topics—e.g. "How to Go to Dinner with a Brother on Drugs" (Diaz, *When My Brother* 46). Just like her, Martinez uses a combination of the carnivalesque and the grotesque to make allegorical poems that attack the status quo (Martinez, "Author Q&A").

As has been clarified throughout, Diaz and Martinez employ elements of their respective humor traditions but are not limited by them, as their comprehensive attitude toward other cultures enriches their own. Thanks to that tolerant attitude, the poets can create a community of assorted readers in terms of age, gender, cultural background, ethnicity, etc. Still, they also share a perspective of inter-ethnicity as a double-edged sword: on the one hand, it can be a positive way to defuse conflict and learn from each other, but it can also produce resentment and violence. Accordingly, both authors are partly confident and partly skeptical about the actual nonviolent meeting of people with different ethnic backgrounds, like the ones in their poems.

When My Brother Was an Aztec and *Hustle* might seem very different due to the authors' origins and individual points of view, which undoubtedly influence their writing^S; however, their books share many humor techniques, topics, and aims. The two works touch on taboo subject matters, although from different perspectives: Diaz looks at them from the outside, as a spectator in her community or as a witness of her brother's problems; in contrast, Martinez examines his role in the gang he belonged to and reflects about his personal experiences in jail and the army, and with literature. Their anthologies share the goals of reinforcing resiliency in both personal and communal spaces, supporting positive inter-ethnic encounters, struggling with stereotypes and the hierarchies that perpetrate them, and criticizing themselves and others. In their own ways, Diaz in *When My Brother Was an Aztec* and Martinez in *Hustle* create culturally specific pieces of global transcendence.

3. **Humor on screen: the cinema of Chicanos/as and Native Americans**

3.1. **A *quinceañera*'s tale**

“Two *quinceañeras* and a funeral”

(Westmoreland, qtd. in Bowen 2)

There once was a young princess who was just about to celebrate her debutante ball; however, this princess, who belonged to an ethnic community outside the beauty canon, did something to be repudiated by her family, which led her to contend with economic problems. As can be understood from the very beginning, this is not going to be a traditional fairy tale that rewards being beautiful, special, and rich as most canonical stories of this kind do (Lieberman 387). The protagonist, Magdalena, is not a regular princess either and the magical moment, as when Cinderella is given her dress or Sleeping Beauty is woken up by a kiss, comes here with the unpleasant surprise of unexpected teenage pregnancy.

Quinceañera, directed by Richard Glatzer and Wash Westmoreland, was filmed in 2004 and won two awards at the Sundance Film Festival in 2006, when it premiered (Glatzer and Westmoreland, “indieWire”). The film introduces a group of relatives who, for different reasons, gather in the margins of what is considered correct by their traditional Chicano/a culture and family (1). The excuse to introduce the story of these people is the *quinceañera*, a rite of passage to adulthood in certain Latin American communities to celebrate a teenage girl’s 15th birthday (Bridges 155; Saborío Carranza 29; Watters 146). In this rite of passage to adulthood, families can spend thousands of dollars (Bridges 160; Watters 150) for the girl to feel like a princess for one day (Saborío

Carranza 34) in a ceremony that combines Latin American and U.S.-American traditions (Davalos 110-23; Saborío Carranza 30; Watters 155) and that integrates pre-Columbian origins (Bridges 156; Davalos 107; Watters 153) and European roots (Cantú and Nájera Ramírez 16).¹⁶³

This celebration is the reason for the filmmakers' satiric reinterpretation of the story.¹⁶⁴ It is important to mention that *Quinceañera* is not a film by Chicano/a authors, but Anglo filmmakers who had been living in a *barrio* for some years (Glazter and Westmoreland, "indieWire"); in spite of that, they achieved to involve the entire Chicano/a community in the movie-making process (Glazter and Westmoreland, "Ghostboy", "indieWire"; Rochlin). Thanks to their help, the filmmakers were able to record a portrayal of life in the *barrio* (Rochlin) from an outside and yet inner perspective. The crew acknowledge that their intention was to record a Kitchen Sink drama, a type of film originated in Britain in the 1950s to depict the working class of Northern England "with gritty realism, political criticism and sardonic humour" (Glazter and Westmoreland, "indieWire"). Thence, in nine months, *Quinceañera* was born as a low-budget Kitchen Sink-Reggaeton style drama shot within one mile of the directors' front door (Rochlin). Thanks to this movie, I will demonstrate how Chicanos/as, among other communities of color in the United States, use humor to reflect testimonies of struggle, not only against an imperial power but also in opposition to the boundaries of their own culture.

However, *Quinceañera* cannot be strictly defined as a comedy because of its tragic plot about family problems and cultural alienation in a typical *barrio* neighborhood. Therefore, this chapter will justify why this film can be described as satirical, although it

¹⁶³ To know more about the celebration of the *quinceañera*, see Davalos, Bridges, Saborío Carranza, and Watters.

¹⁶⁴ Satire is a typical humor technique employed by Chicanos/as in their life and in their cultural manifestations (see Hernández).

does not necessarily make the audience burst out laughing.¹⁶⁵ First of all, I will briefly introduce the role of Chicano/as in Hollywood from the early 20th century until nowadays, as well AS their response to mainstream depictions of their community. Then, I will discuss the plot of the movie and certain questions of importance in order to fully understand the employment of humor in *Quinceañera*, and I will prove that this film should be considered as a satire according to its characteristics and goals. I will lastly develop different interpretations of *Quinceañera*'s humor according to the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, the Bergsonian theory of mockery, and the Freudian grotesque.

Chicano/a cinema and humor in Hollywood

In the first three decades of the history of cinema (1900s to 1930s) Chicanos/as were mere spectators of the Hollywood industry, which was aimed at producing movies to colonize and assimilate the new Mexican immigrants (Ayala 34) whose roles in the movies were either plainly incidental or blatantly racist (Cortés 97). A few years later, due to President Roosevelt's Good Neighbor policy¹⁶⁶ and the assistance of the Chicano/a community in World War II, Hollywood adopted a more sympathetic but still patronizing and assimilating attitude towards Chicanos/as (99). Nonetheless, in the 1960s and 1970s, together with the rebirth of Chicano/a literature, Chicano/a cinema started rising.¹⁶⁷ These movies used to represent Chicano/a identity, which collided with mainstream American

¹⁶⁵ I am again following Siro López, for whom a humorous text that does not seek laughter in the audience is related to humorism instead of comicality. López differentiates a third type of humor, satire (18-19), which better fits my interpretation of *Quinceañera*. That is why, instead of humorist, I classify the movie as satirical.

¹⁶⁶ This is the name of the United States's foreign policy with Latin America in the 1930s, under the principles of reciprocal exchanges with Latin countries and non-intervention and non-interference in the latter's domestic affairs (Rabe 45-58).

¹⁶⁷ Chicano/a comedies, or comedic films which reproduce Chicano/a characters, started appearing at the time; probably, *Cheech and Chong: Up in Smoke*, from 1978, was the first famous Chicano/a comedy made by "Cheech" Marín, a Chicano comedian who opened up the way for subsequent humorists in his community (Noriega xx).

culture and had not properly been represented in the cinema industry at the time (Ayala 3). Nonetheless, it was not until the 1980s that Chicano/a movies were part of the Hollywood industry (3). In spite of Chicano/a cinema's depiction of taboo questions (injustice, racism, the struggle for independence, decolonization, poverty, drugs, violence, etc.), its success has endured until nowadays (3).

All in all, Hollywood has usually been alternatively displaying attitudes of paternalism with Chicanos/as, as well as of racism and vilification, from the very beginning (Alvarado 77). The birth of cinema was not fair regarding ethnic representation. There was a clear polarization of the scarce Chicano characters in the first three decades of Hollywood: they were either *caballeros* of Spanish descent or the Mexican *mestizos* that had to be chased by honorable men (Maciel 38). Other characters embodied the stereotypes of the greaser,¹⁶⁸ the *bandido*, the Latin lover (both male and female), the comical buffoon (Gerster 153), and the lazy dimwit (Alvarado 77). In the 1930s and 1940s, new genres were introduced in the film industry, but the stereotypes about Chicanos/as were pretty much the same, especially the *bandido* role (Maciel 45) and the Chicano who is rescued by an Anglo, a plot which represents a clearly paternalist attitude (47). It is true, though, that from the second half of the 1940s, after the Second World War, Hollywood started producing more positive Chicano/a characters (48).

For Chicanas, film representation has been even more discriminatory: in the first decades of the cinema industry, they were prostitutes with a fiery temper or the love interest of an Anglo man (Cortés 98);¹⁶⁹ in any case, they were highly sexualized characters. In the 1930s and the 1940s, in support of President Roosevelt's policy (99),

¹⁶⁸ *Mestizos* of Mexican origins, predecessors of the *bandido* and the gangster (Maciel 39).

¹⁶⁹ Inter-ethnic relations were permitted between an Anglo man and a Chicana, as long as the woman's skin was not too dark and she had a certain level of education; nonetheless, a relationship between a Chicano/a and an Anglo woman was plainly impossible (Cortés 98).

Chicanas were more present on screen, though usually playing frivolous and sensual characters (99). Nevertheless, little by little, from the 1950s, these superficial roles were paired with the depiction of more realistic Chicanas: strong, intelligent and resolute, although some of them prostitutes (101). Certainly, a change came in the 1960s and 1970s, when Chicano/a cinema started becoming more successful. While the Chicana prostitute started disappearing, so did those other tough Chicana characters who were not necessarily prostitutes. Thus, there was not only a reduction of negative portrayals of Chicanas, but a general decrease of their representation in Hollywood (103). Nonetheless, Chicana characters have been present in movies about Latino gangs and urban Latinas, as role models for their community in the Hollywood industry (104), and in a variety of roles in Chicano/a cinema since the 1980s.

Martina de la Luz Ayala enlists an elemental feature that contemporary Chicano/a films should pursue: reclaiming and updating the history of the Chicano/a community, and empowering its social, political and economic endeavors (46). Likewise, she indicates certain steps for Chicano/a cinema to follow nowadays and in the future: films must be “truthful representations of the Chicano reality and the Chicano people” and, at the same time, respect and dignify their community (140); they need to include a variety of aspects from Chicano/a culture (history, traditions, names, etc.); they ought to give voice to Chicanos/as in order to produce new and realistic role models; and they should display how Chicanos/as have influenced the United States (140). Moreover, she also considers that involving the entire community in the process is fundamental to preserve their history and honor their culture, and that Chicano/a audiences need to have a critical role (141). Finally, affluent Chicanos/as are encouraged to support filmmakers in the community (141). As a consequence, Chicano/a cinema should be considered as the product of the whole community, and not only the particular vision of an individual artist.

You are invited to a *quinceañera* (RSVP)

*Quinceañera: Echo Park*¹⁷⁰ narrates the story of a group of Chicano/a relatives who, for various reasons, have been ostracized by their traditional family and culture. The protagonist is Magdalena, a teenager who lives in Echo Park, Los Angeles, with her parents, who run a storefront church. As her *quinceañera* approaches, Magdalena¹⁷¹ finds out that she is pregnant, although she has never had complete sexual relations with her boyfriend, Herman. While Herman leaves the *barrio* under his mother's guidance in order to avoid spoiling a brilliant future as a doctor, Magdalena's family discovers the pregnancy. Her father rejects her because he considers her a sinner, so she decides to move in with her great uncle Tomás and her cousin Carlos. However, Magdalena's problems are far from solved, as Tomás's house is bought by an affluent Anglo homosexual couple who eventually forces him and the two teenagers to leave the place because of a problem with Carlos, as will be examined later.

Chicano/a cinema is usually concerned about showing real settings of Chicano/a life; thence, Montecito Heights, Highland Park, Lincoln Heights, Boyle Heights, and Echo Park, in Northeast Los Angeles, are common locations for Chicano/a films (Ayala 67). Likewise, *Quinceañera* is set in Echo Park, a densely populated neighborhood in the centre of L.A. This area is ethnically diverse—Latinos/as, Asians, African-Americans, and other ethnicities live there—, and has traditionally been home to modest families.

¹⁷⁰ *Quinceañera* can be considered as a coming-of-age story (Glazter and Westmoreland, "Quinceañera") that Annie Eysturoy calls *Bildungsheld*, a narrative of growth in which the liberation and the coming-of-age of a Chicana are directly influenced by family, tradition, and community (qtd. in Luna Estévez 70).

¹⁷¹ Magdalena's name inevitably references Mary Magdalene. According to feminist theorists, the two Marys in the Bible have traditionally represented the two stereotypes of women: the "virgin/whore" hierarchy (Wolf 85, 131-32). Ironically, the character of Magdalena achieves to overcome these two stereotypes: she is regarded as the whore by the community, but her real behavior is closer to the virgin's. Her name is ironic, because the prejudices shown by the community mirrors her father's, who should be able to believe Magdalena's story, as he runs a church and preaches the miracle of Jesus's conception. This association, and the cynical attitude of her father, are directly referenced in the movie when he talks about Magdalena with Tomás and defends that the only way for a woman to become pregnant is to have a sexual intercourse with a man (*Quinceañera* 00:44:40).

Latinos/as were the largest group by far until the 2000s, when the popularity of the neighborhood led to a process of gentrification (Glazter and Westmoreland, “Ghostboy”); the 2010 census shows that the Latino community is the most important group, now followed by a well-off Anglo community.¹⁷² As a criticism to such a backdrop, the *barrio* and its problems play a key role in the film, which was shot in real houses, schools, and parks of the neighborhood in order to capture the spirit of the place and to cherish everyday life.

The movie was inspired by Glazter and Westmoreland’s experience when they lived in Echo Park, as they were invited to the *quinceañera* of a girl from the *barrio* and were captivated by the celebration (Glazter and Westmoreland, “indieWire”). Hence, the Chicano/a community is portrayed in the film in direct relation with the *quinceañera*. The film uses the festivity to represent a bridge between Latin American and US-American cultures but also a generational gap in Chicano/a families and the controversial questions of gender and sexuality that the *quinceañera* involves. However, this ritual is interesting in the context of the film not only for the bond it creates between the members of the community (Watters 149), but also for the tensions that arise from it. These problematic points are referenced in the movie, which portrays religious, ethnic and gender problems.

As for religion, although the *quinceañera* has a very strong Catholic component (Davalos 106), some members of the Church consider it as an “unchristian celebration” (109) due to its encouragement of sexual awakening among unmarried adolescents (109). This interpretation is especially alarming in an ethnic context with high rates of school dropout, teen pregnancy, unemployment, and poverty (Cantú and Nájera Ramírez 16) which are openly discussed in *Quinceañera* by Magdalena’s father (00:30:08). The

¹⁷² These and other details about Echo Park’s population and evolution can be accessed in “2010 Census”.

quinceañera party is also questionable regarding inter-ethnicity: on the one hand, it bridges the two cultures of young Chicanos/as (traditional Mexican origins and US-American contemporary culture); but, on the other, this amalgamation can produce contradictions (Davalos 123). For instance, the modern ritual can be understood as acculturating due to the modifications of the original celebration¹⁷³ to match Anglo culture—e.g. the sweet sixteen—and the new expectations of young Chicanas due to economic independence and expectations of gender equality (Watters 155).

The *quinceañera* has usually been criticized as a patriarchal ritual (Davalos 117) that indoctrinates people (especially, women) at a very early age about gender roles, sexuality, “proper female behavior” (111), and heterosexuality (Watters 152) in Chicano/a culture. Although gender roles have changed thanks to education and feminism, this celebration is considered to perpetuate the oppression of women (149), as it narrows Chicanas’ opportunities to marriage, motherhood, and subservience to the male (153). Actually, sexuality and gender issues are among the most relevant for the plot of the movie.

Once upon a time, there was a *quinceañera*

Magdalena’s story is certainly a tragic one, but it is depicted with a pinch of humor (Glazter and Westmoreland, “Quinceañera”; Luna Estévez 84). This narrative about endurance, whose characters prove their resiliency in many different ways, can make the filmmakers’ subtle satirical approach go unnoticed. Nonetheless, after a careful study, the

¹⁷³ According to Davalos, the *quinceañera* can be traced back to Aztec times, when the sexualization of fifteen year-old girls made more sense as they were considered full-fledged women (107).

features of a satire¹⁷⁴ start sprouting. For Charles Knight, satire is an artistic strategy that “both explores and reflects the gaps and contradictions” of a culture and “is both critical and representative of those contradictions” (50) from a humorous point of view. In the case of *Quinceañera*, satire defies traditional literary genres to criticize both Chicano/a and U.S. cultures. Thus, its aim is not a particular person or an archetype, but the whole sociocultural context of Chicanos/as.

Quinceañera adopts the traditional elements of fairy tales,¹⁷⁵ which are catalysts of collective memories and values (Prokhorova 56), and subverts their most defining characteristics, producing what is known as an anti-tale.¹⁷⁶ Anti-tales make use of old forms with new functions: different elements of the prototypical fairy tale genre are absorbed by the new form (a novel, a song, a movie, etc.), and both versions speak to each other (Bacchilega 4; Prokhorova 51). The main goals of anti-tales are, thus, subversion (Prokhorova 51), the deconstruction of the status quo (Bacchilega 4, 13), the questioning of cultural values and the disruption of normative discourses (Prokhorova 140). The comic plays a very important role in anti-tales because it allows authors to take a modern

¹⁷⁴ I will argue that *Quinceañera* is a satire, and not a parody. Though these two humor forms are sometimes employed unambiguously, some authors have described them differently. For instance, for Knight a satire is a frame of mind that attacks an entire group, a system or an archetype, while a parody is aimed at a particular person (6). For López, a parody is a type of satire in which a particular individual, and not society as a whole or a social group, is mocked (19).

¹⁷⁵ Glatzer and Westmoreland choose to represent a fairy tale as a satire they are well-known by Anglo society (Knight 5) and represent many topics in which the directors are interested. The main characteristics of fairy tales are the recurrent employment of symbolism and the polarization of characters through exaggeration and simplification. These traits are magnified even more when stories become satirical retellings (Connery and Combe 36; Knight 5) in order to make their critique as clear as possible. These features materialize in *Quinceañera*: the secondary characters are symbolic because they are portrayed as simplified archetypes, whose attitude is polarized in favor or against the protagonists.

¹⁷⁶ If we look carefully at the features of anti-tales, we can observe that *Quinceañera* fulfills them all: they include fairy tale features but in a tragic rather than the expected happy way; furthermore, the plots of the original stories reflect on the problems of modern society, and they incorporate elements of contrast between fairy tales and the real world (Prokhorova 51). *Quinceañera* also includes other features of anti-tales enlisted by Cristina Bacchilega: pessimism, subversion, realism, dissonance between the fairy tale and the anti-tale, exploration of unlearned lessons, adult themes, cynicism, untelling (showing or implying rather than verbalizing), criticism of a given culture, anti-parabolic features, gray morality, shifting perspectives, intertextuality, avant-garde style, a feminist perspective, a demythologizing attitude, and a tone of disenchantment (3).

perspective of traditional folklore (Prokhorova 55). Therefore, the revisionism and reinvention of the fairy tale genre in the context of ethnic communities explores the effects of colonialism and marginalization (Hopkinson 9). Anti-tales, due to their satirical features, bring forth a post-modern revision of traditional popular stories; deconstruct the Anglo cultural imagery; and prove that Western ideology often is outdated and can be replaced by alternative models from other cultures.

Quinceañera mocks the traditional rules of fairy tales even in one of the film posters,¹⁷⁷ in which the protagonist, Magdalena, displays a challenging pose to demonstrate that she will not be performing the role of a regular princess, but also uses her bouquet to hide her pregnancy, which shows her struggle with society's morals. Actually, all the main characters of the film challenge traditional fairy tales, as they do not adapt to the aesthetic, cultural, social, and economic canons. They not only challenge the Anglo status quo, but their own Chicano/a culture as well. Hence, I will employ Vladimir's Propp's studies of fairy tales to justify *Quinceañera's* deconstruction of this literary genre; although his typology has been criticized for its simplification of characters and plots, it proves revealing to study the overturning of traditional character roles in anti-tales in general and *Quinceañera* in particular.¹⁷⁸

According to Propp's classification, Magdalena is the princess/heroine, which is obvious at first sight: she is dressed in a princess gown in the poster, and she starts the story as a passive figure who follows the orders of her parents, her boyfriend, and her community. As the film continues, however, Magdalena is no longer the typically passive

¹⁷⁷ The film's posters can be found in Appendix 2.

¹⁷⁸ There are other systems of classification of fairy tales, such as Antti Aarne's, Stith Thompson's and Hans-Jörg Uther's (Aína Maurel 125). Though they are erudite systematizations of fairy tales' typologies (126), they are focused on the plot of the stories rather than their characters. This means that Propp's approach is still useful to study the characters.

princess, since her pregnancy makes her strong and proactive. She decides to have the baby, to continue her studies (*Quinceañera* 00:45:38), and, finally, to forgive her father (01:23:38). At first, there is a clear separation between the princess and the heroine ROLES:¹⁷⁹ Magdalena is still pigeonholed in the former, and she will integrate the latter INTO her personality only after she has undergone several difficulties; in any case, at the end of the film Magdalena succeeds in harmonizing the two roles, performing, according to Propp, an assimilation of functions or the melting of two archetypes in one single character (103). Hence, Magdalena breaks with the standards of femininity from fairy tales as a way of demonstrating the difficulty to handle her identity as a strong, independent Chicana. For example, she faces racism when she is refused the rental of a house because of her ethnicity (*Quinceañera* 01:13:06), and, especially, when she is able to tell jokes about her pregnancy though it is the cause of all her misfortunes (00:47:25, 00:47:46).

Magdalena can be compared to other women from her community in the film, mainly her mother and her group of girl friends. The most important difference between them and Magdalena is that the latter does not accept her role as a submissive woman, which is encouraged in Chicanas through their *quinceañera* parties, according to certain scholars. Magdalena's mother and friends adjust to the "good" Chicana: kind, self-sacrificing, nurturing and Virgin-like (Niemann 62). However, the protagonist does not exactly oppose this role by embodying the "bad" Chicana (62). Magdalena does embody some features of the bad Chicana (she does not accept the role of women in traditional Chicano/a culture) but not others; therefore, she creates a new model for Chicanas that

¹⁷⁹ It must be highlighted that Propp never drafts the functions of the princess in detail; the princess archetype can function in many ways, but it is always a subservient character to an almost always male power figure: the king or the hero (Lin 81). In any case, certain features can be deduced: being noble, pious, virtuous, young, and beautiful, she is a prisoner of society's expectations (82). As Murphy states, the Proppian role of the heroine is to set out on a journey, and to marry at the end of it (35).

overcomes the virgin/whore polarization and opens up new possibilities for girls in her ethnic group.

Magdalena follows the footsteps of other Chicana characters from literature and cinema who have already paved the way for her. One of the best known is probably Esperanza Cordero, the protagonist of Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*, with whom Magdalena has certain similarities. Esperanza criticizes gender roles in the Chicano/a community because "they don't like their women strong" (Cisneros, *The House* 10). It is precisely Magdalena's strength and insubordination in *Quinceañera* that are denounced by her community, confirming Esperanza's words. Both girls learn about sexuality at an early age: Magdalena by becoming pregnant at fifteen, and Esperanza by being objectified when she and her friends play with a pair of high-heel shoes (40) and when men force her to kiss them (55, 96, 100). Their resemblances in this field are obvious when Esperanza complains about her own people, "the whole world waiting for you to make a mistake when all you wanted, all you wanted, Sally, was to love and to love and to love" (83), just as Magdalena did. In contrast to Magdalena, Esperanza has other friends who give examples of an alternative model of femininity, like Nenny, who wants to leave her house on her own and not by marrying and becoming pregnant as other young Chicanas have to do (88). Magdalena and Esperanza are unconventional role models for Chicanas who "have decided not to grow up tame" (88) by rebelling against gender roles (91-93, 108) in Chicano/a communities.

Magdalena's flatmate in her uncle Tomás's house is her cousin Carlos. Carlos is the hero/prince of the story (Glazter and Westmoreland, "Quinceañera"), but he is not the typical one either. In his free time, Carlos steals CDs and flowers (*Quinceañera* 00:06:34), and smokes weed while watching cartoons (00:45:27). He also is a homosexual Chicano who befriends the white gay neighbors who eventually buys Tomás's house.

Eventually, Carlos falls in love with one of the men, but ends up being objectified (00:19:03; 00:25:33; 00:57:18; 01:02:07) and rejected by him, which causes the eviction of the family. Due to his criminal behavior and sexual orientation, Carlos mocks Propp's expectations for a hero/prince. When Magdalena arrives at Tomás's house, Carlos is already living there after being thrown out of the parental home because of his sexuality and his rebellious behavior. At first, he helps his uncle by working at a car wash, and he is not very fond of Magdalena. As they grow more and more familiar, Carlos undergoes a major transformation: he takes his revenge by scratching the gay couple's car when they buy Tomás's house (01:10:53) and changes his job in order to provide for Magdalena and her baby, thus assuming the role of hero (01:12:09). In a very symbolic scene at the end of the film, Carlos walks Magdalena to the altar at her *quinceañera*, and so he fully performs the fairy tale prince (01:25:22-01:25:55).

Carlos is a profoundly anti-canonical character, because he can only be the prince thanks to his relationship with Magdalena, whereas in traditional fairy tales it is the other way round: a woman usually becomes a princess by marrying the prince. Carlos represents a new model of Chicano masculinity as he struggles to balance his sexual and ethnic identities, which he eventually achieves when, revealing his emotions, he is able to cry in front of his entire community (*Quinceañera* 01:21:51-01:22:30). As Sergio de la Mora explains, there is a place for homosexuality in Chicano/a culture, but it is a place of contradictions (5). According to him, Chicano/a communities have reinforced their conception of masculinity through cinema, creating a "virile, brave, proud, sexually potent, and physically aggressive" man (7, 10). At the beginning, Carlos tries to follow this pattern with his attitude and his appearance (*Quinceañera* 00:23:05), but his attempts are closer to parody than to imitation. In the end, he overcomes the tensions that stop him from accepting himself (Mora 120). The existence of a homosexual character that is

complex and serious, like Carlos in the movie, is vital for Chicano/a groups to reimagine masculinity thanks to visual representations of dignified gay characters in cinema (Glazter and Westmoreland, “Ghostboy”; Mora 6).¹⁸⁰ The fact that Carlos impersonates the figure of a very ironic prince who achieves redemption thanks to sensitivity and not physical strength proves that a different prince/hero is indeed possible.

Tomás is a fascinating figure who acts as the assistant fairy godmother (or, in this case, godfather). Tomás is called “tío” (uncle) by everyone in the family, although he is actually the great uncle of Magdalena and Carlos; this means that he is timeless, epitomizing the memory of the community (Glazter and Westmoreland, “Quinceañera”). Tomás is the thirteenth¹⁸¹ child (*Quinceañera* 00:50:47) of twenty-two and a working-class man who sells *champurrado*, a typical Mexican beverage, on the streets of Echo Park (Glazter and Westmoreland, “Quinceañera”). He takes in the family members who are outcasts: Carlos, expelled for his homosexuality and rebellious behavior, and Magdalena, homeless on account of her pregnancy and her alleged “sin” (*Quinceañera* 00:37:20). In the course of the film, he saves Carlos from a fight and cures him afterwards, as well as advises members of the family and intervenes on disputes, usually taking things with a pinch of humor.

Tomás also seems to represent a character that does not fit into traditional gender roles: he works and gives advice as a respected male figure, but he also cooks and cuts Carlos’s hair (*Quinceañera* 01:01:09). Tomás stands for ambivalent features by fulfilling

¹⁸⁰ Julee Tate explores the recent redefinition of male homosexuality in *telenovelas* like *La vida en el espejo* (543), the comical *Yo amo a Juan Querendón* and the tragic *Sortilegio* (546). These narratives on screen represent a “challenge to what has been a standard of heteronormativity, and their inclusion serves as an impetus for the re-examination and reconfiguration of what has been a monolithic gender narrative” (539). The gay characters in the aforesaid *telenovelas* share Carlos’s opposition towards stereotypical male homosexual characters with effeminate behavior (539) that have historically been harshly repressed in Mexico (540) and are still condemned.

¹⁸¹ Thirteen is a number associated with a long history of superstition as a lucky number in some places and unlucky in others (Kratschmer 2). Thus, it is a good metaphor for Tomás’s ambiguous behavior.

the roles of men and women at the same time and displaying a maternal attitude towards Magdalena and Carlos. This behavior, in the context of a movie with gender concerns, could be understood as a celebration of queer identity. Moreover, Tomás's garden has an altar that ironically mixes pagan and religious symbols; there, he keeps photos of film protagonists and images of the Virgin of Guadalupe that reinforce Tomás's ambivalent personality and the hybrid spirituality of many Chicanos/as. He goes to this altar to pray for his family and, when he dies, Carlos and Magdalena go there to pay him an intimate homage (01:16:37). His death seems to magically solve all the problems that had arisen—Magdalena's father apologizes and Carlos is seen in a new light by his family.

Magdalena's parents act as the leaders of the community, the fairy tale king and queen. Magdalena's father is the king in a symbolic sense because he governs the morality and religiousness of the local community: he runs the storefront church apart from working as a policeman, which is an ironic equivalent of monarchy in the Chicano/a community. When he learns about Magdalena's pregnancy he is profoundly ashamed of her moral transgression. On the other hand, although Magdalena's mother tries to understand and help her, taking responsibility for her child's action, she is subject to her husband's impositions because "Father knows best" (Gordon 77-78).¹⁸² Although it would be interesting to see Magdalena's mother rebel against the limitations of her role as the queen, her submission to her husband's decision is necessary to push the princess into breaking the boundaries of her character and becoming a fully-fledged heroine. Furthermore, the figure of the mother introduces another case of criticism against the traditional role of married women in Chicano/a culture.

¹⁸² To know more about traditional parents' roles in Chicano/a communities, see Luna Estévez (71).

Magdalena's boyfriend, Herman, for his part, is the fake hero who pretends to fix the problems but runs away and abandons the princess (*Quinceañera* 00:48:00; 00:59:28). The white gay tenants are, according to Propp's theories, the villains because they sexually use Carlos (00:25:33) only to dump him later and evict Tomás from the house, eventually killing him (01:17:35). Although the association between homosexuality and villainy could be read here as homophobic,¹⁸³ I understand it as an attempt to make the couple fulfill a twofold function, both positive and negative, shattering stereotypes and polarizations. Furthermore, they confront the traditional Chicano/a community with a radically different reality new to the *barrio* by representing an anti-canonical way of living, a rejoinder to the traditional idea of masculinity in Chicano/a culture, and act as a stimulus for Carlos's self-acceptance. Lastly, there is another curious and satirical figure that might be associated with the pumpkin-carriage in Cinderella: the Hummer limo that Magdalena requests to be a real princess at her *quinceañera* (00:12:26, 01:24:35).

The neighborhood at large plays the role of a Greek chorus when they express the ideas of the group about the events of the film. Seen as an ensemble, the characters together create a clash between the harsh life experiences of Chicano/a communities—racism, gender issues, sexual controversies, economic difficulties, etc.—and traditional fairy tale literature for children. Representing and evaluating the difficulties of being a Chicano/a in the United States by means of a fairy tale might perhaps be seen as a parodic sugar-coating strategy that distances the film from reality. However, *Quinceañera* does not hide adverse events in the lives of the characters; in fact, it shows that humor is a sign

¹⁸³ I do not consider the characterization of the Anglo homosexual couple as homophobic for two reasons. In the first place, the filmmakers have acknowledged that the couple responds to a realistic and open-minded representation of homosexual characters (Glazter and Westmoreland, "Ghostboy", "Quinceañera"). More importantly, there is another homosexual figure, a lesbian woman, who helps Magdalena by accepting her as a tenant for very little money (*Quinceañera* 01:13:38-01:14:37).

of resiliency in the face of pain. Instead of substituting tragedy for comedy, *Quinceañera* proves how these approaches to Magdalena's story are just two sides of the same coin.

Music is a very important element of relief for this community, but also an important factor of adaptation, in this case, of a fairy-tale. According to Linda Hutcheon, sometimes music is not considered an important element to adapt a story, but it "reinforces emotions or provokes reactions in the audience and directs our interpretation of different characters" (*A Theory* 81). Furthermore, Terrence McNally states that, if music is important for any adaptation in general, it is particularly significant to add new dimensions to characters and situations that are familiar to the spectator (qtd. in Hutcheon, *A Theory* 121), which is the case of anti-tales like *Quinceañera*. Life in Echo Park, therefore, is permeated by music ("The modern world" 1): it establishes a clear generational separation and, with a sound that is essentially Chicano, helps the film's modern reinterpretation of a traditional fairy tale from the point of view an ethnic group.

The soundtrack is organized in two groups. In the first one, the scenes with older people (Tomás, the parents, the aunts, and the uncles) are enlivened by traditional music, such as *merengue*, *boleros*, and religious songs. On the other hand, young people (Magdalena, her friends, Carlos, the white couple, and so on) move to the beat of contemporary music: pop, electronic music, hip hop, and reggaeton. The portrayal of such a generational gap is one of the objectives of music in the entire film. What is more, both the movie and the *quinceañera* start with a waltz, the typical music genre of fairy tales on screen, but the soundtrack quickly moves on to reggaeton, not only at the party but also throughout the film. The introduction of this lively Latin music genre helps relocate the audience in the context of Chicano/a culture without losing the memory of the fairy tale, but it also lampoons the symbolic pureness of the waltz by substituting it with highly sexualized music and dance.

Echo Park in the film can be interpreted as the parodic counterpart of a wonderland, in direct contrast to the archetypal fairy tale space of the castle, where everyone is usually wealthy and happy. Oppositely, Echo Park shows the life of more realistic contemporary characters. Again, a satirical symbolism is employed to criticize the life of Chicanos/as in the United States, but also to show how the neighborhood deals with its many difficulties: though Latinos/as are the nation's largest ethnic group (17.6% of the population in July 2015, more than 60% of whom are of Mexican origin, as was mentioned in the first chapter), Chicanos/as face economic and educational problems intimately related to endemic racism and exploitation.

The moral of the story

Satires need very specific conditions to exist, according to Dustin Griffin: “a time that longs for moderation” (134), very fixed norms that can be negotiated and questioned, controversial public standards of morality (134), and generational conflicts (135). All of those elements appear in the movie, thus demonstrating its satirical point of view. As has already been said, the celebration of a *quinceañera* is a time for moderation, as it challenges limitations regarding sexuality and gender roles. Madgalena's father addresses the contradiction between the spiritual and the material aspects of the ritual (*Quinceañera* 00:04:26). The gender rules fostered by the community not only at the *quinceañera* but during the entire movie respond to traditional Chicano/a values, such as the *macho* stereotype in the case of Carlos (00:23:05). These norms are transmitted from one generation to the next in such a strict way that they can be an object of mockery. The generational conflict is also an important issue in the film (Glazter and Westmoreland, “Quinceañera”), and it is reflected, for instance, in *Quinceañera*'s music. Between the

older and the younger generation, morality is understood in a different way, which presents diverse standards and causes most of the problems. Hence, *Quinceañera* fulfills all of the requirements that a satire demands.

The previous texts (Henry's and Serros's narratives and Diaz's and Martinez's poems) have shown that the goals of the authors can materialize in a variety of humor strategies, such as irony, parody, exaggeration, and so on; however, *Quinceañera*'s objectives cannot be understood separately from its satirical perspective. Satire works from a necessarily critical point of view, as its transgressive power focuses on the representation and mockery of the gaps and contradictions of public life and its rules within a particular group of people (Connery, and Combe 9; Griffin 36-38; Knight 7, 50). Thence, satires exhibit a more or less straightforward dichotomy between good and evil (Connery and Combe 1). The satirical mode is employed by ethnic groups at a postcolonial stage to denounce (Oesterheld 75) and discuss contemporary political and social issues (80). In this case, *Quinceañera* criticizes a myriad of topics: sexuality, religion, gentrification, and especially racism and inequality (social, economic, of gender, etc.). As satire is a parasitic form (Knight 203), the movie employs a variety of humor strategies; thus, the ironic, parodic, grotesque, and incongruous gags ultimately respond to the satirical tone of the movie. Like in the narratives and poems, *Quinceañera* employs humor in order to achieve some fundamental goals: the destruction of hierarchies in and out of the Chicano/a community, the promotion of resiliency as the most fruitful position to manage difficulties, the production of a critical (and also self-critical) discourse, and the promotion of inter-ethnicity.

According to Brian Connery and Kirk Combe, satires are “demolition projects” (1) specialized in destroying hegemonic structures. *Quinceañera* perfectly responds to that major function in various levels. For instance, the frame story of Magdalena's and

Carlos's growth employs the anti-tale structure to reverse the usual status quo of Chicano/a communities, in which the parents are at the top and the people who do not follow the rules of society are placed in the margins. Even so, with the eventual apology of Magdalena's father and Carlos's return to the family core, there is a transgression of such power structure, as the authority figures (the parents) realize their mistakes and the outcasts (Carlos and Magdalena) are accepted and appreciated in the community.

Besides, other secondary plots contribute to demystify hierarchic structures, for instance, a particular scene in which Carlos has a significant conversation with Gary, the homosexual man he develops feelings for. Carlos is showing Gary some gang signs from Echo Park, but he advises the Anglo man not to use them out of the *barrio* because a rival gang might kill him. Gary, astonished by that unforeseen extreme risk, exclaims "You really live in a whole other world, don't you?" (*Quinceañera* 00:39:28), and Carlos answers "No, you do" (00:39:31). With such a simple sentence, Carlos demonstrates that the dominant Anglo outlook of people with a different ethnicity is just one possible point of view; while Gary treats the ethnic minority as otherness, Carlos reverses his discourse and places Chicanos/as on top of Anglos by imposing his ethnic perspective.

In *Quinceañera*, resiliency is a key concept to define the protagonists (fundamentally Magdalena, Carlos and Tomás). The entire plot is an example of growth and acceptance, not because problems magically disappear but because the characters learn to overcome them. The protagonists prove their endurance in multiple scenes. For example, Carlos and his father have a very unpleasant fight (verbal and physical) at Aileen's party; after that, Tomás sends Carlos to his own home because the boy's presence is uncomfortable for the family. Tomás tries to lighten the situation by joking about Carlos's wounds saying "You will live" (*Quinceañera* 00:11:34), an ironic exaggeration. Resiliency is a fundamental feature of Tomás, and he proves it when he

tells Magdalena that he tried to kill himself at nine years old to come back as a different person in a sort of reincarnation. To Magdalena's surprise, the man admits having achieved his goal, as he became a different, more positive person after the experience (00:51:20-00:52:07).

Criticism and self-criticism are also very important aims in the film in order to help spectators realize the ideological struggles beneath Chicano/a culture (Gutierrez-Jones 118). Thanks to humor, the filmmakers transcend apparently fixed preconceptions in Chicano/s culture, like gender roles and sexuality issues; mirror contradictions, especially in the case of Magdalena's father; help accept oneself; and ease ethnic conflict (Luna Estévez 80). Critical stances appear when the main characters talk about different types of exploitation of Chicanos/as by Anglo characters. There are a few examples, like the Chicano/s community's complain about the change of the *barrio* (*Quinceañera* 00:43:04) due to gentrification¹⁸⁴ and the aforesaid objectification suffered by Carlos, which symbolizes the racist attitudes that Chicano/s communities are subject to.

The filmmakers state that the emotional aspects of *Quinceañera* are universal (Rochlin), although the setting of the movie and the background of the characters are culturally specific. The employment of a satirical perspective such as an anti-tale has a twofold intention that is deeply related with inter-ethnicity: on the one hand, humor can uncover cultural differences and problems (Erichsen 28) but, at the same time, it strengthens cohesion, transgresses group boundaries and enters new territories of dialogue (Erichsen 39; Gutierrez-Jones 115). Furthermore, tales, as well as anti-tales, encourage cross-cultural readings and have international features, because they can represent a particular group but do not specifically belong to it (Prokhorova 58). As

¹⁸⁴ "The whole neighborhood is the same!" (*Quinceañera* 01:13:46).

explored before, one of the goals of Chicano/a cinema that is present in *Quinceañera* is to prove that Chicanos/as can change the United States from within, reinventing its inner core (Stavans 14) and intervening in the hegemonic discourses of mainstream U.S. culture (Fellner and Heissenberger 162-164).

***Quinceañera* in the light of Bakhtin, Bergson and Freud**

Of all the humor theories discussed in previous chapters, the one that suits *Quinceañera* best is the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, as the philosopher himself acknowledges that satires are one of the fundamental forms in which the carnivalesque is embodied (Bajtín 12). Nonetheless, Bakhtin points out the importance of ambivalent self-mockery for the satire to be really carnivalesque. He asserts that modern satires have lost their self-mocking capability, which places them “above the object of ... mockery” (12) and causes the carnivalesque to vanish (12). *Quinceañera*’s satire also fulfills this requirement because it questions Anglo culture as well as to Chicanos/as, as has already been discussed. All satires, according to Knight, aim to criticize public life and transgress the moral codes (7) of a particular culture, allowing for a portrayal of its negative elements; thus, satire works in two levels: representation and criticism (50). This means that a satire will necessarily imply a distortion of the original material (203), just like *Quinceañera* adapts Magdalena’s story to fit the canonical form of a fairy tale. Therefore, the key element to distinguish a satire from a mere adaptation is the critical objective (50), which is also the key point of the carnivalesque. If carefully studied, the carnivalesque is a form of satire with very particular conditions, like its time constraint and self-critical aspects (Bajtín 6, 12), but with the common critical aim and distorting mechanisms of any other satirical text.

Accordingly, the reversal of pyramidal power relations in *Quinceañera* is a primary topic that includes the other subjects of criticism in the movie, such as racism, poverty, gentrification, objectification, sexuality, etc. To begin with, as discussed above, *Quinceañera* plays with the stereotypes of traditional Anglo fairy tales in order to show that they do not fit contemporary youth. Furthermore, the movie proves that these canonical figures can be improved and overcome by realistic characters who demonstrate their strength in spite of the opposition of the community's traditional values. In addition, this movie puts in the spotlight the oppressed among the oppressed: Magdalena, a pregnant adolescent who is censored by the community even though she has not committed any sin; Carlos, a young man who is experiencing his homosexual awakening and the objectification of an Anglo oppressor; and Tomás, an old man with a pro-queer identity that challenges what is culturally expected of a *macho*. The central position of these typically silenced figures and their respective identifications with the princess, the prince and the fairy godmother reverse not only the canon of fairy tales, but also of the discourses that are usually silenced in society. While the protagonists of *Quinceañera* would be either harshly punished for their antisocial behavior or plainly ignored due to their marginalization, this movie rewards their fight against cultural impositions (Mora 115). In the end, it is not them who relinquish to the standard of society, but their community who learn to understand and appreciate their differences.

Hence, what Magdalena, Carlos and Tomás do in this anti-tale is to teach their community and audience a lesson on respect and acceptance. These three characters are mocked by their ethnic group because of their peculiarities, which is a perfect example of Bergson's theory of mockery as a corrective from social deviations (*Quinceañera* 01:03:20-01:03:30). However, at the end, it is the community who turns into the victim

of a satirical mock because of their rigidity.¹⁸⁵ Actually, this attitude also responds to Bergson's theory, because he argues that the object of laughter is always related to stagnation and mechanization. Actually, Bergson argues that "in modern comedy, society and its representatives have become encrusted with the mechanical ... Only [the protagonist], because of [his/her] 'flaw' is elastic enough to expose society's petrification" (Mast 21). Thence, the corrective laughter yielded against Magdalena, Carlos and Tomás backfires on the community, who is eventually punished for their intolerance. Moreover, there is another detail about the Bergsonian theory of humor that matches certain aspects of satires in general and *Quinceañera* in particular: the Dancing-Jack. Knight asserts that some of the people who are objects of satirical mockery can be purely evil, but all of them are profoundly insensible, not because they display a foolish behavior but because "they are unaware of their folly" (3). The throwback of the community's laughter against the three main characters of the film is a great example of this attitude, and their Dancing-Jack behavior is the reason why they can be objects of satire.

On another note, the subversive essence of anti-tales can also be related to Freudian theories that defend the necessary role of humor in society in order to endure restrictions and rules. Although Freud pays special attention to grotesque and obscene jokes, he acknowledges the importance of any type of humor that can work as an escape valve for people in society, revealing the visceral and instinctive essence of humor. Withal, there are indeed some instances of obscenity when young people dance inside the limo (*Quinceañera* 00:03:15) and the girls adopt a sexual attitude that they know is inappropriate saying: "Don't tell my mom!" (00:03:17), which is repeated at the

¹⁸⁵ Artificiality and rigidity are also mocked by Magdalena and her friends when they watch the video of Eileen's *quinceañera* (*Quinceañera* 00:27:19-00:29:20), in which the lack of spontaneity is the overall tone.

quinceañera party (00:07:52). There is another example of inadequate attitudes at Eileen's party, when an old lady (Magdalena's, Eileen's and Carlos's aunt) bothers a young boy (00:07:06), which validates the carnivalesque's importance to safely transgress social rules thanks to humor and laughter.

Closure

This subchapter has argued that *Quinceañera*, as an example of Chicano/a cinema, employs satire and anti-tales in a highly productive manner. By adapting a satirical perspective and parodic, ironic, and grotesque humor strategies, the movie achieves to represent innovative characters in Chicano/a cinema that can empower different gender roles thanks to the protagonists, Magdalena and Carlos. The plot of Magdalena's growth and her family's story is openly sad, and yet the filmmakers manage to create a comic atmosphere out of it. Hence, *Quinceañera* also demonstrates that a movie, just like any other text, does not necessarily have to be hilarious to produce humor, as other strategies that do not seek laughter, like satire or humorism, can also be applied to tragic stories with comic purposes.

Glatzer and Westmoreland fulfill all the goals of Chicano/a cinema proposed by Ayala except one: that of being made by Chicano/a filmmakers. However, the ability of Glatzer and Westmoreland to act as mere observers and involve the community proves their respectful attitude and demonstrates the efficiency of inter-ethnic collaboration, in opposition with the kind of ghetto mentality that is criticized in *How to Be a Chicana Role Model*. This message of inter-ethnic cooperation is another issue in the movie that insists on the importance of maintaining an attitude of tolerance. As previously addressed, this is one of the most important messages of the film. Nevertheless, this is not a utopian

movie, and criticism, self-criticism, and a questioning of hierarchies are also present in it because they are vital elements to realistically represent the life of Chicanos/as. Thus, though the film includes the traditional happy ending of a fairy tale, it is just momentarily, like in the Bakhtinian carnival; ethnic groups in the United States cannot be said to live happily ever after, and the struggle for equality remains an enduring challenge.

3.2. Indian cinema, Trickster soul

"Humor is the most effective political tool out there,
because people will listen to anything if they're laughing"

(Alexie, qtd. in Hearne 49)

The Trickster is one of the fundamental and best-known mythological figures across all Native American tribes and it perfectly embodies the concept of enantiodromia, or running on the opposite direction, a principle of balance by which a force produces its own opposite (Jung 211). Thus, the Trickster is at once “creator and destroyer, giver and negator, he who dupes others and who is always duped himself ... He possesses no values ... yet through his actions all values come into being” (Radin xxiii). Although *Smoke Signals*¹⁸⁶ is not the story of a Trickster, it does incarnate the feature of enantiodromia: the movie incorporates many of the elements it harshly criticizes and, just like a Trickster (xxiv), it employs humor and incongruity to show the possibility of alternative behavior.

¹⁸⁶ The film’s poster can be seen in Appendix 2.

Smoke Signals was the debut of the American Indian filmmaker Chris Eyre with the Native American author Sherman Alexie as scriptwriter,¹⁸⁷ adapting some short stories from the latter's collection *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (Serrano Moya 798).¹⁸⁸ The film premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in 1998 (Kilpatrick 71),¹⁸⁹ where it was advertised as "the first film to be directed, acted, and produced by Native Americans to have a major distribution deal" (Hearne xv). Though the movie confronts native and non-native characters with delicate topics such as alcoholism, injustice, racism, stereotypes,¹⁹⁰ violence, trauma¹⁹¹ and loneliness, but also with the humorous and witty tone of Alexie's works (Hearne 182; Kilpatrick 71). *Smoke Signals* is currently considered a classic of Native American cinema and an innovative work of visual storytelling (Hearne xv). In this chapter, I will analyze this movie to demonstrate that Native American humor pursues a regenerative aim: to deconstruct widespread depictions of American Indians on screen, and to discuss polemical questions regarding the life of this ethnic group with a critical but resilient attitude.

In order to understand the vital role of comicality in *Smoke Signals*, I will first review the development of Native American cinema and the relation between American Indians and Hollywood. This background will be important for the understanding of many concerns expressed in the movie, especially its determination to destroy the propagandist stereotypes of the American Indian created by mainstream cinema, to question hierarchies, and to criticize the imperialist attitude of the United States. Later, I will

¹⁸⁷ I will consider Alexie, the scriptwriter of the movie, together with Eyre, the director, to interpret *Smoke Signals* because the film was based on a story written by the former, as will be explained in this section.

¹⁸⁸ More information about this book and its relation to *Smoke Signals* can be found in Hearne (38-44).

¹⁸⁹ It received the Audience Award for Dramatic Films, the Filmmakers Trophy, and a nomination for the Grand Jury Prize (Hearne xv; Kilpatrick 71).

¹⁹⁰ Fighting stereotypes is an important aim of Native Americans, from a humorous perspective or not, which has been included, for example, in Chystos's poetry (Emmons 149-54).

¹⁹¹ For instance, there is a scene in which the domestic violence suffered by Victor and his mother due to his father's alcoholism causes a traumatic experience for the child that causes a bitter father-son relation (*Smoke Signals* 00:30:19).

introduce *Smoke Signals*'s plot and its literary and audiovisual predecessors (about and by American Indians) in order to trace back its most important sources. I will then examine the humor strategies employed by Eyre and Alexie and the goals they respond to: primarily, to challenge the Anglo sociocultural hegemony, to encourage inter-ethnic communication, to support resiliency, and to celebrate American Indian culture. My analyses will be supported by the humor theories of Bakhtin, Bergson and Freud whenever necessary.

Native cinema and Natives in cinema: Is humor possible?

Native Americans were first recorded as a curiosity on a rare footage in 1895 ("Through Indian Eyes"), but the very first feature-length movie about American Indians made in Hollywood was *The Squaw Man* (1914), which is also one of the first Western films to be recorded in America (Hearne 10-11). This proves the interest from very early times to capture and show images of this ethnic community; however, Native Americans have intentionally been excluded from meaningful roles and the production of their own portrayals from the very beginning (Serrano Moya 792; "Through Indian Eyes"). Hollywood's cinematic characterization of American Indians has matched sociopolitical relations between the tribes and the United States since the dawn of the audiovisual industry (Serrano Moya 792). The first documentaries and movies, such as *Nanook of the North* (1922), merely represented the life of the Natives from the point of view of non-

native filmmakers (792), but the movies became progressively politicized to produce propagandist stereotypical images of the Indian.¹⁹²

At the beginning, the Native could be seen as “(1) ‘the other’/‘the faceless’/‘alien’/‘a bloodthirsty savage’/‘the enemy’” and/or “(2) ‘the respected enemy’” in early films like *Stagecoach*, *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, *Drums Along the Mohawk*, *The Searchers*, *How the West Was Won*, etc. (Serrano Moya 792). These films describe American Indians negatively and always as the adversary. Later on, the Natives were basically “(3) ‘an exotic object of anthropological study’/‘an alien passion’”(792) in *Buffalo Bill and the Indians* or *Sitting Bull’s History Lesson*; “(4) ‘the pitiable victim’/‘the doomed victim’/‘lo, the poor savage’” (792) in *Hombre* and *Cheyenne Autumn*; “(5) ‘the mascot’/‘the pet’/‘the subservient inferior’/‘the good Indian’” (792) in movies like *The Lone Ranger*;¹⁹³ and “(6) ‘the noble savage’/‘the mystic’/‘the wise old chief’” in *Geronimo: An American Legend* among others. In more recent years, Hollywood has attempted to produce a new cliché of Native American characters as “(7) ‘a human being’/‘the same’” (Serrano Moya 792) in *Dances With Wolves*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, and so forth.

This revisionist convention started to be cultivated in the 1970s, but it boomed in the 1990s; nonetheless, paternalist and imperialist (Hearne xxii) attitudes pervade these films, which have only retold the same story from the same perspective: the Native vanishes while the white man succeeds (Serrano Moya 793). For instance, in movies like *The Last of the Mohicans*, *Grey Owl* and *Thunderheart*, Natives still lack a voice of their own, as the dominant white man speaks for the tribe that fosters him (Huhndorf 5). Apart

¹⁹² Actually, as Jacqueline Kilpatrick argues, preconceptions about Native Americans in cinema date back to the 15th and 16th centuries and to cultural constructs derived from the literature of James Fenimore Cooper, Robert Montgomery Bird and Irwin P. Beadle (58-60).

¹⁹³ The figure of the Lone Ranger’s native sidekick, Tonto, is studied in depth in Kilpatrick (65).

from these preconceived images, there is also the question of the representation of indigenous women, “the princess or the Pocahontas Perplex” (Serrano Moya 793), in films such as Disney’s *Pocahontas* (1995). Native women are usually portrayed as strong, exotic, beautiful, maternal and wild all at the same time (793).¹⁹⁴

Contemporary films from the turn-of-the-twentieth century (*Pocahontas*, *The New World*, and even *Avatar*) continue to partly romanticize, partly demonize native characters and persist in validating Western imperialist topics in genres like science-fiction (Hearne xxiii). Nevertheless, the most dangerous stereotype is probably that of “the vanishing Indian” (xxii), which has been constructed throughout the history of Hollywood in order to make the audience presume that Natives are locked in the past and unable to participate in the contemporary world. Such a static imperialist narrative is endorsed today by means of an “intellectual colonization” (Ayala 2) that allows filmmakers to purge a history of ethnic cleansing and genocide from Euro-American memory “with impunity” (Carlson 2; Huhndorf 2-3, 6). This proves the power of the audiovisual to create “nation-building mytholog[ies]” (Huhndorf 4). The vanishing Indian has been the most powerful image constructed by Hollywood about the Natives: not only “red skin”, “long black hair”, “dressed in leather” and wearing “feathers”, not only “exotic” and “fierce” (7-8), but, above all, extinct.

To match the tragic and violent depictions of American Indians, humor has been systematically excluded from their characterization in Hollywood. Margaret Atwood argues that “on the whole Natives were treated by almost everyone with utmost gravity, as if they were either too awe-inspiring as blood-curdling savages or too sacrosanct in

¹⁹⁴ To read more about Hollywood stereotypes of Native American women, see Martínez Falquina’s “*Squaws y mestizas: imágenes de las nativas en el western de Hollywood*” and Marubbio’s *Killing the Indian Maiden: Images of Native American Women in Film*.

their status of holy victim to allow any comic reactions either to them or by them" (qtd. in Gruber 1). Thence, either because of fear or guilt, mainstream filmmakers have had a sense of responsibility for the representation of American Indians, usually not in terms of respect or acknowledgment but concerning their duty to produce propagandist material to indoctrinate both Natives and non-Natives.

Since the 1970s, there has been a renaissance in American Indian counter-cinema¹⁹⁵ that, after centuries of cultural genocide, displacement, assimilation, and misrepresentation, has allowed Natives to take control of their portrayals on screen (Serrano Moya 791) or to claim “visual sovereignty” (Hearne xxix).¹⁹⁶ This movement, materialized in movies of different genres with diverse tones and topics, primarily fights the vanishing Indian conception (Kilpatrick 58), spreading the vitality of American Indian cultures beyond the fictional construct of conventional Hollywood cinema (795). Until recently, native cinema was in the main documentaries like *Our Spirits Don't Speak English*, whose productions is less expensive, but which have a more limited audience (Youngberg 141).¹⁹⁷ Nonetheless, more recently, American Indian filmmakers have adopted Western cinematic genres to reformulate their history and voice their experiences (Hearne 146). Even so, native counter-cinema does not necessarily imply an exclusively native cast and crew, which might not only be virtually impossible, but also not necessarily positive according to Chris Eyre (147). The most important aim of Native

¹⁹⁵ “Rough grouping of films, filmmakers, and institutions which attempt to set themselves against the formalist and ideological domination of Hollywood cinema” (Goldberg, qtd. in Youngberg 150).

¹⁹⁶ Native American sovereignty is “the recognition of native tribes as separate and sovereign political entities—and as nations that exist within the larger nation of the United States—as defined in formal treaties made with European nations and with the United States and as acknowledged in the U.S. Constitution” (Hearne xxvi). Hence, “visual sovereignty” means “the way relations between nations influence (and are influenced by) the shared spaces of visual culture” and “the way Indigenous visual media work to redefine the parameters and significations of mainstream mass media communications” (xxix-xxx).

¹⁹⁷ Nonetheless, Angela Aleiss claims that the first revolutionary movie with a native cast was *The Song of Hiawatha* in 1913. Although it cannot be considered native counter-cinema, it should be taken into account as an attempt to introduce a different and more realistic image of American Indians in Hollywood.

American cinema should be reaching and educating a non-native audience to change preconceptions (160), utilizing the power of cinema to construct imagination in their favor.

American Indian counter-cinema includes a myriad of genres:¹⁹⁸ documentaries, historical movies, animated films, science-fiction, dramas, comedies, and so on.¹⁹⁹ Humor plays an essential role in binding together Native American communities (Lincoln, qtd. in Bowers 247; McCloskey 41), celebrating survival (Lincoln, qtd. in Bowers 247; McCloskey 45) and releasing intercultural tension (Lincoln, qtd. in Bowers 247). For example, as will be later developed, *Smoke Signals* reflects cultural differences between Natives and non-Natives to produce humor (250). Circular structures are also used comically to indicate the need to continually rebuild and repair the world (252), such as in the movie *Pow Wow Highway*. Furthermore, self-mocking humor is important to elicit empathy from the viewers, alert the audience to difficult life situations, and recognize their part in the negative aspects of life (Bowers 249). Therefore, it is inevitable to find these uses of humor in American Indian cinema too.

¹⁹⁸ Alexie is pessimistic about the future of Native American cinema and advises young filmmakers and actors to “give up the idea of theatrical distribution. Don’t even pursue it” (Alexie, qtd. in Hearne 193). He encourages young native audiovisual artists to “be a Crazy Horse of film making. Be Red Cloud” (193), that is, to work on independent production away from traditional distribution channels.

¹⁹⁹ One of these documentaries, *Reel Injun*, depicts the representation of Native Americans in Hollywood; others explore many different topics, like *RUMBLE: The Indians Who Rocked the World*, *Forest Spirit*, and *Surviving Columbus*. To know more about animated films, see Schertow. To find examples of science-fiction movies, go to Jae. *Tushka* and *Naturally Native*, are examples of dramatic movies made by Native Americans (Hearne 16). One of the best examples of American Indian comedies is the famous mockumentary *More than Frybread*.

Where does *Smoke Signals* come from?

Smoke Signals depicts two young Coeur d'Alene men, Victor and Thomas,²⁰⁰ who travel from their Idaho reservation to Phoenix to gather the ashes of Victor's deceased father, Arnold, with whom he had a troublesome relation (Hearne xviii; Serrano Moya 798) but who was his only male authority figure (Savlov). The movie's title has a double meaning. First, it alludes to a fire accidentally caused by Arnold that killed Thomas's parents but from which Arnold saved the boy (Hearne 29) and which makes Arnold eventually run away from the reservation.²⁰¹ The smoke signals of the title also stands for one of the most universal stereotypes created in Hollywood about American Indians, as well as for a broad communication system across boundaries (xix).

The men's trip by bus²⁰² and in Arnold's pickup truck (Hearne xix) is a voyage of discovery (Savlov) that serves as an excuse to show the confrontation of two different Native American identities. On the one hand, Victor is represented as the prototypical serious and stoic American Indian who arouses people's respect; on the other, Thomas Builds-the-Fire performs the more traditional role of a spiritual storyteller (Serrano Moya 798). It is interesting how these two characters perfectly complement each other: though Thomas is the unifying thread of the story, Victor is the engine that keeps things happening (Hearne xx).²⁰³ Actually, the central theme of *Smoke Signals* is Victor's

²⁰⁰ Victor and Thomas are "cousins" (due to a long family friendship, not to blood ties), friends despite Victor's bullying Thomas (*Smoke Signals* 00:32:30), and even brothers in a symbolic way (Hearne xix).

²⁰¹ Diane Glancy says that "there is a lot of bitterness about fathers in Native American Literature" because of the abundance of absent father figures who abandon their families as a metaphor for the harshness of cultural loss" (121).

²⁰² As Huhndorf mentions, "the bus is a multivalent symbol" (93) that acts as a microcosm in which different types of people with conflicting experiences coexist (*Smoke Signals* 00:20:58). Furthermore, its name, "Evergreen Stagecoach" (00:21:24), refers to Western movies and the conquest of the West, in which the role of the Natives was completely unrelated to the stagecoach, the vehicle of the settlers. Again, Huhndorf interprets it as a metaphor for cinema itself as a vehicle for the colonialism and segregation conducted by Anglos, who obtain the best seats while the Natives are relegated to the back (93).

²⁰³ The truth is that Victor learns about his own father, who left his community and is blamed by Victor for having abandoned his family, thanks to Thomas (Serrano Moya 798). Thomas and Arnold used to have a

transformation, and so the film is a *Bildungsroman* in which, by leaving the familiar space of the reservation, he learns to respect Thomas (*Smoke Signals* 01:13:12) and understands his own identity aside from Hollywood conventions.

The parodic stereotypical behavior of the main characters takes the audience back to previous Hollywood movies that build the conventional image of the noble, savage, and vanishing Indian (Hearne xx-xxi). This is an important issue because, as Eva Gruber explains, metafiction is one of the most important resources of Native American humor (80) not only in written form, which is her main concern, but also in audiovisual media. Intertextuality becomes ironic (Hearne 3) when American Indian characters learn how to behave from non-native actors in Hollywood movies; however, these characters are usually also able to recognize that their attitude is based on Western preconceptions and, consequently, deconstruct the molds they have acquired (Serrano Moya 798). According to Joanna Hearne, *Smoke Signals* alludes to canonical genres of Hollywood films (road movies, comedies, buddy movies, family drama, and so on) to “[reshape] American cinema from within” (Hearne xvi). This is an example of the comic reversal, a form of ironic reinterpretation (Gruber 80) employed by Eyre and Alexie to make both native and non-native question the hegemonic canon.

The relation between Victor and Thomas mirrors that of coyotes and badgers in many Native American trickster myths. Usually, badgers, like Thomas, are hard-working, cautious and protective (“Native American Badger”), while coyotes represent the Trickster’s intelligence, stealth, greed, recklessness and arrogance (“Native American Coyote”) that can also be found in Victor’s character. The association between badgers and coyotes in Native American trickster myths is not only based on imagination but on

close relation as the latter both caused a fire that killed Thomas’s parents (*Smoke Signals* 00:56:42) and became a father figure for the boy (Hearne xix; *Smoke Signals* 00:02:09).

facts, as these two animals usually hunt together in a partnership as unexpected as profitable. When they are hunting for rodents, the fast coyote is able to track them and catch them, but it is the badger, with its powerful claws, that can dig through the burrow and reach the prey underground for coyote to kill it (“Badger and Coyote”).

However, myths also reflect the complicated interaction between these animals: if coyotes have the opportunity and the necessity, they will eat badgers (5). It is not clear whether this mutualism responds to cooperation or robbery (5). This relation of symbiosis and use is mirrored in the protagonists of *Smoke Signals*, who employ of each other’s resources and knowledge, and, though Victor-coyote starts mocking and attacking Thomas-badger, in the end they reach mutual admiration and appreciation. This satirical introduction of comical American Indian mythology, especially when it is combined with the Hollywood road movie genre, updates traditional storytelling and proves its adaptability to modern narratives, contemporary topics and present concerns.

Smoke Signals has two predecessors: Alexie’s aforementioned book *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*²⁰⁴ and the movie *Powwow Highway*. Eyre affirms that he read Alexie’s semi-autobiographical story “This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona” (Alexie 59-75) in 1994 and he felt it should be made into a film because it already had the structure of a road movie (Hearne 168). According to Quentin Youngberg, although the movie succeeds in tackling political issues, “much of the political force that inheres in the short fiction that served as the basis for the film is lost in the translation of Thomas Builds-the-Fire and Victor into film” (143). Basically, Youngberg argues that the movie follows the plot of the story, but it is primarily centered on the two men’s friendship and Victor’s growth instead of the book’s political claims (143), which is

²⁰⁴ Ten years later, Alexie was writing a sequel to *Smoke Signals* set a decade after the events of the movie: *Smoke Signals: Fire with Fire* (Alexie, qtd. in Hearne 180).

something Alexie himself agrees with (Hearne 185). However, it must be mentioned that the short story about Victor and Thomas's journey, "What it Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona", is enriched by other stories in Alexie's book. For instance, it is thanks to "The Trial of Thomas Builds-the-Fire" (Alexie 93-103) that we understand Thomas's political demands and the sociocultural value of the stories tells (Hearne 143). Thence, in Alexie's book a great part of the critical load of Victor's and Thomas's story lies in the rest of the stories that enrich the experiences of the protagonists and which cannot possibly be reflected in the film due to time constraints.

It must be understood that the adaptation of the short stories into a buddy film demands certain changes that limit the political burden of the movie (Youngberg 143). *Smoke Signals* focuses on the very specific event of recovering Arnold's ashes without a broader background; furthermore, being targeted to both Natives and non-Natives, it requires a "gentler tone" (Hearne 185), which does not imply that it is free from denounce (Youngberg 144). In fact, as previously mentioned, the movie reacts against misrepresentation in the film industry, especially the 1990s romanticized image of Native Americans in Hollywood (Hearne xvi, xxi); hence, the movie was and still is remarkably revolutionary regarding visual sovereignty (189) and its humorous yet critical point of view that creates an oppositional voice to predominant images of American Indians on screen (Hearne xvi-xvii).

The second intertextual reference in *Smoke Signals* is *Powwow Highway*, the original native buddy film that serves, in many ways, as precursor to Eyre's movie. Though *Powwow Highway* was not as acclaimed by critics and public and it was made by non-Natives (Hearne 189), it "still represents a pivotal moment in the development of native film" and a milestone in Indigenous representation in cinema (Youngberg 145).

According to Sherman Alexie, “You take a thing like *Powwow Highway* and 99% of Indians have seen it” (Hearne 45), but “every [single] Indian has seen [*Smoke Signals*]” (167), so both road movies are classic Native American films. Nonetheless, in certain ways, *Smoke Signals* has gone a step beyond *Powwow Highway*: according to Eyre and Alexie, their movie “remains the only film ever written and directed by Native Americans that ... ever went even remotely mainstream” (Eyre, qtd. in Hearne 179). However, the most important point in common between these two films is their active employment of humor, which gives us a hint on the importance of comicality in Native American cinema.

Smoke Signals has achieved many important landmarks: it was screened at the White House, was parodied by popular Hollywood movies (Hearne 181), and has become an anthem for young Native Americans who appreciate it nowadays (Hearne 176, 188); on the other hand, Alexie acknowledges that it is disappointing that *Smoke Signals* led the way for a different type of native cinema that did not really have continuation (188). The movie is not only important for what it depicts but also for the symbolic value of a film made by Natives about Natives’ problems that has been successful with non-native audiences (Hearne 188; Youngberg 153). Like other American Indian movies (*Powwow Highway*, *Skins*, etc.), *Smoke Signals* tries to escape from victimization and grief, which usually typify Natives, in order to discuss the problems of American Indian characters respectfully (Serrano Moya 799) and with humor (Youngberg 144). Thanks to that comical perspective, the film is mild with non-native viewers that otherwise would probably be disinterested (144).

***Smoke Signals's* humor**

The use of humor in *Smoke Signals* can be studied from many points of view, as different parts of the movie make use of diverse humor strategies with particular aims. In general terms, the entire film can be studied according to Bakhtin's carnivalesque theory in two different aspects: first, the movie is aimed to destroy the hierarchical structures of society (Bakhtin 42) that are mirrored in Hollywood cinema; secondly, in many scenes, Eyre and Alexie adopt a self-mocking point of view (12). The aforementioned appropriation of Hollywood genres implies a challenge to the canon and the power structure of standard cinema (Hearne xvii) in order to "reinvent the enemy's language" (38). This appropriation has to be necessarily accompanied by humor, as one of *Smoke Signals's* "most effective weapons against the media imperialism of the Western [genre] has been humor and irony" (14), which thus talks back to Hollywood stereotypes (15).

Gruber justifies that humor, particularly irony and satire, is consistently utilized by Native Americans in their literature to fight clichés that have damaged them for centuries (2); what is more, she also presents a recent trend that focuses explicitly on the preconceptions created by popular cinema (142), which is the case of *Smoke Signals*. For example, Arnold's escape is related to the vanishing Indian, although he actively decides to leave whilst in predominant Hollywood cinema the Natives are forced to disappear and die (*Smoke Signals* 00:04:14). The film critically mocks Hollywood cinema (00:36:24, 00:43:09, 01:06:51) and blockbusters that reflect the image of Native Americans, namely *The Last of the Mohicans* and *Lone Ranger and Tonto*, and popular science-fiction, like *The Last of the Winnebago* (00:07:04, 00:33:42) in order to allow Natives to reimagine their own identity (Gruber 31), and non-Natives to question the concepts they have adopted from popular cinema.

Ironically, Victor lampoons Thomas for embracing the image of spiritualism from Hollywood movies without realizing that he also bases his identity as a stern Native American on ideas received from mainstream cinema. Actually, Victor even tries to teach Thomas “how to be a real Indian”, focusing his lessons on Hollywood’s Westerns’ depictions (Hearne 32; *Smoke Signals* 00:33:53, 00:36:59, 01:01:50). The combination of irony and satire is commonly employed by American Indians to deconstruct and change existing preconceptions (Gruber 55, 60). Thus, it is proved that Eyre and Alexie are concerned with misrepresentation and with the possibility of a more accurate depiction of their own people (Hearne 178; Bond). Actually, Alexie acknowledges that for the actors “it was rare ... to even get those many lines. In the entertainment industry, it’s all about monosyllables ... so ... allowing everybody to ... have a wide range of emotions ... that was the big thing” (Hearne 185).

In addition to these general considerations about the importance of the genre and the comical point of view chosen by Eyre and Alexie, there are particular questionings of power structures, such as a satirical song about John Wayne.²⁰⁵ First of all, it is a direct attack to an important Western movies’ actor by means of which the colonizer becomes vulnerable in front of the colonized; secondly, Victor and Thomas are making fun of John Wayne because of his seriousness, using an image that is typically imposed on American Indians to mock the Anglo actor (Hearne 95). Victor ironically states that he would never trust a man whose teeth cannot be seen (*Smoke Signals* 00:37:58), an allusion to the false stereotype of the stoic Indian.

²⁰⁵ “John Wayne’s teeth, hey ya, John Wayne’s teeth, hey ya, hey ya hey ya hey, / John Wayne’s teeth, hey ya, John Wayne’s teeth, hey ya, hey ya hey ya hey, / Are they false, are they real, are they plastic, are they steel, hey ya, hey ya, hey” (*Smoke Signals* 00:38:04).

Self-mockery is often employed by Alexie and Eyre to “make fun of ‘oral traditions’ while at the same time translating [their] own performative, storytelling impulse” (Hearne 49), that is, on the one hand they mock traditional culture, but at the same time they acknowledge its value.²⁰⁶ Though Hearne limits self-mockery specifically to the portrayal of storytelling, many other elements from Native American culture are mocked in the movie, questioning their role to represent identity; it is the case of songs (*Smoke Signals* 00:07:25, 00:38:04), the importance of nature (00:09:10, 00:27:22), ceremonies (01:00:24), the figure of the medicine man (00:33:33), Native American leaders like Geronimo (00:07:45), and, above all, frybread (00:35:32, 00:44:42, 00:46:31). The protagonists are also subject to a “comedic distantiation, when irony creates a critical self-awareness” (Hearne 44). Paradoxically, this means that the characters’ identity is formed by the same conventions they attack and which eventually prove useless to be “a real Indian” (*Smoke Signals* 00:33:53, 00:36:59). For example, the film criticizes the ironic process by which American Indians learn to be Natives through movies: “The only thing more pathetic than Indians on TV is Indians watching Indians on TV” (00:43:18).

However, Native American humor is not only subversive: “it is more than ‘laughing back’” (Gruber 3). In *Smoke Signals*, the goals of resiliency and criticism usually go hand in hand: it is thanks to criticism that the characters can achieve a resilient attitude, and thanks to resilient humor the movie can produce critical discourses. As Hearne defends, the filmmaker and the scriptwriter use humor and playfulness instead of resorting to the usual tragic tone of stories about historical misrepresentation (14, 15). That is a way not only to rationalize problems, but also to cope with them (Gruber 203;

²⁰⁶ It is a defining trait of parody to make fun of a given topic at the same time that it acknowledges its worth. This feature, which is a good example of humor’s incongruity, is hinted but not explicitly developed by Adele Marian Holoch (36) and López (19).

Bond). Though the importance of the healing power of humor for Native American communities has gone unrecognized in many cases (McCloskey 45), *Smoke Signals* proves that “laughter is a powerful and sustaining force of resilience in the face of adversity, and it is a profoundly social act” (Huhndorf 26). Thus, “Native humor... is ... a new way of confronting complex issues” (26) and a “vital coping mechanism” (McCloskey 40). For instance, Suzy Song, Arnold’s neighbor and friend, is talking about a very popular Powwow with thousands of Indians and Victor and her laugh when she ironically comments: “I wish we had been this organized when Columbus landed” (*Smoke Signals* 00:53:22).²⁰⁷ *Smoke Signals* exhibits the American Indian tradition of teasing, joking, and razzing (45) in many scenes in which Natives reflect about the colonization process, a typical Native American humor topic (Emmons 140; Hearne 27) that allows to create a pan-Indian bond that will be explored below.²⁰⁸

Apart from the connection with traumatic historical events, there are also jokes about the current situation of Native Americans. When the protagonists are on the bus, Thomas talks to a gymnast who claims that her dream was to participate in the Olympic Games, but Jimmy Carter took her dream away by boycotting the Games; then, Thomas ironically answers: “You gymnasts got a lot in common with us Indians!” (*Smoke Signals*

²⁰⁷ There is another example when Arnold is telling Suzy about a basketball game in Victor and him faced two priests. At the moment of victory when the child shoots the decisive basket, he ironically says that “for at least one day, the Indians won!” (*Smoke Signals* 00:51:55). One more evidence of humor to address colonization can be found in a conversation between Victor and his mother, Arlene. She asks him to come back from his journey, and the son offers to sign a paper, but Arlene declines and teases Victor by referring to the signature of treaties that were systematically broken by the settlers: “No way! You know how Indians feel about signing papers” (00:14:44).

²⁰⁸ This comment is more than simply ironic, and it can be connected to a very particular form of humor in Galicia (Northwest Spain): *retranca*. According to the RAG, *retranca* is the ability to talk with ulterior motives, especially when intentional humor is intended (“Retranca”). Thus, *retranca* is related to irony in its playfulness with the said and the unsaid (Castro-Vázquez 328; Hutcheon, *Irony’s* 11) and with black humor in its corrosive and even macabre topics (Friedrich 232), but it is more than just that. *Retranca* is always employed with a double satirical and ironic way: by laughing at a harsh reality, it allows for resiliency (232) and the demystification of untouchable figures (Castro-Vázquez 328). Native American humor, in these particular examples as well as others, also makes use of a type or ironic humor that can be considered *retranca*. Actually, *retranca* was used as a resilient response to the Castilian intruders in Galicia (328), which is a common aim in the humor of ethnic minorities.

00:23:13) in association with Carter's disappointing Native American policies ("Jimmy Carter" 5-6). Likewise, Velma and Lucy, the two native women who drive their car backwards (*Smoke Signals* 00:16:26-00:20:05),²⁰⁹ tell Thomas and Victor to prepare their passports to leave the reservations because the United States is a foreign country for them (00:19:53). Victor and Thomas also joke about poorness in the reservation at different points of the movie (*Smoke Signals* 01:13:29; Savlov), which confirms that Native Americans employ humor when they need to confront a painful experience in order to reflect the cathartic potential of the situation.

Furthermore, as I have previously mentioned, resiliency in *Smoke Signals* is profoundly linked to criticism, as the use of humor to address questions of racism implies fostering a positive attitude. In the previous examples, although a resilient attitude might be the most important aim, there is always criticism towards imperialism, poverty and racism. Nonetheless, there are more samples of the employment of comicality with critical goals. There is, for instance, a mention of Indians' relocation when Victor and Thomas have to walk a long way to find Arnold's house. At that moment, Thomas makes an ironic and powerful speech: "We've been traveling a long time, ennit. I mean, Columbus shows up and we start walking away from that, trying to get away, and then, Custer moves into the neighborhood, driving down all the property values and we gotta keep on walking, then old Harry Truman drops that bomb and we gotta keep on walking somewhere..." (*Smoke Signals* 00:39:35).

An element that is comically utilized is the Fourth of July, another popular topic of native humor (Hearne 27) to criticize Native Americans' lack of cultural, political and

²⁰⁹ Velma and Lucy are a parodic reinterpretation of *Thelma & Louise* (Alexie, qtd. in Hearne 182). Their driving backwards can be understood as a metaphor for the importance of going back to the past of Native Americans "in order to go forward" (Hearne 105), but it also mocks the pitiable condition of cars in the reservation (Alexie, qtd. in Hearne 182).

economic independence from the United States (*Smoke Signals* 00:01:31, 00:11:14). The film also denounces that, after colonizing the Natives, non-Natives romanticized and adopted their traditions, particularly in the 1960s when “all the hippies were trying to be Indians” (00:17:44), although “being an Indian in the 21st century” is “a crime” (00:18:54). Victor even proves that the racist and hierarchical attitude of U.S.-Americans towards Indians are real when two cowboys occupy their seats and force the protagonists to move to the back of the bus: “Cowboys always win” (00:37:13), a sentence with both historical and audiovisual echoes.

The movie is set first on Coeur d’Alene’s reservation and then in rural and urban areas of the American West and, though most of the characters are Coeur d’Alene, they also acknowledge their identification “as part of an intertribal pan-Indian culture” (Hearne xxv, 54). Hence, although *Smoke Signals* is shot in very specific locations with their own particular history and culture, its cinematic discourse is explicitly aimed at building coalitions. As Eyre discusses, “I don’t feel a need to make culturally relevant films, I feel the need to make films that are personal and that nourish and entertain ... I don’t feel the need personally to try to carry a cultural flag ... I do carry a human flag that happens to be connected to a culture” (Hearne 178). Therefore, Eyre decides to use humor as an ethnic glue (Gruber 38) between different cultures instead of exclusively his particular group because, for him, being human comes before belonging to a particular community. Accordingly, though *Smoke Signals* is centered on the portrayal of the relation between American Indians and the United States, Eyre and Alexie are able to touch on universal themes (Savlov) and create global connections that point out parallels with other ethnic groups. The film also proves that the United States is not “a bastion of freedom and democracy but rather a colonizing entity” (Hearne 25). Despite its parochial

story, *Smoke Signals* is inter-ethnic in that it shows interrelations with other ethnic groups, which creates political and artistic alliances among ethnic communities (Hearne 19-20).

The clearest way in which these connections are created is by introducing references to the cultures of other ethnic groups, usually wielding comicality as a mediation strategy (Gruber 2). For instance, the name of Lester Falls Apart ironically alludes to Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, which at the same time goes back E.B. Yeats's poem "The Second Coming" (Hearne 24). This character was created in 1987, when Alexie read Achebe's novel and recycled its title for Lester's family name: "That's a Sisyphus novel, and there's no identity in the world more Sisyphean than Native Americans" (Alexie, qtd. in Hearne 191).²¹⁰ Hence, laughter and humor in *Smoke Signals* act as a kind of glue (Hearne 26; Bowers 247) that bonds individuals together and fosters social cohesion, creating a community of Native Americans, but also of non-Natives.

In this creation of a community beyond a single ethnicity, it is important to learn a new way to engage with people from different backgrounds, and an aspect of the Bergsonian theory of mockery might be particularly revealing. According to Bergson, mocking other people teaches socially correct behavior (Bergson 9), an educational purpose which is also present in *Smoke Signals*. Self-mockery questions certain aspects of American Indian behavior and identity, as has been explained, and there is an example of internal mockery between American Indian tribes when Victor and his friends mock Apaches for their height (*Smoke Signals* 00:07:45). This type of playful internal mockery helps create a pan-Indian community (Bergson 5; Emmons 185; Gruber 39, 197-98; Savlov), and celebrates each tribe's concept of Indianness (Emmons 181) by teasing but not discrediting other tribes. Furthermore, the movie's mockery of stereotypes about

²¹⁰ The mythical figure of Sisyphus has already been mentioned in relation with Native Americans in one of Natalie Diaz's poems, "Downhill Triolets" (Diaz 52).

American Indians intentionally teaches non-Natives how to relate both to American Indians and to people from a different ethnicity in order to produce respectful exchanges from a position of inter-ethnicity. Thus, *Smoke Signals* is a manual to educate non-Natives when developing relations with individuals from different ethnicities. It may seem that these questions are not related to Bergsonian mockery as a means to maintain social order; however, as shown in the above analysis, it can be understood that humor can help keep social relations healthy instead of detonating conflicts.

At first sight, *Smoke Signals* does not have any relation with Freud's theory of humor, as it does not contain obscene jokes or grotesque elements; however, Freud's theory focuses on any possible sign of challenge to social rules, any discomforting attitude on the border of accepted social behavior (Freud 182). It shows coincidences with the aims of Bergsonian humor, but they differ in their mechanisms: both theories respond to the employment of humor to reaffirm the social order, but Freud explores the capacity of comicality as an escape valve (182) while Bergsonian mockery attacks any person who does not follow social rules in order to secure order, as has just been mentioned (Bergson 50). Therefore, both Freud and Bergson understand comicality as a means to prevent the collapse of society, though Freud explores examples of humor as a release to avoid a society from disintegrating due to its repressive nature (Freud 182) and Bergson documents lampooning to educate people (Bergson 18).

The instances above, which illustrate Bergsonian humor in *Smoke Signals*, should not be mistaken with Freudian comicality to interpret many scenes in the movie that deal with uncomfortable topics, such as violence, alcoholism, racism, etc. from the point of

view of humor. There is an illustrative example of Freud's ideas: Arnold's ashes.²¹¹ The symbol of the ashes can have a double explanation in line with Freudian humor: on Arnold's part, it can be the ultimate transgression of the social rules he had challenged all his life; in the case of Victor, it can represent his relation with his father, on the border of what is considered a proper father-son bond, which would be confirmed by the release of Arnold's remains by Victor when he is able to forgive his father. In any case, the ashes are a symbol of the little space of rebelliousness allowed by society in order to keep the status quo. That little space of defiance to repression is exactly where the humor of *Smoke Signals* works, as, on the one hand, it tries to destabilize social hierarchies but, on the other, it needs to teach people how to treat each other in order to avoid conflict in inter-ethnic communication.

Last but not least, another important goal of *Smoke Signals* is to dignify the traditional values of Native American cultures, which is also one of the fundamental aims of American Indian humor (Gruber 204-7). Thus, humor in the film emphasizes the importance of traditional practices such as storytelling through the character of Thomas, who takes back the power to tell stories in both public and private ways (Hearne xx). The power of stories is almost palpable in the movie when Thomas buys a car ride to Velma and Lucy so they drive the men out of the reservation in exchange of a good story (*Smoke Signals* 00:17:26).²¹² The movie also recovers the traditional value of circularity,²¹³ as Thomas's voice begins and ends the film (Hearne 30) and narrates the friends' trip from "point A to point B back to point A" (Eyre, qtd. in Hearne 168). Circularity, in this case,

²¹¹ When Suzy delivers Arnold's ashes to Thomas and Victor, they are surprised to discover them kept in a can instead of a proper urn (*Smoke Signals* 00:42:11), which seems a grotesque way to treat the remains of a person (01:09:30).

²¹² The value of stories as a currency has already been explored in section 2.1.1. with regard to Gordon Henry's *The Light People*.

²¹³ To read more about circularity in American Indian cultures, see Allen.

revises the “dead end” in Hollywood films about journeys (Hearne 99) to prove that Victor’s and Thomas’s lives have a future after their excursion, fighting the standard image of the vanishing Indian. The insistence to compare Arnold with a salmon in many scenes, and to take him back to the river where the Coeur d’Alene Indians traditionally fished for salmon is also a symbolic allusion to circularity because “salmons leave and then return to the place where they were born” (113), which is exactly what Arnold does when he dies (*Smoke Signals* 01:18:42-01:18:58). The fact that these practices are made fun of is not a censoring mechanism, but a celebration of the continuation of a culture that is still alive and can be played with (Gruber 220).

Closure

It is important to value *Smoke Signals* for the cultural significance it holds for Native Americans since it was first released, and also for the audacity of Eyre and Alexie to make a film that holds a strong sociopolitical message from a daring humorous point of view. For that reason, this movie has become a milestone for American Indian filmmakers and audiences, but also for the non-native people who watch it, as the film teaches important lessons on coexistence, respect and the life of American Indians. Anyhow, it must also be considered that this type of movie cannot be studied in isolation, but as an heir of a long history of films: first, it celebrates and pays homage to previous fundamental Native American cinema; second, it appropriates and destroys Hollywood Western movies from within. *Smoke Signals* drinks from a long tradition of unfair and propagandist stereotypes, but also from previous movies that took a first step to depict American Indians in a trustworthy way.

In any case, it is the humorous perspective that differentiates *Smoke Signals* from other movies that seek fair representation and visual sovereignty. Apart from that, humor makes the film suitable for both native and non-native audiences to reflect about questions of stigmatization in a resilient environment (Mast 15). Interestingly enough, this film has exhibited traits of comicality and humor techniques that had been documented in written literary texts, such as the comic reversal, but not in American Indian movies. Nonetheless, in spite of employing certain strategies that have been specifically classified as characteristic of Native American humor, the goals of *Smoke Signals* are shared with the works studied previously in this dissertation: to portray the resiliency of ethnic communities, to foster a critical attitude, and to celebrate the community's culture. Therefore, going back to the beginning, *Smoke Signals* has been confirmed to fulfill, above all, the role of the traditional Trickster: it teaches Indian and non-Indians that there is another possible way to do things, a different point of view to see the world.

3.3. *Quinceañera* and *Smoke Signals*: a comparison

A film, by itself, is a transcendental document for the historical, cultural, narrative and creative representation of a group (Gerster 97-103). If recorded from the perspective of humor, a movie will probably activate mechanisms of comparison, contrast, transgression, and re-reading (Schmidt Noguera 5-7) that allow spectators to become aware of a particular issue (Ayala 1; Schmidt Noguera 6). Comic cinema (which is not always necessarily a comedy, as has been previously proved) can educate, liberate, raise awareness, reinvent, empower, denounce, and give voice to mainstream groups but also to ethnic communities (Ayala 1, 2). Therefore, the main aim of my comparison of *Quinceañera* and *Smoke Signals* is to give a larger scope of the sociopolitical and cultural

context of these films together. In that respect, after the previous analysis of each movie, a comparison of the two sheds light on the circumstances of ethnic groups in the United States and their adoption of humor in their own representations on screen.

Research projects about humor in cinema have reached the conclusion that puns, caricatures, the grotesque, black humor (Blanco Mallada 56-58) and the absurd (Schmidt Noguera 6) are common audiovisual techniques. Nonetheless, scholars also acknowledge that humor and comical characters vary greatly from one culture to another (Blanco Mallada 58; Schmidt Noguera 1); hence, I will discuss the use of the culturally specific humor of Native Americans and Chicanos/as in cinema. I have previously explored the comical strategies employed in *Quinceañera* and *Smoke Signals* as representatives of Chicano/a and Native American films; now, I intend to determine how the uses of humor in these two ethnic communities match or differ, which I expect will shed light on the employment of humor in ethnic counter-cinema.

When it comes to comparing *Smoke Signals* and *Quinceañera*, their differences are probably more remarkable than their similarities at first sight. To begin with, they have different cultural and historical backgrounds, although they coincide in the unfair and stereotypical representation in mainstream cinema. Beyond the particular clichés of each ethnic group, Chicanos/as and American Indians have traditionally been portrayed as the negative counterpoint of the Anglos, as their subservient assistants in the case of men, and as their maternal entities or sexual objects in the case of women.

Both *Quinceañera* and *Smoke Signals* reinvent conventional Western genres in order to subvert Anglo ideologies through satire and mockery.²¹⁴ On the one hand,

²¹⁴ Both movies' main humor strategies, though reinforced by other comical techniques, are satire and mockery; as interpreted by Christina Oesterheld, these are the most typical humor forms of ethnic groups in postcolonial stages with a critical purpose (75).

Quinceañera satirizes traditional European storytelling and subverts the form and content of a traditional fairy tale; on the other, *Smoke Signals* mocks Hollywood road movies in order to adapt mainstream audiovisual narratives to a story about a non-canonical ethnic group. Thus, the directors of both films seem to have had similar aims when they decided that their movies should satirically adapt foreign genres to tell their stories: in the first place, to demonstrate that ethnic groups acknowledge their difference from canonical cultures (Ashcroft et al. 58, 77); secondly, to defend the positions of ethnic communities as active creators instead of passive victims (212); and, finally, to promote local cultures with global concerns (222). In short, these two films reinvent Western genres in order to destroy their universalizing ideas from within.²¹⁵ Hence, *Smoke Signals* and *Quinceañera* are, from the formal point of view, satirical retellings that recycle traditional genres, but each movie captures its story in a different way. Siro López's study offers an explanation as to why such different movies, one tragic-comic and the other clearly comical, resort to the humor strategy of satire but produce divergent outcomes. According to his classification, *Quinceañera* is an example of satire while *Smoke Signals* is closer to comicality.

Magdalena's story in *Quinceañera* appeals to the audience's feelings by narrating a tragic situation (López 20) that seems unsolvable but is eventually fixed (20) thanks to resiliency and maturity (21), favoring the audience's empathy (20). That is why this anti-tale arouses a smile in the watchers, but not laughter, which is, in this case, reserved for *Smoke Signals*. Thus, both the movie and the anti-tale genre could be interpreted as an example of what López calls humorism. However, *Quinceañera* achieves to develop an alternative discourse from canonical media's thanks to satire, its humorous techniques

²¹⁵ Adele Marian Holoch gives examples of different ethnic communities that employ humor to resist universalization and homogenization (212).

and its critical goals. These touches of satirical, rebellious humor, which have already been studied in depth, help create a different representation of the Chicano/a community, especially teenage Chicanas and homosexual Chicanos. Probably, *Quinceañera*'s greatest achievement is to create a movie about a tragic story that does not victimize but empower the ethnic community it is portraying.

Chris Eyre's and Sherman Alexie's film, though making use of satire as *Quinceañera* does, seeks laughter (López 14) through its trickster features (16), its positive and cathartic intention (Bowers 249, 253), and its challenge to colonial powers (253). While *Quinceañera* is focused, from the point of view of humor, on exploiting a particular comical technique (satire) to depict the life of Chicanos/as, *Smoke Signals* can be considered, to some extent, a catalog of humor in American Indian culture. *Smoke Signals*'s use of comicality shows the capacity of Native Americans to produce comedies that allow them to take distance from tragic and traumatic experiences and stereotypes, many of which were created in Hollywood. Perhaps, the most important consequence is that a comical approach to this revisionist intention allows ethnic groups to reimagine their identity out of the propagandist constructions of mainstream audiovisual media. López's explanation for the difference in each of these movies' treatment of humor is complemented by Gerald Mast's theory, when he argues that one distinction about comedies that carry a message is "whether the film transmits its values exclusively by comic devices or by serious sections interspersed with comic ones" (22); according to that classification, *Smoke Signals* would be closer to the former and *Quinceañera* would represent the latter.

This does not mean that Richard Glatzer and Wash Westmoreland content themselves with the employment of satire as the only humor technique in the movie: they

also introduce self-mockery and irony, among other resources; the point is that, in *Quinceañera*, satire is the primary humor frame for Magdalena's story, and the rest of the comical techniques secondarily reinforce this satirical perspective. Conversely, *Smoke Signals* includes a wide variety of humor forms (most of which have been cataloged by Eva Gruber in literary but not audiovisual texts) that interact with each other. Hence, both Westmoreland, Glatzer, Eyre and Alexie decide to employ humor as the most suitable outlook to capture their stories; however, they have different approaches regarding to what extent their movies ought to be comedies, and which humor strategies best convey the message of their projects.

There are also similarities between these two movies from the thematic point of view. To begin with, their frame is the exploration of the protagonists' relation with their fathers (or their father figure). The disappearance of the father is, for Magdalena and Victor, a traumatic moment that will trigger the events portrayed in the movies and their personal growth.²¹⁶ Therefore, it is due to the growth caused by the difficulties between fathers and their children that *Quinceañera* and *Smoke Signals* can be considered *Bildungsromanen*. However, the personal development of the main characters is combined with background stories that add an important load of criticism to role models, the *macho* stereotype, racism, poverty, classism, and so on. Regarding *Quinceañera*, Magdalena stands for a Chicana model outside the stereotypical good Chicana/bad Chicana, while Tomás and, especially, Carlos question traditional and outdated masculinity standards, as already examined.

²¹⁶ The disappearance of the father is clearer in the case of Victor's, who first leaves his family and his community and later passes away. Regarding Magdalena's father, he does not literally go away or die, but he distances from her and disappears from her life. Apart from that, Herman, Magdalena's boyfriend, also leaves his future child before it's born.

Aside from the fight against Hollywood clichés in *Smoke Signals* that I have already commented on, masculinity is another important topic in this film, particularly the character of Thomas, who, opposite to Victor's stereotypical masculinity, shows a more androgynous model of Native American man (Hearne 85). Curiously, these two movies address the topic of masculinity in diametrically opposite ways: while in *Smoke Signals* Thomas shows the need to return to traditional American Indian models of masculinity, *Quinceañera* tries to escape from the image of the typical *macho*. In either case, both movies acknowledge the need for alternative models of masculinity (and femininity).

Humor in *Smoke Signals* and *Quinceañera* responds to similar aims: to cherish the importance of resiliency, to create imaginary spaces for criticism and discussion based on equality and conciliation, to teach people from other communities to relate to Chicanos/as and Native Americans, and to question the power structures of the contemporary world. In the movies, humor is always used as a catalyst of resiliency, a way to endure the tragic moments of life with buoyancy (Bowers 247); at the same time, it produces critical discourses against racism, imperialism, assimilation, gender roles, etc. (Gutiérrez-Jones 117; Oesterheld 77, 80). In *Smoke Signals*, resiliency and criticism go hand in hand. If the film depicted the life conditions of Native Americans from an exclusively comical perspective, it would have run the risk of forgetfulness and sweetening; still, Eyre and Alexie choose a comical conciliating attitude to produce realistic critiques about the life of American Indians that do not lead to conflict. Thanks to self-mockery, irony and comical historical allusions, Eyre and Alexie achieve to discuss questions of colonialism and racism in past and present times. The objective is to maintain a balance between denouncing inequality and displaying an appeasing intention.

Quinceañera also deals with these questions, and it stands for a kind of diplomatic criticism, but in this case resiliency and critique are not as directly linked as in *Smoke Signals*. On the one hand, resiliency is represented by comic exaggerations in many cases and by satire almost always in order to prove that difficulties do not just magically disappear, but it takes hard work and positivity to overcome them. This is a message for ethnic communities to take an active position against problems instead of taking the road of self-indulgence and victimization. On the other hand, Glatzer and Westmoreland, supported by the Chicano/a community that helped making the film, aim to criticize the unfair treatment that Chicanos/as are subject to: racism, cultural appropriation, gentrification, sexual abuse, etc. Nonetheless, *Quinceañera* can also function a platform for young Chicanos/as to complain about injustice in their communities.

Quinceañera and *Smoke Signals* can be understood to link their local experience to global concerns, and to create links with other cultures thanks to the power of humor to build a community (Erichsen 30). *Smoke Signals*'s most important lesson might be the destruction of stereotypes, which, in general, negatively influence the relation between ethnic communities and Western people. By destroying the constructed images of American Indians from Hollywood, Eyre and Alexie show that ethnic groups are alive and dwell in the modern world (Emmons 8), which reminds the West to treat them as individuals and not clichés (110).²¹⁷

Quinceañera contemplates inter-ethnicity from a different angle. This movie highly relies on universal emotions and empathy, and, although it deals with characters attached to a particular place with a very specific cultural background, it appeals to the common language of feelings, especially in adolescence. Thence, *Quinceañera* works in

²¹⁷ As argued by Katherine McCloskey, humor is a common way to convey knowledge and teach lessons in Native American cultures (43).

the field of our similarities as human beings. Besides, the use of a satirical frame is also related to inter-ethnic concerns, as fairy tales do not belong to any specific country, but are a universal heritage (Prokhorova 58). In any case, both *Quinceañera* and *Smoke Signals* have been recorded through the lens of humor as a negotiation tool in cultural conflicts in order to reduce aggressiveness and equal individuals from different groups (Erichsen 30).

Last but not least, as already mentioned, both movies adopt and adapt foreign forms to the stories of ethnic communities in an attempt to talk back to the imperialist power by using its own means to carry the message of the oppressed (Bacchilega 13). These two movies explore Western genres and stereotypes in a humorous way (Oesterheld 84) to question hierarchies (Gutiérrez-Jones 113, 118) and to evaluate the history and representation of these two ethnic groups (Bowers 251; Fellner and Heissenberger 162). This revision of the canon is, according to Bakhtin, the main aim of satirical humor (4, 10). *Quinceañera*, as has been mentioned, adapts and rearticulates traditional fairy tales and their prototypical characters (the princess, the prince, the king, the queen, the villain, etc.) in order to adjust them to Magdalena's story. The aim of this satirical retelling is not only to prove that the stereotypical characters of a fairy tale do not match reality, but also to question the Western belief system behind a fairy tale (Bacchilega 4-5; Prokhorova 51). *Smoke Signals* also reinvents Hollywood classical genres (comedies, road movies, and buddy films) in order to allow and encourage ethnic communities to disrupt the propagandist constructions created in the core of Anglo cinema. The adaptation of traditional Hollywood genres, together with the challenge to American Indians' stereotypes, shakes the foundations of non-native knowledge about Native Americans that the audience learns from mainstream cinema. Furthermore, it calls

into question the intentional misrepresentation of American Indians, among other ethnic groups, on screen.

Throughout these pages, I have recurrently mentioned the utilization of self-mockery as a humor strategy in both *Quinceañera* and *Smoke Signals*. Self-mockery is the basic form of self-critical humor and, in these movies, it usually responds to a necessity to use the comic as a reinforcement of bonds between members of the same cultures (Lincoln, qtd. in Bowers 247; McCloskey 42). The Bakhtinian carnivalesque, which is primarily focused on the reversion of the world order by means of mockery and satire (4, 10) lively encourages self-mockery. When the time comes to denounce injustice against a particular community, it is also vital to be realistic and acknowledge that the problems of ethnic communities do not exclusively originate outside them but comprise people in these communities as well. According to Bakhtin, humor should be a two-way road in the sense that “it is also directed at those who laugh” and not only at those who are mocked (12). Hence, Native Americans and Chicanos/as in *Smoke Signals* and *Quinceañera* also employ humor, specifically self-mockery, to criticize the problems of their communities, which also reinforces the links of people in each ethnic group by referencing common experiences.

As I have justified in the previous chapters, the humor theories by Bergson and Freud, through different techniques, respond to a similar purpose: humor is a fundamental tool to maintain social order. Though Freud focuses his studies on the obscene, he is actually interested in any means of humor that momentarily subverts social order in order to make restrictions and rules manageable for people (Freud 182). This justifies why the subversive nature of the satirical anti-tale in *Quinceañera* and the reversal of stereotypes in *Smoke Signals* are useful as an escape valve to debate about social inequality.

Following Bergson and Freud, we can argue that humor must be carefully managed, as a misuse or abuse of it can destroy the social order it tries to keep by favoring the dominant group and damaging the message of ethnic groups. This proves that employing humor is a double-edged sword: it can be used to destabilize, but it can also be employed to maintain the status quo.

For Bergson, humor is also a control tool, but he interprets mockery as a punishment for challenging the rules (Bergson 50). Both movies show examples of mockery in and out of each ethnic group. For example, Victor in *Smoke Signals* mocks Thomas for a good part of the movie because he considers that his friend's apparently careless behavior is not acceptable, or plainly embarrassing, and must be changed. On a deeper level, Eyre and Alexie overtly play with Hollywood stereotypes about American Indians in order to punish the mainstream audiovisual industry for its unacceptable behavior that obstructs mutual understanding and perpetuate prejudices. As for *Quinceañera*, there are different examples of lampooning as a social corrective when Magdalena is made fun of by her friends for becoming pregnant (*Quinceañera* 01:03:20). However, eventually, Carlos and Magdalena metaphorically mock the Chicano/a community for its rigidity and lack of acceptance in order to compel its modernization and open-mindedness.

At the very beginning of this dissertation, I asserted that, though tricksters have been widely developed in Native American mythologies, Chicanos/as are also linked, from the point of view of humor, to the trickster principle of transgression. Both *Smoke Signals* and *Quinceañera* are intimately related to the Trickster's role: deconstructing preconceptions and fostering an alternative point of view. Hence, though each movie chooses the humor techniques that best suit its cultural background and objectives, both

exemplify the power of comedy films to reinterpret the world and make the audience question the canon. Though the goals of both movies are ultimately similar, each one includes particular elements of their different cultures and presents its aims through different humor techniques.

Smoke Signals and *Quinceañera*, which might seem quite different, eventually prove themselves similar in certain aspects, which demonstrates that, in spite of cultural divergences, what joins people together is more than what divides them. This message of addinity in spite of cultural diversity is fundamental in the movies by people who belong to particular ethnic groups but portray universal feelings (despair, fear, loneliness, compassion, resentment, forgiveness, etc.). This does not mean that the cultural background of these films is irrelevant; my point is that their greatness lies in their ability to defend, each from its own perspective, the possibility of inter-ethnic understanding if people do not consider differences an obstacle but a reward.

4. **Revising mythology in video games: *Guacamelee!* and *Never Alone***

Along with literature and cinema, video games have become the most powerful means of cultural expression and communication in the contemporary world (Navarrete Cardero et al. 109). Actually, video games have been the fastest growing industry in the last thirty years (Vila 1) to the point that, nowadays, playing video games is the rule, not the exception (Juul, qtd. in Torres-Parra 781). They are comparatively the most recent narrative phenomenon regarding content, form, and aims, stemming from a history of “social games” and “rituals” (Redmond 47) as old as humankind.

For some critics, literature, films, and video games are in constant competition to prove best at conveying meaningful experiences for the audience. Certain scholars argue that, while literature and cinema always show the same sequence of events, video games offer potential storylines and different experiences for every player (Vila 3); nonetheless, not all video games have an open world that players can explore differently. Other theorists appeal to differences in narrative time, as “old” media (cinema and literature) are “about what already happens” while “new” media are “about what could happen” (Frasca 85), although video games borrow time techniques like flashbacks from cinema and literature (Vila 4). Some researchers also employ the representation-simulation dichotomy to examine the limitations of traditional media against the strength of video games to involve the player (Simons 3, 14; Vila 8), though that is ultimately a matter of perspective for many critics (Simons 7). In the end, Narratology Studies battle those who insist on opposing literature, cinema, and video games as mutually exclusive approaches (Jones 20) to the ancient human need to tell stories (Hutcheon, *A Theory* 118; Navarrete

Cardero et al. 115).²¹⁸ The truth is that studying the similarities between new and old media proves more productive than focusing on establishing limits and differences.²¹⁹

It is true that simulation, which is a feature in video games, might improve the players' experience by involving them in a more active way, since they become part of the story instead of being mere spectators, as usually happens in traditional media (Hutcheon, *A Theory* 13). This is not to advocate for video games as superior to literature or cinema, as I have already stated, but to acknowledge that the former use contemporary technological developments in order to offer the audience a new approach to storytelling. Hence, the capacity of simulation to include the audience in the plot allows to develop a persuasive critical message "that actually helps players challenge the model's built-in assumptions" (Turkle, qtd. in Frasca 87), which turn video games into potential tools for education and sociopolitical discussion (Frasca 89-90).

The academic Koichi Iwabuchi has coined the concepts "cultural odour" (27) and "cultural fragrance" (27) to distinguish the way in which the imprint of a particular culture is negatively or positively received in the global market (27). Both cultural odor and cultural fragrance are based on stereotypical representations of cultures other than the Anglo mainstream. However, most video game producers, consciously or unconsciously, choose not to create realistic games with a strong cultural odor because they assume that it will thwart global success; nonetheless, those with a strong stereotypical cultural fragrance will probably be positively accepted worldwide because they accommodate to the constructed stereotyped image of a particular culture.²²⁰ Producers seem to think that

²¹⁸ For example, Antonio J. Planells de la Maza argues that most video games stick to the ancient narrative model of the hero's journey (524).

²¹⁹ To know more about the problematic of comparing video games, literature, and cinema, see Mukherjee's *Video Games and Storytelling*.

²²⁰ For example, Iwabuchi mentions that many games featuring ninjas portray this figure as a stereotype, not necessarily due to a lack of knowledge but because the cultural fragrance of ninjas better fits Western

a lack of cultural odor “is imperative if they are to make inroads into international markets” (94). In any case, Iwabuchi does not take into account a more recent trend in the video game industry that bravely accepts and celebrates the cultural odor of different cultures without turning it into a fragrance.

The possibility of resistance to canonical culture forms through video games is especially meaningful for ethnic communities on the periphery of power, as it can support a multiplicity of voices and acknowledge plurality (Torres-Parra 764). Moreover, the possibilities of video games are not limited to exhibition, but also inspire the change of “fundamental attitudes and beliefs about the world, leading to potentially significant long-term social change” (Bogost, qtd. in Seiffert and Nothhaft 257) when players apply the lessons they learn in the game to their lives: “videogames train as they entertain” (Redmond 51). Therefore, ethnic groups can employ video games as a decolonial response by utilizing the mechanisms of popular culture to show their non-canonical beliefs and to foster resistance (Torres-Parra 766); the tools of the colonizer may become, once again, the tools of the colonized.

That way, video games become symbolic spaces where three forces compete: “transnational media corporations” (Redmond 43), “digital communities” of fans and gamers (43), and indigenous groups (Torres-Parra 776). This causes a clash between commercial companies with AAA games (that is, mainstream games) of massive popular culture (Redmond 43) and ethnic communities that intend to share their traditional knowledge and local culture. Though it seems that this conflict concerns opposing factions, it is possible, and desirable, to join them in order to produce narratives that can convey sociocultural messages for a worldwide audience (Torres-Parra 776):

ideas (27). This is the case of the stereotypical images of Chicanos/as and Native Americans that are gathered in section 4.4.

“videogames of the oppressed” (Frasca, qtd. in Torres-Parra 780). It is true, though, as Souvik Mukherjee points out, that AAA studios have recently started taking interest in postcolonial groups and ethnic communities (*Videogames and Postcolonialism* 2). However, if we compare the catalogs of AAA game and indie developers, there is a clear contrast: while the former, more often than not, display dominant Western ideas, many of the latter are making great efforts to release games with meaningful messages in terms of ethnicity and gender issues.

The relation of video games with humor has usually been a vexed one, as these media have deliberately abstained from comicality in order not to seem inferior or less profound than traditional narrative media (Dormann 81-2; Mainer Blanco 129). Still, humor and video games committed to social issues have proved compatible to tap into their didactic side (131), inserting puns, wit, repetitions, intertextuality and other humor devices in their structure, rituals, and characters (132-33).²²¹ It is also true that comical video games do not always have socially responsible goals, as in many cases humor is sexist and racist (136). In spite of the fact that any video game genre can be potentially humorous, the adventure genre has proved prone to the employment of such perspective (137), such as in the game *Grim Fandango* (1998)²²², especially, in indie games from non-mainstream developers (139).²²³ In this section, I will analyze how two indie video games adopt very different approaches regarding humor in order to express the ethnic concerns of two groups in particular: Chicanos/as and Native Americans.

²²¹ Related to this, Authors like Anton Nijholt explore the ways in which players can create humor by playing games that are not comical per se.

²²² *Grim Fandango* is one of the most famous adventure video games of all times, released by LucasArts in 1998 and combining elements of Aztec traditions, Mexican culture, and *film noir* (especially *Casablanca*).

²²³ To know more about comical video games, see Dormann.

The two games that I will explore, *Guacamelee!* and *Never Alone*, employ one of the most important vehicles for humor that has been commonly used in video games since the dawn of the industry: mythology.²²⁴ Video game franchises such as *God of War*, *Tomb Raider* and many others have explored mythological figures and settings. According to Karl Kerényi, mythology connects us with the truths of the spiritual world (15) and talks about our origins (22), and for those reasons it is usually understood as an archaic narrative form; video games are able to update myths and coordinate this narrative material with modern concerns through a contemporary medium. According to Joseph Campbell, mythology in the modern world (what he calls new mythology) will always have the same foundation as old mythology, but while the latter used to be focused on the community, the former is more productive for individual self-knowledge (307). The main reason for the retelling of myths from a humorous perspective is related to a demystifying intention that can respond to the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, as comicality challenges the role of ancient myths that shape our culture (Vautier 229); however, as I will explore here, there is a twofold intention in these games: to rebel against the foundations of a particular cultural system and, at the same time, to celebrate the importance and validity of myths and lore.

Video games have an enormous potential for ethnic groups as a platform to portray and exhibit their cultures to an enormous community of gamers and to raise awareness about issues of gender, ethnicity and race, as will be proved next through the analysis of *Guacamelee!* and *Never Alone*. Though this does not mean that all video games are successful in questions of representation, it is true that they might help ethnic groups resist cultural imperialism. Linda Hutcheon defends that adaptation, of a cultural system in this

²²⁴ As documented by Luna Estévez, mythological revising is an important topic of humor for Chicanos/as and other ethnic groups.

case, always involves a process of creation and interpretation that, on the one hand, helps preserve a heritage and, on the other, might be understood as appropriation (*A Theory* 8); despite that, whether a video game is an adaptation or an appropriation depends ultimately on the developers' intentions and creative process: are they content with reproducing superficial stereotypes, or do they elaborate on the characters and the background? Do they work on a particular culture to add value to the story with a critical intention? Is their treatment of a culture based on thorough research? These are the questions scholars need to ask in order to determine whether a video game that represents an ethnic culture can be labeled as appropriating it or not.

The adaptation of ethnic cultures is particularly representative of the indie scene, as these producers are usually more involved in creating video games with social transcendence. The following analysis of two indie games will prove that the commitment of smaller companies with the representation of diversity does not conflict with critic and public success. As Hutcheon explains, "it is time to look ... to such things as popularity, persistence, or even the diversity and extent of dissemination" (*A Theory* xxvi) in order to measure the success of adaptations that portray a minoritized culture. Accordingly, I will demonstrate that ethnic communities are not excluded from technological advances (event though some of them do not even have first-hand access to technology), but can benefit from them to produce faithful representation, to cause appreciation and to encourage resistance.

4.1. *Never Alone: playing by Iñupiaq rules*

“[Humor is the] perfect means to, on the one hand, strengthen group cohesion while at the same time transgressing group boundaries and entering new territories”
(Erichsen 39)

To be “the first indigenous-owned video game developer and publisher in U.S. history” (McElroy) is an enormous challenge in terms of experience, funding and the responsibility of setting an example for those who will come afterwards. That is why a game like *Never Alone*²²⁵ received so much attention by the gaming community and the video game industry when it was first launched in 2014. This modest indie game was produced by Upper One Games, the video games producer of the Cook Inlet Tribal Council (an Alaskan Native community), in cooperation with the industry veterans Games for Change and E-Line Media (Matos; Narcisse; Parkinson). Although the Tribal Council is financed by the U.S. government, there was a necessity to find other income sources. Furthermore this organization was concerned with transferring their traditional knowledge to the younger native generation and to non-Natives and with criticizing the perpetration of stereotypes about Native Americans in mainstream media. These are the two reasons why they decided to embark on the creation of a video game, which seemed the best way to share and preserve their culture on an international scale since these games can attract young people in and out the Indian community (Farokhmanesh; Matos; Parkinson).

²²⁵ The title of the game itself reinforces the communal point of view of the game: *Kisima Injitchuᅇa*, which literally translates to “You’re never alone” (Filippidis).

At the same time, the company was also well aware of the risky space they were trying to access (Kamen): no ethnic community had ever broken into the video game industry like that. As a result, the three mentioned producers started to sketch *Never Alone*, a standard platformer²²⁶ based on a traditional Iñupiaq myth in which players have to combine the unique abilities of the two main characters: one of them can push and pull objects (“*Never Alone’s* Gameplay” 00:24:20) and wield a weapon against enemies and obstacles (00:32:47); the other can jump higher (00:17:15) and summon looms²²⁷ (00:12:55). In this section, I will explore how the humorist and ironic approach of *Never Alone* condenses the main preoccupation of Alaskan Natives, and how video games can answer it by updating traditional wisdom and shedding light on the community’s problems.

In order to do so, I will first elaborate a summary of the game’s plot and an introduction to the two main characters. Then, I will justify my classification of *Never Alone* as a work of humorism and I will analyze its ironic design. I will move on to explore the main topics of the game and the humor devices employed to approach them: the problem of transference of traditional knowledge (mainly, ecological balance and cultural values) through trickster figures, the concern with historical rewriting, the destruction of stereotypes with sarcasm, the achievement of self-determination and self-representation through irony.

²²⁶ A platformer video “revolves heavily around players controlling a character who runs and jumps onto platforms, floors, ledges, stairs or other objects depicted on a single or scrolling (horizontal or vertical) game screen. It is frequently classified as a subgenre of action games” (Klappenbach).

²²⁷ Looms are spiritual manifestations of animals that help the characters during their journey (McEwen; Narcisse).

This game follows the adventures of Nuna,²²⁸ an Iñupiaq²²⁹ girl whose name is that of the earth according to Iñupiaq mythology (Filippidis).²³⁰ Her village has been devastated by a mysterious supernatural blizzard, probably related to climate change caused by Western pollution, and she insists on finding the source of the storm in order to restore nature's balance and allow her tribe to go back to their daily lives (“*Never Alone*’s Gameplay” 00:00:46-00:02:00). During her adventure, she meets a fox that helps her throughout her journey (00:08:21).

The fact that Nuna belongs to the Iñupiaq community is not just anecdotal, as the importance of Native American Iñupiaq life and culture is fundamental in the game: the clothes (00:10:02), daily tasks (01:01:04), tools (00:31:45), art (00:05:49), environment (00:44:52) and mythological figures (01:10:00) are based on their culture. Moreover, the entire game is narrated in Iñupiaq language, which highlights its preoccupation with the preservation and dignification of this endangered tongue in addition to other spheres of their traditional culture. Apart from that, the cinematic scenes of the game introduce a cartoon style based on traditional Inuit scrimshaws²³¹ that serve narrative and artistic purposes, and celebrate traditional art not usually known by mainstream audiences.²³² The player learns about the Iñupiaq community in the “Cultural Insights” (short

²²⁸ Images of Nuna and the rest of the game’s characters can be found in Appendix 2.

²²⁹ I will be using the name Iñupiaq to talk about the Native Alaskan community portrayed in the game because that is how the members of the community refer to themselves; however, this group of people is usually referred to as Inuit. These designations are not perfect synonyms, though: both are traditional ways to describe the native communities of people who live in Alaska, but Inuit speak the Inuit language while the Iñupiaq employ the Inuktitut language. A general name for all the native groups of Alaska could be Eskimo, but it is usually considered derogatory and even offensive by them. For a more detailed explanation, see “Eskimo, Inuit and Inupiaq”.

²³⁰ In the case of Nuna, only someone familiar with Iñupiaq culture might understand that her name is a tribute to the Earth and its natural balance. This illustrates native as a humorous technique in Native American cultures (Gruber 89).

²³¹ To learn more about scrimshaw art, see Appendix 2 and access the game’s official website <http://neveraloneygame.com/inspirational-artwork/>

²³² These scenes remind of traditional Winter Counts, Native American blankets or the bones and ivory that some native groups used to carve their scrimshaws.

documentaries about traditional and contemporary Iñupiaq life and culture) that they are rewarded with every time Nuna and the fox meet an owl (Hindes; Narcisse).

It is true that the players of *Never Alone* will probably not burst out laughing, but the game does actively include an overall humorist point of view. As shown in other narratives like *When My Brother Was an Aztec* (see chapter 2.2.1), this perspective was named by Siro López. According to his classification, humorism in *Never Alone* is aimed at the arousal of empathy between the players and the protagonists of the narrative (20), the girl who is facing a problem that seems impossible to solve and her fox helper. In the case of this video game, the players walk a few miles in Nuna's shoes, in the company of the fox, as they attempt to accomplish a superhuman task. A humorist perspective is especially useful for ethnic communities like the Iñupiaq people because it demonstrates a resilient attitude (20-21),²³³ as well as the importance of empathy across ethnic barriers. Therefore, what happens in *Never Alone* between Nuna as a representative of the Iñupiaq people and the players from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds is a relation of solidarity that encourages the audience's smile when Nuna and the fox succeed.

The scant examples of blunt comicality and humor that can be found in *Never Alone*, due to its humorist approach, are inserted in a game that is, in itself, an enormous irony. The vast majority of video games eventually put players face to face with the main boss, a designation that refers to the strongest enemy that will have to be defeated to win the game. It is important for games to adjust to that structure because it determines a horizon of expectations that helps players keep a sense of direction. At the beginning of *Never Alone*, players are introduced to Manslayer ("*Never Alone's* Gameplay" 00:35:10, 01:44:24), and they automatically assume that he will be the final boss; however, the

²³³ Native Alaskan traditional knowledge (IQ and TEK, as I will explain later) is intimately related to resiliency "as the capacity to self-organize and adapt to emerging circumstances" (Tristan et al. 236).

game tricks the players into thinking that Manslayer is responsible for the blizzard, and, thus, the boss to defeat in order to finish the adventure. It is true that players fight against Manslayer, who chases Nuna and the fox to steal her mythical weapon, but after he disappears (01:41:50) the blizzard continues and the players learn, to their surprise, that he had never been the real cause of Nuna's troubles.

At this point, players have probably lost the sense of direction in the game, and they start to wander like Nuna herself until they come across the Blizzard Man, a giant made of ice who causes a snow storm when he swings his adze to break a mountain ("*Never Alone's* Gameplay" 01:47:50-01:48:42). Hence, players guess that they must kill the giant or steal his adze so that he cannot cause more storms, but that is not the end of the story either: Nuna has to go back to her village and destroy the tool of the giant, who, instead of becoming angry, laughs, sings a song and leaves (02:04:35-02:05:52). The game ironically manipulates the player's expectations²³⁴ and the structure of video games in order to demonstrate that *Never Alone* follows the rules of Native American storytelling.²³⁵ Therefore, gamers have to accommodate to the Natives' rules in a process of reverse acculturation in which non-Natives are pushed to play by Iñupiaq rules. This comic intention tallies that of many Native American writers (Sherman Alexie, Linda Hogan, Thomas King, Susan Power, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Gerald Vizenor, among others) who explore the tensions between native and non-native storytelling from an ironic point of view (Bowers 250) to react against "official traditions or ossified ideologies" in different genres and media (Erichsen 30). In this case, *Never Alone* goes a

²³⁴ Though the game plays with the gamers' expectations in order to make them accept the Iñupiaq cosmogony, which is common in the comic reversal technique of American Indian humor (Gruber 80). This metafictional resource is also very typical of contemporary narrative and postmodernism.

²³⁵ As noted by Katherine McCloskey, American Indian storytelling is often linked to humor in order "to make serious points and show people how and how not to live" (43).

step beyond that denounce and actively rewrites a centuries-long history of native acculturation.²³⁶

The main intention of the game, and of the “Cultural Insights” in particular, is to encourage inter-generational and inter-ethnic transference of traditional wisdom and to denounce the impact of climate change on Iñupiaq lifestyle, specifically in “No More Thick Ice” (“*Never Alone*’s Gameplay” 00:44:52). As documented by several authors, starting by Boas in the 19th century, Inuit peoples have developed activities intimately related to the maintenance of their environment (Tristan et al. 233), and they were among the first to observe the effects of climate change in their ecosystems and their lives (Flys Junquera et al. 90; Grau 443; Tristan et al. 234).²³⁷ The Alaskan Natives are known for their ability to develop tools and strategies to adapt to changing weather conditions; however, the fast advance of global warming, together with the socioeconomic changes that come with it, challenge this ability (Tristan et al. 234).²³⁸ The body of knowledge collected by Alaskan Natives through the centuries that has allowed them to survive to changes in nature is known today as Native Alaskan Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK).²³⁹ Nevertheless, it is only a part of the traditional wisdom that links the Inuits with their environment, as, together with TEK, the spiritual and mythological foundation beneath the relation between the Natives and nature must be taken into account; thus, TEK is just a fragment of *Inuit Qaujimaqatuqangit* (IQ).²⁴⁰

²³⁶ Eva Gruber argues that historical rewriting is one of the fundamental aims of Native American humor (89, 131).

²³⁷ The Western association between Native Americans and ecology produced the stereotype of the “ecological Indian” (Garrad 120): “Native Americans, or American Indians, are the *locus classicus* for [the assumption of indigenous environmental virtue]”.

²³⁸ The ecological concerns of Inuit tribes in contemporary times have also been explored in literary works, such as *Solar Storms* by Linda Hogan.

²³⁹ Traditional Ecological Knowledge will hereafter be referred as TEK. To know more about it, see Tristan Pearce et al.

²⁴⁰ *Inuit Qaujimaqatuqangit*, or Inuit Traditional Knowledge, will be referred hereafter as IQ. To understand more about it and its differences with TEK, see George W. Wenzel.

Alaskan native leaders and elders are finding difficulties to transmit their wisdom to the younger generations (Tristan et al. 240). It is not only a question of pure survival, but an issue of cultural endurance. Bronislaw Malinowski defends that the environment is on the basis of the construction of culture (Pedrosa Bartolomé 314); therefore, what the Cook Inlet Tribal Council intends in *Never Alone* is to raise awareness about the defense of the ecosystem, not only for natural balance per se, but as a means to protect their culture and cosmogony. That is, Natives are not working to protect their TEK but their entire IQ. It is not strange to have a Native American tribe using humor to transmit life lessons, as precisely the reinforcement of tribal cohesion and collective memory in American Indians society has traditionally been intimately linked to the comic (Gruber 205; McCloskey 42).

The other fundamental goal of the game is to introduce Native American oral storytelling as an innovative strategy to portray ethnic communities in video games. The entire game is a revision of the Inuit myth “Kunuksaayuka”,²⁴¹ which was recorded in Robert Nasruk Cleveland’s collection of *Stories of the Black River People*, in combination with other myths that include the Blizzard Man (“*Never Alone*’s Gameplay” 01:47:50), the Little People (00:29:11), Manslayer (00:35:10), the Rolling Heads, and the Sky People (01:10:00). According to John Storey, myths and orature are useful because “a large part of who we are seems to belong in the past, that is, our sense of self seems grounded in our ‘roots’” (81); those roots are our individual as much as our collective memory, Storey continues, which we access by means of reconstruction and representation, but not exactly the resurrection, of the actual past (85). This is what the Iñupiaq community does in *Never Alone*, which presents direct links with intertextual American Indian humor (Gruber 80). Still, the main plot of “Kunuksaayuka” is

²⁴¹ The original myth can be accessed in the website of *Never Alone*: <http://neveralonegame.com/kunuksaayuka/> and <http://neveralonegame.com/kunuksaayuka2/>.

manipulated in order to modernize the story. To begin with, the protagonist is changed into a girl, as the game developers allege, in order to contest the low representation of realistic female characters and thus inspire more women and girl gamers (“Cultural Gaming”); furthermore, the traditional myth is transformed into a parable of global warming.

However, what is the point of employing video games, among all the possible media at hand, as a vehicle to express sociocultural and environmental preoccupations? Apart from the appeal of video games and new media to younger people, Mario Grau studies the difficulties faced by Native Alaskan people and their cultures to survive even at subsistence level (443); hence they have recently started to employ forms of activism and cyberactivism that include comic trickster figures (449-50). The introduction of such humorous elements responds to Joseph Meeker’s suggestion to reread comedic texts from an ecological perspective (Love 25).

In Native American cultures, as shown above, one of the fundamental mythological figures is the Trickster, which also appears in *Never Alone*. For Native American cultures, the Trickster “provides a message of resiliency that is relevant to dynamic cultures that are able to adapt and flourish today” (Ferguson 2). Trickster figures reinforce the intention of the Iñupiaq community to demonstrate that they are not relegated to the past and belong to the contemporary world (Emmons 12). Moreover, the Trickster has always fostered a resilient attitude that celebrates cultural pride and acknowledges the existence of a presence that fights “an oppressive western society” (64). Resiliency is, in fact, one of the main topics of the game (Acevedo), whose very existence challenges the stereotype of Native cultures as dying (Starkey): “Instead of eliciting self-pity, [*Never Alone*] stands in absolute defiance”.

The most characteristic trickster character that can be found in *Never Alone* is the Little People.²⁴² The fact that these characters do not help Nuna but hinder her task should not be understood as the characterization of evil characters; they are tricksters, they “[possess] no values, moral or social” and are “at the mercy of [their] passion and appetite” (Radin xxiii). Consequently, the Little People in the game, who are based on a traditional Inuit story, steal Owl Man’s²⁴³ drum not due to hostility or ethics, but because they find it attractive (“*Never Alone*’s Gameplay 00:25:50).

However, the Trickster also has a vital critical aspect, as “laughter, humor and irony permeate everything” it does (Radin xxiv) in order to question the status quo and human morals (Ferguson 96). Hence, in summary, the Trickster fulfills three goals by means of its humorous dimension: to bring Native American communities back to date, to celebrate traditional figures as a response to contemporary problems, and to examine the hegemonic cultural order imposed by the West.

Through most tricksters, Native American cultures find a way to question social order and hierarchies, which borrows elements of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque. In the game, one character that can be read from a carnivalesque perspective is Nuna’s fox companion. Though at the beginning the fox seems to be only an animal, when it dies fighting Manslayer, it is reborn in the form of a flying young boy that is revealed to be an animal spirit (“*Never Alone*’s Gameplay” 01:21:39). These spirits are human forms of animals that can only be seen by certain people when the animal is willing (01:30:13),

²⁴² The mythical figure of the Little People is explored in depth in the “Cultural Insight” titled “Little People”. Little People appear in myths across the Native American tribes of Alaska as very small but also really strong creatures that can either help or bother people.

²⁴³ When Nuna reaches her devastated village, she finds the Manslayer ravaging the houses and attacking the people. She follows him when he leaves and she meets the Owl Man, who obviously has some kind of superhuman abilities. He wants to help Nuna save the village, but he also needs to recover his drum, which the Little People have stolen. When Nuna and the fox return the music instrument, which is sacred for Alaskan tribes (“The Heartbeat of the Community” 00:00:01-00:00:23), to the Owl Man, he gives her the bola.

and they can be considered as the ultimate questioning of one of the most important hegemonies the West has created: the superiority of humans above animals.

Nuna's companion embodies the idea that a human form is not exclusive to people and, thus, people are not superior to animals.²⁴⁴ The fox employs a humorous resource that is very typical of the carnivalesque: the mask. For Bakhtin, the mask "is connected with the joy of change and reincarnation ... it rejects conformity" (Bakhtin 39) and is related to the violation of natural boundaries (40) because it comes from another world (40). Although the fox is not wearing a literal mask, it is employing his animal form to hide an identity that makes him very similar to Nuna if not more powerful than her. By surprisingly adopting a human form,²⁴⁵ he proves that the two protagonists, in spite of their apparent differences, have more in common than what initially meets the eye.

The fox, thus, demonstrates the intention of the game designers to shed light on IQ. Interactions between humans and animals are a basic element of IQ (Wenzel 245), which is why the fox is such a fundamental character of the game, as powerful as Nuna or maybe even more. One of the fundamental principles of IQ is the *liijaaqaqtaliniq*, the obligation of "not acting badly or with wrong intent with regard to animals" (247). Native American cultures have a common appreciation for animals, which are "a swarming, talkative presence in the folklore of every Indian tribe" (Erdoes 389) and have a major role in Indian mythology and religion (389). Actually, in American Indian lore, there is no division between animals and humans, who can shift appearances at will (389) just like *Never Alone*'s fox does. The native understanding of humans as not superior to other

²⁴⁴ I will come back to this issue, but this is a critical juncture to mention "the extended relationship [that Natives] share with all human beings. But the relationships that native people see go further, the web of kinship extending to the animals ... to all the animate and inanimate forms that can be seen or imagined" (King, qtd. in Garrad 127).

²⁴⁵ Surprise has also been documented as a form of humor (López 16).

forms of life (Mander 218) clashes with Euro-American values that not only establish a distinction with non-human beings, but a radical opposition (Garrad 25). Therefore, the fox represents traditional native knowledge and defends that the only possible way to stop ecological damage is for people to change mainstream hierarchies and to embrace conceptions closer to IQ. This process of reverse assimilation, in which non-Natives are led to adapt to Native cosmogonies could be understood from the point of view of the reversal of roles in the Bakhtinian carnivalesque.

Similarly, the inspiration of *Never Alone* in orature shares the aforementioned aim of rewriting history and reversing power structures. Orature in the game is shown as a curious humor practice that can be linked to the Bakhtinian carnivalesque in terms of form and goals. The narrative starts and ends as if it were a storytelling ceremony: “I will tell you a very old story. I heard it from Nasruk when I was very young. It is said that...” at the beginning (“*Never Alone’s* Gameplay” 00:00:33) and “I have heard Nasruk tell the story that way” at the end (02:06:41).²⁴⁶ That is, at the opening and closure of *Never Alone* there is an off voice that introduces the story with traditional Inuit orature formulas.

This process of intertextuality, which is documented in Native American humor by Eva Gruber (80), can be connected to Bakhtin’s carnivalesque inversion of roles in a literal and in a metaphorical sense. Literally, the producers together with the Cook Inlet community design a game in which Iñupiaq culture prevails over mainstream Anglo culture’s game design, language, characters, tools and goals. Furthermore, in a metaphorical way, traditional storytelling is disguised as a video game as if it were wearing a mask, which, according to Bakhtin, creates surprise in the audience and makes

²⁴⁶ I have designed this style for in-text citations of videogames from the 2016 edition of the modern language association, since the citation rules for video games is not explicitly standardized yet. For in-text quotations, I indicate the title of the game and the hour, minute, and second of the quoted event taking as a reference the recording of my own.

them reflect about hierarchical orders (Bakhtin 39); thus, this comical camouflage allows the Iñupiaq community to adapt and appropriate a Western form to fulfill their own concerns and traditional narrative formulas. What is more, storytelling allows the audience to have their preconceptions and beliefs suspended and to temporarily accept the alternative world views that are presented in the game (Bakhtin 39; Gruber 80).

The employment of such a contemporary form as a video game by an ethnic group is intimately related to an effort to destroy stereotypes (Carlson 108) which has already been commented on in the analysis of *Smoke Signals*. *Never Alone* is particularly concerned with the stereotype of the “vanishing Indian” (Hearne xxii). This goal is explicitly mentioned in the “Cultural Insight” entitled “A Living Culture”, in which one of the Iñupiaq who participate in the game ironically claims that most people do not understand that Native Americans “aren’t a museum piece” (“*Never Alone*’s Gameplay” 00:02:20).

Another stereotype that is present in the game is that of the “ecological Indian” (Garrad 120). As has been previously mentioned, players have to adopt a native perspective to deal with the environment of the game thanks to a carnivalesque transformation that places native knowledge on top of the Western understanding of nature. Thus, players experience that the link of Alaskan Natives with their ecosystem is much more profound than the Western cliché of the ecological Indian suggests. In general, American Indians’ respect for nature does not only respond to a traditional lifestyle of pre-Columbian low population and cultures lacking metal weapons and horses (121), but to mythologies that emphasize the importance of nature and the interdependence between human beings, non-human beings and inanimate forms (King, qtd. in Garrad 27). Video games allow ethnic groups to include their voice in the vast panorama of the globalized

world by employing the latest media available to demonstrate that their culture is still alive and holds importance in the contemporary world.

Never Alone allows the Cook Inlet tribe to spread their culture and to respond a need for self-determination and self-representation (Matos), which are issues that are also explored by *Smoke Signals* under the concept of visual sovereignty. A review of *Never Alone* by Daniel Starkey is particularly important to understand the relevance of these cultural initiatives and artistic endeavors by ethnic groups. Starkey is an American Indian himself, and he admits that it has always been easy for him “to accept the death of hundreds of culturally rich histories”. He had internalized that his culture and his people were doomed to extinction. That was until he played *Never Alone*, which taught him that ethnic groups have chances to be in power of their own representation. The game’s use of humor is crucial at changing people’s minds in this way.

The game cherishes and spreads traditional Iñupiaq culture, its myths, customs, tools and tribal relations by ironically mystifying daily tasks and tools to the category of heroic. For instance, Nuna wields a weapon, the bola, which is examined in a “Cultural Insight” by an Iñupiaq elder who explains that children used to shoot their bolas to hunt ducks while their families went on the hunt for sea animals (“*Never Alone’s* Gameplay” 00:31:43). Hence, a daily tool that can even be considered a childish toy is raised to the same mythical level as swords, bows, and axes.

Even though Nuna wields her bola as a weapon, she rarely employs it to hurt enemies but to eliminate obstacles instead. The lack of violence against enemies is deeply linked with the IQ concept of respect for life in Inuit culture that is illustrated in the “Cultural Insights” “Silla Has a Soul” (“*Never Alone’s* Gameplay” 00:13:30) and “Everything Is Alive” (01:02:23). It is vital to consider at this point who the real enemy

of Nuna and the fox is and whether there is an enemy at all in the game. For some critics, the main antagonist is the blizzard (Acevedo), but other characters such as the Little People and Manslayer can be considered adversaries; nevertheless, this interpretation is not entirely correct. The blizzard is unwillingly caused by the Blizzard Man, who eventually accepts the destruction of its adze due to its damaging impact; the Little People, as has been explored, do not really oppose Nuna; and the Manslayer, though being really evil, is not responsible for the destruction of Nuna's village. Accordingly, the message of the game is that damage comes from a lack of balance of the elements of Silla that has to be corrected, or from the will to act individually against the community ("*Never Alone's* Gameplay" 01:44:40), but never from a unique source of evil that must be destroyed.

In the game, it is said that "Being different, that fox revealed to the girl just how beautiful [they] were" ("*Never Alone's* Gameplay" 00:13:04).²⁴⁷ This simple sentence shows that the game is profoundly preoccupied with finding beauty in difference. The concept of difference was included in Chapter 1, but it is relevant to remember it now in the context of *Never Alone*. Dean A. Harris contends that difference can be understood in an essentialist way as an oppositional classification of people who belong to a normative group or not, which leads to oppression and cultural colonialism (14); on the other hand, difference can categorize groups of people according to organic similarities and dissimilarities, but not complete oppositions, encouraging heterogeneity and mutual understanding (15-16). In this game, the two main characters acknowledge their

²⁴⁷ "They" in the quotation refers to the spirits that are summoned by the fox. I understand that, for traditional native knowledge, the animal demonstrates Nuna—and the players—that difference is beautiful, not threatening. This idea should help non-native gamers to change their attitude to other ethnicities and pursue inter-ethnic cooperation.

difference, and sometimes it is even necessary to change the playable character²⁴⁸ because the gamer needs to employ a particular ability that either Nuna or the fox does not have. Yet those differences do not imply a hierarchy between them, as each one contributes with their strengths to achieve the same goal.

Evan Narcisse has written that playing *Never Alone* “feels like the Iñupiaq community ... is opening its arms to give outsiders a big communal hug” because mass media “enable people to experience as memories what they did not themselves live” (qtd. in Storey 85). Consequently, by allowing non-native people to live the experiences of an Inuit girl, *Never Alone* builds a community of gamers who, in spite of their previous ignorance of Native Alaskan life, grow aware of Inuit culture as they stock up the experience of the game in their memory. Thus, although inter-ethnic relations are neither explicitly represented nor directly fostered in the game, *Never Alone* does have an educating purpose that can help build healthier relations between cultures.

The success of public and critics of a game that not only represents an ethnic community, but rewrites its mythology employing an endangered language, demonstrates that the initiative of Upper One Games, though risky, is fruitful, necessary and appreciated. Many critics, as we have seen, document comicality as one of the most powerful tools of ethnic groups to fight stereotypes and offer an alternative version of history and society that collides with mainstream culture.

Never Alone is intimately concerned with the insertion of the player in a space and a culture that is probably completely alien, and the irony in its design plays with the gamers’ expectations about the goal of the game and the enemies to defeat. One of the

²⁴⁸ A playable character is a character or avatar in a video game that can be controlled by the players. The opposite is a non-playable character, which is controlled by the game’s artificial intelligence, not including enemies (Ceceri 112).

reasons why the game ironically deconstructs the model of typical platformers responds to a reverse acculturation practice, in which the players with a mainstream Western background are stripped from their own cosmogony and accept a minoritized one. On the one hand, the game highlights the cultural distance of Native American and Anglo cultures and leads players to respect difference, especially ecological issues. On the other hand, the ironic adaptation of a video game according to the rules of traditional Native American storytelling allows the Iñupiaq community to reinvent and update their mythology to contemporary necessities, and to celebrate daily life.

Finally, *Never Alone* introduces one of the best known Native American mythical figures—the Trickster. Tricksters are the best examples of traditional American Indian humor, and they perfectly convey the value of resiliency and an alternative understanding of the world order that is fundamental in this game. Therefore, *Never Alone* does not only portray Inuit culture through beautiful graphics and an exotic setting, it genuinely divulges Inuit culture. *Kisima Injitchuġa* (i.e. *Never Alone*) is the first game in which an ethnic community is actively involved to carry a message on the need to respect and learn from those who are different, and it is also a model for future ethnic games to come.

4.2. ***Guacamelee!* and the satirical mystification of daily life**

“Reading satire is doubly perilous, for
satirists specialize in demolition projects”

(Connery 1)

The question of adaptation versus appropriation of ethnic cultures and their mythologies by the video game industry has been particularly controversial in the case of

*Guacamelee!*²⁴⁹ From the very first moment. This game explores the universal topics of good versus evil and the hero's journey, which have always lied at the core of myth, poetry, narrative, cinema, and now, video games. *Guacamelee!* is a well-know and acclaimed 2D action²⁵⁰ platformer developed and first released by DrinkBox Studios, a small Canadian indie studio ("About Us"), in 2013. The protagonist, whom players will lead, is Juan, though they can also play the cooperative mode as Tostada,²⁵¹ the female guardian of the mask and *luchadora* who helps him.²⁵² Gamers will be able to explore a non-lineal open world based on traditional Mexican folklore inspired by the game's animator's Mexican origins ("Dipping Into"); thus, I will examine how the game explores Mexican culture and mythology from a comical point of view to bring Mexican myths up-to-date and to help change the negative representation of Chicano/as in video games. However, it is undeniable that *Guacamelee!*'s humor is a matter of interpretation.

In the outskirts of a small Mexican village called Pueblucho lives Juan Aguacate, a humble agave farmer ("*Guacamelee!*'s Gameplay"²⁵³ 00:00:30-00:01:11) who is in love with the unnamed daughter of El Presidente (00:02:33-00:03:00). On *Día de Muertos*,²⁵⁴ a *charro* skeleton, Carlos Calaca, attacks the village and kidnaps El Presidente's daughter, murdering Juan in the process (00:03:48-00:04:36). Then, Juan goes to the World of the Dead, where the mysterious *luchadora* Tostada gives him a mystical mask that allows him to return to the World of the Living transformed into a powerful *luchador* (00.05:25-

²⁴⁹ I will be using *Guacamelee! Gold Edition* for PC.

²⁵⁰ Action games are those that require the player to have quick reflexes (Oxford).

²⁵¹ Her name is probably a reference to her skin color.

²⁵² These characters, as well as others from *Guacamelee!* that will be mentioned later, are shown in Appendix 3.

²⁵³ Due to the length of the game (around 8 hours), I have selected the excerpts of the game that illustrate the issues that are addressed in this chapter.

²⁵⁴ *Día de Muertos* or Day of the Dead is an important Mexican celebration that seeks to join the world of the living with the one of the dead with a bright and lively environment. It is celebrated on the same day as Halloween and *Día de Todos los Santos*, but its roots can be traced back to Aztec mythology. To read more, see Flores Martos.

00:06:05). Hence, Juan must become a hero and accept his responsibility to prevent Calaca from sacrificing El Presidente's daughter taking control of both Worlds. As obvious as it seems, the abundance of traditional Mexican topics and characters in combination with humor defines the game's plot and characterization. The aforementioned names can be understood as mocking, which would imply that the producers of the game are appropriating and not celebrating Mexican culture. This issue will be commented upon later.

Guacamelee! actively employs comicality in a variety of forms, fundamentally satirical self-mockery, which, according to Bakhtin, is cardinal when trying to subvert hegemonic power structures due to its acknowledgment of the limitation of one's own (Bajtín 6,12). It is controversial that the entire game mocks different aspects of Mexican culture, mainly mythology and the figure of the *luchador* that I will comment on below, but also other Mexican elements: *agave* ("*Guacamelee!*'s Gameplay" 00:03:53), *telenovelas* (00:03:07), *piñatas* (00:11:45), allusions to football (00:07:51), *catrinas* (00:08:29), *churros* (00:14:18), *siestas* (00:13:00), *ponchos* (00:13:43), *alebrijes* (00:16:37), references to Olmec culture (00:16:23), *tule trees* (00:30:52), *chac mool* statues (00:09:47), *tequila* (00:11:41), etc. Characters' and places' names also have a satirical tinge to them: Juan Aguacate (00:00:26), Pueblucho (00:01:15), Fray Ayayay (00:01:39), Tostada (00:05:31), Santa Luchita (00:11:13), Jaguar Javier (00:09:00), Great Uay Chivo (00:10:00), etc.²⁵⁵

Self-mockery is important when employing humor with a critical aim, as it demonstrates a mature and resilient attitude, encourages communication and avoids victimization ("Dipping Into" 10). At the same time, Bergson's theory of mockery offers

²⁵⁵ Mocking through names is a humor technique documented by Eva Gruber in a Native American context (89); however *Guacamelee!* confirms that it is also employed in other contexts.

an interesting approach to self-mockery: if mockery is a technique to correct other people's behavior, self-mockery must respond to the necessity to acknowledge one's faults and improve them.

All the aforementioned references to Mexican culture are not just inserted in the game for fun, but they are connected to create a coherent world in the context of the game's suspension of disbelief, "the magic circle" in Game Studies (Navarrete Cardero et al. 113). For instance, the game's quests, which are important for Juan's development and should be heroic, are mocked by reproducing traditional Mexican daily life: taking some chickens to the pen ("*Guacamelee!*'s Gameplay" 00:07:27-00:07:50), gathering the ingredients of an *enchilada* for an old lady (00:12:45-00:12:57), giving back a girl's lost doll (00:31:18-00:31:46), finding the astray member of a *mariachi* band (00:12:07), etc. Though all these missions are somewhat epic regarding difficulty, they are to some extent downgraded by means of satire. The hero does not accomplish superhuman tasks but helps people in a village with their ordinary problems instead, which celebrates and dignifies traditional daily life in Mexican culture and impoverished people in general, especially those tasks commonly carried out by women. The special fight moves learned by Juan throughout the game are subject to a similar satirical characterization,²⁵⁶ and so are the *luchador* and *luchadora* costumes which, far from being honorable and fetching, are fairly humorous.²⁵⁷ Though this practice could be understood as a humiliation for Juan, an alternative reading suggests that Mexican culture is elevated to the category of heroic and mythical.

²⁵⁶ They are named "The Rooster Uppercut" ("*Guacamelee!*'s Gameplay" 00:10:52), "The Olmec's Headbutt" (00:16:23), "The Goat Jump" (00:17:25), "The Goat Climb" (00:38:26), and "The Pollo Power" (00:26:28), among others.

²⁵⁷ Both Juan and Tostada can choose between a typical but comically exaggerated *luchador/a* costume, chicken suits, and *mariachi/catrina* robes ("*Guacamelee!*'s Gameplay" 00:19:26-00:19:52).

Through humorous references to cultural elements, the developers of the game create a community of players who become acquainted with Mexican culture and learn to appreciate it. For example, this game features traditional upbeat Mexican music²⁵⁸ and Chicano/a language by mixing English language with Spanish expressions such as “*Vientos!*” (“*Guacamelee!*’s Gameplay” 00:23:31), “*Macizo!*”, “*Viva Piñatas!*” (00:11:44), and so on. Chicano/a identity is a meaningful issue in the game; although not explored as deeply as in *Never Alone*, it is very present on the walls of Santa Luchita and other locations of the game, where players can find a fundamental symbol for Chicanos/as: an eagle catching a snake over a cactus that evokes the founding of the legendary city of Aztlán (00:03:25).

An instance of comical self-criticism in *Guacamelee!* is the consideration of gender roles. It criticizes certain aspects of masculinity and femininity in both Mexican and popular Anglo culture by introducing a hyperbolically sexualized female *luchadora* as the guardian of the sacred mask and by mocking Juan’s over-the-top masculinity (“*Guacamelee!*’s Gameplay” 00:19:58). In spite of his strong appearance, Juan embodies many features that challenge the traditional Mexican *macho*:²⁵⁹ he is as powerful as any Anglo superhero and catches the eye of a beautiful upper-class educated woman but he does not avoid domestic chores like gathering chicken or preparing *enchiladas*. The stereotype of Mexican masculinity does not necessarily involve physical strength but a sexist and dominating attitude that Juan questions throughout the entire quest.

²⁵⁸ Music is a very important part of the process of adapting a work or a cultural system to an audiovisual medium, because of its potential to “gain respectability and increase cultural capital” (Hutcheon, *A Theory* 91).

²⁵⁹ Chicano masculinity is a complex merging of Hispanic culture, Catholic religion, dominant American middle-class white male stereotypes, and the internal dynamic of Latino families (Gardiner 43). According to Sergio de la Mora, the traditional Chicano *macho* embodies male supremacy through virility, braveness, pride, sexual potency, and physical aggressiveness (7).

Nonetheless, the game, willingly or unwillingly, produces certain dialogues and characterizations that can be considered as sexist. For example, Juan's love interest, El Presidente's daughter, is unnamed throughout the entire game, as if her only achievement was being the protagonist's partner. Still, this female character is portrayed as an educated woman who has returned from university ("*Guacamelee!*'s Gameplay" 00:01:57-00:02:01) and who does not accommodate to the virginAL stereotype in Mexican culture that I have examined in previous sections.²⁶⁰ The fact that she is unnamed does not match her constant appearances and her contemporaneity; thus, her lack of name could also be interpreted as an ironic criticism of the irrelevance of females in games and other media.

Another figure with a complex gender characterization is X'Tabay ("*Guacamelee!*'s Gameplay" 00:17:42), who is at the same time a powerful mythological figure (00:24:22-00:24:47) and a jealous woman subdued to Calaca's plans (00:18:02). This mythic woman seems to have its origins in the Mayan goddess Ix Tab (goddess of the gallows) who inhabits the sacred *yaxchee* tree. X'Tabay materializes to seduce men at night as a beautiful woman with long hair, just like the game's character, and makes them go astray forever (Ligorred Perramon 202). This character is not only important for its traditional Mexican roots, which provides the game with authenticity, but also because it links X'Tabay to figures from different cultures.²⁶¹ X'Tabay's role as the stereotypical *femme fatale* that uses men at her will is downgraded and mocked by her jealousy of a mortal girl, which, again, questions the virgin/whore binary opposition. These examples involve a discussion of gender issues that in some cases is direct and in others is more

²⁶⁰ At a certain point in the game, Calaca argues that he needs a virgin woman for his ritual sacrifice, to which El Presidente's daughter replies in surprise: "Haha... *yaa*... about that...", thus implying that she is not the virgin she seems to be ("*Guacamelee!*'s Gameplay" 00:33:54).

²⁶¹ Similar figures from other mythologies are Lilith, the Greek sirens, Circe, the succubus, the Arab qarinah, the Indian yakshinis, the Nordic huldras, the Slavic rusalkas, the Central American ceguas, etc. The fact that this mythical figure is shared by different cultures does not make the stereotype of the *femme fatale* less sexist, but it does help the game insert multi-ethnic references.

subtle. Thanks to irony, criticism does not have to be explicit, because it gives a tool for the addressees to move between the said and the unsaid (Hutcheon, *Irony's* 11). An honest critique is an important analytical tool, but the ironic reproduction of sexist attitudes gives the audience the chance to develop their own reflections.

At the beginning of this section, it was mentioned that self-mockery is especially valuable in the context of humor to subvert social hierarchies, which is precisely one of the fundamental benefits that ethnic communities can find in video games. As argued before, video games have an enormous potential to change beliefs about canonical culture by presenting alternative cosmogonies to players (Seiffert and Nothhaft 257); though this is a very serious endeavor, humorous games like *Guacamelee!* train players and send a valuable sociocultural message through parody. Actually, *Guacamelee!* is a perfect example of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque both in form and content. Formally, it is set in a carnivalesque celebration in which the living and the dead are mixed, as the player can change the modes of the games from the World of the Living to the World of the Dead in order to advance in the game ("*Guacamelee!*'s Gameplay" 00:30:58). In terms of content, it mocks religion, which is one of the traditional aims of carnivalesque humor (Bakhtin 7), by making *luchadores* sacred figures whose images appear in the church's stained glass windows ("*Guacamelee!*'s Gameplay" 00:06:30).

What is more, the reversal of the socioeconomic order also responds to sociocultural aims, as normative Mexican culture is mocked and inserted as a secondary background for the setting of the game. A good example are the incongruous dozens of advertisements on the walls of Santa Luchita ("*Guacamelee!*'s Gameplay" 00:11:19-00:14:18) that seem alien to a traditional Mexican village²⁶² and that mock Western

²⁶² Though it might seem shocking to find such advertisements in Santa Luchita, there are other examples of Latin American mockery of publicity, such as Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost their Accents*.

advertising industry as they celebrate Mexican products. These advertisements usually portray commodities with Mexican origins like “Pollo Rojo Tequila: Don’t be a chicken! Try it!”,²⁶³ “Angry Rooster Awesomesauce” (00:11:56), “Gato Gruñon cat food” and the perfume “Odor de la Muerte” (only when Juan visits the World of the Dead), among others. Ultimately, any mention of the Western world, such as British singers, are just background details and a tool to demonstrate that rural Mexican culture is alive.

Incongruity is technically said to work with wit in order to find connections beyond apparent differences (Billig 72), and that is what *Guacamelee!* does by referencing other famous video games like *Super Mario*, for instance when X'Tabay tells Juan “Your princess in is another castle” (“*Guacamelee!*’s Gameplay” 00:20:36), *Metroid* in its use of the Choozo Statues (00:32:42), *Street Fighter* and other fighting games in the battles’ cutscenes (00:35:09), etc. There is a curious case of intertextuality that connects the game with contemporary real life, for instance: Calaca uses political propaganda (00:27:26), Olmec heads warn Juan not to take liquids when he is being teletransported as if he was traveling by plane (00:19:15), a character mentions Adele’s songs to refer to X'Tabay's breakup with Calaca (00:26:47), etc. Furthermore, the game also includes language employed by gamers in an exercise of metanarrative, such as “o rly?” and “yes rly”, which helps foster a common language for players all around the world no matter their ethnicity.

Despite these previous considerations regarding humor, *Guacamelee!* has been subject to controversial opinions by gamers, video game critics and scholars. Some critics and players consider this game an attack to Mexican culture, a case of cultural

²⁶³ The developers of the game acknowledge that the insertion of jokes about tequila was a difficult decision for them, as it could address a too sensitive issue or perpetrate a negative stereotype (Lien). This proves their concern with producing a satire out of respect and without any assimilating intentions.

appropriation and a disrespectful parody (O'Grady), yet others, of both Mexican (Albor) and non-Mexican origins (Lien), think that "claims to authenticity are poisonous" (Albor). Humor is profoundly ambivalent, and, as many authors like Bergson and Freud explain, it can be used to liberate but also to oppress. In the case of *Guacamelee!*, comicality can be understood to be of great use for hegemonic cultures by perpetrating the stereotype of the Mexican as a target of mockery, a person that is so naïve that it can be easily laughed at. Though I have suggested that daily tasks in the game, like herding chicken or cooking traditional food, are dignified, I also understand other possible interpretations in which these activities are used as humiliating. This reading of humor from the point of view of superiority theories can include the treatment of female characters and the use of comic names, too, to allow players to look down on the characters from an ethnic community and, hence, to objectify them.

It is of fundamental importance, however, to notice that, though this game's humor might seem plainly satirical and superficial, it draws on pieces of knowledge of Mexican culture that stem from utter respect and thorough research. Furthermore, as Bakhtin theorizes, the usage of satirical humor helps demystify certain issues that might seem too serious in order to make them more approachable to all (in this case non-Mexican) audiences (4, 8, 42). Actually, the developers of the game have stated their concern when introducing Mexican elements (Lien). That is, although the game parodies Mexican culture, it does not remain on its surface but reproduces this tradition faithfully and respectfully. What is more, the only aim of the game is not to mock Mexican lore for the sake of it; as previously argued, criticism against Anglo popular culture is also present, as well as the celebration of Mexican culture. It is very dangerous to take humor lightly and assume that the inclusion of a humorous perspective solely responds to a humiliating intention; in spite of the fact that mockery may produce shame, that is only one objective

of its use among many others. However, this twofold interpretation proves the richness and also the risk of humor studies, as different people might project their own ideas in their understanding of comicality.

The best evidence that humor in *Guacamelee!* does not limit itself to superficial assumptions and to the lampooning of a minoritized culture is probably its mythological background. The game's narrative deals, basically, with the importance of Mexican mythology and the figure of *luchadores*. On the one hand, the *luchador* is over-dignified and exaggerated but, on the other, it celebrates women's work and other humble daily tasks. The main background for *Guacamelee!*'s story is the Day of the Dead, which is very important in Mexican culture. *Día de Muertos* is the Christian adaptation of the Mesoamerican celebrations that link the living with the dead. Though the dead were said to spend the entire year in Mictlán (The World of the Dead, or the Hell depicted in the game), DURInG that festivity they could return to the World of the Living to give their blessings (Shujaa and Shujaa 359). These ideas were the seed for today's celebration, an opportunity that Calaca and his minions take to escape Hell and invade the World of the Living, thus causing chaos in both dimensions. References and decorations from *Día de Muertos* are scattered throughout the game, like skulls of deceased people in altars and chests, which were traditionally exhibited as trophies in reference to death, rebirth and connection with the ancestors (359).

This celebration has a relation with Bakhtin's interpretation of carnival, which is even more exaggerated in *Guacamelee!* To begin with, Bakhtin defends that carnival used to consist of "civil and social ceremonies and rituals [which]... mimicked serious rituals" (5). At *Día de Muertos*, this mimicking of serious rituals is directly related to death and burial seen as a process of renewal (51), but the video game expands it to the parody of

combats between heroes, rituals sacrifices, etc. Bakhtin continues to argue that carnival “built a second world and a second life outside officialdom ... in which [people] lived during a given time of the year” (6); thus, it is important to highlight the subversive but limited character of the festivity. *Día de Muertos* in *Guacamelee!* also matches this feature, as it is explicitly mentioned that it only lasts one day. Furthermore, the game represents the insurgence of this occasion by introducing the ultimate act of subversion: switching the World of the Living and the World of the Dead. The nature of the festivity itself cannot possibly allow Calaca to succeed, as a carnivalesque celebration “represents a form of life that is real and ideal at the same time” (8); however, the fact that *Día de Muertos* “is subject only to its own laws” (7) allows this villain to temporarily destabilize order and suspend hierarchies.

Aside from that, the game recovers other figures from Mexico’s pre-Hispanic traditions, such as the character of X’Tabay that I have already explored. Other figures with legendary links are Carlos Calaca, the villain of the game; Great Uay Chivo, Juan’s coach; and the *luchadores*. Calaca’s²⁶⁴ characterization is that of a *charro*, a traditional Mexican cowboy “who performs equestrian feats in *charreadas* (rodeos)” (Castro 44). *Charros* have become a symbol for Mexican standards of masculinity and *machismo* as well as a national symbol reinforced by the *mariachi* costume (44), and Calaca matches this description in detail. The mystic of the *charro* has increased in popular culture since Mexico’s independence and is further developed in the game’s evil figure of Carlos Calaca, who ironically contradicts the traditional identification of *charros* with law and order (44).

²⁶⁴ Calaca’s name is a pun for those people who are familiar with Mexican culture, as a *calaca* is a skeleton-like figure or a decorated skull used for decoration on *Día de Muertos* (Shujaa and Shujaa 359).

Calaca is Juan's opponent; thence, in the game, the mythical figure of the *charro* is confronted by the mystified *luchador*. The figure of the Mexican *luchador* was born in the 1930s, when *lucha libre*, or wrestling, was imported from Texas to Mexico City, where it soon became "one of the most popular and culturally resonant entertainments" (Levi xii) and was adapted to Mexican culture. It grew into a colorful, dramatic and acrobatic show (xiii) profoundly linked to bravery (Holmes) and justice (Barthes 23), but also violence, simplism, contrivance, fake (5) and *machismo* (Holmes). This determines that *lucha libre* is not only a sport but also a performance similar to a play or a circus, as Roland Barthes explains (13). Curiously enough, the fact that *Guacamelee!* employs *luchadores* as heroes is fairly common in Mexican culture, as they have been consistently used by Mexican activists due to their comical capacity to "connect contradictory domains" (Levi xiii).

Luchadores in *Guacamelee!*, apart from their role of parodying mythology, are also one of the examples of criticism of the aforementioned *macho* stereotype (Levi xiii). *Luchadores* are parodied, particularly through names; we can find puns like Gato Negocio, Rana Soltera, Mega Hombre ("*Guacamelee!*'s Gameplay" 00:13:45), Loco Lobo Tequila (00:11:41), El Baño (00:13:01), Caballero Churro (00:14:42), etc.²⁶⁵ Nevertheless, at the same time the figure of the *luchador* is elevated to the category of a god, which is also referenced by Barthes: "wrestlers remain gods because they are, for a few moments, the key which opens Nature, the pure gesture which separates Good from Evil, and unveils the form of a Justice which is at last intelligible" (Levi 23). Therefore, in the game we find *luchadores* in the church's stained glasses, since they are revered by people and similar to Roman gladiators; their show is advertised all over Santa Luchita,

²⁶⁵ Some of these names create intertextuality with Internet culture, as they turn figures from memes, like Business Cat and Foul Bachelor Frog, into *luchadores*.

where there is even a school for *luchadores* (“*Guacamelee!*’s Gameplay” 00:13:36). The heroic facet of Juan as a *luchador* is emphasized by Great Uay Chivo, his coach. Their relationship recalls that of Disney’s movie *Hercules*, in which the Greek hero is trained by a humorous goat-like satyr. At the same time, the movie’s trainer of heroes is based on the Greek mythological character Chiron (Daly and Rengel 35), which entails a reproduction of literary hero trainers.

The characterization, especially of Juan and Calaca, perfectly demonstrates the satirical dimension of the game. As Bergson states, a parodic character “must be self-rooted, and yet superficial; with features invisible to its actual owner; but visible to the rest; extremely considerate to its own self, but troublesome to others; ... capable of being tacked on to all the vices and even to a good many virtue” (82). Juan’s *luchador* archetype (“*Guacamelee!*’s Gameplay” 00:05:47-00:06:05) and Calaca as a typical *charro* (00:28:33-00:28:36) fit this definition to the detail: the game draws upon characters that are deeply rooted in Mexican culture; nonetheless, Calaca and Juan challenge the traditional depiction of *charros* and *luchadores* except in their physical aspect. Moreover, their flaws seem to be invisible to themselves, and they take their own feats very seriously, but their personality is comical for the players, who understand the inconsistencies of the idea of a protagonist as a virtuous hero. In short, these characters represent negatives aspects of traditional Mexican culture and also of mainstream culture in some cases, but, at the same time, they also dignify Mexican and Chicano/a rural customs.

Guacamelee! is not afraid to intentionally employ humor in spite of the controversial response of players; actually, that is probably one of its goals: to produce critical discourses about it, not only in its favor but also against it. However, what is the practical use of the formal employment of comicality here? The principal goals of this

game's humor can be summarized in the following three: to give value to rural Mexican and Chicano/a cultures, to deconstruct power relations, and to produce a critical discourse. The employment of mythological retelling, though from a comical point of view, helps divulge Mexican culture to the wide community of gamers; what is more, its humorous treatment, instead of being humiliating, demystifies sensitive issues (religion, gender roles, etc.) to bring them closer to younger audiences. Consequently, the game gathers a community of players who internalize its Mexican elements, and, at the same time, combines these references with others from other cultures. This mixture, together with the fact that canonical Anglo culture is submitted by an ethnic group, helps present a new possibility in video game design. Moreover, *Guacamelee!*'s awards show that it is possible to portray an ethnic community without necessarily minimizing the quality of the game.

The truth is that the game not only implicitly criticizes the industry's Anglo predominance, it also explicitly (though lightly) denounces gender inequality, sexism and other negative attitudes in both video games and Mexican culture. The attack of Mexican culture itself is one of the reasons why the game has caused such a disputed response, but at the same time it grounds a lesson on resiliency. Resiliency is shown in Juan's ability to defeat evil and in the game's capacity to portray and exhibit Mexican culture with humor and respectfulness, proving that video games can be an enriching means of expression for ethnic communities. Hence, *Guacamelee!* is the perfect example of humor's two sides: while it is a perfect vehicle for politically incorrect criticism, it also represents that humor is open to interpretation and might be read in different ways. Nonetheless, it is undeniable that this game investigates this tradition in depth to play with its elements with wit, even though this comical approach might be uneasy for some

people. Therefore, *Guacamelee!* proves that humor is able to bring forth questions that might be uncomfortable to discuss in any other way.

4.3. ***Guacamelee!* and *Never Alone* side by side: tales of tricksters and *luchadores***

“From fantasy titles like *Skyrim* to expressionistic adventures like *Okami*, [video games] regularly raid ancient cultures” (McEwen), which indicates that mythological rewriting is just one example of the inspiration of video games in traditional narratives; therefore, the goals, rules and models of contemporary video games that seem so remote to ethnic groups actually arise from their cultures in many cases. Sadly, video games are more often than not unacquainted with a respectful visual portrayal of these communities, and most of the times ethnic groups are “filtered through the homogenizing lens of Tolkienesque lore” (McEwen) or scavenged for serviceable enemies and settings. This lack of visual sovereignty is symptomatic of a process of visual colonization (Carlson 109), erasure, and appropriation of ethnic cultures (107) by means of visual media, which are “as powerful as print in the creation of nation-building mythology. While books are undoubtedly objects of power, so are images” (McEwen).

Native American characters in video games tend to be exaggerated, sampled (Parkinson); caricatured, naive (Kamen); with red skin, long black hair, dressed in leather, fur and feathers, and frozen in time (Carlson 7): in one word, stereotyped. As brutal as it sounds, the objectives of games with Native American characters are usually “to rape a

native woman,²⁶⁶ slaughter Indian braves²⁶⁷” or assume the identity of an exotic American Indian character (75).²⁶⁸ Moreover, “players are rewarded for their ethnic cleansing accomplishments” (75). In fact, many games adopt the imagery and setting of Western movies.²⁶⁹ Thus, it is rare to find a game that actively involves an American Indian community (Parkinson) in order to use “the power of video games to promote culture and show people they are more connected than not” (Kamen). As *Never Alone*’s developers explain, “in many games, Nuna’s cultural heritage would be a helpful way of rounding out her character, but *Never Alone* injects that cultural identity in every crevice of the world” (McElroy). That is exactly what differentiates appropriation from representation in games like *Never Alone*, *Mulaka* and *Otsi!: Rise of the Kanien’keha’ka Legends*. In these games,²⁷⁰ the artists, programmers, and media makers, especially those with Native American origins, “are creating imagery that speaks to, from and about specific communities” in a way that, usually with humor, deconstructs stereotypical images of Native Americans (Carlson 107-8).

If Native Americans are misrepresented in video games, recognizably Latino/a characters make less than 3 percent of the top 150 games (Tracey), and, even when they appear, they are simply stereotypical figures that lack in-depth characterization (Lavandier). Though Frederick Aldama acknowledges a rise in the number of video games by and about Latinos/as, these typically appear as background characters (241). Usually, Latino/a characters without a distinct nationality or an identifiable cultural

²⁶⁶ This is the case of the brutal game *Custer’s Revenge*.

²⁶⁷ Like *War Along the Mohawk*, among others.

²⁶⁸ As in the games *Second Life*, *No Man’s Land*, *Super Street Fighter II: The New Challengers*, *Tekken*, *Mortal Kombat 3*, *Killer Instinct*, *Virtua Fighter*, *Turok*, *Tengai Makyou: The Fourth Apocalypse*, *Darkwatch*, but also in others like *Shadow Hearts: From the New World*.

²⁶⁹ Like *The Oregon Trail*, *Red Dead Redemption*, and many others.

²⁷⁰ Some games from triple A companies, such as *Prey*, *Infamous: Second Son*, *Assassin’s Creed III*, *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*, and others try to portray American Indian characters under a new light, avoiding the reproduction of certain stereotypes. However, they still tend to include a lot of preconceptions.

background have appeared in fight games,²⁷¹ sports games, and games of different genres featuring criminals and gang members²⁷² (421-22). Nevertheless, F. Aldama's claim that some improvements are being made is supported by both classical games like *Grim Fandango* and contemporary ones like *Guacamelee!*, *ICED!*, and *Papo y Yo* that overtly employ humor to respectfully and profoundly depict Latino/a cultures.

Both *Guacamelee!* and *Never Alone* gather traditional myths of Chicano/a and American Indian cultures respectively in order to destroy negative stereotypes. *Never Alone* adapts the Inuit story "Kunuksaayuka" and combines it with other myths and trickster-like characters from Alaskan folklore, like the Little People. The developers of the game not only include these mythical references in order to divulge this culture; they also show that traditional mythology can respond to contemporary preoccupations, such as climate change and gender inequality. For example, the "Cultural Insights" in this game add value to traditional Iñupiaq lifestyle and explore mythology. On top on that, their most important achievement is to show contemporary Native Alaskan people telling their own stories and exploring their concerns, thus demonstrating the vitality of native culture and fighting the destructive stereotype of the vanishing Indian.

On the other hand, it is precisely due to the parodic portrayal of Mexican mythology that *Guacamelee!* has been accused of appropriation since its release. Nonetheless, its erudite portrayal of Mexican folklore proves that the game was made from utter respect for this culture. *Guacamelee!* adopts a humorous point of view to encourage resiliency and to demystify certain sensitive topics (Díaz Bild 97; Holoch 22),

²⁷¹ Such as *Garou: Mark of the Wolves*, *The King of Fighters*, *The King of Fighters 2000*, *Street Fighter II*, *Street Fighter IV*, *Tekken 3*, *Tekken 4*, *Tekken 6*, *Rage of the Dragons*, and *Dead or Alive: Paradise* among many others.

²⁷² That is the case of *The Warriors*, *Call of Juarez: The Cartel*, *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, and *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, for example.

but some critics have confused this lack of seriousness with a lack of depth. This is far from being true, though: humor in *Guacamelee!*, as is many other cases, is one of the best perspectives to adopt in order to destabilize preconceptions (Proaño-Gómez 179), provoke reflection in the audience, and encourage resiliency (Gutierrez-Jones 123).

In line with those games that make a real effort to respectfully include ethnic groups, *Never Alone* and *Guacamelee!* show a special concern with the dignification of Native Alaskan, Mexican and, by extension, Chicano/a cultures (the latter being derived from Mexico).²⁷³ For instance, the people who feature the “Cultural Insights” of *Never Alone* includes issues of traditional Inuit life, and some of them adopt an ironic tone that marks a cultural distance or is taken from the humorous tone of the original stories they recount, like “Northern Lights” (*Never Alone’s* Gameplay” 01:10:00). In the case of *Guacamelee!*, humor is a double-edged sword that combines self-criticism with the dignification of Mexican and Chicano/a culture. Actually, both games insist on dignifying the life of humble people for ethnic groups. *Guacamelee!* is all about balance: first, between a critical attitude towards Anglo culture and the criticism of negative aspects of traditional Mexican culture; second, between the aforementioned self-criticism and the celebration of this culture. Self-criticism via parodies and mockery is particularly powerful regarding questions of traditional gender roles in the Mexican tradition and also in the video game industry. As a consequence, this game embraces the ambivalence of humor: while it can criticize and destroy, it can also be constructive and praising.

Never Alone does not only display an attitude of respect and peacefulness; it is also strongly critical. Criticism in the game goes beyond the topic of canonical and hegemonic world structure to address international issues that severely affect Inuit

²⁷³ The beautiful esthetic of the game is in itself a demonstration of utter respect.

communities and many other people. Particularly, the problem of global warming and melting icecaps floods the game from its gameplay, which forces Nuna and the fox to cross platforms of floating melting ice, to the “Cultural Insights”, in which the Iñupiaq community members explore the problem of global warming for them and the entire world (“*Never Alone*’s Gameplay” 00:44:52).

The ironic design of *Never Alone*, with the fake bosses that mock the players’ expectations, sets a challenge to the typical design of video games which is usually based on Western storytelling. However, *Never Alone* shows an alternative way to present a story in order to transmit different values from most AAA games. In that sense, it is an exercise of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, as it momentarily disrupts the canon of video games and “[builds] a second world and a second life outside officialdom” (Bakhtin 6). The implications of this humorous Bakhtinian perspective are important for ethnic communities that address a massive international audience through video games because they can show their cosmogonies as contemporaneous alternatives to mainstream culture. The Bakhtinian carnivalesque, thus, is a productive comical strategy for these video games, and *Guacamelee!* sticks to it too by setting its plot in the carnivalesque *Día de Muertos*, at which, like in Carnival, the world is upside down. Thanks to this disturbance of the laws of nature and culture, the antagonist of the game can attack the World of the Living while the designers celebrate the understanding of the living and the dead in Mexican and Chicano/a cultures.

In *Never Alone*’s gameplay, the expectations of gamers are manipulated to promote the acceptance of an alternative storytelling. Therefore, it shows an inclusive goal and it directly addresses questions of difference positively to produce enriching exchanges and collaboration, especially between Nuna and the fox. The game is definitely

interested in building bridges between native elders, native gamers, and international players who adopt Nuna's adventure in their cultural imagery. Still, this ironic technique is also a challenge to hierarchies. Gamers are used to a particular structure and specific roles based on Western storytelling and mythology, and *Never Alone* defies the typical character of the enemy, the reasons for evildoing, and the goals of the hero; thus, it reinvents the so-called magic circle of the game and compelling players to accept Native Alaskan beliefs. *Guacamelee!* is also well aware of the players' multiple cultural backgrounds, and so it mixes elements from different traditions (Anglo, Japanese, Latino/a, etc.) in an authentic melting pot in which all those references create a new cosmogony. The game's humorous intertextuality, which mocks ninjas, *luchadores*, Western advertisements, Mexican products, etc., could be interpreted as a claim for the inclusion of players with many different backgrounds—a claim for global understanding.

The comparison of a tongue-in-cheek game like *Guacamelee!*, stirring mockery in the audience, and the amicable *Never Alone*, which rouses the players' empathy, might seem forced, but only because these two games include different approaches to humor. On the one hand, similarly to previous texts studied in this dissertation such as *Smoke Signals*, *Guacamelee!* responds to a mixture of what Siro López defines as satirical and comical. It is a satire because it combines sarcasm, irony and fantasy (18-19) to ridicule and condemn injustice (18); it is comical because it looks for the players' complicit smile and laughter (14). Therefore, *Guacamelee!* intentionally provokes laughter in the audience by mocking injustice (gender inequality, for instance) through the satire of traditional Mexican figures like the *charro* and the *luchador* together with non-Mexican ones like the mistress in distress, the *femme fatale*, and the hero's trainer. This game sticks to the typical characterization of the comical, and it fulfills all the requirements to be defined as such.

On the other hand, *Never Alone* employs a different, less common type of humor, which López calls humorism and that is present in previously discussed texts like *When My Brother Was an Aztec*. *Never Alone*'s humorism, in contrast with *Guacamelee!*'s comicality, appeals to the audience's feelings, stimulating an empathy that prevents mockery (López 20) by facing the protagonist with a problem that seems unsolvable but that is eventually fixed (20). This causes solidarity first and relief at the end. In any case, like satire, humorism is a technique that binds humor with a moral purpose: it encourages a personal attitude of resiliency and resolution (20-21). Nuna is the resilient figure that shows bravery and tenacity as she sets off to save her village from the unknown source of a ferocious storm, but which she manages to find and stop. Hence, aside from making players smile with easiness, *Never Alone* teaches a valuable lesson on equality, the importance of community, and the respect for nature's balance by adopting a less frequent and not so noticeable humor strategy. Gerald Mast's classification of comedies in cinema is adequate to compare these two games: while *Never Alone* transmits its values "by serious sections interspersed with comic ones", *Guacamelee!* does it "exclusively by comic devices" (22).

In spite of the obvious differences between *Guacamelee!* and *Never Alone*, they share the narrative technique of mythological retelling, the humorous strategy of intertextuality, and their fundamental goals: celebration of ethnic (Native American and Mexican) cultures, criticism and also self-criticism, questioning of power relations, and inclusion of audiences from different ethnicities. Though the employment of myths has been popular in the video game industry, these two games show that there is an alternative way to the usually stereotypical construct. Mythological reinvention in *Never Alone* and *Guacamelee!* allows both producers and gamers to criticize the deepest roots of a culture

and also to acknowledge the value of the myths and cosmogonies of ethnic groups not as a museum piece but as a way to address contemporary concerns.

Finally, the fact that these games are filtered through a humorous lens proves that fun video games are not necessarily less concerned with justice and social issues than serious ones. Although sometimes comical practices are linked to assimilation, these two games evidence that a thorough research and a respectful representation that actively involve members of the ethnic community are definitely not incompatible with various forms of humor. Thus, *Never Alone* and *Guacamelee!*, as other games with a concern for minoritized cultures, combine the reach of AAA companies, the interest for gamers' attention, and the preoccupations of indigenous communities. Accordingly, they promote the enormous potential of video games, on the one hand, and humor, on the other hand, to expose, update, and dignify ethnic groups worldwide. This is how the empire plays back.

Conclusion

This study of the uses of humor in Native American and Chicano/a literature, cinema and video games has proved that, in spite of the specific features of each group, these communities use their comical creative works to resist and denounce their social, cultural and economic problems in the United States as a paradigm of the Fourth World and neocolonialism. For these communities, humor is more productive than victimization, because it allows them to develop dialog instead of hostility and resentment, and because it shatters the harmful imperialist dichotomy of victim and perpetrator. The fact that humor gives ethnic groups a chance to overcome suffering is a fundamental device for their decolonizing struggle, as the lack of comical representations of ethnic groups and “victimization [have] become a defining feature of race and ethnic cultures” (114) and neocolonial attitudes. Thus, the humorous texts of ethnic groups hold value for their authors and their communities, because their concerns are given voice, their struggle is represented and the path for forthcoming similar works is paved; furthermore, comic works are also worthy for the public, who are stripped of their prejudices to engage in a learning process between them and the ethnic groups that produce the texts. However, humor must not be idealized; as Maggie Ann Bowers warns, humor has a dangerous comforting and self-satisfying capacity that, in the case of ethnic groups, might mask the difficult situations they face (255). In addition, humorous texts might be understood as threatening, as they can potentially boycott the possibility of mutual understanding through distance.

Taking into account the fact that humor is present in all human societies, throughout the past chapters I have developed a comparative study of comicality in the works of writers, filmmakers and video game designers of ethnic groups (Gordon Henry,

Michele Serros, Natalie Diaz, David Tomas Martinez, Chris Eyre, Sherman Alexie and Upper One Games) or that actively include ethnic communities (Richard Glatzer, Wash Westmoreland and DrinkBox Studios). Some of the aims of this humorous approach seem to be culturally determined. For instance, Native Americans include the figure of the Trickster that is typical in Native American cultures; Chicanos/as make use of strategies like *picardía* and engaged humor instead. At the beginning of this dissertation, I listed the aims that I expected the aforementioned comical works would share: to question the socioeconomic hierarchies of neocolonialism, to allow minoritized voices a chance for criticism (including self-criticism), to canalize resiliency, and to explore issues of inter-ethnic communication and community making. As a whole, these goals respond to a need to overcome colonization. Though each text uses humor to a different extent and with diverse techniques, I have been able to confirm that the aforesaid basic objectives are present, or at least suggested, in most of the works.

Calling hierarchies into question is present in Henry's novel's obscene humor, mockery, parodies, irony, and puns, intimately related to the Bakhtinian carnivalesque and the Freudian grotesque; in Serros's narratives through Bergsonian mockery; in Diaz's poetry by means of carnivalesque and grotesque verses and the traditional Native American humor techniques of historical rewriting and comic reversal; and in Martinez's poems in relation to the Freudian grotesque, Siro López's theory of satire, the rewriting of intrahistories, and the characteristic Chicano/a engaged humor. These authors also play with form as a means to produce criticism towards power structures. The reversal of the hegemonic world order can also be found in the two movies I study, though it does not hold as much importance in *Quinceañera* as it does in *Smoke Signals*, with the comic reversal and the constant jokes about the socioeconomic power structures that respond to Bakhtin's humor theory. One of the reasons why video games can be productive in the

context of ethnic communities is precisely their capacity to contest imperial powers through a media that was precisely created by the latter. The employment of mythology in *Never Alone* and *Guacamelee!* allows these groups to produce historical rewriting, incongruity, parody, and irony as means to produce a reverse process of assimilation in which the culture of the ethnic group is the dominant system that foreign players have to adopt.

Criticism and self-criticism are also fundamental to these works, though they are approached through different means. While Henry employs puns and treats these subjects as secondary, for Serros they are a central preoccupation that she explores by means of irony, satire, paradoxes, and obscene mockery; and while Henry is concerned with ethnic questions, Serros evaluates racism and also sexism. For Diaz, criticism and self-criticism are also very important, and she employs humor to cope with racism, gender problems, poverty, and a variety of non-canonical topics through parodies and caricatures. However, Martinez's poetry is more focused on intrahistory and the criticism of his own community and even his way of being in the past. Probably, *Quinceañera* is the product with the highest load of self-criticism. For the directors of this movie, it was vital to give Chicanos/as voice to criticize the problems of their own culture through the satirical reinterpretation of a fairy tale that perfectly embodies Bakhtin's explanation of self-critique. *Smoke Signals* is also concerned with criticism but focused on the destruction of stereotypical images of Native American people on screen by satire, intertextuality, and puns. This goal is shared by *Never Alone*, in which stereotypes play a major role to develop ecological criticism. A curious case of self-mockery is represented by *Guacamelee!*, which, by mocking Mexican and by extension Chicano/a culture, illustrates the ambivalence of humor to, on the one hand, castigate the gender roles division and, on the other hand, dignify and value tradition.

Throughout this dissertation, I have referred to authors who acknowledge the healing power of humor as one of the most important traces of resiliency. With them, I can confirm that the resilient attitude of the Native American and Chicano/a communities in the texts that have been analyzed is fundamentally based on humor. Trickster characters from Native American literature have always carried lessons on resiliency and used humor to heal spiritual wounds, as reflected in Henry's novel, in which many characters adopt trickster figures; in Diaz's poems, although there is no direct reference to tricksters; in *Smoke Signals*, in which resiliency goes hand in hand with criticism; and in *Never Alone*'s tricksters. Resiliency is also a central topic for Chicanos/as: Serros's characters, the protagonists of *Quinceañera*, and Martinez's poems repeatedly show resiliency by means of satire, irony, and mockery in the personal and public spheres to allow individuals to overcome the stereotype of victim. Another way to show resiliency in some of the texts studied is through the celebration of the culture of their respective authors, which is the fundamental technique in *Guacamelee!* but also appears in all the other texts.

Ultimately, I read most of these works as encouraging, in subtle or explicit ways, the possibility of inter-ethnic communication in the contemporary world as the best way to negotiate colonial relations, to learn from other cultures, and to give voice to usually silenced individuals. Nevertheless, many of these texts acknowledge the difficulties of this task, as understanding is impossible if hierarchical structures are not abandoned and relations between different cultures are understood as a way to create uniformity instead of cherishing difference. Thence, humor is proved to be an ambivalent tool for mutual understanding that can easily become assimilating and controversial. Inter-ethnicity is encouraged through puns, irony, and comical intertextuality to create a link between the creators (authors, filmmakers, and game designers), the ethnic communities involved, and the public (readers, spectators, and players). In the best of the cases, such a hybrid

community is not based on ethnicity per se and proves that different interpretations of the world are possible for those who are willing to manage difference in non-conflictive way.

Nonetheless, humor is not used with the same purposes in all cases, and it is not understood in the same way in all the texts. According to López's classification, some of the texts adopt a humorist approach, while others exploit comicality per se, and some others fall in the category of satire. In general, those texts produced by Native Americans tend towards humorism, as their goal is to involve the reader and cause empathy through sarcasm, irony, and a more amicable tone to address non-native publics. Comicality is the preferred category of Chicanos/as, apparently, with a tongue-in-cheek humor, ridicule, mockery, misunderstandings, pun, and intertextuality; however, *Quinceañera* has an overall satirical point of view reproduced in a parody in which other comical elements are introduced. Notwithstanding, this classification is not at all rigid, and, though it is true that these tendencies have been demonstrated, they cannot be considered closed categories: *Hustle* tends to humorism more than comicality, *Smoke Signals* is comical instead of humorist, and *Guacamelee!* shows traces of comicality and satire at the same time.

At different stages in my dissertation, I have found certain voids in the theoretical studies of Native American and Chicano/a humor, or ethnic humor as a category in itself. It is well known that Humor Studies are not among the most popular academic fields; however, I expect to have proved their importance in the contemporary world as a means to give voice to usually silent groups. Some studies approach the possibilities of humor as a means to move different cultures closer, but the truth is that most of these works are limited to a single ethnicity or culture, which is in itself a contradiction. This lack of comparative studies is the reason why I decided to find examples of Native American

humor in Chicano/a texts, and vice versa, thus proving the capacity of humor to cross ethnic barriers. Hence, studies of the uses of humor by ethnic groups in comparison and also in interaction would be an excellent way to reflect the goal of humor as a linking agent between cultures. Humor is an absolutely necessary tool to comprehend contemporary processes of decolonization, as all the participants involved benefit from it: both the colonized and the colonizers need it to heal wounds and to overcome hazardous imperialist attitudes, and the whole world needs humor as a feature that makes human beings equal. A productive inter-ethnic communication and an ethical understanding of difference should include humor as a vital ingredient.

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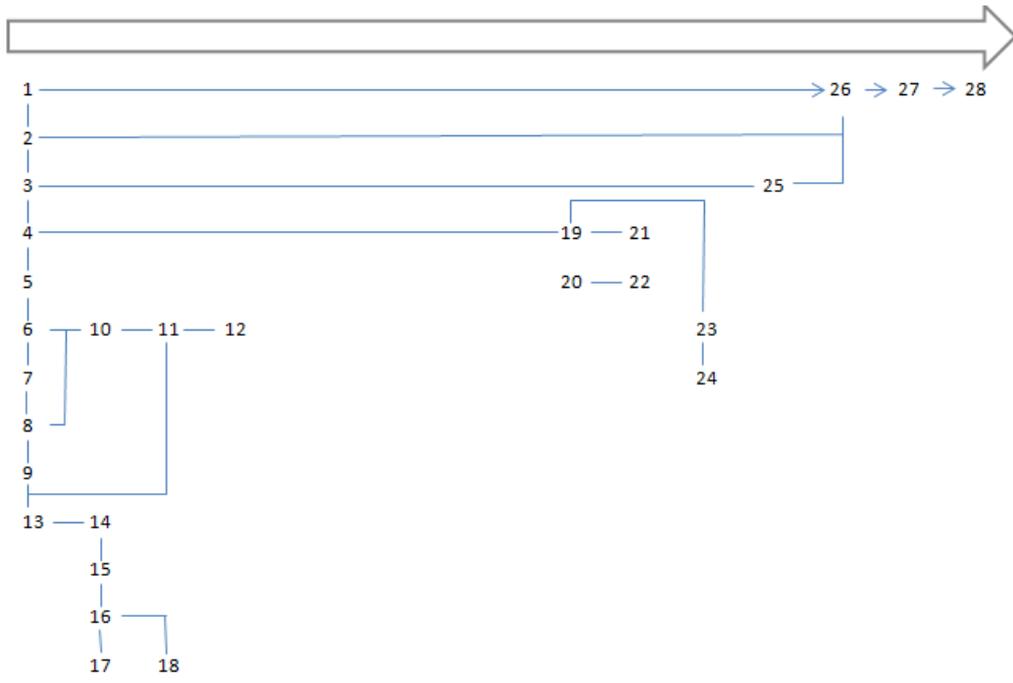
Appendix 1: *The Light People*: suggested table and outline

The table and the graphic included here are intended to clarify the complex narrative structure of the novel *The Light People*, by Gordon Henry. In the case of the table, the different colors represent different plots. The first column, filled with numbers, is an attempt to describe the chronological order of the narration of the events; thus, the numbers point out the order in which the stories are told and the relation between them. The second column, also including numbers, indicates the order of the chapters in the book, whose title is mentioned in the third column. The last column, with characters' names in it, shows which character is going to lead the readers to the following story. For instance, in the first chapter readers meet several characters, and one of them, Arthur Boozhoo, is going to be the person who leads to the following narration.

1	1	“Invisible Trails”	Arthur Boozhoo
2	2	“Arthur Boozhoo on the Nature of Magic”	Rose
3	3	“Rose Meskwaa Geeshik’s Monologue on Images”	Oshawa
4.1	4	“Oshawa’s Story”	Oshawanung
5.1	5	“Oshawa’s Uncle Story”	Bombarto Rose’s book
6.1	6	“Bombarto Rose: Mixed-Blood Musings in Obscurity”	Bombarto Rose
7	7	“The Autobiographical Prohile of Bombarto Rose...”	Bombarto Rose
8.1	8	“The Prisoner of Haiku”	Elijah Cold Crow
8.2	9	“Haiku and Dream Songs of Elijah Cold Crow”	Elijah Cold Crow
8.3/6.2	10	“Bomarto Rose: Essay on Parameters of Residence	Bombarto Rose
8.4/6.3	11	“Bombarto Rose: A Note to Hold the Eyes”	Bombarto Rose
8.5/6.4	12	“Bombarto Rose: Winter Song”	Old Woman Cold Crow
10.1	13	“Old Woman Cold Crow’s Monologue on the Death...”	Old Woman Cold Crow
10.2	14	“Old Woman Cold Crow’s Story as Paymen...”	Abetung

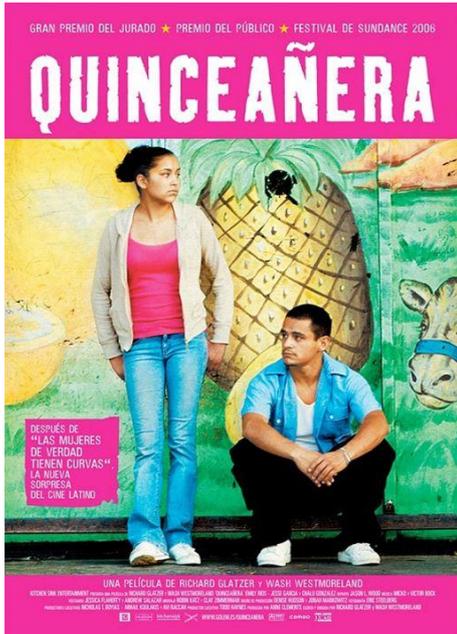
11.1	15	“Abetung’s Story”	Geeshis
11.2	16	“Geeshis”	Franklin Squandum
11.3	17	“Franklin Squandum’s Death Dream: A Mini-Drama...”	Franklin Squandum
11.3	18	“Squandum’s Funeral”	
4.2	19	“Requiem for a Leg”	Oshawanung
4.3/ 5.1	20	“Oshawanung’s Story”	Witnesses
4.4	21	“Systems and Witnesses for the Museum”	Anthropologist
4.5/7.2	22	“The Anthro’s Tale”	
4.6	23	“After the Requiem”	Oshawa
5.2	24	“Oshawa’s Attempt to Kill”	Rose
3	25	“Rose Meskwaa Geeshik’s After-Image Dreams”	Arthur Boozhoo
4.7	26	“Arthur Boozhoo: Two Dogs Stuck Together”	
1	27	“Seed’s Journey to the Cave”	Oskinaway
1	28	“We the People”	-

Making reference to the number of the chapters (the second column of the table above), the following graphic combines the story (the chronological series of events of the novel), together with the plot (the order of the events in the narration). The arrow indicates the chronological passage of time, in with the numbers of the chapters are placed. Horizontal lines indicate an advance in the story, while vertical lines link chapters in terms of depth (a mise-en-abyme structure). Therefore, the story does not advance in time from chapter 1 until chapter 26. Chapter 2 to 25 do not follow the protagonist’s story, but add complexity and depth to the novel by chaining the stories of other characters. Hence, chapter 6 is inserted in chapter 5, which derives from chapter 4, and so on and so forth.



Appendix 2: *Quinceañera*'s and *Smoke Signals*'s posters

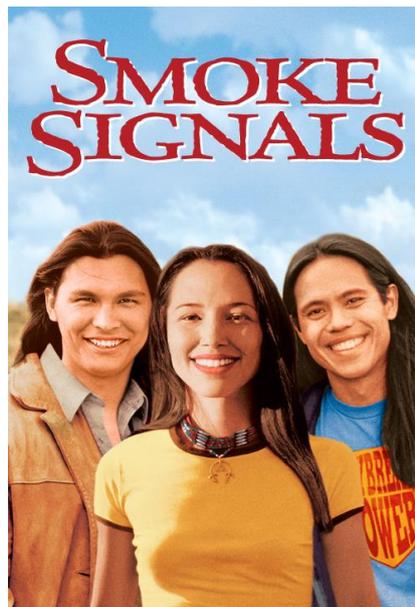
The following images are the posters of the movies *Quinceañera* and *Smoke Signals*. All of them have been taken from the official websites of the movies' film production companies and distributors.



1 Poster of *Quinceañera* featuring Magdalena and Carlos



2 Another poster of *Quinceañera*



1 Poster of *Smoke Signals* with Victor, Suzy, and Thomas (left to right)

Appendix 3: Some images from *Never Alone*

The following images belong to the main characters of the video game *Never Alone*. They have been taken from the video game's official website, which can be accessed at <http://neveralonegame.com/game/>.



1 Original concept art for Nuna



2 Nuna and the fox



3 Manslayer



4 Owl Man handing Nuna her bola



5 Northern Lights



6 Little People

Appendix 4: Pictures from *Guacamelee!*

The following images show the most important characters in *Guacamelee!* Most images have been obtained from the official website of the game, and the ones from other sources are accordingly specified.



1 Juan before becoming a luchador on his way to the church



2 Juan as a luchador and Calaca above and Tostada and other luchadores below



3 From left to right, X'Tabay, Flame Face, Great Uay Chivo, and Javier Jaguar



4 Checkpoint in the form of an altar for Día de Muertos



5 "Artwork of El Presidente's Daughter" by Jbsaw1 (CC BY S-A 3.0)

