



Undergraduate Dissertation

Trabajo Fin de Grado

Purposeful Humour: Laughter and Ethnicity in
Michele Serros' *How to Be a Chicana Role Model*

Author / Autora

Carmen Beltrán Gracia

Supervisor / Directora

Silvia Martínez Falquina

FACULTY OF ARTS

FACULTAD DE FILOSOFÍA Y LETRAS

2019

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	3
CHAPTER I - THE CHICANA CAN LAUGH: A THEORETICAL APPROACH TO HUMOUR AND CHICANISM	5
1.1. Chicanism: the Making and Unmaking of a People	5
1.2. Transformative Laughter and Other Theories on Humour	10
CHAPTER II - TOWARDS THE HALF-SMILE OF THE UNCLASSIFIED CHICANA	14
2.1. Laughter as an ambassador in <i>How to Be a Chicana Role Model</i>	16
2.2. Laughter as a group regulatory tool in <i>How to Be a Chicana Role Model</i>	23
CONCLUSION	27
WORKS CITED	29

Abstract

A Chicano/a is someone who lives in contact with two different cultures: the Mexican and the Anglo-American. Thus, Chicanism is usually referred to in terms of duality, fluidity, transculturalism, alterity, *mestizaje* (Anzaldúa) or hybridity (Bhabha). However, ethnic identification is overall an open conception which depends on individual performance. Humour can seize the potential of Chicanism's constructed nature to de-construct and re-define its parameters, and thus work as a fundamental instrument for individual and collective change. Diverse theories on humour's mechanisms (relief and incongruity theories, the carnivalesque; the "antirhetoric" of humour [Gilbert] and sympathy theory [O'Donnell]) disclose the usefulness of laughter as a therapeutic strategy, as a tool for intercultural dialogue and social change, and a form of resilience or resistance. This essay is concerned with how Michele Serros employs humour with social aims in *How to Be a Chicana Role Model* (2000). She foments intra and intercultural dialogue, promotes a sense of community, and destabilizes pre-hold racist conceptions—in this sense, special attention will be paid to the use of irony and the mockery of racist discourses. As the essay concludes, through a comic genre, Serros enters the mainstream and stands as a subject advocating for freedom of self-definition.

Resumen

El/la Chicano/a vive en contacto con dos culturas diferentes: la mexicana y la anglo-americana. Así, la Chicanidad se suele definir en términos de dualidad, fluidez, transculturalidad, alteridad, mestizaje (Anzaldúa) o hibridez (Bhabha). En última instancia, sin embargo, la identidad étnica se basa en una concepción abierta que depende de la performatividad de cada individuo. El humor puede aprovechar el carácter artificial de la Chicanidad para de-construir y redefinir los parámetros que la limitan, funcionando pues como una herramienta fundamental para la transformación individual y colectiva. Múltiples teorías sobre los mecanismos del humor (teoría de la descarga y de la incongruencia, lo carnavalesco, la "antiretórica" del humor [Gilbert] y la *sympathy theory* [O'Donnell]) revelan la utilidad de la risa como estrategia terapéutica, como instrumento para el diálogo intercultural y para el cambio social, y como una forma de resistencia. Este trabajo presta atención a los modos en los que Michele Serros emplea el humor con fines sociales en *How to Be a Chicana Role Model* (2000). La escritora fomenta el diálogo intra- e intercultural, promueve el sentimiento de comunidad, y desestabiliza suposiciones racistas. Con respecto a este último caso, se prestará especial atención al uso de la ironía y la imitación burlesca de discursos racistas. El ensayo llega a la conclusión de que, por medio de un género cómico, Serros entra en la cultura popular y se presenta como sujeto defendiendo la libertad de definirse a sí misma.

Introduction

In a country with 56.5 million of Hispanic population in 2015 (“Hispanic Population [2]”),¹ being Latino/a means, however, being part of a minority who suffers from continuous racism and discrimination. Although Chicano/a fight against racial oppression has come a long way—especially since the social movement of *la Causa* for Chicano/a rights in the 1960s and 1970s—, many feel that social commentary and activism are still necessary. This is especially so in the case of Chicanas, subjected to a double and sometimes triple oppression because of the intersection of race, gender, and, often, class.

Michele Marie Serros (b. Oxnard, California, 1966; d. Berkeley, 2015), tagged once by *Newsweek* as “one of the top young women to watch for in the new century” (Del Barco), was an American author and social commentator influenced “by both her working-class Mexican-American heritage and Southern California pop culture” (Del Barco). She published her first book, a collection of poetry entitled *Chicana Falsa: And Other Stories of Death, Identity and Oxnard* in 1993, while she was still in college. *How to Be a Chicana Role Model* (2000), her second publication, would be followed by her first young adult novel, *Honey Blonde Chica* (2006) and its sequel *¡Scandalosa!* (2007). She was a fairly popular speaker, who also wrote for the *Huffington Post* and worked as a staff writer for a season of the ABC television sitcom *George Lopez* (produced by the American of Mexican descent George Lopez). For many, humour was fundamental to Serros’ writing. As the case of *How to Be* exemplifies, this humour did not obscure

¹ Out of this 56.5 million, 63.3% are of Mexican origin (“Share Mexican Origin [2]”). In 2000 (year of publication of *How to Be a Chicana Role Model*), the number of Hispanic population in the US was 35.2 million (“Hispanic Population [1]”), out of which 59.3% was of Mexican origin (“Share Mexican Origin [1]”).

social or political commentary, but on the contrary, it allowed to address such commentary through the mainstream in dialogic ways (Del Barco).

Organized in thirteen chapters or “rules,” *How to Be* presents a series of episodes in the life of a Chicana protagonist named “Michele Serros.” The auto-diegetic narrator recalls scenes of her childhood and adulthood, many of them depicting encounters with racial oppression and stereotypes, to which Serros often replies with irony. The book has a clear autobiographical content, and in this relation with reality it can be read as offering some degree of social commentary. This essay will focus on the ways Serros employs humour in the novel to support her socio-political criticism: she explores what it means to be a Chicana in contemporary US, she denounces racism and stereotyping, she promotes intra- and intercultural dialogue and, last but not least, she creates a sense of community. Often in her work, racist commonplaces are subverted through the “recycling” of images, mockery, or parody. Other strategies are also employed with the different purposes mentioned; sometimes, several aims coexist in a same sequence.

This essay is divided in two chapters. The first part of Chapter I, entitled “Chicanism: the Making and Unmaking of a People,” introduces useful theoretical terms such as Chicanism, transnationalism, the Other, the frontier, hybridity or intersectional feminism. Its second part, “Transformative Laughter and Other Theories on Humour,” points at different theories on humour’s nature and uses. Chapter II: “Towards the Half-Smile of the Unclassified Chicana,” offers an analysis of Serros’ *How to Be a Chicana Role Model* (2000). Divided in two subsections —“Laughter as an Ambassador” and “Laughter as a Group Regulatory Tool”—, this chapter makes use of the aforementioned theoretical tools while it points at different instances in which humour proves useful to prompt social and individual change.

Chapter I - The Chicana can Laugh: A Theoretical Approach to Humour and Chicanism

1.1. Chicanism: the Making and Unmaking of a People

Although Mexican-American culture has existed since the beginning of relations between two nations, Mexico and the United States, the Chicana/o as a distinct social category did not appear until the 1960s, with the Chicano Movement for the exaltation of *la Raza* and the Chicano values—mainly encapsulated by the Spanish language and, especially, the importance of family ethics (Valencia 30). Once considered derogatory, it is through this movement that this term is re-appropriated and starts to be preferred to others such as Mexican-American or Hispanic, since ‘Chicano,’ unlike the former terms, was a label chosen by activists of *la Causa*, and marked a political identity (Mabry 1).

However difficult it may be to establish what it is to be a Chicana/o, most current definitions include references to the idea of duality, hybridity, fluidity, or transculturalism. A Chicana/o is someone who lives in contact with two cultures: the Mexican and the Anglo-American, but who can also move along the spectrum, back and forth towards each culture, depending on the moment and situation. Valencia talks of “Chicanidad as a subjectivity in flux” (1), as something in constant de- and re-construction. Chicanas/os are a vivid example of a transcultural phenomenon that is, after all, found in every culture and individual, since we never stand as separate islands but as groups and psyches in continual interaction.

Discussing transnationalism, historian Deborah Cohen points at the different interpretations of the prefix trans-, which can be understood

as going beyond [nation borders] [...], as relational, formed in the in-between spaces; and [...] as change, as in the subject position formed and in play between nations [or cultures] and through crossing borders. (in Mabry v)

Transculturalism is a phenomenon resulting from the contact between cultural groups, but which also destabilizes the concept of culture itself, goes “beyond” the borders that are thought to delimit it. The meeting cultures actualize themselves in the process, losing and gaining traditions, modes of speaking, of moving, etc., and creating something new. As Mabry exposes it,

Chicanos live in a dynamic sphere in which they share a dual frame of reference defined by a lived reality shared among numerous spaces. This lived reality is carried across borders, representing a synergy of cultures. (52)

In addition to the notion of transculturalism, to understand how Chicanas/os have been traditionally portrayed and constructed, it is also important to look at several major conceptualizations of identity and culture. Of particular interest here are theories on alterity, the new mestiza (Anzaldúa), and hybridity (Bhabha). The Other as described by the poststructuralists (mainly, Lacan and Derrida) establishes that we organize our language and discourse in sets of oppositions, dichotomies in which we do not understand the one without the other. Applied to imperialism and colonialism, this means that the East has been created in opposition to the West and assigned all those qualities that the West has not wanted for itself—or, if idealized, has been still *used* as a tool for the criticism of the West. Consequently, the East, the developing or Third World, is perceived as chaotic, dirty, irrational, untrustworthy; most importantly, it becomes the object, rather than the subject, of representation. As a “periferic” part of Anglo-American society, Chicanas/os are equally subjected to these dichotomies. In his theoretical proposal, Derrida suggests that we must find the inconsistencies in this discourse of artificial oppositions, and so question and deconstruct it.

Regarding race and culture, Anzaldúa claims that Chicanas/os “are a synergy of two cultures with various degrees of Mexicanness or Angloness” (85), and goes a step further to propose that “a new consciousness” (100) must be created, a “third element [...] which is greater than the sum of its severed parts [...]—a mestiza consciousness” (101-102). For her, the new consciousness entails a regeneration of *la mestiza* into a superior, stronger race that can see, at once, “through serpent and eagle eyes” (100-101). A somehow similar proposal—though not exclusively applied to Chicanos/as—is that of Homi Bhabha and his concept of hybridity. Bhabha recognizes that “all forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity”; from this dialectical process, a “third space” is created, where new positions can arise (211). Bhabha further explains that

the importance of hybridity is that it bears the traces of those feelings and practices which inform it [...] so that hybridity puts together the traces of certain other meanings or discourses [...]. [This process] gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognisable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation. (211)

It should be noted that, in spite of their obvious relevance, both Bhabha’s and Anzaldúa’s theories have nevertheless received some criticism for carrying the risk of silencing a reality of oppression and power dynamics that can hinder the ideal that both propose (Martínez Falquina 139). Some critics have also warned of the potentially essentialist nature of frontier theories such as Anzaldúa’s. These proposals, Johnson and Michaelsen or Kawash suggested, somehow presuppose that there exist distinct and separate, ‘pure’ cultures which ‘contaminate’ or transfer elements to each other (in Martínez Falquina 139). Yet reality is usually more ambivalent and less Manichean.

To problematize or obviate the constructed nature of Chicanism, as these critics do, does not deprive Chicanos/as’ experience of realness, as in fact it may be argued that we construct all reality through our senses and reasoning, and this does not prevent

it from having a real effect in our lives. Racism and xenophobia, the difficulty of self-definition and identity doubts are real in the lives of people who constantly struggle with external definition and stereotyping. Indeed, the issue of assimilation reveals the importance that race and culture still have in interpersonal and international relations. This self-awareness can nonetheless offer an opportunity for revision and re-definition of parameters, as we realize that Chicanism is in fact a construction, as are clear-cut racial differences (Shih et al. 125), culture, or identity. As it happened after Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, the revealing of the artificiality of essentialism allows for a questioning of long-held ideas about race, class, gender and culture. Chicanism can, then, be personal, unstable, and open.

Thus, Chicanism is in constant definition, since the reality of Chicanas/os is complex and changing. In this picture, the position of Chicana women is especially tense, for a complex crossing of race, class, gender, and sometimes sexual identity operates in Chicanas' oppression. For these women, the relationship with Chicanism is even more complicated; as Anzaldúa summarizes, moving between two languages, "[t]hough I'll defend my race and culture when they are attacked by *non-mexicanos*, *conozco el malestar de mi cultura*" (43). During *la Causa* movement of the 60s, Chicanas found themselves excluded, silenced in the supposedly universal *El movimiento*, and unrepresented by white feminism. Given that often neither *La causa*—mostly male—nor mainstream feminism can fully encompass the Chicana experience (if there is any defined one), intersectional feminism, which recognizes that "the violence that many women experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities, such as race and class" (Crenshaw 1242), becomes a valuable alternative. This approach contributes to unveiling how Chicanas are subjected to a triple oppression, marked by their condition of (mostly) brown, working class women. Part of them, in addition,

claim non-mainstream sexual and gender identities. Some, such as Gloria Anzaldúa, will resort to Xicanisma or Chicana feminism, a reaffirmation of the Chicana with indigenous roots. Besides Anzaldúa, names of empowered and subversive racialized women such as Cherríe Moraga, Sandra Cisneros or Ana Castillo are at the foundations of the healthy, strong literary tradition in which Michele Serros can be placed.

In *The Massacre of the Dreamers* (1995), Ana Castillo exposes historical social and institutional racism, present in an infinite amalgam of forms that include sterilization, lynching, lower salaries, identity questioning, or misrepresentation. Nowadays, Chicanas/os still consistently suffer stereotyping and racism. Cristela Alonzo's stand-up routine reveals some of the most common assumptions about Chicanas/os, perceived as being superficial or telenovela-centred—"We don't vote! [...] Not unless it's *American Idol* or *The Voice!*" [2:15-2:23]—and extremely Catholic. The stereotypical image also constructs them as cleaning workers or caregivers—"This was the fantasy [...] I was gonna be the maid in their tour bus [10:40-10:43]"—; and having omnipresent mothers and absent fathers—in other occasions, its contrary image, the idealized Chicano family, its promoted instead. Parallely, Alonzo points to institutional and 'everyday' racism. She criticizes the lack of Latino referents when she claims that "Selena² is the closest thing Latinos have to a superhero" [4:05]; Trump's proposals—"Trump's gonna build a wall. [...] We will swim. I don't care. [...] [We will make] an immigrant triathlon!" [4:35-5:02]—; or cultural appropriation and Chicanas/os' lower salaries and employability—"Hey, girl, you wanna go tan? Let's go be ethnic for a week. [...] Bleaching booths [...] I'd love that! Hey, I need to be two shades whiter this week, I got a job interview" [6:38-7:12]. In addition, although a good number of Americans of Mexican descent do not speak Spanish, hispanophonia is still a requisite

² Selena Quintanilla (1971-1995) was an American of Mexican descent famous for being a singer, spokesperson, model, actor and fashion designer.

for Chicanism in the imagery of many Anglo-Americans and Europeans. Other stereotypes include dark skin, low educational level, tendency to criminality, and exuberant sexuality, which is both exotized and patronizingly condemned at the same time. Painful as it is, this racism can nonetheless be contested from a humorous stance. This approach is the one Serros will adopt for the most part of her novel.

1.2. Transformative Laughter and Other Theories on Humour

Although sometimes forgotten in academic circles, humour has been an object of study throughout history. Critics usually distinguish three main theories on humour: superiority, incongruity, and relief theory (Critchley 17). As Hill and Fitzgerald point out, “each of these positions comes from a distinctively Western philosophical orientation” (96); however, they can still be useful in the analysis of *How to Be a Chicana Role Model*.

Superiority theory, represented by Plato, Aristotle, and Hobbes, poses that humour is a way of minimizing the other: we laugh because we feel superior. The sudden discovery of our greatness would be then at the base of humour (Critchley 17). According to this theory, ethnic groups could use humour “to disparage or suppress each other, to create bonds among ethnic group members, or simply to keep one or another group within its place in society” (Hill and Fitzgerald 96). Incongruity theory, as developed by Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard and Kant, feeds on the idea that humour arises from the unexpected connection of apparently unrelated elements, or from non-equivalence between what we expect to happen and what actually happens. Because of the liberating nature of surprise, incongruity theory can be connected to relief theory, whose major exponents were Herbert Spencer and especially Freud. Laughter is

explained as a liberation of contained or repressed energy (Critchley 17). Humour is then resilience, as it helps to cope with everyday restrictions and oppressions, providing a relief vent through which subjects can be freer to find themselves.

Connected with relief and incongruity theory is Bakhtin's carnivalesque. The Russian philosopher locates in the carnival of the Middle Ages an example of the liberating and subversive power of laughter. For him, the carnivalesque forms (mainly parodic) challenge authority and conventions, unbalancing power structures and momentarily liberating the individual from their constraints, creating a space for renovation. The carnival is festive, because it regenerates; it is universal, because it includes everybody, unlike humour described by superiority theory. In addition, its humour is ambivalent, because it refuses to lead to clear-cut conclusions, and it has a philosophical and utopian character, because its aim is serious and focused towards change and the future (Díaz Bild). Carnavalesque forms are thus very useful as a tool for social change, and, in their formation of a creative space and momentary challenge of constrictions, they can lead to the (re)claiming of the alienated self.

Humour is an instrument that can be used in many and amply varied ways. According to relief theory and writings such as Tey Diana Rebolledo's "Walking the Thin Line: Humor in Chicana Literature," laughter has therapeutic power, aiding to release tension and come to terms with trauma, facilitating recovery in the process. It can also "reflect humane contradictions, helping to accept oneself and to cope with conflictive or ambivalent situations" (Tafolla, in Luna Estévez 80, translation added). It is thus an element of resilience, or of personal and collective resistance. In this sense, together with other strategies, the comic can also achieve cultural or social change.

By mocking hegemonic discourses, humour can undermine their authority whilst presenting an alternative space for new definitions to arise. Despite its limitations (it

can, for example, oversimplify complex issues), humour is particularly effective in this regard, since it catches the audience ‘unprepared’ and thus less defensive towards supposedly light-hearted criticism. Joanne Gilbert’s “antirhetoric” and the “rhetorical safety net” (Gilbert, in Valencia 10) refer to this elemental advantage of humour, which allows for criticism and attack while the comedian is shielded by the rhetoric of ‘it’s just a joke.’ For Hill and Fitzgerald, the key to humour’s use as a weapon for social change resides in its defamiliarizing power, as “the comedian offers a creative interpretation of our social and cultural patterns and permits us to see reality differently, and potentially in a more socially constructive fashion” (102). Similarly, self-deprecating jokes can “call cultural values into question by lampooning them” (Gilbert 319). Through a play of compliance and questioning of images and values, the racialized, stereotyped individual can make social denouncement, in an operation similar to Bhabha’s mimicry. According to Bhabha, the process of mimicry, in which the colonized subject imitates and camouflages under the image of the colonizer, can have a mock effect. This subject, mimicking the colonizer—being white but not quite, as Bhabha expresses—cannot completely mask his/her difference and returns a deformed image of the colonizer, prompting a questioning of its authority (Young 147). In an akin fashion, the Chicana can seem to comply with the hegemonic discourse or stereotype, only to twist its meanings and destabilize it from within.

The comic mode can also serve as a dialogic tool among or inside cultures. It contributes to the formation of a sense of community, as its members laugh together, and can improve relationships between groups in conflict as well, as it softens what would otherwise be considered attacks (Hill and Fitzgerald). In this respect, Doran Layne O’Donnell offers the sympathy hypothesis, which defends that humour is

sometimes employed to reduce the “negative potential” of some human interactions (O’Donnell in Hill and Fitzgerald 97), both within and outside the group.

Humour can present itself in multiple forms, including irony, parody, sarcasm, wordplay, camp, etc. However, in *How to Be*, many of those forms will have a similar potential and aim of creating a space for regeneration and re-definition. As Gutiérrez-Jones explains in “Humor, Literacy and Trauma in Chicano Culture,” humour is part of Mexican and Chicano/a culture: present from popular—the *corrido* tradition—to elite cultural production, it often addresses hybridization and has a political motivation. In its working through racism, humour leads to defamiliarization, rethinking, and ultimately, healing (Gutiérrez-Jones).

Chapter II - Towards the Half-Smile of the Unclassified Chicana

Onstage like Cristela Alonzo or offstage, the Chicana/o performs. To describe Chicanism as a performance is merely to point at the fact that identities are not essential qualities but “cultural acts” (Sollors, in Belgrad 252). The individual, especially the racialized one, is defined through external, cultural frames of understanding, which set the limits or possibilities of their life experience. Performativity also means that identity is a personal and changing construction, with which the artist can experiment to explore self-definition. In *How to Be a Chicana Role Model*, Serros develops a self-conscious, stylized account of her own experiences as a Chicana. Her work in this sense comes close to that of stand-up comics, who, in their autobiographical routines, “simultaneously perform self and culture, offering an often acerbic social critique sanctioned as entertainment because it is articulated in a comedic context” (Gilbert 317). Departing from this concept of identity as open and personal, in the text, Serros will defend a flexible conceptualization of Chicana identity, signalling the inconsistencies of stereotypes and racist attitudes by means of humour and opening thus a space for new definitions to arise. The title of the book summarizes the main mood of Serros’ work: the premise that it will teach its readers “How to Be a Chicana Role Model” is in itself ironic, as indeed the subsequent rejections of fixed classifications will demonstrate. The narrator eschews definition, shifting between the critique of dominant Anglo culture, the internal criticism of Chicano/a community, and self-ironization.

Regarding genre, *How to Be a Chicana Role Model* can be defined as a *Künstlerroman*, in which “the concept of creativity as a catalyst for self-discovery is the basic theme” (Eysturoy 21). More interestingly for this analysis, the text also resembles what is popularly known as “chick lit,” in its autobiographical component, informal,

comic tone and importance of (Chicana) womanhood experience. Chick lit is described as “a genre of fiction concentrating on young women and their emotional lives” (“Chick Lit”), a usual example of the genre being *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (1996). Chick lit is clearly popular fiction, directed at a young readership, and humour is central to it. It was, at least at its birth, a white, heterosexual (Smith 2) middle-class women’s genre. Books that were also taken to the screen like *The Devil Wears Prada* (2003) or *Sex and The City* (1996) present prototypical protagonists whose narratives, although often implying criticism towards societal standards and pressures (especially regarding appearance), easily oversee racial differences and escape open commentary on political issues such as class.

The fact that Serros chooses to write a text with such reminiscences of chick lit is relevant, because it indicates a renovation of the genre in which she works through racism entering the mainstream; moreover, she does it by means of a “light,” comic and, therefore, quite accessible genre. In this way, (Anglo)cultural dominance is challenged from within. *How to Be a Chicana Role Model*, like Serros’ preceding publication, *Chicana Falsa: And Other Stories of Death, Identity, and Oxnard*, explores generic choices outside drama, without forgetting social consciousness. Comedy here does not imply nihilism; rather, it tries to “make us see that reality is richer and more contradictory than what serious genres want us to believe” (Díaz Bild 18). In this novel, the strength, vitality and resilience at the core of humour is exploited with both personal and collective aims in order to examine contemporary Chicana identity.

2.1. Laughter as an Ambassador in *How to Be a Chicana Role Model*

Regarding content, one of the most important functions of *How to Be Chicana Role Model* is, without a doubt, the use of humour as a dialogic tool between cultures. Serros' fictionalization of autobiographical events creates a distance that allows us to look at them through new, analytical eyes. Her subversive strategy is often based on a comic defamiliarization of stereotypes or racist assumptions. In this process, the rhetorical development leads us to a position from which readers can recognize racism and/or find support in denouncing racist practices, fomenting thus a discussion on the issue. In "Role Model Rule Number 5: Respect the 1 percent," Serros builds up tension about a presumably major betrayal of her family:

I spent [that Christmas] alone because not only was I emotionally overcome and completely outraged by my family's actions, but I was the sole participant in an annual boycott. Relatives who I'd thought were a loyal tight loving circle of kinship actually went and did it. (69-70)

She continues in an akin fashion to lead the readers into a growing state of suspense, only to break it in an unexpected way: "God, I'm so ashamed to admit it, but my family actually chose to spend the last hours of Christmas night with Madonna" (70). Following incongruity theory, what seemed as an unforgettable offense shocks us as something "mundane" and makes us laugh. More importantly, the inverse process is also triggered. The mundanity of going to the cinema is imbued with a new relevance through its association with Michele's outrage and racial or ethnic conscience.

The witty turn that the narrator partakes creates a distance that allows us to adopt a new perspective from which the actual racism of the practice can be clearly identified. It is only after laughter that we reflect on the stated denunciation: that Latinos/as, the "largest minority" (71) in the United States, are under- and mis-represented. The fact that Chicanos/as' (and other Latinos/as') roles are portrayed by non-Latinos is indeed

important, as it points at historical racism in the form of silencing and cultural appropriation. It is white America that has decided what is it to be a Chicano/a and has denied them the opportunity to represent themselves. The anecdote recalled by Aunt Margaret summarizes it: “I could have been Evita in my college musical. [...] I almost had the role [...] but they said my hips were too wide and that I didn’t look Latin enough, not like *Madonna*” (70). The absurdity of this premise is then laid clear, and we can start recognizing—and denouncing—it in the non-fictional, still-racist, world. Through the comic in this sequence, the narrator also seems to distance herself from her own position, protecting herself from being catalogued as “a radical” and thus making humour more effective in its revisionary intent. The fragment is then an example of humour’s “antirethoric” (Gilbert, in Valencia 10) as well.

Most often, the narrator of *How to Be a Chicana Role Model* carries out a fundamental game of compliance and questioning of stereotypes, mocking our expectations both regarding the style of narration and her performance within Serros’ own (fictionalized) experience. She does not advocate for idealized essentialism, given that,

[s]ince there can be no nostalgic return to pre-colonial purity, no unproblematic recovery of national origins undefiled by alien influences, the artist in the dominated culture cannot ignore the foreign presence but must rather swallow it and recycle it to national ends. (Vieria and Stam, in Mabry 23)

Although Serros does definitely not accept racist practices, she does not directly or explicitly confront them either, taking another alternative outside simple opposition or negation. Her criticism is based in a discourse game in which she continuously plays with the (Anglo) reader, challenging our expectations and thus making us aware of our internalized assumptions and images on race and culture. In “Let’s Go Mexico!”

(Chapter 7), she rejects the romantization of Mexico, parodically narrating her excursion to Cuernavaca's IHOP almost as an explorer in the search for meaning-giving purity: "I could almost feel I was getting closer to what I was looking for [...] what I had been looking for was smack in front of me" (110). In the first encounter with these lines, the reader imagines a place imbued in a special sense of relevance and truth, only to discover that the narrator is in fact describing a restaurant chain. IHOP becomes a space where Michele can resort for familiar comfort, an oasis of "*Mexican-American* memories" (110), but in this case, it is a real location.

Earlier in the chapter, Serros uses irony to mock exoticizing discourse on Mexico. Simulating brochure-like language, she obviates the absurdity of Manichean stereotyping:

In the catalog there were pictures of students (white) lounging around the school's swimming pool (aqua blue) being served piña coladas by waiters (brown). [...] I looked at the pictures and wondered how I'd fit in. (102-103)

By means of in-brackets clarifications, these images suffer a process of defamiliarization as their stereotyped, constructed nature is brought to the foreground. Through the juxtaposition of the colour of water with skin colour, classifications are broken in a carnivalesque way, as skin colour loses importance as an identity-definitory tag. Finally, the last sentence works to obviate the mismatch of these conventions with reality—as she asks: "You don't think I really talk like that, do you?" (102)—and to problematize their rigidity. Through the comic mode, Serros advocates for an ambiguous definition of the Chicana experience in which she places herself. Working "within the visual constraints and liberties afforded by our very image-driven society," she commits autonomous "acts of resistance" (García 112) to escape her very own cataloguing. Serros' attempt is carnivalesque, since its lampooning of official discourse

on Mexico through parody destabilizes hierarchies of authority and importance, values usually associated with seriousness—at least in Anglo culture. Stereotypes are similarly played with, neither rejected nor embraced. In her account of her family’s betrayal (not respecting the “one percent”), Michele complains: “[n]ot the Virgin Mary... not My Donna... but *Madonna*” (70), using the stereotype of Chicanas/os as strongly Catholic as a tool for humour. Later in the text, she explains:

I always like to make up fake elongated Spanish-sounding surnames not only to make their job more challenging but to add a little diversity to their life [...] [such as] Ms. Michele María Ruiz de la Verne de Fazio. (139)

These sequences function both as a mocking of the stereotype and a reclaiming of Chicano/a values and images (religion, names and surnames). The ambivalence between these two options is indeed part of the book’s intent.

In “Role Model Rule Number 6: Live Better, Work Union,” Michele encounters a painter who wants the writer to model for her because, in her words, her nose is not “one of those typical small, little upturned things,” but “looks very—how should I say?—Indian?” (82). As the narrator herself clearly states, this constitutes an instance of exoticization, in which the Other’s appearance becomes an exclusive good for consumption. bell hooks explains:

When race and ethnicity become commodified as resources for pleasure, the culture of specific groups, as well as the body of individuals, can be seen as constituting an alternative playground where members of dominating races, genders, sexual practices affirm their power-over in intimate relations with the Other. (in García 114)

Michele, however, quickly identifying this attitude as racist, does not position herself as a victim but as a subject in control. Through a process similar to Bhabha’s mimicry, she

seems to embrace the objectification; in a deeper level, nonetheless, she is committing an act of rebellion, as she “enters the game” to twist it to her advantage:

“I’m afraid ... well ...” I cringed. “You can’t have it for less than ... two hundred dollars.”

“Two hundred dollars!”

“A day.”

“That’s a lot just for a nose.”

“Yes, but it’s an Indian-looking nose, a member of [...] [t]he local union, Union 233.” My home address, but she wouldn’t know. “Aren’t you familiar with it?” (83)

By means of playing with a value that she recognizes as a fantasy, she manages to mock the stereotype and momentarily reverse the hierarchy, making clear that her “‘particular feature’ knew how to sniff out opportunity” (83). Humour here also serves as relief, helping her cope with a trauma that still exists. The confession that she “squeezed the sides of it again” (83)—an obsession that started with a friend’s derogatory comment—reveals the scope of the effects of racism, as well as the ongoing necessity of Serros’ social critical stance and rebellion. In addition, ambiguity in Serros’ actions—taking economic advantage of the situation—avoids her idealization.

The narrator repeats this appropriation strategy often throughout the text. In “Role Model Number 8: Reclaim Your Rights as a Citizen of Here, Here,” she denounces her constant subjectification to “The Question” about her origin, supposedly other than California or the US. As it happened in the story about her modelling nose, Michele refuses to be the subject of racism and challenges hierarchies and stereotypes from within, mocking the oppressive discourse through exaggeration and sarcasm:

“So, where are you from?”

“From Oxnard,” I answer.

“No, I mean originally.”

“Oh, St. John’s Hospital, the old one over on F Street.”

“No, you know what I mean!” (123)

She claims as well that “[s]ometimes when I’m asked The Question, I like to lie and make up areas within the Latin world from where I supposedly originated” (124), producing—again—a playful, trickster-like exercise of ambiguity that reminds us of the complexity of her experience. Serros adopts the logic of the interrogator to expose the absurdity laying in commonplaces such as automatically joining ethnicity and nationality:

LA OTHER: [...] I’m sixth-generation Californian!

ME: Sixth-generation Californian? Wow, you don’t look Mexican. (125)

This somewhat *Reductio ad absurdum* points at historical conflict between Mexico and the US, reminding us that it is indeed Michele who has the right to be in California, according to The Question’s nationalist logic. It also mocks the idea that she does not look “Californian enough”—as her friend Terri makes clear when choosing a nickname in page 16. Serros does not negate the necessity of adopting an identity or origin, she openly wonders, “[h]ow [did] he [know] where he was going if he didn’t know where he was from?” (127). Rather, her criticism is directed at the imposition of that identity by Anglo mainstream culture. She rejects the creation of “The Other,” consequently, she parodically positions herself as the powerful subject asking the questions and referring to the stranger as “La Other” (125). Michele does not want to lose her identity by being “universalized”; a premise ironized about in Donald P. McWhite’s letter in “Answer All Fan Mail”:

The average kid in Connecticut may not understand your stories and you need to make them accessible to everyone. Instead of using a colloquial term such as chicharrones, why not just pork or ham? A ham sandwich? [...] next time you sit down to write, think about the kid in Connecticut. (207)

Through expressions such as “you need to,” “why not,” or “the next time you sit down to write,” the author of the letter addresses Serros in a teacher-like, patronising tone. In addition, a word like “chicharrones” (Mexican) is considered “colloquial,” while “pork or ham” (Anglo) are supposedly universal. The repetition of “A ham sandwich?” underlines the absurdity of “Donald P. McWhite’s” petition. The inclusion of this letter in the chapter states a reproval of similar attitudes in 2000s’ US. It also serves Serros to position herself as agent, as readers are confronted with these critiques precisely in her second published book—and McWhite loses more authority as we furthermore read that he cannot manage to get published.

Following the inherent critique that the letter fragment states, the adoption of an identity, even if it is constrictive, must be necessarily undertaken. Oppressive identity definitions offer the opportunity to redefine that identity (like Judith Butler defended in *The Psychic Life of Power*) as the process of self-definition works against the rejected model, discarding and recuperating. Accordingly, Serros defines herself as Chicana but warns at the same time of the impossibility of spotting a definitory Chicana experience. In this way, she reclaims herself and speaks out for the Chicana community. More than disidentifying or distancing herself from “Chicana” identity, she deprives the original signifier of its imposed meanings—for instance, Spanish is problematized as a defining tag for Chicanism. By associating other meanings to the signifier “Chicana,” Serros redefines the term while using the same language: that is, she rejects the identity in its imposed version and embraces it in its personal, self-defined version.

2.2. Laughter as a Group Regulatory Tool in *How to Be a Chicana Role Model*

Humour in *How to Be a Chicana Role Model* does not only serve as a dialogic tool between cultures—in this case, mediating between the Anglo and the Chicano/a culture—but it can also provide a fundamental resource for ingroup criticism and for the creation of a sense of community. For Professor Daniel Belgrad, representations of Chicanism usually move in-between the emphasis of hybridity and communication and the exposure of conflict and difference. He states that these “enact a dialectic between accessibility (openness to the dominant culture) and inaccessibility (the assertion of difference), in which accessibility is shown to be necessary, but inaccessibility is finally insisted upon” (251). Likewise, Serros insists on the necessity of accessibility and communication; in this process, she denies more than once the myth of the idyllic community. Although security is found among her (Mexican-American) family, she is not oblivious of the many faults members “of her same community” can commit. Her internal criticism does not suppress, however, the challenging of the racism and conflict that still inevitably arise between the Anglo and the Chicana/o America.

In the analysis of the usefulness of humour in interpersonal criticism within the group, Gilbert’s description of the “antirhetoric” of humour (in Valencia 10), and the sympathy theory described by O’Donnell (in Hill and Fitzgerald 97) are especially relevant. Both refer to the power of the comic to reduce aggressiveness in the interpersonal exchange, and therefore, avoid conflict. As an example, throughout the text, there is an ongoing denunciation of a Chicano who organizes an event in which Serros reads her poetry, but for which he never pays her. Moreover, he remains unavailable to the numerous attempts of the narrator to contact him, while we learn that he is supposedly occupied in organizing “Latino-friendly” events such as a “Chicano Karaoke Club” (73), a “Cajete Mujer Conference” (73) or a “Hispanic Literature Series”

(160)—all ironically crafted names. Although Ernesto Chavez, Ph.D, seems a generous member of the community at first, it is soon made obvious that his obliviousness of Serros' calls is intentional, and that his dedication to the community is false. The censure of his behaviour is always stated in an implicational level but summarized in a witty—although sad—wordplay: “‘Really, he’s down for brown.’ [...] ‘No, listen. It’s not about brown, black or white, it’s all about green’” (86). Here, class relations are discussed: Serros' identity is dimensioned by her being a Chicana and a working-class member, and her intersectional perspective recognizes it. The attitude of “Mr. Community” (86) is finally condemned in “The Plaintiff, the Poet,” in which the narrator fantasizes with Mr. Chavez being declared guilty in a trial.

The assumption that a tight supporting community always comes from same-race peers is further problematized in “Role Model Number 2: Seek Support from Sistas.” First, Serros states: “[w]hen I first saw Jennifer I felt a connection right away. Hey, she’s Brown, like me” (22). Nevertheless, the narrator, telling the story in retrospect, distances herself from her initial position to subtly comment on this belief. Michele’s voluntary blindness on refusing to see Jennifer’s inadequacy for her fantasy of “[a] brown woman supporting another brown woman in a black world” (23) is not innocent. As the narrator adds: “[r]emember, it was the set of *In Living Color*” (23), the fictionality of the “black world” is extended to the possibility of a “brown” comradeship in this case. Thus, Serros soon ascertains that support is not exclusively found in an ethnic community where there can be internal discrimination, since other factors such as class intersect in the different identities of its members: “Maybe she didn’t recognize that I was a brown girl just like her. Maybe she didn’t care” (25). Similarly, Serros also addresses language issues and the divisions they cause within the Chicano/a community. Anzaldúa explains:

Because we internalize how our language has been used against us by the dominant culture, we use our language differences against each other. [...] We're afraid the other will think we're *agringadas* because we don't speak Chicano Spanish. We oppress each other trying to out-Chicano each other, vying to be the "real" Chicano. [...] There is no one Chicano language just as there is no one Chicano experience. (80)

In "Let's Go Mexico!" Michele confesses: "The main reason I wanted to learn more Spanish was for credit. The foreign-language credit" (101). The play between two of the meanings of 'credit'—as social recognition and as university recognition—mocks the idea that language (hispanophonia) must be a requisite for Chicanism, as does the self-irony in the constant references to Michele not speaking Spanish *well*.

On the other hand, the festive and celebratory nature of (some types of) humour can help to the building of the community. As people laugh together, they may find a private nexus in the understanding of the joke and in the sharing of joy. Although the whole text is somewhat interested in this kind of work—it is after all mostly directed to a young Chicana readership—, there is a passage that especially exemplifies it. In "Role Model Number 9: Any Press is Good Press," Michele enters into a discourse about the importance of ironing, something that "white people don't [do]" (140). The rest of the chapter, focused almost exclusively on irons, seems an exaggerated internal joke among Chicanas/os. In this episode, the excess of Martha's obsession with irons creates a parody or a campy picture; however, the intent seems to be more playful than subversive:

This one's left over from my sister's wedding. She got fifteen irons at her bridal shower. Can you believe that? Only fifteen! Anyway she kept eleven out of respect and gave the rest to family. I got this one. Look, it's still in the box, from May Company. Fancy, huh? (142)

Martha's (a *chola*) excessive interest in irons serves as well to mock her own "*chola* identity"; at one point, language resembles that of a proud gang-member showing a

knife: ““Check out the point on this thing.’ [...] ‘Yeah, it’s sharp’” (143). The portrayal of Martha Reyes’ obsession with ironing can also be read as a sarcastic caricature of Chicana or Mexican women as dedicated to cleaning work. In any event, excess leads to the defamiliarization of irons, which produces a comic absurd picture.

Conclusion

In *How to Be a Chicana Role Model*, Serros effectively uses humour as a tool for self-definition and empowerment, to encourage group formation, and to promote both intra and intercultural dialogue. In her performance, she explores Chicana identity and questions racist attitudes and stereotypes. Humour—irony, sarcasm, the absurd, the carnivalesque, etc.—manages to create a space where definitions can interact with one another and establish a new and more flexible conceptualization of Chicanism. Generic choices—*How to Be*'s similitude with chick lit—are also important: Serros enters the mainstream through a “light,” popular and comic genre, and actualizes it, contesting racism whilst vindicating celebration and enjoyment.

Serving as a dialogic tool between cultures, humour in *How to Be* can produce a comic defamiliarization in which the previously unquestioned racist images are now rendered incongruous. Mechanisms such as irony can be also used to establish a play of compliance and questioning of stereotypes which rejects universalism. Ambiguity is thus celebrated in small “acts of resistance” (García 112) against the imposition of an external definition. The “antirhetoric” (Gilbert, in Valencia 10) of humour proves very useful to make Serros’ criticism more effective in its tackling of under- and misrepresentation of Latinos/as, nationalist assumptions about origin based on appearance, cultural appropriation, romantization, exotization and idealization. The author does not reject the “Chicana” marker of identity but rather de-constructs it in its Anglo-imposed version, and defends a model of Chicanism that places ambiguity and openness at its very core.

Humour in the text is also directed towards in-group criticism and the formation of a sense of community. Serros addresses class issues within Chicano/a community, as

well as language issues (hispanophobia). In this regard, humour's "antirhetoric" (in Valencia 10) and "sympathy theory" (O'Donnell, in Hill and Fitzgerald 97) prove useful. On the other hand, parodic or campy images help in the building of a cultural community that laughs together.

Social commentary shaped in humorous popular forms can stand out in a world overflowed with information as a powerful means of self-assertion and rebellion, as has been proved by the analysis of *How to Be a Chicana Role Model*. Despite its apparent escapist nature, humour can be fundamental in the re-working of cultural relationships and individual self-conceptualization. For all its faults, it reveals itself as an alternative, empowering response to oppressive classification, creating a therapeutic space of contestation and constructive criticism.

Works Cited

- Alonzo, Cristela. *Cristela Alonzo: Lower Classy*. [video file]. 2017. *Netflix*, <<https://www.netflix.com/title/80117453>>. Accessed 18 April 2019.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Aunt Lute Books, 1987.
- Belgrad, Daniel. "Performing Lo Chicano." *MELUS*, vol. 29, no. 2, 2004, pp. 249-264.
- Bhabha, Homi. "The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha." Ed. J. Rutherford, *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. Lawrence and Wishart, 1990, pp. 207-221.
- Butler, Judith. *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford University Press, 1997.
- "Chick Lit." *COBUILD Advanced English Dictionary*. Collins Dictionary, 2019, <<https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/chick-lit>>. Accessed 09 May 2019.
- Crenshaw, Kimberle. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 43, no. 6, 1991, pp. 1241-1299.
- Critchley, Simon. *Sobre el humor*. Translated by Antonio Lastra, Quálea Editorial, 2002.
- Del Barco, Mandalit. "Remembering 'Generation Mex' Writer and Proud Outsider Michele Serros." January 7, 2015. *National Public Radio*, <<https://www.npr.org/2015/01/07/375640110/remembering-generation-mex-writer-and-proud-outsider-michele-serros?t=1559036340547>>. Accessed 22 May 2019.

Díaz Bild, Aída. *Humor y Literatura: Entre la liberación y la subversión*. Universidad de La Laguna, 2000.

Eysturoy, Annie O. *Daughters of Self-Creation. The Contemporary Chicana Novel*. University of New Mexico Press, 1996.

García, Emma. "SERIOUSLY FUNNY: A Critique of Hollywood's Post-Colonial Gaze in the Work of Michele Serros." *Chicana/Latina Studies*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2009, pp. 104-133.

Gilbert, Joanne R. "Performing Marginality: Comedy, Identity, and Cultural Critique." *Text and Performance Quarterly*, vol. 17, 1997, pp. 317-330.

Gutiérrez-Jones, Carl Scott. "Humor, Literacy and Trauma in Chicano Culture." *Comparative Literature Studies*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2003, pp. 112-126.

Hill, L. Brooks, and Brandon Fitzgerald. "Humor Reconsidered with Prospects for Interethnic Relations." *Intercultural Communication Studies*, vol. XI, no. 4, 2002, pp. 93-108.

"Hispanic Population [1]." 2006-2015, Pew Research Center analysis of American Community Survey (1% IPUMS). *Pew Research Center*, <<https://www.pewhispanic.org/2017/09/18/facts-on-u-s-latinos/#hispanic-pop>>. Accessed 23 May 2019.

"Hispanic Population [2]." 1980-2000, Pew Research Center analysis of U.S. decennial census data (5% IPUMS). *Pew Research Center*, <<https://www.pewhispanic.org/2017/09/18/facts-on-u-s-latinos/#hispanic-pop>>. Accessed 23 May 2019.

- Luna Estévez, María Olga. *El humor como agente subversivo y liberador en el proceso de reconstrucción de la identidad femenina en la ficción chicana*. Doctoral Thesis, UNED, 2015.
- Mabry, Sarah. *Transculturalism in Chicano Literature, Visual Art, and Film*. Master's Thesis, Brandeis University, 2018.
- Martínez Falquina, Silvia. *Indias y fronteras: el discurso en torno a la mujer étnica*. KRK, 2004.
- Serros, Michele. *How to Be a Chicana Role Model*. Riverhead Books, 2000.
- “Share Mexican Origin [1].” 1850-2000, Pew Research Center analysis of U.S. decennial census data (5% IPUMS). *Pew Research Center*, <<https://www.pewhispanic.org/2017/09/18/facts-on-u-s-latinos/#share-mexican-origin>>. Accessed 23 May 2019.
- “Share Mexican Origin [2].” 2006-2015, Pew Research Center analysis of American Community Survey (1% IPUMS). *Pew Research Center*, <<https://www.pewhispanic.org/2017/09/18/facts-on-u-s-latinos/#share-mexican-origin>>. Accessed 23 May 2019.
- Shih, Margaret, Courtney Bonam, Diana Sánchez, and Courtney Peck. “The Social Construction of Race: Biracial Identity and Vulnerability to Stereotypes.” *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2007, pp. 125-133.
- Smith, Caroline J. *Cosmopolitan Culture and Consumerism in Chick Lit*. Routledge, 2008.

Valencia, Sonia Ivette. *¡Que Funny!: Humor in Contemporary Chicana/o Cultural Productions*. Master's Thesis, Georgetown University, 2012.

Young, Robert J. C. *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West*. Routledge, 1990.