

HUMORING RESISTANCE

*laughter and the excessive body
in latin american women's fiction*

DIANNA C. NIEBYLSKI

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Iberian Thought and Culture

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Dianna C. Niebylski

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*For my brother Javier and my sisters Faviana and Jackie,
with whom I share all kinds of humor*



*For my son Christopher, who has learned to humor the world,
and laugh at himself, in several languages*

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Introduction



Laughter has the remarkable power of making an object come up close, of drawing it into a zone of crude contact where one can finger it familiarly on all sides, turn it upside down, inside out, peer at it from above and below, break open its external shell, look into its centre, doubt it, take it apart, dismember it, lay it bare and expose it, examine it freely and experiment with it.

Mikael Bakhtin, “Epic and the Novel”

In providing libidinal gratification, laughter can also provide an analytic for understanding the relationships between the social and the symbolic while allowing us to imagine these relationships differently.

JoAnna Isaak, *Feminism and Contemporary Art:
The Revolutionary Power of Women’s Laughter*

Toward the middle of Ana Lydia Vega’s story “Pasión de historia” [“Red Hot Story”],¹ there is a moment when the story’s narrator, an aspiring writer, and her friend Vilma, an unhappily married femme fatale trying to cling to a Caribbean sense of pleasure in a sleepy French village, break into spontaneous laughter over a comment Vilma makes about the meal she is about to serve for dinner. In a rare show of domesticity, the spirited Vilma has taken over her mother-in-law’s kitchen to cook a traditional Puerto Rican meal of rice and beans. She does so in honor of her visiting friend, but she is well aware that her French family finds the dish unpalatable, uncivilized, and, worse, indigestible. As she begins to dish out generous portions of the “great Puerto Rican national stew” onto the “resigned plates” of her husband and in-laws, Vilma tells Carola (in Puerto Rican Spanish, so the others will not understand) that her recipe will “hit them like a stink bomb.”² Vilma’s comment, with its nasty scatological implications, catches the normally reserved narrator off guard, causing her to lose her composure for the first time in the story. As the women start howling, the rules of civility begin to crumble

and the normal routine around the dinner table quickly disintegrates. Vilma chokes. The old couple watches in disbelief and discomfort, and their long faces further feed the women's laughing frenzy. The husband sits nursing his quiet but visible rage at being left out of the joke. And no wonder. While it lasts, the unpremeditated laughter turns the narrator and her friend into women who are suddenly capable of becoming temporary agents of disruption even in the face of grim disapproval. The comic exchange, neither witty nor verbally offensive in this case, nevertheless has the effect of turning the two exotic but marginalized women into potential harbingers of social and cultural chaos.

An emancipatory signal and a warning sign of more dramatic transgressions to come, the laughing spectacle opens up a space for indecorous excess and illicit pleasure, a space the narrator has been eager to explore from the beginning of the story. Loud and literally uncontrollable, the two women's laughter at the dinner table has immediate and disturbing effects. It shatters convention, it augurs trouble for family and community, and it momentarily topples the gender, age, and ethnic hierarchies encoded in the different bodies that share the stereotypically bourgeois kitchen. Significantly, the burst of unexpected laughter propels the friends into visible, and offensive, physical action: they are literally *shaking* with laughter. As material evidence of a surplus libidinal energy stemming from the two women's bodies, this laughter angers those who are outside the joke (the old parents-in-law and the young husband), forcing them to take defensive measures in return.

"Pasión de historia" is part of a rapidly growing corpus of works by contemporary Latin American women authors who engage multiple "genres of laughter" (Laura Mulvey's term) and a wide variety of "performative" excesses in order to explore alternative forms of resistance to mechanisms of control and containment.³ Markedly disparate in tone, mood, and style, these works have in common their refusal to participate in the discourse of victimization that has long dominated the writings of Latin American women and conditioned a large segment of Latin American feminist criticism centered heavily on this perspective. Narratives of victimization revolve around the traits of self-abnegation, elusiveness, invisibility, compliant speech, and obedient silence, tropes often associated with the discourses of "purity," or idealized femininity. By contrast, contemporary texts by Latin American women who engage the comic vision—lightly, darkly, ironically or absurdly—seek to counter the rarefied images and purified sounds of victimized femininity with the more entropic images and more dissonant sounds often associated with the traditions of the carnivalesque, the grotesque, black comedy, or camp.

To date, Latin American literary criticism has shown little or no interest in listening to women's humor or hearing their laughter. This oversight can be attributed to a general indifference to comic discourses as legitimate modes of literary expression, an indifference that has resulted in the underestimation

of some first-rate authors and the dismissal of whole literary subgenres. Yet, while the last few decades have witnessed a growing interest in certain types of humor in works by canonical and newly canonized male writers (Jorge Luis Borges, Julio Cortázar, Jorge Amado, Gabriel García Márquez, Guillermo Cabrera Infante, and Luis Rafael Sánchez, among others), less easily identifiable modalities of humor present in the literary production of so many contemporary Latin American women writers have been all but ignored. In a plenary lecture delivered at the opening of the prestigious Julio Cortázar Series at the University of Guadalajara on the subject of Hispanic humor in April 2000, Alfredo Bryce Echenique neglected to mention a single Latin American, or Spanish, woman author.⁴ Although Bryce cites a passage from Erica Jong's 1973 bestseller *Fear of Flying* in his opening quotations, he never mentions another woman in the course of his lecture. One might have hoped that the geographical location of the lecture series (Guadalajara, Mexico) would have inspired this novelist and critic to make a passing reference to Rosario Castellanos, or at least to her predecessor Sor Juana. Given the physical proximity of their works and wit, their absence from his sweeping historical overview would seem to indicate an almost willful indifference to, or ignorance of, Hispanic women's humor. Even as he insists on the need to transcend old clichés about humor as the special province of certain national or regional groups, on this important occasion Bryce Echenique remains deaf to the realm of women's laughter.

Feminist approaches to Latin American narratives have been likewise slow in identifying and validating the importance of humor as a transgressive discourse by contemporary Latin American women. There are important individual exceptions, of course. Some excellent studies have appeared on the subversive use of irony in Sor Juana, on the ironic mode in Rosario Castellanos, on the uses of verbal wit in Luisa Valenzuela's short stories, on carnivalesque parody in Caribbean women authors (especially Ana Lydia Vega and Rosario Ferré), and I refer to many of these in subsequent chapters. But there has been no attempt to theorize the versatile humor of Latin American women authors as a growing and significant mode of strategic resistance in contemporary Latin American fiction. Even Debra Castillo's groundbreaking *Talking Balk* and Jean Franco's deservedly celebrated *Plotting Women*, while examining multifarious forms of gendered resistance, privilege non-ludic aspects either of domestic tasks and private or public gender conflicts.⁵ Largely preoccupied with rescuing more sober tactics of transgression or reclaiming previously silenced voices, women-centered criticism has touched only sporadically, and tangentially, on the importance of contemporary women authors' incursions into light and dark comic practices.

In an effort to redress this gap in our critical corpus, this book explores the production of humor in works by women authors who foreground to role

or the performance of female bodily excess in the production of different types of humor. As fluid and ambiguous somatic articulations, corporeal expressions of excess are not confined to the same discursive laws as ordinary speech or more regulated bodily gestures—hence their unsuspected and unexpected powers of dissolution, disruption, and dislocation. Often aimed at dissolving fixed limits and borders or poking holes in the pretentious or reductive solemnity of social institutions and cultural grammars, the practices of gendering humor and embodying excess studied in this volume encourage ex-centricity and uncivil disobedience. The strategic and heuristic significance of these practices lies in their potential for revisiting old conflicts and old *aporias* from unexpected angles.

Sharing a commitment to the comic vision does not imply sharing an identical sense of humor. Neither does it imply sharing a common objective for the deployment of that humor. Ranging in mood from sappy and sentimental to aggressively hostile or disconcertingly entropic, the works examined engage different moods of humor, revealing, in the process, diverse ways in which humor can lead to different degrees of resistance, transgression, or subversion. Despite some common targets, crucial ideological differences separate the sentimental comedy of Laura Esquivel's *Como agua para chocolate* [*Like Water for Chocolate*], the carnivalesque bawdiness of Ana Lydia Vega's "Pasión de historia" ["Red Hot Story"], the skeptical wit and ironic humor of Luisa Valenzuela's *Realidad nacional desde la cama* [*Bedside Manners*], the devastating black humor of Armonía Somers's *Sólo los elefantes encuentran mandrágora* [*Only Elephants Find Mandrake*], and the entropic camp humor of Alicia Borinsky's *Cine continuado* [*All Night Movie*].⁶ I chose these particular texts because of their singular insights into the relationship between different modalities of humor and the "humoring" of female excess. Furthermore, by linking texts normally characterized by their disparities rather than their structural, narrative, or thematic similarities, I aim to make an even more persuasive case for the pervasive rhetorical forcefulness of humor and corporeal humors as potential sources for dislocating and exposing solemn and solidified historical and cultural impasses that cut across generic, regional, and national borders.

Throughout this book, I use the term "humor" and the adjective "comic" broadly and generically to refer to a range of discursive strategies meant to provoke an active response from readers who apprehend the incongruity, double-voicedness, absurdity, or hyperbolic nature of the articulation, utterance, or situation.⁷ Much can be learned from the generic preferences of the works I study, but any attempt to impose a too-rigid taxonomy on the multivalent types of laughter that emerge from these works would have the effect of reducing the degree of ambivalence present in the forms of humor and excess studied. This would be regrettable. A certain degree of semantic am-

bivalence is part of what makes the differently coded humor and humors I discuss strategically useful and rhetorically rich.

Although they engage and conflate many different comic genres, the works I have selected share important thematic parallels that cut across generic and national borders. The first and perhaps most notable of these parallels centers on the notion of how to refigure female subjectivity. With their wide parameters for play and performance, the use of both light and dark comic techniques opens up unexpected possibilities for challenging notions of fixed (gendered) identity and codified gendered behavior. Even in the mildest comic frame analyzed in this book—the sentimental humor of *Como agua para chocolate*—the presence of Gertrudis as an unorthodox female subject among so many conventionally feminine types constitutes the novel's most radical strategy and its one attempt to offer an incongruous model of comic femininity. Albeit sporadic, the appearances of this outrageous, boundless Gertrudis have a decentering and destabilizing effect on the spaces around her, enough to temporarily rattle the novel's clichéd romantic assumptions. In a more skeptical and more satirical comic vein, Luisa Valenzuela's *Realidad nacional desde la cama* experiments with the unexpected disruptiveness of a lethargic, exhausted, and seemingly passive protagonist who remains in bed for the duration of the novel. Despite the limitations of her supine position, this *apparently* unpatriotic, *apparently* indifferent woman manages to resist the threat of a military takeover and to help unite the rebels without abandoning her bed until the last paragraph of the novel. At the more entropic end of the humor spectrum, the possibilities for experimenting with alternative models of female subject construction are even more dramatic: anything goes in Alicia Borinsky's *Cine continuado*, where riotous, anarchic women masquerade their way in and out of multiple selves and mutating bodies, spreading chaos while experimenting with desire as a source of excess or superfluosity. In these as in other constructions of unconventional female subjects, there is a clear preference for excessive, dissolute, "contaminated," or lawless women, women whose very presence serves both to mock the limiting potential of fixed gender roles and to highlight the need to explore the values of transience and multiplicity in ever more recombinant options.

The unstable nature of these fluid or mutating female subjects contributes powerfully to the lightly comic, darkly comic, or grotesquely comic explosiveness of the humor I examine. But so does the recurrent sense of comic *rage* that emerges, in diverse ways and to varying degrees, from these same narratives. Appropriating Freudian assumptions about the liberating role of aggression in various kinds of humor, all the works I study find ways to exploit humor's creatively destructive impulses. In Armonía Somers's *Sólo los*

elefantes encuentran mandrágora, a chronically ill protagonist delights at the prospect of infecting her doctors with her body's own black (or at least darkly yellow) humor: her barely controlled fury feeds the narrative's nihilistic rhetoric and its anarchist politics. Ana Lydia Vega's bawdy femmes fatales play hard at games of pleasure, but the narrator's boisterous laughter cannot hide the story's underlying sense of barely repressed consternation, both toward the culture that forces women into limited and limiting sexual stereotypes, and toward the women who are not clever enough to escape the stereotypes imposed on them by their circumstances. Even Laura Esquivel's conciliatory tragicomic melodrama revolves around women "at the boiling point." The specific targets of comic rage vary significantly from narrative to narrative, but the recurrent hostility is almost always aimed at all-too-restraining or containing familial, social, and cultural environments.

Not all the laughter in these narratives is sufficiently ambivalent, destructive, explosive, or entropic to be "Medusan," in Hélène Cixous's sense of the term.⁸ Even in its mildest forms, however, the laughter threatens to derail cultural mechanisms that aim to repress women's bodies or their humor. What is more, where the practice of bodily excess and laughter is truly anarchic, the ideological and political intent is less clearly directive or prescriptive. In other words, in the darker and less festive of the novels studied here, the ludic subversions target multiple sociocultural orders simultaneously, resulting in a predictable sense of ambiguity or outright confusion. In *Realidad nacional desde la cama*, *Sólo los elefantes encuentran mandrágora*, and *Cine continuado*, the mix of skeptical or entropic humor and bodily humors succeeds in shattering inherited moral and ethical certainties but resists proposing easy substitutes—facile role reversals least of all. At the darker end of the spectrum, women's humor opts for a strategy on ongoing destabilization rather than reconciliation or substitution.

It might be difficult, at first glance, to relate the comic or grotesque activities of these disruptive, contagious, or openly riotous female subjects to the chatty and even garrulous nature of the voices that narrate their story. Without underestimating the thematic and tonal differences in the narratives considered, it is worth noting that they frequently revolve around conversations, reports of past or present events, or gossip about recipes, revolutions, and rebellious women. Because the conversations are seldom rendered as dialogue but rather are retold as story, the style is rich in verbiage—a common trait of women's narratives whether comic or not. Ironically and unexpectedly, this trait is least evident in *Como agua para chocolate*, where the narrative reflects a surprisingly monologic structure and flavor. Yet it is exuberantly present in Ana Lydia Vega's long story "Pasión de historia," in which the narrator's celebration of the bilingual verbosity strikes the reader as one

of the story's best features. It is plainly in evidence in Luisa Valenzuela's conversational skepticism and in Alicia Borinsky's talk-show-style vignettes. The least overtly conversational of the narratives I scrutinize is Armonía Somers's *Sólo los elefantes encuentran mandrágora*, but even this richly intricate, unapologetically difficult novel derives much of its thickly bilious humor from the gushing dissemination of verbose tales that make up the narrative. Here stories lead invariably to other stories, and telling tales becomes a pathological necessity for the novel's ill and ill-humored protagonist.

Arguing against the generally accepted masculinist gendering of deconstructive practices, British science fiction writer Gwyneth Jones states that "[d]econstruction is . . . a markedly *feminine* activity of curiosity, greed, gossip, insatiable pursuit of secret details, the reckless, inquisitive adventure of Pandora or Bluebeard's last bride. Its project is to bring us *more*, not less, from any text or any genre template: more information, more implications, more possibilities." (130). The story-driven, gossipy, detail-hungry narratives I examine have a sharp deconstructive bite. In fact, by laying bare not only the dynamic of competing verbal discourses but the role that body language plays in the production of these discourses, these texts move beyond a discursive semantics of resistance and toward a somatized performance of the same, one in which the boisterous voice becomes indistinguishable from the permeable body.

Occasionally, the superimposition of gossipy or garrulous narrative voices has the effect of diminishing the narratives' more tendentious and potentially "offensive" humor. But nothing can deflect attention away from the intrusive presence of the female body as an incontinent, indecent, torpid, sick, or lawless source of the light or dark humor in these works. As I discuss at greater length in the next chapter, these texts share a common fascination with anchoring verbal and situational humor in the "humored" bodies and the embodied "humors," of their female characters.⁹ Whether uncontainable or torpid, degraded, mutant or mutating, the female bodies present in these narratives are resistant to any and all attempts to tame, streamline, or diffuse the light or dark "humors" that afflict them. If "writing with the body," as both Luisa Valenzuela and Hélène Cixous remind us, is both a liberating exercise and an act of resistance, writing with the body's "humors" is nothing less than an explosive act, whether the "humors" are melancholic, hot-blooded, skeptical, phlegmatic, or choleric. I do not mean to imply that all forms of humor examined in subsequent chapters grow directly out of the physical actions or bodily functions of female characters (although often they do); rather, that an intimate, visceral awareness of the connection between gendered humor and women's bodies conditions every aspect of these narratives.

DETERRITORIALIZED HUMOR, LOCAL ACCENTS

Because humor is a social as well as a discursive phenomenon, it bears national, cultural, and sometimes regional imprints of the environment in which it is produced or performed. The humor of certain local stereotypes and cultural practices in Laura Esquivel's *Como agua para chocolate* can be appreciated fully only in the context of Mexican history, Mexican cuisine and its crucial role in defining cultural identity, and a certain uniquely Mexican type of popular melodrama. Similarly, the overlapping curves and cul-de-sacs of Ana Lydia Vega's comic strategies are best understood in the context of *choteo* or *guachafita*, a decidedly Caribbean expression of humorous excess. There are recognizable traces of a distinctly urban *porteño* comic skepticism in Valenzuela's *Realidad nacional desde la cama*. Alicia Borinsky's *Cine continuado* reflects the influence of tango culture (itself a national pastime easily given to parodic imitation). Armonía Somers's biliously black humor bears traces of a specifically *platense* comic-gothic sensibility (the term *platense* comes from the Río de la Plata, the river that separates Montevideo from Buenos Aires).¹⁰

One of the discoveries I made in the course of this project, however, was to note that as the humor becomes more aggressive or entropic, the traces of national or regional inflections become less relevant to the strategic deployment of that humor. Valenzuela's urban Argentine wit cannot be separated from the author's incorporation of a very literary modern European tradition of comic skepticism. Borinsky's hyperbolic, postmodern irreverence blends a colloquial use of black humor often associated with the criminal element in Buenos Aires with a much more transnational generic use of camp humor. Somers's highly metaliterary narrative reflects clearly the influence of multiple strands of modernist and postmodernist humor that borrow heavily from European and North American traditions of the gothic-grotesque. Although I am cognizant of the risks involved in approaching discursive models across national and regional borders, the performative nature of excessive bodies I encountered in the course of this project points me toward the realization that much of contemporary women's humor has a strong "bordered" or transnational streak. Thus, while in my analyses of individual texts I discuss the "subversive particularity" (to use Neil Larsen's term) of specific kinds of discursive humor, highly embodied expressions of comic and grotesque excess offer evidence of cultural transbordering. To put it differently, there is substantial evidence to argue that heavily embodied comic practices have a higher index of "translatability," or transcultural exportability, than strictly discursive modes of humor.

It is interesting to note, in this context, that three of these narratives are situated on national frontiers or in cities that reflect the reality of border cultures: *Como agua para chocolate* is set in Coahuila, on the frontier between

Mexico and the United States; *Realidad nacional desde la cama* appears to take place on the frontier between Argentina and Uruguay; and the stories told in Ana Lydia Vega's "Pasión de Historia" take place both within and outside the borders of San Juan, Puerto Rico (itself a "border" city). The other two narratives feature movable characters all too familiar with the vicissitudes of national and international exile. Although the borderline cartographies of these narratives are hardly necessary elements for the practice of the kind of "transbordered humor" I discuss here, they are nevertheless an important reflection of the increasingly porous boundaries of national and cultural identity.

Given these transversal scenarios, I think it pertinent that in Spanish the words *travesura* (prank, mischief), which often relates to humor and play, and *travesía* (crossing) are etymologically related to the verb *atravesar* (to cross, to go through). The double-coded, often double-crossing element in humor not only encourages but demands a willingness to cross borders of various kinds: generic borders, national borders, ideological borders, tonal borders, discursive borders. Because a "neutral" practice of humor could only be a contradiction in terms, I make no attempt to occupy a position of neutrality in my many border crossings. My preferences for certain kinds of humor, and certain kinds of bodily humors, are fully in evidence in the chapters that follow. But this too is part of negotiating the comic crossings.

THEORIZING LATIN AMERICAN WOMEN'S LAUGHTER

In the passage mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Vilma's deceptively simple "joke" ("this hits them like a stink bomb") momentarily obscures the very mixed sources of the laughter that follows. Despite the comic aggressiveness of the remark, the reader senses a curious disproportion between the women's laughter and Vilma's actual comment. It is easy enough to conclude that the women are not laughing at the comment itself but at the character's witchy plan to inflict something like a Montezuma's revenge on her French family, but this speculation only adds to the possible source, or multiple sources, of the uncontrollable laughter.

Since it is clear from the story that the provocative femme fatale has been waiting for a chance to avenge herself on her overly jealous husband and her oedipal mother-in-law, the joke appears, on one level, to be a classic feminist joke, one that relies on a typical marker of female domesticity (cooking) to enact an angry but funny transgression. Yet the fact that Vilma has decided to cook this particular meal on the day of the U.S. invasion of Puerto Rico (a date the women remember because it also just happens to be the day on which Puerto Ricans "celebrate" their pseudo-Constitution) suggests that the joke may rest not on a gendered comic revenge but on a postcolonial one

instead. It might be, finally, that what provokes the women's laughter is their sense that they have temporarily usurped the stiff hegemonic order of this country-French kitchen by imposing both their foreign ingredients and their loud foreign accents at the dinner table on a day that has significance only to them. My point is that, while the joke elicits immediate reactions from all those present (hilarity from the women themselves, confusion from the in-laws, rage from the husband), the source of the joke, and the real or potential targets of the laughter it elicits, are diffuse enough to discourage any one-sided explanation of the comic transaction as a culturally bound joke, a carnivalesque scatological joke, or a joke with a strictly feminist edge. A combination of all these reasons might begin to provide a more complete explanation of the "source" and the target(s) of the humor in this passage, but any attempt at bringing together these competing discourses, however necessary, proves messy.

In "Women and Humor," a review of theoretical works on North American and British women's humor and critics' attempts to theorize it, Eileen Gillooly arrives at the conclusion that while women's humor may be "intercategorical," it is not "undifferentiated" (476). Writing about the "unruly woman" in Hollywood films and television, Kathleen Rowe makes a similar point when she notes that "[t]he genres of laughter have long proven elusive and difficult to theorize . . . [yet] that is no reason for feminists not to investigate these genres for what they might teach us, not only about the construction of gender within repressive social and symbolic structures, but also about how those structures might be changed"(5). With other students of women's humor, I am persuaded that women authors' "renegade" comic or carnivalesque tactics are best studied within frames that are fluid or porous enough to encompass the hybrid nature of the texts as well as their mixed humor. Among the contemporary writers I examine, there is a marked preference for narratives that combine and conflate comic, grotesque, and carnivalesque genres and subgenres; it would be misguided to attempt to frame any one single narrative within a single comic genre. In other words, among the various forms of resistance practiced by these authors is a resistance to rigid generic demarcations. For this reason, I have adopted the broader category of "genres of laughter"—a category used by Laura Mulvey and later by Kathleen Rowe in their respective studies of feminist and profeminist humor in Hollywood films and television—for discussing widely divergent if representative ways of humoring resistance studied in this book. As should become evident through my analyses of individual works, the articulation of light and dark laughter and the performance of bodily excess play themselves *differentially* across the gendered humor spectrum.

I came to this project as a literary critic and with the intention of approaching my subject largely from the perspective of literary analysis. Yet the