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**The Use of Humor in Manuel Mujica Láinez's  
*Crónicas reales***

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[Hipertexto](#)

In this paper I show how humor in the work *Crónicas reales*, by the Argentine writer Manuel Mujica Láinez, pushes features of both the baroque and the postmodern to the surface. First, I provide a brief review of humor as a concept.<sup>1</sup> Second, a brief summary of the career of the writer leads into my description of the work I will be analyzing. Third, I present some considerations about the time period in which Mujica wrote *Crónicas*. Fourth, I consider how the Latin American baroque aligns with textual postmodernism to place *Crónicas reales* in what I am going to call the postmodern baroque. I will finish with a few textual examples of humor in this work to provide a clearer idea of the term postmodern baroque as a reading technique.

One of the blockbuster movies of the summer of 2007 was the Simpsons' new cartoon, made into a feature-length experience. But for any of you who watch the Simpsons, either regularly or from time to time, their story is our story. We all laugh and giggle at the antics, but behind the colorful characterizations (Marge with her big blue hair, Bart his irreverent vocabulary, Lisa with her uncharacteristic and precocious insight and intelligence, all not, I must add, much different than how Mujica describes his characters in *Crónicas reales*), their family is OUR family. In broad terms, Matt Groening's cartoon, as a humorous

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<sup>1</sup> Neither Naomi Lindstrom, in her book *Twentieth-Century Spanish American Fiction* nor Gerald Martin, writing in his 1989 book *Journeys Through the Labyrinth: Latin American Fiction in the Twentieth Century*, pay attention to humor as a defining feature of fiction from Latin America. Mujica Láinez's use of humor as technique not only strengthens his already large corpus of narrative, historical, and journalistic writings, it opens up the possibility of including humorous literature as an important part of the Latin American literary tradition.

series of mishaps, “is a constant in [our] human lives, ever present, although ever changing, and inextricably tangled up with art” (Wick Reaves 9).

As the Simpsons cartoon/movie shows us, comedy allows our version of reality to be what it ought to be rather than what it has to be (Feibleman 421). There is evidence of this in the interesting but brief history of one certain document used briefly during the conquest of the New World by Spain. As a way to convince themselves they had rightly taken over the indigenous populations, the conquerors read a *requerimiento* or requirement. In short, the *requerimiento* “based Spanish claims to authority not on simple conquest but on the donation of the new lands to Spain by the pope” (Kamen 97). This document was narrated out loud to the natives, stipulating to them “that if they did not accept the Spanish obedience and the Christian religion they would be treated as rebels, dispossessed of their property and enslaved” (Kamen 97). Upon reading the statement, Bartolomé de las Casas evidently reacted with ambivalence, not knowing “whether to laugh or cry” (quoted in Kamen 97) since for him it seemed ludicrous to speak in a language the natives had no way of understanding. The author of the document, Juan López de Palacios Rubios, reacted similarly. The historian Henry Kamen notes that “Palacios Rubios ‘could not stop laughing’ when [Fernández de Oviedo] told him what some commanders had done with it” (97). This example does not and should not allow a comic interpretation of the conquest by any means. It does exemplify, however, the ambiguous but at the same time important role humor can have in interpretation. As another example, in *Songoro cosongo*, one critic notes how Nicolás Guillén’s poetry displays humor as criticism that allows readers to “recognize in the comical pathos their own insecurities and intracultural violence. Social life...is made up of these violent, comical encounters, in which all wear masks that both express and repress the pain” (González Echeverría, *Celestina’s Brood...* 204). Comedy is critical; it pushes limits but hesitates to accept those limits (Feibleman 429).

As I show in another part of this paper, a postmodern reading lays bare the many connecting features, or limits, of an exclusive discourse and uses those empty spaces to re-think and re-situate elements in a new configuration. This new register, however, introduces ambiguity and thus becomes, in the case of Latin American cultural production, a positive threat to a prevailing discourse that normalizes. “In a social situation demanding strict gender and sexual formation as integral to the political performance of national ‘being,’ not being available for easy reading was both a danger and a form of civil disobedience” (Taylor 19). Humor exposes limits between elements, revealing those spaces as vulnerable. Through Mujica Láinez’s use of humor and “Through the exposition of their connectivity, limitations are unexpectedly exposed and the comic aspect is brought into dominant relief” (Feibleman 431). “The criticism which comedy makes of all actual things and events is aimed specifically at their formal structures” (Feibleman 428), so humor, as a baroque element, creates the possibility to turn back on the configuration of things and to expose a different perception of that original arrangement. “Actuality may contain value, so comedy seems to argue, but it is capable of containing more of value; and it is necessary to dissolve those things and events which have some value in order to procure

others which have a greater amount” (Feibleman 430). Humor in Mujica Láinez allows textual narrative to entertain. Instead of a singular interpretation of narrative events, humor in the plot opens internal laws that pertain only to characters. This aperture gives the reader more capability to do two things. First, the opening allows the reader to laugh and have fun. Second, it begins a process of interpretation knowing that the text is not insurmountable. Humor demystifies the epic stature of the historical chronicle, Mujica’s choice of narratological mechanism associated with the official discourse of power that tells of founding moments of a city, state, or nation. Mujica, in *Crónicas reales* as in his work *Misteriosa Buenos Aires*, brings down the stature of official text to the level of and for all readers (Barraza Jara).

Laughter, the physical reaction to a humorous situation, is at best ambiguous (Gay 328). It can serve as, however, one possible route to undoing deep foundations of a society or culture. The presence of humorous situations in *Crónicas reales* points to the author’s contemplation on the past and current situation in Argentina (Pérez 532), for as I show here, beneath the humor in Mujica’s work are true realities that are not impossible to criticize, laugh at, or ultimately, reevaluate in a different register. Diana Taylor notes the liberating performance capabilities in the work of the Brazilian entertainer Denise Stoklos where “The colonizer/colonized spectacle [in Latin America] is always double-coded. Something else is always happening beneath the seemingly transparent routines imposed by the new masters” (Taylor 18). Taylor here invokes an element of a baroque aesthetics, as defined by Ilán Stavans: “a style [that] is likely to flourish in environments where a variety of diverse, often antagonistic ethnic, linguistic, and religious backgrounds clash, generating a state of impurity and contamination, an atmosphere of hybridization...” (Stavans xxx). In stand-up comedy, for example, the audience laughs at jibes and jokes that may not be directed at individuals who make up the audience. But our reaction through laughter is aimed at ourselves, “at our humorlessness and overseriousness, at our pretensions, violent customs, and deadly ignorance” (Larner 115). Comedy presented in this type of arena could very well be designated as baroque performance, for “through [baroque] poetic representation a voice once connected to a particular individual body... is made to ‘speak’ in the interest of another” (Bultman 455). In Mujica Láinez’s humor, despite a dominant culture’s intent (military authoritarianism, in the case of Argentina) of forging a universal identity for the dominated (a democratic society), not everything is transparent or clearly defined because ultimately the reader might react with a laugh which, as I show below, re-positions what was originally thought to be solidly foundational.

Manuel Mujica Láinez or “Manucho” as he is known by some was born in Buenos Aires in 1910 to an affluent family. He spent his youth traveling in Europe. His connections and kinship with the upper echelons of Argentine society, as he grows older and as his ancestral privilege allows him, permit him to develop strong relationships with Argentina’s best writers of the twentieth century. These ties with writers such as Victoria Ocampo allow him the chance to write and publish in highly respectable journals and newspapers of the literary world. Soon, there is widespread recognition of Mujica Láinez’s writings. His

career as journalist spans almost five decades and his fame as writer of narrative and historical fictions eventually extend throughout all of Argentina, Latin America, and Europe. In 1963 he receives the Premio Nacional de Literatura. His works have been translated into more than fifteen languages. Mujica Láinez dies in Córdoba, Argentina, at his house El Paraíso, on April 21, 1984 after a highly successful career. Yet, a highly reputable literary career notwithstanding and aside from a passing mention by the small number of scholars dedicated to studying Mujica Láinez, *Crónicas reales* has received virtually no attention from literary critics, the same critics who show interest in writers that shape narrative fiction of Latin America. While I focus on only one aspect of one of his works in this paper, Mujica Láinez's entire career and writings deserve more attention than they have received over the years. The handful of articles and a small number of books devoted to him do little justice in remembering one of Argentina's and Latin America's most respected writers of the twentieth century.

Mujica Láinez published *Crónicas reales* in 1967 in Buenos Aires with Editorial Sudamericana. The work is available currently in two formats. On the date already mentioned it was published by Sudamericana as one work with no ISBN number. On the cover of this edition is a black and white reproduction of an oil painting titled "El Castillo," painted in 1966 by Horacio Butler, which is part of the collection of Enrique T. Bonelli, of Rosario, Argentina. This edition measures 7 inches by 4  $\frac{3}{4}$  inches, and can be obtained through online booksellers such as Alibris or Barnes and Noble who then acquire the book through independent bookstores catering specifically to foreign language texts. It is also available as part of Mujica Láinez's *Cuentos completos*, volume two, published by Alfaguara in Madrid, Spain in 2001. In this collection are, in addition to "Crónicas reales," "El brazalete y otros cuentos," "Un novelista en el museo del Prado," and "Cuentos dispersos." Mujica Láinez's papers are located in the Rare Books and Special Collections Library at Princeton University but there is no mention of *Crónicas reales* in their inventory.

*Crónicas reales*, or as I translate the title, *Royal Chronicles*, is hard to classify. It lays out the history of several generations of a royal family from an unspecified place and time, and it is narrated from the point of view of a chronicler and narrator, one person who is responsible for the compilation of the events that is the novel. One feature of the 1967 original work exhibits postmodernist tendencies. On the back cover of the Editorial Sudamericana edition the reader understands that it is possible to read the work in two ways: in order or each of the twelve chapters on its own: "Aunque lo forman doce cuentos independientes, débense leer estos como una novela...." There is a similarity here with the work of another Argentine writer, Julio Cortázar's 1963 *Rayuela*. Both of these works are "contained" in the form of one book yet they both provide the reader with a slippery, non-permanent reading tactic that defies definition, a strategy of reading that I include in both the baroque and postmodern.

The work has twelve divisions; neither the Alfaguara edition nor the Sudamericana use the term "capítulo" but rather roman numerals indicate each chapter. Each of the twelve parts is dedicated to a well-known figure from Argentine cultural history; for example, part five is dedicated to Marta Lynch,

seven to Silvina Bullrich, eight to Eduardo Mallea, and twelve to Alberto Ginasterra who, incidentally, composed the music to the operatic version of Mujica Láinez's novel *Bomarzo*. Each of the first eleven sections is titled with the name of member of the royal family or with a name that connects in some way with a member. The narrator refers to each section as a "crónica" or chronicle, and tells the story of a specific member of the dynasty.

The first chronicle introduces Hércules, the founder of the dynasty. He is a stonecutter, and this chronicle is titled "El rey picapedrero." Hércules manages to build an enormous cathedral only to make it come crashing down, wiping out an entire generation of a competing family. In Chronicle 2, called "San Eximio," the reader learns of a member of the family who became a saint. In Chronicle three King Carlo III is unable to produce an heir so he builds an artificial king, his progeny, which murders him and two of his scientists; the chronicle is named "El rey artificial." In Chronicle Four, titled "El rey acrobata," the king Carlo VI becomes concerned when one of his sons becomes a tightrope walker and not a warrior like his other son. The Acrobat King ends up ruling with balance and poise, as is fitting his title. In Chronicle Five, the youngest son of Hércules V falls in love with the daughter of a rival family. His mother kills them both with an arrow, thus this chronicle is called "El enamorado" in honor of the deep love between the ill-fated royals. Chronicle Six tells of a sailor and his expedition to discover new lands. He and his crew land on an island whose leader is a woman covered in hair from top to bottom, and the only way they will be able to sail again is if they decide to have sex with her and her women. They do, and just before departing the island they drink from the Fountains of Youth and of Knowledge, and sail home as brilliant babies. Chronicle Seven is named after one of the sons of the king, "Monsignore." Similar to his acrobatic ancestor introduced in Chronicle Four, Monsignore prefers to dress like Louis XIV with tall wigs adorned with brightly colored ribbons and barrettes and a mole painted on his cheek, walk with an ornate cane, and wear shoes with red crystal heels. The male members of court imitate him, and the women are not outdone as they compete with the men to dress in the most extravagant outfits. He does manage to go into battle with an island of reclusive hermits. The highlight of Chronicle Eight, called "La gran favorita," is the emergence of Lorina Borso as she rides naked into battle against the Turks, a "new Godiva" as the narrator calls her. Chronicle Nine, "La princesa de los camafeos," provides details about the unfaithful husband to Princess Palestrina-Bonaparte who, in retaliation of her lover's infidelity, moves to Venice, Italy, meets four Irish hippies who steal her every cent, and throw her collection of priceless cameos into the Grand Canal. The reader meets one member of the royal family who is a vampire in Chronicle Ten, called "El vampiro." News gets out about the vampire and a British film company arrives to film the latest movie, "La bestia de Wurzburg," the name of his castle. The vampire manages to suck the blood out of all the crew members except Miss Godiva Brandy, who murders the vampire with a shirt starched in garlic water. Chronicle Eleven, "La reina olvidada," tells of culture's inability to remember one of the members of the royal family, Queen Federica Victoria Tram-und-Taxis. Beyond senile, she weaves a tapestry with one of her consorts,

and the large weaving becomes a national treasure, even if she does not. The last chronicle gives a summary of each of the first eleven stories by way of taking the reader through the National Museum where artifacts of each of the family members from each of the chronicles are on display.

Mujica Láinez's *Crónicas reales* shows how, as I read it, the 1960s are a decade of change in Latin America as well as in other arts of the world. While Mujica Láinez continues to write for newspapers and to publish other works during this time, he managed to quietly publish *Crónicas reales* as well. On a profound level, in this work Mujica Láinez exposes and at the same time criticizes populist political tendencies in Argentina of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. But on its surface he enhances the tradition of story telling, an art that loses importance in many Latin American countries as the "modern" world evolved. In the "Foreward" to his 1960 book *The Singer of Tales*, Albert B. Lord writes "Narrowness has never been excusable, whether it be ethnic, geographic, religious, social, or even academic, least of all in the space age" (xxxv). From there, Lord presents his theory that works such as Homer's *Iliad* are the product of oral epic performers or singers as he calls them. He shuns narrowness for a much broader, almost infinite paradigm: he collapses singer and composer into one, starting with Homer's *Iliad* and moves into contemporary tales from Eastern Europe; Lord observes that, as his theory shows, "in the case of the oral poem [a] gap does not exist, because composition and performance are two aspects of the same moment" (13).

To what extent, in a similar fashion, is Mujica Láinez both composer and performer in *Crónicas reales*? At about the same time that *Crónicas* appeared the residents of many Latin American countries undergo increased movement from rural areas to the cities. This phenomenon, in inverse proportion to enhanced capabilities to record and store traditional knowledge from the rural areas, means fewer ways to maintain, in the short term, local homogeneity and in the long term, rural traditions. Members of a community scatter toward big cities in search of employment and increased economic opportunities. Referring to Yugoslavia, Lord notes how "In the country villages, where the houses are often widely separated, a gathering may be held at one of the houses....Men from all the families assemble and one of their number may sign epic songs" (Lord 14). As a consequence of what Lord calls "the space age" individuals are no longer available to gather and to record and maintain local information in the form of legends, myths, or stories. In their place are electronic means of harnessing cultural information, processes that are more and more separate and separated from human interaction.

The shift to the metropolis is also a transition from authentic, market-free culture to commercially commoditized artifacts of local interest; thus surfaces a new type of culture, that of the hybrid work of art, symbolic of the postmodern age. Smaller rural communities are unable to maintain traditions so they get packaged into neat, ideology-free units for sale to international tourists. In their introduction to the second edition of Lord's work, Stephen Mitchell and Gregory Nagy boast of one of the "Important new features," an "'audio publication' is featured in the compact disk (CD) that accompanies this new edition of *The*

*Singer of Tales*" (vii). The increased amount of media capable of reproducing a hybrid cultural artifact in the 1950s and 1960s continues today. This technology reduces the need for individuals from rural communities to transmit their traditions from person to person as well as the need for a literal visit to the rural communities by tourists since the same media can transport the artifact directly to the consumer.

Albert Lord's groundbreaking work, in 1960, laments how an original cultural artifact, the story, loses importance in this process of urbanization. The increased presence of faster means of communication (and ultimately the message of that communication) signals the loss of the gradual process of storytelling. The centrality of the story teller loses importance in local communities, the result of media capable of carrying it outside of the local community. During the 1970s and 1980s, authoritarian administrations rule several Latin American countries. These regimes go to great efforts to watch and repress printed material. A mode of resistance to censorship begins to surface, oral transmission of personal and collective testimonies and histories (Franco 177). This hybridization, or bringing-together of different elements, of distinct ways of recording local information highlights a means of refusing to go along with the official discourse of the military regimes. Oral transmission and written testimonies are both process and product of these turbulent times, signaling to the governing elite that silence is not an option for the survival of a democratic society. *Crónicas reales* offers readers the chance to see how writing and orality, or the telling of a story are two modes of remembering, essential ways not to forget the past.

Many fiction writers, during the 1960s in Argentina, search for international recognition, often combining art and politics in their works. In the opening paragraph of her essay, "Narrator, Author, Superstar: Latin American Narrative in the Age of Mass Media," Jean Franco informs us, in the first sentence, that the three producers of the expanding genres of mass media culture during these years in Latin America are the author, the chronicler/storyteller, and what she calls the "superstar of mass culture production" (Franco 147). Then, in the next sentence, she repeats the list of three—except she uses the term "narrator" in place of chronicler/storyteller. She closes this opening paragraph back on track, telling us she will explore the texts and allegorical natures of "the chronicler, the author, and the superstar" (Franco 148). Similar to how Franco describes this process of collapsing roles, Mujica Láinez merges narrator and chronicler into one voice, which not only provides a detailed history of the royal family but makes use of sharp humor throughout the novel as well to make the narrative an enjoyable experience, similar to stories being told by people in small villages. Professor Franco emphasizes the malleability of these terms in times of cultural, economical, and literary change in Latin America in her important article, appropriate when examining this work by Mujica Láinez.

In her article Franco also shows the evolution of the term "author" in Latin American literature of the twentieth century. According to her observations, with time the function of an author becomes more difficult to define. Even today, twenty-five years after the appearance of this article, the challenge of fame even

now causes the single term “author” to take on another meaning, that of star. Back at mid-20<sup>th</sup> century in Latin America, she writes, “the novelist and the implied narrator separate themselves from the represented social enterprise whose frustration and failure is in direct contrast to the novelist’s own achievement as author” (166). Today, the creator of text and the industry that promotes it are one. Even though he “copies” the chronicle, Mujica Láinez collapses novelist and chronicler (himself) into a humorous narrator to elevate Franco’s point. At the close of her article, published soon after Mujica Láinez wrote *Crónicas*, she argues this type of separation is no longer possible. Despite the earlier *lapsus linguae*, her semantic stumble is intentional rather than accidental since what she argues for becomes true with Mujica Láinez who, similar to Franco’s fusion of terms, uses humor as a both process and product of one person: author, narrator, and chronicler of his work.

This text, a collection of twelve short stories or a novel of twelve chapters, demonstrates two features that allow it to be studied as a hybrid literary artifact. It combines aspects of the baroque and of postmodernism, two critical approaches currently popular with scholars and critics of Latin American narrative fiction. The baroque, as an approach with which to interpret post-conquest Latin American reality from the Spanish point of view, looked back onto an original with new lenses. But that new reality offered unexpected challenges when time came to describe the new world. The Spaniards were at a loss to grasp Latin American reality since “their training in the theology of a dual universe, in which God and the devil, good and evil, justice and retribution, played their appointed parts” (Kamen 144) but did not form part of the indigenous world. Their conquest, “the culture of the non-sedentary peoples of the New World,...[did not have a] belief in a Supreme Being [who] appeared not to exist” (Kamen 144). Considered by many to be over-the-top adornment, the baroque manages to maintain a critical edge that aims “to call attention to the artificiality of human endeavors by accentuating their unnatural character....It abounds in conceits and counterfeits, in theatricality and obsessive sophistication” (Stavans xxx). For example, in Chronicle Two of *Crónicas reales*, “San Eximio,” the slow movement of a parade of persons otherwise considered to be physical and social opposites recalls Carnival and its mixing of elements. The narrator describes it as a “pirotecnia que desencadenaban tantos objetos quiméricos...que chisporroteaban como provistos de alas flamígeras, al ser lanzados sobre la multitud...” (Mujica Láinez 32). This demonstrates the baroque, “The chaotic accumulation of fragments from different cultures [that was] an essential part of the festive public pompousness [typical] of the Colonial [Latin American] Baroque” (González Echeverría, *Celestina’s Brood...* 145).

In the postmodern era language “reveals its inherent powerlessness to do anything other than repeat, articulate and disarticulate an inherited language” (Bultman 447) through electronic modes of creation, communication, and compilation of information. Even writing during the 1960s when technology was only beginning to impress with its new way to understand reality, Mujica Láinez’s text undermines a rigid conception of text. Chronicle twelve, as already indicated, returns the reader back to the first eleven chronicles, summarizing



their protagonists and central ideas. In this fashion, the text becomes circular, unending, since the reader is repeatedly transported to the beginning and asked to read the chronicles again. Mujica Láinez and the narrator show how “concepts of coherent identity and truth become increasingly problematical” (Page 388) by imposing a re-turn upon the reader. *Crónicas reales* are, and I use this verb in the plural intentionally, a continual fragmentation, into many generations, of one family and their descendants (Page 392). These accelerated ways discourage an “easy” reading and create texts that do not conform to strict guidelines, a feature that was present in the Latin American baroque of the Renaissance. The accelerated motion of discovery, of continual attempts to make new voyages in order to find new lands, makes it difficult to pin down, according to Mary Gaylord, certain versions that purport to tell the truth. She notes that chronicling all the new discoveries confounds the idea of “one text”: the “startling realities [of the new lands] could never be thought of as tucked safely away in some venerable text...since they were ongoing and like to impinge in unpredictable ways on one’s own experience” (Gaylord 88). The chronicle marks the beginnings of literature in and about the conquest of the New World by Spain in the fifteenth century. It was intended for an authority figure, the king of Spain, to interpret and not for the common reader. Today, the *crónica*, and *Crónicas reales* with it, takes on a new dimension. Esperança Bielsa, in her 2006 book *The Latin American Urban Crónica: Between Literature and Mass Culture*, defines it as “a genre of popular literature which incorporates mass cultural forms and language, speaking to a large audience of the immediate social and cultural realities that characterize urban life” (xiii). Mujica Láinez hands over his text to the reader and allows the reader of his chronicles the chance to laugh during the process of reading; as a result, Mujica Láinez, his narrator, and the reader undermine the concept of “crónica,” literally giving it a new reading that loses the seriousness of the chronicles of the conquest. The opening chronicle tells of the von Orbs dynasty’s founder, Hércules I, a stone cutter. He chips away in a quarry to make a living and he also cuts a path for the reader to enter into difficult terrain: how to make sense of twelve episodes of his family’s history and to sculpt a clearer image of the von Orbs dynasty. Within the opening chronicle Hércules manages to not only build an enormous cathedral, he also successfully brings the concept of structure crashing down to the ground. His design of the cathedral includes an ornate rope that ends in a beautiful tassel. As the ceremony opens to commemorate the new cathedral, the tassel is pulled and the cathedral comes crashing down, eliminating one entire generation of a competing family. This opening chapter at once builds and destroys, allowing the reader to understand that history and the documents that support it are changeable. They are, as Mujica develops this work with humor, meant to entertain too and provide moments of levity as they teach and instruct about the important facts of historical figures.

Each of the twelve chapters presents the story of a different member of the von Orbs family. The narrative moves forward in time but always glancing back. Mujica Láinez often interjects statements such as “As we saw in the previous chronicle” or “As the reader will remember” to anchor the reader in the

present chronicle. As the title indicates, these are royal chronicles. Mujica Láinez, then, takes what is authentically Latin American, the chronicle, adds humorous language, physical laughter, amusing but socially important characters and situations, and transforms it into a critique of the upper class. This baroque twist back onto itself, the ornate language within the process, and the presence of humor all converge to allow multiple interpretations. Mujica Láinez revolutionizes a seemingly rigid literary form into one with room to maneuver.

The *crónica*, during and immediately following the conquest of the New World, became the important literary contribution of colonial Latin American literature. This account was actually more like a “novel” since it was usually read independently. The “chronicle” as written by Mujica Láinez, unlike its fifteenth and sixteenth century counterpart, serves more as a method of storytelling than of recording events, observations, or facts. This supports the idea of Mary Gaylord that it is time to blur the previously defined borders and erase the distinctions between “Golden Age” literature and “Latin American colonial” history (Gaylord 90-91). Beginning with its title Mujica Láinez’s book evokes literature from the period of conquest of Latin America by Spain such as the 1555 *Relación y comentarios* by Cabeza de Vaca, the 1609 work by the Inca Garcilaso de la Vega, *Comentarios reales*, or any of the many texts written as chronicles during the years of the Conquest of New Spain. Inca Garcilaso, similar to Mujica Láinez, is an exception to how many individuals in the New World made their (hi)stories known, for two reasons. First, Doris Sommer argues for a particular reading of Latin American texts that highlights difference, engaging readers who might be unfamiliar with a/the text/s they are reading. Inca Garcilaso, according to Sommer who argues along with Gaylord that it is time to unfasten the earlier conceived notion that only Latin American writers during the Colonial era wrote history. Inca Garcilaso fits into a particularism of the postmodern, I argue, since “Instead of fitting into the conventions, he operates alongside them. His genre is not history; it is ‘Commentaries’ on other chronicles” (Sommer 75). Second, both he and Mujica Láinez are part of the ruling elite, the upper echelon of their respective societies. They both have easy access to writing since there are few obstacles in their desire for expression. If anything, as Sommer argues, the text is not an obstacle; it is the reader, who must adjust reading strategies for wider comprehension. The Inca Garcilaso, like Mujica Láinez, is “a local informant who will talk, if we relax our habitual posturing and learn to listen properly” (Sommer 77). This contrasts with, for example, Christopher Columbus who, in his *Diario a bordo*, narrates what he is seeing to a scribe, thus conflating speaking and writing into one document. In similar fashion the events in *Crónicas reales*, as the reader learns in Chronicle Twelve, that are presented to the reader had been given to the narrator by someone else.

In seventeenth century Spanish-language poetry a baroque poet such as Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz “presents to the reader archetypical diagrams of love and the passions, but the reader should not and cannot infer that the poems possess validity...” (Paz, Marting 88) because of her use of complicated language involving, for example, tricky juxtapositions. This same trend continues into twentieth century Latin America, for in the late 1950s through the 1970s writers

such as José Lezama Lima and Severo Sarduy begin to voice “a [similar] mestizo expression only partially dependent on the European matrix” (Salgado 319), an expression found in *Crónicas reales*, written at the same time. Fostering a baroque style of writing, Mujica Láinez offers “a refutation of literature’s role in achieving a basic ideal of medieval historical theory” (Bultman 444) whose center was Europe. Educating future employees in the postmodern age requires the teaching of skills that foster wide, horizontal navigation rather than narrow, top-to-bottom navigation. With expanded classifications in electronic and technological communication systems, workers now need to foster adaptability outside of defined requirements rather than develop a singular category of skills (Friedman 315). Mujica uses complex sentence structures including the extended use of semi colons within long paragraphs that force the reader to experiment with form that will deliver interpretation in a different way. Post modern thought sees a future of possibilities rather than a singular outlook that will determine future generations’ ability to succeed or fail.

As mentioned above, the opening chapter of *Crónicas reales* offers the reader access to the rock quarries of the kingdom. The presence of natural resources suggests a country’s wealth, but highlights its inability to compete in a global market. Throughout *Crónicas* family members are exiled, either voluntarily or not, to Wurzburg Castle in a remote part of the kingdom that no doubt is full of untapped resources. The narrator, however, suggests ruling elites that nationalize all material production. The kingdom, through the eyes of its leaders, needs no external support or collaboration; it is apparently self sufficient. In this way, Mujica develops a culture of sedentary intolerance that has no place in the postmodern world. Laughing at situations offers the possibility of escape from these restrictions. It is “another authoritarian system that can steamroll vested interests and archaic practices” (Friedman 429). Throughout many generations the kingdom “has a long history of simple being an instrument of patronage for the ruling party or local interests, not the national interest” (Friedman 430). Due to the onslaught of mass media, or electric media in the case of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, there is no longer one center, an original anything. Everything is copied and copy-able, always moving, and it is no longer possible for semantic “oneness.” Stuart Hall points out an extreme postmodern view that echoes this idea of infinite simulation. He notes that in this age of repetition “the Self is simply a kind of *perpetual signifier* ever wandering the earth in search of a *transcendental signified* that it can never find—a sort of endless nomadic existence...wandering in an endlessly pluralistic void” (Hall 300, emphasis in original). In the case of *Crónicas*, George Landow draws a parallel between electronic media and stories like those written by Mujica that take us “outside” of the text:

we experience the narrative as removed from our physical world, and therefore as we enter the narrative world, we imaginatively and experientially leave our own to the extent to which we immerse ourselves in the story; when we return to our physically and emotionally existing world, we ...bring the emotions, attitudes, and ideas of the story back with us and thus experience our everyday world in a somewhat different way (Landow 247).

For Landow, our current age allows the construction of what he calls a hypertext, something I see as a postmodern strategy or tool to read or reading any kind of text. A hypertext contains links that connect readers with other, perhaps external, texts that can be brought back in/to the original text. It is, according to Landow, “an information medium that links verbal and non-verbal information” (3). The latest computer technologies in 2007—search engines such as Google, play-back television such as TiVo, on-line vendors such as Barnes and Noble who sell their goods using only key strokes—create what Thomas Friedman calls “collaborative systems that enable customers [or readers as I argue here] to pull [information] on their own, and then responding ...to what they pull” (182). Friedman argues that a postmodern outlook about the present as well as the future encourages ownership, the capability to feel part of something, everyone making connections and connectivity (361).

This strategy turns “text” over to the reader, allowing its entirety to be looked at or added to from a different perspective. It is through this system of power relations between text and reader that meaning surfaces. What connects the reader with the stories narrated in *Crónicas reales*, its link, is humor. Comic or humorous language and situations produce laughter, a personal moment for the reader when it is possible to pause and revisit the text in order to invest meaning. Humor enforces this turning back to re-examine, in the case of *Crónicas*, serious familial problems. In this fashion Mujica, and in turn the reader, questions the seriousness of hierarchical rigidity from a funny perspective, one from which it might not have been possible without seeing how funny some of the situations really are. In a sense, the link of laughter in Mujica allows for the reflection of the story in a different frame. The mirror is the centerpiece of Baroque aesthetics; similar to laughter as reflection, the mirror “reflects back to the subject the strangeness of the object, which then the subject assumes as its own, an arrogation...that is always by definition reflexive and eminently superficial” (González Echeverría, *Celestina’s Brood...* 148). Humor or laughter, then, is one feature of the postmodern baroque, more something to apply to textual analysis than a mere classification.

I finish with a look at four expressions of humor in *Crónicas reales*: complex but amusing descriptive language, the presence of laughter during awkward situations, brilliant and at times hilarious names of the characters, and humorous situations in which the characters mirror the lives and actions of an upper class. A consistent feature of *Crónicas reales* is the use of long sentences and clauses strung together with commas and semi colons. At almost any point in the narrative one can identify such usage. In Chronicle Eight, “La gran favorita,” King Matías III wakes up in bed with a stranger, after a night of excessive drinking. Mujica provides a lengthy description separated by semi colon after semi colon, but its hilarity diminishes the concern for taking too seriously such grammatical wizardry:

se levantó una bruma...a través del cual el ingenuo Matías, como si estuviera frente a una circo vaporoso, vio concretarse pirámides corpóreas enredadismas, de cuya trabazón sobresalían los brazos frenéticos de Amarilis; los pechos de María del Suspiro;

las ruedas del carrito de Hyeronimus van Zutte, que giraban locas sobre la cabeza de su dueño; los pies descalzos del fabulista Zum Vosc, atrapados entre los muslos de una de las señoritas callejeras; las orejas, el belfo y la cola del asno, que había sido devuelto a la parranda; todo ello vibrante y zarandeado como un colosal engendro mixto, que emitía una voz igual a la de Ange Petitange, pero destemplada, y que gritaba pasajes de *Hamlet*, hasta que aquella hidra se derrumbó y el Rey beodo sucumbió al mareo y no vio nada más. (Mujica Lainez 117).

It is in passages such as these where Mujica Láinez demonstrates his superb use of language, not unlike his contemporaries such as José Lezama Lima. In fact, in this example Mujica Láinez's writing style parallels that of Lezama in, for example, *Paradiso*: "El barroco de Lezama [como el de Mujica en la cita arriba mencionada] no es el de los historiadores de la literatura, sino un barroco que viola las reglas del decoro poético y la reverencia por los clásicos, que los deforma y contamina con elementos fuera de tono, de mal gusto..." (González Echeverría, "Lezama, Góngora..." 438).

I turn next to the presence of laughter itself in *Crónicas reales*. With few exceptions, characters' laughter replaces verbal speech during and/or commentary about a particular situation. Chronicle Six, aptly called "Los navegantes," relates the story about the discovery by the half brother of King Wotam, Lovro von Kwatz, of an island ruled by a woman covered in fur from top to bottom. This chronicle contains the largest amount of laughter than in the other eleven. The Hairy Queen, or la Reina Velluda, laughs the most. She never speaks, allowing the reader the opportunity to wonder what language she would produce if she were to talk. When von Kwatz and his crew prepare to leave the island, they discover the Fountains of Youth and of Knowledge. They guzzle large amounts from each fountain so they turn into brilliant babies. As the sailors slurp down these waters, the Hairy Queen, "fiel a su hábito, no cesaba de reír y de exhibir dientes blanquísimos, extraviados en la espesura de su pelambre" (Mujica Lainez 79). Her white teeth stand out, but the narrator takes no notice at her physical difference. The reader, upon reading her laughter, sees the possibilities in overcoming physical difference and learning to live happy.

Mujica incorporates stunning names of people that inhabit and institutions that govern the fictitious place where *Crónicas reales* takes place. Some of the names translate beautifully into English, others are a combination of many languages, and still others provoke laughter simply for being oxymoronic or paradoxical. I provide some of the names as examples:

Princesa Robusta del Olvido; la Reina Diamante de Samotracia; the families of Wittlesberg-Anhalt di Cremona and Wittlesberg-Anhalt di Gorizia; Boadicea, Athenaís, Wladimira, and María del Suspiro; la Princesa Siglinda Palestrina-Bonaparte and Prince Nemrod Palestrina-Bonaparte; Miss Godiva Brandy; Violet Daisy; la Reina Federica Victoria Tram-und-Taxis; and the leader of a group of four Irish hippies, Phalo Doro which the narrator parenthetically dubs "extraordinaria combinación" (Mujica Lainez 140).

Place names and those of organizations are equally brilliant:

Gremio de Trabajadores de Piedra; Bellas Artes y Artesanías Proletarias; Cooperativa General de Peones; Universidad Más Libre; Instituto de Verdugos de la Monarquía;

Instituto de Averiguadores de la República; Correos, Teléfonos y Tentativas Telefónicas; Comisión de Monumentos Históricos y Semi-Históricos; la Santa Cofradía de la Buena Muerte; and Cuerpo de Oniromantes de la Corte.

Mujica names his characters and places with slightly recognizable tags. He forces the reader to make connections between and to wonder at the name and an actual person in world or Argentine history. He borrows names but by twisting them and adding extra words he converts their original stature to the equivalent of a blank space ready to fill in with an interpretation.

I return to Chronicle Six, “Los navegantes,” which provides one humorous situation that opens up multiple avenues of interpretation. In this Chronicle one member of the royal family sets out to sea, discovers an island, drinks from the Fountains of Youth and Knowledge, and returns to the kingdom as a new man—or in this case as a child. He makes friends with three sailors who will accompany him: the Portuguese Marquis Joao Tortorello da Fonseca, “un parche verde en el ojo izquierdo,” the Andalusian Nemoroso de Villadiego, “un aro de cobre en la oreja derecha,” and the Venetian Pilatos Vendramín, “un papagayo chirriante que tenía por perchas sus clavículas” (Mujica Láinez 70). The conquest of the New World by the Spaniards was not, as Henry Kamen argues, an undertaking solely left to Spain. Mujica Láinez here seems to offer a demythification of the idea of Spain as uniquely responsible for the discovery of new lands. As Kamen notes, using a combination similar to Mujica Láinez’s version, “A Genoese had offered the New World to Spain,...[and] a Portuguese and a Basque (in a voyage documented by an Italian) offered the Old World as well” (Kamen 198-99). The four men and their crew of 49 set out but “a pesar de la enseñanza original que les impartieron Lovro y sus improvisados oficiales, procedieron de tal suerte que...el San Eximio comenzó por remontar ...en sentido opuesto” (Mujica Láinez 74). After finally making landfall on an island ruled by a hairy woman, they fall prey to her lascivious needs. They learn from their hairy female captor that they are close to an amazing discovery. They make their way the source of the fountains of Youth and Knowledge and drink incredible amounts from each. The group of adult men transform into brilliant babies; even Pilato’s parrot “era ahora un ave implume que disertaba como un profesor” (Mujica Láinez 81). They return home and meet their wives, undoubtedly in a state of shock. “Los locos insoportables de ayer, hoy niños doctos, les hablaban evidenciando una cultura inconcebible...” (Mujica Láinez 83). During an audience with King Wotam, Lovro gave “una alocución de pirotécnico lujo verbal...” (Mujica Láinez 84). Eventually King Wotam and the young sailors go to war over the kingdom. The king defeats them by slaughtering them, forever being known as “el Hérodes” (Mujica Láinez 87).

Published in 1967 *Crónicas reales* fits within the time period of the “Boom” of Latin American fiction but it is also an example of what I have called the postmodern baroque since the use of humor, underutilized by mainstream writers of Latin American literature but never veiled or hidden by Mujica Láinez as a way to condemn rigid cultural norms, allows the reader to participate actively in a new strategy of reading in order to weaken these norms for a re-interpretation of actual reality. *Crónicas reales* shows how “the events of recent Argentine

history, both its bloody period of dictatorship and its rapid modernization, require a redefinition, a rethinking of those human categories—the individual, the private, the public, the professional, the collective—which have underpinned the modes, and even the possibility, of political activity since pre-modern times” (Page 394). A confluence of distinct interpretive frames from distant time periods, postmodernism and the baroque share the common element of a noticeable but tense divergence. Postmodernism, as its eponym informs us, is the word used to describe what comes after the modern era, a fusion of the past and the present; it, however, shares something of both eras in tension. The mechanization of communication and the rise of industry during the post-World War II years create the current dissonant frenzy of turning towards machines that blur distinctions between reality and virtuosity. Taking recognizable elements and fusing them into as well as onto a new environment, the baroque surfaces when the tensions from this attachment become apparent. These tensions should not be taken as opposing or negating forces, as Mujica Láinez shows, but as ways to re-define the inherent features of each original element. The postmodern baroque, then, describes tensions created in a distant era that manage to survive in the contemporary period, the combination of the familiar with the sudden reaction of bewilderment at what was understood to be recognizable that is now adorned with elements that do not quite fit. It is through humor that Mujica Láinez models the postmodern baroque in literature about societal structures in Argentina as well as in Latin America and beyond. The flaws and basic humanity of the ruling elite, through characterizations of a fictional royal family that could very well be the familial structure of those in power, are exposed in humorous situations and through complex language that both turn back on their reality, exposing it as a construction, an object that has come to define the postmodern era. In this fashion, Mujica Láinez fits within “many of Argentina’s most sophisticated artists who have found greater expressive potential in an anti-realist aesthetic which resonates strongly with the theories and cultural practices of European and North American postmodernism” (Page 386).

Why does Mujica create such funny or at least laughable situations? It is less the characters that are funny than the predicaments in which they find themselves. Mujica writes this work during the mid-1960s when change is happening world-wide. He shows us that change can and does happen but only if it benefits a certain group, in this case, any generation of the royal family he presents in *Crónicas reales*. The ability or willingness to change is evident in several episodes: King Carlo creates a robot to govern forever; Hércules I builds a monumental structure mechanized to self destruct; world filmmakers produce a blockbuster vampire movie on site at Wurzburg Castle. Mujica demonstrates the potential for the kingdom to advance in a competitive global market yet it remains confined to itself as the circular narrative structure indicates. Humor in *Crónicas reales* is the result of laughing at the kingdom’s leaders rather than with them. The post modern phase of the world-wide economy based on production requires forward thinking by leaders ready and willing to participate in this economy. We laugh at the generations of Mujica’s royal family because of the absence suggested by the author of competition. The royals go into battle with hermits

and Muslims over land, or better, the ability of one superpower to extend its territory to include larger areas. Material production within the kingdom is overseen by industry sanctioned by the state, as the names of the organizations, mentioned above, attest to. It is funny when, in chapter 8, Lorina Borso charges into battle on horseback, shedding more articles of clothing as she advances until she is riding naked, and the sheer bewilderment at such a spectacle halts opposing troops in their tracks. It is less a laughing matter, however, when contemporary Latin American economies such as Argentina or Mexico lack the ability and desire to strip themselves of the past and march headlong into a future of possibilities. Former Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo notes this potential for Latin America and agrees that shedding old clothing might be a step in a better direction: "We are still discussing prehistory. Things that are taken for granted everywhere were are still dismissing as if we are living in the 1960s... We are taking years and years to decide on elementary reforms whose needs should be strikingly urgent for any human being" (quoted in Friedman 431).

The complex narrative structure and syntax of Lorina Borso's naked march into fame, rather than lessening its descriptive potential, increases the liberating tendency of Mujica's writing. The reader, like Lorina, must shed previous trappings of conformative and conforming linguistic restraints and surge onward toward freedom. Her Baroque advance incorporates visuals and sound with a moving rhythm that, regardless of appearance, succeeds in creating an historical niche for her:

No faltaban recursos a su imaginación, y ese amanecer culminó su refinamiento teatral. A cincuenta metros del ejército de Mahoma se detuvo. Redoblaron los aleccionados parches, substituyendo las músicas viriles por un rataplán de voluptuosa cadencia ensoñada, un ritmo de zoco, de jardín moruno con surtidores, de cuento persa y, simultáneamente, la actriz arrojó a ambos lados de la cabalgadura los guantes encalados del Príncipe. Luego se despojó de la chaqueta escarlata, que cayó al suelo con sus alamares áureos, y surgió debajo su leve camisa, tensa sobre los pechos. Desfallecían los tambores de languidez rijosa....Con arte sumo, con evidente dominio empírico de lucidez premonitoria, inaugurando la era del strip-tease público, la favorita se fue liberando de las ropas restantes. Lo más embarazoso fue desprenderse de las calzas ceñidas y de las botas de húsar, sin desmontar, pero lo cumplió con bailarina gracia. Y todo el tiempo, todo el tiempo sonaban las graves cajas sensuales y avanzaba el corcel de la nueva Godiva, que por fin quedó desnuda sobre el cuello de la bestia, alabastrina, estatuaria, en una mano la espada y en la otra la bandera" (Mujica Láinez 130-31).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Incidentally, Lorina Borso was not a blood relative of these royals. Earlier in Chapter 8, she, at first mistaken for a male, wound up in bed with King Mathias III after a night of partying. Awestruck by her beauty, the king takes her as his lover, infuriating most of the nobles and alienating himself from the military elite of the kingdom. In this chapter more than in the other eleven Mujica highlights his satire of the absurd necessity of ruling nobility to maintain pure bloodlines, uphold proper social alignment, and continue genealogical superiority. Lorina is a wild mixture of humble origins, a multicultural and Baroque hodgepodge in stark contrast with uncorrupted royal heritage: "Lorina Borso, que así dijo llamarse la beldad, le refirió [al Rey Matías] la historia de su breve existencia, y lo hizo con tan fascinantes embrollos...que en ciertos instantes el Rey infería que era hija de gitanos y en otras de nobles reacios al matrimonio; que a veces entendía sus ojos, que sus incomparables ojos azules orlados de pestañas negras habían registrado las primeras luces en Polonia, y otras en Portugal y aun en las Antillas; que por



It seems that, after all is said and done, Manucho will have the last laugh. On the cover of the collection of fictions published by Alfaguara that contains *Crónicas reales* is a photograph of Mujica Láinez. He looks kindly at the reader with a smile at once obvious and subtle. Behind him, in gilded frame is a drawing; what appears to be his autograph appears in a small circle near the middle of the drawing. It is dated 1966. In this drawing, in the lower right hand corner, is a mermaid. Behind her is the bird's eye view of an undulating river, winding through what appears to be a town with buildings, spires of churches and cathedrals, all drawn with oranges and blues in the manner of a cartoon. Inscribed in the river are the words "...te lleva consigo, a través de dulzuras y tempestades; te lleva siempre, siempre, como si fueses su único y hermoso..." where it finishes. Where is this place? What is he smiling at, something humorous that he wants us to know? Since October of 2006, the Fundación Manuel Mujica Láinez, the house-museum of the writer that his widow left for the public in La Cumbre, has been under scrutiny for the illegal sale of many of the books in the collection. In November 2006 it closed indefinitely. As of February 2007 it opened again to the public. The title of an article from the website of *La Voz*, dated May 21, 2007, reads "El Museo Manuel Mujica Láinez recobra esplendor." Readers of Mujica's work can now return to his beloved refuge where, according to the article, "'Manucho' y Balzac, su querido gato, sonrían desde algún lugar...." That "some place" could be anywhere—the town in the drawing, the unfinished sentence written in the river, our place of residence, or the country depicted in *Crónicas reales*. What matters most, however, is that Mujica is *there*, with a smile, inviting us to that place on fun and funny adventures, too often neglected in times like ours that we take way too seriously.

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momentos prevalecía...el concepto de que había sido la amante de un ilustre señor extranjero, y luego lo substituía la noción de que Lorina Borso había paladeado los místicos azúcares conventuales, o que había interpretado...papeles que incluían a las trágicas hirientes y a las cómicas risibles; porque fue tanto lo que habló con cautivadora gracia, que Matías III...decidió que no pertenecía aquel ser a nuestro opaco mundo sino a uno de inenarrables portentos..." (Mujica Láinez 118).

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