

**From Private Healer to Public Threat:
Teresa Urrea's Writings in *The Hummingbird's Daughter*
and *Queen of America***

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"My writing came to me of itself. I wanted to write, and I wrote, but how I learned I don't know, for I was not taught. On the floor of my mother's house I first wrote with my little finger in the dust." –Teresa Urrea (interview with Helen Dare published in *The Examiner* on July 27, 1900, San Francisco. Cited in Holden, 215)

"What to do when a woman has written something? The first line of defense is to deny that she wrote it. Since women cannot write, someone else (a man) must have written it." –Joanna Russ, *How to Suppress Women's Writing*, 20

Teresa Urrea was born in 1873 in Ocoroni, Sinoloa, three years prior to the commencement of Porfirio Díaz's authoritarian presidency. In 1906, four years prior to the outbreak of the revolution waged to oust Díaz, she died of consumption while living in Arizona as a divorced mother of two illegitimate daughters. In her brief thirty-three years Teresa became revered as a popular saint across Mexico and the United States, and she has

been memorialized as the Santa de Cabora, the Queen of the Yaquis, and Mexico's Joan of Arc. In an epic portrayal of the author's distant relative,¹ Luis Alberto Urrea's prize-winning historical novel, *The Hummingbird's Daughter* (2005), relates Teresa's life up until her exile. Its sequel, *Queen of America* (2011), relates her life in the United States until her untimely death. This analysis focuses on how both novels make reading and writing a key facet of her uniquely powerful character despite a lack of consensus about Teresa's literacy or political engagement. Historical and literary sources typically express doubts about Teresa's literacy and question whether she shared or independently articulated the political beliefs and texts that were attributed to her. Luis Urrea's novels deliberately resolve these issues by making reading, writing and political engagement central to her life's story.

Luis Urrea is professor of English and creative writing at the University of Illinois-Chicago. He is an acclaimed fiction writer, and he was also 2005 finalist for a Pulitzer Prize for his nonfiction work *Devil's Highway*, that relayed the tragic story of undocumented immigrants to the United States who were abandoned by their *coyote* in the Arizona desert. His work about Teresa Urrea deliberately blends literature and history as he explains and synthesizes over twenty years of research. His historical documentation is varied, from a vast network of testimonials to historiography to other literary accounts of Teresa to archival sources. Like historians and novelists who preceded him, he also has to work with such unreliable sources as newspaper coverage of Teresa that was sensationalist, male-dominated, subject to censorship, and politically biased. The novels' representation of Teresa as not only someone who was literate, but also as someone who was an avid reader and intellectual thinker, may be dismissed as incompatible with the "historical" intentions of Luis Urrea's work. And yet, the doubts he implants about her oft-supposed ignorance of reading and writing is not only well founded in the available data, but also compatible with her qualities as a woman who actively and aggressively

¹ Luis Urrea clarifies in the "Author's Note" at the conclusion of the first novel that, while she is technically a cousin, "I grew up believing she was my aunt. Apparently, my great-grandfather, Seferino Urrea, was Tomás's first cousin" (497). For clarity I will refer to the author throughout the paper as Luis Urrea, and the other Urrea characters by their first names.

defied the male-dominated parameters of her existence by forging a public and political identity from the private domain of her bodily and spiritual talents.

I argue that by presenting her as an accomplished writer, Luis Urrea's novels position Teresa's influence in religion, medicine and politics as a direct challenge to the patriarchal contours of late nineteenth century society in the Mexican-U.S. borderlands. His representation of her keen intellectual and spiritual abilities, like that of other women in the two novels, illuminates a collapsing of conventional distinctions between the public and private realms. This results in a clever critique of a society that would presume to restrict girls and women from actively participating in public matters. Yet, it also renders visible diverse ways that women did participate in their homes and wider communities, despite an unfortunate shortage of documentation regarding women's creative expressions of their beliefs, skills and allegiances in a patriarchal context. The novels portray women's agency in a wide range of experiences, including expertise in domestic, medicinal and spiritual matters, everyday weapons against domineering men, management of economic affairs, and participation in political rebellion. This depiction provides a window, however fictionalized, into how women have historically navigated the intersections of their domestic identities with consequential political matters across regional and national borders.

Teresa is not portrayed in Luis Urrea's novels as a likely hero from the beginning in that her gender, social class and ethnicity position her as triply marginalized. Yet, she is ultimately capable of channeling the multiple facets of her identity to wield exceptional power through her body and her language. The plotline generally follows the prevailing consensus about Teresa's life. She was born the illegitimate daughter of a fourteen year-old indigenous woman named Cayetana Chávez and an affluent rancher in northern Mexico named Tomás Urrea. When she was only seven years old, and living as a *peón* on her father's ranch, Tomás Urrea became targeted by the Díaz administration for supporting the opposition candidate in the 1880 elections for Sonoran governor. To insulate himself from Díaz's retaliation, Urrea moved the entire ranch and its workers north

to the ranch of Cabora. Despite her controversial origins, Teresa become recognized by her father in Cabora and allowed to live in the main house. There she would befriend Huila, the ranch's *curandera*, and Teresa herself would become adept at indigenous practices of healing with herbs. Later something happened that left Teresa first in coma and then in a trance-like recovery that would last for months. While Luis Urrea's novel portrays this as a physical assault on the ranch, others have described it as an epileptic attack.² Upon regaining full clarity, Teresa claimed to have spoken to God and her healing powers took on mythic proportions. Testimonials of her healing powers abound, and few would deny that there was something unique about her, perhaps attributable to mysticism or other "extrasensory powers" (Holden 107). Stories abounded about how this transformation had enhanced her abilities to heal, and Teresa's exceptional talents launched her into a public realm as poor Mexicans by the thousands trekked to the ranch in her honor. Teresa's acclaim grew as she delivered sermons to the pilgrims with politically perilous messages about social justice.

Teresa's public presence took on greater significance as news of the messages she shared with the disadvantaged masses drew the ire of local and national political leaders whose heavy-handed efforts to establish order and progress in Mexico depended on a submissive citizenry. Whereas she was known to give sermons that underscored the need for social justice, there is broad consensus about a lack of direct link between Teresa and the revolts that were waged to the cheers of "Viva la Santa de Cabora!" The most prominent of these revolts occurred in the small town of Tomóchic, led by Cruz Chávez, whose brother may have been healed by Teresa herself, but her influence in the rebels of Tomóchic is generally understood as more symbolic than direct.³ Nevertheless, the perception of her influence as

² Holden, for instance, refers to a seizure (51) and Domecq "Teresa Urrea" reproduces an article from *El Monitor Republicano*, published on December 21, 1889, that refers to her sickness as "catalepsia" and an "ataque delira" (17).

³ For example of a historian who denies this meeting, see Fredreich Katz (23). The violent suppression of the entire town of Tomóchic was first depicted in the renowned, but initially controversial, Porfirian-era novel by Heriberto Frías. The violence waged against towns in and around Tomóchic exemplified, according to Mario Gill "porfirian sadism" and ranked among the most "monstrous" of "the crimes of the porfiriato" (my translation 627). It is notable that Vanderwood's

intensely threatening can be deduced by references to Teresa as “the most dangerous girl in Mexico”⁴ and by her ensuing political exile to the United States for conspiracy to incite rebellion. From there Teresa continued to heal, but her name and image can also be found in published materials designed to fan the flames of rebellion in Mexico at the turn of the century.

The Literacy Question

Despite Teresa being credited with (and punished for) politicized sermons to mass audiences and published texts in Mexico and the United States, Alex Nava’s 2005 article in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* presumes that Teresa Urrea was illiterate. Characterizing her “a non-literate woman without formal education” (516), who lacked “the weapon of the pen” (497, 517), Nava reserves any estimation of her power for “her mystical experiences and the insight and healing powers that flowed from them” (497, 517). In a slight contrast, Paul Vanderwood’s seminal historical account in *The Power of God against the Guns of Government*, contextualizes the condition of women in the time period as drawing on certain forms of power in that they “fought alongside their menfolk in their continuing conflicts with the military” and they “knew the law, their rights, and how to speak their minds in public” (87). Nevertheless, he notes that “Teresa had no formal education, but taught herself to read and write, if only in the most rudimentary way; she could write her name but not much more, and her reading was limited to the simplest texts” (165). Robert McKee Irwin’s examination of Teresa in *Bandits, Captives, Heroines, and Saints* concurs that given “her very

seminal work on *The Power of God against the Guns of Government* includes only minimal mention of Teresa herself in history of the Tomóchic rebellion.

⁴ Attribution of this quote is murky and unlikely to have been uttered by Díaz himself. Nevertheless, sources point to Díaz’s direct involvement in the assessment of Teresa as dangerous. For the unattributed quote, see Holden 146; for the quote attributed to “presidential declaration,” see *Hummingbird’s Daughter*, 477; for portrayal of Díaz’s involvement in her exile, see Domecq *The Astonishing Story*, 258-261 and Illades, 72-74; for comment on the federal government’s assessment of Teresa as a threat see Holden xii, Gill 63 and Nava 498-99; for mention of encoded telegrams between Díaz and local authorities regarding Teresa’s involvement in the Tomóchic rebellion that would prompt the president’s orders for punishment, see Domecq, “Teresa Urrea,” 21-26.

limited education, it is unlikely that she was able to write something on her own" (230).

Fictionalized representations have offered a slightly more empowered portrayal of her literacy. For example, William Holden's *Teresita*, states that as a young child she was a "half-hearted student" (27). He elaborates that there was "no system of public education existed in Sonora" and therefore Teresa ended up studying alongside her half-brothers under the instruction of "a private tutor for two or three months at a time to teach them the rudiments of scholarship. Teresita, exceedingly precocious, soon outdistanced the boys, much to their frustration and resentment" (42). Another example, Brianda Domecq's historically-based novel, portrays Teresa as initially uninterested in formal education (43) but later as a self-taught reader and writer (47-50). However, Teresa eventually internalizes a lesson taught to her by Huila regarding the need to "evade reason, free herself from language" (124) so that she becomes ultimately dismissive of "words" (317, 320). Domecq's novel refers to articles written by Aguirre that he falsely attributes to her (327), and by the end of the novel Teresa explains in a letter to a friend her deficiencies with writing, stating "I have found someone who will write for me, since I have never been able to master the pen" (339). Elisabeth Guerrero discusses Domecq's characterization in light of Jean Franco's argument that "subordinating women...and relegating them to the domains of feeling" risks upholding the "separation of male rationality from female feeling and the exclusion of women from the public domains of discourse" (cited in Guerrero 55). And while Guerrero ultimately concludes that Teresa "breaks the binary opposition of reason versus mysticism" (55), it is clear that in Domecq's novel, like other historical and literary sources, there is a pervasive downplaying of Teresa's literacy.⁵

Incongruities in the assessment of her literacy abound, making it curious that the historical and literary sources have so consistently

⁵ For notable exceptions see Mario Gill's reference to a flier signed by Teresa without doubting her authorship (643-644) and reference to her role in Aguirre's U.S.-based newspaper without scrutinizing how she "formaba parte de las redacciones" (644). Although the source of the insight is unclear, see Marian Perales's comment that, toward the end of her life, Teresa "assisted neighboring Mexican children with written Spanish lessons" (115).

downplayed if not denied her abilities to read and write. For example, Robert McKee Irwin's study refers to now missing letters "from Teresa" that "a Tarahumara man...claimed to have found near Tomóchic" and that were designated for "several prominent residents of Tomóchic dated 1891 and 1892" (219).⁶ Irwin additionally references her more formal attempts at writing just one year later, quoting coverage by Chihuahua's *El Progreso* newspaper "expressing amazement" that Teresa "was to start writing for a newspaper," mocking her as a "saintly journalist!" (224), and elaborating:

Let's see: to whom might such a thing occur? ...for there to be saints who after performing a half a dozen miracles, take up a pen and zas!...make themselves available, notebook in hand, to go, in newspaperwoman's attire, glasses on, in pursuit of a big story, that could only happen in the final lustrum of this shimmering century. (*El Fronterizo* 18 November 1893, cited in Irwin, 224-225)

Teresa's relationship to journalism is more typically associated with the publications in the United States directed by exiled family friend, Lauro Aguirre. After Teresa's exile and relocation to El Paso, "Aguirre began to publish installments of a book titled *¡Tomóchic! ¡Rendición!* that was "openly" critical of Díaz and in which "Teresa Urrea was listed as coauthor" (Irwin 228).

Despite various compelling bylines, most critics suggest that Aguirre did the writing while Teresa's name was strategically included to generate support among the masses for his opposition to Díaz.⁷ For example, Irwin implicitly challenges any authority that her supposed authorship might convey by characterizing her writing as showing "major collaboration (if not textual control) by Lauro Aguirre" (293). Similarly, Domecq unequivocally supports the notion that Teresa intended to politically collaborate with Aguirre ("Teresa Urrea" 37, 43), but she generally cites "la redacción y el contenido" as evidence that the oft-cited article "Mis ideas sobre las revoluciones" with Teresa's by-line "no pudo haber sido escrito por Teresa y lo más probable es que sea por la pluma de

⁶ Irwin refers to Vanderwood's research regarding these letters, and includes in a footnote that this has been cited by others as well thus suggesting general acceptance of its veracity (n.21, 293). Holden's book includes an extended reference to Teresa as author of letters to Cruz Chavez (165-66), in which she advocates for a nonviolent resolution to conflicts in Tomóchic.

⁷ For further examples, see Vanderood 302; Irwin, 228, 230, 236-238, 293; Perales 107, 109.

Aguirre” (42). Regarding Teresa’s involvement “as co-author of a book on the destruction of Tomochic [sic]” Holden asserts that it was “Aguirre doing the actual writing” (170). Lilián llades likewise introduces texts signed by Teresa, but concludes that they must have been written by Aguirre because of their discussion of “una serie de conceptos filosóficos e históricos” (82) presumably beyond her grasp.

Characterizations of Teresa’s intellectual deficiencies are counterintuitive when taking into account the unusual attention Teresa garnered for her healing abilities and political engagement. Despite disparaging comments that circulated about her healing talents as an illusion upheld by fanatics, Holden states that “her reputation for extrasensory powers attracted attention in scientific circles throughout the United States, Europe and Asia. Physicians came from abroad to study her techniques and determine the nature of her cures” (107). Beyond her medical pursuits, Teresa’s intellectual and political formation was uniquely nurtured given that she lived much of her life with her staunchly anti-*Porfirian* father. Tomás Urrea was known for his extensive library, and his relationship with Lauro Aguirre, the engineer turned leader of a fledgling oppositional movement in the late nineteenth century. While Holden points out that Tomás Urrea had a “lack of formal education” (42), it is notable that his literacy and political engagement have not been put under the same scrutiny as that of his renowned daughter. On the contrary, according to Holden:

Tomás’s library at Cabora was comparable to Don Laura’s, for he had an inquiring and wide-ranging curiosity and acquired books for the pleasure they gave on long, quiet evenings. During Lauro’s visits to Cabora, the two men would sit on the veranda until late at night, discussing the oppressive political situation in Mexico, the significance of Mexico’s history, its religion and economy, and the ultimate destiny of the republic. (42-43)

Holden goes on to describe Teresa as uniquely interested in these political discussions and contends that Aguirre’s presence was undoubtedly influential on Teresa.

There are varying standpoints on the intellectual and political nature of the relationship between Aguirre and Teresa. Whereas Holden calls Aguirre “One of the formative influences on Teresita’s intellectual

growth” (42), Vanderwood more cagily states that he “seemed to be, at least to some degree, Teresa’s mentor” (221). Irwin cites Valadés’s conclusions that Aguirre “had been an early visitor to Cabora after word of Teresa’s first healings became public. [...] ‘From this moment on, the engineer Aguirre became Teresita’s spiritual guide’” (212). Their link took on a political dimension through Aguirre’s El Paso based oppositional newspaper. Once exiled, Teresa and her father first settled in Arizona, but they would, shortly thereafter, move to El Paso, where the Aguirre newspaper was published. Even after moving to a variety of cities across the United States, Teresa would eventually name her first daughter Laura after her friend Lauro Aguirre. Luis Urrea capitalizes on such bits of evidence, however circumstantial, regarding Teresa’s active engagement with Aguirre’s political goals to craft his novels’ protagonist as a highly literate, intelligent, critical and hardworking woman who fully realized a multi-faceted identity in steadfast defiance of often ridiculed patriarchal expectations.

The Hummingbird’s Daughter

The Hummingbird’s Daughter sets the tone for literacy issue by the third chapter, in which Luis Urrea offers a general description about the rustic life of northern ranchers. Among the details about basic identity, geography, society and survival in late nineteenth-century Sinaloa, it presents Tomás Urrea as a man who is passionate about books. His “prize” in a wagon delivery of goods for the ranch was a boxed set of Jules Verne novels (25), and this prize is accompanied by the presence of Tomás’s dear old friend, Lauro Aguirre, who will translate the books into Spanish for him. In sharp contrast, these same opening chapters relate Teresa’s birth, with the detail that her mother, Cayetana, could not write and so she had to memorize the baby’s long name (Niña García Nona María Rebecca Chávez) “to keep it straight” (30).⁸ While the difference between the privileged and marginalized groups is clear, there is a notable hybridity in that both Tomás and Teresa are portrayed from early on as learning valuable life lessons

⁸ Teresa is portrayed, while still a child, choosing to be called Teresa after learning about Saint Teresa in church and being attracted to her ability to fly, her scent of flowers, and that she “loved God more than anyone else in the world, and God let her do miracles” (51).

from the indigenous; Tomás's father even muses, "What boy didn't have his old Indian to teach him?" (42). In the case of Huila and Teresa, their relationship is repeatedly described as that of a teacher and student (96-97, 102, 114, 125, 268-269, 272, 275), whereas Tomás's recollections of "when he was a student" (135) also include his formal education in the city of Culiacán.

The novel portrays literacy as predominantly limited to men, although not all men, a distinction that is underscored during a trip north when "Tomás read the names [of towns along their route] aloud for Segundo [his trusted ranch hand], who could not read them" (112). Following Tomás's support for the opposition candidate for Sinaloan governor, he is forced to relocate the ranch farther north to avoid political persecution. Among the list of possessions to be moved in the treacherous journey by wagon are "love letters" and "Tomás's library" (117). His wife Loreto takes their children to an alternate location, and she promises to write, "a gesture recognized as symbolic, since there would be no place to send a letter *if she could write*" (109, emphasis added). Later Huila clarifies for Teresa that Doña Loreto does not know how to read, but that their "patrón reads for her. He reads to her from books, or he reads to her from the newspaper when he thinks she can understand it" (145).

Women's literacy is not unheard of, however, as when Tomás's eventual companion, Gabriela, is first portrayed as the daughter of a nearby restaurant owner who was surprisingly able to go off to college:

"I have been away," she said. "Studying.
 "You went to school?" Tomás said.
 "Yes, Don Tomás. These are modern days. Women attend college."
 She smiled a little.
 "'Delightful," Tomás murmured. (211)

After Gabriela moves in with Tomás, there is a discrepancy in the narration because Gabriela is portrayed as needing to learn how to read, which she does with the help of Teresa and Aguirre as they all take advantage of Tomás's vast library for their intellectual enrichment (281). In that the library is portrayed as key to his identity as a powerful man (280), Teresa's eventual access to his books speaks to her own ascent to a role of power.

Teresa's interest in writing seems to be pre-destined, despite the many sayings presented throughout the novel about how the peons must resign themselves to the inferior status into which they were born.⁹ She is the daughter of a woman known as the Hummingbird, which is described in a dream as embodying writing. The narrator explains:

a hummingbird made of sky came down from the heavens. It was too small to be seen, yet she could see it. Its blue breast reflected the world as it descended. Its wings were white, made of writing. Although she did not have words, she recognized them. The hummingbird's wings had been written with a quill pen. (81)

When Teresa begins to perfect the art of dreaming under Huila's tutelage, she has another dream related to literacy: "She saw people [...] holding books and newspapers. Reading...and she knew they were reading about her" (137). While foreshadowing the theme of how information would eventually circulate in press about her, the importance of learning for herself how to read soon follows in an extended conversation between Teresa, Huila and another servant to the Urrea's, Don Teófano about reading the bible in which Teresa asks if the women can read it:

"The priest can read it," Huila said. "We don't read it."

"Why not?"

"We just don't."

[...]

"Why can't we?" Teresa insisted

"We're not priests," said Huila.

"But you said we do holy work. We work medicine and pray to the saints and the Virgin and the four directions."

"Don't be a pest, child"

"Aren't we the same as a priest?"

"Women," she said. "You're just a sprout. And when you are a woman, you won't read that book!"

"Why not?"

"Ay, niña! Women are not priests. Now stop this silliness."

Teresita just sat there, staring.

⁹ For example, in *The Hummingbird's Daughter*: "If you were born to be a burro, they sighed, you can't be an eagle" (47); "If you were born to be a nail, you had to be hammered" (53); "If you were born to be an anvil, you must bear many blows" (120); "If you were born to be a nail, you cannot curse the hammer" (120). The examples continue in *Queen of America*: "If you were born a crow you couldn't expect to live like an eagle" (66), and the oddly empowering twist to an earlier saying: "'If you were born to be a hammer,' Teresita told herself, 'do not curse the nails.' Still, on some days, she was the nail and they were the hammers" (106).

“Do you read?”

“Are you crazy, child? Why would I read?”

“But—“

“Reading,” Huila said, “is for men. Like babies are for women, books are for men.”

[...]

“You are learning what you need to know,” said Huila. “Who needs books? Who needs to learn Yori foolishness?”

“I do.” (144-45)

Teresa later declares that being denied reading is akin to being kept as stupid as a mule, and she declares “I will read,” later shouting, “I want to read!” (146) despite admonitions that if “they don’t teach white girls to read, what makes you think they’re going to teach a little Indian anything” (147). Teresa’s response: “I’ll show them,’ she promised. ‘I’ll show everybody” (148).

Teresa lives up to her promise after the ranch is moved to the north, she becomes accepted in the main house, and her friendship with Aguirre takes root through reading. The narration clarifies that she “found Aguirre fascinating” (171) and even watches him read from afar or in his room surrounded by “his piles of books” (173). She asks him about what he is reading, and he lets her see his copy of *Don Quixote* (173). Therein begins her first reading lesson as; at her request, Aguirre goes over a few letters with her (174). Shortly thereafter, she sees him and calls, “Engineer...Teach me a new word” (180). He complies, and she tells Huila: “He’s teaching me to read [...] I wrote my name” (180).¹⁰ This led to a more formal teaching arrangement in which Aguirre teaches from the bible to both Teresa and Huila and then a wide range of other topics. Aguirre:

was quickly taken with his role as a minister to the People. He instigated an afternoon salon, where he could lecture them on affairs historical or philosophical. Each day at three, they gathered near his bed under the great tree and heard talks on animal magnetism, the zodiac, the political machinations of the Díaz regime. (181)

When Teresa becomes even more integrated into the Urrea home, she is described as Tomas’s “companion. Sometimes he spent entire days talking

¹⁰ When Huila later interrupts Teresa practicing writing her name, Teresa bluntly informs her: “I am learning” (203). Teresa’s newfound skill makes her like a teacher to Huila when she shows the very intrigued curandera how to write her own name (204).

to her about Díaz, or ranching, or horses, or history” (281). Also, “she spent hours working her way through his library” (281), leading to discussions with her father about Sor Juana, *Ivanhoe*, Voltaire, and other texts (281).

Beyond lessons with her father and Aguirre, Huila has Teresa work with “the teacher” (205) to intensify her training as a medicine woman with a regional expert. Teresa merges distinct styles of learning when the esteemed teacher Manuelito explains that Teresa must memorize “one thousand plants at the very least,” a task associated with “matters of spirit” that could take “One and a half lifetimes” even for someone as “smart” as her (215). However,

Teresa surprised Manuelito with a secret weapon of her own: pencils and a couple of Aguirre’s notebooks. She sketched the plants in the notebooks, and she scratched their names and their details onto the pages. Manuelito was astounded by this. He made her teach him to write his name, and she showed him the letters. He held the pencil in his fist and made wobbly letters, then beamed at his name when he was through. They put the page on the wall of his house. When she was done with her studies, she had two hundred plants listed in her books. (217)

These notes would serve in the realm of healing soon after when “Teófano’s niece came down with terrible menstrual cramps, she was able to consult her notes and concoct her first potion” (222). This episode portrays traditional healers as intelligent in their own right, but also highly capable of incorporating writing as a complement to their medicinal practices.

Teresa’s literacy would also be required for meeting the expectations of her new life as the recognized daughter of Tomás. What would later be referred to as “Teresita’s curriculum” (253), Tomás lays out a set of rules for his daughter such as the requirement to bathe and groom herself regularly (243-244) and wear “proper attire” including shoes (244-245). She was also to engage in “proper conversation” in that she was “expected to ask questions about the bizarre imaginings of Edgar Allan Poe. And Tomás enjoyed hearing her opinions about problems of the day” (247). This expectation would be met with “postsupper literary sessions” (249) that included the Bible only at Teresa’s insistence. Luis Urrea reminds readers that these gains in Teresa’s literacy were not typical of a patriarchal society. When Teresa “petitioned for the right to read whatever Tomás had in his library,” Tomás’s reaction was initially negative:

Una infamia! It was unheard of! He was appalled to learn that it was Aguirre himself, that snake, who had started teaching her to read and write. It took only three days of her angry silence to force him to acquiesce to her demands. The first book she read was Bernal Díaz del Castillo's chronicle of the Spanish conquest. She did not care for Tomás's beloved Jules Verne. Even in translation, it seemed boring and boyish to her. They began to order books by post. Juana Austen. Las Hermanas Bronte. (250)

Teresa's feminization of the reading process is not the only challenge to Tomás's initially rigid sense of the dominant society's culture of literacy. She also brings a mystic challenge to the rational world that the powerful men in the novel represent. Since neither Teresa nor Tomás wanted her to attend formal school, "Tomás and Aguirre created a course of study for her that she added to her field studies and dream work. Sometimes, while she was asleep, she read books in distant libraries... In dreams, French or German was easy to read" (251). In this way the novel merges within Teresa's character distinct worlds that were conventionally kept separate in this sociohistorical context. This foreshadows how she will become uncommonly consequential in both gendered worlds as she intertwines the mystic realm of the provincial female *curanderas* and the worldly, rational masculine realm of literature and politics.

Teresa's access to male-dominated spheres of rational intellectualism and worldly politics does not inspire her to abandon the spiritual and indigenous realms. She continues to relish being "connected to the earth" (272) and having the ability to communicate with God (278) and eventually with other spirits. Tomás even acknowledges her ability to embody a combination of skills as a woman:

He had indulged her indigenous interests, and her explorations with Huila. He felt that it was only fair to allow her an education in her Indian ways. It was a reasonable complement to her studies in the library. Aguirre had taught her well. She could discuss politics better than most men in the llano. Tomás was proud of her. (286)

Despite Tomás's fears that this strong young women could be targeted by the Díaz regime, rather than attempt to hamper her visibility he began to re-envision her possibilities: "He had begun to see Teresita in his mind as the great patrona. [...] The first woman to command the vast holdings of

the family. He could *see* it. It could be done, even it seemed unspeakable” (287, italics in original).

While Teresa’s healing powers grew and her acclaim began to circulate, she ironically became more aware of her provincialism and was curious about things beyond what she has already seen, tasted or experienced (300-301).¹¹ It was Aguirre, however, who would have the occasion to move beyond the Cabora ranch. When rumors circulated that the Rurales were ominously looking for him, he promptly moved to El Paso and “began a newspaper” (304). Teresa stayed behind, but her role at the ranch would be changed in another way after being brutally attacked by a seemingly deranged ranch hand named Millán. While in a coma for twelve days, Tomás would read her favorite books to her (320-321). They eventually believe she has died and prepare her for burial. When Teresa unexpectedly awakens, she remains in a trance-like state for months in which she helps Huila find peace on her own deathbed, has reliable premonitions, can perform miraculous healings, and inexplicably begins smelling of roses.¹² When she finally becomes fully cognizant of her strange new situation, the world has come to her in the forms of throngs of pilgrims seeking her healing powers, thus changing the contours of the ranch forever and her own identity: “She was now their lover, their saint, their mother, their friend. It was already too late to return to her old life” (349).

The new realities being forged by Aguirre in El Paso and Teresa as a folk saint in Cabora are interconnected through politicized thought and published writing. On the one hand, Aguirre “published broadsides and wrote incendiary tracts denouncing President Díaz” (340). On the other hand, Teresa’s presence for the impoverished masses is understood as political in that she understands the dire consequences of Díaz’s expropriation of the people’s land. The two forms of politics join when her father tells her of Aguirre’s business:

“Aguirre has started a newspaper,” Tomás said. “He publishes political stories.”
[...]

¹¹ Gabriela is similarly portrayed as bored with her conventional domestic role in the Cabora ranch (288).

¹² Corroboration of this special smell can be found in Holden (77).

“I love politics, Father,” Teresita exclaimed. “I will write for Uncle Lauro.”

“But,” he sputtered, “what do you know of politics?”

“God gave this land to these people,” she replied. “Other people want this land and are stealing it.”

She drained her coffee cup and put it in the middle of her empty plate.

“Politics,” she said. (350)

True to her word, the narration shortly thereafter reveals that thousands of pilgrims are regularly camping out at the ranch, and that news of Teresa’s political views arrive to the doorstep of the president by means of her writing in Aguirre’s newspaper:

El Monitor reported with some alarm that Teresita was preaching “extremely liberal views.” She was quoted as saying, “Everything the government does is morally wrong.” A colonel in the army, Antonio Rincón, took two hundred Yaquis, men, women, and children, prisoners, and carried them in the gunboat *El Demócrata* and dropped them in the ocean between the mouth of the Yaqui River and the seaport of Guaymas, all of them perishing. In the presidential palace in Mexico City, President Díaz first read of the atrocity in Lauro Aguirre’s *El Paso* newspaper. The article was written by Teresa Urrea. (352)

Teresa thus became known not only as “Girl Saint,” but also “female writer of propaganda” (353).

The novel addresses doubts about how such writings could be the sole work of Aguirre, who is widely characterized in the historiography as putting her name on his own words, by explaining that Teresa’s weekly writing routine: “On Sundays, she sat in the courtyard and enjoyed the flowers. She went up to her room and opened her inkwell and took up her pen. [...] On Mondays a buckaroo would carry her articles to Alamos and post them to Texas” (358).

Her political views are also made public in sermons, and Tomás frets that her “bizarre antigovernment and anti-church sermons” will put all of them in grave danger (378). Aguirre is portrayed as determined to appropriate Teresa’s image and words for his own aims because he sees in her the possibility of realizing the goal of revolution. As he explains to Tomás in a letter, “In her lies the flaming ember of liberation for all Mexicans!” (379). Later the narrator describes Aguirre’s perspective of

Teresa as “a flame waiting to be fanned” (408) and to that end explains that Aguirre has portrayed her as “the goddess of war” (409), “The Queen of the Yaquis” (411) and “the Mexican Joan of Arc” (409). On a critical note about men’s manipulation of Teresa, Aguirre seems to put words and beliefs into her mouth, writing: “The ‘Saint’ Calls for Freedom and Land!” (409) and other bold statements that leaves Teresa “speechless” when Tomás shares the articles with her (411).

There are further indications that Teresa’s words are not immune to manipulation by the politically motivated men in her midst. *The Hummingbird’s Daughter* portrays Cruz Chávez, the eventual leader of the failed Tomóchic rebellion as a literate man (360) who seeks Teresa’s counsel in person and later through an exchange of letters.¹³ When Cruz tells her of the impending confrontation after artwork was stolen from Tomóchic’s church by church officials, she implores him to exhibit restraint: “Harm no man! That is God’s iron rule, Cruz! You have been done a great harm! But together, we shall resolve to have your artworks returned, and your land blessed and inviolate forever! This is our holy battle. Justice for Tomóchic!” (423-424). Flagrantly contradicting her counsel, Cruz reports to his own followers that Teresa orders them to “begin a holy war to save Tomóchic!” (424). This sets off “a series of documents” (437) about the situation in Tomóchic that directly implicates Teresa in the rebellion in the eyes of the Díaz regime and local officials. She and her father are arrested, despite Tomas’s best efforts to falsely claim that his daughter “doesn’t care about politics” (439). Once arrested, Teresa and Tomás learn that “Miss Urrea has been recognized by presidential declaration to be the Most Dangerous Girl in Mexico” (477), and they are eventually exiled as the government prefers to avoid an execution transforming her into a martyr (481).

¹³ Letters are described in the novel as being delivered through a combination of mule train drivers and Rarámuri runners (423). Vanderwood corroborates that “mail courier services linked the dispersed mining centers to one another and to the outside. Normal delivery was weekly, in more remote places monthly. Sometimes it took a year for a letter to reach its destination, but people still marveled at the service, perhaps because they had no alternative. Many sites could only be reached through three-tiered delivery: by wagon from Chihuahua to the foothills, thence by mule as far as the trails extend, and finally by Tarahumara runners, paid a dollar a day to lug 30-50 pound packs of mail” (126).

It is a fitting conclusion to *The Hummingbird's Daughter* that on the train ride to the United States, Teresa's experiences are a combination of spiritual and political while also involving a good book. Prior to single handedly thwarting an anticipated attack of the train by her supporters, she has an out of body experience while conversing with Huila's spirit: "She was everywhere in the sky. She turned around and saw herself behind herself, reading a book; cooking; preaching; laying hands on a child; riding; sleeping" (486). Huila explains these images as the essence of her identity: "It is you. Every you, every possible you. Forever, you are surrounded by countless choices of which you are to be. These are your destinies" (487). *The Hummingbird's Daughter* has thus summed up its rejection of an image of feminine identity that would depict girls and women as bound to confirm to limited and limiting types. Not only is Teresa literally in motion and crossing borders, but Luis Urrea has also portrayed her as transgressing a myriad of socially and politically constructed boundaries by harnessing her physical, spiritual and intellectual capabilities to cast her in the provocative image of the daughter of a hummingbird made of words.

Queen of America

Queen of America starts up where *The Hummingbird's Daughter* leaves off, and it ultimately delivers a more complex portrait of Teresa's writing and political views because it has become patently clear to the Urreas that her public presence is highly dangerous. Even while safely on the other side of the border there is a dramatic storyline about hired Mexican assassins out to silence the Urreas, and there are tensions surrounding a possible case against her in the United States for fomenting rebellion, a possible rejection of their citizenship requests (82-3) or even extradition to face charges in Mexico for her supposed participation in ongoing uprisings following the massacre at Tomóchic. It therefore appears logical for Teresa to deny the political nature of her interests, healings or writings. Nevertheless, a full denial is lacking as she explains her side of the story to a curious group of women: "I did not inspire war, I never preached war. I was trying to tell the People of God's love...of God's justice." (21). While her image would grow into a legend through word of mouth, via

testimonials of her healings, and also within biased journalism, Teresa herself ends up muddling through the new experiences all the while finding a familiar routine of treating followers with her miraculous healing abilities. And of course there were always chances for her to read books (94, 136) and exchange letters with Aguirre in El Paso or Gabriela back in Mexico.

Whereas at first Aguirre is portrayed as using her image without her knowledge or consent (62), eventually Aguirre invites her to write with him on *El Independiente*.

“I want you to work here with me,” he said, sitting down at his desk.

“Excuse me?”

“Here, Teresita. I want you to help me edit this newspaper.”

She sat back in her seat. He expected her to gasp, or cry out, or refuse his offer out of hand. But she did not. She smiled. She rubbed her stomach.

“Edit?” she said.

“”Yes! We can write together!”

[...]

Thinking he was really smart, Aguirre said, “This is true healing, Teresita. Healing of the mind!”

She snorted.

“I have written articles before,” she said. “It was interesting. But hardly sacred.” (145-146)

Teresa is finally convinced when she sees that working for the paper will allow her to repay some of her debt to her father, who sacrificed everything for her safety. Yet, she holds Aguirre to specific conditions:

“I will not violate my principles,” she said

“No.”

“You can’t change my words.”

“Never”

“I will have freedom to say what needs to be said.”

“I swear to it.”

“I will not advocate violence.”

“Well! No...”

“We will hire women.”

“I...Right.”

He put out his hand. She looked at it. Should she agree? [...] She could help Don Lauro bring justice to the very People she had sprung from, the People she might never see again. Justice. Evolution. Her head spun a little. [...] Reluctantly, she put her hand in his. They shook.” (147)

While Tomás was miffed that Teresa “now had two jobs—Saint and girl reporter” (148), Teresa was motivated to collaborate with Aguirre on his book project called “*Redención!*” (150) regarding the injustices in Tomóchic because “she believed the story had to be told. She owed it to her fallen friends. She owed it to the People” (149). Teresa carried out her first duties as “girl reporter” with “revolutionary resolve” (even wearing “a pair of Tomás’s trousers”) while still keeping up with her “Saint’s schedule” (150). It is explained that Teresa went on to write articles “with message about fate, destiny, and God’s bounty” (165), although we learn that Aguirre breaks their deal in that “had taken her sentiments and transformed them into ferocious proclamations” (165).

Her writing maintains a connection with the spiritual in a scene when she receives a letter that she expected to be “an editorial response to one of her articles for Don Lauro” (170), but instead it was “a letter from the archangel Gabriel” (170).¹⁴ While this episode inspires curiosity about her ability to receive letters from other spirits, Aguirre continues to push her to use her power for “political” rather than “holy” pursuits (172). Rather than those two realms being at odds, however, the novel portrays her medicinal powers waning in tandem with her declining political influence. Teresa and her father’s departure from El Paso is the first step in that direction.

Back in Arizona the Urrea family has been reunited thanks to Gabriela’s arrival, and Teresa’s life begins to appear more conventional while still retaining her defiance against patriarchal barriers and creating opportunities for autonomy. While Teresa still performs miracles with her healing powers (210), she spends most time trying to dodge reporters and find independence from her overbearing father. Unfortunately, her struggles with Tomás push her toward a brief and tragic marriage with a demented ranch hand, who would shortly thereafter be found insane. Aguirre’s political writings have gotten him in hot water, and Teresa undergoes a crisis given the bad marital decisions she had made. The spirit of Huila helps her to find a silver lining to her troubles: “Perhaps,” the old

¹⁴ The angel Gabriel writes again to her home in New York (411), and Luis Urrea clarifies that the text of the letter is available in the New York public library (490).

woman said, "your job was also to remind everybody that men can be bastards" (268). At that she becomes untethered from the men who have shaped her life until then to accompany a family to San Francisco where her healing powers are requested. She stops writing, but the novel reminds us through the interview with real "girl reporter" Helen Dare (of the San Francisco Examiner), that the novel is still about women trying "to succeed in a man's world" (294). When in San Francisco Teresa is given the chance to take her healing powers on the road, she reasserts the political connection that she herself associates with her healing talents: "she would use them [the Consortium financing her trip] to take God's power to all of America. Let Aguirre's revolt take root" (311-12).

Even when writings about Teresa seemed disengaged with any truth, and thus tempting a rejection of the written word, we are reminded of her intimate connection to words when she dreams again of a hummingbird: "A hummingbird too small to be seen whose body was made of sky and whose wings were made of words" (363). This connection between Teresa, writing and politics is sustained when she later meets back up with Aguirre, who speaks of the troubling "rail strike" in Mexico. Teresa responds "I can help them" (394-395), despite his sense that they should exercise more restraint in harnessing her participation for revolutionary purposes (given the failed rebellions they have already been associated with). Throwing caution to the wind, Aguirre even fantasizes that "She might be moved once again to write a column or two" (396).

Nevertheless, Teresa's political motivations are portrayed throughout the rest of the novel as waning. The rest of Teresa's days in the United States are predominantly filled with the spectacle of her cures, now for well-off clients who pay her for her services. It includes finding love with the family friend, John Van Order, who joins her as translator, then lover, then father to her two children. She eventually has two daughters with John, whose love for his family sadly loses priority to his material desires. Teresa's experiences in this stage range from the processing of divorce documents to winning a fashion contest in New York, and of course to reading novels in her spare time. She is depicted as losing her powers when the people around her only aspire to use her for their superficial

interests, and when she loses touch with her roots. For example, she is horrified to find that some of her cherished possessions of Huila's have been lost, and she suddenly realizes that she "could not remember the last time she had touched soil with her feet. She could not remember when she had last put her feet in free running water. She had not pulled a fruit off a tree or ridden a horse or prayed in a sacred spot" (442). The storyline culminates with her trip back "home" to Arizona where her father has passed away and where Teresa will eventually succumb to the plague.

Despite her years of fame and involvement in public matters, Teresa declares that "coming home is my triumph. [...] Do you see? I am a mother now. I am not anybody's daughter. I am nobody's saint. I am walking back to the road, and all the illusions of that life are gone." (461). Indeed, John leaves her, so she ends life as a single mother, and she buys her own house, including space for her *consultorio*, making Teresa the sole head of her own household and medical practice with two daughters. Confirming the end of her public persona: "There had been no press interest [...]. No reporters [...]. No photographers. And no pilgrims to speak of. [...] But Teresa was perfectly happy among her leaves and twigs" (466). The women in family are reunited in a powerful light, beginning with the appearance of her mother, Cayetano, to make Teresa's deathbed "the happiest moment of her time on earth" (479). Meanwhile, Teresa's daughters "read and play with their dolls" (479) and, ultimately, Huila appears to usher her into death with her characteristic wit and wisdom: "'This is the culmination, child,' Huila said. There are no more paths. There are no more choices. In the end, you are left with this. Yourself" (484).

Conclusion

Both novels conclude with a focus on Teresa's identity. *The Hummingbird's Daughter* might appear more rebellious as it projects this extraordinary woman beyond the parameters of her family home whereas, by contrast, *Queen of America* might seem to depict a return to the conventional as Teresa seeks to reestablish herself in the family home, beyond the public eye, reconnecting with her spiritual and earthly instincts. In my reading, nevertheless, both novels portray the realities—however

fictionalized—of women in patriarchal societies seeking to chart their own, unique path. Teresa’s choices are not portrayed as false dichotomies such as either the domestic or the public, either the rational or the irrational, either the feminine or the masculine, either the corporal or the intellectual. Rather, she embodies the power one garners from the overlapping and intersection of distinct spheres. She garners power and authority in the domestic sphere, she blends spiritual and political discourses, and she uses finds applies her inexplicable corporal powers (such as her hot hands and rose scent) to the realm of science. More specifically, Luis Urrea’s novels portray Teresa’s ability to read, write and publish as a key her transformation from private healer to public threat. The depiction of a woman making use of such unexpected abilities implants widespread doubts—doubts that persist to this day in the case of Teresa Urrea—about how far a woman can go to push back against, and creatively participate in, the dominant structures that surround and attempt to define her.

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