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Bad hombres

Images of masculinity and the historical consciousness of US-Mexico relations in the age of Trump

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In August of 2016, a couple of months before the United States presidential election, then-candidate Donald Trump visited the presidential palace in Mexico City at the invitation of Mexican president, Enrique Peña Nieto. In the wake of his visit, a barrage of images, memes, and video clips were produced to mock, memorialize, and comment on it. This article analyzes the semiotics of those images and their relations of metonymy where Trump and Peña Nieto respectively stand for their countries in scenarios as abusive and jilted lovers, as iconized Mexican toys such as *piñatas* and *baleros*, and as the protagonists of popular movies such as *Dumb and Dumber*. A recurrent anxiety in these images involves the political humiliation of Mexico at the hands of the United States, and the gendered humiliation of Peña Nieto at the hands of Trump. Possible gendered rescues in memes include turning Trump over to El Chapo or to Carlos Slim, calling respectively on figure/ground relations of socio-sexual capital of masculinity and of monetary capital.

Keywords: Mexico, memes, Internet, politics, Mock Spanish, Trump, Latin America, gender

At the end of August 2016, ten weeks before the United States presidential election, then-candidate Donald Trump visited Mexico City, invited by Mexican president Enrique Peña Nieto. In the wake of Trump's visit, a barrage of images, memes, and video clips were produced to mock and comment on the event. Those images presented metonymic relations of Trump/United States and Peña Nieto/Mexico as abusive and jilted lovers. A recurrent anxiety in these widespread images involves the political humiliation of Mexico at the hands of the United States, expressed through the gendered humiliation of Peña Nieto at the hands of Trump.



Trump's visit was an unabashed disaster for the Mexican president. Many in Mexico (and abroad) blamed that visit and its photo opportunities for beginning the turnaround in the narrative of Trump's then-flagging campaign (Reid 2016). The visit allowed Trump to stand on the world stage, at the presidential palace at Los Pinos in Mexico City, and look minimally statesmanlike. Only a few days earlier Peña Nieto had faced his own scandal with revelations confirming that his undergraduate law thesis was heavily plagiarized, and one month prior to the visit, he had hoped, with a brief public apology, to leave behind a personal real estate corruption scandal that had engulfed him for two years.

During and after the Trump visit, the Mexican electorate was livid. Public figures, led by Morena party opposition figure Andrés Manuel López Obrador and former Mexican president Vicente Fox Quesada (2000–2006), condemned the visit. They portrayed it as a deliberate distraction set in motion by Peña Nieto in order to deflect attention from questions related to his thesis, the real estate deal, rising gas prices due to his privatization of oil companies, government corruption, and criminal impunity for failing to find the culprits responsible for the 2014 disappearance of forty-three teacher trainees from Ayotzinapa. And as if that were not enough, the public seized on Peña Nieto's ineffectuality with regard to reining in drug cartels (made more pointed by the audacious escape of El Chapo from a maximum-security Mexican prison), as well as his fumbling of public interviews and lack of English fluency in speeches abroad. Caricaturists and meme-makers feasted on these qualities, combining them with Peña Nieto's youth, short stature, and slightly pompadoury quiff, to portray him as an imbecilic, incompetent, and impotent man-baby. In some ways, they used some of the same tactics Trump himself uses in degrading his opponents (Hall, Goldstein, and Ingram 2016). Peña Nieto's approval rating at the time of Trump's visit stood at a historic low of 23 percent (Ortiz 2016).

The men behind the (Mexican) masks

Gender theorists, led by R. W. Connell, have posited a hierarchy of masculinities in public spheres, masculinities that “embody, organize, and legitimate the domination of men in the world gender order as a whole” (2016: 234). Such public masculinities in the political sphere include what Connell calls “transnational business masculinity,” a form of masculinity that opposes the “tough, power-oriented masculinities” enacted and maintained through war and global politics (see also Hooper 1998).

Tactical distinctions are made by the chorus of politicians involved, who deploy sexist and homophobic language in their own displays but later decry them in the displays of others. The famously misogynistic Trump, for instance, expresses shock at the treatment of women in other countries and uses this indignant stance (as George W. Bush did before him) to justify political aggression. Even Barack Obama, despite his self-proclaimed feminism, relied on masculinist language when he attacked Republicans “who act tough” by taunting them as afraid of resettling Syrian refugees who were “widows and orphans” (“That doesn't sound very tough to me”; Fabian 2015).

In Mexico, the discursive effects of the cacophony of reactions to Trump's visit resulted in the pummeling of Peña Nieto's business masculinity. One of the most

prominent actors in this process was Vicente Fox, who appointed himself as defender of Mexico's honor and turned up on Twitter as a kind of condescending avuncular troll to Peña Nieto, and on Trump's feed as an insolent provocateur. Freed from the barely observed protocol constraints of his former role as president, Fox (now with his own television show, *Fox Populi*) has become famous for trolling Trump, calling him a child, swearing at him directly on television, popularizing hashtags such as #FuckingWall, and bashing piñatas in Trump's image (see Figure 1). It surprises no one in Mexico that their former president could act this way, since during his own successful 2000 presidential campaign Fox castigated his opponent Francisco Labastida with homophobic taunts, calling him *chaparro* (shorty), *La Vestida* (cross-dresser), *mandilón* (henpecked), and *mariquita* (sissy). Fox, with his salty, populist language, huge cowboy boots, and tough rancher image, ridiculed and goaded his staid adversary from the establishment PRI party, who complained to the electorate during the presidential debate that Fox was using *majaderías* (vulgarity) and rude gestures, and thus was offending Mexican families (Brody Angers 2004; see Carrasco 2012 for archived recordings).



Figure 1: Former Mexican president Vicente Fox hits a Trump piñata. Image taken from YouTube video “#TacosMakeAmericaGreat,” published September 10, 2016. Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tqXBbNEmGpg>.

As Elinor Ochs (1992) explains, “few features of language directly and exclusively index gender . . . some may presuppose gendered identities for the speaker, the hearer, or overhearers” (1992: 339–40). It is not solely rude words and gestures, then, that would allow Fox to discursively regulate Labastida or Peña Nieto’s masculinities, but rather their deployment in light of the meanings of homophobic slurs in Mexico. As Tomás Almaguer (1993) and Guillermo Núñez Noriega (1999) have noted, in Mexico and Latin America the critical distinction in men’s sexual behavior may not be between gay/straight (Freudian sexual choice) but rather active/passive (Freudian sexual aim). In such an arrangement, “the [sexually receptive] passive, which is understood as feminine, is radically devalued” (Almaguer 1993: 255). By reducing Labastida to a *mariquita*, Fox leveraged Mexican homophobic slurs and interpellated Mexican voters into overhearers and judges, humiliating the PRI (ruling party) candidate, and eventually contributing to the end of the PRI’s seventy-year stranglehold on power. Figures 2–4 below, taken from widely circulating memes, express the anxiety that Peña Nieto will share a similar humiliation

at the hands of Trump: In each of these images, the United States metonymically penetrates a receptive Mexico.



Figure 2: Trump and Peña Nieto as lovers.

Source: <http://elblog.com/internacionales/registro-33935.html>.



Figure 3: Trump and Peña Nieto voicing the lyrics of a popular torch song.

Peña Nieto: "If you like we can be friends; I could help you forget the past."

Trump: "Let [me] go." (Literally, "Don't cling")

Source: <http://elpueblo.com/notas/Memes-por-la-reunion-de-Pena-Nieto-y-Do>.



Figure 4: Peña Nieto as a Stripper, Trump as Patron.

Source: <https://twitter.com/aldoenrique09/status/771225492405956609>.

Such masculinity battles are represented iconically in popular culture by a traditional Mexican *balero*, a cup-and-ball toy, reinvented to “schlong” the Trump icon (Figure 5). Other meme images depict gender rescue scenarios, with Trump being chased by megacriminal Joaquín Guzmán/El Chapo (Figure 6) or ridiculed by megamillionaire Carlos Slim (Figure 7)—images that respectively call on relations of socio-sexual capital of masculinity and money.



Figure 5: Traditional Mexican *balero* (ring-and-pin toy) in shape of Trump.

Source: <http://www.informador.com.mx/internacional/2016/688696/6/fabrican-balero-de-trump-tiene-exitosas-ventas-en-internet.htm>.



Figure 6: Chapo chasing Trump.

Chapo: “What was it you were saying about Mexicans?”

Trump: “Chapo . . . I was only joking!!”

Source: www.cnet.com/es/imagenes/donald-trump-vs-el-chapo-memes/4.

War, dignity, and historical consciousness

In Mexico City, from 5:30 in the morning until almost noon, while almost invariably stuck in traffic, one can tune in to a variety show on *Radio Centro*, broadcast on the 1050 frequency of the AM radio: *Buenos Días*, with Héctor Martínez Serrano, who is one of the veteran radio personalities in Mexico. The program, a mix of news, commentary, and entertainment, has been going on since 1982 and is a fixture in the city’s sonic landscape.



Figure 7: Carlos Slim on Trump.

Slim: "Donald Trump thinks that we Mexicans are idiots; but he works for me."

Source: <http://www.generadormemes.com/meme/7vsln8>.

On January 26, 2017, five days postinauguration, Trump practically uninvited Peña Nieto for a state visit by saying that unless he agreed to pay for the wall, he might as well not come. Fox immediately called for Peña Nieto to defend Mexico's dignity and face Trump, using the colloquial phrase *fajarse los pantalones* (lit. "tighten up one's pants"). Media ridicule ensued. For example, one popular political cartoon (Durán 2016) shows a small Peña Nieto buckling his belt in front of a looming Donald Trump. When Trump says (in translation), "Your president knows how to *fajarse los pantalones* (figuratively, "to stand up to someone")," Peña Nieto responds (exaggeratedly): "Ah, it was *fajarse*?" The pun here is between *fajarse* (literally, "to tighten up") and *bajarse* ("to pull down"), with Peña Nieto's sexual misunderstanding representing a failure of masculinity.

But there were other fears at work. Here is an excerpt of the *Buenos Días* commentary, reflecting both the historical consciousness of Mexicans in relation to the United States and deep worry about the possibility of war:

We have no strength, apart from dignity, unlike Cuba in its moment with the missiles [referring to the Bay of Pigs crisis]. . . . What can we do except dialog? Even if it's a dialog like you might have with a drunkard at a bar? We already have . . . historical lessons that tell us how a confrontation between us is always fatal for Mexico: the results? The loss of half of our territory, the sale of La Mesilla [the Gadsden Purchase of 1854], terrible loss of life and blood everywhere, fifty presidents one after another, some last two or three months, some last a year and a half. That is where we have to draw from, our very own history. (Martínez Serrano 2017)

Carlos Slim, the Mexican impresario, came into the fray with a similar message, calling an hour-long press conference ostensibly to defuse Trump's vociferous plans for the wall and to express his support for Peña Nieto and for the renegotiation of NAFTA, calmly urging the country to buy Mexican. Note that Peña Nieto experienced a unique (for a sitting president) parade of past presidents, aspiring 2018 candidates, foreign leaders, media impresarios, public intellectuals, and business magnates telling him what to do on social media. After expressing his support for Peña Nieto and congratulating the Mexican people on their show of unity

(#To2unidos) against Trump's wall, Slim issued the following warning: "Lack of unity has brought the worst consequences for Mexico. In the fifty-five years after our [1821] independence, we had sixty-six changes of government, nine constitutions, five wars with foreign powers, and four losses of our territory." It is no coincidence that this anxiety over war and loss of territory is expressed in the highest levels of government and business hierarchies as well as in the popular media. Looming large is the fear that Trump will screw Mexico and take it back to the subordinate role it had in the nineteenth century, or even worse, destabilize the country, plunge it into chaos, and take more territory.

A pervasive historical consciousness, this time referencing living memory, is also evident in the cartoon depicted in Figure 4. Peña Nieto is portrayed as today's Mexico, a stripper ogled by a smug Trump, offering her backside to the john. Except, on closer inspection, the cartoon suggests that Mexico has already been sold to the United States. At a table in the background sit former Mexican presidents Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988–1994) and Ernesto Zedillo (1994–2000), who were in charge of drafting and implementing NAFTA in the early 1990s.

Bad hombres

During the last presidential debate with Hillary Clinton in October 2016, Trump's mispronounced Spanish phrase "bad hombres" touched a nerve and launched a thousand memes. Adam Schwartz (2016) analyzed the usage with Jane Hill's (2008) framework of Mock Spanish:

To produce and rely on Mock Spanish within otherwise monolingual English speech . . . is an often unconsciously strategic effort to silently dominate the folks who are imagined to speak that language, but to do so through attempts at silliness, humor and acting "cool" or "with it." . . . Trump did not say "bad men." He said "bad *HOMBRES*." It was *HOMBRES* that connected the notion of "immigrant" not simply to "men" (the literal translation of that word), but to what the Spanish-ness of his choice could index: MEXICAN men as inherently undesirable, "illegal," criminal, violent. (Schwartz 2016)

During the US/Mexico diplomatic crisis precipitated by an indignant Peña Nieto tweeting his cancellation of the late January US state visit, Trump and Peña Nieto had a private phone call. The Mexican government called the conversation "fruitful and friendly," while Trump claimed that although the call was very good, he was very firm with Peña Nieto. On February 1, 2017, Mexican journalist Dolia Estévez reported that Trump had humiliated Peña Nieto by threatening to send troops to Mexico (*Aristegui Noticias* 2017). The next day the Associated Press corroborated, quoting Trump in a transcript: "You have a bunch of bad hombres down there. You aren't doing enough to stop them. I think your military is scared. Our military isn't, so I just might send them down to take care of it" (Salama 2017). Media exploded, speculating about whether Trump was preparing for military action in Mexico; damage control machines in both Mexico and the United States worked on overdrive. Later that day, the White House described Trump's comments as

“lighthearted” and said that they were “part of a discussion about how the United States and Mexico could work collaboratively.”

Consider one last image, an infographic published on Facebook’s *Pictoline* (2017) shortly after Trump and Peña Nieto’s phone call. Entitled “La Llamada Trump-EPN,” the cartoon continues the theme discussed throughout this essay of a smitten, feminized, passively delusional Peña Nieto. In the first diptych, we see AP journalist Dolia Estévez’s version of the encounter: Trump threatens a military invasion of Mexico because of “bad hombres” while Peña Nieto listens silently with a puzzled look. In the second diptych, we see the US government’s version of the encounter: Trump brags about America’s and his own greatness while Peña Nieto listens without understanding anything (“Chale, no le entiendo nada”). The third diptych satirizes the Mexican government’s rosy account: Trump and Peña Nieto are now smitten lovers, each coyly insisting that the other hang up first (“Cuelga tú. . .; “No, cuelga tú primero”). It would seem that Peña Nieto, despite all historical and contemporary evidence to the contrary, still imagines that his love and respect for the United States and its leadership is mutual.

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"Bad hombres": images de la masculinité et conscience historique des relations Etats-Unis-Mexique à l'époque de Trump

Résumé : En août 2016, deux mois avant les élections présidentielles états-uniennes, le candidat Donald Trump se rendit au palais présidentiel du Mexique à Mexico à l'invitation du président Enrique Peña Nieto. La visite génère un torrent d'images, de memes et de vidéos commentant, marquant et se moquant de l'évènement. Cet article analyse la sémiotique de ces images et de la métonymie qu'elles incarnent, dans laquelle Trump et Peña Nieto représentent leurs pays respectifs dans des scénarios où ils jouent le rôle d'amants abusifs et inconstants, iconiquement représentés par des jouets mexicains tels que les piñatas et les baleros, ou bien en tant que protagonistes de films célèbres tels que *Dumb and Dumber*. Une inquiétude récurrente de ces images implique l'humiliation politique subie par le Mexique aux mains des Etats-Unis, et l'humiliation genrée de Peña Nieto aux mains de Trump.

Des scénarios de sauvetage également genrés existent, comme par exemple celui de livrer Trump à El Chapo ou à Carlos Slim; ces scénarios font usage de relations fond-figure établis autour du capital socio-sexuel de la masculinité et du capital monétaire.

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