

Deadly Serious: Humor and the Politics of Aesthetic Transgression

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Abstract

This essay examines the political utility of humor using a framework developed in recent geopolitical scholarship read through Jacques Rancière's theorization of the politics of aesthetics and applied to everyday political life in contemporary Mexico City. Geopolitics here offers a unique lens through which to understand the spatiality of humor and its effects on the aesthetic and affective processes by which urban identities are constructed and contested. Building on roughly 14 months of ethnographic fieldwork, I argue that humor's subversive potential allows for simultaneous or co-constitutive aesthetic effects, such as the simultaneous disruption of political norms and the genesis of a more inclusive spatial imaginary of urban citizenship. This argument extends previous work on humor by emphasizing the complex, mutable, and multifarious nature of humor effects in practice, perhaps most especially in subversive modes. I demonstrate the strategic political value of humor through the exploration of three ethnographically-derived examples: an episode of a popular satirical video series, a newly christened popular saint said to protect residents of an historic neighborhood from gentrification, and a humorous tirade against the city's mayor at a local neighborhood meeting.

Keywords

humor, aesthetics, politics, transgression, gentrification, Mexico City, albur, relajo, urban, geopolitics

Introduction

It's funny, but humor rarely receives serious treatment from human geography.¹ Across a wide range of perspectives within and beyond the discipline, however, there is growing interest in humor as a tool of politics, from the mass communication of ideas through cartoons (e.g., Dodds, 2007; Dodds and Kirby, 2013; Hammet, 2010), public demonstrations and performances (e.g., Routledge, 2012; 2019; Boykoff and Osnes, 2019), and television and web-based political commentary (e.g., Thorogood, 2016), to interpersonal and group relations in the workplace (e.g., Erikson, 2019), marketplace (e.g., Haviland, 2011), and spaces of leisure (e.g., Macpherson, 2008) and education (e.g., Dittmer, 2013), in addition to the quotidian negotiation of the troubles, traumas, and injustices experienced by variously oppressed and subjugated groups across the globe (e.g., Ridanpää, 2017; Van Ramshorst, 2017; Bhungalia, 2020). Collectively, this burgeoning body of research forcefully asserts and explores humor's profound spatiality, including the practically limitless subtle and spectacular ways that humor is implicated in the construction and maintenance of subjectivity and identity; binding bodies together and fostering affinity, confidence, and solidarity through shared experiences and sensibilities. Humor is, in other words, every bit as spatial as it is social.

But humor is a complicated, ambiguous, and dangerous affair.² As Freud (1960: 297) noted over a century ago, and as much of the recent work cited above painfully demonstrates, “[t]he species of humor are extraordinarily variegated according to the nature of the emotion which is economized in favour of humour: pity, anger, pain, tenderness, and so on.” Laughter and smiles forge bonds of belonging, but also create, exploit, and exacerbate social divisions. Jokes take aim at power and privilege, but as often as not they are turned on the marginalized and used to reinscribe existing social hierarchies (in a visage of humor Billig (2002: 452) refers to as “antisocial”). Shocking events around the globe in recent years—as when satirical cartoons serve as touchstones for mass lethal violence and comedic television programs threaten to collapse entrenched authoritarian regimes—also plainly testify to humor's renewed geopolitical significance. As its operation fundamentally relies on distortion, denial, and/or deviation, humor's social morphology is above all inconstant, making humorous motivations, expressions, receptions, and effects extremely difficult to precisely qualify and more especially to predict (e.g., *This American Life*, 2021). Likewise, the crafting of humorous personality and the deployment of humorous tactics seldom present a simple choice between ‘white hat’ and ‘black hat’ modalities. Even a “conventional” sense of humor common to healthy familial relationships, Billig (2005: vii) reminds, “often calls for an element of malice.” Humor's “inherently mysterious” (Veatch 1998:

¹ This statement is no less a faithful reflection of this dearth for its levity, which issues as much from its (unintended, I fully admit) fidelity to the first sentence of Freud's (1960 [1905]: 39) *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* as from the obvious: “Anyone who has at any time had occasion to inquire from the literature of aesthetics and psychology what light can be thrown on the nature of jokes and on the position they occupy will probably have to admit that jokes have not received nearly as much philosophical consideration as they deserve in view of the part they play in our mental life.”

² As I am here interested in humor as a matter of human geography, for the purposes of this article I adopt an expansive usage of the concept similar to that of Billig (2005), discussed in more detail below. This posture has it that humor includes but cannot be reduced to humorous gestures (such as a joke, pantomime, or monologue), responses and effects (such as laughter, pleasure, or sense of community), or to the strictly comedic, save in this last instance for a shared conceptual and practical slipperiness (see Bergson, 2009).

161) paths are thus complex and winding for both practitioners and audiences; beset with enigmatic signals, unforeseen travails, and severe experiential and informational asymmetries. As has long been recognized in humor theory, however, this ambiguity is precisely the source of humor's social power. The appeal of humor's unique subversive potential mitigates the dangers inherent to the "unruly complexity" (Degani, 2018: 486) of this terrain in the decision matrices of its users, beckoning like the immortal inducement attributed to Yankee sage Yogi Berra ('When you come to a fork in the road, take it'). Understanding humor's import as a tool of politics, and a matter of human geography more broadly, requires attending to the socio-spatial morphologies within which such decisions are made, and the subversive uses to which humor's ambiguities are put in everyday life.

Beyond commonplace and intuitive geographical metaphors (jokes and 'sense[s] of humor' are nearly invariably defined colloquially by 'insides' and 'outsides', for instance), geopolitical insights on the spatiality of humor suggest a special relationship with what Rancière (2010) calls "the distribution of the sensible", or the system of aesthetic registers through which things, actions, and bodies are 'placed' and sensory experiences encoded and decoded. In this article, I turn attention toward the subversive roles that humorous transgression can be made to play in the contestation of such partitionings, both critical and creative. As recent feminist geopolitical scholarship has crucially demonstrated, such processes must be carefully examined in everyday theatres traditionally relegated to the personal, the local, and the banal (see Dittmer and Gray, 2010; Christian et al., 2016). With this insight in mind, this article builds on roughly fourteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in Mexico City to explore how everyday residents use humor to create and exploit cleavages in aesthetic orders and enact alternative geopolitical identities.

This work moves beyond important studies of the construction of discrete territorial identities across multiple spatial scales, focusing instead on efforts to disrupt such aesthetic formations and the behaviors and ideas they enable and constrain, opening up new spaces of possibility in the process. Such work is nowhere more necessary than the world's largest cities, where conflicts over socio-spatial exclusion and marginalization are expected to continue to explode as the 'urban age' deepens (Dikeç, 2017), and where citizenship and other questions of multi-scalar politics are now most actively negotiated (see Beaugregard, 2018; Harvey, 2012; Sosa López, 2017; Martinez et al., 2020). And while the increasing reach of digital networks and social media amplify the role of humor in political discourse (see Pearce and Hajizada, 2014; Kang, 2017), humor at the level of the everyday ethnographic encounter remains a crucial but underappreciated piece of both the research process (as the ethnographer struggles to cultivate a sensitivity for the nuance of local humor) and socio-spatial processes themselves, or what Carty and Musharbash (2008: 152) call "quintessential socio-cultural 'stuff.'" Seen from this vantage point, humor's potential far exceeds the limited role to which it is often relegated by expanding notions of the possible for urban residents. Exploiting the strategic potential of humor to elide policing, I will show how residents of Mexico City build on longstanding local and national traditions of political humor to kick down the walls of official and unofficial socio-spatial partitions alike, subversively deploying humor in a variety of ways to contest such globally salient urban processes as megaproject-driven redevelopment, gentrification and neighborhood change, and dubious 'democratization' by carving out spaces of radical potential in contemporary imaginaries.

In the section that follows, I develop a framework for understanding humor's radical potential through a Rancièrian reading of urban geopolitical aesthetics. I then elaborate three examples of such humorous politics derived ethnographically in Mexico City, paying special attention to their transgressive nature and subversive potential. Finally, I offer some concluding remarks on the continuing relevance of humor for scholarship in human geography and political transformation, including the possibilities for humorous transgression in service to emancipatory ends.

Placing the Politics of Humor

Humor remains an underappreciated fundament of subjectivity (Houston and Senay, 2017), despite longstanding preoccupations in social and behavioral psychology (e.g., Freud, 1960) and rapidly growing interest in the significance of humor to organizational cultures, professional relationships, and overall social wellbeing (see especially McGraw and Warner, 2014; Aaker and Bagdonas, 2021). It is also extraordinarily and notoriously tricky to define. In a generatively intuitive framing, Aaker and Bagdonas (2021) place humor in the middle of a three-tiered typology ('levity', 'humor', 'comedy') analogized to activities pertaining to physical fitness ('movement', 'exercise', 'sport'). "Levity," they write, "is a mindset—an inherent state of receptiveness to (and active seeking of) joy" (Aaker and Bagdonas, 2021: 37), which can be elevated into humor (and eventually the more standardized/professionalized 'comedy') with increasing levels of intentionality, training, and experience. Not everyone can become a successful comedian, they argue, but most everyone willing to put in a little effort can move toward a "mindset of levity" and combat the negative health and social effects of the startling "humor cliff"³ they observe among adults across the contemporary world. For the analytical purposes of this article, I will use 'humor' to refer to activities that Aaker and Bagdonas call both 'humor' and 'comedy', guided by a shared concern for intentionality in humorous practices.⁴ Following Bergson (2009) in attempting to avoid the scholastic temptation to "impriso[n] the comic spirit within a definition", I adopt this rather capacious posture in an effort to contribute to an analytical familiarity ("a practical, intimate acquaintance") between humor and human geography, using quotidian urban politics as a point of entry for this article and a point of departure for this burgeoning area of geographical inquiry. And, again with Bergson (2009), my hope is that human geographers "may also find that, unintentionally, we have made an acquaintance that is useful."

Though it is beyond the scope of this article to fully articulate and disentangle the various theories of humor origin⁵—what makes a joke funny or not funny, etc.—the outlines of humor's deeply ambiguous nature are of singular import (see Smith, 2009; Routledge, 2019). Humor's origin has traditionally been divided into three bodies of theory, which Billig (2005) identifies as 'superiority'

³ The name they've given to a gradual but nevertheless dramatic decline (after all, who would buy a book that advertises a 'gradual but statistically significant humor decline'?) in everyday instances of smiling and laughter among adults beginning roughly after age 20 (Aaker and Bagdonas, 2021: 30).

⁴ Even these parameters would be rather shaky for a general study of humor. A focus on intentionality, however, provides a productive analytical vantage on the political utility of humor in everyday life, for practitioners both professional and decidedly unprofessional.

⁵ A (largely) thankless task of killing the frog (see McGraw and Warner, 2014) if ever there was one, this work has been extensively done elsewhere. See especially Freud (1960); Critchley (2002); Billig (2005); McGraw and Warner (2014); Aaker and Bagdonas (2021).

(wherein social hierarchies provide levity at the expense of others), ‘incongruity’ (which relies on departures from the expected), and ‘release’ (elsewhere called ‘relief’, whereby humor can be used to deflect or otherwise navigate difficult emotions and situations, or to alleviate a variety of pressures). Designating such categories of origin is complex work, given the shades of meaning and palimpsestic layerings that often attend even the most seemingly straightforward of jokes. In a recent attempt at a comprehensive framework, McGraw and Warner (2014) modify Veatch’s (1998) “N + V theory” into what they call “benign violation theory”. Staking a truly global claim, they argue that “humor only occurs when something seems wrong, unsettling or threatening (i.e., a violation), but simultaneously seems okay, acceptable, or safe (i.e., benign)” (McGraw and Warner, 2014: 10). Proximity (geographical, historical, social, etc.) is a crucial determinant of the malignancy of a given ‘violation’ in this theory; both absolute and relative distance can make a situation far more or far less funny. Even more than its origins, humor’s uses and effects—its potential to destroy and create, preclude and induce—offer insights into both the spatiality of humor and its political utility. In a study of such effects, Meyer (2000) identifies four ‘functions’ of humor: identification, clarification, enforcement, and differentiation. Meyer (2000: 329) qualifies the former two as ‘unifying’ and the latter two as ‘dividing’ functions, posing humor as a paradoxical tool “by which communicators can unite or divide their audiences.”

This inherent socio-spatiality has long been intuitively evident to humorists, students of humor, and everyday persons for whom spatial metaphors—being ‘in on’ the joke, for instance—come easy to hand. Humor often functions, as Dodds and Kirby (2013: 48) argue, as a “boundary-marking exercise”, drawing lines of group membership through a shared sense of what is or isn’t funny. Understanding the political power of humor thus begins with appreciating its operation in the socio-spatial field of subjectivity, and the ways in which social identities are spatially constructed. Geopolitical scholarship, which traces connections between territory and identity, and between spatial imaginaries and social processes, provides a useful lens for this inquiry. Once consumed with the practices and discourses of statecraft, critical, popular, and more especially feminist geopolitics have of late turned attention toward the quotidian, the banal, and the local (see Dowler and Sharp, 2001; Dittmer and Gray, 2010; Christian et al., 2016), in order to better account for the affective and other dimensions of identity production and maintenance. Attention to humor as a crucial part of such everyday geopolitical activity has increased markedly in recent years, as scholars train their focus on recognizing and contending with humor’s many and shifting expressions (see Dittmer, 2013; Thorogood, 2016; Ridanpää, 2017; Clark and Fluri, 2019). For Routledge (2019), humor’s ambiguity makes it an especially incisive tool for enacting “alter-geopolitics”, which both challenge existing geopolitical regimes and attempt to build and populate alternative symbolic and material spaces.

Diverse everyday uses and effects of humor abound in this growing geopolitical literature in increasingly complex ways (most especially in ethnographic accounts), collectively demonstrating highly uneven and often contradictory outcomes rooted in the same obscurity and fluidity that make humor such an appealing mode of geopolitical critique. Erikson’s (2019) work among women firefighters in Australia shows that humor can be used to forge a sense of trust and even challenge structures of oppression (like patriarchy) in everyday ways, but also to exploit and reproduce those same structures, or even extend their sway (see also Molé, 2013). For Van Ramshorst (2017), Central American migrants’ use of humor resists commonly totalizing

narratives of tragedy, revealing a fuller range of affective experience and negotiation in migration. Likewise, Macpherson (2008: 1092) emphasizes the multidimensional qualities of humor and laughter among visually impaired walking groups, noting its functions in coping, facilitating relationships, and offering relief while also posing its appearance as an indication of pessimism and powerlessness, inviting researchers to “think carefully about the precise constitution” of a humorous ‘disposition’. Dittmer’s (2013: 510) analysis of humor at Model United Nations events makes much of the “exteriorisation of geopolitical difference” underpinning much humor that comes at an other’s expense, though allowance is also given for the unifying effects of humorous practice among participants. In tracing attempts to address climate change through stand-up and sketch comedy in Colorado, Boykoff and Osnes (2019: 159) illustrate the role of humor as a vehicle for communicating uncomfortable messages and destabilizing power relations. They also caution that humor can perform the exact opposite function, making comfortable what should not be and “absorbing power to produce social change”, demonstrating the troubling ambiguity of humor’s purchase abiding in “the power of comedy to lubricate sites of subversion as well as sites of distraction” (Boykoff and Osnes, 2019: 159).

While these and many other studies illustrate the coexistence of humor’s contradictory functions of unification and division or creativity and destruction in everyday life, there has as yet been little consideration for the blending of these functions in practice, or of their co-constitutive effects. That is, while unifying and divisive modes have been identified as co-present possibilities in a variety of scenarios, humorous gestures have rarely been treated as simultaneously productive of antipodal effects, or as having the ability to fulfill multiple functions, modulate between functions, or function sequentially as part of strategic communicative interventions. While subversive humor works to demean and diminish its targets (be they structures of oppression, oppressors, or oppressed), this is to say, such maneuvers can also act as emancipatory and creative gestures, or as factors in or catalysts for such action. Moreover, despite important calls to “bring geopolitics into the mainstream of urban studies” (Rokem et al., 2017: 255), research on urban geopolitics has largely remained focused on its ‘hot’ (e.g., instances or effects of violent conflict) rather than its more ‘banal’ (e.g., everyday negotiations of subjectivity) dimensions (see Christian et al., 2016), and has tended overall to focus on existing analytical categories and territorial identities associated with scales, containers, and motivations more typically under geopolitical purview (e.g., nation, region, ethnicity, religion, etc.). In other words, though cities are increasingly recognized as ‘strategic sites’ of geopolitics (Graham, 2004), urban geopolitical research has yet to develop a research agenda that can account for the unique and rapidly changing concerns of everyday life in the cities and neighborhoods of an urbanizing planet, especially as these intersect with vital questions of urban citizenship and political participation, sub-municipal territorial identity and community, and the utility and legitimacy of urban governance structures. In what follows, I will argue that subversive humor can and does tear at the seams of the social fabric in ways that assert the presence of those made to be or to seem absent and create voids inside the social totality to be filled by the as-yet unnamed and emplaced.

Realizing such emancipatory possibilities requires assault on the particular aesthetic configurations of the social world—what Rancière calls “the police” (2010: 44)—which are defined in principle by “the absence of void and of supplement.” Rancière’s (2010: 103) police “designates not an institution of power but a distribution of the sensible within which it becomes possible to define

strategies and techniques of power.” The ‘distribution of the sensible’⁶ is the foundation—the “primary aesthetics” (Rancière, 2013: 8)—upon which what is commonly taken for politics⁷ is enacted. Particular partitionings of this “system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it” (Rancière, 2013: 7) assert a complete saturation of the social, such that proper places and roles are assigned to even the infinitesimal minutia of perceptive experience. Such orders are the rubrics by which registers are assigned (what is speech, in a classic example, and what is noise), beauty is adjudicated (what is appealing, and what is not), position and posture are delineated (where does something or someone belong, and in what attitude and condition), and political possibilities (in common parlance) are decided (who is counted, who counts, and how). These systems, too, are fundamentally spatial in material and metaphorical senses. Rancièrian ‘politics’, by contrast, presents an existential challenge to the police and its partitions and distributions (Dikeç, 2005; 2013). “The essence of politics”, Rockhill (2013: 95) explains, “resides in acts of subjectivization that separate society from itself by challenging the ‘natural order of bodies’...an anarchical process of emancipation that opposes the logic of disagreement to the logic of the police.” To initiate politics from this vantage point is to disrupt or undermine the police, through contentious action. Theorizing such resistance to contemporary police orders has yielded notions of mass democratic abstention, political revolution, and social upheaval (see Žižek, 2008), and empirical studies devoted to a rather diffuse but gathering ‘rage’ (Dikeç, 2017). Recent calls to look beyond the charismatic loci of politicians, parties, and policy, however, emphasize the everyday nature of the police and of its contestation (e.g., Derickson, 2017). And as Rancière (2010: 45) reminds us, “[p]olitics, before all else, is an intervention in the visible and the sayable.”

As a mode of communication, humor has a special capacity to distort or transgress such partitions of the visible and the sayable, allowing its practitioners to “transcend recurring arguments or patterns because messages with humor can get people to laugh at contradictions...instead of frantically, futilely, or tragically seeking to correct or eliminate them” (Meyer, 2000: 328). Humor can be used to assert the presence of and draw attention to specific bodies, as the protest activities of Carole’s (2006) ‘Raging Grannies’ demonstrate in explicitly rejecting what they perceive as an imposed and creeping social invisibility. For Bhungalia (2020: 389), humorous practices under conditions of subjugation in Palestine show a uniquely transgressive political potential for humor, a method of refusal built through a politics “genealogically linked but not entirely reducible to resistance.” Such “refusal”, Bhungalia argues, works through the denial of terms of authority, rather than political opposition. In addition to ‘lubricating’ existing areas of opportunity or asserting presence through negation, however, humor can also facilitate the creation of new spaces of dialogue and action as subjects transgress the boundaries and exceed the capacities assigned by the police. Such “identificatory transgression” (Gerlofs, 2018: 991) can act as an inaugurating political gesture, or what Žižek (2013: 73) calls “the elementary form of resistance”, brought about by “disturbing such orders of the visible and proposing different lateral links of the visible, unexpected

⁶ Importantly also referred to as “the partition of the sensible” (Rancière 2010: 44).

⁷ “What is generally referred to as politics, such as the organization of powers, the distribution of places and roles with its systems of legitimization, and even the procedures through which collectivities come together and reach a consensus, in fact, all fall under the category of the police as a system of governance” (Dikeç 2005: 174).

short circuits, etc.” Cutting against the grain of aesthetic givens, subversive humor can therefore allow competing spatial imaginaries to be constructed and lived, different positionalities to be claimed and constituted, and previously unimagined and/or unimaginable political possibilities to be engendered and enacted. In Rancièrian language, such subversive humor allows for the assertion of “the part of those without part” (Rancière, 2010: 43), whether an existing remainder inevitably attending the social sutures of the police (see Dikeç, 2005; Swyngedouw, 2011) or novel elements yet in the process of becoming in contradistinction to the police (see Davidson and Iveson, 2015). In both complement and contradiction to Dodds and Kirby’s (2013) claim of humor’s potential to reframe as a more ‘pacific’ form of everyday geopolitics, I propose considering its potential to commit a special kind of violence to the aesthetic orders that govern social worlds, with a fuller appreciation of its ambiguously destructive and creative capacities.

That the police allows for and admits to no remainder or surplus assures the omnipresent possibility of such a transgressive politics. And though such possibilities are practically limitless, their contours are inextricably linked with partitions of the sensible. As Dikeç’s (2013: 82) careful parsing of the multiple meanings of the French *partage* makes clear, ‘partition’ for Rancière refers to “both what is shared in common and what is separated in a given community.” Though easily overlooked, the dual sense of the term is crucial. Aesthetic practices, Rancière (2013: 14) argues,

only ever lend to projects of domination or emancipation what they are able to lend to them, that is to say, quite simply, what they have in common with them: bodily positions and movements, functions of speech, the parceling out of the visible and the invisible. Furthermore, the autonomy they can enjoy or the subversion they can claim credit for rest on the same foundation.

The common, the given—the partition of the sensible—forms the basis for subversion as well as for the governance of the police, as both rely on a shared aesthetic lexicon. Such landscapes of meaning are, as geopolitical scholarship has shown, profoundly contingent upon history and geography. Humor is likewise situated and emplaced, both within social, spatial, and historical contexts—what Critchley calls the *sensus communis* (common sense) of “intersubjective appeal” that defines any humorous body’s “social reach”—and with respect to its attendant worlds of ‘seriousness’. For Billig (2005: 4, following Mulkay, 1988), the “reversed world” of humor “cannot stand apart from the world of seriousness” with which it is always and inevitably in conversation. Humorous transgression forces the humorist onto this serious terrain, and can therefore be a dangerous, even deadly business.⁸ Refusal, subversion, and even ‘zaniness’ are not always tolerated by the world of seriousness. This terrain and the reactions that emanate from it are highly unpredictable, and often seem subject to extreme aesthetic fluctuations and temporal variability. As a result, transgressive humor as an everyday practice—whether spontaneous or premeditated, surgical or broad spectrum, prudently subtle or heedlessly indiscreet—commonly appears experimental.

⁸ See, for example, the work of Egyptian Comedian Dr. Bassem Youssef, including as chronicled by Sara Taksler’s 2016 documentary film, *Tickling Giants*.

In Mexico City, as the next section will elaborate, subversive humor takes shape among layers of rich humorous tradition from political cartoons to sophisticated interpersonal language games, alongside and against the living history of revolutionary political tradition and pageantry, and amidst the violent maelstrom of social change now afoot and yet portended within and beyond its confines.

Practicing Humorous Transgression in Mexico City

For at least several centuries, Mexico City has been a place of aesthetic tumult. In the middle decades of the twentieth century, its exploding population churned through property regimes and land uses at its sprawling peripheries as the former colonial capital, the beloved “City of Palaces”⁹ home to around a half-million *fin de siècle* residents, gave way to a sprawling metropolis of nearly 15 million. Despite secure foundations, aesthetic sensibilities in the capital have shifted markedly through the episodic and violent mutations of this urban revolution (see Gallo, 2004). Newly arrived *chilangos*¹⁰ were forced to contend with a complex local vocabulary and an array of humorous traditions and practices, a cultural onslaught still experienced by migrants from across the country and the region. The process of adjusting and in turn contributing to the rhythms of this milieu, as I have learned many times through personal experience and the tales of friends and informants, continues to make one the unwitting butt of jokes. Some longstanding elements of the city’s sense of humor have been notoriously shocking to even the most urbane of would-be assimilators, including a minor-key penchant for ‘gallows humor’, the intimate jocularly of sexualized ribbings and aggressive masculinity games elevated to a form of art, and the baroque peculiarity of the city’s striatic layerings and messy blendings of the divine and profane. In distinguishing Mexico City from New York, Gallo (2004) cites the AIDS crisis as instructive. While New Yorkers mounted a sober political campaign, Gallo writes, *chilangos* turned the vulgarities of *lucha libre* (professional wrestling) on a personification of the disease in *El SIDA* (its acronym in Spanish), a macabre combatant and object of scorn pitted against local folk hero Superbarrio (a costumed advocate for marginalized residents). Though recognizing the risk of trivializing a devastating epidemic, Gallo (2004: 17) argues that the public awareness and political capital generated by this strategy represent an important “form of political activism” couched as entertainment, “a representative instance of how Mexico City’s inhabitants often deal with traumatic events by transforming them into elaborate narratives” (also, see Boudreau, 2017). Such ‘black humor’ as both “political critique” and “ethical rebuke” enjoys a long and illustrious lineage in Mexico, perhaps especially in its infamously intimate dances with the macabre (Lomnitz, 2005).

Perhaps the city’s most outstanding contribution to the world of humor is the *albur*,¹¹ a hypersexual joust of (usually) friendly opponents—traditionally male¹²—that rewards sophistication in double

⁹ A moniker often erroneously attributed to Alexander von Humboldt. See de Mauleón (2015), who instead credits Charles La Trobe.

¹⁰ A common name for residents of Mexico City.

¹¹ *Albur* and *alburrear* (the infinitive verb) have no direct translation.

¹² Prominent counterexamples certainly exist, most notably the recently deceased *Tepiteña* Lourdes Ruiz Baltazar, colloquially known as ‘La Reina del *Albur*’ (Queen of *Albur*) or ‘La Verdolaga Enmascarada’ (something akin to ‘The Masked Pestilence’). The term ‘verdolaga’ is the Spanish name of *portulaca oleracea*, commonly known as purslane, a botanical common to much of the Western Hemisphere and often considered an invasive or semi-

entendre, vulgar phonetic manipulation, and especially spontaneity and performative agility. The form is an exaggerated representation of a broader tendency in the use of language in Mexico (Paz, 1985; Gutmann, 1996; Anaya and Cózar Angulo, 2014), as Hirsch (1990: 5) explains:

In the *albur*, even the simplest of conversations can suddenly become a raging battle of sexual metaphors and puns. A man can say he is going to buy milk, or that the sky is cloudy, and suddenly he has been verbally anally raped by his friend in a *muy típico* Mexican game of verbal dominance called *albures*. To outwit a friend in these duels of puns, openly exhibiting a familiarity with the vocabulary if not the real thing, is highly regarded. A game played by men and boys, the object is to misunderstand something deliberately, responding not to the intended meaning but to a second, sexual meaning.

The *albur* is distinguished by its vulgarity and multivalence, but also by the symbolically subversive potential it shares with other forms and broader currents of humor in Mexico. In an analysis of the routinized performance of Mexico City street clown *Tontolín*, Haviland (2011: 261) argues, “Tontolín’s art depends precisely on revaluing the normal indexical value of using vulgar and abusive talk precisely for this space of public entertainment: retaining the intimacy of insult, the sharedness of shaming, and the sociality of sexual allusion to draw performer and audience into a close, collusive social relationship”. In *Tontolín*’s case, such relationships are bent to serve as entrepreneurial entrepôts, but these shared spaces of meaning are also turned toward other purposes, including the troubling of boundaries and framings of popular consciousness or official discourse (Neria and Aspinwall, 2016), and the negotiation of identity and belonging (Chávez, 2015). The transgressive capacities of *albarear* place it comfortably within the remit of a broader mode of expression in Mexico known as *relajo*. Like the practices and orientation it names, Sánchez (2012: 6) defines *relajo* as “both an attitude and a manner of being”, building on and explicating the work of philosopher and *relajo* theorist Jorge Portilla, for whom the term signifies “a suspension of seriousness” (quoted in Sánchez, 2012). In the introduction to a collection of essays by Carlos Monsiváis, the great chronicler of Mexico City, Kraniuskas (1997: xiii) argues that *relajo* “hints at a dimension of mockery (as in ‘making fun’) and transgression, and refers to an attitude towards dominant values—which ‘relajo’ refuses to take seriously”. *Relajo* and its application in the *albur* and other quixotic expressions offer a window onto a longstanding tradition of transgressive humor elevated to form and widely practiced throughout the capital, the country, and increasingly the region.

No less than during the revolutionary upheavals of a century before, Mexico City’s contemporary material and symbolic landscapes bear the trauma of conquest under the impulse of a new set of players. Sweeping democratic reforms at the local and national level have returned to the newly rechristened Mexico City—a ‘Federal District’ under near total federal control until constitutional reforms in 1996 and 2016—much of the political autonomy it lost in 1928, and the young Morena

invasive species, used in some parts of Latin America as a metaphor for something that ‘spreads like wildfire’, and, in classic *albur* fashion, toying with phonic gestures toward the phallus (*la verga, la verdura*, here perhaps suggesting Ruiz Baltazar as something akin to ‘the masked penis’, as a woman playing what is traditionally and still overwhelmingly a men’s game) and a sexual pestilence, evoking the burning sensation of gonorrhoea for her proven and unsurpassed mastery of *albarear* (Suárez, 2019). See also Chávez (2015).

political party has seen leftist populist Andrés Manuel López Obrador ascend the Mexican Presidency and Claudia Sheinbaum Pardo the city's mayoralty. Devastating earthquakes, increasingly global attention, and dire competition for urban property are also colliding in older neighborhoods in waves of aesthetic alteration that many residents can hardly be blamed for thinking conspiratorial. In the summer of 2013, I arrived in Mexico City to study and work with a group of residents, academics, activists, and non-governmental actors seeking to contend with these changes. Like many who have written about humor, it was not an initial focus of my research. My interests lay instead in the organization and activities of urban social movements, the changing geographies of urban citizenship and socio-spatial inequality, and the politics of urban redevelopment.¹³ But as I soon learned, *chilangos* often enact politics in aesthetic and affective registers (see also Crossa, 2012; Rasmussen, 2017), and in increasingly novel ways in response to a dramatic shift in municipal priorities toward redevelopment in recent years (Delgadillo, 2016; Leal Martínez, 2020). Humor plays a huge variety of political roles as part of this agenda, from everyday conversations and transactions to political organizing and presidential addresses. Its cacophonous and phantasmagoric expressions across mode, media, and moment have nearly universally been treated as discrete phenomena, however. Human geography's synthetic impulses are here of great analytical benefit, and should be trained on developing a more comprehensive theorization of humor's quotidian political potential. As a move in this direction, in the following sections I elaborate three ethnographically-derived examples of humor's many expressions, selecting these over countless others because their meaningful differences and relationships to specific questions of contemporary urban (geo)politics in Mexico City and beyond demonstrate a range of humorous transgressions. In each example, humor is mobilized in unique ways, according to different motivations, and toward distinct ends, operating within a shared *sensus communis* but simultaneously subverting aesthetic tenets of the very same. The first of these examples is anchored by a popular YouTube video made by comedic activists, the second by a newly christened patron saint of the victims of gentrification, and the third by a hypothetical interview with the city's mayor as imagined and enacted by a longtime resident of a rapidly changing historic neighborhood.

'El Jefe del Defe'

Los Supercívicos is an activist comedy group formed in 2006 by comedians Arturo Hernández and Alejandro Marin y Kall, the latter popularly known as 'Esewey' (*Aristegui Noticias*, 2017). For the past several years, the team has produced a steady stream of YouTube videos largely aimed at

¹³ This general description references three major mixed-methods research projects I have undertaken in Mexico City in recent years. The first was doctoral research conducted between 2013 and 2016 (supplemented by several research trips between 2017 and 2020). I used roughly 12 months of ethnographic and archival research to investigate the city's grassroots politics in contemporary and historical (twentieth-century) perspective, beginning from a focus on the politics surrounding the right to the city (especially the development and promotion of The Mexico City Charter for the Right to the City from 2008-2010). The second project uses similar methods and data sources to comparatively investigate the implications of the 1985 and 2017 earthquakes along spatial, socio-cultural, and political economic lines. Data collection for this project began in earnest in 2017, and remains ongoing. The third project has a broader geographical umbrella, and uses Colonia Juárez as one of several case studies in an international comparative examination of neighborhood change, using primarily ethnographic (participant and passive observation and semi-structured interviews) and visual methods (landscape photography, on-site surveys, and geovisualization). I began data collection for this project in 2019, and this research is likewise ongoing as of August 2021.

publicly shaming actors they consider to be behaving badly, and to make other social and political interventions in Mexico City. In the fall of 2015, Los Supercívicos produced a video imploring *chilangos* to vote in a then-upcoming public referendum on the public-private redevelopment project known as the Corredor Cultural Chapultepec. The skit, ‘El Jefe del Defe’,¹⁴ takes aim at the planning process surrounding the now-defunct Corredor project. It begins by introducing the actors playing the characters of Mayor Miguel Ángel Mancera Espinosa and Head of ProCDMX (the agency in charge of the project) Simón Levy Dabbah. The scene opens with these two characters peering through the levels of the project’s scale model with child-like glee and giggling cynically over their plans to include ‘local’ business. A ridiculous assistant informs them that guests have arrived, who Mancera explains to Levy are residents of the neighborhoods most directly affected by the project. With obvious frustration and distaste, Levy whines about having to engage at all with “*estos pinches hipsters*” (“these fucking hipsters”) and introduces the piece’s central critique, “*va porque va*” (“it goes because it goes”, a statement of profound circularity meant to signify the sham nature of local democratic participation schemes). Three ‘residents’ enter, dressed in exaggerated costume—a Roman soldier representing Colonia¹⁵ Roma, a countess representing Colonia Condesa, and President Benito Juárez representing Colonia Juárez. After comically dismissing their concerns and cursorily listing the project’s benefits—it will “place us in the first world”, Levy intones—Mancera finally relents to their objections and agrees to a vote. The assistant then calls in a large group of other ‘residents’ from an adjacent room. The newcomers are drenched in racial, ethnic, class, and other stereotypes, and the Juárez, Condesa, and Roma characters quickly point out that these ‘others’ don’t belong. These ‘neighbors’ counter that they have voting ID cards, a point repeated by Levy in support of their right to participate. Votes are immediately cast by a raising of hands, and the project is easily carried over the objection of the ‘real’ residents. Just then, the Supercívicos come crashing in through the ceiling (and the fourth wall), and begin imploring viewers to vote against the project in the coming referendum, then weeks away. “We have to demonstrate to the leaders of this city that we must be part of the planning of our city!”, Eseyey argues with sudden sincerity. The struggle, they go on to explain, is not only against this project but a series of others that would convert much of the city into a noisy mess of multi-tiered highways and covered private shopping centers, an increasingly familiar refrain across the city’s central neighborhoods.

Los Supercívicos traffic in dangerous humor, and this episode is no exception. That some of the jokes, costumes, representations, and attitudes in this and other of their videos find easy reference to the ugliest variants of superiority theory, and are demeaning and likely otherwise offensive to many, should not be lost in this discussion; as is common in media devoted to ‘public shaming’, Los Supercívicos frequently allow their lesser angels, so to speak, to stray into the enforcement of retrograde aesthetic sensibilities (appeals based in racial/ethnic/gender/sexual stereotypes, for instance). Such gestures commonly lift those ‘in’ on the joke above the social tide while those targeted as the ‘butt’ drown under the punchline. Rather than the free-flying potshots of this episode, however, I want to highlight several crucial analytical points that revolve around the aesthetic interventions the authors seek to make in this work. They make repeated mocking and

¹⁴ The title translates roughly to ‘The Mayor [also translated as ‘boss’ or ‘head’] of DF’, a play on the Federal District (DF), then still the city’s official name.

¹⁵ Roughly, ‘neighborhood’, an official designation in Mexico City.

sarcastic reference to the project's name—replacing 'cultural' with 'commercial', for example—giving the lie to the idea that an elevated lineal park and shopping center could ever rightly be called a 'cultural corridor' and in the process laying bare the 'real' motivations of its boosters. They caricature personified neighborhoods and their residents, critiquing spatialized narratives of identity and belonging. They undermine the referendum process, part of a hard-won set of reforms collected in the Law of Citizen Participation, by humorously demonstrating a manipulation of voter geography that turned out to be all-too-real (see Díaz, 2015). In each of these assaults on the real political processes and personalities involved, the Supercívicos invite viewers to consider the world through different lenses (something the Mancera and Levy characters ironically do in the episode, offering glasses with \$-lenses for the three residents to view the scale model), undercutting certain load-bearing supports of a larger set of aesthetic givens in the process.

Paradoxically, or what would appear to be so, the Supercívicos use the foregoing humor to open up a space of serious discussion at the end of the episode, wherein they implore residents to participate in the very same democratic process the preceding minutes have ravaged. This late turn toward the seriousness of the issue betrays an unspoken premise and the main target of their intervention: the (assumed) political apathy of local residents.¹⁶ Cynical, acerbic humor affectively endorses disaffection with the city's planning process and broader political system and its perceived trajectory, delineating a common space wherein critique of the 'world of seriousness' can be shared with the audience. The jokes and antics are not themselves the point; the violence they enact in exposing a sham exercise of local democracy instead blazes through to a deeper and more insidious reality, that such abuses of democracy are only possible if the citizenry so allows. Most residents I spoke with, from many different walks of life, were skeptical to the point of dismissal of the citizen participation exercises surrounding the Corredor Cultural Chapultepec. The realization that even profoundly corrupted democratic mechanisms could be rescued and put to work in service to residents' demands (as ultimately happened in this case), however, was obscured by the fiction of political insulation and impunity surrounding the mayor, his party, and what many derisively refer to as the real estate cartels, and the assumed inevitability of their designs. This is the partition that the episode ultimately aims to dismantle. After ruthlessly shredding the official cartography of political positions and possibilities with jokes, mockery, and silliness, the Supercívicos implore their viewers to craft and enact a radically different vision of urban democracy in Mexico City; not by demanding a different set of laws, institutions, or mechanisms, but by simultaneously unlearning their assumed places and reasserting their ability to leverage existing democratic structures to produce meaningful change (see Knott, 2013). Humor therefore both simultaneously and sequentially performs both unifying and dividing functions in this episode, first establishing common ground through critique and subsequently allowing for the subversion of a widely assumed and accepted premise of political powerlessness. Especially in consideration of the shockingly successful anti-Corredor movement of which it formed a part, Los Supercívicos's incitement to unlearning through transgressive humor offers a compelling demonstration of Knott's (2013) reading of the political value of laughter courageously exemplified at great personal and professional cost by Hannah Arendt. "Laughter makes available confidence in our fellow man,"

¹⁶ This assumption is not without merit, as a long history of political apathy (largely though far-from-exclusively proxied by electoral participation/abstention) has been well documented in Mexico City and the country more generally. See, for example, Eckstein (1988); Millán (2013).

Knott (2013: 10) writes, “confidence in the human power of resistance—against ideology and terror, against obscurantism, repression, dogmatism, and despotism.”

La Juaricua Santa María de la Juárez

Altars to a wide variety of patron saints are such a quotidian part of Mexico City’s streetscapes (to say nothing of its interior spaces) as to border on the banal. In the historic neighborhoods of Juárez and Santa María la Ribera, a new member of the popular canon has recently arisen, responding to the call of residents for protection from rising rents and displacement associated with gentrification, an influx of foreigners, and finance capital. She is a small wooden statue adorned not only with a traditional white dress and elegant purple sash, but also with visual markers of hipsterdom as unmistakable as asymmetrical coiffure, biodynamic wine, or yesteryear’s fixed-gear bicycle. She is Santa Mari la Juaricua, or La Juaricua Santa María de la Juárez (depending on whom you ask), the wooden-bespectacled, pearl-studded-cowboy-hat-wearing aesthete of the ordinary, patron saint of the would-be displaced and overexploited renters of Mexico City. She is the creation of artists Sandra Valenzuela and Jorge Baca, the latter a resident of long familiar provenance in the area and the former a self-described “first-wave gentrifier” (Kroth, 2017). In the past several years, Santa Mari has developed both a local and an international following, aided by laudatory media coverage abroad, a humble social media presence, interviews with local outlets, and appearances (accompanied by her handlers) at political and social events. The pleas from her patronage are simple: protection from rising rents, property developers, and gentrification writ-large.

In examining everyday traces and spectral presences of state power in Mexico City, Boudreau (2019: 417) attributes the socio-spatial sway of such invented saints and their altars to the failures of the state narrowly understood, or instances of “unsatisfactory muscular protection” (also, see Brenner (2004) on “narrow state space”). In a city of “Baroque modernity” (Echeverría, 1994) defined by a violent mixture of the religious and secular and the formal and informal, Boudreau (2019: 416) argues that such a saint “participates in the formation of the Mexican state and continues to work with, against and perhaps even in negotiation with it.” Such are the officially and heretically beatified of Mexico City, filling in the innumerable absences of a sieve-like state. Santa Mari is a special kind of saint, however, even among the apocryphal number. La Juaricua makes light of popular liturgical practice and attempts to bend urban geopolitical identity in a time and place increasingly engulfed by competition over space and meaning. This, too, is dangerous terrain for subversive humor, even in a city in which rapacious redevelopment (often apparently in service to foreign interests and palates) is increasingly commonplace, devotion and catechism often acquire novel form, and the canon—while unquestionably venerated—is relatively more democratic, at least in popular expression.¹⁷ Santa Mari’s comical departure from dogma and playful engagement with the sober reality of neighborhood change (variously expressed and

¹⁷ Examples abound, from the relatively more serious, witnessed in stern devotion to Santa Muerte (*la flaca* (‘the thin one’), or, more commonly, ‘holy death’), to the decidedly more tongue-in-cheek, embodied by San Crudas (a play on San Judas Tadeo (*crudo/a*, ‘hung over’), the patron saint of lost causes and a favorite in Mexico City), who watches over the toilet at a tiny hole-in-the-wall cocktail bar in a hip section of Roma Norte.

experienced through superiority, incongruity, and relief), however, are only the most superficial manifestations of the humor endowed by her creators.

More than a passing glance at her appearance and activities betrays the wit of Santa Mari's creators, and their willingness to offer themselves as aesthetic sacrifice. Under the heading "pedestals are out", Aaker and Bagdonas (2021) reference prominent examples and large-n studies to make the case that self-deprecation through humor is an increasingly popular and highly effective leadership strategy, exerting a heavy influence on perceptions of the abilities and trustworthiness of practitioners. That the patron saint of the stalwart tenants of the newly fashionable intentionally resembles (especially) creator Sandra Valenzuela—a confessed gentrifier—and is purported to intercede on behalf of similar transgressors, is a subtle but striking use of self-deprecating humor to challenge assumptions underlying how lines of conflict and belonging are drawn in changing neighborhoods. But to complete the maneuver, to find a sinner welcome among the saints, self-deprecating humor must succeed in producing an effect something like what Bergson (2009) calls "a momentary anesthesia of the heart" among a group that already perceives itself under threat. Precise analytics for qualifying and combatting neighborhood change at the pace and reach of that of the past few years remain elusive in Mexico City (as elsewhere), and resident attitudes can be expressed in strikingly different terms even within one section of a neighborhood.¹⁸ Even so, longtime residents tend to intuitively and aesthetically parse their own from the other with relative ease, and to have strong feelings about such judgements. The vision of gentrification proffered by Santa Mari fundamentally subverts the most common of these conceptions by insisting that the forces opposing local residents are not hipsters and young, worldly intellectuals, but duplicitous property developers, greedy landlords, foreign expatriates, and predatory finance capital. By turning the comedic crosshairs inward, humor here operates as a kind of "jocular geopolitics" (Fluri, 2019), working in the interstitial spaces of subversive critique to create space for counter-narratives of inclusion on the one hand (new but neighborly residents are not the problem, but potentially part of the solution) and to forge resistance to invasion and exploitation on the other (recognizing the real enemy enables a broader and more robust coalition). Unlike the packaged products of Los Supercívicos, Santa Mari embodies a longer performance of episodic apparition and inspired devotion that blends the unifying and divisive effects of humorous transgression in service to social change of a more chemical nature. Her artistic metapolitics, in Rancière's (2020: 141) language, are a subtle but potentially revolutionary "social hermeneutics."

Breaking with intuition and local common sense on an issue that many see as increasingly grave—even, from a community perspective, existentially so—is a big ask, especially from such a little saint. Anecdotal ethnographic evidence suggests the possibility of a shift among some local residents toward this perspective,¹⁹ though time alone will ultimately place the impact of this

¹⁸ Owing in no small part to the increasing imposition of foreign concepts like 'gentrification', itself frequently a locus of humor, as the simple translation, *gentrificación*, is commonly confused for a woman's first name.

¹⁹ Over the course of the past several years, residents with whom I have spoken about La Juaricua (including friends, colleagues, and strangers) have expressed a variety of opinions on this point in particular. Many state or imply some measure of reservation precisely on the grounds of belonging, though many of these same seem to be drawn in or at least disarmed by the humor of her presentation. I have never seen a mention of Santa Mari, across dozens of instances at minimum, fail to garner at least a wry smile, even from the most serious of characters.

deeper aesthetic intervention of Santa Mari's humor somewhere between the fleeting fancy of provenance and the subtle seismicity of providence.

La Dama del Vestido Morado y El Jefe de Gobierno (The Lady in the Purple Dress and the Mayor)

My third example is a scene that occurred in an ordinary moment of a meeting of neighbors in Juárez in April 2016. I had been invited to attend these meetings as an observer, having met and interviewed some of the organizers. This particular meeting, part of what was called the "Juárez Neighborhood School of Citizenship", took place on a pleasant Sunday evening, on the second floor of an historic building on Calle Turín. Though a great many interesting things were done and said at this meeting, for the purposes of this analysis I will call attention to only one brief episode, in which a woman I refer to as Lidia took center stage. I described her in my field notes as older, wearing a long and striking purple dress matched by mascara. She had taken a position near one of the windows, presumably in order to smoke, which she did off and on throughout the meeting. Her words seemed to carry considerable weight with the group, which at the time I attributed both to her clearly knowing many of the assembled personally and also to her strong voice and compelling manner. In the midst of the meeting, I recorded the following interaction (fieldnotes, 4/24/16):

She spoke with conviction, but colored her tirades with humor and affection for her friends in the room. After one of her small speeches, [one of the discussion leaders] proposed something to her: "An experiment," [they] began, "I'm Mancera [then Mayor Miguel Ángel Mancera Espinosa], what would you say to me?" Lidia immediately rose from her seat and began to swear violently at [the discussion leader]. I honestly had not seen such vitriol since my first and only *lucha libre* match the previous year. She spat her insults and waved her arms. She would not be stopped, even when, after her first few rounds, the two [discussion leaders] behind the table tried to calm her and explain that they wanted something more serious and substantive. Nothing of the sort would come from Lidia, however. When she had finished, she sat down, crossed her legs, and angrily mumbled a few parting barbs. The experiment had failed, from [the discussion leader]'s perspective.

In the moment, I understood only that this gesture had been good for a laugh for some of the assembled persons, and also showed how unpopular Mancera had become among this group of neighbors. But reflecting on this interaction later, and with the benefit of many more conversations with members of this group in the ensuing months, I came to realize the significance of the rejection of the discussion leader's proposal, and the significance of packaging this rejection with humor. This discourteous dismissal of a system perceived to be compromised and the deep-seated desire for some yet-unformed alternative found echoes in other parts of this same meeting, and in many others during and since this period of fieldwork, though none since have quite reached Lidia's performative gravity.

As Bhungalia's (2020) theorization of a politics of refusal under subjugation demonstrates, humorous practices allow for unique and powerful expressions of the rejection of political terms, and of authority. The vulgar and aggressive response Lidia offered the organizer was a refusal to

pursue any serious discussion with Mancera, even as a thought experiment there among friends and neighbors gathered ostensibly for just such a purpose, and constituted a bold statement about the way forward for a person and a group who felt betrayed by the state, and by this mayor and party in particular. In her unrelenting assault, Lidia used humor to introduce a yet-nascent but nevertheless radical notion—at the very least the necessity of moving on from the PRD and perhaps at most the necessity of rejecting the kind of ‘stakeholder’ politics and participatory schemes that proliferated in Mexico City under PRD control. Though Mancera (who has been serving in the Mexican Senate since 2018) had taken office with the largest popular mandate in the Mayorality’s history, by the end of his term he instead enjoyed a local reputation for turning his back on civil society and the concerns of everyday residents. Mancera’s administration has since been extensively investigated for corruption and mismanagement by officials of the new regime of Mayor Claudia Scheinbaum Pardo (of the breakaway Morena party headed by President and former Mexico City Mayor Andrés Manuel López Obrador), and has recently (May 2021) faced additional public scrutiny (rising even to accusations of criminal negligence) for its handling of safety concerns related to the city’s transportation infrastructures, particularly in the wake of the devastating 2017 earthquake.²⁰ Mancera’s party, the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (Party of the Democratic Revolution, hereafter PRD) was once the great hope of many *chilangos*, and controlled the Mayorality from the inception of the democratic elections it helped to secure in 1997 through its first mayoral defeat in 2018. Lidia’s aesthetic intervention was therefore a profoundly democratic gesture aimed at the merely onomatologically democratic, exercising, as Rancière puts it, the unique power of the *demos* “to divide the *ochlos*”, perhaps especially at such crucial junctures. In this moment, Lidia’s practice of radical political equality is an attempt to realize a fundamental democratic function, “to declassify, to undo the supposed naturalness of orders and replace it with the controversial figures of division” (Rancière, 2007: 32–33). In the months surrounding Lidia’s performance at this meeting, she and many others related profound feelings of heartbreak, loss, and anger directed at the party for what they perceived as political betrayal, a shift in attitudes many credit with a pronounced shift in electoral support away from the PRD and toward the breakaway Morena, which was historically victorious in both the national and local executive elections some two years later.

Lidia’s brazen vulgarity was, as an obvious signal of a humorous gesture in this context, falling squarely within the remit of the longstanding traditions of Mexican and *chilango* humor outlined above. Still, not everyone found Lidia’s performance funny, and I consider it as likely as not that for a few *vecinos*,²¹ this didn’t necessarily register as humor.²² Others certainly did find it funny, and the laughter and (admittedly rather chaotic) levity elicited by her diatribe represent a measure of success in simultaneously producing several distinct effects, each with interdependent functions in her larger performance of political refusal. On the one hand, her performance represents the most ‘classic’ presentation of humor among these three examples, a kind of deflection or affective

²⁰ On May 3, 2021, some 26 persons were killed when an elevated section of the city’s mass transit train system collapsed in the *colonia* of Tláhuac. The line in question (12) is the city’s newest, and has been mired in controversy since its 2012 opening. See *BBC News Mundo* (2021) for a brief overview.

²¹ Usually ‘neighbors’, or ‘residents’.

²² Having spoken with many of those present about this incident (including Lidia), I am confident that while Lidia’s performance was a strategic affective blend not reducible only to humor, the humorous element was both intentional and central.

substitution. In Spring 2016, in a moment of hope for grassroots politics coming hot on the heels of the Corredor saga and in anticipation of the drafting of the city's first constitution, Lidia's insistence on principled rejection of the city's longstanding leftist alternative and standard-bearer of hard-won democratic reforms was a difficult message to deliver, despite a gathering measure of consensus among her peers. Humor makes space for this kind of intervention, as it "acts as a substitute for the generation of [distressing] affects, it puts itself in their place", as Freud (1960: 293) argued. Attempts to see an audience, as Freud (1960: 295) might have it, "infected by the rogue's indifference", is a palliative function of humor's transgressive aesthetic potential also commonly identified in numerous expressions in the geopolitical literature (e.g., Boykoff and Osnes, 2019; Van Ramshorst, 2019). Simultaneously, Lidia used humor to solicit what Bergson (2009) calls "a kind of secret freemasonry, or even complicity, with other laughers". It is helpful to recall that this performance came in the midst of a hopeful moment for grassroots politics, and was bound up with increasingly pressing questions of political affiliation and local support brought on by the schism of the mainstream center-left (most obviously the growing challenge to PRD support by Morena, and the uncomfortably cozy relationship between Mancera and locally despised President Enrique Peña Nieto of the long-ruling Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI)). This was a neighborhood and a moment wherein robust assumptions of PRD support were very much in question for some, though the affective force of Lidia's appeal was a decidedly pearls-clutching aesthetic transgression of this local geopolitical partition. To provoke the kind of political disruption Lidia was demanding required numbers, and her humorous gesture can be productively read as an attempt to incite her neighbors by disabusing them of lethargic or nostalgic geopolitical imaginaries. Whatever role this particular episode may have played, such a change was indeed not far off, as 2018 saw the upstart Morena claw away at the PRD (and PRI) faithful and dramatically reshuffle electoral geographies in the city, much as a young PRD had done some two decades before astride a wave of local and national democratic reforms anticipating the 2000 national 'transition to democracy' and the ouster of the PRI from the Mexican Presidency for the first time in some 71 years.

Conclusion

Knott (2013: 11) explains that laughter—like "the wisdom of children and the imagination of poets"—has a special power "to displace things, to move them somewhere else", and to "transgress rationally comprehensible reality." Humor, that is, allows its users to subvert and challenge the aesthetic partitions of socio-spatial sensibilities that structure both symbolic and material human geographies (Rancière, 2010). Professional comedians and workaday residents alike make subtle and spectacular use of humor as "a way of rebelling against the demands of social order" (Billig 2002: 452) from the neuro-circuitry of affect and the cauldron of subjectivity to perceptions of the possible and the dictates of decorum. In this article, I have argued that humor's profound ambiguity—and its duplicity, inconstancy, and deniability—hold immense potential to create incisions in urban geopolitical imaginaries by bringing down walls between neighbors, carving out space for new perspectives and norms, and inflicting and salving social wounds. Moreover, I have called for and sought to contribute to the development of a more comprehensive theorization of humor's spatial and political significance in service to a broader research agenda for this crucial area of human geography. To this end, the examples from Mexico City analyzed above join a growing geographical literature to demonstrate the breadth of humor's expressions in

contemporary urban politics, and indicate only a few of the practically limitless and complex ways it can be used to subvert the foundational aesthetics of everyday life in pursuance of political goals.

Illustrating a range of humor's creative and destructive capacities in quite different expressions and contexts, each of these examples demonstrates how humorous transgression can create space for radical difference. By striking at an aesthetic given, at a particular piece of the 'partition of the sensible', humor's socio-spatial effects can prove unifying and divisive, violently destructive and creatively emancipatory. Los Supercívicos are engaged in a clever and compelling campaign of 'public shaming', in the process ensnaring a wide swath of *chilango* society (Ahmed and Villegas, 2016). In 'El Jefe del Defe', humor serves as a kind of inoculant, preparing the social body for the dangers of the more insidious demand the comedians ultimately place upon the audience. They mock the obvious rhetorical sleight of hand in the design and promotion of a planned redevelopment project, chastise powerful figures for their abuses of the planning process, and throw shade on territorial urban identities and practices of citizenship before imploring their audience to reimagine and remake these geographies through a painful dismantling of a cornerstone of common political perception: residential powerlessness in the face of municipal authority. Simultaneous, differential effects form part of a single sequence in this surprisingly successful lesson in geopolitical 'unlearning' (Knott, 2013) through humorous transgression. Through ritual apparitions and a sustained performance that plays with local religious practice and tradition, the heretically beatified Santa Mari likewise illustrates the power of humor to make space for the inscription of alternative aesthetic and socio-spatial partitionings. The path to acceptance for her transgressive insistence that even early gentrifiers be embraced as part of her flock is made easier by the self-deprecating humor of her creators, persons instinctively or conventionally taken to be part of the problem. This subtle aesthetic intervention works to delicately displace the dearest of instinctual and affective residential cartographies and simultaneously cultivate a new geopolitics of gentrification in its place, repositioning devout newcomers as part of the faithful and shrewdly shifting strategic focus toward more powerful, external foes. La Juaricua's serene embodiment of her creators' sacrifice is a humble testament to the value of unflinching penance in permanent castigation, and teaches us that effective humorous transgression need not always be an ostentatious affair. Lidia's bombastic repudiation of Mayor Mancera, of course, aggressively demonstrates an alternative course. In the finest Mexico City tradition, Lidia uses vulgar humor both to provide relief and to elicit complicity, brilliantly galvanizing these distinct functions in order to facilitate a gesture of profound political refusal. The central gesture of this episode was a rejection of what would otherwise seem a reasonable premise, a hypothetical dialogue between an unsatisfied resident and the city's executive head. By preventing the proposed experiment from taking place, the impassioned Lidia insists that residents of Juárez reject their political imaginaries and alliances, despite the obvious pain of moving on from decades of dashed hopes and the fear of an uncertain future. Though the electoral shifts of the ensuing years prove Lidia's prescience, she mitigates her vanguard position on this message with the affective substitution and shrewd confederacy of laughter.

Geographical research has only just begun to appreciate humor's socio-spatial implications. These three interventions variously and collectively demonstrate humor's capacity to make a special kind of subversive gesture; like *alburear*, they demonstrate a variety of uses rooted in generative ambiguity. From improvised, everyday episodes of jocularly to commercial productions, I have

argued, humor's innate intractability lends a singular edge to a variety of assaults on the aesthetic norms that govern our socio-spatial worlds. But this ambiguity must be carefully attended by both practitioners and analysts. The dangerous forays of its transgressive practitioners onto the unpredictable terrain of the world of seriousness are always speculative, and often put relationships, reputations, and even lives at risk. Such gestures are obliged to work with common language and sensibilities, in this case building on Mexico City's established traditions of political humor from tabloid cartoons to vulgar double-entendres. Their success depends on their ability to rupture these very same patterns of sense perception and the meanings they carry, parsing social space for the emergence of something radically other, something unaccounted for and without a proper place (Rancière, 2010), like a surge of political activism from a reliably sleepy neighborhood, an impossible coalition of resident interests, or a revolutionary rejection of the norms of urban citizenship. Geographical conceptualizations and analytical treatments of humor must also remain strategically flexible, not only for reasons of humorous inconstancy over time and space but also because humor is by nature a multiple and extremely malleable form of communication, and its presentations are sufficiently multi-valent as to appear intentionally sardonic to even the most patient of analysts. Contemporary cities, as these examples also show, are shot through with proliferating lines of conflict and transformational processes that frustrate existing frameworks of geopolitical analysis (e.g., informal and peripheral urbanism, gentrification and neighborhood change, (de)centralization, democratization, financialization, climate change, and global pandemics). In an increasingly urban world, socio-spatial tensions will undoubtedly find novel form, and there is every indication that humor's import in propelling, mitigating, and otherwise negotiating these tensions will indeed merit its qualification as deadly serious.

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