"Memes" as a Cultural Software in the Context of the (Fake) Wall between the US and Mexico

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Abstract. Memes function as "digital graffiti" in the streets of social media, a cultural electronic product that satirizes those in power. The success of a meme is measured by "going viral" and reproduced like a germ. I am interested in analyzing these eckphrastic texts in the context of the construction of the wall between the US and Mexico. I examine popular memes in Mexico and in the US from both sides of the political spectrum typing "border meme" in a Google search and by analyzing their trends in the same search engine. I believe these "political haikus" work as an escape valve to the tensions generated in the cultural wars that consume American politics. The border is an "open wound" (as Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes said) that was opened after the War of 1847 that resulted in Mexico losing half of its territory. Now the wall functions as a political membrane to keep out the "expelled citizens" of the Global South from the economic benefits of the North. Memes help to expunge the gravity of a two-thousand-mile concrete wall in a region that shares cultural traits, languages, and an environment that cannot be domesticated with monuments to hatred. Memes are rhetorical devices that convey the absurdity of a situation, as in the example below of a border wall with an enormous "piñata" that infantilizes the State-funded project of a fence. The meme's iconoclastography set in motion a discussion of the real issues at hand, global economic disparities and the human right to migrate on this small planet of ours.

Keywords: Memes, Border Theory, US/Mexico Border, Digital Culture.

1 Introduction

The term meme was coined by Richard Dawkins, a British evolutionary biologist, in 1976 in his book *The Selfish Gene* as a unit of cultural transmission. He wrote: "We need a name for the new replicator, a noun which conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of *imitation*. 'Mimeme' comes from a suitable Greek root, but I want a monosyllable that sounds a bit like 'gene'. I hope my classicist friends forgive me if I abbreviate mimeme to meme." (*The Selfish Gene* 192). There are many popular memes that relate to different cultural trends, such as "Leave Britney Alone," "Gangnam Style," "Situation Room," "Advise Dogs," "LolCats," "Success Kid", but in this article, I will concentrate on the genre of "border memes". I offer a cross-cultural study of border memes produced in Mexico and the United States about the mutual issue of the border wall that was raised during the 2016 American presidential campaign and continues to this day as a contentious topic.

Memes are the internet lingua franca; they function as multimodal "digital graffiti" in the streets of social media, a cultural electronic product that satirizes with humor and

parody current popular events, and can be used by "netizens" to criticize those in power with the conjunction of photography and writing. The success of a meme is measured by its "virality", the mass distribution where text-image conglomerate and the mutations are reproduced like a germ or a part of the genetic trend of subculture societies. I am interested in analyzing these eckphrastic (verbal description of a work of art) texts in the context of the construction of the wall between the US and Mexico. I examine popular memes in Mexico and the US from both sides of the border. I believe these "political haikus" work as an escape valve for the tensions generated in the culture wars that consume American politics. The anonymity of the meme erases the possibility of retribution from those in power. Memes are a modern "Pasquin" referring to Pasquino a XVI century "talking statue" in Rome where people would post satirical labels and anonymous lampoons in the forms of *cartelli* or pamphlets that would be distributed massively. As Ryan M. Milner argues in regards to the importance of engaging in political discussions as a way to perfect democracy with participatory media: "Memetic logics -at their worst when they facilitate open, polyvocal public conversation." (155) Memes create vibrant conversations and diversify discourse in the public sphere.

2   The Border as Method

The border is an "open wound" (as Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes said) that was opened after the War of 1847 and resulted in Mexico losing half of its territory. Currently, the wall functions as a political membrane barring the "expelled citizens" of the southern Mexico border from the economic benefits of the North. Memes thrive on contentious ideas ridiculing both sides of the spectrum. Some memes expunge the gravity of a two-thousand-mile concrete wall in a region that shares cultural traits, languages, and natural environment, a region that cannot be domesticated with symbolic monuments to animosity. Memes are rhetorical devices that convey absurd situations, as in a popular meme that shows a colorful piñata on the edge of the border, a meme that infantilizes the State-funded project of a fence and sets in motion a discussion of the issues at hand – global economic disparities and human migrations.
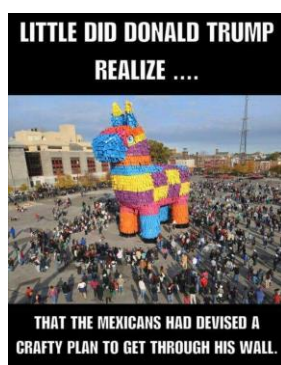

Fig. 1. Image of a piñata similar to a Trojan horse to satirize the invasion of Latin America to the United Stated of America.

The idea of the border wall re-entered the national imaginary as one of the major campaign promises by then-candidate Donald Trump. The "big beautiful wall that Mexico will pay for" was also the trademark of his run for office, an idea that captured one of the great challenges of a XXI century characterized by migrations from the Global South to the Global North. Donald Trump in June 16, 2016, said as a campaign promise: "I will build a great wall — and nobody builds walls better than me, believe me —and I'll build them very inexpensively. I will build a great, great wall on our southern border, and I will make Mexico pay for that wall. Mark my words." This incendiary remark was a rhetorical device to incite division and move an agenda that believes in protecting the country from the "brown wave" as described by Samuel Huntington, a late Harvard political scientist. Huntington predicted the Trump Era and the rise of nativism to counteract the rise of Hispanic migration by saying there is "no Americano dream"; he was against the ideology of multiculturalism and described the fear of losing the white Anglo-Saxon composition of the country. The border involves ideas of migration, economy, apartheid and "gore capitalism" as defined by Tijuana intellectual Sayak Valencia to describe the savage cruelty of biopolitical configurations of industrialized economies that decide who lives and dies along the two sides of the border. There is no question that "border memes" increased in popularity after Donald Trump's campaign and his eventual election to public office, as is shown in the next graphic.
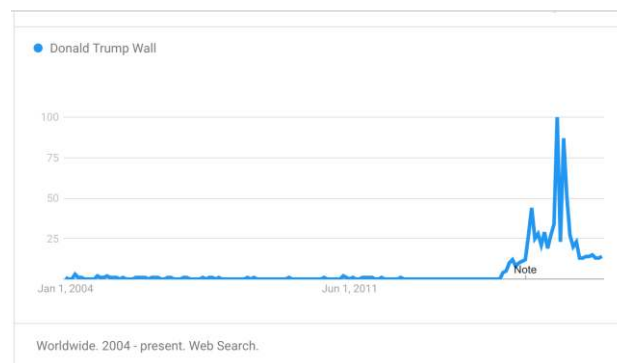

Fig. 2. Web searches on "Google Trends" (2004-2016) of topic "Donald Trump Wall" increased in 2016 during the Presidential elections.

Memes condense a political view of a subject with a photograph and a caption that shows the irony of a situation and satirizes a dogmatic view. In the case of border memes, they play with stereotypical perceptions of both sides of the border, for example in the meme that shows a massive piñata resembling a Trojan horse. The composition signals that inside, as a party favor, a group of Mexicans will be hiding and ready to disembark in the US. This meme plays with the idea of invasion and it can work polysemically for both sides of the political spectrum as it satirizes the piñata, a popular Mexican tradition in children's parties and as a war strategy, downplaying an actual invasion from Mexico (the only actual Latin American invasion to the US happened in 1916 led by Pancho Villa) but it also toys with the idea of the American fear of a "corruption" or invasion of Anglo-Saxon culture as a puritanical idea of hygienic preservation of the homeland to keep out the "barbarian" invaders. Memes' colloquial capacities to turn sticky subjects into casual, humorous one-liners, help to thaw contentious subjects and reaffirm political

views. Moreover, the malleable capacity of memes to adapt to new political views and interpretations gives them a continuous viral dissemination into different readings, edits, remixes, mash-ups or variations of certain elements.[1]

Yet, the apparent humorous and innocent chiding critique of the meme does have an impact in steering political outcomes – as the 2016 American election has shown – as does the intense propaganda, aka digital warfare, engaged in by Russian interests to demerit Western democracies. In short, the creation of these memes (whether by foreign or domestic interests) functions as an instrument of division, splitting public opinion and opposing democratic or liberal ideologies. "Divide and conquer" works efficiently for global political interests in the open waters of the internet, which allow for the free flow of information and viralization of memes, particularly ones that incite deep erosions of civility and play with stereotypes, racism, sexism, and the fear of the other. For example, in the following meme, we are presented with the idea of a Latin American invasion by presenting immigrants attempting to cross the border, a group of men presented as a threat that needs to be controlled. This image, taken out of context, helps to support the idea of fortifying the border wall, that is, promoting Trump. Or in the next image, a sharpie correction of the political lines that divide Mexico and the United States uses Trump's mistake of calling the State of Colorado as one that borders with Mexico (and the so-called "Sharpiegate") to invalidate the President's efforts to build a wall by lacking basic knowledge of geography and also highlighting his inability to accept error.

Fig. 3. A meme of a group of men crossing the border, the text signals the idea of an invasion to produce fear.

Fig. 4. Meme of President Trump that parodies the "sharpie gate" and the mistake of him saying that Colorado has a border with Mexico.

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[1] The widespread emoticons (or emojis) are a form of meme. They were created in 1982 by Scott E. Fahlman to eliminate misinterpretations of written messages and contextualize the emotion behind the writing.

3   Uses of Meme

Joel Penney in his book *The Citizen Marketer: Promoting Political Opinion in the Social Media Age* studies modern communication's uses of computational propaganda that shapes the public mind and can spread ideas – but also increase polarization – and that move beyond the pejorative categorization of "slacktivism" or "clicktivism". He writes: "The citizen marketer charts the evolution of political participation in an age of mediatized politics, promotional cultural, and viral circulation" (34). Penney reevaluates the citizen-level symbolic action that shapes the social world with new modes of political action that progressed from the 19ᵗʰ century forms of "classic" participative demonstrations, that is, protesting in the streets. The current model of "economies of attention" requires us to circulate in social media and become our own marketers. In this system, we must also render our personal information and media usage to public knowledge and to the benefit of economic exploitation of the landlords of internet platforms.

Memes work as a mechanism of instant approval or rejection. For example, the "like" button on Facebook is a way of casting a ballot on a particular view of the world and the "share" button turns content into marching vehicles of propaganda, displaying banners of social change or social scorn to convince others and recruit new converts. Another example of a meme shows the hyper-guarded political division on the border with barbed wire and border patrol agents. To counterpoint, in contrasting photo we see a simple marking in the cobble stones that divide two European countries, showing that the US and Mexico border is a militarized zone that does not take into consideration the coexisting cultures in this region or the combined multimillion dollar economy that, if measured as a single region of US and Mexican states, is a larger zone than Western Europe, a territory with linguistic hybridizations, sister cities, such as El Paso and Ciudad Juárez, that have interdependent economies, and transborder cities (Tijuana-San Diego) that – if seen from a satellite perspective – conform a single cultural unit far away from other cities of cultural influence in their own respective countries.

Fig. 5. A meme that contrasts the hyper guarded border of the USA and Mexico and the line between European countries that share similar economies.

Facebook and Twitter are indeed the main marketplaces for new meme products; as mentioned above, the like button or retweet becomes an instant voting machine to "charge" the likability of an idea, a photograph, a meme, that then gains popularity and catches transmissible proprieties. As successful meme is a popular meme, one that has captured with humor the core of an idea and has arrived to a fertile ground of supporters of that ideology. Limor Shifman in her book *Memes in Digital Culture*, argues that we live in

an "era driven by *hypermimetic* logic, in which almost every major public event sprouts a stream of memes" (4). In her definition, a meme is "(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance; (b) that were created *with awareness of each other*; and (c) were articulated, imitated, and/or transformed *via the Internet by many users*." (8) Memes are distributed via social media through sites such as 4chan, Reddit and Tumblr, where "people use memes to simultaneously express both their uniqueness and their connectivity" (30). In her chapter "May the Excessive Force Be with You: Meme as Political Participation", she posits that memes make a point and engage in three interwoven functions: "(1) as forms of persuasion or political advocacy, (2) as grassroots action, (3) as modes of expression and public discussion." (123). In that definition, I see memes as political posters that become an emblem of an idea, a signaling device to create communities and ultimately groups or opposite bands to engage and provoke incendiary remarks. Indeed, memes thrive in divided times, and during political conflagrations.

Moreover, the meme "DNA" is coded with data from current news and repackages itself in new conceptual forms that work with repetition. It could be argued that Trump himself acts as a "meme" repeating certain catch phrases (Build the Wall!) but avoiding important disclaimers. For example, the Cato Institute has reported that border patrol agents in the field say that a wall would only stop migrants for few minutes and will not actually deter them from crossing as it will be a "bump in the desert", which means that a multibillion dollar investment would be a crass misuse of taxpayers money. Memes work as a simplification, a mnemonic device of postmodern society.

4   Memes from the Other Side of the Border

Memes that were generated in Mexico or in Spanish tend to criticize the then-Mexican president, Enrique Peña Nieto, for inviting Trump when he was a candidate and giving him the chance to appear as a head of state. The encounter backfired for the Mexican president as Trump, in the same day in a political rally in Arizona repeated the mantra of Mexico paying for the wall. In the following meme, we see Trump saying, "I will build a wall," and the Mexican President responding, "I will select the construction company," in reference to a different corruption scandal that involved a seven-million-dollar house that a construction company (Higa Group) built for the Mexican president in exchange for multimillion dollar government contracts as was reported by Mexican journalist Carmen Aristégui. Enrique Peña Nieto was the 64th President of Mexico from 2012-2018 (during half of the Trumps's first term in office). He embodied the corruption of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in Mexico that ruled the country for the most part of the XX Century. He was one of Mexico's least popular presidents, engulfed in corruption scandals, and mishandlings of the Iguala kidnappings and disappearance of students in 2014.

Fig. 6. A meme that parodies the former Mexican President suggesting a construction company to build the US/Mexico wall that was benefited with contracts during his administration in Mexico. It reads: "I will build a wall! And his Mexican counterpart responds: I will select the construction company!" (My translation).

Memes that deal with the border in Mexico also feature the recurring topic of "El Chapo Guzmán", a drug lord that escaped a second time from a Mexican federal prison in 2015 by digging a mile-long tunnel, to the embarrassment of Mexican authorities. This was an embarrassment for the Peña Nieto presidency. Another meme relating to the topic of the drug trafficking war, uses a still image from the movie *World War Z*, that shows a group of zombies climbing like ants over the wall in the Gaza strip, and the meme comments that they would be Americans climbing into Mexico in search of the illegal drugs they cannot get if the actual border were shut down.

Fig. 6-7. A meme uses a frame from the movie World War Z that represents Americans jumping the wall on search of drugs in case the wall is built.

In most of these memes the border appears as an absurd mode of containing migration, a hasty simplification, as it does not address the core of the problem – which is the hemispheric division of North and South, or the tensions between the Globals, Locals and Mobals, to use the classifications of geographer Harm de Blij in his book *The Power of Place*. Indeed, memes are a product of the "globals," who see the world as interconnected and linked, in opposition to the "locals," for which the world is large, and who reside on the periphery, and "mobals", migrants who leave their countries in search of a better place, and who have become tired of waiting for an improvement in their lives.

Other memes use partisan division to play with opposing views, as in the following "kiss" between the two leaders that follows, or the memes that use kissing for political purposes, such as "the kiss from Marseille" where two women kissed in front of an antigay protest. Another example uses the landscape of the desert (the "saguaros" or cactus

from the Sonoran Desert) where thousands of migrants die under scorching temperatures, in which a cactus sends a message by pointing a middle finger. Because of the dangers of enraging the political base or powerful people, an important characteristic of memes that is used to avoid political persecution is the freedom of anonymity, as Patrick Davison says in his article on the language of memes:

This freedom can have obvious personal benefits if the material one is generating, sharing, or collecting is transgressive. For those Internet users who revel in the existence of racist, sexist, or otherwise offensive memes, a practice and system of anonymity protects them from regulation or punishment that peers or authorities might attempt to enact in response to such material. (132)

As with pamphlets that are distributed widely, the intellectual co-ownership of the meme is distributed within the community that shares it. By distributing it and helping to spread the viral content we become also co-authors and supporters of the ideology distributed, but then again, it also frees us from responsibility for its content if trouble arises.

We can find an early predigital form of the meme in Satire (from *satura,* a medley of theme and tone). At the center of the meme are scornful ridicule and didactic presentation; the meme creator, just as the satirist, believes that change is possible, and their intent is to sway us to an ideal alternative. Satirists "encourage our need for the stability of truth by unmasking imposture, exposing fraudulence, shattering deceptive illusion, and shaking us from complacency and indifference" (Ruben Quintero 4). An example of two satirical definitions pertaining to the border come from Ambrose Bierce, who in his book *The Devils Dictionary* defines "boundary": "In political geography, an imaginary line between two nations, separating the imaginary rights of one from the imaginary rights of the other" (28) and when defining "immigrant," he writes unapologetically: "An unenlightened person who thinks one country better than another." (117) Satire works as in the case of Ambrose Bierce, as a pedagogical tool to expose and lighten up hard, opinion-laden concepts.

5   Conclusion

Internet memes are persuasive devices that use humor or satire to persuade others toward a political view. In the case of the genre of "Border wall memes," the political division between the US and Mexico becomes a symbol for discussions of migration and the interrelation of the Global South and North. A simple photograph with a caption works as a better mechanism to influence political views, but this works on both sides of the aisle, to soften or harden the promoters of nativism and xenophobia. Memes are the banners of a political campaign that can materialize with the click of a button and if a meme is successful and becomes viral, that simple political exercise can have major repercussions in conforming or defending a world view. As in the proffered memes, humor is an aid in coping with the gravity of real migration policies that affect millions of lives. Memes can aid in exposing the fantasia of constructing a planetary suburbia or national gated community, instead of addressing the hemispheric disparities that condemn the Global South to live in distressing conditions. Therefore, investing stratospheric sums of money on wars, instead of eliminating hunger and violence, which are ultimately the reasons for migration and the construction of medieval devices of exclusion, such as brick border walls.

As we can see in the following memes, the possibilities are endless for this new form of postmodern communication. They seem harmless per their simplicity but they condense an ideology and move a specific agenda. The mode of parody acts upon this text-image mechanism as a form of repetition with critical distance. "Parody – often called ironic quotation, pastiche, appropriation, or intertextuality – is usually considered central to postmodernism, both by its detractors and its defenders" (Hutcheon, 93). Memes have become the official language of the internet, we read the pulse of society in these tapestry re-appropriations of culture and intertextualities of current events, stereotypical views, movies, cartoons, used to demystify ideas, insert quotation marks into the seriousness of political figures, and punch holes in their "solid" walls.

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