

A LIFE WELL LIVED IS A LIFE IN PIECES:
A COMIC POETIC EXPLORATION IN LIFE, DISASTER, AND PEDAGOGY

by

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Abstract

Through a comic poetic narrative, this dissertation tells the story of my inquiry as a magpie researcher into different facets and functions of humor with a particular focus on disaster humor and its pedagogical possibilities. I begin with an invitation to the reader to join me on this journey through my narrative approach in which my poetry and photographs figure prominently. Then I offer up some stories of my life to share with readers about my comic worldview. Following these stories, I review humor-related theoretical literature, my own comic worldview, disaster humor and particularly Mexican humor in response to disasters. Examining the function, form and theories of humor also involved engaging with the performances of several select stand-up comedians. My exploration of Mexican disaster humor was further enriched when I travelled to Mexico City where I taught a course on the cultural, social, and political functions of humor at UNAM, the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. Carrying through the theme of disaster humor, at the end of this dissertation, I briefly examine the humor emerging from the Covid-19 pandemic. This was a rather unexpected exploration; as a magpie researcher, it was an opportunity I could not ignore.

As a result of this meandering inquiry, I believe that the pedagogical possibilities of humor require an engagement with discomfort, courage, and vulnerability. When we stop in these moments and spaces of discomfort, courage, and vulnerability, even for a brief moment to consider ourselves and others, a form of distanced intimacy develops. These stops then can reveal to us mechanisms of othering which paradoxically may create inclusions or exclusions. The recognition of this paradox involves a process of distancing which may also produce laughter. In these uncomfortable, at times, fleeting moments lies the possibility of rebellious change.

Lay Summary

This work is a comic poetic collection of stories, poems and theories written to understand the functions of humor, the role it has played in creating my worldview and the importance it plays in the lives of others. In this examination, I spent time in Mexico City at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) where I taught a course on the social, cultural, and political functions of humor. In this collaboration, the students and I explored the role humor plays in their world, particularly its connection to disasters such as earthquakes. From these interactions and my teaching experiences, I crafted a comic pedagogy of discomfort that includes elements of discomfort, vulnerability, and intimacy to show the pedagogical possibilities of humor. The examination of humor during the COVID-19 pandemic was an unexpected addition and conclusion to the dissertation.

Preface

This dissertation, its poems and photographs are the original, and independent work of Gabriella Maestrini (©MAGA) unless otherwise explicitly stated.

The University of British Columbia Behaviour Research Ethics Board (BREB) approved the Mitacs research project portion under certificate number H18-00659.

The following two poems, *Vulnerability, death, and research* and *Entering skin first* from the dissertation have been published on the Educational Studies Blog on May 25, 2021, as *The courage to step into comic vulnerability*

<https://blogs.ubc.ca/edst/2021/05/25/the-courage-to-step-into-comic-vulnerability/>

The following two poems from the dissertation were submitted for publication: Memories (MAGA 2020) and On border-crossers and in-betweeners (MAGA 2017).

The last stop of the dissertation was presented at the annual Educational Studies Graduate Research Day April 8, 2022, with the title: *Viral humor in shaky times: Writing a dissertation on humor during a pandemic*

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iii
Lay Summary	iv
Preface	v
Table of Contents	vi
List of Figures.....	x
Acknowledgments	xiv
Dedication	xvii
An Invitation: Behind the scenes of a comic dissertation.....	1
<i>Written through and by the heart</i>	<i>3</i>
TEARS AND LAUGHTER.....	5
<i>Dancing with metaphors</i>	<i>6</i>
Knotty pedazos: Essays of a different kind.....	6
A comic dissertation	9
<i>Dissertation starts and stops.....</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>Moving On:.....</i>	<i>11</i>
INTERMEZZO #1	12
STOP ONE: Writing the comic poetically	13
<i>Vox cor: Heart and vulnerability in writing</i>	<i>14</i>
<i>Vox poetica: An example of this evocative possibility.....</i>	<i>16</i>
<i>Vox comica: Humorous storytelling as an act of living: Wor(l)ds apart</i>	<i>18</i>
<i>Poetic and comic inquiry are not such strange bedfellows</i>	<i>19</i>
The everyday language of poetry	20
<i>Vox intima: Intimacy and vulnerability</i>	<i>21</i>
<i>Poetic writing: Worldmaking</i>	<i>22</i>
<i>Moving On.....</i>	<i>24</i>
INTERMEZZO #2.....	25
STOP TWO: Scenes of my life	26
<i>Scene 1: Born different</i>	<i>28</i>
<i>Scene 2: An Italian in Rome.....</i>	<i>29</i>
<i>Scene 3: A family legacy</i>	<i>30</i>
Memories of a file.....	32

<i>Scene 4: Semi-precious stones: Heim not Home</i>	33
<i>Scene 5: Buttons and needles</i>	34
<i>Scene 6: Humor in the classroom</i>	35
<i>Scene 7: My doctoral adventure into the comic</i>	37
<i>Moving On</i>	38
INTERMEZZO #3	39
STOP THREE: My backpack full of characters	40
<i>Humor theories</i>	41
<i>The functions of humor</i>	42
<i>Comic worldview(s)</i>	44
<i>Exploring my comic worldview</i>	48
Ontological dimensions and ‘the other’:.....	50
Epistemic kernels: Humor knows and performs	51
Aesthetics in worldview	53
<i>Discomfort and the comic: Distanced intimacies</i>	54
<i>Moving On</i> ...	57
INTERMEZZO #4	58
STOP FOUR: From disaster humor to Trümmerhumor	59
<i>Disaster humor</i>	59
<i>Post-disaster humor</i>	64
Performed cultural memory	66
Memory and forgetting	67
Trümmerhumor: Ruins, disasters and beyond	72
<i>Mexican Humor: Pedazos from the ruins</i>	78
Albures and playing humor: Codigos secretos	83
Death, disaster, earthquakes, volcanoes, fires... ..	87
<i>Moving On</i> ...	89
INTERMEZZO #5	90
STOP FIVE: Mexico – Sometimes pedazos are the only pieces left ...	91
<i>Pedazos and knots: Fragmented memories</i>	92
<i>Llego a Mexico</i>	94
Becoming a real humor researcher.....	95
<i>Daily life among the rubbles</i>	97

A not so typical day in the life of a gringa living in the monster	99
Uber drivers: Car diaries.....	100
La Primera Voz represents the connection between death and the comic	101
La Segunda Voz represents gendered discomfort	102
La Tercera Voz reflects a profound female encounter	103
La Cuarta Voz represents the encounter with unexpected grief	104
La Quinta Voz represents the political in the streets:	108
<i>El humor político se encuentra en las calles.... Las calles son políticas. El humor callejero es político</i>	108
<i>Finding my way at UNAM</i>	109
Disaster of a different kind: Zapatos Rojos – Red Shoes.....	111
Magpie Adventures: Humor is everywhere.....	114
First week: Figuring it out, finding my bearing	115
A trip to the health care office: Intimacy among strangers.....	116
Walls – Murals – Posters.....	117
The cycle path: Intergenerational stories	120
Aviso importante – an important announcement	125
Staircase to ‘heaven’: On my way to the new classroom	126
<i>Teaching about and through humor.....</i>	131
Entering skin first: Bridging the divide	133
Entering skin first: Revealing spots.....	134
A night full of sounds: Learning to listen	135
Jaguars: Tenochtitlan – Teotihuacán - Pyramids	136
Revealing spots to one another – keeping relationships intact	137
Another five minutes is all it takes for a German ... to protest	139
Disaster preparedness Mexican style	140
<i>Moving On</i>	145
INTERMEZZO #6	146
STOP SIX: A comic pedagogy of discomfort	147
<i>The stop as teachable moment.....</i>	148
<i>Creating communities of laughter in discomfort.....</i>	150
<i>Violence in the comic: Sick jokes</i>	153
Comically being othered: Some more violence	155

<i>Comic vulnerability meets the everyday</i>	159
<i>Distanced intimacies</i>	161
<i>Co-creation of humor</i>	162
<i>Moving On...</i>	164
INTERMEZZO #7	166
LAST STOP: When the post-it falls	167
<i>Coming full circle</i>	168
<i>Disaster returns to Mexico</i>	170
<i>Toilet paper crisis of 2020</i>	173
<i>The never-ending wave</i>	178
<i>Before closings re-openings: A magpie leaves some shiny objects</i>	179
Bibliography	180
Appendix	199
Student pictures	199
Course flyers/ workshop flyers	201
A small selection on who to watch.....	203

List of Figures

Figure 1 ©MAGA 2019 <i>The heart: Mexican metal artwork on the wall of my apartment in Coyoacán, Mexico.</i>	3
Figure 2 ©justoutsidetheboxcartoons – used with permission from the artist	4
Figure 3 My caption: Vulnerability takes heart and courage from Facebook – uncredited –	13
Figure 4 ©MAGA 2017 Cement Poetry	19
Figure 5 ©MAGA 1970ish Germany – rebellion anyone?	26
Figure 6 ©MAGA 2018 The contents of my mother's walker	30
Figure 7 ©MAGA 2019 Cheap therapy for UBC students	37
Figure 8© MAGA 2019 A backpack full of characters and a chair full of crap	40
Figure 9 ©Rick McKee, 2014 Used with permission from the artist.....	46
Figure 10 © 2013 Andrew Evans - Used with permission of the artist	49
Figure 11 Autogrill - direction Swiss border - https://wikimapia.org/789256/de/Rastst%C3%A4tte-Pratteln	58
Figure 12 Facebook Extreme makeover – Tornado Edition 2011 - https://www.al.com/wire/2011/05/tornado_links_glencoe_debris_f.html	59
Figure 13 ©2009 Victor Solís ‘Nice morning in Mexico [City]’. Used with permission from the artist.	61
Figure 14 Personal communication	61
Figure 15 https://www.villagevoice.com/2010/09/08/the-10-very-worst-911-themed-ads	62
Figure 16 Personal communication: Memorialization of 9/11 through ink on skin – It’s raining men. Taken from a song by the Weather Girls. Cringeworthy funny to memorialize and considered one of the most offensive tattoos ever. ... https://www.oddee.com/item_97919.aspx	63
Figure 17 ©MAGA 2019 A broken world - pedazos	73
Figure 18 ©MAGA 2019 Cycle path at UNAM	75
Figure 19 Octavio Paz quote 2020- Translation: For the Mexican, life means the possibility to f**k over, of to be f***ed over as [strategy of survival]. https://cronicadelpoder.com/2020/11/19/100-frases-de-octavio-paz-para-celebrar-100-anos-de-poemas-ensayos-y-mas/	78
Figure 20 Figure 23 ©Larisa Vazquez, 2019. Used with permission from the artist. Translation: Here rests Dolores. Dear God, accept her with the same joy as I have sent her to you.	79
Figure 21©MAGA 2019 Sedona, Arizona where a considerable number of Mexicans live and work.	79
Figure 22 ©Neil Kohny - Identity Crisis of Death - Translation: Prepare yourself for the kiss of /from death; But if you don’t have lips! http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/us/	80
Figure 23 Twitter 2017 – the making of intergenerational stories Sept 19, 1985 & Sept 19, 2017,	

https://twitter.com/C_CulturaUNAM/status/1174669473548292096?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw	87
Figure 24 ©MAGA 2019 - UNAM's bicycle path – looking toward the past - the story of a changed narrative 1985-2017. Picture, picture on the wall, who tells the bestest story of them all? Sanctioned memorialization of two earthquakes	91
Figure 25 ©Bousiko 2012- Used with permission of the artist	93
Figure 26 Circulating Mexico City at night. https://mexicocitystreets.com/2014/05/17/top-five-favorite-views-mexico-city/	94
Figure 27 MAGA 2019 - My digital post-it that summarizes all those topics and themes that appeared during my stay. Created with www.wordl.net	95
Figure 28 ©MAGA 2019 Church in Xochimilco, Mexico that bears the signs of the 2017 earthquake	97
Figure 29 ©MAGA 2019 Church in Xochimilco south of Mexico City where bricks have created a hole underneath the window	97
Figure 30 ©MAGA 2019 Street plaque- Home of the coyotes.....	98
Figure 31 ©MAGA 2019; meme I created and shared on our WhatsApp with students while talking about the vastness of the city and the crowded buses and metro lines on the daily commute to campus.	99
Figure 32 ©MAGA 2022 Santa Muerte Candles – the back the candles sports a prayer to Santa Muerte – in English and Spanish.....	101
Figure 33 ©MAGA 2019 - CONAGUA with fire damage about two hours after the fire was extinguished	108
Figure 34 ©MAGA 2019 Red Shoes Collage - it takes a pigeon for perspective	111
Figure 35 ©MAGA 2019 The walk of the red shoes.....	112
Figure 36 ©MAGA 2019 Outside students offices	114
Figure 37 ©MAGA 2019 Start the day with this brand of milk. “It doesn’t work”, says the sign.....	115
Figure 38 © MAGA 2019 - Sincronizada – No, I don’t have the habit of photographing all my food!	116
Figure 39 ©MAGA 2019 Side-by-side on the wall are my companions - Censorship – Dogma, Power, Das Kapital, Universal History, Money, and Power	118
Figure 40 ©MAGA 2019 - Graffiti: I am the space in which I am. Translation of poster: International seminar – Indigenous epistemologies and intercultural education in Mexico City at the National Museum for Global Cultures.....	118
Figure 41 ©MAGA 2019 The wall of the disappeared	119
Figure 42 © MAGA 2019, Sons and daughters for the identification and justice against forgetting and silence. Not forgetting, no forgiveness.....	120
Figure 43 ©MAGA 2019 The forcibly disappeared.....	120
Figure 44 ©MAGA 2019 Mexico City Ghosts.....	121
Figure 45 ©MAGA 2019 Mexican Greatness - Translation: a teenager cleans the surrounding areas of the fallen building at the corner of Bolivar and Chimalpopoca to allow for rescue work.	122
Figure 46 ©MAGA 2019 - Earthquake pictures along the cycle path: 1985 meets 2017 in anticipation of 2020 and 2021; made with Collage Maker	123

Figure 47 ©MAGA 2019 Military personnel with Frida - the canine hero hailed so for the number of human lives rescued. Mexican greatness - the spirit against adversity [plan marina – the navy plan].....	124
Figure 49 Frida (in style) Mexican Navy's (SEMAR) Canine Unit - https://www.eonline.com/news/882194/meet-frida-the-heroic-rescue-dog-who-s-already-saved-12-lives-in-mexico	124
Figure 48 ©MAGA 2019	124
Figure 50 ©MAGA 2019	125
Figure 51 ©MAGA 2019 Important announcement.....	125
Figure 52 ©MAGA 2019 Walls outside the classroom	127
Figure 53 ©MAGA 2019 Walls outside the classroom	127
Figure 54 ©MAGA 2019 – vignettes of a classroom.....	128
Figure 55 ©MAGA 2019 The Case of the Missing Fire Extinguisher is replaced with a detailed card outlining evacuation procedure. Takes a bit to read.	129
Figure 57 Personal Communication: In case of an earthquake, the last one is f**ked.	130
Figure 58 ©Eduardo Salles Used with permission: www.cinismoilustrado.com ; https://twitter.com/sallesino/status/581502449564798976 What you need to do in case of an earthquake – in case of the earthquake, stay calm and post it on Facebook before getting out	130
Figure 59 ©MAGA 2019 Leopard Spots – the back of my own hand	133
Figure 60 ©MAGA 2019 Jaguar stencil art - wall to Faculty of Political and Social Sciences, Mexico City	136
Figure 61 Personal communication with students/ Earthquake detector model #2012 on the Richter scale...don't touch! And the second reads: Earthquake detector. ...	140
Figure 62 © MAGA 2019 my classroom board on ' <i>Politics of Disaster</i> ' – <i>At least I know not to eat and which way to evacuate</i>	147
Figure 63 ©2011 Malcolm Evans – with permission from the author Title: Cruel world published in New Zealand in the Christchurch Press, the Timaru Herald, and the Manawatu Standard	148
Figure 64 Recreated from Morrell, 2009, p. 1	150
Figure 65 <i>Personal Conversation</i>	153
Figure 66 ©Rick McKee, 2014 Used with permission from the artist	155
Figure 67 ©MAGA, June 2018 - Sorry, Mexico. Today we build the wall. In reference to the soccer match Germany vs Mexico	156
Figure 68 ©MAGA 2020 When the post-it falls.....	167
Figure 69 ©2017 Victor Solis: Used with permission from the author. One year anniversary of the 2017 earthquake. Translation: And may tomorrow be nothing but a mere drill.....	168
Figure 70 Personal Communication	168
Figure 71 Created from the urban dictionary https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Covidiot	170
Figure 72 Personal Communication – Translation: It doesn't take a genius to know what is going to happen on the 19th, right? September earthquakes with magnitudes and epicenters.....	171

Figure 73 WhatsApp personal communication - Quick question: If we have an earthquake can we all go out or is it only one per family?	171
Figure 74 WhatsApp personal communication- Translations: Are you bored? Come to Mexico City and get to know our traditional September earthquake. You can't live without the experience. There will be pajama and lingerie fashion shows.	171
Figure 75 ©Victor Solis 2020 Used with permission from the author	172
Figure 76 ©MAGA 2020 Where did the TP go?	173
Figure 77 © MAGA 24 2020 The important food group is still here, YAY!.....	174
Figure 78 Personal Conversation – self-explanatory	175
Figure 79 Personal Conversation Translation:	175
Figure 80 Personal Conversation: Desperate times	175
Figure 81 Personal Conversation: Duct tape	175
Figure 82 Personal communication Toilet Paper – ©Steve Cutts - the new hot commodity.	176
Figure 83 Both Personal Communication	177
Figure 84 Personal Communication - Translation: Excavations in Europe in the year 3025	178
Figure 85 ©Daniel Beyer Sept 25, 2017, Grilled Chicken – By permission of Daniel Beyer and Creators Syndicate, Inc.	179
Figure 86© MAGA 2019 Students at UNAM – photo used with their permission.....	199
Figure 87 © MAGA2019 Students at UNAM - photo used with their permission.....	199
Figure 88 © MAGA 2019 Students at UNAM- photo used with their permission.....	200
Figure 89 ©MAGA 2019 Course flyer advertised on the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences at UNAM	201
Figure 90 ©MAGA 2019 Faculty-wide workshop at UNAM in Mexico City; ©Evans Cartoon used with permission of the artist.....	202
Figure 91 ©MAGA 2019 As a way to connect the Mexican students with our department and to give back to them, I created a workshop on their stories. Here is the Educational Studies Invitation with Mexican students in attendance.....	203

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In no particular order do I name them with their permission: ¡UN MONTÓN DE GRACIAS!!

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...You all inspired and humbled me to be my humorous self.

Dedication ¹

To my dreams who provided answers when I was in the dark
To my dragonfly who validated me and gave birth to me
To my coyote tricksters who grounded me in mischief
To my deer herd near and far who struggled with me
To my hummingbirds without whose songs, I would not have healed
To Gayatri my twin soul in a sister's body.

And most of all,
To my little girl,
May she always laugh her ass off!!!

... In deep gratitude.

A love note to my mother

Heart

Home

Peace

Roots

....

In your presence, I miss you.

¹ Simona, Vicheth, Autumn, Omer, John, Haideh, Camille, Mariel, Aurea, Lena, Marcelo, Ivan, Shirley, Hyun, Yotam, Mary, Stephanie, Roy, Shayna, Kevin, Rosemary, Bernard, Rhonda, Claudia, Candle

An Invitation: Behind the scenes of a comic dissertation

A magpie journey

This dissertation reflects a magpie journey aimed at exploring different facets of humor and the connection of these facets to everyday life. This is a comic poetic inquiry with many twists and turns which mimic various aspects of my lived life, my experiences, and my surprises

Magpies² are considered very smart birds (I like that characteristic). Some tales say that magpies tend to collect shiny objects and bring them back to their nests. Calling myself an academic magpie is a comic metaphorical device. Magpie, as an itinerant collector of shiny things, like the other animals that appear in the dissertation (leopard, racoon, coyote), is an animal metaphor/messenger that brings into the light, into the stop, teachings otherwise not accessible. Whether the magpie actually steals shiny objects is far less important than understanding what tasty morsels she places in her dissertation nest, and in turn, brings into the spotlight to create a collection of pieces (I call pedazos) that come together in comic multitude, fragmentation, and liminality. These pedazos then become “an evocative collection of disparate [glittering] objects given meaning by their association” and placed into a wider whole (Yardley, 2019, p. 1) that may take the reader on divergent multiple liminal paths. Theoretically, I explore these objects woven onto a web of knots.

I did not set out to write a comic poetic dissertation; it wrote me. The initial aim for my doctoral research was to examine the pedagogical possibilities of humor, particularly its contributions to anti-racist pedagogy in my English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching where I had used the performances of stand-up comedian Russell Peters and noted how his performances opened spaces for uncomfortable dialogues around race, discrimination, and identity.

While a successful pedagogical tool at the time, I felt that something was lacking. The more I read, the more I realized that essentializing and reducing humor to ‘just another pedagogical tool’ was missing something important. *‘Just be funnier in the*

² As gazza ladra, diebishe Elster [thieving] or courageous magpie, this corvid appears in many stories around the world. <https://www.birdspot.co.uk/culture/magpies-and-superstition>. Even Puccini wrote an opera about her.

classroom so your students learn better or take better tests', was the main tenet of the literature (Berwald, 1992; Chabeli, 2008; Cruz, 2019; Deiter, 2000). Feeling that this was a reductive lens, I began to ponder how *I* viewed humor, its role in my life, its role in society, and its pedagogical possibilities outside formal institutions. Maybe there was a connection between humor and being human?

I began to examine more closely what it meant to have a comic worldview, how I created the world comically, and how *I*, as a comic being, was using humor in my own teaching and research practice. As an academic magpie, I gathered many questions along the way. When was I funny, what did I deem funny in the comedians to whom I was drawn, and what made something comic in the first place? How do you research humor while you are laughing? How can you observe comedy when you are convulsing in laughter, shaking in anger at the performance, or dealing with the ghosts that hurt your heart? How do you create intimacy with your co-humorists while our bodies are shaking in laughter and are engaged in power disparities (Butterwick & Selman, 2009)? How do we cross the crevasses of the untranslatability of humor? How do we avoid trivializing humor or the importance that humorous stories have for those living the effects of *disasters*? Ultimately, I hope this dissertation shows the importance of taking *humor seriously as inquiry* without *killing it*.

Here are the key questions which guided this inquiry:

1. What can humor do?
2. What functions might it serve in a society and for an individual?
3. What pedagogical possibilities might humor in general and disaster humor more specifically provide in making sense of the world we inhabit?

For the writing of a comic poetic dissertation through which I attempt to answer the above questions, I explored disaster humor as a significant area of humor studies. Furthermore, my study examines the pedagogy of humor through my lived experiences as an educator teaching about and through disaster humour in Mexico where I collected stories of this humor concerning earthquakes. Through these stories, I push the idea of disaster forward to embrace the embodiment and performance of disaster humor as educator, researcher, and stranger in multiple strange lands.

Written through and by the heart



Figure 1 ©MAGA 2019 *The heart: Mexican metal artwork on the wall of my apartment in Coyoacán, Mexico.*

This doctoral journey has been a heartfelt and heartful inquiry. Writing through the comic is writing through the heart; it is how I move about the world, create my world, and write it. A joke, a funny story, a comic moment, or a thought-provoking topsy-turvy comment, all these occupy a position, a space, a place from which to start, to which to return or from which to digress.

Do I contradict myself?
I am large; “I contain multitudes”³
I am an academic magpie⁴,
And this is my dissertation.
Don’t leave shiny objects around!! (MAGA 2021)

Multiplicity is inherent in the comic; there is a danger in understanding the world or the comic through a single story, as I am reminded by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009)⁵

³ (Gay & Freeman, 2014, p. 102); (Prendergast, 2014)

⁴ Throughout the dissertation I rely on the magpie, coyotes and leopard as animal metaphors and their heart teachings.

⁵ [https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda ngozi adichie the danger of a single story/transcript?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story/transcript?language=en)

many times. The danger remains in viewing life through a single worldview, denying the tension and discomfort of multiplicity:

So, how do *I* know? Shamlou (1974) suggests that we know through our hearts, through the hearts of others, through the presence of an/other. In *Farewell*, he asserts,

It takes two hearts to live,

...

One heart to give, one heart to receive.

...

One heart to speak, one heart to respond.

So, I feel the presence of the human.

I add, without an/other's heart in relation to an/other's heart, we cannot experience the genuine comic. The comic needs the reverberations, the echoing in an/other's stories. The comic presents itself as simultaneously plausible and implausible (Palmer, 1994), making it funny and placing it just outside the box.

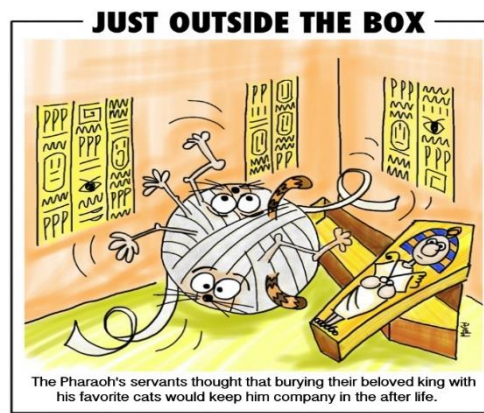


Figure 2 ©justoutsidetheboxcartoons – used with permission from the artist

In following the path of my heart then, I create a “heart-opening” (Ellis, 2004, p. 34), where writing and the comic, reverberate against each other to create selves and others. As Tedlock (2011) further clarified, “I have spent my time not so much in walking a particular path, but rather in spiraling along multiple alternative [heart] paths” (p. 331). Pelias (2004) makes a plea for a methodology of the heart within what I call an *agile methodology* that is located in the researcher's body, a “body deployed not as a narcissistic display but on behalf of others, a body that invites identification and empathetic connection, a body that takes as its charge to be fully human” (p. 1) which is

a body that knows through the comic. An agile methodology, my only path, is the path of the heart. I draw on Don Juan's teachings, the Yaqui shamanic elder in Castañeda's accounts,

I only roam the paths of the heart or that have heart [recorro solo los caminos que tienen corazón]. Anything is one of a multitude of paths [un camino entre cantidades de caminos] ... Look at every path closely and deliberately. Try it as many times as you think necessary. Then ask yourself, and yourself alone, one question. ... Does this path have a heart?" (Castañeda, 1968, pp. 106-07).

In following the path that has a heart, an inquiry that "acquaints us with our own heart" (Bergson, 2002, p. 53), I am inspired by Gibran⁶ who explains what it means to move the comic outside the heart to the margins reducing it to 'buts' and 'justs'.

TEARS AND LAUGHTER⁷

Upon the bank of the Nile at eventide, a hyena met a crocodile and they stopped and greeted one another.

The hyena spoke and said, 'How goes the day with you, Sir?'

And the crocodile answered saying, 'It goes badly with me. Sometimes in my pain and sorrow I weep, and then the creatures always say, 'They are *but* crocodile tears. And this wounds me beyond all telling.'

Then the hyena said, 'You speak of your pain and your sorrow but think of me also for a moment. I gaze at the beauty of the world, its wonders and its miracles, and out of sheer joy I laugh even as the day laughs. And then the people of the jungle say, 'It is *but* the laughter of a hyena' (Gibran, 1932, p. 177).

*One's tears, one's laughter
reduced,
diminished,
vanquished
to
'just'
a joke.
(MAGA, 2020)*

⁶ Gibran is a 19th century Lebanese poet, philosopher, painter
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/kahlil-gibran>

⁷ Capital letters in the original

Dancing with metaphors

As readers may have noticed, metaphors have been central to how I conceptualize and narrate my doctoral inquiry; it is a journey with stops and starts, twists and turns, knots, and pieces. These metaphors provide me with conceptual insights (MacCormac, 1985 in Goatly, 2005), and help me to render stories alive to allow for the interplay of ideas. “Creative metaphors are unconventional verbalizations [and visualizations] rooted in unprecedented ways of viewing the world” (Black, 1962; Miles, 1967 in Dynel, 2009, p. 30), making them apt for working with the comic and to create new lexica where necessary. They also serve as a way for me to communicate my ways of viewing the world to readers.

As Lakoff and Johnson (2003) note that metaphors allow us to explain and understand something emergent or new that cannot be described or explained otherwise. “The metaphor is the message”, says Richardson (2000, p. 334). Metaphors may be abstract yet real elements in our comic stories, creating living beings, making worlds (Underhill, 2009), drawing us into their echoes.

Other key metaphors, in addition to magpie, journey, and heart, are ***pedazos*** [pieces] and ***knots***. The concept of *pedazos* emerged out of the earthquake rubbles in Mexico City where I spent time teaching a course on humor (more on that later). At times somber and, at times lighthearted, the *pedazos* in this dissertation constitute an attempt at understanding life as performed through the comic. Using, at times, a fragmentary writing approach is a deliberate way to show how the *pedazos* in our lives are often unexpected, non-linear. The metaphor of knots has also informed my approach.

Knotty *pedazos*: Essays of a different kind

Have you ever tried to unravel a knot you unexpectedly have come across? Your shoelaces perhaps? You find a knot in your runners’ laces not knowing how it got there and even less how to undo it. The task may seem simple - yet pulling from one side may make the knot tighter, while pulling from another side may not accomplish anything at all. It just seems stuck in itself, holding onto the mystery of the knot. Teeth, bobby-pins, swear words - nothing works.

It takes a while to find the perfect spot through which the knot opens and unravels, showing its structure, its beginnings, and its ends or its further entanglements - one’s patience is tested to the point of possible abandonment only to come back to it because it is necessary to undo this knot.

Many are the approaches, many the attempts; at times even the repetition of the same approach fails miserably until the knot *allows* itself to be opened. (MAGA, 2021)

The same happens for the understanding of the comic. *Pedazos* and *knots* are those “liminal, epiphanic spaces” where the real work happens (Denzin, 2018, p. 41). In its *pedazos*, in the coming-together of these pieces, everyday life emerges as a humorous performance. Trying to unravel the comic knot, has taught me to trust what it lets me see in its presence. In a “broken world, there is beauty”, explains Williams (2009, p. 1) in relation to the coming together of mosaic pieces to create an image that makes each *pedazo* as important for the whole as the whole itself.

The metaphors of *pedazos* and *knots* also speak to my geographic meanderings, to the streets of Mexico, to the streets of South Africa, to the memory that is encapsulated/ knotted within humorous stories. *Pedazos* from the rubbles - a collection of stories, essays, musings, articles, and chapters constitute pieces in a whole [an unfinished whole] – trying to understand what it means to lead a comic life. In a methodology of the heart (Pelias, 2004) which guides me in my poetic writing choices but also in my research interests, I am guided again by Don Juan’s teachings who remind me that while there are many paths, the only path to take is the path from the heart.

My interests are also guided by current social, cultural, and political events that create humor in responses to these events. As varied as these locations are, so are the meaning-making approaches I use to understand the manifestation of a certain kind of humor within certain geographical and political contexts. How can ultra-right humor co-opted for shootings in Christchurch, NZ coexist with the revolutionary humor during the Arab Spring (Anagondahalli & Khamis, 2014; Elsayed, 2016)? How can we live within these tensions? In my dissertation I explore these tensions using theoretical tools from a variety of disciplines, as well as my own comic worldview.

Another important metaphor used to map my journey is the notion of **stops**, moments of lingering, where I, and I hope the readers, can stand still long enough to focus on one particular aspect of this inquiry. Instead of traditional chapters, this

dissertation has several stops; they are not absolute final endings, rather they are endings/openings, lingerings of sorts that I hope shed light onto a topic while opening the experience to another point of view, another ending, an alternative narrative, an uncomfortable stumbling block or even better, a pedagogical disruption. Maybe these stops even cause laughter. I draw inspiration for the stop on the work by David Applebaum (1995), who stated that every expression hides its truth and needs to find a way into the light especially if “displaced, understressed, unintended and overlooked” (p. vii). The comic is the overlooked, displaced and at times unintended who needs to come into the light to show what, in the everyday, matters to us. “To stop [to linger in the light] is to begin a movement toward a moment of awareness, of consciousness, a spark of initiation, a moment of creativity” (Applebaum, 1995, back cover), the moment before bursting into laughter.

The stop may be a moment of truth, of discomfort, a confrontation with hard-to-hear realities, a spotlighting of sorts in the confrontation with oneself, a bringing into focus of what we *need* to hear, rather than what we *want* to hear. With this in mind, I imagine stand-up comedy performances, the telling of funny stories, punchlines or comic encounters, disastrous events, as a series of stops, as moments of lingering. Stand-up performances have become inspiration for a conceptualization of the comic throughout this dissertation (see below). I stop in their voices to reach for echoes of comfort, discomfort, and vulnerability. The moment of de/light, of darkness, of discomfort, of disruption, of dis/belief, of a stop, a lingering, a moment, where something dark or light or opaque happens when a pedagogy of vulnerability meets a pedagogy of discomfort in the comic, which in my experience, is one of the more powerful pedagogical convergences.

Moments of awareness
Moments of risk
Moments of opportunity...

These stops are the pedazos or pieces I have selected from my own life, my comic worldview, conversations, and magpie research interests.

A comic dissertation

In sharing with readers my comic worldview, I have included cartoons, poems, photographs, and pieces of stand-up performances. They all are essential elements of my comic poetic worldview and how I construct the world around me. While I could have written an entire dissertation just on their contributions alone, here I have woven Russel Peters, Ahmer Rahman, David Chapelle, Trevor Noah, and Hannah Gadsby throughout as supportive stand-ins for my own sense-making of disasters big and small. Except for the anonymous comedian in *the Rape is real and everywhere tour*, whenever I mention their work, I provide links to their performances so that the reader may experience them for themselves. My inspirations also come from academic and non-academic authors; however, I consider stand-up comedians to be everyday philosophers, theorists and social commentators (Mintz, 1985; Quirk, 2015) with a unique comic point of view whose works have helped me to theorize ontological aspects of a comic worldview (Ahmer), distanced intimacies and vulnerability (Chapelle), a comic pedagogy of discomfort (Gadsby), vulnerability (anonymous comedian) and performed cultural memory (Noah) within the comic (more about these concepts later). It was Peters' performance on race, identity and hauntings that started my academic and pedagogic journey into the comic⁸. Since creative dissertations like this rarely happen in isolation, I specifically mention their work to indicate the genealogy of the concepts and metaphors in this dissertation.

As a trained photographer, I also pay attention to the comic in the visual world. Photography and poetry allow me to express my life's comic and sometimes not-so-comic points of view to hopefully help the reader walk beside me. The deliberate use of photographs, collages and other visual material is a central aspect of navigating my world and should not be considered merely illustrative. They are a pedagogical approach to engaging, integrating and enmeshing the visual and textual through discomfort, vulnerability, and courage (Combe & Grauer, 2019).

Except where explicitly stated otherwise, the photos and poems are my sole creation which I identify using the caption ©MAGA. Much to my surprise, I discovered

⁸ I have linked here a piece written about his importance in my early teaching moments. <https://www.sfu.ca/education/cels/bilingual/bilingual-corner-2015/Comedians.html>

someone else had also used this acronym - Donald Trump! Oh dear! MAGA or 'Make America Great Again' was the former United States president's campaign slogan.

©**MAGA – dare I say it?! I found out I 'Make America Great Again' (MAGA, 2020)**

MAGA - four letters from my names: last and first inverted
a different rendering of my name in Italian,
one to mean witch, sorceress, knowledge seeker,
creator of other worlds and words
deeply seated in the folds of the body
vulnerable, intimate, living, creating.

I named my first car MAGA - an acronym for a married life long gone.
I sign my photographic art MAGA - an acronym for painting with light
I sign my research MAGA - an acronym for the comic, the unexpected, the
topsy-turvy, the liminal, the in-between.

Darn, what a responsibility I ~~didn't set out~~ to make America great again.

Dissertation starts and stops

There are seven **stops** on this journey as outlined below, each one an effort to undo the knots of my inquiry. Interlaced are intermezzi⁹, texts I have written in the spirit of a guide helping the reader wander (and ponder) with me. Following this invitation, in **Stop One** I map out the comic, poetic and autobiographical approach taken in this doctoral inquiry and the writing of this comic poetic dissertation. Then in **Stop Two** I share a collection of my own life stories with a brief discussion about the everyday as essential material for humor. These stories from my life I hope will help readers understand my comic worldview and the way I locate myself in this inquiry. In **Stop Three**, in keeping with the metaphor of a journey, I open with an image of my theoretical backpack from which I share relevant humor-related literature with key theoretical concepts that have guided me. In **Stop Four**, I continue with a discussion of conceptual resources that have shaped my inquiry. This time I focus on 'humor in the ruins' or disaster humor, a central concept emerging from my Mexico project *No pierden el humor: Post-disaster humor in Mexico*. **Stop Five** tells of my time in Mexico

⁹ Drawing from music history, intermezzi are rooted in scene buffe [comic scenes] of seventeenth and early eighteenth century serious operas; these are in-between compositions that can function either as transitions between acts or serve as stand-alone pieces providing comic relief or dramatic contrast (Troy, 1979).

where, as a visiting scholar and researcher, I taught a course on the cultural, social, and political functions of humor to undergraduate students at UNAM (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México). I learned from students how disaster humor is a significant aspect of Mexican humor.

In **Stop Six** I delve deeper into the connection between intimacy, vulnerability, and discomfort in the conceptualizing of a comic pedagogy of discomfort and humor's capacity to create a space to engage with this discomfort, through vulnerability, at the heart of this pedagogical possibility. In the **Final Stop** the notion of disaster humor informs yet another unexpected part of this doctoral journey - the humor emerging during and from the COVID-19 pandemic while writing this dissertation. Being a comically attuned academic magpie, I could not ignore the humor stemming from this complex moment of disaster that provides such a prominent example of humor-in-the-making, so I provide you with a few snippets. Concurrent to the pandemic, Mexico had to deal with more earthquakes causing a flurry of humorous commentary which I have included in the last section. This final stop also serves as a summary of sorts, as a coming to an artificial full circle, an ending with reopenings.

Moving On:

I hope this invitation has served as setting the stage to this doctoral journey informed by my magpie comic worldview, the metaphors shaping that inquiry, and the stops and knots of my doctoral travels.

INTERMEZZO #1

Hola, buenos días – welcome - Guten Tag und un cordiale benvenuti. We'll be leaving shortly but before we do, let me tell you a story. On your right....

I recently went to a conference in Seattle. I know the city a bit, had printed all the maps but as I walked up the steep hill from King Street where the bus from Vancouver stopped, I had doubts. First, I asked for directions from the bus driver, who told me he was from Portland and didn't know the city. Then, I asked a little old Chinese man who pointed me to the local Jehovah's Witnesses, who had a stand there with their materials. So, I walked up to them and said, "I'm lost, and I need directions, but not from Jesus. Can you tell me how to get to Union Street?"

Well, I do need directions and I'm assuming you do as well. On the first stop of this tour, I speak to the approach I've taken to writing this comic, poetic, autobiographical and story-filled dissertation.

STOP ONE: Writing the comic poetically

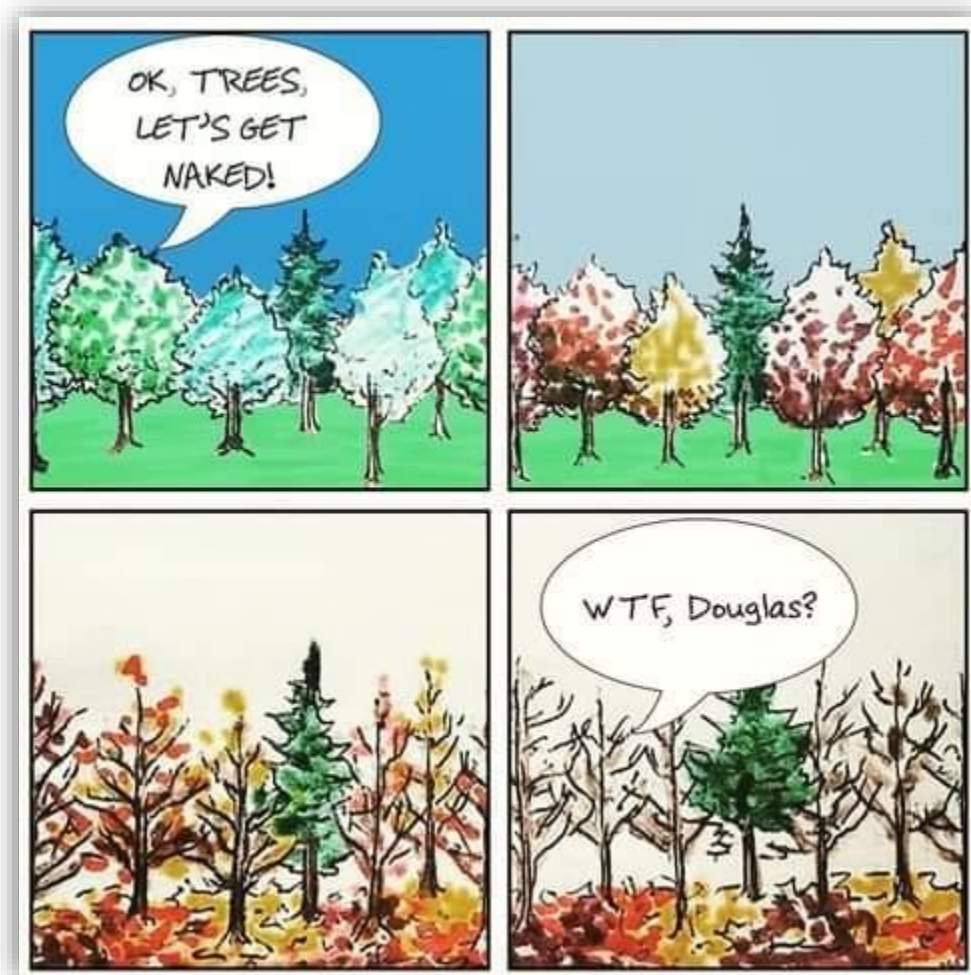


Figure 3 My caption: Vulnerability takes heart and courage from Facebook – uncredited –
<https://www.natureoutside.com/lets-get-naked-humor/>

Researching and writing selves—both individual and collective—seek the language that best creates intimate and ethical connections with one another (Neilsen, 2012, p. 93).

Vulnerability isn't for everyone. When you write vulnerably, others respond vulnerably. To write vulnerably is to open Pandora's box to other forms of knowing. [...] Making oneself vulnerable in the vulnerability of others is calling for an intellectual and emotional engagement leaving behind our own trail of longings, desires and unfulfilled expectations [...]" (Behar, 1996, p. 16; pp. 19-25).

Vox cor: Heart and vulnerability in writing

This dissertation is an engagement with vulnerability, that of my own and of others. Vulnerability is key to the stories I tell and to my poetry. “Attend to story - stay open and vulnerable”, says Leggo in *Sailing in a concrete boat* (2012b). With this in mind, Leggo (2005) further states that “Poetry offers significant ways for learning and practicing our living in the world” (p. 380). The comic, I believe, does similar work of knowing, living and becoming in rendering oneself open and vulnerable. This way, Wiebe (2015) and Snowber and Wiebe (2009) use poetry as a way of exploring their vulnerabilities; they see that process as leading to fuller forms of engaged pedagogy in their classrooms, I add, maybe with a dash of discomfort. While classroom pedagogy is not the focus of my research, the pedagogical aspects and possibilities of humor are. I will explore this aspect in more depth in stop six. Again, encouraged by Leggo (2005), I claim that my poems and my comic point of view are part of my ongoing comic and pedagogical engagement with living in the world in which my poems are attempts to capture multiple moments, intensities, and layers of struggle (Owton, 2017) whether these struggles are my own or those of my co-humorists.

We attend to stories through the comic and the poetic

Further in the attempt of capturing multiple moments, intensities, and layers, Baldwin (2005, p. xi-xiv) states that “our lives are our stories, and our story is our life since story is the narrative thread of our experience(s)”. They are how we make sense of the experience, what we tell others and what/how we remember. We create our lives through stories, serious, dramatic, or comic ones.

“The truth about stories is that that’s all we are”, says (King, 2003, p. 2) thus, through comic stories we may also understand who we are. For Baldwin (2005, p. 73), we need to “First, ... wrap our lives in language and then we act on who we say we are. We proceed from the word into the world and make a world based on our stories”. I attend to the word-making and world-making through the autobiographic, the comic and the poetic aspects of stories, as a way of poetically and comically living in the world while staying open and vulnerable (Brown, 2017)¹⁰. Staying open and vulnerable is as

¹⁰ https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_the_power_of_vulnerability

much about the courage of and a commitment to the comic as it is connected to a pedagogical vulnerability and discomfort.

This openness also appeared during the writing process. “Sometimes you have to write something that doesn’t work before you find a format that does”, says Ellis (2003, p. 126) echoing my own sentiments at the start of my dissertation writing process. I understood that writing entirely in the voice of the more traditional academic social sciences did not echo mine because to touch the heart and reverberate in the comic is ultimately the purpose of the stories in this dissertation. During my stay in Mexico and elsewhere, those stories that touched my heart became the guiding voices in this inquiry.

Epiphanous insights: Poetic mini- narratives

Situated in a comic poetic inquiry, many of the pieces, or pedazos, as I call them, are epiphanies, a term I borrow from Faulkner (2020) and Denzin (2018). I turn these epiphanous insights (Richardson, 2012a, p. 189) into, at times, fragmentary poetic mini-narratives (Denzin, 2017) that build the scaffolding, the web that connects the various pedazos in the dissertation. Partially found poems, partially poetic transcripts, partially literary poems constitute the inquiry approach (Prendergast & Belliveau, 2013). So, true to my love for literature and my background in modern languages and cultural anthropology, I turn to the literary devices of essays, poems, metaphors, and imagery in my writing (Faulkner, 2020).

Creating a comic poetic dissertation means that through the process of writing (Richardson, 2000, 2001), I craft my insights, each in turn moved into the spotlight through a series of stops to allow simultaneously for partiality, multitude, and elusiveness to expose and reveal the “ shimmering, intelligible, emotional patterns and hidden meanings” (James, 2017, p. 50). I alternate a narrative analytical voice with poems, with more short concise reflections that aim for the heart of an experience. In this, my reflections seesaw between autobiographical and auto-ethnographical creating textual performance on the page. The performance comes “through the conventions of line breaks, spaces between lines and between stanzas and sections, and [...] sounds of silence” with deliberate textual placements on the page, elaborates Richardson (2012, p. 189).

I craft poems and narratives composed, at times, from a variety of events, from a variety of voices and from a variety of circumstances exactly to allow for the heart to shine. As Galvin and Prendergast (2016, p. xv) elucidate, there are many voices that may appear in a poetic or in this case a comic poetic inquiry. These may be “*a vox autobiographica/ autoethnographica, a vox theorica, a vox poetica*”. For this inquiry I add to this list two important ones *a vox cor*¹¹ and *a vox comica*. A vox cor is a voice from and through the heart, which I have explained previously, my only path, while the vox comica or the comic voice is at the heart of this inquiry. The following pedazos are examples of those voices. In later sections I will not signal these specific voices, rather I will intermesh and intertwine them for a less linear writing, reading, and performing echoing the messiness of life with its rubbles.

Vox poetica: An example of this evocative possibility

For Dave Chappelle’s¹² raw comedy he relies on his storytelling skills. Yet, he leaves the craft raw, not rehearsed, not reiterated until the perfect form is achieved; rather, he leaves it in its comic infancy. Yet to be born; yet perfect the way it is in its intent to rattle, to make the audience’s breath falter. The comic need not be funny; in the form of a stop, it can simply take your breath away. My response to Chappelle’s performance with his words in italics.

Witnessing the raw, the unrefined, the unexpected

*You can’t breathe for 8:46 minutes*¹³.
Normally I wouldn’t show you something so unrefined, I hope you understand.

Yet...
Makes you catch your breath
makes you stop.
makes you think.

Can’t breathe for 8:46 minutes.
The streets are speaking for themselves

¹¹ Cor – heart (Latin)

¹² Chappelle is an American stand-up comedian and actor, known for his, at times, controversial stand-up performances, and sketches.

¹³ (Based on a YouTube performance by Chappelle on June 6, 2020, in Ohio in response to the death of George Floyd and in support of the Equal Justice Initiative - <https://youtu.be/3tR6mKcBbT4>)

The streets speak
The streets know.
The streets bleed.

Can't breathe for 8:46 minutes.

I came for laughter.....
What if this time it were different? (Bilici, 2010) What if this were a
rehearsal from fear to laughter [and back]? I ask.

I came for the laughter,
I stayed for the power of the emotional truth.

To stop breathing is missing the breath of in/justice. (MAGA 2020)

Keeping the *heart of the story* is fundamental to my writing, keeping it raw, maybe with the intent to rattle just a tiny bit. Witnessing a comic event is a highlight for any audience. Being part of an albeit fleeting *community of laughter* that comes together to hear the comedian's stories is what makes us buy tickets. As much as it is a community of laughter, it is based on a community of knowledge, as Oring (1987, p. 278) explains. If we think back to Chapelle's performance, this essentially means that a fleeting temporary community comes together in a shared moment of story with that shared knowledge of that community. In the above case it is the lived experience of police violence resulting in death, reflecting racial discrimination and historical violence. While I do draw from stand-up performances as theoretical inspirations, I use these as crossover stand-ins in dialogical interviews, classroom encounters and informal moments of common stories. I do watch these performances through the heart. While recognizing myself/ourselves in stories, we share a complex understanding of the world in these narrated absurdities and heart/hardships that depict everyday moments of life. Maybe you recognize yourself in these life moments, too.

The poetry and other forms of writings in this dissertation work off the presumption that the shortest distance between two people is poetry and the most-intimate distance between two people is laughter/ the comic. Poetry, similar to the comic, ...

reveals, ... has the power to open up the unexpected, to contribute to aesthetic depth, to bring us close to ambiguities with metaphor and image, it allows access to vulnerability, courage, and truth telling and playfully or poignantly forges new critical insight (Galvin and Prendergast, 2016, p. xi).

I wish I had the gift of a comedian in the ability to craft jokes, humorous stories, and one-liners; I have, however, the ability to write stories and poems with unexpected endings in which I convey the humorous in the everyday - so I stick to what I know. I have the gift to 'see' the comic in everyday interactions which is what allows me to comment on what I feel, see, and experience. Here is how I see the comic voice come together in telling stories to maybe, only maybe, forge new critical insights.

Vox comica: Humorous storytelling as an act of living: Wor(l)ds apart
(*homo ridens and homo fabulans*¹⁴ meet tellers and interpreters of narratives)

We live in stories; we live through telling humorous stories, we live through making sense through humorous stories.

We are storytelling beings; we are comic/ humorous beings; we are humorous storytelling beings. Through stories we make our worlds.

Shared narratives, unimaginable spoken words written into the city's wind, create images of strangers passing through common spaces.

Uncovering everyday lived experiences of self and others
in hard-to-exchange s/places through hidden language
encroaching on comic memories, unhealable rifts, and slippery meanings.

Thrown into the world of lived realities
creating streaming tears of heard, possible and imagined worlds
made to thinkingly feel and feelingly think
through language, with language out of being
stories spoken, heeded, exchanged in an attempt to connect, to share.

Aware of the interconnectedness of time, place, and space
exiled into oblivion of daily ways
accepted, yet estranged names of perceived intruders venture
from exile to essential sadness inscribed onto moving bodies
made different through distant yet present pasts.

¹⁴ Homo ridens and homo fabulans (Morreall, 2009)

Successions of expulsion, displacements and embodied imaginaries are created to know the world otherwise as our sense of belonging fades into unrecognizable glimpses.

W o r (l) d s apart yet touching distances provide an encounter between self and other as interstice, fissure, rubble, invitation, improvisation, stop — the *comic*.
(MAGA, May 18, 2016)

Although my writing appears static on the page, the crafting of a comic dissertation that focuses on disastrous moments is a living document. There is no end - continuity lives in it. While this dissertation offers a series of stops (moments of lingering) they must not be considered conclusions, nor endings but a constant reopening from within temporary stops. This comic-in-the-making with reopenings from within temporary stops is exemplified in the final stop where I nod to the current COVID-pandemic.

Poetic and comic inquiry are not such strange bedfellows



Figure 4 ©MAGA 2017 Cement Poetry

Poetry [the comic] matters because it serves up the substance of our lives, and becomes more than a mere articulation of experience.... Mainly, it allows us to see ourselves freshly and keenly. It makes the invisible world visible
(Parini, 2008, p. 181 in Faulkner, 2020).

The same reason for using poetry in representing research and lived experience, can be said for the use of the comic. Both are integral to my life and (re)present a powerful methodological approach. As Watson (2015, p. 2) claims, the *humorous worldview*, or as I call it the *comic (worldview)*, is a unique opportunity for investigating the social that accepts the social world's multiple realities while allowing the "humorous to

represent the serious” (Hynes & Doty, 1997, p. 13). So, looking at what the comic conceals or reveals, are the foundational aspects of this dissertation.

The everyday language of poetry

“The language of poetry”, writes Parini (2008, p. 181), provides deep understanding in ways that other writing does not”. Using comic poetic language is a political act itself much like Faulkner explains that “poetry is politics” because the political task of poetry is to make new words and new worlds (Faulkner, 2017, p. 89). New words and new worlds may be created through writing the comic especially when connected to the political, social, and cultural aspects that invite comic stories. As I examine later, the comic in disaster humor is deeply connected to these aspects with governmental politics of prevention, management, trust, rescue, flourishing, reconstruction, and the reaction by people to these politics.

Cloaked in everyday language, my *voces/voices* shine more brightly through poetic language. Through my *I*, as Alarcón (2015, p. 16) states,

in the end	al fin
we shall find	en otros
ourselves	nos hemos
in others	de hallar.

By poetic language I do not solely refer to crafting poems, rather I mean a descriptive, accessible language that conveys emotions and is evocative of the experience that it is meant to describe. My poems, short or long, are narrative in nature, they are my storytelling voice. These poems are “truthful”, in that they are truthfully conveying the emotional experience that occurred (Faulkner, 2020, p. 52); they are reflections on stories and experiences to maintain their heart. In this, I follow the writing of Scott-Hoy and Ellis (2012) and Pelias (2004) in discovering a heartfelt autoethnography, an approach that focuses on dialogue, emotion, embodiment, spirituality, self-consciousness and reflexivity.

When writing evokes emotions, laughter and/or provokes introspection in the reader giving the sense that the “experience described is lifelike, believable, and possible” that is its credibility, explains Ellis (2003, p. 127). In this, the poetic aligns with the intent of the comic. In order for a comic story to evoke emotions, laughter or

provoke introspection, the described experiences need to be portrayed, as any good storyteller would, as lifelike, believable, and possible *lived experiences* [[in vox poetica](#)]. Lived experiences allow for [distanced intimacies](#), staying distant yet intimate. This cycling between intimacy and strangeness, as *intimate strangers*, is what may create the more evocative humor or the most evocative writing. Drawn into this real/imagined/distant/yet close moment, we seesaw between emotional closeness and mediated distance (Blank, 2013, p. 59). I delve into this more in stop six in the crafting of a comic pedagogy of discomfort so necessary for the comic. Here I introduce this idea:

Vox intima: Intimacy and vulnerability

Comic poetry creates intimacy, intimacy creates comic vulnerability
to be uncomfortable
to seem stupid
to not know
to bomb.

Be connected and committed to each other's well-being
emotionally,
poetically,
comically,
rely on your gut knowledge.

Intimacy of self and others is an intimate relationship with
self,
other,
spirit.

As one gives of self, one receives from self and others
taking a first step into reciprocal uneasiness.

Cultivating care is reciprocal investment in each other and self
Forged through stories,
forged through relationships,
forged through relatedness.

Remembering our intimacies means every part of the body needs
to remember,
to resonate,
to reverberate in the discomfort of the comic.

Co-constructed comic relationships are those mirrors
through which we can see beyond.
(MAGA, 2021)

I use the different voices to explore how stories present possibilities for “accessing the complex, mysterious, even ineffable [intimate] experiences that comprise human living” continues Leggo (2012). I am especially interested in understanding how humor can help us live, overcome adversity, make sense of the world we live in, learn about the world, create our worlds, and critique it. For example, Double (2017) a UK academic and stand-up comedian explains how he overcame the effects of an accident by way of his own cathartic creative comic process through which he transformed his traumatic experience into stand-up performance. Life experiences need not be traumatic to become transformative or cathartic or epiphanous. These stories need to mean something to those who tell and live these comic stories which I have witnessed in Mexico.

From these worlds, as researcher, teacher, and poet, I appreciate Prendergast’s idea that (2009) “poets have spoken the truth, as they have seen it, about themselves and their world around them; poets [and comedians] are witnesses” (p. 489). The way that poets and comedians know the world they inhabit, contains memory and knowledge of this world.

Poetic writing: Worldmaking

Again, I would argue that the comic is akin to poetry. The rhythms and choice of words can mean the difference between huge laughs and awkward silences. The art of humorous writing is seen partly in one-liners, observational and narrative (poetic) jokes. For jokes to be effective, namely, to make the audience laugh or pause, we need to pay attention to every word, every syllable, the grammar, the syntax, the rhythm, the pauses, and their lengths which is what Faulkner (2020) elaborates in her book *Poetic inquiry: Craft, methods and practice*. We need to attend to comic poetic form and content to create the worlds we live in or to imagine worlds that we want to inhabit.

Creating one-liners and using words found in the transcripts of conversations or notes is both a coding device as much as it is an analytical tool (Faulkner, 2020 p. 151) answering the question: *what does humor mean to you?* One-liners in comedy are those essential jokes capable of reducing a situation, or observation into one punchline. I have used this technique to highlight and summarize the definition of humor my co-

humorists shared at the end of stop five. Informally, I have listened to an answer to this question in all my encounters whether they were dialogical interviews, informal encounters in the Uber or on the streets.

Writing poetically, in my case, is inherently who I am and how I reflexively process my world. Since childhood I have written poetic short stories, moral tales, and poetic reflections on my worlds. Not always have these writings been around epiphanous, enormous, life-changing events, most often they have been everyday minute occurrences of some life significance. The reflexivity in found poetry (Faulkner, 2020; Walmsley, Cox, & Leggo, 2017) are often my style of choice - I collect words of significance, images or expressions that have moved me profoundly from which to craft my impressions, my theories and my reflections. Throughout the dissertation there a few of these pieces e.g., [*Living/ lived memories*](#).

Not only do I use the process of writing poetic narratives to represent themes but also as a device for reflection on my own research and teaching practice as foreigner, as outsider, as gringa, as woman, as humorist, as student, as European etc. As well, I reflect through poetry, on my own biases, my expectations, intersections, and power differentials (Faulkner, 2020) to uncover my own taboos, my discomforts, and blind spots in humor, in writing, in research and in pedagogy while rendering myself vulnerable through my work.

As Kusserow (2005) also clarifies, “the act of writing a poem is a deep meditation on ... fieldnotes [my travel notes, my observations, my interactions] where I tried to focus on all the subtleties of what I observed” (p. 71). During my stay in Mexico, which I explore in stop five, I have crafted stories, poems and observations from a series of *notas de viaje* or travel notes, see [*Madres solteras*](#).

Leggo (2008) highlights that poetry, as does the comic, allows us to ask different kinds of questions that challenge us to think much more deeply about the aesthetic and epistemic demands of our research and our praxis. Most importantly through the comic and the poetic, we are able to show the “multidimensional nature of research and the lived experience” (p. 155). This multidimensionality is key in understanding the slippery liminal aspects of humor. Knowing through the comic or through poetry is not only a

cognitive moment but it is a moment and movement of the body, the mind and the spirit that come together in the lived experiences of those I write about.

Moving On....

In this first stop, I have attempted to explain how I write creatively which is closely connected to how I see the world humorously. In the next stop, you'll find some stories from my life. I hope they provide testimony to my comic worldview and maybe, they will make you laugh or maybe just stop you in your tracks.

INTERMEZZO #2

Time for a break. Get yourself something to eat and drink. Sit and relax. Popcorn anyone? Perhaps a poem comes to mind. Jot it down on a piece of paper. Or maybe an image or a joke. We could share these at the end of the journey (only if you want). The next stop is a collection of stories about me. Yes, this journey is all about me but also about you, what you feel and think as you walk with me... keep notes about that, too.

STOP TWO: Scenes of my life

Any performance starts with an invitation:
Get your ticket! This is an invitation into the risky business of the comic.



Figure 5 ©MAGA 1970ish Germany – rebellion anyone?

“A coherent narrative constructs an ... image of the self [and others] out of the disparate, messy fragments [I call pedazos] of lived daily experience”.
(Hoskins, 1998, p. 5)

Beim Humor versteckt sich der tiefste Ernst hinter dem Scherz.
Humor is the deepest seriousness behind the joke [not a literal translation]
(Schopenhauer, 1879, W II, p.109)

I still remember the weight of the old, cold, metal flashlight; I am hiding under the heavy down covers creating my little reading sanctuary; it is two o'clock in the morning and I have school soon; I am sure my mother will come back into my room telling me again to go to sleep. Psssssss!!!!.....How can I let up from these fascinating characters in those adventure books that inspire all those stories and poems I write when they leave me wanting for more, for a different life, far away?¹⁵

These scenes from my life, my personal pedazos, illustrate my understanding of everyday life as central to the comic. As Morreall (2009) noted, the comic lives in everyday locations, in everyday language, is intimate yet emotionally distant, is comprised of mental jolts and is agile in its thinking and problem-solving. The comic relishes disorder and ambiguity, bringing together agile methodologies and distanced intimacies. The comic is housed in the everyday world with its faults and limitations, ridicules death and enjoys multitude, attempting to critique, mock and poke fun at authority. This poking fun at authority is a big part of the comic stories that I have been privy to on my journey. *Comic solidarity* is about shared struggle and making it easier to bear. It is what I call humor in the ruins or Trümmerhumor which I found in Mexico City. I venture into these ideas and the stories from Mexico later in the dissertation in stop four and five.

In the everyday, the comic is not only a branch of criticism but also a branch of knowledge, a way of reading the world comically in its multiplicity where it is able to shatter, refract and reorder familiar paradigms (Bruns, 2014; Critchley, 2002; Gordon, 2014; Morreall, 2009). The comedians from which I draw inspiration, use their humor to critique their own place in the world characterized as other, as not belonging, as outsider. In this they echo my own life experience in Europe as guestworker, as Other, as not belonging, as out of place. Sensing kinship, I am drawn to their stories for their critique and alternative imagining of the worlds we live in. I theorize this in the following reflection inspired by Gloria Anzaldua's writings (2006) and Gomez-Peña's texts (2000).

¹⁵ Just in case you wondered what I read: Enid Blyton's *The Famous Five Adventures* and *Hanni und Nanni*; *The little prince*; Grimm's fairytales; *Reinecke Fuchs*, *Arabian Nights*, *The name of the Rose*, the adventure of *Pinocchio*, alternating Italian and German authors.

On border-crossers and in-betweeners

When I see Y(i)OU(r) body perform on stage,
the immigrant body, the in-between body,
I see my own, listen to my own, experience my own,
feel my own crossing borders,
living in in-between worlds
real and imagined across time, space, and geographies.

Shaking my body in laughter, slow tears moving down the cheeks
one laughing, one crying as I gaze,
not to an 'other', but to an alliance of entanglements, those lived and perceived
moments of otherness....

while making sense of it all,

what it means to live in a world that doesn't accept,
that doesn't feel, that doesn't want - to include,
be just, be me, be other, be...one, no one, two one. Here.

My no/body, my other/body, my shared/body, nos/otr@s/ydob.

(MAGA, 2017)

Scene 1: Born different

(a Roman-Catholic hospital in Germany; a German mother; an Italian father from Tuscany with 1960s guestworker immigrant status).

Would you believe it if I told you that I was born different? I was supposed to be a boy... much to the despair of my father who, as a good traditional Italian, wanted to have a first-born son.

Apparently, I was born rebellious gifted with a funny bone, too. Drawing on Boskin (1997), I define rebellion as speaking back to authority to challenge its norms, assumptions, and established worldviews....through humor. I was kicking and screaming three months too early with long jet-black hair. The nurses called me the 'mini Beatle'. Not sure if it was the screaming or the black hair. When at the age of 10 my math got better, I figured out that *I hadn't been born early* but that my Catholic parents had had premarital fun.

Quite the tomboy in an attempt to please a demanding father, I climbed trees, went fishing, knew how to tend olive trees, make wine, build houses, or open those dreaded pickle jars. I was also born into an artistic family that valued music, the arts and performances since my father was a painter, musician, photographer, and calligrapher from whom I learned to see the world in colorful sounds, shapes, pictures, and movements.

In my mother's family especially, teasing, and quick wit are still cherished ways of being that have created, at times, a superficial family intimacy behind which to hide. Good or bad, this is the legacy of intercultural, interracial, and intertwined European stories. Even here, I was discovering the notion of *distanced intimacies*, a concept I use to indicate the intimate/distant tension one uses when creating humor, while teaching, while researching, while living.

Scene 2: An Italian in Rome

As I said, I was born rebellious, which continued well into teenagerhood, maybe I still am? They said, 'No boyfriends', I said, 'I don't care'. They said, 'We are leaving for Rome', I said, 'I'm going too'. This sense of rebellion would be an entry point into my own comic worldview, since I did quite outlandish things that at a later date would be retold for dinner table amusement.

During a normal summer holiday in Italy, one day my parents had German visitors they wanted to take to Rome, about a 3-hour train ride away from our house in Tuscany. I was kicking and screaming because that's where I wanted to go too. After all, they had promised they would take us. C'mon, the craziest city where the amphitheater stands next to the baroque cemetery next to a modern apartment building...3000 years of history in half a block. My parents left with their friends by train in the afternoon. That same evening, after I had schemed all afternoon on how to beat the group, I left with my boyfriend at the time...in secret by car because I NEEDED to see Rome. We raced at 150km/h along the highway to arrive downtown at midnight. As we were finally driving down the road coasting the Coliseum, I spotted a group of tourists. It was them...my parents and their friends.

I was over the moon to have found them, so we stopped, and I yelled at them from across the street. I hadn't even contemplated that my parents wouldn't be thrilled. Oh boy, was I in trouble. My dad, yelling a range of creative Italian expletives, chased me down the Coliseum while dodging garbage and rats. Needless to say, I had the night of my life in Rome, a superb Roman breakfast, an anxious ride back, and a hurting bottom.

Scene 3: A family legacy

Researching humor in relation to others is as much revealing of my own comic spirit, mind, and body as I navigate my own life situations. Not always does the comic reveal itself readily. In dealing with my mother's passing in 2018, my sister and I were talking about the ways that my mother could have lived a better, easier, and longer life.



Figure 6 ©MAGA 2018 The contents of my mother's walker

This would have meant leaving her apartment of 40 years (that of my childhood) to move into an assisted living facility. Coming to terms with leaving her cherished apartment, she finally chose door number three. She left this world on her terms:

dropping dead on a walk through the most beautiful meadow while picking flowers and berries. Her walker was filled with both.

When I went to Germany to care for her remains, we visited the place where she was found. A wooded meadow filled at sunset with thousands of dragonflies. Later, at the funeral home, I took pictures of the contents of her walker filled with those flowers and berries. I laughed hard since these items very much represented her personality and her maddening gifts. Never one to let herself be dragged down by her illnesses or her physical limitations, my mother rather joked about them giving her ailments names when things got to be too much to bear. Joking about her ailments was one way she kept a positive attitude towards an insidious disease that was to take her mental and physical abilities.

While clearing out her apartment, we found a collection of poems, writings, inspirational quotes, and the dirtiest jokes among her papers collected over the arc of her residency. *Dirty* was her thing. It is mine as well...finding the double meaning in about everything is one of my fortes. Since moving to Canada over 20 years ago, I have had to tame this wild side of me, as not everyone here appreciates this rather direct rearing of the comic.

After my mother's passing, I have come to reflect on my family's comic legacy, since my mother's eight siblings display quick wit coupled with teasing and mocking. As in other families, we understand that this humor serves a big, yet at times contradictory, role: it alienates others, keeping them outside; it creates a family inner circle of intimacy; and, at times, it even keeps its members intimately distant from one another. I have previously noted the concept of distanced intimacies which means to be vulnerable and intimate yet distant enough to laugh or to be humorous. Bergson (2002) elucidated this sense of distanced intimacies showing how the comic is part of being human (p. 4). He states that "Maybe we gain [from being in the presence of the comic] something more flexible [...] a practical, intimate acquaintance" (p. 3-4) that tells us something about ourselves and our lives and of our hearts. Here I show the difference between the two fundamental terms "comic" and "comedic":

The comic is the essence of our beings.

The comic shows failings.

The comic reveals humanity.

The comic reveals and hides.
While the comedic performs it,
showing what lies at its heart. (MAGA, 2020)

Through being human, we encounter a variety of intercultural, intergenerational approaches to humor apparent in how people deal with disasters, tragedies, and rebuilding.

Having been brought up with the legacy of World War II, the Holocaust, and my own family stories¹⁶, I have often wondered how humor and the comic would and could emerge out of the darkest of places. Roberto Benigni's (Benigni, 1997) movie *La vita è bella* - Life is beautiful, rings in the melancholic comic aspects of life in concentration camps, the flourishing of the human spirit in circumstances of tragedy and disaster and the upending of the social order (Sherman, 2002). Although my grandfather was far from a comic soul, his stories have shaped my understanding of in/justice in the world.

Memories of a file

There are rows of boxes piled along the backstreet of the old post office¹⁷, a treasure from the late 1800s facing the now called Synagogenplatz - the square dedicated to the Holocaust. The old post office, too small to hold the mailing needs of the expanding city of 180,000, has to move to a newly built, high-tech facility behind the railway station. The treasures from its basement bowels, gutted, laid bare in boxes unprotected from the elements exposed to prying eyes, give room for a curious high schooler with his inquisitive hands.

A hand reaches inside a half-opened cardboard box moving aside the cover to reveal its contents. Folders, upon folders, upon more folders with weathered stains of age grab his attention. Shaking, one, then another, then one more is carefully picked up. At the third, he pauses. The name on the inside spine is well-known in town, familiar beyond mere recognition. It is my grandfather's name.

¹⁶ my grandfather was interned for 18 months in 1943

¹⁷ My hometown, in the Ruhrgebiet the former coal heart of Germany, was almost completely destroyed during WWII with very few pre-war or medieval buildings left intact. As industrial centre of Germany, special bombing took place to destroy the factories.

Old German script favored during Nazi times recounts of a medical and familial story. Number XXXX. A human life reduced to a number to be disposed, disposable in its pathology. This folder brings together past and present, a medical order signed to forcefully remove him from his home to be exterminated, *simply* because ...

I was given this folder during recess in my last year of high school never imagining its content and that I would write about it nearly 40 years later. My body is involved in the writing of this experience - my body having held the story for so many years as incomprehensible burdened legacy - a family history and story not privy to many - an attempt at holding its space but not revealing it to whom it belonged.

The memory of this heavy folder tucked away in an old hat box on top of my mother's wardrobe unleashed itself into my consciousness after her death - carried across oceans. In the knowing of a people, archives hold power. In mine, my body holds the archive, my desk drawer claims to safe-keep the vulnerable content.

Scene 4: Semi-precious stones: Heim¹⁸ not Home

The drive to Ida Oberstein, well known for its semi-precious stones takes us to a white building. Its large enclosure marked with uncertainty, apprehension, and excitement. The next six weeks away from home for the first time, are a step away from home into independence, or so I thought. My sister and I are greeted by Catholic nuns clad in white robes who would be our 'family' for the foreseeable future. They organize the schedule, activities, bedtime, and food. Nobody foresaw how it would turn into a living/ lived nightmare. My parents' good intention for a wholesome time in the mountainous region of Rhineland-Palatinate in Germany, revealed itself to be trauma-laden to this day.

Sent as 10-year-old picky eater to gain weight, to become 'whole', we were force-fed, force-slept, physically, and verbally demeaned and punished when crying for missing home. Not eating or not finishing what was on the plate during our *wholesome* stay was deemed unacceptable. Vomiting our food because we just could not handle any more was met with the order: eat it up or be beaten. Frequently both...

¹⁸ Kindererholungsheim (Verchickungsheim) or Heim for short means orphanage, home, sanatorium – a place to heal. In Germany's history, these places of healing are connected in their structure and intent to Nazi times where individuality and rebellion were suppressed.

I did not see much of my sister during this time, even though it would have been easy to accommodate siblings; even my free-spirited comic rebellion got squashed.

Coming home after the stay, I vividly remember trying on my favorite pants in front of the long mirror. You know, those funky real 70s bellbottoms, colorfully-striped glorious pants I loved so much, only to realize that they would not go passed my knees. I had been stuffed, like a Christmas goose¹⁹ fattened up for slaughter.

To this day I despise milk rice pudding!

Sounds like stories from another world? From another era? Maybe - yet many Catholic children were subjected to these demeaning practices for generations creating adults still coping with the effects.

I still carry the *semi-precious stones* with me from Ida Oberstein.

Scene 5: Buttons and needles

On a summer holiday in Tuscany, Italy where we stayed every year with three generations of women, the following story unfolded. My great-grandmother, Nonna Armida, my grandmother, her sister, my mother, my father, my sister, and I, were all crammed into a two-bedroom apartment on the second floor with a roof that connected to the other apartment building. The ease of access of that roof allowed my sister and I to visit our friends frequently on the other side of the courtyard.

My great-grandmother was the butt of many pranks my father played on her; illiterate [I like the Italian word better – *analfabeta*, meaning not knowing her alphabet], she was sharp as a tack and not easily fooled. Always clad in a home-made frock with a needle stuck in the lapel for snail-eating, she was the reigning matriarch of the family with a heart of gold. At times she would give my sister and I one thousand lira each, the equivalent of 10 cents, not to be spent all in one place.

One day, while Nonna Armida was sewing a new frock, my father messed up the buttons she had laid out, telling her that she was missing one. Angry at this insult, she swiftly lined up all the buttons to the corresponding holes to indignantly show my father

¹⁹ Yes, we eat goose for Christmas dinner not turkey

that she knew what she was doing. The entire exchange was filled with creative Italian swearwords that my great-grandmother shrieking in laughter unleashed onto my father.

Scene 6: Humor in the classroom

The movement into my doctoral adventure of studying the comic stems from my experiences teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) in Vancouver. I never really wanted to become a teacher when I immigrated to Vancouver from Europe; however, it was better than working at the old Eaton's department store downtown in the Men's section, dealing with the infinite choices of shirts matching ties and ties matching shirts while dealing with the outlandish demands of the executives working in downtown offices.

In the classroom as well as in other aspects of my life, I perform the comic – which is the lens through which I see, know, and experience the world. This ability has brought me into the hot seat many times as my European upbringing does not translate well into local notions of humor. In the first few years of my teaching career in Vancouver, Canada, my teaching evaluations were very low. I could not understand why students were calling me a mean teacher – I cared about them a lot!!! I failed to understand that German sarcastic wit and dry puns do not translate well interculturally.

While progressing to other occupations, I finally pursued a master's degree at the University of British Columbia (UBC). One day I was standing in my ESL classroom with two groups of students who were silently staring each other down. Some of the interactions between these two groups were so hostile that they resembled an old-fashioned standoff. No one speaking. Deadly in a language classroom. Then, one day in my pedagogical preparation for that class, I came across *Outsourced* (2007)²⁰ by Canadian comedian Russell Peters who speaks of racism, ethnicity, and encountering the world (Hirji, 2009; MacPherson, 2007) which I showed to the class. I started with one of his routines called '*Cultural names*'²¹. While he uses his own name to show the historical entanglements of colonialism, race and stereotypes, he also exposes

²⁰ Maybe these clips help you to understand his approach: <https://youtu.be/eaO1Sz7-VYQ>; <https://youtu.be/uTXemscTJWM>

²¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eaO1Sz7-VYQ> –

assumptions and prejudices about ‘cultural’ names in general. I used this to discuss with the students their names and the stereotypes they had experienced. Even then, I worked with a *comic pedagogy of discomfort*, only that I didn’t know it yet!

Here is a brief snippet edited for brevity and profanity

I like cultural names.
Cultural names are really cool, you know? I don't have a cultural name--
and Indian people, for some reason, have a real tough time with this,
but my real name is Russell Peters.
[Some audience members boo]
Both of my parents are from India, and that's the name they gave me. Russell
Dominic--
[Audience members still booing]
Look at you dumb m*****s right there!
Do you know Indian history at all? At all?!
...
The British were there, for 400 years. You don't think they f***d one or two of us?
If they could steal all our jewelry, they could bang one or two of us!
That's my real name. Both of my parents are from India,
and they named me, "Russell Dominic Peters."
They are from that Italian India called Calcutta ...

With his particular maverick approach to rebellious ethnic humor (Boskin, 1997; Gillota, 2014; Rappaport, 2005) he pokes fun at a number of racial-ethnic groups, pointing at each group’s incongruencies and stereotypes. In this particular type of comedy, stereotypes are used as an extreme trope to break open the dark spaces of racism or discrimination (Pickering, 2014) through an act of subversion (Marra, 2014). Stereotypes are recognizable broad categories that infused with humor, allow for the inherent absurdities of the stereotype to emerge. In Peters’ comedy, it is used to breathe in hope for change.

Through the use of a variety of pedagogical activities and approaches, including this comic pedagogy of discomfort²², *Outsourced* helped my students to overcome their own stereotypes that would then allow them to practice English. This particular form of pedagogy used problem-posing dialogues, through which some students were able to

²² A comic pedagogy of discomfort is based on Boler’s (1999) idea of a pedagogy of discomfort. I elaborate on this idea in stop six.

state that they identified with the discrimination modeled in the performance. Some spoke about the stereotypes they held about others in class, which finally allowed for some difficult interpersonal conversations among my students.

Initially, as noted in the invitation, this made me think about examining the possibility of stand-up comedy and humor as anti-racist pedagogy in the ESL classroom which is what I proposed in my PhD admissions essay. But things do change!

Scene 7: My doctoral adventure into the comic

A while ago, when I explained my research, I was asked whether I was a stand-up comedian, which seems to be a common conclusion when studying the comic in relation to humor and stand-up comedy. The first time this question arose, I was unsure about the answer. Since I have delved into the more human side of what the comic means to me, I have a more refined answer. I think that Bergson (2002) was onto it: the comic is one that “defies easy definition”; it is an “eternal shapeshifter that when cornered changes its purpose, its form, and its function” (pp. 3-5).

So, here is my answer – I am not a stand-up comedian, but I am situationally funny. I am a comedian-in-the-moment. I am able to play off others, to create and see double entendres and to find the humorous in everyday situations. This creative, imaginative stance may reveal itself in signs, memes, stories, or the statements of others that I am able to twist or in which I may detect the incongruent. As a trained visual artist this involves the visual world as well.



Figure 7 ©MAGA 2019 Cheap therapy for UBC students

On a pre-pandemic workday at UBC, I came across newly installed parking meters opposite the Peter Wall Institute. Now ‘talking parking meters’, I thought, would provide cheap therapy for UBC students. Just imagine the lines....

Many times, my humor is too off-kilter. The quick wit that comes with it is a honed skill from infancy that I have somewhat inherited from both sides of the family. Since not all humor is considered positive, it is also necessary to reflect on the violence embedded in the comic. Teasing, mocking, for example, can display violence in more or less hidden forms which in families shows up to a party like good old’ Uncle Otto nobody likes. Of course, we talk about racist, sexist, misogynist, ageist, and other ‘ists’ in humor.

I hope that these stories have helped the reader to understand how I came to study humor, how I have crafted my own comic understanding of the world, and how stand-up comedy has been an inspiration for my thinking. Well, you guessed it ... I am rebellious, and I see humor everywhere. This rebellion manifests itself in my research subject, too. I was told by some that an inquiry into the comic was not ‘real’ research, or that humor was such a controversial topic that it would not resonate with anyone or any funding agency. True enough!!! Any time in my life that someone has told me ‘you can’t do this, or you can’t be this’, I have taken on the challenge. In this sense, the comic provides rebellion in the face of limitations as one of the most liberating experiences (Boskin, 1990; Freire as cited in Lewis, 2010).

Moving On....

In this first stop of our tour, I’ve shown you a few clips from my home movie, the pedazos of my life, with the delights and dangers of my comic worldview. I’ve discussed the importance of the everyday as a source of comic knowledge. At the next stop, I’ll introduce to you some of the ideas and concepts guiding me. As a magpie, I’ve gathered many more than what is included here. I’ve selected only a few (so my backpack can fit onto the overhead rack).

INTERMEZZO #3

Time for another break before we visit the next stop. Here's my backpack story, I'm sure you can relate. Do you have a backpack where important items just go missing?

The night before departure

As usual, I place my luggage close to the door to see what I still need to pack. Suitcase, document pouch and backpack. The latter sits lonely to the side as I may be adding more to its pockets in the hours to come. Chaos always ensues with last minute additions. The various pockets house all those characters, real or fictitious, who have been an inspiration not only for my comic dissertation but also for my life. I am amazed at how many characters fit onto one of those minuscule USB sticks that invariably disappears in the cracks of the backpack, its temporary disappearance always met with panic and promise to be more organized.

STOP THREE: My backpack full of characters



Figure 8© MAGA 2019 A backpack full of characters and a chair full of crap

Envision an ancient canvas travel backpack, one that has seen places near and far. Envision it on the ground, on my knees; dirty, scuffed, and mishandled through years of use, yet cherished for its wisdom, presence, and company. In its crevasses, folds, and pockets peek many a name, many a story, and notes from many a pensive moment, often the result of time alone. Some are buried deeper while others sit more on the surface appearing readily through the tough fabric, but all prepared to contribute.

The various pockets of my backpack house all those characters, real or fictitious, who have been an inspiration not only for my comic poetic dissertation but also for my life. They inform my journey, my comic worldview, my poetic auto/biographical/ethnographical writings, my comic pedagogy, my comic research practices and the comic as the art of living, being, knowing. The comic is not just a state of mind but also a state of being, a mode of knowing. It makes worlds, finds them, it inhabits them and reimagines them. The numerous pockets of my backpack speak to the need for multiplicity when exploring the meaning or functions of the comic.

Below, I walk through some of the theoretical explanations of humor I have encountered and then turn to the notion of worldview in specifically crafting my comic worldview.

Humor theories

Humor is too rich, too varied, and too complex to be confined within the narrow limits of any single sociological school. Indeed, “no single discipline can cope adequately with humor” (Mulkay, 1988, p. 3). Humor studies is multidisciplinary with theories from many fields contributing: linguistics, anthropology, semantics, semiotics, sociology, philosophy, and literature, all aiming to explain what makes x funny. Although each of these theories provide points of entry into understanding the comic, Attardo and Raskin (1991) champion an interdisciplinary approach to gain insights into what makes a story, an event, a circumstance funny or how we might know the comic world.

Weaver (2011) concurs that there is not one theory or approach that explains all humor, although incongruity theory may possibly be the most accepted explanation of the cognitive aspect of comic phenomena. Incongruity theory, succinctly put, states that a set-up (story) is followed by a perceived incongruity, a shift in perspective or a surprise, maybe a stop of sorts. It is a reaction to a perceived or real unexpected statement or moment when something is deemed to violate our mental patterns or our social, cultural, or political expectations (the punchline). Most of what we know as jokes, follow the set-up/punchline in its basic form. Cohen (1999, p. 11) provides me with this succinct example,

According to Freud, what comes between fear and sex? - Fünf
(best understood when read with a heavy German accent – yes, I went there!)

In the past, various explorations and explanations have also theorized why we laugh, what makes something funny, and how it may fit into the wider social, political, and cultural aspects of societies (Ziv, 2010). So, why do we laugh? Do we feel superior (superiority theory, Plato, and Hobbes), do we need to release tension (relief theory, Freud)? Does laughter stem from a sense of play? (Morreall, 2009) Is it a benign violation of norms and morals (McGraw & Warner, 2014)? Or do we react to a perceived or real incongruity?

In “A note on humor”, the preface to *The Book of Negro Humor*, the words of Langston Hughes (1966) ring in my own comic thoughts. Humor is

Laughing at what you haven’t got ...
When the joke is on you but hits the other fellow [sic] first ...
What you wish in your secret heart were not funny ...
Your own unconscious therapy ...
Like a friend who looks like a stranger but isn’t because you realize
you have known him [sic] all your life ...”
[Maintaining] its distance while keeping you company as long as you are
capable of meeting it halfway (p. vii).

Laughter is only one possible response to intentional or unintentional incongruous humor (Critchley, 2002; Gordon, 2012; Morreall, 1987, 2012). The pause, the stop (Appelbaum, 1995), a cringe, a sigh, silence, a sense of offense or simply the moment just before erupting into laughter might be more powerful and more important in shining a light on what matters than laughter itself, which I explore further in stop six.

The contextual aspects of humor cannot be ignored, since different cultures understand humor to be different things for different purposes (McGraw & Warner, 2014). There is little in the literature I reviewed, however, about a non-western exploration of the comic and its situatedness in epistemic traditions other than western thought. From the literature, most non-western understanding of humor appears to be rooted in folkloric traditions, trickster stories, and outsiders’ accounts (Ibarrola Armendariz, 2010; M’Baye, 2009; Otto, 2019; Szokolczai, 2019), leaving them to be constructed as marginal, traditional, uncivilized worldviews rather than legitimate ways of knowing (McCall et al., 2017).

The functions of humor

In addition to the theories that explain what makes something funny, I am drawn to theories that explore the *functions* of the comic. Underlying my inquiry is an understanding and curiosity about how the comic functions socially, culturally and politically in a given social, political, cultural, geographical, or historical context (see Billig, 2005; Carroll, 2014; Martineau, 1972; Ziv, 2009).

Witkin (1999) and Morreall (2001) have noted the following possible functions of humor. First, humor can be a veiled critique by a marginalized group within an

oppressive social order that finds something unjust or wrong. Since humor operates within multiple and different layers of meaning (hidden to the oppressors), the critique can be shielded behind ‘it was just a joke’ (some Mexican humor is considered to have this function). Second, it may be used as social glue or generate a sense of solidarity in laughing together at the oppressor. This kind of humor is apparent in social movements (Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014; Molon Batista, 2019) where humor is used by protesters with specific targets as the focus. Third, humor may help oppressed individuals and groups who are suffering to serve as coping mechanism, helping to keep one’s sanity. Fourth, humor can help with survival, moving beyond a disaster into flourishing or repair (Gordon, 2014). Lastly, it might help to block and subvert indoctrination into dominant perspectives; it can disrupt taken-for-granted and often discriminatory views and constructs. For dominant groups, oppressive humor (humor at the expense of an ‘other’ to establish superiority) is often taken-for-granted and understood as a straightforward, singular, and obvious humorous message of the norms and worldviews regulating the group.

Rarely are these views challenged. See the cartoon on the diseased Mexicans on p. 47 and again in stop six. For a marginal group, however, humor can be the only way to critique oppressive structures. Thus, humor can function as an anti-oppressive response, illuminating stereotypes and exclusionary thinking to unmask such worldviews and expressions to avoid reprisal. In considering the functions of humor, events such as earthquakes, terror attacks, mass shootings or wars can also be material for jokes because such events powerfully influence and shape the way we view the world. I explore disaster humor further in stop four.

The comic can be a social lubricant creating a sense of intimacy; this humor may be a tool in the exercise of power within a social group or across social groups, as more recent stand-up comedy has shown (Bruns, 2014). Going back to Russell Peters, he provides stereotypical joking material across all racial-ethnic groups in the audience. While surveying his audience, he speaks to the macho behavior of Latino men, the anglicization of Asian names, the often misunderstood names of Indians and the sexual prowess of Black men marrying white women. As he is a member of a racial-ethnic group, he plays with this entangled distance and intimacy. While stereotypes

traditionally have been used to put ‘the other’ in their place and exercise control (Appiah, 1990), comedians who perform racial-ethnic comedy, a term used by Rappaport (2005), claim this space to show how unstable these constructs are, how they rely on white norms and privileges and how they may be imagined otherwise. This “imagining otherwise” is explained by Turner (as cited in Mintz, 1985) as a way that a “group or community seeks to portray, to understand, and then to act on itself is enacted in a space of “public liminality” (p. 73), a space that enables the inverting or a subverting of the old. The possibility of liminal subversion is one of the most important functions of humor and possibilities of the comic (Martineau, 1972; Mintz, 1985).

Comic worldview(s)

Humor is not a mood but a way of looking at the world (Weltanschauung) (Wittgenstein, as cited in Naugle, 2002, p. 150)

The comic becomes part of a worldview through its particular way of looking at the world. Below I share my own comic worldview which underlies my way of being and knowing to illustrate who I am as a comic being and how I live a comic life. Here Roberto, one of the co-humorists from Mexico, expressed his view,

We should not take life so seriously. You can feel heavy by life; you can see life as being catastrophic but when you change the way you look at the world, then this thing is not that important. It is not an optimistic view rather a comic view of life. It is important to see the funny in things because we can access the bigger picture through humor.

The concept of worldview helps me to illustrate how humor is part of a bigger picture of life. Since it has entered the English language, worldview has been used across a variety of academic disciplines eluding precise definition (Sire, 2015). While it is a slippery concept, worldview provides for me an opening to analysis, multiplicity and liminalities that are useful in connection with the comic (also a slippery term) (Berger, 1997). In disciplines such as philosophy, sociology, anthropology and folk studies, worldview is used as a concept to analyze how humans, through artifacts and ideas, have constructed their understanding of the world and how these artifacts, in turn, have constructed the world around them.

Many philosophers since Kant have used, refined, and written about *Weltanschauung* in their particular historical context and for their philosophical understanding of worldview (Sire, 2015). *Weltanschauung* initially appeared in the writings of Kant in *Critique of Judgment* (1790), after which it became a key term in German Romanticism and Idealism²³ to refer to a “sense of perception of the world” (Naugle, 2002, p. 22), meaning a global outlook on life and the world at the time with all this entails. As a loanword, *Weltanschauung* began to enter other languages by the 1830s and started to be translated into English as ‘worldview’ around 1858 (El-Aswad, 2012; Naugle, 1998; Underhill, 2011).

Worldview is considered to reference a more personal and historically relevant point of view providing explanations for social processes and cultural structures that may influence how we see ourselves and others (Naugle, 1998; Smedley & Smedley, 2012; Vidal, 2011; Wolters, 1983). Dilthey (as cited in Sire, 2015) stated that “world views develop under different conditions, climates, races, nationalities, determined by history and through political organization, the time-bound confines of epochs and eras” (p. 26). This explanation is important as it shows the multiplicity of worldview(s) and the relevance of historical context. Wittgenstein (as cited in Sire, 2015) remarked that “the struggle of worldviews over one and the same world” (p. 29) is at the core of many conflicts.

“Even the word *worldview* contains itself a *worldview*” clarifies Sullivan (2009, p. 1) since it not only has historical origins, but is also part of any literary, oral and pictorial artifact or text where it shows its epistemic, ontological, and aesthetic aspects (Ong as cited in Hiebert, 2008). A worldview involves an exploration of values and ideas, a way of looking at life itself; it may also constitute an exploration of the violation of social norms and expectations (Hiebert, 2008). Worldviews shape the way we see, experience, and know the world. Worldviews then may function as maps of realities and maps of living that provide guidance for our behaviors.

²³ In the works of Fichte, Schelling, Schleiermacher, Schlegel, Novalis, Paul, Hegel, and Goethe

Loosely defined, worldviews may be a way of creating, judging, and knowing the world according to our realities or beliefs. These beliefs can be helpful, hurtful, and/or harmful. This is one of the major tensions embedded in a comic worldview– it can oppress or liberate depending on whose point of view we are examining (Morreall, 2014).

According to Lovering (2001, p. iii) the concept of worldview is useful if one tries to understand: (1) oneself, (2) others, and (3) one's experience; I add a fourth element: connection to society. Furthermore, Sire (2004) asserted that a worldview is not a mere set of basic concepts “but a fundamental orientation of the heart” and a commitment to understanding “the really real” (Sullivan, 2009, p. 554), which rings true to my understanding of the importance of comic and the poetic in my world. People's behaviors are reflected in their worldview, and how they come to understand (or not) the worldview of others. The cartoon below is an example of how Mexicans are seen as diseased and unwanted as they attempt to cross the wall to the US, illustrating a xenophobic worldview.



Figure 9 ©Rick McKee, 2014 - Used with permission from the artist

And here is another joke illustrating a comic worldview:

Wittgenstein, Donald Trump, and a blind mouse walk into a bar.

Says Wittgenstein after ordering his favorite drink, humor is a way of looking at the world.
Says the Donald, make America great again.
Says the blind mouse after some hesitation, I can't see what the problem is. (MAGA, 2016)

Very little has been written about how a comic worldview influences the creative process of crafting humor or how it might influence life. Berger (1995) and Morreall (2014) conceived that a comic point of view may lead to answering questions such as: How does one think, behave and create humorously? Or, I add, maintain the comic while writing a dissertation?

I have been interested in worldview exactly because everyday aspects of my lived experience may help to explain how I make my world through a comic view. Drawing on my previous exploration of the comic, to have a comic worldview is not a mere mood, a fleeting moment, but an organizing stance toward lived experience. In the quote above, Wittgenstein was thinking about how living during the Nazi regime took away the ability for humorous expression. This was, in fact, taking away something much deeper. It was an eradication of a fundamental, existential human expression of a world, and the freedom to be in that world (Ashkenazi, 2011; Morreall, 1997; Naugle, 1998; Williams, 2010).

A comic worldview shapes inquiries into how humans, as *homo ridens*²⁴ (Morreall, 2009) live with incongruities, challenge established worldviews of racial divides, discrimination, ideas of fixed identities, and provide political commentary in spaces/places where many voices are silenced (Auslander, 1993). A comic worldview acknowledges that the world is full of struggles and problems yet allows for openings and stops where stepping back into discomfort may change how we look at life. This is one of the foundations for a comic pedagogy of discomfort that I conceptualize in stop six.

Worldview(s) are used to create realities, to create worlds, to know the world around us and so may constitute a map for living based on shared values, norms, and

²⁴ Homo ridens (Latin) means laughing person

ideas (Sullivan, 2009). As any migrating body knows, one can adopt multiple worldviews based on one's new or temporary location. It is the construction of a world that is understood locally, globally, and historically within dimensions of society, of culture, politics, human and non-human beings for which geographical location influences social, political, and cultural understanding of the world (El-Aswad, 2012).

Exploring my comic worldview

In approximating my personal understanding of the comic, I refer to Bergson (as referenced in Bruns, 2014) in rendering the comic as a

living thing to be treated with respect due to life and we shall not aim at imprisoning the comic spirit within a [single] definition ... [because it has] a logic all its own [telling us something] about life with its social, collective and popular imagination (p. 3).

To explain this further, Foer and Morrow (in Burns, 2014) quote the words of Walpole:

This world is a comedy to those who think, a tragedy to those who feel ... but what of us who thoughtfully feel and feelingly think? What if all of us, like Lear's faithful fools, who see a universe of contradictions and fateful inversions, laugh so hard that we cry? (p. 15).

Like Walpole, I experience the world as contradictions and tensions, not determined by the distinction into tragic and comic but in an enmeshing of the two to create my intricate view of the world, maybe shedding a tear or two in the process. Based on a worldview lens then (Carroll, 2008, 2012), my own comic worldview is at the center of this dissertation to examine my own life experiences which I provided through my stories in stop two.

In fact, "to read [to know, to live] the world comically means that the world is open and incomplete", always in a state of becoming (Bruns, 2017, p. 5) and in limbo where "[the comic] can be understood as a mode of thought and a way of life that undertakes to bring any fixed state of affairs to some sort of unscrupulous irresolution" [...] (Critchley as cited in Bruns, 2017, p. xxv). Then, "knowing the world through humor" [to have a comic worldview] means living in a liminal, ambivalent space in which humor as inquiry can linger (Gordon, 2014, p. 19-22) which is my entry point into my comic poetic inquiry.

For the creation of my comic worldview(s), I will briefly, in turn, focus on the ontological, epistemic, and aesthetic elements only to acknowledge that all dimensions are interwoven. Ontological dimensions are those hidden, taken-for-granted realms that we often find lurking in dominant worldview(s) where they produce their legitimacy of being and knowing (Andreotti, Ahenakew, & Cooper, 2011; Yancy, 2012) where they are those deeply seated assumption that we rarely question.



Figure 10 © 2013 Andrew Evans - Used with permission of the artist

Dominant worldview(s) are discursively shaped by power, structures and social dynamics of communities, nations, and individuals (Hiebert, 2008; Naugle, 1998; Sire, 2015). These hidden dimensions may be revealed and questioned as entangled, layered, complicated, webbed constructs in an attempt at undoing them through the comic.

Ontological dimensions and ‘the other’:

At the heart of an ontological dimension are questions of what makes us human, what our social reality is, and what assumptions we have about our role in it. Think of an iceberg where this dimension occupies the invisible part and where our presuppositions or norms may only ever be challenged or brought to the surface when confronted with another worldview or when confronted with the presence of a stranger we do not recognize as our own (Sire, 2015, pp. 20-21). The confrontation often happens in and through the comic when attending stand-up performances, through comic encounters, through listening to jokes or creating memes. Exploring historical worldview(s) that supported slavery, we might ask about the construction of humans as slaves, as non-humans or as born free. We may also question how human beings and the social order was created and how it may be connected to the present. To understand and examine the ontological implications of our worldview(s) (Degh, 1994; Hiebert, 2008; Naugle, 2002; Sire, 2015; Underhill, 2011; Valk, 2010, p. 111) we might also need to inquire whether we understand the world to be serious, somber, or comic entangled and enmeshed with one another.

Ontologies are as varied as worldview(s); they also may be competing with or complementing each other. To make this aspect clearer in the joking [comic] realm, per Pierce (cited in Andersson, 2013) an ontological joke is one that “suggests or describes something that is impossible to do or realize” (p. 1) which means not only a logical impossibility but also a physical one. Let me provide an excerpt from Ahmer Rahman’s 2013²⁵ skit called ‘*reverse racism*’ part of his comedy special *Fear of a Brown Planet* that shows the conceptual impossibility of the term. Rahman is a Bangladeshi-Australian comedian whose skit I have used in classes to show the subversive role the comic can have (Kramer, 2020). Of course, much more could be said about his ontological takes – here I use him the way I would use an academic voice – to support my ideas. I have edited for clarity and brevity.

... you get on stage making jokes about white people ... that’s a kind of racism
don't you think that's - Reverse racism?

²⁵ For the real experience, please watch his performance https://youtu.be/dw_mRaIHb-M

I said, no I don't think that's reverse racism, because I think reverse racism doesn't exist.

... I could be a reverse racist; all I would need is a time machine right and what I do is I get it my time machine I go back in time to before Europe colonized the world, and I convinced the leaders of Africa, Asia, Middle East, Central and South America to invade and colonize Europe or I just occupy them, steal their land and resources, set up some kind of, like I don't know, trans Asian slave trade where we exported white people to work on giant rice plantations in China.

Just ruin Europe over the course of a couple of centuries so all their descendants would want to migrate out and live in the places where black and brown people come from of course in that time I'd make sure I set up systems that privileged black and brown people at every conceivable social political and economic opportunity. The white people would never have any hope of real self-determination.

... every couple of decades make up some fake war as an excuse to go and bomb them back to the Stone Age and say for their own good because their culture's inferior and just for kicks I would subject white people to color people's standards of beauty; they end up hating the color of their own skin, eyes and hair; if after hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of years of that I got on stage at a comedy show and said hey what's the deal with white people and how they dance that would be reverse racism.

Epistemic kernels: Humor knows and performs

We learn everyday life lessons through telling humorous stories.

We make our worlds through stories.

We learn alternatives to the dominant narratives.

Humor knows; laughter knows; it rings true in the body. (MAGA 2017)

"Human beings are storying creatures. We make sense of the world and the things that happen to us by constructing narratives to explain and interpret events both to ourselves and to other people" (Sikes & Gale, 2006 in Mendieta 2013, p. 136). Hence, as *homo significans* (meaning makers) the world is accessible to us through interpretations. However, we are also *homo fabulans* (storytellers) and *homo ridens* (laughing person) because we interpret and tell stories about our experiences, about who we are or what we want to be, and what we believe and what or how we know. Narratives order our world (Wibben, 2011).

Silences in humor

Humor is loud
Yet conveys silent knowledges

Laughter is loud,
provokes convulsions²⁶

Moves through the loud
Pushes its edges

Gets to knotty moments
There to be unraveled in

those moments when we know and
Those moments when we don't know. (MAGA, 2019)

Worldview(s) entangle knowing with being. Since I understand a comic worldview as knowing through the body, through the heart and the mind, comic worldview(s) are created through lived, embodied experiences. During a Canadian stand-up comedy tour on rape called "Rape is real and everywhere: A national comedy tour, in 2016", the organizers and performers consciously broke the taboo around sexual violence. The performers deliberately reclaimed the word 'rape' to focus on the embodied aspects of sexual violence that cannot be cleansed through political correctness to show how stepping into vulnerability draws the story emotionally closer.

My poetic memory of this embodied experience follows:

caN RapE eVer be FunN? TabooSS (MAGA, May 2016)²⁷

He rolled up the ramp, shaking with excitement for the looming performance,
Shaking, drooping, drooling, anxious, happy, yet uncanny in his telling a story of
A past of abuse and violence by those deemed to protect and care.

Introduced as funny man, as entertainer, as survivor,
Did he find his voice, his character, his persona through a deep, carrying voice
On a dimly lit stage, ready to shout, to savor, to show his soul's embodied scars.

Laughter bubbles to the surface, as he creates the set-up for the joke
Then, slowly, unexpectedly, more and more tears stream down his face as he

²⁶ With convulsions are meant the violent disruptions of the social, economic, and political order.

²⁷ [from the 'Rape is real and everywhere comedy tour'] <https://rabble.ca/whatsup/rape-real-and-everywhere-national-comedy-tour-launch>

Tries to frame the punchline in a swift move.

“No! he shouts, NO!! ... I promised myself I would not cry ...
I would not cry, damn it!!!

And here I am ... crying like a drooling baby.”

The audience pauses, sighs, emotions linger and spread like ghostly beings
Slowly the first voices from the seats make themselves heard...
And laughter of encouragement combined with applause gradually raise
empathic energy.

The comic in action, the power of laughter, the knowing present
Connected to a violent past healed through the performance on stage in our
presence
Wheeled back down a ramp into darkness.

As audience member and survivor, at times extremely uncomfortable,
do I sit in the darkened balcony of the Rio²⁸ with a notebook in my lap.

Yes, MY lap... the seat of all the violence.

Aesthetics in worldview

Gorringe (as cited in Walsh, 2006, pp. 1-2) argues that art, artifacts, bodies, and the comic are an embodiment of the way we view society and our place in it. Books such as the *Divine Comedy*, Grimm’s fairy tales or even the Harry Potter series (Friend, 2006) have provided us with parallel words and worldview(s) with their own aesthetics, moralities, memories, and epistemologies connected to wider societal implications. While these works of art can provide us with knowledge of *the* or *a* world, these works also provide us with embodied experiences of characters, the personas, and our own reactions to these worlds. It is in the making of new or different worlds that we may see an unknown comic side of ourselves in relation to the new world.

In the case of the comic, through artifacts such as stand-up comedy, cartoons, memes, and stories, artists, comedians, and everyday people tell us how they see and experience the world. Memes are particularly important in the digital world because as a cultural object, memes are intentionally anonymous, can have viral circulation, are in constant state of change and may have a significant impact (Ramírez Plascencia, 2018). We can then participate in these experiences through laughter, stops, silences, and

²⁸ The Rio is an alternative theatre in East Vancouver, Canada.

pauses. Or we may even add to those memes before we send them off again. The stories from Mexico in stop five and around COVID in the final stop provide such comic artifacts. Artifacts of any kind, here specifically comic artifacts encapsulate worldview(s) because humorous expressions of any society reflect what matters to a people (Stebbins, 1990; Toelken, 1996; Underhill, 2011). Not everyone will share a worldview, but they may experience the world comically in a similar way (Bruns, 2017). Since worldview(s) are fluidly constructed systems, they provide crevices and openings for the comic to appear, to express a social or political imaginary, with “the comic as a social practice, ... within [...] a concrete and historically specific situation” (English as cited in Mackin, 2001, p. 195). By speaking against the structures of dominance we make “the dominant structures ...the butt of the joke” (English, cited in Mackin, 2001, p. 195).

What is hot when it freezes, and what freezes when it gets hot? (MAGA 2015)

A: dirty answer

B: dirty answer

C: menopausal women

D: actual answer: my computer during the writing of this dissertation

Discomfort and the comic: Distanced intimacies

One further dimension of my comic worldview is rooted in the coming-together of the comic in discomfort, intimacy, and vulnerability. Rather than being a dispassionate observer, I am emotionally, physically, and spiritually engaged with the comic to provide me with answers to some of the most important life and social questions. It wraps me like a mummy whose eyes stay wide open – I stay wide awake in the comic. However, as Bergson (2002) again reminds us, “the comic could not produce its disturbing effect, unless it fell [...] on the surface of a soul that is thoroughly calm and unruffled” (p. 4).

I disagree with Bergson (2002) that “for laughter there is no greater foe than emotion” and that a “highly emotional souls would neither know nor understand laughter” (pp. 4-5); quite the contrary, one has to stay distant to laugh but have an embodied reaction to care. The famous formula time plus tragedy equates comedy is noticeable in the emotional distance one needs to an event that might allow for tragedy to turn into comedy; however, this does not mean that one is an entirely dispassionate

spectator to one's own life. Bergson even goes so far as to advocate for a "momentary anesthesia of the heart" (p. 4) in order to appreciate or create humor. While I advocate for the reinstating of the heart after a moment of anesthesia, I propose never to lose heart in the first place and to stay in the thick of it.

Out of the above considerations, the concept of *distanced intimacies* emerged to indicate both frames for writing, pedagogy, and research. How it relates specifically to pedagogy, I will elaborate in more detail in stop six. Here is how I see it. You need to be close enough to cry and far enough to laugh or vice versa. While I have mentioned earlier that I consider laughter but one of the possible reactions to the comic, the pedagogical stop is much more powerful. The following three voices succinctly summarize what distanced intimacies in relation to the comic may mean.

Laughter forms a bond and simultaneously draws a line. (Lorenz, 1966, 2002, p. 284).

Laughter is the shortest distance between two people.
It connects us, it allows us to be human.
(Victor Borges, 1972).

Jokes, in short, are complicated transactions in which communities are forged, intimacy is offered Cohen (1999, p. 13)

The concept of *distanced intimacies* allows me to be present in the comic, in pedagogy, in life, in writing and in research while keeping an emotionally safe distance to the impact that the engagement with comic, personal, disastrous stories on occasion provide. One needs to stay intimate to allow vulnerability, yet one may not be able to enter laughing without staying distant; one cannot write from the heart without remaining intimate. This cycling between intimacy and strangeness, as *intimate strangers*, is what may create the more evocative humor or the most evocative writing. Drawn into this real/imagined/distant/yet close moment, we seesaw between emotional closeness and mediated distance (Blank, 2013, p. 59).

"Intimacy creates intimate humor: that's when the stinger hurts the most", says Justine a young British woman that I met on my Mexican journey as we sit around my

kitchen table eating quesadillas. Can one laugh and be emotionally distant? Can one engage in comic poetic inquiry by remaining emotionally distant? Can one laugh during dialogical interviews and stay emotionally distant? In my world, the answer is yes...and...no.

Intimacy, vulnerability, courage, and discomfort are significant aspects of how we navigate personal relationships. For this understanding I draw on the work of Brown (2017) and Kavedžija (2018), the latter having done research on how Japanese navigate intimacy in their personal relationships while having the need to stay distant in densely populated areas. Through attention to rituals of politeness and formality, Japanese can express their emotions carefully in their social interactions without losing their safe spaces. Brown (2017) describes vulnerability as the uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure we feel when we step out of our comfort zone or do something that forces us to perceive a loss of control. Brown advocates for a personal disclosure that creates intimacy in vulnerability with those that matter.

Intimacy is a significant element of how comic co-creators form communities of laughter. Communities of laughter refers to the imaginary, ephemeral, transitory, and temporary presence of a community during a performance that immediately after dissolves, and laughter as real or imagined complicity with others who join in the laughter echoing in one another (Anderson, 1983; Bergson, 2002). Rarely do we laugh by ourselves unless we want to be seen as fools. In a community of laughter, we may be drawn, even involuntarily, into another's laughter. Co-creators is a conversational, dialogical interviewing approach that I have used in which I performed distanced intimacies. I will come back to the idea of co-creation and distanced intimacies in stop six when I discuss comic pedagogy.

As mentioned earlier, at times I draw from stand-up comedy. Brodie (2008) considers stand-up comedy a genre of intimacy where, in a dialogical form, the comedian enters into an intimate relationship with the audience. This intimacy is not only rendered through the close presence of the audience, but also through a shared, maybe a temporary worldview, in resonance with the comic stories. The audience and the comedian are present with body, mind, and the comic to co-create the performance.

Without this intimate yet distant space, the stories would not have such a profound effect. A third layer that adds to the previous two is the intimacy that disaster events create in us whether we have been present physically or remotely. We are present emotionally. In the context of my humor research, I refer to 9/11 as one of these emotionally intimate events that has left an impact on how we see disaster humor, how close the event was, and how it has impacted us (Davies, 2003) and (Navaez, 2003). I definitely remember exactly where I was on the morning of... Of course, this is not everyone's frame of reference.

My comic worldview moves my being, my heart and my research...although an outward engagement with a world, this path of the heart is a journey towards the centre of one's own existence – not just my own (Abram, 1996; Berger, 1995, 1998). The unexpected, the slightly out of focus, the incongruous, the play with unacceptable ideas move me to chuckles, to shakes in disbelief or to outright laughter even if by myself.

Moving On...

In this stop, I have explored some of the humor-related literature and performances that have guided and informed this doctoral journey beginning with some theories about humor and laughter. Then I roamed through notions of worldview, specifically what a comic worldview might be and concluded with my own comic worldview with particular focus on the concept of distanced intimacies. In the next stop, I turn to disaster humor, another key concept informing my magpie journey.

INTERMEZZO #4

Time for another break. One needs snacks, toilet paper, drinks and preferably a road map, if one is not male and adverse to asking for directions with somewhat disastrous consequences. Here is that story.

MAGA – my first car

In 1992, we had only just started dating, we purchased a Fiat Uno together on paper promissory notes (cambiali). For Christmas, with only two payments made, we left for our first long drive from Italy to Germany, a roughly 1200km journey crossing three countries.

After intense fog at 2am we finally arrived at an Autogrill²⁹ parking lot just before the Swiss border. While he walked up the stairs to find the restroom, I stayed behind. 15 min passed, ...30, then.... 45 when I seriously started to get worried about his whereabouts. Geesh, where were the cell phones then?!....

Finally, he made it back huffing and puffing in anger.

He, 'Where have you been?'

I, 'Right here, I haven't moved.'

He, 'I thought you had left me here and driven off with the car.'

I discovered that rather than turning right from the restroom to get back to the parking lot, he turned left crossing into the opposite direction of the highway back to Italy.



Figure 11 Autogrill - direction Swiss border - <https://wikimapia.org/789256/de/Rastst%C3%A4tte-Pratteln>

²⁹ a famous rest stop chain in Italy

STOP FOUR: From disaster humor to Trümmerhumor³⁰



Figure 12 Facebook Extreme makeover – Tornado Edition 2011 -
https://www.al.com/wire/2011/05/tornado_links_glencoe_debris_f.html

In this stop I explore first disaster humor, then post-disaster humor and finally Trümmerhumor with its connection to memory. I conclude this stop with an examination of literature on Mexican humor.

Disaster humor

Disaster humor in short is the type of humor that responds to and is created by those living through, in and at the margins or centers of disasters. Disasters are those man-made or natural occurrences that are perceived as “a sudden event, such as an accident or a natural catastrophe, which causes great damage or loss of life or that has unforeseen consequences”³¹. The sharing and producing of disaster humor has grown through social media, making it now a predominantly digital phenomenon.

³⁰ I use the capitalization of German nouns

³¹ <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/disaster>

Disaster comes from the Latin *dis astro* - meaning ill-fated in reference to the stars. Disaster humor is commonly understood as humor that circulates, is created and understood after a *disastrous* event or in response to an imminent disastrous one (Cherry et al., 2018; Ellis, 1996, 2019; James, 2014; Kuipers, 2014; Smyth, 1986). Disaster humor though is more than the event itself; it includes the resilience, the process of flourishing and reconstruction that can follow and linger after an event. Two of the frequently cited disasters are 9/11 and the explosion of the Challenger in 1986, although hurricanes, earthquakes, and other natural disasters such as pandemics (Marcus & Singer, 2017) have also produced forms of humor. Disaster humor mostly occurs following a disastrous event, it involves humor as humor-in-the-making, since humor has the ability to morph and react immediately to what occurs in the world. It is a great vehicle to understand what matters to those experiencing disasters. Humor in general and as a response to disasters more particularly illustrates people's adaptability, ambiguity, and responsiveness to immediate socio-political and cultural circumstances.

The interest in disaster humor has been spear-headed by Davies (2003), Kuipers (2002), Oring (1987) and Smyth (1986) who, first after the Challenger explosion and then after 9/11, collected and investigated the various appearances of disaster humor noting what was considered taboo or in bad taste. For the attacks on 9/11 specifically, but for many other calamities, jokes about the event itself or the subsequent human tragedy are often considered taboo. As Blank (2013) puts it, "large-scale disasters reveal cultural anxieties, prejudices, rumors, beliefs, and a pendulum of opinions as individuals make sense of the chaos and reassure themselves " (p. 58).

Joke cycles that contain the same memes, cartoons or jokes used in similar or differing contexts, have a long research history (Cheng, 2017; Davies, 2010). Disaster jokes circulate in different forms carrying old memories overlaid with the new. According to Oring (1987), disaster jokes and their cycles are an important indicator for what matters at a given time. They may also be used in new contexts to convey the message of fear, memory, or critique.

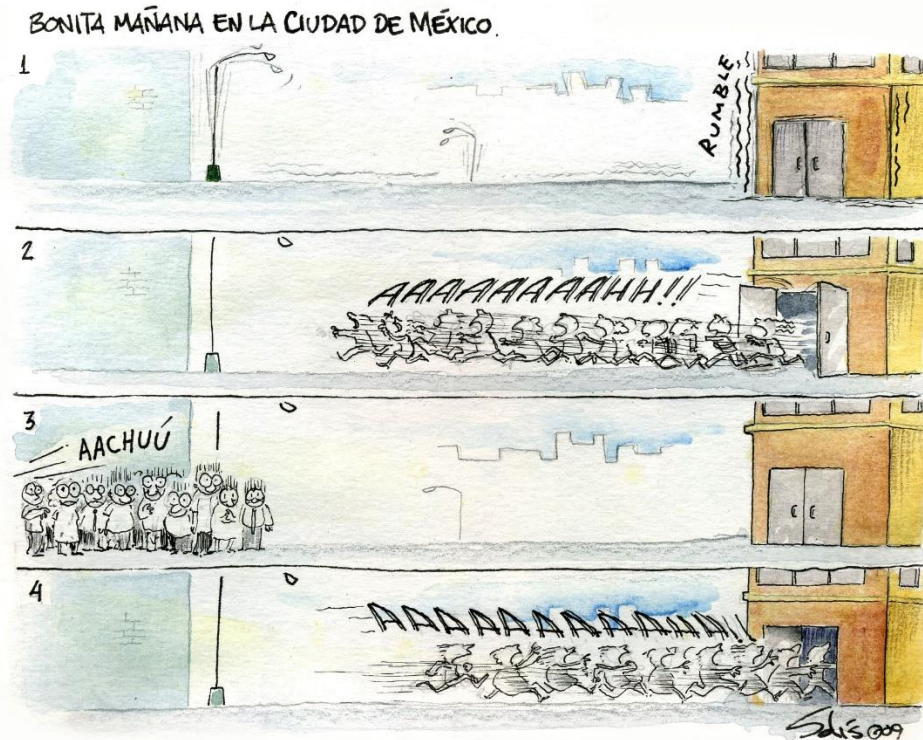
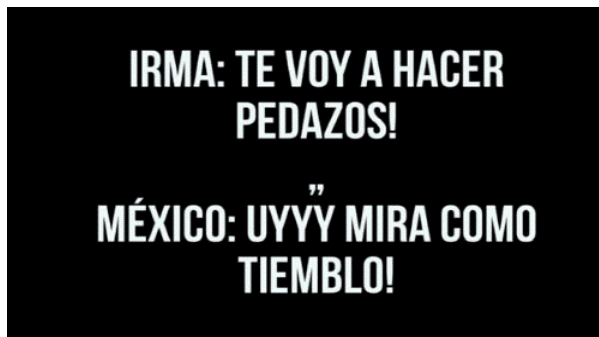


Figure 13 ©2009 Victor Solís 'Nice morning in Mexico [City]'. Used with permission from the artist.

The above cartoon from Mexico City shows how the same image referencing the H1N1 flu applied to the current COVID-19 pandemic to connect that epidemic to Mexican earthquakes (note, Mexican earthquakes are at the heart of my stories in Stop Five). The above cartoon shows how humor can be used to map threats from the outside or threats from the inside. The internet and social media have made the circulation, the (re)cycling, and the appropriation of these cartoons to different contexts significantly easier; however, the old is infused with the new context carrying its memory.

Davies (2003) takes up the notion of mediated tragedies, those tragedies curated or distributed through TV, media, and social media platforms. This selective media uptake means that there are many disasters occurring, although no one is watching because they are directed to look elsewhere. This phenomenon is expressed in the below meme referencing hurricane Irma and the Mexican earthquake of 2017. What happens when multiple, co-occurring disasters strike? Which one is deemed more important?



Fuerte terremoto no detiene el humor mexicano en las redes

Translation: Irma: I am going to blow you to pieces! Mexico: Uhhh, look how I tremble.

The caption below reads: The strong earthquake is not able to keep Mexican humor from social media.

Post 9/11 humor made fun of the terrorists but not of responders, survivors, or those who died in the towers. In the following examples, the Lego ad of 2005 and the tattoo were considered to be in very bad taste, yet cringeworthy humorous. In the Lego ad, we see the metaphor of rebuilding used to promote a company.

Figure 15 <https://www.villagevoice.com/2010/09/08/the-10-very-worst-911-themed-ads>. Due to possible copyright issues, the picture has been removed.

In the next one, the tattoo builds on the famous song by the Weather Girls with pictures of people jumping from the twin towers rather than awaiting their fate.



Figure 16 Personal communication: Memorialization of 9/11 through ink on skin – *It's raining men*. Taken from a song by the Weather Girls. Cringeworthy funny to memorialize and considered one of the most offensive tattoos ever. ... https://www.oddee.com/item_97919.aspx

Bad taste was the reason behind a self-imposed humor moratorium instituted across media in the United States immediately after 9/11 (Boskin, 1990; Kuipers, 2011; Smyth, 1986). Only after then Mayor Giuliani lifted the moratorium, would the late night shows and magazines such as *The Onion* resume their satirical commentaries (Kuipers, 2011). Emotional distance to the event is/ was needed.

Although Kuipers and Oring used the term disaster humor to indicate man[sic]-made disasters I have observed how ‘natural’ disasters also have sparked the production and sharing of humor in response to disasters such as pandemics, epidemics, floods, heat-waves, droughts, and any mass shooting. Including the current pandemic, they all qualify as disaster humor. Other epidemic examples are the 2014–2015 Ebola crisis in which Ebola-chan, a manga, was created to “embody some of the complex social and political issues provoked by an infectious disease outbreak” (Marcus & Singer, 2017, p. 342).

Smith (2006) challenges the notion of ‘natural’ in relation to disasters outlining the social component of disasters such as hurricanes and earthquakes due to the way that societies prepare for them or manage them afterward. Hurricane Katrina is a well-documented example where a natural disaster helped to expose social, structural and racial inequalities (Cherry et al., 2018; Baker Kee, 2014; Ellis, 1996; Goren, 2020; Mpofu, 2021; Phillips, 2011; Smyth, 1986; Walker, 2005). Preventing the breaking of

the levees, the disastrous rescue efforts, and most certainly rebuilding and resilience have exposed how gender, class, and race may have played a tremendous role in the extent to which we may consider something ‘natural’ or disastrous. Hurricane Katrina is also an example for how humorous graffiti³², jokes and memes have played a vital role in providing people with hope, resilience. critique and healing (Cherry, 2009; Cherry et al., 2018; Haggins, 2014; Kapucu, Hawkins, & Rivera, 2013).

Disaster humor provides a view into the social, cultural, and political processes shaping how this humor appears. I suggest a more appropriate term is *post-disaster humor* which more accurately identifies humor that appears because of and after a disaster. The term post-disaster humor provides a more nuanced, deeper, closer reading of what it is meant to reveal, perform, emerge, break open and disrupt thus keeping the disastrous event from being historically stuck.

Post-disaster humor

Pushing this understanding of disaster humor to an aspect of *post* is an attempt to transform disasters from isolated historical moments keeping them stuck in remembrance, to complex activities with a history, a present and a future. Post-disaster humor has transformative potential as shifts in perspective can arise. Post-disaster humor also references taking care of one’s community in the aftermath. If we focus only on the disaster without the ‘after’, disasters are understood as ahistorical points in time without memory of past, without present or future implications. Seeing these events as only part of the past, ignores how history has the potential for transformation, of a critical engagement inquiring into how we got to the disaster/ ruins.

Memorialization through humor, explains Blank (2013), functions in today’s society through social media or various other internet platforms. Blank provides as examples the Challenger explosion, 9/11 and a variety of celebrity deaths including Michael Jackson. It does not take much to continue the list with other celebrities (Marcus & Singer, 2017). However, not all are equally represented. It seems though that joking about Princess Diana’s death, or the circumstance of her death, is taboo.

³² Due to copyright issues, I provide a link to Richard Misrach’s photos from Katrina’s graffiti <https://acurator.com/richard-misrach-destroy-this-memory/>

While societies have a multitude of ways to remember and keep memories of events alive, rarely is humor thought to be one of them. Usually, the state or other organized institutions create and sanction ceremonies on specific dates, times and locations. In the case of post-disaster humor, remembrance and memorialization does not occur through state or institutional sanctioned practices, rather such humor can be subversive and rebellious speaking to how people want to remember these disasters. In the case of Mexico's earthquakes, sharing jokes, cartoons and memes generated post-disaster provide rich examples of this specific humor and how people laughingly remember. In memory studies, life stories of the Holocaust, for example, are considered to carry the cultural and collective memory of a people including jokes, joking and funny stories. These stories are shared in order not to forget the moments of atrocity. Sharing of funny stories and jokes tell us as much about a people as the more serious moments do (Hall, 1973; McGhee, 1999; Üngör & Verkerke, 2015).

Humor in this context of post-disaster may be considered a repository of lived experiences (Taylor, 2007) which may be liberatory, oppressed and oppressing, context specific and historically relevant. At times, we do not understand a joke unless we look at it in its social, historical, and political context. Even knowing the context intellectually, we may find it hard to connect. Yet, telling funny stories is rooted in past disastrous events that are also connected to the present to show how these funny stories shape people, their understanding of the world in which they live, and the knowledge carried through these stories. As in the case of the Mexican stories in stop five, we may consider how humor carries intergenerational memory. This knowledge, this memory, may, in the words of racoon, an undetermined trickster figure in an indigenous graphic novel, provide "healing [that] can happen by looking at yesterday and its consequences, [so that] one can change tomorrow" (Edmonds & Farritor, 2010, p. 17). If we accept that stories carry memory of life experiences, then funny stories and narrative jokes may do the same. In stop five, I explore the connection of post-disaster humor to intergenerational memory and performed cultural memory. Here are two poems I wrote exploring how the comic in autobiographical narratives carries memory:

Performed cultural memory

A life well-lived is a life in pieces.

Humor carries its own rubbles; it does not only emerge from it...
The slippery, yet sticky pieces cling to the memories of multiple
events.

They know....

Never what they seem.
MAGA (2020)

MEMORIES

Memories can be heavy or light.

Cloak heavy memories in humor.

To make them lighter
let them take off in laughter
as ethereal beings.

So that the laughter
may carry away
the heaviness
inscribed
onto a body
rendered different

Memories know
Memories teach
Memories connect
Memories erase
Memories tear apart.

Cacophonous ways to remember
to evoke our pasts
to keep truths alive

As performed cultural memory.

Memory plays a role in how meaning is made of every event, big or small, significant, or not, disastrous, or not, comic, or serious. There are many ways to remember through formal as well as informal activities. Through spontaneous memorials, candle vigils, photographs, rituals and funny stories people try not to forget. I call this performed cultural memory. The performance aspect of cultural memory is linked to the political, cultural, and social processes involved in producing, telling, performing, or sharing a joke, funny meme, cartoon etc. Performed cultural memory follows Taylor's (2007, 2016) idea of memory in embodied performances, such as dances, as cultural memory practices that inhabit knowledge of the past, carry it into the present and the future. The comic connects to the body. If we laugh, our bodies shake as we inhabit our humorous body, as we carry memories of those comic and not so comic stories with us. These embodied cultural memories can be collective, individual, political, private, and public, shared or kept secret. They may also be considered counter-memories depending on the status of the individual or group (Meusburger, 2011).

Memory and forgetting

Maybe memory is enmeshed with forgetting or the fear to forget? (Connerton, 2008) "El olvido buen puede ser una forma profunda de la memoria" (Forgetting is another deep form of memory) claims Jorge Luis Borges³³ in 1972. Today, as I write these pages, I am reminded of other forms of memory/forgetting/ remembering in the forms of toppled statues of colonizers, slave owners and other prominent western figures rooted in colonial history whose ghosts can still be felt today. The ghost metaphor is useful for producing visions of spaces of everyday culture through artifacts, practices, and language. Below I use the notion of a ghostly appearance to create a connection between lingering effects in the present that stem from a lived experience in the past. I performed the following knock, knock joke's call and response causing a harrowing gasp:

Knock, knock.
Who's there?
9/11
9/11 who?
I thought you wouldn't forget.

³³ <https://giovannipapiniblog.wordpress.com/2017/05/30/borges-papini-y-el-plagio/>

As survivors of 9/11 have asked: how do we survive as living ghosts while all memorialize the events and the dead (del Pilar Blanco & Peeren, 2013) as we distinguish between living memories and lived memories? Many survivors of the earthquake of 1985 in Mexico City, still actively live the effects of the ghostly experience (Anderson, 2011; Poniatowska, 1995) and ask similar questions. Through the comic, we may be able to bring back the ghostly beings into living consciousness. Healing can occur through the performance of cultural memory. Through its funny rendering, it may provide the necessary distance to allow the comic to do its work.

As stated earlier, my inspirations for this dissertation do not only come from academic texts, conversations, literature, and everyday lived experiences. Performed cultural memory, as construct, comes from the performance and book by stand-up comedian Trevor Noah whose autobiographical work speaks to how he performs cultural memory and how this memory in turn is performed on him. While his performance certainly warrants a more profound treatment than I can provide in this dissertation, it signals the influence that his ideas have had on my inquiry and conceptualizing of the comic. I reference his performance because I deem stand-up comedians to be everyday philosophers in charge of speaking in ways that others cannot (Mintz, 1985; Mintz, 2008; Wesley-Esquimaux, 2011) including me. Stand-up comedians like Noah speak of everyday lived experiences through which we perform, know, and remember the world (Carlson, 2016; Denzin, 2011; Tedlock, 2011).

Comedians are cultural, social, and political commentators and keepers, through humor, of cultural memory. Comedians then may be considered informal autoethnographers, according to Double (2017) who translate what they experience into stand-up performances. They craft a form of *ethno-comedy*³⁴ in which they use their data, their observations, their own and other's life stories to craft their routines. These everyday lived experiences then constitute the fabric of a comic pedagogy of discomfort which, in Noah's case, constitutes a counter-memory to the Apartheid illegality

³⁴ While I flag here the work of Saldaña (2005), I strictly adhere to the exploration of the concept of performed cultural memory in relation to disaster humor.

discourse of mixed racial families. I will come back to a comic pedagogy of discomfort in stop six.

This is how Noah's performance at the Apollo Theatre in London in 2013³⁵ helped me conceptualize performed cultural memory in the comic.

How a crime was born in 1:30 min...

00:13 good evening I grew up in South Africa
00:18 that's where I still live; I enjoy it; I grew
00:21 up there during a time known as
00:22 apartheid. for those who don't know
00:24 apartheid was a law in our country that
00:26 made it illegal for black and white
00:28 people to interact with one another you
00:30 know this was against the law [...] I grew up in
00:34 a mixed family; well with me being the
00:36 mixed one in the family; my mother's a
00:39 black woman; a Xosa woman [...] born in South
00:40 Africa that's one of the languages of
00:42 with the click; Xosa, Xosa
00:43 so a black woman and then my father is
00:46 Swiss but they didn't care you know; they
00:48 were Mavericks of fighting the system
00:50 my mom was arrested for being with my
00:52 dad. she would get fined; she would get
00:53 thrown into prison for the weekend but
00:55 still she'd come back she's like ...huuuuuuuu; I don't care, I don't care
[Afrikaans accents]
01:04 I want a white man you know and my dad; it's crazy, my mom
01:07 was also like, well you know, how the
01:08 Swiss are with their chocolate; so ...
01:16 and so they got together, and they had
01:19 me, which was illegal, so *I was born a*
01:22 *crime* ... which is something I
01:24 don't think they ever thought through
01:25 because as a family we couldn't live
01:26 together you know like in the streets we
01:28 couldn't even be seen together; my father
01:30 would have to walk on the other side of
01:31 the road and he could just wave at me
01:33 from far like a creepy pedophile like a
01:37 pedophile ... when my mother dropped my hand, I felt like a bag of weed

³⁵ May I suggest watching the clip? <https://youtu.be/vi7SeBI7z9A>

Autobiographical stories then, comic or not, are inhabited by performed cultural memory as embodied knowledge of identity, culture, race, political ideology, worldviews, and class. Through laughter, pauses and suspensions, Noah draws the audience and the spectators into his private/ public/ shared/ collective memories where he unravels the insidious elements of a racist regime that on purpose pitted non-white groups against one another. Funny stories and jokes are commonly understood to entertain. Here I explore them as forms of performed cultural memory to learn from them, engage with them, and be unsettled by them as a side of the uncomfortable pedagogical potential of humor.

These accounts, provide through the humor in which they are told, a personal cultural memory that helps to gain insights into how we witness and remember, how we use oral stories to preserve memories and how the comic can serve as the glue to bring these aspects together. Noah uses his personal yet also cultural memory to speak back to the dominant narrative of *being apart* (Rossing, 2014) challenging the dominant interpretation of the past that seeks to oppress or repress. Really, he is challenging the dominant worldview of South Africa through his accounts. Through laughter, pauses and suspensions, the pedagogical moments in his skits, Noah draws the audience into his memories.

The performance of one's autobiographical accounts, as Trevor Noah does, then also reveals what, where, when and how societies remember everyday lived disastrous/ traumatic experiences (Robben, 2005). Performing everyday life through its memories adds a profound layer of connectedness to one's community, one's own body and one's own history. In Noah's case, he is constantly reminded of being born a crime. The simple act of walking down a street without being able to hold his mother's hand, demonstrates how this performed cultural memory may be a mesh of private and public, or indeed may be a counter-memory with kernels of criticism for a regime that perfected the segregation of bodies (Noah, 2019). Haunting is the description of his mother letting go of his hand at the sight of others.

Often, we think of memory as being an individual, solitary, cognitive ability. However, there are those like Connerton (1989) and Taylor (2007) who theorize

memory as collective or social memory of a group. These may be small groups such as villages, clubs, or families whose members know one another well or nation states in which members do not know one another at all. Our experience of the present largely depends upon our knowledge of the past. The body, according to Connerton (1989), is the site onto which memories are inscribed and through which we recall events.

To connect knowledge about the past with the present, we may use paintings, photos, objects, ceremonies, and rituals to remember (Meusburger, Heffernan, & Wunder, 2011; Sturken, 1997). Other ways of remembrance of past knowledge occur through dance, theatre, cultural performances, spontaneous vigils, tattoos, poetry, jokes, and laughter. We only have to take, for example, Newfoundland and Irish wakes that are used to share funny stories about the deceased (Navaez, 2003). El día de muertos in Mexico also serves as such memorialization of those who came before us being the only socially, culturally and politically sanctioned time in which humor may be officially imbued with memory.

While the brick and mortar archives harbor our official narratives and memories, the repertoire within and on the body exposes the non-formal and non-traditional ways in which knowledge is shared, remembered and (re)produced.

This section concludes with a poem inspired by T. Noah and T. Coates³⁶ *Between the world and me*

LIVING MEMORIES

Drawing lines in the sand
Moving emotions as surges of energy through a body without touch
Connected to cells across a universe
Across time and s/pace
Feeling attached to symbols and material creations
Left to fester, ponder without relief
Across streets and highways of transmission
Performing living and lived memories of pasts unforgotten,
Unraveled and uncanny in its capillaries.

³⁶ Coates, T. (2015). *Between the world and me*. Spiegel & Grau.

Dominated by the understanding of superiority and deceit
Violated onto a body made different
Inscribed into a name of non-acceptance
Global moving across invaded landscapes
Rendered impossible for forgiveness.

Laughter into — out of existence
Of traces rendered imperceptible
Speaking impossible truths
From mouths silenced long ago

Through...

Taking of lands
Taking of rituals
Taking of personhood
Taking of self
Taking of names
Taking of soul
Taking of future...

LIVED MEMORIES
(MAGA, 2016)

Trümmerhumor: Ruins, disasters and beyond

Extending the notion of post-disaster humor to Trümmerhumor provides a way to revel in the ruins, to move and sift through the rubbles in search for what lies beneath (as exemplified in Trevor Noah's performances and writings). Real and metaphorical ruins or rubbles come together when the foundations of real and imagined buildings crumble so that they may be reconstructed in different ways or even preserve their status quo.

Concepts like these have a history
Concepts like these have a function
Concepts like these show possibilities
Concepts like these show a world
Concepts like these make a world
Concepts like these create imaginaries...

These fragments have shored against my ruins –

*And so it was I entered the broken world
Turning shadows into transient beauty –*

Hurry up please
its time
we snickered.
(MAGA 2020)

*Inspired by T. S. Elliot, *The Waste Land* (1922) and T. T. Williams (2009) *Finding
beauty in a broken world**



Figure 17 ©MAGA 2019 A broken world - pedazos

Imagine for a moment being without words, having only an image in mind that perfectly explains what this kind of humor expresses. On a cycle path at UNAM, I stand in front of a chain-link fence onto which gigantic posters are affixed. Some covered with graffiti, some torn, they speak of history, of disaster, of pride, of loss, of ghosts, of absurdities. I see the clusters of broken-up pieces that once were whole – buildings, people, toys. My gaze follows the walk down the path to see the fissures in the plaster of once habitable places now rendered broken through the forces of the earth's shifting.

These pieces of rubble stacked sky-high in areas where houses that could not withstand the forces have created their own heaps, random color arrangements from

different floors, roofs, gardens, rooms form something new. I squint to discern in-between the fissures created in the spaces of bare contact, rubbing, moving, grating, sanding, and disappearing from sight. Objects and people come into focus – rescuers, rescued, dolls, shiny helmets, unnerving reflections, a VW Van, a cross – people gathering in silent eerie prayer – ghostly presences and absences. I move closer - now it comes into focus - where once there were ghetto-like claustrophobic structures, the sun caresses the little yellow-brown weed that peaks its head through the rubbles. It pushes with an undeniable strength through the concrete, through the broken-off stones towards the sky, towards the sun, towards a new configuration - yet aware of its roots deeply connected to what life was there before.

Roots clinging to the old; yet petals moving towards the creation of new with the watery, stony, airy connected to tears, blood, death, rebuilding keeping the seeped, seeded memories alive. Keeping the laughter, the absurdity, and the oddness alive. Keeping, yet moving...yet breaking, rendered partial yet whole.

Emerging from the destruction, from these pieces of rubble is the concept of *Trümmerhumor* - the humor that forges its way through the ruins, the pieces, the rubbles onto the surface of existence to express what cannot be said otherwise. The kind of humor shared through stories, images, memes, jokes, puns, and wordplays to create, critique and imagine a world rising from the disaster displaying the displacing of community, opposition, life, and death - never frivolous.

I have searched long to find an English word that could explain what this type of humor could be or what it might do. Empty handed, I turn to my mother tongue, German, with its gift of preciseness. I turn to a literature that gave birth to a new understanding of German writing after the almost complete physical and social destruction of Germany after WWII.

I reach far back into my mother tongue
to uncover a word that succinctly gets to the
essence of the humor I see emerge from the
rubbles/ ruins.

Rubble literature or Trümmerliteratur,
a literature of the ruins, in the ruins, among
the ruins lends itself to describing the effects,
origins, and properties of ‘disaster humor’ in
the Mexico post-earthquakes of 1985 and
2017 and now 2020. It allows me to describe
also other humor emergent from natural or
man [sic]-made disasters.

“Germany’s postwar authors strove for
an authentic depiction of reality in the rubble.
This was not only a form of protest, but their
attempt at returning to a life of normality”
(Weeks, 2017, p. 1). Trümmerliteratur was an
emergent post-disaster WWII type of post-war
literature which authors such as Boll,
Borchert, inspired by the American short-
story, created. Nachkriegsliteratur, post-war
literature, originally described a genre of
literature containing short-stories, satire, and
poems to depict the destroyed German city
and landscape and its rebuilding efforts.
Stripped of the frills of the Nazi rhetoric, this
literature meant to reference a country amid
rebuilding. This kind of Wundenliteratur, a
literature that still bears the wounds of an era,
works well as a concept to indicate the effects
of an era still lingering.

Dangers while doing research...

I walk along the cycle path
Intent on finding pictures of a
rubbled past.

I come upon rubbles, stones, ghosts,
masks, stories, faces,
....

pedazos.

Pictures nestled within pictures
within frames within discourse
The eerie presence of the moment.



Figure 18 ©MAGA 2019 Cycle path at UNAM

I step back,
Distraught
Drawn into the frames

Lost ...

While caring not to be run over.

In this sense, Trümmerhumor may play an important role in critiquing the status quo, in rebuilding from the ruins and to remind of human flourishing after a life-altering event, opening the scenario to real, lived, everyday experiences of those on the ground (Assmann, 2011; Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995; Gebhardt, 1997; Sederberg, 2014; Trümmerliteratur, 2018; Weeks, 2017). Moving from post-disaster humor to Trümmerhumor became a further step in creating lexica far more expansive than the sole focus on disaster. The ruins, rubbles (Trümmer), debris and remains constitute the building blocks for something new and different without ever leaving the original context of the hauntings, lingerings and specters.

The concept of Trümmerhumor is composed of two ambiguous terms Trümmer (ruins/ rubbles). As explained in stop two, the comic is an elusive contested multiple entity, so are the rubbles. Here I outline what these ruins, these rubbles are, what they do and how we may define them other than dead, insignificant, lifeless pieces to allow us to see what questions can be asked of them. Although slippery, this multitude and concept of Trümmerhumor is generative as I grasp its sycophantic bits to appreciate and explain its role in disaster/ rubbles (Trümmer) contexts (Sederberg, 2014). It reminds me of the colosseum during the Middle Ages when pieces of the building were taken to construct new structures³⁷. Rubbles resist easy identification, reconstruction, and categorization as they linger in the fluid spaces of fissures. Trümmerhumor changes what is left behind.

The humor, the laughter and the funny stories that have been told before the ‘disaster’ are still lingering in the ruins and are the building blocks for new humor, new stories, new experiences, and transformation. As seeds that are able to grow and flower in the harshest of conditions, so does the humor that comes out of the rubbles. This humor may also function as what Sturken calls “technologies of memories” (in Luger, 2010, p. 4; Sturken & Cartwright, 1997). She considers them politically-charged objects through which memories of events are shared, produced, and given meaning. While Luger (2010) applies this concept strictly to post-9/11 poetry, these

³⁷ The colosseum in Rome is an example in which stones after the great earthquake in 1231 were used to build elsewhere. After the structure fell in disuse for games, the colosseum was stripped of its stones. In 1749 Pope Benedict XIV ended the practice and consecrated the structure since so much Christian blood had been spilled that it was sanctified through the shedding of this Christian blood.
<https://www.worldhistory.org/Colosseum/> ; <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colosseum#Hopkins>

ideas are also relevant to my exploration of the cultural production of humor in post-disaster earthquakes. Cultural memory then not only carries the cultural contexts, but also history and geography. The humor associated with historical, cultural and social events is shaped by collective memories and the systems of remembering which create openings for critique (Plate & Smelik, 2009).

Trümmerhumor may offend. As MacLure (2010) suggests “theory frequently offends ... and ... the value of theory lies in its power to get in the way” (p. 2). This may be true for a heuristic concept as well. I hope Trümmerhumor gets in the way, breaking open new or unusual ways to see the world; it may allow an ability to produce wonder or transformation. Bringing together multiple disastrous events, such as a series of earthquakes, can through the stories of intergenerational rubbles point to changes needed in society (Bohannon, 1995, p. 118).

Politics and disasters are inevitably intertwined as evident in government responses, politics, recovery, and prevention efforts (Bommer, 1985). Through humor, social and economic justice as well as human rights are discussed and spotlighted during disasters. Disasters, as a time of disruption, have been used to reflect, to dream, to hope and to critique the existing social order.

Viewing disasters through a comic lens, others might perceive as frivolous, not serious, or unbecoming of such tragedies and in bad taste. However, those who have lived and experienced disasters such as earthquakes use humor, as any form of human expression, as a way to make meaning of events in their lives. This approach is not only psychological (Webb, 2018) rather draws on the social functions and processes of humor to sustain, nurture, relieve, restore, resist, survive, flourish, transform, critique and rebuilt. The disruption and destruction of the order may shed light onto the political failures to prevent, to recover and to rebuild. The lack of social and economic justice is also brought into the spotlight when those affected take matters into their own hands, illustrating how government has failed them. As long as it's someone else's tragedy, those unaffected do not have to burden themselves with the aftermath. Those affected, however, must cope through and beyond the disaster. In Mexico, those impacted by disaster became the focus of my time there as did the notion of Trümmerhumor.

In the next and final section of this stop I turn my attention to a particular manifestation of Mexican post-disaster or Trümmerhumor. A more sustained account of my exploration of Mexico's disaster humor follows in stop five.

Mexican Humor: Pedazos from the ruins



Figure 19 Octavio Paz quote 2020- Translation: For the Mexican, life means the possibility to f**k over, of to be f***ed over as [strategy of survival]. <https://cronicadelpoder.com/2020/11/19/100-frases-de-octavio-paz-para-celebrar-100-anos-de-poemas-ensayos-y-mas/>

The Mexican ... is familiar with death, jokes about it, caresses it, sleeps with it, celebrates it; it is one of his favorite toys and his most steadfast love. True, there is perhaps as much fear in his attitude as in that of others, but at least death is not hidden away ... Death can be seen as nostalgia, rather than as the fruition or end of life, [it] is death as origin. The ancient, original source is the grave, not a womb (Paz, 1994, p. 58/62).

Religious festivals, celebrations of patron saints, virgins, and, first and foremost Holy Week, highlight the importance of death and offer Mexicans their own version of a carnival in the celebration and mocking of death in calaveras (Congdon, 2003). Paz continues,

The *fiesta* is by nature sacred, literally or figuratively, and above all it is the advent of the unusual. It is governed by its own special rules, that set it even apart from other days ... It all occurs in an enchanted world: time is transformed to a mythical past or a total present ... everything takes place as if it were not so, as if it were a dream. ... By means of the *fiesta* society frees itself from the norms it has established [echoing the carnivalesque]. It ridicules its gods, its principles, and its laws: it denies its own self" (p. 50-51).

In the upending of established norms of the reverence of death, here are two examples that show how Mexicans entangle humor in death.



Figure 20 Figure 23 ©Larisa Vazquez, 2019. Used with permission from the artist. Translation: Here rests Dolores. Dear God, accept her with the same joy as I have sent her to you.



Figure 21 ©MAGA 2019 Sedona, Arizona where a considerable number of Mexicans live and work.

Certainly, the most well-known use of humor in death are Mexico's long-standing rituals of día de muertos which mix Catholic and non-Catholic elements (Brandes, 2003; Congdon, 2003; Paz, 1994).

As Miguel³⁸ explains the Mexican connection to death:

Every year there is a festival with sweet [sugar] skulls — every skull has a name, and you can collect a skull for every member of your family. There is a whole tradition around offerings, but I have never felt it to be a humorous expression; but we are really laughing about death — [does laughing mean that it is humorous?]

So many songs, jokes, aspects of death are involved in the humorous traditions.

³⁸ You may remember Miguel from my acknowledgments. He is the teacher in whose classroom I was allowed to teach.

We have calaveritas as poems; they tease the person — you are teasing the person in their potential death. It can be scary — or superstitious for others, or disrespectful; in Mexico it is normal — it is a word game in poem form. All comes together in the part of year [for día de muertos]- all the expressions are very natural - but if you think about them carefully, they are humorous expressions about death.

It is a way to reflect upon our mortality - in a humorous way or through a humorous perspective - but it really is a celebration of life. After all the offerings, we eat. We share every part of the offering with the family or other people and the dead. That way we are celebrating life and being together. It is almost to not feel the tragic of dying or our own death...It opens up a door for death to come, to nourish, to be satisfied and then the dead go back again. And life continues...



Figure 22 ©Neil Kohn - Identity Crisis of Death - Translation: Prepare yourself for the kiss of /from death; But if you don't have lips! <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/us/>

During my first academic trip to Mexico at the end of October 2018, I was gifted a calaverita that I use here with permission from the author. Calaveritas are poems gifted to a dear person wishing for a long life.

Algo muy tradicional en estos días de muertos. 2018

Todos están de fiesta en el panteón
Pues pronto recibirán a Gabriella,
los muertos se preparan para el reventón

Con tequila y mucha candela.
Los esqueletos refuerzan sus huesos
Se cuelgan flores y cepillan sus dientes
Quieren lucir muy apuestos
Para cuando llegue la canadiense.

No falta quien esté temeroso
que su buen humor y mucho ajetreo,
los aleje de su lugar de reposo.
Gabriella está preparada
disfrutará la pachanga
pero no será capturada
sabe que burlará a la Muerte
con bromas y chistes
y también algo de suerte.

Con cariño, Larisa

Something very traditional in these days of the dead. 2018

Everyone is partying in the cemetery
Well, soon they will receive Gabriella,
the dead prepare for the party

With tequila and lots of candles.
The skeletons strengthen their bones
They hang flowers and brush their teeth
They want to look very dapper
By the time the Canadian arrives.

There is no shortage of those who are
afraid
that good humor and a lot of hustle,
take them away from their resting place.
Gabriella is prepared
she will enjoy the party
but she will not be captured
she knows that she will outwit Death
with teasing and jokes and also some luck.

The celebration of life in death, the death-humor paradox, is central to Mexican humor (Navarez, 2003), challenging taboos around laughter, comic stories and death itself. This mocking of death is also a cultural indicator of the importance of teasing in Mexican life. Mexican teasing encapsulates both mockery, mimicry and minding for an ‘Other’. As indicator of care, family members and friends engage in teasing to show affection and group belonging. You need to be able to *take it*, to be part of it. Understanding the role of humorous mimicry in the wider societal context and not only as a psychological function, might provide an understanding of mimicry in relation to colonial oppression.

Being able to subtly mock or mimic the oppressor without them knowing, is sometimes the only rebellion possible (Schole, 2018).

In Mexican society, according to Hernández (2006, p. 301), “el buen comportamiento y los morales tienden a ser prioridades y ciertas cosas no se dicen en público y se relegan a ser comunicadas solamente entre los cuates.” [Good behavior and moral values tend to be priorities; certain things are not said in public and are left to be communicated only between friends.] Obvious in this statement is the importance of maintaining insider community values defensible against outsiders.

Directed outwardly, this teasing becomes mockery toward those whose success is greater, those whose fortunes are greater and those whose geographic location has positioned them better for monetary success. This is evident in the Mexican humor related to the Oscar success of *Roma* a hailed Mexican movie that portrayed a live-in housekeeper of the 1970s living in the Colonia Roma, a well-known, now a well-visited neighborhood of Mexico City. Yalitza Aparicio Martínez³⁹, the principal actor, was publicly mocked through a number of, more or less funny, memes for being Indigenous and too successful in Hollywood. Being Indigenous is still one of the undiscussed missing pieces not only in the Mexican humorscape but also in the Mexican political, social and cultural scape reproducing social inequalities. There is a lot of violence built into Mexican humor because ‘se burlan de todo y todos’ (they make fun of everything and everyone), says Miguel.

Although those Mexicans with whom I spoke think of their own society as raceless dominated by class inequalities, in humor, popular culture and art, the hidden dimensions of race appear quite clearly. Used as nicknames,

Blanca
Moreno
Indio
Negro

are all not so subtle reminders that race is embedded, enmeshed, and encapsulated in social class, yet rarely specifically addressed.

³⁹ <https://www.elsoldemexico.com.mx/gossip/omg/yalitza-aparicio-rechaza-este-polemico-meme-lleno-de-burla-2990797.html>

Albures and playing humor: Codigos secretos⁴⁰

wordplay/ worldplay/ jeu de mots/ wordspiel /

A Mexican rhyming world play: Para todo mal mezcal, y para todo sismo lo mismo
[for everything bad drink mezcal, for every earthquake drink the same – unfortunately
in English the rhyme is lost.]

Teasing, playing with words, and using language as a comic vehicle often occurs in the form of albures. Albures are a vernacular, jocular approach to life – a sense of the comic rooted in oral tradition. The Mexican approach to word plays is considered a cultural artifact in itself. Those Mexicans with whom I interacted, pride themselves with being funny people with a uniquely Mexican sense of humor, wordplays upon which albures are based, are not uniquely Mexican (Gibbs, 2018; Winter-Froemel, 2015). Albures as ‘simple’ wordplays are used in everyday language, however, nothing is simple about these wordplays; they are laden with meaning, context, history, and memory. Although there are books written with examples on how to become a seasoned alburero⁴¹, much of this witty skill needs to be practiced and battled out orally (Beristáin, 2015; Castillo, 2020; Haviland, 2011; Laverture, 1998; Pita Pico, 2014).

Schole (2018) and Zenner and Geeraerts (2018) claim that the origins of word battles in Mexico go as far back as the Spanish colonial domination used as resistance strategies to secretly poke fun at the conquering Spaniards because no one could be trusted. These historical conditions influence the cultural context and the social relationships of the present therefore have a great deal to tell us (M’Baye, 2009, pp. 3, 6). One has to be in the know about language, culture, and politics in order to commit to the albures battle. Since it constitutes a battle, social interactions and an audience to this form of communication are important; those engaged need to show off their abilities. Emerging from the interaction of social, cultural, cognitive, and linguistic forces yet staying elusive to outsiders may constitute a means of resistance. For a successful battle to occur, a winner and a loser need to be established; the one with the greatest creativity outlasting the other, wins. The use of vernacular language rather than literary vocabulary makes the meaning even more elusive when this interplay between

⁴⁰ Secret codes

⁴¹ [https://tureng.com/en/spanish-english/alburero%20\(m%C3%A9xico\)](https://tureng.com/en/spanish-english/alburero%20(m%C3%A9xico))

vernacular and literary creates a rift, a deliberate deviation, from the educated elites (Schole, 2018).

Albures are thought to have originated in the centre of the country in a mining town; double entendres, mostly sexual in nature (*el doble significado*), are at the core of these albures. Simply put, there are literal and non-literal meanings in language; the albur plays with incongruity in meaning, the non-literal meaning that needs to be decoded instantaneously by the one engaging in the word battle. As a strictly oral tradition, albures are difficult to learn and to pin down especially by a gringa.

In 2006 Hernández (Hernández, 2006) created a written anthology taken from his blog posts to show the variety of albures distinguished into three types:

- Albures conceptuales/ conceptual albures
- Albures fonológicos/ phonological albures
- Albures mixtos/ mixed albures

He further specifies that albures are not the same as double entendres; albures are used to ‘hurt’, to sting, but not to insult while double entendres are considered to contain a main ambivalent message. As a secret code, deep-seated taboos may be addressed (e.g., homosexuality).

Anaya and Cozar Angulo (2014), Beristáin Díaz (2001), Castillo (2020), Haviland (2011) and Hernández (2019) examine the albur from a historical, poetic, and folkloristic point of view connecting its origin to Spanish coloniality when meshing Spanish and indigenous languages became a new way of speaking in an unintelligible code to the outsider necessary to protect against the colonial oppressor. It was/ still really is poking fun or laughing at an oppressor whether they are politicians, the establishment, Americans, or los conquistadores.

Popular online publications and YouTube video interviews with albureros and albureras are common and help to situate the albur in Mexican Spanish orality where they are deemed an important part of Mexican daily life. Albures are proudly claimed as part of a unique Mexican identity constructing the self as Mexican, as man, as macho as other, as different, as proud and distinct especially from the United States (Yosi & Cozar

Angulo, 2014) although one of the most successful albureras was a woman. An alburero machista [macho joker]⁴² – is mostly a male joker, as many identify albures with machismo and male domination in society. However, in recent times, the queen of albures Lourdes Ruiz Baltazar⁴³ (la reina de los albures) was hailed as the National Champion of the Albur, winner of many national battles breaking this male-dominated area of Mexican humor. She famously states that “alburear es solo cuestión de práctica” [alburear is only a matter of practice]⁴⁴.

Lope-Blanch (2000), a well-known linguist specializing in Mexican Spanish has created an atlas of the many idiomatic expression for which Mexican Spanish is known stating that

El español ha evolucionado mucho desde su llegada a nuestras tierras, las lenguas indígenas influyeron en el léxico para enriquecerlo, sin embargo, a nivel semántico, oral y por supuesto literario los cambios han sido fenomenales. Una de esas ‘nuevas’ formas expresivas es el albur, producto 100% mexicano, y más específicamente de la Ciudad de México. La definición del Diccionario del Español de México se consigna con las siguientes palabras:

‘Juego de palabras de doble sentido que en una conversación sirve para comentar o responder a algo en plan de burla o escarnio, normalmente aludiendo a algo que se considera una humillación sexual’...⁴⁵

[translation....]

Spanish has evolved tremendously since arriving in our lands, the indigenous languages have influenced the [Spanish] lexicon to enrich at a semantic, oral, and literary level with phenomenal changes. One of these new forms of expressions is the albur, a 100% Mexican product and more specifically from Mexico City. The Diccionario de Español de México defines albur as the following: ‘A wordplay with double entendre that in a conversation serves to comment or answer to something at the level of a joke or mockery, normally alludes to something that might be considered a sexual humiliation’.

⁴² <https://www.jornada.com.mx/2016/05/31/capital/029n2cap>
<https://www.chilango.com/general/y-a-todo-esto-que-es-el-albur/>

⁴³ <https://www.excelsior.com.mx/comunidad/muere-la-reina-del-albur-de-tepito-lourdes-ruiz/1307495>

⁴⁴ <https://www.elsoldemexico.com.mx/cultura/aqui-los-mejores-albures-de-la-reina-del-albur-lourdes-ruiz-del-barrio-tepito-y-quien-es-3318895.html>

⁴⁵ <https://www.etcetera.com.mx/articulos/el-albur-de-mexico-para-el-mundo/>

Books
collect
alburess.

I wonder,
what happens
to the ephemeral,
fleeting
albur
when fixed
onto the static
pages of a dictionary?
(MAGA, 2021)

Death, disaster, earthquakes, volcanoes, fires...



Figure 23 Twitter 2017 – the making of intergenerational stories Sept 19, 1985 & Sept 19, 2017, https://twitter.com/C_CulturaUNAM/status/1174669473548292096?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw

How death is understood through Mexican culture and humor is evident in the responses to natural disasters which change or alter the political, social or economic conditions or contexts in which they occur (Bohannon, 1995, p. 122). This is revealed in the intergenerational stories from the 1985 earthquake in Mexico City which are intertwined and connected to the new earthquakes of 2017, 2020 and 2021 illustrating how social, cultural, and political memories are performed through the telling of any story including comic ones. The convergence of a political system and an earthquake in 1985 disrupted the social order to create a new civil society that had not existed before due to the long-standing authoritarian power held by the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional). The location of the 1985 earthquake in the ancient Aztec core of the metropolis and the major damages sustained to the buildings with their casualties is credited as a change agent to Mexico's civil society, politics, economy and gentrification within the city (Camacho de Schmidt & Schmidt, 1995; El sismo del 19 de septiembre de 1985, 2019; Poniatowska, 1995; Preston & Dillon, 2004; Solnit, 2010).

Earthquakes are linked to their regional geographical location and coordinates; they do not have names like hurricanes.

Earthquakes don't get names:

Why do earthquakes not get names?
Because by the time we get around to naming them,
they are already over.
Seriously!!!

Detailed and accurate coordinates seem more important for the naming of earthquakes.
The naming of hurricanes, as they take longer to pick up speed and force, can be traced and 'predicted'.

Something that cannot be predicted is not deserving of names. Not even in hindsight.

Without creating a date and a geographic location, we would not know where they occurred, so the Mexico City earthquakes become Sept 1985, Sept 2017, June 2020, Sept 2021. Fixing an earthquake this way may, however, fix the event firmly in place. Without seismic precautions, fixed, inflexible structures, if one continues this idea within earthquakes, are conducive to more destruction. However, if we look closely, earthquakes are ongoing. Think of the aftershocks or movements before and after the actual main tremor; they are in a state of becoming with possible further destruction ahead. Humor may help to deal with this precarity and instability, being itself unstable, precarious, and risky.

When in 2017 the Mexico earthquake coincided with Hurricane Irma, many questioned the intensity and focus of reporting on the hurricane as being US centric. Days passed in which the landfall was announced, predicted, and speculated upon, while the Mexican earthquake received little mention in US news. Memes to this effect have circulated online providing a critical commentary to the US-Mexican relationship. Whose disaster is more important?

Poor, Popocatepetl....

His name, an Aztec creation meaning *smoking mountain* is hanging on to his name affectionately reduced to Popo. He has even caused earthquakes before erupting⁴⁶. Recently, he came out of dormancy, but he's been huffing and puffing for a long time making the people living at the bottom scramble every time he spews some ashes. As the good warrior that he is⁴⁷ (MAGA, 2020).

The Mexican government has devised an alarm system called the 'semáforo', the streetlight, where the different colors indicate the level of alertness. With varying shades in each color category, people are alerted to the more or less imminent danger of evacuation. The locals mercilessly mock the use of this alert system.

In late March 2019, the Popocatepetl, the active volcano south of Mexico City close to the city of Puebla, erupted with huge plumes of smoke. While the volcano is always active, in recent years the occasions when the volcano has spewed ashes have become more frequent, causing locals to joke about the shapes of the plumes, the Popo becoming angrier and more disruptive. One day the plumes look like an elephant, other days it becomes a cotton ball. Stories about Popo's activities go back to pre-contact times.

Moving On ...

This stop has explored the notion of disaster humor, post-disaster humor and disaster in the ruins. I have introduced Mexican humor in preparation for the next stop where I share stories, images and poems created during my visit there.

⁴⁶ <https://volcano.oregonstate.edu/popocatepetl>

⁴⁷ <https://fraguadevulkano.blogspot.com/2017/03/los-volcanes-popocatepetl-e-iztaccihuatl.html>

INTERMEZZO #5

I wonder if any of you have been to Mexico and encountered its humor? Or have you been to any other place whose language you don't speak fluently? Or have you experienced a disaster and seen or even created humor about that experience? Maybe the recent pandemic has made you share a meme or two? Let's have a chat about that. We'll stop here for a little while so you can sit quietly, relax, and ponder what you've encountered before the next installment of my doctoral journey. Maybe some tequila, or mescal to wet your senses? I am so looking forward to your responses to this magpie adventure.

STOP FIVE: Mexico – Sometimes pedazos are the only pieces left



Figure 24 ©MAGA 2019 - UNAM's bicycle path – looking toward the past - the story of a changed narrative 1985-2017. Picture, picture on the wall, who tells the bestest story of them all? Sanctioned memorialization of two earthquakes

As I noted in the invitation to this dissertation, my time in Mexico was not part of my earlier plans for my doctoral journey. It, like many events in my life emerged rather serendipitously from a chance encounter, which, given my magpie tendencies, turned my attention to yet another opportunity to explore the power of a comic worldview.

So, sometimes hallway conversations take you to Mexico. Just passed the stairwell, the stark, narrow hallway of our department (Educational Studies) is a small square room, glass clad on three sides that I semi-benevolently call “The fishbowl” making interactions with those having offices along the outside hallway a cherished moment. Everyone stops to say hello, waves and is on their merry way. On one of those days in 2017, an unknown face travels down the corridor giving me the opportunity to say hallo through the open door. This first contact with Larisa Enriquez-Velázquez would be the start of a friendship, an academic collaboration, and an inspiration that

brought me to UNAM (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México) in Mexico City where Larisa is a researcher and professor.

During our many subsequent hallway conversations about our respective research and life interests, we discovered that informal learning spaces is what we have in common although I do not have Larisa's mathematical-scientific, digitally minded awareness. Across our differences, however, we found that an interest in Mexican humor was something we did share. That connection helped us through our pedagogical and methodological disagreements. Through many brainstorming moments in hallways, pubs, homes, and walks, we found a way to create the Mitacs Globalink⁴⁸ interuniversity proposal that led me to Mexico City into Larisa's home department at UNAM where she would not only serve as university liaison but also as a springboard for all Mexican cultural and humorous matters that a foreigner undoubtedly encounters. Many times, I would ask Larisa about humorous slang that would elude me.

Ask any doctoral researcher at the beginning of a project and they will tell you their plans, interview scripts, BREB application and contingency plans. It was not much different for me, except that the application to do humor research in Mexico was not initially so central to my project as the pieces and explorations of humor that I had already written. Rather than exclusively focusing on theoretical and analytical considerations of humor, here was a project that allowed me to intertwine two important aspects: one was to teach a foundational course around the social, political, and cultural function of humor to undergraduate Mexican students and second, have conversations with these students regarding their experiences with humor around disasters, more specifically the earthquake of 2017.

This encounter with Larisa, while accidental, led me to a major moment in my doctoral journey - my experiences in Mexico at UNAM as a visiting teacher and researcher.

Pedazos and knots: Fragmented memories

Writers such as Ulysse (2015) have used performative fragmentary writing as an evocative way to create a stitched-together impression of a whole. With her connections

⁴⁸ <https://www.mitacs.ca/en/programs/globalink/globalink-research-award>

to Haitian earthquakes, Ulysses creation of alternative narratives for post-earthquake Haiti which she delivers in English, French and Creole was an inspiration. I was drawn to her aim to push against “disaster reproduced long-standing narratives and stereotypes [...]”, in her case, narratives about Haiti as a “synonym of poverty, backwardness and evil” (p. 26). I humbly follow in her footsteps in my attempt to create a comic poetic narrative of my lingering, along with the UNAM student (my co-inquirers) in the ruins of Mexican earthquakes.



Figure 25 ©Bousiko 2012- Used with permission of the artist

The pedazos in this stop have been created from my *notas de viaje* or ‘disastrous’ travel notes. The question of ‘what constitutes post-disaster humor in Mexico’ informed how I encountered my apartment living, teaching, conversations, walks through the city and daily Uber rides. I begin below with my arrival to Mexico City when I sensed I was becoming a *real* researcher. Then I share some of my experiences of daily life in my attempt to find my bearings in this new role. My encounters with humor from the ruins or Trümmerhumor as I traveled to and around the UNAM campus follow. To conclude, I focus on my classroom experiences and explorations of humor with the Mexican students.

Llego a Mexico

*First moments
in the monster⁴⁹
aka
Mexico City*



Figure 26 Circulating Mexico City at night. <https://mexicocitystreets.com/2014/05/17/top-five-favorite-views-mexico-city/>

The first time the airplane circled over Mexico City it was twilight – the time when all the lights of the city seem to appear out of nowhere. To pave the way for my research, I stayed there in November 2018 to speak with instructors, faculty administrators and future colleagues. So, when I arrived the second time in 2019, I was not so much astounded by the lights but by the vastness of the city encircled by mountains, wrapped in smog, stretching out like a mythical creature to the end of the horizon. I call the city lovingly a *monster* because as such she engulfs me, challenges me, uplifts me, she also allows me to play, explore, research and search for the comic in the midst of her boundaries, among her people.

I slowly leave the safety of the airplane only to descend into the immigration area that has finally done away with its red and green buttons, the fail-safe system to check

⁴⁹ I use the figurative meaning of monster as something that evokes both fear and wonder in the city's attempt to monstrare – to show, reveal, teach

passengers' smuggling abilities and their luggage. For a city this size, the airport feels underwhelmingly small, yet crowded with peoples' comings and goings. Listening to the cacophony of voices, dialects and languages, my heart beats faster. I am finally embarking on this adventure of doing 'fieldwork' with the comic, through the comic and at the emergence of it.

Becoming a real humor researcher



Figure 27 MAGA 2019 - My digital post-it that summarizes all those topics and themes that appeared during my stay. Created with www.wordl.net

Although I had explored the performances of a few stand-up comedians and was reading humor related literature, I felt I truly became a humor researcher the moment I landed at the Benito Juarez airport in Mexico City and walked through customs. An elderly customs officer inspects my papers and asks me in English the perfunctory questions about the purpose of my stay to which I reply in Spanish. The gears somewhat switch – the gringa speaks decent Spanish – or at least more than most. While she asks

me about the length and the purpose of my stay, I get the first sense of what it means to be a researcher. I get to claim this title, albeit I really do not feel much like one. As I step towards the customs counter, I step into performance.

Now, even my visa reflects this – I AM A RESEARCHER - without this permit I would not be able to be at the university; now I get to occupy a space of status.

~~Mexican authorities sequester
immigration papers upon departure—
my status as researcher
has vanished
only leaving
the trace
of a stamp
in my passport.~~

The phone sits snugly in the back pocket of my pants; I pull it out to switch to my Mexican phone number, a strategy that would prove vital in navigating and staying safe in this city of millions. I called a friend whose acquaintance I had made during my previous stay when I needed a ride to the airport from Coyoacán where I would be staying again. I called him. At least I tried. Having been away from Mexico for quite some time, I didn't realize how that would affect my language abilities...I was stumbling over the words, the grammar, and the vocabulary. Gosh, I sounded awful. Anyone who speaks another language, I do speak four fluently, knows how difficult it is to stay current with a language one does not speak very often and over the phone no less. Eventually, I succeed in organizing the pickup.

As I reach the pick-up area of the terminal, no one is there. Slowly panicking, I call him again to make further arrangements. Another 10 minutes go by with curious stares from the waiting passengers and the security attendant. I call my friend again to ensure I am in the right spot. He confirms that he got my coordinates. Again, I wait and wait and wait...

My anxiety rises since I have no other way to get to my destination. I dial his number again. This time, he doesn't answer the phone. I wait again. Then, he calls me back asking me on which side of the terminal I am. So, in this unpracticed raw Spanish, among curious stares, I try to explain where I am located. When I fail in my description, a brilliant thought strikes – I ask the security attendant to speak to my friend to explain where I find myself. I will never forget the look of incredulity of this man at my request. Sadly, my accent belies my abilities.

He finally agrees to take the phone, rolls his eyes, explains that in fact I am in terminal 2 instead of terminal 1. After not even ten minutes my friend pulls up and drives me to the other side of the monster that would be my home for the next few months. These first steps as 'a gringa' on Mexican soil are a sign of things to come. 'La gringa' would stay with me for quite some time accompanying me into my daily life.

Daily life among the rubbles



Figure 29 ©MAGA 2019 Church in Xochimilco south of Mexico City where bricks have created a hole underneath the window

Bienvenida con leche

The old imposing palacio covered with ancient colorful azulejos [tiles] behind the Zocalo⁵⁰ creates the perfect backdrop to a visitor's souvenir photograph. To the side is the barely visible opening to one the narrowest, dimly lit calles (alleys) I have ever seen where I spot laundry across clothes lines, windows open to the cacophony of smells, sounds and voices to which I am drawn.

Hushing my own conversation, I enter the alley while scurrying around make-shift crate seats. I look up at one of the ajar windows when a lukewarm, brown liquid caresses my face and lands on my shirt baptizing me giving me the bienvenida through café con leche. With this welcoming coffee stain, I jolt into my life in Mexico City.

Coyoacán – the home of Frida Kahlo and the coyotes



Figure 30 ©MAGA 2019 Street plaque- Home of the coyotes

I stayed in one of the historically significant towns at the southern outskirts of Mexico City called Coyoacán in an apartment shared with two male roommates, two dogs, a female caretaker, whom I call the Candle (from a small village outside Puebla), and an older owner who I would meet as well. Catapulted into the family dynamics of a hilariously dysfunctional family, I was adopted immediately. By the two dogs anyway, it took the caretaker much longer. As a tomboy I had an instant connection to my male

⁵⁰ Zocalo is the square in front of the government building in Mexico City

roommates with whom I shared many mezcals. The ability to drink copious amounts of hard liquor is definitely an advantage when living in a male dominated society.

A not so typical day in the life of a gringa living in the monster

Get up; greet the dogs; make coffee; share coffee with the Candle; eat breakfast – obligatory sharing of the breakfast with the dogs; call Uber; starting the comic in the Uber – informal conversations about being and living the comic in Mexico; getting to CUAED; have breakfast with Larisa checking in on progress; taking a taxi to PoliSci – walking up the same stairs but never knowing what to expect.



One day there is a protest, one day there is a music performance blasting, one day there is an empty space with only the murals and pictures, one day there is a student meeting. I receive the looks from others with some degree of laconic acceptance since I stand out like a sore thumb in my perceived whiteness and gringaness. Short of carrying the American flag, I am American in the eyes of many. Attempting to explain the difference to my students, Uber drivers and others is challenging me through the confines of my multiple identities that I carry through this world and into my comic worldview.

Figure 31 ©MAGA 2019; meme I created and shared on our WhatsApp with students while talking about the vastness of the city and the crowded buses and metro lines on the daily commute to campus.

Going to Mexico as literal and metaphorical comic border crosser on the path of post-disaster humor, I am inspired by the work of Anzaldua (2009) (also see my poem on *border crossers and in-betweeners*). Since I draw on and I am drawn into stories that echo my own, I am a border crosser in spirit, skin, and experience aiming to push

the boundaries of our understanding of comic identities roaming in “the margins, crevices and interstices (Gomez-Peña, 2000, p. 8). The poem below, points to those who live the borders, to those whose bodies are made up of bordering, bordered and overlapping selves. Borders, real and imagined, are continuously crossed in humor to remind us that “Borders don’t mean much. They are someone else’s imagination” King (2020, p. 19). As I watch performances, listen to stories, engage in humor, cross literal, and metaphorical boundaries and borders, I am starkly reminded of my own body situated as ‘other’, as wanderer of places, spaces, and wor/l/ds.

Wanderer of places, spaces, and wor/l/ds

I am Italian in Germany
I am German in Italy
I am a white settler in Canada
I am a gringa in Mexico

National labels become skin labels

.... Who am I?

None of them and all of them.

I cross multiple identity borders with my body, the languages I speak, my abilities to camouflage, shapeshift and move through the world.

Not the skin I inhabit.
(MAGA 2019)

Uber drivers: Car diaries

One of the best ways to find out about the comic spirit of a people is the everyday; in my case I experienced the everyday comic also while taking Ubers. It provides an opportunity to talk with drivers that know the city well, have insights into the human condition and are not afraid to interact with foreigners. Car diaries ⁵¹ is a term taken from the 2004 movie “Motorcycle Diaries⁵²” based on the memoirs written by Che and Granado depicting the motorcycle journey that Che Guevara took from his home in Argentina to Cuba.

⁵¹ Car diaries – a journey into and through the comic

⁵² https://therustyquill.files.wordpress.com/2013/12/ernst0cheguavara_m0t0rcycled1ar1es.pdf

I first used this idea during my commute from Vancouver to Abbotsford, a 140km round trip, where I completed my BA in adult education. My colleague and I used the long drive as a space in which to make sense of the multifaceted aspects of being a mature student in a BA program and throw together ideas for assignments. I am referencing this term again, because the daily commutes in Mexico taken inside a vehicle have provided another such important space in which to explore, understand and share what it means to be comic in this world. Five different *voces* appear in the following *notas de viaje*.

La Primera Voz represents the connection between death and the comic
Santa Muerte⁵³: My first Uber ride

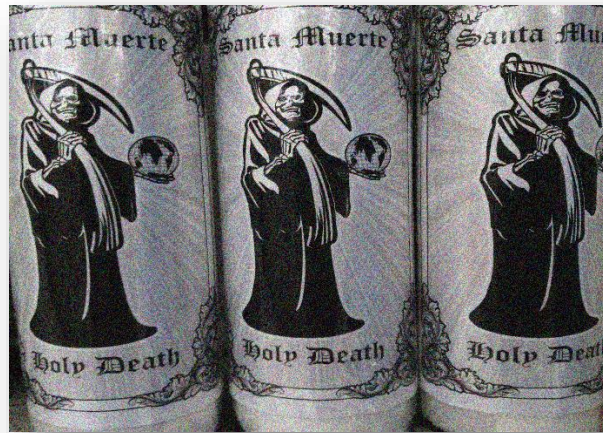


Figure 32 ©MAGA 2022 Santa Muerte Candles – the back the candles sports a prayer to Santa Muerte – in English and Spanish

He wants to know what brings me to Mexico City
He tells me about the Mexican sense of humor
Connected to death since Aztec times

Nos reímos de la muerte, he says, we laugh at/about death

He tells me about la Santa Muerte - nuestra señora de la santa muerte
She has a shrine, all to herself

Laugh about death, don't take her too seriously

⁵³ (Gaytán Alcalá, 2013; Kristensen, 2015; Whittington, 2011)

If you are devoted, she cares,
If you are an addict, she heals

If you ask without offering....
If you need her, she is present only asking for your soul in return

She is just,
I need to see for myself. (MAGA 2019)

In my conversations with Uber drivers, I met predominantly male ones of varying ages. While conversations with the men were usually easy, the next one presented its own challenges. On one of these drives back from UNAM after teaching, I met a young driver who barely greeted me. While this is not uncommon since most locals do not expect me to speak Spanish, he kept the radio dialed to a station⁵⁴ that I had discovered previously renowned for its edgy satirical commentary, poking fun at politics, sex, religion, or anything that the hosts might encounter in the news. The two male hosts have guests visit to comment on the topics as well.

At first, I was confused about the issue since it seemed to have to do with a controversial female senator. Then I clued into the topic itself.

La Segunda Voz represents gendered discomfort

What makes a man more uncomfortable than a radio show that equates the knowledge of the clitoris to the little known medicinal properties of marijuana? As usual, I sit in the back. This time the radio is not blasting with music; instead, La Corneta, a popular three o'clock radio program is playing. The two male radio hosts parody on an older female senator. Her commentary is played over and over again with the hosts commenting, satirizing, and parodying the senator who was raising the issue of the legalization of marijuana in Mexico as a way to undermine the power of the narco cartels and so was equating the limited information about the benefits of marijuana with the unknowns around the female clitoris.

⁵⁴ https://wradio.com.mx/programa/la_corneta

It is difficult to keep a straight face, or to ignore the visible discomfort of the driver who by the end of the program does not know where to look except to avoid any eye contact through the rearview mirror. So, at the outlandish comparison, I burst into laughter fueled by the clear level of severe discomfort of the driver. My laughing, however, broke the ice to chat briefly about the radio program in general. Never did we touch on the topic of the recesses of the female anatomy or its connection to the equally obscure benefits of marijuana.

La Tercera Voz reflects a profound female encounter

For the first time I was greeted by a female Uber driver. The moment I stepped into her car I could sense her hesitancy. We rode in silence for a while when she commented on my extreme punctuality because I was on the sidewalk waiting for her when she pulled up. Not something a chilango⁵⁵ would ever do because they would take their sweet time getting ready making her often wait for 30 minutes.

She asked me if I liked the city to which I replied that I was surprised to see all the different neighborhoods and was impressed how different they all were from one another each with a different personality including Coyoacán which had been an independent village before being swallowed by the monster that Mexico City is now. I felt that the city was so big and that with work I did not really go out much that is when she suggested that I should take a chilango boyfriend who would take me out dancing and to dinner.

When I told her that I had a partner back home, she said that it would not matter to the men here. We moved onto the topic of children, so she inquired why I did not have any kids. When I answered that I was too old, she explained that there was always the possibility of adoption. It was hard to be alone taking care of a child without family around, I mentioned. That's when she told me her story.

Madres Solteras: Another woman's story (MAGA 2019)

I ask you of your story,
Of what brought you here,
Of your hopes and dreams -

She deflects, continues to drive in silence.

⁵⁵ Slang word for someone from Mexico City

A woman needs a man
To show her a good time
To take care of her
To have kids with.

And yet, she does it alone.

I ask you of your story,
Of what brought you here,
Of your hopes and dreams -

She sighs...

A woman needs kids,
To be a mother,
Relies on her own mother

Because she does it alone.

Her questions become more intense
Peppered with conviction that a mother's heart
Exists through her children

That is why she drives.

She is soft, yet strong
She is open, yet reserved
She is mother, yet alone
She yearns.

She tries to fit my pieces into her story.
She tries to fit me into her story of *madre soltera*⁵⁶.

La Cuarta Voz represents the encounter with unexpected grief

On my mother's birthday I woke up crying not knowing that the Candle was in the kitchen. Tears streaming down my face, I reached for coffee. Her little frame, long grey hair... haltingly walks over, embraces me. We stood there in shared grief ... just two women ... crying together. We shared stories of death, faith, and sense-making. That evening I attended, for the first time in at least three decades, a catholic service at the local cathedral to light a candle in my mother's name. The Candle turned out to be one of the most important people and metaphors throughout my stay. During one of my sleepless nights, I was musing about my relationship with the caretaker when the image

⁵⁶ *Single mother*

of a candle appeared. It dawned on me that she signified a candle through her guiding light in dark times of life and research. Her light turned out to be profound life teachings with her faith in the black Virgen of Guadalupe to guide her and her traditional plant knowledge she so willingly shared with me in the many subsequent kitchen moments.

One day, her long braided hair bobbing in incredulity, she looked into my pan with fried plantains to which I was adding salt. Eating a savory version of plantains as I had been taught in Venezuela was just so foreign to her. I could see her think: Ay, que güera⁵⁷!

Guided by the candle, the next poem shows what happens when one's own disasters bear upon the research in its utter vulnerability. The spaces, pauses and placement of the text with its punctuation show the speeding up and slowing down of an entire day meandering over multiple pages.

Vulnerability, Death and Research

I sur/re/n/der myself vulnerable – (MAGA, March 20, 2019)

I opened up
Guided by this *Candle*
who treated me like any other güera at first ... it bothered me...
For some reason I wanted her to like me...

We lived in the same house ... but it took vulnerability ... my own ...
my own tears ...

They changed everything.

On my mother's birthday I woke up crying
not knowing that the Candle was in the kitchen
tears streaming down my face as I reached for coffee ...

Her little frame, long grey hair... haltingly walks over, embraces me
We stood there in shared grief ... just two women ... crying together

She shared with me that she had lost her brother... way too soon... we shared the how,
the when and the why ... as grieving people do...we shared...we hugged...we embraced
across these so different bodies...

⁵⁷ The fair-haired/blonde/white skinned one; also used as synonym for foreigner

I hugged the dogs ... they knew ... always...

NOTHING MATTERED

Time stood still

Time stood still

Time ... stood ... still...

Even if for a moment, my mother's presence and passing transported me back to when I got the news ... I couldn't breathe...

I learned the Mexican word for it: ella falleció... [she was missed, she left, she passed on, she expired, she disappeared, she stopped existing] — yet present...

The Candle, a devout believer in the Virgin, urges me to go to church ... she would even go with me if she could, or send her daughter with me to see the 'big one' ⁵⁸ dedicated to Guadalupe ... the Virgin ... the Black One ... The one woman we can relinquish our plights to ...

She will listen, the Candle says. She will make it easier...

I fight the urge ... I resist those Catholic roots ... I am reminded by those around me that it might help to leave my grief there ... nothing else ...

just abandon myself to a moment of vulnerability ...

just a moment... just to have

time

stand

still ...

I went to church that evening ... to a Catholic Mass... something I had not done in years.

⁵⁸ Basilica de Santa Maria de Guadalupe, Mexico City

The only foreign body among locals ... la gringa... I laugh to myself. Whether I want to or not. I shake my head ... at ease and yet so out of place

The mass starts with the acknowledgement of those that have passed ... lent ... resurrection ... the body of Christ ... my mother's body lying in the sun for a stranger to find....

I shiver,

feel sick,

feel

my

body

burn

Memories

Embodied Moments of Recollection

Memories

I sit in the most uncomfortable wooden pew... the ancient timber digging into my sacral bones ...

.... I have trouble following the familiar yet so foreign prayers in Spanish ... I still remember them...[f**k] ... so much work to forget, so little needed to evoke...

After Eucharist a tiny woman clad in black moves across the aisle toward me taking my hand in both of hers ... she extends the ritual ... she mutters words I do not grasp ... I silently accept her gesture.... Do I belong now? A sign of peace? - finally?

The ceremony closes ... for a while, I rest in the church plaza with soft wind rustling through the trees ... I observe the night sky, feel the wind on my wet cheeks the evening hustle of people moving through this space with whom I have no connection ... only the death of my mother has brought me here.

Finally, something makes me move.... a somnambulist among the awake ... I hesitantly make my way back to the house... tourists and locals alike cross my path as I continue through the plaza de los coyotes with the fountain releasing sprays of multicolored droplets....

Coyotes Tricksters reminding me in their spirit form that there is humor even in the darkest of times

.... their playful presence a reminder of my strength, of my abilities to survive, to conquer, to strive ... to flourish?

Cobblestones await me - the unevenness - the darkness of the unfamiliar streets too... as I turn the corner to Calle Escondida, the secret, the hidden street, I hear the tamale vendor in his nightly call:

! tamales! ... ricos tamales Oaxaqueños⁵⁹,

... tamales...

..... for ten pesos I give in to his seductive call.

La Quinta Voz represents the political in the streets:

El humor político se encuentra en las calles.... Las calles son políticas. El humor callejero es político (Huchin Sosa, 2019). Political humor is found in the streets – the streets are political. Street humor is political.



Figure 33 ©MAGA 2019 - CONAGUA with fire damage about two hours after the fire was extinguished

⁵⁹ Tamales! Yummy tamales from Oaxaca. Tamales.

One day I receive a twitter message telling me that the building that houses the National Water Authorities had caught on fire and consequently had been evacuated. As acronym it spells *CONAGUA*⁶⁰ which means ‘with water’. A simple, yet powerful play with words shows how quick the response is and how humorous expressions are created or morph as others add to it or subtract from it; many jokes circulated on Twitter that day including mine to the students that read *SINAGUA* – without water and *CONHUMO* – with smoke as the picture that I took of the building on my drive back into Coyoacán shows. My creation of the *CONHUMO* word play received mixed reactions from the students. Thinking comically in another language and sharing the outcomes with those native speakers is anxiety-producing since joking, teasing, and creating humor represents a form of language literacy and cultural mastery. When does one become proficient in humor in another language? Is there ever a point when one becomes literate? Apparently, I have a long way to go.

Urban humor explicitly claimed as Mexican with indigenous influences in modern Spanish is proudly hailed as driving foreigners crazy at the elusive meaning when one is the butt of the joke. Remember those albuers in stop four? I know first-hand. I was asked, ¿Te gustan los chiles? A tricky little question that seems innocent enough given the spicy cuisine of Mexico, only to find out that the question refers to the male anatomy. In the literal translation I was simply asked if I liked chili peppers/ if I liked it hot. In the wordplay, I was asked if I liked penis.

Finding my way at UNAM

These next stories show all those intended or untended comic instances while navigating a new campus, the various events housed there and my teaching space. Teaching classes, particularly a new course that I had never taught before, or that in this configuration has never happened at UNAM, has its own set of challenges. Teaching it at a different university, with Spanish speaking students and on a gigantic unfamiliar

⁶⁰ CONAGUA Building: (Comisión Nacional del Agua – National water authority in Mexico City)
<https://noticieros.televisa.com/ultimas-noticias/incendio-edificio-conagua-cdmx-coyoacan/>

campus tested me in quite unexpected ways. UNAM's campus swallows UBC's⁶¹ not only in the number of students but also in its surface.

It spots nine separate overcrowded free bus lines shuttling students and faculty from one end to the other. Over 360,000 students work and study on this campus that despite its enormity feels nestled in an oasis of tranquility. This universe-city is built upon lava rocks, yet another signifier of how disasters have become part of Mexican culture. It is called ciudad universitaria, or CU. Parks, a greenbelt, protected areas, iguanas and colibris are as much part of the campus as are controversial buildings that have sprouted despite an assurance of protecting green spaces.

I have never mastered taking these buses without outsider help unable to place myself along those routes. Having learned how to orient myself with the backdrop of mountains in Vancouver, I am unable to fathom any direction in the monster. In my daily trips from CUAED to my classroom, I decided that taking an inexpensive cab was preferable to getting lost along the way or maybe getting off the bus at the complete opposite end of campus. Of course, this would have been hilarious for anyone willing to help a gringa.

Red shoes

To show how March 8, 2019, unfolded, I have photographed, narrated and explored the stairs choreographed with red shoes. I have used the next few pages to create a visual poem. The bottom of this page is intentionally left as white space ...

⁶¹ UBC – The University of British Columbia

Disaster of a different kind: Zapatos Rojos – Red Shoes

Remembering women – March 8, 2019 – a visual poem

This morning I reached the campus stairs to be startled by all these red shoes on the steps — every day is different. The stairs are a space for gatherings, protests, exhibits, and music. A little earlier I had come across a transgender and women's installation preparing to protest and strike for the March 8 women's march downtown.



Figure 34 ©MAGA 2019 Red Shoes Collage - it takes a pigeon for perspective



Figure 35 ©MAGA 2019 The walk of the red shoes

Zapatos Rojos – Red Shoes - Ni Una Más

I saw those red shoes lined up on the stairs
With letters to the dead girl stuck in high
With people passing without a glance
The impact of the sun gone by

I saw those red shoes lined up on the stairs
The whole world sharing in the pain they caused
With paint still dripping wet along the path
The shadows creeping up along the way

I saw those red shoes lined up on the stairs
Forming a circle wide around the trees
The stairs give space to slow walking
As pictures formed inside my head
Of missing souls, of missing spirits

I saw those red shoes lined up on the stairs
Clouds moving in above the midday sky
As I make my way to humor class
Connecting to my state of mind
Of jokes in social protests
Girls, and women alike –
Their unpunished murderous disappearance affects us all.
A female researcher...

Ni ... Una... Más. (MAGA 2020)

Magpie Adventures: Humor is everywhere



Figure 36 ©MAGA 2019 Outside students offices

Multistoried university buildings are part of the campus as are offices, libraries, food stalls, restaurants, supermarkets, and administrative outlets. Outside the student offices I find this notice which reads “We accept your green garbage there (without oil). The collection happens on February 8 behind building 8. We are waiting for you”.

“And upstairs”, says the graffiti, “you can get crack cocaine”.

On this table there are little packages containing chilled gummies and snacks; on the other side are various on-campus publications for purchase that range from menstrual information to exposing government lies to issues involving indigenous peoples.

While shopping at UNAM’s own supermarket, indeed the university is so big that it needs its own supermarket, I was walking aimlessly through the aisles of foods that I had come to love. From the spicy grasshoppers to grandma’s hot chocolate, I found them all. However, when I asked where the tequila was, I stumbled into a hornet’s nest. Apparently, alcohol is strictly forbidden on campus; so is pot. I am sure that I smelled and saw both. In foraging for food, I came across this picture ...



Figure 37 ©MAGA 2019 Start the day with this brand of milk. “It doesn’t work”, says the sign

First week: Figuring it out, finding my bearing

It’s just lunch

I step out of the office with Larisa to accompany her to the office that deals with the health insurance claims of its employees. Yes, there is such an office on campus. Together, Larisa and I make our way to the closest bus stop just opposite the little shack that serves fresh-made sandwiches, freshly squeezed juices and fruit snacks next to the junk food shed that sells cigarettes.

Knowing how to order my favorite food, a *sincronizada* (a synchronized sandwich/ a version of quesadilla typical for Mexico City), has eventually become my favorite mid-day sport. It took a while to get comfortable in the fast-paced order-wait-pick-up rhythm. I admit to having had the order placed over the phone by my colleagues just to be safe because I feared that I might just get something completely different from my original order. Yet I tried...

I step up to the window, my neck tilted upward to meet the server's gaze - pushed by the approaching bodies of students and faculty all intent on ordering quickly to leave the mid-day heat to retreat into the cooler offices. I stand to the side, unsure. I fidget with the money in my sweaty palms inside sticky pant pockets, ready to order, repeating in my mind the pronunciation, terrified that I wouldn't understand any questions of specificity. 'Una sincronizada con jamón de pavo', por favor (a synchronized sandwich with turkey ham, please) is what eventually comes out. Good enough? I seem to have been understood! In rapid fire come the questions for additional condiments: jalapeños, vegetables, drinks, to go??... I strain to hear the various propositions unable to think as fast as the questions are coming. *No, gracias*, is all I mange.



Figure 38 © MAGA 2019 - Sincronizada – No, I don't have the habit of photographing all my food!

A trip to the health care office: Intimacy among strangers

We wait at the bus stop. People join on either side of us moving quickly as buses with various numbers and directions approach. I have no idea which color goes where, neither does the map make any sense to me. Nine lines, various stations, metro stops.... Help!!!! Finally, Larisa indicates that our bus is the one around the corner, so we step up to the curb. Three steps up and I enter a different world in which bodies, backpacks, music, and conversations mingle, mix, and leave the bus through the open windows. I encounter stares; I clearly do not belong; curiosity, questions, wonder I meet in the eyes of the passengers. The bus is full – I share the sweat, the intimacy with strangers as bodies brush against one another in the three-o'clock rush in curiosity on the 30-min ride to the outskirt of campus where one of the main arteries meets the campus.

Navigating the sidewalk, difficult to cross with its out of place cobble stones where my feet catch the uneven chippings, are vendors of all kinds. Food, knick-knacks, everyday necessities, cheap electronics, and the daily papers litter the entrance to the office where we are headed. The atmosphere, the smells, the sounds, the lights, and the lines all remind me of my life in Italy. Its bureaucracy, its unevenness, its rituals. I'm struck by the uncanny resemblance activating memories of a past life. Lines form in front of every counter moving in orderly fashion without numbers, red neon displays or paper tickets that I know from Canada. Like in Italy, each person asks the previous one if they are the last and so the line moves forward. I know this ...I belong in the line of waiting bodies, oddly not so out of place.

Walls – Murals – Posters

My daily routine of getting to class taking a taxi from CUAED where my office is to the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences where my classes are takes me five minutes and an average of 12 pesos, the equivalent of 80 cents. I could take the overcrowded bus that runs the entirety of the gigantic campus, but I am privileged, so I choose to incur the expense. Not only am I economically in the position to pay for a daily cab ride, but I also inhabit a different social status that marks me as a foreign professor and researcher. At times I feel a mocking deference that comes with this role as I find my way through spaces of belonging and difference.

Getting out of the cab, paying, and handling a full backpack is another story, however. The door jams, I get stuck feeling like an ungraceful woman, nothing close to the high-status expert I supposedly am ... I am a fish out of water staring intensely at the mural that presents itself in front of the cab door placed in the shade of the blaring mid-March sun. Not sure whether to stop to photograph the mural, I finally decide against it to amble, out of breath from the smog mixed with the altitude, towards the building shown to me days earlier.

To the right, a shady opening reveals a lunch spot whose smell of freshly made comida corrida (Mexican fast food, as in something that is cooked quickly) wafts through the air before even noticing the opening. Another day I will venture in.

The chain-linked fence up the hill, in stark contrast with the deliciously filled lunch air, spots black and white posters from the 1968 student protests and massacre of

Tlatelolco in Mexico City, while on my other side are murals that depict faces stifled by
censure and enchained democracy. Familiar themes for a leftist Mexican faculty of
political and social sciences referencing major western theoretical thinkers.



Figure 39 ©MAGA 2019 Side-by-side on the wall are my companions - Censorship – Dogma, Power, Das Kapital, Universal History, Money, and Power

Where are the indigenous voices? They stay just outside the fence off campus.



Figure 40 ©MAGA 2019 - Graffiti: I am the space in which I am. Translation of poster: International seminar – Indigenous epistemologies and intercultural education in Mexico City at the National Museum for Global Cultures.

Further up the hill, as I huff and puff, just around the corner from the ‘greatest’ thinkers, I turn left to stairs that will become my daily companion. Metaphorically, through these stairs, I create my own path of observations, impressions, and emotional moments. Stairs that lead me to my class, stairs that lead me to the ‘red shoes’, stairs that lead me to the portraits of the forcefully disappeared around the world, stairs that lead me to my comic pedagogy of discomfort. Then, I stop in my tracks shocked at the unexpected violence embedded in the photographs and the murderous fate. I study the posters when I recognize H.I.J.O.S.⁶², an organization in Latin America through which children of the forcefully disappeared connect to seek justice and whereabouts of their loved ones.

Though not comic in the traditional sense, the images below exemplify the accidental comic, the one that takes your breath away. The comic that leaves one thinking, creating a shift in perspectives, when emotionally caught by surprise or caught by dissonance. Here it left me emotionally shaken. What appears to be a bullet hole in the forehead of Mr. ?Ridvan Arakr..ç is actually left by a hole from a pipe in the concrete. Encountering the unsuspecting juxtaposition of the comic in tragedy, leaves me to ponder the fate of this man and others with him. This wall would be my companion on my way to class reminding me in my discomfort of this accidental comic in tragedy.



Figure 41 ©MAGA 2019 *The wall of the disappeared*

⁶² <https://www.hijos-capital.org.ar/nuestra-historia/> ; <https://www.britannica.com/topic/HIJOS>

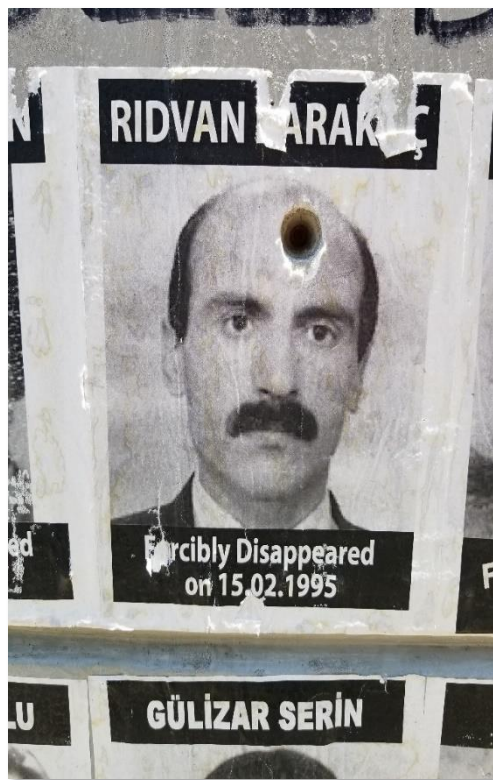


Figure 43 ©MAGA 2019 The forcibly disappeared.



Figure 42 © MAGA 2019, Sons and daughters for the identification and justice against forgetting and silence. Not forgetting, no forgiveness.

The cycle path: Intergenerational stories

Along the bike path at UNAM not far from my classroom I first discovered the storied images that connect the earthquakes of 1985 (in black and white) with images of 2017 (in color). The pictures depict changing and changed narratives, for me they are an example of the power of critique in Trümmerhumor. Observing the 2017 earthquake now depicted in color, I am struck by the overt nationalistic and patriotic rhetoric where a dog named Frida (maybe a not so subtle connection to Frida Kahlo?) saves them all. Cartoons, memes, and jokes around Frida saving Mexico have circulated widely on social media. The patriotic rhetoric around the benevolent state echoes U.S. rhetoric. Even the state logo is on the 2017 posters with the military/navy hailed as savior. In 1985, the biggest critique against the government was the use of the military to punish volunteers and keep them from reaching those stuck in the rubbles (Poniatowska, 1995; Solnit, 2010).

The collective cultural memory of the 1985 earthquake in Mexico City is connected to the one in 2017 as I have been reminded multiple times throughout my conversations. The earthquake in 2017 happened on almost the exact anniversary and so the 1985 event remains alive in the consciousness of many. The 2017 disaster was the first major earthquake since 1985. Social media was not present in 1985, so stories were shared through newspapers, fliers, murals, posters, clandestine publications, graffiti, or oral stories. As noted in the previous stop, modern social media have provided a rich digital personal or collective archive for the sharing of jokes, cartoons, and memes that we can draw from to understand how people create and share post-disaster humor and to gauge how they 'laughingly' remember. Remember Solis' cartoon that has circulated on various social media platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic especially immediately after the 2020 earthquake in Mexico City? Recycling or recirculating humor shows how pertinent the commentary remains while not losing its historical relevance but rather creating a new contemporary significance. Repurposing humor to tell a slightly different story is one of the advantages of accessibility to social media. Creativity and imagination are involved in telling multiple stories with the same humorous cartoon.

In the image below, volunteers and neighbors organize themselves to form chains. Through the long exposure, the volunteers in the first photo appear ghostlike.



Figure 44 ©MAGA 2019 Mexico City Ghosts



Figure 45 ©MAGA 2019 Mexican Greatness - Translation: a teenager cleans the surrounding areas of the fallen building at the corner of Bolivar and Chimalpopoca to allow for rescue work.

The number of volunteers among high school and university students during and after the 2017 earthquake was remarkably high, says Miguel, the teacher in whose class I was a guest lecturer. The reason for this, he believes, are the intergenerational stories told by parents and grandparents about the effects of the 1985 earthquake which made students volunteer. Cuevas (2005), Preston and Dillon (2004), and Solnit (2010) attest to the historical social changes resulting from the student protests of 1968 and the earthquakes of 1985 when citizens took life and rescue efforts into their own hands.

These events are often cited together as they were both significant in the making of modern Mexican society. Student participation in the rescue and clean-up efforts and civil disobedience were a direct consequence of the perceived or real absence of government during the 1985 earthquake. Another consequence of the state's failure to act was the creation of unions such as the seamstress union because of the many casualties of single women seamstresses in the tailoring district of Mexico City. Other significant outcomes included the creation of a housing authority pushing back against the attempt at a forced gentrification of the poor from the centre to the outskirts of the

city, an advanced seismic detection system, and ultimately the end of the one-party autocratic rule of the PRI.

The collage of photos below is a small selection of images from 1985 fastened to the chain linked fence. No words explain their presences – I am left to my own devices to make sense of the destruction. As I move along the path, the narrative changes – from black and white into full color images which now include explanations, titles, and voices. The government message found in the 2017 images stands in stark contrast to the lack in official commentary in 1985. Even the rescue dog is engulfed in a different narrative.



Figure 46 ©MAGA 2019 - Earthquake pictures along the cycle path: 1985 meets 2017 in anticipation of 2020 and 2021; made with Collage Maker



Figure 47 ©MAGA 2019 Military personnel with Frida - the canine hero hailed so for the number of human lives rescued. Mexican greatness - the spirit against adversity [plan marina – the navy plan]



Figure 48 Frida (in style) Mexican Navy's (SEMAR) Canine Unit - <https://www.eonline.com/news/882194/meet-frida-the-heroic-rescue-dog-who-s-already-saved-12-lives-in-mexico>

Figure 49 ©MAGA 2019



Figure 50 ©MAGA 2019

Frida – who has become a major asset in the hero narrative - has even made it onto the 500-peso bill. Mocking this hero narrative, the students told me that a meme posted on Facebook said, “I am going to go to bed with my dog’s kibble so that they are going to find me in case of an earthquake.”

I come to know later through my conversations and readings that the absences along the path speak of an absent government, of abandoned citizens and abandoned single women, *madres solteras*. Veiled critique of government is encapsulated in the nuggets of humor speaking of abandonment, self-sufficiency, and self-reliance as well as an aversion to change. The protection of the status quo, since no alternatives may be imagined, can lead to a sense of resignation to the destruction as the homemade seismic devices may indicate. They can be found in the rubbles to seep into humor.

Aviso importante – an important announcement



Figure 51 ©MAGA 2019 Important announcement

Above is the notice upon entry to the building where I teach. “On the 19th of September, the Ministry for the Safeguard of Buildings, has given the green light to the CUAED building where I worked. After the Sept 19, 2017, earthquake, the structural safety of this building has been ascertained. The small damages that have been found, will be resolved shortly”. Not entirely true, as I was assured.

The faculty of Political and Social Sciences is a vast catch basin for degrees in public administration, sociology, political and social science and so on. I was scheduled to teach for two hours twice a week. I also booked a final group conversation with the entire class. Five male students agreed to talk with me once classes were over. As a former English as a foreign/ second language (ESL/EFL) instructor, I drew on my experience with language learning students. This time the focus was not grammar and vocabulary but humor and the exploration of political, cultural, and social aspects of Mexican society and beyond. The prospect of speaking with, learning from, and interacting with a foreign researcher and professor was helpful in creating support from the administrators and the students since this would bring academic capital in the form of participation certificates used on their CVs.

Staircase to ‘heaven’: On my way to the new classroom

I make my way up a few more flights of stairs to finally reach the open staircase leading up to the classroom plastered with mostly feminist murals, invitations to protests and incitements to participate in lectures. Femicide is considered rampant in Mexico and other Latin American countries making it sadly common for posters in the halls to raise awareness and to provoke a governmental stop to the unpunished murders of women. In my class, female students outnumber the male students four to one.



Figure 52 ©MAGA 2019 Walls outside the classroom

The first poster reads: *Fourteen femicides a day; We together against fear.*

The second reads: *Princesses do not exist.*



Figure 53 ©MAGA 2019 Walls outside the classroom

The cacophony of voices as students break for lunch are sounds now unfamiliar to my Canadianized ears as are the blasting loudspeakers coming through the open windows of the room, I will use for the next five weeks. Looking around I notice the arrangement of the chairs, the stark walls, the whiteboard, and the windows without glass panes covered by hefty curtains that block out the midday heat. The lone sparrow that sits on the curtain rod looks as lost as I am.

Then, as my gaze roams the room, my pedagogical home, I notice on the back of the wall a golden stencil shimmering in the little bit of light that comes through the drawn curtains. It eerily sets the tone for my class: *somos más fuerte que un Nokia 3310* - we are stronger than a Nokia 3310⁶³.

⁶³ The Nokia 3310 model is considered an indestructible, unhackable dumbphone that may help to survive the apocalypse according to <https://www.techradar.com/news/the-nokia-3310-just-turned-20-years-old-heres-what-made-it-special>

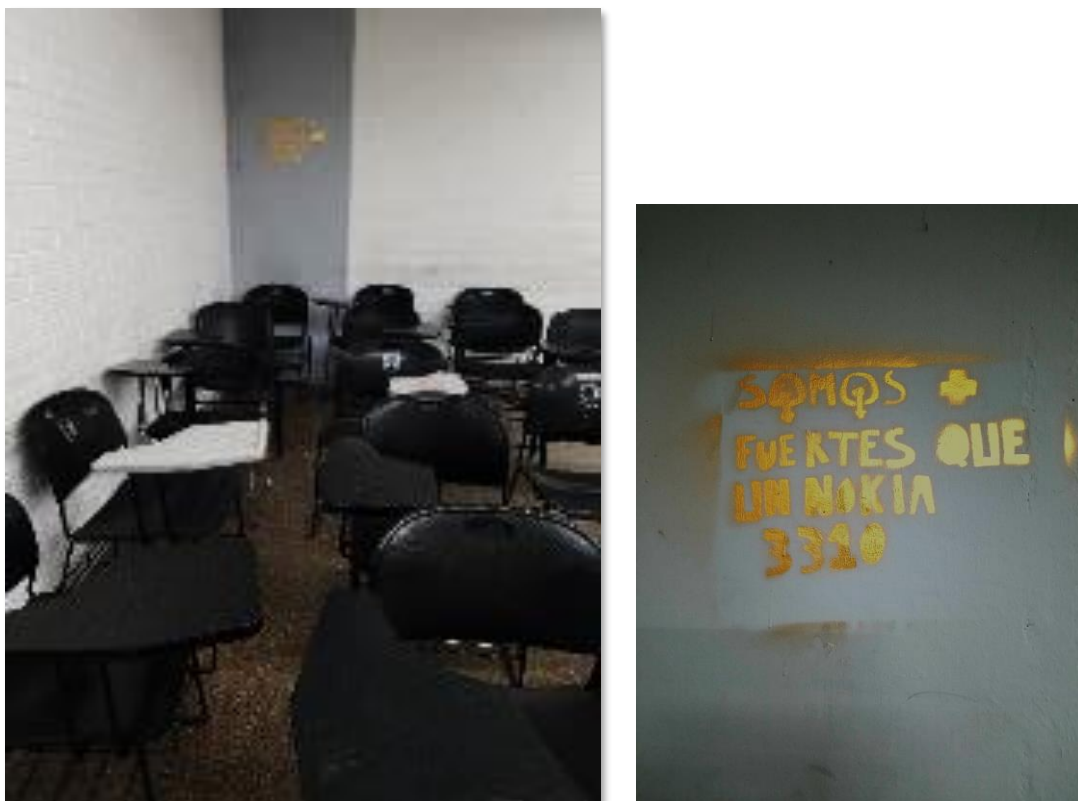


Figure 54 ©MAGA 2019 – vignettes of a classroom

There are no projectors; I have to bring my own paper, whiteboard markers too, otherwise they will disappear. I am thrown into a very different economic context. The students see themselves as privileged to attend UNAM, considered a prestigious public institution. While it does not levy tuitions fees, an entry exam is required. I carry my own laptop protecting it like a hawk since my PhD lives in its folders; I carry both speakers and projector to be able to share videos, pictures, and slides with this class of 22.

I walk the halls that bear a daily reminder of fissures and damaged possibilities. Signs that show me the way in case of evacuation; signs, which tell me that the buildings I inhabit are in working order and that the hairline fissures are only cosmetic. Maybe. The absent fire extinguisher brings into focus the absurdity of updated procedures. The simplicity of signs is substituted with the absurdity of a poster outlining a complicated set of procedures. The fire extinguisher is missing - yet its ghostly function is still present on the wall; the new version of procedures sits below. As a Facebook post shows,

one should not update one's status in case of an earthquake either. Or, even more laconically, the small poster tells people that they are just f**d if they are the last one out.



Figure 55 ©MAGA 2019 The Case of the Missing Fire Extinguisher is replaced with a detailed card outlining evacuation procedure. Takes a bit to read.



Figure 56 Personal Communication: In case of an earthquake, the last one is f**ked.

From top left to bottom right:

- Ask someone else if the earth is shaking
- Trying not to move to see if you can corroborate
- Keep an internal dialogue whether to stay or to leave
- Forget everything you should be doing
- Think for a couple of seconds that nothing bad is going to happen
- Think for a few seconds that you were worth it
- Lessen the anxiety with jokes on twitter
- Promise yourself that next time you'll be doing it right
- Obviously not

Figure 57 ©Eduardo Salles *Used with permission: www.cinismoilustrado.com;* <https://twitter.com/sallesino/status/581502449564798976> What you need to do in case of an earthquake – in case of the earthquake, stay calm and post it on Facebook before getting out

The spoof on the official procedures, but also mocking the procedures themselves, or mocking the apparent addiction to updating one's personal status on social media and the mania for selfies in dangerous situation are all encapsulated in the above sign.

Teaching about and through humor

My UNAM course was organized around these five themes: 1) introduction to humor theories; 2) functions of humor; 3) humor in social movements; 4) indigenous humor; and 5) post-disaster humor. First through an online portal, then through a WhatsApp group, I encouraged the students to share their own comic artifacts or any other useful materials in relation to these themes. I collected these artifacts to bring to class to continue our conversations.

Surveying the crowd, establishing intimacy with students, and building trust was part of my efforts to create this new community of laughter. To help achieve this intimacy and trust, I asked the UNAM students what they knew about humor, who they were in relation to humor, and how they experienced humor in their own lives, particularly in relation to disasters. I wanted to create a community where we were not only talking *about* humor, but also *being* humorous. Co-creating humor was many times more important than talking about humor. As I discovered, the students had vastly different backgrounds yet shared similar political attitudes and critical thinking around political, cultural, and social processes of their Mexican national and individual identity, their humor, and their place in life. Many aspire to visit or move to the United States or Canada. Averaging twenty years of age, they were between their second and fourth year of their programs. This course on the social cultural and political functions of humor was considered a credit toward part of their English language requirements for graduation. Linguistically we moved between Spanish and English in our explorations of the subtleties of Mexican verbal humor.

I considered my own place as insider, outsider, expert, and student/researcher, visiting scholar - all labels and considerations not shared by the students who initially only saw me as the foreign professor that had come to import and impart wisdom and knowledge. The most common question was, 'How do you see Mexico and what do you think Mexico needs to do to step out of the shadows of the United States?' I invited the comic into these conversations to mock my loss for answers that do not sound like an advertisement for the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank or an endorsement for capitalism. The status of a foreign scholar is one of higher class with access to a highly regarded North American education and opportunities that are lacking for many

in Mexico. This manifests itself in how I am addressed or spoken to, the questions I am asked and what titles are used. Maestra or profesora are the most common – since I have a master’s degree, I am called by this professional title, or I am simply called professor. Getting the students to call me by my first name is almost impossible – crossing the divide from distance to intimacy takes time. However, having honed my skills for over thirty years in multicultural classrooms I knew I needed to break the ice early on. I am apt at cultivating relationships, creating new ones swiftly, bridging divides, particularly through humor.

Through my own comic worldview, I am able to shift from the taken-for-granted assumptions of outsider/ insider/ expert moving towards co-creator, co-investigator, and colleague. Staying with discomfort and vulnerability were key. Bridging this divide in a professional environment was not desired at times and was sometimes met with suspicious resistance. Hierarchical social and professional structures are engrained in everyday interactions; I clearly felt my position as outsider. Instead of experiencing direct defiance, I relied on my intuition and sense of discomfort to guide me to when I was uninvited, regarded as suspicious, or an unwelcome outsider.

Starting a new course is always uncharted territory particularly at a foreign university. So, during the first introductory meeting with the students, it was important to set the tone to bridge the unknown and the discomforts of expectations. I had never taught this course before, but the themes and activities were familiar to me having gathered them from workshops and talks I have conducted in various formal and informal settings. As I have mentioned, a comic pedagogy of discomfort involves thinking about how to create a space for vulnerability or where trust is established such that discomfort is not met with fear nor avoidance. On my first day teaching at UNAM, March 25th, 2019, a space of vulnerability and a certain amount of intimacy was created, although not in a conscious way. Here is this moment etched in my memory:

Finally, I get to live the dream of teaching a course on humor that I have designed over the arc of five years. In my introduction to the students, Larisa presents a brief bio of me. She sits on a chair just to my side as I stand in front of this new class. After the perfunctory introduction, I tell the story of my collaboration with Larisa, how her ideas

of online learning and my ideas of humor were crosspollinating our understanding of our research. True to my ESL training, I checked back with the students about the meaning of crosspollination. While doing so, I told the students that crosspollination was like going from flower to flower with Larisa. This unintended sexual innuendo broke the ice between the weird foreign instructor and the local students. Trust me when I say that it was very uncomfortable. In many ways, though, it was a perfect beginning to teaching a course at UNAM about humor, through humor and vulnerability where a pedagogy of comic discomfort revealed itself. The following instances move along these moments of vulnerability and discomfort.

Entering skin first: Bridging the divide

In my first encounter with the UNAM students I also cannot disguise my skin condition which renders me even whiter than white, nor can I disguise the quite visible tattoos that are inscribed onto my arms. On other occasions, I would have covered those tattoos trying to render the students comfortable with my own sense of otherness. This time is different, I enter the conversation skin first, on my way to a comic pedagogy of discomfort, vulnerability, and courage.



Figure 58 ©MAGA 2019 Leopard Spots – the back of my own hand

Entering skin first: Revealing spots

I move through the world skin first

I turn increasingly whiter as my spots progress⁶⁴

As I sit in the scorching Mexican heat and my skin tans,
I show up to my own skin maps and writings
Unable to decipher the hieroglyphic markings.

Perhaps, they lead to what I seek. (MAGA, 2019)

Since I have white spots all over my body, I suggest to the students I could be a leopard. I am thinking with Ahmed and Stacey (2004) through my own skin as I enter my research/ teaching space in Mexico. “Skin is both lived as boundary and point of connection” revealing distanced intimacies; “skin is the place where one touches and is touched making it the most intimate experiences and the most public marker of histories and memories” (Ahmed & Stacey, 2004, preface). White skin, or fair skin, seen as desirable, as superior, as privileged is marked on my body as different, as diseased, as dis/eased — many do not know what I carry or who I carry. Am I diseased? Am I contagious? Am I an insider/outsider to my own skin? I open the book to my own skin, in my own vulnerability (Brown, 2012) rompiendo el hielo (breaking the ice).

Is this self-deprecating humor also part of becoming part of a group? How do you mask skin since it is the first visible embodied contact between me and the world? Leopards - Jaguars are revered in Mexico. They are messengers and carry spots within spots marking not only their fur but also their skin. The jaguar of the same family as the leopard, has been depicted since Meso-American times as messenger between light and darkness.

You lie in wait between light and dark
between the stars and earth
your spots the twinkling stars
that hide, reveal, estrange
the hidden dimension from the light
the lighter dimension from their hiding places

⁶⁴ Vitiligo is a progressive autoimmune disease for which there are no known causes or cures. Connected to other autoimmune diseases, I walk the earth with my skin companion.

hidden in plain sight
rendered visible through the spots
you walk from the shadows into the light
spots first. (MAGA 2020)

My spots, however, do not camouflage me when I enter the classroom; they render me hyper-visible. As Dimmendaal (2015) clarifies “the spots of the leopard reflect selective advantages for its natural habitat” (p. 2). There are scientific explanations for the rosettes of the leopard; other explanations are constructed through myths and stories. My adaptive strategies are the comic.

Bromearse or teasing as a form of humor brings not only laughter and care but also violence into the relationships. In a politically correct northern world, such humor is often perceived as derogative and demeaning. When I indicated that I might be called a leopard or a jaguar because of the spots on my skin, my self-deprecating humor helped to ease the tensions of a foreigner coming into the students’ space and helped to create a sense of trust in my efforts to co-create, to listen.

A night full of sounds: Learning to listen

As I adjust the mosquito netting around the frayed hammock, I wonder about all the critters big and small that may be wandering around the village while all are asleep. Little did I know that the netting is only a perfunctory protection against the tiniest invisible sleep deprivers as the white specks on my limbs would attest on my flight home shunned for fear of being contagious.

The little pitter patter scurrying creatures near the hammock are more easily identifiable – apparently trivial sounds amplified by the deepest darkest night more difficult to discern. It will take weeks before I have the courage to ask trying to duplicate the unsettling sound. A jaguar, no less, in the vicinity of the camp is strolling around the unprotected perimeter searching for easy prey, the hammock providing no protection from this striking predator. The Amazon fauna, deeply embedded in my memories, has taken me to the banks of the Orinoco⁶⁵, Isla Ratón, the jaguar and the indigenous teachers who shared their selva [the jungle] and the raudales [rapids], teaching me to listen.

⁶⁵ Research project in the Venezuelan Amazon on the “Cultural adaptation of Piara to extreme climate”

Jaguars: Tenochtitlan – Teotihuacán - Pyramids

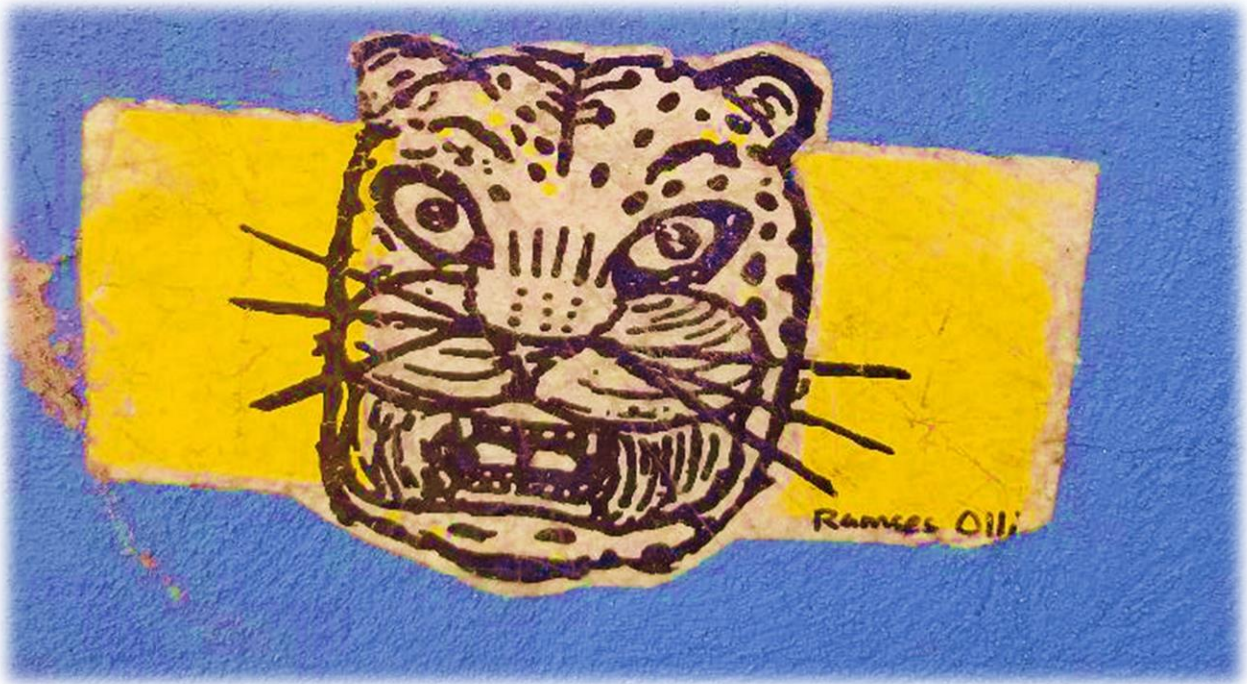


Figure 59 ©MAGA 2019 Jaguar stencil art - wall to Faculty of Political and Social Sciences, Mexico City

Even from the bus I can hear the call...
Vendors at the pyramids display carved jaguar heads
blowing into them to recreate the eerie rattling call of this elusive animal.

I feel a connection
To the spots,
To the elusiveness
To the eerie calls
That mimic the animal
To scare
To recall
To ...

As I ascent the steep steps up the sun pyramid
Among others who have chosen to be there early on this hot day,
I hear the luring call.

Standing atop, I can feel the echoes of the calls far below in the valley
The space between the sun and the moon
Held together by the plumed serpent.
I let the sheer immensity of the valley

The closeness to the sun descends
onto my skin and into my being as
I join the energies that encircle these ancient creations.

My skin tingles to the rhythm of the calls
My own spots burn in the morning sun
I turn toward the moon
Bringing my presence as a gift.

Why, do you ask, am I speaking of skin when I research humor? ¿La blanca? ⁶⁶
The privileged one? (MAGA 2020)

Revealing spots to one another – keeping relationships intact

As noted, I built an important connection with students through my spots and calling myself a Jaguar. Such banter and nicknaming proved to be fundamental to the students' comic creations, worldview, and maintenance of relationships. Creating nicknames for ingroup members such as friends, family and close acquaintances is highly appreciated, while the same strategies are used to name outgroup members, thus upholding and fashioning boundaries (Ziv, 2010). These nicknames can focus on bodily ailments, perceived character flaws, and any other characteristic rendering a person different. In other parts of the world this might be considered bullying, though the students assured me that this was a way to show affection and to accept one's deepest flaws whether they are physical or psychological. El gordo, la bola (the fat one, the ball), la flaca (the skinny one) are just small examples for the types of nicknames the students explained. These nicknames zoom in on deeply-seated insecurities. Could it engender a move from flaws to strengths? Maybe it is a desensitization to one's own flaws and insecurities, building survival strength?

In one case, a student mentions his mother being a pro at creating nicknames for everyone because she was able to zero in on the main particularity of a person and translate it into a nickname. His mother called her friend a *colibri* going from flower to flower in reference to her drinking alcohol. Ah, crosspollination again! Entering skin first during my teaching in Mexico helped me to shift from being an outsider to an insider, well a little bit less than an outsider. This comic move aligned with how Mexicans pride themselves on teasing about obvious or prominent mental, physical, or

⁶⁶ The white one

other distinctive features. Being at the receiving end of such teasing can make you stronger or show that someone belongs, or it can make you an outcast, say Pablo and Roberto, two of the students. In my case, it made me both.

Pablo refers to a sense of intimacy necessary among friends and close acquaintances to create nick names, to engage in verbal battles, to *alburear*, and to tease. In this play among close friends, people know that it is a 'joke' so that feelings are not hurt, and relationships remain intact. As Justine noted, *being the butt of a joke doesn't hurt as much because you're in on it*. *Alburear* is an oral battle that relies on sexual and other innuendoes; when asked about an example, Pablo had this to say:

G. Can you give me an example of an *albur*?

P. No I can't. It is *playing* humor⁶⁷ in the situation.

G. Are you good at it?

P. [He laughs proudly], yes, I am. Not only with my friends but also with people that I meet. But it is better with people that you know. They need to understand.

In relation to Pablo's statement of *playing humor*, again, I draw on *The Little Prince* (1943), who mentions that "words are the source of misunderstanding" (p. x) particularly in translation. Yet, at times exactly the equivocation reveals the meaning - playing is juxtaposing what does not fit - maybe to make others laugh.

What important function does this ability to tease, mock and ridicule have in Mexican society, one which invokes pride in students, their friends, and their family members? Ridicule and mockery, it seems, is not always negative. What functions may it present that other societies have lost? Martineau (1972) and Ziv (2010) argue that it may have these four functions: a) establish in-group superiority, b) create in-group/out-group boundaries and belonging, c) desensitization to one's own insecurities and a survival training, and d) show care.

As I explored with the students how nicknames are created, I mentioned that this form of teasing, mimicking, or mocking would, in my home context, be considered politically incorrect or would constitute harassment. This interpretation was considered quite foreign to these students. When a people already mock death, what else remains?

⁶⁷ he says *playing humor* while maybe meaning 'joking'

Perhaps, there are reasons why Mexicans mimic and mock. First, they mimic to flatter, and second, they mock to flatter defiantly. Mocking may be used when Mexicans feel inferior or superior (Schmidt & Schmidt, 2014) in relation to their standing with authorities, governments and colonial histories. Humor cuts both/ many ways.

During the second to last week of teaching to explore indigenous humor and cultural appropriation, I showed two video performances of Charlie Hill, the first Native American to do a routine on the Richard Pryor Show in 1977⁶⁸, and the performances of Tito Ybarra⁶⁹. The videos provoked a discussion about the limited presence of indigenous humor in Mexico and the world. During that week's discussion, the students brought to the classroom examples of indigenous humor, but this humor was about indigenous peoples not humor created by Indigenous peoples.

"We didn't think that indigenous peoples had a distinct comic worldview", said the students during and after watching the videos. Previously they had brought indigenous memes and cartoons that ranged from themes of vegetarianism to colonial legacies, but the punchlines of those memes were *about* indigenous peoples not examples of indigenous-generated humor.

Another five minutes is all it takes for a German ... to protest

Preparing for another class, I again stand in front of my classroom door with the hustle and bustle of students moving through the hallway to reach other rooms, their friend for lunch or simply to leave campus. The heavy door sports a window through which I can see its occupants. It is a small group headed by an older professor engaged in discussion with his students. I lean against the cool wall waiting for the session to end so that I can set up my computer. With an external projector and audio equipment, it always takes a while to get all the cables connected and the materials organized so I like to have time to collect myself in the space in preparation for the challenging topic of humor in social protests.

⁶⁸ Maybe a peak to their performance here: <https://youtu.be/545t5SvvyDo>
<https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/books/a35446676/charlie-hill-native-comedian/>

⁶⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UQO5Qcl8aAk>

It is the same prof I have seen before. The bell rings: out of courtesy I wait five minutes with my own students gathering behind me. Then I decide to make a move - I open the door to ask the instructor how much more time he would need since my class was ready to start. I offered him 10 more minutes - he counter-offered 5, which I accepted. True to my German punctuality, after the allotted five minutes, I gestured him to wrap it up. He said he needed more time; I told him that I would give him the unused minutes next week.

Disaster preparedness Mexican style



Figure 60 Personal communication with students/ Earthquake detector model #2012 on the Richter scale...don't touch! And the second reads: Earthquake detector.

As we moved into post-disaster humor in Mexico, the students told me about their own disaster preparedness. Mexicans perceive the government as absent in creating adequate seismic prevention systems; students and their families have thus created their own in the form of chimes hanging over doors and inside windows to hear the shaking of the earth, a not so veiled critique of the government's lack of action. Even if since the 1985 earthquakes the government has instituted official seismic protocols, preparedness and alarm systems, the distrust runs deep. It is better to rely on one's own ingenuity than on the government. This remembering of an absent government bridges the way that people intergenerationally remember and perform memory in/through/after disasters. This performed cultural memory which I elaborated on in stop four, is evident in the students' stories.

"We can't joke about the people affected by the tragedies, but we can joke about the absurdities in tragedies and the failings of the politicians in mitigating the effects", say the Mexican students in my class. The Mexican students still have a keen sense of civil accountability, a distrust in government institutions, and a strong political and social involvement, particularly at UNAM, a left leaning university. During the 2017 earthquake, students on campus helped one another to evacuate the buildings and support one another in the aftermath even helping others to get in touch with loved ones farther away.

During my time at UNAM, it became clear that earthquakes were not considered single, disconnected moments in time, but rather entangled webs of events showing what is required to change. The following series of textual excerpts come from recordings and consequent transcripts of my conversations with the teacher and the students. Miguel, the teacher, shared his encounter with the 2017 earthquake.

I was about to enter class, my class at CU [ciudad universitaria, UNAM] when I felt the earth shaking.

1:10 - just walking to the classroom; I heard the alarm - it was the commemoration of the 1985 earthquake; we had a drill. On my way to CU, I saw/ read some memes about the drill. They were mocking the drill - when the earthquake hit, there were already memes that were making fun of the drill connected to the 1985 earthquake.

I thought it was a drill — and then the earth was already shaking heavily; many women and young students were in shock and crying. Some men too but mostly women.

Evacuated — I was about to enter the class — the students were just coming in, but I helped people to evacuate — I kind of helped — I was scared but I don't really panic. Fractions in which I do not know what is going to happen; I was safe but also you don't know what is going to happen; I was sure I wasn't going to die that day, so I started to help. *But it was big, not like the disaster movies.*

It was bigger than anyone anticipated; we didn't know the extent of the earthquake until much later; the telephones were not working, so we had no connection to any signal. Signals were blocked, no way to understand what was going on until about 4-5 hours later; the radio was broadcasting; only later it became apparent that many buildings had collapsed; [different areas than in 1985 - connection is always present, though]

Only later we were able to communicate with our families.

Both Pablo, a student, and Miguel mention the laughter of relief when they noticed that they had survived the recent earthquake; emotional distancing helps to appreciate these aftershocks [of laughter].

As mentioned in the previous stop, the 2017 earthquake occurred on the almost exact anniversary of the 1985 earthquakes. I noted how intergenerational and performed cultural memories were operating. Here is Pablo's account of his experience

I actually live at the outskirts of the city - called Netzahualcoyot - I travel about an hour and a half to my faculty. That day I remember that I was on the way from my faculty. I was about two minutes away from my home I was on the public transport when I felt the shaking.

It was funny, because I thought that the driver was drunk - wtf, what is happening.

We see the lights and they were shaking, and I was scared because I have felt so many earthquakes but never like that.

My family lives near where I was, and I was walking toward where they are living, and I was shaking as well as the country.

So, when the earthquake ended and I got to my house to see if everything was alright, we had materials for the business of my parents, ladrillo, cemento ⁷⁰ and all had fallen down. It was a complete disaster in my house.

This is where I was.

My sister was in the school, she is older than me, 31. Just my dogs; because they were pretty frightened about what was going on.

And I just relaxed them.

More like after when we saw the disaster in the house - we were like, at least we were not in the house, maybe just small jokes about the dogs being ok or they are not running away - small ones. We joked around after it was over.

[we talked about the 1985 earthquakes] Yes, because my mother used to work in the centre of the city. And she remembered that when she went to her work, they said, no you can't pass because there was the earthquake and so many buildings fell down.

And my mother was frightened because she didn't know what to do. My father came from Veracruz, so it was when he came to the city only to see it falling down.

This is what I was reminded about.

We immediately checked on our friends on social media. We checked in and asked if everyone was ok and if anyone needed help. Because many of my friends like [are] in Mexico City. So, I was scared for anyone being injured so we were in touch with all in those days.

If someone needed help.

There was a lot of humor, but it was more like a comparison between the other states that were injured before Mexico City because before it happened, but it was in Oaxaca, and we played jokes about the bolillos⁷¹.

Because the earthquake didn't happen in Mexico City first, so there was a lot of teasing - so it was in Oaxaca, and I am not in that situation. So, when it happened in Oaxaca, I remember that all the social media were playing jokes.

There is tension and rivalry between Mexico City and Oaxaca. In their humor, students showed me how intimate distances were operating in the ancient rivalries between the

⁷⁰ Bricks and cement

⁷¹ Bolillos are white rolls commonly used in Mexico City and jokingly referred to as medicinal panacea for any situation, event, or ailment.

periphery and the capital city. As long as the event is seen as distant, one can tease and mock others. Both locations, in turn, became the butt of jokes told by the rival. In Roberto's account below, in both Spanish and English, he poses profound questions about the purpose of humor in relation to life in general and to earthquakes more specifically.

Humor nourishes much like cooking. Good food can make people feel good. Bad food can make people feel like shit.

En la colonia donde vivo se cayó un edificio durante el temblor – yo ayude' - y normalmente la gente se burla de los oficiales o de los políticos y la falta de apoyo político y económico – [in the neighborhood where I live, a building crumbled during the earthquake – I helped- normally people make fun of government officials or politicians and the lack of political and economic support]

but the people helped each other - there is not making fun of the disaster itself but of the circumstances that either appear before, during or after the disaster – [it is] definitely not used to make fun of the persons within the disaster [or the tragedy] but more to lighten the situation without making fun of the people or the lives lost

La función del humor en el desastre es mucho más para aligerar la situación que no burlarse de la situación o de las personas [the function of humor in disasters is not to make fun of the situation or of the people]

¿Pueden ser chistes - bromas – o modos de hablar? [they can be jokes, pranks, or ways of talking]

When the earthquake hit, I was at the uni in the library

All were panicking - agitated - we sat down with an old woman - and then they talk[ed] about what they felt and the panic that they felt - a form of speaking - relief - *ya paso'* – [it's over]

To conclude, here is a summary of how my co-humorists saw humor⁷²:

Humor provides different perspectives for life

Humor hides and reveals simultaneously

Humor shows a comic view of life to deal with it

Humor exposes hypocrisy

Humor is Mexico's medicine.

Humor is machista.

Humor exposes lack of memory in Mexican culture

Humor is not professional

Humor is a not a mood

Humor is Mexico's way of life

Humor in the form of albures is a código secreto (a secret code)

Humor callejero/ street humor

Humor for potential disasters

Humor shows courage

Humor prepares you for the worst

Humor shows intimacy and draws you in deeper

Humor is a coping mechanism for a foreigner

Humor shows real life situations

Humor is an attitude and an affirmation of life

Humor is rooted in human essence

Humor goes to the heart of things

Laughter is an act of living

It is the humor that will teach you

Humor has a dark side

Humor strips you naked.

Humor overcomes fear

Moving On ...

In this stop I have shared many pedazos, stories and photos of my Mexican journey and my connection with the students at UNAM who became my co-humorists rather than research participants. Co-creation is central to the pedagogical contributions of humor. It is also fleeting, ephemeral, emergent and organic, occurring in the moment of laughter. I was often left with either the feeling of connection, of having been able to be a contributor or with the sense of being a complete outsider in this Spanish/ English humor ping-pong game. This process of co-creation would prove significant in forging relationships, in the depth of conversations and in its inevitable vulnerabilities. In the next stop I continue to explore the process of connecting in a classroom where humor was explored and created.

⁷² This collection of statements is a verbatim summary from my encounters.

INTERMEZZO #6

I hope you were able to travel with me as I navigated my way in Mexico, beginning with the airport, on to UNAM and then to my classroom. Everyday was a challenge and an opportunity to immerse myself in Mexican humor. Let's have another pause to catch our breath, maybe chat about what stories and images struck you, what memories you had about being an intimate stranger in a strange land. But we won't stop too long before getting back on the bus. We've got two more stops to go....

STOP SIX: A comic pedagogy of discomfort

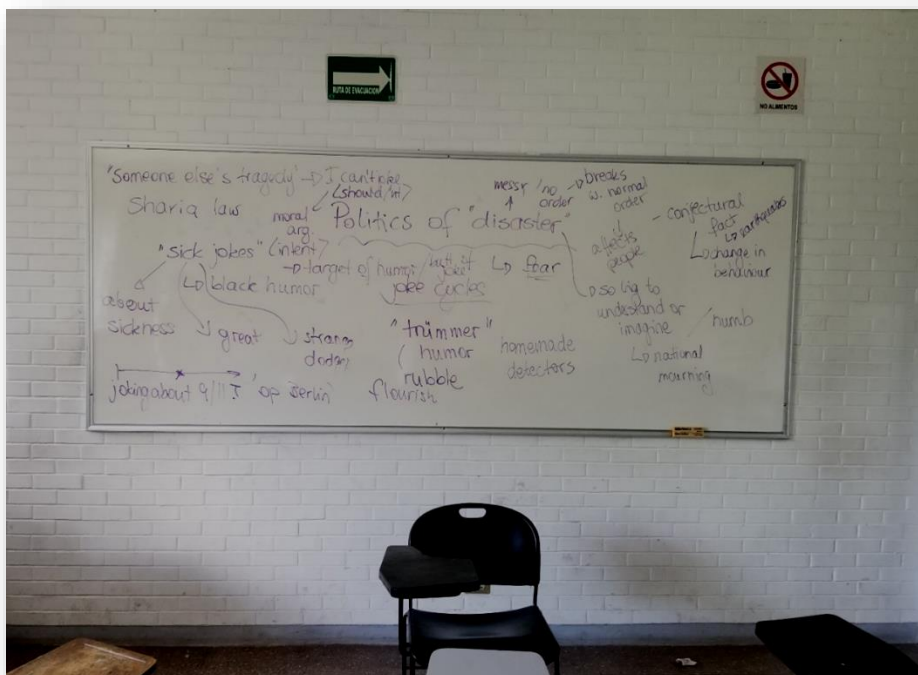


Figure 61 © MAGA 2019 my classroom board on 'Politics of Disaster' – At least I know not to eat and which way to evacuate.

In the previous stop, I shared many everyday street experiences and my UNAM encounters during my stay in Mexico. Most were unexpected ephemeral interactions with roommates, taxi and uber drivers, food vendors, students, objects, and stories. These informal conversations challenged my understanding my taboos, my discomforts, and being in the world. And, I have come to value deeply the unexpected informal pedagogical moment.

This stop delves deeper into an idea/concept which emerged from this doctoral journey, particularly from my time at UNAM. I have come to conceptualize a comic pedagogy of discomfort and how it involves a connection between intimacy, vulnerability, and discomfort. I began this journey intrigued with the pedagogical possibilities of humor. Here I offer my own approach to such pedagogy that occurs in both formal classrooms and informal settings. Centre-stage is the understanding that humor has the ability, particularly its generation of discomfort, to teach us about how to understand, y/our place in the world. In this stop, I linger for a while longer and in some

respects, I offer some theorizing of a comic pedagogy of discomfort. I begin this discussion by briefly returning to the notion of the stop.

The stop as teachable moment

Years ago, when I first started contemplating comic moments, the set-up and the punchline seemed significant. The more closely I examined and experienced these processes, I observed a moment immediately before the burst of laughter (or cringe) which I call *the stop*. It is the significant pause before audiences respond with discomfort, delight, or disagreement. And by audience, I mean anyone willing to engage in a comic moment. I return to Applebaum's (1995) notion of the stop which is an embodied awareness, a teachable or learnable moment. The stop may be a punchline, an unexpected moment of recognition, a coming into presence of what was previously unexplored, that which becomes alive, awake in a disturbance, disruption, in laughter, jolted into an awareness of a different way to know. These stops are not necessarily major epiphanies, although they can be. These stops can be instances of wonder or hauntings, they may create an invitation, a pedagogical instance through which we can engage with the world. This can be a solitary moment or one occurring in the company of others, both inside and outside a classroom. The power of stops, I argue, are the instances of discomfort, vulnerability, and intimacy courageously reveling in them.

I have used the following cartoon in classes and workshops to exemplify the stop.



Figure 62 ©2011 Malcolm Evans – with permission from the author Title: *Cruel world* published in New Zealand in the Christchurch Press, the Timaru Herald, and the Manawatu Standard

I am offended

I am offended was the students' and workshop participants' reaction. After the initial reaction of *I am offended*, I invited a young woman who made the statement to lean into her discomfort to express what it was that was missed or that the group had not yet learned. Pushing through the initial *I am offended* reaction into what lies beneath, might allow us to question our ideas of femininity, patriarchy, and our relationships with our bodies. Exploring the initial uncomfortable stop reaction led to an examination of divergent, strong and differing points of views and consequently to questioning of deep-seated assumptions in our worldviews.

Without exploring the statement *I am offended* further, an opportunity is missed to delve into the depth of its meaning. I am offended can hinder and stifle much needed conversations inside and outside the classroom through which there is an opportunity to reflect and challenge our assumptions and beliefs, our knowledges, our worlds, our discomforts, our own vulnerabilities, or our delights. Without this exploration, such a statement becomes a form of resistance to dialogue and resistance to uncomfortable discussions that can get to the heart of difficult topics.

In these stop moments, there is an opportunity to attend to our embodied reactions; giving voice to the offense can point to something missed or something not yet learned. Graefer et al. (2019, p. 173) explain it this way, "Offense is an affectively charged, slippery subject that escapes clear definitions" and "is to be distinguished from that which is illegal". In its powerful charged affects, there is a pedagogical opportunity. And what is deemed offensive can change across space, time, and context.

One afternoon I was presented with a meme in class that depicted Hitler [I will not repeat the text] ... when I first saw the meme, I was stunned by my powerful reaction that catapulted me back to my grandfather's stories of internment during WWII in Germany. On the other hand, the Mexican students, removed in time, place and space from the historical content of the meme, did not share my discomfort, nor my historical sensibilities. They would have been more uncomfortable about the depiction of feminicide in Mexico. At first, I was tempted to prohibit the use of the meme using my

authority as the teacher. Being in the presence of the comic can, at times, involve navigating emotional landmines.

Here was my reaction,

I stopped, offended, thrown back into my own past, at first unwilling to be uncomfortable, unwilling to be open, unwilling to be humored and most importantly, unwilling to be vulnerable, only willing to be offended. I did not want to accept the gift of the stop. I step back, breathe, washed over by the discomfort, step into vulnerability and explain.

I credit the Mexican students for allowing me to live in the tensions of my discomfort. Throughout my fieldwork in Mexico City, I have come across many moments of pedagogical discomfort where I was confronted with my taboos and my limitations regarding political correctness. The following cartoon represents this sentiment well.

Please Enjoy This Culturally, Ethnically, Religiously And Politically Correct Cartoon Responsibly. Thank You.



Cartoon by Shaun.

Figure 63 Recreated from Morreall, 2009, p. 1

Creating communities of laughter in discomfort

My observation of the knowledge and skill of stand-up comedians (some of their performances have been described in earlier sections of this dissertation) has also informed my understanding of the comic pedagogy of discomfort. Comedians deploy a number of strategies to work with their audiences, groups of strangers, so that laughter and perspective shifts may occur. Like using ice breakers when working with groups or teaching, comedians survey the crowd to break down what is known as the fourth wall to enable intimacy with a group of strangers. The other three walls are the actual sides of the stage, while the fourth wall is the opening of the stage toward the audience. By

bringing the audience into the performance, this fourth wall falls away and the distance between the performer or the humor-oriented instructor and the audience/class are shortened such that a moment of intimacy can occur.

In these moments of intimacy, the comedian is not positioned as higher nor expert, nor is the instructor. In stand-up performances with fast-paced narratives, it is a time-limited moment when trust and intimacy need to be established quickly. In creating an intentional community of laughter in the classroom, the same is true. Gaining trust and intimacy may take one moment, one class, an entire course, and anything in between. Sometimes it never happens; acknowledging that possibility is uncomfortable for sure.

This genuine in-the-moment humor involves courage and taking the risk to be uncomfortable, vulnerable, and intimate. A comic educator has an intention to create a community of laughter built on trust. The dance between vulnerability and trust is a delicate one. To create a community of laughter in the classroom, in a theatre, with friends and strangers, one must trust oneself and others to be open to discomfort despite an impulse to shy away. In my classroom teaching, but also in my encounters with strangers while in Mexico, my goal was to build trust through sharing my own vulnerability. Offering myself to others in self-deprecating or self-comic ways were both accidental and sometimes deliberate. It involved classroom activities aimed at breaking through self-defense walls (my own and that of the students) when coming together as strangers. As I outlined in the previous stop, I offered my own vulnerability to the students (and now I offer it to you, a stranger), through my *leopard spots*.

As I explained previously, discomfort can feel razor sharp, especially when taboos, violence, and offence are present. These elements are evident in the performances of comedian Hannah Gadsby⁷³. She began her 2019 performance of *Douglas* by sharing with the audience her Outline or plan in which she shared her strategy and intention to incite discomfort. I take inspiration from her performance and ideas, just as I have found value in academic publications. While her performance could use much more attention than what I am able to offer here, I offer a glimpse of her

⁷³ Maybe you have a chance to watch this amazing diamond of a comedian here <https://www.netflix.com/ca/title/81054700>

comedic strategy as an example of the pedagogical value of discomfort. Offense and discomfort are important aspects of Gadsby's performance. In Gadsby's words:

Now..., I'm going to do a bit of what I call "hate baiting."

... I will just say a thing. And I will
make no f****ing effort to make it funny.
I'll just say it and leave it there.

....

Like, just leave it there.

....

Now, if in that bit, you
find yourself offended by anything I say ...
please just remember
that even if you find
yourself surrounded by people who are
laughing at something you find
objectionable... just remember the
golden rule of comedy, which is, if you're
in a minority, you do not matter. You
don't. Don't blame me. I didn't write the
rules of comedy. Men did. Blame them. I
do. It's cathartic.

Tensions, contradictions, and contrasts are part of humor, yet it is difficult to hold the space for contradictory, at times violent, humor. It is jarring to be in the presence of offensive and what might be felt as violent communication. While it is tempting to consider only what might be called positive humor, it is also important to deal with the racist, the misogynistic, the uncomfortable, the sexist, the discriminatory, the offensive aspects of humor. Both positive and negative humor serve a function in the community in which this humor is created and shared, even humor geared toward exclusion or mocking of the 'Other'. For some, humor is always violent, especially humor which mocks an 'Other' perhaps used for relief, release, or even maintaining a position of superiority.

Violence in the comic: Sick jokes

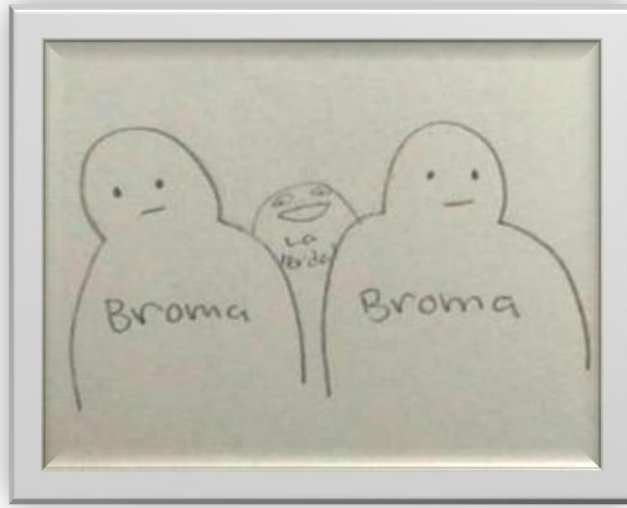


Figure 64 *Personal Conversation*
[entre broma y broma la verdad se asoma] is a popular Mexican saying.
Translation: In between two jokes sits the truth

In the drawing above, this is what the comic does. Somewhere within the jokes lies a truth that the teller tries to convey. Not all these truths need to be positive, as Billig (2005) prompts. We may have caught ourselves chuckling at violent humor. There is negative in the comic, there is violence in the comic; humor does not always make us feel good even though we might shake in convulsions of laughter. Under the guise of political correctness hailed censorship, the discovery of a lived truth is stifled, a truth hidden beneath the social, political, and cultural processes embedded in these humorous expressions.

While preparing slides for the course in Mexico City, the students and I heard about the mass shootings at two Christchurch mosques on March 15, 2019⁷⁴, in New Zealand. Serendipitously, this disastrous event occurred during one of our sessions on the connections between violence and humor. Violence perpetuated in jokes shared on social media may have instigated the shootings⁷⁵. The manifesto posted by the gunman, included various memes and inside jokes that might have stoked or supported extremist

⁷⁴ https://www.bbc.com/news/video_and_audio/headlines/47632769/nz-shootings-comic-asks-searching-race-relations-questions

⁷⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christchurch_mosque_shootings

beliefs steeped in racism. As we thought about disasters, I wondered how mass shootings and their effects fit into the definition of disaster and how humor may play a part in this.

As I read through the BBC news blog, I saw reference to memes that had been posted online on some of the ultra-right websites. The content, labelled as ‘sick jokes’, poses an interesting conundrum to the understanding, function and political relationships that jokes may show. If humor shows the political, social and cultural processes that move a specific section of society, then what does this tell us about why these ‘sick’ jokes are created and circulated (Beerman, 2014; Davies, 2011; Ellis, 2019; Kelly, 2011; Morrow, 1987)? Memes, especially, are readily created humorous expressions that not only circulate online but morph through each iteration. Adding or subtracting becomes a creative outlet to voice what is on one’s mind regarding a current topic. Vitriolic memes to perpetuate racist, sexist, and neo-Nazi ideology are also in circulation and because memes are particularly easy to use because of their anonymity, ease of creation and shareability, these memes may express highly obscure meanings at least to a mainstream audience as they reference ambiguous insider perspectives (Ohlheiser, 2019). However, they show what matters to this insider group. Rather than rejecting or refusing to explore these types of jokes, it may be worth sitting with the discomfort they create to better understand the worldviews being expressed.

Labelling something a ‘sick joke’ often speaks to the violence embedded in some forms of joking. It also points to forms of judgement which reflect dominant societal norms dictating why and how something is deemed a ‘sick joke’. While I agree that some jokes push the limits of freedom of speech, fundamental rights, and expression, it is still valuable to attend to these forms of online or shared joking to understand what pains or moves a certain group.

Sick Jokes: (MAGA, 2020)

They say sick jokes were at fault
Appropriated,
Used
To kill
To maim

To ostracize
To allow
A reason to other the other for another - still humorous?
The dark side of humor inciting violence?

Humor can liberate and speak back; it can and has also been used to oppress, instigate violence, and may contribute to mass shootings. I reference here the Charlie Hebdo shootings of 2015 in France that have sparked discussion around the age-old notion of freedom of expression especially related to humor and the responsibilities enshrined in this freedom (Titley et al., 2017).

Comically being othered: Some more violence

Remember this cartoon?



Figure 65 ©Rick McKee, 2014 - Used with permission from the artist

Performing marginality and being othered (Gilbert, 2009; Gilbert, 1994; Kearney, 2004) are prominent themes in Mexican humor, showing how Mexicans are othered or feel being othered in relation to their status as unwanted, diseased and illegal. I have shown this cartoon earlier and I return to it here to note how the US is frequently a frame of reference in Mexican political humor. For many Mexicans, questions of legitimacy in relation to the US is prominent and Mexicans often consider themselves inferior in this relationship, which the Mexican students often discussed. At the time of my stay at UNAM, the extension of the wall between the US and Mexico was a hot topic for the students and they readily shared their opinions with me. Trump's request that Mexico pay for the construction of this wall was met with mockery and mirth. The above cartoon which I used in a workshop on political aspects of humor, was met with cringe, laughter, and heated discussions about the underlying long-

perpetuated stereotypes and violence toward Mexicans trying to enter legally and illegally into the United States. The violence of this cartoon provides an example of in-group/out-group dynamics that draws harsh boundaries around who belongs and who does not. The laughter in response to this cartoon depends on the group engaging with this image. In this cartoon, a conservative protectionist narrative casts illegal immigration as diseased, unwanted and as a threat with responses such as building a wall considered necessary to keep illegality at bay.

During one of my Mexican get-aways from the city, I found t-shirts in Puerto Vallarta that said: “We have more fun on this side of the wall and the food is much better”. Unfortunately, I did not think of taking pictures then. Here is a different wall.



Figure 66 ©MAGA, June 2018 - Sorry, Mexico. Today we build the wall. In reference to the soccer match Germany vs Mexico

The above image shows the German cover page for the soccer encounter between Germany, the favorite to win, and Mexico; it not only plays with the threat of a wall between Mexico and the US but also echoes Germany's past with the Berlin wall and the separation between the BRD and DDR; a wall that led to defection, death, and turmoil from its inception until its dismantlement, effects felt well into the present.

Discomfort, vulnerability, and intimacy

Rather than turning away or hiding from discomfort, we must embrace it and keep open those spaces of discomfort. Charged humor, a term used by Krefting (2014) refers to humor that “relies on identification with struggles and issues ... and rallies listeners around some focal point be it cultural, corporeal, or racial ethnic similarities... [it draws] from personal experiences” (p. 5). Such humor may cause moments of uneasiness or disruption. In these moments of unease or disruption lies its pedagogical possibility. I am inspired by Boler who argues that we must willingly encounter a “rattling of complacent cages” (Boler, 1997, p. 175), which can evoke one’s own demons and taboos. Rattling the cages is part of a process of questioning taken-for-granted assumptions about others and ourselves. Thus, the comic complicates life, pushes one to see more nuances. It is not only a self-reflective moment but can be part of a collective understanding with far-reaching effects. Maybe it causes *a* change.

A pedagogical space of discomfort according to Boler (1999) is one that treasures the questioning of beliefs and assumptions; it is a step into critical inquiry and collective witnessing which Boler observes can generate “defensive anger, fear of change, and fears of losing personal and cultural identities” (pp. 177-178). I would add that this experience of discomfort can also set in motion challenges to privilege, knowledge, and power. As specific pedagogical event, humor may facilitate the examination of our self-images, how we know and what we choose or do not choose to see.

In my class at UNAM, the students reported having conversations with their parents and friends about the topics discussed in class. They noted how much this had opened their eyes to the deeper layers and functions of humor within their families and society. Opening one’s eyes is at times the most uncomfortable moment – one cannot unsee. As I mentioned before, these comic encounters were not limited to my classroom where certain activities led to discomfort. I found these encounters in my everyday navigation through Mexican streets as I stumbled across stories or images. They were stops that elicited a comic response but also tested my sensibilities. Leaning into the discomfort altered my perspective, which is what stops and lingerings are for.

Discomfort also comes from a fear of vulnerability

This fear of vulnerability shows up, as my supervisor calls it, in “the shitty” committee, which are those gremlin voices in our heads that tell us how flawed, incapable, and fake we are! I certainly deal with that impostor in my head not only when I step inside a new classroom but also in the choice of my research topic. In both, I am stepping into the discomfort of an intimate relationship. It needs a bridge of sorts, a breaking of the ice which hopefully happens quickly. As I entered the pedagogical space of teaching about and through humor at UNAM, I endeavored to break down the fourth wall to create those comic intimacies with students.

Much like stand-up performers, I surveyed the room to see how much the students already knew about humor and the social, political, and cultural processes that may make it appear. I wanted to connect with the students through humor; this desire for connectedness allowed me an opportunity to take students and myself into the realm of discomfort. Modeling this vulnerability helped to create an environment of trust that encouraged students into speaking their minds. Remembering that this was also a second/ foreign language learning class, this speaking their minds was done in English or in Spanish depending on how comfortable the students felt in either language.

Being able to laugh about myself provoked students into laughing about and with me. Sharing funny stories, creating real-life contexts with them provided a background to the theories that underpin the cultural social and political construction of humor. I connected thinkers they had encountered in their sociology classes to real-life humorous examples to create the context necessary to apply these ideas. This way, I hoped to show the students that I was capable, personable, and not taking myself too seriously as the expert on the subject. I made myself vulnerable to their life stories, meeting their own vulnerability as students speaking in a foreign language and as experts of their own comic lives.

Allowing myself to make mistakes in English and in Spanish, I invited students to do the same, which served as a form of intimate reciprocity. There is always a risk of such intimacy, in the willingness to share and be vulnerable. As an insider/outsider, I

was at times able to blur the lines. But I will never be Mexican, nor will I ever fully comprehend the nuances of Mexican humor.

Comic vulnerability meets the everyday

I propose a comic pedagogy of discomfort where vulnerability meets the everyday. Vulnerability is essential to stepping out of and leaning into the discomfort of the comic. Maybe it lends an ear to hard-to-hear truths. Vulnerability for Brown (2012) and Brantmeier (2013) is an act of courage, one that reflects the roots of the word – cor, the heart. Being courageous in one's own vulnerabilities, in one's own not-knowing, in one's own taboos, is giving way to one's heart. I define vulnerability as the ability to step into discomfort, to stand tall in plain sight of oneself, unafraid to step into the fear. It is an openness to an encounter with a different Other or a self-other which may challenge the understanding of self, others, and the world (Tinning, 2018).

Brantmeier (2013) claims that a pedagogy of vulnerability, and I add situated in the everyday, challenges us to render vulnerable our frames of knowing, feeling, and doing, inside and outside formal spaces. It centers not knowing, co-discovery and dialogical reflection. It is a space of risk, the risk of stepping into the conversation skin first. Remember the poster about the forcibly disappeared I encountered during one of my first days in stop five?

As I walked around the corner of the Political Science building, I stumbled. Stumbling across the pipe-rendered bullet hole, the unintentional comic revealed itself. The pipe hole in the middle of the forehead of Mr. XX, was unintentionally resembling a bullet hole, the most likely outcome of his disappearance. Although not a laugh-out-loud moment that we usually associate with the comic, it shook me in comic disbelief. Uncomfortable at my own chuckle, I faltered. It was a physical embodied stop as I stood still in my tracks at the un/intentional comic discomfort and the power of the visual encapsulating violence, harm, tragedy, resilience, memory. I was touched, open to an encounter by existences miles away - it took my breath away. Having my breath taken away, took me to the edge of my dis/comfort. I gasped for air as I witnessed the rawness, the vulnerability of these moments.

An uncomfortable vulnerable stop that interrupts, disrupts, encourages us to reimagine our worlds, our lives and our dis/comforts or pedagogical beings. It is like *a tug on the sleeves* (Fels, 2012), a pebble in one's shoe, an invitation to "participate in the world's

renewal not as we imagine it, but as [we] will come to create it” (Arendt in Fels, 2012, p. 51).

Comic pedagogy of discomfort is not only or not necessarily about how we teach through the comic; it is much more about how we are stopped in our tracks, tugged at our sleeves, feeling the pebble in shoes, can be taught by those ephemeral, unexpected visceral moments of comic encounter and what those moments may invite us to ponder. In a more formal setting, the pedagogical stop in a comic teaching environment can be fleeting. It may appear during a brainstorming session on the board, through a spontaneous faux pas or an involuntary innuendo that can be used to think about what the stop allows us to see.

The everyday, as noted, is the source, the beginning of much humor. My everyday encounters while in Mexico showed me, at times not so humorously, this truth. My body was part of that everyday. What happens when we are invited to ponder what we do not want to admit? During my stay, I had to deal with everyday moments of discomfort, vulnerability and courage that were not related to teaching, research, or academic performance; rather, they were an unexpected syllabus related to my body’s wellbeing.

**This body isn’t mine...
when an acute hypothyroid storm is not on the syllabus (MAGA 2019)**

She hasn’t worked

She feels the pressure
She isn’t happy

She struggles

She struggles through the sheer immensity of what I set out to do ...
researching laughter and humor in disaster

what if this is *my* disaster?

I function in another language with a body that does not want to collaborate

I walk

Placing one foot after another feeling the weight of not going anywhere

Struggling, stopping, moving, then stopping and struggling again.

Slowing down, speeding up yet staying glued in one place,

I fall over the uneven cobblestones.

Where did *MY* sense of humor go?

What do you do when you can't sleep while teaching?

What to watch when your body doesn't work?

Here is what I *did* watch:

How to kill a drag queen: Feathered friends, pecking orders, clucking hens and unicorns (MAGA 2019)

Mexico City: I am sleepless; tossing and turning in a King Size bed with the dogs scratching on my door. As big as the bed is, so is the TV.

Netflix: RuPaul's Drag Race 10 seasons; priceless

Humor in drag – or humorous drag – or hiding in plain sight.

At least I deal with humor, right?!

Distanced intimacies

A pedagogy of discomfort involves a kind of distanced intimacy. To laugh together, to co-create, both sides have to mediate intimacy and distance (Belford & Lahiri-Roy, 2019; Orgad & Seu, 2014) to stay close enough to share stories but distant enough to laugh. In a comic pedagogy of discomfort distance and intimacy become entangled.

As a pedagogical strategy
As an interviewing method
As a way of being with students
As a way of sharing myself
As a research methodology.

Distanced intimacies can emerge when we create humor in the moment and do not shy away from difficult topics, taboos, or discomfort. When teaching about and through humor, one needs to be willing to step not only into the delight of laughter and entertainment but also into discomfort, where contentious issues of sexism, racism, discrimination, absences, and violence are magnified. This decentering, unbalancing gift

that humor offers, is paramount to the comic pedagogy of discomfort. Explore being offended and show up for the discomfort that difficult conversations and topics bring with them - it might open the world a crack further.

In this attempt to crack the world open up further, I understand co-creation as *humor-in-the-moment*.

The comic creates intimacy, intimacy creates comic vulnerability ...
to be uncomfortable
to seem stupid
to not know
to bomb.

Be connected and committed to each other's well-being
Think emotionally,
think poetically,
think comically,
rely on your gut knowledge.

An intimate relationship
with self, other, and spirit
one gives of self
one receives from others.
Take the first step into
reciprocal uneasiness.

Cultivating care is reciprocal participating in one another and self
Forged through stories,
forged through relationships,
forged through relatedness.

Remembering our intimacies means every part of the body needs
to remember,
to resonate,
to reverberate in the discomfort of the comic. (MAGA 2021)

Co-creation of humor

A comic pedagogy involves co-creation, often in-the-moment creation of original humorous materials, not only about using ready-made videos, performances, cartoons, jokes, and memes to elicit reaction and analysis. While analysis is important in

understanding the cultural, social, and political processes that make humor appear, the co-creation of comic moments is also important. Sometimes these are intentional in-the-moment set-ups, little baits, other times these are serendipitous moments of surprise. Often, they are ephemeral, fleeting, rarely documented or documentable instances.

In the classroom, as in our daily lives, we have many of these moments – whether we attend to them or not is, at times, a matter of attention, attunements, ability, or comic worldview. Sometimes these are cognitive stops, a shift in perspective, other times these are embodied stops in the forms of physical discomfort, pedagogically expressed through communal laughter, discussions, silences or cringes. I have been asked how one knows when something is uncomfortable, when one's taboos and boundaries are being tested. In my response I say the body tells the story, the knot in the stomach is a good start.

As pedagogical moments, these stops may give rise to problem-posing dialogues, inquiring into discomfort, and taboos. The processes can stretch us far into the reaches of our beings as we struggle to reveal and understand our social, cultural and political views. Many of these moments I have experienced myself, others I have witnessed through stories or conversations. I have created a record of my encounters with these stops, included in the dissertation as *notas de viaje* using photographs, poems, or memes. For the students, it seems, these stops revealed themselves through class discussions. At times I was told, "I've never thought about it that way!" For one student called JC by his peers (short for Jesus Christ because of his appearance; note the Mexican practice of teasing), one of these comic stops happened while we were looking at memes discussing the knowledge embedded in humor. He felt that humorous memes, in their informal way, did not carry knowledge or memory; real or true knowledge was only in textbooks. "I don't think it's knowledge. It's not official. It's not in a textbook for all to learn". Through our discussion, he discovered that memes too were carrying political knowledge and memory. The collection of memes we discussed were memes associated with Mexican social movements that dealt with wide ranging topics such as feminicide, abortion and corruption.

As noted earlier, I conceptualize pedagogy widely, noting its occurrence in both formal and informal space. Many informal encounters that I have observed, photographed, or experienced come from the streets. While teaching in Mexico I brought together aspects of my teaching experiences in classrooms with my experiences on the streets to conceptualize a comic pedagogy of discomfort. On the walls and stairs of the university and in many other moments I have been surprised by elements of discomfort, or by elements of the tragic in the comic.

Last day of class

I wanted to celebrate the last day of class, so I brought American doughnuts and soda to class. One of the head teachers joined our group for our final discussion and to celebrate our last class together. The exchange was aimed at summarizing the main take-aways from the course, to receive feedback on content and to know whether this course was helpful to the students as learning experience. After our class, I still had doughnuts available, so I step for the last time into the hallway to ask those waiting students if they wanted some food. With big eyes do they accept.

While I pack up my laptop, the projector, and the markers, I look outside the glassless windows onto the courtyard, thinking back to all those amazing, uncomfortable, and hilarious moments that I have shared with these students. I did not feel like the lonely sparrow any longer but as someone who had made a tiny mark in the lives of those I have met.

As educators we often wonder if we make a difference, if our teaching has born fruits, or if we could have done something differently. Any and all these questions have no answers, I have to trust that it just is...and that I can stay with the discomfort of not knowing.

Moving On...

In this stop I have reflected on my formal and informal pedagogical experiences in Mexico, my engagement with stand-up performances, and my consideration around the pedagogical possibilities of humor, specifically what seem to be elements of a comic pedagogy of discomfort. I map out ideas, a kind of theorizing, about how discomfort, vulnerability, intimacy, and courage are operating in not only a humor-oriented

classroom, but also in informal encounters. In the next and final stop, I come to the end of my dissertation and bring elements from the previous stops to connect them with the health disaster humor emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic.

INTERMEZZO #7

So, we are coming to the end of this magical mystery tour. Did you take some shrooms for that?

One last travel story for now. Recently I sat on a bus downtown when an elderly man slowly made his way onto the bus. After settling into the closest seat at the front, the bus pulled away from the curb. Along the route, the bus driver, in the tone of a seasoned tour guide, proceeded to announce landmarks, transfers, and fun historical facts with every approaching stop.

After a good time of this entertaining ride-along, the elderly man shouts out ‘Can you also give advice on the stock market?’

The dry laconic response of the driver, ‘I wouldn’t drive a bus now, would I?’

Here we go then - Have I enticed you to use a comic pedagogy of discomfort in your own teaching? I would love to hear your ideas. After this break, we get to our last stop where I bring the tour full circle while I leave you with some viral humor. I had hoped that by now the pandemic would not be shaping our everyday lives any longer, but its evolving presence seems to be here for a while longer. Are you tired of it all? I know I am...but I’ve got a stash of toilet paper, so I’m good.

LAST STOP: When the post-it falls



Figure 67 ©MAGA 2020 *When the post-it falls*

A testament to the invention and gratitude to copious amounts of sticky notes used to map all the moving pieces of a comic dissertation. For some reason, the epilogue kept landing on the floor.

When I moved to a new apartment at the beginning of the pandemic, I placed all the blue sticky notes on the rough surface of the pantry door to have a visual prompt of the structure of my dissertation. I walked by this pantry door everyday to be reminded that I think with performed cultural memory, with Trümmerhumor, with distanced intimacies, discomfort, and vulnerability as my academic companions.

I have taken you on a journey through the comic creating, I hope, worlds for you, giving you glimpses into *my* world and that of people I have encountered. Throughout my PhD life I have attempted to bring new ideas to the discussions on what the comic is, what it may be able to do and its limitations while keeping my three main questions in mind. What can humor do? What functions may it serve in a society and for an individual? And what pedagogical possibilities might humor in general and post disaster humor more specifically provide in making sense of the world we inhabit? Although this has been a significant journey, I reply comically to these questions that I am nowhere near an answer.

Through stories, poems, literature, reflections, and questions, I have endeavored to mark the significant pedagogical possibilities of humor, how the comic may bring in understanding of why humans use comic stories in their lives, how these funny stories

may carry memories of a past and how these ideas may be used in a humor-oriented classroom. Through multifaceted voices from academics, poets, stand-up comedians, and my own, I have crafted a web of knots to be unraveled further.

Coming full circle



Figure 68 ©2017 Victor Solis: Used with permission from the author. One year anniversary of the 2017 earthquake. Translation: And may tomorrow be nothing but a mere drill

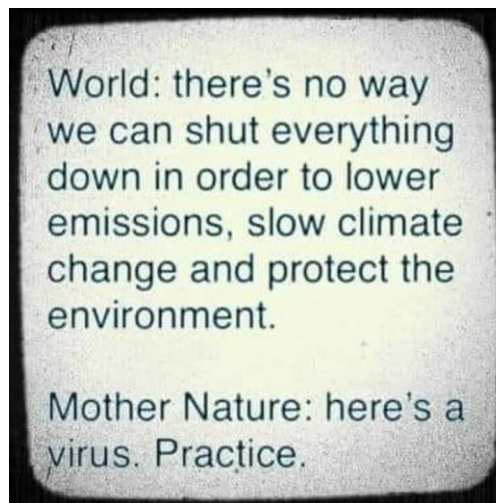


Figure 69 Personal Communication

Viral humor in shaky times

A dissertation on the comic would not be complete, if ever, without a brief nod to the current pandemic and its related disaster humor. Covid-19, murder hornets, riots, asteroids, Godzilla – what else has 2020/21/22/XX in store for us? As a humor researcher, times like these are a global humor goldmine. As mentioned earlier in stop four, the term disaster humor usually indicates humor produced after a disaster. However, this pandemic is different. While in most cases, the humor is created after the disaster when everyone feels safe, the current pandemic shows us how humor-in-the-moment is possible to deal with ever-changing events. Humor in or around an epidemic is nothing new as Marcus and Singer (2017) report from their research on Ebola memes. So, as comedian Will Durst ⁷⁶ (n.d.) reminds us,

There is humor in the specter of the worst disaster in our nation's history. All I have to do is sweep away the debris of shock to find it. And [the comic] is defiance. It's a snort of contempt in the face of fear and anxiety. And it's the laughter that allows hope to creep back on the inhale.

Humor-in-the-making is created and shared by people moving through disasters as they try to make sense of the world around them. This sense-making occurs through a variety of topics and in a variety of forms that are readily shared. People respond in many ways to changing events around them to curb fear of the unknown, fear of death, fear of loneliness and fear for loved ones. Sharing the fear may ease it. Humor serves a myriad of needs and functions for those consuming and producing it. Humor production in the social media age reveals what is important to populations around the world and how individuals or groups deal with a fast-changing fearful world 'out there'. In the case of Mexico, the convergence of earthquakes (2020 and 2021) with a global pandemic has definitely amplified this sentiment (Gibson, 2021) as Victor Solis' cartoon above shows.

Sharing memes, jokes, and cartoons on a variety of subjects including absurd behavior has been a major contact point among the people I know. Not only has this cemented the friendship bond we share but it has also created an opportunity to critique and comment on life outside the restricted social bubble in which we lived. Seeing that many of us share issues of isolation, discourse on vaccinations, infection numbers, US

⁷⁶ <https://www.inspiringquotes.us/author/2327-will-durst>

politics, to name a few, this has created an in-group dynamic within which it feels safe to share humor that challenges our everyday lived realities. This humor-in-the-making has caused many neologisms, my favorite by far is *covidiot*.

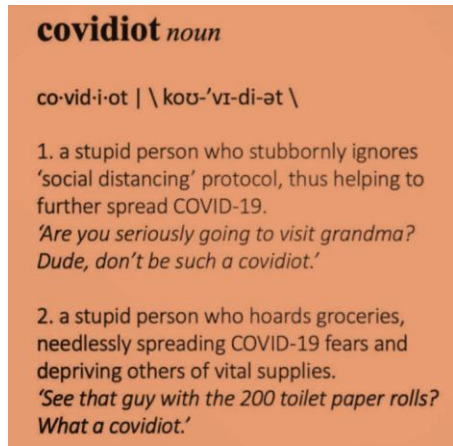


Figure 70 Created from the urban dictionary <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Covidiot>

Humorous neologisms creatively express and deal with behavior in crisis. It is a form of verbal play used for humorous purposes to bring people who think alike together, to challenge the 'normal' view of life (Carter, 1999); it can also draw the boundaries around those who belong vs those who do not. This creative, inventive everyday language takes place in, at times, marginal spaces; it is not simply about being playful, rather it has a practical purpose (Sablayrolles in Winter-Froemel, 2018, p. 199). Using a new lexicon, albeit a humorous one, may function as social glue in the absence of personal social contact. As social glue, Covid humor echoes the albuers in Mexico even though, in this pandemic, it clearly has modern origins.

Disaster returns to Mexico

As mentioned before, sometimes multiple disasters occur at the same time. While a global pandemic is still raging around the world, Mexico has had to face the aftershocks of more earthquakes. In true Mexican comic fashion, patterns for the earthquakes seem to emerge.

1985 – 2017 – 2020 – 2021...and counting?



Figure 71 Personal Communication – Translation: It doesn't take a genius to know what is going to happen on the 19th, right? September earthquakes with magnitudes and epicenters

In Mexico, in the following few memes, linking social distancing behavior during the pandemic and the seismic guidelines for earthquakes mixing them up.

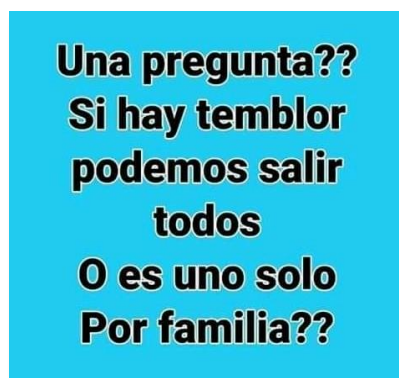


Figure 72 WhatsApp personal communication - Quick question: If we have an earthquake can we all go out or is it only one per family?



Figure 73 WhatsApp personal communication- Translations: Are you bored? Come to Mexico City and get to know our traditional September earthquake. You can't live without the experience. There will be pajama and lingerie fashion shows.

On the first anniversary of the Covid Pandemic, Víctor Solís had this comment with which I close the section.

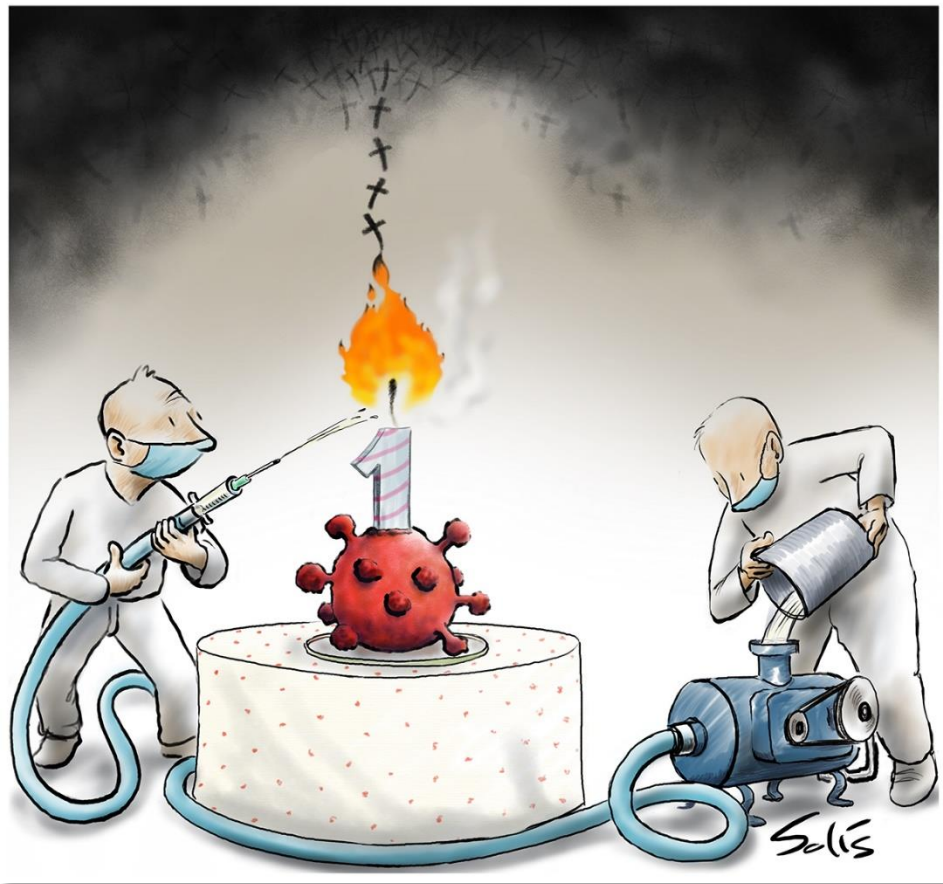


Figure 74 ©Victor Solís 2020 Used with permission from the author

Common themes in pandemic disaster humor

It seems that there are themes that arise as some of the same behaviors and measures appear throughout the world. Toilet paper hoarding and panic buying together with public shaming of those who do not follow social distancing measures or do not wear masks are and were quite common. This particular way of shaming has been called *pandemic shaming*⁷⁷ by the BBC. Humor has also had a role in this form of shaming. In an article published online by the BBC (March 24, 2020), the author claims

⁷⁷ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-52022743>

that quarantine shaming is becoming the new way to protect social and cultural norms. Similar to the idea of humor as social corrective, shaming has emerged as a way to make people around the world follow the imposed self-isolation and physical or social distancing. In some instances, this has been effective in forcing compliance and a way to police others. On the other hand, it may only have limited results. Social psychologists referenced in the above BBC article specializing in public shaming indicate the controversial effects of these tactics.

Frequently governments have been on the receiving end of shaming practices in response to policies or practices deemed stifling personal or collective freedoms. The result of shaming is evident in Costco and other mega-retailers' measures to bar customers who have purchased more than the limits of items such as sanitizers, toilet paper and other staples barring customers from returning these items for refunds when they are no longer necessary. These retailers were shamed into taking measures against toilet paper hording.

Toilet paper crisis of 2020

In Germany and elsewhere, toilet paper was a hot commodity, fetching high prices, was kept under lock and key, protected by guard dogs, the police, and gadgets. The absurdity of hoarding toilet paper for a respiratory virus through *pandemic panic shopping* as it was called in the media has sparked a flurry of memes and jokes about empty aisles and ransom for toilet paper. Here are the aisles of my local supermarket.



Figure 75 ©MAGA 2020 Where did the TP go?

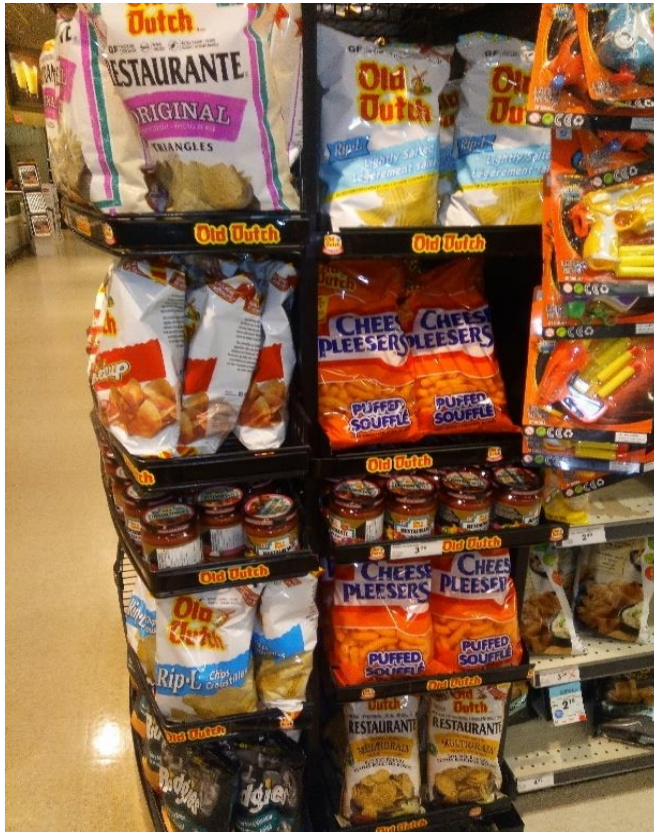


Figure 76 © MAGA 24 2020 The important food group is still here, YAY!

Germans have shown off recipes for newly created dishes with toilet paper, disinfectants, and pasta. I had only to browse the aisles in a supermarket or to inspect the shopping carts of shoppers to see the same absurd behavior. The following are four examples of humor related to the toilet paper shortages in Germany, the US and Mexico illustrating local efforts to solve the problem. The lack of toilet paper has had a truly international solution.



Figure 77 Personal Conversation – self-explanatory

Figure 79 Personal Conversation: Duct tape

Figure 78 Personal Conversation Translation: I knew that at some point the bakery receipts would come in handy

Figure 80 Personal Conversation: Desperate times

The following four memes are examples of what happens in a society when toilet paper becomes the hottest commodity.

social corrective in particular, humor can be used to shame, to mock and to call for change or correcting of undesirable social behavior. Many have adopted or internalized the directives of their governments as necessary temporary evil and will point fingers at those who will not comply.

Probably the biggest winners are the toilet paper manufacturers and Cerveceria Modelo, the Mexican maker of Corona beer – either they make a killing being this closely associated with the corona virus or people stop buying the product fearing that the virus is now in the bottles and being transmitted. At the beginning of the pandemic when the scientific nomenclature was less familiar, the association between the beer and the virus was circulating online like wildfire.⁷⁸



Figure 82 Both Personal Communication

Although one might think that this negative connection would have hurt the company making the beer, this was not quite true⁷⁹.

⁷⁸ [https://designbump.com/corona-virus-memes/?utm_source=outbrain&utm_term=space.com%20space.com%20\[36\]&utm_content=\[Gallery\]%20Newly%20Discovered%20Animal%20Dubbed%20The%20Cutest%20Little%20Creature%20In%2000fa5415d3176847664b4790fe9a3336f0&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=DBP-US-DKT-OUT-Aardwolf-9](https://designbump.com/corona-virus-memes/?utm_source=outbrain&utm_term=space.com%20space.com%20[36]&utm_content=[Gallery]%20Newly%20Discovered%20Animal%20Dubbed%20The%20Cutest%20Little%20Creature%20In%2000fa5415d3176847664b4790fe9a3336f0&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=DBP-US-DKT-OUT-Aardwolf-9)

⁷⁹ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/no-coronas-beer-sales-did-not-suffer-from-the-coronavirus/>

The never-ending wave

How do we manage our fears that the pandemic is here to stay as we witnessed the second, third, fourth and fifth wave? How will those who have lost family members deal with the tragedy through humor? Only time will tell. As stories from other disasters show, once emotional distancing, survival and flourishing occur, then humor will also appear in those communities to lift the human spirit. As I have seen, this humor often appears after the worst is over and people sigh a breath of relief. Co-humorists in Mexico City told me just that: when we realized that we were alive and nothing had happened to us, we started to laugh and tease each other – we regained our humorous attitude. And while laughter is not always a response to humor, it is certainly an expression of relief of having weathered the worst.



Figure 83 Personal Communication - Translation: Excavations in Europe in the year 3025

Before closings re-openings: A magpie leaves some shiny objects

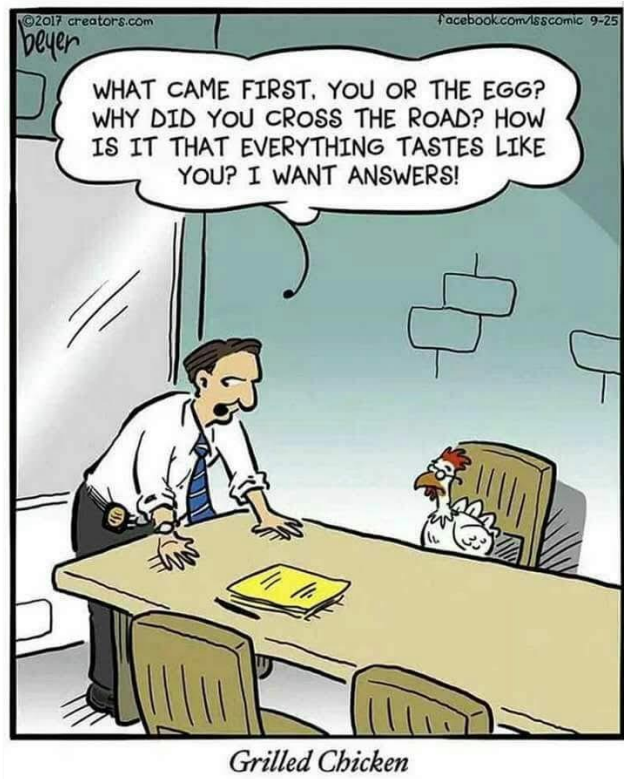


Figure 84 ©Daniel Beyer Sept 25, 2017, Grilled Chicken – By permission of Daniel Beyer and Creators Syndicate, Inc.

As with any research project, but with post-disaster humor, Trümmerhumor or humor-in-the-making, the ongoing possibilities are plenty. I reiterate that this humor shines through the ruins, creates worlds and makes what is important come through the fissures, maybe to rebuild, to resist, to survive, maybe to be resilient. Making sense through the comic in a constantly and rapidly changing world, is just one of the many ways that we can approach a life lived in pieces in the comfort of discomfort, in the instability of the ruins, in the vulnerability of the courage to show up to our own stories and that of others. Humor can undo the permanence of tragedy – through its multiplicity, it helps to deal with uncertainty. Embracing this uncertainty, I query, *It's not the end, but where to stop?* I respond with Rumi: “*You say, end this poem here, and wait for what is next. I will. Poems [the comic] are rough notations for the music we are.*” — Rumi, in *The Music We Are*⁸⁰.

⁸⁰ <http://propertyblotter.com/2011/03/31/spring-is-poetry/>

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Appendix

Student pictures

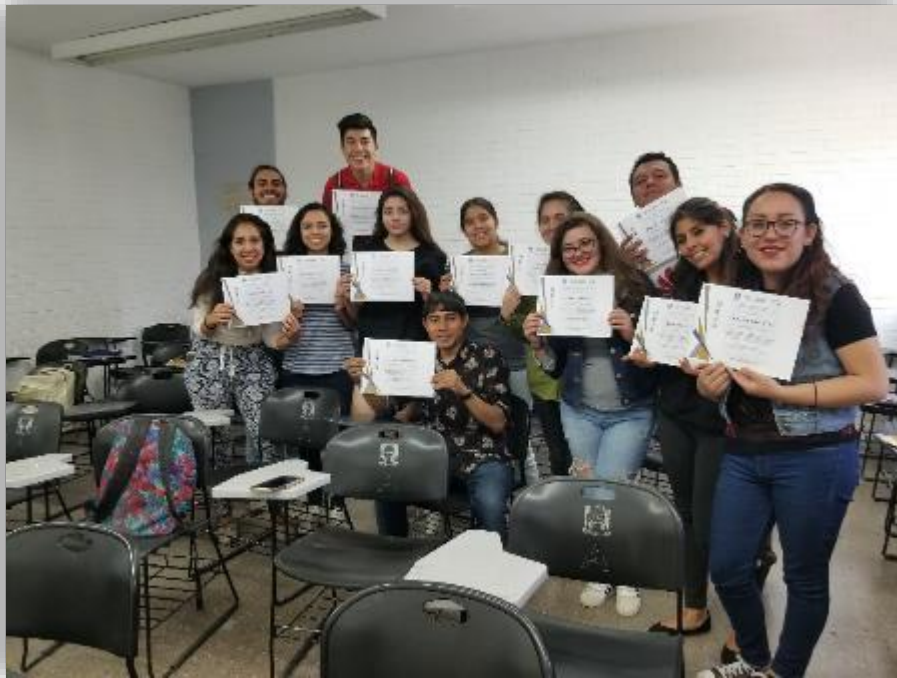


Figure 85© MAGA 2019 Students at UNAM – photo used with their permission



Figure 86 © MAGA2019 Students at UNAM - photo used with their permission




Figure 87 © MAGA 2019 Students at UNAM- photo used with their permission

Course flyers/ workshop flyers




Figure 88 ©MAGA 2019 Course flyer advertised on the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences at UNAM




**EXPLORATIONS INTO THE
POLITICAL, SOCIAL AND
CULTURAL ASPECTS OF HUMOR**

Two part event: Lecture followed by workshop

Humorous expressions are as old as humans and each era has had philosophers attempting to define, describe or understand what humor is. In this event, we will explore some of these theories as they apply to different societies. We will explore different artistic forms, social movements and uses of humor in global contexts to understand what makes something funny, what subversive aspects and elements are used as well as how we may use a comic worldview to see our lives through a different lens. The guiding question for this event is: Can we ever speak back to power through humor?

 Universidad Nacional
Autónoma de México

 THE UNIVERSITY
OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

March 25th, 2019

12:00 to 3:00 p.m.

**Auditorio Manuel
González Casanova**

**Aula de
videoconferencia**

**PHD. CANDIDATE
GABRIELLA MAESTRINI**
University of British
Columbia
gabriella.maestrini@ubc.ca

Figure 89 ©MAGA 2019 Faculty-wide workshop at UNAM in Mexico City; ©Evans Cartoon used with permission of the artist

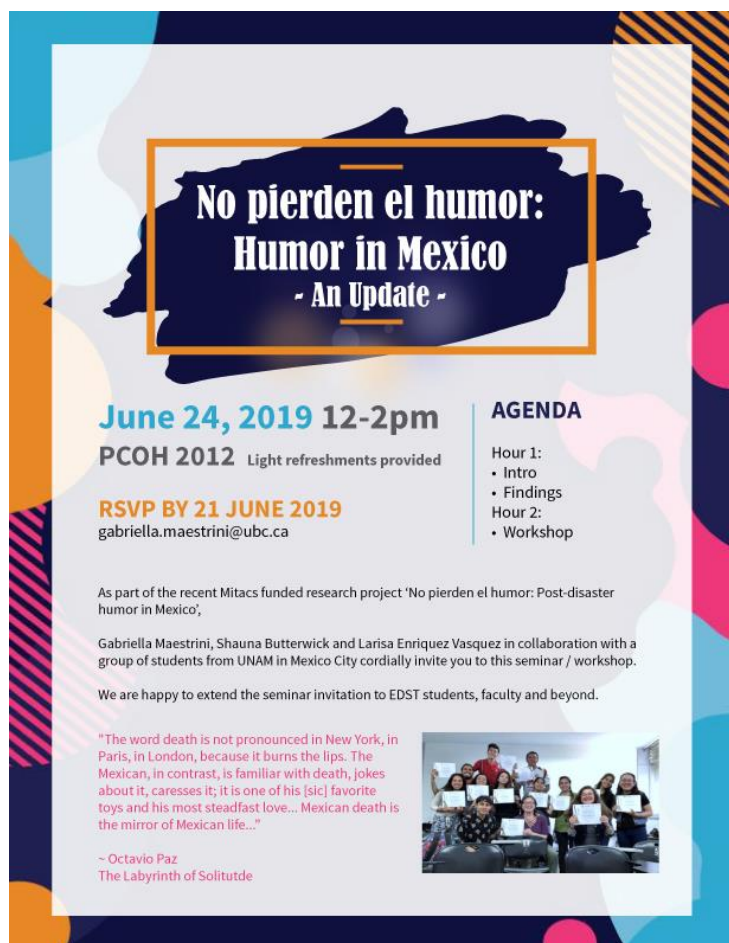


Figure 90 ©MAGA 2019 As a way to connect the Mexican students with our department and to give back to them, I created a workshop on their stories. Here is the Educational Studies Invitation with Mexican students in attendance.

A small selection on who to watch

Russell Peters

Ahmer Rahman

Hannah Gadsby

Hari Kondabolu

Dieter Nuhr

Dave Chapelle

Senay <https://en.qantara.de/content/german-turkish-stand-up-comedy-laughter-fosters-integration>

Kaya Yanar

Vir Das