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Introduction

Internet, Humor, and Nation in Latin America

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The Internet and humor are fine examples of forms of participatory culture. A notable portion of what circulates on the web is humor, produced and consumed by private citizens. These are participants, who, along with consuming the corporate diet on offer, also respond creatively and productively to commercial and social invitations to participate, moving from consumer to prosumer. Humor is one of the central ways in which such Internet-based capture and participation mechanisms are successfully presented and enacted.

The Internet is both a medium, the latest in a long line of mass media, and a space of trans-individuation, in other words, collective or social co-creation. As a media space often organized in a limited variety of formats, it tends to favor certain forms, lengths, and affects. As a commons, it is nurtured by all participants and shapes their affects and subjectivities in ways that have deep cultural, economic, and political corollaries inside and outside the nation, constituting a key space for the definition of identity. As a relatively deterritorialized space, it interacts in myriad ways with the forms of cultural and political territorialization of the nation. Lastly, as a part of the communication infrastructure, the Internet is associated in more conventional ways with the geopolitics of information production and circulation.

Humor, on the other hand, is often based on mechanisms of superiority, relief, or incongruity, while its effects also contribute to the formation of community and identity. As theorized by British critic Simon Critchley, ethnic humor in a national context is an instance of superiority-based humor. It functions like "a secret code" that is shared by all those who belong to the *ethnie,* producing a context and community-based ethos of superiority. This superiority is expressed in two ways: first, foreigners do not share our sense

of humor or simply lack a sense of humor. Second, foreigners are themselves funny and worth laughing at. Thus, humor plays a strategic role in the signaling of the boundaries of identity—who stands inside or outside significant communities. If the Internet seems to have universal reach and may tend to de-territorialize the availability of cultural production, humor is based both on a series of references (contents, figures, processes) of global circulation (what Renato Ortiz calls an international popular culture) and on much more specific territorializing processes that pertain to the world as lived within a geocultural space (what Ortiz terms concrete *mundializações*), in other words within a shared territory demarcated by a language, and cultural, historical, and political references (often a nation-state, sometimes a world-region, following John Sinclair).

When we began the work for this book on the Internet and humor in Latin America, we developed a series of bold questions that were meant to outline a broader agenda-setting paradigm that our volume could contribute to but, given the state of research on these topics in Latin America, could not truly hope to answer: If Internet-based humor provides relief, what is it a relief from or of? What are the semantics and syntactics specific to Internet humor? What is the distinctive logic of Internet-based humor? In the context of the Internet, what is incongruous? When it comes to humor, what relationships does the audiovisual aspect of the Internet bring about with its written side? What kinds of humor go viral and which do not, and why? What role does humor itself play in the affective and economic structure of the Internet? In sum, how does the Internet alter, confirm, enhance, or deflate the dynamics of humor?

At stake here was the possibility that new forms of theorizing humor and its cultural role in our contemporary life may be needed to account for the actual intersections of humor and the Internet in an area that years ago a group of distinguished Latin American scholars envisioned as the Latin American cultural space of the twenty-first century (Garretón et al.). One of the best-known forms of this alternative theorizing of humor in direct connection with the culture of the Internet is the work of Sianne Ngai on the gimmick and what she calls "our aesthetic categories": the zany, the cute, or the interesting (*Our Aesthetic* 1). Indeed, humor may be one of the central gimmicks of Internet-based culture. While the conventional acceptation of "gimmick," according to Oxford Languages, is "a trick or device intended to attract attention, publicity, or business," Ngai explains the gimmick as a specifically modern labor- and time-saving device that, in calling attention to itself and grabbing our attention, often irritatingly but also always effectively passes it-

self off as a full aesthetic object worthy of our consideration when it is, in fact, only "an instrumental part-object" (*Theory* 52). Hence, the gimmick is both a trick and a wonder—"It is a form we marvel at and distrust, admire and disdain, whose affective intensity for us increases precisely because of this ambivalence" (54). In her work, Ngai begins to think about aesthetics in direct connection with the cultures of production, circulation, and consumption for which the Internet is both a major medium and vehicle. While our volume will not be the place to significantly develop such an agenda in its connection to humor, we envision it as one of the first steps in the proper direction in the Latin American-related area by focusing empirically and theoretically, within the humanities and the social sciences, on a few formats and platforms that are important in the production, circulation, and consumption of humor on the web within this world-region.

With the nature of the Internet and humor in mind, we originally asked our contributors: If what we described above is the case for humor in a nation-based context, could they produce empirically based chapters discussing concrete examples of Latin American-produced and -consumed Internet-based humor in any of its multiple manifestations? Within the broader context, we mentioned recent precedents on the topic of humor in modern media, such as Jody Baumgartner and Jonathan Morris's *Laughing Matters: Humor and American Politics in the Media Age,* which examines the role of humor in US politics—along with David Thorne's *The Internet Is a Playground,* exemplifying a performative disposition—and resources like Luis Loya García's bibliography, *Latino Humor in Comparative Perspective.* In the spirit of *Cualca* (AR), the web series starring Malena Pichot; *País de Boludos* (AR), the political humor YouTube channel; *Greg News* (BR), the John Oliver–styled satire show; *Porta dos Fundos* (BR), the massively popular YouTube channel; *El Boletín del Gomelo* (CO), the political satire Internet show; *La Pulla* (CO), the YouTube political news team; *Upsocl* (CL), the quirky humor website; *ElDeforma* (MX), the entertainment, news, and satire website; *El Pulso de la República* (MX), Chumel Torres's YouTube channel; *Gente Como Uno* (PE), the "real-life" TV series; or *Remezcla* (US), the Latin American culture–based website and media company, we then set out to contribute to the study of the interaction among the Internet, humor, and nation.[1] While much work to date in this field has focused on satire—see Paul Alonso's *Satiric TV in the Americas,* which discusses how cultural globalization and hybridity operate in today's transnational entertainment and commercial critical humor thanks to the impact of streaming—we were interested in all types of Internet-based humor practices (cutting across formats and media).

Our volume, then, aims to explore, from a multi- and interdisciplinary open perspective, the many ways in which Internet-based humor is created, produced, consumed, used, circulated, reproduced, transformed, and answered. On the whole, we are interested in the significance of web-based discourses and narratives in the context of local, national, regional, transnational, and global cultural production, commercial ventures, material culture, audiences, education, government policy, and community practices. If the Internet has been an extraordinarily effective medium for social interactions and even for a redefinition of what counts as a social interaction, then, we have come to conclude, humor is one of the things that circulates the most in such interactions. This is true both for online and off-line interaction. In the context of off-line, a recent psychology textbook clarifies, "Humor is a universal human activity that most people experience many times over the course of a typical day and in all sorts of social contexts" (Martin and Ford 37). Online, businesses and advertising agencies, to name some actors in this arena, discovered early on that humor is one of the fundamentals of viral advertising. An early article on the then still relatively new form stated in 2006, "Humor was employed at near unanimous levels for all viral advertisements. Consequently, this study identified humor as the universal appeal for making content viral" (Porter and Golan n.p.) For this reason, our main contention is that humor increasingly plays a critical role in the way social media articulate negotiations within the culture, often between the overall population—an expanded civil society embodying the nation—and the characters and/or institutions associated with the cultural/political establishment, which personify the state, effectively leading to new modes of imagining interactions between both while addressing a wide variety of issues and topics, from the daily impact of inflation to gender disparity. To a great extent, then, many of these social interactions are amusing and much of the humor that circulates the most does so via the Internet or social media, so much so that one of the pioneers in the study of web-based humor, Limor Shifman, has proposed a method, web memetics, to study how jokes circulate (and change as they do) through the Internet (Shifman and Thelwal 2567). A different set of web-based humor quantitative researchers underscores how the abundant quantity of humor on the web represents the possibility of a new way of studying humor:

> Users of social media, in numbers dwarfing by orders of magnitude the sample sizes of traditional ethnographic studies, incessantly congregate at media aggregation websites to tell other people what they find funny. Given this plethora of Web 2.0 information, it is likely that a new way of

> studying the sources of humor may now become feasible. (Mahapatra et al. n.p.)

Then, one can ask, what does humor bring to such social media and Internet-mediated interactions? How does the structure of the different types of humor contribute to shaping social contact? Conversely, how do the Internet and social media influence and transform what comes to be seen as humorous today? What effects do the discursive and technical affordances of new media have on the humor being created, shared, and touched through its channels? This is easily recognizable in all chapters of this volume, though there are texts like the one by Eva Paulino Bueno and Fábio Marquez de Souza—involving the acceptance and circulation of a well-known character in popular culture and videos based on the aesthetics of communitarian advice—that would simply be unimaginable without the gregarious nature and domestic practices of Internet citizens targeted by their objects of study and the impact of technology on their social routines. Their chapter evinces—like many of the others, but to a more acute extent—how the Internet shapes and changes the flow and breakdown of humor. Therefore, we argue for the weight of the role of humor within the new array of practices influenced by technology that define the outlines of cultural, economic, political, and social relationships in Latin America. Thanks to the Internet, Latin American forms of humor are circulating in neoteric ways and reaching previously overlooked audiences on more culturally personalized and value-extracting platforms, generating novel means of interaction with the political sphere as well as greater expectations of accountability.

To advance our contention, we have divided this introduction into four sections. The first part concerns the theorizing of humor as a cultural activity. The second one deals with the Internet as a media space and locus for trans-individuation and social co-creation. Part three brings these issues to the Latin American context, while part four introduces the contents of this volume.

On Theories of Humor

In his edited volume *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor,* John Morreall divides theories of humor into three different types, depending on which central humor mechanism they emphasize: superiority, relief, or incongruity. Given Morreall's standing as a forerunner in humor studies, his work has been embraced as a template by many authors, including Critchley and Terry Eagleton. Superiority-based theories of humor (dating as far back as Aristo-

tle, Plato, and Hobbes) explain, according to Critchley, a basic functioning of humor, especially of the ethnic variety: "Humor is a form of cultural insider-knowledge, and might, indeed, be said to function like a linguistic defense mechanism. Its ostensive untranslatability endows native speakers with a palpable sense of their cultural distinctiveness or even superiority" (88–89). This type of humor depends on "a secret code" that is shared by all those who belong to the *ethnie,* and it produces a context and collective-based ethos of superiority that separates those who share the code from those who do not and are thus viewed as laughable.

On the other hand, to Critchley, relief-based theories of humor (Herbert Spencer and Sigmund Freud figure among the examples) are about accumulated energy in search of some form of release and relief for its subject, while in incongruity-based theories (examples from the work of Kant, Schopenhauer, and Kierkegaard are mentioned), humor is the result of the incongruity between our structure of expectations and the punch line of the joke that surprises us. Critchley's contribution to this theorizing of humor is to propose that, for the incongruity effect to occur, there has to be a previous basic congruence between the structure of the joke and the cultural presuppositions of a particular society (what he calls a *sensus communis*). If this common sense is affirmed in racist or xenophobic humor, it is also questioned both by a leftover awareness of our own racism that the joke produces and, in other types of humor, by a certain critical detachment from that shared everyday life. In the finest humor, Critchley proposes, the subject, instead of laughing at others, does so at her- or himself. For instance, witness the case of Argentine comedian Guillermo Aquino, discussed by Alberto Centeno-Pulido in this volume, in which, while Aquino criticizes the situation in Argentina, he is most certainly issuing a biting assessment of *argentinidad* (Argentineness or the condition of being Argentinean), and thus including himself within the population not only affected by widespread corruption and political and economic instability but also responsible for it. This is why one of Aquino's favorite mechanisms of representation is to talk to himself, setting himself in the future so he can laugh at his situation in the present. Germán Garmendia, the YouTuber discussed in Juan Poblete's chapter, also replicates this kind of behavior to some extent, as the quick editing of his videos allows him to examine his very own reenactment of Chilean culture and thus poke fun at himself, simultaneously incarnating subject and object of study. Hence, the result is not simply pleasure, but also a critical awareness of the contingency of the subject and her/his circumstance. In this way, humor generates not just a confirmation of our connection to a social group, with all its shared presuppositions, but also an *epoché,* a bracketing of the naturalized belief in