

THE POWER OF LAUGHTER: HUMOR, VIOLENCE AND CONSENSUS IN NEW SPAIN. 17TH AND 18TH CENTURIES*

EL PODER DE LA RISA: HUMOR, VIOLENCIA Y CONSENSO EN LA NUEVA ESPAÑA.
SIGLOS XVII Y XVIII

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ABSTRACT

Joking and teasing permeated all aspects of life in New Spain. Using court records from Mexico City and its surrounding communities, this article explores the ways that laughter was deployed within New Spain's culture of masculinity. Humor was both a means for to relate to each other but also to mark differences. It was a normal part of the day to day interactions of men in New Spain between friends who joked and teased but it could also fall flat when one person did not have the right tone. Yet the border between joking and insulting comments was imprecise and thus often led to conflicts. Laughter brought people together when they were of the same social class but when it was used in an offensive

RESUMEN

Las chanzas y bufonadas estaban presentes en todos los aspectos de la vida cotidiana en la Nueva España. Utilizando las fuentes judiciales de la ciudad de México y las comunidades colindantes, este artículo explora cómo los hombres utilizaron la risa dentro de la cultura de masculinidad de la época. El humor era igualmente una forma de acercarse entre varones pero también para señalar una distancia social. Aunque era un aspecto normal de las interacciones diarias de los hombres en la Nueva España y, en particular entre amigos, este podía fallar cuando el tono de la voz no era adecuado. La frontera entre los chistes y los insultos no era muy exacta y en consecuencia el humor mal entendido resultaba con frecuencia en conflictos. La risa podía servir para unir a los conocidos dentro de una misma clase social pero

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manner, it was transformed into a weapon to assert social distance. Such humor was also part of seductions and similarly had political overtones when it was used in satirical songs.

Humor brought people together and created groups of insiders and outsiders. Laughter was a powerful tool within social interactions and provides an alternate way to understand the culture of masculinity in colonial Mexico.

Keywords: Humor, Men, Friendship, Mexico, Tone, Satire, Songs

cuando se utilizaba como arma invocaba la distancia social entre individuos. Además el humor igualmente hacía parte de las seducciones y de las protestas políticas valiéndose de las canciones satíricas. El humor reunía los miembros de grupos sociales y plasmaba el hecho de pertenecer o quedar fuera. La risa era un instrumento fundamental dentro de las interacciones sociales y nos provee una forma alternativa para entender la cultura masculina de México colonial.

Palabras Clave: Humor, Hombres, Amistades, México, Tono, Sátira, Canciones

I. INTRODUCTION.

Humor and laughter are among the most human of all emotional outbursts; they are present in all cultures and, after crying, laughing is one of babies' first forms of expressions. But beyond being a natural human trait, humor operates in other ways; groups who share a joke are often brought together while when a person is the object of ridicule, it can exclude them. Joking can serve to create in-groups and outsiders (Martin, 1977: 2-18). Despite its universality, in the early modern world, the quality and manner of laughing did evoke some disapproval especially among elites. Letting go with loud guffaws denoted a lack of refinement and was not appropriate in mixed company (Davison, 2014: 922-928). Humor could also be used in a more directed manner, and social satire, exclusionary jokes and other forms of mockery were often employed in subversive manners (Thomas, 1977: 78-79; Beard, 2014). Simple fun that was present in everyday life could have a darker side.

In New Spain, there were countless opportunities for jocularly within the numerous festivals, the constant promenades in many parts of Mexico City, and the exuberant life of the streets. There were various events which gave rise to uproarious fun, lewdness, gluttony and drunkenness; there were so many ways to engage in disorderly merriment (Rubial García, 1968: 62), and many of the incidents in this article occurred during festivals and other occasions of merriment that provided a context of loosened rules. Much of this jollity was informal and spontaneous and so was rarely recorded. Some incidents came to the attention of the Holy Office, for example, the mock baptisms and weddings that Mexicans organized for their dogs. As Frank Proctor reports these pretend ceremonies provoked uproarious laughter among those who attended; they were a common diversion described as a "jocosidad" (jokes) (Trey Proctor III, 2014: 1-28; Thomas,

1977: 78; Tortorici, 2013: 93-119; Ávila González, 2007). Although much of this entertainment was an ordinary part of daily life or at least festivals and special occasions in New Spain, because of its boisterous quality, its tendency to border on loss of control, Bourbon officials tried to rein in these tendencies. During the eighteenth century, officials increasingly attempted to limit the types of amusements typical of the lower classes: setting off rockets, getting drunk, the thrills of seductions and the fun associated with feast days. If they had their way, Bourbon officials would have transformed New Spain into a sober, industrious colony; instead, the residents simply took their parties to new locations or found subtle manner to resist this ordering of their lives (Viqueira Albán, 1999: 112; Voekel, 1992:183-209).

In this article, I examine the place of laughter and humor in the masculine world of New Spain. As part of a larger project that explores masculinity in colonial Mexico, I have collected information from 570 court cases from Mexico City and its surrounding communities ranging chronologically from 1542 to 1810. Despite this wide temporal range, the majority of documents are from the late eighteenth century. This documentary corpus provides a window onto the very masculine worlds of work, the street, and taverns but also of ribaldry and fun. There were two sides to this masculine world—one consisted of friendly fun with people of a similar rank but the other was the much tenser negotiation of place either high or low. Sometimes humor could be used to broker the divide between social classes but equally it could be employed for social exclusion, criticism or protest. Thus, laughter was, at times, a strong tool for both consensus and discord. Studies of masculinity have often located friendship and humor in traditional writing conventions such as personal letters, memoirs and jest-books (Davison, 2014: 921-945; Shepard, 2005: 110-130; Reinke Williams, 2009: 324-339). The power of camaraderie among plebeian men is harder to locate among individuals of low or no literacy and writing culture. Yet, studies of the rapport among lower class men reveal the significance of leisure activities and humor in developing bonds of solidarity (Lussana, 2013: 872-895). Thus friendship and laughter were intertwined for the development not just of male sociability but also cohesion. This article explores the interconnected worlds of masculine friendship and laughter highlighting humor as a force for cohesion and dissension.

II. MALE FRIENDSHIP.

Masculine sociability was everywhere in New Spain; in the streets, in workshops and factories and in the multiple entertainments such as bullfights and cockfights. These were not necessarily exclusively male preserves but they

tended to be dominated by men. Within the work environment, especially when labor conditions were dangerous or simply unpleasant, laborers often needed to form alliances to support one another; these bonds were frequently forged not just in the workplace but rather they spilled over into amusements such as going to drink or gambling (Lussana, 2013: 876; Castro Gutiérrez, 2012: 153, 161, 164). Most male socializing occurred outside their homes among friends and neighbors (Kanter, 2008: 65; Lara Cisneros, 2010: 281-282). While men and women shared many experiences and spaces, male friendships developed within a different set of parameters and became a culture unto itself.

Friendship seems like an ephemeral quality unless defined and recorded in some way. It represents an emotional attachment with another that was acted out in certain manners. Within the upper reaches of society, friends recorded their ties in their memoirs or letters but for working and middle class people such chronicling of friendship was uncommon (Macías González, 2008: 19-48). Yet, in the judicial documents, some snippets show how men in New Spain acted out and conceived of their camaraderie. In colonial Mexican society there were numerous social conventions and rules that were designed to maintain morals but they also kept people at a distance. Friends were allowed to infiltrate the spaces of reserve and enter the intimacy of homes. Even within the Casa Profesa, a Jesuit monastery in Mexico City, fellow monks recognized a male friendship. They commented that the brother Villaseñor sought out Brother Juan Ramos because of the “estrechez y familiar trato” (closeness and affable dealings) of the two. The pair had long conversations over games of checkers¹. Of course, monasteries were spaces of enclosure even if many monks circulated both inside and outside the walls. But within secular homes as well, entry into private spaces was a mark of friendship just as crossing the threshold without invitation was an insult. Don José Ignacio Espino and don Felix Roldán marked their friendship by allowing a mutual communication and trust within their homes’ interiors². Most of all, men recognized that others were friends by the time spent together; in their perceptions, friends

1 “que frecuentemente lo buscaba (Ramos) como por la estrechez y familiar trato entre los dos, tal que algunas veces dejaba dicho hermano Juan Ramos la portería por subirse al aposento del Hermano Villaseñor; y el Hermano Villaseñor su aposento ponerse a platicar con el Hermano Juan Ramos, como solía, a jugar a las Damas”. Tribunal Superior Judicial del Distrito Federal (Colonial). Alcalde del Crimen. Serie Criminal, caja 47A, exp. 14. Mexico City, 1743. Archivo. En adelante se abrevia TSJDF.

2 “Que el relacionado Roldán era amigo tan íntimo del que refiere que mutuamente se comunicaban en confianza sus interiores”. Archivo General de la Nación. Criminal vol. 362 fol. 235- 281 Mexico City, 1802. En adelante se abrevia AGN. See also: TSJDF (Colonial) Alcaldes Ordinarios Serie Criminal, caja 33A, exp.1 Mexico City Mexico City, 1793. See also: TSJDF (Colonial) Alcaldes Ordinarios Serie Criminal, caja 34A, exp.8 Mexico City, 1810. Archivo.

were inseparable. This closeness was expressed as “estrecha amistad” (intimate friendship) which was seen when companions “que regularmente andaban juntos por todas partes”(regularly went everywhere together)³. José Ramón Arrequin and José Barrantes walked about together day and night; in addition Barrantes had helped out financially when Arrequin got married⁴. Intimate friendship was also conveyed by eating together—interestingly this was also one of the ways that an informal relationship between man and woman was made concrete. In work settings such as workshops or obrajes where men lived side by side, they had few choices and thus when they picked an eating companion, to others this was clearly a sign of friendship. The young apprentice, José Rafael Basoa testified that two of his fellow workers “pues eran muy amigos que comían juntos” (were very good friends because they ate together)⁵ In the prison-like conditions of a Mexico City bakery, the laborers each had a small space for sleeping called a *rancho*; this was their equivalent of an interior, semi-domestic space. José Salgado would eat with Manuel González in his rancho signifying their companionship and it was observed how happy they were in each other’s company⁶. Friends could count on each other for favors such as the loan of some horses⁷; they would fall out when they got drunk or had a contest but they remained good friends nonetheless⁸. Although, when they left their homes every day, men tended to be in the company of other men not all were friends; they chose their companions carefully to be people whom they could trust and whose company they enjoyed.

In moments of leisure, men engaged in various diversions with their friends. The act of pasear or strolling about was a common amusement—on that was part of rituals of heterosexual seduction but was also an innocent pastime with male friends. Groups of young males often met in parks either the Alameda or those with more means, the further out, Chapultepec Park⁹. On holidays, they

3 AGN Criminal vol. 362 fol. 235- 281 Mexico City, 1802. Archivo.

4 AGN Criminal vol. 537 fol. 19-48 1804 Cuautla. Archivo.

5 AGN Criminal vol.154 fol 175-203, 1802 Coyoacán. See also: TSJDF (Colonial). Alcaldes Ordinarios, Serie Criminal, caja 31A, exp. 49 Mexico City, 1661, fol. 1v. Archivo.

6 AGN Criminal vol. 625 fol. 350-378. 1804, Mexico City. Archivo.

7 TSJDF (Colonial) Corregidores, Serie Criminal, caja 17b, exp. 100 Mexico City, 1802, fol. 1-7v. archivo.

8 TSJDF (Colonial). Alcaldes Ordinarios. Serie Criminal, caja 31A, exp. 17 Mexico City, 1632; AGN Criminal vol. 571 fol. 294-302, Mexico City 1794; AGN Criminal vol. 155 fol. 205-246 1808 Coyoacán; TSJDF Colonial, Corregidores (Coyoacán), Criminal, caja 28B, exp. 119, 1804, Mexico City. Archivo.

9 TSJDF Colonial. Alcaldes ordinarios, Criminal, caja 35A, exp. 52, 28 fs. 1796. Mexico City; AGN Criminal vol. 564 fol. 19-143. 1801, Mexico City. Archivo.

would also walk in groups or go and see the festive fireworks¹⁰. Men like José Reolosa thought nothing of wandering about with friends all day and even all night¹¹. One night in Coyoacán, some friends decided to ramble about the streets at night, accompanied by the music of two violins, but clearly out for fun because they had put on masks. They were also out for the kind of mischief that young male friends can find out at night, drinking, singing and dancing; some of the older residents found their gaiety unpleasant¹². A lot of the socializing between friends occurred in taverns or homes where alcohol, music and gambling abounded. These acts of sharing in raucous fun cemented male camaraderie (Gayol, 2000; Muchembled, 2012; Shepard, 2005; S. C. Lam 2007: 70-110; Lussana, 2013: 872-895). Drink was a constant lubricant to these male encounters but friends also got together and snacked on olives or a *puchero*¹³. Outside of their homes, these quotidian, simple acts helped to fortify their bonds but the strongest glue to these friendships was alcohol; men often commented upon the time spent in *pulquerías*, *vinaterías* and *fondas* with friends¹⁴. In many cultures, this male pattern of going out to drink was a way to consolidate ties by reciprocal invitations, by the mutual greetings, by listening to tall tales of feats of bravery and sexual conquest, but most all by making each other laugh (Gayol, 2000: 150-163; Muchembled, 2012: 63-64; Shepard, 2005: 120-124; Reinke Williams, 2009). It was often groups of male friends who took matters into their own hands to use humor and ridicule for their own purposes. Thus the laughter and fun that emerged in these settings and the male camaraderie that was formed as a result were important components to the ways that laughter was deployed.

10 AGN Criminal vol. 488 fol. 37-70 1804 Tlanepantla; TSJDF (Colonial). Alcaldes Ordinarios, Serie Criminal, caja 33A, exp. 3 Mexico City, 1795. Archivo.

11 AGN Criminal vol. 407 fol. 209-227. 1809, Mexico City. Archivo.

12 TSJDF Colonial, Corregidores (Coyoacán), Criminal, caja 28A, exp. 29, 1742, Mexico City. Archivo. Rubial García writes that during festivals there were masquerades and dances.

13 AGN Criminal vol. 694 fol. 71-176 1803 Mexico City; TSJDF (Colonial) Corregidores, Criminal, caja 17B, exp. 112 Mexico City, 1803. Archivo.

14 TSJDF Colonial. Alcaldes ordinarios, Criminal, caja 35B, exp. 67, 1800. Mexico City; TSJDF Colonial. Alcaldes ordinarios, Criminal, caja 35A, exp. 25, 17 fs. 1790. Mexico City; TSJDF Colonial. Alcaldes ordinarios, Criminal, caja 32B, exp. 92, 8 fs. 1792. Mexico City; AGN Criminal vol. 86 fol. 6-27 1808 Mexico City; AGN Criminal vol. 488 fol. 37-70 1804 Tlanepantla; AGN Criminal vol. 694 fol. 71-176 1803 Mexico City; TSJDF Colonial. Sección: Corregidores (Coyoacán), Criminal, caja 28B, exp. 82, 1769, Mexico City; AGN Criminal vol. 402 fol. 17-34 1801 Mexico City; Tribunal Superior Judicial del DF (Colonial) Corregidores, Serie Criminal, caja 17b, exp. 100 Mexico City, 1802; AGN Criminal, vol. 727 fol. 13- 1796 Mexico City; AGN Criminal vol. 397 fol. 88-114 1798 Mexico City. Archivo.

III. FUN AND DAILY LIFE.

Jocularity crept into so many spaces in New Spain, that officials felt the need to contain it with rules. As early as the sixteenth century, the ecclesiastical *cabildo* had to set down parameters for conduct of its members while attending mass: no weapons, no talking, no sending notes or reading but especially “no hacer chanzas, bufonadas o gestos que provocaran la risa de los asistentes” (joking, teasing or gestures that provoked laughter among those present) (Rubial García, 1968: 185). Clerics were clearly able to deploy their jocularity; when Fray Jacinto Miranda was jailed, he would appear at the prison bars with other prisoners and when a religious procession passed by that included brothers from his monastery, “haciéndoles señas y riéndose para ellos” (he made signs and provoked much hilarity)¹⁵. Within the judicial documents, there are numerous references to the amusement and entertaining atmosphere of male reunions. Participants referred to this merriment with a vocabulary of variants on joking: *chanza*, *mofar* or *hacer burla* were all words that described the tenor of communication between men. At a *fandango* for the occasion of a wake in Cuautla, when the party got out of hand, José Arrequin and José Barantes, two long-time friends, were play fighting with a stick. At first, they seemed happy and affable. The partygoers were inebriated; they were singing and dancing as was accustomed when someone decided that the two friends should dance the *bamba poblana* using knives. Later, one witness described this version of the dance as a “chanza” or joke¹⁶. Friends often engaged in play fighting—it was part of the joshing kind of masculinity¹⁷. But, such jokes and joking around were not just characteristic of the revelry and abandon of parties, it also occurred on a more regular basis. Antonio de los Ángeles Barrado, an indigenous man from Mexico City, described his long friendship with Sebastian Fabian (alias el *Coscusero*) as one in which “siempre han chanceado” (they always joked about). In 1726, the trust that they had established broke down in the context of a day of drinking pulque and a disagreement over a very small sum of money (two reales) in the context of hop-scotch (*rayuela*)¹⁸.

The previous examples suggest that social occasions were the setting for much of this joking about. Because, in both cases, the witnesses did not specify a particular jest or prank it seems that the parties were engaged in a humorous, joshing type of banter until it got out of hand. The descriptions are vague but tan-

15 AGN Criminal vol. 463 fol. 1-153 1790 Mexico City. Archivo.

16 AGN Criminal vol. 537 fol. 19-48 1804 Cuautla, fol. 27-27v. Archivo.

17 AGN Criminal vol 1 fol. 1-10, Chalco 1776. Archivo.

18 TSJDF Colonial, Alcaldes ordinarios, Criminal, caja 31B, exp. 91, 1726, Mexico City. Archivo.

talizing in their suggestions. Vicente Villalba described how on the day of San Francisco, a holiday and festivity, he went to the house of Francisco Tellen where people had gathered undoubtedly celebrating. Villalba “se puso a chancear” (began to joke about) with don Nicolás Pebedilla but clearly something went wrong. Pebedillo got angry; they exchanged some punches, separated and then because Pebedilla had challenged him saying that he would meet him in an alley, Villalba was walking in the streets when Pebedilla attacked him using his horse as a weapon¹⁹. The victim believed that Pebedilla’s strong reaction was because of previous antagonism; why then were they joking about? Violent outbursts were, in fact, not a desirable trait within masculine culture of New Spain. The documents repeatedly refer to remaining peaceful; for example “quieto y pacífico,” (calm and peaceful) “quieto y seguro,” (calm and secure) “quieto y sosegado”²⁰ (calm and serene); the very definition of a good man was calmness and its opposite was clearly undesirable²¹. As Andrew Fisher has explained, among officials and members of the ruling elite in New Spain, it was important to maintain an emotional equanimity, as outbursts were a sign of weakness (Fisher, 2014). Returning to the case of Villalba and Pebedilla, if they were already antagonists, why would they joke about in a party? The African-American tradition of “playing the dozens” might provide an insight into their behavior. This practice consists of a ritualized exchange of insults between two young men for the amusement of an audience of onlookers (Abrahams, 1962: 297). Its origins have been attributed to Africa, specifically, there are similar games played in Nigeria and Ghana (Chimezie, 1976: 401-420). Scholars have interpreted this custom in many ways but essentially, the object was to maintain composure and self-control in the face of the mounting insults that were stated in a jovial, joking manner (Lefever, 1981: 73-85). Although the details are not clear, it is possible that Villalba and Pebedilla were engaged in a bout of joking that veered into insults in the manner of “the dozens” because they could not contain their animosity. Writers on New Spain do comment on the fact that occasions of male camaraderie often devolved into

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- 19 TSJDF Colonial. Corregidores (Coyoacán), Criminal, caja 28B, exp. 69, 1765. Mexico City.
- 20 AGN Criminal vol. 677 fol. 243-273v, Cuautitlán 1778; TSJDF (Colonial). Sección Corregidores serie Criminal caja 36ª exp. 1 6 fols. 1601 Mexico City; AGN Criminal vol. 132 exp. 2, fol. 8-10. 1647, Tacubaya; Tribunal Superior Judicial del DF (Colonial) Alcaldes Ordinarios, Serie Criminal, caja 31A, exp.4, Mexico City, 1628; TSJDF (Colonial) Alcaldes Ordinarios, Criminal, caja 31A, exp.12 Mexico City, 1631; AGN Criminal vol. 225 fol. 5-38 1808 Mexico City; AGN Criminal vol. 176 fol. 73- Tlanepantla, 1773. Archivo.
- 21 AGN Criminal. vol 727 fol. 127-167, Mexico City 1781; TSJDF (Colonial) Alcaldes Ordinarios, Criminal, caja 31A, exp. 49 Mexico City, 1661; AGN Criminal vol. 228 fol. 185-208 1801 Chalco; AGN Criminal vol. 132, fol. 414- Mexicalcingo 1788; AGN Criminal, vol. 131 fol. 280-297v, Xochimilco, 1790. Archivo.

violence and generally they blame this pattern on the effects of alcohol (Kanter, 2008: 65) but the role of this joshing type of atmosphere has not been explored.

The boundary between jokes and insults seems to have been rather nebulous in some cases—another indication that joking between men had overtones of competition. Social occasions, even those which included exalted members of the colonial elite such as the clergy, could easily descend into open animosity if jokes went too far. In 1790, Padre Fray Joseph de la Concepción left his monastery on the occasion of a get-together after a special mass of thanks to the Galician people for their support of the throne. Several of those in attendance at the church went to the house of don Antonio Arvide. The conversation veered into what were clearly dangerous waters when one person mentioned that a friend had been imprisoned. One of the guests, don Luis Uriarte took offense and began to spew insults but the monk insisted that it was all “pura chanza” (just joking)²². Psychologist Rod Martin explains how humor can serve to “save face;” if the recipient of comments takes offence, it is easier to dismiss the words as a failed joke (Martin, 2014: 934). The underlying tension between men broke through the veneer of joking around. One night in 1805, when don Juan López Cancelada, was joking and having fun with one of his employees, don Lorenzo Peláez came in and although they greeted him politely and in a sense, invited him to join in their merriment, because of previous bad blood, he began to insult Cancelada.²³ Joshing around was plainly a normal part of social interactions; one that generally eased social tensions but when it failed, the resulting conflicts resulted in judicial files. Thus, it is important to remember that the examples that made their way into the archives are not necessarily representative of the quotidian and customary social interactions that involved humor.

IV. FLAT HUMOR AND TONE.

Most probably most of the joking around between men occurred without any major confrontations or problems and certainly when men took offense at a witticism or humorous comment, the reason for the failure was often related to tone of voice. Indeed, although paper records cannot convey the quality of voices or their inflections, some commentaries point to the problem of interpretation of the manner of statements rather than the words themselves. In her study of sociability in nineteenth-century Buenos Aires cafés, Sandra Gayol remarks that if

22 TSJDF Colonial. Alcaldes ordinarios, Criminal, caja 32A, exp. 61, 22 fs. 1790, Mexico City. Archivo.

23 AGN Criminal vol. 537 fol. 159-178. 1805, Cuautla. Archivo.

a man refused a drink, his tone of voice, its inflection and other physical aspects could make the difference between taking this negative response as insulting or not (Gayol, 2000: 153, 107). There was a long tradition within New Spain, going back to its Hispanic origins, of judging men on the qualities associated with their voices. A sixteenth-century Spanish medical treatise connected a deep voice with a man who was strong, daring, proud, randy, with a good appetite and handy; in contrast, man with a higher, thinner voice was thin, timid, but very intelligent, astute and easy to please (Nava Sánchez, 2011: 24). In any kind of interaction, it was important to strike the right tone—in voice, body positioning and other corporeal aspects (Undurruga Schüler, 2012: 311). These intangible elements made the difference between a humorous comment and an insult.

Some tones of voice were offensive but probably more so in certain contexts; the quality of a person's voice could either inflame a tense situation or soothe the tempers. In a conflict between a hacienda worker and his supervisor, Carlos José, instead of explaining his absence in a soothing sounds replied insolently "con tono altivo" (a haughty tone)²⁴. Captain don Juan María Muzgier went into the pharmacy of don Juan Leandro Romero to ask about a debt that was overdue. Such dealings over money were always delicate but when Romero answered his queries "con un modo de socarronería y autoridad burlesca" (in an ironic tone and jocular authority) and added to this picture by keeping a finger in his mouth, the military man could not contain his anger²⁵. Clearly, the pharmacist was being sarcastic in his tone and demeanor much to the outrage of his debtors. A sarcastic tone could transform polite modalities and greetings into slights and an inversion of respect. The terms "señorito" or "Vuestra Merced" which in certain circumstances were used courteously could be reversed into an insult when used with a sarcastic tone²⁶. In Amecameca, the tension between community officials and the indigenous residents erupted because of the manner of speaking of one subject. During a public act in which the officials were confirmed in their offices, Mateo Francisco Sacatengo, an indigenous man, spoke as if he was in charge, "que la voz era entonada"(that his voice was haughty) and then in act of contempt, he spoke in another language (probably Nahuatl) and used a word (Tiquitasque) not understood by the others²⁷. These examples have nothing to do with humor but show how the tone and demeanor of a speaker could radically affect perceptions

24 AGN Criminal vol. 139 exp. 12, fol. 210-232. Malinalco, 1794. Archivo.

25 AGN Criminal vol. 465 fol. 220-228, Mexico City, 1794. Archivo.

26 AGN Criminal fol. 154 exp. 1 fol. 1-100, Coyoacán 1807; AGN Criminal vol. 537 fol. 19-48. 1804, Cuautla. Archivo.

27 AGN Criminal vol. 274 fol. 83-87. 1780, Amecameca (Jur. Chalco). Archivo.

of a conversation. As anyone who had tried their hand at jokes knows, timing and tone are vital to the success of humor.

These tonal failures were part of some incidents in which those involved actually explained, as best they could, how these miscommunications of voice could transform friendly communications into insulting ones. Augustín Antonio, an indigenous man from Tlanepantla, recounted how he was passing by the small farm of José María Robledo, when teasingly (por bufonada) “ai estas ganando de Valde, pues ya podía estar esto concluido” (oh, you must be earning a lot, you could be finished this job already). He was very clear in his testimony that he meant these words to be a friendly joke, a humorous kind of teasing but clearly they were misunderstood as the recipient was immediately annoyed and even though Augustín tried to patch over their problems by helping with the agricultural work, the tension simmered up again leading to blows²⁸. Although this episode shows how an attempt at humor could fall flat, in another example, it was the actual tone of the remarks that were misinterpreted. In 1794, many residents of Jilotepec were in attendance at a display of acrobatics that took place in the local plaza de gallos. Late in the evening, at about 11:00 pm, one of the performers jokingly began to pass around a plate asking for coins. According to Juan Pedro Viqueira Albán, acrobats used social satire along with their physical dexterity to amuse so the atmosphere at this show was probably already one of mockery as well as fun (Viqueira Albán, 1999: 164-165). The acrobat made an attempt to give the plate to one of the residents who refused saying “que lo cojera que por bien hay estaba Andrade que lo prendiera” (that he would not take it because Andrade was present and he would arrest him). Don Ignacio Andrade was a lieutenant in the Acordada (police) and he was in one of the front rows. Andrade entered into the fun and replied “si acaso era el Molina” (as if he was Molina), the alguacil or official who would have made the actual arrests. So far, everything had been in jest and the audience was happy. Someone in the back rows of the crowd of spectators called out “Andrade no es alguacil pero es soplón de la Acordada” (Andrade is not the alguacil but he is an informer for the Acordada). The word “soplón” was a strong insult in this period and thus Andrade exploded calling the anonymous speaker and “hijo de un tal” (son of a such and such) and then he turned around to see that the local priest and his good friend had said the words. Andrade backtracked on his hostility but after the show and, in the next days, he attacked the priest both verbally and once tried to run him over on horseback. Various witnesses came forward to recount their version of the events. No one

28 AGN Criminal vol. 176 fol. 368-391. Tlanepantla, 1808. Archivo.

disputed the words used, simply the tone that was employed by the priest. Laureano Peña stated that the priest “no dijo en tono ofensivo sino jocoso y en voz blanda que solo en las inmediaciones lo apercibieron” (did not say the words in an offensive manner but rather in a jocular way with a soft voice that might have only been apparent to those in his vicinity). He went on to mention that because they were all present at the entertainment of the acrobats, it was natural that the words would take on a humorous tone. He, along with many others, commented on the very strong friendship that the two antagonists had enjoyed previous to this incident; perhaps the confidence between the two led the priest to miscalculate the level of informality and jocularly he could use with his friend.²⁹ Humor, it seems, depended a lot on the context and the trust that friends had with each other. Perhaps those who were insulted in these episodes were tone-deaf or maybe the speakers misinterpreted the situation and struck the wrong note.

V. DERISION AND LAUGHTER.

The joshing relationship that characterized the interactions seen above was among groups of men who considered themselves to be relatively equal. They relied on a verbal dexterity and calmness in the face of jovial remarks made at the expense of the subject. Other exchanges were less innocuous and occurred not necessarily across class or race lines but rather between groups that seemed at odds (Thomas, 1977: 77-78)³⁰. Those involved used words such as “mofar” (mocking) or “hacer burla”—the terms reflect a different, more openly hostile dynamic in which participants did not resort to witty remarks but rather to blunt, cruel mockery. Historian Verónica Undurraga Schüler recounts several incidents of mocking or teasing in eighteenth-century Chile. In some cases, men would mimic others’ gestures or form of walking. They also teased them for their baldness and in one case, a hairdresser was provoked because his profession meant he had to associate and go into feminine spaces (Undurraga Schüler, 2012: 288, 311, 339, 341). These incidents tested the equanimity of those who were teased; they could be a form of challenge and often led to violent outbursts.

When men mocked each other, they were provoking and often they openly asserted their power over a person less powerful than them or who was an outsider for some reason. In his study of the history of the Royal Mint, Felipe Castro Gutiérrez notes that many poorer men who identified as *españoles* worked in this institution because it paid well but they considered it a blow to their dignity.

29 AGN Clero Regular y Secular, vol. 28 exp. 1, fol. 1-29. 1794, Jilotepec. Archivo.

30 Thomas comments on how ridicule often crossed class lines and could be used to silence others.

As such they did not fit in terribly well, many within this group insisted on the honorific “don” even though it was not customary for workers, as opposed to the supervisors, to enjoy this deference. Consequently, these poor españoles were the butt of many jokes and tricks (Castro Gutiérrez, 2012: 140; Undurraga Schüler, 2010: 299). The forces at work in these incidents are not always fully explained but provide some hints. Manuel José Lara, an indigenous man from Coyoacán, complained the Antonio Orejuela had hit him with a shovel injuring him so badly that he could not work. His aggressor was briefly imprisoned but when freed, Orejuela went about “hacienda burla” (taunting him) and provoking him³¹. Similarly, Alfonso Aguilar, an indigenous man from San Juan Yxtayopan in the area of Xochimilco, had accused José Cabello of killing his son with premeditation a year previously. Despite his denunciation, Cabello was free on a surety and made a point to deliberately taunt Aguilar and his wife. From their account, Cabello was the village strongman who went about bragging about his feats of courage but was perceived as arrogant. He had committed other offenses and seemed impervious to contempt³². Unfortunately, these documents did not include much information about the actors in these little dramas but it seems clear that those men who mocked and taunted the complainants had enough power within their communities to avoid repercussions for rather serious crimes.

Hierarchy was a fundamental value in New Spain’s social makeup even within families. Boys grew up knowing their place; they were expected to show deference and submission not just to their parents but also older relatives and family members (Kanter, 2008: 58). It was perhaps this tension over birth order and deference or maybe just the kind of teasing that is often the offshoot of sibling rivalry that led to an ugly incident between some brothers. Phelipe de la Cruz, an indigenous man who lived just outside Mexico City, complained that his brother Lorenzo and another man, Joseph Antonio, perhaps a friend, used the occasion of showing him a plan to make fun of him. Phelipe had never learned to read and so he could not make any sense of the diagram or any writing included; thus, the two young men cruelly mocked him, and going further, his brother grabbed him by the hair, hit him in the head with a rock, and cut his pants with a knife³³. Phelipe was clearly the victim of a serious physical attack so it is interesting that his brother’s mockery was as important as the blows; he added that they should not have mocked his illiteracy as he was poor. He understood that he became a

31 TSJDF (Colonial). Libros y expedientes diversos, hojas sueltas, caja 96, exp. 33, sin foliación. Coyoacán, 1785. Archivo.

32 AGN Criminal vol. 131, fol. 208-208v. Xochimilco, 1809. Archivo.

33 TSJDF (Colonial). Corregidores, Serie Criminal, caja 16b, exp. 74. Mexico City, 1749. Archivo.

victim of these taunts and assault because of his limitations and also because his status—poor and illiterate—made him an outsider.

In a few instances, the words used to make an outsider feel his place were included in the document providing a rare glimpse into the power of mockery in colonial Mexican society. In 1767, don Antonio Aricoechea went to the Coliseo to see a play. In the colonial period, the theatre attracted broad sectors of the populace, not just for the show but to gossip, complain, criticize and seduce (Viqueira Albán, 1999: 33-44). Just before the beginning of the function, as people were milling about ready to go into the hall, don F. Mora, a Mexico City merchant, said very loudly to a group of his friends, “ay va el que está casado con la hija del chino” (underlined in the original) (there goes the man who is married to the Chinaman’s daughter)³⁴. It was indirectly an insult to don Joseph Morato, his father-in-law, because it challenged his racial identity. In fact, it was Morato, not Aricoechea, who brought forward the complaint about these words; he disputed the claim that his origins were Asian and noted that his daughter was “noble, bien criada y de cristianos procedimientos,” (noble, properly raised and an old Christian) and noted that his parents were European and he was born in Seville (Thomas, 1977: 77)³⁵. These words, casually stated but meant to be heard not just within one small group at the theater but also by the recipient of the scorn were meant to exclude but no doubt, they amused the people of the in-group. They reinforced the insecurities that many in the middle classes felt about their identity and played into the constant battle in New Spain over racial identity. Picking on an outsider could also happen in work situations among much more vulnerable people. Within Mexico City workshops, the apprentices often bore the brunt of physical punishments from their masters but other workers could be as cruel with words. In a tailor’s shop, as the light dimmed in the late afternoon, the master asked Manuel García, a sixteen-year-old apprentice to go out and buy some candles. When he returned, one of the journeymen, Ilario Urban, jokingly said “que hasta sebo comes” (you even eat tallow now) referring to the candles. There was a clear difference in rank between the two and the senior worker was teasing but also asserting this difference. Not all apprentices were submissive and, in this case, García contradicted his superior. This led to an exchange of words, insults and then blows³⁶. In both of these episodes, those teasing and joking wanted to

34 TSJDF (Colonial). Alcaldes Ordinarios, caja 31B, exp. 111. Mexico City, 1767. Archivo.

35 TSJDF (Colonial). Alcaldes Ordinarios, caja 31B, exp. 111. Mexico City, 1767. Archivo. Thomas writes that humor was sometimes used to keep people in their place.

36 TSJDF Colonial. Alcaldes ordinarios, Criminal, caja 33B, exp. 70, 15 fs. 1809, Mexico City. Archivo.

reinforce their own status as part of the in-group but indirectly, giving themselves an opportunity to retract or claim that they were joking. It was an underhanded method but one that often functioned.

Similarly, toward the end of the colonial period, tension over the seemingly ubiquitous presence of institutional changes and the officials who enforced these reforms erupted into teasing or “mofar.” In 1810, one evening as soldiers from the Infantry Regiment of New Spain arrived for guard duty at the Coliseo, the main theater of Mexico City, they paraded in front and sounded off. As they were doing so, their commanding officer, the lieutenant don Juan de Zabaleta heard a voice in the crowd near the theatre repeating the soldiers’ words perhaps mimicking the soldiers in jest. He thought that this act was perhaps a simple coincidence so he made his soldiers repeat the maneuver. He heard the repetition once again and sensed that this was an insult or mofa to his person. He went to the theater’s door to see who was the culprit and saw a civilian wrapped in a fresada or sheet—clearly a poor man. He took out his sword and hit the man with the flat of his blade³⁷. This extreme reaction came from a sense of being mocked despite his authority and perhaps feeling threatened by the increasing tension between soldiers and civilians on the cusp of the Cry of Dolores. There were many layers of officialdom in Mexico City; guarding the garitas or customhouses at which vendors had to pay taxes before bringing their goods into the city was probably a most unpopular task. In 1799, Pedro Morales, one of these guards, caught a man trying to sneak by his garita without paying. A grenadier, Mariano Estevez was passing by; instead of lending assistance to a fellow official, he joined in with the other vendors who were insulting and mocking the guard calling him a ravenous thief (*ladrón hambriente*)³⁸. Soldiers were not always the subjects of teasing; in 1800, José Palacios went to have a drink at the *vinatería* behind the barracks. He was alone and so maybe an obvious target since he was out of place in what was probably a military haunt; some soldiers began to taunt him. The military men were in the company of some women which may have meant that they were showing off by picking on an easy target³⁹. The guards who looked after street-lamps were an important presence at night but, at times, unpopular because they were associated with the unwanted lamps that were a Bourbon imposition. One of these officials, José Mariano Almaras, was teased by a band of ruffians one night and they also threatened to throw stones at him⁴⁰. The power of derision and

37 AGN Criminal vol. 421 fol. 1-24. 1810, Mexico City. Archivo.

38 AGN Criminal vol. 398 fol. 45-55. 1799, Mexico City. Archivo.

39 AGN Criminal vol. 617 fol. 72-86. 1800, Mexico City. Archivo.

40 AGN Criminal, vol. 687 fol. 171-192. Mexico City 1796. Archivo.

mockery was all over this society, moving along the cracks that were beginning to show in the late colonial period.

Most of the examples of teasing and derision were momentary acts which may have arisen from a larger frustration or animosity but they were transitory at best. Such mockery could, however, be much more elaborate and pointed but nonetheless surfaced when tensions between social groups were widespread. In 1802, the local priest of the village of Chimalguacan Atenco in the Chalco region was called to administer the last rites in a nearby community. Such requests were part and parcel of a cleric's duties and a common sight within cities where they were sometimes accompanied by *cofradía* member chiming small bells (Carvajal López, 2011: 37). One of the men who had called him kept covering his mouth as if to stop his laughter. Smelling a rat, he sent his fellow cleric, the licenciado Aparicio who went to the neighboring town of La Magdalena to confess the sick man: Bentura del Carmen. Upon Aparicio's arrival at the patient's lodgings, he found the invalid in bed; he bent over to take his pulse and started to ask Bentura what was ailing him. Bentura then told Aparicio that he was heartbroken because he had missed mass that day. Aparicio began to interrogate Bentura's wife and others who were present. He discovered that this trick had been dreamed up by the community's governor, José Manuel Luna, who was engaged in a power struggle with the priest. It was a ruse to shame the priest and to get him to leave his post. Bentura testified that he participated in this prank because of his anger at the priest's conduct at Easter when the residents bought palms but the cleric had not blessed them. The power struggle between the priest and governor emerged in other ways; the governor was openly contemptuous of the cleric calling him a "meco otomite," "Cura Vaquero," "cura otomita sin calzones;" during mass, he would nudge his neighbors with his elbow and openly laugh at the priest; after mass, the governor would sit on a bench and to mock the priest, he would make all the parishioners kiss his hand.⁴¹ The power struggles within Mexican villages over authority and who would be priest were common (Fisher, 2014) but generally they were played out with more openly conflictive strategies. In this example, the local governor harnessed the power of derision to make his opponent's life much more difficult. It was the zenith of such campaigns—so clever in that it was hard to complain about some jokes and pranks but these actions, nonetheless, made life difficult for the cleric.

41 AGN Criminal vol. 255 fol. 288-309. 1802, Coatepec (Jur. Chalco). Archivo.

VI. FLIRTING AND JOKING.

The cities and villages of New Spain provided numerous locations where men and women could meet and exchange seductive looks or banter. The many parks were sites of flirtation but also the various paseos along Mexico City's canals as well as the abundant festivities in all communities allowed for a more relaxed atmosphere and thus romance was often in the air (Rubial García, 1968: 72; Gemelli Casrri, 1955: 161-163). Many lower and middle class Mexicans went to all-night parties called fandangos where men and women sang, played music but especially danced together in most seductive manners (Rubial García, 1968: 164-165); Martínez de la Rosa, 2013: 117-119, 121, 123). But flirtations also had content and a lot of the ingredients within these approaches were humorous or joking in nature.

Some of the accounts of this joking flirtation are frustratingly vague. Doña María Manuela Arteaga recounted how, in 1804, she was in the balcony of her house; she leaned out and saw some women cavorting along the street below. She observed how they began to engage with a soldier who was on the opposite sidewalk. The women called the soldier over and had a private chat which infuriated the man and shortly after, he unsheathed his sword and went after the servant who was accompanying the ladies. The soldier, Antonio Basilio Ramírez seems to have misunderstood the women's joking flirtation for an insult; he reported hearing "ay va un aparejado de los Verdes" (there goes a conscript of the Greens)⁴². His reasons for such a strong reaction to a seemingly innocuous statement undoubtedly occurred because of the tensions between various regiments and also amongst civilians and military. Usually respectable ladies in the streets should not have addressed men in any way; perhaps the fact that they were a group and chaperoned by an attendant gave them the courage to try to engage in some ostensibly harmless joking flirtation. The streets after all, according to Viqueira Albán, were the best place for men and women to exchange looks and smiles leading to greetings and maybe more (Viqueira Albán, 1999: 100). Some jesting seductions were somewhat more obvious to the participants but still somewhat obscure from a modern perspective. In 1805, María Josefa Pomposa Meléndez commented to the household's coachman, Esteban Alejandro, that his beard was too long. Such an observation was not innocent as men's beards were considered to be a symbol of their masculinity (Earle, 2012: 24; Muchembled, 2012: 77-80; Lypsett-Rivera, 2012). Her brother framed this audacious conduct as "chancear"

42 AGN Criminal vol. 706 fol. 294-303. Mexico City, 1804. Archivo.

or kidding around. The young woman accompanied the coachman to the barber and paid for him to have a shave. In itself, she was being forward but shaving the man herself was simply a step too far. The message of her actions, even though framed as a joke, was too much for one of the other employees who proceed to stab Esteban probably in a fit of jealousy⁴³. It was not only women who joked with men although perhaps such conduct—because it was somewhat scandalous—was more likely to be recorded. Corporal don Ignacio Ortiz was on guard duty in the Royal Jail in 1808. To amuse himself, he found a place on the stairs up to the warden's residence where he could see and talk to the female prisoners. He was caught by another employee engaging in salacious, joking comments with the women (*chacotear*) and exciting them with his antics. One witness described this behavior as “*chuleando con las reas*” (having fun, showing off)⁴⁴. Not surprisingly, the prevalence of joking in New Spain culture of sociability influenced the way that men and women went about their seductions.

VII. SONGS AND SATIRE.

Music, dancing and songs were an integral part of socializing in New Spain. Even inside churches where music was part of the sacred devotion, during the popular festivals, choirs often sang *villancicos* that had strong secular overtones—some about playing cards with all its associations with gambling (Cashner, 2014: 384-388; Fahrenkrog, 2014: 224). In houses and streets, in the taverns and other meeting places, people played the guitar or the *vihuela* and sang popular songs.⁴⁵ Some of these songs were so scandalous that the more upright citizens reported their words to the Inquisition. The words to these tunes were often lewd but also showed a profound disrespect for institutions such as the Catholic Church (Rivera Ayala, 2000: 178-184; 1994; Thomas, 1977: 78). Rude songs also made spaces such as *pulquerías*, *vinaterías* and *fandangos* part of the masculine range of spaces where they took delight in obscene lyrics (Rubial García, 1968: 116; Barclay, 2014: 749, 755, 759). Some of the song titles which appear in the documentation include the *Bamba Poblana*, the *Son de Justicia*, and the *Son de*

43 AGN Criminal vol. 573 fol. 136-154. 1805, Mexico City. Archivo.

44 AGN Criminal vol. 538 fol. 60-91. 1808, Mexico City. Archivo.

45 AGN Criminal vol. 617 fol. 72-86. 1800, Mexico City; TSJDF (Colonial). Alcalde Mayor de Xochimilco, Serie Criminal, caja 32B, exp. 48 Xochimilco 1795; AGN Criminal vol. 76 fol. 1-194, 1803 Tacuba; AGN Criminal vol. 40 fol. 142-151, Coyoacán 1805; AGN Criminal vol. 235 fol. 220-223v, Xochimilco 1780; AGN Criminal, vol. 110, fol. 135-175 1745 Tacuba; AGN Criminal vol. 398 fol. 3-44 1799 Mexico City; TSJDF Colonial. Corregidores (Coyoacán), Criminal, caja 29B, exp. 100, 6 fs. 1754, Coyoacán. Archivo.

Jarabe⁴⁶. Most of these tunes were scandalous but generally they were just part of the background noise. Some songs, however, provoked the ire of those who heard them, especially if they were targeted by the lyrics.

Most people sang in festive occasions simply for the sheer joy of it and because they were among friends and family who shared in the delight and amusement. But lyrics could have content that was controversial not just for officials of the Holy Office but for individuals. Historian Carla Gerona uncovered the words to numerous songs called *décimas* that were commonly performed in group settings in the Texas/Louisiana borderlands. Many of these songs were predecessors of the more commonly-known *corrido*—in the case studied by Gerona, they shared a content which described social and political issues of the day and sometimes attacked individuals by criticizing their weaknesses (Gerona, 2014: 100, 116). In a much more personal attack, don Miguel Xavier Padilla, an español living in Xochimilco, recounted how he went to a house party at the residence of don Bartholo Obscura—the intention of the gathering was to honor the Virgin of Guadalupe with offerings at the domestic altar and then appropriate music and celebrations. Such observances were common enough in New Spain to provoke the ire of Bishop Francisco Fabián y Fuero (1719-1801) ranted that despite their apparent religiosity, these parties around honoring domestic altars were simply an excuse to go out at night and engage in sinful pastimes—he believed that these nocturnal excursions had been the devil’s invention (Fabián y Fuero, 1770: 451-452; Rubial García, 1968: 87; Fahrenkrog, 2014: 225, 231)⁴⁷. Padilla had barely arrived at Obscura’s house when he heard music at the door; normally music was an integral part of such gatherings but, in this case, within the lyrics, he distinguished his last name. He realized that he was being “satirized” and not being able to contain himself in the face of such provocation, he went out to confront the group of musicians. Those in the street serenading him with a satirical song included a number of fellow Xochimilco residents with whom he had previous run-ins. Earlier Padilla had fought with members of this group while they were all on a paseo and, on another occasion, when they were playing the game of pelota, Padilla had taken out a knife to threaten Josef Matías⁴⁸. Clearly there was bad blood between Padilla and other members of the youthful españoles of Xochimilco. Those

46 AGN Criminal vol. 537 fol. 19-48 1804 Cuautla; AGN Criminal vol. 617 fol. 72-86. 1800, Mexico City, fol. 74v-75, 78v-79v. Archivo.

47 Rubial Garcia comments that during festivals many Mexican placed altars with images, candles, incense burners and vases with aromatic water in the doorways of palaces and churches. This practice was common and also controversial in colonial Santiago, Chile.

48 TSJDF (Colonial). Alcalde Mayor de Xochimilco, Serie Criminal, caja 32B, exp. 48. Xochimilco, 1795. Archivo.

singing outside, however, used the power of humor rather than violence to seek revenge upon their enemy. Yet, the words of this song, which unfortunately were not recorded, although not “dishonest” in the sense of bawdiness, irreligiosity, or threats against the state harnessed the power of shared laughter to attack their rival.

Toward the end of the colonial period, as residents of New Spain were becoming more and more discontented with Spanish rule, this same scenario of a religious occasion, the worship of altars and singing in the streets took on a more serious tone. On Christmas Eve, in the town of Tacubaya, many of the residents had erected altars in streets around the town plaza. This night was, of course, an important event in the religious and social calendar. The residents of Tacubaya, like most people in New Spain, were on holiday, the restrictions normally in place regarding conduct were loosened and, so too, was their sense of respect and submission. During such festivals, as Keith Thomas notes, there was often a kind of “inversionary humor”—at times such joking was innocuous but it could be used for rebellion or to advance new ideas (Thomas, 1977: 77-79; Rubial García, 1968: 85). Town officials were worried about the festivities because, in the past, some residents had engaged in riotous behavior; thus they decided to provide more officials to patrol the streets. Some young men were engaged in the Christmas time activities of “correr el gallo” while many had picked up their guitars and vihuelas and were walking about singing. A group of young men, however, began to use lyrics that were aimed to provoke official ire and to make fun of officials and in particular the lieutenant. The document does not provide a transcript of the lyrics, but they mention the words “de Veracruz he llegado viniendo por el Oriente solo por venir a darle a este Carajo de Teniente”(from Veracruz I have come from the East just to give it to this prick of a Lieutenant)as well as other verses. It ended with this verse: “Con esta y no digo mas agua de la mar bermeja pensaría en Teniente que mi china es muy pendeja” (With this and not saying any more, water of the crimson sea, I will think of the Lieutenant and say that my china is a coward)⁴⁹. This short snippet of the lyrics is not at all clear but does seem similar in tone and wording to the “dishonest” song collected by inquisition officials. It also makes reference to being a song that came from Veracruz—the source of many of these types of melodies—but also the provenance of some soldiers stationed in the area around Mexico City. The songsters also made many references to the officials as “soplones” or informers, a standard insult that while it was very common was also considered very offensive. The youths were roaming about the area around the

49 Underlined in the original.

central plaza; when they were confronted by the officers on patrol, they became violent and began to riot. The officers managed to arrest some of their group but when they took them back to the *casas reales*, the young men attacked the prison and liberated their friends⁵⁰. The young men who roamed around the streets of Tacubaya on Christmas Eve had taken the tradition of satirical, mocking songs that usually were performed for much smaller audiences to a larger venue. Their actions harnessed the power of laughter for a political purpose which was still diffuse but was an extension of the growing political unease that was popping up in many parts of New Spain's social and cultural landscape.

VIII. CONCLUSIONS.

Humor and fun have been an integral way that historians have understood the popular culture of New Spain but most scholars have not addressed it directly. It was a central part of the daily interactions of residents but men especially seems to have used jokes and pranks as a way of relating to one another. Nevertheless, there was a fine line between jests and insults. Jokes were a way of navigating this frontier between politeness and the abandon of violence. Because the prevailing norms for men were, in fact, control and equanimity, they had to repress their urges to attack among members of their own class. Perhaps because of this pressure to conform and to be serene, they used humor to negotiate this difficult line between peaceful interactions and maintaining their social position. As Alejandro Cañeque has shown, members of New Spain's elite often fixated on subtle slights such as whether they could bring velvet cushions to sit on at mass (Cañeque, 2004: 149); Eagle, 2012; Rybczynski, 1986: 82-83). The arguments over cushions or having a box at the bullfights were ways to sublimate the real violence and power struggles that were occurring behind the scenes (Viqueira Albán, 1999: 12). Humor was, I believe, another way that men could channel their anger and instincts to violence into more socially acceptable forms of interaction.

At times humor covered up the fractures that were present in colonial Mexican society, the very real contradictions that men lived within their masculinity between how they were supposed to be and what they felt. Using jokes and teasing as a cloak, they could say what they really felt, they could attack others without landing a blow and they could break the composure and self-control of other men. At the same time, humor could be used to calm; like many common insults that lost their meaning and the bite in New Spain (Lipsett-Rivera, 2005),

50 AGN Criminal vol. 76 fol. 1-194. 1803, Tacuba. Archivo.

the joshing relationship between men became part of the social landscape of the times. At the end of the colonial period, humor began to have more of an edge as the conflicts between creoles and gachupines, soldiers and civilians, different branches of officialdom erupted with teasing and pranks. An effective use of mimicking and joking could create groups of insiders and outsiders and could undermine the authority of those who were supposedly in charge. Satire was the apotheosis of this use of humor for political purposes. Residents of New Spain began to deploy satire more frequently and their sense of nation was stimulated on the verge of the declaration of Independence. Humor could be a weapon of the weak but in New Spain, it became an important way to define a culture that has remained vibrant to this day. The jokes of yesterday may not have been written down but they became a norm within the culture of everyday life in Mexico.

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