

# Mexicans Be Like

Briana Nichols

*University of Pennsylvania*

This article explores the use of “Mexicans Be Like” memes in terms of the heteroglossic tension they both employ and produce, and the ways in which meme examples creatively recontextualize ideas about immigration, the border, contested histories, models of personhood, racialization and presumptions of social value. I understand these memes as an opportunity for viewers to position themselves in political, social and cultural landscapes, and in so doing contribute to an environment where consumers are not passive but quintessentially productive, altering the meme content, and redeploying them into new social domains. In an attempt to appreciate the work “Mexicans Be Like” memes do, I consider how the “Mexicans Be Like” meme produces and contests certain models of personhood and the social values associated with them. This piece explores how the producer/consumers of this meme are necessarily bricoleurs, constructing meaning via their thoughtful deployment of cultural, at times stereotypic, referents. This article points to ways in which people produce meaning through their engagement with the meme form, using it to challenge dominant narratives in the context of a collaboratively produced Web 2.0 environment.

At some point in 2014, Reddit user Nerdadicusprime posted an image to Reddit (Figure 1). This image consists of a photo with white text superimposed across the top of it. The photo depicts a young girl in a crowd of protesters holding up a cardboard sign. On the sign, written in marker, is this young girl’s message, “FUCK WEED. LEGALIZE MY MOM.” The text superimposed on the photo says “Mexicans Be Like.” The image is comprised of semiotic partials: the photo of the girl, her sign, the context she exists in; the text added to the photo; the forum on which the composite image is posted; and the slew of commentary the image generated. Taken together, these partials comprise a complex and multi-layered object through which the photographer, the image-producer, the Reddit user and commentators position themselves in dynamic political, social and cultural landscapes. The object is a *meme*; it is widely spread, imitated, and consistently rearticulated, a product where categories of consumer and producer are not neatly delineated.



Figure 1. Meme example from Reddit

The image posted to Reddit is an example of a widely circulating Internet meme in which the phrase “Mexicans Be Like” is paired with other signs and text to convey a “piece of culture...which gains influence through online transmission” (Davison, 2009). This meme example is a part of a communicative repertoire (Rymes, 2010) that uses language and images to convey messages salient to specific viewers and their lived experiences. The meaning of the composite semiotic array is distinct from that of the image or text in isolation. This article is an attempt to understand the work “Mexicans Be Like” memes do. *How does the “Mexicans Be Like” meme produce and contest certain models of personhood and the social values associated with them? What are these values? For whom are they meaningful?* This project is, at best, a “thin slice” into this world, a slice that does not attempt to claim “full social knowing” (Jackson, 2013) but rather engages in the unfinished work of asking questions about a phenomenon characterized by multi-modality and multi-authorships, where “content is produced by multiple participants, simultaneously and independently of each other” (Androutsopoulos, 2011, p. 281), and meaning is constantly shifting. The meme example displayed above generated over 659 comments from Reddit users. The comments ranged from questioning the accuracy of the meme message and representation to engaging in metacommentary about the place and value of “X Be Like” memes on the Internet. It provoked impassioned discussions around immigration in the United States. The comment board (see Figure 2) allowed people to embed themselves and their family histories into larger discourses of migration (“many of my great grandparents were legal immigrants”) in an attempt to legitimize their opinions about the meme itself and the topic it alludes to. Moral and intellectual evaluations of other community members were based on people’s perspectives on migration (“If you actually believe the lie you just wrote, you’re a sucker and a fool”). Prompted by this “Mexicans Be Like” meme example, user discussions ranged from the racial profiling practices of the Los Angeles Police Department to the heterogeneity of immigrants in the United States, deconstructing the stereotype of all migrants as Mexican (and all Mexicans as migrants).



Figure 2. An example of a Reddit comment board.

Reddit is an example of the collaborative production and mass amateurization Shirky (2008) references in his book, *Here Comes Everybody*, where users engage with Web 2.0 environment in the active production of knowledge (the veracity of the knowledge being provisional and evolving) (DiNucci, 1999 as cited in Rymes,

2014; O'Reilly, 2005). Through user participation on Reddit the social relevancy of the Mexicans Be Like meme example is illustrated. Whether or not the meme is viewed as “legitimate” by the Reddit community, or if memes are valued as cultural objects with general worth, this meme example in particular generated an opportunity for viewers to position themselves in political, social and cultural landscapes, and in so doing contributed to an environment where consumers are not passive but quintessentially productive.

In this project, I will explore the use of “Mexicans Be Like” memes in terms of the heteroglossic tension they both employ and produce and the ways in which meme examples creatively recontextualize ideas about immigration, the border, contested histories, models of personhood, racialization and presumptions of social value. It is not my intention for this paper to be the only legitimate reading of the memes presented—the power of memes specifically, and of Web 2.0 generally, is that of participation and reframing. Each viewer can share the meme, or not, within their larger virtual communities. They can re-appropriate the meme, change the image, reword the text, and deploy it anew. However, part of the power of these memes depends on the tensions they attend to—and the stories—of migration, cultural appropriation and valorization—these tensions uncovers.

### A Thin Slice

This project arises from a trend I noticed in my own digital life as a public school teacher working with predominately Mexican and Mexican American students in a major U.S. city. Upon leaving the profession, and lowering the security settings on my Facebook page, my former students began finding me, friending me, and showing up on my Facebook wall feed. In addition to the constant requests for “rates,” “tbh” (to be honest) posts and Vine videos, I noticed my former students posting and commenting on “Mexicans Be Like” meme examples and using the #mexicansbelike hashtag. Their posts demonstrated how they were using the Web 2.0 environment to actively engage in meaning making and contestation. Through their posts of, and commentary about, “Mexicans Be Like” meme examples, they were members of a participatory network engaging in and producing specific communicative repertoires unbound by physical geography. In a Web 2.0 environment, social value is generated. Rymes and Leone (2014) note that “when any post receives more comments, shares, and responses, its social value/meaning/relevance increases. When it goes ignored, its value disappears” (p. 31).

The extent to which my students were sharing and commenting on the “Mexicans Be Like” meme indicated the existence of a social domain of users who consume, spread, reproduce and recontextualize the meme. These *citizen sociolinguists* (Rymes & Leone, 2014) engage in discourses often simultaneously mobilizing humor, cultural nuance and political critique. Sometimes the meme examples also relied on specific models of racial personhood and xenophobia. The meme appears to be uniquely Mexican and American (and Mexican American), relying on a knowledge of multiple and overlapping social domains in order to produce meaningful content. Despite the meme being called “Mexicans Be Like,” the actual meme examples are contingent on the pairing of cultural or embodied *Mexican* identities and non-Mexican, largely (white) American tropes. Without knowledge of both domains, the meme examples are only partially understood,

jokes that don't quite land. As such, this meme appears to be a product of the enduring entanglement between the United States and Mexico, resulting from an intimate knowledge of the values, customs, beliefs and practices on both sides of the border. Producer/consumers of this meme are necessarily bricoleurs, constructing meaning via their thoughtful deployment of cultural, at times stereotypic, referents. Whether through language use—English, Spanish, and a mix of the two—or visual content, the meme always seems to have conceptualizations of Mexican (culture, place, or practice) and (white) America and Americans as its contextual grounding. Whiteness, Americanness, and gringo-ness are three categories against which the meme creators regularly contrast Mexicanness. Within each meme, these categories can index race, class, culture and language.

### Theoretical Framework

#### Memes and the Academic Lens

This article is a study of one meme type as it is produced, circulated, and commented on in a Web 2.0 environment. Meme, coming from the ancient Greek word *mimema*, “something imitated,” denotes “all non genetic behavior and cultural ideas that are passed from person to person” (Börzsei, 2013, p. 1). For the sake of this paper, memes are understood as reproducible semiotic assemblages (often text and an image or animated GIF) widely shared on the internet. Despite the fact that the story of memes is integral to understanding digital culture, and its discursive relationship with the non-digital, memes themselves have often eluded the gaze of researchers (Börzsei, 2013). The internet meme is a cultural object, ever changing, recontextualized and recirculated, commented on, and often commenting on. Memes are produced by and produce “citizen sociolinguists,” the “every person” online who “uses senses and intelligence to understand the world around them” (Rymes, 2014, p. 26), providing insight into circulating discourses and how people are actively making meaning of their lived realities—both cyber and IRL (in real life). An attentiveness to internet memes follows Blommaert's (2010) call for a sociolinguistics of mobility, which attends to the highly virtual realities of language producers, and the resulting spread of both language and ideology through both virtual and physical geographies.

Memes are emblematic of our Web 2.0 era, where information is no longer stored but shared and repurposed (DiNucci, 1999 as cited in Rymes, 2014; O'Reilly, 2005). They are both a form of communication and a type of communicative repertoire (Rymes, 2010) which use language and images to convey messages salient to specific viewers and their lived experiences. Memes are mass mediated cultural elements circulated and readapted by users, used to position individual selves in political, social and cultural landscapes. With this conceptualization of memes, the study of a specific meme can point to ways in which people produce meaning through their engagement with that meme form.

#### Creative Recontextualization, Models of Personhood, and Social Value

A critical element of meme production is the appropriation and resemiotization of mass-mediated cultural products (Leppänen & Hakkinen, 2012). These cultural

products act as a form of discourse practice and social engagement with political and social interest shared by their producers and consumers. However, to produce a meme, enough people with shared interests need to participate, allowing for the multiplication, mutation and spread of the cultural product, which often take the form of “humorous and subversive” representations (p. 17). Sometimes, these representations are of the Other and serve to “create and enforce hierarchies of value and have an impact on those who have access to resources with which distinctions and categories are created” (p. 20). However, the renderings can also be produced by the Other and act as subversive representations of *the self*, representations which can be diverse, widely circulating, and critical of alternate mass-produced and hierarchical messages.

Memes, including the “Mexicans Be Like” meme, depend on the wide circulation of mass produced messages and the interactions users have with these messages. These widely circulating forms become part of individuals’ communicative repertoires (Rymes, 2010) and then can be altered and redeployed, relying on the semiotic form of the original message to create a critical resemiotized version. Rymes (2012) notes that in human engagement with the symbolic world, consumers can engage with these signs mindlessly, but they can also engage critically, in ways that are “ironic, playful, mocking, subverting, faux culture-jamming, and so forth” (p. 214). This critical engagement involves the *creative recontextualization* of mass-mediated accounts. Individuals “selectively incorporate...widely circulating semiotic elements into locally relevant communicate repertoires to fit with their own, local communicative goals” (p. 215). This selective incorporation is not mindless but creative, and helps to communicate a new message in a particular social domain, dependent on the original message while destabilizing it.

In this work, I examine the ways in which the “Mexicans Be Like” meme form uses creative recontextualization to question specific circulating models of *Mexican* and *non-Mexican* personhood and the values associated with them. By models of personhood, I am referring to a cohesive yet fluid bundle of the expected behaviors, values, and trajectories of a person or group (Wortham, Mortimer, & Allard, 2011) that are embedded within the social lives of cultural values. Speech, including speech in the virtual world, unfolds simultaneously as a process of communication and of “value production, maintenance and transformation” (Agha, 2003, p. 231). As Agha explains, schemes of cultural values have social lives, and these are produced through discursive interactions: “cultural value is not a static property of things or people but a precipitate of sociohistorically locatable practices... which imbue cultural forms with recognizable sign-values and bring these values into circulation along identifiable trajectories in social space” (p. 232). Models of personhood are cultural forms with recognizable sign values; however, they are only relevant within the social domains that are able to identify both the form and value it carries with it. These models of personhood are not static, but consistently contested and reproduced with new variants and significance depending on the social domain they exist within. A model of personhood is a social identity that emerges across several events, and comes to presuppose the person to whom that identity is assigned within a specific social domain (Agha, 2007; Wortham, Mortimer, & Allard, 2009).

In the United States, an extensive history of Mexican migration and immigration, rife with political and social dispute, informs the production of



specific *Mexican*, *Latino* and *white* / *Gringo* models of personhood. As the boundaries of racial belonging are not immutable, the relationship between constructions of Mexicanness and whiteness are themselves historically situated (Fox, 2012). For the sake of this paper, race and racialization are talked about within the context of the United States, understanding that the racial categories differ according to national contexts. Mexicanness, whiteness and constructions of the *gringo* are historically embedded. *Gringo*, while related to whiteness, is not synonymous with it. The term has a contested history, but is generally believed to have been coined during one of many U.S. military occupations in Latin America where *green* is either symbolic of soldiers' uniforms, or the color of the U.S. dollar, and *go* is what residents wanted U.S. soldiers to do—leave, according to the story chants of *green go* morphed into the term *gringo*. What *gringo* denotes today is also highly context dependent. *Gringos* can be understood as Americans, or foreigners, or non-Spanish-speakers, but its meaning can also take on more value laden nuances (Ramirez, 2013). In Mexico, narratives of *gringos* depict a model of personhood that is "materialistic, self-righteous, ignorant, xenophobic, crass, hypocritical, and obese" (Lynam, 2008). These narratives of the *gringo* are evident in meme examples discussed later in this paper where the header of "Mexicans Be Like" is replaced with "White People Be Like" or "Gringos Be Like." In these examples, more often than not, the *gringo* is the northern, (white) Other.

For Mexicans and Mexican Americans living in the United States, questions of who has and has not been considered white throughout the course of American history have been both socially and legally significant. Mexicans in the United States were legally classified as white by the U.S. government, but have experienced the social and structural exclusion of Otherness (Martinez, 1997). Dick (2011) explores how "'Mexican immigrant' and 'illegal alien' have become conflated in the United States, effectively criminalizing Mexican immigrants as dangerous Others" (p. E35, emphasis in original). This conflation produces a model of *Mexican* personhood in which Mexicans are "dark-skinned, small in stature, possess 'indigenous' features such as broad noses, and so on" (p. E36, emphasis in original), they refuse to learn English, and they are undesirable, criminal and "illegal" (Plascencia, 2009, p. 381). Perceived racial markers index immigration status, and immigration status conversely indexes racial markers. In the United States, additional models of personhood exist for those perceived as *Mexican*: the model minority (Wortham et al., 2009), the gangbanger, the cholita and the bracero to name a few. The list of identities *available* (Wortham et al., 2009) to Mexicans in the United States relies on the deployment of specific representations and social stigmas, and often ignores the heterogeneity of the population.

### Heteroglossic Tension

Bakhtin (1981) defined heteroglossia as the blending of conflicting discourses through language, creating a multi-layered and complex unity from a hybrid of utterances. Baily (2007), as discussed by Androutsopoulos (2011), expands on this definition to include the "simultaneous use of different kinds of forms or signs and the tension and conflicts among those signs, based on the sociohistorical associations they carry with them" (p. 282). This concept allows us to look at discourse as fabricated by "social actors who have woven voices of society into

their discourses, contrasting these voices and the social viewpoints they stand for" (p. 282), and focuses on the coexistence of divergent and competing ideologies that are indexed both by language and the semiotic arrays it is accompanied by. Androutsopoulos (2011) explains that "heteroglossia invites us to examine contemporary new media environments as sites of tension and contrast between linguistic resources, social identities, and ideologies" (p. 283).

In this work, I will attend to the "Mexicans Be Like" meme as an object capable of indexing social, historical and ideological tensions. Within each of these meme examples is a context, a history, and narratives of belonging, intelligence, and cultural practice. The juxtapositions of language and signs in these memes is productive of heteroglossic tension, ultimately allowing for the polyphonic rendering of migrant experiences within singular images. The first meme example presented where the young girl holds a sign saying "FUCK WEED LEGALIZE MY MOM" is a powerful example of both creative recontextualization and heteroglossic tension. In this meme example, the author of the meme pairs the ideas of legalizing marijuana and legalizing people in the United States. The addition of the "Mexicans Be Like" text on the image indicates the existence of a social value (immigration reform) within a specific population ("Mexicans") by using another legalization movement as a referent. Presenting a young girl (as opposed to an adult) carrying a sign that both uses the curse word "fuck" and alludes to the drug marijuana through the use of the slang "weed" is productive of heteroglossic tension. The sign is the apparent voice of the girl; however, the language on the sign is not necessarily indicative of the voicing the reader expects from a young person. The juxtaposition of these two voices can produce a critical tension for the reader.

## The Border

Processes of creative recontextualization and the production of heteroglossic tension, models of personhood, and social value are sociohistorically contingent. These processes cannot occur without the cultural embeddedness of certain sign values such that their recontextualization can become meaningful. Many of the "Mexicans Be Like" meme examples rely either implicitly or explicitly on conceptualizations of the *border* as well as the histories and values associated with it. In order to properly situate this meme, it is important to understand the role of the *border* in discourses of Mexican immigration to the United States. The *border*, its production and its crossing, is both a literal construct (the northern border of Mexico, the south-western border of the United States) and an ideological framework through which *border* protection and boundary maintenance occur.

The *border* carries with it histories that are social, political, geographical and cultural. It is a site of policy, policing, contested sovereignty, and collective imaginaries. Plascencia (2009) explores the nature of the "border" (p. 383) in the imaginary of politicians and the U.S. people. He argues that the "border" is constructed as an unmarked category—when we as Americans reference the *border* what we are actually referring to is the southern border of the United States, the border with Mexico. The "immigration problem" (p. 383) is similarly marked to mean the problem with Mexican migrants (as opposed to Canadian, or other migrants), whose unauthorized presence in the United States is a threat

to U.S. sovereignty. The corresponding solution, he explains, to this “immigration problem” is regaining “border control” (p. 383), and plans to solve the imagined migration problem are focused on securing the southern border, despite the fact that most migrants subject to removal by immigration are visa violators, not illicit border crossers. Doty (2011) and Fassin (2001) draw connections between the *border* and the *margins of the state*. The policing of borders is what defines the limits of political entities and legal subjects; it is where law and order are both stringently enforced and actively ignored, and where tensions regarding this dynamic are most extreme. Borders do not exist in a vacuum; they exist against the backdrop of specific social, political and historical realities. Borders are both produced and producing entities, validating certain bodies over others. Many of the “Mexicans Be Like” meme examples, reference the notion of the border—and more importantly border control. The meme images seem to explore the historical situatedness of the border, its arbitrary nature, and the lived experiences of crossing it.

### Methods

To begin understanding the use of the “Mexicans Be Like” meme on Reddit and in other Web 2.0 environments, as well as the production of value associated with this use, is to engage in a form of *citizen sociolinguistics* which “up-ends established rules of access” to information production and dissemination and instead “attends to the emergent norms of participatory culture, largely constructed through social media and governed by social media users” (Rymes & Leone, 2014, pp. 32–33). In a citizen sociolinguistics approach we can attend to the reality that people actively engage with and understand the world of language around them. It is *participatory culture*, a culture with relatively easy access and communal support for creating and sharing (Jenkins, 2006), that constructs meaning, not the isolated academic.

In deciding to look at the production of models of personhood and social value via the “Mexicans Be Like” meme, I originally wanted to gain an understanding of the breadth of meme examples available. I searched for the meme on Facebook, Tumblr and Google, seeking as many examples as possible. In my search I also found that the meme co-occurred frequently with the #mexicansbelike, and so I integrated this hashtag into my search queries as well. Thus the process of finding the meme examples emulated the experience of searching for other information online; each site I found potentially linked me to another relevant resource, and I was able to conduct a snowball sampling of “Mexicans Be Like” memes.

When selecting memes to analyze for this article, I attempted to choose memes that were both widely spread and commented on in order to look at memes with high social relevance and value (Rymes & Leone, 2014). I also sought out cases that seemed to be exemplars of specific subcategories within the “Mexicans Be Like” meme (such as the differences between Mexicans and gringos/[white] Americans, references to Mexican-American history, border control, and language use). I focused on examples of the meme which seemed to come from within Mexican and Mexican American communities—memes that relied on specific insider cultural knowledge which perhaps played on racialized models of personhood and immigration, but didn’t read as overtly racist or bigoted in nature.<sup>1</sup> It is nearly

<sup>1</sup> I found that the meme examples relying on bigotry and racism, while present, did not gain the same traction online—and thus were not replicated in high numbers—as meme examples relying on nuanced knowledge about the lived experiences of Mexican Americans.



impossible to know who created, modified and disseminated the examples I examine here, and while I recognize that the uses of this meme are heterogenous, I am much more interested in the meme as a meaningful object within Mexican American virtual communities than as a tool for hatred deployed by others.

### History of “X Be Like”

Like many internet researchers, the sources one relies on to figure out the history of internet phenomena are often themselves products of that phenomena. Rymes and Leone (2014) reference the use of sites like [urbandictionary.com](http://urbandictionary.com) and [youtube.com](http://youtube.com) as useful and relevant resources in a citizen sociolinguistics methodological paradigm. In this case, I used [knowyourmeme.com](http://knowyourmeme.com) to get a basic understanding of the history of this meme type. According to *Know Your Meme*, the first mediatized use of the phrase was actually in a Redman rap where he claims that “bitches be like he ain’t shit.” The “Bitches Be Like” meme was the first of this subtype, showing up on Asian Town Forums as the picture of a raw whole chicken with the caption “Bitches be like/ I’m still a virgin shoe” (Particle Mare, n.d.). This was in April of 2012. By October of the same year, the “Bitches Be Like” Twitter feed and Facebook pages were opened, and the first derivatives of the meme in the form of “Niggas Be Like” began popping up. The “Bitches Be Like” meme peaked in 2013, but is still present in the meme world, and now derivatives abound, including “Mexicans Be Like,” “Latinos Be Like,” and “Mexican Moms Be Like.”

### Data Analysis

In an effort to understand how “Mexicans Be Like” memes produce and contest specific models of personhood and the social values attached to them, I selected representative meme examples to analyze in terms of how they deployed creative recontextualization and heteroglossic tension in order to produce a message that could be understood within a specific social domain of participants. I also examined the models of personhood constructed (or contested) through the memes, how these models of personhood were racialized, and the social values embedded in the semiotic arrays presented. Lastly, I look at how, through use of the strategies mentioned above, the memes become meaningful tools for contesting dominant narratives around immigration, the border, and the histories of interaction between Mexico and the United States.

### Creative Recontextualization, Heteroglossic Tension, and Social Domains

Memes, by their nature, are successful when disseminated widely. Their spread is connected to processes of meaning making. In the production and dissemination of memes, individuals integrate preexisting widely known semiotic elements and communicative repertoires relevant to specific social domains to produce locally meaningful messages. This selective merging of widely circulating sign-values and locally situated repertoires helps to communicate the new message within a particular social domain, and is an act of creative recontextualization by individuals. Much of this creative recontextualization relies on heteroglossic tension, the blending of ideas, voices, and sign-values whose dissonance produces new meaning. Within the “Mexicans Be Like” memes, the most successful

examples relied heavily on both creative recontextualization and heteroglossic tension. In order for these memes to be meaningful within a specific social domain, individuals of that social domain have to be simultaneously familiar with the widely circulating semiotic element, and the locally relevant communicative repertoires. To be able to perceive the heteroglossic tension, the dissonance of the voices in combination, the viewers have to already have a sense of the voices individually. For many of the “Mexicans Be Like” meme examples, this means having knowledge of a heterogeneous array of Mexican and Mexican American experiences and cultural practices, understanding multiple communicative repertoires of English and Spanish, grasping the models of personhood indexed by the descriptors *white*, *gringo*, *Mexican* and *paisa* in context, and being able to identify relevant sociohistorical elements referenced by the meme. Comprehending the meme, finding it relevant, sharing it, and possibly altering it are highly situated practices. The acts of creative recontextualization necessary to generate successful memes depend on significant knowledge bases for both the meme producers and meme consumers.

Figure 3 consists of two “Mexicans Be Like” meme examples using creative recontextualization and heteroglossic tension to produce messages relevant to specific social domains. These meme examples employ creative recontextualization to question stereotypes about Mexican im / migrants in the United States. In order to be effective, the meme examples rely on previously circulated symbols, placing these symbols in new contexts, or selectively juxtaposing them in order to contest their normalized inherent value.

In the first meme example, the image is split in two. On the top half, the text reads “Mexicans Be Like,” and is superimposed on a picture depicting a group of men whose physical presentation is stereotypically associated with gang affiliation. The bottom image is of a group of people at a big party, circled around a piñata, and reads “In line for the piñata.” This creative recontextualization plays on the mass-mediated imagery of Mexican *gangueros* as criminal, tough, tattooed, bandana wearing men, juxtaposing this image with the light-hearted nature of a party. It forces the reader to reevaluate their assumptions of the top picture, where it might appear as though the men are in line for something much more nefarious than a chance to hit the piñata. The images shown in tandem destabilize racialized stereotypes connecting Mexicanness with criminality.

The second meme example uses semiotic elements from a previously circulating meme—unrelated to “Mexicans Be Like”—to produce its message. On the left hand of this example is the image of this other meme, one that swept the internet in February 2015. Within 48 hours of this



Figure 3. Memes employing creative recontextualization, heteroglossic tension, and social domain.

memes being posted—which asked users to determine if the dress was gold and white or black and blue—the image of “[#TheDress](#)” was ubiquitous with over 400,000 tweets, 1.8 million votes, and influenced at least one major advertising campaign (to prevent domestic violence) (Triple Zed, 2016). The discourse around the meme delineated two options for dress color—with some folks varying the colors slightly in their commentary—however this meme example recontextualizes “[#TheDress](#).” Instead of relying on the blue/black and white/gold binary circulating throughout the United States in English, this “Mexicans Be Like” meme offers the third option of “Yo Veo A La Virgen” [I see Our Lady of Guadalupe (the Virgin Mary)]. The reframing relies on the same linguistic form used in the original meme (I see blue..., I see white...) but de-centers the response away from the hegemonic binary to a culturally familiar trope within Mexico (and much of Latin America), that of seeing the Virgin in everyday objects. The heteroglossic tension of this meme example lies in the selective pairing of the “the dress” with the image of a woman fainting, and the pairing of the English “Mexicans Be Like” with the Spanish “Yo Veo A La Virgen” which produces an uncanny sense of simultaneous dislocation and humor. The meme example appears to be both a nod to a trope in Mexican culture, and a contestation of dominant internet discourses.

The meme examples discussed in this section use creative recontextualization and heteroglossic tension to contest specific models of personhood, social value, and historical narratives. While this use is specifically attended to in the discussion of memes from Figure 3 it is important to recognize that creative recontextualization and heteroglossic tension are tools used in each of the meme examples presented, even if not overtly attended to in their analysis.

### **Models of Personhood, Racialization, and Social Value**

Many of the meme examples analyzed rely either implicitly or explicitly on perceptions of Mexicanness and the non-Mexican. Often this non-Mexican appears to be a (white) American. Perceptions of Mexicanness and of (white) Americans/gringos can be identified through the deployment of, and challenges to, specific models of personhood. The production and maintenance of models of personhood are intimately tied to processes of racialization. Thus, the models of personhood available to Mexicans and Mexican Americans in the United States are simultaneously reliant on perceptions of Mexicanness and whiteness, with one often acting as a referent for the other.

Digital platforms provide important contexts in which to engage and denaturalize processes of racial formation. The virtual world is a conduit for mediatized conversations about race. As Nakamura (2002) notes, discourses on race through text, image and video have become “an increasingly important channel for discourse about differences. Race has itself become a digital medium, a distinctive set of informatics codes, networked mediated narratives, maps, images, and visualizations that index identity” (p. 5). Users both consume and produce images of race which are performed, contested, and deployed as salient features of individual identity through “racial coding” (Nakamura, 2002). This is not a uni-dimensional process promoting openness and critique; it also allows for the production of inequality in the virtual world along racial lines, and can promote the diffusion of entrenched racial ideologies and imaginaries. As discussed earlier,

the racialization of Mexicans and Mexican Americans within the United States is a long enduring, heterogeneous and emergent process by which Mexicans have experienced divergent legal and social racial framings, framings which change over time as public policy and sentiment regarding Mexican migration shifts (Fox, 2012). Mexican immigrants, and Mexican residents, have largely been conflated with “illegality” (Plascencia, 2009, p. 378) in the United States, a process which criminalizes Mexicans as dangerous others, and racializes them as inherently threatening and foreign (Dick, 2011).

Inherent in the concept of a model of personhood is the notion of representation. Representation can be both the “self conscious mapping to a wider eavesdropping public” and in-group identity boundary formation (Jackson, 2013, p. 4). In this meme context, the in-group is not a rigidly bounded group formation; rather, it is a discursive community of comingling creators and consumers. Despite its amorphousness, the community of “Mexicans Be Like” producers exerts a power to challenge privileged representations of Mexicanness and contest the deployment of certain models of personhood. In some sense, the “Mexicans Be Like” memes act as the construction of an archive that can document specific narratives and histories, and prove the salience of overlooked migrant experiences (Jackson, 2013). Many of these memes also rely on *stigma symbols* (Goffman, 1963) drawing attention to a “debasing identity discrepancy” (p. 44), but in referencing these stigmas, the memes are actually engaged in “stigma management” (p. 51) or stigma recontextualization, where the negative sign becomes differently characterized.

The meme examples in Figure 4 attend to racial models of personhood through their use of creative recontextualization and heteroglossic tension to index contrasting social identities. In the first example a (presumably) Mexican man is squeezing lime juice into Bud Light beers, with text stating: “Mexicans be like/ mira [look] I started juicing.” While potentially relying on a stereotype relating to the alcohol consumption of Mexican men this meme example is also a commentary on a “stuff white people like” trope. The semiotic array makes clear that the literal juicing the man has started is that of squeezing lime juice into his beer—but the juicing being cheekily indexed is the bourgeois concept of juicing connected to so-called healthy lifestyles and whole or organic foods. This representation points to potentially incongruous cultural values, but one is left wondering who is the butt of the joke. It could be the Mexican man who is positioned as misinterpreting the meaning of juicing, but it also can be read as a commentary on *gringo* priorities which questions the social value of specific consumer-based practices.

The second meme example is of a tattooed man with a mustache, playing cards at a table covered in alcohol—another depiction of Mexican masculinity (see Broughton, 2008; Gutmann, 2004; Mirandé, 1997; Sequiera, 2009). In terms of semiotic display (the alcohol, the subject’s tattoos and mustache), it at first glance appears to be referencing the same stigma-based model of personhood as the piñata meme —Mexican maleness as innately intersecting with criminality and gang membership. However, similar to the earlier meme example, here the text imposed on the image allows for a completely different model of personhood to be deployed. It reads, “You take good selfies...but can you make posole?” Posole is a Mexican stew traditionally made with hominy. The model of personhood



attached to Mexican men is contested here—this man is a tough card playing tattooed guy and a wiz in the kitchen. Juxtaposing taking good selfies as a lauded (and rather vapid) skill with the ability to prepare a traditional Mexican dish deploys an understanding of cultural values (larger youth technological culture, traditional Mexican culture) to transform them. Representations of masculinity are made complex and heterogeneous via the circulation of these cultural forms.

In the third meme example, the text is flipped. Instead of “Mexicans Be Like” it says, “White people be like / get these illegal immigrants off of my land” emblazoned on an image of indigenous peoples. The message here points out that it is not “[their] land” to begin with—the land was inhabited by someone else long before the “white people” came. Notice that this does not say “Americans Be Like” or “U.S. Citizens Be Like.” The message is explicitly racialized—white people becomes a proxy for American citizens, non-whiteness a proxy for the Other. The contrast between the text and the image communicates a message of contested social identity, and questions the racialization of Other, positioning it as conveniently forgetful of an alternate, and often silenced, history.

The last meme example explicitly references the iconization of Mexicans as illegal via phenotypic stereotypes. This meme was posted with the #Mexicansbelike hashtag, and shows a stereotypically Mexican looking man wearing a t-shirt that says “Relax, Gringo... I’m Legal.” This image critiques *gringo* fear and xenophobia, and the concerns over the legitimacy of some bodies and not others. The message, and tension in this image, is produced through the deployment of a specific body, calling attention to the viewers’ assumptions regarding who that body is. However it also attends to, and perhaps reinforces, a legal-illegal paradigm. This paradigm assumes the legitimacy of a *border* in the production of migration status—a legitimacy which is contested by the meme examples in the next section which seek to upend naturalized histories of Mexico and the United States as discrete sovereign nations.



Figure 4. Memes employing models of personhood, racialization, and social value.



## The Border, Immigration, and Historical Narratives

In the “Mexicans Be Like” meme examples, the notion of the border—and more importantly border control—is called into question. The meme images reference the historical situatedness of the border, its arbitrary nature, and the lived experiences of crossing it. The first example in Figure 5 reads “Mexicans be like/ Air Paisa/ Hopping borders since 1846.” The image behind the text is a play on Air Jordan, the iconic Michael Jordan jumping image. Instead of an outline of Michael Jordan, the meme shows a white outline of a man in cowboy boots and a cowboy hat against a black background. The man is a “paisa”—who, according to *Urban Dictionary*, is a Mexican man who lives in the United States and “wears cowboy hats, belts and boots made of ostrich skin” (Paco Rivera, 2005) is a “countryman” and an inhabitant of a rural area who lacks sophistication (Republica Mexicana/ Estados Unidos Mexicanos/ Mexico, 2004). The meme references the year 1846, which was the beginning of the Mexican-American War. When the United States annexed Texas, effectively separating families who now lived on opposite sides of this new border, swaths of Mexicans were turned into Americans through the capture of 500,000 square miles spanning from the Rio Grande to the Pacific Ocean. Creating the “Air Paisa” emblem, and associating it with the act of “hopping borders since 1846” draws attention to border production and contestation. The “Air Paisa” was produced by U.S. territorial expansion and is the embodiment of sovereign contestation. This image, and message, is made intelligible through the use of a quintessential emblem of American sports, the Air Jordan.

The next meme example seems to poke fun at border security and policing. Posted with the hashtag #mexicansbelike, it shows an image of a man using the border fence as a hammock with text that reads “Cual pinche ‘border’/ Mira, watcha.” It’s hard to produce a really accurate translation of this text, but the first line roughly translates to “What fucking ‘border’.” The second line references the Spanish word “mira,” translated as look, and the English Spanish hybrid “watcha” translated similarly as look or watch. This meme example uses language in combination with an image of a stereotypically Mexican looking man making the border fence into a hammock to denote not only the survival, but the championing of Mexican migrants over the physical border. This shifts the imaginary of the border from a site of effective enforcement, to



Figure 5. Memes denoting the border, immigration, and historical narratives.

a site of domination—not of the border security over Mexican migrants, but of migrants over the physical border. While this image does not help communicate the very real dangers U.S. border security measures produce for people attempting to come North (Doty, 2011), it does reframe the border as an impotent construct, one which is overcome daily.

The last meme example of this sample shows an airplane flying with a number of people sitting on top of it (clearly photoshopped into the image). The airplane in the image is actually an Algerian Air airplane, leading me to believe that this image has been recontextualized from another meme circulating the internet in a different social domain. The text on the image says “Mexicans be like/Ebola in America?/Let’s go home!” This creative recontextualization speaks to circulating narratives regarding the logic of migration. The U.S. is frequently talked about as a *land of promise* (Lind, 2012), carrying with it an implicit assumption which informs U.S. immigration policy. As a land of promise, people yearn to live in the U.S., producing a unidirectional flow of migration which needs to be controlled and restricted. The meme example engages this perception by providing an alternate, and humorous, interpretation of migrant logic. The semiotic array in this meme destabilizes the idea that Mexicans uncritically prefer being in the United States. It flips the migration narrative by depicting people illicitly hitching a ride home—sneaking over the border in the opposite direction.

## Conclusion

The “Mexicans Be Like” memes offer a “discursive space and a set of semiotic resources” which allows creators and viewers “to make sense of and evaluate of their experiences” (Leppänen & Hakkinen, 2012, p. 19). They are an opportunity to contend with and expand on the limited representations available to Mexicans in the United States. Many of the “Mexicans Be Like” meme examples use this strategy to produce powerful political and social commentary, critique dominant discourses, and create subversive representations of the self. On some level, the resemiotization of dominant discourses allows for critiques to be comprehensible—it is a linguistic, Web 2.0 answer to Audre Lorde’s assertion that the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. Perhaps not in their original form, but if reconfigured, as is the case here, the master’s tools can certainly do some damage.

The meme creators produced and disseminated alternate discourses contesting widely circulating ideologies about immigrants, Mexicans, and the border. They transformed and redeployed semiotic content to produce critical resemiotized versions of familiar content and in so doing indexed social, historical, and ideological tensions. Within each of these meme examples is a context, a history, and narratives of belonging, intelligence, and cultural practice which meme creators sought to challenge and destabilize. Despite their nature as ephemeral cultural products, the memes become meaningful tools for contesting dominant narratives around immigration, the border, and the histories of interaction between Mexico and the United States. “Mexicans Be Like” producers exert a power to challenge privileged representations of Mexicanness and contest the naturalization of dominant historical discourses. Taken together, these meme examples produce an archive documenting the salience of overlooked migrant experiences while destabilizing gendered and racialized stereotypes.

## Acknowledgements

I gratefully acknowledge my former middle school students who provided me with the inspiration for this paper. I would also like to thank Dr. Betsy Rymes for encouraging me to turn my blog on the “Mexicans Be Like” meme into a formal academic piece, and the editors at WPEL for their hard work and dedication.

Briana Nichols ([brianan@gse.upenn.edu](mailto:brianan@gse.upenn.edu); [www.sas.upenn.edu/anthropology/content/briana-nichols](http://www.sas.upenn.edu/anthropology/content/briana-nichols)) is a 3rd-year PhD student at the University of Pennsylvania pursuing a joint degree in Anthropology and Education. After receiving her BA and MA from the University of Chicago, she spent 5 years teaching in the Chicago Public Schools working with predominately Latino communities on the south and west sides of the city. Her experiences as a teacher inform her current research interest in the mobility, subjective positioning, and state management of “undocumented unaccompanied youth” as they circulate between Guatemala and the United States.

## References

- Agha, A. (2003). The social life of cultural value. *Language & Communication*, 23(3–4), 231–273.
- Agha, A. (2007). *Language and social relations*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.
- Androutsopoulos, J. (2011). From variation to heteroglossia in the study of computer-mediated discourse. In C. Thurlow & K. Mroczek (Eds.), *Digital discourse: Language in the new media* (pp. 277–298). Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press.
- Bakhtin, M. M., & Holquist, M. (1981). *The dialogic imagination: Four essays* (N. Holquist, Trans.). Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Blommaert, J. (2010). *The sociolinguistics of globalization*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.
- Börzsei, L. K. (2013). Makes a meme instead: A concise history of internet memes. *New Media Studies Magazine*, 7.
- Broughton, C. (2008). Migration as engendered practice: Mexican men, masculinity, and northward migration. *Gender & Society*, 22(5), 568–589.
- Davison, P. (2009). The language of internet memes. In M. Mandiberg (Ed.), *The social media reader* (pp. 120–136). New York: NYU Press.
- Dick, H. P. (2011). Making immigrants illegal in small-town USA. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, 21(s1), E35–E55.
- Doty, R. L. (2011). Bare life: Border-crossing deaths and spaces of moral alibi. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space Environmental Planning D*, 29(4), 599–612.
- Fassin, D. (2001). The biopolitics of otherness: Undocumented foreigners and racial discrimination in French public debate. *Anthropology Today*, 17(1), 3–7.
- Fox, C. (2012). *Three worlds of relief: Race, immigration, and the American welfare state from the progressive era to the new deal*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma; notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Gutmann, M. C. (2004). Machismo. In *Men & masculinities: A social, cultural, and historical encyclopedia* (Vol. 2, pp. 478–480). Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO.

- Jackson, J. (2013). *Thin Description: Ethnography and the African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Jenkins, H. (2006). *Fans, bloggers, and gamers: Exploring participatory culture*. New York: NYU Press.
- Leppänen, S., & Häkkinen, A. (2012). Buffalaxed superdiversity: Representations of the other on YouTube. *Diversities*, 14(2), 17–33.
- Leppänen, S., Kytölä, S., Jousmäki, H., Peuronen, S., & Westinen, E. (2014). Entextualization and resemiotization as resources for identification in social media. In P. Seargeant & C. Tagg (Eds.), *The language of social media: Identity and community on the internet* (pp. 112–138). Houndmills, United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lind, M. (2012). *Land of promise: An economic history of the United States*. New York, NY: Broadside Books.
- Lorde, A. (2003). The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. In R. Lewis & S. Mills (Eds.), *Feminist postcolonial theory: A reader* (pp. 25–28). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Lynam, J. (2008). *Estadounidenses and gringos as reality and imagination in Mexican narrative of the late twentieth century* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest. (3340191)
- Martinez, G. (1997). Mexican-Americans and whiteness. In R. Delgado & J. Stefancic (Eds.), *Critical white studies: Looking behind the mirror* (pp. 210–213). Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Mirandé, A. (1997). *Hombres y machos: Masculinity and Latino culture*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Nakamura, L. (2002). *Cybertypes: Race, ethnicity, and identity on the internet*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- O'Reilly, T. (2005). Web 2.0: compact definition. Retrieved from [http://radar.oreilly.com/archives/2005/10/web\\_20\\_compact\\_definition.html](http://radar.oreilly.com/archives/2005/10/web_20_compact_definition.html)
- Paco Rivera. (2005, March 16). paísa. In *Urban Dictionary*. Retrieved April 13, 2016 from <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=paísa>
- Particle Mare. (2015). Bitches Be Like. In *Know Your Meme: Internet Meme Database*. Retrieved April 12, 2016 from <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/bitches-be-like>
- Plascencia, L. F. (2009). The “undocumented” Mexican migrant question: Re-examining the framing of law and illegalization in the United States. *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development*, 38(2/3/4), 375–434.
- Ramirez, A. (2013, October 13). Who, exactly, is a gringo? Retrieved from <http://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2013/08/07/209266300/who-exactly-is-a-gringo>
- Republica Mexicana/Estados Unidos Mexicanos/Mexico. (2004, August 6). paísa. In *Urban Dictionary*. Retrieved April 13, 2016 from <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=paísa>
- Rymes, B. (2010). Classroom discourse analysis: A focus on communicative repertoires. In N. Hornberger & S. Lee McKay (Eds.) *Sociolinguistics and language education* (pp. 528–546). Tonawanda, NY: Multilingual Matters.
- Rymes, B. (2012). Recontextualizing YouTube: From macro–micro to mass- mediated communicative repertoires. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 43(2), 214–227.

- Rymes, B. (2014). *Communicating beyond language: Everyday encounters with diversity*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Rymes, B., & Leone, A. R. (2014). Citizen sociolinguistics: A new media methodology for understanding language and social life. *Working Papers in Educational Linguistics*, 29(2), 25–43.
- Sequeira, D. (2009). *The machismo and marianismo tango*. Pittsburgh, PA: Dorrance.
- Shirky, C. (2008). *Here comes everybody: The power of organizing without organizations*. New York, NY: Penguin.
- Triple Zed. (2016). #TheDress / What Color Is This Dress. In *Know Your Meme: Internet Meme Database*. Retrieved April 12, 2016 from <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/thedress-what-color-is-this-dress>
- Wortham, S., Mortimer, K., & Allard, E. (2009). Mexicans as model minorities in the new Latino diaspora. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 40(4), 388–404.
- Wortham, S., Mortimer, K., & Allard, E. (2011). Homies in the new Latino diaspora. *Language & Communication*, 31(3), 191–202.