

EPILOGUE



LAS TRAMPAS MODERNAS

Hay trampas que el hombre evita
pero estas modernas, no . . .

COPLAS DE DON SIMÓN

This book took far too long to write.¹ Like all tardy authors, I have a litany of irrelevant excuses for the delay. One of those excuses involved a move from a small town in Ohio to a small town in Colorado. While the professional and personal reasons behind the move are indeed irrelevant, the move itself produced unexpected insights into the ongoing sentimental education of working-class Mexican men. For instance, my neighborhood park now hosts an informal gathering of working-class Mexican immigrant men, ages anywhere from early twenties to late sixties, who hang out most seasonable afternoons, talking and joking with each other in a slang-inflected Spanish reminiscent of Pitacio and Chema: plenty of “*güey*s,” although more “*brodes*” than “*manarios*,” evidence nonetheless that they share their Porfirian counterparts’ enthusiasm for playing around with English words.

My contemporary guide to this latest incarnation of working-class male sociability and socialization comes in the form of a five-hour afternoon radio show on *La Tricolor Denver 96.5 FM*, El Show de Erazno y la Chokolata—“el show más chido por las tardes” [the coolest show in the afternoons]—which is broadcast everyday all over the western and south-

ern United States.² Although not especially political, the show resembles the early twentieth-century Mexico City penny press in most other ways: its principal mode is satire; it boasts a mix of topical and regular features; it is primarily directed at a working-class Mexicans; it is intensely chauvinistic about Mexico and being Mexican but cynical about the country's political class; its "editorial" perspective is mostly male even when channeled through female personas (although women do have a prominent voice); it alternately mocks and celebrates working-class Mexican culture; and it provides practical and psychological tips for coping with the trials and tribulations of modern life. Despite its billings as a family variety show, "Saturday Night Live de la tarde" [Saturday Night Live in the afternoon], *Erazno y la Chokolata* focuses much of its attention on adult gender relations, especially male insecurities about women and female complaints about men.

In *El fracaso de amor*, Ana Lidia García Peña argues that in nineteenth-century Mexico City "domestic conflicts between women and men were characterized by hatred, violence, and abandonment . . . in a century plagued by modernizing initiatives."³ At one level, *Erazno y la Chokolata* would suggest that nothing much has changed despite over two centuries of modernizing initiatives, many of them aimed directly at reducing domestic conflict by fixing dysfunctional masculine behavior. Indeed, one of the show's principal protagonists, "El Doggie"—fictional sportscaster and host of "La hora del Doggie"—espouses the worst traits of working-class Mexican machismo and spends most of his airtime egging on male disciples (they refer to him as *maestro*) and antagonizing the angry women who call in to berate him for his blatant misogyny (which he alternately embraces and denies).⁴ The other prominent male characters—*Erazno* (a wannabe wrestler), *Chente* (a caricature of former Mexican president Vicente Fox), and *Los Super Amigos* (parodies of Mexican mariachi greats Vicente Fernández and Antonio Aguilar)—are little better.⁵ With all of these characters, humor typically comes in the form of *albures*, "a rhythmic game of words and gestures that combine humor with insult, which occurs principally in spaces of masculine interaction," in this instance a male-dominated broadcast booth. As sociologist Ivonne Szasz explains:

The albur is generated in social contexts of the extreme repression of sexuality and serves as a means to communicate norms related to gen-

der and masculinity. As a language that begins in puberty in a society that denies sexual knowledge and curiosity in women and children, forbidden knowledge is transformed into a form of power, the power that adults exercise over children, husbands over their wives. . . . Young men display an impressive gamut of information about sexual anatomy and make a show of their handling of masculine language and masculine ability to break the rules. Mastery in the domain of language substitutes for mastery in deeds, knowledge implies experience, and constitutes proof of adulthood and virility.⁶

While Szasz's explanation of Mexican male humor certainly rings true for the male personalities on *Erazno y la Chokolata*—their female interlocutors regularly comment on their “juvenile” attitude toward sex—it fails to capture the complex layers of satire at the heart of the show's popular appeal, and quite possibly the complexities of working-class masculinity as well. Take for example, these two blog responses to a *La hora del Doggie* episode, posted on YouTube as “Llamada de radio escucha enojada por La hora de Doggy” [Call from a radio listener angered by Doggie's Hour], in which Doggie harangues a female listener who has called in to complain about irresponsible young boys who impregnate their girlfriends⁷:

Male listener: Maestro doggy. Usted es un oasis en el desierto. una luz en la oscuridad, que bueno que ha llegado para dar el mensaje a todos aquellos que todavia permanecen ciegos, yo era uno de ellos pero ya salí del pantano y ahora me considero un hombre libre. [Maestro doggy: You, sir, are an oasis in the desert. a light in the darkness, how fortunate that you've come to give the message to all those who remain in darkness, I was one of them but have since left the swamp and now consider myself a free man.]

Female listener: Pinche doggy pendejo no sabia ni ke decir el weee. [Doggie is a fucking idiot, the guy had no clue what to say.]

Although most posts for this popular episode came from Doggie's admiring male *alumnos* (students), the female listener's dismissive response in support of a female caller reveals a give and take approach to gender relations that complicates this “space of masculine interaction” in unexpected ways.

Masculine space is complicated even more by *Erazno y la Chokolata*'s distinctive feature: all the major personalities (except the requisite talk show sidekick Garbanzo) are conceived and performed by the same man, Oswaldo Díaz. Díaz's multiple personalities include not only the male characters mentioned above but also the program's female cohort, *La Chokolata* (a.k.a. "Choko"), whose hyperfeminine persona and profemale stance provides a steady in-your-face counterpoint to the macho posturing of the men.⁸ Although all but the most naive listeners are in on the joke, everyone involved—radio personalities, guests, publicists, callers—stays in character, including on the program website and in public appearances, which are usually done by *Erazno* wearing a wrestler's mask that hides his creator's face.⁹ Thus, while the show does indeed recreate a social world predicated on radical (and contentious) gender difference of the "men are from Mars, women are from Venus" variety, the female perspective is well represented through drag performance, female callers, and female guests. Topics certainly include nineteenth-century divorce case favorites like "hatred, violence, and abandonment," and frequently devolve into shouting matches between angry women and belligerent men (especially *Doggie*), but the overall effect is surprisingly good humored and gender inclusive, which no doubt accounts for the show's considerable popularity with both sexes.

Representing gender relations as always already troubled isn't necessarily a bad thing or reactionary thinking. In *The Queer Art of Failure*, cultural critic Judith Halberstam notes the limitations of "acceptable forms of feminism that are oriented to positivity, reform, and accommodation rather than negativity, rejection, and transformation," arguing that "there are definite advantages to failing. Relieved of the obligation to keep smiling through chemotherapy or bankruptcy, the negative thinker can use the experience of failure to confront the gross inequalities of everyday life in the United States."¹⁰ The presence of a queer character in *Erazno y La Chokolata*, coupled with the anxious iteration of gender norms in light of their obvious and repeated failure in listeners' everyday lives, thus works to satirize masculine pretensions to self-mastery and domination of women. This is especially evident in the regularly featured game show, "Hembras contra Machos" [Females versus Males], which involves the principal characters and call-in listeners in a competition to determine

whether women are smarter, kinder, tougher, more honest, more faithful, more loving, and so on, than men (or vice versa).¹¹

Even more telling is the daily “Chokolatazo,” an on-air surprise phone call from Choko at the behest of a listener who wants to “probar la fidelidad de la pareja” [test the faithfulness of her or his partner].¹² During the call, Choko pretends to represent a candy company offering to send a promotional box of heart-shaped chocolates to a person the recipient of the call would like to recognize in a special way, typically not the one who requested the Chokolatazo. This daily real-life soap opera with wounded lovers of both sexes confronting their betrayers “on the air” is particularly poignant for a transnational migrant community divided by a heavily policed political border that enforces prolonged separations and creates ample opportunities for deception—and indeed most calls are to lovers on the other side of the border or in other cities. Although the immediate appeal of *El Chokolatazo* is audience sympathy (voiced by Choko) and perverse satisfaction (voiced by the male characters), the confrontation that follows the failed fidelity test reveals as much about “the gross inequalities of everyday life in the United States,” amplified by harsh immigration policies and the Global North/Global South divide, as it does the character flaws of the offending or offended partner.

Separated from the early twentieth-century Mexico City penny press by more than a century, over fifteen hundred miles (from Mexico City to Los Angeles), a political border, and a different medium (radio), *Erazno y la Chokolata* nonetheless shares its predecessor’s strategy of cloaking social critique in layers of satire. And, as with the penny press, the show’s social satire includes a self-mocking approach to gender relations that stands in for reflexivity—the essential marker of modern selfhood predicated on the continuous revision of knowledge in light of new information—even though both sources generally seek to promote reflection in their readers/listeners rather than model it in their fictional protagonists. In other words, the reader/listener is pushed to reflect on and adapt to the “modern” world by the stubborn cluelessness of the protagonists, who are too tradition bound to break free of the social norms that condemn them to endless cycles of betrayal, abuse, and dissatisfaction. An added benefit: as distinct voices of a single performer, the show’s different personalities channel the stereotypical masculine and feminine

“scripts” around and through which listeners seek to make sense of their lives.¹³ A useful preview or rehearsal of the reception they might expect should they chose to go public with their problems and concerns.

The opportunity for listeners to reconcile these disparate voices comes in the final hour of the program when Choko teams up with celebrity doctor Elvia Contreras to provide listeners with practical, often quite explicit advice about all aspects of their sexual health. This matter-of-fact advice from the matronly *doctorcita* (dear doctor), often in direct response to call-in listeners, is accompanied by predictable reactions from the regulars, with Choko offering empathy and support while the men vacillate between mockery of troubled callers and deference towards their unflappable guest expert. If Szasz is correct in her observation that Mexican “society denies sexual knowledge and curiosity in women and children” and that “forbidden knowledge [expressed by men in the form of *albur*s] is transformed into a form of power, the power that adults exercise over children, husbands over their wives,” then Erazno y La Chokolata’s final hour represents an radical revolution in the locus of sexual knowledge as an expert woman, abetted by a queer moderator, calmly dismisses the uninformed opinions of the men, thus undoing the power of the male-controlled *albur* and its pretensions to “mastery in the domain of language.” Moreover, this strategic reversal is persuasive precisely because it first allows the male characters to voice sexist opinions, make snide comments, mock callers, and express shock at unconventional behavior (responses listeners might expect to hear in their daily lives), before they eventually cede ground to the *doctorcita*’s expertise—in effect scripting a mature professional woman as the calm, rationale spokesperson for modern ideas about sex and juvenile men as hysterical, uninformed apologists for an embattled tradition of male domination.¹⁴

While the Mexico City penny press could boast nothing quite like the final hour of Erazno y La Chokolata, both media evince a strong commitment to an alternative disciplinary strategy for their mostly working-class readers/listeners. The contemporary United States, like late Porfirian Mexico City, is no stranger to top-down social reform agendas that seek to impose, often through discriminatory policing (and harsh immigration policies), normative notions of proper behavior on allegedly recalcitrant minority populations that don’t live up to middle-class standards. This is true for mainstream media as well as government agencies.

For example, when the *doctorcita* appears as a sex educator on Spanish-language television programs, the hosts nod appreciatively at her comments rather than channel the rancorous voices of macho men and “diva” women. The information may be the same, but the effect is much different, since it presumes an educated middle-class audience predisposed to accept and act on expert advice, after the fashion of the bourgeois prescriptive literature of late Porfirian Mexico City directed at the *gente decente*. In contrast, the satirical approach of the penny press and Erazno y La Chokolata derives its popular flavor (and perhaps its efficacy as well) from a willingness to engage with and give voice to popular resistance to high modernist social reform projects, in both instances a top-down sentimental education of “unexpected citizens” marked as marginal by class, race, ethnicity, and national origin.¹⁵

Producing a traceable genealogy that links the early twentieth-century Mexico City penny press to an early twenty-first-century U.S. radio program is far beyond the scope of this book. But the continuities between the two projects are many and striking: the strategic use of social satire, a variety show format that includes reader/listener contributions, an obsession with gender relations and changing notions of manhood, the injection of the improper voices of “unexpected citizens” into the public sphere, an embrace of alternative disciplinary projects, the role of editors/performers as intermediaries between the uncouth working classes and the *gente decente*, and so on. Rather than propose a general theory of social satire along the lines of Mikhail Bakhtin’s carnival, I would argue that these continuities reflect a distinctly Mexican genre—a satire of sentiments—shaped by specific convergences of historical and cultural forces and haunted by the specter of durable inequalities in Mexico (and the United States). I would argue further that analysis of this satire of sentiments can shed useful light on the complex, often contradictory history of working-class masculinities in Mexico and across the Mexican diaspora—unexpected insights that trouble conventional wisdom about the irredeemable misogyny of Mexican popular culture, the bourgeois origins of the “civilizing process,” and working-class men as the spiritual progenitors and paradigmatic practitioners of macho. That then is what I have tried to do in this book.