

## Seizing the Memes of Extraction: A Latin American Intervention

POLITICAL HUMOR IS A CULTURAL form through which a collectivity can provisionally and explicitly address itself by means of a critical representation of its experience of the present. Memes are an essential site of the digital remediation of political humor; as such, memes about the mining industry hold a crucial frontline in the struggle over the cultural representation of capitalist ruin.<sup>1</sup> But any meme is also a mine-in-waiting: the networked infrastructures that sustain memetic production and circulation employ our labor and gaze, capitalizing on imaginaries of participatory digital democracy to render profitable participatory digital servitudes. Mining memes index, then, ironically, how memetic circulation becomes another extractivist circuit within the expanding sites of data mining that exploit our social species-being in communicative capitalism.<sup>2</sup> As cultural objects linked to a broader set of practices, artifacts, agencies, and imaginaries, however, memes cannot be reduced to their techno-material infrastructures alone. Formal questions about how politically humorous memes produce meaning aesthetically are as significant as questions of mediation and articulation that address their relation to context-specific processes of identity formation.<sup>3</sup>

On first reading, the “Cuando visitas Canadá / Cuando Canadá te visita” (When you visit Canada / When Canada visits you) meme is simply a précis of the extractivist core of capitalist modernity and its uninterrupted colonial dynamics. It denounces Canada’s domestic greenwashing by highlighting the combination of historical and regulatory conditions that makes it a global mining powerhouse, and the asymmetric geopolitical relations it perpetuates.<sup>4</sup> The juxtaposition of a visiting tourist and a visiting foreign power submits to scrutiny the dramatically different outcomes of those visits. But the second-person address in the present tense of “When Canada visits you” works further as warning and as marker of an ongoing process, not only as a claim of past injury. Visually underscoring that wordplay with an unusual inversion of dominant modes of representation—which would have



FIGURE 1. Cuando visitas Canadá / Cuando Canadá te visita (When you visit Canada / When Canada visits you).

the Global North as an industrially developed urban landscape and the Global South as exuberantly underdeveloped wilderness—the meme shows instead a protected natural reserve in one place as the privileged double of a ruined landscape elsewhere, both directly linked by the global division of labor in resource extraction. This visual flip highlights how a certain privileged access to nature, to leisure, and to environmental concerns is made possible by the ongoing and longstanding extractivist economies that generate the deteriorating planetary conditions under which those very concerns become necessary at all.

Several versions of this meme have circulated online since at least 2020. The popular Facebook account Memes de Ciencias Sociales (Social Science Memes) published versions of the meme in June and October 2020, with views, shares, and reactions in the thousands.<sup>5</sup> Fundación Glaciares Chilenos (Chilean Glacier Foundation) tweeted another version in September 2020, in connection with the legal case against Canadian mining company Barrick Gold's projects in Pascua Lama on the border of Chile and

Argentina.<sup>6</sup> Other versions have circulated in Mexican and Panamanian contexts and have been reposted to Canadian subreddits *r/onguardforthee* and *r/EhBuddyHoser* and other social media platforms. The meme effectively re-presents a familiar experience to an in-group, but in a way that conceptually reframes that experience through comparative contrast. Laughter at one's own tragic circumstances is the cathartic boast of wit taking on the objective asymmetry of the power relation. Whatever theory of humor one favors—play, incongruity, relief, superiority—all can be found at work here.

A clever, relatable, succinct take on a complex present problem makes this a good meme, and the circulation of its several versions makes it a moderately successful meme as well—that is, one that resonates and is subsequently liked, shared, appropriated, and reproduced.<sup>7</sup> Its iterative elements can refer to both the singular image macro itself and other citable, mutable components as the meme undergoes a series of transformations inviting further engagement: the instructive tale of two juxtaposed landscapes, the contested senses of visiting an *other* (there are many variations of “When you visit x / When x visits you” memes), the multiplication of devastated landscapes as visual representations of capitalist ruin.

Incidentally, mining memes that contrast two landscape panels, one lush, the other ruined, emerged as fossil fuel-friendly digital ephemera at least as early as 2016. These memes deployed visual disinformation to question the green credentials of a lithium-based energy transition, showing disfigured landscapes of open pit mines next to neat oil pipelines running through green forests. Fact-checking showed that the images used in these memes were not of lithium mines but did not necessarily acknowledge the social, energetic, and ecological costs of lithium mining.<sup>8</sup> Global demand for lithium continues to rise exponentially, a demand increasingly linked to the discourse of a sustainable energy transition modeled around lithium-based rechargeable batteries. Meanwhile, the endless economic growth dogma that drives that demand, and the actually existing conflicts over and limitations of lithium and other mineral extractions, remain largely unchallenged in that discourse.

This Latin American meme about Canadian mining, while using the same two-panel template of the fossil fuel-friendly memes, reframes the issue entirely. It centers regional debates around extractivism to underscore the colonial history and violence of the global economic growth model itself. The lithium rush, and mining in general, remains an active frontline in conflicts on the continent over the survival of Indigenous communities, land rights, water access, and environmental destruction. Consequently, Latin America has emphatically turned to the question of extractivism in the last decades, a critical perspective that complements the classic but insufficient critical framework of exploited labor in traditional analyses of capitalism.<sup>9</sup>

For the meme, it does not matter whether we are discussing lithium, gold, or any other extracted good. It is the “visiting” logic instead—as a built-in feature of colonial-capitalist modernity—that is shown as the core destructive engine: the perpetual search for cheap raw materials and labor for the accumulation of riches elsewhere and the speculative investments that mortgage ecocide in exchange for short-term profit. The legal and economic structures overseeing these violent forms of dispossession not only link one form of mining to another but also generate and incentivize entrenched systems of wreckage that irreparably damage environmental and cultural ecosystems.<sup>10</sup>

Calling out the poor record of Canadian mining in Latin America against Canada’s image as an environmentally friendly and progressive welfare state simultaneously illuminates the transnational complexity of resource extraction and the abstract logic of the capital relation. This logic has been undertheorized and too often reduced to finger-pointing at the United States and its history of overt interventionism in Latin America. This, in turn, has limited the counterhegemonic articulation of alternatives not modeled after extractivist development, fueling a simplistic anti-US rhetoric that provides comfortable alibis to competing foreign powers and their allied local elites.<sup>11</sup>

Showing what one should really see when admiring Canada’s natural preserves—both as a particular place and as a stand-in for the Global North—the meme performs a pedagogical, decolonial countervisuality.<sup>12</sup> It functions as a self-reflective reminder of the complex structures of desire and domination built into the visual narratives of colonial capitalism and internalized through various developmentalist imaginaries that buy into the promise of catching up, imitation, progress, techno-solutionist salvation, and so on. In this case, the top panel offers environmentalism and leisure as objects of desire compatible with developmentalism. Demystifying their allure, the meme intervenes in the memetic circulation of coloniality itself.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the subjects in the text, the implied *tú* (you) of “Cuando visitas Canadá” (When you visit Canada) and the ones doing the visiting (be it Canada or someone else), offer a relatively straightforward narrative of injustice, of victim and victimizer. However, the juxtaposition of the two images complicates that collective *you*, because the irreversible and violent ruination of the extracted landscapes and lives remains. So no matter who is keeping the spoils, them or *you*—that is, the (post)colonial *we* addressed by the meme’s *you*—that someone is called to self-reflection. In doing so the meme implicitly articulates a first-person plural subject *we* that is not the same national popular subject *we* in whose name Latin American extractivist developmentalist practices have continued and even expanded, often while dressed in apparent decolonial and anticapitalist rhetoric.<sup>14</sup> The image

of the mine shows a cycle of catastrophic accumulation and cosmetic environmentalism, regardless of whether those spoils are promised to be redistributed more equitably. The extractivist critique thus challenges both leftwing and rightwing developmentalist-friendly populisms that have disputed political dominance in the region in the last two decades.

In short, the meme synthesizes and puts in circulation a series of situated contemporary concerns and phenomena:

- 1) the popularization and proliferation of global anticapitalist online humor and of critical responses to the climate emergency;
- 2) the tentative emergence—with the rise and fall of the so-called Pink Tide in Latin America, marked by waves of massive street protests and mobilizations, and informed by decolonial theory and practice—of a heterogeneous, intersectional collective political subject that is not the national, popular *we* usually addressed by state policy and capitalist investment;
- 3) the predominant role of memes, no longer niche artifacts, in the mainstream frontlines of cultural and information wars;
- 4) the transmedia organizing of specific antimining struggles, and the broader impact of their digital media campaigns and practices.<sup>15</sup>

From the early days of dependency theory in the mid-twentieth century to the potent decolonial feminisms of the twenty-first, a vast and varied critical and artistic corpus in Latin America has reflected on the links between resource nationalism, coloniality and (under)development, and the political paths open to plurinational states.<sup>16</sup> The anti-imperialist posters of the Organization of Solidarity with the People of Asia, Africa, and Latin America (OSPAAL) could be considered the solemn predecessors of political memes such as the one analyzed here, as radical mass-media interventions that also explore decolonial visual literacies and seek to mobilize transnational solidarities via direct, succinct messages with visually compelling compositions and iterative elements. This meme participates in that historical project of critique, but, as a popular digital artifact, its humor addresses and brings into being another type of audience, a provisional collective subject whose participatory creativity and peer-to-peer sharing are premised on digital democratization as a tool of transformative politics, yet whose emancipatory ethos is compromised at every step by the extractivist violence that characterizes the entire chain, from lithium to likes.

Whether memes can nonetheless help in the process of convincing ourselves to build more equitable worlds is a question this meme raises but does not answer: what political horizons are visible at this time that would redefine what those worlds look like and point us to the kinds of technical and material infrastructures that can sustain them? In the meantime, we could do worse than rethink what kinds of cultural representation and media practice a counterapocalyptic outlook demands of us today.<sup>17</sup>

## Notes

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1. As defined by Limor Shifman and Ryan Milner, memes are digital artifacts produced and circulated via internet-mediated collectivities that typically comment on and model (aesthetically, emotionally) an experience of the present, featuring iterative, citational, multimodal, mutable, and self-referential groupings that can be appropriated and modified according to context and audience. See Ryan Milner, *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media* (Cambridge, MA, 2018), and Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* (Cambridge, MA, 2013).
2. Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, "On the Multiple Frontiers of Extraction: Excavating Contemporary Capitalism," *Cultural Studies* 31, nos. 2–3 (2017): 185–204.
3. Hito Steyerl, "The Articulation of Protest," trans. Aileen Derieg, *Transversal Texts* (September 2002), <https://transversal.at/transversal/0303/steyerl/en>.
4. Anna Tsing, "Inside the Economy of Appearances," *Public Culture* 12, no. 1 (Winter 2000): 115–44.
5. <https://www.facebook.com/MemesDeCienciasSocialesOficial/posts/esas-mineras-canadienses-son-unas-loquillas/2678408655749395>, <https://es-la.facebook.com/MemesDeCienciasSocialesOficial/posts/canada/2775487056041554/>.
6. [https://twitter.com/glaciares\\_ong/status/1303783995319234561](https://twitter.com/glaciares_ong/status/1303783995319234561).
7. Nirvana Tanoukhi, "What Is a Good Meme?," Memetics and Mimesis: The Memosphere in the Public Sphere Conference, Dartmouth College, 23–24 February 2024. I have to thank Nirvana and all the participants of that conference, my fellow Meme Aesthetics panelists at the 2023 ACLA meeting, and Diego Alonso Cerna Aragón for all the illuminating conversations that led to this piece.
8. <https://www.aap.com.au/factcheck/lithium-mining-meme-digs-itself-a-hole-with-deceptive-photo/>.
9. The critique of extractivism can be understood as one among many intersectional and multifaceted approaches to anticapitalist critique that multiply our understanding of modernity and its contradictions. See, for example, Aníbal Quijano, "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America," *Nepantla* 1, no. 3 (2000): 533–80; Fred Moten, "The Subprime and the Beautiful," *African Identities* 11, no. 2 (2013): 237–45; Audra Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States* (Durham, NC, 2014); and Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (New York, 2004) for model approaches to decolonial, antiracist, and feminist critiques of colonial capitalism that share with extractivist critique the focus on modern forms of violence and irreversible harm visited upon lands and bodies.
10. Including, for instance, what Tsing calls the "entrepreneurial chains" of frontier culture; "Inside the Economy," 131–32.
11. Moishe Postone attributes such limitations to "a fetishistic understanding of global development" in "neo-anti-imperialism." See his "History and Helplessness: Mass Mobilization and Contemporary Forms of Anticapitalism," *Public Culture* 18, no. 1 (2006): 96.
12. Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Durham, NC, 2011).

13. Already in Alexander von Humboldt's writings on the Americas we find the contradiction between the environmentally destructive logic of colonial agriculture and the promise of natural abundance as a guarantee of national emancipation. Ericka Beckman's *Capitalist Fictions: The Literature of Latin America's Export Age* (Minneapolis, 2012) deals with the post-independence literary afterlives of that foundational dilemma.
14. Eduardo Gudynas, "Natural Resource Nationalisms and the Compensatory State in Progressive South America," in *The Political Economy of Natural Resources and Development: From Neoliberalism to Resource Nationalism*, ed. Paul A. Haslam and Pablo Heidrich (London, 2016), 102–17.
15. See "Observatorio de Conflictos Mineros de América Latina 2024" (<https://www.ocmal.org>) and "Observatorio Latinoamericano de Conflictos Ambientales" (<https://olca.cl/oca/index.php>). For the concept of "transmedia organizing" see Sasha Costanza-Chock, *Out of the Shadows, Into the Streets!: Transmedia Organizing and the Immigrant Rights Movement* (Cambridge, MA, 2014).
16. Macarena Gómez-Barris, *The Extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives* (Durham, NC, 2017).
17. A feminist counterapocalyptic approach rejects both the fictions of modernity that scaffold the acceleration of Man-made harm to the conditions for planetary life, and the apocalyptic framework of total despair that they tend to induce. See Joanna Zylinska, *The End of Man: A Feminist Counterapocalypse* (Minneapolis, 2018).