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Kill Your Darlings: The Afterlives of Pepe The Frog, Sherlock Holmes, and Jim Crow

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KILL YOUR DARLINGS: THE AFTERLIVES OF PEPE THE FROG, SHERLOCK

HOLMES, AND JIM CROW

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Allison Sardinas

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To: Dean Michael R. Heithaus
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This thesis, written by Allison Sardinas, and entitled Kill Your Darlings: The Afterlife of Pepe the Frog, Sherlock Holmes, and Jim Crow, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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Professor Heather Blatt, Major Professor

This thesis works to establish a literary theory and cultural studies as a theoretical lens with which we can view harmful emerging pop culture phenomena like the so-called alt right. The premise is supposed in three parts, with the first being a simple introduction to the Pepe character and how he is grounded in literary studies through a comparison of Sherlock Holmes and his early fandom. The second part is a survey of the legacy of Jim Crow and I present the evidence that Pepe is very much Crow's spiritual successor in their shared preoccupation with white anxiety. The third is a discussion of language in which I bridge the use of memes as language with how that language effectively communicates. Ultimately, Pepe the Frog is able to tap into the pop culture collective through a democratizing of language facilitated by digital spaces on the internet, and his proliferation is made readily viral by the racist language he speaks through ala Jim Crow era anxieties.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE   PAGE

1. Kill Your Darlings: The Afterlives of Pepe the Frog, Sherlock Holmes, and Jim Crow

WHAT'S IN A MEME?

As the internet has become more ubiquitous in almost every aspect of our lives, memes have emerged as a major component of online communication. Part of what ensures memes maintain their integral status in online communities is their role in the sharing culture of the internet. Memes proliferate easily because their format as an image are immediately recognizable to community members. Part of what makes memes so unique, though, is their ability to straddle language and image and reach towards liminal, shared, human experiences. Because memes often have pictures or facial expressions that people can relate to, the marrying of these relatable images with anecdotal text creates and recreates moments in time, feelings, and experiences. Memes then, quite literally, establish bonds with "the other" in pretty intimate ways. People share memes to get to know and relate to each other by sharing those experiences, feelings, and moments in time via this semi-specialized language. This often get dismissed because of their silly form.

Memes do not have the best reputation, with lauded news outlets like NPR calling them more "Dada-esque than denotative, and mastering dank memes has an effort-to-payoff ratio that really, truly is not worth it" (Domonoske). NPR's view does not exist in a vacuum. Despite being influential in so many ways, academic work seems similarly dismissive of the significance of memes. With the exception of a few, younger academic critics, many departments are still focusing on classical studies, perhaps because of the nebulous "dada-esque" nature of memes. Despite how hard they can be to pin down,

memes are being increasingly thrust into the material world from digital spaces. The "I Can Haz Cheezburger" cat (figure 1) has become multiple calendars, which blurs the line between the digital and the material and offers a whole host of questions for academics, journalists, and the general public.

Figure 1
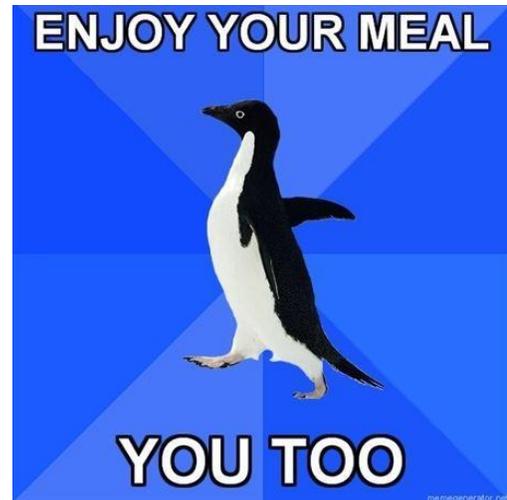
Figure 2

Memes are often valued in a quantitative way that mimics the way an economic system that values capital. People view memes as successful if they can measure a high number of shares, likes, upvotes, etc. However, while sharing can be indicative of how successful a meme is, the aforementioned liminality is a lot harder to measure with data. Successful memes often spread because they allow communities to participate in authorship, even mimicking parts of oral cultural traditions, by reimagining shared experiences as one's own. Memes like Socially Awkward Penguin (figure 2) are beloved not simply because they have been shared at high rates, but also because people bond over sharing embarrassing stories. That vulnerability in sharing an embarrassing experience opens communities up to dialogue by encouraging others to share their own

stories. Sharing experiences like those prompted by memes such as the socially awkward penguin can make anonymous spaces surprisingly intimate.

Memes can pull off this awkward intimacy because language often reaches towards classification, but sometimes comes up short. What if someone is simultaneously sad and confused? Using language alone in a casual conversation makes this difficult to communicate. Memes work as a supplement to language because they utilize, and are situated firmly within, language. Memes are at the hearth of language creation by situating themselves in relation to the other, and it is through that need for shared communication that new language forms. This need for community is exactly why memes cannot be too prescriptive or denotative, because they need a space for rotating authorship.

THE (ALT) RIGHT CAN'T MEME

If this description of sharing-culture sounds like a culture that is a little nebulous or even "leftist," that is because it is often aligned that way. There has been a semi-serious question floating around various internet echo chambers: are the best memes made by the political left, or the right, and does that matter? Sharing culture on the internet certainly has some bastions of progressive thought, through general forums like Tumblr to more specific sites like Archive of Our Own[1]. However, the popularity of sites like r/theredpill

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[1] A nonprofit website where users can read and publish fanfiction.

on Reddit[2], and as those online movements that are drenched in misogyny and racism like gamergate[3], show that large, vocal segments of sharing culture are geared toward white male audiences. Although sharing culture on the internet is still frequently associated within the masculine spaces that dominate the internet (4chan and Reddit), the more masculinized the space of the meme, the less it depends on shared authorship to perpetuate.

Sites like Reddit, dubbed "the front page of the internet," are often where memes either proliferate or originate. According to a 2016 study by the PEW research center, Reddit users are "more likely to be male, young, and digital in their news preferences" (Barthel par.2). The default identity on the internet is often thought to be white, young, and male, and Reddit's demographics seem to mirror that assumption. Of course, correlation does not equal causation, so this is not to say that young, white males *are* the default population of the internet. It could be that these demographics feel more comfortable in the heavily trafficked spaces that Reddit offers, or may even be more apt to claim their race, gender, etc.—almost like a reverse-order stereotype threat. 4chan, Reddit's more anonymous and grosser brother, is harder to gather data on because of the nature of the site. As an anonymous image board, users do not divulge their identities on

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[2] The sixth most popular website on the internet and the most popular news/entertainment site on the internet, Reddit organizes its pages in "Subreddits." r/theredpill, is a notoriously misogynistic and racist subreddit, with over 250,000 members, that has been the subject of increasing controversy over the years.

[3] An organized internet attack against women in videogames.

4chan; but based on the internet catchphrase "tits or GTFO"[4] being believed to originate on the site, it is safe to assume that 4chan's demographics are similar to that of Reddit's.

It is not a coincidence that the more male-populated the space in a meme is shared within is, the more it becomes an ideological indicator, or a marker, instead of participant, of identity. A key difference being that a marker of identity is the identifier— it is stagnant in its representation. A participant in identity can help build that identity, allowing for a polyphony of voices to be represented in a way a marker of identity cannot. Markers indicate a hegemony of representation whereas an indicator does not necessarily indicate a hierarchy of identity. The ways in which memes function on the internet mirror the ways in which power structures are materially realized in the world. When a large bank or university is run in a deeply white, patriarchal, or colonial space, it stands to reason that those institutions will be less inclusive and more focused on hegemonic goals than on building meaningful intimate relationships. When traditional conservative forces grab hold of a meme, the sharing becomes more perfunctory than communal, and the arguable purpose of "memeing," is destroyed.

Author of the book *The Ambivalent Internet*, Whitney Phillips says, in an interview with *Vice*, that right wing memes proliferate because:

> That is what a bigot is: a person who is not able to actually interact
> with individuals in a meaningful, compassionate way, so they just lump
> everybody under the single category of Mexicans and say they are
> rapists, which is what Donald Trump did. That's an easier sentiment to

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[4] Brad Kim is the editor-in-chief of "KnowYourMeme.com," where he details the history of internet memes such as these.

memeify because it's not making any argument or claim,

it's just a nebulous statement that people can then bring their own

bigotries to, so it almost allows for more individual resonance because

it's not saying anything real. (Bish)

For Phillips, "memeing" is very much an act of blind proliferation, but even as noted in her quote, the way the Right memes allows for "individual" reflection. When the right memes, users are not connecting to each other, but rather are projecting harmful attitudes like bigotry and then retreating into themselves. This self-imposed echo chamber works to isolate them on two fronts. First, bigotry, as Phillips notes, makes it hard to empathize and socialize with others, which easily leads to isolation. Secondly, memes can be used as a bridge to share experiences and build internet communities by resonating through story-telling; however, when the right memes it uses the opportunity as a basis for self-affirmation instead of community building. This is diametrically opposed to the way I see memeing being effectively used. Proliferating imagery to affirm bigotry is more akin to propaganda than it is to emerging digital sharing communities. As far as this paper is concerned, the right cannot meme[5].

It does seem as though the people who are most likely to pay much attention to meme culture are affiliated with "leftist institutions." Think pieces of this sort are often associated with liberals, and institutions of higher learning are very rarely affiliated with

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[5] The opinion that the right cannot meme does not mean that the idea of memetic proliferation in colder terms will not be used more than once in the paper. There are effectively multiple definitions of memeing that will be utilized, with one definition referring to sharing culture that builds community spaces and the other being a sharing something at a high rate until it becomes recognizable to large groups of people. Pepe as a meme falls within that latter category.

the conservative side of the aisle. Some might argue that the left enjoys tearing everything apart, so parts of internet sharing culture, like memes, should be no different. But memes are inevitably becoming pervasive within our culture, and are affecting large swaths of impressionable young people. The media have dubbed this ability to effect younger demographics, in part, as the "culture war." Because the stakes of these interactions seem so high that they merit the term "war," investigating what we mean when we say "meme" and their effects is necessary. The first step in building meaningful discourse around maligned pop culture phenomena is to raise the level of discourse surrounding those phenomena. A good way to raise the discourse is to give these popular issues a vocabulary and theoretical lens to use so that we as participants can critically engage with the world around us.

In literary studies and theory, situations can be "read" in the same way that students of literature read a book or a "text." More importantly, messages that uphold power structures often disseminate through popular culture, which almost always has some foothold in narrative, print culture, or digital media. These methods of dissemination are all tools of established literary studies. Without having to delve into the nuances of literary theory, there is already a basis for the study of memes within literature. Since these elements of literary study are not created in an academic vacuum, it makes sense to understand that characters that erupt out of these cultural moments can be studied contemporaneously through the lens of literary studies. Pepe the Frog is one such character.

Just as important, however, is making sure the field of literature and its associated epistemologies are appropriate. The time since the 2016 election has been dizzying for

many; the large amounts of scandals pouring out of the White House to the significant uptick in hate crimes, the nonstop tumult has left many people in America saying: "this is not who we are." Quickly, though, think piece after think piece has responded to this confusion with attempts to ground conversations within certain lenses like historicism, pop economics, and feminist theory—among others. However, there is a certain phenomenon that many different cultural critics and academics are grappling with: the rise of white supremacy in the mainstream culture. For some, it seems that white nationalists and supremacists almost literally apparated from their Klan rallies and onto our TV screens almost overnight, but the truth is more sobering than that. The United States' complicated history with race, gender, class, and colonialism plays a significant role in our current political and cultural climate.

It is also necessary to acknowledge the absurdity of this moment in history and how frequently academia dismisses emerging media forms, like memes, as being less worthy of scholarly study than more traditional works, like classic literature. It is at the intersection of absurdity and academic gatekeeping that many emerging phenomena get left in the lurch, doomed to be studied by a student of history years from now. It's easy to get bogged down in the endless nuance that a survey of all those aforementioned factors would result in. Luckily, the internet has provided a convenient amalgamation of several of these factors in the Pepe the Frog meme. Unlike other memes, Pepe has become a clear marker of ideology, becoming almost a stand-alone character in himself. Pepe's transformation into an alt-right character makes him a perfect candidate for a traditional character study. Ultimately, the field of literary studies offers a timely lens to make sense of these conflicting issues.

ET TU, PEPE?

Pepe has gained the attention of almost every single major media outlet, largely due to his associations with the so-called alt-right. While the alt-right is a complicated group in terms of pure political leanings[6], their racism and white nationalism is less complicated to identify. Because of their willingness to engage in fantasies about white nationalism and blatant gender stereotyping, the alt-right has emerged as a virulent form of republicanism that seems dead-set on regressing civil rights for minorities, women, people with disabilities, and anyone else who is not white, straight, male, and "American". In certain segments of the left, particularly on left leaning social media like Tumblr and the leftist segment of Facebook that dubs itself "left-book," the alt-right is referred to as Nazis. Though there is some dispute over the use of the term Nazi in the context of the alt-right, these left-leaning platforms tend to see a dangerous precedent being set when people want to split ideological hairs when genocide is a talking point. So, when the new face of the alt right, Richard Spencer, got punched in the face[7] on inauguration day, 2016, it was of note that he got punched while trying to explain to a reporter who the frog on his lapel was. Not surprisingly, that Frog was Pepe.

Pepe did not start out his anthropomorphic frog life as an alt-right meme (figure 3). He originated in a webcomic called *Boy's Club*[8] realized by creator Matt Furie. *Boy's*

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[6] Are they more populist? Fascist? How much does that distinction really matter, anyway?

[7] Twice.

[8] Yes, that's where the apostrophe is supposed to be.

Figure 3

SYMBOL OF HATE?

Thanks to recent appropriations of Pepe the Frog as Adolf Hitler, a Klansman and numerous racist caricatures, the meme earned a spot in the Anti-Defamation League's database of hate symbols.

Courtesy of Carbon Costume

Record Scratch   *Freeze Frame*

Yup, that's me. You're probably wondering how I ended up in this situation.

Club is a far cry from the hate speech that Pepe now represents. The webcomic features four anthropomorphized animals that are more likely to make fart jokes than sling racial slurs. Pepe was made internet famous when a single panel of the comic, which featured Pepe saying "feels good, man," was made into an image macro and spread around the usual places like Reddit and 4chan. The comic's reliance on low-brow humor made it popular enough to spawn a book. As *Paste* magazine reviewer, Hillary Brown puts it, "The tendency of *Boy's Club* to mine the same comedy ground over and over (stoned people are hungry, marijuana alters your perceptions, scatology is hilarious) suggests that any kind of larger point is a mirage." However, even though *Boy's Club* is not reveling in blatant racism, sexism, xenophobia, or other bigoted positions ad infinitum, there are strong links between the comic and toxic masculine communities that often develop into white supremacist spaces. The characters in *Boy's Club* often harness a stoner apathy to deal with life's issues. None of them are particularly skilled, nice, or exceptional in any way. They are essentially internet everymen, able to be adapted into digital spaces that are largely masculine.

It is important to make the distinction that Pepe's representation is complicated, but not nearly as wholly innocuous as outlets like NPR, the anti-defamation league (ADL), *The Atlantic, Polygon, Solon*, and many more have stated that he is. In a piece titled "Understanding Ugandan Knuckles in a Post-Pepe the Frog World" published by *Polygon*, Julia Alexander says that Pepe "was degraded from harmless meme to hate symbol." Oren Segal of the Guardian also tapped into how hapless Pepe was, calling him "a harmless cartoon." The ADL also noted that he had extremely benign origins. These notations of Pepe's happy existence before being an alt-right symbol is common. However, there is a reason why Pepe was picked up by the whirlwind of the alt-right instead of the Socially Awkward Penguin or Bad Luck Brian. Pepe, being a weed loving everyman, may be harmless in and of itself, but the context that he is situated in, and his target audience, has proven to be an insidious breeding ground for hate speech, doxxing[9], and white supremacy.

The previously stated white maleness of popular online spaces like Reddit is relevant to the spread of Pepe and his ability to be seen as thoroughly benign in his early forms. *Boy's Club* often used fart jokes and bro-stoner comedy to connect with its base, which was seemingly white and male. After all, Black, female, and other intersectional demographics were tacitly othered through the language and content that *Boy's Club* represents. There was no use of African American Vernacular English, but plenty of discussion around heterosexual male desires, and penis references that served almost like inside jokes between reader and author. If memes are language that can connect in extra-

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[9] A form of harassment in which private information about a person, such as email, phone number, home address, family names, etc., is made public, putting that person and their family at risk.

linguistic ways to an audience, then perhaps Pepe is tapping into a cultural malaise found within the demographic of young white men.

In fact, PEW found that between 1994 and 2014, every other male and female demographic--Black, Asian, Hispanic--made gains in college enrollment and graduation rates, except for white men (Lopez and Gonzalez-Barrera). In fact, after the Obama years, these subsequent drops in enrollment rates, and a national shortage in skilled labor, the demographic that was used to having all the power is stagnating according to several measurable metrics. It makes sense then that an underachieving frog that represents the internet everyman would appeal to a demographic thirsty for growth in their waning, but still very present, power. However, the inevitable rise of Pepe into the more virulent right shows that perhaps behind that seemingly innocuous facade of silly stoner jokes lies a connection to a more violent resentment. After all, someone is joining those storm front raids, and it is not just self-proclaimed Nazis.

KILL YOUR DARLINGS

Regardless of the links between the alt right and what plenty of commenters think is the perfectly harmless version of Pepe, his creator Matt Furie absolutely despised his transformation into hate symbol. As a result, Matt Furie killed Pepe to try to reign in his creation and reclaim Pepe as his own. On some web forums, people argued about how to take Furie's assertion of control over Pepe. Many invoked the memetic phrase "The internet never forgets[10]" in order to describe how futile Furie's efforts would inevitably

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[10] A phrase that is hard to locate its origins, but paradoxically, has never been forgotten.

be based on the sharability of online spaces and cache websites, like the "way back" machine, that catalogue webpages as if they never "died." [11] In fact, creators have a long history of trying to take back their creations from the public, or what can be seen as early versions of fandom, for hundreds of years. This assertion of control raises questions about authorial control, the prospect of the death of the author, and what traditional literary studies can say about the links between popular culture and literary figures. One famous example of another author trying to exert control over his creation is the case of Sherlock Holmes and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's planned murder of his beloved character.

In Methodist minister Silas B. Hocking's memoir, he details conversations he had with his friend, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, about his detailed plans to murder Holmes. Doyle was growing weary of Holmes's popularity, so he "determined to end the life of his hero (Starrett 255)". Doyle believed that Holmes was threatening to essentially erase Doyle by eclipsing him in things like name recognition and also his other historical novels, which he believed were a greater literary achievement. Doyle has been quoted saying that if he didn't kill Holmes, "he'll make an end of me (Miller, 153)". Similar to Furie, Doyle's wish to rein in his literary creation proved fruitless, but it did present some interesting questions about authorship across time.

In Roland Barthes essay, "The Death of the Author," Barthes suggests that the author's intentions do not matter in interpreting the work. If a reader is limited by an author's interpretation, then the reader can understand themselves as also an author of the work, since the reader is necessarily rewriting the work in their own mind as they read,

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[11] An internet archive that preserves content in order to preserve as much information on the internet as possible. It can be found at archive.org/web.

contributing their own interpretation in a deeply personal and unique way. Literature has always provided characters for readers to relate to; after all, literature does not exist without context, and characters help readers empathize with strange and careful world building, and ethnicities or genders readers may be antagonistic towards to invoke humanity in the reader. When we read, we have a certain voice that reads to us in our heads, and each of our imaginations conjure up images specific to our minds and ours alone[12]. These personal aspects of reading and experience can make relationships between characters and readers intimate. Even though Pepe and Sherlock Holmes are the intellectual property of their creators, ultimately, capital "A" authorship, one in which the author is the end-all-be-all of impact, interpretation, and meaning, cannot exist. Ultimately, Doyle chose for Sherlock to live just as Furie decided to revive Pepe. Literature can articulate what is evident with Pepe: killing a character is only necessary once it has taken on an afterlife of its own.

In terms of Pepe and Sherlock, the popularity of the characters reached a fever pitch not necessarily because of the content of the characters themselves, but because of the fandom of each of the characters. Though the case of Pepe is different in that he was representing hate speech and ideation, both authors were worried about the current representations of their characters negating their previous, and future, works. Sherlock would erase Doyle's historical novels and their relevance, as Pepe would mire Furie in a hate speech movement that would inevitably eclipse his work as a comic creator. In both cases, the intentionality of the author was dwarfed by how readers understood the

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[12] Or until we watch a movie adaptation.

characters within their own lives. The treatment of both Pepe and Holmes proves that characters can be introduced by an author, but they cannot be controlled by the author. Once a character is introduced into the world, capital "A" authorship becomes a myth that is proven time and time again—through Pepe, through Holmes, and possibly through other characters that *were* killed off but we assumed it was part of the canon—because readers help give life to characters, not just creators. An interesting aspect of "Death of the Author" is that authorship in many fandoms is already more complicated in that it belongs to all readers who are commonly understood as authors as well. In meme culture, authorship is understood to be shared already, and if shared authorship is not new, then meme culture inevitably is not either, at least in its propensity for shared authorship. In America, the shared authorship of characters extends to the shared authorship of historical events, and a good example of a negative sharing culture that informs Pepe's current presence is that of Jim Crow.

WHITE ANXIETY IS THE NEW BLACK

People often think of memes as being a modern invention. However, the phrase was coined by evolutionary biologist, Richard Dawkins, in his book *The Selfish Gene,* and the word it derives from is literally ancient. Dawkins modeled the word "meme" after the Greek word "mimeme." Translated from Greek, the word means "imitated thing." Within the context of his book, Dawkins presented memes as ideas, behaviors, or other transmittable forms of interaction that transfer from one person to another. Perhaps not so ironically, Dawkins himself helped popularize the word "meme" because of his response to a woman who said she was uncomfortable being asked back to a man's hotel room at

4:00 a.m. His response derided western women as not being oppressed enough (as opposed to Muslim women, whom he called "muslima"), and it became what's known on the internet as a copypasta, or a block of text that gets copied and pasted in different places as a sort-of ironic inside joke (Y.F.). In a particularly performative fashion, Dawkins' own response helped establish memes as popular culture. By Dawkins's own definitions, though, the concept of memes is much older. It is important to understand not only what a memetic presence is in America, but also how Pepe fits within that much larger legacy and how that legacy contextualizes his ability to move from the digital to the material.

Transmitting cultural ideas from person to person is a practice that is most likely as old as civilization itself. In America, some of the most lasting presences that keep cultural relevance involve race, gender, or class. Oftentimes, these categories intersect and the result is the translation of these specific ideas over and over again, much like how Americans and American media refer to immigration in terms of water ready to drown us (Santa Ana, 320). Frequently, the repetition of behaviors or ideas within a culture is referred to as a cultural more or even a tradition. Often these mores and traditions are harmless, like telling ghost stories around a campfire or sitting down around a table for a meal. Sometimes though, traditions are steeped within toxic behaviors that we like to pretend are not traditions. A tradition is pretty loosely defined as being a behavior or belief that has been passed down from generation to generation. If this is the case, then America has some pretty nasty traditions like racist mob violence and those traditions are not behaviors that sprout up without context. This contextualization of more hateful traditions, repetitious cultural expectations, or habits can be reframed within the lens of

literary and cultural studies. With this reframing, we can *read* these situations as memetic, and therefore also understand Jim Crow as being one of America's first memes, or at least viral forays into meme sharing culture that became commodified and normalized to the extent we see in digital spaces. Due to digitization, it is important to find a memetic presence within American history that gained similar footholds even without the reach of the internet, and that is part of why Jim Crow is an important figure to explore.

Jim Crow is, for many Americans, synonymous with a group of oppressive laws aimed at shackling African Americans even after emancipation. Before delving too deeply into the details of what "Jim Crow" laws were, it is useful to survey the history of Jim Crow in America. Before being legislative fodder, Jim Crow was a character in a series of minstrel plays. Minstrelsy has been described as "One of our earliest cultural industries," which "reveals popular culture to be a place where cultures of the dispossessed are routinely commodified--and contested" (Lott 8). In other words, the pop culture phenomenon of Jim Crow, and its reception, not only makes the case for a serious consideration of things like cultural studies to contextualize power structures, but also that Jim Crow helped commercialize, perpetuate, and define myths about African American culture. In academic circles, popular culture is often maligned as not being scholarly enough. However, popular culture *is* culture, and it is the space where many of our national anxieties converge.

The cultural industry of minstrel shows was perhaps the first example of a variety show, mixing singing, dancing, and comedic monologues. Though harmless-sounding enough, minstrel shows hinged on their actors presenting in blackface, with the majority

17

of their content also revolving on racist stereotypes and anti-Black caricatures. In his book, *Love & Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, Eric Lott complicates the idea that blackface minstrelsy was simply the most effective way of mocking African Americans. He states that "blackface minstrelsy was less a sign of absolute power and control than of panic, anxiety, terror, and pleasure" (7). Lott describes a form of projection from white America onto African Americans. That projection is necessarily complicated, but it ultimately reveals not some absolute truth about Black folks, but rather the anxieties that African Americans made these white people feel. Lott goes on to explain that the pleasure he explores in his book is the pleasure that white folks felt in comparison to the Black populations they were deriding. Lott suggests that when minstrels were performing in blackface, exaggerating their incompetence for laughs, that it is more likely that those white folks were finding an easier way to laugh at themselves or their anxieties about whiteness, otherness, capitalism, etc.

The mere presence of otherness, like Blackness, can make people question their own identities. Very frequently, dominant power structures present themselves as invisible because they are ubiquitous. In a viral TED talk in 2008, violence educator Jackson Katz told the audience that language is connotative and denotative. He said that those connotations carry weight; when we say things like "race," "gender," "sexual orientation," we automatically think of the minority, or the disempowered. Katz explained it like this: "In each, the dominant culture is left out of the equation. This is one way that dominant systems maintain themselves in that they are rarely challenged to think about their own dominance." Katz says that these systems can perpetuate

themselves because we cannot detect them and thus they are normalized. When Richard

Dawkins defined memes, he said they can be the dissemination of ideas or behaviors.

Since Jim Crow has persisted since the 19th century in various forms, it stands to reason

that one of its most foundational memetic aspects is the dissemination of white anxiety.

THE NEW, NEW JIM CROW

The ideas behind Jim Crow have persisted, transmitted, and evolved because, if by

nothing else, of its tremendous staying power within American cultural tradition. In 2010,

almost 200 years after minstrel shows started to boom in popularity, Michelle Alexander

released a book about disproportionate racialized incarceration entitled *The New Jim*

Crow. Alexander defined the idea of a new Jim Crow as being laws that target and

disenfranchise Black people that work more insidiously than "separate but equal," or Jim

Crow, laws. "The new Jim Crow" that Alexander refers to is eye opening because many

white Americans believe we live in a "colorblind" world, particularly after the election of

Barack Obama (Wise 5). Therefore, modern racism must couch itself in other fights, like

that of the drug war, to successfully target Black communities through tactics like

disproportionate minority contact and over-incarceration. These new drug related laws

laid out in *The New Jim Crow* carry on Jim Crow's legacy through the legal aspect of

disenfranchising particularly Black populations, but they also persist through the virulent

strains of racism that fuel the "drug war" in the first place.

Since laws do not spontaneously create themselves, Alexander tacitly

acknowledges that the legacy of Jim Crow—anti-Black racism and white supremacy—

still exists. We do not inhabit a colorblind society. The ability of Jim Crow's legacy to

outlive even the civil rights movement speaks to a deep white insecurity in our country and the fact that Alexander's book became a number one best seller on Amazon shows that many Americans seem interested in the idea that America participates in systemic, anti-Black racism. Part of how Jim Crow has vigorously reemerged 50 years after the civil rights era is because of the several different iterations of white anxiety, and how language has been weaponized to propel those myths forward.

James Baldwin famously argued that the word the "n word" was a message of white anxiety, and therefore a logical follow-up to the legacy of Jim Crow. Baldwin, shown in the film *I Am Not Your Negro*, said that people tend to describe what they see in themselves when they relay their thoughts about another: "I'm not describing you when I'm talking about you, I'm describing me," he said in that same video (Peck, 1:55). If Baldwin is to be believed (and he makes a compelling case, if not just by creating a scenario wherein the alternative argument is loaded, to say the least), then there are hugely lasting linguistic testimonies to white anxiety that start out as extra-linguistic cultural attitudes. Baldwin is expressing how white American culture feared Black power. Jim Crow laws, which were instituted in 1877 after Plessy v. Ferguson, posited that Black people were "separate but equal." Baldwin is pointing out how hypocritical a notion that is, and that terms like the "n word" work to create a racial hierarchy so that African Americans knew what that "equal" really meant[13]. Baldwin adds that the true "n words" are white Americans, and they are projecting their fears onto African Americans. The concept behind the racial slur is ultimately a white invention, not an objective truth.

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[13] Not equal.

20

Baldwin understands that the construction of Black identity from white America is, therefore, a reflection of white identity since Black Americans clearly do not exhibit the traits that the "n word" insinuates. Pepe works in a very similar way by encapsulating markers of white anxiety, but then weaponizing them against the other.

Pepe's construction as specific brand of white identity is established through his depiction in juxtaposition with those who have historically had conditional whiteness. Most notably, Pepe has been featured next to racist Jewish caricatures, which helps define his whiteness as an identity firmly planted within an "Aryan race" construction of whiteness. The few times that Pepe himself is depicted as another race himself, he is often shown with exaggerated racialized features, and used to frame that race as being evil, conniving, or inept. One of the most prominent memes features Pepe as a Jewish man sitting suspiciously in front of the world trade centers, insinuating that 9/11 was a Jewish conspiracy. However, these iterations of the meme require significant facial distortions, suggesting that Pepe's default is a very strict version of European whiteness. That whiteness, in lock-step with history, is often exclusionary of identities that have had conditional whiteness, like Italians. Depictions of Hitler far outnumbers any depictions of Mussolini, which indicates that it is not that Pepe enforces fascism, but instead a particular brand of genocidal white supremacy that is built off of white anxiety. The fact that Pepe's default construction fits comfortably without any distorted facial features into KKK and Nazi uniforms shows that Pepe's identity is also one that is preoccupied with things like miscegenation, Western colonialism, and male superiority. All of these preoccupations are also heavily engrained in Jim Crow era racial anxieties, and before exploring those ideas more in depth, it's important to more thoroughly discuss how white

identity is defined and maintained within racist systems of oppression and their cultural signifiers.

White identity had been, and still is, formulated out of its relation to the other. When the other becomes the one, or *actually* assimilates, the identity of the dominant culture is threatened. In his book *Slavery and the Culture of Taste* Literature Professor Simon Gikandi notes that slavery helped define white identity, even overseas via things like portraits and architecture. Gikandi shows examples where that extra-linguistic culture has been used to convey status, class, and taste as defining characteristics of white identity. In picture after picture, Gikandi presents portraits of white families with their slaves, who are often shackled or otherwise visually restrained, to give context to whiteness (figure 4). Gikandi argues that it is through the juxtaposition of Blackness that whiteness rose to power and formed a whole culture. Essentially, without an other to oppress and give power to whiteness, whiteness ceases to exist as we know it. Jim Crow's legacy utilizes this juxtaposition eventually through the invocation of Black and white mixing, or miscegenation (figure 5) and Pepe weaponizes that same idea through
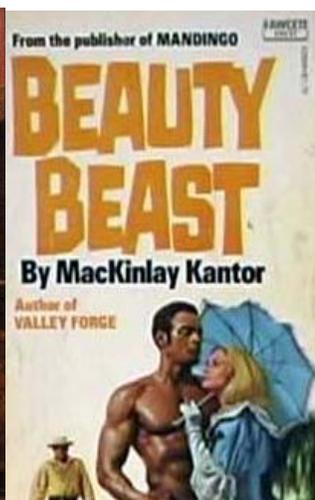
Figure 4   Figure 5   Figure 6

his proliferation in seemingly benign spaces (figure 6). The juxtapositions become subtler the more that white America believes they have progressed in racial terms.

Part of these extra-linguistic cultural attitudes that link with Pepe and Jim Crow is the discipline of visual studies. Within the context of plenty of interdisciplinary theories and fields of study like queer, feminist, postcolonial, and poststructuralist theory, the idea that everything worth studying is completely textual is often dismissed. As a result, the door is wide open for interpretations of things like power and imperialism through a different perspective. Visual studies posits that images are powerful and can change cultural attitudes. In terms of Jim Crow, the very concept of whiteness, and the overall dissemination of power, visual cultural exports are hugely influential.

In Marlon Riggs' influential 1986 documentary titled *Ethnic Notions*, Riggs discusses how damaging stereotypes about African Americans were commodified, sold, and consumed by American culture in the 19th century and beyond. Many of these stereotypes like the Sambo, the Coon, the Mammy, the Pick-a-ninny, etc., were popularized in Jim Crow, or Jim Crow style, minstrel shows. Interestingly enough, plenty of the exaggerated racist caricatures of Black physical features resulted from white actors portraying themselves in blackface, and all that entailed. White actors would smear their faces with burnt cork or charcoal and color their lips large and red. After the Jim Crow character became a staple of pop culture, American industries expanded on the notion of racist visual culture by creating figurines that would adorn the houses of white families (figure 7). The industry of racist figurines and memorabilia extended to other caricatures as well, targeting children, grandparents, women, sons, cousins--the entire Black family unit. Print culture adopted this racism and printed comics and books that exploited fears

23

of miscegenation and books aimed at children featured Black children who looked dirty and unkempt. Filmmaker D.W. Griffith even hopped aboard this highly lucrative, racist train and drove the film *Birth of a Nation* into the world—a film which popularized the myth that Black Americans eat fried chicken and watermelon and that the KKK is actually noble. Griffith also exploited fears of miscegenation with his white female characters literally jumping off cliffs to avoid Black men. Early 20th century America was a deeply patriarchal institution, so many of these stereotypes served to disempower Black men. After all, if Black men were not able to control their families, have children, and lead in the same patriarchal fashion that was valued by the Western world, then who would "civilize" those families?

There are a lot of cultural assumptions to keep up with in order to follow the logic that Black men would be seen as the natural gatekeepers to the race's viability (and why it would then make sense to create characters like Jim Crow to illustrate how unsuitable for leadership Black men were). First, there is the assumption of the supremacy of the legitimacy of a nuclear family. Underpinning this assumption is a solidly Christian ethnic that determines men as the head of the house (closer to God, whole and not made from a rib) and that the order to families—Father, then wife, then children—is ordained by God. Divine inspiration for the exaltation of the nuclear family not only makes the idea of creating a family a loaded task, but it creates a "proper" way to form relationships within communities that could very well be defined almost solely by protestant whiteness. By defining the properness of a family by these white values, others, like African Americans, immediately fall outside of that paradigm, outside of Godliness, and into a role of a sinner who does not perpetuate basic institutions of community in productive ways. In

addition, these assumptions actively masculinize all power structures, which creates a binary wherein what is "feminine" is bad. Black folks were frequently feminized, but particularly the men, as a shorthand that communicated all these purported negatives about African Americans and their ability to assimilate into the dominant white culture that ensured humanity, citizenship, and personhood. The visual culture of these caricatures of Blackness helped normalize and perpetuate visual markers of dehumanization. These figurines, books, and movies frequently adorned houses, were read to white children, and were played during Hollywood's Golden Age, signifying several memetic cultural assumptions--not only about white male supremacy, but also of white male anxiety.

Figure 7

Traditional memes like Pepe rely heavily on this loaded visual culture to convey messages quickly and efficiently, but also to convey the memetic legacy of other entangled power structures that were represented by Jim Crow. Pepe's ability to tap into these previously racialized symbols of oppression is necessitated through the spaces of toxic masculinity he was strained through, like 4chan and plenty of online communities

25

within Reddit. In fact, based on the assumptions bred through white male anxieties imbued into Jim Crow and even the N word, it makes sense for a reader of racist history to even expect Pepe's radicalization into hate symbol to occur in a heavily white and masculine space. Part of the reason that Pepe was radicalized instead of other, much more benign memes, is because of the space he was adopted into and how easily he fed white male anxieties. His first audience was largely white and male, and so is his current audience. This is not to say that all white males are Neo-Nazis, but that Neo-Nazis are primarily white and male. Much like how racists in 1950s America would adorn their homes—which often represented things like taste, culture, and even beliefs— with racist caricatures, current racists will place Pepe on their Twitter profiles, Facebook posts, or even suit lapels.

As discussed earlier, Pepe's identity, much like other visual markers of racist propaganda, is carefully constructed as being white-coded. In many of the examples of within this paper, he represents people who are seen as upholding white supremacy, like Donald Trump or David Duke. The visual culture that imparts racist ideation onto a frog is complicated, but it's also not coincidental. Jim Crow era racist caricatures are easily called out, and making Pepe a blatant white man would make those racialized connections easy to make. New eras in racism have to adapt to that aforementioned "colorblind" society. The need to couch racist views in a way that will fit into larger societal ideas of a post-racial society while still signaling to a racist audience is called "dog-whistle racism." Pepe performs as a dog-whistle, able to cloak himself but still convey a white supremacist ideology. In addition, Jim Crow era visual racism frequently oriented itself around derogatory depictions of Black Americans while Pepe is an

indicator of the colonizer, or the person with power. This is a significant shift, as it indicates the need for those with the Pepe signifier to unite under a more palatable symbology, instead of trying to degrade the other (though depictions of Pepe next to other cultures often works to define *and* degrade, much like the portraits in Gikandi's book worked to define "the culture of taste"). Ultimately, Pepe's visual representation indicates the anxiety around losing the ability to openly state white superiority, otherwise Pepe wouldn't be a green frog standing in for KKK grand wizards. Both Pepe and Jim Crow are different iterations of the same white anxiety, just consciously expressed through what is culturally appropriate at the time.

Part of understanding just how loaded and necessary it is to understand visual culture in tandem with cultural and literary studies is to resituate the conversation within the frame of something often hurled around like a bomb: imperialism. In his book *Visualizing American Empire*, David Brody explains how easily images can warp people's views of other cultures and how that insidiously promotes a kind of Western[14] hegemony among the consumers of that visual culture. In a review of the book, Arlene de Vera states that "Visual culture includes the study of forms of technology and their reception, and the resulting changes in conventions of perception and ways of seeing" (De Vera, 825). The internet is a fairly new invention, with several cultural critics stating that it is so early in its infancy that culture is still being fought over and meaningful stewardship has yet to be established. Within these early years of the internet, technologies are bound to develop that relay messages about our culture. The culture of

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[14] Read: "American."

memes is becoming integral to online communication and some believe that Pepe is the current defining meme of the internet.

POLITICS IN THE TIME OF PEPE

According to the editor and chief of popular website "Know Your Meme" Brad Kim, the internet is divided by Pepe himself. In fact, he understands there to be a pre and post-Pepe internet (Alexander). Of course, this idea of a pre and post-Pepe is a little fallacious when contextualized through the legacy of Jim Crow. Pepe can easily be understood as a spiritual successor to Jim Crow era anxieties—one that is needed to transmit racist ideas more poignantly in the modern world of the internet. Jim Crow makes sense to use within more formal, legal contexts, like with Alexander's book, because, if nothing else, Jim Crow's more dated presence acts as almost a gatekeeper in and of itself for modern consumers of racialized narratives. Pepe bridges racialized anxieties, Jim Crow, and emerging digital communication. He is the language, the iconography, needed to speak within digital spaces. So, if Pepe is in fact the defining meme of all of internet culture thus-far, then it does not seem coincidental that he is speaking to a memetic presence that may be the defining meme of America.

Looking at a brief history of Pepe the Frog, it becomes clear that it was in 2015 that 4chan launched its campaign to "take Pepe back from normies" (Nuzzi). "Normies" is shorthand for normal people who are not tapped into the ironic spaces of places like 4chan. They are not in on "the joke," which is often built on a culture of references and subversive humor. The year that the Alt-Right tried to monopolize Pepe is also the same year that Trump announced his presidency. As Trump gained popularity, so did Pepe's

new persona. As previously mentioned, Pepe reached a fever pitch when, on inauguration day in 2016, Richard Spencer pointed to Pepe on his lapel right before getting punched in the face[15]. It is helpful to remember that Trump's inauguration was heavily mired in racist, sexist, and xenophobic overtones. He started his campaign by insinuating that Mexicans were rapists, he was endorsed by former and current KKK members, and people who called for Black genocide openly rallied in his defense. Trump's rise to power so neatly coinciding with Pepe's popularity as an alt-right icon is very similar to Jim Crow's popularity bursting solidly into the mainstream after emancipation (figure 8). Jim Crow and Pepe have one thing in common: they reached their breakout points of dissemination (and subsequent stagnation as symbol instead of memetic story-telling device) after Black Americans made serious strides towards equality within white male America.

Figure 8

CNN commentator Van Jones called the phenomena of Trumps' winning "white-lash" in several interviews immediately following Trump's Electoral College win. Approximately 58% of the white vote went to Trump with 63% of that vote coming from

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[15] Twice.

white men, an exit poll from PEW found (Tyson and Shiva). Although Trump's opponent was a white woman, anxieties that surround white maleness also are expressed through misogyny, as is evidenced by the externalization of fears via miscegenation myths that were almost always produced, marketed, and sold to and by white men. Most notably, however, is the fact that Obama was the first Black president, which is why commentators like Jones understood Trump's ability to be endorsed by the KKK and elected by a majority white voter base as white-lash. Historically, white-lash has been seen in every step forward that Black America (and female America) makes, whether that be emancipation, the civil rights movement, or the first Black president. The difference with Pepe, however, is how he translates into a new digital culture never before seen, and how he does that through the evolving nature of language, image, and metaphor in a way that straddles the digital and the material.

SPEAKING PEPE

> "We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language. That may
> be the measure of our lives." -Toni Morrison

Language evolves constantly. New mediums, experiences, and cultural contact prompt us to find new languages to communicate new situations. The advent of the internet has prompted a surge in new words and ways to communicate. Ten years ago, the word "meme" existed as a term mostly within Dawkins' book. Before that, it existed in another form within an ancient Greek context, and neither of these two iterations of the word could have possibly anticipated its evolving definitions. What is important to note about

this flexibility of words is that many of us, particularly in the English-speaking tradition, rely on definitions to tell us what words mean. We assume that the definition is what gives words meaning, when it is actually us, the speakers, who determine how language is interpreted.

According to linguists and educators Anne H. Charity Hudley and Christine Mallinson, "...language is always changing, and variation is inherent within all languages at all times" (12). An example of this changing language is exemplified through the way I have used the word "meme" throughout this paper. Meme has its more formal, almost dictionary definition, which is what was coined by Richard Dawkins. In multiple sources like Merriam Webster and the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), his is the first definition. The second definition, however, is the one that was used towards the beginning of the paper: the definition that became evident because of the sharing culture of the internet. Because people used memes to share and impart personalized stories, the definition of what a meme is has since changed. On these same dictionary sites, the second definition reflects this change, with the order of the definitions also reflecting the timeline of the word's evolution. In addition, the word "meme" transformed from just a noun to include verb usage, which was also used in the second subheading, "the right can't meme." I was using the verb form in terms of the second dictionary definition, but explaining the prescriptive version of the word by trying to locate it in a dictionary can be confusing. That is why, when reading for meaning, we use context clues to determine what a word means. A dictionary cannot tell you how a word is being used in a specific context in the world, in conversation, or in news articles. Short of reading an academic paper, definitions are difficult to come by explicitly in communication. Prescriptive

understanding falls short not only because language comes from the speakers, but also because language exists in relation.

To understand what words are saying, readers must understand the meaning. But deciphering meaning in language is an incredibly complex task that hinges on our ability to relate to meaning at all. Trying to understand what it is to mean begs the question, how do we decipher meaning in the first place? Continental philosopher, Martin Heidegger, in his work *Poetry, Language, Thought* discussed meaning as "The intimacy of world and thing is present in the separation of the between; it is present in the dif-ference" (50). Again, if we visit the first part of the essay briefly, memeing was discussed in terms of the space it filled between language and emotion. Memes occupy that liminal space with images, but those images exist within relation to specific words and communities. Using the example of how memes utilize image, Heidegger might understand the story memes are telling when they transmit from one person to another within the same example of Bad Luck Brian. Users in a community share their specific embarrassing stories, and the meme tries to bridge the separations that exist between the event, the memory, the telling, the community, and all of the spaces that necessarily and simultaneously exist, lest we all meld into a single hive mind. In trying to bridge those gaps that exist in all relationships to all things, meaning is created. In short, we want others to understand, we want to connect, even if we can only grapple at the thing itself, or the translation of the thing itself that we create instantaneously, in a moment, through language. Human beings are subjects, so we cannot objectively *tell*. We must filter

through language, which is already grasping towards something—even if that something is only a memory.[16]

Language is as limited as memory, which is why it is expected and exciting that when a new medium comes about, like the internet, it can help bridge those gaps through a democratization of language. It is also important to note that language is not only the written word. Language is simply communication. American Sign Language is, pretty obviously, language. Symbols like hieroglyphics and even the seemingly useless "wingdings" are used as language. In linguistics, images or entire ideas are couched in what are known as metaphors[17]. However, all these forms of language, though given meaning and existence via speakers, are typically heavily policed and, therefore, limited. For example, in English, there is a version many native speakers believe is "standard," even though most speakers of English utilize regional dialects instead of the more academic, standardized form (Hudley and Mallison, 12-15). Hudley and Mallison say this of language standards that are found all throughout the world: "If any language or language variety has a prestigious label, it is because that type of language is spoken by socially, economically, and politically powerful people and is not due to any independent linguistic qualities" (12). English dominates internet usage and is often the assumed lingua franca online. Our anxieties about language online, then, would naturally reflect our anxieties about race, gender, class, etc. as well as our anxieties about English in

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[16] Which is grasping towards another memory of that memory until it gets to the event itself which can only exist in the present through retelling.

[17] Which is similar to the ways we understand metaphors in a traditional sense, except these metaphors are usually linked to larger cultural values or beliefs.

general. These anxieties are embrangled; they not only reflect our fears that have been represented through memetic presences like Jim Crow and now Pepe, but also our fears about a changing world that values and speaks a different English altogether.

The internet's democratization of language is apparent everywhere, but the focus here is on its democratization of the English language. Jim Crow essentially went viral after the emancipation of African Americans from slavery because emancipation stoked white male fears about identity. Similarly, the internet is stoking fears about language, and since language is often gendered, racialized, and classed, memes like Pepe, which are linked to other cultural anxieties, end up as amalgamations of large swaths of American anxieties. Even though Jim Crow represents many of the same anxieties projected by white male America as Pepe does, he does not translate as well into online spaces because his presence does not fully anticipate the extended fears that the internet stokes. Jim Crow will inevitably persist, but Pepe is unique to online culture as he not only embodies racial, gender, and colonistic fears surrounding the lessening of white patriarchal hegemony, but also anxieties about globalization and the feminization of communication in popular spaces--among a million other anxieties that are revealed when others are allowed to join the conversation.

For some, it is difficult to understand how the internet's usage of language illustrates how so many of our issues with language are tied to things like race, gender, or class and how a meme like Pepe would inevitably emerge out of those systems. However, there are plenty of examples that show that how we choose to use language is often a reflection of ourselves. In 2015, the *New York Times* published a piece in its style section that wondered a very important question: "Should Grown Men Use Emoji?" First, let's

note that since 2015, the usage of the word "emoji" has evolved so that most speakers probably would pluralize the word, so it's fairly evident that this piece is indicative of anxieties of masculinity *and* grappling with a new concept that seems to be part of a larger cultural shift. In addition, this emoji debate also pulls together our anxieties about visual culture integrating with written culture. The author of the piece, Matt Haber, asserts that, "Given their resemblance to the stickers that adorn the notebooks of schoolgirls, not to mention their widespread adoption as the lingua franca of tweens and teens everywhere, some people wonder whether grown men should be using them at all." Haber's statement is loaded and is fueled by anxieties that men feel about seeming effeminate or childish. Strikingly, these fears are *very* similar to those expressed by white men trying to assert their ability to have their own children and procreate as was seen in Jim Crow era propaganda. What is different, however, is that Haber did not ask a historian or a scientific racist to explain these claims, he asked a linguist.

Haber's use of a linguist is interesting in that it shows that anxieties over language have often been taken for granted because other issues, like race, have been prioritized. Emojis are indicative of a larger cultural struggle over language, and who gets create it. This larger cultural struggle is where memes like Pepe find their homes. They encompass past struggles, but also extend outward to represent current shifting attitudes. The emoji conversation is part of several blog posts and articles asking questions like, "Is internet English Debasing the Language? Not IMHO" (Poole); "Is the Innanet RUINING Teh English Language??? ¯\(°_o)/¯" (Chayka); and "How Twitter Is Destroying the English Language" (Friedman). Memes are often lumped into the "debasing" debate. It makes sense then for Pepe to contain subversive "internet" elements that are frequently seen as

degrading the language. A return to formal "standard" English would not translate well into these nontraditional linguistic spaces that use image so effectively. And part of Pepe's ability to jump from webpage to the material world lies within a concept called multimodality.

In their book *Multimodal Discourse*, Gunther Kress and Theo van Leewuen discuss how there is a pedagogical imperative to privilege monomodal discourse (e.g. only discussing sound in a film) as opposed to trying to understand a text, object, or cultural output in multimodal terms (e.g. surveying that film's dialogue, sound, gaze, cinematography, etc in conjunction with each other). Kress and Theo van Leewuen express that the shift from monomodality to multimodality has been facilitated by the digital age. They state, "different modes have technically become the same at some level of representation" (2). Pepe is a good example of a multimodal object. He started out in a classical literary tradition: as a character in a comic. He then graduated to a meme which allowed his visual presence to largely inform how he was used. Then again, he shifted modality when he became an icon that was printed on t shirts, pins, and hats. Pepe's presence translates from the material to the digital largely because he is image, dialogue, and movement all rolled into one.

This concept of multimodality is also important to understand when considering how we tend to frame discussions of language. When framing conversations, it is not uncommon to see single issues being discussed piece-meal. In other words, there tends to be a hyperfocus on one issue at a time without a concentration on intersectionality, or within the context of language anxieties that have been expressed on the internet, multimodality. It is important to note that multimodality and intersectionality are not

interchangeable concepts, but they do share the impetus to take various factors into account in order to more accurately assess the whole. As expressed earlier, language preference and anxieties about that preference are frequently tied to issues connected to race, gender, and class. In a monomodal world, questions of language could only be myopically understood because other factors were not always as apparent. Digitization makes cultural factors more apparent oftentimes because it is easier to understand how these ideas are transmitting since curious observers can cross examine multiple factors instead of just one. In addition, the internet has a way of remembering via things like caches, and so it is very rare that multimodal phenomena just pop into existence without any traceability. Pepe's ability to translate into various mediums parallels how the internet is making multimodality harder to ignore: the line between the material and the digital becomes more blurred as modern life becomes more invested in each realm of existence.

THE UNBEARABLE WHITENESS OF PEPE

Figure 9

Although Pepe can be understood as a multimodal object, how he has tapped into decade's old American anxieties complicates his identity as a single thing, whether that be object, meme, or even memetic presence. Memes are bridging many gaps in communication that have been exposed through online discourse, and so understanding Pepe as a meme can be read already as being more complicated than just silly images gone awry. However, classifying him as just a meme suffocates much of how he exists in the material world. The reality of Pepe is that he is very much a part of language that transmits through tangible dissemination as well as digital. In Katherine Hayle's book, *Writing Machines*, Hayles proposes that the spaces where transfer occurs should be taken into account when classifying complicated phenomena that have been evidenced by the digital world. Hayles proposes the term, "*material metaphor*, a term that foregrounds traffic between words and physical artifacts" (22). Most of us understand metaphors as being purely rhetorical, or, as Hayles puts it, "verbal" (22). Hayles opens the definition up to include objects that transmit through various spaces, like print culture or digital media, much like Pepe. And since Pepe speaks to a memetic presence as old as Jim Crow, the term material metaphor helps makes sense of his presence in the material world. When Pepe is on Spencer's lapel, when he is on a t-shirt, or on a flag (figure 9) at an alt-right rally, Pepe becomes a material metaphor. Material metaphors are not new, but like the discussion about multimodality, the digital age has helped us find a language to communicate these ideas that may not have been apparent without the perspective of digitization. For example, the racist Jim Crow caricatures that were bought and sold in the 1940s and 50s can be understood as material metaphors because they literally solidified racist narratives into the homes of white America. The ground they traversed

38

bridged the material and the rhetorical to create physical manifestations of cultural attitudes. Pepe simply exists in more spaces than those figurines, so his representation can be understood through additional perspectives, like the digital, that did not exist in the 50s.

Hayles is not the only person to critically engage with the concept of metaphors; in fact, linguist Otto Santa Anna proposed that metaphors often straddle the written and image to convey anxieties about issues like immigration. In his book, *Brown Tide Rising*, Santa Anna argues that imagery surrounding anti-immigrant narratives that focus on immigrants being tides, waves, or water that encroaches, erodes, and drowns, helps fuel xenophobia through massive dissemination via news, media, and cultural narratives. I am not a linguist, so I cannot definitively say that caricatures that emerge like Pepe and Jim Crow are metaphors that are similarly disseminated, but I can say that parallels exist in how white America's anxiety fuels the fight over the acceptance of both Black and brown bodies. There also is no mistaking that white America reaches towards familiar imagery and tropes to disseminate these messages that seem to persist in one form or another for over the last century. Cultural metaphors depend on images or descriptive imagery to concisely communicate threats to America. Since blatant racist propaganda like blackface is seen as too blatantly racist, more insidious racism, like a frog that only wears Nazi memorabilia around the right audience[18] serves as a dog-whistle appropriate for our modern, digital times.

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[18] See: 4chan's /pol board

English is used in many places around the world, and many attribute that to British colonization, United States imperialism, and the often-times predatory tourism industry. In many developing nations, English was not introduced peacefully, and that fact has a place in the discussion of why it is that America has a preoccupation with metaphors, memes, and iconography that is often racist, sexist, xenophobic, and colonialist. According to Judith Butler, men have the pressure of performativity, since they are seen as being the more desired form. If that theory is expanded out just slightly, most identities who find themselves at the top of cultural hierarchies also have the pressure of performing and proving their superiority since that place at the top of the pyramid has not been rightfully earned. This performance exacerbates anxieties that have been thoroughly visited in this paper. Language is limited in its ability to communicate, and so images that fill the space between understanding and language are especially affecting because they tap into fears and reflections of dominant cultures. A larger survey and a more in depth multimodal perspective is necessary to know if all colonizer languages reflect similar cultural feelings that transcend the written word and grasp towards the liminality. Since it is in the spaces that meaning is made, the fact that English keeps reaching towards a language that speaks to deep seeded anxieties about American identity might be able to elucidate some of our cultural problems and, even, how to fix them effectively.

Decisively, Pepe is a part of literary, cultural, and multimodal traditions that have been frequently maligned by academic sources and even its own hearth in pop culture. Part of being able to explore, contextualize, and understand the phenomena that is Pepe is first elevating the discourse around Pepe. Essentially, we must take memes seriously, and

try to analyze emerging fields within various epistemologies so we can foster intelligent and responsible discourse. The Alt Right is a consequential issue that has been linked to other racist traditions, so making sense of these moments is important in quests for justice. As the internet elucidates some our worst cultural practices, it also sheds light on intersections that have always existed and how complicated our relationship to language really is. Untangling some of these more complicated relations is an opportunity to problem solve some of our most intimidating issues. Problem-solving Pepe is part of a larger obligation we all must establishing responsible stewardship in this shifting cultural climate. There are plenty of things to be excited about: the prospects of minority and women presidents, the fight for pay equity, fairer representation in media--but if history has any say, justice and equality aren't achieved without pushback. My attempts with Pepe are ultimately to start serious conversations that will hopefully yield conscientious and insightful ideas about how to address some of America's cultural ails. Maybe our solutions can be found in unexpected places, like a thesis on Pepe the Frog.

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