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A Rhetoric Of Zaniness: The Case Of Pepe The Frog

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A RHETORIC OF ZANINESS: THE CASE OF PEPE THE FROG

by

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DEDICATION

For Ewan, Finn, and Gizmo. And for Allison most of all.

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Introduction

On January 20, 2017, the day of Donald Trump's presidential inauguration, white nationalist Richard Spencer was filmed giving an interview on the streets of Washington D.C. while surrounded by protestors. Toward the end of the video, Spencer is asked about the cartoon frog on his lapel pin. Spencer replies, "It's…Pepe. He's become kind of a symbol…" (see fig. 1.1). However, before Spencer can complete his thought, he is punched in the head by a masked protestor. The video went viral in the days following the inauguration, and the image of Spencer getting hit became a relatively popular meme (especially among liberals and leftists looking for a sense of catharsis in the wake of the inauguration).

Fig. 1.1. Richard Spencer explaining Pepe lapel pin (before getting punched in the head), ABC News (Australia), 22 Jan. 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aFh08JEKDYk

For many, the video raised an ethical question about how far is too far when protesting Trump and the alt-right. That is, the video caused many to focus on the rhetorical practices of the left. However, setting aside the question of whether it is right or wrong to punch a Nazi, I believe

the video also raises questions about the rhetorical practices of right wing political and social movements, specifically about how Pepe the Frog functions as a symbol for various groups that cohere and communicate online. How did Pepe (see fig. 1.2), of all possible objects, become a symbol of trolling, the alt-right, and the Trump presidential campaign? Why does Pepe resonate with these collectives? What moods and feelings does Pepe create? What politics does he promote? How does Pepe's rhetorical life help us to better understand online subcultures and political movements? How does Pepe help us to better understand digital rhetoric in a "post-truth" era?

Figure 1.2. Pepe the Frog, Know Your Meme, 26 Mar. 2015,
https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/pepe-the-frog

Pepe is, undoubtedly, a rather odd symbol for any social or political movement, including white nationalism, and any attempt to account for Pepe's rhetorical function must account for this oddness without explaining it away. In perhaps the most appropriate turn of events, as soon as Spencer tries to explain Pepe's significance in the video, he is silenced by the punch from the

protestor. Instead of assigning a specific, fixed meaning to Pepe (as Spencer seemed prepared to do), this project describes and analyzes Pepe's evolution from comic, to meme, to hate symbol and beyond. By charting Pepe's rhetorical trajectory (by which I mean the path that he traveled to accumulate various meanings) and analyzing his various iterations and encounters, we can better understand the rhetorical appeals and communication practices of certain online political and social movements. That is, I believe Pepe the Frog has more to tell us about Richard Spencer (and others like him) than Richard Spencer can tell us about Pepe. Specifically, Pepe illustrates the role that zaniness plays in the rhetorical practices of online subcultures and political movements.

In *Our Aesthetic Categories*, Sianne Ngai claims that the zany (along with the cute and interesting) is one of the aesthetic categories "best suited for grasping how aesthetic experience has been transformed by the hypercommodified, information-saturated, performance-driven conditions of late capitalism" (1). For Ngai, zaniness, "is as much about desperate laboring as playful fun" (23), and, "has a stressed-out, even desperate quality that immediately sets it apart from its more lighthearted comedic cousins, the goofy or silly" (185). So, while zaniness is best exemplified through comedy, it is not simply defined by the humorous response it elicits from an audience. Ngai writes, "For all their playfulness and commitments to fun, the zany's characters give the impression of needing to labor excessively hard to produce our laughter, straining themselves to the point of endangering not just themselves but also those around them" (10). Ngai's description of zaniness in the above passages indicates that there is something dangerous, even unpleasant, about zaniness that can be both appealing and unsettling.

While Ngai is specifically concerned with contemporary aesthetic experience, I argue that zaniness is an especially useful concept for helping rhetorical scholars better understand some of

the more problematic aspects of digital rhetoric, including political and social movements that cohered online (such as the alt-right). I will illustrate this rhetoric of zaniness by tracing different iterations of Pepe the Frog through various encounters and argue that, despite undergoing rather radical transformations throughout his rhetorical life, Pepe brings a particular zany style to each context in which he appears. Through this analysis, I will show how zaniness has come to define a particular style of communication in digital environments. That is, zaniness is not only something we experience when encountering art objects. It can be used to create collectives, generate attachments among the members of a group, and promote social and political movements. By tracing Pepe through his various iterations and encounters, we see how zaniness extends from the realm of the aesthetic to the realm of rhetoric. In my analysis of this rhetoric of zaniness, I will focus on four different moments of transformation for Pepe: 1) his initial appearance in Matt Furie's *Boy's Club* comics and transformation into a meme, 2) his appropriation by the alt-right and transformation into a hate symbol, 3) his adoption as unofficial propaganda for the Trump presidential campaign and transformation into a political symbol, and 4) copyright lawsuits brought against parties who would profit off of Pepe and the use of Pepe as a symbol of the 2019 pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong. Each of these encounters and transformations is predicated on Pepe's origins as a zany aesthetic object and in some way extends our notions of what zaniness is and what it can do. I will focus on these moments of transformation in each of the subsequent chapters.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will review the scholarship that informs this project. Given Pepe's aesthetic origins and rhetorical trajectory, this project draws on a variety of work across the fields of visual and digital rhetoric, media theory, cultural studies, and affect theory. In particular, media scholars who have studied memes as a process of replication and participation,

such as work by Limor Shifman and Ryan Milner, and work on how memes function as rhetorical tools for the alt-right, most notably recent work by Woods and Hahner, would seem to offer an obvious starting point for this project. Perhaps most relevant to my project is work in the field of visual rhetoric on iconic images, such as Hariman and Lucaites' work on iconic photographs and Laurie Gries' new materialist method of iconographic tracking. The work by these various scholars offers promising concepts for studying the Pepe as a visual object that circulated in digital environments. However, while this project is indebted to each of the scholars cited above, none offers a concept or method that adequately describes the unique circumstances of Pepe's circulation and reception. That is, while each of these authors informs my approach to studying Pepe, none fully accounts for the particular weirdness of Pepe and the way that he created moods and feelings that galvanized the various collectives that appropriated him as a symbol. I argue that any attempt to account for Pepe must take the object itself into consideration. It is not enough to simply consider the ways that memes and images circulate online and in social media. We must also consider the moods and feelings a specific object generates by studying the aesthetic sensibilities and rhetorical practices of the audiences that appropriate the object.

In my attempt to develop an approach to this object that takes its uniqueness and weirdness into account, I turn to aesthetics and affect theory and, in particular, Ngai's concept of zaniness. Following a review of work in memetics and visual rhetoric, I explain how Ngai's work on zaniness offers a starting point for my analysis of Pepe's rhetorical life. Ultimately, I claim that zaniness is not only the most useful concept for understanding Pepe but is also a more versatile concept for studying visual and digital rhetoric as it more adequately describes the

communication practices of certain online groups and social movements, such as online trolls, the alt-right, and the Trump presidential campaign.

Memes and Memetics

Given Pepe's status as a relatively popular meme, the field of memetics is perhaps the most obvious starting point for this study. After all, scholars in the field of memetics are centrally concerned with the way visual objects are transformed and transmitted through digital media. As an object of study, memes have generated significant attention in a variety of fields, including media studies and rhetorical theory. In popular usage, the term "meme" has come to designate an image with interchangeable text (what is more specifically defined as an image macro). However, this common usage of the term ignores its rather interesting and controversial origins. The word meme was first coined by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins' in his book *The Selfish Gene*. Dawkins, in an attempt to apply evolutionary theory to culture, used the term to describe any "unit of cultural transmission" (192). For Dawkins, the essential aspect of memes is replication. That is, a meme is defined by the process of replication it undergoes rather than any specific formal characteristics. Despite the fact that people now commonly think of memes as visual texts that circulate digitally, Dawkins is not centrally concerned with images or digital content. Anything (a song, a phrase, an idea, etc.) can be a meme if it can be taken out of its original context and circulate on its own (194). Despite coining the term, Dawkins' description of memes has been met with criticism by scholars in both the sciences and humanities. One particular issue is the question of agency. As Ryan Milner points out, Dawkins' theory attributes agency to the meme itself rather than the humans who create and disseminate it. That is, for Dawkins, memes are "'replicators' acting on passive recipients" (Milner 21). However,

Dawkins' association of memes with a process of replication is an important starting point for many scholars.

In *Memes in Digital Culture*, Limor Shifman defines "meme" as "(a) a *group of digital items sharing common characteristics* of content, form, and/or stance; (b) that were created *with awareness of each other*; and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed *via the internet by many users*" (7-8). Following Dawkins, Shifman highlights the fact that studying memes is as much about understanding the process of replication as it is about understanding a particular object. However, unlike Dawkins, Shifman inserts the human element, identifying "users" as an essential part of the replication process. Also, Shifman focuses on memes as specifically digital objects. That is, for Shifman, the internet is an essential element in helping memes to circulate. Following Shifman, Ryan Milner's book *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media* focuses on "*memetics* as a set of social practices, instead of focusing on *memes* as individual texts" (19). That is, Milner argues that to understand memes, one has to understand the process of participation involved in creating any particular meme. Milner goes on to outline the "fundamental logic" of memes, five concepts that define the process of replication: multimodality, reappropriation, resonance, collectivism, and spread. Of these five concepts, the most important for understanding why particular memes are replicated, and that are most important to my study of Pepe, are the concepts of resonance and collectivism. After all, as Milner observes, "memetic texts spread through collectives because they resonate with participants in those collectives. In the process, participants are connected as texts are shared" (32-33). That is, individuals participate in the process of making memes because a meme resonates with them in some way.

While resonance is important for understanding why memes travel and how they connect the individuals within a collective, Milner admits that it is difficult to assess resonance since "individual texts resonate with different people for different reasons" (29). To help address this difficulty, Milner turns to Barthes' concepts of studium and punctum described in *Camera Lucida*. For Barthes, studium and punctum are the different degrees to which one is affected by a photograph. Studium denotes appreciation of the image. Studium is recognizing that there is something in the photograph to be admired, even if it does not move the viewer. That is, "*studium* is of the order of *liking*, not of *loving*" (Barthes 27). Punctum goes beyond mere appreciation and indicates instances when an image moves a viewer at a personal level. Punctum is a feeling that ruptures. Punctum "is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)" (Barthes 27). According to Milner, studium is what causes a meme to connect with an individual while punctum is what causes the individual to go the extra step and share a meme on social media (32).

Milner is correct that studium and punctum are both necessary (if rather obvious) preconditions for how memes resonate within collectives. Milner writes, "In their shared resonance, memetic media are the product of buzzing collectives" (33). However, it is not just a matter of collectives creating memes that resonate with the individual members. Memes also create collectives that produce them. Or, perhaps more precisely, memes create and perpetuate the feelings and moods that make a given collective possible. In the case of Pepe, he is certainly the product of the shared "resonance" of trolls on forums such as 4chan. However, he also had an appeal that cannot be reduced to a process of replication and participation. There is a feeling he produces as an aesthetic object which gets perpetuated when he is used in various rhetorical situations. Therefore, it is not enough to say in some abstract sense that Pepe resonated with the

individuals and groups that appropriated him. We must also account for aesthetic sensibilities and rhetorical practices of the collectives that use Pepe.

Woods and Hahner's recent work on alt-right memes is specifically concerned with the central role memes play in the rhetorical practices of the alt-right as a particular social and political collective. According to the authors, memes function as a way for the alt-right to cohere, as "a way to brand the Alt-right such that like-minded folks have a way to proliferate their ideas and to recognize those with whom they align" (13). Memes also have an effect on those the alt-right sees as their opponents. That is, when the alt-right use memes in social media, "Public discourse is thereby stultified, or at least unproductive, when public figures and the people are compelled to respond to memes" (15). Based on these functions, the authors argue that understanding memes is essential for understanding the rhetorical practices of the alt-right and how the movement appeals to individuals. The authors write, "If scholars are to understand the rise in both publicity and numbers for the Alt-right, we must study its memes and the rhetorical principles they demonstrate" (14). Woods and Hahner see Pepe as an especially important meme for the alt-right. The authors claim that "Pepe as an iconic symbol is key to explaining how the Alt-right became a publicly identifiable whole" (68). They go on to claim that "the meaning of Pepe is not as important as his rhetorical function" (87). That is, "Pepe is used to mold public understanding of the Alt-right as he is continually recirculated" (90). However, Pepe is not just an object that is deployed by the alt-right for certain rhetorical effects. He also has certain effects on the alt-right and the various other collectives that deploy him. He creates certain moods and feelings among the group members and shapes the aesthetic sensibilities and rhetorical practices of the group. He also shapes the way that members of the collective view themselves. Any work

that attempts to explain Pepe needs to not only take the way he is used by various collectives into account. It needs to also take into consideration how he acts on those collectives.

While memetics (specifically the concepts of resonance and collectivism and the way memes function rhetorically for collectives) offers useful starting points for this study, the problem with this field is that the actual object of attention is either the process of replication or the activity of participation that individuals and collectives engage in rather than any object that is produced. While Woods and Hahner approach Pepe as a particularly important iconic image, they are too concerned with how Pepe is used by this particular group and do not address why this particular image resonated with the particular collectives that he did. To this end, a theory or method that better accounts for objects as actors is necessary which is why I turn next to the field of visual rhetoric, in particular Hariman and Lucaites work on icons and Laurie Gries' work on iconographic tracking.

Iconic Images and Iconographic Tracking

Hariman and Lucaites provide an important starting point for understanding how images circulate in public culture and how they serve particular purposes in liberal democracies. In *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy*, Hariman and Lucaites argue that "iconic photographs demonstrate how photojournalism underwrites democratic polity" and that "successive iconic images across the twentieth century reveal a shift within public culture from more democratic to more liberal norms of political identity" (13). Although images have often been regarded as disruptive of democratic deliberation, the authors claim that images "can provide crucial social, emotional, and mnemonic materials for political identity and action" (14). The authors' rather narrow focus on photojournalism notwithstanding, their definition of what makes an image iconic is a useful for understanding Pepe's function as

an icon. The authors write, "we define photojournalistic icons as those *photographic images appearing in print, electronic, or digital media that are widely recognized and remembered, are understood to be representations of historically significant events, activate strong emotional identification or response, and are reproduced across a range of media, genres, or topics*" (27). Pepe can hardly be said to represent a "historically significant" event. However, the image does meet every other criterion identified as necessary for an image to be considered iconic.

Figure 1.3. William Gibson's tongue in cheek tweet identifying Pepe in avocado packaging, 16 May 2017, https://twitter.com/greatdismal/status/864549084580921345?lang=en

Like other iconic images, such as Mickey Mouse or McDonald's golden arches, one might even see Pepe in images where no resemblance is intended. For example, in author William Gibson's tweet from 2017, Gibson (jokingly) claims to see Pepe in the logo on a bag of avocados (see fig. 1.3). Even though the image does not look much like Pepe, the fact that

Gibson would make this connection speaks to the extent that Pepe has acquired iconic status in American (and more specifically digital) culture.

In Hariman and Lucaites' analysis of various iconic photographs, the authors not only focus on the aesthetic characteristics of the images, but on the ways the images circulate through various media. In this way, the authors lay the groundwork for the work done on iconographic tracking by Laurie Gries. Similar to the focus that memetics places on the process of participation and replication required to make an object into a meme, Laurie Gries's "New Materialist Approach for Visual Rhetorics" described in her book *Still Life with Rhetoric*, places an emphasis on the way that visual objects circulate in digital spaces. A key concept in Gries' methodology is rhetorical transformation, which Gries defines as "the process in which things become rhetorical in divergent, unpredictable ways as they circulate, transform, and catalyze change" (27). For Gries, this process is a result of the contexts and situations in which visual objects are created and circulated. That is, "as images materialize in different versions and enter into divergent associations, they become rhetorically diverse as they work alongside other entities, human and nonhuman, abstract and concrete, to alter collective life" (28). The concept of rhetorical transformation has immediate relevance to an object such as Pepe the Frog. After all, Pepe was not created with racist associations but gained these associations as he was put into relation with other "entities" such as white supremacists and swastikas.

Gries' calls her method for studying objects that have undergone this process of rhetorical transformation "iconographic tracking," a four part process that involves "data hoarding," "data mining," expanding the "data collection by using new search terms…to follow both visual and verbal threads in relation to each transformation," and conducting "a close study of specific collectives to determine how an image intra-acts with humans and various

technologies and other entities to materialize, spark change, and produce collective space" (110-114). Gries chooses a particularly rich case study to demonstrate this method: Obama Hope. She describes how the image was circulated and remixed in ways that the image's creator, street artist Shepard Fairey, and the Obama campaign could not have anticipated.

Gries' work is perhaps my project's most important methodological antecedent. In the same way that Gries tracks Obama Hope through its various iterations, my project traces Pepe the Frog throughout various encounters with other "entities." However, Gries is so focused on the process of circulation that she loses sight of the object itself. This is, in part, due to her grounding the study in theories of new materialism. According to Gries, the "*thought style* particular to the new materialist rhetorical approach" relies on six principles: becoming, transformation, consequentiality, vitality, agency, and virality (86-87). Based on these principles, Gries argues that "things" should be studied

> as vital actants that are constantly changing, circulating, and triggering all kinds of collective actions via their multiple, divergent relations. Rather than study visual things such as Obama Hope as visual texts that can be read, decoded, and interpreted *within* specific contexts then, the challenge is to investigate how such vital actants are actually *productive of* space (and time) as they materialize, flow, and intra-act with a variety of entities in and across various assemblages. (87-88)

Gries is correct to account for the ways that visual objects act upon other entities. However, for an approach that attempts to fully account for things as "actants," she neglects the thing itself in favor of a focus on a process of circulation. For Gries, it does not matter what visual object one is studying, whether the Mona Lisa or Obama Hope, what matters is the process of circulation that the object undergoes. Another issue with this approach is it assumes that how an object changes is most significant for understanding the object's rhetorical life. While this may have been the case for Obama Hope, I will argue that in the case of Pepe the Frog, it is not what changes but what stays the same, what Pepe carries with him from one context to the next that is

most interesting and most important for understanding Pepe as both an aesthetic and rhetorical object. Rather than attending to what changes as an object is recomposed and circulated, my approach attends to what remains. That is, what does an object carry with it as it travels from one context to the next?

Like Gries, my method involved an initial phase of "data hoarding," where I collected every image or reference to Pepe that I could find. However, where Gries treats all iterations of Obama Hope as equally important to the rhetorical life of the image, it soon became clear that not every reference to or depiction of Pepe was of equal relevance to his rhetorical transformation and that there were particular moments of transformation that marked a shift in the life of this particular object. Following Graham Harman's critique of new materialism in his book *Immaterialism*, my method attempts to avoid what Harman calls overmining (new materialism's tendency to reduce objects to their actions) by acknowledging that not all encounters that an object has are equally important. That is, where Gries treats every moment in the life of Obama Hope as equally important, I argue that there are only a few moments in the life of an object that change its rhetorical trajectory for good. In the case of Pepe, these were his transformation into a meme on forums such as 4chan, his appropriation by the alt-right, his unofficial adoption by the Trump campaign, and Matt Furie's efforts to #SavePepe from the various groups that appropriated him.

Something that Gries does not thoroughly address is why Obama Hope was transformed in the particular ways that it was. What moved an artist to imprint the image in a field (Gries 65) or to remix the image to make Obama look like the Joker (Gries 123)? That is, why did it resonate with particular audiences and why did these audiences appropriate and remix it in the particular ways that they did? I argue that scholars need to address these questions when

studying rhetorical transformation. The first step in addressing these questions (especially when an object has circulated online) is to attend more explicitly to the discursive practices of collectives and subcultures. In addition, scholars need to turn more deliberately to the fields of aesthetics and affect theory. One of the overarching intentions of this project is to explore the ways a seemingly innocuous aesthetic object can be taken up and used for various rhetorical purposes. To that end, to understand Pepe the Frog's rhetorical life, one must begin by understanding Pepe as an aesthetic object. While Gries acknowledges that affect is important to the study of rhetorical transformation, she does not adequately account for the role it plays in an object's transformation. In the case of Pepe, I argue that Sianne Ngai's work on zaniness is best suited for helping us to understand the aesthetic sensibilities, affective energies, and rhetorical practices of the online collectives that appropriated him. That is, Pepe's zaniness created particular moods and feelings that caused him to resonate with trolls, the alt-right, and the Trump campaign.

Zaniness

Ngai's work on zaniness is part of her broader project concerned with the minor affects. *Our Aesthetic Categories* focuses on the particular "feeling-based judgments that we make in our daily lives" (Porte). Rebecca Ariel Porte writes, "In choosing to work with aesthetic categories that don't always mark themselves as aesthetic, Ngai shows us how deeply our daily lives are interpenetrated with taste — aesthetic ways of feeling and judging the world." Where classical aesthetic theory is concerned with certain privileged aesthetic categories, such as the beautiful and the sublime, Ngai is concerned with "everyday practices of production, circulation, and consumption" and the aesthetic categories that correspond to these practices: the zany, the interesting, and the cute (1). Ngai claims that the aesthetic categories of the zany, cute, and

interesting "are as ubiquitous in the postmodern literary anthology and museum of contemporary art as they are on the Internet and television" (1-2). Of the three concepts described in Ngai's book, zaniness is the one most well suited for helping us to understand both Pepe's appeal and the type of digital rhetorical practices that produced him.

Ngai claims that zaniness is "really an aesthetic about work—and about a precariousness created specifically by the capitalist organization of work" (188). Ngai looks to the sixteenth century Italian genre of commedia dell'arte for the origins of this category. In these theatrical productions, the zanni character was "an itinerant servant, modeled after peasants forced by drought, wars, or other crises to emigrate from the hills near Milan to Venice in search of temporary work" (192). Ngai writes, "Zaniness thus begins as a style tied to the artistic representation of a person of a specific historical type: a character defined by a specific kind of labor or relation to labor" (192-193). In a post-Fordist context, a zany character is one that is in a constant state of action. Yet this action, while often associated with production and labor, is not necessarily productive. In fact, a zany character's work or activity is often counterproductive. Ngai writes,

> On first glance, zaniness seems purely a symptom of the 'perform-or-else' ideology of late capitalism, including its increasingly affective, biopolitical ways of meeting the imperative to endlessly increase productivity. Yet for all its spectacular displays of laborious exertion, the activity of zaniness is more often than not destructive; one might even describe it as the dramatization of an anarchic refusal to be productive. (12)

Ngai's archetypal zany is the character Lucy Ricardo from the sitcom *I Love Lucy*. For Ngai, Lucy's zaniness is tied to her inability to adjust "to new roles and social situations quickly" (174), specifically her inability to successfully perform the various jobs she takes on from one episode to the next (think of the infamous chocolate factory scene). Other examples of late-

capitalist zanies Ngai cites are Richard Pryor in *The Toy* (where he plays a male nanny) and Jim Carrey's titular character in *The Cable Guy*.

In addition to labor, zaniness is also an aesthetic category about gender in that it challenges the performance of traditional gender roles. For Ngai, "we are living in a transitional moment in which the type of labor that the zany has always indexed, labor that was not always viewed as especially feminine but that for two centuries has been very much so, is just beginning, slowly but noticeably, to lose its gender specificity" (209). Pryor's male nanny in *The Toy* especially exemplifies this facet of zaniness. She also claims that the 1997 film *The Full Monty*, in which a group of men from northern England become strippers after the steel factory in which they work closes, "deals…directly with the impact of the post-Fordist turn on prevailing ideas of gender" (212). In this instance, the characters' zaniness is tied to their difficulties adjusting to their new social situations, specifically a social situation in which they must adopt work (in this case, sex work) which is stereotypically is reserved for women.

Ngai's analysis of zaniness extends to a number of different pop culture objects, not just sitcoms and films but commercials and satirical writing. However, as Ben Highmore claims, "aesthetics is not limited to the domain of art" (ix), and zaniness is not only suited for describing Pynchon novels and sitcoms. It is also especially well-suited to describe the experience of interacting and communicating in digital environments. In digital environments, especially social media, one is continually required to take in new information and perform new roles. For instance, when logging on to Twitter and watching the timeline constantly refresh and fill with new content, a user might feel like Lucy working in the candy factory filling her mouth as the conveyor belt speeds up.

As we consider what defines a zany rhetorical style, it is necessary to distinguish zaniness from comedy and appeals to humor more generally. That is, not all rhetorical appeals that elicit a laugh from the audience can be described as zany. For instance, while many late night talk shows, such as those hosted by John Oliver and Samantha Bee, make arguments about social and political issues and appeal to their audiences through humor, their style is not really zany. The difference between an appeal to humor and an appeal to zaniness might be best illustrated by the two different iterations of Stephen Colbert's late night shows. Colbert's first show, *The Colbert Report*, meets the criteria of zaniness in that Colbert was admittedly playing a character (a right-wing blowhard modeled after certain Fox News hosts such as Bill O'Reilly). Certain of the other stylistic choices (the screeching eagle over the opening credits, Colbert running to different parts of the set to interview guests) also lend *The Colbert Report* a zany style. When Colbert took over for David Letterman on *The Late Show*, he dropped the right wing character, and the show has a more relaxed style, typical of other late night talk shows. Both shows have a perspective and, at times, even make explicit arguments about social and political issues. Both shows also appeal to humor to make these arguments. However, Colbert's performance on *The Colbert Report* is zany in that he is constantly performing and the audience is required to constantly keep up with his performance while his more natural, laid back persona on *The Late Show* is not zany.

Zaniness, then, has an unwieldiness that comedy in a broader sense does not have. For an aesthetic object, or a rhetorical appeal, to adopt a zany style, it must do more than simply make the audience laugh. Ngai claims that, "the experience of zaniness ultimately remains unsettling" because it demonstrates "the easiness with which these positions of safety and precariousness can be reversed" (11). Zaniness as a rhetorical style, then, might be funny, but it might also leave the audience in a state of discomfort. Zaniness is defined by a kind of manic activity that might

repel an audience as easily as appeal to it. An aesthetic object, then, such as Matt Furie's *Boy's Club* comics (in which Pepe originally appeared) is zany not just because it makes the reader laugh but because it leaves the reader in a state of disgust or discomfort. In the same way an aesthetic experience can be considered zany, I argue that certain rhetorical practices can be zany as well. For instance, a tweet by the president of the United States insulting Kim Jong Un and threatening nuclear war against North Korea might make an audience laugh (either at the insult or at the president's foolishness and lack of any sense of political decorum), but it is also unsettling in the way it challenges U.S. citizen's assumptions of safety (in that this type of petty message might very well provoke an attack or start a war).

If, as I will argue in the following chapters, zaniness has come to dominate both the aesthetic sensibility and rhetorical practices of certain online subcultures, collectives, and political movements, the question remains of why focus specifically on Pepe? Why does this particular cartoon frog warrant such extended consideration? The "post-truth" era presents us with rather serious rhetorical and political questions. We are living in a time when certain assumptions about decorum in politics and public discourse are being challenged (or shown to be false from the start). Given the importance of these issues, it may seem odd to focus on a comical figure such as Pepe the Frog. I focus on Pepe here for a number of reasons. First, the character presents us with perhaps the most obvious example of the way zaniness has influenced public discourse and political rhetoric. Also, it is one of the strangest examples of "rhetorical transformation" in recent memory and speaks to the way memes become embedded in the cultural consciousness. While it is not uncommon for a seemingly benign icon to be appropriated as a hate symbol (i.e. the swastika), the appropriation of Pepe by alt-right trolls and Trump supporters is a fairly unique case. In fact, alt-right trolls are often referred to as "Pepes" by some

liberals and leftists. This bit of metonymy speaks not only to the role that Pepe plays in alt-right circles but to the prominence he has in online culture.

As I will show in each of the chapters that follow, by tracing Pepe through his various encounters, we can begin to understand the communication practices of the groups and movements that adopted him as a symbol. While a number of authors, in both scholarly fields and the popular press, have attended to the role memes play in the rhetorical practices of the alt-right and the way they have functioned as tools for political propaganda, Pepe deserves sustained attention because of his particular reception history and the close association he has with the alt-right, the Trump campaign, and broader online culture.

Chapter Descriptions

In each of the chapters that follow, I focus on a particular moment of transformation in Pepe's rhetorical life.

Chapter 2 describes Pepe's aesthetic origins and transformation into a meme on the website 4chan. I begin with an analysis of Matt Furie's webcomic *Boy's Club* and argue that the fractured, fragmented form and crude subject matter of the comic exhibits Ngai's aesthetic category of zaniness in a way that resonated with the trolls on 4chan. I then focus specifically on "Feels Good Man," the comic from which the original Pepe meme was taken. I argue that the emphasis on pleasure at other people's expense which is present throughout *Boy's Club*, and "Feels Good Man" in particular, is what resonated with the trolls on 4chan who are motivated by "lulz." I conclude the chapter by analyzing three versions of the Pepe meme: "Feels Good Man," "Sad Frog," and "Smug Frog," and describe how each demonstrate a particular kind of zaniness.

Chapter 3 focuses on the way that Pepe was appropriated by the alt-right. Continuing the discussion of trolling begun in Chapter 2, this chapter looks at the more specifically political

subcultures of 4chan and Reddit and the way that Pepe began to take on more problematic and explicitly racist and anti-Semitic associations. The chapter looks specifically at the Cult of Kek and Kekistan, a satirical religion and nation started by a certain trolls associated with the alt-right. Although intended satirically, the religion demonstrates the importance that Pepe and zaniness play in the alt-right's rhetorical practices.

Chapter 4 focuses on Pepe's transformation into propaganda by the Trump presidential campaign. The chapter argues that Pepe's zaniness makes him a uniquely appropriate symbol for the campaign given Trump's own zany rhetorical style. I begin by reviewing the scholarship on "post-truth" rhetoric that has come about in the wake of Trump's election. I argue that the concepts scholars have used to analyze Trump's rhetoric, notably bullshit and fake news, adequately describe the content of Trump's rhetoric but do not adequately explain why these messages resonate with his supporters. In particular, they do not help to explain how an object like Pepe functions as political propaganda for the campaign. I focus my analysis on Trump's use of Twitter and discuss how it exhibits his zany rhetorical style. I also focus on his followers' adoption of the moniker "Deplorables" and focus specifically on the "Deplorables" meme that featured Pepe and was shared by a number of individuals associated with the Trump campaign. Ultimately, I argue that Pepe is a uniquely appropriate symbol for Trump given Trump's zany rhetorical style.

In Chapter 5, I focus on what I call Pepe's rhetorical "afterlife." I begin by considering the campaign to #SavePepe, led by Matt Furie and the ADL, which attempted to reclaim Pepe from the alt-right and the Trump campaign. After these efforts failed, Furie killed Pepe in a one-off *Boy's Club* comic. While this might have signaled the end of Furie's association with the character, he would go on to settle a number of copyright lawsuits against individuals who

attempted to profit off of Pepe's image. In perhaps an even more unexpected turn of events, Pepe would go on to become a symbol of the pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong in the summer of 2019. While this does not dissociate Pepe from the alt-right or erase his racist associations, it does add another layer of meaning to this rather odd rhetorical life. I conclude the chapter by considering the methodological implications of this study and discuss some of the other digital objects that zaniness helps us to understand, including the Philadelphia Flyers mascot Gritty and "weird Twitter."

What does a rhetoric of zaniness do? What kind of collectives does this rhetoric create? What kinds of politics can this rhetoric promote? I will answers to these questions in the chapters that follow by tracing Pepe's rhetorical trajectory and describing his rhetorical life.

Chapter 2: The Zaniness of Pepe the Frog

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I claimed that Pepe the Frog's rhetorical trajectory is rooted in the character's zaniness, in his "particular style of incessant doing" (Ngai 181). To understand Pepe's zaniness, one should begin with the web comic *Boy's Club* in which Pepe first appeared. *Boy's Club*, by artist Matt Furie, is a work of manic crudity. The comic is a stoner comedy that revolves around four anthropomorphic animals: Andy, Brett, Landwolf, and Pepe. In keeping with the stoner comedy genre, the comics typically revolve around the characters getting high, pulling pranks on one another, and having seemingly inane conversations. The characters originally appeared in comic strips Furie published on MySpace in 2005. A year later, Buenaventura Press published the first issue of *Boy's Club*, releasing four issues in total between 2006 and 2010. In 2016, Fantagraphics released a single volume collection of the comics. Even in collected form, *Boy's Club* is fragmentary and disjointed. In general, the comic typically eschews extended narrative in favor of short scenes and vignettes, many running no longer than a single, six-panel page. Only one of the comics in the Fantagraphics collection adheres to any sort of narrative (the aptly titled "The Long Story"). Often, the comics will simply juxtapose panels depicting the characters engaged in various activities without any explicit connection (Brett playing Gameboy on the toilet, Landwolf peeing on a wall, Pepe throwing up, etc.).

In this chapter, I will chart the various ways that Pepe transformed from his initial appearance in Furie's *Boy's Club* up to his appearance as a meme. I begin with an analysis of Furie's *Boy's Club* in light of Sianne Ngai's aesthetic category of the zany. Despite the fact that the characters do not engage in activities typically regarded as productive, they are nonetheless constantly active, generally in the pursuit of pleasure and self-gratification. In this sense, the

focus of the comic is on the characters' labor, although the labor is the characters' manic pursuit of pleasure. The comic most clearly exemplifies Ngai's aesthetic category of zaniness through its blurring the line between labor and fun. I argue that Pepe's zaniness is what caused him to resonate with the trolls on 4chan who made him a meme and that meme making and trolling (the rhetorical practices most closely associated with 4chan) are themselves zany activities in that they are frenetic actions that impel the participants to constantly perform or to adopt new, constantly changing roles. Ultimately, I show that while various image macros transform the character in ways that render him unrecognizable from his appearance in Furie's comics, the affective energy that remains with Pepe the Frog through his various iterations, as he is recomposed and circulated, is zaniness.

Boy's Club and Zaniness

The "spectacular displays of laborious exertion" and "anarchic refusal to be productive" that Ngai points to as defining characteristics of zaniness runs throughout *Boy's Club*. In *Boy's Club*, the characters are constantly engaged in labor, yet this labor is not in the service of biological need, nor is it in the service of political action or social good. Instead, the characters labor in the service of pleasure and self-gratification. They get high, pull pranks, watch TV, and play video games. There is no purpose that the characters' actions seem to fulfill, or cause that their actions serve, other than pleasure.

Ngai claims that zaniness is "as much about desperate laboring as playful fun" (23). What we find in *Boy's Club* is "playful fun" as "desperate laboring." Of course, fun here is not meant in the light-hearted way that it is commonly used. As Ngai points out, "Even the word 'fun' is strangely not fun" (297). Ngai traces the etymology of the word which, according to the OED, in its original usage meant "'cheat or trick; a hoax; a practical joke'" (qtd. in Ngai 297). Ngai

claims that "fun," "refers here not to one's own feeling of enjoyment or pleasure, but to being the source of somebody else's" (297). The pranks that the characters in *Boy's Club* pull on each other would certainly fit this definition of fun. The transformation of fun into labor is perhaps best exemplified by "The Long Story." As mentioned above, the comic is the only extended narrative in the entire Fantagraphics collection. The story revolves around the characters' attempts to take a picture of the longest piece of shit any of them has ever seen. After Landwolf takes the shit, he shows it off to the other characters, and they are all so impressed they decide to take a picture of it. When it turns out that their camera is out of batteries, they use wax paper to save the shit and preserve it in the freezer so that they can take a picture of it later. The story ends with Pepe almost eating it before he is stopped by the other characters. In the end, they take the picture and dispose of the shit. The focus of this narrative is on a completely unnecessary endeavor that requires the labor of nearly all of the characters. Here, one of the most basic of human labors, the disposal of waste, becomes a something of a game. More labor goes into the preservation of the waste than would go into simply disposing of it.

The characters' "fun" and disruption of productive labor is also prevalent throughout the comic's many six panel vignettes. For instance, in one of these comics, Landwolf farts in Brett's face while Brett is practicing transcendental meditation. Later in the series, another vignette depicts Landwolf farting in Pepe's face while Pepe plays video games. Here, one could argue that the energy put into practicing meditation (or even playing video games) is a form of productive labor in that these activities contribute to the maintenance of one's mental health or entertainment. However, Landwolf's fun at the expense of the other characters can be seen as a kind of counterproductive labor that is characteristic of zaniness.

Ngai's claim that zaniness is tied to a breakdown of traditional gender roles would seem to present a problem since, as the title implies, the comic's perspective is distinctly male and there are no female characters depicted in the comic. In one panel Brett laments, "i wish i knew some girls. a girl" (Furie 32). In a review of the comic for *Paste*, Hillary Brown observes that, for female readers, the book "will not improve your view of men," speaking to the way the comic revels in crudeness. However, while the comic is undoubtedly problematic at times, its gender dynamics are not as simplistic as Brown's critique suggests.

Throughout *Boy's Club*, there are numerous examples of the comic's characters eschewing traditional gender roles. For instance, in "The Long Story," Brett is portrayed in his underwear dancing to "I'm Every Woman" by Whitney Houston and "Hat 2 Da Back" by TLC. Both songs are celebrations of femininity, albeit two very different approaches to femininity: Houston's song a celebration of a more traditional femininity which sees woman as intuitive nurturer, while TLC's song is a celebration of femininity that does not fit society's traditional norms. In another comic, Andy asks Pepe if he would rather hook up with George Clooney or Tom Cruise. After giving it some thought, Pepe answers simply, "clooney."

Of course, both of these scenes can be read ironically, as eliciting humor from behavior one would not expect to see from a cisgender, heterosexual male. However, there is no judgement (either depicted or implied) of these behaviors by the other characters. In fact, it seems that the other characters consider it perfectly normal to dance alone to songs celebrating femininity and speculating about sleeping with other men. Rather than reading these scenes ironically, I would argue that the characters accept femininity and homoeroticism as perfectly normal aspects of their personalities (even though these are not behaviors associated with typical masculinity). Or, perhaps more accurately, the characters in *Boy's Club* exhibit a kind of gender

anxiety in that women are completely outside the scope of their experience. Again, the comic's gender politics are certainly problematic at times, and the characters occasionally exhibit homophobic and sexist behavior. However, the comic still gestures toward a kind of breakdown of tradition ideas about gender and sexuality that Ngai claims is characteristic of zaniness.

The sense of zaniness that runs throughout the comic clearly resonated with the trolls on 4chan that first turned Pepe into a meme. The communication that takes place on this forum is dominated by memes and trolling. In what follows, I will discuss how memes function in the context of forums such as 4chan. I will also analyze the relationship between the original Pepe image macro ("Feels good man") and 4chan's /b/ board, the message board on which the meme originally appeared. Pepe's popularity as a meme, I will argue, is rooted both in the zany aesthetic sensibility of the trolls who appropriated him and the fact that he exhibits characteristics of a "beta male," a particular type of masculine identity adopted by certain trolls on 4chan.

Memes and 4chan

In the previous chapter, I discussed Ryan Milner's work on mimetics and the concept of resonance. For Milner, understanding why memes resonate with audiences is essential for explaining how memes circulate. In her essay "In Defense of Memes," Whitney Phillips also highlights the centrality of resonance when trying to understand how and why memes travel, especially among trolls on sites such as 4chan. Phillips writes,

> Contrary to the assumption that memes hop arbitrarily from self-contained monad to self-contained monad, memes as they operate within trolldom exist in synecdochical relationship to the culture in which they inhere. In other words, memes spread—that is, they are actively engaged and/or remixed into existence—because something about a given image or phrase or video or whatever lines up with an already-established set of linguistic and cultural norms.

According to Phillips, in order to understand why a particular meme resonates, it is necessary to both understand the media utilized by the users and the cultural norms established by the users. That is, to understand a meme's rhetorical trajectory (how it is used, where it is used, etc.), it is important to understand the environment in which it was originally produced. So, in the case of Pepe, one must consider 4chan and "cultural norms" established by the users of the site.

To understand how and why Pepe became a meme, it is not enough to simply analyze a series of image macros. While this kind of formal analysis does have much to tell us about why an object resonates, we must also look at the "cultural norms" surrounding the meme and the media that produced it. To this end, I put forward two questions for analyzing memes: How do the social media platforms where the object originated determine the rhetorical trajectory of the meme? What remains when an object that resonates with a user is remixed, recomposed, or otherwise altered by that user? In what follows, I will address these two questions as they pertain specifically to Pepe and his origins on 4chan.

4chan is an imageboard founded by Christopher "Moot" Poole in 2003 as a "content overflow site for a Something Awful subforum called 'Anime Death Tentacle Rape Whorehouse'" (Phillips 57). While the site has boards dedicated to a number of topics, it is perhaps most notable for the /b/ (or "Random") board. In a 2008 *New York Times Magazine* article on 4chan, and trolling more generally, Mattathias Schwartz writes, "Measured in terms of depravity, insularity and traffic-driven turnover, the culture of /b/ has little precedent. /b/ reads like the inside of a high-school bathroom stall, or an obscene telephone party line, or a blog with no posts and all comments filled with slang that you are too old to understand." The comparison to a bathroom stall is certainly accurate, but a bit of an understatement. Due to the multimedia nature of the site, in addition to the fact that almost everything on the site disappears soon after it

is posted, the board lends itself not only to the type of scatological and offensive graffiti one might find in a public restroom, but to revenge porn, hentai, and images of real life violence. While these kinds of transgressive images and language are no doubt shocking to someone visiting the site for the first time, for the trolls who frequent the site and contribute to this discourse, this is the lingua franca of this particular subculture. Often, these messages are posted ironically. Rather than expressing any sincere belief, the entire purpose of posting these things is to illicit a response from people. That is, the rhetorical practices of the site are defined by trolling and lulz.

Trolling and Lulz

The term "trolling" is often used to describe any kind of antagonistic message (whether or not its delivered in an online forum). Given the term's rather inexact popular usage, it's necessary to begin by providing a more precise definition. The OED defines "trolling" as posting "a deliberately erroneous or antagonistic message on a newsgroup or similar forum with the intention of eliciting a hostile or corrective response." While this definition adequately describes the activity of trolling (or "shitposting" as it is often referred to), it ignores an important element of the activity which is the pleasure trolls receive from the "corrective response." Trolls commonly refer to this pleasure as "lulz."

In *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things*, an analysis of trolling as a subcultural phenomenon, Whitney Phillips claims that "lulz," "indicates acute amusement in the face of someone else's distress, embarrassment, or rage" (57). Phillips makes a connection between online trolls and trickster figures from folklore. Citing Lewis Hyde, Phillips claims that the trickster figure represents a contradiction. The trickster is often both "culture-hero" and "culture-villain" (9). While Phillips does not go so far as to claim that trolls are tricksters, there is

nevertheless an ethos both trolls and tricksters share, a "negating strain," to quote Lewis Hyde, which seeks to upset the established order (qtd. in Phillips 9). As Philips shows, tricksters are often motivated by immediate self-interest and self-gratification. Phillips writes, "trolls embody trickster's amorality, impetuousness, and shameless desire to splash about in the muck" (13). Phillips does not see trolling as an inherently problematic activity and argues that, as a rhetorical strategy, it can be utilized for many political causes, on the right or left. Phillips acknowledges that while trolling may have begun as an activity unique to a particular online subculture, it has evolved into an activity that can be utilized by anyone. Nevertheless, trolling continues to be associated with particular, antisocial activities online such as those that occur on 4chan.

In *Never Alone, Except for Now*, Kris Cohen argues that trolling is a "broken genre," in that it is a form of "intimacy without reciprocity" (42). Following Fredric Jameson's definition of genre as a "tacit agreement or contract" and Lauren Berlant's claim that genre is "a loose affectual contract that predicts the form that an aesthetic transaction will take" (qtd. in Cohen 44), Cohen argues that trolling is a direct result of the democratic potential of online discourse. Cohen claims that trolling is "a technical feature of networks" and that it "expresses something fundamental, something technical about networked life" (64). For Cohen, trolls use a forum,

> to show that it was disrupted from the start, that the democratic idealizations of the Internet may not be any part of the Internet's innate potential, but might instead be a fantasy that compensates for the absence of exactly that potential. Their actions thus mark the presence of another logic of sociality entirely, one that is less familiar and that grates against democratic expectations. (65)

While Cohen does not address "lulz" explicitly, this is the aspect of trolling that causes it to be a "broken genre." That is, while trolls are aware that they are provoking people to simply receive a corrective response, the victims of trolling are often unaware that they are being used by the troll for this purpose, that the trolls are deriving pleasure from their engagement and interaction.

While one party believes they are having a sincere exchange, the other is merely provoking them in order to make them mad. Trolling, then, requires the troll to perform, and often to improvise, based on the response they receive from the person being trolled. In this way, trolling is a kind of zany rhetorical practice that requires the troll to take on a persona and play a role. The troll might express beliefs that they sincerely hold. Or the troll might simply post something they do not believe but that they know will offend the person being trolled. For someone encountering trolling for the first time, the experience can be dizzying. Like the aesthetic experience of zaniness, trolling as a rhetorical practice never allows its audience or participants any sense of sure footing. Unless you are in on the joke, it can be difficult, if not impossible, to determine what is meant ironically and what is meant sincerely.

While the posts on 4chan are often trolling (or "shitposting") in the pursuit of lulz, the communication that takes place in these forums can often be intended sincerely. The offensive language and images trolls post is not always intended ironically, and it can often be impossible to tell the difference between trolling and messages that are intended to be genuine. Regardless of whether or not a message is sincerely or ironically intended, the communication that takes place on 4chan fosters regressive cultural norms, particularly with regard to gender and race. Often, users will position themselves as social outcasts who do not meet certain masculine standards. These individuals often refer to themselves as "beta males" and "incels." In order to understand how Pepe functions as a symbol for online trolls, and how Pepe became so closely linked to trolling, one needs to take into consideration the regressive gender politics that underlies 4chan. I argue that the 4chan's gender politics, which relies on a binary masculinity in which men are divided into "alpha males" and "beta males," an important element for understanding Pepe's appropriation by trolls and, subsequently, the alt-right.

Beta Males, Incels, and Pepe

In her article, "The New Man of 4chan," Angela Nagle describes the role of transgression on sites such as 4chan and the regressive gender politics this type of discourse fosters. She also discusses a number of cases where the seemingly ironic messages posted on the site led to real life violence. Nagle begins the article by discussing the case of Chris Harper-Mercer, who is thought to have posted a warning to 4chan's /r9k/ board the night before he committed a mass shooting at Umpqua Community College. According to Nagle, the post had "warned fellow commenters from the Northwestern United States that it would be a good idea to steer clear of school that day." Harper-Mercer's case is especially interesting because, according to Nagle, the post that is alleged to have been made by Harper-Mercer was accompanied by an image of Pepe. Regarding the relationship between Pepe and 4chan, Nagle writes, "in his original cartoon form, Pepe was a sad sack, prone to bouts of humiliation. But as his froggy visage got meme-fied on 4chan, he took on a distinctly more menacing aspect. Pepe became a favorite icon of last-straw ranters spewing extreme misogyny, racism, and vengefulness." In a sense, Pepe would appear to be both a product of, and an embodiment of, the cultural norms of 4chan and the trolls who inhabit the website. In particular, Pepe would seem to function as a stand in for "beta males." As the name implies, "beta males" are the opposite of "alpha males" (or "Chads" as many on 4chan refer to them). This kind of language is especially appealing to the more political faction of 4chan, the alt-right (which will be discussed in the next chapter). In the article "'Cuck,' 'snowflake,' 'masculinist': A guide to the language of the 'alt-right,'" Jessica Roy's writes, "Members of the alt-right are obsessed with masculinity, manhood, gender roles and the concept of "alpha" and "beta" males. Alpha males are leaders, like Trump; beta males are portrayed as weak and emasculated." The term is thrown around in certain contexts online often in a self-

deprecating way. That is, trolls on 4chan see themselves as "beta" and often embrace the identity. According to Nagle, responses to Harper-Mercers post included questions such as, "'Is the beta uprising finally going down?'" (qtd. in Nagle). After the shooting, another post claimed that "'This is only the beginning. The Beta Rebellion has begun. Soon, more of our brothers will take up arms to become martyrs to this revolution'" (qtd. in Nagle).

Another group associated with beta males and 4chan is "incels" (which stands for "involuntary celibate"). Incels are (typically) heterosexual men who claim that they are unable, despite their best efforts, to have sex with women. Often, incels will blame the women who do not sleep with them for being too easily seduced by "Chads." The idea of a "beta uprising" (as mentioned in the responses to Harper-Mercer) against mainstream culture is a recurrent motif in incel forums online. While such an "uprising" is in some ways satirical, self-identified "beta males" and "incels" have acted out violently. Significant attention was given to incels in 2014 after Elliot Rodger went on a shooting spree in Isla Vista, CA and killed six people. In a video he recorded during the spree, Rodger appears to blame the women who would not sleep with him for his actions. After Rodger's committed the shooting, a significant amount of media attention was given to the manifesto he left behind as well as the many videos he posted to YouTube in which he would go on racist and sexist rants.

Another instance where a self-identified incel acted out violently occurred in 2018 when Alex Minassian drove a van into a group of people in Toronto, killing ten. After the attack, it was revealed that the man had posted messages sympathetic to Rodger and incels on social media. One such message posted on Facebook reads, "Private (Recruit) Minassian Infantry 00010, wishing to speak to Sgt 4chan please. C23249161. The Incel Rebellion has already begun! We will overthrow all the chads and stacys! All hail the Supreme Gentleman Elliot Rodger!" (qtd. in

Makuch). While this post by Minassian was not posted to 4chan, the explicit reference to 4chan indicates just how closely associated the forum is to the kinds of regressive gender politics espoused by people like Minassian and Rodger.

Given the way 4chan trolls refer to themselves, especially in regard to gender, it makes sense that a work such as *Boys' Club*, in which the male characters do not appear to have relationships (platonic or romantic) with females, would resonate with them. While the views regarding gender and sexuality expressed on 4chan are often far more regressive than what is found in *Boys' Club*, the absence of female characters and the rendering of the male characters as gleefully unaware of social mores would clearly resonate with the trolls on 4chan. Of course, posters such as Harper-Mercer who actually act out violently are the minority on 4chan. Typically, offensive images and language are posted to 4chan because the poster finds it funny. The purpose of posting offensive or violent language and images is to get a reaction from other people, to troll in the pursuit of lulz. If the cultural norms of 4chan are defined largely by trolling, the language used to communicate these cultural norms is memes. Many popular memes got their start on 4chan, including Pepe the Frog. The question I will explore in the remainder of this chapter is if this aesthetic of zaniness runs throughout the entire comic, why Pepe, rather than one of the other characters, became a meme. To answer this question, I will analyze some of the original Pepe memes, starting with "Feels Good Man."

"Feels Good Man"

The original Pepe meme, "Feels Good Man," is taken from one of the six panel stories typical of *Boy's Club* in which Andy sees Pepe peeing with his pants around his ankles. Landwolf later tells Pepe that he "heard you pull yer pants down all the way to go pee," to which Pepe simply replies "feels good man" (see fig. 2.1). Here, Pepe does something that the other

characters deem to be atypical male behavior. This panel summarizes the overall ethos of *Boy's Club*, with its emphasis on "fun" (in in the word's original sense) and, most importantly, self-gratification. Pepe's actions, and subsequent defense of his actions, point to a certain disregard for what is deemed socially acceptable or typical adult behavior. Not only does Pepe disregard what is deemed typical or acceptable in his given situation, he revels in it. What determines his actions here is simply self-gratification.

Fig. 2.1. Matt Furie, *Boy's Club*; rpt. on Know Your Meme, 12 Apr. 2009, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/feels-good-man

In "Feels Good Man," Pepe invites the reader to wallow in pleasure. To enjoy oneself without any regard for how it appears to others or for what is acceptable in society. In this comic, Pepe does not care what other people think of his actions. While he may not be intentionally trying to elicit a response from those around him, there is a sense in which the joke is on people who do react. The comic presents Pepe as the subject of the other characters' fun (in the word's

original sense). Even if he is not the target of a practical joke, he is still the source of their amusement. However, rather than getting offended or defensive about the way the other characters attempt to humiliate him, Pepe embraces it and relishes the response he receives from the other characters. His gaze directed at what we assume is a video game (Landwolf is holding a controller), Pepe is portrayed with a blank look in his eyes and a quiet, content smile on his face as if what the other characters think of his behavior is of no consequence to him. In many ways, Pepe's attitude here mirrors the behavior of the trolls who populate 4chan. The comic also presents Pepe as something of a beta male. It is the other characters who are presented as more traditionally masculine. However, rather than get offend by or defensive about the way the other characters are emasculating him, Pepe embraces it. Like the trolls on 4chan, he welcomes the role of beta male. It would make sense, then that Pepe, rather than any of the other characters, would resonate with 4chan users.

Because *Boy's Club* started as a self-published web comic, it made it easier for the work to be taken out of context and recomposed. According to an entry on "Feels Good Man" on the website Know Your Meme, Furie uploaded this six-panel vignette to Myspace in 2005. Although Furie later deleted the page, the comic was uploaded to 4chan's /b/ board by an unidentified user. Other users then latched on to the cartoon, and the image of Pepe saying "feels good man" became a popular image macro (see fig. 2.2). In keeping with the original comic, the image macro was often used to celebrate contentment or self-gratification. One can see rather clearly how this comic, and the ethos underlying "Feels Good Man," would resonate with online trolls, who are in large part motivated by the pursuit of "lulz." Throughout 2008 and 2009, "Feels Good Man" was recomposed a number of times. A simple Google image search turns up dozens of variations. While these iterations alter the original version in significant ways (Pepe's face drawn

on the bodies of various Pokémon characters, for instance), what remains unchanged throughout these various image macros is Pepe's face and the catch phrase "feels good man." The phrase "feels good man" also began to be used without any explicit reference to Pepe. For instance, a number of people who posted on Reddit about losing weight or donating to charity titled their posts with the phrase. However, throughout the years, other more drastic departures from the original image began to appear online.

Fig. 2.2. "Feels Good Man," 25 Jan. 2011, https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/95218-feels-good-man

Feels Bad Man/Sad Frog

One of the most notable variations of "Feels Good Man" is "Sad Frog/Feels Bad Man" (see fig. 2.3). The entry on "Feels Bad Man/Sad Frog" on Know Your Meme notes that the first version of the image appeared on Reddit in January 2009. This version simply altered Furie's original drawing so that Pepe is frowning rather than smiling, and the text in the speech bubbles

is changed from "feels good man" to "Feels bad, man." In August of that year, another image of

Pepe looking sad (though not a remix of the original image) was posted in a body building forum

with the caption "not good man." Where "Feels Good Man" revels in the feeling of pleasure,

"Sad Frog," laments the absence of pleasure. However, while "Feels Good Man" and "Feels Bad

Man/Sad Frog" reflect opposing emotional states, there is still a sense of zaniness that runs

throughout both images. Even the Sad Frog image is so exaggerated as to be comical. In Sad

Frog, it is as if Pepe is working to be sad rather than expressing a genuine emotional state.

Fig. 2.3. "Feels Bad Man/Sad Frog," 10 Feb. 2012, https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/248081-feels-bad-man-sad-frog

Smug Frog

In 2011, Pepe was transformed again into "Smug Frog" (see fig. 2.4). This version of

Pepe was noticeably different than both "Feels good man" and "Sad Frog." That is, while the

others looked distinctly like Furie's original drawings of Pepe in *Boy's Club*, this version did not.

While the image is still recognizably Pepe, it is altered so that he has a smirk on his face and his hand held to his chin as if he is thinking. He is also drawn with a rather knowing look on his face with his eyes directed at the viewer. The Know Your Meme entry on "Smug Frog" claims that the oldest known version of the image was posted to 4chan on 2 June 2011. The website claims that the purpose of the image was to "make fun of the style of humor of the television show *The Big Bang Theory*."

Fig. 2.4. "Smug Frog," 9 Nov. 2014, https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/862065-smug-frog

Although "Feels Good Man" and "Sad Frog" changed Pepe by taking the character out of his original context, "Smug Frog" represents a more drastic departure from Furie's original drawing. Both "Smug Frog" and "Feels Good Man" are related to feelings of pleasure. However, there is a distinct difference between the pleasure derived from smugness and the rather neutral pleasure of "Feels Good Man." There is a sense in which the good natured tone of "Feels Good

Man" is abandoned in favor of something more malicious, more antagonistic. If, in "Smug Frog," Pepe is expressing a feeling of superiority, to whom or what is he feeling superior?

The answer to this question would no doubt change depending on the context in which the image was used. When used by trolls on 4chan, Pepe's smugness was often directed at people who were being trolled on social media. For instance, "Smug Frog" would often be inserted in images that created an incongruous and often offensive contrast, such as the World Trade Center buildings on 9/11 or dressed as an SS officer in front of the gates of Auschwitz (see fig. 2.5). In these cases, Pepe's sense of smugness seems to be directed at the victims of 9/11 and the Holocaust. However, the smugness is also directed at anyone who would get offended at this kind of offensive imagery. While "Smug Frog" is noticeably different from Pepe's original appearance in *Boy's Club*, the zaniness remains as smugness is predicated on someone having fun at another's expense.

Fig. 2.5. "Smug Nazi Pepe," 7 Nov. 2014, https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/861025-smug-frog.

Each of these memes is distinct, both in their depiction of Pepe and in how they were used in social media. However, none of the memes discussed above is inherently problematic. That is, early in Pepe's rhetorical life, sharing a meme depicting Pepe or having Pepe as your social media avatar may have implied something about your aesthetic sensibility, but it did not say anything necessarily about your political or social views. Many individuals shared images of Pepe on social media without knowing that he was associated with 4chan or trolling. Pepe was a malleable image that could express a number of different affective states while retaining his zany sensibility. For instance, the singer Katy Perry shared an image of Pepe on Twitter to express the rather disorienting experience of jet lag (see fig. 2.6). However, the memes discussed above, and "Smug Frog" in particular, lay the groundwork for the ways that Pepe will be used when he is appropriated by the alt-right.

Fig. 2.6. Katy Perry shares image of Pepe on Twitter to describe experience of jet lag, 8 Nov. 2014, https://twitter.com/katyperry/status/531011411720151041?lang=en

There is a sense of zaniness that runs throughout each version of Pepe that appeared on social media. However, there is also something zany about the act of recomposing Pepe. That is, creating memes in and of itself can be seen as a zany activity. Often, it is labor in the service of "lulz" (another concept grounded in fun in its original sense). Both the object and the circumstances surrounding the production of the object are zany. In a sense, when one creates a meme, one is simply creating the same thing over and over again.

Conclusion

On June 14, 2017, abortion activist Renee Bracey Sherman tweeted the following from the airport while waiting for a delayed flight: "I have my bluetooth on because I'm using my headphones, and White supremacist Jacob takes the opportunity to try to send me Pepe bullshit." In the tweet, Sherman includes a screenshot of the "Smug Frog" that the man, identified only as "Jacob," tried to send her. Sherman, who is African-American, interpreted the message as racist harassment. Sherman was able to find the man in the airport, and in subsequent tweets Sherman describes her confrontation with him. According to Sherman, "Jacob" claimed that he did not "know what the Pepe meme means" and that he was merely sending the image randomly "to a bunch of people just for fun." Sherman claims that when she "called bullshit" on Jacob's appeals to ignorance, he did not respond. Of course, given Jacob's reluctance to respond to Sherman, it would be a mistake to ascribe any motives to his actions. However, by the time this incident occurred, Pepe was so closely associated with trolling that one can assume Jacob was trying to elicit a response from Sherman. By the time of the incident, Pepe was closely enough associated with the alt-right that Jacob's message can safely be interpreted as racist regardless of his intentions.

The most interesting part of this encounter is Jacob's lack of any apparent motivation. That is, Jacob did not appear to have anything to gain from sending the image to Sherman. Even if we take him at his word, that he was not targeting Sherman and sent the image to various people at random, it's still unclear what he would have to gain from this except, of course, lulz. Like the characters in *Boys' Club*, Jacob's labor here, like all trolls, is a kind of exertion in the service of nothing. His prank did not provide him with anything other than a corrective response for his actions. However, as opposed to other instances of trolling, where the troll does not face any consequences for their actions, Sherman was able to confront Jacob face to face. As such, it is doubtful Jacob experienced the same kind of pleasure he would if he enjoyed the type of anonymity that most trolls do.

The responses to Sherman's tweets are a mix between people showing sympathy for Sherman, people who don't understand what Pepe is, and people who don't believe Jacob did anything wrong. Another interesting aspect of this encounter is the fact that Sherman immediately interpreted Jacob's message to be antagonistic. This, of course, has to do with the fact that by 2017, Pepe was already associated with the alt-right.

In a March 2017 post to The Donald subreddit (a message board dedicated to Donald Trump supporters), a user named Jesus_Faction posted the original "feels good man" image with the title, "Let's not forget the original Pepe that started it all!" It is worth noting that while the original poster seems to know who Pepe is, some of the comments by other users indicate that they are not aware of where Pepe originated and how he became a meme (and a political mascot). Essentially, this post (and Sherman's encounter with Jacob) speaks to the ways that Pepe has travelled since his original appearance in *Boy's Club*. That is, while many people are aware of Pepe, they may not be aware that he is the creation of Matt Furie. For many, Pepe is

simply a hate symbol and political icon belonging to no one but the nameless, faceless internet. In the remaining chapters, I will look at the ways that this meme became a hate symbol and a political mascot. That is, I will address the question of what a rhetoric of zaniness looks like when put to more explicitly political purposes.

Chapter 3: The Alt-Right, Trolling, and the Cult of KEK

Introduction

In the article "How Pepe the Frog Became a Nazi Trump Supporter and Alt-Right Symbol," published by *The Daily Beast* on 26 May 2016, Olivia Nuzzi describes Pepe's evolution from internet meme to political icon. In order to explain how a rather benign object became associated with white supremacists and the Trump presidential campaign, Nuzzi interviews two white nationalist 4chan users, @JaredTSwift and @PaulTown_, who claim to have helped orchestrate Pepe's appropriation. The two men (identified only by their Twitter handles) claim that Pepe's appropriation by the alt-right was "by design," and that there was "'an actual campaign to reclaim Pepe from normies.'" That is, these white nationalists intentionally appropriated the character when celebrities such as Katy Perry and Nikki Minaj began sharing Pepe memes on social media. According to Town, the initial effort to turn Pepe into a white nationalist symbol was undertaken by about ten people who "helped plot it out over drinks in late 2015, before taking to /r9k/," the 4chan board on which the racist Pepe memes initially appeared. When asked why there was such an attachment to Pepe among 4chan users, @JaredTSwift claims that, "'He's a reflection of our souls, to most of us. It's disgusting to see people ('normies,' if you will) use him so trivially. He belongs to us. And we'll make him toxic if we have to.'"

If this sounds slightly dramatic, and a lot to go through to create a racist meme, this is because Swift and Town were likely lying to Nuzzi. At least, this is what Jonah Bennett claims in an article published on the conservative website *The Daily Caller* in September 2016. Nuzzi's article circulated widely online and was even shared by the Clinton campaign in a (since deleted) statement explaining the connection between Pepe and white supremacists. While Bennett's

article may not be an outright rebuttal of Nuzzi's piece, Bennett seeks to undermine it by claiming that Nuzzi's article was "a complete troll job." The basis for this claim is interviews Bennett conducted with the same white supremacists interviewed by Nuzzi. According to Bennett, "The troll consisted of Town and Swift feeding an outrageous narrative to Nuzzi in the hopes she would scoop it up and feature as many quotes as possible– a fairly common practice among various alt-right groups to gain in-group status." Overall, Bennett tries to show that Nuzzi's article is merely an effort to discredit the Trump presidential campaign by linking it to white nationalism. The premise underlying Bennett's piece is that trolls are not to be taken at their word. Since Nuzzi made the mistake of assuming the trolls were honest, she clearly does not understand the people she is profiling and, therefore, the connection she is trying to make between Pepe, the alt-right, and Trump is invalid.

Of course, the fact that Town and Swift provided exaggerated information to Nuzzi is, in some ways, irrelevant. After all, Pepe was appropriated by, and has become a symbol of, the alt-right, so there is an association between Pepe and white supremacists that cannot be ignored. Bennett is clearly trying to dissociate Trump from the white nationalists within the alt-right, and he makes a number of incorrect assumptions in this effort. Perhaps the most problematic is that racist language and imagery can be separated from racism itself. That is, Bennett seems to be offering the typical defense of trolling which is that it should not be taken seriously. Another point that Bennett makes (which, to be fair, is important to note) is that there is a "large sphere of the internet that uses Pepe with absolutely no hint of political connotation at all" (or, at least, there was before the 2016 presidential campaign). However, this makes the assumption that an object can only have one static meaning and that meaning cannot change over time. While Bennett's attempt to invalidate Nuzzi's piece and dissociate Trump from white nationalism is

ultimately inadequate, he is correct to account for the role that trolling played in the appropriation of Pepe. Rather than debunking any information in Nuzzi's article, I believe that Bennett's piece complements it. That is, by claiming that they lied to Nuzzi in an attempt to "troll" her, the interviewees lay bare both the ethos and pervading rhetorical strategy of the entire alt-right movement. Taken together, these articles provide a more complete picture of what Pepe represents and why he was appropriated by the alt-right.

In the previous chapter, I argued that Pepe's zaniness is, in part, what caused him to resonate with trolls on 4chan whose rhetorical practices are defined by zaniness. This claim extends to the alt-right, which is the more overtly political faction of 4chan. In what follows, I will focus on the alt-right and account for the role trolling played in the appropriation of Pepe by this group. I will look at some of the ways Pepe has been used by this group, focusing specifically on The Cult of Kek and Kekistan, a fictional religion and nation (respectively) started by prominent alt-right figures that satirizes online activism and uses Pepe as a symbol. Ultimately, I will show that what sets the alt-right apart from various other white nationalist movements is the way that it cohered online and the way that zaniness defines the group's rhetorical practices.

The Alt-Right

Defining the alt-right can be difficult since the movement does not have a central leadership or any coherent platform. One useful place to start is the article "An Establishment Conservative's Guide to the Alt-Right" by Allum Bokhari and Milo Yiannopoulos published by the conservative website Breitbart on 29 March 2016. The article's banner image, an obvious nod to Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* with the GOP establishment in the role of Scrooge and Pepe as the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, depicts an elderly elephant looking on fearfully as Pepe,

dressed in a black robe, points to a grave marked "GOP 2016" (see fig. 3.1). By the time the article was published, Pepe was linked to the alt-right to the extent that anyone reading the article would associate Pepe with the movement in the same way the elephant symbolizes the mainstream GOP. The image, created by artist Jeremie Lederman, positions Pepe not as a replacement of the traditional GOP but as a harbinger of the GOP's demise. The message, it would seem, is that conservatives as a whole must become more like Pepe or risk fading into irrelevance.

Fig. 3.1. Jeremie Lederman, from "An Establishment Conservative's Guide to the Alt-Right," breitbart.com, 29 Mar. 2016, https://www.breitbart.com/tech/2016/03/29/an-establishment-conservatives-guide-to-the-alt-right/.

In keeping with the ghost motif, Bokhari and Yiannopoulos begin the article with another literary allusion, this time to *The Communist Manifesto*: "A specter is haunting the dinner parties, fundraisers and think-tanks of the Establishment: the specter of the 'alternative right.'" The authors claim that other journalistic attempts to describe the alt-right, both by the right and left, have not "been able to explain the movement's appeal and reach without desperate caveats and virtue-signalling to readers." The article, then, is an attempt to describe the various groups that constitute the rising political movement while also defending it against criticism from establishment conservatives and liberals.

Despite the authors' rather sympathetic attitude (the authors, Yiannopoulos in particular, are associated with the movement), the article is a fairly straightforward "taxonomy of the movement" and is a good place to start when trying to understand this rather amorphous collective. The authors identify four, very loosely connected, groups that make up the alt-right. These include the "Intellectuals," including figures such as Richard Spencer and Nick Land, who inform the movement's ideology; the "Natural Conservatives" who prioritize the preservation of cultural identity over other traditionally conservative positions (such as free market economics); and the "1488ers" essentially neo-Nazis and other extremist white nationalists ("14" is a reference to "the 14 words," a common white supremacist slogan, and "88" is code for "Heil Hitler"). However, while all of these groups are associated with the political right, there's nothing particularly "alternative" about any of them, and it is unclear what their appeal is, especially to young people who are generally associated with the alt-right. The one group the authors identify that does distinguish the alt-right from other right wing and white supremacist movements is "The Meme Team," essentially the internet trolls who engage in provocative and offensive behavior online.

The authors claim that "The Meme Team" is distinguished by a sense of impropriety and a desire to push back against social norms. This transgressive sensibility generally manifests through racist and sexist posts on social media (especially through venues like 4chan). The authors claim that these trolls are not actually bigots, comparing them to the 60s countercultural movements, and that the racist and sexist language they use is merely to "fluster their grandparents." The authors attempt to distance these trolls from the "1488RS" and to justify their use of racist and sexist language as simply edgy rather than hateful. The authors assume that it is easy to distinguish "The Meme Team" from the "1488ers," as if someone who creates racist content ironically is significantly different from someone who creates it sincerely. However, this claim relies on the premise that audiences are supposed to read the offensive language ironically while taking trolls at their word when they claim not to be racist. It also assumes that any attempt at humor is somehow free of criticism.

While the authors of the Breitbart article claim "The Meme Team" is a "subset of the alt-right," I argue that they are the epitome of the alt-right. That is, there is nothing particularly new or alternative about white supremacists using pseudo-intellectual language to mask or defend racism and nationalism, as "The Intellectuals" and "Natural Conservatives" do. Neither is there anything unique about the overt white supremacy of the "1488ers." None of these groups would have adopted a zany image such as Pepe as their symbol. However, the transgressive sensibility of "The Meme Team," and the role trolling plays in the group's communication practices, is something new for conservative political rhetoric. This transgressive sensibility is a result of the fact that the alt-right developed on the internet, specifically social media sites such as 4chan where trolling and memes determine the style of communication.

Many scholars and journalists who have studied or reported on the alt-right have focused on the role the internet played in the movement's formation. In his book *Alt-America*, journalist David Neiwert places recent right-wing movements in American politics, such as the alt-right and the Trump campaign, in the context of right-wing movements going back to the 1990s. Neiwert sees the development of the internet, and the way it enabled anonymous communication, as the reason the alt-right movement cohered in the specific way that it did. While certain other extreme right-wing political ideologies, such as conspiracy theories and patriot movements, found a forum on the internet, the alt-right was formed on the internet. Therefore, the sensibility of those who associate with this group is more explicitly informed by social media and other online forums. Given the fact that the alt-right is not a formal organization, it is difficult to point to a moment when the alt-right was created. However, Neiwert points to the "Gamergate" controversy as a moment when the alt-right movement began to coalesce.

Gamergate and the Origins of the Alt-Right

Gamergate began in 2013 when game developer Zoe Quinn created a game titled *Depression Quest*. According to the game's website,

> Depression Quest is an interactive fiction game where you play as someone living with depression. You are given a series of everyday life events and have to attempt to manage your illness, relationships, job, and possible treatment. This game aims to show other sufferers of depression that they are not alone in their feelings, and to illustrate to people who may not understand the illness the depths of what it can do to people.

Though the game was well-received by critics, Quinn's ex-boyfriend, Eron Gjoni, wrote a blog post falsely accusing Quinn of trading sex for positive reviews. Despite the fact that Gjoni was lying, the controversy caused Quinn to become the target of harassment by online trolls who saw the game as an attempt to inject feminism into the gaming industry. Other prominent feminists in the gaming industry, including developers such as Brianna Wu and critics such as Anita

Sarkeesian, were also targeted by trolls. Some of the messages these women received crossed the line from harassment to threats of violence. For instance, Wu, who had been critical of Gamergate on social media, had her personal information (including her address) posted on social media (Neiwert 214). While many of the trolls who participated in these attacks claim that they were concerned with "ethics in videogame journalism" (Hawley 47), it's clear that the primary motive behind Gamergate was sexism and misogyny.

A number of media figures associated with the alt-right made their names during the Gamergate controversy, including Milo Yiannopoulos (who promoted Gamergate as tech editor for Breitbart) and Mike Cernovich. Neiwert claims that Gamergate "heralded the rise of the alt-right and provided an early sketch of its primary features: an internet presence beset by digital trolls, and, ultimately, open racism, anti-Semitism, ethnic hatred, misogyny, and sexual and gender paranoia" (215). In *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*, George Hawley argues that Gamergate and the alt-right "should be viewed as separate movements" (45) and that Gamergate "shared the Alt-Right's style but little of its substance" (47). However, this overlooks the fact that both the alt-right and Gamergate were motivated by hostility toward (what those on the right often refer to as) "cultural Marxism," a rather ill-defined term which is typically used by the alt-right as code for "political correctness" or "identity politics." Hawley's claim that the alt-right and Gamergate were separate movements that shared a "style" also underestimates the extent to which style defines the alt-right as a unique facet of right-wing politics in the United States. Gamergate, then, may not have been the official beginning of the alt-right. Nevertheless, the Gamergate movement prefigured the alt-right's primary rhetorical strategies (trolling and harassment) and galvanized what the movement would see as its primary ideological opponent ("cultural Marxism").

While some have eschewed the term "alt-right," because it distances the group from the racist ideology which informs it, Hawley claims that the term nevertheless identifies a particular brand of right-wing politics. Hawley claims that the alt-right "is a white-nationalist movement," which wants "to see the creation of a white ethnostate in North America" (11). However, what sets this movement apart from other conservative and white supremacist groups that preceded them is the central role humor plays in the group's sensibilities. Hawley writes,

> The issue of tone is important. Rage and hate were the primary emotions associated with the older white-nationalist movement…. The Alt-Right offers something more attractive to potential supporters: edginess and fun…..This is a curious paradox of the Alt-Right; it may ultimately be a greater threat to mainstream politics than these earlier groups precisely because it often comes across as much less threatening. (25)

Neiwert also sees "irony" and "humor" as what distinguishes the alt-right from other white supremacist movements (256). As Hawley claims, while previous white supremacist movements adopted a symbol such as the swastika sincerely (in the same way the Nazis did), "The new Alt-Right put swastikas in Pepe's eyes because it was hilarious" (68). This style, this sense of "edginess and fun" associated with the alt-right, is a direct result of the fact that they cohered on the internet, in spaces such as 4chan where one could share offensive content anonymously without fear of repercussions.

What Hawley calls "edginess and fun," and Neiwert calls "irony" and "humor," I call zaniness. It is this zany sensibility, developed in online spaces such as 4chan and exemplified by a symbol such as Pepe, which informs the alt-right's collective identity and distinguishes them from previous right-wing and white nationalist movements. The way this zaniness most blatantly manifests itself is through trolling, the group's primary rhetorical strategy that is a kind of "desperate laboring" which produces nothing except "lulz." "Lulz," which I defined in Chapter 2, plays an incredibly important role in the alt-right's rhetorical practices. So important, in fact,

that "lulz" receives its own entry in the style guide for the white nationalist website *The Daily Stormer*. As reported by journalist Ashley Feinberg, the style guide instructs would be contributors to keep the tone of the site "light" (qtd. in Feinberg). In addition to advising writers about which racist and sexist slurs are most appropriate for the site, the style guide indicates that "Most people are not comfortable with material that comes across as vitriolic, raging, non-ironic hatred. The unindoctrinated should not be able to tell if we are joking or not" (qtd. in Feinberg). As discussed in the previous chapter, this is the essential paradox of trolling. It is impossible to tell whether a given antagonistic message is intended sincerely or ironically. Of course, if trolling is a rhetorical strategy utilized by the alt-right, this raises the question of who the audience is for the trolling. After all, the recipient of the antagonistic message is not likely to be persuaded by someone openly mocking or insulting them.

In *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*, Hawley addresses the rhetorical dimensions of trolling. In particular, he looks at the way trolling has functioned as a persuasive strategy for the alt-right. Hawley cites a post on the alt-right blog *The Right Stuff* that describes who trolls should see as their intended audience. Where *The Daily Stormer* style guide is concerned with the tone of the articles written specifically for their site, *The Right Stuff* post focuses on the type of trolling that happens across a variety of platforms. According to the post (which has since been removed but which Hawley quotes at length),

> You should assume that you will never manage to convince your ideological enemies of the merit of your position. Rather, the purpose of trolling is to convince people reading your comments of the merit of your position. On many different web forums, lurkers outnumber posters by 10 to 1. The purpose of trolling raids is to convince these anonymous people, not the person you disagree with. As such, you can win hearts and minds even when met with universal opposition. (qtd. in Hawley 73)

Trolling functions for the alt-right not just as a way to upset the mainstream (as Bokhari and Yiannopoulos claim) or to normalize explicitly racist ideas (as *The Daily Stormer* claims). It also

functions as a recruitment tool, as a way of persuading those with a similar zany sensibility that the social and political leanings of the alt-right are compatible with that sensibility. However, the audience for trolling is not the people who are the victims of trolling. Instead, the intended audience is the anonymous people who might happen upon the trolling. It is important to point out that not all trolls are "alt-right." In fact, many trolls on Twitter come from the political left and use trolling to attack alt-right figures. Nevertheless, trolling is the discourse that created the alt-right and sets it apart from other hate groups and right wing political groups. Essentially, while the alt-right does not define trolling, trolling defines the alt-right.

As discussed in the previous chapter, this is the milieu out of which Pepe grew and through which he became associated with trolling. Pepe was adopted by the alt-right because of his zaniness. However, he was transformed into a hate symbol by the alt-right because the alt-right's uniquely zany rhetorical style uses trolling and lulz to mask hate speech. Although @JaredTSwift's claim that Pepe was a "reflection of our souls" may have been an exaggeration, Pepe did clearly mean something to the alt-right trolls who appropriated him. This is, of course, evidenced by the number of alt-right trolls who shared images of him on social media and made him their profile avatars. Perhaps the most significant evidence that Pepe has become a symbol for alt-right trolls is the satirical religion and nation started in his honor: The Cult of Kek and the nation of Kekistan.

The Cult of Kek and #FreeKekistan

The term KEK, like "lulz," is a derivative of "lol" that started on the fantasy video game World of Warcraft. It then became an inside joke on certain online forums including 4chan. According to Know Your Meme's entry on "Kek," a 4chan post from 27 November 2015 claimed that there was an Egyptian god named Kuk (also spelled Kek). The deity was considered

androgynous with its female depictions taking the form of a snake and its male depictions taking the form of a frog. Although the post does not mention Pepe explicitly, it's clear that the poster is referencing Pepe, and replies to the original post include images of "Smug Frog" and Pepe in ancient Egyptian clothing in front of the pyramids. The original 4chan post includes a selection from the Wikipedia page on Kuk with a comment from the original poster reading, "So a meme is 5000 years old. Life is cyclical and humanity never forgets" (qtd. in Know Your Meme). Not long after this was posted, a satirical religion was started which worshipped "Kek" in the form of Pepe.

Two important concepts for the "religion" are "meme magic" and "meme warfare." The entry on "Meme Magic" on Know Your Meme provides the following definition of the term: "a slang term used to describe the hypothetical power of sorcery and voodoo supposedly derived from certain internet memes that can transcend the realm of cyberspace and result in real life consequences." The term "meme warfare," coined by activist Andrew Boyd in 2002, has a richer conceptual history and is a bit more complex. However, it is similar to "meme magic" in that it acknowledges that memes are important for disseminating information to create social change. According to Boyd, "A vital movement requires a hot and happening meme" (qtd. in Olson). The event that trolls attribute most explicitly to Pepe's meme magic is the nomination and election of Donald Trump. As will be discussed in the following chapter, many trolls take credit for (and revel in) Trump's political success in 2016.

A number of online forums devoted to the worship of Kek were started in the wake of initial post on 4chan. Multiple blogs devoted to the religion were started, including pepethefrogfaith.wordpress.com. The site's home page takes you to an article titled "The Truth About Pepe the Frog and the Cult of KEK." The site includes entries such as "How 4chan Pays

Tribute to Kek (Sacrificial Offerings)" and "Carl Jung Foresaw the Coming of Kek." Another site devoted to the religion is thecultofkek.com (see fig. 3.2). Along with images of ancient Egyptian gods with Pepe's face, the site also includes Christian images depicting the statue of Liberty as Mary, Donald Trump as Christ, and Pepe as Christ's followers.

In addition to the "religion," the trolls also created a fictional country called "Kekistan." Know Your Meme's entry on "Kekistan" claims that the name of the country was coined on Reddit in 2015. However, in 2017, Kekistan gained popularity on Twitter after alt-right YouTube personality Carl Benjamin (AKA Sargon of Akkad) claimed in a (since deleted) tweet that "shitposters meet the British govs [sic] criteria of an ethnicity" (qtd. in Know Your Meme). Benjamin's followers then decided that this ethnicity should be called "Kekistani." A number of Benjamin's follower's replied to his tweet with the hashtag #FreeKekistan, and an online (faux)social movement was born.

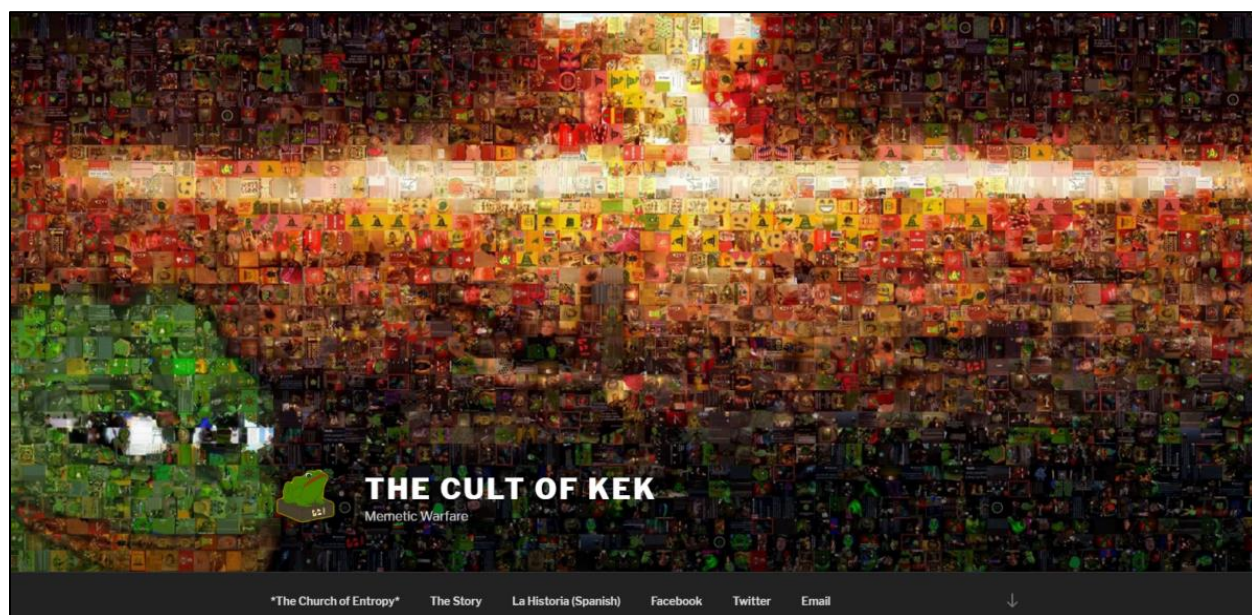
Fig. 3.2. The Cult of Kek homepage, https://thecultofkek.com/

While many of the original tweets that included the Free Kekistan hashtag were replies to Benjamin, the hashtag took on a life of its own in the days and weeks that followed. Soon, it

became something of a rallying cry for the alt-right, and even Richard Spencer twetted, "Set our people free! #FreeKekistan." Many (if not most) of the #FreeKekistan tweets included images of Pepe, and a number of these images depict him as a soldier, politician, or diplomat fighting for the Kekistani cause. The alt-right often targets progressive social and political movements, and one function of the Free Kekistan hashtag is to mimic and mock other, sincere movements (one hears obvious echoes of the Free Tibet movement). However, like Pepe memes more generally, #FreeKekistan gave the alt-right an object around which they could cohere. By engaging in online activism on behalf of a fictional country, alt-right trolls were voicing their sincere commitment to the zany sensibility of their movement. A number of Twitter profiles have been created representing the fictional country, including @RepublicofKek and @Kekistan_Gov, and a flag was even created for the fictional country (see fig. 3.3). The flag's design and colors (black and white stripes against a green background) resemble the flag of the Nordic Resistance Movement, a (primarily) Scandinavian neo-Nazi organization. While discussions of establishing an actual Kekistan (much like the religion) are likely tongue in cheek, the Kekistan flag has been taken to a number of white supremacist rallies, indicating that the idea of this kind of fictional country, while satirical, is still important to these trolls.

As with anything associated with the alt-right, the Cult of Kek is a uniquely online phenomenon that exhibits the zany style evident in the rhetorical of trolling and the feeling of "lulz." While all religions are defined by certain rhetorical practices, the Cult of Kek is in a sense dedicated to the rhetorical practice of trolling. That is, the object of the religion is not the Egyptian deity Kuk or even Pepe. The religion is about trolling and the feeling of "lulz" trolling produces. As such, it's unclear how much of the "cult" is sincere and how much is satire. In an article for the Southern Poverty Law Center, David Neiwert writes,

In many ways, Kek is the apotheosis of the bizarre alternative reality of the alt-right: at once absurdly juvenile, transgressive, and racist, as well as reflecting a deeper, pseudo-intellectual purpose that lends it an appeal to young ideologues who fancy themselves deep thinkers. It dwells in that murky area they often occupy, between satire, irony, mockery, and serious ideology; Kek can be both a big joke to pull on liberals and a reflection of the alt-right's own self-image as serious agents of chaos in modern society.

It is a safe assumption that the trolls who belong to the cult do not believe in a literal deity with the head of a frog. However, the religion does serve a certain purpose for the alt-right trolls. One has only to look at the images of white supremacists waving Kekistan flags to see that there is something sincere in it.

Fig. 3.3 *Kekistan Flag*, knowyourmeme.com, 1 Feb. 2017,
https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/ke-kistan

Conclusion

On 15 March 2019, a gunman attacked two Mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, ultimately killing 51 people. The gunman was identified as a 28-year old Australian man named Brenton Harrison Tarrant. In the days following the attacks, there were numerous reports about Tarrant's ties to white supremacist and far-right organizations, including accusations that he

donated money to the Austrian Identitarian Movement (Reuters). Two aspects of the attack received significant media attention. The first is the fact that Tarrant livestreamed the attacks on Facebook. The second is that Tarrant authored a manifesto that made reference to a number of internet memes. Both the video of the attacks and the manifesto are texts rife with references to memes and other aspects of internet culture. While Pepe is not mentioned explicitly by Tarrant in either the video or the manifesto, the Christchurch attacks demonstrate the way that right-wing and white nationalist politics intersects with a zany aesthetic sensibility in online environments. Zaniness, particularly of the kind found in online spaces, is never simply benign. Trolling and shitposting and other zany rhetorical activities have material consequences that are impossible to anticipate. While the feeling of "lulz" may be enough for some trolls, the feelings of hate clearly are motives for others.

By arguing that trolling and "lulz" is what links Pepe and the alt-right, I am not attempting to dissociate Pepe from white nationalism or claim that Pepe is not a hate symbol. After all, while not all trolling is hate speech, trolling is often simply hate speech masked in a veil of irony (which is, of course, indistinguishable from hate speech intended sincerely). Clearly, this is one of the many meanings attributed to Pepe and it cannot be denied. What I am claiming is that arguments about whether or not Pepe is a hate symbol miss the point and do not adequately explain why objects depicting him are problematic. Instead, my reading of Pepe attempts to account for the many various and contradictory meanings he has assumed over the years. That is, Pepe does not simply represent a specific racist ideology. He represents something just as troubling: an ethos that neither condones nor condemns an immoral ideology such as white nationalism.

Through his association with the alt-right, Pepe would go on to become associated with the presidential campaign of Donald Trump. If it had not been for Trump's presidential nomination, Pepe would have likely remained a relatively obscure symbol of an online right wing movement. In the following chapter, I will look at how Pepe came to be associated with Trump and discuss the way Pepe became the perfect visual manifestation of own Trump's zany rhetorical style.

Chapter 4: Pepe and The Deplorables

"Trump's election is going to be the biggest 'Fuck you' ever recorded in human history. And it will feel good." –Michael Moore

"Feels good man" –Pepe the Frog

Introduction

On 9 September 2016, Hillary Clinton delivered a speech at a fundraiser in New York that would become one of the defining moments of the 2016 presidential race. In the speech, Clinton lamented the fact that the hateful language used by Donald Trump during his presidential campaign had empowered his "racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamaphobic" supporters and claimed that "you could put half of Trump's supporters into what I call the basket of deplorables" ("Clinton 'Basket of Deplorables' Remark Draws Fire"). In what followed, Clinton went on to sympathize with, and validate the concerns of, the other half of Trump's supporters, claiming she understood that many of them felt let down by the government (Blow). However, soon after the speech was delivered, the phrase "basket of deplorables" was taken out of context and began trending on social media.

In the days that followed, the phrase caught on and became something of a rallying cry for Trump supporters (Chozick). On 10 September, the right-wing website Breitbart, which had strong ties to the Trump campaign throughout the 2016 election, published an editorial by Wayne Allyn Root titled, "I Am One of Hilary's 'Basket of Deplorables." For Root, Clinton's comment was the moment she "let the cat out of the bag," confirming her negative opinion of the "millions of angry white males who support Donald Trump." Toward the end of the article, Root writes, "Yes, they hate us. We're just 'a basket of deplorables.'" Root's statement here characterizes the typical response of Trump supporters to Clinton's speech. That is, rather than

being an insult for the worst of Trump's supporters, labeling oneself a "deplorable" became something of a badge of honor.

On social media, the phrase "basket of deplorables," or simply "deplorables," became a meme and was used in a number of image macros. One particular image gained quite a bit of notoriety after it was shared by Donald Trump Jr. on Instagram and Roger Stone on Twitter (see fig. 4.1). The image is the poster for Sylvester Stallone's 2010 film *The Expendables* with the words "The Deplorables" in place of the film's title and the faces of some of Trump's most notable supporters in place of the film's stars. The bodies in the image are arranged in a pyramid with Trump at the apex (inserted on Stallone's body). The bodies are covered in heavy, black military gear, and almost all of the individuals are carrying some sort of weapon. In the background, smoke, fire, and debris rain down. The lettering is a worn stencil font, used in much of the film's advertising, which complements the image's overt militarism. Among the faces included in the image are members of Trump's family (his sons Eric and Donald Jr.), politicians who supported him (Chris Christie and Mike Pence), and alt-right media personalities (Alex Jones and Milo Yiannopoulos). Although Trump's face is front and center, the most prominent face in the image (positioned, like Pence, directly behind Trump) is Pepe the Frog.

As a result of the image being shared by people so close to Trump and his campaign, a number of publications, including *Vanity Fair* and *Esquire*, published articles explaining the link between the Trump campaign, the alt-right, and Pepe. Perhaps the most noteworthy piece published about this was a statement issued by the Clinton campaign (which has since been removed) titled, "Donald Trump, Pepe the frog, and white supremacists: an explainer," which claims simply that Pepe is "a symbol associated with white supremacy" (qtd. in Kozlowska).

Fig. 4.1. "The Deplorables," knowyourmeme.com, 11 Oct. 2016,
https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/events/hillary-clinton-s-basket-of-deplorables

The "Deplorables" meme represents a significant moment in the rhetorical life of Pepe the Frog. It is the moment where Pepe went from a relatively unknown internet meme to something of a public figure, both because the image was shared by members of the Trump campaign and because of the reception of the image in the press. It is also the moment where Pepe became inextricably linked to the Trump campaign. In the same way that "basket of deplorables" became the campaign's unofficial slogan, Pepe became its unofficial mascot. In a broader sense, it is the moment Pepe became linked to a politics of resentment that Trump exploited throughout his campaign. "The Deplorables" meme raises a number of questions with regard to the relationship between Pepe and the Trump campaign. How did Pepe function as propaganda for the campaign? Why did Pepe's particular brand of zaniness resonate with Trump supporters? What makes Pepe such an appropriate symbol for Trump?

At one level, the reason for Pepe's adoption by so called "deplorables" is fairly straightforward. As the Clinton campaign statement rightly claimed, many of the alt-right trolls who appropriated Pepe and made him a meme were Trump supporters. However, not all alt-right trolls supported Trump because of his policies (for some of the more hardline white nationalists associated with the alt-right, Trump did not go far enough in his attacks on immigrants and minorities). Some supported Trump simply because they liked his particular rhetorical style. That is, they saw Trump as a fellow troll.

In what follows, I will focus on the relationship between Pepe and the Trump presidential campaign. I will begin by reviewing recent work in rhetorical theory on "post-truth" political rhetoric. I argue that the concepts scholars have used to analyze Trump's rhetoric, including "fake news" and "bullshit," are inadequate for explaining Trump's appeal. I will analyze Trump's rhetorical style, specifically as expressed on social media, and argue that (like Pepe) Trump's appeal is rooted in his zaniness. I will show how this zaniness found its most appropriate visual expression in Pepe the Frog and will analyze Pepe's appearance in images produced by supporters of Donald Trump during the 2016 presidential campaign. In particular, I focus on the "Deplorables" meme. Not only is the image a significant moment in the rhetorical life of Pepe but the image says quite a bit about the Trump campaign and Pepe's function within it. Ultimately, I will argue that what we see in both Trump's social media presence and the adoption of Pepe as propaganda for Trump's campaign is the way a rhetoric of zaniness can be used to appeal to resentment and nostalgia.

Trump and Post-Truth Political Rhetoric

The election of Donald Trump left many people, including scholars of rhetoric and writing, in a state of shock and confusion. How could a presidential candidate who defied rules,

norms, and basic human decency win an election? One of the most disturbing characteristics of Trump's rhetoric (demonstrated both on the campaign trail and since he has taken office) is his flagrant dishonesty. Of course, dishonesty is not unique to Trump. Many (if not most) politicians are caught in a lie at some point in their career. However, what makes the Trump phenomena unique is the amount of lies he tells. According to *The Washington Post*, Trump made more than 10,000 "false or misleading claims" in his first two years in office (Kessler, Rizzo, and Kelly). This is a fairly stark contrast to the 18 lies that *The New York Times* claims Obama told over the course of his presidency (Leonhardt, Philbrick, and Thompson). What is perhaps even more disturbing than the amount of lies Trump tells is the way he flaunts his lies and the way his supporters are so willing to overlook them.

The way Trump's campaign seemed to normalize flagrant dishonesty led many to label the current moment as "post-truth." In the wake of the 2016 presidential election, the term became so ubiquitous that Oxford Dictionaries declared "post-truth" the word of the year for 2016 (Flood). Oxford defines "post-truth" as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief." Given rhetorical theory's concern with "shaping public opinion" and "appeals to emotion and personal belief," the term has been of particular interest to scholars attempting to understand the current moment. In particular, Bruce McComiskey's book *Post-Truth Rhetoric and Composition* describes the implications of this concept for the study of writing and public discourse. Similar to Oxford, McComiskey defines "post-truth," as "a state in which language lacks any reference to facts, truths, and realities" (6). McComiskey claims that "In a post-truth communication landscape, people (especially politicians) say whatever might work in a given situation, whatever might generate the desired result, without any regard to the truth value or

facticity of statements" (6). That is, what defines this "post-truth" moment is not that people confuse lies for the truth, but that the very distinction between truth and lies does not seem to matter. In his analysis of the "post-truth communication landscape," McComiskey focuses on two specific rhetorical strategies: fake news and bullshit. The central problem that McComiskey identifies with these strategies is that they foreground ethos and pathos at the expense of logos.

McComiskey is centrally concerned with Donald Trump's rhetoric and turns to Trump's speeches and tweets for examples of how both bullshit and fake news have circulated in the public sphere. McComiskey claims that these strategies did more than just help Trump to get elected. He writes, "All of these unethical rhetorical strategies, constantly televised and repeated throughout the year-long campaign and election cycle, have deeply affected public discourse in general, not just Trump's personal use of it" (3). McComiskey is certainly correct that Trump's campaign and election have had an effect on public discourse, and it is easy to see how bullshit and fake news are appropriate descriptions for the types of appeals made by both Trump and his supporters. However, the question remains of what to do about rhetorical strategies such as bullshit and fake news. How do rhetoricians teach and study effective communication when truth and appeals to reason no longer seems to matter? How do we combat "post-truth" rhetoric? McComiskey's answer to this question is simply fact checking. He writes, "Bullshit must be held to a standard of evidence that it cannot survive. Fake news must be held to a standard of truth that it cannot withstand. Ethos and pathos at the expense of logos must be held to a standard of reasoning that they cannot endure" (44).

McComiskey may be correct that bullshit and fake news have come to define political rhetoric in the post-truth era and that Donald Trump is a particularly significant practitioner of both. But these terms do not help us to understand why these rhetorical strategies are successful.

After all, Trump's bullshit and fake news did not appeal to his supporters simply because they thought what he was saying was true. In fact, some of Trump's supporters may even acknowledge that he lies and that he will continue to lie. Trump appealed to them because they liked the way he communicated—his particular rhetorical style. It is doubtful that simply providing more fact checking would do anything to diminish bullshit or fake news from circulating in the public sphere or make it less persuasive.

In *Reality Bites: Rhetoric and the Circulation of Truth Claims in U.S. Political Culture*, Dana Cloud addresses the tendency of many to rely on fact checking to combat Trump's lies. Cloud argues that constantly fact checking Trump's claims is an ineffective way to counteract his rhetoric. Cloud (citing an unidentified friend) claims that "Trump supporters took him seriously—they did not need to take him literally" and that "His language is keyed to produce a feeling rather than make a convincing argument" (x). For Cloud, the tendency of many (particularly those on the left) to simply combat misinformation through fact-checking (as McComiskey advocates) is misguided as it does not account for how knowledge (episteme) becomes common sense (doxa). Much of what is labeled "fake news" or "bullshit" resonates with audiences at an emotional level and, as accurately as the terms "fake news" and "bullshit" are for describing the Trump's truth claims, they do not adequately help us to understand why they resonated with his audience.

Cloud also claims that the concept "post-truth" has made a scapegoat out of the working class. That is, the underlying message is often that the people who identify as working class are not educated enough to be trusted to fact-check or research information, and it is assumed working class people are more likely to be taken in by Trump's falsehoods and to vote for him. Cloud writes, "My argument in this book challenges the elitism of assumptions that rural and

working class people are necessarily ignorant and backward as an explanation for Trump's victory" (x). Cloud is correct that there is a certain sense of elitism that infects much of the discourse about "post-truth" rhetoric and communication. The idea that the working class is responsible for Trump's victory ignores the fact that white voters across class lines are responsible for Trump's victory.

Following Cloud's critique of "post-truth" rhetoric, I argue that the concepts McComiskey uses in his analysis, bullshit and fake news, only gets us so far in understanding the current cultural and political climate. That is, while bullshit and fake news may accurately describe the content of a message, they do not adequately describe what it is it about the message that resonates with certain audiences. Another issue is that these concepts rely on a discursive, logocentric view of rhetoric that does not explain how an object such as Pepe resonated with Trump's supporters. For rhetorical theory to more fully account for "post-truth" rhetoric, we need a conceptual repertoire that also accounts for visual and digital objects.

As I will show in my discussion of Trump's rhetorical style, bullshit and fake news often adopt a zany style, and this style is the root of their appeal. Consider, for instance, conspiracy theorist, and notable Trump supporter, Alex Jones. Given the way he disregards facts that contradict his claims, it can be assumed that Jones does not concern himself with whether or not the information he shares with his audience is true or false. What he is trying to do is provoke his audience. In this regard, he's a bullshitter sharing fake news. Nevertheless, his style of address, the way that he is constantly improvising when confronted with information that contradicts his claims is zany. This zaniness is highlighted by many liberal and leftist critics who have remixed and recomposed his videos (such as those created by comedian Vic Berger). It is also this sense

of zaniness that has caused him to resonate with his audience and circulate his messages as widely as he has.

To adequately address the rhetoric of conspiracy theorists such as Jones, or online trolls, or Donald Trump, we must do more than simply fact check and point out their lies. Rhetoricians need to do more than simply shout "Bullshit!" or "Fake News!" when confronted with their claims. We need to understand their appeals beyond the mere claims they make. We need to understand how and why their style appeals to an audience and what moods and feelings are produced by these appeals. In the case of Trump, we need to understand how his zany rhetorical appeals were used to promote a politics of resentment.

Trump and the Politics of Resentment

In the campaign of Donald Trump, we see a unique manifestation of, what rhetorician Jeremy Engels calls, the politics of resentment. Engels claims that resentment is not an inherently problematic emotion and, within democratic societies, can be deployed to productive ends when it is directed towards elites. However, while resentment can be deployed to productive ends when used to fight structural inequality, Engels claims that US citizens' resentment has not been directed at elites but at fellow citizens. Rather than resentment itself being a problem for American democracy, Engels claims that the political problem American democracy faces is "not the *quantity* of resentment but its *directionality*" (12).

For Engels, political resentment results in violent rhetoric which in turn can result in violent actions. Engels writes,

> I believe that much of the resentment felt today is the product of widespread feelings of powerlessness in the populace, along with the general sentiment that citizens are victims to forces and changes beyond their control. In turn, much of the violent political discourse we are inundated with today is the direct product of this civic resentment" (4).

Engels sees many of the tragedies that have taken place in recent years, such as the shooting of Gabrielle Giffords, as the result of violent political rhetoric. That is, the rather volatile mixture of political resentment and violent rhetoric inspires people to act out in violent ways. Engels claims that one of the most egregious culprits of this is Sarah Palin, claiming that "Her rhetoric taps into a long American tradition of violent talk and metaphor, a tradition built on the centrality of violence to the American experience" (103). While there are certainly similarities between Trump and his conservative predecessors (notably Nixon and his appeals to the "silent majority"), Trump and his campaign stand apart from his rhetorical antecedents if only for the fact that he more overtly appeals to both resentment and violence.

Scholars have noted the role that resentment plays in Trump's campaign. For instance, rhetorician Michael J. Steudeman focuses on Trump's appeals to victimhood and argues that "the demagogic core of seething resentment is always front-and-center in his arguments" (11). The most blatant example of this is Trump's position on immigration. In his speech announcing his candidacy for president, Trump notoriously claimed that, "When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best…. They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people" ("Full text: Donald Trump announces a presidential bid"). In response to this claim, many in the press noted that immigrants are, in fact, less likely to commit crimes than natural born citizens (Perez-Pena). Nevertheless, the statement was not intended to make any claims to truth (even if Trump sincerely believed the things he was saying) but to appeal to the resentment those in his intended audience felt toward immigrants.

Trump also makes more overt appeals to violence than his political predecessors. Where other conservative politicians, such as Sarah Palin, may use violent imagery or metaphors,

Trump explicitly directed his supporters to act out violently. For instance, when a protestor disrupted one of Trump's campaign rallies, Trump stated that he would "like to punch him in the face" (Diamond). Trump also encouraged his supporters to "knock the crap out of" protestors at his rallies and claimed that he would pay the legal fees of his supporters accused of assault (Reisman). According to CNN, Trump also made the statement at a rally that, "We're not allowed to push back anymore" (Diamond). Although it is not entirely clear what time period Trump is specifically referring to (When exactly were Americans allowed to "push back"?), this statement links physical violence with a sense of nostalgia that permeated his entire campaign. It also appears to be an overt appeal to conservative resentment of changing societal norms and, what conservatives often refer to as, "PC culture." This language resulted in physical violence, with protestors being physically assaulted at his rallies on multiple occasions (Mathis-Lilley). This is to say nothing about Trump's rhetoric regarding the media, which he often frames as the enemy of the people. For instance, in a tweet from 2 July 2017, Trump shared a video of him from WWE's WrestleMania clotheslining someone with the logo from CNN inserted on their head. The video was interpreted by many, including CNN, as promoting violence against those members of the media who criticized Trump (Grynbaum).

What makes Trump's violent rhetoric and appeals to his supporters' resentment unique is his particular zany rhetorical style. Many of the instances of Trump stoking violence at his rallies or promoting violence against the media on Twitter are done in a way that is ridiculous. As mentioned in the introduction, the relationship between Trump and zaniness is best exemplified in the adoption of Pepe as an unofficial mascot for the campaign. However, before I focus more specifically on this encounter, I want to examine some of the ways that Trump utilizes a rhetoric of zaniness, both in his oratory and social media presence.

Trump's Zany Style

Both Trump and his supporters have pointed out that Trump rarely uses a teleprompter when delivering a speech. These comments are often interpreted as an implicit dig at President Obama's oratorical skills. In contrast to Obama's more deliberate style, Trump's public speeches are often improvisatory nonsense. Regarding Trump's rhetorical style, Bruce McComiskey writes, "what strikes me as the most relevant characteristic in terms of Trump's post-truth rhetoric is that he always seems to be acting" (21). For McComiskey, this means that Trump is always aware, or always gives the impression, that he is giving a performance. That he is always on. However, it is this off-the-cuff style that gets his supporters excited. By rejecting the scripted, professional style most politicians adopt, Trump's oratorical choices become another way that he connects with his supporters. This is not to say that Trump talks like his supporters. What is more likely is that Trump supporters would like to talk like Trump, with the same bravado and lack of regard for political correctness, but they cannot because they do not enjoy his economic and social privilege.

For Cory Wimberly, the style of Trump's propaganda can be seen as an attack against the professional class other politicians represent. Wimberly writes,

> While modern propaganda was designed as a means for a professional class of propagandists to control the public at the behest of the wealthy elite that employed them, much of Trump's propaganda relationship is established directly without the mediation of professionals. One side effect of Trump's rejection of the mediation of professionals in his propaganda is that without the professionals to make it seem as if his every decision is careful and well researched, those communications make it clear just how little professional oversight he gets in any area of his political career. Trump's antiprofessionalism, which is communicated in his off-the-cuff and unscripted messaging, has shown deep appeal for those voters who resent professionals, especially working-class white men and those without a college degree. (181)

What Wimberly calls Trump's "antiprofessionalism," I would call zaniness. Listening to Trump's speeches, especially if you are trying to make sense out of the message he is

communicating, can be a dizzying experience. While he might begin by reading or reciting prepared remarks, he often veers off script. Take, for instance, his notorious speech at the 2017 National Scout Jamboree. Early in the speech, Trump claims that the theme of his speech will be "success," and that he does not want to talk about politics. However, within the first few minutes of the speech, he calls Washington a "sewer" and goes on to insult both Hilary Clinton and the media. The speech veered so off course that *The Washington Post* published a video on YouTube titled "5 things you wouldn't expect a president to say to Boy Scouts, but Trump did anyway." Trump's manic, improvisatory style is characteristic not only of his spoken address but also of his online persona.

Trump and Twitter

Trump is the first president who appears to be perpetually online. There is rarely a day when Trump does not tweet (or retweet) messages to his followers. While many politicians use social media to connect with their supporters, Trump's use of social media is particularly notable. *World Policy Journal* compared Trump's Twitter activity to other populist world leaders, including Vladimir Putin, Nigel Farage, and Marine Le Pen. According to the journal, Trump had tweeted 35,000 times (as of spring 2017), compared to Le Pen's 12,000 and Farage's 11,000. Of course, it's not uncommon for a president to use Twitter to connect with followers. Obama utilized social media throughout his campaigns and presidency. However, the tone of Obama's posts never betrayed the kind of personality that Trump's do. That is, there was never the illusion that it was Obama composing his Tweets. With Trump, on the other hand, it can be difficult to tell whether it is a staff member or the President himself who has posted a message to Twitter. This is because the persona that Trump creates online is completely consistent with the bombastic, nonsensical style he adopts when delivering a speech or giving an interview.

There is something zany about Twitter itself that is appropriate to Trump's rhetorical style. Brian Ott argues that Twitter, as "a mode of communication…is defined by three key features: simplicity, impulsivity, and incivility" (60). Given the character limit for tweets (140 until 2017 when this limit was doubled), users can both generate and consume content at a rather rapid pace. Twitter's motto, "It's what's happening," gives the impression that, by logging on, the user is connecting to, even participating in, multiple events happening simultaneously around the world. This sense of immediacy and connection can certainly be a positive thing. For instance, Twitter played a fairly significant role in the protests and revolutions that took place throughout the Middle East during the Arab Spring. However, as Ott claims, it also gives users the impression that they can let their guard down and say whatever they want to whomever they want without repercussions.

Given Trump's position as host of *The Apprentice*, many have focused on the relationship between Trump and television, with some calling Trump the first reality TV president. However, the defining platform of the Trump campaign and presidency is clearly Twitter. It is through Twitter that Trump's zaniness most definitively manifests itself. In her analysis of how Trump's stylistic choices suit his populist politics, Anna Young describes the relationship between the president and his preferred social media platform. Young writes,

> But in the same way that television as a medium will forever be linked to bringing Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy into Americans' living rooms, Twitter is inextricably connected to Trump both as a candidate and as president. His Twitter posts range from platitudes about America to complaints about particular public figures to threats against other countries. Trump views Twitter as his medium to speak directly to the American people. He also understands his tweets garner considerable attention and circulation. For a person who considers ratings the coin of the realm, Twitter makes sense for Trump's populist style. (33)

Many of Trump's most controversial and antagonistic statements, both during his campaign and presidency, have been made on the platform. Take, for instance, his statements regarding Kim

Jung-un. On 11 November 2017, Trump tweeted, "Why would Kim Jong-un insult me by calling me 'old,' when I would NEVER call him 'short and fat?' Oh well, I try so hard to be his friend - and maybe someday that will happen!" This was followed by another tweet on 2 January 2018 in response to the reports that North Korea was continuing to develop their nuclear capabilities: "North Korean Leader Kim Jong Un just stated that the 'Nuclear Button is on his desk at all times.' Will someone from his depleted and food starved regime please inform him that I too have a Nuclear Button, but it is a much bigger & more powerful one than his, and my Button works!"

What makes these tweets worth noting is that they are not merely hyper-militaristic reactions to North Korea's development of nuclear weapons. An aggressive stance against North Korea's growing nuclear capabilities is, at some level, understandable (Trump's base would most likely expect this from him). However, these are not just aggressive. They're catty. While one might expect comedians or late night hosts to insult Kim Jong-un's manhood, to find the president doing this publicly is, to say the least, disturbing. Of course, Trump's audience for these Tweets is not Kim Jong-un but the supporters who elected him in large part because of this rhetorical style.

Another way in which Trump's use of Twitter is zany is the way he uses it to manufacture crises. As Naomi Klein writes, "Since taking office, he's never allowed the atmosphere of chaos and crisis to let up." According to Anna Young, Trump's style "creates the perception of a constant and never-ending stream of crises. These crises serve to galvanize and organize his in-group against his out-group" (32). While there are certainly legitimate crises that need to be addressed, Trump has a particular tendency to create issues in order to divert from real problems. For instance, his attacks against representatives Ilhan Omar, Alexandria Ocasio-

Cortez, Ayanna Pressley, and Rashida Tlaib (some of Trump's most vocal critics in congress) are clearly intended to distract from other, legitimate issues (such as the conditions of immigrants being held in detention facilities). In this sense, Trump's rhetoric is zany in the sense that it is "laborious exertion," that is "more often than not destructive" (Ngai 12).

Then, there is the "covfefe" tweet. While one could argue that insulting people and creating crises through Twitter is strategic, this incident defies any rational explanation. Just after midnight on 31 May 2017, Trump tweeted "Despite the constant negative press covfefe" (qtd. in Estepa). The tweet, clearly sent accidently, was soon deleted. However, as Jennifer Estepa wrote on the one year anniversary of the tweet, "instead of pretending it never happened, he leaned into it." A few hours after the original tweet, Trump posted, "Who can figure out the true meaning of 'covfefe' ??? Enjoy!" This tweet, and a comment made by Sean Spicer in a press conference that "a small group of people know what he meant" by covfefe (qtd. in Estepa), could be interpreted as jokes about the original tweet. However, certain more conspiracy minded Trump supporters argued that the word could be translated from Arabic as "I will stand up" (qtd. in Collins). However, as Ben Collins claims in an article written for *The Daily Beast*, this translation is flawed. This fact does not seem to matter as his supporters are determined to ascribe meaning to even the most nonsensical of his utterances, even if it means devoting themselves to the hermeneutic equivalent of a dog chasing its tail.

Trump's zany rhetorical style found its perfect visual manifestation in the form of Pepe the Frog. Throughout the rest of this chapter, I will discuss some of the images depicting Pepe used by Trump and his supporters. After providing an overview of the initial encounters between Trump and Pepe, I will return to the "Deplorables" image macro as I believe it exemplifies the

distinctive strands of resentment, nostalgia, violence, and zaniness unique to the Trump campaign's rhetoric.

Pepe and Trump

Fig. 4.2. "Pepe Trump," knowyourmeme.com, 13 Oct. 2015,
https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1028931-donald-trump

One of the first images linking Trump and Pepe was posted to 4chan on 22 July 2015. According to Know Your Meme's article on "Pepe the Frog," a Malaysian artist named Maldraw "posted an image on 4chan's /pol/ board of Smug Pepe as Donald Trump overlooking a fence at the U.S.-Mexican border holding back sad Mexicans drawn as the Feels Guy." Although it did not circulate as widely as other images, it is notable as it is most likely the first image of Pepe as Trump. The fact that the image did not generate as much attention as subsequent images is, perhaps, not surprising as it could just as easily be used by Trump's detractors to highlight the cruelty of his immigration policies. However, on 13 October 2015, Trump shared a video on Twitter titled "You Can't Stump the Trump (Volume 4)." In addition to the video, Trump included an image of Pepe in the tweet. This "rare Pepe" is standing at a podium wearing a suit with an American flag lapel pin and a red tie (see fig. 4.2). He also has a mass of blonde hair

styled similarly to Trump's signature pompadour/comb over. The tweet generated quite a bit of attention, especially among Trump supporters, many of whom responded to the tweet with other images of Pepe (and Pepe as Trump).

These two images are notable because Pepe is not simply positioned as a supporter of Trump but as Trump himself. This raises the question of what it is that makes Pepe such a suitable stand-in for Trump. To make sense of these images and their function as propaganda, we have to return to the concept of trolling as a rhetorical strategy. In the previous chapters, I discussed the role trolling played in the formation of Pepe as a hate symbol. Trolling played a role in Pepe's development as a meme, and Pepe came to stand for the particular type of malicious trolling that took place in certain message boards such as 4chan. Trolling also played a unique role in the 2016 presidential election. Not only were some of Trump's most vocal supporters alt-right trolls, but many described Trump's zany rhetorical style as "trolling," particularly when he would say or do offensive things to receive attention in the media. Due to this, a number of trolls latched on to Trump and supported him in the election. In an article for the *Chicago Tribune*, Abby Ohlheiser describes the reaction on 4chan on election night as it became apparent that Trump would be declared the winner. One Trump supporter seems to have captured the general mood among 4chan's trolls that night, posting, "I'm f---- trembling out of excitement brahs….We actually elected a meme as president" (qtd. in Ohlheiser). By calling Trump a meme, this poster connects Trump with a certain sensibility rooted in online zaniness, specifically trolling.

The connection between Trump and trolling has been widely acknowledged. In July 2015, before the presidential primaries even began, Nate Silver wrote an article for his website FiveThirtyEight, titled, "Donald Trump is the World's Greatest Troll." For Silver, it is Trump's

ability to garner the most media attention of any of the Republican presidential candidates that makes him a troll. Silver writes, "Trolls operate on the principle that negative attention is better than none. In fact, the troll may feed off the negative attention, claiming it makes him a victim and proves that everyone is out to get him. Sound like any presidential candidates you know?" After the election, Scott Goodstein wrote an article for *The New York Times* titled, "Donald Trump Trolled Us All. We Should Learn From It." Specifically, Goodstein draws attention to Trump's ability to bring "fringe attacks to the mainstream." That is, where offensive comments posted online might be deleted or ignored, there was no way to ignore or delete Trump's comments.

It was not just the mainstream media that noted Trump's similarity to trolls. The alt-right media also noted the similarities. In July 2015, Richard Spencer's white nationalist website *Radix Journal* published an article titled, "Why We Need a Troll as President." The article points out the many contradictions in Trump's political positions and the fact that Trump has often expressed political views to the left of his Republican primary opponents. Despite being a less than ideal candidate for the alt-right, the article argues that white nationalists should support Trump. The article reads,

> Yet Trump is worth supporting. He is worth supporting because we need a troll. We need someone who can expose the system that rules us as the malevolent and worthless entity it is. We need someone who can break open public debate. We need someone who can expose and heighten the contradictions within the system. And we need someone who can call out the press, the politicians, and the pseudo-intellectuals as the empty shells they are. The fact that Trump himself is part of this same farce is utterly irrelevant.

For white nationalists, like the publishers of *Radix*, it is not Trump's ideology that makes him worth supporting. It is Trump's rhetorical choices, his ability to speak in a way that would upset the establishment, that make him a candidate worth supporting. The fact that Trump disrupted

the status quo, even if he did not perfectly align with white nationalist ideology, was enough to garner their support.

Another way Trump can be seen as a troll is in the way he has been able to avoid facing the repercussions for the offensive or antagonistic things he has said. For instance, early on in his campaign, he criticized John McCain's war record by saying he liked people who "weren't captured." It is unclear exactly what Trump had to gain (other than attention in the press) by making the comment. While Trump made far more offensive comments throughout his campaign (notably the infamous *Access Hollywood* tape), this moment stands out because it was on the record and in front of an audience. It is safe to say that the comment would have been a campaign ending gaff for any other politician in any other election, and many mainstream conservatives denounced Trump after he made the comment. However, Trump's campaign did not suffer for it.

The defense many supporters offered for Trump is also similar to the defense often offered for trolls. As Whitney Phillips points out, trolls often hide behind a veil of irony. That is, trolls do or say whatever offensive thing they want, and then claim that they didn't really mean it. Phillips writes,

> Trolls don't mean, or don't have to mean, the abusive things they say. They get to choose the extent to which their statements match their personal beliefs; they get to establish that they're just trolling…. Targets of trolling, on the other hand, are expected to take trolls at their word, and are only trolled harder if they resist. Consequently, trolls exercise what can only be described as pure privilege — they refuse to treat others as they insist on being treated. Instead, they do what they want, when they want, to whomever they want, with almost perfect impunity (26).

This is also the defense often offered for the offensive things Trump did or said on the campaign trail. For instance, when defending the way Trump mocked a disabled reporter, spokesperson Kellyanne Conway claimed that "You always want to go by what's come out of his mouth rather

than look at what's in his heart" (Blake) as if what Trump means and what Trump says are two completely different things.

The association between Trump and Pepe, then, would seem to go beyond the fact that Trump is supported by a number of white nationalists who had adopted Pepe as a racist icon (as the statement by the Clinton campaign claimed). The images that portray Pepe as Trump seem to be playing on the fact that both Pepe and Trump are symbols of the type of malicious trolling that characterizes much online discourse. That is, both Trump and Pepe became symbols of a type of trolling that white nationalists utilized in online spaces. What links Pepe and Trump is a shared ethos that might best be described as a kind of zany resentment. It is a resentment of propriety, a resentment of what conservatives might call political correctness and the alt-right calls "cultural Marxism." In "The Deplorables" image macro, this ethos of zany resentment finds its ultimate expression.

The Deplorables, Political Resentment, and Zaniness

As Ryan Milner claims, memes are shared because they resonate with users for (often personal) reasons. The fact that "The Deplorables" image was shared by two prominent members of the Trump campaign raises the question of what exactly it is about this image that caused it to resonate with them. Clearly, the image is meant to be tongue in cheek, but the fact that two of Trump's advisors saw fit to share this meme in such a public way indicates that its aesthetic, rooted in a kind of overt (and rather ridiculous) machismo, must have resonated with them.

If, as I have argued, Pepe and Trump are bonded by a zany rhetorical style that is largely distinguished by trolling, how can we understand "The Deplorables" as a piece of political propaganda? In his book *How Propaganda Works*, Jason Stanley claims that, within liberal democracies, "Political propaganda presents itself as an embodiment of cherished political

ideals" (81). If so, it is worth beginning by asking exactly what political ideals are presented in this image. Although the image is not an official product of the Trump campaign, I would argue that the image characterizes Trump's presidential run better than any propaganda officially produced by the campaign in the way that it uses zaniness to produce feelings of political resentment.

Like most modern Republicans, Trump adopted a deferential attitude toward Ronald Reagan throughout the 2016 presidential campaign (despite being critical of some the Reagan administration's policies in the past). In an August 2015 interview for *Meet the Press*, Trump was asked, in reference to his campaign slogan "Make America Great Again," the last period in history when he thought America was great. Trump responded to the questions by pointing to the 1980s, claiming that, "during the administration of Ronald Reagan you felt proud to be an American" ("Donald Trump on Immigration, Hillary Clinton"). Of course, this is to say nothing of the fact that Trump took the slogan "Make America Great Again" from Reagan's 1980 campaign. (Although Trump claims to have authored the slogan himself [Taibbi]). These statements reflect the attitude of many American conservatives (and even some liberals), for whom Reagan remains the standard by which all Republican politicians are judged. That is, Trump's statements in this interview articulate the nostalgia many American conservatives feel for the Reagan administration.

The *Expendables* films play on a similar nostalgia for the Reagan era. The franchise features a number of performers such as Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Bruce Willis, and Mel Gibson who each made their names in 1980s action films, films that critic Susan Jeffords has labeled "hard-body films." In the films, Stallone plays Barney Ross, a leader of the titular group of mercenaries. Many of the characters, just like the stars playing them, are clearly

past their prime. Yet, the audience is led to believe that there is no one better suited to take on the challenges the group must face (warlords, arms dealers, etc.). A particularly interesting example of this is found in the second film in the series when a younger member of the team is killed while on a mission. Of course, it is up to the older team members, led by Stallone, to get revenge against the villains who killed him. Here, we find a reversal of the typical action film trope where the young hero seeks revenge for the death of a mentor or father figure. In the *Expendables* films, it is the mentor/father figure, as a representative of seemingly outdated hard body masculinity, who is best prepared to take on the villain.

Jefford draws a direct link between Reagan's presidential persona and the action movies that were popular during his presidency. Jeffords argues that the hard body heroes in 1980s American action films represent a departure from the heroes depicted in films released during the Carter administration. For Jeffords, the 1970s was a time of "disillusionment and disorientation" in Hollywood (16). Even the Dirty Harry franchise, which would seem to be a prototype for the 1980s hard body films, demonstrates a "sense of bitterness and nihilism" that was not present in the films of the 1980s (17). Jeffords writes,

> the heroes of the hard-body films suggest a different kind of social order, one in which the men who are thrust forward into heroism are not heroic in defiance of their society but in defiance of their governments and institutional bureaucracies. In each case, these heroes are shown to be representing the will and desires of the 'average' citizen against the self-serving empowerment of government bureaucrats who are standing in the way of social improvement (19).

Based on Jefford's description, one might say that the hard body heroes of the 80s action movies play on a sense of resentment toward institutions that are seen as not representing the interests of the "'average citizen." This also accurately describes the way that certain conservative politicians, Trump especially, fashion themselves and the way they play on the resentment felt by their supporters. In particular, one can see echoes of Trump's promises to "drain the swamp" in

Washington D.C. and to represent the interests of blue collar workers by bringing manufacturing jobs back to the U.S. As Jeffords makes clear, there is a strong connection between the conservative politics of the Reagan era, which continue to define conservative policies today and the movies that made stars of figures such as Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger (who are political conservatives in real life). In the same way, there is a connection between the resentment of the hard body films and the political resentment of the Trump presidential campaign.

"The Deplorables" would seem to reinforce Trump's desire to return the United States to, what he regards as, the greatness of America in the 1980s, just as the *Expendables* films attempt to return the franchise's stars to their moment of greatness. "The Deplorables" meme makes the relationship between *The Expendable*'s aesthetic nostalgia and conservative political nostalgia transparent. Both the image and the films yearn for the hard bodies and militarized might of the Reagan era, for a hard body machismo that asserts itself on the world's stage. However, "The Deplorables" is distinguished by a certain sense of zaniness. In a way, the image is stylistically consistent with the tweets about Kim Jong-un cited above. While Trump attempts to adopt a hard-bodied machismo in the face of foreign powers, he does so in a way that makes him look ridiculous.

The *Expendables* films and the Trump campaign both play on a resentment toward institutions that conservatives feel have weakened America's place in the world. While "The Deplorables" would seem to reinforce these feelings of resentment, the image nevertheless undermines any sincere emotion. The guns, knives, and explosions signal hard body masculinity. Yet the presence of Pepe undercuts this masculinity. Through the reference to hard body action films, the image sincerely appeals to conservative political resentment. However, through the

presence of Pepe, the image makes this resentment look ridiculous. What better way to encapsulate the Trump campaign?

Conclusion

In March 2017, not long after Trump's inauguration, Politico posted a video interview with Matt Braynard who served for a time as director of technology for the Trump campaign. The interview, focusing on the central role memes and social media played in Trump's campaign, is titled "Was Pepe the Frog the most effective campaign surrogate for Donald Trump?" Pepe is not mentioned specifically during the course of the interview, but the title points to the way Pepe became the central meme associated with a political campaign largely driven by memes. Pepe's role in the Trump campaign speaks less to the role memes played in the election and more to the role trolling played as a zany rhetorical strategy used to promote Trump's politics of resentment and nostalgia.

Leading up to the 2016 presidential election, Michael Moore performed a one man show. In the show, he read a letter that offered a rationale for why people, who might not otherwise be racist or xenophobic, might vote for Trump. Moore ends the letter by saying, "Trump's election is going to be the biggest 'Fuck you' ever recorded in human history. And it will feel good." While most elections appear to be about acceptance (of a candidate, a platform, an ideology), the election of Donald Trump seems to be about rejection: most explicitly of Hilary Clinton, the professional class, and the "swamp" Washington DC has become. Trump's supporters often expressed explicit resentment toward these individuals and institutions. Those who saw Trump as a corrective to the corruption in Washington were clearly mistaken since Trump is even more mired in the swamp than Clinton. There is nothing about Trump's politics that goes against the way things have been for decades. Like any other conservative politician, Trump's priority in the

office is simply to cut economic and environmental regulations. It is difficult to imagine any of his opponents in the Republican primary acting differently had they been elected. The only way Trump diverges from typical conservative politicians is through the zany rhetorical style he adopted to appeal to the political resentment of his so-called "deplorables."

Chapter 5: Pepe's Rhetorical (After) Life

Introduction

In October 2016, Matt Furie partnered with the ADL to attempt to "Save Pepe" from the alt-right ("ADL Joins With "Pepe" Creator Matt Furie in Social Media Campaign to #SavePepe"). However, by that time Pepe was already firmly associated with the alt-right, and the results of the 2016 election only worked to solidify the connection between Pepe and white nationalists. It soon became clear that it would be impossible to reclaim Pepe from online trolls or erase his racist connotations. So, in a 2017 *Boy's Club* comic, Matt Furie killed Pepe. In the comic, published by Fantagraphics for Free Comic Book Day, the rest of the *Boy's Club* characters are shown standing around Pepe's coffin. Landwolf pulls out a flask, raises it, and toasts "here's to you lil' buddy." However, before taking a drink, he pours it over Pepe's corpse (qtd. in Johnston). By having Landwolf pour one out, not just for, but on Pepe, Furie is both mourning the death of his creation and disrespecting what it has become. Despite Furie's hopes that Pepe's status as a hate symbol was simply "a phase" (Furie, "It's Not Easy"), the comic appeared to be Furie's way of conceding that the character was not his to control and would always be associated with the alt-right.

While this comic may have marked the end of Pepe's life in the fictional world of *Boy's Club*, it certainly did not mark the end of his rhetorical life. Neither would it mark the end of Furie's involvement with the character. After the publication of this comic, Furie did not simply give up the character to the alt-right. Instead, he would go on to successfully pursue legal action against individuals who attempted to profit off of images of Pepe. While Furie was unable to reclaim his character from the internet, he was able to successfully control who could profit from the character. In perhaps the most startling turn of events, Pepe would go on to take on other

political associations when he became a symbol for the 2019 pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong.

In the previous chapters, I have primarily focused on Pepe's rhetorical life and the way that his zany style resonated with groups that cohered online, particularly various right wing political groups in the United States. In this chapter, I will describe the various, often unpredictable, ways Pepe travelled after becoming associated with the alt-right. While the success of the Trump presidential campaign would seem to cement Pepe's association with the alt-right, in keeping with his zany aesthetic origins, and the tendency of the zany character to remain in a constant state of activity, Pepe would continue to move in ways that were unexpected and take on associations that Furie could not have anticipated when he killed him the panels of *Boy's Club*. If Pepe's rhetorical life is zany, his rhetorical afterlife is even zanier.

The Adventures of Pepe and Pede, Infowars, and Copyright Lawsuits

In 2017, Eric Hauser, an assistant principal at a Texas middle school, self-published a children's book titled *The Adventures of Pepe and Pede* (see fig. 5.1). According to Matthew Gault,

> The children's book…tells the story of Pepe the frog and Pede the centipede. They're excited because Wishington Farm, where they live, has a new farmer in charge. After eight years of bad leadership, the friends are happy to finally enjoy everything the farm has to offer.
>
> Their revelry is cut short when they find out their favorite pond is now a murky swamp ruled by the terrible alligator Alkah. The buddies use teamwork and honesty to take down Alkah and free his minions from their muddy chains.

Gault goes on to claim that the "reader's interpretation" of the book "will depend on their working knowledge of alt-right memes." For instance, the reason one of the main characters is a centipede has to do with the fact that many of Trump's supporters online "refer to themselves as centipedes" (Gault). Other references are a bit easier to decipher, such as the fact that the

villain's name is one letter away from "Allah" and that the characters he is oppressing look like they are wearing burkas. Needless to say, these references were interpreted as Islamaphobic by many commentators. Though Hauser initially self-published the book, when it began to generate attention online, it was acquired by Post Hill Press, "a conservative-leaning publishing house." (Wootson Jr.).
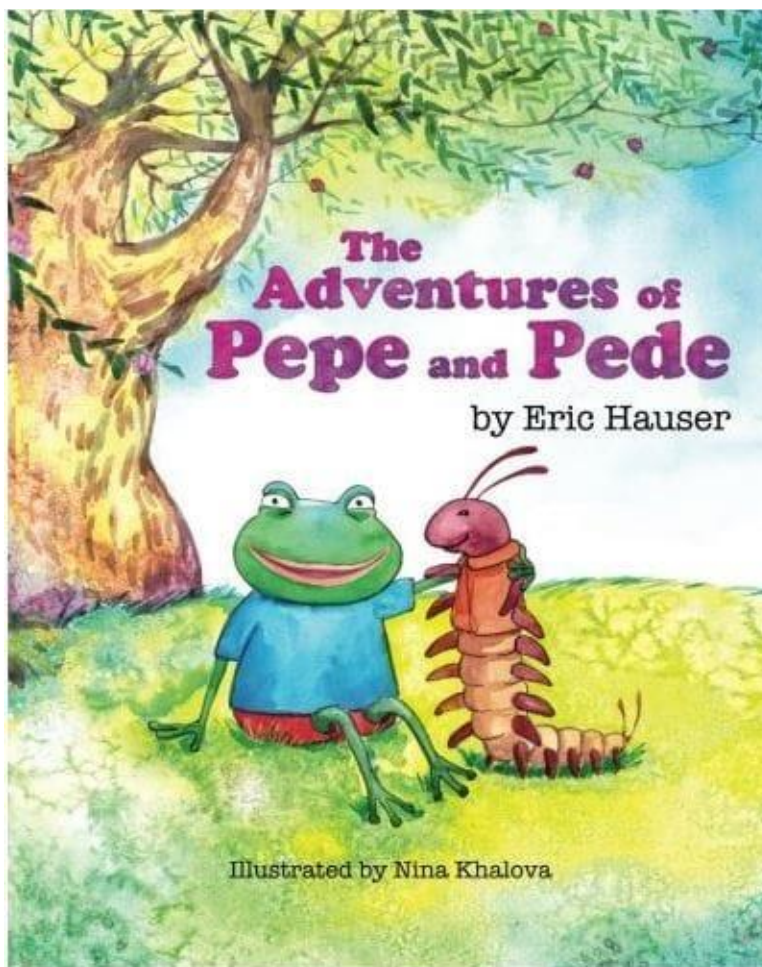

Fig. 5.1. Cover of *The Adventures of Pepe and Pede*, 15 Aug. 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/education/wp/2017/08/15/an-assistant-principal-wrote-a-childrens-book-about-alt-right-mascot-pepe-the-frog-it-cost-his-job/

Hauser's intentions publishing the book are quite vague. It is certainly not uncommon for an educator to publish a children's book. It is also fairly common for children's books to include overt social messages. However, by including explicit references to alt-right memes, it would

seem that Hauser's intentions were to do more than simply tell a story that advanced Islamaphobic messages (which he certainly could have done without referencing Pepe). The presence of these memes, and Pepe specifically, speaks to the way that online zaniness has infected social and political commentary in the United States, particularly right-wing political and social commentary.

Despite the various offensive references and imagery throughout the book, it is the presence of Pepe that drew the most attention. While Furie could not prevent trolls from recomposing and sharing images of Pepe on forums like 4chan and Reddit, the publication and sale of a book was a different story, and Furie decided to pursue legal action to protect his copyright. According to Priscilla Frank, Furie's lawyers' job was "fairly simple" considering the fact that Hauser had given Nina Khalova, the Ukranian freelance artist he hired to illustrate the book, explicit instructions that the frog character should resemble Pepe. Due to Furie's lawsuit, production of the book was halted, and all profits ($1521.54) were donated to the Council on American-Islamic Relations (Frank). Hauser was eventually fired from his job as an assistant principal, and, though the book currently has a page on Amazon, the site does not list any used or new copies available for sale.

Hauser and Post Hill Press are not the only ones who have tried to profit off of Pepe's popularity among the political right and white nationalists. According to Kayla Epstein, writing in *The Washington Post*, the website Infowars, run by right-wing conspiracy theorist Alex Jones, also began selling merchandise featuring images of Pepe (specifically, a poster that featured Pepe's face among other Trump supporters). While the poster is the type of image that someone might create and share on social media, selling it was a clear violation of copyright law. In June 2019, Infowars settled with Furie and agreed to pay him the profits from the poster ($15,000

total) and destroy all remaining copies. Epstein cites Furie's lawyers who claim that cease-and-desist letters had also been sent to other groups attempting to profit off of the character, including the white nationalist website *The Daily Stormer* and r/The_Donald (the Reddit page dedicated to Donald Trump). While the alt-right may feel a sense of ownership of the character, that ownership only goes so far. Furie's efforts have effectively made it clear that individuals associated with the alt-right will not be able to profit off of Pepe.

Both the Infowars poster and Hauser's book are in keeping with Pepe's image as cultivated by the alt-right. That is, while the lawsuits were certainly victories for Furie, they did not change the way he was viewed by the public or how his image was used in social media. However, Pepe would take on another level of meaning when he became a symbol of the 2019 pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong.

Pepe and the 2019 Hong Kong Protests

In summer of 2019, protests broke out in Hong Kong in reaction to a law that would have allowed people to be extradited to mainland China. The protests soon took on broader pro-democracy associations with a number of young Hong Kongers taking to the streets and conflicting with police. Like many 21st century social movements, including the Arab Spring and BLM, the protests have been thoroughly documented on social media. The movement was essentially leaderless with no central figure. However, a number of symbols emerged throughout the protests for participants to rally behind. One such symbol was a woman, thought to be a nurse, whose right eye was injured by police. After the image of her assault circulated throughout social media, other protestors began to wear bandages on their eyes. An image of the injured woman was posted to Reddit in the days following her assault. In the picture, she is

shown holding a sign depicting another symbol around which a number of the protestors cohered: Pepe the Frog (see fig. 5.2).

Fig. 5.2. Hong Kong protester with Pepe sign, Reddit, 13 Aug. 2019, https://www.reddit.com/r/pics/comments/cpsdwd/protestor_in_hong_kong_today/

Pepe's appearance in the Hong Kong protests is not the first time that he appeared in a context that would seem to defy his associations with the alt-right. There were, in fact, a number of images macros circulating online that positioned Pepe as a leftist or anti-fascist (see fig. 5.3). However, most of these images were created with an awareness of Pepe's association with the alt-right. That is, depictions of Pepe as a leftist or antifascist icon seemed to rely on his status as

a right-wing icon. These images were created and circulated because there was a certain irony in seeing Pepe portrayed as a leftist curb stomping fascists. Pepe's appearance in Hong Kong, however, does not have the same level of irony. Many in Hong Kong were not even aware of Pepe's problematic associations in the United States.

Fig. 5.3. Anti-fascist Pepe posted to the Leftist Dank Meme Stash, Facebook, 30 Jan. 2017, https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=1300410443348339&set=gm.1842693252613688&type=3&theater&ifg=1

The presence of Pepe in the Hong Kong protests is perhaps most surprising considering the rather strict censorship laws enforced on the Chinese internet. According to internet researcher Gabriele de Seta, Pepe's popularity on the Chinese internet precedes the Hong Kong

protests. In a 2016 article, de Seta describes the various memes that became popular on the Chinese internet despite government censorship: "Along with repertoires of local QQ emoticons, TV series animated GIFs and Jiang Zemin antics, user interactions on Chinese social media platforms also make use of content sourced from more global repertoires such as Rage Comics, Japanese anime characters, Doge the Shiba Inu dog and Wojak the Feels Guy." For de Seta, Pepe "is perhaps the single most striking example of the transnational circulation of digital folklore." However, while Pepe's transnational travels would take him to such unexpected places, his more problematic associations were lost in translation.

During the protests, Daniel Victor published an article for *The New York Times* describing Pepe's popularity among protestors. While some Hong Kongers interviewed by Victor expressed vague awareness of Pepe's political associations in the United States, others claimed to be completely unaware of these problematic associations. According to some of the protesters who used Pepe's image, Pepe is simply a "funny" cartoon frog. Others claim that Pepe's connection to the alt-right "did not matter." Another protestor claims that in the same way "Symbols and colors that mean something in one culture can mean something completely different in another culture," Pepe means something different to Chinese protestors than he does to Americans.

Pepe's presence in these protests is perhaps even stranger than his appearance as a white nationalist symbol, and the question of Pepe's resonance with the Hong Kong protestors is even more difficult to determine. Victor cites an anonymous post on LIHKG (a Hong Kong social media site) that claims that Pepe's appeal is rooted in his comedic aesthetic: "It just looks funny and captures the hearts of so many youngsters. It is a symbol of youth participation in this movement." Another protestor interviewed by Victor claims that Pepe resonates with the

protestors because he is "sad just like them." According to de Seta, Pepe is referred to by Chinese social media users as "*shangxin qingwa*, or sad frog." de Seta claims that Pepe resonates with Chinese social media users because "he is weird, funny, and they can empathize with his existential sadness." It is notable that Pepe is described as at once "weird," "funny," and "sad." Typically, these are not emotional states that we consider to be compatible. However, Pepe's zany aesthetic makes him both comic and pathetic. That is, a zany character can make us laugh through their sadness. They can make sadness seem ridiculous or absurd. Their sadness, while real, is not to be taken too seriously.

The point that de Seta makes about empathy is important for understanding how Pepe functioned as a symbol for the Hong Kong protests. While some images depict Pepe as an opponent of the protestors (such as a police officer), many (if not most) images depict Pepe as a stand in for the protestors. In the image in figure 2, for instance, the individual who was injured sees Pepe as a literal stand in for herself. Pepe is not just depicted as a comrade with similar struggles. There is a more direct sense of identification taking place. In a moment that was no doubt traumatizing for the woman, she turned to Pepe to help her express herself and represent herself to the world.

The alt-right reaction to this turn of events was both racist and paranoid. An article published by the white nationalist website *The Daily Stormer* claims that the CIA was using Pepe's image to manipulate the alt-right. The writer claims to "know Asians well enough to know that this is not the type of imagery that would appeal to them in the first place" and that there is "zero chance that it is organic." In the same way that Furie attempted to "Save Pepe," there is a sense in which it seems like *The Daily Stormer* is attempting to control Pepe, to determine what he does and how he acts as a rhetorical agent. However, attempts to control

Pepe's rhetorical trajectory by both Furie and by the various right wing groups who also felt a sense of ownership of the character are ultimately misguided. While it is impossible for an individual or a group to control any object's meaning, Pepe's zaniness and reception history makes him an especially unwieldy object. As the example in Hong Kong shows, Pepe does not belong solely to American culture, let alone the political right in America. He belongs to a much more nebulous, zany culture of the internet. While Furie may be able to prevent groups and individuals from profiting off of Pepe, it is impossible to keep Pepe from spreading. In the same way that Pepe's zaniness caused him to resonate with trolls on 4chan, the alt-right, and Trump supporters, Pepe's zaniness is what prevents him from being controlled by any one entity or group. The protests in Hong Kong may not "Save Pepe," but they do offer another level of meaning to the character. It would be a mistake to see Matt Furie's legal successes and the protests in Hong Kong as some sort of conclusion to Pepe's story. As long as Pepe's zany style continues to resonate with people, his rhetorical life will undoubtedly continue to go in unexpected directions.

Conclusion

In my analysis of Pepe's various iterations and encounters, I have focused on those moments that are most important to his rhetorical life (thus far) and have argued that his appeal is rooted in his particular zany style. My study of Pepe's rhetorical life offers theoretical and methodological possibilities for the study of other visual objects in digital spaces. Throughout this project, I have attempted to make two related arguments about visual rhetoric and digital communication.

The first argument is methodological in nature and is about how an object such as Pepe should be studied. Rather than treat every iteration of Pepe as equally important, I have focused

on those moments throughout his rhetorical life that have been most notable in his evolution from rather innocuous (if vulgar) comic character to meme to hate symbol to… whatever might be next. In order to understand how Pepe became a meme, a symbol for the alt-right, and propaganda for the Trump campaign, it is important to focus more specifically on his aesthetic origins and how Pepe as an aesthetic object produced certain feelings and moods that were suited to the digital environment in which he was composed and recomposed. It is also important to consider what remains with an object as it is remixed and recomposed. While this project has drawn from a variety of works in visual rhetoric and media studies, notably iconographic tracking and memetics, these works do not fully help us to account for the appeal of an object like Pepe. They may help us to generalize about the way visual objects move in digital spaces, but they do not help us to understand the way objects appeal to particular audiences. To put it another way, while these fields offer concepts and methods for studying *how* visual objects move in digital spaces, they do not fully provide concepts for describing *why* certain objects move in the particular ways that they do. My project has attempted to address this issue in the field by more closely attending to the aesthetic origins of the object in question, the feelings produced by the object, and the rhetorical practices of the various audiences that appropriated and recomposed the object.

The second argument has to do with zaniness and its usefulness as a concept for studying digital rhetoric. Zaniness provides scholars a concept that not only helps us to understand why Pepe resonated with various groups and how he was used by these groups but to describe a significant amount of digital communication. The alt-right is not the only collective whose rhetorical style is defined by zaniness. Zaniness also defines certain leftist discourse online as well. For instance, on 24 September, 2018, the Philadelphia Flyers introduced their new mascot,

Gritty. With orange fur, a shaggy beard, and googly eyes, Gritty could be a distant cousin of Animal from *The Muppets*. According to Ian Crouch, Gritty was given the backstory that "he had been living in the team's home arena and subsisting on hot dogs." Gritty's distinct blend of zaniness and creepiness generated significant attention, especially among leftists online. On 26 September, the leftist magazine *Jacobin* tweeted "Gritty is a worker." This was followed by parody Twitter accounts with a distinctly leftist edge, such as "Fellow Worker Gritty." Images began circulating depicting Gritty as an anti-fascist. One shows Gritty skating while holding an air cannon is captioned "How many men have I killed? Not men. I kill fascists." Another depicts Gritty punching Pepe with the words "Goodnight Alt-Right" (Horgan). In October, mainstream outlets began to pay attention to the ways leftists appropriated Gritty. In *The Wall Street Journal*, Jillian Kay Melchior published an op-ed lamenting Gritty's appropriation by leftist, claiming that Gritty "belongs to Philly." The way that Gritty has been appropriated by the political left is, in some ways, similar to the ways Pepe was appropriated by the alt-right. The comparison to Pepe is also notable because Gritty has a similar zany style. Both Pepe and Gritty are undoubtedly odd political icons that demonstrate the way zaniness has permeated online political discourse. Gritty intersects with another facet of online zaniness, what is often referred to as "weird Twitter," a subculture of Twitter that is dominated by leftists. These objects deserve the same attention as Pepe as they afford us a similar look into the ways that the internet has shaped political discourse in the "post-truth" era.

While this project does not offer analysis of these objects, it does offer a starting point by beginning a conversation about the way zaniness as an aesthetic category has shaped certain practices of digital rhetoric and writing. While I have tried to treat Pepe as a unique object, I would not claim that Pepe is unique in his zaniness. Zaniness offers rhetoricians and those who

study digital culture a concept for understanding how communication happens online (especially in some of the more problematic venues). I would not claim to offer a method or concepts that are appropriate for studying every meme or visual object that circulates online. However, I hope that this analysis of Pepe's rhetorical life is the start of a conversation about the way zaniness has come to define digital rhetoric.

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ABSTRACT

A RHETORIC OF ZANINESS: THE CASE OF PEPE THE FROG

by

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A *Rhetoric of Zaniness: The Case of Pepe the Frog* traces the character of Pepe the Frog through various moments of, what Laurie Gries calls, "rhetorical transformation." Specifically, the dissertation analyzes Pepe's initial appearance in Matt Furie's *Boy's Club* comics, his emergence as a meme, his use as a hate symbol by the alt-right, and his adoption as unofficial propaganda for the Trump presidential campaign. Using Sianne Ngai's aesthetic category of zaniness, I argue that throughout each of these moments of transformation Pepe exemplifies a certain style of zaniness that is essential for understanding digital rhetoric and communication in the post-truth era.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

Sean Milligan received a bachelor's in English Education from Rochester College in 2008 and a master's in English Literature from Oakland University in 2011. He is the recipient of a Graduate Teaching Assistantship, DeRoy Doctoral Fellowship, a Graduate Professional Scholarship, and a Summer Dissertation Award. He has presented work at Rhetoric Society of America, The Thomas R. Watson Conference, and the Cultural Rhetorics Conference. His work has appeared in the edited collections *Teaching Hemingway and the Natural World* and *Hashtag Activism: Case Studies of Digital Protests and Social Movements*. Currently, he is a Visiting Professor in the Department of Writing at Grand Valley State University.