INSTAGRAM AND THE MEMED SELF

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The communicative power and political potential of internet memes has garnered increasing interest in recent years, compelling study from journalists, researchers, and internet users alike. Journalists have delved into specific meme communities with an effort to track memes' impact on politics both on and offline (Nagle, 2017; Barrett-Ibaria 2018). The crowdsourced meme wiki "Know Your Meme" has become a useful source for taxonomizing memes, their source material, their variations and spread, providing researchers an imperfect but wide-reaching starting place for the history of popular memes. Academic work, too, has come to recognize memes as an important part of internet culture and a growing literature has emerged around meme study. The still-coalescing subfield of "meme theory" has largely focused on memes in the terms of their viral spread and their political or social efficacy (i. e. Shifman, 2014). But little research attends to memes as objects in their singularity, nor to the meme makers themselves as artists or craftspeople.

The irreverent, bizarre, and deeply political work of Instagram meme artists serves as a potent rejoinder to the claim that "the left can't meme." In their commitment to an always-moving mix of politics and absurdism, Instagram memers have something in common with the Alt-Right despite their completely opposed political views. Many of these well-followed accounts have developed a signature brand of humor and aesthetics while cultivating loyal fans. These "meme lords" are part of a recent wave in online culture I'm calling "Weird Instagram." Named for Facebook precursor (Hongo, 2018), Weird Instagram might best be differentiated from Facebook in the way its practitioners have include their own selves in their posts, taking on new performative, diaristic, or autobiographical qualities. Self, identity, and subjectivity features prominently in the work of these meme artists, often verging into deeply personal territory. Memers present themselves as almost *anti*-influencers who nevertheless use the same tools and platforms to support their work. By focusing on two meme artist's use of their own image, this paper describes an emerging practice that toys with identity and the boundaries of the self.

Selfies and memes are both social media phenomena that aren't often discussed together. The co-occurrence of the front-facing smartphone camera with a social platform (Instagram) designed around the circulation of images forever changed our relationship to photography and portraiture. (Marwick, 2015; Jurgenson, 2019). Alongside the move toward what Alice Marwick calls "Instafame," a similar push toward authorship and self-promotion has come out of the weird world of meme culture. These artists are compelled by the platform to engage in the same "attention economy" Marwick described in her early study.

Addy Borneman (@*gayvapeshark*) and Jenson Leonard (@*coryintheabyss)* rose to viral prominence alongside the explosion of "weird Facebook" meme pages and groups (Barrett-Ibarria, 2018; Hongo, 2018). Borneman founded the Facebook page *Lettuce Dog,* inviting Leonard to become an admin before forming "Sharks, Dragon Ball, Vaping, and Being Gay." In 2018 the bulk of their production migrated to their Instagram accounts, @gayvapeshark and @coryintheabyss, and to a platform that allowed for a greater control of their content and encouraged more engagement with their followers.

Borneman was the godmother of weird Facebook, and her page *Lettuce Dog* became known for its absurdist, irreverent meme production before she moved on to her @gayvapeshark persona. Her memes were text-heavy and conversational. Mostly using stock photos, Borneman's characters can be seen as types to whom she attributes characteristics that are often unflattering. The humor of Borneman's memes is often found in the contradictions in her character's behaviors, motivations and self-perceptions.

There is one character with greater complexity however: Borneman herself. Borneman, who was a transwoman, created the anthropomorphic shark character to ventriloquize her observations. But upon moving to Instagram, that shark became more confessional, sometimes sharing quotidian details and thoughts from Borneman's life. She began to include her own images as well in September 2018, often connected to experiences from her life as a trans person. Imbued with a melancholy humor, this work takes on a new dimension following Borneman's 2020 suicide.

"Cory in the Abyss" is a handle that could not better represent the absurdist hyper-referentiality of meme culture. Jenson Leonard's alter-ego refernces a long running Twitter meme riffing on the 2007 spin-off *Cory in the House* (Abreu, 2017). Similarly, Leonard's work often refers to a long and tangled knot of referentiality: online in-jokes, bizarrely appropriated pop culture, and crude humor. Unlike the haphazard collage aesthetic of many memers, Leonard's memes are polished works of graphic design exhibiting a meticulous attention to detail. His work is situated in politics, gender, and race—especially the Black American experience. Leonard's work as @coryintheabyss, often draw from historical Black cultural productions that have little presence in the dank meme world. Leonard's references vacillate between the allusive and the garish, contributing to the sense that he's cultivating a series of political statements amidst the crude and absurd. This sense is compounded when looking through his memes as a collected body of work.

Leonard uses his own image very sparingly, when compared to Borneman. His face appears in the profile image of his Instagram account, photoshopped onto the water entity from the film *Abyss.* In some noteable pieces, Leonard uses images of Black men in ironic reference to himself and, perhaps, to play on the common racist failure of white people to see Black people as unique individuals. This cultivated uncertainty begs the viewer's complicity in confusing two Black men's identities, an interpellation of visual white supremacy made darkly playful.

Memers are thought of as political agitators, idle shitposters, or simply nodes in a digital multitude—rarely artists. But weird Instagram complicates those frames, and challenges assumptions around memes and their spread. Meme artists *do* create content to be shared in hopes it will go viral, but each meme represents its author's oeuvre instead of a distributed cultural text. Instagram, the home of the "influencer," imposes a parasocial connection and presentation of self. No longer anonymous, these artists have had to reconcile their own relationship to the selfie.

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