



# USness

Observing a small group of hyperconnected gay men during a time of political uncertainty,  
I may have some thoughts.

By Henrik Jonathan Klijn

**M**y political patience with American democracy ran out this year. I can tell you the exact date: June 30, 2023, around eleven central. Having another morning coffee while mindlessly scrolling, [news broke](#) that the Supreme Court of the United States, by a 6-to-3 vote, sided with Colorado web designer Lorie Smith, who opposed same-sex marriage and challenged Colorado public accommodations law, by asserting the state was unconstitutionally compelling her to serve everyone equally.

In his [opinion](#), Justice Gorsuch felt that since Smith may be asked by possible potential clients—she had not designed a website, let alone an LGBTQ+ one, at the time of her [filing the case](#) in 2016—to contribute to their wedding creatively, she could expect to be constitutionally shielded from such participation. Naturally, this issue of selection and refusal to work for fear of endorsement and moral compromise goes both ways; remember when Marc Jacobs and Tom Ford [refused to dress](#) Melania Trump for the 2017 inauguration? But this felt different. This was legislated. This felt like a repeat of the Colorado [wedding cake case](#), which, in turn, felt like when Red-state governors dragged their heels legalizing marriage equality in 2015, which felt like, well, an entire history of queer second-class status.

Let me be clear: American democracy is dying. It's on a form of life-support, the kind we use for coma patients the same way we kept my mother alive after her stroke. Breathing, intravenously fed, but essentially unresponsive and wasting away. It's how "democracy" is done in

countries like Poland and Hungary. Very little in the way of pro-democracy legislation is passing Congress. The Supreme Court is blatantly showing itself more sympathetic to ultra conservative causes. And a former US president has, at last count, been indicted three times for, amongst other charges, orchestrating an insurrection using collaborative media and conspiracy-based online platforms. Read that sentence again. Now consider that the very same indicted president is actively seeking another term, that he is the frontrunner in securing his party's nomination, and polling among voters suggests he is within reach of getting re-elected to the very office he betrayed.

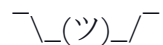
When democracy declines—or dies—it seldom recovers. [Instead](#), it reanimates, neutered, into a zombie-state that performatively holds elections, while limiting the number of polling stations; it denounces opposition victories as rigged and vilifies the “other” stopping short of criminalizing and persecuting them (for the time being); and it replaces the press with propaganda.

I've never been party to the belief that significant social change had to be transformational on a personal level for everyone, and I lived through the end of Apartheid, which says a lot. Instead, I've always strongly suspected that, for some, life barrels ahead while they just get on with stuff, untouched and untethered viewing those who say otherwise as worrywarts who obsess over things like finding fun seitan recipes online, which, incidentally, I did as well, during my 2018 vegan stint.

But here we were. And so, and not to sound la-di-da or anything, I thought about Nietzsche, specifically something I came across years ago while studying Richard Strauss' [tone poem](#), *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, a work more famous for being the dum-dum-dum-da-dum bit in *2001: Space Odyssey* (1968) than the fact that it is based on the book of the same name by the German philosopher. In an early 1870s essay, eventually to be [published](#) in *Philosophy and Truth*, Nietzsche asks, “What then is truth? A movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms: In short, a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished, and which, after long usage, seem to a people to be fixed, canonical, and binding.”

He continues that “truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions—they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force, coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal and no longer as coins.” I remember making a mental note to go find that quote on Google and bookmark it for when I feel ready to ponder the state of truth, online engagement, democracy, and how we got to this place. But what then *is* truth? And what about truth in an accelerated society? And where do we even start?

Not one for the doldrums, I wondered what those who came before us would have done. Harvey Milk. Bayard Rustin. James Baldwin. Allen “America I’m putting my queer shoulder to the wheel,” Ginsberg.<sup>1</sup> Well, that’s as good a place to start as any, I thought.



A text interrupted my doomscrolling through a morning blend of Facebook, TikTok, and links to news sites I find triggering yet riveting. It was from my friend, Jon: a link to a new [Tiny Cedric TikTok](#). Tiny Cedric is a diminutive Chihuahua with a floppy tongue that cannot be contained and a shrill squeal where other dogs have a bark. In other words, he’s adorable and the subject of highly shareable content. Today, Tiny Cedric was being groomed to [go on a date](#) with his girlfriend Lou, another Chihuahua, albeit long-haired. The Cedric and Lou brand of cute is saccharine, and the level of doting on a pint-sized fleabag beggars belief, but I nevertheless found myself considering life with a Tiny Cedric of my own.

Me: Do you think Cedric is easy to travel with?

Jon: Yes! He’s the definition of pocket-sized.

... ..

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<sup>1</sup> From *America*, by Allen Ginsberg, Berkeley, January 17, 1956.

Jon is always at me to get a dog, especially a Chihuahua, which is interesting as he knows I want an Old English Sheepdog or an Irish Wolfhound.

Jon: You should get one.

Me: 🤔. I'm over 6'. Built like a rugby player. NOT one-night-in-Paris

Hilton.

Jon: You would look great with a Tiny Cedric in a tote at customs.

Jon: BRB.

... ..

Jon's texts about Tiny Cedric made me marvel at how TikTok, rather than a mere device to detached scrolling, was clearly adept at hardwiring pre-existing yet dormant feelings of inadequacy, and how much occasional near-maniacal gleefreshing resembled a sugar rush.

Jon: OK—just heard from Glanson and Diego. Let's meet at Broken English [Taco Pub](#) in Old Town? Noon?

Me: Great.

Jon: I also want us to take a moment & talk about [this](#).

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“Nice to see you, boys—wow—*this* is a fun place. And for lunch! A refreshing change from screaming over karaoke and cocktails at Boystown bars,” Glanson said, hugging each of us.

It's been a few months since we last met up for lunch and somehow life has kept us all busy in a good way. The modes of communication between us—everyone nowadays really, come to think about it—are absurd and besides group chats we use WhatsApp, iMessage, Telegram, Facebook Messenger, and various social platforms (some dating-based), all depending on who's traveling and what's being shared, leading to a sense that we're inhabiting walled gardens, each its own ecosystem.

Except actual phone calls. Because no-one does that anymore. And so, over shares and comments, we've become more conscious of the need to monitor our progressively more volatile political landscape and be more engaged, meaning that we take time to share—sometimes text—about it.

“So what do you think about this.” Jon opened the TikTok he shared earlier. Nearing a certain age with a Ph.D. in music and extensive knowledge about opera, culture, and art, Jon is, by his own admission, “out of fucks to give” and prone to grouchiness. He pressed play and we watched the TikTok of drag queen Thorgy Thor from RuPaul's Drag Race Season 8 doing something that had us rewind the scene to ensure we weren't missing something.

As part of a quick-fire challenge with a Mexican theme, the very premise of which veered dangerously close to cringe tropes, stereotypes, and cultural appropriation—think big earrings, sombreros, and shrill “*¡Ay, caramba!*” yelps—Thorgy dressed up as Frida Kahlo, replete with unibrow, huipil, embroidered skirt, gold hoop earrings, and oversized flowers on her head.

Thorgy's Frida was confused, jerked around, flailed, and finally fell to the ground raising one leg at a time, indicating God knows what: sexual arousal, stupor, or maybe a comment on Kahlo's myriad health issues, including the amputation of a leg in later life. The Drag Race queens loved it. RuPaul yelled with mirth, while Mexican-American singer, AB Soto, whose song “Cha Cha Bitch” provided the soundtrack for the challenge, clapped hands and laughed. It all felt a little off.

“I don't think much online anymore speaks to the gay community all that much.” Jon, like many older gay men, finds our zeitgeist alarming. “I think the queer community, for the most part, just sees everything first as another reason for dragification. We are fundamentally out of touch with the reality of the world and our culture is reduced to an easy jumping-off point for talentless drag queens like Thorgy Thor.” He took a sip of his mezcal-based Margarita.

By coincidence, Broken English—the restaurant we were meeting at—had a small poster on the door with a Pride flag and a QR code to a site populated with pics from events with LGBTQ+ people. It was a crude thing, homemade, reeking of well-intentioned “let's just do something

because it's Pride and gays are known to get tetchy.” By coincidence, the little Pride poster had a sketch of Frida Kahlo making a “cool” gesture with both hands crossed in front of her while, underneath her, the tagline “Taco Wasted” was meant to mean something. At least the tacos tasted delicious, and there were pictures of hot *luchadores* on the walls.

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My phone pinged and everyone reached for their phones since the cachet of a Grindr alert is now ne plus ultra among gay mating calls. At any gathering such as this, the happy sound of the Grindr ping will have an entire table hastily check devices, some more clandestine for fear of appearing desperate while others act blasé in anticipation of unsolicited dick pics or the apogee of sex-positivity: the dick vid. And while the act of checking out of the conversation with friends to be cyberflashed is socially side-eyed, the currency held by the Grindr alert is nevertheless huge.

Excited and a little apologetic, I felt around in my backpack.

ChuckRhymesWith: Sup

Me: Hey

... ..

ChuckRhymesWith: Nice profile

Me: Thanks.

... ..

ChuckRhymesWith: Looking?

Me: ...just meeting friends. Lunch. Maybe later?

... ..

ChuckRhymesWith: Into?

Meh—I mean—what *do* you say? How did it happen that our entire sexual experience has come to be condensed into an app—a profile—a few lines of banter, and a hastily arranged tryst? Not for nothing, the proliferation of social media has coincided with the rise in pre- and post-exposure medications such as [PrEP and PEP](#). But, for now, ChuckRhymesWith is not on the agenda.

Me: ... ..

ChuckRhymesWith: Guess not.



“I see several posts of all sorts by entitled Gen Z kids on TikTok because they think they have nothing to be concerned about and that this has just always been like this,” Glanson said. He moved to Chicago from Florida when, as a Black gay man, he felt his rights were threatened after Ron DeSantis was elected governor in 2018. HIV+ and undetectable, Glanson had to negotiate his way around stigma on various dating apps, leading him to adopt a somewhat guarded persona. “There is this sort of naive Gen Z righteousness and referencing of certain, often gay, iconography without much consideration given to our history. And, of course, gay culture gravitates heavily to Black culture. But it’s an open question whether cis-het Gen Z has our backs as an LGBTQ community or, for that matter, if LGBTQ Americans care about the issues about the cultures that they, in turn, emulate and appropriate.”

“Word, Glanny!” Jon nodded in approval. “The younger generations have the luxury of gaining access to a ready-made gay universe through a very diluted lens with very low risk of embodying any of the things that those who have gone before them have gone through, much less respecting the process of trauma and hardship we endured despite our perceived rebel stance.”



“[Padam!](#)” I added. “It’s about the feels. And by the way, that song is trending far higher on TikTok than anything about gay rights or toxic Floridian crapola. On Facebook however, there is a continuous stream of outrage, so it seems like its a platform and age thing.”

Diego smiled. “Interesting you say that. Pop stars and music are way more influential with Latinx,” he said. “The kids I know, my nieces and nephews, don’t care much for politics or news, mostly because it’s not something that they feel part of. But they do gravitate to everything Gloria Trevi, or some electro-cumbia group like [Mexican Sound System](#), so we need those type of artists to be more active on platforms and spread the word.”

“But,” I said, “there is just about nothing more fake and off-putting than some star who whines about getting out and voting. I think the best thing is for those kind of influencers—high level ones—to aggressively take part in discussions and make formal statements. When [Taytay endorsed Joe Biden](#) in 2020, that was a big deal and he was dragged over the finishing line, amongst others, by her fans.”

“In what I think of as a hyperconnected world, issues that affect our community,” Diego said, his finger moving in a circle indicating our group, “if we can really call us a community, are more visible than ever before and even though this heightened visibility may appear to foster or anticipate acceptance, it exposes us to elevated scrutiny with potential backlash from less tolerant groups.”

“Social media encourages the construction of idealized personas,” I said, “which kinda leads to a significant disparity between what we present and reality. For gay men, the pressure to conform to societal beauty standards can exacerbate feelings of loneliness and inadequacy. It’s at the core of us. It’s a sort of usness that has always been there but now, for better or worse, has brought with it a unique set of challenges.”

“Exactly,” Jon sighed, “and this usness that you talk of, with all its memes and viral stuff and social media, shapes our collective identity and culture. And of course they can—and do—perpetuate stereotypes and misconceptions about us as LGBTQ+ people, leaving some, in specific

real-world locations, alienated and frustrated. The rise of dating apps has changed how we form connections, and for us these apps are both blessing and curse, because they tantalizingly suggest a possibility of a meaningful relationship as we chat away while at the very same time inducting us into a hookup culture that runs counter to the meaningful relationship we think we want.”

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All this talk of apps and meaningful connection reminded me to check my email, and, seeing none, I checked Facebook. Predictably, I was almost instantly outraged by a post [announcing](#) that the Florida State Board of Education will henceforth teach students how some Black people benefited from slavery because it taught them valuable skills—[part of new African American history standards](#)—a move that the state teachers’ union, and frankly everyone with a modicum of shame, had since blasted as a “step backward.” The 2023 Florida curriculum also “advocates teaching about how Black people were also perpetrators of violence during race massacres.”

Buoyed by Chablis, I responded to a comment by a Floridian troll.

Me: De Santis is a dickhead.

Solano 75: Screw you Libtard.

Me: Is your sister too busy?

I felt better. For a moment, I wondered why it was so good, all this online yacking at a profile littered with flags and Semper Fi memes and whether, perhaps, it really *was* me.

I wondered if, maybe, THAT was the big deal with social media. How it acted as some sort of self-healing or a mirror into the soul—the modern version of hurling a lowball at the wall and finding release in the shattering. When I sat back and looked at the exchanges and barbs, I felt better about Florida, having said my piece at the specter of a De Santis reign. Like I was doing something.

I wondered if, perhaps, I should thank Solano\_75 from Coral Gables. What *was* it with the Cuban vote, I wondered, and made a mental note to search for information on shifts in Latin voting patterns and how hyphenated identities shape voting patterns. I took another sip of wine.

“You’ve got the look of someone who just read a bitch on Facebook,” Jon said.

“I should thank Solly Solano for the pleasure of letting off some steam,” I smiled.

“I’m sure he knows. Is he even real?”

“You never know these days,” Glanson added. “Everyone knows everything and we usually put it there. My dad would have died if anyone saw him naked, but I have pretty raunchy pics of me posted across many platforms. And I did it.”

“Yeah we know—we’ve all seen,” I said. “But it doesn’t stop with the risqué stuff. If you check the time for the Presbyterian Friday Fish-fry, Facebook knows. If you pause for a second too long on a keto recipe posting, TikTok suddenly feeds you endless diet adverts.”

“And in a time where Tennessee is forcing a hospital to [hand over records](#) of patients who need gender reassignment,” Jon said, “and Texas wants to [prosecute the driver of the car](#) that takes someone to an abortion clinic in a blue state, is anyone really safe? Are any of our online searches and interactions just a Supreme Court decision away from being, essentially, self-incrimination?”

From where I was sitting I could swear Jon had a tear in his eye. I looked away for fear of embarrassing him but made a mental note that just snapping at Solano\_75 from Coral Gables on Facebook possibly wasn’t enough. And that we needed to do more, but what, I wondered.

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And so, this issue around usness and online personas, along with the code-switching implied by multi-platformed lived experiences, seemed to be a question of control, and more to the point who had it. In “[Netizens, Revolutionaries, and the Inalienable Right to the Internet](#),” Tok Thompson asks, “who controls the story? *Qui parle?* as the French say.” He continues, if “we admit

the tremendous power of narratives in shaping social reality, then we must investigate how its larger, unifying stories are formed and influenced in order to fully understand a society” (51).

It’s precisely what Gilles Deleuze has in mind when he claims in his [1992 essay](#), “Postscript on Societies of Control,” that modern societies—and their surveillance mechanisms—have transitioned from [Foucauldian](#) “disciplinary societies,” characterized by physical confinement and omnipresent overseers—a reworking of [Betham’s](#) panopticons of watchers and the observed—that form rigid hierarchies, to societies of control where individuals are subjected to continuous surveillance and manipulation. And we don’t have to look far for evidence to see how we now live in virtual sociotechnical panopticons.<sup>2</sup>

Michel Foucault’s theory of the panopticon was that society is more concerned with control than discipline, and so, modes of observation and scrutiny have morphed from that of mere proctoring, suggesting a government-like or institutional entity, to comprehensive and ubiquitous social orthodoxy: each member of society cast simultaneously as supervisor *and* the supervised.

Professor Emerita at Harvard Business School, Shoshana Zuboff, warns in “[The Age of Surveillance Capitalism](#),” that Silicon Valley and other players mine user data to anticipate and control their behavior. During a [chat with The Harvard Gazette](#), Zuboff says that “surveillance capitalism’s “means of behavioral modification” at scale erodes democracy from within because, without autonomy in action and in thought, we have little capacity for the moral judgment and critical thinking necessary for a democratic society.” She continues that surveillance capitalism knows “everything about us, but we know little about them. They predict our futures, but for the

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<sup>2</sup> Think mass surveillance programs; social media platform tracking; smartphone tracking; the internet of things that survives on comprehensive surveillance ecosystems; biometric technologies in various contexts, from unlocking smartphones to airport security; predictive analytics predicting behaviors and preferences; algorithmic governance, automating decision processes from criminal justice systems to credit scoring; to not mention online behavioral monitoring, COVID-19 contact tracing and surveillance; cybersecurity; or digital identity.

sake of others' gain. Their knowledge extends far beyond the compilation of the information we gave them." It's a nefarious kind of control.

Deleuze, as far back as 1992, identified that "control societies" rely on algorithmic mechanisms to monitor and predict individual behavior, thus exerting subtle forms of control, and Zuboff makes it clear that online platforms utilize complex algorithms to curate content, creating echo chambers that reinforce users' existing beliefs and preferences. This personalized control fosters a polarization of society, with individuals increasingly isolated within their ideological bubbles, amplifying the effects of memetic tug-of-war, if not full-scale combat.

In the online ecosystem, hacktivism, the use of technological skills for political ends, may be viewed as a form of resistance against control mechanisms and hacktivist groups like Anonymous have carried out operations targeting powerful entities, using memes and digital tactics to expose corruption and advocate for social justice. But most of that feels reactive and quickly gets vilified by the very perps of surveillance capitalism who have our likes and dislikes and search histories.

But "Societies of Control" also emphasizes a certain fluidity and flexibility of modern social structures, and, for gay men, this has translated into a constant negotiation with identity, as they code-switch their way around online spaces and social contexts, and for good reason as Deleuze's notion of surveillance is particularly pertinent within the LGBTQ+ community where increased visibility on social media can lead to exposure to hate speech, online harassment, and threats to personal safety. A study by the [Trevor Project \(2021\)](#) found that LGBTQ+ youth who experienced discrimination online were more likely to report suicidal ideation and feelings of loneliness while another by [Pew Research Center \(2020\)](#) revealed that LGBTQ+ individuals are more likely to engage in self-censorship and limit their online activities due to privacy and safety concerns.

This blurred line between realities is addressed in "[Simulacra and Simulation](#)," a 1981 philosophical treatise written by French sociologist and philosopher Jean Baudrillard in which he explores the concept of simulacra—something that replaces reality with its representation—and its

profound implications on contemporary society, culture, and reality. Baudrillard feels that in modern times, reality has been replaced by a hyperreality characterized by simulations and copies, and he argues that we live in a world where representations and images have become detached from their original referents, and, he suggests, this has led to a blurring of the boundaries between reality and the simulated. In this hyperreal world, Baudrillard argues, images and signs circulate freely, reproducing themselves endlessly, without any reference to an underlying reality. The result is a society where simulations, copies, and signs take on more significance than the actual reality they are meant to represent. Baudrillard uses a fable on cartography by Jorge Luis Borges to explain what he means with the simulacra.<sup>3</sup>

It does lead one to wonder if today, Instagram, for example, is the ultimate simulacra? The act of online posting is fraught with considerations around what someone else will think of the post. And how the user can get other users to have specific impressions after viewing the post. “If I go with A rather than B, do I look better there? Do my surroundings make me look better?” And so users set about constructing identity over many postings around an Insta-identity that is being curated with a user response in mind based on a representation of the self—a simulacra—where the real self is not visible on the platform, only curated glimpses meant to represent the self.

And specifically for LGBTQ+ individuals, the pressure to present idealized versions of themselves on social media often lead to further disconnect. A survey by [GLAAD](#) (2020) found that 55% of LGBTQ+ adults aged 18-34 reported feeling the need to present a curated image of

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<sup>3</sup> *On Exactitude in Science* by Jorge Luis Borges:

...In that Empire, the Art of Cartography attained such Perfection that the map of a single Province occupied the entirety of a City, and the map of the Empire, the entirety of a Province. In time, those Unconscionable Maps no longer satisfied, and the Cartographers Guilds struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it. The following Generations, who were not so fond of the Study of Cartography as their Forebears had been, saw that that vast Map was Useless, and not without some Pitilessness was it, that they delivered it up to the Inclemencies of Sun and Winters. In the Deserts of the West, still today, there are Tattered Ruins of that Map, inhabited by Animals and Beggars; in all the Land there is no other Relic of the Disciplines of Geography.

—Suarez Miranda, *Viajes de varones prudentes*, Libro IV, Cap. XLV, Lerida, 1658

themselves on social media, further contributing to feelings of frustration and alienation. And so we post, fearing that no one will love an old-fat-femme-whatever queen.

In an age when the most technologically advanced our homes got was a calculator or television, Baudrillard managed to explain the concept of memes and digital discourse in a way that underpins exactly what Limor Shifman refers to when she [writes](#) that “user-driven imitation and remix have become highly valued pillars of contemporary participatory culture, to the extent that one may argue that we live in an era driven by a hyper-memetic logic. The term “meme” is particularly suitable to describe this glut of re-works, as the concept —deliberately connoting “mimesis”—is flexible enough to capture a wide range of communicative intentions and actions, spanning all the way from naïve copying to scornful imitation.”

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But you know,” Jon said, “Just looking at the events in the news and balancing it with what I see on the internet reveals a disconnect between being gay, or Black, or a woman, and the need to protest. It seems as if we lack true social justice zeal or that societal challenge gene that young people had in the 60s and 70s. I feel that the revolutionary spirit used to be part of our DNA, which started to fizzle in the 80s when it became all about conspicuous consumption. The only thing that kept a gay protest flame alive was the AIDS crisis because young gay men were dying and watching their friends get sick, which informed ACT UP. But by the 90s, I feel like all of that was passé, and, well, here we are.” Jon lived through the AIDS crisis. For him, current societal shifts and trends are too disconnected from those we lost.

“We’ve yet to find our voice from a social justice, wealth inequality, political corruption standpoint, including, this country’s appetite for things like Desert Storm, the Persian Excursion,

and 911 revenge,” I added. “And the current appetite for fabricated culture wars. The post-Trump world reminds me that some of us gaze at ourselves, wondering just how the fuck we got here.”

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It’s an uncomfortable truth that “the left can’t meme” without appearing fully cringe-worthy, mired in partisan propaganda, or so toxically vague compared to an original or founder meme, that it reeks of [normie](#). This is perhaps a genuine inability on the part of the left to color outside the lines of acceptability and political correctness, and so, unable to meme away and risk offending minorities, we are stuck in a space seemingly designed for risqué output with a right-wing flavor.

Jeff Giese—he frequently appears in discussions around mimetic scuffles—followed up his article, “[It’s Time to Embrace Memetic Warfare](#),” with “[Hacking Hearts and Minds](#)” in 2017. He writes that “for many of us in the social media world, it seems obvious that more aggressive communication tactics and broader warfare through trolling and memes is a necessary, inexpensive, and easy way to help destroy the appeal and morale of our common enemies.”

The QAnon conspiracy theory gained significant traction on social media platforms, with adherents using memetic warfare to propagate the baseless claim that a secret cabal of Satan-worshipping pedophiles controls the world and is being fought against by Trump. QAnon followers often share elaborate memes and symbols, such as the letter “Q” and the phrase “Where we go one, we go all” ([WWG1WGA](#)), to signal affiliation with the conspiracy theory and recruit new believers, which, to be clear, amounts to an effective and consequential semiotic soup of memes and signals.

Suffice to say, “Anonymous” and “Occupy” aside, even as we are in the midst of significant culture wars being waged, the net result of the left’s efforts amounts to significantly less. In fact, a short—far from exhaustive—search for leftwing efforts to wage memetic war yields far less impressive results. [Columbia Journalism Review](#) conducted a study after the 2016 election reveals



that “right-wing media network anchored around Breitbart developed as a distinct and insulated media system, using social media as a backbone to transmit a hyper-partisan perspective to the world.” Another aspect the study makes clear, is just how new all this is, pointing out that “out of all the outlets favored by Trump followers, only the *New York Post* existed when Ronald Reagan was elected president in 1980.” Even more alarming, the study suggested, was that “while mainstream media coverage was often critical, it nonetheless revolved around the agenda that the right-wing media sphere set.” That agenda is fed, in a way that echoes relativity, by fake news—a greatest hits of tropes around immigration, terror, crime, Islam, the economy, and a litany of “revelations” about Hillary Clinton—its memetic spread, and media compulsion to cover it. It resulted in what [Richard Hofstadter](#) termed “the paranoid style in American politics,” meaning decontextualized facts, reiterated fabrications, and logical gymnastics that construct a fundamentally fallacious worldview.

“Fake news,” as Trump is [fond of referring](#) to anything he doesn’t care for, or suits his agenda, is a term too cute by half. It undervalues what is actually meant, and how the phrase is intended, creating a grammar that affords credibility to the incredible. But more problematic, a counter offense to this line of attack is sorely missing. None at any rate that realistically compares with anything resembling the “fake news” narrative that aims to undermine public trust in legitimate news sources. Memes with captions like “CNN is Fake News” or “Mainstream Media Lies” are frequently shared by right-wing supporters, seeking to delegitimize critical reporting and promote alternative narratives. And we have little to combat memes that depict immigrants as criminals or job stealers, featuring images with captions like “Build the Wall” or “Deport them all” that circulate widely on social media, amplify anti-immigrant rhetoric. And, lest we forget, we had bupkis when it came to COVID-19 memetic assaults that spread misinformation and downplayed the severity of the virus, often rejecting public health guidelines and promoting unproven treatments while portraying vaccines or mask-wearing as weak and deserving of public confrontation.

The January 6 Insurrection, an event that was almost entirely orchestrated and in the weeks leading up to that event, false and misleading information about the 2020 presidential election was widely spread on social media platforms with baseless claims of widespread voter fraud and election rigging amplified, contributing to the belief among some that the election had been stolen. Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Parler became echo chambers for extremist ideologies, further polarizing an already toxic online discourse, serving as spaces for like-minded individuals to meet, plan logistics, share information about the Capitol protest, amplify their messaging, and recruit new members. These social media platforms were central to coordinating transportation to Washington, D.C., with widely distributed information about caravans and bus routes, ensuring the gathering of participants from various parts of the country. And during the insurrection, participants live-streamed events on social media platforms with live videos providing real-time updates about the situation unfolding at the Capitol.

To put this in broader context, January 6 was—possibly—an opening salvo. If previous election cycles birthed a proliferation of memes in the United States with the Insurrection as the net result, we’d better buckle up. Both 2024 and 2028 promise to be worse. Through memes and tweets, Donald Trump’s 2016 campaign declared war on the GOP, Democrats, Hillary Clinton, the media, Mexicans, and, most of all, “political correctness.” And “Pepe the Frog,” a ubiquitous meme, which originated as a harmless internet meme, was co-opted by right-wing groups and became associated with white nationalism and anti-Semitic sentiments.

Memes and tweets have been central to an ongoing war on democracy, human rights, LGBTQ+ rights, women’s reproductive rights and more. Perhaps we may have been more prepared if we all read—and understood—Giese’s 2015 essay on memetic warfare. It’s doubtful, though.

The problem with mimetic tit-for-tat is that when one side’s tit can’t adequately match the other side’s tat, it creates a near-perpetual state of disadvantage.



My phone pinged again.

Masc4Masc: hey nice profile

Me: Thanks. You too.

Masc4Masc: thanks

... ..

... ..

Me: You there.

Me: ?

... ..

I was immediately annoyed at the profile name. Why are some gay men so obsessed with the construction of masculinity? A quick scroll through TikTok shows myriad men at ease with fluidity and camp while dating apps severely lack anything that even approaches that level of self-expression—let alone humor—making the dissonance in the gay male construct as viable sex partner versus the gay male as a social creature, more transparent.

It is a miracle that anyone on a dating app actually ever gets out of the house and, you know, hook up, I thought. I was also irritated by the lack of punctuation in my possible paramour's hastily constructed repartee.

It made me wonder whether this was normal or if we had entered a highly voyeuristic, disconnected era. Whether our online personas, exposed and more divulging of our innermost secrets, have spawned a society of sweaty lurkers for whom IRL connections were anathema.

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After a lull in the conversation, Diego sighed. “I think some young gays—and straights—have no connection with any kind of struggle. We don’t know how. And the apps make it all look so normal out there. And fun.” Diego was too young to be directly affected by the AIDS era and too shielded to be affected by the current migrant crisis, his parents having left for the USA in 1990, but he was always mindful that he stood on the shoulders of those who preceded him.

“Pride is not what it used to be,” I said, fully aware of just how ‘get off my lawn,’ that sounded. “Have a look at this, I actually bookmarked the scene because I’m so annoyed by it. It’s from *Glamorous*, the [new Netflix show](#) that pushes hard against gender and orientation boundaries and I found this gem.” I search the beginning of episode five until I find the scene. “In this bit, the main character, Marco, who is gender non-conforming, speaks with drag queen, Dizmal, about Pride, its meaning, and corporate exploitation,” I said, pressing play on my iPhone.

Marco: What about representation, inclusivity?

Don't you think Pride should mean something?

Dizmal: Anyone here got a brick? We got us the next Marsha P ready to start Stonewall all over again.

Marco: Oh my God. Okay. I just think pride should mean something.

Dizmal: Maybe it did back in the dial-up era but look around the world has cashed in. I know I have, because I am a whore, darling. We all are.

“I don’t even watch that show and I hate it” Diego said. “I wonder if our disconnect is because there are unresolved issues in our dealing with stages of survival and acceptance. Art—or online stuff—seldom address and deal with pain.”

Jon cleared his throat and took another sip. “I hate these kids.” He shook his head. “I guess I like that Dizmal is so clear-eyed and ready to game the Pride machine. I think you are right. And I don’t want to change the conversation but as a result of the tone of our online ecosystem I feel constant pressure to curate my life to present an image of unending positivity—like I’m super-

blessed and thankful for my Instagrammable Ugandan coffee from Trader Joe's in this special little mug from who-knows-where in Mexico, sitting at a tiny table in my kitchen overlooking the brick wall against which drunk students piss every weekend when they leave the bars.”

“The Uganda coffee Insta thing may—I think—be one of the expressions of [fetishized sight](#),” I said, “although to some the wall visible from your place, and the guys, are it's own fetish but that's not what Marx had on mind, I'm sure, and certainly not the paper I'm referring to.” Everyone laughed, and I paused for a minute. “So, the way I apply ‘fetishized sight’ to what you're saying is that Instagram, for example, hinges on our fixation or over-focus on single objects that we're sharing in the hope of validation and acceptance. So, in effect, it forms a highlights reel—a showcase—of ‘best moments’ that conceals personal struggles and challenges through a curated representation that makes up this myth of perpetual happiness—a myth that makes all of us feel inadequate or at least discontented with our lives.”

“But it's just a cup with coffee. And a pretty kitchen with a shitty view but it's gritty and kinda sexy,” Glanson said. “And not everything is always meant to be *curated*, as you say.”

“The fact that we self-curate so naturally when engaging with Insta is exactly the problem I am highlighting,” I said, “and the price of admission to the app is a “[good vibez only](#)” mentality that ignores the origin of the coffee in that cup and that Uganda is considering executing gays while *we* look past the fact that Trader Joe's is tacitly supporting that country, by doing business there.”

“I do find that hugely triggering,” Diego said, “that whole ‘just be positive’ or ‘good vibes’ culture, where online users are peer-pressured into ignoring any hint of negativity and focus myopically on presenting an almost medicated outlook.” He paused. “And I often close Insta because I feel that I'm not good enough. Actually, that I am not white enough, because the platform feels overwhelmingly white cis-het, which I guess, is why Black Twitter started.”

“Exactly. A community within the community for users that feel marginalized and ignored—invisible—to that elite or host community,” Glanson said. “Isn't Musk South African?”

“Unfortunately,” I said. “In fact, he was born in the same hospital as me in Pretoria, the HF Verwoerd<sup>4</sup>, which in turn was named after the architect of Apartheid. And I hate to say it, but some South Africans are douchebros.”

Glanson leaned over and ruffled my hair. “It’s OK. We love you. But just a last thing about [Black Twitter](#). A lot of Black users are planning to migrate to a new app, [Spill](#), which is about to launch. It has Black founders who left X when too many in the community had issues with what seemed like a lack of hate-speech moderation on Twitter which seems somewhat toxic under your countryman’s leadership,” he said with a nudge in my direction.

“We do love suffering misfits,” Glanson continued, staring out the window, “and particularly if they come in the shape of an over-the-top woman at the end of her rope.”

“Like,” Jon responded, “why do you think we love Liza?”

“And Britney,” Diego laughed.

“And why do old opera queens gravitate to Madam Butterfly and tragic train wreck operatic heroines?” Jon shrugged before continuing. “It’s as if it takes our less-than-bougie suffering, elevating it to something epic, on an operatic level.”

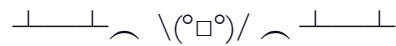
“That’s interesting. I think *we* are operatic,” Glanson said. “Our lives are dramatic. Our look is part costume. We are inherently artists. We are in some form of constant conflict with society, and afflicted by childhood traumas and finally, after mentally amputating the worst bits and clinging to chosen family, we die, alone, and many of us, unloved. That’s some opera-shit right there.”

“It’s who we are,” I said. “I was 10 when I wrote the Afrikaans word for gay—moffie—on a piece of paper which I stared at for a while, hating it and me and not knowing why. Now, years later, I know that as queer folk we play corrected copies of ourselves, we develop a new grammar and modulate our voices, and try to blend as a mechanism to soften moments of embarrassment and

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<sup>4</sup> Since 1994 known as the Steve Biko Academic Hospital at the University of Pretoria .

discrimination. And the hard thing is that we will spend most of our lives trying to figure out which bits of us are authentic and which bits are part of an emotional exoskeleton.”



“I’ll walk with you to the Redline stop,” Jon said, as I left Broken English. We walked in silence for a block, the busy neighborhood somewhat overwhelming as most of the bars and restaurants were filled to capacity with students and rowdy Northsiders making the most of the good weather. Chicago really celebrated whatever heat and sun it gets.

“You know, I think it boils down to the possibility that we’ll never make it until we learn to say “pussy,” Jon said. “We are so scared of offending we play such advanced semantic hide-and-seek that we end up essentially impotent. Just look at how the left has never been able to say “pussy,” and that is one of the most damning things to attach to Trump. I mean, if that was Biden or Hillary…”

“You’d never hear the end of it,” I said. It was funny because it was true. Jon was referring to the Access Hollywood video that surfaced in the lead up to the 2016 Election, when Donald Trump in conversation with Billy Bush, the Access Hollywood anchor at the time, said, “when you’re a star, they let you do it. You can do anything.” Bush says, “Whatever you want,” to which Trump famously replied, “Grab them by the pussy. You can do anything.”

“Now, just to follow up from our conversation earlier,” Jon replied, “if we *are* to engage in memetic warfare, and at the time of that video we were buried under anti-Hillary stuff and Pizza-gate, let alone the collective Republican meltdown over Hillary’s use of the word “deplorable,” the best the left could do was bleep out the word pussy while tut-tutting and rolling their eyes.”

“True,” I said, “and is it any wonder that, given the language and blatant misogyny, not to mention the very definition of toxic masculinity so evident from that Access Hollywood language

and how the left keeps merely fanning themselves in the face of nuclear-level heat, it any wonder that Roe vs. Wade was struck down? And that the best we can do is vent on TikTok.”

We walked silently for a block. Sometimes one just needs to be quiet—us against the world. I wondered if we—all the bits that make us *us*—will be ok, or if this was just how things will be from now on.

Saved from my rabbit hole was a familiar ping.

Masc4Masc: Sup?

... ..

Me: Hey...Not much. Bored.

Masc4Masc: Looking?

... ..

“*Somebody* is getting noticed,” Jon said. “This is me. Have fun.”

I looked at the message again. Oh well. YOLO.

Me: Sure.



## Glossary of ASCII Art

In keeping with the online and connected theme of this work, I researched the evolution of the emoji and symbol system used in text-based settings. ASCII art refers to images that are created using the ASCII text characters.

Widespread usage of ASCII art can be traced to the computer bulletin board systems of the late 1970s and early 1980s, where the examples in this essay originate. The limitations of computers of that time period necessitated the use of text characters to represent images.

ASCII images are created by either converting an existing image to ASCII characters by hand or starting from scratch and using typography to create a decent approximation of something.

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