

CRITICAL MEME READER III

INC READER #17

BREAKING THE MEME

EDITED BY CHLOË ARKENBOUT AND İDİL GALİP

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MEMES AS A CULTURAL REMEDY: A CRITICAL RACE ANALYSIS OF BLACK MEMETIC RESISTANCE

ALEXIS E. HUNTER AND TIERA TANKSLEY

The Sociotechnical Ingenuity of Black Youth

Over the past two decades, social media has become a primary medium for Black youth to share widely how societal injustices continue to harm historically marginalized communities. Youth-led social media movements showcase how technology is being repurposed and/or hacked for justice. Marginalized communities' embodied experiences and emerging literature are unearthing socioemotional and mental health consequences of activist burnout and racial battle fatigue.¹ It is crucial to acknowledge how Black youth are re-envisioning digital activism in more expansive, restorative, and anti-capitalist ways. It is vital to place Black resistance into a rich history of exploitation, capitalist and otherwise, and recognize how and why youth activists are calling attention to the intersectional labor, trauma, and exhaustion that often go unaddressed and unacknowledged in collective organizing.

In response to the exploitation and commodification of activist labor online, and growing awareness of the mental, emotional, and physiological health effects of experiencing anti-black racism on and offline, Black youth are identifying the importance of prioritizing holistic wellness alongside advocating for the transformation of our material conditions.² This is exemplified by the increasingly popularized call to consider "rest as resistance,"³ the staunch critique of "grind culture" within the Black community, and the creation and dissemination of memes as playful, joy-centered acts of refusal.

Our collaborative reflection on Black youth's engagement with social media honors our personal and scholarly sisterhood. Alexis identifies as a Black youth and has led organizing efforts leveraging social media for healing, resistance, and communal care. Tiera's research has explored how Black youth repurpose social media for joy, activism, and healing since her early 20s, when she herself was a youth activist on social media. We both continue to collaborate with youth in our work as scholar-activists.

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- 1 Tiera Tanksley and Alexis E. Hunter, "Black youth, digital activism and Racial battle fatigue: How young Black activists enact hope, humor, and healing online," *The Handbook of Youth Activism*. (in press for 2023).
 - 2 Shawn Ginwright, "Radically healing black lives: A love note to justice," *New Directions for Student Leadership* 148 (2015): 35.
 - 3 Tricia Hersey, *Rest is Resistance: A Manifesto* (London: Hachette UK, 2022).

We write this to affirm that these digital practices are not a departure from our groundings in our ancestral roots of love and collective liberation. We are witnessing the beauty of how Black youth are weaving old and new legacies of Black fugitivity together by leveraging internet technologies as sites for communal care, healing, joy and accountability.⁴ We have shared stories of how digital spaces have been an environment our community repurposes for transformative care that is tethered to social justice. We are noticing social media's potential for healing in our lives and the necessity of embracing everyday practices that evoke joy, hope, and community as we heal and navigate oppressive systems.

Anti-Blackness as the 'Default Setting'

Critical race theorists have extensively examined how anti-black racism is ingrained in the physical world.⁵ In recent years, critical race technology scholars like Ruha Benjamin,⁶ Sayfia Noble,⁷ Kishonna Gray,⁸ and André Brock⁹ have extended articulations of the "per-manence of race" to include digital and technological contexts. The digital testimonies of Black social media users highlight the permanence and pervasiveness of algorithmic racism and codified white supremacy online, ultimately countering dominant narratives that position technologies as objective, post-racial, and politically neutral. These realities continue to expose that anti-blackness exists as the "default setting" and "organizing logic" of digital technology. Just as the eras of chattel slavery, Jim Crow, and the age of mass incarceration required unique forms of resistance, so too does this new era of technological racism and the "New Jim Code."¹⁰

Importantly, this burgeoning body of critical race and Black feminist technology scholarship reveals how algorithmic infrastructures, including code, data, and content moderation systems, are designed in ways that reify offline racial logics that keep Black humanity — our stories, our joy, and our liberation — on the technological margins. As Ruha Benjamin explains, anti-black technologies hide, speed up, and automate racism, making resistance and liberation all the more elusive and seemingly impossible. Black youth — through joy-centered and justice-oriented meme creation — subvert and dismantle algorithmic

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- 4 André Brock, "From the Blackhand Side: Twitter as a Cultural Conversation," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 56, no. 4 (2012): 529-549.
 - 5 Derrick Bell, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Race* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).
 - 6 Ruha Benjamin, "Innovating inequity: If Race is a Technology, Postracialism is the Genius Bar," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 39, no. 13 (2016): 2227-2234.
 - 7 Safiya Noble, "Teaching Trayvon: Race, media, and the politics of spectacle," *The Black Scholar* 44, no. 1 (2014): 12-29.
 - 8 Kishonna Gray, *Intersectional Tech: Black Users in Digital Gaming* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2020).
 - 9 André Brock, *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures* (New York: University Press, 2020).
 - 10 Ruha Benjamin, *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019).

erasure and codified anti-blackness. Memes in particular — and the memetic worlds that Black youth create within, against, and beneath the algorithmic margins — are one of the many ways Black youth are resisting codified white supremacy in the digital age.

Mememes as Cultural Remedy

Our theorization of memetic resistance is an explicit, historically conscious acknowledgment of Black joy, humor, and play as liberatory and subversive acts. In addition to theorizing memes as a form of subversive resistance, we also theorize them as a cultural remedy designed to heal the wounds of white supremacy and anti-blackness. Hunter and colleagues define cultural remedies as everyday practices that racially marginalized communities use to center healing and holistic well-being.¹¹

Mememes are a way our communities can take up healing and activism in synchrony, as mememes are cultural balms that enable us to fight for more liberatory futures while unapologetically staying committed to our joy and wellness. Importantly, memetic resistance is not a radical departure from the rich histories and lineages of the ongoing struggle for Black liberation but rather an emerging form of sociotechnical advocacy that bends, breaks, and blurs the mythical dichotomy between activism as *labor*, and activism as *play*. The latter is powerful and calls attention to how enacting racialized joy within a white supremacist system structured by plantation logic can be transformative and, thus, materially and discursively dangerous for those who participate.

Since the goal of anti-black racism is to fragment, dehumanize, and spirit murder Black bodies, Black joy is considered a radically dangerous act simply because it fosters (re)humanization through critical hope and healing. Audre Lorde reminds us of the revolutionary power of joy and affective energy, noting, "In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change."¹² The use of violence to extinguish Black joy is a persistent feature of anti-black social structures and includes such contemporary tragedies as Tamir Rice, the 12-year-old Black boy who was shot to death in his own backyard for playing with a toy gun;¹³ Kiera Wilmont, the Black high schooler who was arrested for conducting a messy science experiment during recess;¹⁴ or O'Shae

11 Alexis E. Hunter et al., "Embracing the Newest Generation of Healers," (Forthcoming).

12 Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1984), 87.

13 Tom McCarthy, "Tamir Rice: Video Shows Boy, 12, Shot 'seconds' after Police Confronted Child," *The Guardian*, November 26, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2014/nov/26/tamir-rice-video-shows-boy-shot-police-cleveland>.

14 Kiera Wilmont, "An Unexpected Reaction: Why a Science Experiment Gone Bad Doesn't Make Me a Criminal," *HuffPost*, December 7, 2017, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/an-unexpected-reaction-wh_b_3328210.

Sibley, the Black queer man who was murdered for voguing at a gas station.¹⁵ These murders exist against the backdrop of increasing hostility towards Black life and wellness, particularly within the realm of education, where the systematic suppression of Black joy is becoming increasingly institutionalized through curriculum bans on African-American studies¹⁶ and the elimination of recess and structured playtime in predominantly Black schools.¹⁷ Likewise, social media platforms have been shown to employ biased content moderation policies around Black joy, including TikTok's banning of the viral #BlackGirlFollowTrain hashtag (which allowed Black girl content creators to find and affirm each other on the platform) and its constant shadowbanning and demonetization of joyous dance content made by and for Black creators (which prompted the Black Tik Tok protest).

Though seemingly innocuous and unrelated to our discussion of memetic resistance, the institutional banning of Black joy both on and offline harkens back to the era of enslavement, where Black rest, joy, and personal fulfillment were crimes punishable by death. Historians have called attention to how engaging in joy, play, rest, and romantic love were seen as crimes of theft and robbery punishable by death during the era of enslavement.¹⁸ This is because experiencing joy, levity, or healing directly challenged the success of the plantation economy, which was dependent upon the slave owner's complete and unbreachable control over Black laboring bodies whose collective hopelessness helped ensure that revolutions and revolts could never occur. Having the courage to "thief" or "steal back" one's body, joy, and humanity from the plantation undermined the economic survivability of the colonial empire.¹⁹ When viewed through the lens of white supremacy and colonialism, it becomes clear that the Black body is meant to be yoked, harnessed, exploited, and erased, and expressions of joyous autonomy — the flames that have historically sparked revolutions — must be suppressed at all costs. With this historical and contemporary context at the forefront, creating memes that invoke culturally situated and race-conscious joy and laughter is a staunch act of resistance.

Furthermore, the hypocrisies of white supremacy create an environment where historically oppressed communities are frowned upon for protesting dehumanizing systems while also being told by systems of power what counts as activism. Nevertheless,

15 Matthew Rodriguez, "O'Shae Sibley, a Beloved Dancer, Killed after Voguing at Brooklyn Gas Station," *Them*, August 1, 2023, <https://www.them.us/story/oshae-sibley-black-gay-man-dancer-stabbed>.

16 GW Today, "Backlash: Inside Florida's African American Studies Ban," *GW Today*, February 1, 2023, <https://gwtoday.gwu.edu/backlash-inside-floridas-african-american-studies-ban>.

17 Olga S. Jarret, "A Research-Based Case for Recess," *US Play Coalition*, November 2013, https://www.playworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/US-play-coalition_Research-based-case-for-recess.pdf.

18 Natasha A. Tinsley, "Thieving Sugar: Reading Eroticism Between Women in Caribbean Literature" (PhD Diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2003).

19 Tinsley, "Thieving Sugar," 191.

the Black community is expanding what activism can look like by asserting that taking care of ourselves is inherently activist-oriented work. This sentiment echoes Audre Lorde's assertion that "caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare."²⁰ Studies have shown that although it is an essential and indispensable aspect of collective organizing, in-person, on the ground activism can be incredibly taxing and dangerous as Black youth are at risk of physical²¹ and carceral violence, which in turn can lead to spirit-murdering,²² racial-battle fatigue,²³ and various other mental health crises.

In the Black community, memes are grounded in our rich graffiti and political cartooning histories — taking, making, and reclaiming space where space is not given. Memes become a way for Black youth to "tag" and disrupt anti-blackness while simultaneously working to transform consciousness in ways that keep our souls intact.²⁴ This nuance is noted by Page and Woodland, who argue that although activism aids youth of color in disrupting harmful systems, it also significantly affects their mind/spirit/body.²⁵ In digital contexts, Black youth are leveraging the critical humor of memes as a healing tool while also recognizing how memes are digital graffiti that increases content virality, thus exposing how anti-Blackness operates. Cultural remedies are necessary to center one's full humanity while working toward social change. Cultural remedies are a beautiful reminder that even as white supremacy updates, so do our communities' loving practices of care. Black youth highlight how memes in particular are a complex and strategic justice-oriented practice. We want to call attention to the need for a more robust understanding that honors how Black youth are expanding our conceptualizations of healing-centered resistance.

Context of the #AlabamaRiverBrawl

To illustrate how memes are a cultural remedy that opens up possibilities for emerging forms of digital resistance and sociotechnical ingenuity, let's look at the events of the

-
- 20 Audre Lorde, "Poetry is not a Luxury," Lorde, Audre. "Poetry is not a Luxury," in *The Broadview Anthology of Expository Prose*, ed. Laura Buzzard, Don LePan, Nora Ruddock, and Alexandria Stuart (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1985), 125.
- 21 Tiera Tanksley. "Race, Education, and #BlackLivesMatter: How online transformational resistance shapes the offline experiences of Black college-age women." *Urban Education* 0, no. 0 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1177/00420859221092970>.
- 22 Patricia Williams, "Spirit-murdering the Messenger: The discourse of fingerpointing as the law's response to racism." *U. of Miami Law Review* 42, no. 1 (1987): 127.
- 23 William Smith, "Black Faculty Coping with Racial Battle Fatigue: The campus racial climate in a post-civil rights era," in *A long way to go: Conversations about Race by African American Faculty and Graduate Students*, ed. Darrell Cleveland (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 171-190.
- 24 Ashley N. Woodson & Alexis E. Hunter, "Memes as Digital Graffiti and Political Cartoons," Workshop hosted at the Practicing Hope Summit at Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts. (2019).
- 25 Page and Woodland, *Healing Justice Lineages: Dreaming at the Crossroads of Liberation, Collective Care, and Safety* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2023).

#AlabamaRiverBrawl in Montgomery, Alabama. On August 5th, 2023, a brawl broke out after Damien Pickett, a Black man working at the riverfront dock,²⁶ asked for a group of white people to move their illegally parked boat so a riverboat could dock. Displeased with his request, a group of white men jumped Damien, and he tried to fight back in self-defense but was simply outnumbered. As Black witnesses nearby realized what was occurring, they immediately sprung into collective action and protected Damien from a tragedy that could have resulted in his death. A young man even jumped off the boat he was on to swim over the dock to defend Damien, and another man grabbed a folding chair. One of many harsh realities of enduring a white-supremacist world in which Black existence is unceasingly under attack is that white people feel they have the right to harm us without consequence. It is important to emphasize that Damien was simply doing his job, and the insidious ideologies of anti-Blackness disregard our humanity regardless.

Located in the deep south, Montgomery, Alabama has historically been the center of many profound Black liberatory movements that brought global attention to the Black experience in America. Montgomery is often referred to as the birthplace of the Civil Rights Movement. In situating our analysis of memes in the cultural event of the #AlabamaRiverBrawl, we recognize that this particular event is deeply connected to the broader contexts of white supremacy and our ongoing pursuit for collective liberation. Gloria Ladson-Billings beautifully articulates that stories are like medicines that support our healing and sustain us as we grapple with the pains of racialized oppression.²⁷

Thus, by reflecting on the #AlabamaRiverBrawl, we can simultaneously weave together stories that contextualize Black Americans' locally and nationally situated experiences in ways that prioritize truth-telling as essential to our healing.

The #AlabamaBrawl is powerful as it represents the power of Black solidarity on and offline. As those physically present came to Damien's defense, Black social media users simultaneously posted digital affirmations and reflections on what transpired. Black social media users leveraged critical algorithmic literacies²⁸ by using the hashtag #AlabamaRiverBrawl when posting memes about the incident to 'disrupt the algorithm.' Through this hashtagging, our communities enacted agency by creating a centralized digital counterspace where, through creating and sharing memes, we could process and uplift our stories and ultimately tell the truth about what transpired at the riverboat dock.

26 Moulite and Wilkes, "Fade in the Water: An Alabama Brawl and the Power of Black Resistance," *New America*, August 14, 2023, <https://www.newamerica.org/the-thread/montgomery-alabama-boat-brawl/#:~:text=On%20August%205th%2C%20a%20frenzied,allow%20a%20riverboat%20to%20dock.>

27 Gloria Ladson-Billings, "Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education," *Teachers College Record* 97, no. 1 (1995): 57.

28 Tiera Tansley, "Employing an Abolitionist, Critical Race Pedagogy in CS: Centering the voices, experiences and technological innovations of Black youth," *Journal of Computer Science Integration* 6, no. 1 (2023): 1-16.

Memes as Transformational Resistance

Through our lens of experiencing memes as a cultural remedy, we can illuminate the civic engagement and digital innovation of Black youth as they lovingly invite us all to commit to critical consciousness and the life-long transformation of our hearts and minds in ways that keep our souls intact. However, this lens still allows space to interrogate and process racialized violence. Therefore, Black meme creation, consumption, and circulation have collective impacts. Though memes have distinctive aspects that evoke various modes of transformational resistance, Black meme creation is all rooted in a deep love of our people. These modes of digital transformational resistance are operationalized due to Black youth's understanding of their racialized experiences and acknowledgment that healing is a gateway to new worlds.

Refusal

*in the face of trials
our souls remain pure
we are strengthened by the love of our ancestors
we know our breath is a portal to the spirit
our people are inherent disruptors
we are not here to align with the rhythms of the world
we are living testimonies
everyday i see us
protecting ourselves and each other*

In her groundbreaking work on Black visual studies, Tina Marie Campt asks: how do we engage a contemporary visual archive of blackness that is saturated by the proliferation and mass circulation of images of violence, anti-Blackness, and premature death? To answer this query, Campt introduces the concept of *refusal*, which names how Black image creation — and, we believe by extension, memes — create "radical modalities of witnessing that refuse authoritative forms of visibility which function to refuse blackness itself."²⁹ An exemplar of this normative/authoritative/hegemonically white way of viewing Black Death — or, alternatively, refusing to see Black life and humanity — is the virality of police killing videos. While the white supremacist colonial gaze demands that we consume, commodify, and fetishize Black death and suffering on a continuous loop and in ahistorical, decontextualized ways, memetic resistance offers us an opportunity to refuse the anti-black colonial gaze and instead look at these images with unapologetically Black ways of knowing. Campt explains that practicing refusal names the urgency of rethinking the time, space, and fundamental vocabulary of what

29 Tina Marie Campt, "Black Visibility and the Practice of Refusal," *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory* 29, no. 1 (2019): 79.

constitutes politics, activism, and theory, as well as what it means to refuse the terms given to us to name these struggles.³⁰ Refusal is perhaps the broadest, most all-encompassing form of resistance because it captures the nature of Black meme creation in general: redefining activism as something playful, petty, and humorous, as well as redefining memes (which are often believed to be solely focused on humor) as politically generative catalysts of social change.

In the case of #AlabamaRiverBrawl, the original video was filmed and narrated by a Black woman. As such, the entire encounter was framed by Black voices and perspectives. The audience hears her reactions and commentary on the incident in real time. She also provides background context and an incisive racial analysis of the events, all while using humor and call-and-response linguistic practices. Notably, the camerawoman is not the only narrator on the scene; by using iconic Black linguistic practices, including signifying and playing the dozens, she invites other Black bystanders to join in the narration. Here, we can see an unapologetically Black form of storytelling — one that is collective and communal, one that includes overlapped speech and circular narratives, and one that uses humor as a form of refusal that disallows viewers to engage with the chain of events through a white colonial gaze.



Fig. 1: Footage of what happened

30 Campt, "Black Visuality and the Practice of Refusal," 80.



Fig. 2: Understanding the history of Montgomery

Another way the #AlabamaRiverBrawl memes enact refusal is in their incorporation and interpolation of Black histories and ancestors. Across all the memes found, there was some recognition of, or signaling to, slavery and its afterlives (e.g., Jim Crow and the Civil Rights era, police brutality, and the BLM era, etc.); naming of the ancestors was part and parcel of what happened on that dock. These practices speak to a Black cultural and historical practice called Sankofa, which means "go back and get it." Sankofa asserts that we cannot understand contemporary issues and events without first situating said events into a rich history. Where white supremacy and colonialism evoke ahistoricism and individualism to obscure the truth, Black visibility and the practice of refusal demand that we use history and non-western ways of knowing to "look back," "look again," and "look differently" so that we can see the truth.



Fig. 3: Walked off that Vessel with her Spirit



Fig. 4: Proud Ancestors

Re-Memory

*what was once hidden
will resurface
re-memory is an invitation to a sacred quest
resurrecting what was once suppressed
we hold anthems and wordless stories
freedom is our birthright, and it will not be denied
the truth will set us free*

Toni Morrison describes re-memory as communal memories of the African American past.³¹ Specifically, she defines re-memory as "recollecting and remembering as in reassembling the members of the body, the family, the population of the past... it was the struggle, the pitched battle between remembering and forgetting, that became the device of the narrative. The effort to both remember and not know"³² the traumas of anti-Black violence, racism, and white supremacy terror.

In "Lift Every Voice and Sing" and "Fade in the Water," we see the collective endeavor to reimagine an alternate history of slavery in ways that center hope, humor, resistance, and survival. Negro spirituals were gospel songs sung by slaves meant to send coded messages about the underground railroad to other slaves. Some of the most famous songs include "Wade in the Water" — a song that explained that one could escape the hunting dogs by wading into the water — and "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" — a song sung by Harriot Tubman to let enslaved friends and family know that she was getting ready to organize the next escape.

31 Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Vintage, 1987).

32 Toni Morrison, "'I Wanted to Carve out a World Both Culture Specific and Race-Free': An Essay by Toni Morrison," *The Guardian*, August 8, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/aug/08/toni-morrison-rememory-essay>.



Fig. 5: *Good Times* Remix: *Fade in the Water*



Fig. 6: *Somebody Said Lift Every Voice and Swing*

Importantly, re-memory goes beyond just reimagining traumatic slave histories, but also the afterlives of slavery they evoke. According to Saidiya Hartman, the afterlives of slavery include "skewed life chances, poor educational outcomes, mass incarceration and premature death." One of the most salient examples of slavery's afterlives is the gratuitous public slaughter of unarmed Black people by white mobs, self-appointed vigilantes, and law enforcement agents, all of whom rarely face penalties for their crimes against Black life.

In the "Open Carry" meme, we can see how the creator re-stories the meaning of "open carry" — a popular gun law in Southern and Mid-Western territories. This reference is multi-layered and calls attention to how constitutional amendments related to guns (Open Carry) and property rights (Stand Your Ground) are often used to justify the extra-judicial killing of innocent Black

Americans. For instance, Philando Castile was murdered by police in Ferguson after alerting the officer to his open-carry license. Here, we see a re-storying and reimagining of laws used to constrict and constrain Black lives to instead be about protecting and sustaining them.

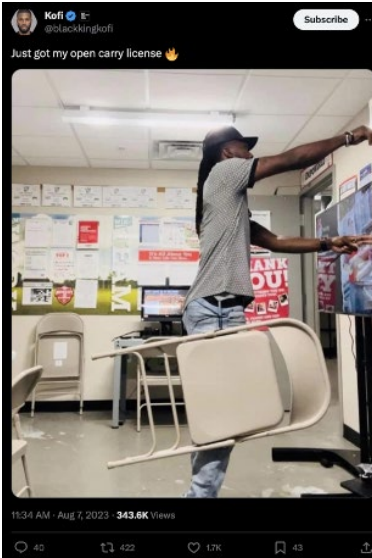


Fig. 7: Just got my open carry license

Remixing

*love is justice out loud
 all we want is for us to look back
 and know we gave it everything we had
 how could you not smile fondly when you think of us
 our stories have become our collective song
 a melody that your spirit cannot shake
 reminding us that the pursuit of justice
 although difficult and a commitment of a lifetime
 can be joyful, and we will not be denied
 and you cannot put your red ink
 on a story we did not give you permission to edit
 let our collective story empower you
 and be a constant reminder
 that we still have work to do*

With roots in hip hop, remixing is a digital call and response that updates and intermixes historical realities with contemporary ones. For instance, one of the most iconic memes from the #AlabamaRiverBrawl remixes Barnes' *Sugar Shack* painting. Barnes' depiction of Black joy and jazz music in the segregated south gained notoriety after it was used as Marvin Gaye's 1976 album cover, and even more so when it was added to the end credits of the 1970s sitcom *Good Times*.³³ Memetic remixing is a collective endeavor to call upon and update the ancestral archive.



Ernie Barnes, *The Sugar Shack*, 1976, acrylic

Fig. 8: *The Sugar Shack* 1976

I love the internet



10:20 AM · Aug 7, 2023 · 1.3M Views

Fig. 9: *The Alabama Sweet Tea Party* 2023

33 The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, "The Sugar Shack." The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Accessed September 3, 2023, <https://www.mfah.org/exhibitions/sugar-shack>.

Remixing doesn't merely include updating the stories, memories, and archival artifacts made by and for the Black community but also remixing popularized stereotypes and anti-black rhetoric that aim to harm and undermine Black people and communities. In the "Black People Can't Swim" meme, the creator is remixing a famous Usher meme, "Watch This," which implies someone is about to be upstaged or proven wrong. Similarly, in the "Now Try That in a Small Town" meme, we see how the creator literally remixes a song that has received backlash for being a lynching anthem used to threaten Black lives in contemporary times, turning white supremacist threat on its head.



Fig. 10: Black People Can't Swim



Fig. 11: Try That in a Small Town

Finally, in the "Have a Seat" and "A Whole Sermon" memes, we can see how the creator calls attention to an iconic moment in Black history. The first harkens back to when Rosa Parks was told by white bus riders to "have a seat," which eventually prompted the Montgomery Bus Boycott. This meme remixes the threat towards Rosa Parks and suggests that the #AlabamaRiverBrawl was "payback" for this historic disrespect. The second puts a satirical spin on a famous quote by Shirley Chisholm, a congresswoman and the first Black woman presidential candidate. These memes call attention to how a humorous and joy-centered re-memory of a Black trauma — and the pain, suffering, and humiliation that civil rights activists endured for our collective freedom — can spark collective and contemporary "lick backs."



Fig. 12: *Have a Seat*

Fig. 13: *A Whole Sermon*

Reparations

*we must go back
back to our origins
back to our roots
as we claim what has always been ours*

Reparations is an expansive and historically rooted term that has, in some ways, become academically sanitized and oversimplified. More often than not, reparations are defined solely

in monetary terms and often focus on the quantification of Black suffering and disenfranchisement. As we continue to witness on social media, Black youth in the digital space call attention to more immediate and unapologetically "petty" (re)definitions of reparations to include "clap backs" and "getting your lick back." Indeed, while financial and economic deprivation is a salient, undeniable, and uncompromisable feature of reparations, physical and material reparations are not the only harm that needs to be repaired. Black joy, life, hope, and wellness were also sacrificed and stripped away during and after enslavement. Thus, we are also owed reparational joy, humor, and levity. Everyday, urgent, "here and now" reparational practices are essential to our healing, especially as we continue to freedom dream and strive towards a liberatory future where comprehensive reparations are fully and comprehensively achieved.



Fig. 14: Nathaniel Alexander Designed the Folding Chair

The "Nathaniel Alexander designed the folding chair" meme also evokes Black history and ties historic harm — including the erasure, exploitation, and co-optation of Black intellectual genius — to contemporary reparations and "lick backs." While the *Take My Hand* Mural of Harriet Tubman in Cambridge, MA, is meant to capture how Tubman brought slaves to freedom, the digital update, including the "Take My Chair" meme, suggests Tubman is encouraging folx to engage in 'lick back' reparations.



Fig. 15: Harriet Mural

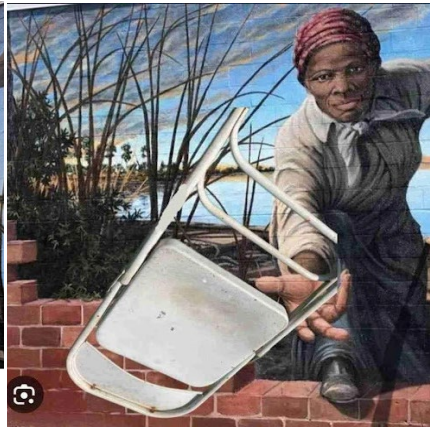


Fig. 16: Take My Chair

The "Civil Rights Museum" meme suggests that, like Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King Jr., and other ancestors before them who fought for freedom, human rights, and reparations, the chair has played an important role in our collective liberation. Finally, the "me watching us get our lick back" meme hints at the collaborative, multi-layered joy that reparations can bring.



Fig. 17: Me Watching Us Get Our Lick Back

Restoration

*the waves crashing against the shore is inevitable
and was once hidden will eventually resurface
the truth shall set us free
freedom is our birthright, and it will not be denied*

Restoration involves "actions and activities that restore collective well-being, meaning and purpose by understanding this as a political act that recognizes the collective nature of well-being and moves away from individualistic notions of health."³⁴ As we can see in the images below, memes play a crucial role in collective healing and communal coping. Because memes are a type of signifying³⁵ — a call and response between community insiders — they are inherently collective.



Fig. 18: *Still Watching*



Fig. 19: *Me Liking Every Single Meme*

34 Ginwright, "Radically Healing for Black Lives," 39.

35 Brock, "From the Blackhand Side."

Therefore, their creation, consumption, and circulation have collective impacts (e.g., the "Black People Across America Watching That Video Today" meme). Memes, therefore, invite individuals into a communal healing space that can profoundly impact those who encounter them mentally and physically. As Kathleen Newman-Bremang (the creator of the "Still watching" meme) notes under her post, "been going through some hard health shit and have barely been able to get out of bed, so this was right on time. Scuba Gooding jr & Michael B. Phelps made me laugh so hard I cried 10 across the board!!!"

Likewise, 'The Re-Enactment,' where Black and white people came together to create a theatrical re-enactment of the iconic moments of the brawl, shows how memetic restoration is also an opportunity for intercommunal healing.

This is fine theater right here.

Give everybody an independent spirit award or something.

#FadeInTheWater



Fig. 20: *The Re-Enactment*



Fig. 21: *It's the Unity in the Re-enactment, For Me*

We believe that the restorative power of memes is essential, especially given recent surges in self-reported mental health struggles by Black Americans following the murder of George Floyd and the Surgeon General's most recent announcement that feelings of isolation and loneliness are at an all-time high amongst Americans.



Fig. 22: *Black People Accross America Watching That Video*

The latter memes, which highlight how memes can be healing on intrapersonal, intra-communal, and inter-communal levels, suggest that memetic resistance can also help us reimagine new, liberatory futures where solidarity leads to intersectional racial justice.

Reclamation

*although white supremacy tells us collective liberation is prohibited
we cast away the lies
consider this a truce between flesh and spirit
we know the ancestral realm is present
and our guide to freedom is within*

Shawn Ginwright defines reclamation as "the capacity to reclaim, redefine, and reimagine a possible future."³⁶ As we can see in the images below, memes use humor to reclaim and reimagine a future where standing up against white supremacy and anti-black violence is not only possible but survivable. We see historically and contemporarily that standing up for Black lives often results in intensified violence, and Black activists often lose their lives in the process.

This is most prevalently evidenced in the Black Lives Matter movement, where activists who documented police murders in real time and those who dared to fight back against police violence during protests have been mysteriously and violently killed in the aftermath.³⁷ Thus, memes about future uses of the chair to 'fight back' against anti-blackness reimagine what is possible for Black activists and present a Black speculative future where protecting Black lives generates rather than stifles the possibility of Black life, wellbeing and futurity.



Fig. 23: *I Keep That Thang on Me*

36 Ginwright, "Radically Healing for Black Lives," 40.

37 EJ Dickson, "Mysterious Deaths Leave Ferguson Activists 'On Pins and Needles,'" *Rolling Stone*, March 18, 2019, <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/ferguson-death-mystery-black-lives-matter-michael-brown-809407/>.



Fig. 24: *Me Practicing For the Next Time Someone Tries Me*

Memes like "I'm really upset with the Montgomery Brawl 'Training Videos'" also reimagine a future where intersectionality is a staple feature of Black liberation - something that has not always been a feature of historical movements. This video features a Black disabled person doing a mock tutorial of how to use crutches to help out in the brawl, disrupting the ways people with disabilities have been historically and contemporarily excluded from movements for social change. A significant critique of both the mainstream feminist movement and the Civil Rights movement is that these movements were focused on a single identity and thus left out the voices and experiences of people at the intersections: Black women and femmes, queer and trans folx, and folx with disabilities. In the memes that came out of the #AlabamaRiverBrawl, we see a purposeful enactment of intersectionality, which allows us to reimagine a future where ALL Black lives are included in the takedown of white supremacy.



Fig. 25: *I'm Really Upset With the Montgomery Brawl 'Training' Videos*

Ultimately, by reimagining a collective future that is intersectional and action-oriented, memetic reclamation paves the way for actively building and working towards ‘a world that is radically different from the one we inherited.’³⁸ This leads us to our final theme: revolution.

Revolution

*we move together
our journeys intertwined
through our collective struggle
we can be made anew
our dreams are threaded in the legacies of our ancestors
our dreams are gateways to new worlds
we cannot be denied
we are guided by the spirits and relentless hearts of those before us
and as we forge new paths
consider our resistance
our communal labor of love*

We connect our analysis of revolution to Robin Kelley’s beautiful articulation of the act of freedom dreaming. Freedom dreaming is an embodied, urgent practice that helps us imagine what we want to eradicate and what we want to build.³⁹ In relation to Black memetic resistance, freedom dreaming is an intervention or disruption that simultaneously reckons with the complexities of the past, present, and future. In this context, revolution occurs as Black folks online and offline defend Black livelihood and highlight that there are repercussions to anti-Blackness.



Fig. 26: It's Giving Avengers Engdame

38 Robin Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2022), 1.

39 Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*.



Fig. 27: *Buddy in Alabama Said*

For the Black community, memes are a life-giving passageway that moves us beyond awareness of how societal injustices impact our communities to create space to process. Black youth are reminding us that resistance is not just about fighting back against white supremacy, but also involves prioritizing our souls. Black memetic resistance allows the Black community to tell our stories and disrupt the white gaze. Memes are a distinctive and necessary justice-oriented practice that expands perceptions of activism while staying committed to being culturally situated. Black youth leverage meme-making to center the collective sensemaking and care in our own communities and remind us that Black activism can and should go beyond being palatable for white consumption. As Black hacktivists, our repurposing of social media for racial justice highlights the potentiality of blending play and labor in activist practices. Black youth's unwavering commitment to abolishing white supremacy and (re)centering the holistic healing practices of our ancestors, where communal healing is embedded in all aspects of our lives, grounds their expertise with digital resistance. We must celebrate and explore informal, everyday learning contexts, like social media, because they are spaces of radical possibilities where we expand perceptions around advocacy, redistribute power, and pursue liberation in joyful, communal ways.

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