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Catalogue Essay

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*“Meme culture feels like prison at this point.”
— Michel Foucault (jk, it was Jenson Leonard)*

This essay builds on ideas developed between Jenson Leonard and myself in a [2017 interview](#) published by AQNB. Memes are to culture as genes are to biology.¹ However, we've moved from a static nature versus nurture dichotomy to a more interactionist model—that is, nature and nurture [interact](#).² For example, genetic predisposition to a disease doesn't predict you'll definitely get the disease: environmental factors, comorbidities, and so on interact to determine whether the illness expresses itself in specific cases.

The same applies to memes—both circulated symbols in general³ and digital memes in particular, such as the work of Jenson Leonard a.k.a. @CoryInTheAbyss. The interactionist model is the best way to understand why so many cultural laborers are exhausted or feel that a sea change is necessary. For example, Jenson is contemplating retiring from the meme game, perhaps to become a fine artist (here, value is created through artificial scarcity or exclusivity rather than by circulation or universal relatability). He's made physical objects in the past—for example a [CD jewel case](#) with a printout of one of his memes as the insert—and comes from a poetry background.⁴

¹ Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 189–90

² See the work of naturalist Daniel Lehrman and psychologist Susan Oyama, for example.

³ “Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches. Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation.” Dawkins 1976: 192.

⁴ In a 2017 *Juxtapoz* interview, Leonard says, “My background is poetry. That’s what I went to school for, but I wanted to make something that was more widely accessible. Instantly publishing

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The general sociopolitical/online context has been exhausting for a while, so the urge to retire is relatable. Black online culture laborers face anti-Blackness constantly, either as much as or even more than in meatspace. Black diaspora theorist Christina Sharpe indeed argues that [anti-Blackness is the weather](#). Anti-Black societies are weather engineers. Corporate social media platforms limit Black creators' reach through shadow banning and ignore reports of harassment and bigotry. Non-Black people consume Black content constantly (and prefer it from light-skinned and white-passing Black people) and simultaneously never really listen to Black people. Non-Black people get accolades and income for the same things Black people get punished for (Black language, style, etc.). This latter seems to become a structural property of digitality, as far back as the obscure [Jive filter](#) of 1986, and more recently in the mainstream with facial modification filters like Snapchat's Bob Marley filter gaffe in [2016](#). Artist Keith Townsend Obadike said back in [2001](#), "The net space just makes the same old burnt cork blackface routine easier. . . . To many white artists, blackness represents some kind of borderless excess, some kind of unchecked expression."

Non-Black digital users express such affects of excess through (1) [GIFs of Black people](#), (2) [emojis with skin tones darker than their own](#), (3) what I have termed [online imagined Black English](#), or digital linguistic minstrelsy, and (4) [Blackfishing](#), which combines (1) to (3) but also involves claiming to be Black and altering one's appearance to advance this claim, and other phenomena. Singer and entertainer [Khadija Mbowe](#) goes a step further and argues that "the screen is the new burnt cork" (emphasis added). This connects with ideas advanced by the artist known as American Artist, who in the essay "[Black Goopy Universe](#)" argues that the "hacker" paradigm of Silicon Valley and its iconic black screen (with white or green code text) evinces a kind of fantasy of control and dominance, which evokes Obadike's point at the level of developer rather than user. Conversely, at least before the advent of the "night mode" option on mobile

content online through social media has always been more gratifying than waiting on a publisher to accept or reject a poem that will likely be read by a very select audience." Jenson Leonard, "An Interview with Jenson Leonard on the Intersection of Poetry and Memes," interview by Eben Benson, *Juxtapoz*, June 30, 2017.

<https://www.juxtapoz.com/news/collage/an-interview-with-jenson-leonard-of-coryintheabyss>.

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devices, the white background of the corporate digital landscape may be cause to reflect on racialized assumptions around a normatively white or white-assimilated user. We can even say that the idea of a general idealized user is unrealistic and ignores the complexity of human capacities. A generic user may be a necessity for an agile development life cycle, but it's an untenable paradox that leads to a lot of bad design and absolute broken trust between those the term "user" represents and those corporate bodies who continue to operate as though it's not obvious to "users" that we are really "products."

What kind of meme aesthetic can express this? With this brief sketch in place, we can turn to Jenson's memes, a selection of which are being showcased as part of the browser-based retrospective exhibition *Yacht Metaphor*, curated by Georgie Payne. Jenson is an artisan, laboring over most of his works to create a digital baroque aesthetic (which he terms "boughetto"), drawing on cultural references that express some of the paradoxes of the digital moment: feeling dead inside but also feeling too much constantly; dealing with information overload while also freely canceling everyone and everything that yucks our yum; hermeneutic of suspicion toward the other without realizing this partly causes our deep isolation; and on and on. There's components of a neo-Y2K aesthetic (replete with glitz and glamor, though perhaps more from a millennial perspective, where the idea of nostalgia for the 2000s really stands in for our own childhood relationship with technology, which might have seemed or felt more playful), as well as clear influence from the "Weird Facebook" and "Leftbook" aesthetics. RIP to [Terrell Davis](#), a major innovator of neo-Y2K, as well as [Gay Vape Shark](#), a major innovator of Weird FB. Leonard's style of humor strongly connects the Black satirical tradition, dating back to the blues, with its heavy reliance on Black language and affect in the digital meme sphere. The question of satirical literacy invokes the struggle for meaning, which I'll return to later.

The idea of an exit (i.e., due to exhaustion) might seem like a paradox juxtaposed with the notion of what Leonard calls "auteur" or high-effort memes. Critics might ask why Jenson would spend so much time on the memes in the first place. Ignoring formal questions of "whether memes are art" and "whether meme makers are artists," we can say that an artist will generally get the most attention for their most inane output: that's

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the nature of the lowest common denominator (and not necessarily a bad thing).⁵ Is a John Henry-type gesture of busting your ass on an overwrought output perhaps tracing a line of flight regarding, let's say, the uncirculated meme? His potential exit is, I think, less a statement on Jenson's part about the value of the medium. Rather, it's about what it is that's actually value-laden (whether exciting or disappointing), about latent potential. In the same way that the best film is perhaps the one no one ever saw, the meme that refuses to circulate (because it never got made, or it's too complex, or it was meant for only one person and that person passed on) is a meme that says a critical position is possible. Under all the layers of lulz, this missing meme is actually a significant thing, in a world where such a critical position truly seems impossible.

Memes are ranked by their circulation. The most viewed is the best one, but maybe not your favorite, the story goes. The corporate social media platforms in this story are akin to the "theatre" of evolution: the individuals with mutations that happen to be useful for their specific environments are the ones that survive. It's a cold world for all the unexpressed mutations, or the ones that might have served well in a different context, or even the ones that might be inexpressible (if that even means anything). In the attention casino, everything starts to feel like either labor, a transaction, or both. We lack terms for what's really going on, and digital network dynamics speed up concept creep (when context- or discipline-specific jargon leaves its specific use zone), so we misuse terms with specific meanings to try and describe what's going on: "emotional labor" (if this doesn't refer to a service industry worker, it may be getting misused); "intersectionality" (critical race theorist and lawyer Kimberlé Crenshaw's legal framework for articulating Black women as a protected class—i.e., rather than having to choose one or the other legally-protected category, as had been the case up till then, which now means something like "overlapping layers of oppression"⁶), and so on.

⁵ In 2017, Leonard said: "I use Adobe software to add a level of production to memes that might be as absurd as the humor in them. But if you look at the statistics of people's engagement with my content, it's no contest; I get a fractional level of attention for my work compared to less produced, rushed, even sloppy content." Leonard, "An Interview with Jenson Leonard on the Intersection of Poetry and Memes."

⁶ See Jane Coaston, "The Intersectionality Wars," Vox, May 28, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/2019/5/20/18542843/>, where Crenshaw is quoted as follows: "Sometimes I've read things that say, 'Intersectionality, blah, blah, blah,' and then I'd wonder,

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Laboring over memes you know won't get as many shares as some random inane shitpost is a kind of tragic action. But with enough satirical literacy, we can, for example, trace a potential through-line from W. E. B. Du Bois's speculative fiction,⁷ to the paintings of Robert Colescott, to Cornel West's philosophy of utopian energy coupled with tragic action,⁸ to the @CoryInTheAbyss aesthetic. If we are reading pedagogical potential into the work, this tragic action implies not only that the best meme is the one no one ever saw (the [rarest Pepe](#)) but also that a certain domain of critical discourse exists in the potentially cringey layers of reference. Some sort of emergent property exists in grokking this referential network. Is this a matter of critical mass (i.e., stacking references to a certain level) or of specific resonances of certain juxtapositions? This is a formal question that I'll leave to the critics.

The kinds of critical proposals available in the work have to do with finding ourselves in horrible, cyclical modes of coping every day. That is, they are in accord with an interactionist model. User experience (UX) design is a kind of gamification in the modern context (an affective casino, like I said), and the meme format in a sense leans into this gamification to explore whether there are alternatives. The space of the poetic, as a space of potential, perhaps arises as such an alternative, and perhaps even remains a horizon within Leonard's endeavors of making: it's unclear if we can get there, but if it's true that the dematerialization of the art object means the refetishization of discourse,⁹ then we can see some mining of the discursive in the context of this @CoryInTheAbyss showcase interface—for example, through *Yacht Metaphor*'s annotation functionality.

'Oh, I wonder whose intersectionality that is,' and then I'd see me cited, and I was like, 'I've never written that. I've never said that. That is just not how I think about intersectionality.'"

⁷ See W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Comet," in *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace), p 253-274.

⁸ Robert Pirro, "Remedying Defective or Deficient Political Agency: Cornel West's Uses of the Tragic," *New Political Science* 26, no. 2 (2006): 147-70.

⁹ Paul Mann, *The Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991).

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The poetic has to do with transcribing or tracking immaterial, nugatory cognitive phenomena in ways that resonate with the writer. But the value proposition doesn't necessarily relate to circulation—this is why poetry can feel like a “private language.” While philosophers since V. N. Vološinov and Ludwig Wittgenstein have argued language is inherently social (and thus the “private language” feeling is a kind of mirage),¹⁰ Leonard may be asking us to imagine the possibility of the private language in the context of another inherently social medium: the meme. Pop cultural frameworks make the message simultaneously “clear enough for a child,” so to speak (for example, *Slave Patrol* (2019), a *Paw Patrol*-based meme that says “Pigs Are (And Always Will Be) Slave Patrols”), while also indicting these formats as deep-seated in white supremacist assumptions and structures, such as the need to humanize the state monopoly of force through TV shows, including *Paw Patrol* for children and *Brooklyn 99* for adults. Indeed, in his argument that language is inherently social (and not private), Vološinov goes further, saying that the struggle for meaning is inherently tied to class struggle.¹¹

The *Yacht Metaphor* showcase itself takes on a game format. Rather than the gamification of affect present on corporate social media UX, it references the participatory model of video games: you enter the browser, and it takes you to a kind of video game title screen. You press any key and are brought to a solitary server rack at the bottom of the ocean, which one can imagine might be prey to sharks—might be nestled alongside the bones of those enslaved Africans thrown overboard or who jumped overboard during the voyage across the Atlantic. Then we come to a “fighter select” screen: each meme is a fighter, so to speak, and choosing your fighter brings up the annotation space for the meme. In theory, gaming as a format has a sociality that might potentially challenge, or at least not fit as usefully into, the alienated sociality of the social media “affect casino” gamification.

But if memes are to culture what genes are to biology, and memes are, at least in part, inherently social, then we find ourselves again emphasizing an interactionist position

¹⁰ See V. N. Vološinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973 [1929]) and Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1953) p88-95

¹¹ Vološinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, 23.

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about both genes and memes. That is to say, it's possible that there are cultural or social causes for genetic changes: an example includes lactose tolerance, which can be found in cultures with ancestral attachments to cattle ranching and dairy consumption. Once cattle ranching emerged, those with mutations for lactose tolerance had evolutionary success (i.e., spread their genes), and, as a result, some people in the world have lactose tolerance. And from the other side, we can see how things like language are not really inscribed in the genes (contra Noam Chomsky): if language were genetic, we would expect to find children who *aren't* able to learn certain languages, due to certain genetic mutations having occurred since the origin of language. But it seems that most children are able to learn any given language to which they are exposed in their environment. Indeed, another linguist, Daniel Everett, argues, contra Chomsky, that there is no "language instinct." Rather, he says, there is a "social instinct."¹² This instinct is why all humans seem to have some form of linguistic communication, and not because of some genetic inheritance.

The next step in this line of thinking is to understand that, in many ways, culture is a ritual escape from culture. The meme maker—especially the meme maker who is interested in the potential for critical perspectives within the form and distribution of the medium—couples utopian energy with tragic action, because they know culture doesn't really have an "outside." They sense that something deep is happening with the affect casino, deeper than the serious issues depicted in documentaries like *The Social Dilemma* (2020). A preoccupation with private language, yoked to a medium whose ontology is circulation (proven by the exception of the rarest Pepe), reveals the primary yearning: the yearning *for the social*. That is to say, the question seems to be whether *the social* is possible in this contemporary context. For example, Leonard attempts to make anti-Blackness visible without recirculating Black death media (the high-tech version of lynching mementos and abolitionist trauma porn), hearkening back to African American studies scholar Saidiya Hartman's argument against such circulation at the beginning of her book on terror and slavery, *Scenes of Subjection*.

¹² See Daniel Everett, *Dark Matter of the Mind: The Culturally Articulated Unconscious* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

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In our 2021 personal correspondence, Leonard acknowledged this somewhat pedagogical bent: “I’m not just shitposting necessarily. . . . I’m sitting with something. This is happening in collusion with theory that people are writing, and me reflecting on ideas. . . . It’s like, how can I distill theory, or attempt to respond to it in my memes, or lead people to those works?” He goes on: “@CoryInTheAbyss doesn’t happen without other people. It’s irreducibly social. I’m not *just* in the abyss—a lot of people are in there. A lot of people feel lost, and dizzy.” The artist’s annotations for *Yacht Metaphor* serve as a massification of this intent, or a yearning toward the social. Novelist and poet Wilson Harris says the artist is but a debt to (1) adversarial formative contexts and (2) the community.¹³ This is not simply a fiscal or moral debt to the community; rather, it’s an unpayable debt, a force of formation that inherently binds us to the other, to all the living today and all the dead who came before and made us possible. We can’t *pay* this debt; we can only showcase it—or gamify it, to follow the line of metaphor. For Harris, for example, aesthetic form is itself a formalization of such unpayable debt. For Leonard, the game of the abyss—which, in this iteration, is a fighting game—is the best paradox to speak to the yearning for the social.

¹³ Wilson Harris, *The Tree of the Sun* (London: Faber, 1978), 64.