MILLENNIAL HUMOUR:
POLITICAL SATIRE & (DIS)ENGAGEMENT IN THE AGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract

In the age of growing precarity and ongoing crises of longstanding political institutions, disaffection and disillusionment have become the norm in the millennial experience in Canada. What kind of humour arises in response to this condition? This project combines in-person and digital ethnography, with in-depth, semi-structured interviews to explore the connections between millennial humour and the making of generational political sensibilities. In response to the increasingly hollow political discourse, my millennial interlocutors—a self-selected group of young, Anglophone Canadians who come together in digital spaces dedicated to leftist politics— seek out internet humour that looks and feels authentic, and that resonates with their lived experience. However, as that humour often focuses on issues such as rising inequality, economic precarity, and environmental disaster, the content that resonates most, often feels “too real,” “gutting” and perhaps paradoxically—unfunny.

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Je reconnais que la terre sur laquelle je travaille et que j'habite est le territoire traditionnel du peuple algonquin Anishnaabeg.

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discussions and exchanges. A special note to my chosen sisters, whose love and friendship know no bounds.

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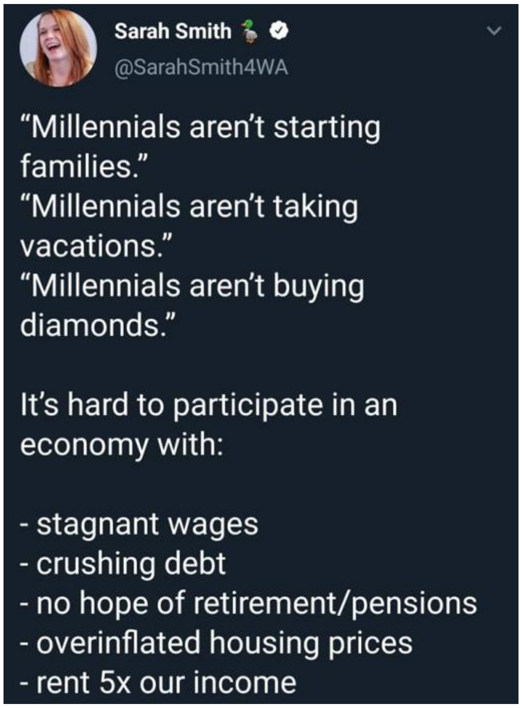
Introduction

Humour has a long and cherished history as a vehicle of political criticism, but its forms, character and modes of circulation tend to evolve alongside new technologies. In recent years, many new genres of satire, such as television shows, podcasts, and various forms of online content, have emerged in response to growing political disillusionment and skepticism. The humour featured on these platforms, like its historical counterparts, can “evoke emotions of anger, fear, despair, or a sense of the uncertain, as well as hope and solidarity” (Rehak and Trnka 2018, 2). In other words, even while thematizing “political anxiety, aggression, power, and gender identity” such humour nevertheless can also become “a tool to resist, repair, reconcile, or make a moral claim” (Rehak and Trnka 2018, 2).

The circulation of these new types of digital humour has shaped in important ways both public discourse and the self-understandings of the millennial generation which grew up alongside these new technologies. Situated at the intersection of anthropology of digital media and humour, this thesis explores what such new forms of internet humour reveal about the experiences and perceptions of the current political moment among some members of the digitally-savvy millennial generation. My focus in this thesis is a small group of self-identified millennial and anglophone Canadians whose political leanings are left of centre, and who enthusiastically engage with new genres of digital humour. Painfully aware of the multiple and ongoing crises—political, economic, and environmental—the millennials I interviewed engage with these types of humour as a form of political critique that speaks to and documents their angst.

Much of this millennial humour has taken the form of memes. Defined by Limor Shifman (2014) as "groups of items sharing common characteristics of content, form and/or stance, which were created, transformed and circulated by many participants through digital participatory platforms," a meme is to social media what graffiti is to public spaces (14). As digital artifacts, memes are embedded in the landscape of contemporary popular culture, where their circulation generates a sense of comradery and generational identity (see Figures 1 and 2 below).



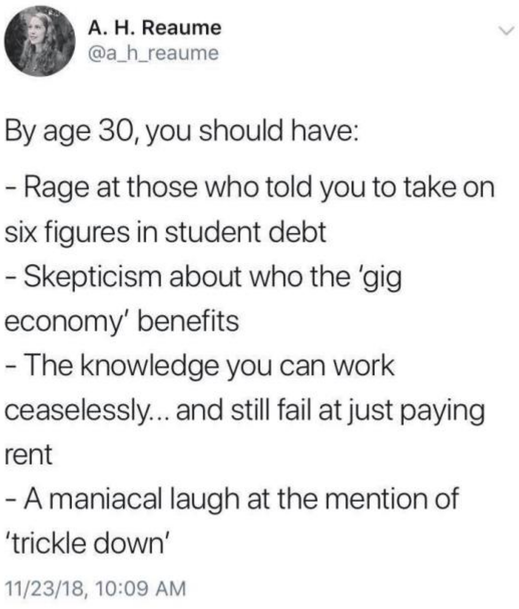
Sarah Smith
@SarahSmith4WA

"Millennials aren't starting families."
"Millennials aren't taking vacations."
"Millennials aren't buying diamonds."

It's hard to participate in an economy with:

- stagnant wages
- crushing debt
- no hope of retirement/pensions
- overinflated housing prices
- rent 5x our income

Figure 2



A. H. Reaume
@a_h_reaume

By age 30, you should have:

- Rage at those who told you to take on six figures in student debt
- Skepticism about who the 'gig economy' benefits
- The knowledge you can work ceaselessly... and still fail at just paying rent
- A maniacal laugh at the mention of 'trickle down'

11/23/18, 10:09 AM

Figure 2

The images above, which originate from Twitter, belong to a subset of memes that aim to speak back to the stereotypes and criticisms to which the millennial generation is currently subjected in much of conventional media coverage. These include the idea that millennials are "killing industries" by not engaging in specific forms of consumerism—a discourse which, as Figure 1 makes clear, deliberately ignores the current economic situation marked by stagnant wages on the one hand and crushing debts and costs of living on the other. Similarly, Figure 2 responds to these unfounded criticisms by deploying sarcasm, in the form of the phrase “by age x you should have...” and following through with a list of biting complaints that channel a particular kind of an affect. This form of satire, which includes a mix of “real” elements and over-the-top, dramatic ones, relies on parody to expose the absurdity of mainstream discourse on the millennial condition (see Boyer and Yurchak 2011 Yurchak 2005). And yet in combination, both memes, and the form of satire they represent, render visible a particular type of humour—millennial humour—which is the central object of this thesis.

Inspired by my love of satirical humour and fascination with coded discourse embedded in it, I embarked on this research, wondering what role satire plays in shaping the political sensibilities of my generation. That said, a generation is a difficult group to pin down, especially in ethnographic research, as each cohort comprises a myriad of complex intersectional identities and experiences. Like other generations before and after them, millennials are divided by class, race, gender, immigration status, sexual and political orientation. Not all millennials are equally affected by the restructuring of the global and local economies. For many members of the generation, being a millennial may not even be a primary or even significant form of identification. And yet, as these tweets above demonstrate, the idea that millennials exist as a coherent social group marked by a shared historical experience, is a common assumption which is often thematized in memes and other forms of internet humour.

My focus in this research is a small group of anglophone millennials in Canada who share progressive political orientation and come together on digital platforms to share and enjoy humorous and satirical content. I wanted to better understand how my interlocutors–a specific and admittedly self-selected group of millennials–relate to these types of humour in a historical moment marked by economic and political uncertainty. Specifically, I wanted to know whether such forms of satire held the capacity to politicize and produce critical awareness, even while they often simultaneously produced a sense of doom.

In the pursuit of answers to these questions, I chose to examine millennial humour through two lenses: that of more traditional, televised satire, exemplified by satirical news shows, and the circulation of political memes among people who belong to this generation. In approaching this topic, I was inspired by Angelique Haugerud's work the satirical troupe "the Billionaires" who argues that studying humour is "less about practical politics than it is about the political imagination, spirit of the times, limits of public discourse, poetics of politics, and the cultural delicacy [of] wealth" (2013, 19). What's more, like her 2013 book, this thesis strives to "analyze cultural politics during a time of profound ambivalence toward politics itself" (19).

To that end, I conducted fieldwork among writers of "traditional" satire (e.g., television, print), whom I observed to understand the making of mainstream Canadian humour. I also interviewed participants in leftist millennial meme culture to make sense of the effects the circulation of these digital artifacts was having on my interlocutors' political sensibilities (see methodology section). Importantly, my research was limited to interlocutors who varied in age but strongly identified with this generational cohort, which is typically said to encompass those born between 1980 and 1999 (see Hobbes 2018; Merriam-Webster n.d.). This is to say, being a "millennial" is something that entails much more than being born during a certain period—it implies a sense of generational identification. But what kind of a category is a generation?

Problematizing Generations

As I have mentioned, it takes more than being born during a specific period to relate to the same things or share the same political sensibilities. And yet living through similar historical moments and transformations can and does generate a sense of a shared generational identity. But what kind of a category is a generation? And, considering that anthropology is generally concerned with specificity, how does an ethnographic analysis approach something as seemingly general and all-encompassing as a generation?

Anthropologist Sarah Lamb has defined a generation as a "group of people who are living through a time period together and participate in some kind of shared identity, practices, and beliefs" (Lamb 2015, 853). She asserts that anthropologists have used this term "in its more genealogical, kinship-related sense," to refer to the intergenerational relationships between parents and their offspring and future descendants, or "to forms of prestige and identity tied to one's position in such a system of kinship descent" (Lamb 2015, 853). This is supported by anthropologist Sherry Ortner, who has developed the idea of "prestige hegemony" to make sense of power differences rooted in age (1996). This way of understanding generations in terms of power hierarchy was particularly prominent among my interlocutors, who often lamented the fact their life trajectories were perceived to be lagging or that they themselves were unable to achieve the conventional markers of adulthood. Interestingly, a good proportion of my interlocutors also bought into the generational conflict with the boomer generation (millennials' parents) which is often thematized in internet humour (see Chapters 1 and 2).

Ethnographic studies of generation may look at various topics, including social change, family morals, social organization in communities, and forms of identity and inequality (Lamb 2015, 853). Cole (2019) suggests that generations can "come to have a special [role] in social change" (190), particularly in light of the "transformative impact of 'youth cultures' and 'youth agency' in the contemporary global era" (Lamb 2015, 854). Furthermore, Sarah Lamb posits that generational identity can be examined along historically situated processes to "explain significant differences in experiences, ideologies, and practices among diverse members of a society or nation" (Lamb 2015, 856).

Furthermore, Strauss and Howe (1991) argue that the members of any given generation encounter critical historical events and cultural trends while also going through the same stages of life. In particular, "the formative experiences during the time of youth are highlighted as the key period in which social generations are formed" (Pilcher 1994, 483). Other scholars emphasize heterogeneity, arguing that generations are "people [grouped] together with little more in common than the years they were born" (DeChane 2014). "Members of a generation (defined as born within the same approximately 30-year period) do not automatically constitute a special-interest group, but by living through the same historical events and social developments, may be predisposed towards similar ways of thinking” (Sanders 2019, 317; see also Mannheim 1927).

Contemporary anthropologists have especially urged that researchers “consider the importance of difference, local context, and structures of power, and how these things influence conceptions of age, kinship, and gender” (Remy 2018) when considering *generation* as a category. Too often, the central position generations occupy in contemporary discourse obscures other differences, including class, gender, race, ethnicity, immigration status, disability, etc. This means that taking on the concept of generation as a point of focus is a complex task that requires careful, in-depth analysis.

Because personal identification with “being a millennial”—or belonging to any generational cohort for that matter— is subjective and requires one’s awareness of the trends (and stereotypes) associated with this group as a whole, I have chosen to concentrate in my research on adults who self-identify as millennials, focusing, in particular, on the younger half of the generation, born after 1990. My interlocutors also share an interest in memetic and internet humour, and digital culture, and as a group strongly identify with leftist politics: something which is not necessarily the case with other members of their generational cohort.

As previously mentioned, popular depictions of “being a millennial” are also often combined with tropes depicting intergenerational conflict. Rather than take this narrative to be a reflection of social realities, I analyze it as a cultural artifact in this thesis. In such social media discourse, “boomers” are represented as dismissing "“millennials” who they purportedly see as entitled and spoiled. In my research, I have found that many of my interlocutors were affected by and took this kind of rhetoric seriously, often getting very frustrated by the perceived dismissal of their own lived experience. Most notably, they expressed particular frustration with popular discourse portraying their generation as entitled and naïve, or worse, as being "brainwashed" and entitled.

Although these kinds of depictions can seem silly and melodramatic, my interlocutors felt a strong need to respond to and contest such stereotypes. "Gwendoline," a graduate student located on the Eastern coast of Canada, did not lose a beat when I asked her, in the late summer of 2019, to "define millennial."

> "The words that I think people associate with that...the first one that comes up is like *entitled*, probably *lazy*. Those are the biggest ones. Oh, and like 'they're always on their phone,' 'they like they complain about how life is hard' and stuff. Those are the biggest things. I *strongly* disagree with it, like, mass media are kind of pushing that description." (italics added for emphasis)

Despite concentrating on what "millennials are not," Gwendoline's response reveals how much of the self-definition of this generation has been shaped by the discursive tropes that circulate about them. Like many other interviewees, Gwen initially defined millennials by invoking the criticisms to which they are subjected to in the popular discourse on millennial/boomer conflict. Although these tropes are both simplistic and problematic, what is remarkable about Gwendoline's response to them is that she sees them not as a reality, but a part of "mass media description" which is powerful not because it is true but because it is everywhere. I will unpack these tensions in greater detail in Chapters 1 and 2.

My interlocutors feel that what these disparaging narratives about their generation leave behind are the structural conditions that shape millennial experience, for example, the formative role of economic downturn and the place of technology in millennials' lives. In fact, my interlocutors saw their lived experience of socio-economic realities and material conditions as the defining characteristic of their political identity. As I show in Chapter 2, such themes played an important role in the kinds of satirical humour my interlocutors found resonant. I now turn to these forms of socioeconomic restructuring and show the effect they have had on helping my interlocutors identify as members of the millennial generation.

On Cruel Expectations

One of the central processes that has shaped the lives of Canadian millennials has been the restructuring of the labor market, characterized by the demise of stable, secure employment, which became normalized during the post WWII era, and the concomitant rise of precarious, temporary contracts. My millennial interlocutors seemed to describe a widespread sense of "anomie"—a "feeling of passivity born of despair [which is] intensified by the prospect of artless, career-less jobs" (Standing 2019, 20). Economist Guy Standing has argued that the post-Fordist restructuring of the labor market has completely upended existing class structures, giving the rise to new social groups, such as the one he terms "the precariat." He argues that there exists "a creative tension between the precariat as victims, penalized and demonized by mainstream institutions and policies, and the precariat as heroes, rejecting those institutions in a concerted act of intellectual and emotional defiance" (2). This tension is present in the words of my interlocutors who offer testimonies such as the following one from "Sybil":

> "We are the most educated, the most well-read, the most hardworking generation in the history of our country, yet simultaneously the most underpaid, underappreciated, and underemployed."

Sybil's assessment of the predicament faced by her generation at a first glance appears defensive, hyperbolic even in its praise of her generational peers, designed to contest the aforementioned descriptions of millennials as lazy and entitled. But her response also reveals something more, which is the extent to which my interviewees were haunted by betrayed expectations of what their adult futures should have looked like. This gap between expectation and experience is a direct result of economic restructuring brought on by neoliberalism, deindustrialization, and the rising cost of living. For example, Sybil highlights the disjuncture between the increased access to education and the stagnation of wages, which would have been unusual during the Fordist era (and largely unheard of among white male workers who once occupied a privileged position in the labor hierarchy). At the same time, her assessment highlights the extent to which millennial expectations remain Fordist, even while their socio-economic realities are decidedly not.

This type of disaffection, born out of a mismatch between expectations and experience, plays an immense role in the humour my interlocutors engage with most. This may be a way to process the range of emotions Guy Standing links to increased precarization of work. He writes, "[p]people are insecure in the mind and stressed, at the same time ‘underemployed’ and ‘overemployed.’ They are alienated from their labour and work, and are anomic, uncertain and desperate in their behaviour” (Standing 2019, 20). This modality of affect was common in my interviews, as my informants continuously spoke of a clash between what they had been encouraged to pursue (in many cases, higher education) and the cruelty of their real-life experiences. When asked to elaborate on the space they occupy in the current social hierarchy, my millennial interlocutors offer testimonials, such as the one below:

> “I am thirty and still in school. It seems to me like credibility is earned by moving along the steps of the Game of Life—so to speak—and if you spend *any extra time* beyond what they expect you to, *on any of those steps*, as many millennials have had to do because of the economic constraints they face, then you *irreparably lose credibility*: I am *so often discredited* because I am thirty and don’t own a home, or have children, or any “real world” experience” (italics added for emphasis).

This excerpt, which I chose from a conversation I initiated on one of the many meme pages I followed that summer, *Leftist Memes for New Democratic Teens*[1], was submitted in the context of a discussion on the ways millennials are portrayed in contemporary discourse. My millennial interlocutor bemoans that he is falling behind in the “game of life” because at 30 years old, he is still at school and has not yet reached the conventional milestones society expects of him.

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[1] Note the page has since been renamed, and in no way is affiliated with the New Democratic Party of Canada. Note that prior to posing this question, I announced myself as a researcher to the members of this group and described the focus on my research.

My interlocutor's testimony reveals is that millennials are still beholden to a very conventional view of a "proper life trajectory," which was normalized during the Fordist era. There, a good life implied stable and life-long employment, home ownership, heteronormative reproduction, and upward social mobility many these days find untenable. Lauren Berlant has argued that attachment to these expectations is a form of "cruel optimism" because we fail to recognize the ways in which these desires also trap us in an extremely limited conception of what a good life is or could be (Berlant 2011). Furthermore, Berlant asserts that the desire to restore Fordist social and economic forms of living is, in itself, an obstacle to our political imagination. Along with many other scholars and activists, Berlant points out that these Fordist desires are themselves problematic, as they are rooted in capitalist definitions of success, property ownership, and tend to replicate rather than challenge colonial structures enabled by the continued dispossession of Indigenous Peoples in Canada. Furthermore, these desires tend to pivot around 20th century middle-class values, which are fairly moderate politically, and often stand at odds with the stated progressive values espoused by my interlocutors.

One could say that this type of cruel optimism is also a product of contradictions of living under late capitalism. Many of my interlocutors felt embattled—which became a basis of solidarity for them, fostering awareness of commonality (Standing 2019, 3). A sense of increasing and widespread economic precarity, alongside growing anxieties about climate change and the immense challenges it poses, promises a rocky future for millennials and those that will come after them. New data frequently is published arguing millennials have “lower earnings, fewer assets, and less wealth” than previous generations (Hobbes 2018; Kurz, Li and Vine 2018; Shabi 2020).

In addition to the worrying socio-economic transformations, there are scary new findings of the environmental crises circulating every day: we are told we are running out of time to curb climate change before its consequences become catastrophic (IPCC 2018, 2021). This creates a particular affective atmosphere reflected in the testimonials of my interlocutors, who deplore their government’s inaction. Admittedly, the sense of humour of a specific portion of the millennials I interviewed, is marked by a defeatist tone which corresponds to the increased sense of social and economic insecurity. But this kind of negative affective charge simultaneously makes this kind of satire feel real, because it seems to truthfully and effectively describe the political conditions within which my interlocutors are living.

What drives my interlocutors’ sense of existential and socioeconomic precarity, in part, is the timing of their coming of age as historical, political, and economic subjects. Earlier generations too have faced the violence of industrial capitalism, but millennials have the distinct experience of growing up during the dismantling of the welfare state and the forms of social security we associate with Fordist regimes of labor and life. Their expectations of life growing up were historically embedded in a unique period of social mobility that has been romanticized into what is now simply unattainable (Berlant 2011).

As Isabel Lorey has argued, “[t]he normalization of neoliberal precarity has a long history in industrial capitalism, where insecurity in working and living has, for a lot of people, been the norm, and the welfare state is the exception” (Lorey in Puar 2012, 165).

Therefore, I am not claiming in this thesis that millennials are the only generation that has suffered from these forms of structural violence, but I want to highlight the way in Fordist expectations–now deemed unrealistic–are contributing to my interlocutors' sense that they are facing a profoundly precarious and insecure future. This remains true even if my interlocutors have managed to hold on to some forms of relative privilege, like access to higher education. But this feeling of precariousness is a quite common theme in the millennial humour that I examine in this thesis.

On the Digital Ecosystem and Political Participation

In addition to this political-economic landscape that shapes a sense of generational experience for millennials, another critical dimension of this cohort's life is the omnipresence of digital technologies—also mentioned, although mockingly, by Gwendoline. Whether technology is a refuge for the unheard, an accessible tool, or simply one's escape from their precarious reality, it is a vital part of the social ecosystem of this millennium. In popular and media discourse, millennials "are often characterized as being digitally savvy, over-protected, and self-absorbed" (Novak 2016, 3). Also, Novak (2016) argues the generation's reliance on technology, specifically its "use of Web 2.0 sources and new forms of engagement are [also commonly] positioned as deviant in traditional news sources" (Novak 2016, 10).

Some of my interlocutors emphasized their generation's status as "digital natives," including "Felix," a gamer and blue-collar worker who lives in Alberta. He adds, "millennials are embracing and being immersed in the digital world, either growing up and adopting it early on, or being fully properly immersed in the digital world while still being relatively young." The omnipresence of digital technology and social media has had a drastic effect on the generation's sense of humour, whether or not their political leanings are the same as my interlocutors. Being a part of their digital worlds and appealing to their generational openness to technology, memes allow the millennials I interviewed to engage with politics in a way they find meaningful, while making reality more manageable.

However, my informants were also clear that engagement with social media felt like an obligation. Maud even explained that, in today's world, having "no online presence is equivalent to having no identity." This reliance on internet media as a primary tool for social and political communication plays an enormous role in shaping the practices and sensibilities of my millennial interlocutors. This at times even results in members of the cohort finding themselves dependent on technology that, in real-time, has the potential to make them depressed or cynical.

Additionally, my informants were all adamant that it is *simply not possible* to be apolitical in the digital age. No matter how overwhelming it may get, a basic knowledge of politics and current events is a "moral responsibility" to all of my interviewees. To them, the idea of withdrawing, or being completely disinterested in politics, is nothing short of a demonstration of privilege. In fact, my interlocutors were repulsed by the idea of *choosing to opt out*, meaning ignoring ongoing political issues or not making an effort to remain informed about them. This is what "Clovis" offered when I asked him how he felt about politics: "It's jaded. And brutal. But to be politically active is exhausting, but not to be engaged is morally repugnant. I would like not to have to be this engaged with it, but in this current state, it's a necessary evil.[2]"

Others were more succinct in their answers: Sybil simply provided me with a clear "no" in a matter of seconds after I asked her the same question, and Felix uttered, "No. It's not. Not participating is a statement in and of itself." During my interviews, the idea that someone can willfully withdraw from politics incited only disdain and reproach, and I knew this sentiment to resonate across wider communities. These emotional responses threw me back a bit at first, not only because of the depth of vulnerability my interviewees demonstrated, but because their responses also made it clear they saw inherent moral value in political engagement. They also reveal a deep-rooted desire for "making things right" meaning to actively use one's privilege for the betterment of their society.

Literature

Given the nature of my topic, my thesis is framed around anthropological literature on humour, affect, media cultures, and, most specifically, memes.

Anthropology of Humour

"Political humour—so vital to political imagination and everyday meaning-making—clearly merits anthropological attention. Yet, as anthropologist Angelique Haugerud has argued, humour has been a rare focus in contemporary ethnography"

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[2] This standpoint, unfortunately, leaves little room for those who seem depoliticized because they are too busy and must hustle for work, rendering them unable to partake in these digital forums for political debate. There is also the question of whether discussing politics online constitutes political engagement (for example, polemics about "slacktivists" vs. "real activists"). Nonetheless, as my interviewee, Maud argued, social media provides certain people, like those with disabilities, who cannot easily join protests or other kinds of in-person political work, a way to take part in debate or political organizing.

(Haugerud 2013, 19). Because humour comes in the form of affective, embodied, and participatory critique, the expression of emotions and moral positions, interwoven with laughter, can generate meaningful and significant political effects (Klumbytė 2011, 474; Trnka and Rehak 2018, 42). However, since my research focuses on political sensibilities and not political action driven by satire, I follow the steps of authors like Tanja Petrović, who suggests anthropologists should conceive political humour as a "tool for reflexive recognition of something that is already there: the political subject's ambivalent positioning and involvement in the structures that make him or her oppressed, precarious, and insecure" (Petrović 2018, 210). Nevertheless, Petrović argues, humour has a "long history of intimate relationship with politics, and the line between the serious and the humorous has always been blurred" (2018, 202).

More specifically, anthropologists have posited that "political satire and irony flourish when other forms of political critique are curtailed, or when conventional political categories, modes of expression, and organization seem inadequate" (Haugerud in Trnka and Rehak 2018, 23). Contemporary scholars have argued that the increase of political skepticism characterizes the culture of late liberalism (as well as late-stage capitalism) and that this is a result of the growing acknowledgment that the rigid and repetitive nature of discourse in mass media leaves little place for authenticity (Boyer and Yurchak 2010). For example, Dominic Boyer and Alexei Yurchak's comparative work on late socialist and late-capitalist humour genres explores forms of parodic overidentification known as stiob, which blurs the boundaries between sincerity and ridicule. The skepticism towards dominant political discourses, undeniably fed by the increased access to the internet, has also fueled the popularity of new critical genres, including satirical news and political memes, which were especially popular in the mid-2000s (see also Boyer and Yurchak 2006).

Because humour is understood to "develop out of situations of disjuncture" (Rehak and Trnka 2018, 59), anthropological literature on satirical acts, such as Haugerud's work on "Billionaires for Bush," argues that satire is a "therapeutic filter for grappling with upsetting issues" (2013, 5). This capacity of humour also generates a sense of 'political intimacy' in which "laughter becomes an expression of closeness and coexistence among subjects [that makes possible] a sensual dialogue among unequals, informed by common values that make their relationship meaningful. Those who [laugh] share moral and civic values" (Klumbytė 2011, 664). These types of theorizations of political humour are reflected in the conversations I have had with my interlocutors. Sybil illustrates this in the excerpt below:

> "I definitely think there's a lot of solace in satire. I think you can accept that, like, we are facing severe global problems whether it's economic, environmental, whatever, problems and things don't look good. But if you can at least take some positivity out of it... that can really help."

In other words, humour not only holds the potential to reassure and unmask the present, but also to be a filter through which one can digest overwhelming emotions (Haugerud 2013, 13). Art and creativity are unique in their potential to channel and "theorize social powerlessness in a manner unrivalled by other forms of cultural praxis" (Adan and Bateman 2015, 107). Humour also relies on and generates a sense of resonance that leads to mutual recognition and moments of solidarity. Here, I find it helpful to reach out for the concept of resonance, which plays an important role in my thesis. Barthes (1980) argues resonance is a two-pronged process: it is the ability of the reader to both appreciate the cultural reference and a personal connection to it, defined as “a pierce, a prick, a mark emanating from some distinct detail of an image that hits the person viewing it” (Milner 2016, 20). According to Susan Lepselter, resonance refers to:

> “Resonance is not an exact reiteration. Rather, it’s something that strikes a chord, that inexplicably rings true, a sound whose notes are prolonged. It is just-glimpsed connections and hidden structures that are felt to shimmer below the surface of things. It is what makes people say, “It all fits together,” and “Something just clicked,” and “My whole life I just felt like something was going on, and this explains it”” (Lepselter 2016, 4).

In short, resonance is a compelling sense of familiarity which stems from the ephemerous sight of a “hidden truth”—a moment of clarity that opens doors to new meanings. Sociologists such as Hartmut Rosa (2016) have argued that “aesthetic resonance [is] an experimental field for adaptively transforming different models of relating to the world” (491). What this means is that part of what makes humour resonant is a sense of honesty and authenticity, particularly when it comes to satire that tackles political themes and current news. Many of my interlocutors were frustrated by conventional news and news analysis sources, which they saw as biased or too close to corporate interests. This kind of reflection lies at the heart of the first chapter of this thesis, which dives into how widespread practices of discourse engineering in the public sphere make my interlocutors yearn for more authentic forms of political critique, including satire.

This fits with the broader scholarship on humor, which argues that parodic media content has been treated as a more authentic, sincere, and serious source of information than mainstream, corporate media, leading to its "extensive mobilization […] in political activism, social movements, and protests" (Petrović 2018, 202). Jones and Baym (2010) write, "what shows like *The Daily Show* offer, in the way of political talk, are, in a word, authenticity" (282). Literature on political media likewise reports a "remarkable trend in the type of programming content, to which audience members turn in search of entertainment and information" (Rill and Cardiel 2013, 1738).

Communication scholars have argued that satirical critique is "inherently democratic and participatory in its interpretation, eluding the cultural conformity and socioeconomic fragmentation of capitalist society" (Shulman 2013, 2). That is because satire is rooted in dissatisfaction with public and civil life, and as such, it is a form of art. And, like any art, it is "profoundly political in nature" (Jones 2013), which makes it a popular tool for "propaganda, […] for manufacturing compliance to a dominant ideology, or [to] serve as a resistance to cultural hegemony by freeing us from the 'tyranny of the possible' and allowing us to conceive new modes of thought and experience" (Shulman 2013, 14). In other words, satire can reshape political imaginations in ways […] leaders have found threatening, and ordinary citizens have found inspiring" (Haugerud 2013, 19). As such, irony can, for example, disrupt the status quo and lead individuals to question the imbalance in wealth and gaps and discrepancies in official political discourses.

Theories of Affect

Given that so much of millennial identity is tied to the generational sense of angst, another body of literature that provides a helpful theoretical frame for my analysis is the politics of affect. Theorists of affect argue that the concept "refers not to the emotions [per se] but something closer to sensation or unconscious forces" (Stephens 2015, 274). Although affect is thought to be more ephemeral and more difficult to name and describe than emotion, scholars like William Mazzarella (2009) have insisted that affect is also rooted in history and social context, and as such, needs to be understood in specific rather than abstract terms. Other theorists, such as Theresa Brennan, have suggested that affective states are not simply properties of individuals but hold the potential to be contagious, which means they can be shared or felt among human beings (2004, 1). This claim has been taken up by feminist anthropologists, who assert that as a dimension of social experience, affect emerges at the "juncture (and disjuncture) of personal experience and public circulation" (Stewart and Lewis 2015, 239).

As this thesis will demonstrate, millennial humour is an affectively charged humour that reflects a range of energetic states, from angst and despair to burnout and cynicism[3]. Importantly, when specific forms of affective charge travel through online platforms in a manner that is continuous, they have the potential to become what Ann Cvetkovich has called "public feelings" (2012). Drawing on feminist affect theory, Cvetkovich has developed the concept of 'political depression' to describe a public feeling arising in response to the fact that "customary forms of political response, including direct action and critical analysis, are no longer working either to change the world or to make us feel better" (Cvetkovich 2012, 1).

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[3] Rosa argues that such "differences in people's attitudes toward the world and how they appropriate the world can be understood as differences in their strategies for seeking resonance and avoiding alienation" (39).

She describes political depression as not only personal, but communal, showing how it may involve social forms of withdrawal, but also create sociability in new forms, "whether in public cultures that give it expression or because, as has been suggested about melancholy, it serves as the foundation for new kinds of attachment or affiliation" under conditions of neoliberal disaffection (2012, 6). In a related vein, Sarah Ahmed has written that happiness, like depression, can be communally felt, and is deeply political. Ahmed defines happiness as something that is "unequally distributed amongst social groups and individuals, disproportionately experienced by those subjects who occupy privileged cultural positions" (2010, 278). This dovetails nicely with my earlier discussion of how lack of willingness to politically engage—notably to avoid the complex subjects that makes one sad or depressed—is interpreted as a sign of privilege and moral deficit by my interviewees.

Other concepts from feminist theories of affect that I find helpful in relation to my material are those of vulnerability and precarity, which I find especially relevant given millennials' critique of the post-Fordist economy. Isabel Lorey argues that the term precarity can be understood in three separate but related ways, as (ontological) precariousness, as a form of social positioning that denotes insecurity and hierarchization, and as an ongoing phenomenon of governmental precarization (Lorey 2011). First, precariousness speaks of a state shared among all beings. Judith Butler and Isabelle Lorey settle for a shared definition of precarity as designating a condition experienced by all humans, de par our social nature (2011). Precariousness is an inescapable "ontological dimension of life and bodies," and as such, its nature relies within the 'being-with' another.

In other words, all social beings experience precariousness due to two unpleasant facts: humans are mortal, and humans are social. Precariousness is, above all, “a rallying cry for a thriving new world of interdependency and care that’s not just private, but it is also an idiom for describing a loss of faith in a fantasy world to which generations have become accustomed” (Berlant in Puar and al. 2012, 166).

The second dimension of precarity is defined by Judith Butler as something that is “at once a material and a perceptual issue, since those whose lives are not regarded as potentially grievable, and hence valuable, are made to bear the burden of starvation, underemployment, legal disenfranchisement, and differential exposure to violence and death” (cited in Lorey 2012, 8). As such, precarity is a hierarchy of divides, where insecurity is distributed unequally amongst the less fortunate. Butler further writes that precarity is the consequence of legal and political regulations, which are supposed to offer a safety net for all, but are rather based on privilege (Butler 2009, iii; Lorey 2011). Lorey as well argues for an understanding of neoliberal governance as a structure that reproduces precarity within social, economic, and legal relations of inequality through a systemic categorization and hierarchization of beings. As such, precarity is to be understood not only as a normalized factor of everyday life, but also as a tool used by the neoliberal West, which governs “through social and economic insecurity, through fear and obedience” (Lorey in Puar and al. 2012, 165)

The third dimension of precarity refers to the Foucauldian concept of governmental precarization: an unstable state of politics through which hourly remuneration and lifestyles stand on rocky ground, resulting in the destabilisation of bodies (Lorey 2011). It emphasizes the problematization of the “complex interactions of an instrument of governing with conditions of economic exploitation and modes of subjectivation in their ambivalence between subjugation and empowerment” (Lorey 2011). This notion of precarity—as a dimension of normalized operations of power that contribute to widespread anxiety about the future—comes perhaps the closest to how I am understanding and using the concept in this thesis.

Nevertheless, the three dimensions of precarity theorized by affect scholars are intertwined: (ontological) precariousness, precarity, and governmental precarization all have in common the central place of governance institutions, which exercises domination by attempting to “safeguard some from existential precariousness, [but abandoning] those who are different and considered less worthy of protection” (Lorey 2011). Consequently, precarity becomes a double-edged sword for individuals who are deemed less valuable: not only does precarity render them much more vulnerable to violence, but it also is a consequence of violence. Berlant writes that, in some situations, vulnerability may be interpreted as fear, rage, or anger, and in turn, has the potential to render someone hostile to others’ vulnerability, to the point of feeling threatened by it (2011). On the other hand, Judith Butler argues that cultivating self-awareness about one’s precarious situation and own vulnerability might lead to acting more generously and less violently about someone else’s precarity (2004, 112).

Finally, and relevant to my work on the circulation of millennial humour, technologies such as the internet and social media can also be the means for creating communal forms of affect. This is because the forms of exchange hosted on such platforms are capable of creating a sense of community and solidarity. New technologies make possible our alignments with strangers within which we recognize ourselves, in not only the "abstract figure of an unknown external other but equally the impersonally intimate domain of affective memory" (Mazzarella 2009, 306). By participating in these digital spaces, the millennials interviewed are able to share their frustrations as well as participate in exchanges that resonate affectively with their lived experience.

Digital Media

Digital media simultaneously allows individuals intimacy and anonymity—that is, an intimacy of strangers in a very public atmosphere that has the "potential to resonate in a very personal way" (Mazzarella 2009, 306). Anthropology of digital media remains an emerging field of study at the intersection of other subfields, such as visual anthropology and anthropology of pop culture. This means the area itself remains small and not easily distinguished from others. However, over the last ten years, anthropologists like Dominic Boyer (2006, 2011), Gabriella Coleman (2010), William Mazzarella (2009), and Anna Pertierra (2018) have published pieces aiming to guide future ethnographers in their quest to capture the complexity of digital media (see Methodology). In particular, Pertierra notes that "ethnographic research on online communities continues to explore some of the ideas developed by earlier media theorists, for example, that of Benedict Anderson, who suggested that modern nations rely on mass media to create imagined communities" (2018, 92). Despite advancements on this side of the discipline, what defines digital ethnography remains debated among anthropologists of media. However, it is essential to note that the Internet is much more than a participatory media space. Despite appearances of openness, digital media is carefully administered and subject to various forms of data craft (Acker and Donovan 2019), which exists for a range of commercial and surveillance purposes. Maud was very eloquent and savvy about the many daily trades of existing on social media:

> "You know, to a degree, I know I'm in my echo-box or echo-chamber when I'm on social media because you know Facebook knows what I'm doing, will curate everything for me. The same thing with YouTube, you know. And all those kinds of things. I know this."

Maud professes awareness of the fact her online content is already curated for her by algorithms on Facebook and YouTube, but she sees this as the price of using these platforms and an unavoidable fact of digital life. Even though so much of the digital landscape is engineered, there is the sense that users are expected to be active participants (Crittenden and al. 2011, 176). Our lives become those not only of citizens and consumers but rather of citizen-consumers, in which the figure of performer and audience are blended (Burnham 2016; Mazzarella 2009, 299-304). What is essential, primarily, in this point, is that the user remains a *consumer,* and "consumer culture always serves the needs of consumer capitalism, including making space for resistance when expedient or profitable" (Duncombe 2007, 16). This is supported by Acker and Donovan, who note "platform companies such as Facebook and Twitter have developed paid advertising as the core capacity for spreading messages and assuaging shareholders" (2019, 1592; see also Benkler & al. 2018).

There is a growing awareness among users that social media, like any other contract, is a trade between privacy and convenience. Maud even joked—although sourly—that something she had mentioned to her roommate while her phone was in the other room became the source of multiple ads and recommendations from different platforms. This kind of surveillance has led to new "calls for practicing ethics in technological domains [which] seem to increase with each new scandal over data privacy, surveillance, election manipulation and worker displacement" (Amrute 2019, 57).

The internet can be a self-serving place, as well as incredibly overwhelming. Still, it is also a space that holds untapped potential for communities to organize and rise together beyond their geographical limitations. This being said, it is no secret that the internet can be as foul as it can be joyful. A virtually non-regulated, no-man's land space, digital media harbours all sort of communities who communicate with their own vernacular and engage in various kinds of subcultural practice. Acker and Donovan also point out that the internet is also the mains stage upon which "disinformation campaigns continue to thrive […] despite social media companies' efforts at identifying and culling manipulation on their platforms" (2019, 1590). They further assert that common disinformation campaign tactics travel across platforms, with traceable information moving from web to platform and back again" (2019, 1595).

In addition to disinformation campaigns, researchers have also noted a spike in various forms of "discourse engineering" in the years that have followed the 2016 U.S. elections. The concept refers to the way messaging is "created [and manipulated] by media-savvy experts [...] and then handed down to the rest of us to watch, consume and believe" (Duncombe 2007, 17; see also Hodges, Graan and Stalcup 2020). I explore this phenomenon in greater depth in Chapter 1.

Given this increasingly complex terrain, it has become essential to understand the inner workings of digital communities and how individuals navigate the complex and ever-growing web of digital platforms. This is especially important because Pertierra writes that “understanding how people engage so deeply with digital technologies [...] offers important ways of understanding how people navigate new economic and cultural formations that have been reshaped by the rise of computing and the internet” (2018, 93). As a consequence, some anthropologists have also emphasized “the importance of reorienting social media ethnography from an emphasis on “network and community” toward a focus on individual experiences, practices, and socialities” (Bonilla and Rosa 2015, 6; see also Postill and Pink 2012, 124). Bonilla and Rosa see this methodological shift as especially important when it comes to studying social movements:

> “E-mail, television, radio, and print have long managed to open up windows into the experience of social movements, but the dialogicality and temporality of [social media] create a unique feeling of direct participation. [Social media] allows users who are territorially displaced to feel like they are united across both space and time” (Bonilla and Rosa 2015, 7).

This means that under certain circumstances, digital media does enable community building and awareness-raising. The onset of “radial” or “lateral” messaging, defined as content that is “spread collectively by a diffusion of participants” (Hodges 2018), has enabled the distribution of horizontal propaganda, empowering collectives to circulate digital artifacts. As a result, digital ethnography must approach social media as a field that is as complex and interconnected as any other field site (Bonilla and Rosa 2015, 7). Participatory platforms reallocate some of the discursive power onto the users, who “take advantage of the materiality of online circulation, which facilitates the quick repurposing of images, photoshopping, textual overlay” (Amrute 2019, 3). This dynamic provides a good explanation as to why my interlocutors see their engagement with memes as a way of reclaiming their own political voice. They may not be the author of the memes they circulate, but the action of sharing such performative artifacts is a conscious decision to signal a position to an audience. More than consumers, my interlocutors became the creators or designers of their own digital narratives, albeit through borrowed items and popular culture items.

Consequently, the contents produced on these sites may be “the work of vast collectives, even if they’re collectives connected only by shared cultural understanding” (Milner 2016, 15). For this reason, Shifman writes that media objects as “memes can be treated as (post)modern folklore, in which shared norms and values are constructed through cultural artifacts such as Photoshopped images or urban legends” (2014, 14).

Memes as Digital Folklore

Scholars such as Shifman (2014), Milner (2018), Mina (2019), and Rehak and Trnka (2018) have studied memes as tools used for social participation on the internet as well in the streets. Limor Shifman argues memes are “created with awareness of each other, and circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users” (2014, 41). “By defining Internet memes not as single units that propagate well but as groups of items with similar characteristics, we can study memes as reflections of cultural and social collectives, as well as the individual voices constituting them” (171). In practice, my interlocutors’ definition and understanding of memes was a bit more plastic and encompassed things like political cartoons that were meant to circulate in the newspapers but had gone viral on Twitter (see Chapter 1). Resonance is most often highlighted by consumers of memes using words such as “too real” and “relatable,” highlighting their connection to a piece of content on a cultural as well as personal level. This is vital to memetic grammar, as resonance is the very element that roots a meme in social conversations and thus allows it to become viral.

That is to say, what makes memes resonant stems from a mixture of recognizable cultural references and current political issues (Milner 2016; Mina 2018), and they can simplify and allow for a new perception of political realities, opening the door to creative commentary and critique (Molé 2013). Moreover, memes are multimodal, in that they carry “complex layers of meaning [embedded in] multiple modes of communication” (Milner 2016, 25). “One popular way to source a meme image,” notes Blevins, “is through video stills, whether that’s from film, television, or a social media platform like YouTube. In some cases, what the meme communicates is made more powerful if a reader understands the context from which the image was lifted” (2020). And, because re-appropriation of memes is continuous, it allows for the constant perfection of aesthetics through the production and reproduction of formats and templates (Mina 2018; Rehak and Trnka 2018). “This instability is part of what makes meme culture work—it’s a shift away from static notions of media consumption toward more dynamic ones of both consumption and production” (Mina 2018, 103).

The transformation and reappropriation of pop-culture material are essential to facilitate memetic participation by blurring the old and the new (Milner 2016: 29). This technique is not unique among satirical acts but has been used by groups as varied as

Billionaires for Bush (Haugerud 2013), Reclaim the Streets (Duncombe 2007), or Occupy Wall Street (Milner 2016). Comics, quotes, "and other resonant pop media [are] woven into the conversation, all of which made the political and economic issues more accessible and resonant to a wider range of the population" (Milner 2016, 160). In other words, those who create memes make do with what is at hand. This practice closely resembles that of the bricoleur, introduced by Claude Lévi-Strauss in 1962 (Milner 2016; Shulman 2014):

> "Claude Lévi-Strauss ([1962] 1966)—himself reappropriating the verb for 'extraneous movement'—speaks of the centrality of 'bricolage' in folk cultures. The *bricoleur*, he argues, is a cultural participant who produces differently than the *craftsperson*. The craftsperson has the resources and support needed to proceed within sanctions of cultural systems; the bricoleur, conversely, is 'someone who works with his hands and uses devious means'" (Milner 2016, 17) (italics added for emphasis).

This means that memes are made of borrowed and repurposed artifacts that create new meanings, new understandings, or simply shed light on an issue previously unconsidered. Memes are made of a chaotic yet organic essence that borrows from external, already established, popular culture items, and because one of the essential characteristics of the meme is reproduction, the ability to use existing material to create something new—even digitally—is vital to the practice (see Milner 2016, Mina 2018, Shifman 2014).

Ahmed writes that virtual communities can be empowered by humour because of the rich affective engagements digital media allows. While not everyone may feel the same way or have the same issues, those who relate to the humour may feel it is directed to them, personally, and to a wider group (2004, 110). In other words, "by insisting on popular participation in both the production and the consumption of the spectacle," Duncombe writes, "we can transform a political and aesthetic form used to control and channel popular desire into one that can express it" (2007, 133). "The joy of memes for viewers comes from being able to track and identify all the things—an entire world of references, bricolage, and extensions that in their circulation create an affective relationship toward the world at large" (Amrute 2019, 3).

That is why Milner writes that memetic media have a characteristic of "polyvocality," meaning encompassing participation of many voices at once. This concept is similar to polyphony, introduced by Bakhtin, who used it to give an account of the role of persistent inequality and everyday antagonisms in social discourse (Milner 2016, 6). This said, the circulation of memes in shared spaces does not just create difference and antagonism, but can also produce a set echo chambers, defined as networks that only receive specific content without opposition, where they flourish because of that very lack of opposing opinions (Milner 2018; Mina 2019).

Echo chambers come into existence through the circulation of specific kinds of narratives and explanations for what is going on in the world. Digital exchanges (especially banter), for example, can profoundly shape social reality as well as generate solidarity. This is quite common inside politically charged online groups, but similar dynamics are at play on most social media platforms, including Facebook pages, Instagram meme accounts, and subreddits. One could say that echo chambers are fast becoming a standard feature of the digital cultural landscape, for better or worse.

Methodology

This section is dedicated to the methodological strategies I employed for this research: fieldwork, digital ethnography, and interviews. Conducting fieldwork and digital ethnography allowed me to observe both the *making of* and the *reacting* to contemporary political satire. The first part of my research focused on ethnographic fieldwork among the producers of a satirical news TV show, which I will be referring to as the *Golden Ass* (see Chapter 1). In preparation for my ethnographic work, I reached out to satire writers for preliminary, casual conversations about their experiences. This work prepared me for my formal fieldwork among writers of print and televised satire because it helped me develop my interview questions. I spent time on their production set to see how televised satire is produced by the media industry so that I could understand better how these forms of humour compared to the more recent, internet-based satire, exemplified by memes (see Milner 2016; Shifman 2014)

The experience of my first "real" solo fieldwork was far more enriching than I had expected because the chaos of "prep week" on the production set, in some ways, felt magical. Over the course of a single week, the growing mess of food wrappers, scribbles on whiteboards, and post-its covering the table created an affective ambiance typical of a family dinner. I am still unpacking, two years later, the full richness of this ethnography, and could not be more grateful to my thesis supervisor, who pushed for me to have a "real" fieldwork experience, in addition to my planned digital ethnography. This being said, there is much about this fieldwork that I cannot share. By the regulations surrounding the production of televised satirical content, including liability issues, I was given clear instructions on what I could write down and analyze in my thesis. Because of legal matters, writers seemed uncomfortable with the idea of sitting down for a formal interview. For this reason, I do not analyze any content from this show. Despite the limitations and the short duration of my fieldwork, I was fortunate to observe the production of satirical humour in Canada, and even more so that the writers were only just returning to work after some time off to prepare for the launch of the following season. Most importantly, this experience opened my eyes to recognize how discourse is engineered (see Chapter 1).

In addition to in-person research, I conducted, over the summer and early fall of 2019, digital ethnography in participatory platforms where Canadian political content circulates. I mainly followed the influx of political meme pages and groups which were, at the time, erupting in anticipation of the 2019 federal elections in Canada. In tracing these forms of circulation, I was guided by Gabriella Coleman's plea to anthropologists to study: i) the relationship between digital media and its cultural politics, which encompasses the circulation of cultural identities, representations, and imaginaries; ii) the "cultures of digital media, evinced by discrepant phenomena, digital genres, and groups"; and iii) the "prosaics of digital media"–social practices framed by a Bakhtinian understanding of language as "lived experience" (2010, 488; 494).

In preparation for 2019 federal election, Canadian media also started publishing articles about the influence of political memes, to the point of dubbing the elections a "meme war" between Federal Parties[4] (Frenzel 2019; McKelvey 2019). The proliferation of this content mostly unfolded over Facebook which became the central focus of my digital ethnography. Some of those groups had colorful names such as “Conservative scare tactics that just describe liberal utopia,” “Snarky Memes for Anarcha Feminist Dreams,” “Anti-Capitalist Memes to Haunt Boomer Dreams,” or even “relatable memes served with a side of cyanide,” to name only a few. What this in effect means, is that I spent hours in digital spaces that functioned as echo chambers following the exchange of digital artifacts and opinions. Like other digital ethnographers, I paid special attention to how people in these spaces were engaging with one another about satirical content.

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[4] This is in part a response to the increasing politicization of social media, particularly following the "meme boom" triggered by the 2016 U.S. Presidential elections (Haddow 2016).

For the scope of this study, I primarily focused on issues of relevance to Canadian politics. However, given the exponential presence of English speakers on social media and the fact that in the digital world, frontiers are virtually non-existent, Canadian Millennials regularly encounter memes from the United States which, despite not always hitting the mark entirely, do share a similar affective charge. That said, it is often impossible to tell whether memes that my interlocutors find engaging come from the US or Canada.

Though I did not really encounter many active meme-makers (something that came to me as a surprise) I did notice a lot of highly active sharers, who would either ‘cross-post’ a meme from one leftist group to another page or group (on the same platform) or would copy the photo from an existing post to create a new one. The former refers for example to someone using the “share post in x page/group/sub” which conserves the original poster’s message and shares it in its entirety, including the name of the page hosting the image and the name of the user who posted it. This is not always an available option: some users or groups may have restrained confidentiality settings that can keep unknown users from sharing their posts, or not accept cross-posting (more frequent in Reddit).

Last but not least, during the summer of 2019, I conducted a total of nine interviews with millennials between the ages of 19 and 28. Many of these interviews were conducted over Skype, as my informants were located across Canada. The recruitment process for these was diverse: I used a pre-emptively approved message on multiple social media platforms, first seeking permission from the administrators ("mods") of the group, as well as on LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter on my accounts. My interviews lasted about an hour each, and they all occurred in English.

Before the interviews, I contacted each of my informants to ask them to collect memes that they found most resonant. This was also by far one of my favourite things to do: memes broke the ice and made my informants comfortable. This is important because interviews like these can become heavy: political topics are touchy, and different political struggles and experiences may elicit a myriad of emotions. I always closed my interviews asking my informants to share their latest favourite memes, which they were asked to collect before our call. At that point in the interview, the conversation is more organic and comfortable, and it becomes easier to jump into the memes themselves for a deeper analysis. Finally, all my interviews were attentive to ethical and confidentiality issues. I allowed my interlocutors to ask for their names not to be used or for their interviews not to be recorded. In light of this, I have chosen to use aliases for all interviewees, some of which were already introduced on preceding pages.

Limits

In an interesting turn of events, all my interviewees identified as “lefties,” “leftists,” or even “left as fuck.” One of them even sent me a link to the “Power 2 People” YouTube Channel, a mobilization account advocating for Indigenous rights located in Vancouver. Embracing anti-colonial, anti-capitalist ideologies, these individuals represent a subset of the millennial generation, consisting of a wide array of intersectional identities. Because of these political leanings, all the memes I received through the interview process are consistent with left-oriented political values and circulate in Anglo-dominant left and progressive echo chambers. The tone and content of these memes might be why this thesis places such a strong focus on themes traditionally associated with the Left, such as the critique of political economy, labour, inequality, racism, and climate change. While this does not constitute a “limit” per say, it does indicate that, by volunteering for my research, my interlocutors found resonance in the calls I put out for my research. This means that the group of people I interviewed is not only limited but self-selected, and able to offer a situated, rather than a representative, perspective on digital humour.

Importantly, even though my research focuses on the memetic discourse on the left, I am aware of the extent to which right-wing media also utilizes memes to rally their bases, as evidenced by “Pepe the frog” and other controversial “radical memes.” My thesis does not deny the existence of such discursive milieus; however it is limited in scope and thus focuses on a particular, and in-and-of-itself valuable, portion of the millennial public. Lastly, despite not having met many meme-makers, my research attempts to make sense of how meme discourse is made, and that is by borrowing popular culture items, like images and quotes from recognizable sources that do not belong to them in order to express a new message (see Memes as Digital Folklore).

Social and digital media can be a chaotic environment where people act in ways that can be authentic or alternatively, highly performative. All this combined makes the "internet ambiguous, [and] capable of delivering racist, homophobic, sexist, and ableist messages in the guise of satire, or of becoming a semiotic repertoire through which social protest movements can ignite, concentrate, and persevere" (Amrute 2019, 3). Given this odd media ecosystem, which at once claims it is participatory and open to all and is simultaneously foreclosed, engineered, and often fake, my thesis is driven by the following questions: What kind of humour does this digital culture give rise to? How do certain types of humour manage to transcend difference and resonate with such a large and heterogeneous group as a millennial generation? What makes millennial humour real, or tangible, and what betrays it?

Considering this, the first chapter of this thesis, entitled, "Funny, but not real(ly)," starts with insights generated by my fieldwork with the *Golden Ass* to offer a way of thinking about millennial humour as being driven by a desire for truth and authenticity in an era of growing skepticism, "post-truth" and "post-trust" (see Boyer and Yurchak 2010; Graan, Hodges and Stalcup 2020). The second chapter, "Too Real: the funny that hurts," begins with a discussion on the capacity of humour to elicit more than laughter, informed by the words and memes of my interlocutors, to illustrate how millennial humour seeks to mediate the overwhelming negativity of everyday politics, guided by the generation's material reality and expectations for the future.

Chapter 1—Funny, But Not Real(ly)

I swivel in the office chair, silent. Around me, the windowless walls are bare. Immaculate, the writers' room beams with bright lights, laughter, and greetings. As the clock ticks, the writers come in and choose a seat of their liking. The whiteboards coating the walls are untouched, canvasses promising a fresh start. Smells of coffee, donuts, and newly purchased notebooks float around the large room. I quietly observe everyone catching up: the team is just starting preparation for a new year of production after a few months off the air. Already, the room buzzes with an organic rhythm of familiarity. The organized chatter takes its course, breaks into chaos, reassembles. One, two, ten times, the leader calls the room to order, only to find himself roped into the inviting charm of joyful reunions. The air conditioning blasts through the room, a soft purring that soon enough disappears in the animation. For a moment, we all forget that, outside the walls of this building, the already weeklong July heatwave waits for us.

Tweaking their work repeatedly throughout the week, writers at the Canadian satirical TV show, which I will refer to as the *Golden Ass,* spend hours ensuring that only the best material is reviewed. By Friday, the jokes are refined enough to put together a draft for production. No matter how hard the crew has worked, however, the result will be wildly different, as the material passes through multiple processes of revision and vetting, which are out of the writers' hands. The writers tell me jokingly that once the piece they are working on is released, they sometimes find themselves *unable to recognize the end product* as their work. Having witnessed the dedication of the show's writers and the care they took to develop the material, learning this came as a surprise.

It was only later that I would realize that this ethnographic insight about the engineered nature of televised satire—its unrecognizability in the final form—foreshadows some of the critical ways in which my millennial interlocutors relate to satirical content writ large, which pivot around questions of authenticity, artifice, and resonance. This chapter thus explores these tensions by looking at the reception of satirical material, not limited to televised satire, among my Canada-based ethnographic interlocutors. I trace the preoccupations of my interviewees with the artificiality and the lack of resonance of certain kinds of political humour, showing how their aesthetic preferences are deeply connected to the desire to overcome alienation from present-day political institutions, which feel as inauthentic as the engineered satire broadcast on Canadian television.

To make sense of this insight, I draw on Hartmut Rosa's argument that 'resonance' and 'alienation' are "two complementary but fundamental forms of relating to the world" constituted in relation to each other (Rosa 2016, 74). Rosa approaches resonance not as a specific emotional state, but a mode of relation, which foregrounds the social effect of certain experiences, rather than their specific affective content (292). In other words, certain experiences can produce a sense of resonance, of synchronicity, while others can deepen one's sense of alienation, even if seem to be "positive" at the surface.

When I asked my interlocutors about their perception of Canadian televised satire, I found that most were disinterested in it, citing that they found little resonance in the material. For instance, "Temperance," an undergraduate student in biomedical sciences and second-generation immigrant of East Asian descent, used to watch *This Hour Lasts*

22 Minutes (also known as *22 Minutes*) with her parents, before she, in her own words, "kind of stopped watching [all] TV." Nowadays, she mostly spends her time organizing environmental causes in Ottawa, where she and I met for our interview. She has not watched the shows in many years but sometimes encounters clips on Facebook. When I asked her to elaborate on why she lost interest, she offered that this kind of thing *can* be "funny, but it's not, like…*real*." She continues:

> "I don't find them to be like super funny, and a lot of that has to do with the way that the comedian communicates…like not taking too much of a political stance." She sighs.
>
> "I find it to be written [to] make fun of politics. But it is not mad roasts, you know, and it's pretty soft compared to something John Oliver or Trevor Noah would say."

In Temperance's view, this was "soft" humour, less biting and sharp than she would want satire to be. It makes fun *of* politics more than provides a critique from a standpoint, which undeniably waters down the critical punch of the material. Her point corresponds with some of the recent analyses of Canadian satire, which posit it lacks the "critical bite" commonly found in American satire and argues the Canadian public is "not really laughing at authority [but rather] being authorized to laugh" (Druick 2008, 123).

Temperance's thoughts were echoed by many others, such as "Killian," a 20-something millennial who lives in Alberta. At the time of our interview, he was in his last year of political sciences and bouncing around different working-class jobs in kitchens and construction. Gaining access to the Internet only in his teenage years, Killian admits that the reading materials he could access during his early age through local libraries always reflected a more “traditional” (he means, “conservative”) set of values and perspectives. His experience in the workforce has been more eye-opening to him, something he attributes to the exposure to other people and stories that he feels school did not prepare him for. Killian’s interest in internet political humour stems from a desire to learn how to be a better person. Therefore, he prefers satire that is intertwined with what he calls “social activism.” I ask him to elaborate, and he explains:

> “I got more interested in that because I think that—I guess I would say it’s more purposeful in a way. And I think it is also more effective [when it] has a meaningful meaning, [when it is] based on statistics, but [also] has a satirical element to capture people’s attention, so kind of like *Last Week Tonight* with John Oliver rather than just *22 Minutes*.”

In Killian’s view, while dry facts are essential for critical insight on social issues, they are more impactful when combined with a humorous political critique. However, as Killian suggests, not every combination of this kind works. Killian’s distinction between the two satirical news shows, one American and the other Canadian, is exciting and demands attention. As our conversation went on, he explained that televised satire “like *22 Minutes*” felt limiting:

> “I stopped following [this kind of satire] because I, uh, I find the [TV] shows—like, there are so many restrictions on them—a lot of what they say is in code. *22 Minutes*, Rick Mercer…they were kind of pretty open that they didn’t like the Conservatives, but in terms of other stuff [they didn’t like,] they weren’t.”

Killian’s comment that televised satire felt restricted piqued my curiosity. In recent years, satirical television programs set in the United States have been reported to read as more truthful (and informative) than “real news” (see Boyer and Yurchak 2006). Scholars have argued that since the turn of the century, there has been a “remarkable trend in the type of programming content to which audience members turn in search of entertainment and information” (Rill and Cardiel 2013, 1738). Similarly, Reilly (2013) argues that these American narratives “add critical complexity to dominant forms of political discourse through their reflexive engagement with contemporary journalism” (259).

However, my interviews reveal a deep sense that Canadian iterations fall flat when it comes to humour and fail to provide my interlocutors with material with which they can genuinely engage. What Temperance refers to as “not real” is eerily similar to what Killian describes as “in code.” By “in code,” Killian means he finds the televised news satire sorely lacking in *actual* political critique. This indicates that these two interviewees question the quality of the message that is diffused and the overarching intentions behind the architecture of this messaging. Killian’s observations also directly echo those of the writers who, as mentioned above, made me aware of how extensively the material on these shows is modified for legal reasons.

Considering this, the first section of this chapter, entitled “F for Fake—on political artifice,” seeks to understand Temperance’s claim of “not real” and Killian’s language of “code” in relation to political humour of the “post-truth era” (Hodges, Graan and Stalcup, 2020). Concentrating mainly on anthropological theories of discourse engineering, this section explores how satirical news is being perceived during an era characterized by the erosion of truth in contemporary discourse. In turn, the second section of this chapter, “Not

Real—The funny that hurts," concentrates on the discrepancies between mainstream political culture and the lived experiences of my interlocutors.

F for Fake—on political artifice

There are several reasons why my project on "millennial humour" begins behind the scenes of a Canadian televised satirical program. Televised and written forms of Canadian political satire are the most familiar iterations of the genre—e.g. *This Hour Has 22 Minutes*, the *Beaverton*, or *The Rick Mercer Report*, which ran from 2004 to 2018. Given that much of the current production and circulation of this millennial humour takes place virtually, I sought to conduct field-based observation among writers of these televised shows to give my project more ethnographic traction. This choice ultimately provided me with ethnographic insight into the broader functioning of the Canadian-English media satirical ecology.

Importantly, however, my decision to observe the writers at *Golden Ass* was inspired by the place that televised satirical news shows have been accorded in the more recent anthropological literature on political humour in the West. Most of the anthropological writing on satirical production in North America—which boomed in the early 2010s—focuses on such televised forms (e.g., Brock 2018; Jones 2013; Rehak and Trnka 2018; Reilly 2013). Boyer and Yurchak's influential piece on the "American Stiob" (2010) described satirical news shows such as The *Daily Show* and the *Stephen Colbert Show* as a sort of 'ground zero' for exploring late liberal public culture and the effects of the consolidation of the media landscape in the era of neoliberalism. Conducting my research ten years later, in the era of "fake news," I was interested in understanding the current place of this form of televised satire in the public culture of this decade.

Accordingly, my ethnographic research with the production team of the *Golden Ass* unfolded in July of 2019. In the interest of preserving the identity of the team I observed, I chose the pseudonym 'Golden Ass' in homage to the picaresque novel of the same name, written by Apuleius in the late second century AD. *The Golden Ass* was one of the first ribald novels in existence, of which satire was a prominent element. Apuleius was the first critic to use the term *satire* in the modern meaning, on which this thesis is built. For a week, production allowed me to sit in the writers' room to observe the creative processes through which televised satirical humour comes to be.

The objective of this experiment was to understand how the media industry produces televised satire and how these forms of humour compared to the more recent, internet-based satire, exemplified by memes (e.g., Milner 2016; Shifman 2014). It turned out that as a corporation owns the *Golden Ass*, legal teams review every single sketch to ensure the network cannot be sued. That is to say, the *actual jokes* and statements I observed go through multiple refining processes, so much so that the writers struggled to recognize their own material in the broadcast product.

Such deliberate forms and practices of revision have been described as "discourse engineering" or "discursive engineering" by anthropologists of digital politics (Graan in Hodges, Graan and Stalcup 2020). Andrew Graan (2020) has notably argued that the contemporary period has been characterized by the emergence of "multi-modal professional practices that intervene in the public circulation of discourse in order to motivate particular forms of popular uptake: a purchase, brand loyalty, a vote, a donation, an endorsement." Sometimes, he argues, the aim of such practices is also to "sanction or marginalize unfavored representations" (2020). Following this insight, I will qualify satirical televised programming, such as the *Golden Ass*, not only as a product of a specific media ecology but as a form of deliberately *engineered* satire, a term I use throughout the thesis.

Graan's (2020) effort to bring attention to contemporary media discourse's designed and artificial character highlights how the media landscape favours certain forms of representation over others. This point dovetails with Boyer and Yurchak's earlier argument that late-liberal media discourse is subject to hypernormalization, a process in which political language becomes so noticeably repetitive, ritualistic, and an end-in-itself (Boyer and Yurchak 2010; Yurchak 2005). The recursiveness of contemporary political discourse is enabled by the unprecedented consolidation and concentration of content production, as well as "the transformation of late-liberal politics into a kind of professional performance culture" (Boyer and Yurchak 2010, 208). Politics, argues Reilly, "now forms an integral part of entertainment programming" (2012, 258). Under these conditions,

> "The formalization of repeatable genres of political performance is valued, and the circulation of formulaic political rhetoric is deemed equivalent to successful political messaging" (Boyer and Yurchak 2010, 209).

However, the other side of this is that words lose their semantic meaning, and by consequence, begin to seem inauthentic (Boyer and Yurchak 2010; Brock 2018). This chapter shows how those structural conditions and the deepening of the crisis of authenticity embodied in the more recent phenomena such as “fake news” feed into an intense desire for the kind of humour that “feels real” among my interlocutors. Consequently, I argue here, the preoccupations of millennials with authenticity in political messaging and resonance are symptomatic of a broader shift in the popular understanding of “truth”—a problem I examine in the following section.

Fake or Satirical News?

Scholars of humour agree that humour is a tool to speak truth to power; and that *good* humour is, above all, centred on emotional resonance (Milner 2016; Miltner 2014). As highlighted, however, truth itself is unreliable in contemporary politics. While the negotiation of “truth” regimes is deeply embedded in political history (e.g., Duncombe 2007; Hodges 2018; Petrović 2018; Reilly 2012), the recent shift is drastic. Petrović (2018) writes:

> “During and after the events of the election of Donald Trump as the forty-fifth US president in November 2016, discussions of the post-truth era strongly recognized social conditions in which the distinction between reality and its direct and true representation does not apply” (202) (italics added for emphasis).

Notably, the term “fake news” has most specifically gone through a semantic shift. During the early 21st century, the terminology referred to production that “spoofed the real news for comedic effect” (Hodges, Graan and Stalcup 2020). In the years that followed the US 2016 Presidential election, the conception of what is true, or what is to be taken at face value, has been under assault:

> “A new Trumpian meaning of ‘fake news’ entered into widespread usage, designating as ‘fake news’ anything ideologically at odds with Trump. This meaning has nothing to do with truth or falsity, and it is all about ideological fidelity and ‘truthiness.’
>
> The irony, of course, is that while masquerading as an instrument for supposedly distinguishing between truth and falsity, the Trumpian usage erodes trust in authentic news sites” (Hodges in Hodges, Graan and Stalcup 2020).

Reshaping the meaning of words like *fake*, *truth*, and *facts* is a symptom of the erosion of social trust in institutions. Latour explains, “facts remain robust only when they are supported by a common culture, by institutions that can be trusted, by a more or less decent public life, by more or less reliable media” (Latour in Kofman 2018). Whence a public refocuses its shared understanding of truth, it becomes much more vulnerable to disinformation. In turn, the traditional terminology to refer to disinformation practices in the age of social media also faces a shift—as seen through innovative terminology such as “truthiness,” quoted above.

The term was coined by Stephen Colbert back in 2005, in the early days of The *Colbert Report*, even though its origins lay in the early 19th century (New Oxford American Dictionary). At the time, it was selected as the “Word of the Year” by the American Dialect Society, a by-product of the newly found satirical twist to the term. In 2010, the term was added to the *New Oxford American Dictionary*, which identified Colbert in the etymology: “truthiness, n. *informal* the quality of seeming or being felt to be true, even if not necessarily true.” Truthiness speaks mainly to something “unburdened by the fact,” “something *truthish* or *truthy*” (Zimmer 2010).

This form of political theatrics is enabled both by political rupture and by a society based on disinformation, which Guzzanti understood as the "loss of a shared political reality" (Rehak and Trnka 2018, 32). Colbert hints "truthiness continues to define those who appeal to raw feelings at the expense of facts" (Zimmer 2010). That is to say, truthiness—as anything in politics—is motivated by emotions, and "everybody […] is acting on the things that move them emotionally the most" (Zimmer 2010) (see also Ahmed 2004; Berlant 2011). What this means is that claims to truth rely on emotional resonance to incite sympathy or alternatively, produce distrust. Considering this, Hodges argues that the current post-truth era could be "more aptly conceptualized as a post-trust era" (Hodges, Graan and Stalcup 2020).

This means that "fake news" can be theorized as a kind of propaganda, insofar as the embrace of "manipulative techniques and misleading messages used against acquiescence for a political cause" (Hodges 2018). Similarly, Duncombe argues these practices make for a "spectacular politics," a sort of mashup of engineering, performance, and truthiness, "created by media-savvy experts, […] handed down to the rest of us to watch, consume and believe" (2007, 17). In short, this means contemporary discourse undergoes many review processes, which ultimately erode trust in institutions, a "consequence of the growing concentration of corporate media ownership" (Petrović 2018, 203). That is not to say *all* engineered discourse intends to mislead. "Annie," a senior editor at the Golden Ass, with whom I spoke to on the phone in late November of 2018, explained:

> “Maybe some people are questioning more the difference between fake news and satire—I’ll always say that satire is rooted in truth. You’re trying to *illuminate the truth* about something. Fake news misdirects people, it is *meant to* purposefully misdirect. It’s really important that people understand the difference between fake news and satire” (emphasis added).

Annie’s insight was a crucial one for my research. Having written satire since she was a university student, she had the experience and standing to provide me with contacts, both for preliminary interviews and for what came to be my ethnographic fieldwork. This quote is both insightful and puzzling. It is insightful because it sets up a straight distinction between *fake* news and *satirical* news, but puzzling because, as I would observe throughout the summer, engineered satire produced by the media industry did not register nearly as ‘real’ (i.e., truthful) among the people with whom I spoke. What I mean by this, is that Annie considered the entirety of satire as a genre to be effective at illuminating the truth. My interlocutors, however, perceived some forms of satire to be more effective, authentic, and resonant than others. In other words, truthfulness of satirical critique itself was not enough to make it work—it also needed to *feel* real.

With this in mind, I wondered what kind of sense my interlocutors made of televised and other industry-produced satire. I wanted to see if engineered satire fails to resonate because of broader political alienation, or simply because this material was not critical enough and more representative of my interlocutors’ political realities. As I would discover, my interviewees were all suspicious of various kinds of engineered discourse. This was made particularly obvious during the online portion of my ethnography, focusing on the (at the time) upcoming Canadian federals elections of 2019, held in the month of October.

“Not Real”—or the zombification of politics

In the summer leading to the 2019 federal elections, I scoured social media for satirical artifacts which could inform my thesis and interviewed a self-selected group of young Canadians in the hopes of better understanding their political humour. To illustrate the way in which my interlocutors engage with satire, I have chosen to use the 43rd federal elections as a focus point. This subsection explores the question of authenticity in political messaging—be it satirical or formal—and particularly the ways in which participants in my research interpret political performance and discourse engineering.

“Maud” is a Ukrainian-Canadian millennial with a disability who is pursuing an undergraduate degree in political science, with a particular focus on non-conforming and disabled bodies. She hopes to enrol in graduate school to further research accessibility issues as soon as possible. My interview with Maud was informal and friendly (she even made dinner during our call), often diverging towards time-consuming but fascinating conversations on life, school, politics, and cats. Maud’s insights were beneficial as she reflected on the shaky status of truth in the current electoral system:

> “The system is in trouble, meaning that something has to give in, and we can see this with the rise of populism, the rise of how everything is ‘fake.’ You cannot trust anything. For me, that's a symbol of the fact that there is a crisis like in the sense of the political system is in trouble and it needs to be fixed.”

This opinion was shared among the majority of my informants, who, as Maud put it, “recognize the system in its current state is completely unsustainable and is existing only to defend capitalism for as long as profits can be maintained.” The words of my interlocutors resonate with Insa Koch’s 2017 analysis of voter apathy and withdrawal among young residents of a post-industrial English council estate who experience a deep sense of alienation from formal political institutions. To make sense of this disenchantment, Koch develops the idea of ‘zombie democracy,’ which derives from Ulrich Beck conceptualization of “[zombie or] living dead” categories which govern our thinking but are not able to capture the contemporary milieu (Beck qtd in Koch 2017, 106). In taking up the language of zombification, Koch accents how “formal electoral processes continue to exist” even though “an increasing number of citizens are withdrawing from participation in voting and other forms of formal politics” (2017, 107).

This sense that the political process exists for appearances’ sake permeated my interlocutors’ analysis of the 2019 elections. At the same time, there was a more profound acknowledgement among them that the current electoral structure is also subject to manipulation and a sort of “engineering” that only aimed to serve the interest of capital and preserve existing relationships of power. As a result, my interlocutors had lost confidence in the electoral structure of the country and the overall political institution. They were especially frustrated with the way mainstream politicians talked about the issues affecting Canada most, including notably the climate emergency, economic uncertainties (mainly related to education and debt), and reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples. Sometimes, however, those concerns were more pointed, for example, when they targeted the Liberal Party of Canada (commonly referred to as “the liberals” or “the libs”) for its failure to fulfil its campaign promises since its return power in 2015.

Throughout the campaign leading to his election, Justin Trudeau made several promises that enticed young Canadians to vote for his party. One particular promise was the reform of the “First Past the Post” electoral system—a promise that gained much traction among young voters. “First Past the Post” ensures any party with thirty-nine percent (39%) of the votes can win a majority government. This pressures electorates into what is colloquially referred to as “strategic voting,” meaning to say that voters are encouraged to vote for a “lesser evil” to prevent another party from gaining power. Strategic voting encourages people to vote *against someone* rather than vote for and with convictions that match their values. More than that, it encourages parties with similar values—in this case, the Liberal Party of Canada (center-left) and the New Democratic Party (left)—to spend more time attacking one another instead of collaborating on matters important to their constituents. Like the media landscape that I described earlier, the mainstream political discourse became highly performative, organized around dichotomies, and often perceived as arbitrary and thus noncommittal.

My interviewees lamented that the electoral reform is the first promise the Liberal Party broke, although not without contestation: many of them felt cheated by this drawback and grew especially suspicious that it was a strategic play to retain power for a second term. “Boris,” in particular, saw right through the performance, saying that it is:

> "in the interest of uh, I guess, existing political situations to keep that system. Like, no party in their interest would want to get rid of that system if it elected them."
>
> In a tone that reveals disgust, he continues, "the Canadian electoral system is not efficient and doesn't represent interests, especially with First Past the Post type stuff."

Boris is a millennial pursuing a degree in Geographics and Environmental Management at the time of our interview. He was clear that this betrayal made him feel disempowered and tricked by the Liberals:

> "They specifically targeted [through] electoral reform [issues like] environmentalism and other things that were my favourite, things enticing the left to follow and," he continues, sourly, "it's like: 'Well, *surprise!'* They did not." (emphasis added)

Boris's words reveal he is mostly frustrated by the perception of being manipulated by promises *designed* to appeal to someone like him. His argument is one that recurred often in my interviews, which highlights an essential point, which is that, if my interlocutors, despite their general skepticism, had allowed themselves to be hopeful the last time around, they certainly would not be as naïve again. For instance, "Clovis," a long-time undergraduate student and bartender established in central Canada, showed a similar, raw disdain, and expressed what many young voters were feeling and thinking in the early fall of 2019:

> "I used to be like," he puts down the beer he opened when we began the call, lifts his fingers and air quotes, '*vote [with] your conscience!'* He then rolls his eyes and grabs his beer again; "but for this upcoming election I might

> actually end up biting the bullet and voting Trudeau just because it’s so tight with Andrew Scheer.”
>
> He sighs. “I hate it so much—I hate that people are like ‘*vote strategically!*’,” this time only raising one hand in air quote; “and refuse to make even move a little to the left so that instead maybe we find another leader.” (emphasis added)

Clovis was interested in politics, but most notably in issues relevant to the rights of Indigenous Peoples in Canada. He desperately wanted to believe that Canadian political system was capable of change, but confesses he feels stuck in a structural situation that he hates but finds inescapable. His testimony highlights in several ways the gap between promises and realities that is the root cause of his sense of alienation. For example, he takes the time to add “air quotes” as he speaks, to signal the disjuncture between what he is saying and what the words he is employing mean. For instance, his use of air quotes when saying “vote strategically” reveals that he finds the entire premise flawed and manipulative. He also points to the lack of diversity among candidates under the First Past the Post voting system. Last but not least, he exclaims that he *hates* this system so much. His dissatisfaction with the current electoral structure is visceral. At the end, he offered he was “just kind of done.”

Similarly, Felix,” a millennial pursuing an undergraduate degree in electronic engineering, explained the disenfranchisement experienced by Canadians like him:

> “We’re using a broken voting system dominated by people that don’t care and people with too much money to champion issues that don’t matter or matter the wrong way.”

The tensions my interlocutors speak of are particularly difficult to address, especially considering how disempowered they feel. These quotes thus indicate that my millennial interlocutors are apprehensive of politics and fille with doubt. Koch argues that these feelings of alienation are linked to late liberal social transformations which glorify individuality over collectivity, but propose no alternative to the old political institutions, which were founded on more traditional and insular values, and as such, struggle to capture the complexity of political life in contemporary era (see Beck 2002; Koch 2017). What this means is that it is quite disorienting to reconcile your own political identity in the political landscape that feels so engineered and disingenuous. Koch argues that what makes democracy feel so zombified are "the difficulties of reconciling a quest for moral personhood with the pursuit of formal politics, be that through voting or any other forms of participation in the formal political system" (2017,107).

While Koch argues that democratic disenchantment feeds this kind of affect, she also suggests this outcome cannot exclusively be reduced to a consequence of individualization (106). I agree with her point: disenchantment produces radically different reactions from millennials leaning to the left than it does with those leaning to the right of the political spectrum, which means that disenchantment is transideological and transpolitical rather than individual experience. What is more, this disillusionment is something shared by both left and right-wing millennials—even if it produces quite different effects and becomes manifest through adherence to divergent political ideals and practices, depending on where one falls on the political spectrum. And as this disenchantment presents as universal, transideological and transpolitical, it ironically also helps perpetuate the myth that millennials as a generation are more homogenous than is truly the case, simply because of their shared political alienation and distrust in existing institutions.

This has important implications for the understanding of millennial participation in mainstream political life. In 2019, for the first time in Canadian history, "everyone in the age group born between 1980 and 2000 will be able to cast a ballot," reported CBC (see Vermes 2019). However, as the quotes above have indicated, young Canadian voters (e.g., first- or second-time voters) were not particularly enthusiastic about the upcoming elections. With little hope for change in a system corrupted by the interests of investors and feeling like they had little voice in the matter, my interlocutors felt more tokenized than anything else.

Over the 2019 summer, "Apathy is Boring," a non-partisan organization located in Montreal that encourages youth to be active citizens in Canada's democracy, collaborated with Abacus Data, a Canadian research firm, in order to o gain insight into news consumption and democratic engagement among Canadian millennials. This research, which surveyed 2000 Canadians between the ages of 18 and 30, further indicated "millennials" are perceived as apathetic, but crucially are not engaged with by the political parties on a meaningful level:

> "[T]he key to youth engagement is not only inviting them into traditional political spheres, but also taking their lived experiences into account and reaching them in the places they are talking about politics" (Apathy is Boring and Abacus Data 2019).

Once again, such claims pool together all kinds of different “millennials,” reproducing a set of stereotypes and misunderstandings that also disregard the complex differences within the generation. Most importantly, such alarmist discourses focused on traditional political structures, which my interlocutors do not perceive as capable of change. These claims also assume that skepticism towards mainstream politics is a symptom of skepticism of politics writ large. However, that might not be the case at all. My interlocutors, for one, cannot at all be described as apathetic: in fact, they seek a different kind of political engagement altogether. I explore this in further detail in the next section of this chapter, “Not Real, and actually existing politics,” which looks at how the Canadian youth I interviewed perceive how they are being addressed in contemporary discourse, and how (and whether) that informs their political orientations. In doing so, this section further explores the disconnect between their lived realities and their portrayal within mainstream discourse, including through tropes of intergenerational conflict (e.g. “boomers *vs* millennials”).

Not Real, and actually-existing politics

In popular representations and internet humour, millennials are commonly portrayed as being politically disillusioned. Part of that disillusionment stems from a sense of not being taken seriously, or of being infantilized by what they describe as “older adults.” As I will soon show, these types of grievances are commonly thematized in millennial humour and might best be understood as an attempt to challenge what Shery Ortner has theorized as prestige economy based on age (Ortner 1996). What I mean by this is that my interlocutors understand their disempowerment and marginalization in the traditional political sphere to be related to their perceived delay in entering adulthood, conceptualized here as a certain level of socioeconomic stability. Access to that stability, at least in the testimonials of my interlocutors, if not all millennials everywhere, has been blocked by the increasingly cruel forms of neoliberal restructuring that have eroded wages and employment stability. This sense of being subjected to arbitrary and deeply unfair gatekeeping from political and economic life, also helped my interlocutors feel a great sense of generational solidarity.

At the same time, however, the circulation of disparaging stereotypes about millennials fuels my interlocutors sense of frustration with traditional political institutions and older generations that are said to control them. Not only do those representations have nothing to do with their lived realities, but they often deny the central role of structural conditions in ways that my interlocutors find hypocritical, disingenuous, and highly problematic. This fracture, between popular discourses and lived realities, mirrors the one discussed earlier, caused by the erosion of presumably ‘stable’ concepts, such as truth and fake.

In social media, one distinct from these tropes of devaluation take is through the portrayal of millennials as naïve and stupid and as “brainwashed by the liberal education agenda.” Rather than being represented as a group with a different—but legitimate— lived experiences and ideological and political positions, the millennials I spoke to felt they were dismissed outright. Indeed, my interlocutors argued such tropes deny “millennials” full membership in society by portraying them as easily duped, misinformed and manipulable. Undoubtedly, some of these tropes of intergenerational conflict are also a form of clickbait meant to inflame various publics and provoke polemics and debate. Portals such as Buzzfeed often publish content that purportedly describes generational tendencies, which is frequently designed to pit generations against one another to increase audience engagement. Although these representations are usually far-fetched and bear little relation to the truth, I found that tropes that derogated millennials really affected my interlocutors, who felt the need to challenge them and provide a counter narrative. This was especially true if issues at the center of these polemics were of heightened political importance, rather than focused on trivial content related to popular culture or fashion. And they often fired back with memes such as the one represented in Figure 3.

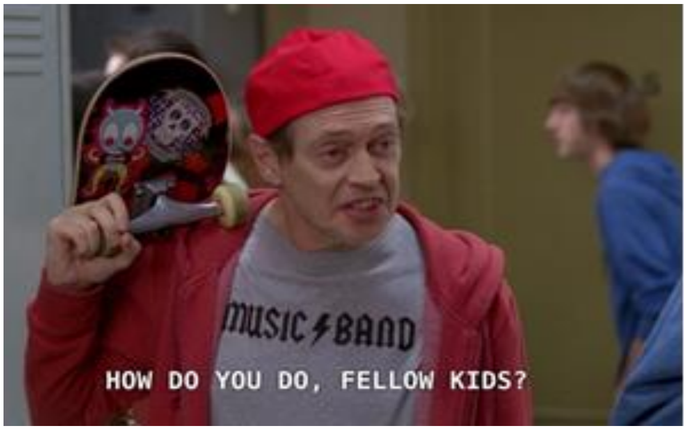

MUSIC BAND
HOW DO YOU DO, FELLOW KIDS?

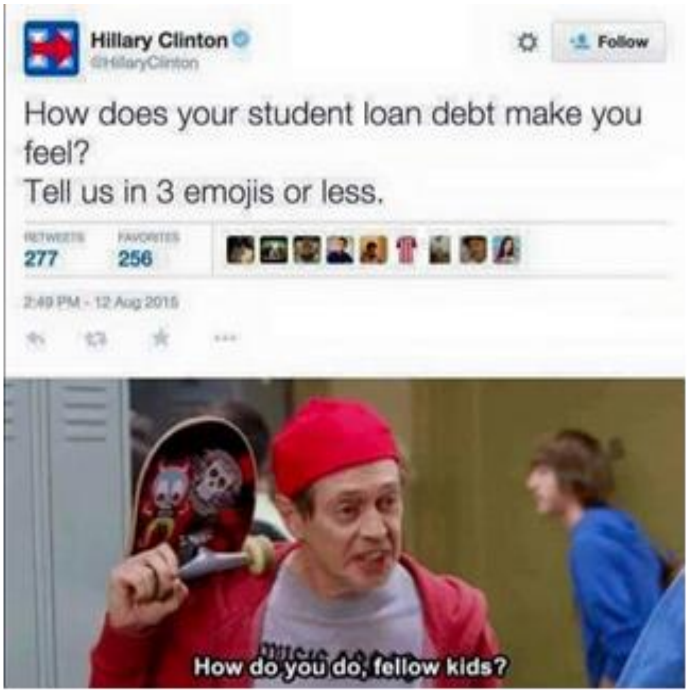
Figure 3

How do you do, fellow kids? is a common way to identify, within digital communities, "users pretending to be part of a community that they are clearly unfamiliar with, […] and egregious attempts at appealing to subcultures" (Know Your Meme, n.d.)[5]. The expression originates from the series *30 Rock*, in an episode in which 55-year-old Steve Buscemi portrays a private investigator posing as a high schooler to approach teenagers. In doing so, he reveals himself as an outsider as his disguise quickly betrays him (see Figure 3).

---

[5] Know Your Meme is a popular digital platform on which users collaborate and add memes' origins, meaning, application, etc.

Over time, the catchphrase “How do you do, fellow kids?” has gained recognition in the online community. Its most famous use dates to the 2016 electoral campaign for the US presidency, during which Hillary Clinton’s communication team, tweeted a question directed at young adults (see Figure 4 below). Clinton’s intended audience responded by sharing this meme, ridiculing further her attempt to seem relatable to young voters. Ironically, In trying to appeal to young voters using emojis, Clinton revealed that she is, in fact, very much out of touch with the day-to-day lives of middle and working class youth.



Hillary Clinton
@HillaryClinton

How does your student loan debt make you feel?
Tell us in 3 emojis or less.

RETWEETS 277
FAVORITES 256

2:49 PM - 12 Aug 2015

Figure 4

It is interesting that a mainstream politician’s attempt to appeal to youth voters failed so spectacularly, given my previous discussion of political alienation among my millennial interlocutors, who complained issues they cared about never seem to be taken seriously. The problem here was that the Clinton campaign raised a serious and relevant issue of student debt in a manner that its target audience found disrespectful and dismissive. Being asked to reduce to one's indebtment to "three or less emojis" was described as insulting by many commentators, who, like my interlocuters, were already feeling unheard by the political structures. The decision to ask for insight and engagement through emojis therefore came across as a poor attempt at understanding the issues surrounding student debt, especially when one takes into consideration just how many threads, narratives, anecdotal evidence, and data detailing the exact information the Clinton communication team was asking for are readily available on the Internet.

Asking for this type of insight on social media is therefore read as a poor attempt to relate by a career politician. In demanding this emotional labour *from others*, especially those already understood to be burdened by this systemic issue, Clinton effectively copped out of her responsibility to listen and, in the process, showed that genuine political action was never the intent of the tweet. For this reason, this request was received by the millennial public and my interlocutors as the latest episode in the Twitter war between the two presidential candidates. It was a performance that attempted to show camaraderie but instead provided a striking example of the ways in which privilege detaches one from the lived experiences of communities.

More than a funny reaction, *How do you do, fellow kids?* fully highlights the irony and frustration of encountering such a request, as far as how little effort is put toward a genuine attempt at a dialogue. Clinton campaign's Twitter gimmick struck many millennials as disingenuous and fake—a prime example of a polished, engineered discourse that fails to hit its mark. Koch (2017) found that this lack of resonance is common among “state officials who [fail] to apply common sense or [are] neglectful or ill-informed” and who are consequently “commonly portrayed as deficient of the ‘stuff’ that made a local person” (115). This is further supported by Petrović (2018), who writes that because mainstream political discourse is so performative, it is often perceived as noncommittal (203).

Resonance, finally

That is not to say that young adults *never* enjoy or consume engineered satire. Sybil expressed that “satirical news comes as a relief when it allows us to focus on the important part that may be more neutral, or factual.” Simply put, like all my informants, she prioritized authenticity, or the recognition, through artistic endeavour, of her lived political experience. Sybil provides the work of Michael De Adder, a famous cartoonist for the Toronto-based *The Star,* a progressive newspaper, to illustrate her point (see Figure 5 below). Although this cartoon is not technically a meme—it is rather a political cartoon that is meant to circulate in a different way—I am including it because it had been shared on and went viral on social media, leading Sybil to perceive it as a meme, or at least, a meme-like artifact.

This image was especially poignant, as it depicts a polar bear sitting on a tiny iceberg melting away alongside an Elections Canada motorboat and representative. Standing in an Elections Canada motorboat, the representative tells the bear it is participating in “partisan activity” by trying to stay afloat. This was published in the summer, during which Elections Canada considered identifying climate change as a partisan issue (see Rabson 2019). The news provoked a backlash among numerous groups, especially millennials and progressives, who took to satire and memes to express their opinions about the news story.

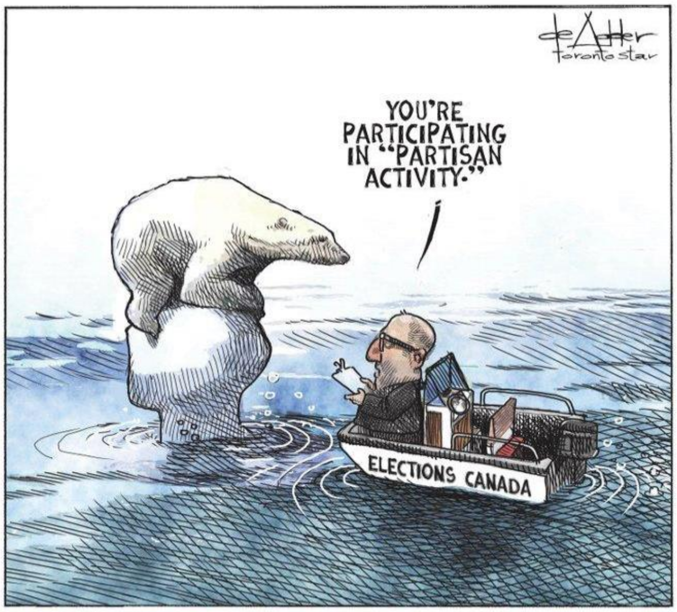

deAdder
torontostar
YOU'RE PARTICIPATING IN "PARTISAN ACTIVITY."
ELECTIONS CANADA

Figure 5

Senses of betrayal, anger, grief, and anxiety rose alongside the scandal, mirroring the profoundly emotional reactions the news provoked. The polar bear was therefore designed as a response to the story, in protest of the discussion being held in the very first place, and it carried a clear message: the climate crisis cannot possibly be considered a partisan issue by seemingly neutral institutions, especially given the devastation it will bring to much of the planet (but especially the most vulnerable and marginal communities). More than that—the cartoon highlights just how hypocritical mainstream parties are in choosing to ignore pressing issues. This drawing by De Adder, turned a meme, was by far the one that hit me most during the interviews: it *gutted* me, and I remember going "oh" upon its reception.

> "Oh... that's *good*. Oh, that's *sad*," I said. Sybil, sighing, answered: "I know! It's so sad but like, *really good* commentary."
>
> She pauses, then goes on to add, "[these are] the ones that actually make you laugh. Those are the ones that are memorable." (italics added for emphasis)

Sybil's words resonated with my own experience of engagement with memes: at times, they are hilarious, but that they can also be sad or invite you to critical analysis. A meme like this has a unique sense of authenticity and an affective charge because it taps into hits hard and reminds one of their own vulnerabilities. The memorable memes are those that linger, the ones that make young adults go "oof, that's *too* real."

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that my interlocutors show a deep desire for the kind of humour that is more critical of power, and less censored or weakened by the very institutions meant to be satirized. This is evidenced by the many ways they referred to engineered satire as a "softer," "less critical" humour, and by the reverence millennials cultivate for humour that takes a particular stance. Both engineered satire, which portrays a much more watered-down political humour, and 'youth-oriented' communication strategies fail to resonate with my interlocutors, and act as a symptom of the more pervasive 'zombification' of politics.

Another issue this chapter has tackled is my interlocutors' angst related to intergenerational conflict, and the discursive tropes that disparage or falsely accuse their generation of being immature, unrealistic, and brainwashed by "liberal ideologies." An important reason these representations—despite being false and often caricatural—rile up my interlocutors is because they serve as an apparent manifestation of their deeply felt social and political marginalization, as well as of what they see as a continuous dismissal of their lived experience. But these tropes are also exploited by various cultural and media producers who want to draw attention to their content. In this sense, the fact that my interlocutors get "baited" by these prepackaged, simplistic tropes is also ethnographically significant. It points to the fact there is a limit to their capacity to recognize discourse engineering processes in action. What's more, the success of boomer vs. millennial trope indicates that some engineered discourses can, in fact resonate—if they sound right or respond to what one thinks they already know about the world. Among my interlocutors, the circulation of these tropes does seem to reinforce a sense of being embattled and victimized—an affective reality they seem to have already internalized.

However, generational conflict is far more nuanced, uneven, and complex than these discursive tropes would lead us to believe, and it is far from limited to "millennials vs boomers." For instance, there is now a rise in satirical content in which members of the Gen Z cohort are mocking millennials' depressive standpoints, and thereby staging evidence of other kinds of generational strife. Those representations in turn help make generational cohorts seem like political and social collectivities—instead of large, heterogenous groups.

That said, the repeated circulation of these tropes on social media helps nurture a set of shared affective states that can be immensely powerful. Jokes about intergenerational conflict can be a powerful way of establishing generational comradery. This capacity of social media to foster a sense of togetherness also explains why my interlocutors choose to engage on participatory platforms, despite the many challenging consequences these spaces have on their mental health. Importantly, despite understanding that the social digital world is inherently performative and fabricated, my interlocutors nevertheless found it difficult to distance themselves from these platforms, seeing them as a core means for forging their social and political identities.

Last but not least, my research has shown me that millennial interlocutors desperately *want* to be involved in politics, but there is no real space to explore their political identity in traditional ways. Despite casting their votes from time to time, they did not believe positive change could come from within the current electoral system in Canada. They are not apathetic; rather, they are passionate and display raw emotions when speaking of their political condition. Therefore, they concentrated that political energy elsewhere. Painfully aware of the bankruptcy of mainstream political discourses—the millennial I interviewed turn to memes in search of a space of affective truths embedded in "actually existing politics."

As I demonstrate in the following chapter, my interlocutors seek a form of humour they describe as "(too) real," one that contains both comedic and defeatist elements. Instead of seeking pre-recorded, engineered satires like the *Golden Ass,* whose content I wrote about in the beginning of this chapter, they choose to navigate the web in search of some artifact that will be worth their time and energy, which would truly resonate with their lived experience. As Boris said, in responding to my question about satirical news, you can “find funnier stuff on the Internet.”

Chapter 2— "Too Real": The Funny That Hurts

Comfortably installed in the grey computer chair in my graduate office, on the University of Ottawa campus, I observe Temperance as she settles down for our interview. Nineteen at the time of our sit-down, Temperance is the youngest of my interviewees. She sits opposite of me, and her hands rest on her bag, itself laid on the table, her fingers absentmindedly twisting the decorative keychain as we begin. Born in the year 2000, on the cusp on generational divide between millennials and Gen Z, Temperance has just wrapped the first year of her undergraduate degree in health sciences. When she speaks, she uses "other millennials," indicating her sense of belonging to the group. Temperance readily admits that she came into political consciousness once she became a university student. Before then, politics was never a topic she could freely bring to the table. The eldest daughter of first-generation immigrants from Eastern Asia, Temperance explains politics is not something you talk about with family, nor casually, "[because] it has this reputation of being [so] dystopic."

In the early minutes of my interviews, I always asked my peers about their favourite topic when it comes to political memes. Doing this often served as an ice breaker: my interviewees, surprised by the question, would break out of the stupor and awkwardness triggered by first-time encounters. The most fascinating thing about these interviews was by far how often my interlocutors would stop themselves in the middle of a sentence, with a mix of shock and guilt on their face, apologizing for forgetting the initial question. I was always charmed by these moments: they felt so organic. In the short-lived space that was our interview, my peers felt safe enough to allow themselves to express their vulnerability despite the fact we had only just met. It was very telling that, in the presence of another millennial, they would dive so enthusiastically into this conversation topic. Temperance's answer to my question provides the entry to this second chapter. Back in my office, when I ask her what kind of memes she enjoys the most, she immediately livens up:

> "To me like... the jokes that I find funny are the ones that I really understand. The things I kind of really like are close to home, so, it's usually Canadian politics, but not always. And, also when it's usually one of the things that has to do with race, I find to be *either really terrible* or *really funny*. There isn't really any in between there."
>
> She smiles and takes a breath before continuing: "But anything about *race*, or *sex*, or *gender*, like those are some issues that I'm passionate about. So those are the ones that can either be *really triggering* or *really funny*." (italics added for emphasis)

In describing the kind of humour that she enjoys, Temperance emphasizes topics close to home, like race, sex, and gender, which shape her own lived experience. Her choice of focus corresponds to the experiences of my interlocutors that I wrote about in the previous chapter, who likewise longed for the kind of humour that resonates with their own lives and generational struggles. But, listening to Temperance, I was also really struck by the contrast she was making between the jokes that were "really terrible/triggering" and "really funny." I also started considering more seriously whether memes could, in some sense, be both at the same time. But before I could ask a follow-up question, Temperance grabbed her cellphone to scroll through her photo library, looking for the image below: “I actually still laugh at this one. Have you seen the flex tape memes?” she asks, and I nod (see Figure 6).

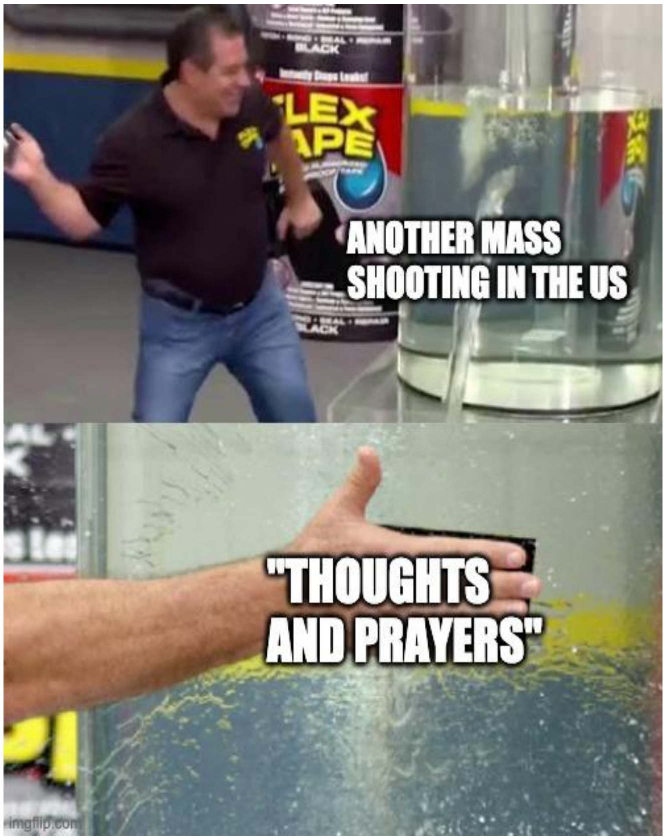


Figure 6

The meme in question, featured in Figure 6, originates from an infomercial that first aired in January of 2019, in which spokesperson Phil Swift, is slapping a piece of Flex Tape onto a leaking water tank. Flex seal tape is advertised as a product that can “fix” massive structural issues. In Figure 6, two labels are identified: “another mass shooting in the US,” on the leak; and “thoughts and prayers” on the tape. The combination of these words with the images from the infomercial is an example of how meme-makers use the strategy of bricolage in combining different artifacts of popular culture in order to create new meaning (Lévi-Strauss 1966 [1962]). Temperance extends her arm to show me the image as she explains:

> “There’s like *really great* iterations of the flex tape meme, but there was one that was circling around a lot—the reason... well it’s pretty sad, it’s the recent shootings in the U.S. and how everyone just wants to ‘*slap thoughts and prayers*’ on it without addressing the *actual problem*.” “They just... use their thoughts and prayers like a Band-Aid solution. That [meme] was one [like] that… like, it was *hilarious* because it was flex tape but also *really frustrating*. I can’t—I can’t because it *fucking hurts*.” (italics added for emphasis)

As I was listening to Temperance, I expected sadness in her tone, but all I could discern was anger. In drawing attention to the inadequate political response to serious issues such as school shootings, Temperance’s analysis of the above meme had a lot in common with the observations of my interlocutors in Chapter 1, who were also frustrated by the performative nature of political discourse and lack of will to address actual problems. Nonetheless, she offered this image because she found it funny, despite the fact her voice cracked at the end, as she exclaimed “it *fucking* hurts.” This is not how we usually describe humour, but it is exactly what makes this interview so illuminating. How does one, in fact, make sense of the humour that hurts? And what does this hurt this say about millennial humour at large?

In the previous chapter, I sought to show how engineered satire, exemplified by satirical news, often does not meet the required characteristics of “good internet humour,” among millennials because it lacks a sense of authenticity and resonance. In this chapter, I turn my attention to humour that does resonate but that in Temperance’s words, “fucking hurts." How can humour be simultaneously funny and gutting? More specifically, how do memes accomplish this peculiar result? What strategies, techniques of representation and tactics do they use to do so? What interests me in particular is how my interlocutors respond to memes that are "humorous, surprising, or emotionally arousing in both positive and negative valences" (Shifman 2014, 2). To make sense of these complex readings of humour, I draw on insight from scholars like Tanja Petrović, who have argued that the logic of the interpretation, reception, and circulation of political humour is often governed by a sense of ambiguity (Petrović 2018, 205). Finally, in approaching this analysis, I also rely on Stephen Duncombe's argument that fun in politics should not (and cannot) be reserved to the few or made into a luxury, but rather should be accessible to anyone "who sacrifices free time as well as the bliss of ignorance" to engage (2007, 58).

Unmasking

The flex tape infomercial popularized the expression *slapping x onto* to describe "band-aid solutions," as Temperance explained. This is a recurring notion in the political landscape of my generation, one that condemns the lack of action on issues such as gun violence. The use of "I can't…" as an exclamation of disbelief is also another popular expression in the millennial vocabulary, which highlights the absurdity of contemporary political discourse. Memes that use this kind of critique are common, as explained by Temperance:

> "it's like... the best memes are the ones that are like *so upsetting* but also *so true* that it also kind of makes it funny that someone made a meme out of it—to make it a little more lighthearted, and I mean by making heavy issues a little bit

> more lighthearted I feel like it also gets people to talk about them a bit more. Those are the ones that actually *get* me."
>
> She stops, takes a sip of water; I push: "so would you say all memes are funny?"
>
> "No. No. They are like... I would say a solid like five, ten percent of the ones that I go through *actually* will make me laugh." (italics added for emphasis)

This conversation with Temperance stayed with me. It was by far the most eloquent description of the 'gutting' side of memes. Temperance uses words like "terrible" and "upsetting" to describe *hilarious* memes and, like my other interlocutors, emphasizes the double-edged nature of memes as one that, in the end, is capable of increasing awareness about political issues like no other media can. In the past few years, memetic discourse on the Left has taken a turn for a darker, *spicier* sense of humour. According to my interlocutors, such memes can be quite funny, but they also hold complex layers of meaning that require a certain level of critical analysis, cultural knowledge, and political literacy. In other words, there is a deep understanding among my interlocutors that genuine laughter is not the sole purpose of memes, or at least not their sole attraction:

> "Sometimes it helps me to put a frame on an issue that I disregarded or didn't think of. Sometimes they just get it exactly right and come up with the angle that I wouldn't have thought of. But there *has to be* a straight up attempt at humour, in some form or another," explained Felix, "otherwise it's just not worth it." (italics added for emphasis)

These excerpts from the interviews suggest that even if the pleasure of memes lies in their capacity to "add humour to the awfulness of reality," to borrow my interviewee Boris's words, millennial humour does more than make people laugh. An effective meme reveals something about the nature of reality that was previously not easily perceived. However, when a meme does so, it also risks being a bit "too real" or as millennials would say, "gutting." Therefore, to echo Felix's analysis, a great political meme, one that "is worth it," tries to counterbalance its negativity, its critical edge, with humour.

Felix's observation about the need for emotional balance makes sense in the context of scholarship on humour, which argues that good humour is above all, centered on emotional resonance (Milner 2016; Miltner 2014) Hartmut Rosa also points out that just because something is sad, it does not mean it cannot produce a positive social effect (2016). Clovis, one of my informants, offered perhaps the best statement to explain the complexities of sensemaking through memes. When he is not at work, bartending, Clovis creates and consumes memes. He favours the ones that hold the capacity to reveal, or unmask, the hidden messages behind political performance. To him, authenticity in memetic discourse is about increasing political literacy and transparency through immediacy:

> "I can crank out whatever—giving the messages without *actually* having to put the effort into writing paragraphs and carefully defining everything—so I'm not misinterpreted and so on, and so forth. *People that understand the format will understand the statement*." (italics added for emphasis)

Immediacy is one of the five major characteristics of memes so that they can be appreciated both on superficial and deeper levels (Milner 2016; Mina 2018). To illustrate his point, Clovis sends me the image above. Figure 7 is a clear example of how memes can communicate a message in a near-instantaneous way. This meme consists of four frames, to be read from left to right, and depicts in the upper left corner the image of a man wearing sunglasses down his nose, his eyes, focussed on an unseen object, show a puzzled expression. The lower left corner, right below, shows the same man, but this time his sunglasses cover his eyes. His face is frozen in a gasp, as though the sunglasses grant him a sort of "sight beyond." These two frames are the backbone of the meme, as they set the tone and statement of the image: *look beyond what you see*. This tactic of "unmasking" could be deployed repeatedly; a myriad of images could be featured on the right, and still the root of the message would not change (see Figure 8)[6].

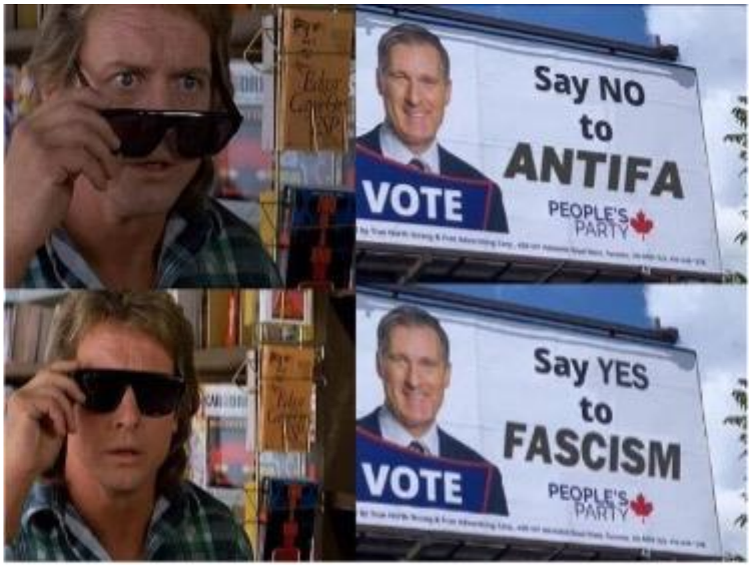


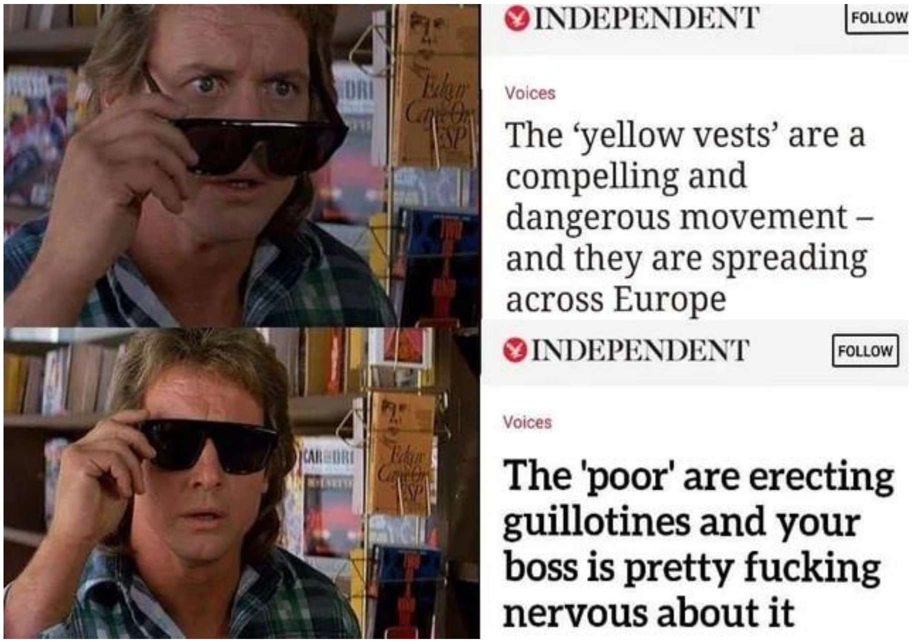
Figure 7

The focus of Figure 2, however, is the official billboard messaging of Maxime Bernier's newly founded People's Party, a right-wing entity which splintered off from the Conversative Party. The People's Party, just like its counterparts in the US, is obsessed with "ANTIFA," which it seeks to demonize and single out as the key political problem.

---

[6] Please note the purpose of Figure 8 is solely to illustrate my point pertaining to the malleability of a meme format. Considering this, I will not be diving into the localized issue featured in the image.

This is made evident by the first image in the sequence, which is based on the Party's own political ad. But the above meme seeks to reveal that the actual *problem* is the ideological narrative behind People's Party's own platform, which is based in hostility towards immigrants, islamophobia, and tacit support for white supremacist groups. The lower right corner, the fourth and last frame of this image, in its revelation, features the very same ad, this time reading "say YES to FASCISM." In this way, the meme suggests that the People's Party's opposition to anti-fascism in fact, testifies to its fascist stance.



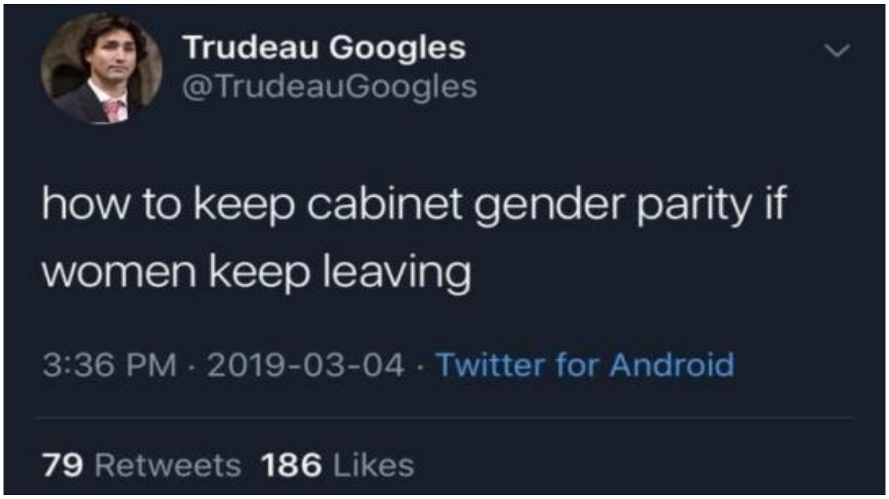
The 'yellow vests' are a compelling and dangerous movement – and they are spreading across Europe

The 'poor' are erecting guillotines and your boss is pretty fucking nervous about it

Figure 8

Not all unmasking memes work in the same way. Sometimes, their aim is to expose the very processes through which political discourse is constructed. Take, for example, the meme above, from the account "Trudeau Googles," which imagines the Prime Minister's internet searches as a way of revealing all the ways in which the Liberal Party fails to live up to its own image. In this instance, the topic in focus is gender parity. Figure

9 gained popularity around the time the Liberal Party removed two women from their positions as Members of Parliament amid the SNC-Lavalin scandal.



Trudeau Googles

@TrudeauGoogles

how to keep cabinet gender parity if women keep leaving

3:36 PM · 2019-03-04 · Twitter for Android

79 Retweets 186 Likes

Figure 9

Once again, the key issue here is the gap between political rhetoric and practice. Gwendoline, who sent me the image during our interview, explains:

> "*Obviously,*" she insists, "it's funny because it's supposed to be what you do. It's like [him] googling, like, in his home office so it's already a funny mental image.
>
> But *then* the thing of this is just like… it just speaks back to what I've heard called like 'lip service' where people say like *we're going to do this* but it's not meaningful; like, in my mind the difference between *access* and *inclusion* where like 'access' is like *yeah you're there, you're sitting in the seat*, but 'inclusion' is where you feel *comfortable* and *valued* and *you're able to participate*.
>
> And, yeah, I feel like this reflected that kind of sentiment, *that's* what I like about this one." (italics added for emphasis)

The initial humorous power of this meme, as Gwen explains, stems from the mental image it triggers: Justin Trudeau sitting at home, googling the very question to find potential solutions, as *anybody would*. More than that, Gwen described Figure 4 as funny *because* it highlights the hypocrisy of the Liberal Party under Justin Trudeau's leadership. Soon after the 2015 federal election, the newly elected Prime Minister gained a boost of popularity when he announced his cabinet would be the first in Canadian history to ensure gender parity. When he was asked about this decision, Justin Trudeau famously said, "because it's 2015!" This stance was congruent with the stated strategy employed by the Liberal Party's electoral campaign, which promoted progressive values and ideas as core to their promises only to renounce them once in office.

This apparent duplicity of the Liberal Party was at the core of my interlocutors' critiques and the subject of many memes they shared with me. As I showed in Chapter 1, Boris and Felix were particularly vocal about the Liberal party's decision not to reform the electoral structure, as promised during the campaign. Such gaps between promises and policies made unmasking memes particularly popular in this context. In exposing, as Gwendoline suggests above, that Liberals could not even enact something as fundamental as gender parity, the meme also implies there is little hope for addressing much more serious issues like keeping in check corporate interests or ensuring meaningful forms of redistribution. What makes this meme at once funny, and "too real" is the fact it exposes Liberal policies not only as a form of "lip service," but as an improvisation that cannot even enact its own basic coordinates, tied to things like gender representation.

The illusion of progressiveness and inclusion, once revealed for its artificiality, becomes impossible to recreate once it has shattered (Rehak and Trnka 2018). In other words, once you notice the fissure, what my interlocutors would sometimes call a "glitch in the matrix," there is simply no unnoticing it. Figure 5, which I have included below to further illustrate this point, employs a similar strategy to unmask discourse. This image—originating from an episode of *The Simpsons* which aired in 2007—became popular in August of 2018. The format employed in Figure 10 "expresses an attempt to hide one's true self" (see Know Your Meme for more). This is similar to the arguments my interlocutors made in Chapter 1 about Canadian humour lacking critical bite. My

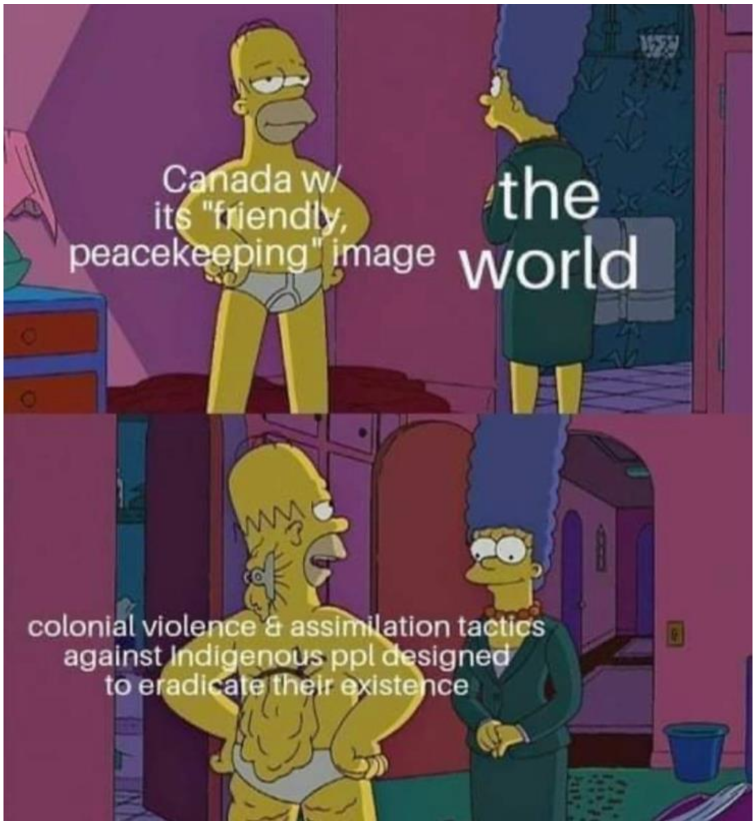

Canada w/
its "friendly,
peacekeeping" image
the
world
colonial violence & assimilation tactics
against Indigenous ppl designed
to eradicate their existence

Figure 10

In the upper panel, Homer stands proudly, fists on his hips, facing Marge to impress her with his slimmed figure. He is labelled as "Canada with its 'friendly, peacekeeping' image," and Marge as "the world." In the lower panel, Homer's back is revealed to show clips and strings to hold back his skin, to shape his figure, unbeknownst to Marge. The label on his back reads "colonial violence and assimilation tactics against Indigenous people designed to eradicate their existence."

interlocutors are frustrated because Canada has long projected this image of being a human rights champion, and a bastion of progressive politics. However, my interlocutors, who actually live in Canada and are aware of domestic political issues, experience this performative discourse as deeply hypocritical.

What makes this genre of memes so popular is precisely its capacity to reveal the disingenuous side of political discourse and to expose the gap between rhetoric and practice. Moreover, this kind of humour can serve as a strategy of generational identity-making because those that engage with these kinds of unmasking memes feel like they are "in the know"—like they understand the hidden reality underneath. Memetic humour in this instance actually "contest[s] the dominant political order [to reveal] the arbitrariness of state ideologies, and the contradictions of everyday life" (Bakhtin qtd in Rehak and Trnka, 2018, 42). It is "a spectacle of estrangement [...] that exposes the bizarre reality of everyday existence" (Duncombe 2007, 156).

Millennials that I spoke to use unmasking memes to expose the ideological narratives in their surroundings and provide a different kind of an interpretation for what is going on in the current political moment. This is because my interlocutors perceive their struggle in political and historical terms, rather than in terms of individual failing—which is a constant source of tension between millennials and boomers. To illustrate this further, the following subsection, entitled *The Perpetual Struggle Bus*, focuses on the memes that thematize the precarious political economic structures, and criticize the refusal of power to take seriously their own lived experience.

The Perpetual Struggle Bus

By now, this thesis has demonstrated that millennials crave authenticity in an environment distorted by various forms of discourse engineering and performative gestures commonly found in mainstream political life. The lack of authenticity in mainstream politics is significantly worsened by the material conditions and lived realities of my interlocutors, which do not correspond to the expectations that were passed onto them by the earlier generations. The post-Fordist political economy has produced a range of disenchantments and disappointments, which in turn generate their own affective states. My interlocutors are acutely aware of their precarious living situation, as this excerpt from my conversation with Clovis shows:

> “Your average millennial is going to be in their mid to late 20s and they’re working and they’re in an economic position that the previous generation would have had in their early 20s because we generally find ourselves lagging behind by a few years economically for some things like buying a home or starting a family and having two kids… it’s just not attainable at the same ages, *if at all*.” (italics added for emphasis)

What is striking about this testimony is that Clovis seems to have inherited a paradigm as to what a ‘proper’ life ought to look like. I did not push at the time, but I wondered afterwards why he was so focused on these specific markers of adulthood–like having two children by mid 20s–which are clearly no longer the norm given the ongoing social transformations that place greater value on attaining higher education, for example. It is also unclear whether Clovis actually wants kids at this time, yet he uses home ownership and having children as a shorthand for economic stability.

Among my interlocutors, I found that it was precisely economic stability that was the biggest object of desire. Millennials often joke that their generation is on a “perpetual struggle bus” but for many of my interviewees, their actual lived experience was profoundly shaped by socio-economic insecurity. Take Sybil, for instance, who had an incredibly difficult upbringing. Abandoned alongside her siblings by her parents in early teenage years, Sybil knows precarity all too well. Being the eldest, she began navigating the real world “at a very young age.” Her difficult financial situation propelled her into heightened political awareness:

> “I had to understand the political climate and why I was in such a shitty situation. So yeah, I’ve been feeling anxious about the political climate since I was a very young child. But I think if I had grown up in a supportive family situation, I probably wouldn’t have started feeling anxious about the political climate until a few years ago.”

Sybil’s testimonial indicates she situates her own condition within larger political and social structures, as supposed to assuming it to be a result of bad individual choices her parents may have made. In a similar manner, she sees her ongoing struggle for economic stability as a product of structural inequality. And, as someone who had been working since before she was even an adult, she was particularly angered by the claims that millennials are lazy and entitled. To challenge this narrative, Sybil instead insisted that “the main characteristic of millennials is that they are hardworking and not compensated for that.” In saying this, she was also drawing attention to the problems of stagnant wages and underemployment, which particularly affect younger workers.

Both Sybil and Clovis highlight socioeconomic instability and inequality as defining dimensions of their lived experience, which are also at odds with the expectations about their future that they inherited as millennial Canadians. These shared observations were charged with similar kinds of defeatist affect and a deep sense of betrayal that the same system that allowed their parents to thrive had failed them. This sense of generational betrayal was one of the reasons why jokes about the boomer generation, and various tropes of generational conflict, were so popular among my interlocutors.

Take for instance, the image below, which Boris volunteered (see Figure 11). Once again borrowed from *The Simpsons*, Figure 11 is a typical representation of millennial angst. In the pictured scene, Homer, distracted, fails to notice the room behind him has caught fire. The fire, labeled "the economy," is certain to harm the employee in the image, identified as "millennials." In front, Homer is labelled as "baby boomers," lovingly gazing at what is identified as "pension," "social security" and "retirement." This sense of urgency, expressed in images such as the one in Figure 11, alludes to the erosion of social safety nets, including pensions, which is nowadays faced by millennials, entering the labor force in the wake of neoliberal restructuring. The meme portrays the socioeconomic difficulties of millennials as a consequence of inaction by boomers, who did not do much to prevent the radical transformations of the economy and the labour market from which millennials are now suffering.

But this meme also presents a very simplified dramatization of socioeconomic realities. This portrayal presumes all "millennials" are in a precarious condition, while all "boomers" enjoy the privileges of "pension" or "social security." In reality, many boomers also face uncertain retirement prospects. What makes this trope additionally problematic is that it portrays each generation as a monolith, assuming that each one represents a social class. It also provides an immediate answer as to who is to be blamed. The other effect of this representation is that it creates a sense of solidarity among millennials, as well as a sense of being embattled as a generation. That takes focus away from any inequalities that exist within the millennial generation itself.

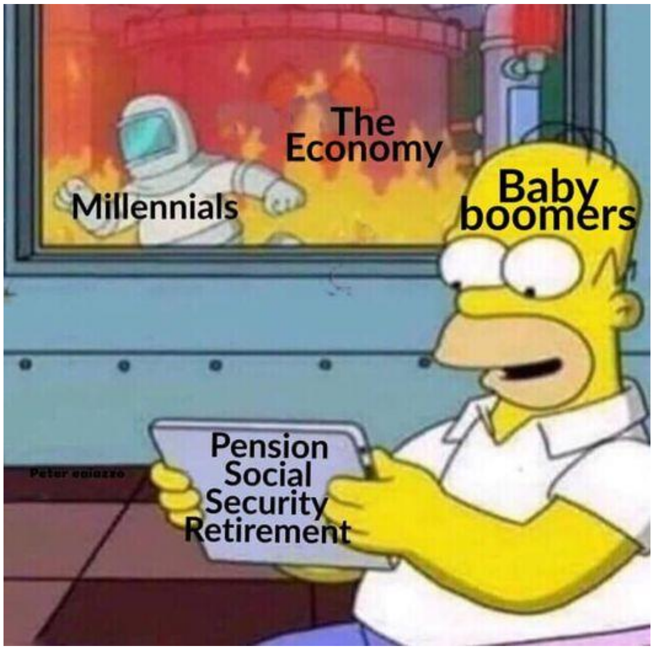


Figure 11

Nonetheless, Figure 11 does speak to structural issues, such as the radical changes of the economy under neoliberal capitalism. Figure 12, which is included below, follows a similar pattern, as it does package together 'young adults' into one homogeneous category. However, that is not the characteristic I want to foreground. In the image, a man sits in a crowded stadium, but his view of the event is entirely blocked by a large pillar. This pillar is labelled "the cost of basic needs" and stands directly in front of the man, who represents "young adults," keeping him from enjoying "a life worth living." What I want to amplify is how the architectural issue of the stadium pictured in Figure 12 is chosen as an allegory for material obstacles facing the "young adult" population.

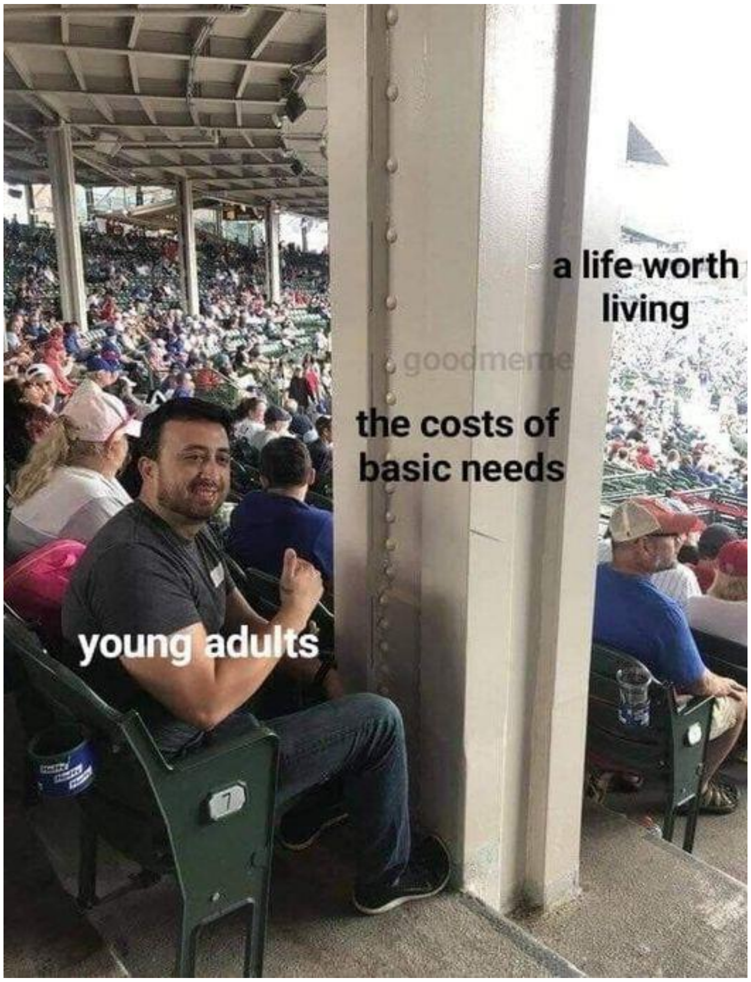


Figure 12

For example, during the summer when I conducted my interviews, there was a lot of political controversy about cuts made to OSAP funding. My interlocutors, such as Boris and Killian, were both worried that these changes to the funding programs would plunge them further into debt or make them unable to continue their education altogether. These cuts, combined with skyrocketing costs of higher education, can be thought of as a manifestation of the kind of obstacles this meme is trying to capture. These types of problems are indeed specific to the millennial (and Gen Z) generation and affect their lives in concrete and material ways. And these issues have a lot of traction among middle-class millennials in Canada, who have been socialized to pursue higher education as a path towards a desirable future– “a life worth living.”

The tensions between these desires, the structural conditions, and the contradictory messages my interlocutors are getting is creating disaffection which is evident in the humour that circulates. The popularity of the defeatist tropes in the memes shared by my interlocutors, like in Figures 11 and 12, intensifies a sense of defeatism and cynicism which can often feel very disempowering. In an attempt to criticize “precarity,” an instrument of neoliberal governance whose objective is to provide the minimum possible social security (Lorey 2012, 3), the millennials I interviewed in effect come to perceive themselves as victims. And while most of my interlocutors do indeed experience various forms of precarity, the blind spot of such argument is that it is often projected onto an entire generation, as if “millennials” as a whole were an exploited social class. What’s more, memes that purport to foreground millennial experience, rarely say much about racial, ethnic, or actual class disparities, let alone other forms of marginalization that are not universally experienced by all members of the millennial generation. This remains true even if my interlocutors, like Temperance and Clovis, either experience or actively critique settler colonialism as a political formation.

That said, one of the reasons why this genre of memes that thematizes social inequality might be so compelling to my interlocutors is because it provides a means for critiquing the violence of neoliberal capitalism, even if such critique takes imperfect forms. Memes like Figures 11 and 12 directly criticize the lack of power and access millennials experience to “encourage the viewer [to] step back and look critically at the taken-for-grantedness of a political system where money has a [bigger] voice [than them], prodding them to question: ‘*Isn’t [the] current political system absurd?*’” (Duncombe 2007, 148)

Even more poignantly, this subset of memes garners popularity among my interlocutors because it challenges the romanticization of a capitalist notion of success as a path that is accessible through hard work and “pulling oneself up by the bootstraps,” to borrow Clovis’ words, rather than forged in privilege. As I have explored in previous parts of this thesis, the myth of meritocracy leads to the normalization of “grind culture” and near-cult like dedication to a place of work (Soloway 2021). Scholars such as Berlant (2011) and Crossman (2019) further argue that meritocracy can be thought of as a form of “false consciousness,” which “encourage[s] people to think and act in ways that [are] counterintuitive to their economic, social, and political self-interests” (Crossman 2019).This certainly corresponds with the views of my interlocutors, who seem particularly frustrated with the continued circulation of moralistic tropes of “hard work” which they associate with their parents’ generation, which tends to fetishize individual action and ignore structural conditions.

That is why the millennial humour I analyze often highlights these leftist and anti-capitalist themes. In fact, every single person I exchanged with for the purpose of this research was clear that their lives were forged in precarity, uncertainty and even fear. As a result, they navigate towards the kind of humour which, in addition to being funny, was on occasion “too real” or, too realistic in portraying the generation’s sense of disempowerment. Artifacts such as Figures 11 and 12 nevertheless have a double-edged sword: their circulation helps perpetuate my interlocutors' sense of being embattled, or "fucked," as Sybil so eloquently put it.

Importantly, these modes of critique further deepen my interlocutors' disillusionment with mainstream political institutions. Duncombe calls this "the Spielberg effect," which he defines as "cynical withdrawing following the recognition that you are being manipulated" (2007, 151). This is why internet humour has become a staple of millennial popular culture: it is a place where millennials like my interlocutors can contemplate their historical condition, as well as search for a place where they feel like they belong. In doing so, they collectively participate in the building of a digital, borderless community which, despite blossoming within self-enclosed echo chambers, provides my interviewees the opportunity and space to meaningfully engage with each other on a broader level. In these self-selected spaces, they attempt to marry their political interests and values with a sense of humour which reiterates and pokes fun at their own ostracization or "manipulation," as Duncombe puts it.

As this above section explains, this often means my interlocutors cannot always perceive the limits of their own critique of either capitalism or engineered discourse itself, which was the central object of the previous chapter. When it comes to certain tropes, such as those foregrounding their own perceived generational angst (and intergenerational conflict that is said to fuel them), my interlocutors do buy into certain forms of engineered satire which resonates emotionally, even if it does not tell the whole story of social inequality. In the section that follows, entitled "Terribly funny," I return to precisely the question of emotional resonance, by focusing on the self-deprecating nature of the millennial humour, which Temperance characterized as both “too real” and “really triggering.”

Terribly Funny

Sometimes lighthearted, the memetic discourse my interlocutors enjoy most can also be terribly gut-wrenching. But even if they are terrible, or frustrating, memes carry complex political sensibilities that soften the blow, so to speak. These iterations, located on the border between what is funny and what hurts, are the golden goose of memes.

> “There’s a lot of solace in satire,” Killian explains. “I think if you can accept that we are facing really serious global problems, whether it’s economic, environmental, whatever problems, and *things don’t look good*, if you can at least take some positivity out of satire that can really help.” (italics added for emphasis)

This is also reminiscent of Sybil’s and Temperance’s points from earlier pages, who both alluded to the essentiality of “good commentary” in memetic humour to find comical relief. For this reason, researchers of memes understand they are “vectors of feelings that help people find and affirm each other” (Mina 2018, 127). This is consistent with anthropological theories of humour, which argue that laughter is an experience and performance of political intimacy (Klumbytė 2011).

What I found curious was that my interlocutors sought more than simple comical relief. Rather, they unanimously indicated the ability of memes to “hurt” them is only part of the fun. Memes are sought both “for the purpose of being entertained and actually having a conversation about,” and to “add some humour to the awfulness of reality,” as

Maud and Boris explain, respectively. What this means is that humour comes as a form of relief to millennials, who agree that sharing the burden lightens it. Figure 13 is one of many in this subset to directly criticize the precarity my interlocutors feel in today's world.

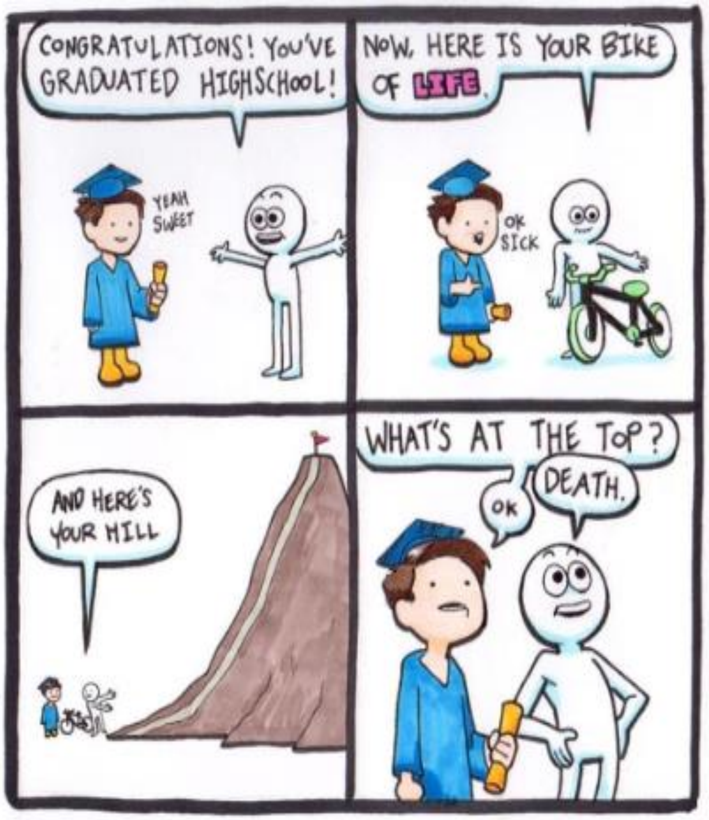
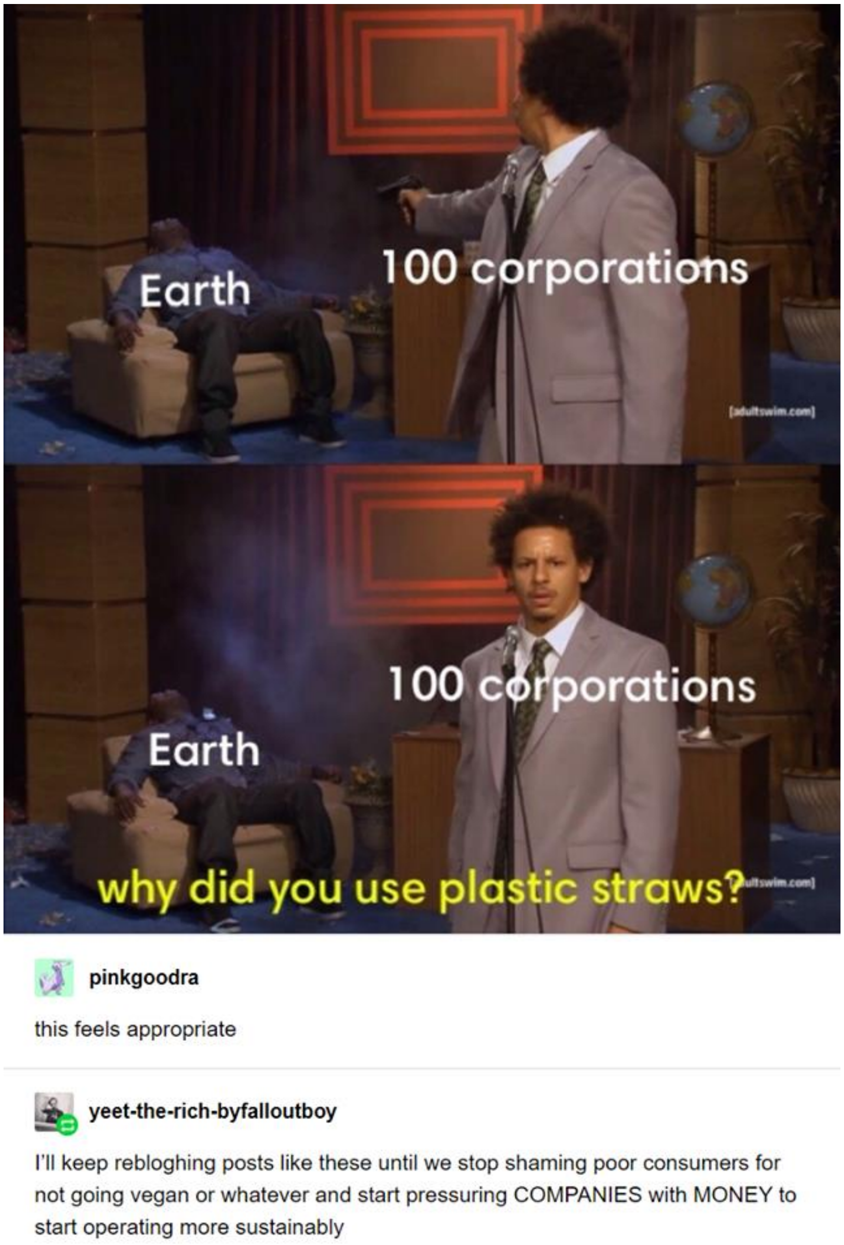

CONGRATULATIONS! YOU'VE GRADUATED HIGHSCHOOL!
YEAH SWEET
NOW, HERE IS YOUR BIKE OF LIFE.
OK SICK
AND HERE'S YOUR HILL
WHAT'S AT THE TOP?
DEATH.
OK

Figure 13

In other words, the memes that frustrate and hurt my interlocutors, while also triggering laughter and *oofs* are those that resonate among them-- *because* my interlocutors are hurting, anxious, and depressed. The fascinating aspect of this subset of memes is that they are not really "funny." Rather, they permit the escape, the acknowledgement that certain things *are no joking matter.* Take Figure 14, below:


Earth
100 corporations
[adultswim.com]
Earth
100 corporations
why did you use plastic straws?
[adultswim.com]

pinkgoodra

this feels appropriate

yeet-the-rich-byfalloutboy

I'll keep reblogging posts like these until we stop shaming poor consumers for not going vegan or whatever and start pressuring COMPANIES with MONEY to start operating more sustainably

Figure 14

This image consists of two items: a meme based on a clip from T*he Eric Andre Show, known as* “Why Would X Do This?”, which “refers to a skit in which we see Andre fire a gun multiple times as co-host Hannibal Buress, then turn to the camera and ask ‘Who killed Hannibal?’” (Know Your Meme). The meme labels Andre “100 corporations” and Buress “Earth” and changes the question from “Who killed Hannibal” to “Why did you use plastic straws?” The meme is completed by two responses to it, originally shared on Tumblr. The first reads “this feels appropriate” and the second, “I’ll keep reblogging posts like this until we stop shaming poor consumers for not going vegan or whatever and start pressuring COMPANIES with MONEY to start operating more sustainably.” While the visual part of the meme could stand alone, in this context, it is enriched by two responses which provide further commentary and create a newly expanded version of the meme that then re-enters circulation.

The users’ commentary indicates how popular climate-related memes have become; given their central topic, they are especially effective at producing jokes which are also gutting. This is because climate change and environmental issues are good examples of difficult structural problems without easy solutions. For a lot of my interlocutors, these themes, in particular, evoke a sense of grief and hopelessness. But this does not mean they refrain from joking about it. Figure 14 is terribly funny for many reasons, the first being that it repurposes an over-the-top scene to encourage its viewers to reflect back on the absurdity and the depressing nature of mainstream discourse surrounding climate change. This visual clearly points out the Earth is being killed by “100 corporations” but the punchline puts the viewer on the spot by asking about their use of plastic straws. The second person who commented on this visual flips thing around, pointing out the ways in which the public is subjected to corporate gaslighting that tends to place blame for environmental crises on consumers.

But, in addition to this, this meme makes the viewer face the question of whether individual action matters in the face of pervasive capitalist extraction and the actions of the 100 corporations that produce the overwhelming majority of carbon emissions. In other words, the meme is gutting because of the hopelessness it highlights—there is a sense that these large and powerful companies can never be held accountable because they have access to endless resources they can spend on setting the terms of conversation. In the meantime, users such as “yeet-the-rich-byfalloutboy” can circulate their poignant critique time and time again, without much effect. By bringing climate change into the mix—another serious issue stemming from unchecked corporate power which is likewise ignored by government leaders—this funny meme suddenly becomes “too real.

Obviously, not all memes focus on such serious content, but my interlocutors, who come together in leftist online groups tend to like this kind of humour. This may be because jokes can be thought of as moments of liberation, “giving a voice to a situation that strikes one as radically irregular” (Douglas qtd Rehak and Trnka 2018, 59), thus “opening space to different experiences and meanings than those inscribed by authorities and made normal through custom” (Duncombe 2007, 138). Anthropological scholarship on humour likewise argues that satirical critique is driven by “desires for a better life [...] accountability of elites, [and] more inclusive politics that take people’s concerns into account” (Rehak and Trnka 2018, 42). This is borne out by my research, which shows how much my interlocutors’ humour is shaped not only by their material reality, but also by their desire for a better future.

During my interviews, my interlocutors showed awareness that their sense of humour is dark and convoluted. This understanding comes in parallel with the recognition that their existence is precarious, and that humour is one of the few ways to provide escape and relief. But there is also something else that happens when such memes circulate. Often, millennials respond to memes they love with phrases such as, “Mood” or “too real,” or “oof.” This creates a particular affective atmosphere that is reflected in the testimonials of my interlocutors, as these reactions not only acknowledge the shared reality about which one is laughing, but also create a sense of a “collective ambiance” based on a sense of shared suffering (O’Dell 2015). Scholars like Petrović (2018) and Mazzarella (2009) use the term “intimacy” to refer to such affectively charged atmospheres. Their assessment is that “collective ambiances,” arise precisely in spaces where participants are “encouraged to break out of the soporific routine of the society of the spectacle and participate in the situation unfolding around them” (Duncombe 2007, 130).

Conclusion

This chapter has been asking the question of what constitutes a compelling meme for the millennials I interviewed. The examination of diverse meme formats indicates that my interlocutors, young, left-leaning millennials living in Canada, embrace a critical view of capitalism and political and economic inequalities it generates, and long for a genuine political space where their presence is acknowledged and considered. More than humour itself, my interlocutors seek to be heard and live in a world that takes people and their socioeconomic needs seriously. In this manner, memetic humour has become a cornerstone in the making of political identity for my interlocutors, who perceive exploitation, inequality and environmental degradation as structural issues which are impossible to escape.

However, as this chapter has shown, there are tensions and blind spots in this form of critique, which have to do with the fact that when it comes to precarity and socio-economic struggle, intra-generational differences are often not acknowledged enough, neither among millennials nor boomers. That said, millennial humour that thematizes political-economic issues does emerge as a way of acknowledging pervasive and deepening class differences that structure Canadian society, for which there is often no effective vocabulary in mainstream discourse. This is especially true for millennials of middle-class backgrounds who note the deterioration of their economic prospects and the increase of living costs and need a language to describe this angst. For instance, Clovis, Killian, Felix, and Sybil had all begun working in their teenage years and quickly had grown to recognize their own disadvantaged positions through work experience "in the real world." And some of my interlocutors, like Maud and Temperance, who are both women descendants of first-generation immigrants to Canada, recognize that their sources of struggle are, in fact, multiple.

The millennial humour I analyzed, rooted in progressive, anti-capitalist and environmentalist values, functions as a means of reclaiming the political narrative for my interlocutors, who express the need for a political space to air their grievances and demand actual solutions (Duncombe 2007, 68). It also does something else, which is provide a space to create a sense of solidarity and togetherness. Maud eloquently put this into words:

> "There is a lot of untapped potential and I think one of the beautiful things about being a millennial, and this is something that I would define as *connectivity*, we're connected to each other in a way that had never been possible before and we can learn so much." (emphasis added)

Similarly, Sybil explains "[access to these kinds of humour] has made me a better person because I am exposed to those different viewpoints, I'm exposed to people who have different experiences. It was really through social media that I started to question my conservative upbringing." Temperance too was clear that leftist values aligned with her own progressive politics, which she saw reflected in the kinds of memes I examined in this chapter. For Temperance, my other interlocutors and even myself, this kind of humour is a space where we can participate in political debate on our own terms. In other words, among others like them, my millennial interlocutors feel like they are part of a broader, chaotic polyvocal community, a "collective that is made stronger and more vibrant through the inclusion of, and discussion among many differing voices" (Duncombe 2007, 126).

Admittedly, my interlocutors probably feel this way because they come together around echo chambers reserved for leftist memes, where they find people who share their views and reinforce them. The memes they share can incite laughter, camaraderie, and solidarity among those who are struggling under the weight of the current political and economic moment. Another important finding of my research is that, despite my interlocutors' appreciation of memetic humour, they did understand that memes cannot be one's only source of political knowledge or literacy, but rather, a steppingstone towards it. My interlocutors volunteered memes which display desires for a better life, communicated through the reappropriation of images and cultural artifacts, mashed together in bricolage to incite a sense of resonance among others who, like them, experience the same sense of disenchantment. Considering this, it is essential to point out that my informants agreed that memes and social media, for all their faults, remind them they *are not alone* in their sense of disaffection.

Conclusion

This thesis has been driven by the question, what kind of humour emerges from the political disenchantment that has been such a prevalent feature of millennial coming of age, punctuated by neoliberal restructuring and increasingly precarious political and environmental futures. Deploying conventional and digital ethnography, and semi-structured interviews with participants of left-leaning online communities dedicated to exchanging internet humour, my research has sought to shed light on the types of millennial humour that aspire not only to be funny but provide various forms of political critique. Chapter 1, "Funny but not real(ly)," has analyzed my interlocutors' quest for the kind of humour that seems sincere and authentic even under the conditions where much of political discourse seems engineered, fake, or performative. Entitled "Too real, the funny that hurts," Chapter 2 follows the testimonies of my interlocutors to determine why the humour that resonates with them most is often depressing or, as they say, "gutting."

While numerous studies have shown how satire can be a useful tool for political critique (e.g., Haugerud 2013; Brock 2018; Petrović 2018), very few anthropological studies explore how digital millennial culture is enabling new types of political reflection, particularly through social media and circulation of memes. What's more, there is little work so far on how these new genres are interacting with existing media structures. By combining an analysis of more traditional media platforms with an ethnography of online circulation, this project contributes to the emerging field of anthropology of media, which has so far focused on transformation of either existing media structures (e.g. Larkin 2008; Mazzarella 2013) or journalistic sensibilities (e.g. Boyer 2005, 2010; Roudakova 2017).

There are three significant findings in my research. First, the political humour I foregrounded in this thesis at once reflects *and* reinforces a sense of political disenchantment which has come to define, rightfully or not, popular depictions of the millennial generation. But more than that, in the digital milieus I analyzed in my research, humour that strongly thematizes the critique of contemporary capitalism also helps nurture leftist political orientations, and a deep concern with social and environmental justice. For many of my interlocutors, engaging with political memes was a steppingstone towards becoming more politicized in general.

In contrast to mainstream depictions of millennials as apathetic (something I examine at length in Chapter 1), my interlocutors who came together around these politicized online groups, were not only committed to increasing their own political consciousness but condemned those who opted to ignore political issues (particularly because they did not see them as relevant to their own lives). My interlocutors thought it was obvious that their everyday reality was profoundly affected by self-serving political institutions that needed to be contested and held accountable. As a part of that effort, they worked to cultivate an alternative set of values based on social responsibility and what some of them glossed as "kindness." I will explore what my interlocutors mean by this in greater depth further below.

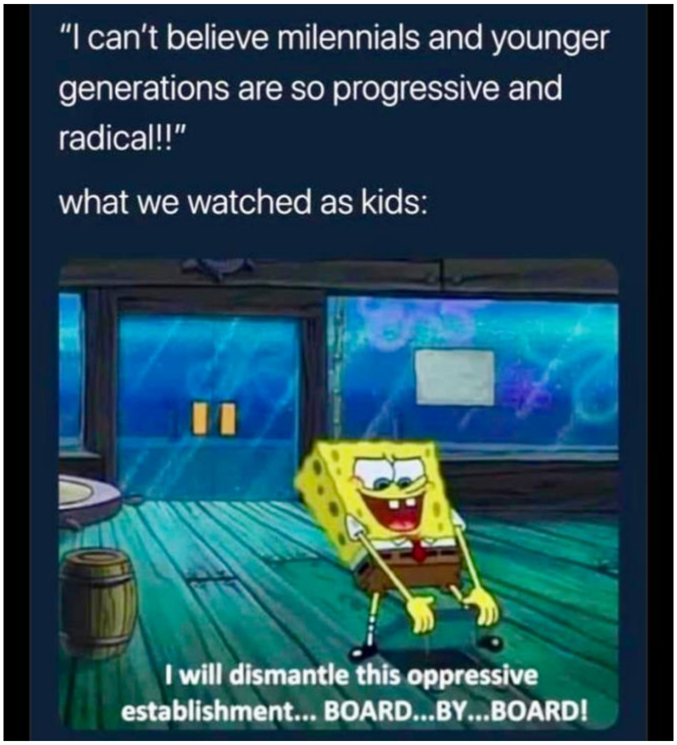
Secondly, the millennial humour I examined in this thesis also generates, and ultimately normalizes, a specific set of narratives about what this generation is about—e.g., the struggle for economic security and grappling with unrealized expectations of a good life, which were passed down to them from the previous, Fordist era. It appears that digital culture and its specific forms of political satire have done for millennials what other types of media have done for previous generations, which is provide them with a set of characteristic and generalizable identifiers. For example, the 60s generation has come to be associated in the collective consciousness with rock music, counterculture, and sexual liberation (see Menard 2019).

In reality, only one portion of that generation identified with those trends or values during that period, but over time, they became general symbols of what it meant to come of age during the 1960s. A similar dynamic is at play in the representations of millennials I analyze in this thesis; they come to stand in for an experience of the entire generation despite the fact they flatten or downright ignore sometimes profound differences of experiences within this cohort, which are shaped by geography, class, race, immigration history, ability and so forth. Popular culture, it seems, is one stage upon which a generation comes to be imagined and consolidated as a collective social agent—a process that also requires keeping out of sight the not-so-insignificant differences in *intra*generational experience. These narratives—or example, the millennial *vs* boomer conflict, which I have unpacked in Chapter 2—are so powerful and omnipresent that even I initially had trouble seeing them as engineered cultural and discursive artifacts reflecting a simplified understanding of the world.

Last but not least, the exchange and enjoyment of memes I examine in this thesis is also a source of relief and solace, and solidarity and camaraderie. This is an intensely social activity that can and does bring like-minded strangers together. In gathering online, these strangers do tend to create echo chambers–communities that share a general level of consensus around certain issues–which have become a quite common aspect of the digital world. Many commentators have criticized this phenomenon, pointing to the fact it appears to contribute to political polarization, which has been playing a decisive role in North American politics, especially since 2016. My research, however, shows a different side of echo chambers, revealing how they can have a positive social effect by helping people create a sense of community with others who share their values.

In what follows, I will spend some time further unpacking these three findings. Much of my thesis has grappled with the question of how to think about my interlocutors as members of the millennial generation, while maintaining awareness of the fact they represented a very small, self-selected, and limited segment of that much larger cohort. One way in which I have tried to do this is by focusing on my interlocutors' analyses of the depictions and representations of millennials in mainstream popular culture and the digital world, which often rely on simplifications and stereotypes, but can nevertheless be very illuminating. Take for instance, the following meme (see Figure 15 below).

Originally from SpongeBob, Figure 15 consists of an image of the main character, who famously works at the Krusty Krab, a fast-food restaurant under the sea, engaged in dismantling the floorboards of the "oppressive establishment" in a fit of rage and discontentment. SpongeBob is a staple of early 21st century kids' television, rich with "memeable" content such as the image above. The screenshot of SpongeBob is combined with a tweet that mocks the way older generations often dramatize the millennial and Gen-Z generations' presumed "radicalization." The meme is a result of bricolage, combining the animated image and social commentary.



"I can't believe millennials and younger generations are so progressive and radical!!"

what we watched as kids:

I will dismantle this oppressive establishment... BOARD...BY...BOARD!

Figure 15

But when I confronted my interlocutors with these kinds of representations of their generation, I discovered that they found them to be both amusing and a bit far-fetched, because they were characterizing their political positions as somehow radical or revolutionary. My interlocutors certainly do not think this about themselves—and neither do I. "What is so radical about caring for people?" asks Temperance:

> "Memes make fun of things in a way that showcases how *not actually radical* it is to simply care about people or to want to do good." (emphasis added)

What does it mean "to simply care about people"? Temperance, in her exasperation, offers that there is nothing "actually radical" about wanting everyone to have a roof over their head, access to water and food, and to feel safe. She is an environmental activist and is genuinely dumbfounded by the capitalist imperative that says people *must* work to survive. That is what she means by “wanting to do good” – to her, what is central is the need to build a compassionate society over a profit-oriented one. Like many other interviewees, Killian’s plea echoes Temperance’s: “We’re not *radicals!* We’re just critical of capitalism, […] critical of the establishment, stuff like that!” (emphasis added). Nevertheless, when they shared these views in many public and digital forums, my interlocutors encountered opposition and downright dismissal of their ideas as too idealistic, naive, and childlike–not unlike what is depicted in the abovementioned SpongeBob meme. To escape such dismissals, they flocked instead to select digital spaces, their own echo chambers, where they know they could have discussions “in good faith” with other individuals who understand them.

Participating in these select digital spaces was less about exclusion than camaraderie. Sybil made it clear that, to her, staying in these bubbles is not about simply blocking anyone who disagrees with you; it is about feeling safe and respected on participatory media. Sybil’s interview was one of my favourites. She was witty and intelligent, and she was passionate about social issues. Nonetheless, like every other one of my interlocutors, Sybil saw no value in entertaining debates with individuals who want to play devil’s advocate and be provocative on the internet. Given the overwhelming toxicity of social media, she saw it as imperative to find a space that can shield you from this negativity[7] and connect you with those who share the same sense of humour. Although the existence of echo chambers has been blamed for the increased political polarization of North American societies, including Canada, my interlocutors, like Sybil, found that argument too simplistic:

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[7] Sybil’s take on negativity is complicated by Stephens, who writes “negativity is not something one can choose to avoid on ethical grounds; rather, it is a necessary part of any marginal politics, and an inescapable part of marginal subjects’ experience and history” (2015, 279). In principle, however, I think she would agree with Stephens’s point.

> "The kind of people I remove myself from are the kind of people that just don't care about learning about the experiences of people who are different. I don't just block anyone who is not *100 percent anti-police* or not *100 percent pro-LGBT*. It's more than my politics is about...*trying to be kind.* You may have shitty views, but if you're trying to learn, that means you want to be better, and so you will *be open to learning and to the discomfort that can bring*" (emphasis added).

There is a lot to be unpacked from this citation. I was especially taken by her assertion that when engaging in political debate, one must "try to be kind." Sybil defines being kind as being "open to learning and to the discomfort that [process] can bring," indicating that kindness is in part about humility and recognizing that we all deserve a chance to grow. More than this, and contrary to popular belief that equates kindness to naiveté and often associates it with women, Sybil is arguing that kindness requires thoughtful effort, and consequently might be better thought of as a capacity that one cultivates as an ethical subject. That said, when she explains that she does not remove herself from debate *immediately* upon disagreement, she also alludes to the fact there are limits to "kindness." "Wanting to be better," in Sybil's view, necessitates that one remains open to having their mind changed. But not everyone has that capacity or the will to listen. This is what helped Maud decide to limit her digital engagements to select echo chambers, as she explains below:

> “I really don’t have patience for ignorant people anymore. I used to be more patient, and I used to be more like, ‘yes, I'll change them.’ It becomes debilitating just to read things that are just so overwhelmingly negative, so I don’t do that anymore. That energy is trashing my life.”

Like Maud, my interlocutors all confessed they were low on emotional energy, crushed by political depression and eco-grief, among other things. In the excerpt above, Maud explains she needed to be more selective about how she engages online, because she needed to protect her mental health from the negative and toxic energy. To my interlocutors, there is no added value in deploying enormous amounts of emotional labour only to be met with resistance, ridicule, and verbal violence. Instead, they find respite in funny banter and exchange of memes in spaces that cater specifically to their leftist values, which they believe foster more inclusive and empathetic communities. To signal this, they often react to each other, and to funny content they share, through specific expressions of sympathy, such as “too real,” “oof,” “I can’t,” which aim to acknowledge their shared sentiment.

This is why my interlocutors are more likely to be highly active on only a few select pages despite the fact they subscribe to many different kinds of sites, whose membership and audience may overlap or not. This reinforces a strong sense of community between those who belong to the same milieus: the more they follow pages that cater to their political leanings, the more they befriend and interact with individuals with similar values as themselves (Mina 2019). Outside of those select echo chambers, however, my interlocutors described feeling persecuted, for their naiveté or for being "snowflakes" which they explain is the main reason they have ceased to engage with the wider public, since such engagement demands too much energy and too much labour.

My position as somebody who is both an insider and outsider of this digital world helped me see the specificity of the community that my interlocutors have helped constitute. What I mean by this is that, as a millennial, the sense of humour and political values of my interlocutors deeply resonated with me, because we shared the same preoccupations with our future, especially political and environmental concerns. However, because I grew up exclusively in French–that is, until the age of seventeen–I was socialized in a different tradition of humour that is associated with and focused on contemporary Quebec. That kind of satirical content, including memes, tends to draw from Quebecois media, like music and television shows. While there are common themes, including environmental and feminist issues, the affective charge of this content tends to be different. This helped me recognize the historically, linguistically, and culturally situated nature of the "millennial humour" on which I am focusing in this thesis.

Millennials as historical subjects

My research found that the satirical humour that resonates most with this subset of the millennial generation is deeply entrenched in their material and historical condition. This condition, as this thesis has shown, is defined by precarity, economic adversity, environmental crises, and political alienation. Amidst the rapidly crumbling state of the environment, the escalating housing crisis, continued violence against vulnerable communities and growing precarity, disaffection with longstanding political institutions have become defining features of my interlocutors' experiences. What my interlocutors highlight amidst it all is the desire for their comedy to be more than for laughs; its appeal lies in the criticism it provides, and in the ephemerous intimacy it generates.

The millennials I interviewed expressed that they are fed up with performative gestures and lip service that appropriate their angst to entice them, but never result in any change. This skepticism, I found, makes them more critical of satire that is produced by professionalized firms, which they understand as "coded," and non-reflective of the(ir) truth. To combat this sense of alienation, my interviewees band together in echo chambers crafted by and for them, in search of camaraderie and authenticity. This supported by Rosa (2016) who writes that resonance and alienation

> "frequently constitute the theme of many artistic works, whether explicitly or implicitly. Longing for resonant relationships to the world and the processing of often extreme experiences of alienation are the major driving force behind both the production and reception of art" (493).

While resonance is an important tool for combating social alienation, as the above quote from Rosa makes clear, what I have discovered in my research is that resonance can also be deceptive, because narratives, discursive tropes, and representations that people find resonant can box them into a particular, and limited perspective on what is going on in the world. One of the things that I noticed is that my interviewees all sounded very embattled, as if they had internalized–and oddly enough, started believing–the stereotypes that are deployed in the discourse on intergenerational conflict. Sometimes, this meant that they were losing perspective on their own relative privilege, especially considering the fact most of them were middle-class Canadian citizens. They were not necessarily suffering from the worst effects of structural violence of colonialism, militarized border regimes, or the kind of abjection that we associate with extreme poverty.

Moreover, my interlocutors seemed to idealize what is essentially a Fordist conception of progression through stages of life (stable job, home ownership, family) which they had internalized growing up, without always recognizing certain segments of the population never had access to those kinds of opportunities, even at the height of the welfare state (see Berlant 2011). More radical scholars would see these desires as replicating a respectability politics and middle class values associated with more moderate political projects (in that sense Sybil is right: her millennial peers are not that radical!) What's more, while they understood that wealth comes in different forms, some of which are immaterial, and passed down generationally alongside privilege, they did not always reflect on the fact they too were implicated in this economy.

Because we find ourselves at a time where wealth is accumulated rather than redistributed, it is much more common even for a middle-class family to possess property, to pass down an inheritance, and to participate in the consumption-focused economy. This has tremendous consequences on the options available to their descendants: Indigenous and children of immigrants (be they first or second-generation) tend to encounter more hardship than white Canadians, but this also varies according to the colour of their skin, their belief system, their gender, sexual orientation, and more.

Ironically enough, the Fordist desires to which my interlocutors hold on, not only leave them with relatively-speaking high expectations (especially at a global level), but also feed their belief that they are entitled to the same, if not better opportunities for social mobility as the generations that preceded them purportedly had. Some of these desires rely on a romanticized vision of the past that probably never truly was. Interestingly, these nostalgic fantasies are nowadays common in both left and right wing imaginaries. The important difference is, while my left-leaning millennial interlocutors critique the present economic downturn as a result of neoliberal restructuring and capitalist greed, their right-wing counterparts reach for nationalist and xenophobic arguments.

Avenues for further research

The place of digital media in our lives has become even more prominent since the onset of the pandemic, which means the ethnographic data collected for this thesis is, in a way, already outdated. However, practices such as discourse engineering, the use of algorithms to curate internet content, and the emergence of echo chambers remain as relevant as ever and demand careful ethnographic observation and analysis. In this spirit, future researchers who follow a similar path in advancing the discipline of digital anthropology must continue to investigate the complex relationship between existing media ecosystems and how individual users engage with online technologies for their own specific ends (see also Bonilla and Rosa 2015).

As digital media comes to play an even larger role in our lives, especially during a global pandemic, it may become harder for digital ethnographers to maintain their critical distance from their own subject matter. So many of us are online all the time, our lives and perspectives being shaped daily by the very technologies and platforms which we need to examine more critically. As I myself struggled with this when it came time to analyze my data, I want to bring this thesis to a close by asserting that as anthropologists of digital words, we must hold on to our ability to make familiar strange, even when it comes to something as mundane and everyday as meme humour and internet exchange.

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