STEEL BEAMS, MYTHS, AND MEMES: HOW LATE MILLENNIALS REFRAME 9/11 ONLINE

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Aidan Kenney

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Aidan Kenney

Thesis Adviser: Ellen Gorman, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

Steel Beams, Myths, and Memes: How Late Millennials Reframe 9/11 Online is the first thesis to explore the ways that memes, shared units of cultural information, have influenced the visual culture and may reflect the waning resonance of 9/11 in the 21st century. While 9/11-based humor is nothing new, over time the form and tone of this humor has drastically changed: what once relied on hateful attitudes towards and humiliation of Muslims has turned to making absurdity out of a horrific event. What accounts for this change, and what does it mean?

Working at the intersection of semiotics, digital culture, and questions of patriotism, Kenney compiles evocative memes and interprets them in light of the American experience of Late Millennials, the generation Kenney defines as “meme-makers.” By reading memes as public conversations with Roland Barthes’ Mythologies as a theoretical framework, Kenney discusses the use of 9/11 not as the signified, but as a signifier for absurdity. Kenney examines the ways in which Late Millennials and older generations encountered 9/11 and how this continues to define the way they create narratives for an incomprehensible day. The author argues that these memes reveal that Late Millennials are constructing their narrative of 9/11 based on distance, not intimacy. While this trend may anticipate the growing impotence of 9/11 both as a collective symbol of unity and a symbol for fear, Kenney imagines a “post-9/11” future where American patriotism can remain intact without this moment as the keystone.
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INTRODUCTION

“As you’re probably aware, Barthes said, ‘The cultural work done in the past by gods and epic sagas is now done by laundry-detergent commercials and comic-strip characters.’” – Tabitha to Riggan, in Birdman or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)1

In the spring of 2015, Jake, then a freshman at Georgetown University, was campaigning for a communications position in a campus club. The position would look good on a resume and, with tactful embellishment, could be spun into something impressive in a job interview, but mostly Jake just wanted to manage the club’s Twitter account. Candidates were making speeches, and Jake, the clever English major, wrote his as a Tweet in under 140 characters. He did this for two reasons: brevity is a skill for anyone using social media, and the gimmick was a funny way to stand out from the others. Once he finished advocating for himself, Jake still had 10 characters left over. With the extra space, Jake ended his speech with a bang (Appendix, Figure 1):

Y elect me?
1. My Twitter game is (fire emoji)
2. Im close w/marketing for promo stuff
3. For live updates, Im @ every game
TY & Hoya Saxa
#BushDid911

Jake got nothing but laughs from the young crowd, 1,662 impressions on Twitter, and won the election (Appendix, Figure 2). Jake told me that he had no worries he would be booed or that anyone in the crowd would not understand him. The ending line was, in his own words, a kind of

1 Birdman or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance), directed by Alejandro G. Iñárritu (Fox Searchlight, 2014), DVD (Fox Searchlight, 2014). This quote is often attributed to Barthes’ Mythologies, though in my attempts to find in it the actual work I’ve come up empty-handed. Perhaps it is a myth itself, though it certainly has the ethos of a Barthes quote.
“cultural currency.” A foolproof plan to win over the club. But why does this get laughs? And why is it significant?

To an outsider, Jake’s words might seem like a grave accusation against a former President. However, in this case, it was a “meme.” Simply put, memes are pieces of cultural information that spread among groups, changing little by little with every new use. They can be pictures, videos, and phrases, and often comprise a combination of these things. They have been a subject of fascination for journalist outlets like the *New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, and they are the center of emerging academic fields on digital culture. Limor Shifman, a leading meme scholar, notes that memes must always be read as “a collection of texts,” that no meme stands alone, but only becomes a meme by being repeated and spread. In a larger sense, memes also function as language, in that they are communication devices that take certain knowledge to be decoded. As Jake put it, they have the value of cultural currency because not everyone can speak the language. Over the course of this thesis, I will show that a certain age cohort I define as “Late Millennials” are the masters of this discourse. To twist Barthes’ words in the epigraph, the cultural work done in the past by laundry-detergent commercials and comic-strip characters is now done by emerging adults with smartphones and laptops.

My initial interest in studying this topic from an American Studies perspective emerged for two reasons: Millennials are the primary makers of memes, and 9/11 is a common theme, subject, or text of various memes. Implicitly, I felt that there was something telling about an

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2 “Jake,” interview by author, Los Angeles, California, February 6, 2018.
event like 9/11 being goofed on by people like myself who, for the most part, have no real memory of the day. My time in American Studies has shown me that the “American Memory” is something that must be passed down. Has it skipped a generation?

Now is as good a time as ever to point out the arbitrariness of generational categories. The term “Millennial,” it seems, has become a catch-all for anyone under 30, though others have begun referring to “Generation Z” with almost the exact same definition (Millennials are those reaching young adulthood in the 21st century, Generation Z is those born from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s). However we decide to categorize a group of people, there will be errors and generalizations; nonetheless, the point here is that many people who were too young to remember or comprehend the terrorist attacks on September 11th, 2001 have begun trafficking in images of and references to 9/11 in the form of memes. This trend has not gone unnoticed; it has, in my opinion, gone under-studied. Prominent media outlets have noted the phenomenon of 9/11 memes, and others have produced pieces focusing on the odd and absurd nature of Millennial’s meme humor, Slate and The Washington Post among them. In her book, Memes in Digital Culture, Shifman cites a 9/11 iteration of a certain meme (Disaster Girl), but does not delve into the significance of this irreverence and style of humor. While many have noted that Millennial Meme-humor is strikingly absurd and dark, no one—to my knowledge—has gone deeply into

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why so much of this humor either centers on 9/11 or, from an American Studies perspective, what it means for the American collective memory.

One might be surprised to learn that 9/11 humor, specifically on the Internet, is not new. Scholars from various fields and backgrounds like Bill Ellis, Giselende Kuipers, and Rosemary Hathaway conducted studies in the early 2000s about Internet jokes that began emerging shortly after the attacks. These studies are tremendously interesting and insightful for historical context, but they cannot account for the humor that has subsequently emerged among Millennials, who did not experience the attacks, nor can they account for the form of memes, which function much differently than jokes on static websites or on email chains.

Early in this project, my initial idea was to evaluate these memes as “folk art” in comparison to murals, tattoos, etc., that represented 9/11. This proved to be problematic; I soon realized that the concepts of authorship and originality are difficult to apply to memes because they are often unattributed to anyone, they act as both communicative units and aesthetic objects, and they are constantly evolving. I began to think comparatively about the earlier 9/11 jokes on the Internet. I thought that my thesis would rely on the intersection between meme theory and scholarship that connects humor and tragedy, specifically as it pertains to 9/11, and compare the “bookends” or humor years ago and humor today. I started to evaluate what qualities made these memes “funny,” what about 9/11 they drew upon, exaggerated, or trivialized. The most helpful article in this area was “Where was King Kong When We Needed Him?” by Giselende Kuipers. In it, she proposes that much of 9/11 internet humor results from placing 9/11 into the realm of pleasurable entertainment it so closely resembled (as an almost cinematic moment of destruction

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7 Bill Ellis is an American who traced the emergence and spread of online jokes after 9/11. Giselende Kuipers is a Dutch sociologist who often focuses on the role humor plays in society. Rosemary Hathaway, American, specializes in folk-lore studies.
encountered largely on TV). This has been a very important insight going forward, even though my focus has changed. I eventually began to find that something was lacking in this approach—that the brand of humor is not as important as the practice of organizing of 9/11 referents into a message to be understood by another person.

The breakthrough that informed the rest of this thesis came the framework provided by semiotics and various critical theorists. Since encountering the writings of Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, and Stuart Hall, I have changed my direction, gained a new vocabulary to use, and found an established discourse to enter. Most importantly, their theory has increased my understanding of the power of signs. It changed my focus from asking, “Why is this funny?” to asking greater questions about the ways in which we are able (or unable) to relate to the reality of 9/11 through signs, as well as taking note of the heavily mediated formats in which Millennials encounter 9/11—largely archival news footage, movies and television, and memes.

The idea of communicating with 9/11 as a sign, what this means about a generation, and what its repercussions might be is not fully understood. If we can get behind the façade of youthful irreverence and bad taste that is present in these memes, we can begin to formulate, and hopefully answer, powerful questions about public memory, generational division, and what it means to grow up as an American in a post-9/11 world. The imagery and visual culture of 9/11 has long formed the memory of the event, and goes on to shape our shared beliefs and values.

How does a person’s perspective on a traumatic past change when they encounter 9/11 in the


9 Miles Orvell, “After 9/11: Photography, the Destructive Sublime, and the Postmodern Archive,” Michigan Quarterly Review 45, no. 2 (Spring 2006): section 3, https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?cc=mqr;c=mqr;c=mqrarchive;idno=act2080.0045.201;g=mqr;rgn=main;view=text;xc=1#top.
space of Internet culture and absurdist humor? Do these memes emerge from the tension that results when a phantom memory, an imposed memory, is put at the center of their national identity? Can we truly inherit trauma? Does the Millennial preoccupation with 9/11 reveal something about their world and worldview? The answers to these questions have ramifications for the cohesiveness of the United States moving forward into the 21st century. Perhaps an unanswerable question that these other questions lead to is: If 9/11 is not still a uniting force, what could be?

The memes of Late Millennials reveal not only a resistance to the mainstream narrative of 9/11, but also present alternative narratives positioning 9/11 as an absurd, meaningless spectacle. This may seem impudent, but it is explained by Late Millennials’ distance from the event – in terms of time, space, and ultra-mediated forms in which they encounter 9/11. A comparison of generational attitudes towards 9/11 reveals that 9/11 does not have the same resonance and meaning if you were not attacked, and you had to be “there” (at the scene or in front of the screen) to be attacked. In this thesis, I argue that because there are myriad narratives and meanings to 9/11, these memes show that Late Millennials are constructing one based on distance, not intimacy. There is no singular way to interpret 9/11, though the dominance of the mainstream narrative, framed in the conventions of “melodrama,” might convince us otherwise.10 I believe that these memes anticipate a decline in the resonance of 9/11 as a collective national symbol, but only time will tell if this proves to be detrimental to American unity.

Because we will be diving into primary sources that may be unfamiliar, it must be said now that memes and the Internet are chaotic. On the Internet, temporality and chronological

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sequence is sacrificed at the expense of privileging the popular and the relevant. The traditional conception of authorship almost completely goes out the window. The meme’s post-er is not necessarily the meme-maker, and it was not necessarily made just before the time it was posted. To try to impose a strict chronological or authorial order upon memes would be futile; not only that, but it would deprive the reader of the bewilderment that goes with encountering these texts. As it is with Internet culture and the practices of technology today, those who encounter these memes are doing so without warning: a 9/11 meme is nestled among clothing advertisements and pictures of your family on Instagram, between stories of terrible bosses and NBA gifs on Reddit, or it begins with a clip from a favorite childhood movie only to cut to the Twin Towers collapsing. I hope to preserve this chaos by inserting the memes themselves somewhat associatively throughout this work. Some of the memes I found deliberately after searching, some I ran into my happenstance, and others were sent to me by friends. Some are relevant to current events and could only make sense after a certain point in time; others are so absurd that to try to figure out why they were made at all seems almost ludicrous. And yet, they persist and propagate.

To return to my earlier point about the arbitrariness of generations: I believe that my thesis will not suffer from relying on a uniquely defined generational category. I have decided to name the crowd I will refer to in this thesis “Late Millennials,” people born in the mid-to-late 1990s to the early 2000s who have little or no (unless they were unfortunate to lose a family member in the attacks) personally traumatic memories associated with the attacks on September 11. While there is a risk of totalizing and homogenizing a diverse group of people, I believe that naming this generation that is at an interstitial moment in history, inconclusively “post-9/11” and “pre-who-knows-what,” will draw attention to the shared experiences of these youths. There are
aspects of American life that are unavoidable for people growing up in a post-9/11 world, like the stress from the threat of terrorism and the strange normalcy of war. These memes are certainly not consumed or enjoyed by all Late Millennials, but they point to attitudes and experiences that I believed are shared, to some degree, by many members of this cohort. I count myself as part of this generation, and while this may grant me more insight or cloud my judgement, I hope it at least attests to the fact that there is something important to be gained from studying these seemingly trivial texts. As a member of this group, I run the risk of privileging my own experiences and opinions as the reality of millions; however, I will draw from a variety of sources and rely on the texts as much as is possible to ground my assertions in evidence, and I believe that my position in this generation enables me to read the memes with an eye and a mind that could not be replicated or imagined by any older scholar. At the very least, I have grown up with the Internet a not-so-imaginary friend. Just as with any close friend, I’m sure it has rubbed off on me. In the words of Gabriel Menotti and Antonio Fernandez-Vicente, “In the contradictory rants of Anonymous, we listen to the Internet thinking aloud.”

Chapter Overview

My thesis will now be divided into four chapters and a conclusion, beginning with “Image, Spectacle, and Memory.” In this chapter, I describe the significance of 9/11 as a visual spectacle, an event where all Americans watching the attacks on live television were terrorized, unlike any event before or since. I draw on theory from Jean Baudrillard and Guy Debord to explain this significance, and go on to describe the ways that images from 9/11 have, from the beginning, been manipulated and framed to craft a more palatable narrative for the public. The

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Chapter ends with a discussion of the significance of 9/11 as a vital component of America’s civil religion, the necessity of civil religion to the United States, and the consequences of irreverent memes competing with American myths.

Chapter II, “Memes and Myth” introduces a formal definition of memes and explains how they must be thought of in the context of this thesis. Because memes may be unfamiliar to the reader, and because there is much more at work in these digital items than meets the eye, this section is vital to understanding the texts I am evaluating. Later, I apply Roland Barthes’ theory of “myth” to memes, lending credence to my previous claims on the potential consequences of memes to the American myth-making process. Barthes’ theory will continue to run throughout this thesis, the force behind my argument. I argue that, by naturalizing certain concepts with 9/11, specifically absurdity, these memes present an alternative to the mainstream narrative of 9/11 – and the reverent response it requires.

Chapter III is titled “The Meme-Makers,” and in it I argue that the intertextual content of the memes, their pop-culture references, indicate that they are being created and spread by a specific cohort, an age-group I define as “Late Millennials.” I detail the way that this generation experienced 9/11, which was much more similar to a “normal” consumption of tragedy than that of those who were “there” for 9/11. For Late Millennials, 9/11 is mediated by time and layers of representation; because of this, they cannot connect to it in the same way that other, older Americans do. The memes present an alternative view of 9/11 as an absurd spectacle, and I propose that this reveals the Late Millennials’ inability to find any meaning in 9/11.

In the final chapter, “Forgetting 9/11,” I argue that these memes reduce 9/11 to a signifier, no longer the topic of discussion, but a stand-in for various significations in the context of other discussions. In doing so, the memes, and the Late Millennials created and sharing them,
suggest than 9/11 is an absurd spectacle that can be joked about: a far-away view that reflects Late Millennials’ distance from that tragic day. Thus, 9/11 loses its power—for both terrorists and Americans seeking to use 9/11 symbolically.

I conclude by proposing what the consequences of this phenomenon might be, and by suggesting areas or methods for further research. With the “Sacred” eroding, what will be left to worship? How can be come to know who precisely is making these memes, and how people react as they consume them? What would patriotism look like without its religious overtones? I hope to leave the reader with more nuanced, pertinent questions than they arrived with, and to encourage in my reader a mythologist’s practice of reinterpreting what seems natural, normal, or mundane.
CHAPTER I: IMAGE, SPECTACLE, AND MEMORY

“This impact of the images, and their fascination, are necessarily what we retain, since images are, whether we like it or not, our primal scene.” – Jean Baudrillard, on the “events in New York,” September 2001.\(^\text{12}\)

One view of The World Trade Center, September 11, 2001 (Appendix, Figure 3)

“Nyan-Eleven,” ca. 2014 (Appendix, Figure 4)

The terrorist attacks that took place on September 11, 2001 endowed an entirely new meaning to the word “weapon”: that which could be used to destroy, could somehow be put to violent ends. The Al Qaeda hi-jackers weaponized commercial planes and skyscrapers, but also, even more innovatively, images and the media. While nearly 3,000 people tragically died on that day,\(^\text{13}\) most Americans and most of the world experienced the terror of that day from far away through television—image and spectacle. In “The Spirit of Terrorism,” the French post-structuralist semiotician and philosopher Jean Baudrillard writes, “In all these vicissitudes, what says with us, above all else, is the sight of the images.”\(^\text{14}\) The sensation of seeing on TV—the realm of fiction and pleasure—something real and horrifying, was a strange and shocking thing. Such violence had never come to spectators safe in their own homes more immediately than the destruction of the World Trade Center. Again, Baudrillard writes, “Rather than the violence of the real being there first, and the frisson of the image being added to it, the image is there first, and the frisson of the real is added.”\(^\text{15}\) In other words, 9/11 occurred first to those watching it as an image, with more visually in common with disaster films like Independence Day and


\(^\text{14}\) Baudrillard, “The Spirit of Terrorism,” 228.

\(^\text{15}\) Ibid., 229.
Armageddon than the news. In that way, the spectacle of 9/11 was not only strange and shocking, but uncanny—eerily similar to the violent, fictional destruction seen day-to-day in films with increasingly realistic graphics. Indeed, many studies have recorded that the first impressions of many who saw the collapse of the Twin Towers felt as though they were watching a movie, or at first believed they were watching a movie until they realized the same images were on every channel. As Baudrillard put it, “The spectacle of terrorism forces the terrorism of spectacle upon us.” The sight of the Twin Towers burning, something that would have been entertaining, pleasing, and aesthetically magnificent in a Jerry Bruckheimer movie, elicited an “immoral fascination” in viewers—the inability to look away from or turn off the TV despite the horror that it displayed. In this way, the media that broadcast of the event was itself weaponized. Again, as Baudrillard wrote, “There is no possible distinction between the ‘crime’ and the crackdown,” and this was the tremendous success for the Al Qaeda terrorists.

When I describe 9/11 as a spectacle, I do not only mean that it was something visually dazzling and breathtaking, though it undoubtedly was. In a spectacle, the images and the sensation of looking becomes a shared experience one has with those around them, and a means of relating to other people. Guy Debord, famed theorist of the Situationist International, defines

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18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.
spectacle as “a social relationship between people that is mediated by images.”20 In making a weapon of spectacle, the suicide-pilots of 9/11 forever altered Americans’ relationship to images of the Twin Towers and their way of communicating about—and thus remembering—the tragic day. It is almost impossible to underestimate the significance of 9/11 as a spectacle: it was an almost unimaginable television-event consumed collectively in real-time that made the world stand all but still for days. Building off of the theory of Debord, Žižek, and Baudrillard, critical theorist Gerry Canavan argues that something as powerful as the image of the World Trade Center falling before ones eyes can be processed as nothing other than “an historical inevitability.”21 As he puts it:

The immediate visual force of September 11 presents itself to us as originating outside human intervention, the culmination of a historical trajectory that began in 1973 with the first construction of the Towers—almost as if (as Baudrillard suggests) it had always been the very telos of the Twin Towers to someday fall, as if Independence Day (1996) and a thousand other imagined apocalyptic disaster movies were simply prophetic pre-figurations of the event that must someday follow.22

This was the initial effect of seeing the Towers collapse—at once seeming possible, then a moment later, fated. At once, every image of the Twin Towers, every establishing shot from a film or television show set in New York City was endowed with the sinister spectre of the unavoidable terror to come. This was the trauma of seeing, in real-time, “not merely the system’s own loss of control but the confrontation with death itself, both the possibility of our own deaths and the specter of death on a mass scale.”23


21 Canavan, “Terror and Mismemory,” 121.

22 Ibid., 121.

23 Ibid., 121.
However, as the days went on, news media-outlets got the chance to actually choose the footage they would replay, and a different visual narrative began to emerge. Images of people jumping from the Towers to die, the collapses themselves, the corpses and gore of the dead, and any other footage that betrayed the total chaos of that day were left out. Essentially, news stations began to re-assert control over the event, to frame it as horrifying, but palatable.

According to Canavan, a scholar whose focus is in pop-culture and media studies, “The calculated response of the media-state apparatus has been the attempt to rechannel the raw, unpredictable trauma of September 11, 2001, into a prepackaged and premythologized ‘9/11’.”

This “9/11,” as Canavan puts it, was a more easily consumable visual narrative that erased the complexity and contingency of that day. Alternatively, Stacy Takacs, an American Studies scholar specializing in media and pop-culture, argues that the news coverage of 9/11 following the attack turned it into a “public melodrama.”

By personalizing the attacks with eyewitness testimonies, emphasizing a gendered view of heroes and victims, using apocalyptic language, and de-emphasizing questions of prevention, the media represented 9/11 as a straightforward story of good versus evil. Thus, since September 12th, attempts have been made to replace the spectacle of uncensored chaos that was 9/11 with something more easily consumable and communicable.

This process has had tremendous effects on the public memory of 9/11, which relies on and is formed by images more than any other event in American history. Miles Orvell, in his

25 Ibid., 125.
26 Takacs, Terrorism TV, 32.
27 Ibid., 32-36.
2006 essay “After 9/11: Photography, The Destructive Sublime, and the Post Modern Archive,” wrote, “Inevitably, our political knowledge and our collective memory function more and more within an epistemology of photography whose implications we have only just begun to explore.”

The question becomes, how can one correctly represent such a repulsive event? Orvell notes that in the history of photography, the aesthetic privilege of the camera’s gaze and the moral onus of depicting misery and horror have long been at odds. Orvell reminds us of Alexander Gardner moving corpses to compose better shots on Civil War battle fields and of the story of photographer George Rodger, who was disgusted as he found himself arranging bodies into artistic forms through his camera lens. Being the most photographed and viewed event in history, this tension manifests in every image of the World Trade Center taken on that day and in the photographs documenting the following days.

We have a “visual knowledge” of the destruction on 9/11 that we do not have for the even more deadly bombings of Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and Dresden (all, significantly, conducted by the United States military). It is difficult to speak about 9/11 without remarking on the impressive scale and aesthetics of it. The controversial composer Karlheinz Stockhausen infamously referred to the collapse of the World Trade Center as “the greatest work of art,” and artist Damien Hirst was quoted saying the destruction was, “visually stunning,” though he then quickly asserted, “I value human life.”

Orvell observes that, although we cannot in good conscience look at the destruction of the Twin Towers as a work of art, the images have an

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29 Ibid.

30 Ibid., section 2.

31 Ibid.
aesthetic power that is not easily overcome, producing a kind of “double vision” between pleasure and horror. The “aesthetic frame” employed by photographers, and, I would argue, videographers from news outlets (i.e., the framing, the color balance, the angle, the shot composition, etc.), served as a “container for the chaos” that was the reality of the World Trade Center’s collapse and its aftermath. Photographers had to show 9/11 within conventions that would mitigate the horror, turning scenes of despair into hope with a well-place American flag or by cropping the carnage. However, the visual culture of 9/11 is not homogenous or cohesive but contested, just like the public memory it informs.

The Internet, unlike curated art exhibits or mainstream television programming, allows the visual culture of 9/11 to proliferate without constraints on volume, taste, or morals. Though he was writing in 2006, Orvell noted that because of the way the Internet operates and digital technology allows for editing and altering photos, “Photography within postmodern culture requires us to accept the messiness of blurred categories and ambiguities, of ambivalent responses, guilty pleasures, of wayward associations that push through our perceptions.” To illustrate his point, Orvell tells the story of a family in Oregon that visited Ground Zero a few years after the attacks on September 11, 2001. The family’s website was the first hit when one Google-searched “WTC Remembered.” On the site’s front page, a bold banner reading “We Shall Never Forget” with a photograph of the cornerstone of Freedom Tower being laid. Below this picture, two more iconic photos were featured: a bearded Saddam Hussein, with the caption, “12/13/03 Saddam Hussein Caught!” Orvell ends on an ominous note after citing this patriotic
family’s dubious, but still visible memorial of 9/11: “We have much to give us reason for optimism in the postmodern culture of the internet, and also much to give us reason for concern.”

The process of remembering, while also altering, 9/11 has continued; in the present-day form of memes, it has ceased the search for victory, closure, or meaning. As the framed, edited, and censored photo and news coverage began exporting a reductive 9/11 on September 12th, 9/11 memes, in a more drastic way, reduce the tragedy to something trivial. With the rapid rise of “memes” and “meme culture,” 9/11 was quickly pulled into the fray of increasingly absurd and grotesque humor on the Internet. However, unlike the morbid event of the slaying of Harambe, a silver-backed gorilla at the Cincinnati Zoo, 9/11 is an event that the “meme-makers,” Millennials, hardly remember. As such, the memes utilizing the visual imagery of 9/11—and those that simply hint at the disastrous day—are rich sources to help in updating our understanding of the public memory of 9/11. But how does this play out?

Browsing among questions about Fantasy Football and “Rick and Morty” fanfare, one runs into a combination of “Game of Thrones” and 9/11 conspiracy theory nestled into the r/all page of Reddit—the front page of the “front page of the Internet” (Appendix, 5). The meme is based off of a reference to “Game of Thrones,” an immensely popular television show on HBO. It is watched by an average of 25 million viewers every episode, and it has been called a “cultural behemoth.” The specific episode reference in the meme is the finale of Season 7,


where (spoiler alert) a resurrected Dragon has turned into a “white walker”—an evil, undead corpse—and uses its—now icy—Dragon’s breath to melt The Wall that has guarded the island of Westeros for millennia. For someone unfamiliar with the show, that might sound like a lot of nonsense, but it was a (literally) earth-shattering development in one of the most popular television shows of all time. Quickly, of course, it was taken to the Internet and meme’d.

This meme communicates the shock of the moment in “Game of Thrones” shown in the photos by referencing 9/11 (and more specifically, 9/11 conspiracy theories). Up until this point in the show, it had been thought that The Wall could never be breached, let alone completely destroyed. It was a vital structure that had stood as long as anyone could remember, and the idea of a zombie Dragon commanded by the General of the undead had scarcely crossed anyone’s mind as a possible occurrence. It was unexpected by both the characters in the show and viewers at home. In a certain way, this event resembled the consumption and, though thankfully in the realm of fiction, the content of 9/11. As an unanticipated, aesthetically astounding destruction widely viewed on television, the destruction of the ice wall was like a safe 9/11. “Game of Thrones” also has its own share of conspiracy theorists: fan theories and fan fiction for the series are extremely popular, and Reddit sites blow up after each episode with predictions for the next week or hunches about what is really going on. Narratives are contested, not believed, and, above all, talked about. When this meme says “Ice Fire Can’t Melt Ice Beams,” it points to the seeming impossibility of this Game of Thrones plot point. The humor comes from applying the incredulousness of “9/11 Truthers” to a TV show, simulating and re-contextualizing the Truthers’ ire. While they spoof the beliefs of the Truthers, however, the meme-maker seems to articulate a genuine complaint—that this was an absurd deus ex machina way to end a season. The meme naturalizes a link between 9/11 and conspiracy—not necessarily to say that the
government actually plotted a “False Flag” operation, but that claims of conspiracy naturally follow from 9/11. Knowing less and less, and encountering less and less of 9/11 itself—as an event, and experience, a trauma—younger generations get their knowledge and ideas about 9/11 from texts further and further removed from the day itself. This has tremendous consequences when memes operate as “myths.”

The United States of America, perhaps more than any other nation, has a need for myths. American political scientist Robert Putnam declares, “Embedded into the American psyche is an implicit article of patriotic faith that the nation owes its very existence, and survival, to a God in the heavens.”

For a people without a common ancestry, ethnic background, religion, industry, or even common geographic features, there are countless ways to dissolve into competing factions. What has enabled America to work thus far, Putnam and his proponents might argue, is America’s civil religion. Putnam draws on American sociologist Robert Bellah, who wrote that “the civil religion was able to build up without any bitter struggle with the church powerful symbols of national solidarity and to mobilize deep levels of personal motivation for the attainment of national goals.” Bellah argued that America’s civil religion relies on the symbolic expression of American principles through rituals, like the Tomb of the Unknown Solider and reenactments of the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln. These rituals commemorate moments in a way that elevates history to an almost sacred level. Putnam and Bellah trace this to the abundant references to God—not a specifically Christian God, but an interested higher power.

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nonetheless—throughout “solemn ceremonial moments of our public life, when the national sense of unity is the strongest.” For the purpose of this thesis, I am less interested in the use of God to create cohesion than in the very fact that history becomes sacred in America. In a way, it must: the history we have experienced and created as a nation binds us more than any of our other identities. September 11, 2001 is one of these moments, and perhaps the most recent seminal and sacred moment in American history.

Indeed, to begin his book on the future of American unity, political scientist Samuel Huntington refers to the dramatic rise in patriotism after 9/11. Specifically, he refers to the almost immediate ubiquity of the American flag after the attacks—Wal-Mart sold 250,000 flags on September 12th, 2001, compared to 10,000 on the same day a year earlier. Just as Americans reached for the flag after 9/11, we continue to look to 9/11, now a symbol itself, at times when national unity is needed. This is something that has been both criticized and lampooned. Michael Tomasky of the New Yorker argues that the fear ignited by 9/11 and stoked by politicians made the American public ready to wage war on a country that, “as awful as its leaders may have been, had never done anything to us directly and had nothing to do with 9/11.” The irreverent cartoon “Family Guy” mocked this technique when the show’s female lead, Lois, runs for mayor. At a town-hall debate, she is interrupted by a gong every time she starts outlining her policies, but receives rousing applause if she merely says, “Nine eleven.” Though the morality of employing

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41 Putnam and Campbell, American Grace, 517.


9/11 to gain votes is questionable, this trend in American politics attests that the symbol of 9/11 is extremely powerful. Bellah wrote that American symbolic forms, if articulated well, can provide “the attainment of some kind of viable and coherent world order.”

Americans must be susceptible to these kinds of patriotic markers if they are to participate in civic life; we collectively agree to take these symbols so seriously that they themselves become the fabric of the country.

These memes, however, violate this process. They add to and complicate the visual culture, the socially constructed meaning made by images, of 9/11, and thus also the public memory of 9/11. While these memes express the attitudes of some Late Millennials, they also have the potential to affect the perceptions of future generations. It may well be that the future of the country, or at least the future of American patriotism and civil religion, will be influenced by this phenomenon and others like it. To continue this discussion, we must tease out and elaborate on the connections between memes and myths.

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45 Robert Bellah, “Civil Religion in America.”

CHAPTER II: MEMES AS MYTH

“Myth deprives of the object of which it speaks of all History. In it, history evaporates.” – Roland Barthes, Mythologies 47

WIRED: “Do you see many internet memes?”
Richard Dawkins: “I suppose I do. I get infected by viruses as much as anybody else, so yes I pick them up from time to time.”48

Bush as Spacey, ca. October 2017 (Appendix, 6)

The term “meme” is a bit unwieldy. It is thrown around in daily conversation by Millennials, and, were you to ask them, would seem implicitly understood—just part of the cultural effluvia one can’t help but inhale. The word itself, however, has history dating back to 1976. The term “meme” was coined by the biologist Richard Dawkins, who defined it as “a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation.”49 He created the term to describe the way that human knowledge is passed on socially, spreading from person to person, much like a gene does from parent to offspring. However, over time, the term has become almost exclusively associated with “digital items” on the Internet—things like pictures (snapped in real-life or computer generated) with or without accompanying text, jokes, videos, websites, etc.50 Limor Shifman, a leading scholar on the subject, defines Internet memes as: “a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which were created in awareness of each other, and were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users.”51 They


49 Shifman, Memes in Digital Culture, 37.

50 Ibid., 41.

51 Ibid.
“diffuse from person to person, but shape and reflect general social mindsets.”\textsuperscript{52} Another scholar on the subject, Ryan Milner, asserts that memes can be best understood as “aggregate texts,” in which singular memes are always operating as part of a larger process and changing slightly or drastically with each iteration.\textsuperscript{53} We must be careful, though, not to forget the importance of individual agents in spreading and creating memes. Shifman writes, “the depiction of people as active agents is essential for understanding Internet memes.”\textsuperscript{54} Taking both scholars into account, we must read memes as parts of a larger (con)text, but always recognize the agency of the individuals who either create or share and situate memes in new locations. “Location” might seem like an odd word to use here, but there are indeed specific areas that might be considered “meme hubs,” or perhaps breeding grounds, most prominently: 4chan, Reddit, and Tumblr, as well as standard social media sites like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram.\textsuperscript{55} Additionally, there is KnowYourMeme (http://knowyourmeme.com), a site that traces and attempts to explain the success, or lack thereof, of popular or esoteric memes.\textsuperscript{56} I relied heavily on all of these sites in my own research, combing through “subreddits” for memes and using KnowYourMeme for historical data and information about them.

One would be right to question whether we can tell if any of these memes are “American-made” at all. The Internet is international, is it not? While this critique cannot be completely refuted, I believe that it is more likely than not that Americans would be the ones still wrestling

\begin{footnotes}
\item[52] Shifman, \textit{Memes in Digital Culture}, 4.
\item[54] Shifman, \textit{Memes in Digital Culture}, 12.
\item[55] Ibid., 13.
\item[56] Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
with and thinking of 9/11 in 2018. Although 9/11 was viewed the world over and it is certainly possible that people from anywhere could enjoy or produce these memes, it is my opinion that these memes reflect an American self-referential critique more so than international spite. However, in future scholarship, I would welcome a different interpretation.

If memes are an unfamiliar subject, it might be useful to make a comparison between memes and graffiti, a kind of text the reader may have had more experience with. Graffiti, an illicit art-form, inhabits a particular zone between a picture and text, much like the way rap music inhabits a particular zone between text and spoken word.57 Crispin Sartwell, an American philosopher and journalist, describes graffiti as “particular and physical [in] that it cannot be separated from the occasion and location and bristling particularities of tis inscription.”58 It also operates with a certain “code”: words and names are often purposefully unintelligible to people outside the graffiti community.59 Sartwell suggests that graffiti “shows one way that language is being altered and created, one with particularly anti-authoritarian implications.”60 In a similar way, memes combine picture and text and, although they are not literally concrete like graffiti on a wall, they are practically unavoidable in certain spaces: if you choose to participate in the realms of these texts, whether it’s the city-street or your social media newsfeed, they may well confront you. Graffiti has anti-authoritarian implications both in its construction—vandalizing property—and in its content—distorting and reinventing written language, an instrument of


58 Sartwell, “Graffiti and Language.”

59 Ibid.

60 Ibid.
power.\textsuperscript{61} Memes, in a similar way, have anti-capitalist and anti-mainstream-media implications: they are not bought and sold, and they are made \textit{by the people}, not companies or corporations. They provide a unique and less-mediated lens into contemporary culture because they circumvent commerce and traverse a space (the Internet) where producers can be subversive without consequence.

Memes may seem like the products of idiotic, disrespectful teenagers.\textsuperscript{62} However, they are deeply impregnated with meaning and worth studying once they are read as \textit{myths} in the Barthesian sense. Simply put, myths are a way of constructing meaning that can turn anything into a language and communicate with it. Memes, as units of communication and meaning-making, are a part of processes that semioticians have written about for decades. They are a language, but one that is not readily readable by just anyone. Shifman writes, “Different meme genres involve different levels of literacy: some can be understood (and created) by anyone, whereas others require detailed knowledge about a digital meme subculture.”\textsuperscript{63} They require knowledge of the items referenced intertextually in each meme, a general knowledge of how the meme began, and the sensibility to decipher the tone of the meme, whether playful, harsh, or dark. They might be totally innocuous or politically charged, but they are always spreading ideas. Were Roland Barthes online today, he would consider memes a hotbed for budding myths.

Barthes, in his seminal work \textit{Mythologies}, describes myths as “metalanguage.”\textsuperscript{64} By this he means a mode of signification that uses objects \textit{already} endowed with meaning to

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{61} Sartwell, “Graffiti and Language.”
\item \textsuperscript{62} Admittedly, many of the memes I am including in this thesis are in extremely poor taste. They certainly do not take into account the suffering of those who died on that terrible day, or the families who still mourn them. However, despite their insensitivity, or perhaps because of it, they are worth paying attention to.
\item \textsuperscript{63} Shifman, \textit{Memes in Digital Culture}, 100.
\item \textsuperscript{64} Barthes, \textit{Mythologies}, 223.
\end{itemize}
communicate a different concept—a “second-order semiological system.” Barthes uses examples like French wine, the face of Greta Garbo, and Professional Wrestling to explain the subtle communicative power of everyday items when used as the “form” for other messages. Wine is not just wine, but a product that provides a “collective morality” for Frenchmen, who drink for “French” reasons; thus, any evils committed under the influence of wine are excused by fate, and not considered the effects of weakness or immorality. Garbo’s face, plastered to perfection, was a language of “conceptual order,” an “Idea,” unlike Audrey Hepburn’s uniquely complex beauty, “an Event.” And who could forget the ring of Wrestling, where the virtues of the performer’s character (the traitor, the hero, the braggart) are inscribed the flesh, their physiques the literal embodiment of their morals.

Following in Barthes’ terminology, memes are language that use familiar phrases and pictures as the forms or vessels for larger significations; they are objects that communicate ideas and concepts not strictly associated with their actual content. They mash-up, punctuate, and juxtapose images and videos of anything (Kim Jong Un, a recognizable cat, a scene from *Muppets Most Wanted*) and take them further and further from their original contexts. When this is done with destruction of the Twin Towers, it radicalizes what was originally being done by the news-media—it wholly removes 9/11 from the real-world. Memes, in this way, can be seen as

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65 Ibid., 224.
66 Ibid., 217.
67 Ibid., 79-81.
68 Ibid., 73-75.
69 Ibid., 3-15.
part of the continued re-framing 9/11. Whether it be through mere editing and sequencing or a complete insertion into pop-culture, both offer juxtapositions decided on by a certain creator.

As Barthes puts it, “Myth deprives the object of which it speaks of all history.” 70 In order to work, memes ask you to look at a picture and think of something else—to forget that what it being used as “form” for a higher “signification” has significance and meaning by itself.71 Working as myths, these memes alienate images of and allusions to 9/11 from their historical meanings. When one who can “read” the meme—because the cultural references are familiar—sees it, they are holding both the concept of the meme and 9/11, albeit obliquely, in their minds at once. 9/11 is drawn upon, but it seems far away, separated by many levels of mediated references—but is it still there.

Barthes uses an apt metaphor to describe the sensation of encountering and deciphering myth: “In the same way, if I am in a car and I look at the scenery through the window, I can at will focus on the scenery or the windowpane. At one moment I grasp the presence of the glass and the distance of the landscape; at another, on the contrary, the transparence of the glass and the depth of the landscape; but the result of this alternation is constant: the glass is at once present and empty to me, and the landscape unreal and full.”72 When Barthes was describing the conceit of a piece of French propaganda featuring an Algerian soldier, he wrote, “One must put the history of the Negro in parentheses if one wants to free the picture, and prepare it to receive

70 Barthes, Mythologies, 264.
71 Ibid., 226-227.
72 Ibid., 233.
its signified.” The image, then is experienced at a remove—not for what it is, but as a conduit for meaning.

In this way, when Internet users encounter 9/11 memes that, by their visual nature, contribute to a public memory of the day, they are not immediately seeing the repugnant images of destruction, or at least their reality is not immediately and viscerally felt. It is not as though 9/11 has vanished from view, but it has become distorted. Add to this that people encountering the meme are likely doing it on the small screen of a smartphone, enmeshed in all of their other social media, promoted advertisements, and mundane texts messages, and you can imagine just how different the experience of seeing 9/11 is for a Millennial today.

When this kind of decoding is done over and over again, one becomes conditioned to respond in a certain way to familiar stimulus. The influential cultural theorist Stuart Hall, in “Encoding/Decoding,” writes, “The operation of naturalised codes reveals not the transparency and ‘naturalness of language,’ but the depth, habituation, and the near-universality of the codes in use. . . . This has the (ideological) effect of concealing the practices of coding which are present.” The seemingly small, repeated act of communicating with signs changes how their content is viewed even outside the context of the coded message, or meme. In this process, 9/11 loses its actual context and accumulates baggage that distracts from its historical locus and political consequences. This happens in a two-sided manner, with 9/11 being moved further from its original places while also taking on additional referents—at the

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extreme, one could be habitually bombarded with memes to the extent that Spongebob brings one closer to thinking of 9/11 than hearing the words “Al Qaeda.”

Take, for example, a meme that uses Bush’s reaction to 9/11 to frame the recent Kevin Spacey controversy (Appendix, 6). This meme is uncommonly topical and temporal. It references Kevin Spacey’s response to the recent allegations levied against him in October 2017: that Spacey molested actor Anthony Rapp at a party in 1986, when Rapp was just 14-years-old.75 In his response, Spacey wrote he was horrified to hear Rapp’s story, but did not remember the encounter. Then, in what many considered a shameful attempt to deflect blame and attention, Spacey came out of the closet, saying, “I choose now to live as a gay man.”76 This meme could only have come after these words were written in this context, and it would be difficult for some to make the connection to the Spacey case, given that images of Spacey himself are nowhere to be found in the meme. It requires up-to-date pop-culture knowledge and Internet savvy to be decoded. This phrase, when applied to Bush, is full of commentary, but it is hard to decipher exactly where the meme-maker stands. It certainly plays off of the trope, so popular on the Internet, that George Bush was responsible for 9/11. Is this meme simply making a joke by applying Spacey’s lame attempt at winning good press to the biggest tragedy of the 21st century? Is it saying that Bush’s actual response to 9/11 was equally as lame? The non-sequitur quality of the line just beneath an image of the impact on the Twin Towers is so absurd as to garner laughter, as is the idea of George Bush, with his masculine Texas drawl, saying the phrase.


76 Ibid.
What is more significant, however, is that the meme naturalizes the connection between Bush and blame for 9/11. In the meme, no real argument is being established, no evidence shown, because that is not the way myths work; instead, a comparison is put together, histories overlaid and collapsed, and the image of Bush consoling the nation is replaced, maybe only briefly, by Kevin Spacey covering his tracks. Barthes writes that it is this “constant game of hide-and-seek between the meaning and form which defines myth.” An entire new history is “implanted into the myth” by the concept – in this case, that Bush’s response to 9/11 was as lame as Spacey’s to the allegations against him.

Whether the meme-maker believes this or just finds it funny to imagine if it were true is almost impossible to know, and certainly not within the scope of this thesis. However, as Barthes tells us, myths emerge for a reason. The concepts that become communicated and the forms they take up are “historical and intentional.” There is no “fixity in mythical concepts: they can come into being, alter, disintegrate, disappear completely.” So, why now? And who are the myth-makers? I argue that a combination of being too young to comprehend 9/11 as it occurred, growing up with more skeptical perception of America than what is implied the mainstream 9/11 myths, and increasingly sophisticated and socially ingrained technology has led to Late Millennials creating these odd, sharp, insensitive, and bewildering texts.

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77 Barthes, Mythologies, 228.
78 Ibid.
79 Ibid.
80 Ibid., 230.
CHAPTER III: THE MEME-MAKERS

“In summary, this is the most self-expressive, diverse, and connected generation of its kind. And, regardless of what we think of them, this generation is the future.” – Shama Hyder in “Here’s What You Need to Know About Millennials” 81

“This generation can’t take a joke’ Our entire generation laughs at fucking internet memes all day long we just don’t like racist jokes” – @ahoybailey, August 22, 2015 (Appendix, 7)

Spongebob Squarepants and Patrick Star, ca. 2015 (Appendix, 8)

It can be ascertained that these memes are being made largely by a certain generational demographic just by looking at them. The references and allusions made in these memes—the stuff mixed up with 9/11—are the cultural currency of American “Late Millennials.” I will use this term to refer to those born from roughly 1993 to 1998. These are people who grew up with Internet access, barely know a world without the American forces in the Middle East, and are accustomed to the security measures prompted by terrorism and mass shootings. They also grew up on TV shows like “Spongebob Squarepants” and “The Fairly Oddparents,” moved into adolescence with “The Jersey Shore” and “Keeping Up with the Kardashians,” and pushed towards young-adulthood with the iconic “Game of Thrones” and “House of Cards.”

Significantly, in the memes we not only see these shows referenced, repeated and distorted—we also see that their content mirrors the taste and humor present in the memes. To varying degrees, the memes employ cartoonish absurdity, reflect the vapid selfishness of reality TV with their insensitivity, and often display cynical attitudes towards authority figures. I am not proposing that Late Millennials “learned” to think in these terms because of these types of TV

programming; however, it is important to draw attention to the ways that these memes fit into the conventions and trends of the popular media Late Millennials have consumed over time.

While these television shows might shed light on the tone and tropes of 9/11 memes, the direction of their insensitivity is still difficult to explain. The hateful and racist Internet-jokes studied by Kuipers and Hathaway, though sick in their own way, are more understandable: Americans were seeking revenge at the time, and perhaps cruel jokes were the cathartic release they chose. But why would Late Millennials be creating jokes that disrespect the innocent victims of these terrorist attacks? To begin answering this question, one must consider the climate of moral anxiety in America during Late Millennials’ childhood.

One place to begin looking is in the pop-culture of the time. In her award-winning undergraduate thesis at Georgetown University, American Studies scholar Emily Troisi argues convincingly that the moral questions raised by the War on Terror provided “fertile ground for [rape-revenge films] The Last House on the Left (2009) and I Spit on Your Grave (2010) to emerge.” She argues that, by allegorizing the morally ambiguous violence of the War on Terror, these films and their remakes push viewers to “question the supposed righteousness of America and to ask whether it ever actually existed.” Troisi points to the discovery of photographic evidence of the abuse and torture of Iraqi prisoners at the hands of Military Police at Abu Gharib Prison in 2004, which pressed Americans to reckon with the tactics being used by

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83 Troisi, “Remaking Rape-Revenge,” iii.
U.S. military to avenge 9/11.\(^{84}\) Were Americans still vindicated in pursuit of justice if these were the methods used to bring it about? To what extent had American military personnel, at least those at Abu Gharib, become terrorizers (if not precisely “terrorists”) themselves?

The sickening news from Abu Gharib was compounded by the discovery of the use of waterboarding by CIA interrogators. In 2008, CIA Director Michael Hayden admitted that a technique called waterboarding, when subject’s mouth is covered and water is poured over their face to prevent breathing, was used on three Al-Qaeda suspects in 2002 and 2003.\(^{85}\) Later, in his 2010 memoir, President George Bush made it clear that he approved of these methods at the time, though he qualified his statement by rejecting waterboarding as “torture,” and instead categorized it as an “‘enhanced’ interrogation technique.”\(^{86}\) Though Hayden and Bush were eventually transparent, the alleged use of waterboarding and the debate of whether it constituted torture had been circulating since 2004.\(^{87}\) Without a convincing defense of waterboarding by American political leaders, commentators began providing their own moral certitude.

In 2008, the controversial social critic and journalist Christopher Hitchens published an article titled, “Believe Me, It’s Torture,” in which he described his own experience of being

\(^{84}\) Troisi, “Remaking Rape-Revenge”, 42.


subjected to the brutal interrogation technique. He starts by noting that until recently, waterboarding was something Americans did to other Americans – something that they were trained to endure might they meet it at “the hands of a lawless foe who disregarded the Geneva Conventions.”

Hitchens draws a distinction between waterboarding and torture that involves mutilation: with waterboarding, there is, “No thumbscrew, no pincers, no electrodes, no rack”; nonetheless, he determines that, if waterboarding is not torture, “then nothing is.”

Perhaps more concerning are the consequences of the United States, a nation often looked to as a moral leader, employing torture. As Hitchens puts it:

If we allow and justify [waterboarding], we cannot complain if it is employed in the future by other regimes on captive U.S. citizens. It is a method of putting American prisoners in harm’s way. . . . It opens a door that cannot be closed. Once you have posted the notorious “ticking bomb” question, once you assume that you are in the right, what will you not do? Waterboarding not getting results fast enough? The terrorist’s clock still ticking? Well, then, bring on the thumbscrews and the pincers and the electrodes and the rack.

Hitchens’ essay is useful both for its insight and clarity, and because it exemplifies the voices concern for the future of America’s international presence coming from the media. Together, the use of waterboarding and the deplorable behavior at Abu Ghraib prompted a moral quandary that, in its boldest form, asks, if America is at war with “Terror,” is America not its own enemy? Late Millennials, children and adolescents at the time, were unlikely to have been grappling explicitly with these questions. What is more significant is that they were growing up at a time

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90 Ibid., 453.
when America was becoming less sure of its moral fortitude as it pursued justice for the terrorist attacks on 9/11. This national anxiety was breathed-in like smog.

Knowing this, it is important to consider that, despite living in a world so heavily shaped by 9/11, Late Millennials at large have little connection to the day itself. Late Millennials only came to “know” 9/11 years after it happened, as they could not actually comprehend it as it occurred. Unlike older folks who saw the Twin Towers collapse on live TV, these people were children in 2001, sheltered from the violence or simply unable to grasp its gravity. Late Millennials experienced 9/11 in an even more mediated context than watching on live-TV—perhaps in a history class, on TV as an anniversary commemoration, or by themselves on the Internet. To say that they “learned” about it reveals the nature of their consumption and conception of it: 9/11 was in the realm of historical events that one must be told about. This is extremely different from the experience of seeing 9/11 occur, which cannot be conceived of as “learning about” as much as being attacked and victimized by, for the point of televised terrorism is that the assault does not end with the death toll but continues with the propagation of images. In this way, what the phrase “Never Forget” means is to never forget the experience and trauma of being attacked on 9/11, which, because they did not experience it in the same way, Late Millennials cannot achieve. It is no coincidence that the phrase “Never Forget” is spoofed so often in these memes: what is more ridiculous than telling someone to never forget what they cannot know?

In various interviews with my peers (who did not have a relative killed in the attacks or were in New York City during the attacks, which is most people), the day of September 11, 2001

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was recounted as a hectic, surprising, but never traumatic, day. The generation is, in a way, alienated from the collective trauma that was experienced together and all at once for Americans on September 11th. And still, they are asked or told to grieve as deeply for it as any true American. This poses a difficulty because Late Millennials do not have connective tissue to the event, but to representations of it. Their connection comes from the archival news coverage and photographs of September 11th and the proceeding days, but also from pop-culture depictions, references, and allusions. Stacy Takacs writes that the initial, on-the-scene coverage of 9/11 was meant less to explain or analyze the events than it was to “bring viewers close to the suffering and dismay – to create an experience of live witness that would envelop viewers into the unfolding drama.” This was achieved by focusing on eye-witness testimonies that, while they may have presented certain facts, privileged an emotional and personal perspective of the events. After this footage had been gathered, the news media began framing the story within the conventions of a “melodrama”: male (firefighter) heroes, female (civilian) victims, and evil (terrorist) villains in a “struggle between abstract good and abstract evil for the soul of humanity.” In the years following 9/11, this battle would play out allegorically on primetime TV; however, over time the TV referencing or allegorizing 9/11 and its aftermath adopted a messier message, one more closely representing the reality of America’s war.

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93 Takacs, Terrorism TV, 32.

94 Ibid.

95 Ibid., 36.
Tackacs argues that patriotic television programs were “the niche market, shaping nearly every decision executives made from 2001 to 2003.”\textsuperscript{96} This was the era of 24, Alias, and The Agency, thrillers that built terrorism up as an apocalyptic threat, heightened the public’s fear, and promoted militarism as an antidote.\textsuperscript{97} But as the war went on and more distressing information came to light—such as the abuse at Abu Gharib and the use of waterboarding—the tone began to change. The television of the later 2000s was characterized by what cultural critic Jeff Melnick has called the “9/11 shout out”: references to the once-taboo topic of 9/11 in either subtle or explicit ways—think of the falling-man opening sequence to AMC’s Mad Men (2007-2015), various episodes of South Park that mock both the 9/11 Truthers and the Bush Administration, and FX’s Rescue Me (2003-2001).\textsuperscript{98} Tackacs writes that, though these shows are likely attempting to benefit from being controversial, the overall trend of 9/11 shout outs served to “desacralize” 9/11 and open it up to more interpretations, contemplation, and debate.\textsuperscript{99} Thus, for Late Millennials growing up in the 2000s, television began pulling 9/11 out of the “off-limits” realm of American sanctity and into pop-culture. These cultural representations, much more so than the actual experience of the day, would have influenced and informed Late Millennials about 9/11, and perhaps also set the tone for how to treat 9/11 as a reference point. For this generation, 9/11

\textsuperscript{96}Takacs, Terrorism TV, 57.

\textsuperscript{97}Ibid., 239.

\textsuperscript{98}Jeffrey Melnick, 9/11 Culture (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), ch. 7, in Takacs, Terrorism TV, 240. South Park episodes of note include “Red Sleigh Down” (12/11/2002), which depicts Jesus as a Rambo-esque rescuing Santa Claus after his sleigh is shot down over Iraq, and “The Mystery of the Urinal Deuce” (10/11/2006), in which it is revealed that President Bush himself is behind the 9/11 Truth Movement because it created the illusion of power, as if some people consider him a mastermind. Rescue Me follows a NYFD firefighter who refuses to address his trauma from the day of 9/11, going down a path of self-destruction that leads the audience to consider the nation’s own process of dealing with grief and the desire for revenge.

\textsuperscript{99}Takacs, Terrorism TV, 240.
is attenuated by both time and by mediated layers of separation, and this has affected how Late Millennials engage with the continual mainstream mourning process.

While, of course, it is not impossible to empathize with tragedies of the past, there is a distinct way in which Late Millennials are also expected to mourn for the era before that terrible day—apparently a more innocent and less complex time. An era that they simply never knew.

This is difficult to do, especially when the chapter in American history and life that began with 9/11 is anything but over. To explain, allow me to draw a comparison. The biggest attack on American soil before the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 was the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1942. Pearl Harbor was an attack by Japanese Kamikaze pilots directed primarily at military personnel, and the attacks spurred the United States to enter into a war that it eventually left victorious and, at least as the story goes, proud. Conversely, 9/11 prompted the United States to begin an invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, a “War on Terror,” and to ramp up national security to unprecedented heights; the United States is still, 17 years later as this thesis is being written, at war in the Middle East, on constant high alert for terrorist attacks, and plagued by Islamophobic sentiment across the country. No clear, brutal revenge was exacted on Al Qaeda as it was on Japan with Atom Bombs. Osama Bin Laden was killed, but as an elderly man and by a

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101 Michael C. C. Adams, “American Experience During World War II,” Oxford Research Encyclopedias (August 2016), http://americanhistory.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.001.0001/acrefore-9780199329175-e-344#acrefore-9780199329175-e-344-div1-6. Adams posits that World War II marked the beginning of the “American Myth of the Good War”: that Americans had battled evil incarnate and come out untarnished, saved the world with democracy, that America could not be wrong, etc. It is relevant that Adams also marks 9/11 and the subsequent War on Terror as the period when the Myth began its decline.
different President, who himself had been highly critical of the Iraq War from its beginning. Instead of emerging from war with (mostly) settled scores as it did after World War II, the United States has entered into a post-9/11 “normal” where the veneer of national safety has been irrevocably torn. When we remember 9/11, we grieve as much for the past as for the victims. The presence of memes attempting to create humor from this tragedy attests, I believe, to the significance of this disconnect between American generations. It is as if, in not being “in” on the trauma with older generations, Late Millennials made an “in-joke” in response. Giselende Kuipers, a scholar on humor’s role in dealing with tragedy, writes, “The ability to play with something is the highest proof of one’s grasp on the matter.” Given that most millennials did not truly feel the trauma of September 11th, joking about it may be this generation’s way of signifying that they have come to terms with it—though not on terms that are acceptable in the mainstream.

It is important to note that, given the amorphous nature of memes and their spread, Late Millennials encounter 9/11, either in images or verbal reference, in much different spaces and contexts than an older American. The most common arena where this generation sees these memes is on Reddit and Instagram. Various subreddits and Instagram accounts serve as the breeding ground, or perhaps the art exhibit, for memes. These are sites that Late Millennials browse on the Metro, between classes, when avoiding homework, etc. Because of this, encountering 9/11 comes at unexpected and mundane times. Seeing 9/11, for them, does not come at a moment of shock or reverence, but rather has become part of the pop-culture


103 Kuipers, “Where Was King Kong When We Needed Him?” 41.
consumed daily. This is not to say all Late Millennials are affected in the same way. There is
certainly no proper or normal was to react to viewing these images, but it can largely be assumed
that most Late Millennials are “in” on the jokes whether they appreciate them or not because of
the familiar content that is incorporated into the meme.

Let us turn back to Jake’s story, whose use of a 9/11 might have helped him gain a
communications position. When Jake employed “#bushdid911” during his speech, he was not
actually asserting a tremendously grave theory about President Bush. Rather, he was
demonstrating his command of the Internet and Internet culture and thus, in a certain way,
coolness. When Jake wanted to showcase his savvy with Twitter and social media, speaking
in “meme” or myth makes perfect sense. On one level, Jake said he thinks that these memes
“make 9/11 palatable. . . . like a safety mechanism.” They allow one to interact with 9/11 in an
irreverent and, perhaps, an almost comforting way. When Jake used it as a joke, it was to
demonstrate his cultural knowledge. So, these 9/11 memes are at once a kind of coping
mechanism and buzz-words for being a cultural insider. For Late Millennials, being able to
express this kind of irony and detachment is culturally and socially valued.

Using these memes as myths that signify one’s own apathy towards history compels
viewers/listeners to juggle both 9/11 in all its horror and this ridiculous and ironic gesture in their
minds simultaneously. It becomes difficult to discern whether this person has any belief in
conspiracy theories, does not respect George Bush, does not respect those who died on the day,
or simply is making fun of it all. What becomes associated, however, is the image and idea of
9/11 and the concept that making fun of it equals coolness.

104 “Jake,” interview by author, Los Angeles, California, February 6, 2018.
It is important to note the role that increasingly sophisticated technology plays in this phenomenon. While the Late Millennial humor around 9/11 is fundamentally different than that of Internet users in the early 2000s, the technology of today creates a system where extremely offensive images can be made, posted, and shared so quickly that the makers, it often seems, have not considered the tastelessness of their creation. It contributes to a general thoughtlessness on the Internet. The most exaggerated example of this might be the 2017 controversy with Logan Paul, a Youtube celebrity who uploaded a video of his encounter with the corpse of a man who had committed suicide in the infamous “Suicide Forest” in Aokigahara, Japan.\textsuperscript{105} The video was met with backlash and criticism from celebrities, politicians, and fellow Youtubers alike, with many claiming that Paul was mocking the deceased man.\textsuperscript{106} Paul has denied this, but the point remains that the Youtube star, at the very least, thought that this video would be entertaining for his fans and suitable for his vlog. This level of grotesque humor stands out for Paul’s remarkable lack of reflection on the decision he was making. However, in a much smaller way, one can imagine a person copying a photo of the Twin Towers in flames from Google Images and laying a picture of the “Magic School Bus” over it, then posting the collage to Instagram all while being relatively thoughtless (Appendix, 9). Carving a statue might allow a creator the time to ponder the consequences and purposes, but this digital medium enables practically mindless production.

While in the past, 9/11 spectators were enraptured by the spectacle of the Twin Towers explosions and collapses, this Late Millennials generation has, it seems, used Photoshop and editing software to show that 9/11 is not unique as a spectacle, that it is not off-limits. They


\textsuperscript{106} Ibid.
blend it with everything else on TV to show that, to them, it is just that: life on the television. This, strange as it may sound, is not all that remarkable in a time period where the lines between reality and simulation have all but disappeared. For the Late Millennial, discerning between the real and the hyperreal, or simulacra, is an everyday challenge. In the world of Reality TV, “Catfishing”, and Fake News, seeing through the lies is an acquired skill, one that demonstrates mastery over the media. Reading reality like a text has become so commonplace that extending it to the attacks of September 11th is apparently funny to a wide audience. Performing a simulation of asserting that 9/11 was a conspiracy is seen as humorous, especially given the contested debate about its reality (a debate conducted by older, less media-savvy consumers, no less). Late Millennials, as I have argued previously, cannot truly identify with or comprehend 9/11 as trauma. It is not theirs to own, and there has been nothing like it since to compare it to. However, 9/11 as a spectacle on the television that people found hard to distinguish as real or fake, the contested truth of the matter, that is something Late Millennials can share in completely.

This is the aspect of 9/11 that fascinates and resonates with Late Millennials, and this fascination manifests in myth-making memes: playing with the “simulation” by simulating it over and over. Late Millennials have grown up in a world where they must be extremely wary of the media—the line between what is real and what is fake is continuously blurred. Some of the most successful television shows that market to this demographic are those that acknowledge and play off of the experience of being unable to distinguish between the real the fake, or they turn the “sham” up to such a high volume that it exposes the absurdity of reality. I am thinking especially of shows like Netflix’s Black Mirror, a British series that interrogates the ways that

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technology produces ways of augmenting, or re-creating real life, so much so that you cannot tell
if what you are experiencing or seeing if truly happening or not. Numerous episodes involve
step-backs from the narrative that reveal everything seen thus far, what you thought was real,
was in fact fake in the diegesis of the show.

Additionally, and on the opposite side of the spectrum, is something like *The Eric Andre
Show*, a parody of the late-night talk show that takes the format’s inherently contrived nature to
its extreme. Andre destroys the whole set at the beginning of each episode only for it to be
rebuilt in seconds; he pretends to be completely unprepared for the opening monologue; it is
intentionally created to be a total mess. On its most hilarious episodes, celebrities who are
unaware of the show’s deliberate mockery come to be interviewed. We watch as they are
unnerved and terrified at Andre’s antics—they had no idea what they are stepping into. We, as
the audience, are in on the unreality of the show, and get to see celebrities expecting to be in the
(equally) predetermined world of a typical late-night show thrown into Andre’s madness.

Even corporate marketing has tapped into this side of Late Millennials taste as well—so
you know it’s real. Tide Laundry Detergent premiered a series of advertisements during the
Super Bowl (2018) that relied on this same reflexive, “meta” acknowledgement. The ads would
begin as any archetypical ad does: a family eating, a couple holding hands, everything is clean
and safe, etc. Then, after the banal voice-over has been exhausted and the viewer is still unsure
of what is actually being sold, David Harbour, the actor best known for playing Jim Hopper on
Netflix’s *Stranger Things*, enters the scene to tell the audience, “See those spotless shirts? It’s a
Tide Ad.” Using this reflexivity to play off the medium of advertisements, the audience starts to
question, “Is every Super Bowl ad a Tide ad? Are we living in a Tide ad?” A similar trick was done by Jean Baudrillard himself in “Simulacra and Simulation” when the author opened with a faux-quote, “The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth—it is the truth that conceals that there is none. The simulacrum is true.” Baudrillard falsely attributed it to Ecclesiastes, enacting his own claim about simulation. As Baudrillard might have predicted, Late Millennials are accustomed to being wary of the reality of anything they see on TV, and media that taps into this has been successful with this young crowd.

In addition to being wary with the media, Late Millennials are also notably skeptical of long-time American institutions. Psychologists and columnists alike have noted the skepticism of American Millennials. In a 2012 study published in the Psychological Science journal, the study’s lead author, Jean Twenge, suggested that events like mass shootings, the Great Recession, and sex scandals in religious communities contribute to the generation’s low opinions of institutions like the government and the media. The claims were based off of a survey of 140,000 high school seniors, which included questions such as, “Do you think most people can be trusted?” Researchers found that, “In addition to the general statement about ‘most people,’ millennial approval of institutions, including Congress, the media, and various religious groups, decreased at a greater rate than in other generations,” in the decade that followed the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. For example, trust in Congress has dropped dramatically: “in


109 Jean Baudrillard, “Simulacra and Simulation.”

2000-2002, 49 percent of 12th graders who were surveyed said Congress was doing a "good" or "very good" job, compared with just 22 percent who said the same in 2010-12. Thirty percent of young boomers were approving in the mid-1970s, and 33 percent of Gen Xers in early 1990s.\textsuperscript{111} It is telling that Senator Bernie Sanders, who spoke out against the corruption of these American institutions and was vocally oppose to invading Iraq in 2002, captivated the Millennial generation in 2016. As one Millennial Op-Ed writer put it, “We are living in an age that is the product of austerity measures, deregulation, skyrocketing student-loan debt, high unemployment and a lack of affordable housing. Many of us cannot remember a time when the U.S. was not dropping bombs on the Middle East. Democratic socialism sounds like a much better alternative than our current system.”\textsuperscript{112} Bush, much more so than Obama, seems to be the symbolic object for this network of institutional negligence, callousness, or, at the worst, mass-murder.

To account for these attitudes, one must attend to the effect of 9/11 conspiracy theories on Late Millennials, and the American public at large. The phrases “Bush did 9/11” and “Jet fuel can’t melt steel beams” reference conspiracy theories that gained significant exposure and garnered many supporters in the years after the attacks.\textsuperscript{113} In the aftermath of 9/11, while there was undoubtedly an uptick in patriotism and collective action, there was also pronounced growth in American skepticism. According to a Zogby poll from 2004, 42 percent of Americans believed “that the US government and its 9/11 Commission concealed or refused to investigate

\textsuperscript{111}“Study: Millennials less trusting than Gen-X was,” Associated Press.


critical evidence that contradicts their official explanation of the September 11th attacks.” A poll conducted by Scripps Howard and Ohio University in 2006 concluded that 36 percent of Americans believe their government was complicit, in some way, with the 9/11 attacks. A New York Times/CBS done in 2006 found that only 16 percent of Americans believed that the Bush administration told the truth about pre-9/11 intelligence, and 81 percent of Americans believed that the government was either “hiding something” or “mostly lying.” The ambiguity around the 9/11 Commission led to the formation of what is known as the “9/11 Truth Movement” – a network of people, united by Internet forums and the like, who continue to call for a new investigation into the attacks on September 11th. According to their website, 9/11truth.org, they intend “To end, by way of integrity and god-given creativity, the regime and illicit power structures responsible for 9/11 and to replace the system that made 9/11 necessary.” Part of the movement’s popularity can be attributed to 9/11 conspiracy films, which have been viewed millions of times, moving from the deep recesses of the Internet to mainstream outlets. The biggest example by far is Loose Change, made in 2005 by Dylan Avery. In 2007, Guardian journalist Ed Pilkington wrote about the surprisingly wide circulation of this film:

As I write, [the number of views] stands at 4,048,990. By the time you read this, it will have risen considerably higher. On top of that, the movie was shown on television to up to 50 million people in 12 countries on September 11 last year; 100,000 DVDs have been

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116 Ibid.

117 Ibid.

sold and 50,000 more given away free. Then there are many more who have watched the film but are never counted, as a result of the active encouragement the film-makers give their supporters to burn the movie and distribute it to their friends. Avery says 100 million people – ‘easy’ - have seen it. That may be an exaggeration, but it's fair to say that something extraordinary is going on.\footnote{Ed Pilkington, “Loose Change: ‘They’re all forced to listen to us,’” \textit{The Guardian}, January 26, 2007, \url{https://www.theguardian.com/media/2007/jan/26/digitalmedia}.}

There have been four re-releases of the film, with one produced by the notorious radio show host and conspiracy theorist Alex Jones, whose show \textit{Info Wars} has become an influential alternative news outlet.\footnote{Jarrett Murphy, “The Seekers,” \textit{The Village Voice}, February 14, 2006, accessed March 10, 2018, \url{https://www.villagevoice.com/2006/02/14/the-seekers/2/}.} But this is not the only film to take a skeptical look at 9/11. As of February 2018, Netflix is showing \textit{9/11: Truth, Lies, and Conspiracies}, a BBC Films documentary from 2016 about the competing theories around the attacks. Taken all together, this information evinces that 9/11 conspiracy theories have entered mainstream conversations in a post-9/11 world, and that, even while many theories may be dubious and untrue, they have had a significant effect on American culture and memory.

Memes like this next one attest to the pervasiveness of these conspiracy theories (\textit{Appendix, 10}). In a similar way to the “Jet Fuel” memes, memes that play with President George W. Bush as the culprit of 9/11 normalize an unexplained but explicit connection between the President and the grave accusations against him. This pair of photographs comes from the inauguration of President Donald J. Trump on January 20, 2017. President Bush was in attendance, as well as his family and Vice President Dick Cheney, who can be seen behind him in the photos. A light drizzle was coming down that day, and the former President attempted to put on a poncho but got snarled in the plastic mess. This did not go unnoticed by the press: Vanity Fair published an article about the incident in May of 2017, it was brought up when he
visited an episode of “Ellen,” and so on. The moment went “viral” and subsequently provided the fodder of many memes. In this one, the meme plays with the dual meaning of “cover up,” as well as the disparity between the expected visual of an evil mastermind needed to orchestrate 9/11 and what we see in Bush: grinning in embarrassment, incapable of navigating his head through a slicker. In the way that the meme is sequenced, in that you are meant to first read the caption and then view the picture, it is almost as if Bush is grinning at our little joke as well—he grins a good natured, “Oh, come on y’all,” and he grins at us. That grin is transformed from one of embarrassment in the moment, to an exasperated smile in the face of tremendous accusations, or, depending on how it is read and who is reading it, a sinister smirk, as if to say, “And I got away with it.” It is difficult to decipher this meme because, like many others, it takes no actual stance on the alleged “inside job” of 9/11. It is cheeky, flippant, and treats the situation in a light-hearted manner unsuitable for a genuine claim on Bush’s morality. It also does nothing to resurrect his reputation or hint at what the meme-maker’s intent is. It is telling of a mindset, one localized to the Late Millennials generations, who are content to bring up accusations of treason and murder towards a President, spoof them, but never come out to take it all back to affirm their true beliefs on the issue. It is treated with the inconsequence of a pop-cultural reference, or a controversial take on a movie. It is growing unclear, or, perhaps more accurately, irrelevant whether the meme-makers believe that 9/11 either was or was not in fact an inside job. These memes exist in an arena where complex thoughts are brought to the table, but extended critical discourse goes unrealized. 9/11 exists more as a prop for a laugh than as evidence or history.

Suffice it to say there is an undercurrent of skepticism and conspiracy in the discourse around 9/11. Regardless of whether these theories are believed or not, they hang like a shroud of doubt around one’s memory of 9/11—just as one cannot conceive of President John F. Kennedy’s assassination for long without then thinking of The Grassy Knoll and The Magic Bullet. Part of the 9/11 conspiracy theorists’ actual argument is that the heat needed to melt the steel beams of the World Trade Center and result in the implosion of the entire building could not have been generated by fire burning jet fuel—as the 9/11 Commission report states — implying that the Bush Administration was orchestrating or cover-up this “false-flag” operation meant to create grounds to invade Iraq. While these began as the claims of concerned, though perhaps paranoid, citizens, they soon turned into the fodder for spoofs on “Truthers” and hoaxes. KnowYourMeme traces the first ironic use of the phrase to a picture from the “I wish I could talk to ponies” webcomic in 2014, and shortly after as the caption of a video where a German Shepherd appears to be driving a car. In my own research, I found the phrase employed by commenters on Reddit, who were joking about the veracity of a video of a barely avoided car crash, and even in a post from The Onion displaying fake letters 1st graders to President Trump (Appendix, Figures 11 and 12). Given that The Onion, a well-known and popular satirical news outlet, participates in this meme, it is safe to say that the phrase “jet fuel can’t melt steel beams” has sufficiently entered into the American vocabulary. It creates a culture of insecurity masked with humor, and it’s a culture that has not gone unnoticed by the media.

Washington Post journalist Elizabeth Bruenig provides a colorful description of the absurdity of Late Millennial humor, and it’s potential underlying causes:

To visit millennial comedy, advertising and memes is to spend time in a dream world where ideas twist and suddenly vanish; where loops of self-referential quips warp and distort with each iteration, tweaked by another user embellishing on someone else’s joke, until nothing coherent is left; where beloved children’s character Winnie the Pooh is depicted in a fan-made comic strip as a 9/11 truther, and grown men in a parody ad dance to shrill synth beats while eating Totino’s pizza rolls out of a tiny pink backpack. In this weird world of the surreal and bizarre, horror mingles with humor, and young people have space to play with emotions that seem more and more to proceed from ordinary life — the creeping suspicion that the world just doesn’t make sense.126

Much of this humor, Bruenig asserts, derives from Millennials’ (see footnote) struggles with feelings of emptiness and despair.127 Whether or not this is the case, headlines like “Why millennials are the most anxious generation in history” from Vogue, “‘They can't even’: Why millennials are the ‘anxious generation’” from the New York Post, and thousands of others like them evince that many would agree.128 Comedy, as conventional wisdom would tell us, is the best medicine; regardless, perhaps humor betrays the concerns of those making the kind of jokes they make. Bruenig writes of Millennial nihilism: “Rather than trying to restore meaning and sense where they’ve gone missing, the style aims to play with the moods and emotions of an illegible world. In a way, it’s a digital update to the surreal and absurd genres of art and literature

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126 Bruenig, “Why is Millennial humor so weird?”

127 I concede that this in this territory my definition of “Late Millennials” becomes a bit problematic. Because it is a unique category of my creation for the purpose of this thesis, articles I cite do not specifically refer to it. However, I believe that my judgments and Bruenig’s descriptions align quite well, and that my qualifier of “Late” does not take away from my claims, but instead makes them more specific and tenable. It is my mission to resist as much as possible the blanket statements made by media publications about “millennials,” while still necessarily making claims about members of an age cohort.

that characterized the tumultuous early 20th century.”¹²⁹ She points to television shows like Tim and Eric Awesome Show, Great Job!, Rick and Morty, and BoJack Horseman. These are popular and successful programs on major networks or media outlets that are both “surreal” and “tangibly dark,” made for Millennials “leaning in to feelings of worry, failure and dread.”¹³⁰ While the creators of these shows are older men who were likely teenagers or adults on 9/11, they have brought the subversive comedy of the 1990s into the mainstream today, and (Late) Millennials have been nourished by it.

This sensibility carries over to memes that, in an increasingly technologized environment, encourage people who might not otherwise participate in media-creation to get in on the action. The bar for being a meme creator is quite low, especially with sites like MemeGenerator (https://imgflip.com/memegenerator) that allow one to easily make a variation of a common meme or form a new one altogether. Memes are participatory media that can reach a huge audience unlike anything else. They subvert the typical top-down model of entertainment consumption, and open up space for things to get . . . weird.

Bruenig describes memes as “any pieces of cultural information that spread among groups by imitation, changing bit by bit along the way.”¹³¹ She points out that a key aspect of this process is the change that occurs, where a meme may begin as one thing and, with each remove, become more and more unlike the original. She elaborates and provides an example:

In other words, distortion is a key attribute of this form, a warping effect that occurs as each instance of a meme grows more distant from its origin, sometimes losing any meaning whatsoever. Gallows humor about the late Cincinnati Zoo gorilla Harambe, for

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¹²⁹ Bruenig, “Why is Millennial humor so weird?”
¹³⁰ Ibid.
¹³¹ Ibid.
instance, has transformed into a whole genre of jokes only tenuously related to the original ape. For millennials, memes form the backdrop of life.\footnote{132}{Bruenig, “Why is Millennial humor so weird?”}

A perfect 9/11 example of this distortion is that of the “Disaster Girl” meme (Appendix, Figures \ref{fig:13} and \ref{fig:14}). Know Your Meme describes it as a “photoshop meme in which an exploitable photo of a smiling girl is superimposed on to images of natural disasters and accidents to imply that she has caused some type of calamity depicted in the background.”\footnote{133}{“Disaster Girl,” Know Your Meme, accessed February 23, 2018, \url{http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/disaster-girl}.} The original image is of a young girl standing before a house fire, looking back devilishly at the camera. She is in focus with a high depth of field, so the house behind her is slightly blurry, but the fire is no laughing matter. The joke here plays off of the incongruity between a sweet little girl and the fire, the idea being that the girl is looking over her dastardly deed and smiling with mischief. Though it was taken in 2004, it was only uploaded to the Internet—by the girl’s father and titled “Firestarter”—in 2007.\footnote{134}{Ibid.} It was entered into a photo contest, and eventually gained some attention. Soon after, it began being meme’d. As the meme moved, any content behind this recognizable child’s face became her the result of devious plan. Notable examples include the girl in the “War Room” with President Obama during the Seal Team Six raid on Osama Bin Laden and the girl, in black and white, against a sinking Titanic.\footnote{135}{Ibid.} This meme was taken to its (debatably logical) extreme with 9/11—a look up at the Twin Towers as one explodes and the other emits thick smoke. Her smirking face is the ultimate juxtaposition to subvert the terror of that day and make it enter the meme. Because of the popularity of this meme and the fact that this girl’s face is the only
consistency needed to make it, 9/11 is entering her world, the world of the meme and all of its associations. It is also more interesting because of the contested veracity of 9/11—while all mainstream information points to Al Qaeda, fringe sources point to the U.S. government and Bush himself. This meme plays off of this history by pointing to the least likely—or the most, in this meme-universe—person to be the evil mastermind. 9/11, it seems, was not deemed “off-limits” or “too far” for this meme, at least by people who made or shared the image. A peer of mine said, “It’s easier to talk about 9/11 with humor,” after I showed him the picture. While it might be easy to call this use of 9/11 cruel or callous, I believe it is something more interesting.

The absurdism and surrealism that Millennials tend towards is not hopelessly pessimistic, but instead, a relief from the real world where it is difficult to find meaning. In her article, Bruenig cites Albert Camus, then applies his insight to the contemporary situation of Millennials: “The absurd,” Albert Camus wrote in 1942, “is born of this confrontation between the human need [for happiness and reason] and the unreasonable silence of the world.” Absurdity is the compulsion to go looking for meaning that simply isn’t there. Today’s surrealism draws aspects of all of these threads together with humor, creating an aesthetic world where (in common Internet parlance) “lol, nothing matters,” but things may turn out all right anyway.” These 9/11 memes may be the Millennial generation’s way of communicating that 9/11 never had meaning for them, and that searching for meaning within it is ultimately useless. Making a myth of 9/11, as if it be the story to unite the country and make us all our best selves, has arguably left us in a state of constant threat. In these memes, 9/11 stands in as the ultimate absurdity—it makes as much sense in the memes as it does in real life for Millennials.


137 Bruenig, “Why is Millennial humor so weird?”
Perhaps the best example of this is the “Never Forgetti” meme (Appendix, Figure 15). Like a piece from the Dadaist movement, this meme is intentionally logically incoherent. However, in aesthetic terms, it is much more elaborate than a typical screenshot/text combination. It certainly took more skill, effort, and time than a standard meme, but it resists narrative or moral statement. It is completely absurd. It does, however, make a note of trivializing the somber command “Never Forget,” a slogan seen every 9/11 anniversary, with “Never Forgetti.” By abstracting the physicality of the Towers and the explosion, depth is erased and replaced with almost flat textures. This draws attention to the aesthetic elements of the impact, like composition and color. If the picture is given enough time, one starts to actually “see” the Twin Towers anew. The real elements of the picture, those not replaced, stand out: the thick blackness of the smoke, each piece of debris, the cloudless azure sky. The image is no longer totalized into “9/11,” but compartmentalized and, in this way, allows a person to look without immediately thinking of the chronology of the day. This image un-narrativizes 9/11. Herein lies the joke: that “Never Forget” really means to never forget the story you have memorized, not to retroactively re-interpret the day with what you now know, with its full history. It means to “Never Forget” the event that justified wars, not to remember the day and think about alternate courses of action, or a world where tragedy was handled differently. It means to ingrain the myth. “Never Forgetti,” conversely, point out that what one is being asked to remember when they are told to “Never Forget” is not their actual memory, but a pre-packaged narrative.
CHAPTER IV: FORGETTING 9/11

Don’t get mad, get even – ca. 2006 (Appendix, Figure 16)

We’re not aiming for the Truck – ca. 2014 (Appendix, Figure 17)

It is important to note that jokes surrounding 9/11 (primarily produced and disseminated on the Internet) are not new. Rather, they have changed in tone and form. In her essay “Where Was King Kong When We Needed Him?: Public Discourse, Digital Disaster Jokes, and the Functions of Laughter After 9/11,” Giselende Kuipers, a cultural sociologist, analyzes Internet disaster jokes created prior to 2006. She considers them a “collective reaction to a phenomenon that is . . . experienced collectively through media.”138 She notes that these Internet jokes were not simply coping mechanisms for those suffering from the terrorist attacks—the jokes were not most popular among New Yorkers or people whose loved-ones died in the attacks.139 Rather, she considers them to be attempts by people far-removed from the attacks to place this sensational tragedy back into the realm of fictional, pleasurable popular culture—into the category of action movies and out of news. Kuipers noted that much of this humor was “sick”; sick, in her words, meaning that the jokes rely on the incongruity between the gruesome and the innocent, like a photo with Teletubbies photo-shopped in as jumpers from the Twin Towers.140 Kuipers argues that the sick humor that emerged in the time shortly after 9/11 on the Internet was a reaction to 9/11’s mass-mediated coverage and the media’s attempt to prescribe emotions to viewers across the United States. In her words, viewers were “drawn into feelings for people they do not know,

138 Kuipers, “Where Was King Kong When We Needed Him?” 41.
139 Ibid., 43.
140 Ibid., 21, 23.
and they [were] confronted with constant talk of things usually considered ‘unspeakable.’” \(^{141}\)

These jokes frequently relied on the inclusion of pop-culture or advertisement references because media disaster coverage is “exactly like pop-culture,” all the other programs we are watching. \(^{142}\) This “genre-play” as Kuipers calls it, presented 9/11 as an event of popular media culture and allows people to respond to the traumatic images with more images of their own. \(^{143}\) According to Kuipers, that “the images of the attacks had spoken to [the joke makers’] media-trained emotions, but betrayed their media-trained expectations, because in the America they knew from the movies, King Kong would have been there.” \(^{144}\) As a false quote from The Onion in 2001 put it, “Terrorist hijackings, buildings blowing up, thousands of people dying—these are all things I’m accustomed to seeing… But this, this doesn’t have any scenes where Bruce Willis saves the planet and quips a one-liner as he blows the bad-guy up.” \(^{145}\)

Additionally, much of the Internet humor to emerge after 9/11 was vengefully patriotic. Jokes had an “aggressive tone,” and relied on “degrading” figures like Osama Bin Laden or Muslims in general. \(^{146}\) Kuipers, a Dutch woman, noted that this tendency was much more common among American 9/11 jokes than Dutch or other international 9/11 jokes. \(^{147}\)

\(^{141}\) Kuipers “Where Was King Kong When We Needed Him?” 40.

\(^{142}\) Ibid.

\(^{143}\) Ibid., 37, 43.

\(^{144}\) Ibid., 43-44.

\(^{145}\) “American Life Turns into Bad Jerry Bruckheimer Movie,” \(The Onion\), September 26, 2001, quoted in Kuipers, “Where Was King Kong When We Needed Him?” 41.

\(^{146}\) Kuipers, “Where Was King Kong When We Needed Him?” 32.

\(^{147}\) Ibid., 39.
Likewise, in 2004, Rosemary Hathaway, an American Internet folklore scholar, showed her class of German university students various “e-lore” (like an image of a stealth bomber with wings reading, “If you can read this, you’re fucked,” and a fake Weather Channel image of Kabul with a mushroom cloud in the forecast). She recounted that few German students found these images funny, and that her collection began to “resemble no more than an embarrassing public display of America’s ethnocentrism.”\(^{148}\) Kuipers attributes this, in part, to the “warlike rhetoric” common in American media discourse at the time.\(^{149}\) While it could be that some or many jokes depicting Bin Laden in degrading pictures were a commentary on this discourse – more joking about the discourse itself than the terrorists – Arabs were often present in these pictures as objects of abuse. Interestingly, in a majority of present-day 9/11 memes, they have all but vanished from view. While previous Internet jokes about 9/11 relied on assigning blame, humiliation, violence, and racist stereotyping, in today’s jokes, the insensitivity is directed towards the American victims and their families. Blame is either assigned as a joke or gone altogether, Osama Bin Laden and Muslims are all but absent, the imagery of the Towers actually being destroyed is much more prominent, and humor relies on an absurd blend on the innocuous and the horrific instead of humiliation.

Late Millennials’ memes, therefore, do not mark the emergence of humor around 9/11, or Internet jokes on it, but rather an evolution of the trend. What might be even more important than tone, however, is that 9/11 has begun to function differently even in jokes. Memes are conversations where 9/11 is not the subject, but a signifier. In the context of these memes, 9/11 is not the root of the conversation; people are not talking about 9/11 as much as they are using 9/11


\(^{149}\) Kuipers, “Where Was King Kong When We Needed Him?” 37.
to comment on present-day culture, or to make a joke that operates by not giving 9/11 the reverence it typically requires. Much like the trend of 9/11 shout outs, this meme trend as a whole, to borrow a word from Takacs, “desacralizes” 9/11.

To better explain what this means, it might be helpful to consider the way that the destruction of the WTC was meant to function from the perspective of the Al-Qaeda terrorists. While the death toll on 9/11 was certainly part of the terrorists’ agenda, this alone, though devastating, would not have had the same effect if it were not televised. Baudrillard writes, “The image consumes the event, in the sense that it absorbs it and offers it for consumption. Admittedly, it gives it unprecedented impact, but impact as image-event.”150 The worst part of 9/11’s violence, Baudrillard offers, is that it is symbolic: “Violence itself may be perfectly banal and inoffensive. Only symbolic violence is generative of singularity.”151 Americans met this terrible symbol with symbolism of their own, attempts to re-take 9/11 by making it a “monument to national innocence.”152 We can read post-9/11 television as still operating in this symbolic realm; in shows like 24, Alias, and The Agency, 9/11 and an American desire for revenge were the symbolic subtext of every effort to track down “bad-guys,” though 9/11 itself was understandably still too painful to be confronted directly. Today, after sites like Youtube have made archival footage accessible, improved computer software has enable easier editing and media production, and social media has abolished the gatekeepers for what can be widely viewed, Internet users have the ability to re-contextualize images of 9/11. This quite literally made 9/11 no longer “off-limits,” but it also enables Americans to re-view and repurpose 9/11.

151 Ibid., 229.
152 Takacs, Terrorism TV, 239.
In memes, 9/11 has become, as Barthes might put it, “speech wholly at the service of a concept.” Not the concept a signifier is ultimately getting at, but the means to get to some other signification. In most cases, it is inserted into whatever context the meme-maker chooses to give a surreal and absurd quality to the pop-culture amalgamation.

While I would not go as far as saying that memes alone have or will completely trivialize 9/11, I do believe that they suggest that this is beginning to occur. This has ramifications for both American memory and for the future of terrorism. In a critique of Jean Baudrillard’s *The Spirit of Terrorism*, Bradley Butterfield interrogates 9/11’s lasting power as a terrorist attack. Leonard Wilcox, in a review of Butterfield’s “The Baudrillardian Symbolic, 9/11, and the War of Good and Evil,” articulates his question as such: “can a symbolic challenge be mounted effectively against a hyperreal regime in which the multiplication of images serves to divert and neutralize that challenge?” In other words, can 9/11 continue to resonate as an image-event in an image-obsessed society? Does repetition continue to enhance the image’s power, or does it, as Walter Benjamin might posit, eventually lose its “presence” and “authority”? These memes, I suggest, attest to the decline of 9/11 as a meaningful symbol; with its proliferation in images, it has become diffuse and its power undermined. In one way, this prevents Americans from rallying around 9/11, either for efforts of war or simply to commemorate a tragedy. On the other hand, it neutralizes the terrorism inflicted upon the American people, subverting the efforts of Al-Qaeda terrorists.

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Essentially, this amounts to forgetting 9/11—that unspeakable crime—or rather, in re-remembering it as something else. As Barthes tells us, myth is “depoliticized speech” which give things a “natural and eternal justification.” Through memes, 9/11 passes from a part of history that must be reckoned with into a fact of the world, and from a fact of the world into something as innocuous as Independence Day. However, memes also undo the grave coverage from news-media and other representations, and show the extent to which 9/11 was being manipulated before it was ever even meme’d. Amanda Hess, a writer for Slate, writes, “Americans who weren’t even sentient when the towers fell are expected to ‘relive’ the event in the form of traditional tributes but also strange and obsessive videos that lie just below the surface of every YouTube clip.” Memes can very well be read as a reaction to this unachievable order and the strangeness of trying to achieve it. Spoofing 9/11 with a smattering of pop-culture items is a type of mythmaking, and one that “makes the world without contradictions because it erases depth.” But what utility does this have for the Meme-makers?

Memes, as myth, create an illusion of a harmonious world Late Millennials seek. It is no coincidence that these memes employ humor, because humor is a tool for resolving discomfort or tension. Speaking about those who viewed 9/11 as it unfolded, Rosemary Hathaway writes, “The incongruity between the aesthetics of the moment and the terror that created them, the irony inherent in this juxtaposition of cinematic display and genuine tragedy, form the foundation of the standard narrative for those who ‘experienced’ the events only via television.” This irony

156 Barthes, Mythologies, 255.
158 Barthes, Mythologies, 256.
is still present for Late Millennials when they encounter 9/11, but it is distorted by time and other media. They are even more detached from the event—those watching on TV in 2001 might not have been in New York City, but they were “there,” present in the moment. It could be that these memes are attempts to resolve the inherent and uncomfortable incongruity of experiencing 9/11 at such a remove. By creating myths where 9/11 is seen as part of the realm of pop-culture, Late Millennials are imagining a different world: not where 9/11 did not happen, but where it is inconsequential—where 9/11 can be laughed about. Barthes writes, “Mythology harmonizes with the world, not as it is, but as it wants to create itself.”160 It’s end is “to immobilize the world.”161

Here, Barthes may be critiqued, for in making memes, Late Millennials are not moving towards a static world, but a world where 9/11 and its myths have lost their stranglehold on American life and memory. The subtle purpose of these memes is to release a generation from a phantom memory and forge a future that is not moored in the darkest moments of the past.

A common thread of memes involves juxtaposing Millennials-childhood-era cartoon with 9/11—which can be seen as the cartoon entering the real world, or 9/11 entering the cartoon diegesis. A certain meme includes a character from an old Nickelodeon cartoon, “The Fairly Odd Parents,” a show that follows Timmy Turner, an unpopular kid with kooky Fairy God Parents (Appendix, Figure 19). However, in the meme, Timmy’s father, Mr. Turner is the person of interest. Mr. Turner is a consistently error-prone goof, who is quick to jump to conclusions and blame problems on a hated neighbor, “Dinkleberg.” This meme seems to imagine Turner as a news-reporter, given the angle of the shot and the Fox News logo in the corner. It is an atypical look at the Towers, which is not often used in memes, or in the imagery typical of 9/11

160 Barthes, Mythologies, 271.

161 Ibid., 270.
memorials. This meme spoofs the media’s representation and coverage of 9/11: it imagines Turner, quick to blame and jump to conclusions, attributing the tragedy to the neighbor with the silly name. If only it were as simple as a cartoon.

Whether it is reasonable or not, memes make it easier to look at and talk about 9/11. This is because in memes, 9/11 is reduced to a signifier. It becomes part of a whole and not an object in itself. In other words, there is relief from the repugnant reality of the images because of the presence of adjacent fictional texts. What remains, however, is a desire to look at the images. In contrast to those watching on TV who could not look away, these meme-makers are going out of their way to find and insert images of the Towers into a digital object of communication. As Jean Baudrillard put it, “The impact of the images, and their fascination, are necessarily what we retain, since images are, whether we like it or not, our primal scene.”¹⁶² Late Millennials want to interrogate this tragedy because it is undeniably fascinating; however, it is taboo to do so.

Shifman writes that “‘bad’ texts make ‘good’ memes in contemporary participatory culture” because they provide imperfections that memers can grapple with, critique, and make fun of.¹⁶³ Perhaps when considered in this way, 9/11 is a “bad text” because it provides so much for the memers to meme: the news coverage, the character of George W. Bush, the conspiracy theorists, the sheer unimaginableness of the attacks, the list goes on. It is not being treated as a historical botch from which we could learn, but as something to lambast without reservation. This treatment of 9/11 reflects a distant experience of it. Learning of it without the personal trauma that resulted from the attack, the farcical qualities of the subsequent conspiracies are privileged and the intimate, first-person perspectives discounted. In this way, the symbolic


¹⁶³ Shifman, Memes in Digital Culture, 86.
challenge that was 9/11 is undermined, and the tragedy of the day trivialized. We are left with the question: is it possible, or even moral to calculate the cost and benefit of this trade-off?
CONCLUSION

Memes are not popular with everyone. They are not the only way Late Millennials communicate, and they are not universally understood. However, the prevalent use of 9/11 as an component of memes and the way in which it is situated reflects a general social mindset and social norms, and it underscores the values of a generation.\textsuperscript{164} From examining the memes, reading them as aesthetic objects, language, and myths—which they are simultaneously and equally—one sees that they do not subscribe to the mainstream, nor the fringe narratives of 9/11. They do not accept that 9/11 marked the end of the possibility for an American life without terror, that it marks the end of an era to be mourned, or that it can only be met with unquestioning patriotism as the mainstream narrative commands. Nor do they accept that the conspiracy theories are valid – that the Bush administration organized a terrorist attack against its own countrymen and women. As an alternative, they create a narrative that lampoons it all, associating it with the over-the-top world of TV—a spectacle that disappears when you change the channel. In situating 9/11 among media from their childhood, and around the same time as 9/11, Late Millennials blend the fictional world they knew well with the reality that still eludes their grasp. It may be that they are only “real” in the same way—things that captivated them on the television.

This meme-humor originates from the Late Millennial inability to intimately identify with 9/11. The Internet meme becomes the vehicle for conversation about that which cannot be freely interrogated in public. There is an expectation to only feel certain things or to learn only certain lessons from the mainstream 9/11 narrative; however, this is an impossible expectation for people who have no true connection to the day or trauma that has yet to heal. The phantom

\textsuperscript{164} Shifman, \textit{Memes in Digital Culture}, 41.
memory imposed upon Late Millennials is a difficult burden to bear, and it seems this burden is being met with irreverence – even a certain amount of violence – as Late Millennials resist the dominant narrative of a “Sacred” 9/11 in an innocent nation.

What all of this means is that growing up as a patriotic American in the 21st century is likely to be different from the way it was in the past. Is the idea of the “Sacred” gone? Or is the nature of reverence changing? Will memes and the Internet inherently influence the trajectory of notions of honor in America? Perhaps becoming young adults in the era of national moral anxiety that was the 2000s had raised doubt among Late Millennials that the United States is inherently good, on the right side, and destined to overcome. Beliefs like these become excuses for depravities – like the abuse at Abu Gharib and interrogation tactics of torture – that the United States would condemn in any other nation, as if America’s fictional fate of greatness washed away every sin. Is it possible for us to believe ourselves a noble nation without relying on a sacred destiny?

Moving forward, what may need to change are the symbols that bring Americans together. It seems, from readings these memes, that Late Millennials have tired of being united as either victims or avengers under the shadow of 9/11. New stories must be told, new icons put into place, new myths forged for there to be cohesion in a changing America. In the midst of the Vietnam War, Robert Bellah worried of the United States equating bloodshed with honor, equating “on our side” with “free”; he posited that a coherent vision of America’s role in the world would precipitate a new set of symbols.165 Had we attained this before 9/11? Can we attain it now? Must the worldview precede the symbols, or could the symbols inform our vision?

165 Robert Bellah, “Civil Religion in America.”
There is something both liberating and deeply sad about the prospect of a trivialized 9/11: it is both freedom from the grip of anger and fear, and the hollowing of a day of unspeakable pain and untold bravery. The horrific acts of Al-Qaeda terrorists cannot be ignored, nor can the heroism and poise of those who risked their lives to save others be forgotten—not unless we are to descend into callous nihilism. With that, I believe it is promising that Late Millennials are still wrestling with 9/11, that it has not completely ossified into a singular shape. Views may well mature over time, and perhaps this phase is needed to come to that coherency Bellah claims is possible.

Future studies of 9/11 memes in other fields would enrich this thesis and the scholarly understanding of this topic immensely. Sociologists might track down the actual meme-creators and conduct interviews to find the intentions behind their works—what are their backgrounds, their resources, their politics?; they might ask the consumers what they thought when they saw them, if they can articulate their reasons for laughing; they might then compare this experience to older Internet users who lack the meme-makers’ vocabulary and disposition. Other scholars in American Studies would be well-equipped to find other texts that speak to changing ideas about reverence and sanctity in the American mindset. Are there other areas where Late Millennials budding brand of patriotism and perspective on American history manifest? Is this very thesis telling of that perspective?

It may be impossible for all Americans to feel compelled by collective national myths, included in iconic representations, or inspired by our history; nonetheless, it is worth searching for these uniting symbols, common grounds. For these reasons, we need the mythologist: one who sees the overlooked, deciphers its message, and debunks it. To be more conscious of our myths, to know they are not natural, might be the key to knowing that what divides us can be
overcome. If I have one piece of advice, it is this: listen to the memes, to the detergent, to the comic-books, and to the wine – and then listen harder.
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APPENDIX

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3
Figure 5

ICE FIRE CAN'T MELT
ICE BEAMS

Figure 6

September 11th

Bush's Response: I have chosen now to live as a gay man.
"This generation can't take a joke"

Our entire generation laughs at fucking internet memes all day long we just don't like racist jokes

2:24 AM - Aug 22, 2015

79.9K 78.3K people are talking about this

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=drWs-9u7sG8
Figure 9

Remastered photos from 9-11

Figure 10

When you can cover up 9/11, but not yourself.
Figure 15

Never Forgetti

Figure 16

DON'T GET MAD... GET EVEN.
Figure 17
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NsKaCS3CtsY

Figure 19