Kill All Normies

The online culture wars from Tumblr and 4chan to the alt-right and Trump

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Introduction

From Hope to Harambe

In the lead-up to the election of Barak Obama in 2008, his message of hope was publicly and with great earnestness shared by vast numbers of liberals online, eager to show their love for the first black president, ecstatic to be part of what felt like a positive mass-cultural moment. After George W. Bush, who had waged wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and embarrassed educated people with his Southern style, and his regular gaffs and grammatical mistakes or ‘Bushisms’, the feeling of shame among US liberals was captured at the time by books like Michael Moore’s *Stupid White Men*.

In stark contrast Obama was articulate, sophisticated, erudite and cosmopolitan. In the media spectacle of his election Oprah cried, Beyoncé sang and crowds of young, adoring fans rejoiced. Even some of the icy hearts of those significantly to the left of the Democratic Party were temporarily melted in what felt like a mass outpouring of positivity and hope, an egalitarian dream realized.

Hillary Clinton tried to repeat this formula in 2016 by dancing on *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, drafting in Beyoncé once again, assuring listeners of her penchant for hot sauce and attracting feminist celebrities like Lena Dunham with the ‘I’m With Her’ slogan. However, instead, she became a source of comedy and ridicule among large online audiences from right across the political spectrum. When she solemnly condemned a new Internet age right-wing movement as part of Trump’s ‘basket of deplorables’, the massed online ranks of the target of her comments collectively erupted in memes, mockery and celebration.
How did we get from those earnest hopeful days broadcast across the media mainstream to where we are now? This book covers this period from the perspective of Internet-culture and subcultures, tracing the online culture wars that have raged on below the line and below the radar of mainstream media throughout the period over feminism, sexuality, gender identity, racism, free speech and political correctness. This was unlike the culture wars of the 60s or the 90s, in which a typically older age cohort of moral and cultural conservatives fought against a tide of cultural secularization and liberalism among the young. This online backlash was able to mobilize a strange vanguard of teenage gamers, pseudonymous swastika-posting anime lovers, ironic *South Park* conservatives, anti-feminist pranksters, nerdish harassers and meme-making trolls whose dark humor and love of transgression for its own sake made it hard to know what political views were genuinely held and what were merely, as they used to say, for the lulz. What seemed to hold them all together in their obscurity was a love of mocking the earnestness and moral self-flattery of what felt like a tired liberal intellectual conformity running right through from establishment liberal politics to the more militant enforcers of new sensitivities from the wackiest corners of Tumblr to campus politics.

Through this period we can also see the death of what remained of a mass culture sensibility, in which there was still a mainstream media arena and a mainstream sense of culture and the public. The triumph of the Trumpians was also a win in the war against this mainstream media, which is now held in contempt by many average voters and the weird irony-laden Internet subcultures from right and left, who equally set themselves apart from this hated mainstream. It is a career disaster now to signal your left-behind cluelessness as a basic bitch, a normie or a member of the corrupt media mainstream in any way. Instead, we see online the emergence of a new kind of anti-establishment sensibility expressing itself in the kind of DIY culture of memes and user-generated content that cyberutopian true believers have evangelized about for many years but had not imagined taking on this particular political form.

Compare the first election won by Obama, in which social media devotees reproduced the iconic but official blue-and-red stylized stencil portrait of the new president with HOPE printed across the bottom, a portrait created by artist Shepard Fairey and approved by the official Obama campaign, to the bursting forth of irreverent mainstream-baffling meme culture during the last race, in which the Bernie’s Dank Meme Stash Facebook page and The Donald subreddit defined the tone of the race for a young and newly politicized generation, with the mainstream media desperately trying to catch up with a subcultural in-joke style to suit two emergent anti-establishment waves of the right and left. Writers like Manuel Castells and numerous commentators in the *Wired* magazine milieu told us of the coming of a networked society, in which old hierarchical models of business and culture would be replaced by the wisdom of crowds, the swarm, the hive mind, citizen journalism and user-generated content. They got their wish, but it’s not quite the utopian vision they were hoping for.

As old media dies, gatekeepers of cultural sensibilities and etiquette have been overthrown, notions of popular taste maintained by a small creative class are now perpetually outpaced by viral online content from obscure sources, and culture industry consumers have been replaced by constantly online, instant content producers. The year 2016 may be remembered as the year the media mainstream’s hold over formal politics died. A thousand Trump Pepe memes bloomed and a strongman larger-than-life Twitter troll who showed open hostility to the mainstream media and to both party establishments took The White House without them.

One of the early significant moments of rupture in mainstream Internet-culture sensibilities was the viral Kony 2012 video.
can map a trajectory through the dominant styles from virtue to cynical inscrutable irony, roughly from *Kony 2012* to the Harambe meme explosion in 2016. The *Kony 2012* film’s purpose was to promote the charity campaign Stop Kony, which itself aimed to have the Ugandan militia leader Joseph Kony arrested by the end of 2012. The film received over 100 million views and went so viral that one poll suggested half of young adult Americans heard about it in the days following the video’s release, causing its website to crash. *TIME* magazine called it the most viral video ever made. On Facebook and Twitter, a vast audience of Western young people normally pretty indifferent to the activities of Ugandan war criminals shared the video, with urgent emotional exclamations attached, which we might now cynically call ‘virtue signaling’.

But then the video and the campaign started to come under criticism from Ugandans, experts on the region, and even their Head of State. Denunciations of the video began to pour in for its crass oversimplification, inaccuracy, emotional manipulation and ‘slacktivism’ – a now common pejorative also called ‘clicktivism’. A mass screening of the film in Uganda was met with jeering and hostility, as viewers were angered that the film was focused on the US filmmaker, while neglecting Kony’s victims. Western critics eager for shares of righteous approval rushed to expose the insufficient virtue of *Kony 2012* and its mainstream supporters.

Then, still at the height of the video’s viral fame, Jason Russell, the filmmaker, was arrested and detained for psychiatric evaluation after his public breakdown was filmed and released online. This became yet another viral video in which he could be seen outdoors naked and shouting, hitting the ground, masturbating and vandalizing cars.

At a dizzying pace, the Kony story had run a now familiar course from mainstream virtue to competitive virtue hot takes to disgrace to *Schadenfreude*, which would become a standard plot of dark online spectacles in the years that followed. Many of those who had shared the video in the spirit of global goodwill were sheepishly taking it down. Earnest, feel-good, easily shared concern had been replaced in a matter of days with the darkest side of the return of a more native, pre-monetized, anonymous Internet-culture – *Schadenfreude*, deep cynicism and the now unstoppable force of public humiliation as viral entertainment.

By 2016, after countless repeats of the *Kony 2012* cycle from virtue to disgrace, a spirit of deep nihilistic cynicism and reactive irony bubbled up to the surface of mainstream Internet-culture and an absurd in-jokey forum humor became dominant. When a gorilla named Harambe was shot dead at the Cincinnati Zoo that year after a child fell into his enclosure, the usual cycles of public displays of outrage online began as expected with inevitable competitive virtue signaling. At first, emotional and outraged people online blamed the child’s parents for the gorilla’s death, with some even petitioning to have the parents prosecuted for their neglect. But then a kind of giddy ironic mocking of the social media spectacle started to take over. The Harambe meme soon became the perfect parody of the sentimentality and absurd priorities of Western liberal performative politics and the online mass hysteria that often characterized it.

On the same day that a post about the incident reached the front page of Reddit news, a petition titled ‘Justice for Harambe’ was created on Change.org, which called for authorities to hold the child’s parents responsible for Harambe’s death, gaining hundreds of thousands of signatures. Soon, the mostly ironically used hashtags #JusticeForHarambe and #RIPHarambe began circulating. Song parodies with Harambe inserted into the lyrics were created, and the call to arms ‘Dicks Out For Harambe’ was quickly turned into a popular expression by comedian Brandon Wardell.

Harambe began appearing in tongue-in-cheek sentimental portraits of beloved celebrities who had died in 2016, like David
Bowie and Prince. One US high school student in a gorilla costume was filmed running along the sidelines at his school’s first football game of the season, dragging another student behind him like the little boy in the enclosure before Harambe was shot. The Zoo pleaded with the meme-makers to stop using Harambe hashtags, and bombarding them with tweets and messages. The memes spread to mainstream media, when a young man holding a ‘Bush Did Harambe’ sign, a reference also to the 9/11 ‘truther’ conspiracy, appeared on MSNBC live outside the Democratic National Convention.

Matt Christman from the podcast Chapo Trap House, itself a knowing product of contemporary irony-saturated online culture, unsentimentally but accurately summed it up saying: ‘the popularity of Harambe jokes proves that people want to laugh about murder but feel bad about it.’ Christman also noted on one podcast that Harambe mania really took off after the Orlando nightclub massacre in a gay club, carried out by a shooter pledging allegiance to ISIS.

Responding to highly mediated tragedies with insensitive pranking and irony had been a staple of online trolling cultures for many years before, but Harambe was the first case attracting such large numbers of people online wanting to get in on the in-joke. It went viral too, because it hit at a time when a particular style of humorless, self-righteous, right-on social media sentimentality had already reached such an absurd peak that the once obscure style of ironic cynical mockery also emerged into more mainstream Internet-culture as a counterforce.

Although it worked as a brilliantly absurd parody, and was embraced by ironists from left to right, what came to complicate the detached humor is that, as in so many other similar cases, it also allowed cover for genuinely sinister things to hide amid the maze of irony. For example, Harambe was referenced by harassers in the hate campaign led against Ghostbusters star Leslie Jones, with largely anonymous threats and comparisons of her to the gorilla. This barrage of abuse came her way after Milo Yiannopoulos, the English gay conservative turned alt-light celebrity, tweeted a series of insults at her and said, among other things, that she looked like ‘a black dude’. The harassment campaign against her for finding herself in Milo’s firing line led to, among other things, her website being hacked and nude photos of her being circulated online.

Given the Harambe meme became a favorite of alt-right abusers, was it then just old-fashioned racism dressed up as Internet-savvy satire, as it appealed most to those seeking to mock liberal sensitivities? Or was it a clever parody of the inane hysteria and faux-politics of liberal Internet-culture? Do those involved in such memes any longer know what motivated them and if they themselves are being ironic or not? Is it possible that they are both ironic parodists and earnest actors in a media phenomenon at the same time?

A hacker who goes by the Twitter handle @prom hacked into the account of Cincinnati Zoo director Thane Maynard tweeting #DicksOutForHarambe from his account. When asked about his motivations, though, he told the New York Daily News he was ‘not sure’ why he hacked Maynard’s account, saying: ‘At the time when it actually happened I was kinda angry at the dude who shot him.’

It was amid this ironical in-jokey maze of meaning that the online culture wars played out, that Trump got elected and that what we now call the alt-right came to prominence. Every bizarre event, new identity and strange subcultural behavior that baffles general audiences when they eventually make the mainstream media, from otherkin to far right Pepe memes, can be understood as a response to a response to a response, each one responding angrily to the existence of the other. Trumpian meme-makers ramped up their taboo-breaking anti-PC style in response to gender-bending Tumblr users, who themselves then became more sensitive, more convinced of the racism, misogyny
and hetero-normative oppression of the world outside of their online subcultures. At the same time, the ‘deplorables’, from the Trumpian trolls to the alt-right, view the Hillary loyalists – the entrenched identity politics of Tumblr and the intersectional anti-free speech campus left – as evidence of their – equally bleak view of a rapidly declining Western civilization, as both sides have become increasingly unmoored to any cultural mainstream, which scarcely resembles either bleak vision.

The once obscure call-out culture of the left emanating from Tumblr-style campus-based identity politics reached its peak during this period, in which everything from eating noodles to reading Shakespeare was declared ‘problematic’, and even the most mundane acts ‘misogynist’ and ‘white supremacist’. While taboo and anti-moral ideologies festered in the dark corners of the anonymous Internet, the de-anonymized social media platforms, where most young people now develop their political ideas for the first time, became a panopticon, in which the many lived in fear of observation from the eagle eye of an offended organizer of public shaming. At the height of its power, the dreaded call-out, no matter how minor the transgression or how well intentioned the transgressor, could ruin your reputation, your job or your life. The particular incarnations of the online left and right that exist today are undoubtedly a product of this strange period of ultra puritanism. These obscure online political beginnings became formative for a whole generation, and impacted mainstream sensibilities and even language.

The hysterical liberal call-out produced a breeding ground for an online backlash of irreverent mockery and anti-PC, typified by charismatic figures like Milo. But after crying wolf throughout these years, calling everyone from saccharine pop stars to Justin Trudeau a ‘white supremacist’ and everyone who wasn’t With Her a sexist, the real wolf eventually arrived, in the form of the openly white nationalist alt-right who hid among an online army of ironic in-jokey trolls. When this happened, nobody knew who to take literally any more, including many of those in the middle of this new online far right themselves. The alt-light figures that became celebrities during this period made their careers exposing the absurdities of online identity politics and the culture of lightly thrown claims of misogyny, racism, ableism, fatphobia, transphobia and so on. However, offline, only one side saw their guy take the office of US president and only one side has in their midst faux-ironic Sieg Heil saluting, open white segregationists and genuinely hate-filled, occasionally murderous, misogynists and racists.

Before the overtly racist alt-right were widely known, the more mainstream alt-light largely flattered it, gave it glowing write-ups in Breitbart and elsewhere, had its spokespeople on their YouTube shows and promoted it on social media. Nevertheless, when Milo’s sudden career implosion happened later they didn’t return the favor, which I think may be setting a precedent for a future in which the playfully transgressive alt-light unwittingly play the useful idiots for those with much more serious political aims. If this dark, anti-Semitic, race segregationist ideology grows in the coming years, with their vision of the future that would necessitate violence, those who made the right attractive will have to take responsibility for having played their role.

This book is an attempt to map the online culture wars that formed the political sensibilities of a generation, to understand and to keep an account of the online battles that may otherwise be forgotten but have nevertheless shaped culture and ideas in a profound way from tiny obscure subcultural beginnings to mainstream public and political life in recent years. It will place contemporary culture wars in some historical context and attempt to untangle the real from the performance, the material from the abstract and the ironic from the faux-ironic, if such a thing is any longer possible.
Chapter One

The leaderless digital counter-revolution

It is worth thinking back now to the early 2010s, when cyberutopianism had its biggest resurgence since the 90s, before the dot-com bubble burst. This time it emerged in response to a series of political events around the world from the Arab Spring to the Occupy movement to new politicized hacker movements. Anonymous, Wikileaks and public-square mass protests in Spain and across the Middle East were getting huge coverage in the news, causing a flurry of opinion and analysis pieces about their profound significance. All of these events were being attributed to the rise of social media and characterized as a new leaderless form of digital revolution. The hyperbole and hubris of the moment should have been enough to make anyone skeptical, but most on the left were swept up in the excitement as images of vast crowds in public squares appeared on social media and then in the mainstream media.

Books, social media and countless gushing columns and blogs celebrated the arrival of what cyberutopians of the early Internet had long prophesized. To pick one typical example of the tone at the time, in Heather Brooke’s paean *The Revolution Will be Digitized: Dispatches from the information war* she claimed, ‘Technology is breaking down traditional social barriers of status, class, power, wealth and geography, replacing them with an ethos of collaboration and transparency.’ *Adbusters*, the Canadian anti-consumerist magazine, published a widely shared article by Manuel Castells called ‘The Disgust Becomes a Network’ when leaderless encampments, organized online, started to appear in Spain and around the world. He argued that what he had been writing about for most his career – the networked society – had taken a radical new form. BBC journalist Paul Mason wrote *Why It’s Kicking Off Everywhere*, documenting the revolutionaries in Tahrir Square, the Iranian ‘Twitter revolution’ and the heavily hashtagged Occupy Wall Street protests that spread around the world.

But this fervor died down in just a few short years. The Egyptian revolution led to something worse – the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood. Islamists ran riot in the streets and stories of rapes in the very public square that had shortly before held so much hope came to light. Soon the military dictatorship swept back into power. The Occupy Wall Street demonstrators remained literally aimless and were eventually forced out of public property by police, camp by camp. By the end of 2013, a public-square style movement took place in Ukraine, which started with many of the same scenes of romanticized people-power in the public square. However this time the leaderless network narrative, which was already starting to look a little less convincing, was left aside because the protests quickly erupted into fascist mob rule.

In many of the events that were considered part of the leaderless digital revolution narrative, like Occupy Wall Street and the public-square protests in Spain, in which thousands occupied the Puerta del Sol, the Guy Fawkes mask was adopted as a central symbol. But the online origins of the mask and the politically fungible sensibilities that can be traced back through the mask should have offered a clue that another very different variety of leaderless online movement had potential to brew.

After the election of Trump, everyone wanted to know about a new online right-wing movement whose memetic aesthetics seemed to have infiltrated sites from the popular The Donald subreddit to mainstream Internet-culture. In the lead-up to the election, the most famous common imagery was of Pepe the Frog. The name given by the press to this mix of rightist online phenomena including everything from Milo to 4chan to neo-Nazi sites was the ‘alt-right’. In its strictest definition though, as an
army of Internet pedants quickly pointed out, the alt-right term was used in its own online circles to include only a new wave of overtly white segregationist and white nationalist movements and subcultures, typified by spokespeople like Richard Spencer, who has called for a US white ethno-state and a pan-national white Empire modeled on some approximation of the Roman Empire. The movement’s media also includes Scottish video blogger Millennial Woes, Red Ice, sites like Radix and the long-form and book publishers Counter Currents.

In the broader orbit of the alt-right, made up of often warring and sectarian factions, there is an older generation of white advocates who pre-date the alt-right but who the alt-right reads and draws influence from, like Jared Taylor from the site American Renaissance who refers to himself as a ‘race realist’ and figures like Kevin B. MacDonald, editor of Occidental Observer, described by the Anti-Defamation League as a primary voice of anti-Semitism for far-right intellectuals. The alt-right is, to varying degrees, preoccupied with IQ, European demographic and civilizational decline, cultural decadence, cultural Marxism, anti-egalitarianism and Islamification but most importantly, as the name suggests, with creating an alternative to the right-wing conservative establishment, who they dismiss as ‘cuckservatives’ for their soft Christian passivity and for metaphorically cuckholding their womenfolk/nation/race to the non-white foreign invader.

Then there is a range of more obscure rightist anti-egalitarian reactionary tendencies like the earlier neoreaction movement or NRx, which includes thinkers and bloggers like Mencius Moldbug and Nick Land, creators of the influential ideas of ‘the Cathedral’ and the latter the ‘Dark Enlightenment’. The idea of the Cathedral closely resembles Marxian critical theory’s understanding of ideology, as an all-encompassing system and prison of the mind. The Dark Enlightenment is an ironic play on the idea of the Enlightenment, based on a suspicion of progress and rejecting the liberal paradigm. Among all of these thinkers Land is the greatest misfit, once closer to the radical left-oriented Accelerationist school of thought and still a highly idiosyncratic thinker, he is not so easily categorized. Within the radical right libertarian pro-tech tendency, common preoccupations include Bitcoin, Seasteading – Peter Thiel’s idea to create a separate state off the coast of the US – and rightist elite applications of transhumanism.

But of course what we call the alt-right today could never have had any connection to the mainstream and to a new generation of young people if it only came in the form of lengthy treatises on obscure blogs. It was the image- and humor-based culture of the irreverent meme factory of 4chan and later 8chan that gave the alt-right its youthful energy, with its transgression and hacker tactics. The Guy Fawkes mask used in the protests in 2011 was a reference to Anonymous, which took its name, leaderless anti-celebrity ethic and networked style from the chaotic anonymous style of 4chan. V for Vendetta, which the Guy Fawkes mask is taken from, and the ‘dark age of comic books’ influenced the aesthetic sensibilities of this broad online culture.

While commentators praised the rejection of the right-left divide among a new wave of Internet-centric protest in the early 2010s, the political rootlessness of this networked, leaderless Internet-centric politics now seems a little less worthy of uncritical celebration. Anonymous activities have over the years leaned incoherently to the libertarian left and right, and everything in between, singling out everyone from Justin Bieber fans to feminists, fascists, cybersecurity specialists, and engaged in the kind of pervert-exposing vigilantism that blue-collar tabloid readers have long been mocked for.

To understand the seemingly contradictory politics of 4chan, Anonymous and its relationship to the alt-right, it is important to remember that the gradual right-wing turn in chan culture centered around the politics board /pol/, as compared to the
less overtly political but always extreme ‘random’ board /b/. Along the way left-leaning ‘moral fags’ who had gravitated towards AnonOps IRCs suffered from a degree of state spying and repression during the height of Anonymous’s public profile from around 2010 to 2012. This absence of the more libertarian left-leaning element within chan culture created a vacuum in the image boards that the rightist side of the culture was able to fill with their expert style of anti-PC shock humor memes.

4chan began with users sharing Japanese anime, created by a teenage Chris Poole (aka moot) and based on the anime-sharing site 2chan. Poole’s main influence for the style of the site was inspired by a Something Awful subforum known as the Anime Death Tentacle Rape Whorehouse. It was set up in October 2003 and by 2011, it grew to around 750 million page views a month. New users were called newfags and older users oldfags. It became a massively influential and creative forum known for pranks, memes and images that ‘cannot be unseen’. The culture of the site was not only deeply and shockingly misogynist, but also self-deprecating in its own self-mockery of nerdish ‘beta’ male identity. Cultural touchstones included war-based video games and films like *Fight Club* and *The Matrix*. There was no registration or login required, so posts were typically all under the username ‘Anonymous’.

This culture of anonymity fostered an environment where the users went to air their darkest thoughts. Weird pornography, in-jokes, nerdish argot, gory images, suicidal, murderous and incestuous thoughts, racism and misogyny were characteristic of the environment created by this strange virtual experiment, but it was mostly funny memes. Poole has called 4chan a ‘meme factory’ and it undoubtedly created countless memes that made their way into mainstream Internet-culture. The most famous early examples of these were probably LOLcats, a cat-picture based style of image macro, and rickrolling, the use of a link to seemingly serious content that sends its user to a video of Rick Astley singing *Never Gonna Give You Up*.

The users of 4chan/b/ acted collectively on things like making Chris Poole person of the year in *Time* magazine’s online poll in 2008 and the collective cyber bullying of a random 11-year-old, Jessie Slaughter, in 2010. They got hold of her name and address, harassed her and encouraged her to commit suicide after she made a silly video of herself speaking in gangsta-rap style. Her situation was, unsurprisingly, not improved by her father posting a video in defence of his upset daughter, in which he threatened to call the ‘cyberpolice’ – in their emotionally underdeveloped way, lack of Internet-culture knowledge is always license on 4chan for any level of cruelty. They also acted collectively on less sinister pranks like Operation Birthday Boy, when an elderly man posted an online ad saying: ‘people wanted for birthday party’. Touched by the lonely old man’s appeal, they found his name, address and phone number, and sent him hundreds of birthday cards, orders of cake and strippers.

In the *New York Times*, Mattathias Schwartz described 4chan/b/ like this:

> The anonymous denizens of 4chan’s other boards — devoted to travel, fitness and several genres of pornography — refer to the /b/-dwellers as “/b/tards.” Measured in terms of depravity, insularity and traffic-driven turnover, the culture of /b/ has little precedent. /b/ reads like the inside of a high-school bathroom stall, or an obscene telephone party line, or a blog with no posts and all comments filled with slang that you are too old to understand.

A common reference on the alt-right ‘kek’ started on 4chan and translated to ‘lol’ in comment boards on the multiplayer videogame *World of Warcraft*, while Pepe the Frog, originating in Matt Furie’s Web comic *Boy’s Club*, epitomizes online in-joke meme humor. Kek is also an ancient Egyptian deity represented
as a frog-headed man while 'the Church of Kek' and 'praise Kek' refer to their ironic religion.

One of the things that linked the often nihilistic and ironic chan culture to a wider culture of the alt-right orbit was their opposition to political correctness, feminism, multiculturalism, etc., and its encroachment into their freewheeling world of anonymity and tech. In the US, one of the early cases of orchestrated attacks against such encroaching women was aimed at Kathy Sierra, a tech blogger and journalist. Sierra had been the keynote speaker at South by Southwest Interactive and her books were top sellers. The backlash against her was sparked when she supported a call to moderate reader comments, which at the time was seen as undermining the libertarian hacker ethic of absolute Internet freedom, although it has since become standard. Commenters on her blog began harassing and threatening her en masse, making the now routine rape and death threats received by women like Sierra. Personal details about her family and home address were posted online and hateful responses included photoshopped images of her with a noose beside her head, a shooting target pointed at her face and a creepy image of her being gagged with women's underwear. The personalized backlash against her was so extreme that she felt she had to close down her blog and withdraw from speaking engagements. When she explained on her blog why she had to step back from public life, writing that she was terrified that her stalkers might go through with their threats, it sparked a whole new wave of geek hatred against her.

Andrew Auernheimer (aka weev), a now well-known hacker and troll, seems to have been heavily involved in the attacks against Sierra, spreading false information online about her being a battered wife and a former prostitute. In 2009, weev claimed to have hacked into Amazon's system and reclassified books about homosexuality as porn. Once a part of the Occupy movement, he now regularly posts anti-Semitic and anti-gay rants on YouTube, has a swastika tattoo on his chest and was also the self-appointed president of a trolling initiative called the Gay Nigger Association of America. This was dedicated to opposing popular blogging and other mainstream activities, thought to be destroying authentic Internet-culture. Sierra has commented on how things have progressed: 'What happened to me pales in comparison to what’s happening to women online today... I thought things would get better. Mostly, it’s just gotten worse.'

Although online spaces and comment sections had started to develop a shocking level of woman-hatred years before, one of the early mainstream discussions of online misogynist extremism was sparked when Helen Lewis interviewed feminist writers in the New Statesman, who brought to light some of what they experienced. Feminist blogger and activist Cath Elliot wrote:

If I'd been trying to keep a tally I would have lost count by now of the number of abusive comments I've received since I first started writing online back in 2007. And by abusive I don't mean comments that disagree with whatever I've written - I came up through the trade union movement don't forget, and I've worked in a men's prison, so I'm not some delicate flower who can't handle a bit of banter or heated debate - no, I'm talking about personal, usually sexualised abuse, the sort that on more than one occasion now has made me stop and wonder if what I'm doing is actually worth it. [...] I read about how I'm apparently too ugly for any man to want to rape, or I read graphic descriptions detailing precisely how certain implements should be shoved into one or more of my various orifices.

Feminist blogger Dawn Foster wrote:

The worst instance of online abuse I've encountered happened when I blogged about the Julian Assange extradition case. [...] Initially it was shocking: in the space of a week, I received a
rabid email that included my home address, phone number and workplace address, included as a kind of threat. Then, after tweeting that I'd been waiting for a night bus for ages, someone replied that they hoped I'd get raped at the bus stop.

Feminist sex writer Petra Davis later wrote:

When I started getting letters at my flat, I reported them to the police, but they advised me to stop writing provocative material. Eventually, I was sent an email directing me to a website advertising my services as a sex worker, with my address on the front page under the legend ‘fuck her till she screams, filth whore, rape me all night cut me open’, and some images of sexually mutilated women. It was very strange, sitting quietly in front of my screen looking at those images, knowing that the violence done to these other women was intended as a lesson... Of course, it didn’t take long to take the site down, but by then I was thoroughly sick of the idea and more or less stopped writing about sex from any perspective.

Significant here is yet another cross-pollinating section of the broader alt-right milieu - masculinist and neomasculinist anti-feminist online subcultures. These are typically concerned with the decline of Western masculinity and some advocate things like the male separatism of Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW), while others advise a more aggressive style of social-Darwinian informed pick-up artistry to ‘game’ the human system. But it was really the broadest orbit of the alt-right, which became known as the alt-light, that popularized this new diffuse and chaotic online set of cross-pollinating subcultures and helped bring it into the mainstream. These included social media celebrity figures like Milo, Twitter and blogging stars like Mike Cernovich, who wrote the male assertiveness guide Gorilla Mindset, former Vice editor

The leaderless digital counter-revolution

Gavin McInnes, and a host of Pepe meme-making gamers and 4chan-style shitposters, who had little in the way of a coherent commitment to conservative thought or politics but shared an anti-PC impulse and a common aesthetic sensibility. What we now call the alt-right is really this collection of lots of separate tendencies that grew semi-independently but which were joined under the banner of a bursting forth of anti-PC cultural politics through the culture wars of recent years. The irreverent trolling style associated with 4chan grew in popularity in response to the expanding identity politics of more feminine spaces like Tumblr. This, itself, spilled over eventually into ‘real life’ in the ramping up of campus politics around safe spaces and trigger warnings, ‘gamergate’ and many other battles.

One can feel the life draining out of the body at the thought of retelling or rereading the story of the gamergate controversy, one which involved internal controversies, hit pieces, hate campaigns, splits and a level of sustained high emotion more fitting for a response to a genocide than a spat over videogames. But for the sake of introduction here is a synopsis, which will undoubtedly satisfy neither side. In the lead-up to the gamergate controversy, feminist games critic Anita Sarkeesian found herself at the receiving end of a hate campaign like the Sierra case, but this time involving hundreds of thousands of participants and a level of vitriol utterly baffling to those outside of the gaming world, which lasted for several years. Her offence was creating a series of YouTube videos introducing viewers to some elementary concepts from feminist media criticism in an accessible and pretty mild-mannered style. Her level of criticism, as a self-identified games fan and someone who sought to reform rather than censor games, would be considered quite normal in literary or film criticism. These other audiences and critics are used to debate and to a relatively civilized adult kind of discourse, in which one can describe an old Hollywood classic as sexist without doubting its aesthetic value and one can
disagree without going straight to the rape and death threats. Her videos feature no calls for video games to be censored or banned. They also offer no criticisms more harsh than what you might read from other pop-culture critics like Charlie Brooker or Mark Kermode on some very obviously retrograde depictions of women in some video games.

For this intolerable crime, Sarkeesian has endured years of jaw-droppingly dark and disturbing personal abuse. Typical online commentary has included things like: 'I'll rape you and put your head on a stick', 'It would be funny if five guys raped her right now', 'I violently masturbate to your face' and the old 4chan standard 'Tits or get the fuck out'. Her Wikipedia page was vandalized with pornographic images and hateful messages. There was also a campaign to mass report all of her social media accounts as spam, fraud or even terrorism. Attempts were made to hack her website through a distributed denial of service (DDoS) attack and to hack into her email. Pornographic images of her being raped by video game characters were created and one offended male gamer even created a video game in which players could punch Anita's face until it was bloodied and bruised, and her eyes blackened and swollen. If you look up Anita today on YouTube you'll find countless videos devoted to hating her and obsessively trying to destroy her reputation and career. This was largely based on the fact that she ran a Kickstarter campaign that made more money than initially planned precisely because of the harassment. All of this was done, remember, to prove that sexism was definitely not, as she had so outrageously claimed, an issue in the 'gaming community'.

Tactics such as DDoS and doxxing (exposing the person's personal details to enable their mass harassment) used by 4chan and originating in Usenet culture became central to attacks on Anita. Games marketed to the anti-feminist gamergate audience were more likely to aestheticize war, violence and technology, while in the years preceding gamergate, the market for games directed at women had grown. This was especially so with games like Candy Crush, aimed at teenage girls who don't know what World of Warcraft is and which obviously offended those who considered themselves real gamers. Gamergate itself kicked off when Zoe Quinn created a video game called Depression Quest, which even to a non-gamer like me looked like a terrible game featuring many of the fragility and mental illness-fetishizing characteristics of the kind of feminism that has emerged online in recent years. It was the kind of game, about depression, that would have worked as a perfect parody of everything the gamergaters hated about SJWs (social justice warriors).

Nevertheless, her dreadful game got positive reviews from politically sympathetic indie games journalists, which turned into a kind of catalyst for the whole gamergate saga. It was understood to be either a war over ethics in games journalism or an excuse to attack feminists and women entering the gamer world, depending on whom you ask. First, let me be clear on my own position on gaming. If you're an adult, I think you should probably be investing your emotional energies elsewhere. And that includes feminist gaming, which has always struck me as being about as appealing as feminist porn; in other words, not at all. However, anyone with some grasp on the basic norms of human conduct will still be able to see why the fallout was utterly unhinged based on Quinn's bad game, other cases of alleged biased reviews and what was no doubt an ideological project to change gaming to make some of it more feminist-friendly. It became possibly the biggest flame war in the history of the Internet so far, an overreaction on a grand scale, in which everyone accused everyone else of lying and malicious intent.

Eron Gjoni, Quinn's ex-boyfriend, posted on forums that she had cheated on him, setting off a wave of attacks on her in which she claims her haters began sending revenge porn to her
family and employers, and trying to hack her accounts. Quinn was, needless to say, threatened with rape and death, and was doxxed. They then attacked a series of feminist gamers and games critics, who waded in, including Brianna Wu, Felicia Day and Jennifer Allaway. In each case there are countless conflicting accounts about the nature of threats and attacks, but even taking the uncontroversial ones alone, it is fair to say they did receive a level of abuse that in the pre-Internet days were reserved for few other than child murderers. This got so out of hand that even the founder of 4chan and champion of the anonymous Internet, moot, banned gamergate talk from 4chan, eventually causing him to leave the site, and the gamergaters moved to the more lawless 8chan.

Quinn found and recorded some of the conversations that took place on a 4chan IRC called ‘burgersandfries’, in which users conspired to destroy her career using the most extreme misogynist language and motivations. In this chat, they express their hatred and disgust towards her, and their glee at the thought of ruining her career. They also expressed fantasies about her being raped and killed. They hoped all the harassment would drive her to suicide and only the thought of 4chan getting bad publicity in response convinced some of them that this isn’t something they should hope for. They distributed falsified nude pictures of her, posting links to online archives of them and sending them to Quinn’s supporters. They attempted to dig up information about her family and to track down anyone with links to her. One found a picture of Quinn at age 13 and posted a link to it. So committed were they to ethics in games journalism that in this discussion they discuss Quinn’s vagina as ‘wide’, large enough to ‘fit 12 dicks at once’ and ‘a festering cheese-filled vagina’ that leaves ‘a trail of cunt slime’ wherever she goes and then speculated about its smell.

Jenn Frank, an award-winning freelance games journalist, wrote an article entitled ‘How to attack a woman who works

in video gaming’ for The Guardian that looked at on-going harassment. It outlined the ways in which trolls were harming women who work in the male-dominated field:

... someone recently and bafflingly tried to hack into my email and phone contacts. This is all very frightening to write, and so I must disclose that I am biased, insofar as I am terrified. I have worked in this industry for most of the last nine – not always perfect – years and I have never professed to be a perfect person. However, my values, my belief that abuse must not, cannot become ‘normal’, ‘acceptable’ or ‘expected’ is at odds with oh, God, please, why are they doing this, what’s the point, don’t let it be me, don’t let it be me. My unabashed love for video games, my colleagues and my work have a conflict of interest with my own terror.

Games writer Jennifer Hepler also came under attacks, in which she claims to have been sent hundreds of abusive messages on Twitter, calling her things like an ‘obese cunt’ and threatening her. Feminist gamers complained that games writer Felicia Day was publicly dismissed as a ‘booth babe’ by a male games journalist. Games designer Patricia Hernandez drew the mention of 4chan, when she called it a ‘cathedral of misogyny’. Encyclopedia Dramatica has a permanent entry for the memes 4chan created inspired by her comment, where she is described as:

A fat, wetback ‘game journalist’ with sausage fingers and a chin like Jay Leno who works for Kotaku, a gaming gossip site infamous for allowing game designers to sleep with its columnists for good reviews and publicity. Patricia is a noted lesbian and feminazi who follows in Kotaku’s proud tradition of writing countless articles about how various games either promote rape or literally rape their female players. Another
staple of Kotaku ‘journalism’ she takes part in is nepotism, which explains why every other article to come from her chubby hands is about her live-in girlfriend.

Without getting too far into the minutiae, and at this point it would be impossible to reach the end of all the various accusations of lies and contestations of how the mass event unfolded, the important feature of the furor here is the role it played in uniting different online groups and in spreading the tactics of chan culture to the broad online right. Gamergate brought gamers, rightist chan culture, anti-feminism and the online far right closer to mainstream discussion and it also politicized a broad group of young people, mostly boys, who organized tactics around the idea of fighting back against the culture war being waged by the cultural left. These included all kinds of people from critics of political correctness to those interested in the overreach of feminist cultural crusades. These brought in to the fold people like Christina Hoff Sommers, the classical liberal who started a video series called The Factual Feminist, which aimed to expose faulty statistics within feminism. Somewhere in the mix with the polite and light-hearted Sommers were also apolitical gamers, South Park conservatives, 4channers, hardline anti-feminists, and young people in the process of moving to the political far right without any of the moral baggage of conservatism. It also made Milo’s ill-fated career, as he used it to shoot to mainstream celebrity status. Ultimately, the gamergaters were correct in their perception that a revived feminist movement was trying to change the culture and this was the front, their beloved games, that they chose to fight back on. The battle has since moved on to different issues with increasingly higher stakes, but this was the galvanizing issue that drew up the battle lines of the culture wars for a younger online generation.

The culture of 4chan, Anonymous etc., in the pre-gamergate days of Occupy and Anonymous could have gone another way.

Long before this ‘geeks vs feminists’ battle, the libertarian left had its own pro-hacker, pro-computer geek, Internet-centric political tradition, which some in the early Anonymous milieu obviously drew influence from. Hakim Bey’s idea of the temporary autonomous zone was based on what he called ‘pirate utopias’ and he argued that the attempt to form a permanent culture or politics inevitably deteriorates into a structured system that stifles individual creativity. His language and ideas influenced anarchism and later, online cultures that advocated illegal downloading, anonymity, hacking and experiments like bitcoin. Echoes of John Perry Barlow’s manifesto ‘A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace’ can be seen in this earlier period of Anon culture and in analyses that reflect a more radical horizontalist politics, like Gabriella Coleman’s work. Barlow was one of the founders of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, anarchist hackers and defenders of an Internet free of state intervention, capitalist control and monopolizing of the online world. In a similar style to the rhetoric of 4chan and Anonymous (‘we are legion’), it warned:

Governments of the Industrial World, you weary giants of flesh and steel, I come from Cyberspace, the home of Mind. On behalf of the future I ask you of the past to leave us alone. You are not welcome among us. You have no sovereignty where we gather.

Instead, this leaderless anonymous online culture ended up becoming characterized by a particularly dark preoccupation with thwarted or failed white Western masculinity as a grand metaphor, which has had some ‘real-life’ manifestations. On 4chan a post, dated October 1, 2015, read:

The first of our kind has struck fear into the hearts of America... This is only the beginning. The Beta Rebellion
Kill All Normies

has begun. Soon, more of our brothers will take up arms to become martyrs to this revolution.

The dramatic and knowingly cinematic tone was typical of the online style that hides itself from interpretation through a postmodern tonal distance, so that if any normie were to interpret it literally they would be laughed at. But in this case it was referring to the real news that a young man named Chris Harper-Mercer had killed nine classmates and injured nine others before shooting himself at Umpqua Community College in Roseburg, Oregon. The night before the shooting, a post on 4chan's /r9k/ board warned fellow commenters from the Northwestern United States to steer clear of school that day. The first responder in the thread asked: 'Is the beta uprising finally going down?' while others encouraged the anonymous poster and gave him tips on how to conduct a mass shooting.

In 2014, an anonymous 4chan user submitted several photos of what appeared to be a woman's naked and strangled corpse, along with a confession:

Turns out it's way harder to strangle someone to death than it looks on the movies... Her son will be home from school soon. He'll find her then call the cops. I just wanted to share the pics before they find me. I bought a bb gun that looks realistic enough. When they come, I'll pull it and it will be suicide by cop. I understand the doubts. Just check the fucking news. I have to lose my phone now.

Police later announced that the victim, Amber Lynn Coplin, was the woman in the photo. Her boyfriend, David Michael Kalac, was arrested after a brief police chase and charged with murder.

If further proof that the anti-PC taboo-breaking culture of 4chan is not just ‘for the lulz’ is needed, after the November 2015 shooting of five Black Lives Matter protesters in Minneapolis, a video emerged of two of the men involved, wearing balaclavas and driving to a Black Lives Matter protest, saying: ‘We just wanted to give everyone a heads up on /pol/... Stay white.’

Just a few years ago the left-cyberutopians claimed that ‘the disgust had become a network’ and that establishment old media could no longer control politics, that the new public sphere was going to be based on leaderless user-generated social media. This network has indeed arrived, but it has helped to take the right, not the left, to power. Those on the left who fetishized the spontaneous leaderless Internet-centric network, declaring all other forms of doing politics old hat, failed to realize that the leaderless form actually told us little about the philosophical, moral or conceptual content of the movements involved. Into the vacuum of ‘leaderlessness’ almost anything could appear. No matter how networked, ‘transgressive’, social media savvy or non-hierarchical a movement may be, it is the content of its ideas that matter just as much as at any point in history, as Evgeny Morozov cautioned at the time. The online environment has undoubtedly allowed fringe ideas and movements to grow rapidly in influence and while these were left leaning it was tempting for politically sympathetic commentators to see it as a shiny new seductive shortcut to transcending our ‘end of history’. What we’ve since witnessed instead is that this leaderless formation can express just about any ideology even, strange as it may seem, that of the far right.
Chapter Two

The online politics of transgression

Transgression has been embraced as a virtue within Western social liberalism ever since the 60s, typically applied today as it is in bell hooks' *Teaching to Transgress*. So elevated has the virtue of transgression become in the criticism of art, argued Kieran Cashell, that contemporary art critics have been faced with a challenge: 'either support transgression unconditionally or condemn the tendency and risk obsolescence amid suspicions of critical conservatism' as the great art critic Robert Hughes often was. But, Cashell wrote, on the value placed upon transgression in contemporary art: 'In the pursuit of the irrational, art has become negative, nasty and nihilistic.' Literary critic Anthony Julius has also noted the resulting 'unreflective contemporary endorsement of the transgressive'.

Those who claim that the new right-wing sensibility online today is just more of the same old right, undeserving of attention or differentiation, are wrong. Although it is constantly changing, in this important early stage of its appeal, its ability to assume the aesthetics of counterculture, transgression and nonconformity tells us many things about the nature of its appeal and about the liberal establishment it defines itself against. It has more in common with the 1968 left's slogan 'It is forbidden to forbid!' than it does with anything most recognize as part of any traditionalist right. Instead of interpreting it as part of other right-wing movements, conservative or libertarian, I would argue that the style being channelled by the Pepe meme-posting trolls and online transgressives follows a tradition that can be traced from the eighteenth-century writings of the Marquis de Sade, surviving through to the nineteen-century Parisian avant-garde, the Surrealists, the rebel rejection of feminized conformity of post-war America and then to what film critics called 1990s 'male rampage films' like *American Psycho* and *Fight Club*.

Milo's favorite description of the unifying 'troll-y' sensibility across the new wave of the online right is 'transgressive'. Ever the unconvinced conservative, he would often say things like, 'the best sex is dangerous, transgressive, dirty' and that conservatism is the 'new punk' because it's 'transgressive, subversive, fun'. He regularly makes the comparison between punk and the alt-right, and obviously he's using the term in the broadest possible way. The ease with which this broader alt-right and alt-light milieu can use transgressive styles today shows how superficial and historically accidental it was that it ended up being in any way associated with the socialist left.

The use of the swastikas or Nazi flirtations as part of a performance certainly has precedents. Joy Division, whose singer Ian Curtis was on the political right, named themselves after the Freitenabteilung, the name of the German camp brothels in WWII. In 1976, in the company of the Sex Pistols, Siouxsie Sioux was beaten up for wearing her swastika armband. Her intention was certainly to shock and offend, but few would argue that it was an earnest declaration of allegiance to Nazism. In post-WWII Britain, one can imagine the weight of the reverence toward the heroes who died fighting Nazism, and the suffering of many British citizens who lived through bombing raids and harsh years of economic austerity. At worst, the armband in this context can be seen as a brattish display of disrespect for its own sake. At best, it can be understood as a typically avant-garde style of transgressing taboos and as a two fingers to the post-WWII establishment, who would use the heroism of the dead to stifle and repress dissent against queen and country.

In an interview with Esquire, weev/Auernheimer, who has a swastika tattoo on his chest, explained his sensibility to the journalist:
I'm at a restaurant with Auernheimer and his friend Jaime Cochrane, who is a softly spoken transgender troll from the group Rustle League, so-called because 'that's what trolling is, it's rustling people's jimmies'. They're explaining to me their version of what trolls do. 'It's not bullying,' says Cochrane. 'It's satirical performance art.' Cyberbullies who drive teenagers to suicide have crossed the line. However, trolling is the more high-minded business of what Cochrane calls 'aggressive rhetoric', a tradition that goes back to Socrates, Jesus and the trickster god Loki, from Norse mythology. Auernheimer likens himself to Shakespeare's Puck. Cochrane aspires to Lenny Bruce and Andy Kaufman. They talk of culture jamming, the art of disrupting the status quo to make people think. They talk of Abbie Hoffman.

Significantly, the character of Patrick Bateman from the film adaptation of the novel American Psycho by Bret Easton Ellis has been one of the most common film references found on forums like 4chan and later the alt-right, alt-light and anti-feminist forums, along with Fight Club and The Matrix. The film tells the story of a narcissistic and sociopathic serial killer who watches pornography obsessively, is sexually violent to prostitutes, kills the homeless with relish and inflicts sexual torture on women in the novel so extreme it rivals de Sade in moral boundary pushing. Literary critic Daniel Fuchs has argued that the novel was part of a literary style, following on from Henry Miller and Norman Mailer, which used notions of transgression and sexual sovereignty from de Sade, and applied them as a form of rebellion and liberation through sexual aggression and violence. It is worth noting that one of the defenses made of American Psycho against its critics, during the debates sparked by its shocking sexual violence, was that the author had left some ambiguity at the end of the novel, suggesting that the events may have only been the crazed fantasies of the main character.
anti-moral humor, which is often described as insane or unhinged to baffled outsiders.

This view of psychopathy and rejection of imposed morality runs through the ethos and aesthetic of the rightist trolling culture. In one early self-description, a 4chan/b/ enthusiast wrote:

/b/ is the guy who tells the cripple ahead of him in line to hurry up. /b/ is first to get to the window to see the car accident outside. /b/ is the one who wrote your number on the mall's bathroom wall. /b/ is a failing student who makes passes at his young, attractive English teacher. /b/ is the guy loitering on Park Ave. that is always trying to sell you something. /b/ is the one who handed his jizz-drenched clothes to Good Will. (...) /b/ is a hot incest dream that you'll try to forget for days. /b/ is the only one of your group of friends to be secure in his sexuality and say anything. /b/ is the guy without ED who still likes trying Viagra. /b/ is the best friend that tags along for your first date and cock-blocks throughout the night. The decent girl you're trying to bag walks out on the date, /b/ laughs and takes you home when you're drunk, and you wake up to several hookers in your house who /b/ called for you. /b/ is a friend that constantly asks you to try mutual masturbation with him. /b/ is the guy who calls a suicide hotline to hit on the advisor. /b/ is nuking the hard-drive next time someone knocks on his door. /b/ is the one who left a used condom outside the schoolyard. /b/ is the voice in your head that tells you that it doesn't matter if she's drunk. /b/ is the friend who constantly talks about your mom's rack. /b/ is the only one who understands what the hell you saying. /b/ is someone who would pay a hooker to eat his ass, and only that. /b/ is the uncle who has touched you several times. /b/ is still recovering in the hospital, after trying something he saw in a hentai. /b/ is the pleasure you feel guilty of when
express sympathy with the victims. Forum users come to the most arguably unsympathetic place imaginable to tell others of their suicidal fantasies anonymously, where they will probably be half-jokingly told to do it. They thus reject the perceived sentimentality of the mainstream media's suicide spectacles and instead remake it as their own dark spectacle, in which pity is replaced by cruelty. And yet, because both the act of suicide and the displays of insensitivity toward suicide victims are perceived as forms of transgression, both found a home within this strangely internally coherent online world. What kind of ideas and styles are being drawn upon by this new transgressive rightist sensibility?

Nietzsche, one of the main thinkers being channeled by rightist chan culture knowingly or otherwise, argued for transgression of the pacifying moral order and instead for a celebration of life as the will to power. As a result, his ideas had appeal to everyone from the Nazis to feminists like Lily Braun. Today, the appeal of his anti-moralism is strong on the alt-right because their goals necessitate the repudiation of Christian codes that Nietzsche characterized as slave morality. Freud, on the other hand, characterized transgression as an anti-civilizational impulse, as part of the antagonism between the freedom of instinctual will and the necessary repressions of civilization. Perhaps the most significant theorist of transgression Georges Bataille inherited his idea of sovereignty from de Sade, stressing self-determination over obedience. Although rightist chan culture was undoubtedly not what Bataille had in mind, the politically fungible ideas and styles of these aesthetic transgressives are echoed in the porn-fuelled shocking content of early /b/ and in the later anti-liberal transgressions of the later /pol/. Bataille revered transgression in and of itself, and like de Sade viewed non-procreative sex as an expression of the sovereign against instrumentalism, what he called 'expenditure without reserve'. For him excessive behavior without purpose, which also characterizes the sensibility of contemporary meme culture in which enormous human effort is exerted with no obvious personal benefit, was paradigmatically transgressive in an age of Protestant instrumental rationality.

The culture that produced both Operation Birthday Boy and elaborate RIP page trolling became what you might call the unwanted gift, a twist on Mauss's *The Gift* that early Internet theorists used as a central metaphor for the non-instrumental culture of sharing that it nurtured. In *The Revolution of Everyday Life* by the Situationist thinker Raoul Vaneigem, Mauss's principle of the gift, originally used to describe reciprocal gift-giving systems in pre-modern societies, was celebrated on the grounds that only the purity of motiveless destruction or ruinous generosity can transcend instrumentalism. The Situationists' critique of 'the poverty of every day life', like Baudelaire's *An oasis of horror in a desert of boredom*, articulated a common sentiment found from the Romantics through to contemporary online cultures of transgression, that ennui, boredom and inertia requires a counterforce of extreme transgression. And yet these ideas often transcended the abstract. But while the Situationists had a better world in their hearts, the nihilistic application of the transgressive style already took shape in the 60s counterculture. The Manson murders', Reynolds and Press argued, 'were the logical culmination of throwing off the shackles of conscience and consciousness, the grim flowering of the id's voodoo energies.'

Another conceptualization of transgression that applies to this culture has been the idea of the carnivalesque. In *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, Stallybrass and White considered the carnivalesque to be a form of radical transgression against hierarchy and hegemony: 'The grotesque tends to operate as a critique of a dominant ideology which has already set the terms designating what is high and what is low.' This is very much how 4chan has long self-described and how it was described by its early 'progressive' boosters, except that the dominant
ideology in the time of 4chan has been cultural liberalism, and the 'low' therefore meant un-PC poor taste, rudeness, shock, offence and trolling. The carnivalesque was also theorized by Bakhtin, whose ideologically flexible and ambivalent definition sounds like much like some of the self-descriptions of trolls on what trolling is doing:

Carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people. Second, it is universal in scope; it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival’s participants. The entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity. Third, this laughter is ambivalent; it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding.

The transgressive style is not without precedent on the formally political conservative right, either. The Federation of Conservative Students in the UK famously shocked with a poster saying ‘Hang Nelson Mandela’ and criticized Thatcher for her soft touch, perhaps an early version of the ‘cuckervative’ jibe. They also had libertarian and authoritarian wings of thought, but certainly constituted a break from the decorum of the Burkeans, adopting some of the harder edge of the Thatcher era, even flirting with far-right ideas. The reformist-left writer Christopher Lasch applied the Freudian conception of transgression as anti-civilizational to his critique of the vacuous nihilism and narcissism of post 60s American consumer society. But since the 60s the norm has until now been that critics of transgression have generally come from the right. Theorist of post-industrial society Daniel Bell lamented the transgressive ethos of the 60s and warned of its ‘obsessive preoccupation with homosexuality, transvestism, buggery, and, most pervasive of all, publicly displayed oral-genital intercourse.’ The transgressive irreverent style of the 60s counterculture was everything the right hated in previous culture wars. The ‘adversary culture’

bemoaned by conservative anti-feminists like Phyllis Schlafly and the neocons of Commentary magazine warned against the destructive impulses of the transgressive sensibility.

Feminism’s relationship to the cultural politics of transgression is more complicated still. When the second wave of feminism burst forth in the 60s, captured in Betty Friedan’s The Feminine Mystique, it was regarded by the right as part of the broader sexual revolution and the transgressive culture that was going to destroy the US family, moral restraints and tradition. In the battle over Roe vs Wade and Phyllis Schlafly’s war on the Equal Rights Amendment, feminism was very much on the side of the transgressive tradition of de Sade, as it sought to destroy moralism and free the id. However, for some feminists the id of their transgressive male peers proved a little too free. Criticisms of the inequities of ‘free love’, and the hypocrisies and inequalities experienced by women in anti-war and other activist movements in the 60s and 70s, started to emerge from feminist writing as a kind of critique of the counterculture. The pornified culture produced by the sexual revolution soon came under its harshest criticisms from feminists like Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon by the 80s, and soon the war-on-porn feminists even aligned with conservatives, who had previously denounced feminism as central to the debauchery of the 60s.

During the recent online culture wars, and their spillover into campus and protest politics, feminists have tried to embrace transgression with the Slut Walk movement and sex-positive pro-trans, pro-sex worker and pro-kink culture that was central to Tumblr. However, like the right, it has run up against a deep philosophical problem about the ideologically flexible, politically fungible, morally neutral nature of transgression as a style, which can characterize misogyny just as easily as it can sexual liberation. As Lasch understood, for progressive politics anti-moral transgression has always been a bargain with the devil, because the case for equality is essentially a moral one.
Equally hated and loved critic Camille Paglia argued that de Sade’s depiction of human evil as innate was a form of satire directed against the Rousseauist tradition, from which contemporary feminism springs. De Sade’s work famously features sexual violence as well as abhorrence for family and procreation, instead creating a violent transgressive sexuality based on the values of libertinism and individual sovereignty. In *Juliette* one rule of *The Sodality of the Friends of Crime* was, ‘True libertinage abhors progeniture’. Paglia argued that de Sade’s devaluing of the procreative female body, and his preoccupation with heterosexual and homosexual sodomy, also shared by chanculture, were not merely the product of a homosexual impulse, as argued by feminist Simone de Beauvoir, but a ‘protest against relentlessly overabundant procreative nature’. Author Susan Suleiman wrote that:

The founding desire behind Sadeian fantasy is the active negation of the mother. The Sadeian hero’s anti-naturalism goes hand in hand with his hatred of mothers, identified as the “natural” source of life.

That the transgressive values of de Sade could be taken up by a culture of misogyny and characterized an online anti-feminist movement that rejected traditional church-going conservatism should also not be a surprise. The Blakean motto adopted by the Surrealists, ‘Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires’, dominance as sexual ‘sovereignty’ and the freeing of the id from the constraints of the conscience have all descended from this transgressive tradition. Just as Nietzsche appealed to the Nazis as a way to formulate a right-wing anti-moralism, it is precisely the transgressive sensibility that is used to excuse and rationalize the utter dehumanization of women and ethnic minorities in the alt-right online sphere now. The culture of transgression they have produced liberates their
Chapter Three
Gramscians of the alt-light

There were two major figures of the online culture wars,Trumpian right who wrote glowingly about the hard core of the alt-right in a heavily quoted piece in Breitbart called ‘An Establishment Conservative’s Guide To The Alt-Right’. These were Milo Yiannopoulos and Allum Bokhari, who traced the intellectual roots of the amorphous alt-right back, in quite a flattering portrayal of the movement, to a number of key intellectuals and schools of thought. They singled out Oswald Spengler, the German philosopher who wrote The Decline of the West in 1918, who influenced the whole discourse civilizational decline and advocated a nationalist non-Marxist socialism and authoritarianism, H. L. Mencken, the deeply elitist but undeniably brilliant anti-New Deal US satirist and cultural critic, who also made Nietzschean criticisms of religion and representative democracy, Julius Evola, the Italian philosopher loved by the Italian fascist movement, who advanced traditionalist and masculinist values and believed modern man lived in a Dark Age, Samuel Francis, the paleoconservative US columnist and critic of pro-capitalist neocorporatism and lastly, the French New Right, who importantly were sometimes called ‘Gramscians of the right’.

The French New Right or Nouvelle Droite adapted the theories of Antonio Gramsci that political change follows cultural and social change. Andrew Breitbart’s phrase was that politics is always ‘downstream from culture’, and was often quoted by Milo. Belgian far-right anti-immigration party Vlaams Blok leader Filip Dewinter put it like this: ‘the ideological majority is more important than the parliamentary majority.’

Prior to 1968, the right had taken the view that ‘ordinary people’ were still inherently conservative, which you can see echoed today in the ‘silent majority’ rhetoric of modern establishment conservatives. The French New Right’s Gramscian aim, which the alt-right today also shares, was to break with the view that defeat of radical elites or vanguards would enable the restoration of a popular traditional order and instead took stock of how profoundly the 60s had changed the general population and become hegemonic.

As Andrew Hartman outlined in his book on the 90s culture wars, The War for the Soul of America, the radical upheavals of Paris 1968 and the rise of the New Left was proof to the demoralized right that the whole culture would now have to be retaken before formal political change could come. This led to the pursuit of a ‘metapolitics’, and a rejection of the political party and traditional activism within a section of the right. Instead, they set about rethinking their philosophical foundations and creating new ways to counter the ‘68 ideology of Social Progress. The resulting French New Right shared many of the alt-right’s preoccupations like multiculturalism and imminent Western decline, also drawing on and adapting ideas from across the political spectrum. For example, they had a strong critique of capitalism, promoting instead local ‘organic democracy’.

Today, the movement that has been most remarkably successful at changing the culture rather than the formal politics is the alt-light. They were the youthful bridge between the alt-right and mainstream Trumpism. Although the tactics of the online right are updated to a digital age, it is hard to think of a better term than Gramscian to describe what they have strategically achieved, as a movement almost entirely based on influencing culture and shifting the Overton window through media and culture, not just formal politics.

They succeeded largely by bypassing the dying mainstream media and creating an Internet-culture and alternative media of their own from the ground up. Here, I want to look more closely
at those being called the alt-light, who became major independent social media figures with huge audiences well before Trump's win. They influenced Internet-culture and eventually more mainstream culture. How did they do this and why did it work?

First, think for a moment about the amount of scholarly and polemical writing that has come from a broadly left perspective in recent generations, attempting to explain why it is that the project of the revolutionary socialist left continues to fail and remains unpopular. Entire schools of thought about the culture industry, media hegemony, discourse, narrative, normativity and power have this problem either overtly or implicitly at their core. Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky’s ‘manufacturing consent’ thesis has remained quite dominant in left rhetoric ever since it was written. The Frankfurt School and the Situationists remain canonical in university theory courses. Of all the Marxian and Marxoid schools of thought, Gramsci’s is perhaps the most influential today, placing media and culture at the center of political analysis and praxis in a mediated age after the decline of the old labour movement.

And yet at the end of 2016 it was the candidate of the right, Donald Trump, who was elected President of the United States despite all mainstream news agencies, including conservative media from Fox News to National Review, working openly against him. Figures like Milo, who were being dismissed as an irrelevant Internet fringe despite their growing mass online audiences right up until the election results came in, rose to mainstream success along with him.

Let’s also remember that during the Obama years millennial cultural liberals had their own new media platforms to fill the vacuum left by the decline in the centrality of mainstream newspapers and TV as the general arena for public discourse. In this brave new world of clicks and content, their alternative came in the form of the often-sentimental feel-good clickbait sites like Upworthy and listicle sites like Buzzfeed. Other liberal sites like Everyday Feminism, Jezebel and Salon delivered a strange mixture of ultra-sensitivity, sentimentality and what was once considered radical social constructionist identity politics.

These sites ran headlines that became almost self-satirizing like ‘8 Signs Your Yoga Practice Is Culturally Appropriated’, ‘Men can be feminists but it’s really hard work’, ‘19 Of The Most Totally Amazing Body-Shaming Clap Backs’ and many others on toxic masculinity, fat pride, gender-neutral toys and quandaries about moral and culturally sensitive consumerism. Clickhole, a project of The Onion, emerged as a timely satirical site that brilliantly mocked the liberal clickbait style with inane titles like: ‘10 Things People With a Spider On Their Face Are Tired of Hearing’ and ‘Our Country Has Become Worryingly Desensitized To Violence In Hot-Sauce Names’.

Unintentionally amusing and easily satirized as sites like Upworthy may have been, at its height in 2013 it was averaging about 75,000 Facebook likes per article, while its site traffic was coming in at around 87 million unique visitors per month. In 2015, the liberal listicle site BuzzFeed’s articles were getting more shares on social media than BBC and Fox News put together. All of these were liberal, millennial-oriented and openly propagandistic.

While the alt-right regard these and the Guardian, BBC and CNN as the media of ‘the left’, espousing ‘Cultural Marxism’, it became obvious when the possibility of any kind of economically ‘left’ political force emerged that liberal media sources were often the most vicious and oppositional. Liberal feminist journalist Joan Walsh called Bernie Sanders’s supporters ‘Berniebot keyboard warriors’, while Salon was one of the main propagators of the Berniebro meme with headlines like, ‘Bernie Bros out of control: Explosion of misogynist rage...’ and, ‘Just like a Bernie Bro, Sanders bullies Clinton...’ Meanwhile Vice, a magazine that made its brand on the most degenerate combination of vacuous hipster aesthetics and pornified transgression, published things
like 'How to spot a brocialist'. Before the elections The Guardian newspaper ran a piece with the comically cultish wording: ‘Time to hail Hillary Clinton – and face down the testosterone left’.

Despite overwhelming evidence of Bernie’s popularity among young women, the myth was relentlessly peddled until it passed into the realm of Internet truth. The old liberal establishment then weighed in; for example, when feminist Gloria Steinem claimed that these numerous female Bernie fans were merely trying to impress their male peers. In the UK, an almost identical phenomenon occurred when the British liberal media establishment, particularly The Guardian, joined forces with their more youthful online offspring in smearing Corbyn and his supporters as being motivated primarily by this nefarious tide of brocialism, despite his squeaky-clean track record on women’s issues in the UK.

Where, then, was the real left’s alternative media during this period? On YouTube, The Young Turks emerged as one of the few genuinely popular talk-show platform video producers, with 3 million subscribers and typical video views of 100,000 to 200,000. British Laborite (who later went anti-Corbyn) Owen Jones started producing popular interview videos. Further to the left, Jacobin magazine was undoubtedly the success story of this period in print publishing and certainly the most interesting media project intellectually. This is because it gave a platform to left critics of the liberal Hillary-supporting center left like Adolph Reed, Walter Benn Michaels, Amber A’Lee Frost, Connor Kilpatrick, Liza Featherstone and many others. Inevitably Jacobin, too, was smeared for being the magazine of choice for Bros and ‘the white left’, despite its two key founders being the children of Jamaican and Trinidadian immigrants, and of having its logo based on the Black Jacobin.

In 2016, the podcast Chapo Trap House also emerged as a form of left comedy, which specialized in mocking the most absurd outer limits of online identity politics of the right and