

This Is Fine

IN THE ARCHIVE OF MEMES, it's striking that one of the most famous and enduring memes, This is Fine, is rarely appropriated. Repeated, yes, enduring far beyond most meme's short life spans.¹ But it is rarely altered or adapted or personalized, except through its insertion in different contexts. This flies in the face of the prevalent and probably correct way to understand memes: through their amenability to adaptation, appropriation, and reuse—their role in the Web's remix cultures of participation. In this understanding, one apprehends memes first through the fact that one participates in them, makes them one's *own*. Sometimes appropriation makes the joke less funny, sometimes more—because quality isn't the point. That's just part of what it means for memes to propagate as personalizable, which is to say, possessable, which is to say, as appendages to a self that is active in and not dominated by the world. It's why memes don't make a good platform for cultures of judgment (for example, better and worse memes, hierarchies of memes, best memes of the year). Distinction isn't what makes memes work. Like all cultural forms that also circulate as information, memes attract repetition, alteration, and, above all, wild proliferation driven by the idea that they are appropriable by anyone.²

But This is Fine is always This is Fine. The dog unchanged, the licking flames unchanged, the resignation unchanged, the coffee mug unsipped but forever in reach. One participates by repeating but in this case without a difference, the personal valence muted to a low hum. From 2014 to the present, the meme has been appended to and captioned a range of dire scenes, affects, and events, but only and ever as itself. It is as though it cannot be changed or bettered. Which is also what the meme thematizes: the pictured scene is about a situation that so dominates the life encompassed by it, that is so unchangeable, that the dog accepts its fate—whether in denial or acceptance we'll never know and it doesn't really matter. The room will burn. From the first panel to the second, an escapable situation becomes an enduring condition. This is what the dog's acquiescence means. And it is what the second panel underscores—the cut to a close-up that gives voice not to alarm or action but to a resigned sigh. Life is this way now, nothing



FIGURE 1. This is Fine meme, from K. C. Green, *Gunshow* #648, "The Pills Are Working," 9 January 2013.

changes while everything changes. Not even the meme that marks that shift is motivated to change.

In the idioms of critical theory, always on the lookout for agencies gained or lost, the meme's unchangingness seems to force a decision on a basic point: is it a meme about the dangers of acquiescence (the room can be burning down and one might not even care) or about the relatability of feeling overwhelmed (which is, in its more empathic way, also about acquiescence)? Or does the meme's participatory envelope encourage disidentification (with the accusation of complicity) or identification (with the shared catastrophe)? But notice that both sides of this distinction pursue the same outcome: what's the quickest way to claw ourselves back to sovereignty? The desire is not to be possessed by the world's dominating structures (whatever sets the room alight) but to get back to a sustaining, if always provisional, indomitability. This reflex to reclaim agency is how you know we're in the ambit of a theoretical apparatus that is too enamored of whiteness and the forms of power and personhood that it so effortlessly possesses.

In their own writing about memes, Aria Dean and Lauren Michele Jackson encourage a different axis of questioning, one that relies less on whiteness's desire for possessive relationships to culture and its vested interest in how cultural participation embellishes selfhood.³ Dean, for her part, is interested in the ways the history of blackness has valued, against every blustering credo of the American dream, forms of self and collectivity that embrace vulnerability and dispossession. Ways of being, in other words, that are not rooted in individualism and the arrogation of agency, that do not

begin with an investment in forms of subjectivity that citizenship—or the more basic goal of simply not being hated and feared—educates people to want.⁴ Dean documents the radical and punishing labor of continuing to want what a world that already fears you says you should not want, because if you stop wanting it, the whispered promise goes, it will allow you a conditional kind of membership. From out of this attunement, Dean hears how people strain against the meme because of the ways it reminds people not of their indomitable individuality but of something more like their *domitability*.

The elusive and frankly awkward nature of this term is given in the social fact that *domitable* is a word that barely exists. It more robustly lives in its negation—as *indomitable*. To talk about *domitability* is inevitably to invoke the amputation of its prefix, *in-*. Why? Do we no longer have a use for that particular concept?

If seemingly opposed ideals—conservatism and liberalism, racism and diversity, exclusion and inclusion—all issue their own injunctions to become indomitable, that is, to become individual, autonomous, equal, and undefeated, I want to listen for both the resistance to and, far more lovingly, the hesitant embrace of anything that jeopardizes fantasies of individual agency, that threatens the ideal of indomitability. Memes are one case in this involuted archive. This is Fine is merely the most literal example. If the impulse of so much critical theory, like the political forms it resists, has been to recuperate a sense of indomitability, to become as hard and violently self-possessed as the world and its targeted conflagrations, maybe we need to start learning how to live with our own *domitability*.

Dean encourages a careful intimacy with the ways the meme might help us start such a project:

Thinking of circulation instead of content, I wonder if memes can guide us toward a post-representational, post-identity politics, answering Fred Moten’s call in “Black Optimism, Black Operation” for an analytic that moves in and out of the shadows, “that moves through the opposition of voluntary secrecy and forced exposure.” What we need, he writes, “is some way to understand how the underground operates out in the open.”⁵

One reason for Dean’s slide from content to circulation here and in all of her work on memes comes in response to something Lauren Michele Jackson observes in 2014 when focusing on the content of memes: a repeated theft and wanton use of black femininity to register a whole range of affects for whomever might lay claim to them—although such gestures often lay claim to any affect *but* the pain and violence that fueled those first expressions of black femininity, or else involve a numb reveling in the recirculation of that black pain. But in a later essay, from 2016, Jackson too sees in memes a figure for a living, lively, but vulnerable black

collectivity that doesn't see its vulnerability (to theft, say) as a political problem to solve: "If we accept that Blackness holds up popular culture, that Black language informs white lingo; if we acknowledge both the individuals and communities (Black Twitter, et al.) that foster our most beloved internet objects, it's not such a stretch to propose blackness as the living tissue of memes."⁶

For both writers, a black collectivity inheres in the vulnerability of memes, something entailed by their proliferation and circulation. This means, for instance, that it is precisely a meme's vulnerability to theft, to being recirculated without attribution, to being appropriated, that makes them figures for blackness. Not just because blackness has been a history of stolen life but because, as Dean says, blackness is also that form of collectivity that has refused to constellate around its opposition to theft, that has refused the temptation to fight the theft of culture with the repossession of culture, that has refused to take on (self-)possession itself, whiteness's ultimate teaching, as the form of subjectivity around which to build its collective sense of self.⁷ Seen in the currents of this history, we can say that memes refuse to refuse to be dispossessed.⁸

This is maybe what most defines a meme. Its scale, however that scale is measured—proliferation and spread, global scope, presence in and across so many lives, its activation of a vast networked sublime—overwhelms the single person, just as data dominates the individuals from whom data is extracted, literally surrounds them. It is parasitic on life while informing that life.⁹ Memes precede us and succeed us, even if that succession exists just in their waning or fading, even if that preceding is just in their obscurity or gathering. In relation to memes, we are all domitable, even when we do not feel dominated, even when the participatory structure of memes feels accessible. Dean says memes help sustain a collective memory that is itself a reminder of one's domitability: "a collective memory that can never be fully encompassed; one can never zoom out enough to see it in its entirety."¹⁰ One serves a meme; and that is how the meme serves us, pleases us, distracts us . . . when it does.

This makes the meme inconvenient in the way that Lauren Berlant describes the inconvenience of other people.¹¹ Berlant's point isn't that people annoy us, get in our way, or behave erratically—although they do. The point is that the inconvenient object can be an obstacle to our sense of ourselves as people whose actions matter and have a more or less direct, preferably causal, relationship to intention. This sovereignty fantasy, for those who've been allowed to nurture it, doesn't always correlate with a felt sense of empowerment, but this makes it no less powerful. Today's white supremacists, avowed and crypto-, exercise their internecine sovereignty fantasy in resistance to the perceived theft of their sovereignty.

In other words, there are many squirrely forms of being that might cluster around a feeling or scene of domitability like the one pictured in *This is Fine*. It's disconcerting that it can be so difficult to tell the difference between the awkwardness of experimental nonsovereignities and the quiet violence that is enacted when, in the name of resistance to the deadening implements of culture, the self is recuperated as possession, as a repository of value and distinction.¹² Laura Ann Stoler teaches us that repeated exposure to violence educates, which is to say, trains but also constrains, our desires.¹³ This is why it can be hard to tell the difference between dispossessing the self of its autonomy and claiming something back in order to move toward self-possession. Between, in other words, asserting or pantomiming sovereignty as a form of self-defense or ingratiation—desiring indomitability—and giving up on sovereignty as itself a form of violence—becoming domitable. Discomfort saturates both sides of what isn't actually a polarity between domitability and indomitability.

What would it mean and how would it feel to identify with domitability? This is part of the speculative undertone I hear in Dean's and Jackson's work on black memes, on the blackness of memes: they want to acknowledge the ways that memes can't be possessed, can't be owned. They see this as a model for a possible disposition toward life. To get there, to test out these uncomfortable possibilities, we're going to need to know about the forms of disavowal and disidentification that magnetize to scenes of domitability.

As both Jackson and Dean stress in trying to feel out these forms of disavowal and disidentification, black cultures are routinely and casually appropriated. But Dean and Jackson also want us to see that memes are immanently appropriable because they are neither ownable nor containable. White appropriation, in this sense, would be violent not just because it steals and lays claim but because it cannot and will not recognize what it is in memes that exceeds whiteness's own appropriative grasping, because it cannot be made to care about that aspect more than whatever crumbs of self-aggrandizement it can gather for itself through participation in the blackness of memes.

In this way, whiteness sees perfectly well what memes are: it is precisely their structure of domitability that becomes another platform from which whiteness can assert its dominion over *whatever*.¹⁴ What Dean and Jackson try to get us to learn about memes is their potential for teaching a relationship to culture and collectivity whose forms of being might desire domitability and not just its overcoming; desire equality not in a flattened structure of shared empowerment but as an always-asymmetrical nonsovereignty. This learning curve would be vastly, dramatically different for people situated in different relations to race and racialization. Dean says that this might mean learning to embrace, to love, to value that which has always

been denigrated and stolen in black life and black cultures. In this, one would identify with the structure of memes: their circulation, their existence in the shadows, the ways they exceed any grasping mode of individuality. For the peoples whose purloined wealth has allowed a fantasy of indomitability, this would require training in an entirely reoriented way of life, learning to become that which they've always hated rather than observing those ways of being at the distance of critical judgment or empathy.¹⁵

But whether in resistance or embrace, memes do put one in nervy contact with nonsovereignty. They allow people to participate in, or at least witness, the lineaments of their own domitability. This is fine. The dog knows. Such witnessing, however, doesn't necessitate that people will care or learn about anything in particular—maybe least of all about what I've been calling domitability. But as Dean and Jackson teach, one's response to this brush with one's immanent domitability is never not telling. Does one scramble to possess what can be possessed in the ruins of the world, or see the ruins as good riddance to a world that doesn't work for most people? A similar question haunts the pronoun of the meme. Does "this" refer to the dog's own situation, its imminent death, something that no self-possessed individual would ever passively accept? Or does it refer to the end of a world that probably wants the dog dead anyway, be the flames far or near?

The seeming impossibility of This is Fine being reworked undercuts the laughter that might imply that the condition of domitability it pictures is only sometimes true. In being able to deploy the meme, seeking laughter, one might imagine that it is thereby wrestled back into something merely situational—changeable, temporary. But in its unchangingness, it also deploys us. Like all memes, This is Fine is in this way about the domitability of life, although its voicing of that condition is more an abashed muttering than a confident telling. People in burning rooms aren't in a position to make proclamations.

Notes

1. Megan Garber, "The Meme That Defined a Decade," *Atlantic*, 26 January 2023, <https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2023/01/this-is-fine-dog-meme-cultural-relevancy/672838/>.
2. This includes disidentification, as José Esteban Muñoz taught us a long time ago when he taught us to see identification and disidentification as less distinct: *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis, 1999). On the ways information gives on to and proliferates personalization, see McKenzie Wark, *Capital Is Dead: Is This Something Worse?* (London and

- New York, 2019); and Kris Cohen, "Literally, Ourselves," *Critical Inquiry* 46, no. 1 (Autumn 2019): 167–92.
3. Lauren Michele Jackson, "The Blackness of Meme Movement," *Model View Culture* 35 (28 March 2016), <https://modelviewculture.com/pieces/the-blackness-of-meme-movement>; Lauren Michele Jackson, "Memes and Misogynoir," *The Awl*, 28 August 2014, <https://www.theawl.com/2014/08/memes-and-misogynoir/>; and Aria Dean, "Poor Meme, Rich Meme," *Real Life*, 25 July 2016, <http://reallifemag.com/poor-meme-rich-meme/>.
 4. Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham, NC, 1995).
 5. Dean, "Poor Meme, Rich Meme."
 6. Jackson, "The Blackness of Meme Movement."
 7. Fred Moten, *Stolen Life* (Durham, NC, 2018).
 8. The phrasing here is adapted from Stefano Harney and Moten. Theirs is "the right to refuse what has been refused to you"; Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Wivenhoe, 2013), 8.
 9. This is often what is meant by the periodizing language of "control": Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control," *October* 59 (Winter 1992): 3–7; Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker, "Protocol, Control, and Networks," *Grey Room* 17 (2004): 6–29; Seb Franklin, *Control: Digitality as Cultural Logic* (Cambridge, MA, 2015).
 10. Dean, "Poor Meme, Rich Meme."
 11. Lauren Gail Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People* (Durham, NC, 2022).
 12. Leo Bersani, "Sociality and Sexuality," *Critical Inquiry* 26, no. 4 (2000): 641–56; Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People*; Lauren Berlant, "The Commons: Infrastructures for Troubling Times," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 34, no. 3 (2016): 393–419.
 13. Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire*.
 14. For a periodizing account of how race gets modulated and encoded in seemingly nonracial or postracial forms, see Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism* (Minneapolis, 2011).
 15. On empathy as a distancing and racializing strategy of liberalism, see Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 1997).