Attack of the 50-Foot Social Justice Warrior: The discursive construction of SJW

memes as the Monstrous Feminine

Abstract

This essay considers the origin and meaning of "Social Justice Warrior" (SJW) memes. Despite each term within the phrase suggesting potentially positive connotations, we argue that as deployed within "alt-right" communities, it implies a kind of monstrous feminine: a woman who is unwieldy and out-of-control. We catalogue and analyze this meme using a visual discourse analysis of texts gathered through Google Images and Reddit. Our findings suggest that the SJW meme is deployed to emphasize opponents as having non-normative, problematic bodies, different brains (ones ruled by emotion rather than logic), and monstrous characteristics. We argue that such discourse is potentially dangerous, but that feminists may have the tools to recreate the SJW as an image of power.

Keywords: Social Justice Warrior, SJW, memes, alt-right, monstrous feminine

Introduction

The last few years of feminist activism, both in on- and offline spaces, are encouraging. From hashtag movements emphasizing the realities of sexual harassment such as #MeToo and #YesAllWomen, to mobilization of large numbers of women in the face of Donald Trump's election to the US presidency, feminists (and their allies) are increasingly public, connected, and empowered in expressing their frustration with the status quo. At the same time, we have seen a concomitant mobilization of individuals within far-right communities – white ethnonationalists, Islamophobes, misogynistic men's rights activists, and others. While not a monolith by any means, these groups are commonly referred to as being a part of the "alt-right."[1] In particular, the "alt-right" is often derided (or lauded, depending on the audience) for their technological acumen especially when it comes to mobilizing the cultural logics of spaces such as 4chan and Reddit. In these communities, memes (Limor Shifman 2014) and *lulz* (a kind of "unsympathetic laughter" per Phillips 2015) serve both as a kind of *lingua franca* (Ryan Milner 2016) and as a marker of insider status.

Of all of the terminology, catch phrases, and memes to emerge from the black hole of the "alt-right's" online presence, the creation of the term "social justice warrior" (or, SJW as it is commonly shorthanded) is perhaps the most confounding. Originally confined to 4chan and Reddit, increasingly the phrase has made its way into the mainstream. It is used as a pejorative within these communities to describe individuals who they claim are overly invested in identity politics and political correctness. The "SJW" is a humorless shrill who takes pleasure in demonstrating their superiority by

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[1] We are using placing the term "alt-right" in quotation marks throughout this piece as this is how these far-right groups refer to themselves, but it remains a problematic term as it implies that their

policing the behavior of others. And yet, the non-abbreviated phrase embodies a positive connotation: perhaps calling to mind the image of an Amazonian fighter, feminized yet deployed for martial labor. However, the shorthanded version has been swallowed by the internet, regurgitated into the "SJW," a bastardized and disempowered stepchild of the original term. How did this happen? We argue that the ambivalent nature of memetic logic enables the paradoxical ways in which the "SJW" phrase is deployed online.

Again, if we are to think about memes as a kind of *lingua franca*, as suggested by Milner (2016), it becomes clear that the terminology "SJW" can have two simultaneous, yet equally viable meanings, depending on the location and context for which the label is deployed. While those who want to take positive ownership of the term see it as the aforementioned Amazonian warrior, the emerging "alt-right" has repositioned it to imply a kind of monstrous feminine: unwieldy and out of control. The meme, in this way, seems to be a paradox, simultaneously empowering and disempowering depending on the context, placement, and location of how it is employed. It is therefore an apt way to understand several important aspects of internet culture:

1.   The paralleling of multiple themes repositioning the same narrative

2.   The villainizing of femininity in online contexts, vis-à-vis "monstrous feminine"

3.   A demonstration of memetic ambivalence

In these ways, the SJW meme creates a window into our current modes of political upheaval as well as online misogynistic practices. We argue that the SJW is central to understanding the memetic logic that underpins the "alt-right's" misogyny, and suggests

practices for ultimately reclaiming the monstrous feminine as a critical undertaking for re-empowering feminists.

To demonstrate this assertion, we begin by historicizing the term and meaning behind "social justice warrior" and how that term transformed into the far more decontextualized "SJW." Next, we discuss the aggregate qualities of the meme and how memes have aided in "alt-right" rhetoric. Additionally, we posit the notion of the "monstrous feminine" which we argue is the underlying theme of the meme's growth and aggregation, and ultimately what turns a straw man – a classic kind of argumentation fallacy – into a form of potentially violent hate speech. We then take on the work of cataloguing, characterizing, and analyzing the SJW meme, as it is portrayed in "alt-right" media. Our analysis of SJW memes focuses on two questions: (1) What does the SJW meme tell us about the ways that anti-feminist and "alt-right" publics think about embodiment and biological difference? (2) How does the image of the SJW exhibit elements of the "monstrous feminine?" Finally, in our discussion and conclusion we consider ways that these memes employ a kind of eliminationist rhetoric and suggest practices for taking back and re-appropriating the SJW, both as monster and Amazon alike.

Historicizing the SJW

The SJW meme crosses many boundaries in terms of the audiences to which it's addressed, making a comprehensive history difficult to reconstruct. The phrase was first used as a mostly positive statement, as early as twenty years ago in news articles (Abby Ohlheiser 2015). However, online the phrase gained a pejorative connotation. While

appearing as early as 2009 in a blog dedicated to countering "identitarianism" called "Social Justice Warriors: Do Not Engage," the phrase was later submitted to Urban Dictionary in 2011 (a crowdsourced site dedicated to defining slang), and appeared on the *Something Awful* forums in 2013. *Know Your Meme* suggests that the pejorative phrase "keyboard warrior" might be a precursor to the "social justice warrior," as it describes a person who is unreasonably angry and hides behind their keyboard, typing screeds directed at an unseen audience (Don 2015). According to Google search trends (see Figure 1), "social justice warrior" reached critical mass beginning in August 2014, right around the time of #Gamergate. Ostensibly about "ethics in games journalism," #Gamergate was actually a coordinated harassment campaign targeting women game designers, journalists, critics, and allies. #Gamergate supporters often used "SJW" as a term to describe the "opposition" that they faced. Ultimately, the #Gamergate movement became a convenient way for a loose coalition of frustrated geeks, misogynists, alt-righters, and trolls to coalesce around a common idea – that popular culture was "overly concerned" with a particular kind of identity politics – even if their tactics and actual motivations for participating were varied (Torill E. Mortensen 2016; Adrienne Massanari 2015; Shira Chess and Adrienne Shaw 2015). But to be a "Gamergater" (GG) or to discuss #Gamergate on Twitter, 4chan, or on Reddit's /r/KotakuInAction suggested a particular orientation towards free speech and gender politics. In particular, they abhorred anything they perceived as bowing to "identity politics" or political correctness, instead advocating for an extremist version of free speech where words had no consequences. At the same time, GGs often discussed their disdain for "social justice warriors" (as they were often delineated), or more commonly shorthanded SJWs, who supposedly

threatened their enjoyment of not just gaming, but culture at-large. Of course, in pejoratively referring to individuals as SJWs, #Gamergate supporters were appropriating a much older concept. "Social justice" has long used by feminists, anti-racist activists, and other progressives interested in ensuring both economic justice and recognition for marginalized identities so that, "…assimilation to majority or dominant cultural norms is no longer the price of equal respect" (Nancy Fraser 1999, p. 25). In some ways, the negative caricature of feminists is not new – one can see echoes of the political cartoons from various global suffrage movements. Through these visuals, as we will illustrate throughout this paper, in the hands of #Gamergate these original positive associations are lost.

The term quickly moved beyond the niche of #Gamergate, regularly appearing on more popular subreddits, on Facebook, on Twitter (in conversations unrelated to GG), in the conservative press, and in darker corners of the "alt-right" mediasphere. As it traversed moved from obscurity to mainstream conservative spaces, the trope was more broadly applied. It no longer referred solely to "opponents" of GG but could be applied to anyone perceived as engaged in practices considered as political correctness (PC) "policing." The SJW was constructed as a person concerned not just with the optics of appropriate identity politics, but someone whose emotional and psychological fragility required trigger/content warnings and safe spaces. Here, the character of the SJW was more of a caricature than an actual person or representation. As we will illustrate via memetic examples later in this article, the SJW became an alt-right straw man for easy and nameless attack.

It's important to note that the abbreviation SJW is used much more frequently than the entire phrase (again, see Figure 1). There are likely several reasons for this. First is a pragmatic one: using SJW is both quicker to type and is shorter than the full phrase – an important consideration on Twitter where much of the original #Gamergate organizing took place. Second, SJW might serve as a kind of linguistic gatekeeping tool for communities like Reddit's /r/KotakuInAction (one of the major public discussion boards dedicated to #Gamergate). Its use both marks the community's collective interest in supporting a very particular kind of unrestricted, libertarian approach to free speech, and requires a certain amount of insider knowledge to understand. Third, and importantly, is the polysemic nature of the full phrase "social justice warrior." Being a warrior implies a position of strength and of power, and for those within these regressive communities (as we will later illustrate via the SJW memes we analyzed), the opposition is designed to be a whiny collection of weak "snowflakes." In other words, using the term SJW conveys a pejorative perspective towards progressive politics and social justice, whereas using "social justice warrior" might foster more ambivalence from people not already engaged in the larger conversation. In these ways, the appropriation of SJW as a memetic straw man became commonplace during and following the upheaval of #Gamergate.

Of Memes...

SJW packs its power because of the emergence and proliferation of what can be characterized as meme culture. Memes serve a number of functions within on- and offline communities: communicative, political, and cultural. As Limor Shifman (2014) argues, political memes can serve as a form of advocacy and activism, promoting awareness

about a particular issue or worldview. And, as cultural artifacts, they are intertwined with issues of gender. While most memes feature a presumed "white, male centrality" (Milner 2016), feminist publics have also used them to express solidarity and do the everyday work of feminism (Carrie Rentschler and Samantha C. Thrift 2015; Samantha C. Thrift 2014). Because of the tacit anonymity (or pseudo-anonymity) and disembodied nature of meme culture, identity politics is simultaneously always present and never fully calculable in distinct memes.

Visual scholars remind us that images are powerful ideological media deserving of scrutiny and local contextualization (John Berger 1990; David Freedberg 1989). For this project, we are using Shifman's (2014) definition of an internet meme as our guide: "(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form and/or stance, which (b) were created with awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users" (p. 41). While we acknowledge that not all discourse related to the SJW trope is embedded in memetic images, their ability to be rapidly disseminated and remixed make them especially salient. The publics who share the SJW meme are situated in cultural spaces (Reddit, 4chan, etc.) where memes and subcultural trolling are normalized and often-productive forms of talk (Phillips 2015). Therefore examining the visual discourse is critical, as it serves an important discursive function within these communities.

The SJW meme is strongly tied to particular platforms – most significantly 4chan and Reddit. As José van Dijck (2013) argues, platforms are designed in ways that afford particular interactions and cultures and elide others. 4chan culture reveres anonymity, chaotic humor, and grotesquery (Phillips 2015). Likewise, many spaces on Reddit are

similar, if less extreme. Unlike 4chan, however, Reddit users are pseudo-anonymous. But both platforms eschew the many rules around content and behavior that characterize other spaces like Facebook, in favor of relatively hands-off policies that often fall to volunteer moderators to enforce (or not) (Massanari 2015).

Because anyone can create a community of interest on Reddit, it has become a hub for both "alt-right" and related communities (/r/KotakuInAction, /r/mensrights, /r/theredpill, /r/The_Donald, etc.) that share misogynistic worldviews and believe that "political correctness" is unfairly stifling free speech. Likewise, 4chan's /pol (politically incorrect), and to a lesser extent /b (random) boards, while long having traded in racist and sexist memes, the "alt-right" has moved beyond simply being a "meme factory" (Jamie Bartlett 2013) to transitioning into a younger, more mainstream version of white nationalist forums such as *Daily Stormer*. As Angela Nagle (2017) notes, the "alt-right" has effectively relied upon the labor of what she terms "ironic meme-making adolescent shitposters…who could be easily summoned in moments like gamergate [sic] or whenever big figures like Milo [Yiannopoulos] needed backup, to swarm and harass their opposition" (p. 45). The ironic nature of this "shitposting" is key – it allows the individual to express sentiment (frustration, anger, hostility, glee, etc.) in keeping with the norms of these spaces, but remain detached from their actual effect or impact.

...and Monsters
In as much as we can think about SJWs and its significance in terms of the memetic power of both the "alt-right" and as resultant of #Gamergate, it is impossible to disentangle the meme from older and more powerful tropes of misogynistic literature and

media. In short, we propose that the resonance of SJW as a meme, and its ability to push away from powerful imagery of a "warrior" – what should have presumably been central to the term – has been reconstructed as a mode of the monstrous feminine. In turn, the transformative power of the meme allowed a shift from imagery of empowerment to that of disempowerment. Yet, it is impossible to think of monsters as entirely powerless, a thread we return to later in the essay.

The monstrous feminine has been oft-remarked upon as a recurring theme in mass media: film, television, and novels all have employed the trope in a variety of ways, that help to maintain a fetishized perspective of femininity, othering it via mediation. Barbara Creed (1993) argues that the monstrous feminine posits a patriarchal subtext within its mediations, reinforcing essentialist views of femininity. In turn, she argues that the anxieties that are subtext to the monsters, "speaks to us more about male fears than about female desire or feminine subjectivity" (p. 7). In other words, like other tropes of horror, the specific depictions of the monstrous feminine are almost always a product of the cultural zeitgeist from which they come. The monstrous feminine serves as a primary example of the patriarchal undercurrents that are central to popular media.

An oft remarked upon aspect of this monstrous feminine engages with biological essentializations of motherhood and reproductive capacities, or otherwise with her rejection of those essentializations. Thus, one can find the monstrous feminine within the brood baring title character from *Alien*, the mythological Medusa bearing an array of ill-gotten phalluses, the blood-soaked body of *Carrie*, or the use of vagina dentata in *Teeth*. Thus, monstrous wombs, menstruation, castration, and vagina dentatas are all central to the archetypal character. In this way, the biological always folds back into the monstrous,

supporting the notion that the feminized monster is always necessarily the "other" in relation to the patriarchal media it serves. Creed links this idea of the monstrous feminine back to Julia Kristeva's (1982) foundational arguments regarding "abjection" and the "abject." Abject, per Kristeva, involves the boundary internal politics of distinguishing between our corporeal selves and exterior bodies with our inner sense of self. The abject creates a grotesque and bodily distinction between the self and others, via "horrific" imagery of that which is most corporeal. In other words, through the abject, the monstrous of horror is almost always connected back to the body of the other.

Horror film, television, and literature have accustomed us to monstrous metaphors of the other – feminized or otherwise. But those mediations can be quickly disentangled from our lived realities by the distance of metaphor. While the *Alien* films might engage with the monstrous feminine, we are unlikely to directly apply those interpretations back into our lived realities; the monstrous feminine here functions on a purely abstract and metaphorical level. In other words, most people probably don't watch the *Alien* films and automatically apply the maternal monster alien to their *actual* mothers. However, this is a bit messier and more complicated within the anonymous and far more personal space of memes, in particular, as they directly relate back to real (human) bodies. To this end, the "alt-right" version of the SJW meme uses fears of abjection and the monstrous feminine to transform the battle-ready language of the "social justice warrior" into the far more toothless (yet more monstrous) invocation of the "SJW." At the same time, this transformation from warrior to monster creates a space for violent hate speech, a topic we will discuss in more detail later.

Methods

To discover the ways in which anti-feminist and "alt-right" publics imagine the SJW, we conducted a visual discourse analysis based on Gillian Rose's (2007) investigation of visual culture. As she notes, discourse analysis can allow us to "...explore how images construct specific views of the social world…[and] how those specific views or accounts are constructed as real or truthful or natural through particular regimes of truth" (Rose 2007, p. 146-147). In particular, we were interested in how these images (re)produce and naturalize a certain social reality for the "alt-right". First, we searched both Google Images and Reddit using the terms "SJW" and "Social Justice Warrior" to find a large selection of images. Then, we purposively selected images that could be categorized into those that imagine the SJW as a kind of monster and those that focus on embodiment and biological difference. After removing duplicate images, this resulted in a corpus of 26 images. These were then examined and coded for what was present (and absent), connections between images, and intertextual relationships.

Breaking Down the SJW Meme

Three different themes emerge in SJW memes that relate to embodiment. The first is that SJWs' bodies do not properly exhibit hegemonic feminine or masculine ideals. The second is that the brain of the SJW is different from a "normal" person's. They are emotional rather than rational and driven by what are perceived as nonsensical, unimportant causes. The third theme builds on the previous two, suggesting that the SJW – not normal and too emotional – is ultimately diseased and monstrous. In this section,

we outline each of these themes illustrating how they build on each other within the *lingua franca* of the online discussion.

Non-hegemonic bodies

The body, as Judith Butler (2007) argues, is often viewed as a medium onto which cultural meanings are projected. But it is also a "*practical*, direct locus of social control" one that is both flexible and durable (Susan R. Bordo 1989, p. 13). Bodies are to be regarded with suspicion, at least within Cartesian traditions, as they are impediments to rational, logical thought (Margrit Shildrick and Janet Price 1999). And certain bodies, as Sara Ahmed (2010) argues, are met with negativity – especially those who occupy oppressed positions and do not demonstrate appropriate fealty to the regimes of which they are a part. Women's bodies, in particular, are viewed as messy, leaking, and disruptive (Shildrick and Price 1999).

The SJW meme imagines bodies that inhabit the world in the wrong way. They are unattractive, at least according to hegemonic standards of masculinity and femininity. These bodies are marked as sexually undesirable and of unknowable gender (thus, even more deviant). One SJW meme (Figure 2) features a person sitting in a bedroom surrounded by posters which represent the various causes to which the SJW is attached. These include statements about challenging the patriarchy, ending rape culture, and eliminating racism. The person in the picture is drawn in such a way to highlight their ambiguous gender – with secondary sex characteristics of both men and women present. They are soft (both physically and metaphorically) and childlike. Their surroundings are

filled with anime figures and decorations representing the bedroom of a "nerdy" college student.

This meme also links the SJW figure to the larger ideological work of the "alt-right". There are markers that are both anti-Semitic (with posters referring to Israel and two including a Star of David) as well as racist (a reference of "black dick being superior" and an anti-rape statement that suggests that no might sometimes mean "yes" if the person isn't white). And one poster features a fake *Time* magazine cover featuring Suey Park (an anti-racist activist who has started several hashtag movements including one to cancel Stephen Colbert's former show) with the words, "Kill whitey." SJW bodies, therefore, are dangerous not just because they refuse to comply with a proscribed gender binary, but they are seen as actively undermining the narrative of white and cisgendered supremacy. The SJW, per this depiction, is full of contradictions, leading to later meme arguments that their brains are not "right."

Other SJW memes suggest that SJWs are not genderless, but they pose a threat precisely because they eschew hegemonic ideals of femininity (or masculinity). One such image (Figure 3) juxtaposes a person representing social justice with Lady Justice. The SJW is a woman, but her appearance suggests a refusal to embrace hegemonic standards of feminine beauty. Her legs are unshaven, she is fat, and has a mohawk. She is not blindfolded like Lady Justice, and her scales are cast off to the side filled with excrement. Nor is she silent – she is yelling questions to an unseen audience, asking that they clarify their race and gender. In this meme, the SJW's body is a threat not just because it does not fit neatly into the their understanding of the category of "woman," but also because the SJW is demanding to know the status of others. Her lack of blindfold suggests that

her understanding of the world revolves around the race and gender of others – this despite her own refusal to fit neatly into such categories herself. The SJW is thus imagined as a hypocritical body. She is a straw (wo)man, based on a fallacy but one that is unambiguously repulsive, perhaps even "monstrous" by the Western beauty standards.

Figure 4 suggests that male SJW bodies also share a particular kind of anatomy. They are unfit, because "muscles are a symbol of toxic male culture" and unmasculine (carrying around a "portable ballsack"). However, they are also imagined as privileged and incapable of working hard. Any gains they receive are seen as ill gotten (as evidenced to the reference to "trust funds" and a "privileged start to life"). This depiction of coddling and privilege plays into the "alt-right's" dismissal of institutional racism and sexism, instead attributing any oppression to an individual's unwillingness to overcome whatever barriers they might face.

Emotional beings

It is not just that SJWs' bodies mark them as different; their brains do too. The SJW brain is emotional rather than rational, making them likely to lash out at other, more "normal" people. SJWs memes imagine them as the ultimate crybaby. They are emotionally weak and incapable of logic and reason. Figure 5, remixes a popular meme – "what people think I do/what I really do" (fastnup 2012). This meme is often used to suggest the incorrect preconceptions people have about one's job or hobby juxtaposed with the reality of said vocation. Instead, in this remixed version, the meme is used to describe how others (friends, family, the world) view SJWs (as a crying child) and how this is actually the reality of what SJWs do. This meme suggests that not only are SJW's

emotionally overdramatic, their immaturity prevents them from seeing themselves as the world sees them. They are not a "warrior" in any real sense. Instead, they are simply babies who cry and yell in hopes of getting what they want. While this meme lacks the monstrous quality, it does function to neatly turn a warrior into a more surmountable subject.

In kind, Figure 6 imagines the SJW brain as something wholly different and marked by its irrational emotionality. At its core (the literal center of this diagram) is the "PC lobe" filled with ideas about speech codes and multiculturalism. The smallest nodes are those related to rational thought and in a mirror of Figure 4, this meme imagines the SJW as lacking both personal responsibility and a willingness to work. Tellingly, the SJW's sense of humor is pictured as being exceptionally small and underdeveloped, while their brain is infected with a "smarter than thou" tumor. Ahmed's (2010) depiction of the "feminist killjoy" is particularly illustrative in this regard, as it highlights the expectation that feminists (and other marginalized groups) exist solely to kill the joy of others.[2] She writes, "feminists by declaring themselves as feminists are already read as destroying something that is thought of by others as not only being good but the cause of happiness. The feminist killjoy 'spoils' the happiness of others; she is a spoilsport because she refuses to convene, to assemble, or to meet up over happiness" (p. 65). The same could be said for the "social justice warrior." Their very presence and unwillingness to be silent or happy with things as they are "spoils" the happiness of those within the "alt-right" who view identity politics as passé or the domain of privileged white women.

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[2] While the phrase "feminist killjoy" has been appropriated by some feminists, this was not Ahmed's original intent.

During #Gamergate, the SJW came to represent a literal spoilsport – the one who fails to derive happiness properly from the games that GGs enjoyed. Or, rather, perversely derived happiness from spoiling the "game" for others by pointing out problematic representations and systemic issues within the gaming industry. The SJW is therefore cast as the "other" by these communities. They do not properly derive pleasure from the right things. Indeed, their brains are entirely different and their reasoning is emotional rather than rational. Thus, they require a different response. Unwilling to listen to "logical" appeals, the SJW is portrayed as someone who will yell simply for the joy of yelling, who is both incapable or fathom "hearing" opposing views, while also being offended on their own (or even more damning) others' behalf. We can see this in the crying babies, or the belligerent "FUCK YOU" yell of Figure 3. The mouths of the memes all employ angry scowls or are drawn mid-yell. Thus, per this imagery, they can be ignored or attacked, but never reasoned with. They are a different species than a "normal" person and are thus lesser.

The Diseased and the Monstrous

In the previous sections, we discussed how the brains and bodies of SJWs depicted in the "alt-right" meme are displayed as "different," and sometimes unattractive. Unattractive, within these spaces can rapidly turn into visual depictions of both "diseased" and ultimately "monstrous." We argue that while some of the name-calling depicted in the previous section is ultimately harmless, there are kernels of hate speech that inflect the visual coding of the meme. Hand-drawn images, for example, show the SJW character as unruly, angry, and visually less human. Other images depict the subject of the meme as

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mentally ill – one showed the SJW in a straightjacket, tongue out, with eyes bulging out of her head. Here, we see ablest premises built into the discussion of representations of the non-normative bodies that SJWs are depicted with. This pejorative depiction of "insanity" clearly equates the "irrationality" of the subject with mental illness. Thus, this builds on the bodies of the previous section; it is no longer enough to show a "different" brain, now that brain is necessarily diseased, and mentally ill. Improper bodies, it would seem, always lead to monstrous bodies. And, in turn, these monstrous bodies are almost always feminized in some way.

As the theme of improper bodies is par for the SJW meme, they quickly begin to move towards notions of the diseased, and ultimately, the monstrous. While the above iterations of the meme might imply that the SJW is different – both in terms of body and mind – that difference becomes increasingly entangled with versions of the meme that suggest SJWs are, at their core, diseased or "cancerous." One iteration uses an image from the Queer-friendly show *Steven Universe* with the words, "SJWS ARE CANCER" (with no further explanation), while another uses the image of a woman commonly associated with the SJW meme and the words "THIS IS CANCER DON'T BE CANCER." The use of the term cancer implies several things simultaneously. First, it transforms the bodily into a dehumanizing rhetoric that turns a straw man caricature into a weaponized biological function. Second, it serves to suggest that the person embodying those traits must be eradicated. Third, it implies that if not eradicated, the SJW will spread to others. It is at this moment that we can begin to see how a meme that typifies hate speech can rapidly shift into the beginnings of what might be construed as genocidal or eliminationist rhetoric.

It is with these references towards cancerous that the SJW body transforms into the monstrous within the meme, almost seamlessly. Some of the monstrous just broaches the bodies of SJWs as cartoonishly unattractive. Others begin to turn the unattractive bodies into bodies that move beyond human. For example Figure 7 depicts a human with two heads, arguing on either sides of the "free speech" issue with contradictory arguments. The resultant monstrous body neatly takes the rhetoric of the previous memes (that SJWs contradict themselves) and turns it into an impossible monster. This is even more the case with Figure 8, depicting a woman's head atop a monstrous insect body with the label "SJW VIRUS" followed by "corrupting this generation and the younger generation – hopefully it dies off before the 2020's…" The SJW, which began as mostly drawn as "unattractive," now transforms into a full-blown monstrous body, with viral or cancerous tendencies. Other monstrous SJWs feature more attractive versions, such as one cartoon that features a character with a traditionally feminine body, but blue and with horns.

Discussion: SJWs, Hate Speech and Genocidal Rhetoric

By transforming a "warrior" into an SJW, and then subsequently turning that SJW from "unattractive" and "different" to "diseased" and "monstrous" we can see the memetic power of the "alt-right." To this end, we argue that memes have the potential violence of off-line materials and other forms of propaganda, potentially leading to violent hate speech or even push towards genocidal rhetoric. This last point might seem to be a stretch; one might ask how silly cartoons might lead people towards this level of

violence, however research on hate speech and genocide illustrates that specific words and images have meanings that help to condition audiences towards certain actions.

In thinking about the power of hate speech, it is useful to briefly unpack the word "hate" and its use in online spaces. Obviously, hate speech in not referring to an emotion of disdain – the concern is not whether the creators of the "alt-right" meme dislike SJWs on a personal level. Susan Opotow and Sara I. McClelland (2007) argue that hate is more than an emotion, it is a "justice construct." They explain, "Hate can trigger injustice, and injustice has the capacity to trigger derogation and violence" (p. 69). Ultimately, Opotow and McClelland's research on several communities where eliminationist and genocidal rhetoric has occurred suggests that hate is a priming element to trigger acts of injustice. Online spaces are, obviously, just as susceptible to hate speech as regional geographies. Long before our current political upheavals, websites such as *StormFront* were studied for their preponderance of hate speech. Christopher Brown (2009) explains, "Hate groups no longer have to communicate in isolation, search for people to hear their message, or distribute leaflets on foot. The Internet provides them immediate access to their followers and makes it easier to spread messages of hate" (p. 190). We are at a moment where eliminationist rhetoric that was once regional or ideologically specific can spread rapidly, now, due to the ubiquity of the internet and the movement of memes online. Memes, in this way, are the new frontline of hate speech.

While some of that hate speech is relatively harmless – straw men waiting to be pushed over to create arguments, the memes that use the monstrous and the diseased neatly suggest what Daniel Jonah Goldhagen (2009) refers to as eliminationist rhetoric – a precursor to genocidal acts. He explains, "Language and images dehumanizing or

demonizing others communicate to those listening and sharing the discussion's assumptions that an eliminationist drive against the disparaged and despised people makes sense. If a being is like a disease, or a bug, or a wild animal, or a barbarian, incapable of being reasoned with [...] destroy the threat, or extirpate the evil" (p. 330). At the core of Goldhagen's argument is that in order to justify acts of ultimate violence seeded by hate, one must dehumanize the object of that violence. Dehumanization may be in the form of disease (SJW as cancer or virus), or may be transformed into demonic entities. The latter, in the SJW memes is composed entirely by imagery: angrily drawn characters that appear more monstrous than human, shrieking nonsense. Certainly, the blue horned SJW provides an apt example of this kind of monstrous rhetoric. The monstrous and the diseased, however, is always just beneath the memetic utterances of how the "alt-right" depicts the SJW. If othering ambiguities of gender or talking about "wrong" brains are part of the anti-SJW discourse, than much of it leads directly back to the themes of monstrosity and disease.

It is here that we return to the monstrous feminine. The monstrous feminine is a mode of allowing for and enabling a kind of Cartesian logic wherein the ideologies and bodies connected to them are inextricably linked. When those bodies are feminine or feminized bodies, bearing the burden of hate speech it helps to transform them into the monstrous feminine. This double bind, according to Elizabeth Reis (1995), helped to create the space for the witch trials in Puritan New England. In a similar way, Edward J. Ingebretsen (2001) suggests that women are typically represented as a moral danger, rather than a physical one, even within the sphere of the monstrous. In other words, a "social justice warrior" (even spelled out) is a danger because of the monstrosities the

term portends in terms of the morality of the justice served. The monster at the center of the SJW is always feminized (even when male) and is always intellectually damaged and (therefore) morally corrupt.

Conclusion: Reclaiming the Monstrous

The SJW meme is a powerful one. It repositions an existing narrative in a way that villainizes femininity (via "monstrous feminine,") and uses the ambivalence of memetic style to mutate that meme, from disparaging to a kind of hate speech. The meme, for sure, is monster-making in quite literal ways: from grotesque, angry androgyny to literal representations of monsters and disease, the meme functions to dehumanize its subject. This dehumanization is at the core of why this meme is an important one to study: as the "alt-right" continues to gain momentum, deploying the internet as its primary weaponry, we need a better sense of what those weapons look like.

But it is also full of contradictions – a kind of memetic ambivalence. Per the "alt-right," the SJW is both a warrior and harmless; it is both a disease and lacking in the ability to sustain itself with logic; it is both monstrous and toothless. It is difficult to combat a meme that teases at the possibility of eliminationist rhetoric, while simultaneously ridiculing its subject as feeble. It is difficult to find a place between the horror and abject of the monstrous and the toothlessness of its reconstruction as an SJW. These contradictions suggest the meaning of the SJW isn't fully formed or fixed yet – and this reality offers the possibility of resistance by those who might reclaim the SJW for themselves as a positive moniker.

In this way, it might be useful to think of older characters that embodied the monstrous feminine. Famously, in "The Laugh of Medusa," Hélène Cixous (1976) writes about feminine style and writing, and (more broadly) feminist theory. She uses the Greek myth as an iconic example of the misunderstood, monstrous feminine writing, "You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and laughing." (p. 885). A monster does not choose to be a monstrosity, just as the "social justice warrior" did not choose to be transformed into an SJW. A monster, however, is not without teeth. It is through Cixous' depiction of Medusa's laughter that we can see a way forward in reclaiming and recapturing the violent and eliminationist potential of the SJW meme. Laughter and playfulness are what allows the othered body to regain agency in her representation. The image of the monster, here is powerful and feminist. She is a maligned character that may not own her fate, but certainly owns her gaze.

In October of 2014, shortly after #Gamergate, a woman named Sarah Nixon decided to push back against the term "Social Justice Warrior." In response, she created a series of buttons, using online gaming "classes" to revamp the concept of "Social Justice Warrior." Her buttons, which she sold for $2 each, included other modes of "social justice," including "Social Justice Cleric," "Social Justice Mage," and "Social Justice Rogue." The response from audiences was overwhelmingly positive, with the online magazine *The Mary Sue* remarking, "As far as misguided insults from Internet-based jerks go, the new hotness for the past couple of months has been 'social justice warrior.' As a slur, it's quite effective. I mean, *clearly* some of us are social justice bards and social justice wizards, and being mis-classed like that can be very upsetting" (Victoria

McNally 2014). Surely, many who encountered the meme who were not part of the "alt-right" were similarly confounded – what was wrong with being a warrior? This moment, the reclaiming of the term and use in non-violent ways is a step towards Cixous' laughter.

In many ways, this tactic of laughter nicely references Whitney Phillips' (2015) important book on troll culture, *This is Why We Can't Have Nice Things*. In her conclusion, Phillips writes that the primary mode of regaining agency within troll culture is to "troll back." In short, she suggests turning the troll tactics back around in order to generate an emotional response that – if done successfully – might unhinge these methods of harassment. Certainly, to this end, the social justice class pins are on the right track. But taking this a step further, and pushing at Cixous' larger argument, perhaps rather than denying the monstrous feminine we should embrace her for her possibilities and for her teeth. Rather than Social Justice Warriors, perhaps, we need more Social Justice Monsters.

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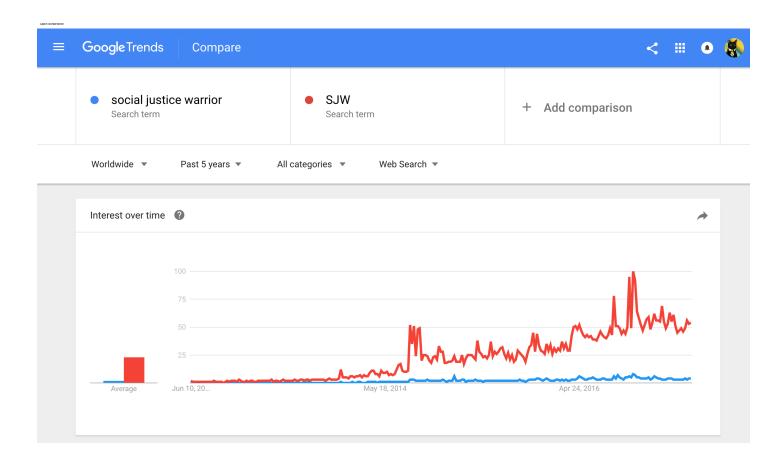
      Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Figure 1: Google Trends data for "Social Justice Warrior" and SJW (retrieved June 5, 2017)

Figure 2: SJW as inhabiting androgynous bodies

Figure 3: The difference between justice and social justice
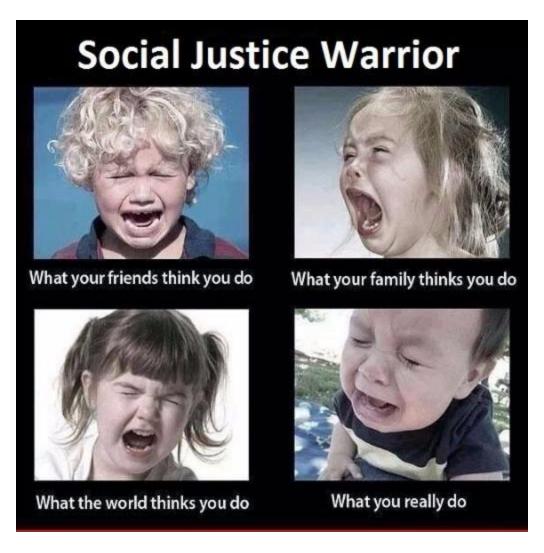
Figure 4: Anatomy of a SJW
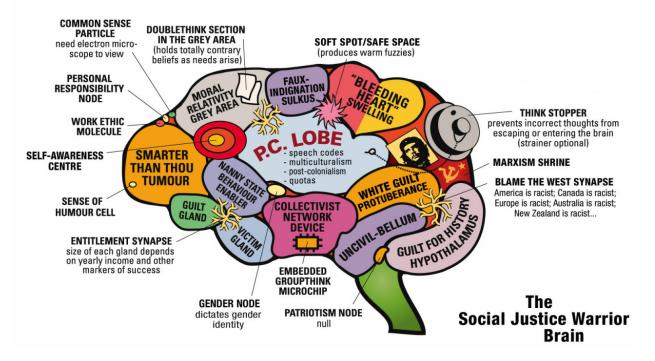
Figure 5: Social Justice Warrior (as crying baby)

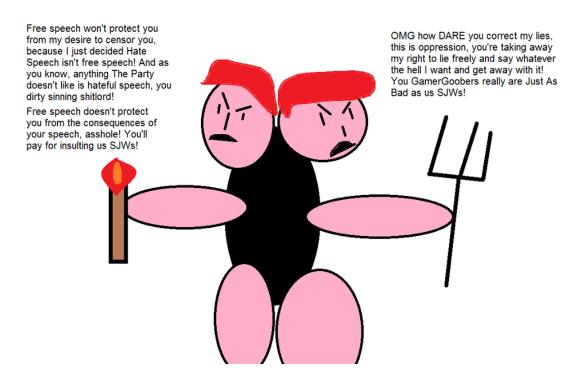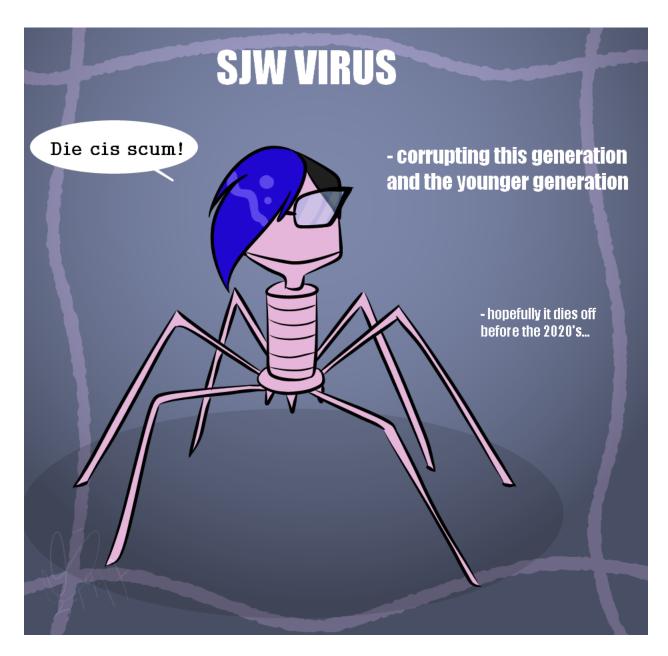**Figure 6: The Social Justice Warrior Brain**

Figure 7: The Two headed SJW

Figure 8: The SJW Virus