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Get Gritty with it: memetic icons and the visual ethos of antifascism

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ABSTRACT

This essay tracks how Gritty, the new mascot of the Philadelphia Flyers hockey team, emerged as a memetic icon for antifascism and the sometimes-contradictory ethos of far-left online publics. Emerging through expressive sharing, remixing, and appropriation of widely recognizable figures, memetic icons come to embody the ethos of publics, helping them foment dissent. Gritty specifically came to embody antifascists' incivility towards fascism, as well as their desire to create a more just world. This article demonstrates how memes serve as an organizing tool for anti-capitalist politics and how tracing the circulation of images within publics shows how they produce icons.

ARTICLE HISTORY

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Introduction

On September 24, 2018, the Philadelphia Flyers hockey team unveiled an orange, furry, and rotund mascot named Gritty. Gritty's introduction on social media spurred expressions of horror at their dishevelled appearance and wide-eyed smile, as well as proclamations that they embodied Philadelphia's rough-and-tumble reputation.¹ Soon, anti-fascist and far-left communities began memeing, or remixing, sharing, appropriating, replicating, and circulating images and other objects featuring Gritty as an avatar of leftist politics.² Within weeks, Gritty went from a sports mascot to an antifascist icon, with both the internet and the Philadelphia City Council officially declaring "Gritty is Antifa."³

This article tracks how, through the rhetorical labor of memeing, antifascist and far-left online publics constituted Gritty as a memetic icon that embodied their ethos. Memetic icons are widely recognized and enduring public objects that are appropriated, remixed, shared, and replicated by particular publics. In some instances, memetic icons can become avatars for the ethos of the publics that circulate them, coming to embody their collective virtues, practical reasoning, and goodwill. Attention to Gritty's circulation demonstrates how memes both facilitate individual humorous expressions in online spaces and serve as a vehicle for performing the public character of networked publics. We argue that memetic icons come to embody the ethos of publics through their participants' uncoordinated, yet mutually constitutive, memetic labor.

As a memetic icon for their sometimes-contradictory ethos, Gritty embodied the tensions within antifascist groups' uncivil, and sometimes violent, politics aimed at creating a more just and friendly world. Gritty came to embody these contradictions between incivility and inclusivity through appropriations that use ironic slogans and absurdist humour to express radical antifascism's commitments to incivility, intersectionality, and revolutionary anti-capitalist struggle. By valorizing these characteristics and dispositions, the Flyers' mascot became a synecdoche for publics seeking to challenge fascism and its capitalist, white supremacist, nationalist, and heterosexist precursors. In that sense, Gritty's status as a memetic icon serves as an important counter-example to the growing body of literature about the role of memes in the spread of racist and fascist narratives of national decline.⁴ Tracing Gritty's movement through radically antifascist online publics shows how memes also play a role in left-wing and anti-capitalist social movement organizing as well as public formation more generally.

The remainder of the article unfolds in five sections. First, we draw on literature in visual and digital rhetoric to theorize the role of memetic icons in establishing the ethos of publics. The following section shows how the tactics radical antifascists use to challenge extant racist, fascist, and capitalist violence constitutes this political movement's paradoxical ethos of incivility and inclusivity. We then describe Gritty's transformation from corporate mascot to leftist political icon before, in the fourth section, analyzing how this icon came to embody the revolutionary ethos of antifascist online publics. The conclusion reflects on the persistence of Gritty memes after the 2020 election as a means of foregrounding the importance of memetic rhetorical labor for linking memetic icons with the ethos of particular publics.

Memetic icons and the ethos of networked publics

This section draws together rhetorical theories of ethos, icons, and memes to offer a theory of "memetic icons." We define memetic icons as prominent visual figures that become linked to particular publics through the rhetorical labor of memeing, or remixing, sharing, appropriating, replicating and circulating images and other (primarily, but not exclusively) digital media. Participants within networked publics produce and circulate memetic icons that function as constitutive expressions of their identifications and values. In doing so, participants develop and alter the collective values and meanings of their publics, cultivating a particular visual ethos. By modulating how they meme icons in relation to the stream of other participants' expressions, networked publics' participants engage in humorous modes of co-belonging that help articulate their character. More than just a conduit of humorous expression, memetic labor participates in the struggles over power and identity that shape and are shaped by their social and economic contexts.

Ethos traditionally refers to how individual speakers establish their credibility by demonstrating their practical wisdom, goodwill towards audiences, and virtue.⁵ While Aristotle emphasizes that ethos arises from individual rhetors, Kristie S. Fleckenstein shows how qualities such as goodwill and virtue were only legible in reference to broader ecologies of speakers and audiences within Greek city-states.⁶ Recent rhetorical scholarship extends ethos' collective qualities by framing this proof as the shared modes of being-in-public of publics cultivating dissent to the social order. Erik Doxtader shows

how dissenting publics' refusal of the dominant terms of public life often invites cohabitation in new modes of co-belonging. The dividend of dissent's ethos is "a self-ful commitment to inventing the terms of public life in the face of institutional assimilation or majoritarian exclusion and a simultaneous commitment to objectify this same sense of self to the benefit of the Other."⁷ Dissent disavows the old order and invites affiliations into new modes of publicness. Public performances help construct oppositional forms of ethos, as Maegan Parker Brooks discovers in the case of Fannie Lou Hamer's vernacular and oppositional rhetorical persona.⁸ Just as speakers can garner credibility by demonstrating virtues that cohere with circulating assumptions, publics can cultivate an oppositional ethos by forwarding values that compose their collectivity and challenge the current order.

The increasing prominence of digital networks in public life amplifies ethos' more-than-individual characteristics.⁹ For Byron Hawk, ethos online refers to "a relational, network logic"¹⁰ which moves between bodies rather than being linked to a single speaker's credibility. Drawing on theories of cybernetics, Fleckstein similarly figures "cyber *ethos*" as "a living network consisting of rhetoric, text, audience, and context"¹¹ guided by the affordances of media architectures and constructed through information flows. Communicators and their audiences are always interacting, in real time, constituting a collective ethos from expressions that they modulate in response to one another. Dissenting publics subsequently construct their ethos through emergent expressions of opposition to the dominant order.

For our purposes, ethos describes how particular networked publics labor to construct their collective values and, in so doing, perform their virtue, practical reasoning, and goodwill. By sharing memes, posting, and interacting through communication networks, individuals collectively develop shared sets of meanings and values that can attract adherents, exclude particular groups, and shape their external credibility. This theory of ethos contributes to rhetorical scholarship about digital publics and visual rhetoric by foregrounding how networked publics' participants deploy memetic icons to simultaneously constitute, and perform the character of, their online communities.

Our formulation builds on theories of networked individualism that describe both how "personal communities are loosely-knit with heterogeneous and often far-flung members" and how "individuals fine tune their networking structure to individual alters."¹² Through common networked communication practices, individuals shape increasingly close-knit communities despite their geographical distance. While these communities emerge from individuals' discrete expressions modulated in response to their broader ecologies, they simultaneously construct collective texts that contribute to their ethos. By attuning to how publics' expressive labor cultivates their reputation, and disposition, we emphasize how "humans work to willfully and collectively shape rhetorical ecologies."¹³ Each image, .gif, video, or other memetic artifact serves as an individual expression that, when participating in the constitution of a memetic icon, simultaneously helps cultivate the public's collective virtues and goodwill.

The expansion of the digital realm amplifies images' rhetorical currency, making them a crucial technology through which networked publics construct their ethos. Networks' increasing importance in shaping everyday life and concomitant expansion of participatory culture (in which individuals produce, remix, and share content) has amplified memes' importance to public communication. Memes are images or other replicable

media that are shared online, occasionally accompanied with textual captions, meant for quick circulation across networked publics. Rhetorical scholars have variably theorized memes as argument,¹⁴ political rhetoric,¹⁵ racial rhetoric,¹⁶ modal rhetoric,¹⁷ and as lively material rhetorics.¹⁸

Participants in networked publics use memes to constitute their publics' collective identities and ethos. Extensive work in media and folklore studies highlights how memetic labor constructs online publics and their reputation. Limor Shifman describes how sharing and recreating memes function as "the cultural embodiment of 'networked individualism': it allows people to be 'themselves,' together."¹⁹ Their role in community formation leads Noam Gal, Shifman, and Zehner Kampf to describe "memes as performative acts, applied both for persuasive purposes ... and for the construction of collective identity and norms."²⁰ As self-expressions, memes simultaneously construct the identities of publics and persuade outside audiences. Ryan M. Milner describes memetics as social practices that rely on new media's underlying logics of "multimodality, reappropriation, resonance, collectivism, and spread."²¹ Through these affordances, users repurpose and spread images and other media, composing collective identities and narratives. Memes can be described then, as individual expressions "woven from and into collective fabric."²² Together, through their mutual appropriation and sharing, participants develop and modulate collective vernaculars of images, languages, and memetic formats. Each image or other expression contributes to their shared values, norms, and identities that simultaneously establish their credibility.

Figuring memes as collective self-expressions that help constitute communal identities, norms, and narratives expands our understandings of how visual rhetoric helps form publics and their ethos. Indeed, rhetorical scholars have shown how data visualizations help establish climate scientists' credibility,²³ how Smokey the Bear figured the reputation of a largely white and male environmental movement,²⁴ and how the Trump campaign "embodied the ethos" of the icon of Pepe the Frog.²⁵ Graphs, cartoons, memes, and other images provide visual cues that can help discern the virtues publics attempt to embody. Yet, these images also contribute to forming the publics themselves, helping constitute the shared practices and vernaculars from which audiences can read their reputation. Icons in particular are a significant site of constitutive rhetoric for the publics that produce, share, and view them.

Within rhetorical studies, the term "icon" ambivalently signifies both an image of outstanding cultural importance and an image that serves as a fitting representation of its referent.²⁶ For Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, an image's iconicity comes from its meaningfulness and emotional power for broad swathes of the public, regardless of potential contradictions and capacities for divergent interpretations.²⁷ Following this description, rhetorical scholars have produced rich accounts of icon generation as a social and affective process intimately involved in constituting publics. Caitlin Bruce poses icons as visual sites of affective emergence for particular publics, naming Pussy Riot's balaclava facemask as an "affect generator," a kind of "mechanical feedback of investment, energy, and meaning making."²⁸ Balaclavas help form publics as they make meanings and generate affects through their transnational circulation. Eric Jenkins, in his engagement with commercials for the iPod, shows how icons can serve as synecdoches, or concrete embodiments of broader ethos or sets of meanings, for religions and corporations seeking to evoke transcendent experience.²⁹ By straddling the line between a

realistic object and symbol of transcendence, the icon can stand in and evoke the ethos of entire organizations. Icons are one example of affectively powerful images rhetors use to participate in, and shape, publics' performances of group identity.

Contemporary media ecologies prompt novel methods of analysis that grapple with memes' often-unstable meanings and, in so doing, show how attending to memetic icons can illuminate how publics intervene in struggles within the public sphere. Because circulating images move rapidly across rhetorical situations, Jenkins argues that isolating single images or memes within a stable context "can result in a neglect of the lively modes of engagement which cause memes to circulate in the first place."³⁰ Similarly, Laurie Gries argues that by analyzing images within "regimes of representation" made legible by specific audiences and contexts, visual rhetoric "eclipses [the] ontological complexity" of images' rhetorical life.³¹ As an alternative method, Gries proposes "iconographic tracking" whereby scholars trace how images flow across distributed networks.³² Rather than imposing structuralist notions of power, race, gender, or sexuality onto images, rhetoricians are invited to follow and describe the diverse paths of images.³³

While both scholars emphasize how the affective force of images exceeds representational fixity, Jenkins criticizes Gries for obfuscating the analysis of how power shapes the contexts through which images flow.³⁴ Jenkins prefers a modal materialist approach that takes seriously the social relations involved in producing and sharing memes. A modal approach encourages critics to ask questions such as: "How do such practices, patterns, and structures of circulation shape social dynamics? What role do such images play in the spread of particular ideologies or the exercise of power?"³⁵ These questions help explore how memes are embedded within and respond to concrete social contexts and political struggles.

Following Jenkins' call for attention to how rhetorical practices and modes contextualize online images, we wager that memeing icons simultaneously constitutes networked publics and performs their ethos. Woods and Hahner, for instance, demonstrate how the alt-right, a group of far-right agitators, gradually appropriated Pepe the Frog, a cartoon amphibian with humanoid features first drawn by Matt Furie for his *Boy's Club* books, as a symbol of racial violence and backlash against social justice-oriented culture. Ultimately, Pepe came to embody the Trump campaign's ethos, which gained prominence by breaking widely perceived norms of civility.³⁶ Icons such as Pepe the Frog can become synecdoches for the political beliefs, attitudes, and desired characteristics of publics.

By establishing, circulating, and transforming particular memetic icons like Gritty, participants simultaneously help constitute networked publics and imbue them with a sense of ethos. Particular memes, like Gritty, become iconic for publics insofar as those publics' participants perceive those figures as fitting embodiments of the public's idealized characteristics. In turn, networked publics' participants repetitively remix these memetic icons in service of unique and discrete expressive practices, contributing to their broader resonances for their given public. Memetic icons take on the characteristics of the publics that meme them, functioning as fictionalized, exaggerated, and humorous expressions of participants' idealized values and behaviors that draw them to participation in a given public. Pepe, Gritty, and similar memetic icons can subsequently be read as synecdoches for collective virtues, goodwill, and practical reasoning,

as much as they serve as strands of the collective tapestry of individualized participation in networked publics. Through the rhetorical labor of antifascist publics, a strange but indeterminate corporate mascot would eventually become an icon that stands in for the broader ethos of leftist organizing online.

Radical antifascism and its online publics

In this section, we describe the paradoxical ethos of radical antifascist online publics. On the one hand, radical antifascism emphasizes the occasional necessity of violent direct action for establishing social, rather than legal, prohibitions against fascist discourses. On the other hand, antifascists also broadly adhere to left-leaning political ideologies rooted in creating an inclusive and more just world without fascism and its interlocking ideologies of racism, capitalism, and heteropatriarchy. Radical antifascist online publics embody the tensions between desiring a better world and judging that uncivil speech and direct action are necessary to achieve it.

Unsurprisingly, antifascism opposes fascist organizing and speech. Fascism, as a discourse and politics, is characterized by an obsessive desire to restore national unity by eliminating the ethnic, racial, gendered, or sexualized Others it blames for national decline.³⁷ The alt-right is the most visible contemporary American manifestation of fascism. While sometimes appearing as an offshoot of mainstream white American masculinity, alt-right groups and speakers either proffer explicit visions of a fascist society or spread its hateful precursors.³⁸ Rather than explicitly identifying as fascists, the alt-right broadens its appeal by cloaking visions of a “white ethno-state” and a restored American masculinity in ironic memes and pretensions of respectability that nevertheless propel participants towards violent political action.³⁹

We define antifascism as active opposition to explicitly fascist movements as well as groups spreading hate and narratives of national victimage, such as the alt-right. Perhaps the most visible tendency within this movement is what Mark Bray calls “radical antifascism.”⁴⁰ Radical antifascist groups, popularly called “Antifa,” engage in direct actions aimed at disrupting fascist speech. Many radical antifascist groups view struggles against racism, ecological injustice, police brutality, and worker exploitation as intimately linked with the fight against fascism’s narratives of social decline. Following Trump’s election and subsequent mainstreaming of the alt-right and white supremacy, radically antifascist online spaces saw an influx of participants while their organizations were figured as excessively uncivil or violent by both legacy media outlets and right-wing politicians.⁴¹

Radical antifascists emphasize establishing social, rather than legal, limitations on fascist speech. Legal restrictions on fascist rhetoric, radical antifascists argue, fail to prevent the rise of far-right movements while providing governments tools for targeting leftist protestors with greater intensity.⁴² Curbing fascism through measured deliberation, they argue, demonstrates a lack of wisdom regarding the legitimacy of fascism’s selective appeals to democratic principles. Indeed, liberalism’s preference for good-faith deliberations grounded in truth remains unable to “break through to a fascist epistemology of power and domination.”⁴³ In response, radical antifascists engage in uncivil direct action to challenge fascist rhetorical advances, demonstrating their virtue and intelligence by discerning between genuine attempts at dialogue and bad-faith arguments. Antifascists’ violence not only aims to shatter fascists’ bad-faith epistemology

by refusing debate, it renders visible the violence of their everyday attacks on communities and promises of national cleansing. Antifascist direct actions subsequently aim to shame fascists and create “a web of personal and professional consequences” for their organizing, including unemployment and financial instability.⁴⁴ They do so by exposing fascists, infiltrating their virtual and in-person spaces, petitioning for their removal from social media and web hosting services, demanding the cancellation of their public appearances, and occasionally rioting to shut down their rallies. Such tactics violate the norms of civility by challenging the presumed inviolability of political speech, cultivating both what Lozano-Reich and Cloud might call “an uncivil tongue”⁴⁵ and a penchant for violence in the service of antifascist principles.

Radical antifascists also generally cultivate an ethos of intersectional anti-capitalism. While proffering visions of a friendlier world appear in contrast with their incivility, militant antifascists emphasize that racist, heterosexist, and nationalist discourses, as well as rampant economic inequality, produce arable recruiting grounds for reactionary movements. Characterized by “anti-racist, post-colonial, anti-queerphobia, anti-transphobia, and feminist organizing,”⁴⁶ militant antifascists envision a more socially and economically equal society. Anarchist, communist, socialist, and broadly leftist identity-centric antifascists subsequently name, to varying degrees, the current legal system, state, and even the public sphere as complicit with the conditions that give rise to fascist movements.⁴⁷ Despite their diversity, radical antifascist groups generally define their character in response to these interlocking oppressions, demonstrating goodwill and political virtue through staunch dissent to the current order.

Antifascists often use social media to propagate messages, garner adherents, and express collective values. Twitter, according to Adam Klein, “... can act as a staging ground for political hostilities to swell, circulate, and sometimes activate the call for confrontation.”⁴⁸ Broad networks of Twitter accounts pose antifascism as a global movement, connecting American activists, Kurdish freedom fighters, European anti-Nazi protests, and even anti-government movements in the Philippines.⁴⁹ Antifascists also use social media platforms, including Reddit and sometimes Facebook, to recruit and activate new members. The alt-right’s rise and Trump’s election propelled what Ellis describes as “... a huge influx of social media-focused, younger antifascists ...” who engage in “meme wars” against their ideological counterparts.⁵⁰ Remixes of a video featuring a black-clad protestor punching Richard Spencer before Trump’s inauguration, for instance, serve as widely-shared avatars for de-platforming fascists through direct action. By sharing content that demonstrates purposeful incivility towards far-right partisans, these networked publics’ participants both express their self-identifications and contribute to an emerging antifascist ethos. By attending to how antifascist publics circulated Gritty memes to comically express their seemingly contradictory virtues and reasoning, we show how this mascot came to embody these online publics’ uncivil opposition to racism, heterosexism, nationalism, and capitalism. We thus demonstrate how memetic icons can become synecdoches for the character of online publics seeking to challenge the terms of civic discourse.

Gritty’s rise

We trace Gritty’s initial circulation, appropriation, remixing, and replication as they moved from newly revealed corporate mascot to icon of radically antifascist online

publics. Gritty was announced as the Flyers' mascot from the mascot's official Twitter account on September 24, 2018.⁵¹ Shortly after this initial Tweet, users remixed Gritty into memes pointing to the mascot's creepy, almost threatening, wide eyes and smile. With an oddly maniacal stare, gangly orange fur, and a penchant for hurling online insults, Gritty quickly became an online sensation and synecdoche for antifascist networked publics.

Shortly after the first official Tweet, left-wing and antifascist communities appropriated Gritty as an icon. While pinpointing the first such recontextualization is difficult, Crouch traces it to "socialist magazine Jacobin" tweeting "Gritty is a Worker" on September 26, 2018 and Gritty's appearance on signs and banners at an anti-Trump protest on October 1.⁵² Gritty quickly became a prosopoetic object, a ventriloquist's dummy, for radically antifascist slogans such as "The only good fascist is a dead fascist"⁵³ and "When our time comes we will not make excuses for the terror."⁵⁴ Images of numerous protest placards and stickers featuring Gritty alongside slogans like "Get fucked forever, racist Proud Boy trash,"⁵⁵ and "Philly crushes fascists"⁵⁶ also circulated in the following months. Shortly after their announcement as the Flyers mascot, Gritty was on their way to becoming an explicitly antifascist icon.

In the process of becoming an icon, Gritty appeared on material objects and circulated internationally, becoming a symbol of global antifascist solidarity. Alongside their placards and stickers, some demonstrators wore homemade crocheted Gritty masks and costumes.⁵⁷ Gritty adorned commemorative objects created and advertised online by leftist DIY crafters. Flaming Idols, an Etsy shop that creates votive candles [Figure 1] featuring icons of the LGBTQ community, began offering a Gritty candle dedicated to the "queer monster" who "quickly became aligned with The Underdog, gender non-conformity and anti-fascism."⁵⁸ Gritty also appeared on Christmas ornaments alongside the "Good Night Alt-Right" slogan⁵⁹ and even a guillotine themed gingerbread house.⁶⁰ Internationally, a Gritty mural emblazoned with the slogan "Antifa Worldwide" appeared in Copenhagen, Denmark⁶¹ and numerous global online publics circulated memes featuring the emergent icon. Gritty's widespread, transnational, multimodal circulation exemplifies how "dissent practices work through multiple media, change forms and platforms, and flow across borders, functioning more as an aesthetic and social process than as static products."⁶² As leftist publics circulated these memes, placards, and other material objects, they transformed Gritty into an iconic embodiment of radical antifascism's ethos.

Some commentators bemoaned Gritty's growing associations with antifascist politics. Gritty's appropriation, according to some conservative pundits, deprived the City of Philadelphia of its rightful mascot while opening up yet another "battleground" in America's culture war.⁶³ These criticisms, however, miss an important point that communication scholars already know: mascots are in some sense always political, a quality that rendered Gritty ripe for appropriation. Consider controversies over sporting mascots that appropriate the identities, names, or likenesses of indigenous North Americans. Describing how "the mascotting of American Indian culture further perpetuates white hegemony,"⁶⁴ Jason Edward Black demonstrates how these mascots construct group identities, including university allegiances. Jackson Miller, Danielle Endres and others similarly show how indigenous mascots, ranging from the respectful and tribe-sanctioned to the explicitly offensive or parodic, serve as sites of contestation



Figure 1. [Picture of a hand holding a Flaming Idols 'Gritty candle with an orange picture of Gritty over a red field.] Rachel Miranda Wedig. Picture of Gritty Votive Candle, Facebook post to group "gritty memes for philly teens," 31 December 2018. <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10214913814211789&set=pcb.1996129617163167&type=3&theater&ifg=1>.

and debate over tribal sovereignty and identity.⁶⁵ Although not already associated with a social group, as with indigenous mascots, Gritty's status as a remixable commodity offered antifascist online publics a resource for collective expressions that constructed an icon for their values and goodwill.

The general politicization of mascots does not, however, explain why Gritty in particular became an icon for radically antifascist publics. Indeed, Crouch posits that their ridiculous appearance and remix-ability served as an opportunity for myriad publics to cement Gritty as an icon of their own ethos.⁶⁶ Yet, our analysis shows how Gritty's appearance as a smiling and dishevelled hockey hooligan lent itself to memes that embodied the particular tensions within radical antifascism's ethos. Simultaneously smiling cartoonishly, covered in orange fur, staring maniacally, a friendly mascot

with open arms, and dressed to play a violent sport, Gritty iconically resembled antifascism's seemingly contradictory revolutionary and uncivil politics aimed at creating a more accepting and just world. Despite these resonances, rhetorical labor nevertheless played a crucial role in a conflict between multiple publics over Gritty's meaning. By making, sharing, and discussing memes that expressed the tensions in radical antifascism's ethos, leftist online publics claimed the mascot as their own. In what follows, we attend to Gritty's transformation into an icon of antifascism's ethos. Specifically, we show how Gritty was crucial to the memeification of antifascist violence and incivility that drew upon their associations with the gritty sport of hockey, as well as how they were used as an avatar of propagating intersectional anti-capitalist slogans and action.

Gritty as uncivil icon

In this section, we detail how Gritty's emergence as a memetic icon expressed the seeming tensions between antifascism's violent and uncivil, yet simultaneously loveable and inclusive, ethos. Gritty's rise was inseparable from visible public controversies over radically antifascists' disposition towards sometimes violent direct action as a strategy for disrupting fascist organizing. Yet, simultaneously, numerous Gritty memes joyously revelled in this incivility as the harbinger of a more just world beyond the violence of capitalism, colonialism, racism, and patriarchy. Through radical antifascist publics' memetic labour, Gritty became a synecdoche for antifascism's goodwill towards the targets of fascism and demonstrations of practical wisdom through uncivil responses to fascist organizing.

Antifascists' uncivil tendencies gained notoriety amid national conversations regarding civility following the 2016 election. Both on the campaign trail and as President, Trump flaunted norms of democracy and civility, spurring right-wing nationalism through rhetorics of national decline and promises of violent retribution.⁶⁷ Trump encouraged violence against protestors at his rallies, advocated jailing his political opponents, and helped stoke rising nationalist, racist, and heterosexist rhetorics.⁶⁸ Many American leftists responded to the growing threat of fascist violence by adopting increasingly confrontational dispositions, a trend exemplified by spectacular protests against Trump's 2017 inauguration and the violent counter-protest against the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville. While initially responding to Trump's norm-breaking campaign, civility rhetoric soon became another tool for disingenuous appeals by right-wing and centrist politicians and pundits. Trump himself accused his opponents of incivility during 2018,⁶⁹ and civility rhetorics became a common response to growing demands for structural economic and social change. Indeed, 2017 and 2018 were marked by "a rise in the number of voices clamouring for a return to an era of centrism, consensus, and civility."⁷⁰ More than tone-policing uncivil speech and actions, many civility rhetorics sought to recuperate space for the defenses of fascist speech and capitalist accumulation, directly challenging the core tenets of radical antifascism's ethos.⁷¹

Gritty memes draw on ironic endorsements of violence and incivility to cultivate sound judgment against disingenuous civility rhetorics. Depicting an already comic mascot as the purveyor of righteous violence allows antifascist publics to embrace the latent possibility of uncivil responses to fascism while maintaining a veneer of distance

from serious calls to political violence. As Heather Woods and Leslie Hahner argue, “irony rests on the ambiguity of figuration” in order to “open up the field of signification.”⁷² Gritty memes, in short, exploit the gap between their literal meanings and the memes’ inherent playfulness to express opposition to reasoning with fascists while maintaining the credibility of a potential threat. Describing how fascists use humour to increase threatening and violent rhetorics’ palatability to broader publics, Kirsti K. Cole writes that “the use of humour and sarcasm does not dismiss the inherent threat but functions as a part of the discipline.”⁷³ Gritty turns these tactics of irony, sarcasm, and absurdist humour against the very idea of negotiating with the perpetrators of racism, heterosexism and economic inequality, forwarding an ethos that emphasizes the wisdom of incivility and the virtues of inclusion.

Gritty memes foreground radical antifascists’ disposition towards mayhem as a wise, and even virtuous, response to quotidian social violence. Hockey culture’s socially acceptable violence as well as the icon’s wild-eyed and monstrous appearance help characterize antifascism’s violence as a wise response to fascism’s brutalities, rather than a wanton embrace of violence *ex nihilo*. Ellen W. Gorsevski and Michael L. Butterworth detail how Muhammad Ali cultivated a “violent ethos”⁷⁴ through confrontational rhetoric wherein “the threat of violence [is] mixed with a non-violent commitment to justice.”⁷⁵ Similarly, Gritty memes came to embody antifascism’s confrontational ethos grounded in frank recognition of the inherent violence of fascist speech and global capitalism’s brutality, as well as liberalism’s civil, and ultimately unserious and unwise, acquiescence to these conditions. Gritty expresses, often humorously, the acceptability and even necessity of uncivility against the sources of everyday violence, helping to compose antifascist online publics’ ethos.

Many memes render absurd or comical threats of violent direct action, expressing the unacceptability of fascist organizing *tout court*. As an icon of antifascist ethos, Gritty does not reason, debate, or deliberate with fascists. Consider one of the earliest “Gritty is Antifa” memes that circulated beginning in early October 2018 [Figure 2]. Shared on Twitter,⁷⁶ Reddit,⁷⁷ 4Chan,⁷⁸ blogs,⁷⁹ and meme compilation sites,⁸⁰ this image features a wild-eyed Gritty menacing viewers with a T-shirt cannon. The images of Gritty are accompanied by a paraphrased quote from a conversation between former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and Soviet sniper Lyudmila Pavlichenko, one of the most famous women soldiers of World War Two: “How many men have I killed? Not men. I kill fascists.”⁸¹ This text recognizes and inverts fascism’s dehumanizing discourses as justification for excluding fascists from public life. By distinguishing “fascists” from “men,” or those traditionally deemed worthy of democratic participation, it reverses fascist discourses’ gendered, racialized, and economic standards of personhood. When combined with an ironic embrace of violence and incivility, Gritty’s disposition emphasizes the wisdom of direct action to enforce social prohibitions against fascism.

While the threat of violence in the statement “I kill fascists” is unmistakable, this image maintains an ironic distance from its literal meaning. Both participants in antifascist online publics and outside audiences may consume the meme’s kernel of truth – the necessity of social prohibitions against fascism – while distancing themselves from realistic threats of physical violence. Gritty’s T-shirt gun, haunting smile and dead-eyed stare, as well as their absurdly bright-orange yet monstrous appearance, encourage



Figure 2. [Black and White image of Gritty holding a t-shirt cannon next to a bright orange picture of Gritty's face with the meme text: "HOW MANY MEN HAVE I KILLED? NOT MEN / I KILL FASCISTS"] u/ Varysisamermaid, "Gritty, how many Men have you killed?" Reddit post to r/grittyisantifa, 29 October 2018, 21:54:02 GMT https://www.reddit.com/r/grittyisantifa/comments/9sk2gj/gritty_how_many_men_have_you_killed/

detachment while remaining vaguely threatening. Participants in antifascist publics may enjoy the threats of violence as an expression of their collective wisdom without plotting murders because they circulate on platforms where jokes, irony, and the construction of non-serious personas is commonplace. Simultaneously, this and similar memes soften antifascist publics' menacing, yet practical, reasoning that neither widespread right-wing violence nor disingenuous civility rhetorics are worthy of rational debate.

Many similar memes use humour to veil threats of direct action, emphasizing the wisdom of antifascists' incivility. Some invite enthymematic analogies between violence against historical fascists, like Benito Mussolini, and the contemporary situation, performatively demonstrating the necessity of incivility against all forms of fascism.⁸² Such memes pose fascists as deserving targets of violence alongside images of an excited Gritty, playing on the mascot's absurdity and audience expectations to invite ironic consumption. Other images ironically invoke right-wing slogans to address the tensions between antifascists' incivility and desire for a better world. One meme [Figure 3], for instance, ironically invokes the phrase "so much for the tolerant left" as the "last words" of Pepe the Frog, who is depicted in a guillotine's lunette atop a scaffold. In the next image, Gritty pulls the lever and executes the alt-right icon. Initially invented by conservative pundits to imply that proponents of equality and inclusion were hypocrites for opposing hatred and intolerance,⁸³ left-wing online publics later satirized this phrase to demonstrate its meaninglessness in the face of growing right-wing violence and incivility.⁸⁴ This and similar images thus embrace the tensions between antifascists'



Figure 3. [Four Panel Comic depicting Gitty with Pepe's head in a guillotine. First panel, Gitty says "ANY LAST WORDS." Second Panel, Pepe says "so much for the tolerant left." Third and fourth panel depict Gitty cutting Pepe's head off with the caption "CHOP".] @ryanryan_hi. "Gitty will win." Twitter, 15 November 2018, https://twitter.com/ryanryan_hi/status/1063048546574852096.

incivility and their desire for a more just world, figuring Gitty as the embodiment of their judgment that refusing to debate with fascists is a necessary step to achieving a better future. Taken as a whole, Gitty memes cut against civility rhetorics, forwarding radical antifascism's ethos through irony, sarcasm, and absurdist humour as a means of broadening its appeal.

More than simply cultivating an uncivil disposition toward fascist speech, however, Gitty memes also embodied antifascism's ethos of intersectional class consciousness. All of the ironic threats of violence, in other words, belie radical antifascists' aim of creating a more just and inclusive world. Indeed, Gitty's enduring salience is partially owed to vibrant anti-capitalist online communities that share significant overlap with explicitly antifascist digital spaces. Mostly composed of young leftists, many of these digital networks cohere around memes that express alienation and disgust in reaction to capitalism's unjust conditions.⁸⁵ Gitty's emergence coincided with the rise of Tankies (AKA:

young online Stalinists), the Socialist Meme Caucus, Leftist Memes for Vanguard Teens, and other anti-capitalist meme groups. Gritty's circulation through these publics as an icon for the desirability of violence against myriad oppressions and capitalist destruction contributed to their embodiment of the tensions between revolutionary incivility and visions of a more just society.

These anti-capitalist online publics memetically stylized Gritty as a revolutionary hero of the working class and advocate for objects of capitalist violence more generally. One meme depicts a factory floor with the caption: "That's a nice means of production you got there ..." The next two panels show a close up of Gritty's wild orange eyes, with the caption "Be a shame if someone ... seized it."⁸⁶ This and similar images forward the online anti-capitalist left's ethos by circulating Marxist ideas about seizing the means of production, showing how the implicit threats of violence are directed towards achieving economic justice. Other memes connect capitalism and the climate crisis. For example, one image appropriates the popular meme featuring Julie Andrews singing in the Austrian countryside with her arms spread widely in *The Sound of Music*.⁸⁷ While the best-known version of this image circulates with the caption "Look at all the fucks I give!," the Grittified version features the orange proletariat protagonist standing in Andrews' place under a caption reading: "THE ONLY WAY TO STOP CLIMATE CHANGE IS TO STOP CAPITALISM."⁸⁸ In these memes, Gritty embodies an explicitly revolutionary ethos rooted in a refusal to accept the structural violence of the capitalist *status quo*. Redeployed to emphasize the goals of antifascist incivility, Gritty comes to embody visions of a more friendly world characterized by economic and ecological justice rather than the capitalist exploitation and destruction. Gritty comes to express and embody the ideal characteristics of antifascist publics as rooted in the recognition of the interlinkages between antifascism, anti-capitalism, and ecological justice.

By extolling the virtues of guillotining billionaires, Gritty memes linked public performances of goodwill to a violent and revolutionary mode of class consciousness. A number of guillotine-themed Gritty memes explicitly situate the ruling class, widely reviled for cementing capitalist domination and corrupting democracy, as objects of scorn and cartoonish violence. One meme, shared on the Reddit page of the podcast Chapo Trap House, with the post title "Gritty's Death Tax," shows a wild-eyed Gritty in a hockey rink with their arms raised in celebratory repose with the caption: "The Higher the Salary/The Higher the Guillotine" [Figure 4]. Another, reminiscent of the Galaxy Brain meme format which shows an escalating series of extreme ideas, positions Gritty as the apex of a series of increasingly hostile political stances against the billionaire class, ultimately culminating in the threat of the guillotine [Figure 5]. Moving from least to most extreme responses to wealth inequality, this image enthymematically locates political wisdom in Gritty's chaotic violence, embodying growing frustrations with liberal reformism underlying antifascist incivility. Liberalism's inept responses to economic inequality have become so intolerable that, like the publics that circulate them, the lovable and goofy monster Gritty has been driven to violence and uncivil speech.

Gritty's uptake also consistently expressed radical antifascism's professed intersectionality, emphasizing these publics' idealized virtue of radical inclusivity and completing the icon's embodiment of the tensions characteristic of their ethos. In concert with anti-

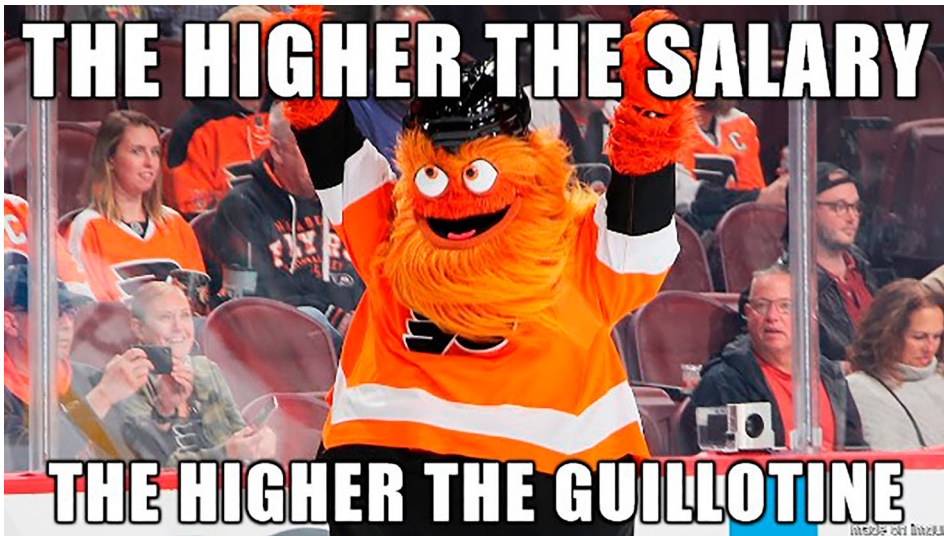


Figure 4. [Color photo of Gritty in a hockey rink in front of smiling fans with the meme caption “THE HIGHER THE SALARY / THE HIGHER THE GUILLOTINE”] u/The1stCitizenOfTheIn. “Gritty’s Death Tax,” Reddit post to r/ChaptoTrapHouse (2 November 2018) https://www.reddit.com/r/ChaptoTrapHouse/comments/9tn484/grittys_death_tax/

capitalist messaging, online publics variably mobilized Gritty as an icon for struggles against racism, sexism, and homophobia. One meme shows Gritty hugging Phillies mascot the Phillie Phanatic accompanied by the caption “Male intimacy and communication is a lethal weapon in the fight against patriarchy.”⁸⁹ Gritty also appeared at protests against the Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency, or I.C.E., a key front in struggles against Trump’s xenophobic immigration policy while anti-I.C.E. memes featuring Gritty circulated online.⁹⁰ Multimodal material objects using Gritty’s likeness expressed further these publics’ desired inclusivity. Votive candles celebrated Gritty the “queer monster” and champion of “gender non-conformity.”⁹¹ A member of the Gritty Memes for Philly Teens Facebook group posted an image from Durham, North Carolina, of a poster depicting Gritty wielding a hockey stick against someone wearing a Swastika. The caption, “MANY COLORS – ONE WORKING CLASS – against racism, sexism, homophobia, and capitalism,”⁹² expressed radical antifascists’ desire for a world without these interlocking oppressions. On the whole, Gritty’s memetic circulation situated the icon as the embodiment of the tensions within antifascist and left-wing publics’ ethos. Gritty came to stand in for the publics who hope to create a better world, free of fascism and the brutalities of capitalism and gendered, racialized, and sexual violence, but who are driven to incivility and violence by the seeming irrationality and disingenuousness of their opponents.

Conclusion

Gritty’s resilience as a memetic icon of antifascist ethos proved salient in the chaotic days following the 2020 U.S. election. As it became clear that mail-in ballots from Philadelphia

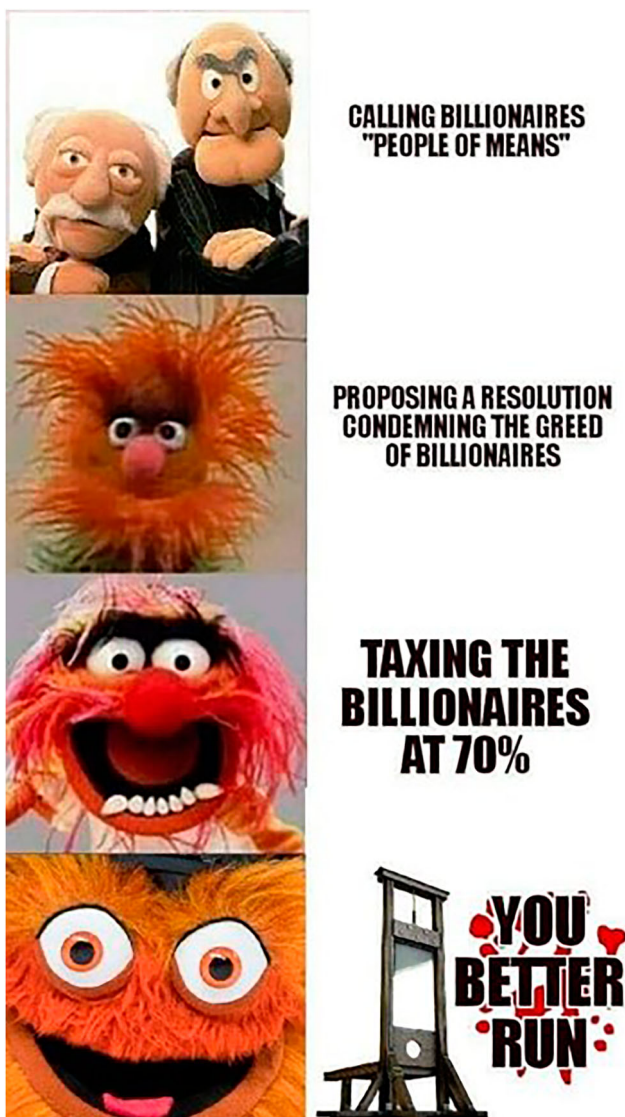


Figure 5. [Four panel ascending meme. Each meme has different puppets from least to most extreme, culminating with Gritty. Each Puppet corresponds to a different text: "Calling Billionaires 'People of Means'" / "Proposing a Resolution Condemning the Greed of Billionaires" / "Taxing the Billionaires at 70%." Gritty's corresponding text appears in blood next to a guillotine, reading "You Better Run."] u/opossumpossum. *Reddit* post to r/grittyisantifa (2 March 2019), <https://www.reddit.com/r/grittyisantifa/comments/awn7x1/>

would play a crucial role in awarding electoral victory to Joe Biden, duelling protests filled the city's streets. Pro-Trump protesters flocked to the city to demand an end to ballot counting while counter-demonstrations from progressives, liberals, and antifascists demanded that officials count every vote. Gritty, now a longtime icon of antifascist resistance, assumed the role of memetic icon for the ongoing protests. Gritty-costumed protestors celebrated Trump's demise by dancing in the streets. Numerous memes also

circulated online, variably signifying Gritty as an icon of American democracy and violent antifascist resistance. While some images figured Gritty as an icon of jubilant celebratory energy, others used the mascot as an icon of revenge,⁹³ or a saviour of American democracy.⁹⁴ Gritty's visual ethos permeated these demonstrations, with the wild-eyed monster embodying both the ecstasy and tenacity of the struggle against Trumpian fascism. These memes, costumes, and signs attest to Gritty's enduring resonance with Philadelphians, as well as the mascot's broader associations with a desire for a more just and inclusive world.

Through memetic icons like Gritty, publics seeking to cultivate dissent against the current order compose themselves, expressing their imagined virtues, practical wisdom, and goodwill. In so doing, they may shape their reputation for external audiences. Memetic labor exercises publics' collective energies, garnering adherents and reshaping public life. Re-articulations of Gritty after the 2020 election retained the frenzied energy, latent threats of violence, and commitment to including the targets of fascist violence. While radically antifascist publics do not lay exclusive claim to Gritty, the icon's popularity is attributable to tensions within these publics' ethos.

Nevertheless, the use of Gritty to celebrate Joe Biden's victory is puzzling. The radical antifascist publics that initially appropriated Gritty tend to oppose centrist politicians, institutional reforms, and even electioneering *per se*. How, then, did Gritty become an icon for electoral politics as a conduit for antifascist resistance? We argue that ethos, as a shared collection of virtues, judgment, and goodwill towards audiences, develops through mutually constitutive and ongoing self-expressions through which publics cohere. Memes perform participants' idealized understanding of what it means to belong to a particular public. Gritty's reappropriations within diverse contexts are products of the rhetorical labor of antifascist and more broadly progressive communities that deploy discrete and contingent responses to fascist speech and organizing. Indeed, despite Gritty's associations with uncivil and sometimes violent direct actions, their simultaneous associations with radical antifascist publics' desire for radical inclusivity and a better world rendered them ripe for appropriation by more electoral-minded publics.

In the face of both the alt-right's rhetorical advances and calls for civility, radically antifascist publics deployed Gritty to express their virtues and practical reasoning. Through memes expressing the futility of debating fascists and these publics' desire for a more just and inclusive world, Gritty became a synecdoche for their self-perceived good judgment and virtues. By remixing images of Gritty in widely known and novel meme formats that appropriated well-worn strategies of humour and ironic distance, these publics constituted the mascot as an icon for their refusal to accept disingenuous and bad-faith arguments about the importance of civility. Our analysis demonstrates that the left can meme. We thus challenge the scholarly and popular view that the internet is a terrain conquered exclusively by publics proffering hate, showing how networked communication can be used to amplify the ethos of movements seeking to stem the fascist tide.

Attention to Gritty's movement from corporate mascot to avatar of radical antifascism demonstrates how publics, through participants' mutually constitutive self-expressions *qua* memetic labor, produce icons that embody their ethos. Memetic icons become synecdoches for the imagined characteristics, tendencies, and dispositions of the online publics through which they circulate. Rather than sidelining structural concerns

of power, ideology, meaning, and context, attention to how discrete publics cultivate enduring patterns of character, habit, and disposition demonstrates how memetic icons help foment dissent. We show then, how tracing images' circulation within concrete publics helps us understand how publics produce icons. Doing so authorizes rhetorical criticism of their meanings, attention to publics' rhetorical labor, as well as how memes might shift popular discourse more generally.

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