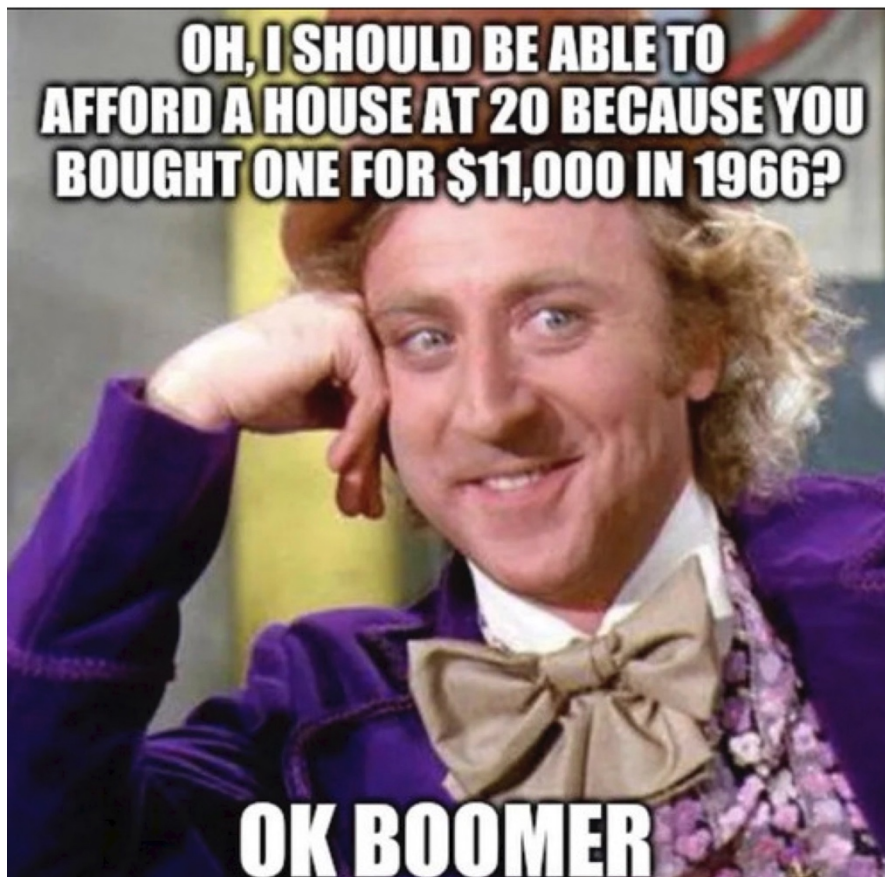# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

'OK Boomer': Internet Memes as Consciousness Building

by Morgan Anderson and Gabriel Keehn

"OK BOOMER" MEME, COURTESY OF AUTHOR

It would be an understatement to say that the internet has reshaped our social world. Indeed, it has become the conduit through which much of our social lives are made possible. The internet, by condensing and removing factors such as time and distance, has fundamentally altered how we relate to others, to ourselves, and to our environment. In recent years, scholars have argued that the influence of the internet on our social relations has extended to large scale social movements and political organizing. Certainly, the role of social media in facilitating recent activist movements, while not without its problems, has been well documented.[1]

While the role of the internet and social media in influencing political organizing has gained the attention of scholars in recent years, less attention has been paid to the social influence of internet memes specifically. Internet memes[2], generally understood as an image overlaid with a word or series of words, have become a ubiquitous form of communication, especially for younger generations. As Simon J. Evnine notes, memes "are images captioned and re-captioned for humorous, political, and satirical purposes, sometimes made for the clearly aesthetic goals of exhibiting beauty, wit, and pathos."[3] The speed with which memes can be consumed, altered, and shared, in addition to their widespread accessibility have made them a unique form of social communication with, we argue, fascinating implications for political consciousness building.

A recent notable example of memes as consciousness building is the emergence of the "OK Boomer" meme. Meant to express the political frustration of Millennials and younger generations with what they see as a fundamentally inequitable and hostile political landscape, the OK Boomer meme has become a shorthand way of signaling one's understanding of the deepening structural inequalities that present unprecedented challenges for our nation's youth. The student loan debt crisis, rising housing costs, unaffordable or inaccessible health and mental health care, the weakening of the social safety net, declining expected lifespans, and the existential threat of climate change means that Millennials and younger generations are inheriting a social landscape that they believe is uniquely more hostile than that experienced by generations before them. Despite the material reality of our nation's youth, a pervasive tide of political conservatism seeks to further consolidate wealth and power, ignore structural barriers to economic stability, and worsen the climate crisis. Growing increasingly tired of expressing their concerns to what they interpret as a generation of ambivalent older Americans that dismiss the political views of our youth as the whining of "snowflakes," the OK Boomer meme emerged as a way for younger generations to unite, commiserate, and we argue, contribute to the important work of consciousness building that is a necessary precondition for political action. Indeed, as Evnine notes:

> Broadly speaking, people start using the images in ways that connect them to certain affects and/or narratives, others respond and imitate, there is consolidation and refinement through the early stages of a meme's history, and so there comes to obtain the requisite association between images, on the one hand, and affective dimensions and implied narratives, on the other.[4]

In other words, the OK Boomer meme is more than an image, but also an internally consistent and intelligible narrative that reflects the type of nascent political theorizing necessary for building social movements. In this way, as we later argue, memes have the potential to serve as entry points through which educators can build on students' mimetic knowledge as a way to cultivate what Max Haiven has referred to as "radical imaginations."[5]

Therefore, what interests us is what follows: first, the historical and sociopolitical conditions that have precipitated the success of the OK Boomer meme; second, the ways in which the meme can be understood as participating both in a history of intergenerational group consciousness and of political engagement; and finally, the implications that this meme, and memes more broadly, may have for pedagogy, both inside and outside of traditional classrooms. We seek to articulate what we see as the implicit class critique leveraged by Millennials and Gen Z through the utilization of the OK Boomer meme. What has been widely framed as a younger generation dismissing their elders, we argue, is actually a nascent expression of a sophisticated sociopolitical critique. Additionally, we show that despite such criticism, the OK Boomer meme avoids adopting an essentializing stance. Instead, by providing examples and analyses of this memographic practice, we argue that educational scholars might understand OK Boomer as a consciousness building movement among Millennials and younger generations that helps these groups build solidarity in the face of their collective marginalization from oppressive systems of capital that present them with unique challenges.

Here, we believe it is both important and helpful to note our positionalities as Millennial scholars. As Deianira Ganga and Sam Scott explain, "the *positionality* literature is now vast and variegated, emanating from a range of disciplinary fields with their own particular subject specialisms, research philosophies and academic cultures."[6] For us, positionality simply means the lens through which we view the world. We both occupy the identity category that has been both the object of critique and the author of the generational rebuttal in the form of the OK Boomer meme. As two Millennial academics, we have acutely felt the effects of the unique material conditions endured by our generation that we outline in further detail in what follows. This means that we are not disinterested observers, but are to the contrary, deeply embedded in the economic and sociopolitical conditions with which we write. As such, we argue that we are uniquely positioned to offer theoretical insight into what we see as Internet memes as consciousness building among both Millennials and Gen Z. Having both come of age at a time when technologically mediated modes of communication and the use of Internet memes became ubiquitous in everyday life, we are fluent both in mimetic communication *and* academic language. We are not unique in this regard. According to the Pew Research Center, the number of college-educated young adults is currently at its highest point yet. As of 2016, 40 percent of Millennials had a bachelor's degree compared to 26 percent of baby boomers in 1985.[7] A generation characterized by *both* unprecedented comfort with technologically mediated interactions as well as high levels of college education results in unique modalities of communication that present

pedagogical opportunities for educators straddling these seemingly divergent, but as we argue complementary, social and discursive spaces.

Scholars of sociolinguistics call this "code-switching." [8] Referring to the practice of switching between languages among second language learners during nascent stages of language acquisition, or to the modifying of linguistic patterns when adjusting to unique social contexts, code-switching enables a speaker to navigate between disparate linguistic communities. In this way, we argue that Millennial scholars and educators are uniquely positioned to serve as a bridge between organic intellectual memographic practice, in the Gramscian sense, and academic theorizing. (Though, as we later note, categories such as "Boomer" and "Millennial" are fluid and correlate more strongly to disposition rather than age). Navigating academia where age and experience tend to grant one more cache (not unjustifiably), we feel particularly attuned to instances of youth articulations of experiences being dismissed outright. Therefore, we call for Internet memes to be taken seriously as consciousness building activity that is necessary for political engagement and mobilizing.

For example, by tapping into mimetic discourses familiar to students, educators can tease out alongside students the social, cultural, and economic systems that make a specific meme discourse both intelligible and effective. Students may understand the mimetic context that makes OK Boomer superficially humorous, but a meme-fluent educator can contextualize OK Boomer as an implicit critique of the move from Keynesian redistributive economic policies enjoyed by many Boomers to the age of neoliberal austerity under which younger generations currently toil. Here, an otherwise simple meme serves as an entry point for teasing out much more sophisticated modes of analysis. As such, a mimetic discourse can serve as a jumping off point for deeper, more critical engagement.

What is OK Boomer?

As with many prominent memes, the origins of OK Boomer are difficult to trace accurately. However, an examination of the meme's rise to prominence provides an interesting context to its current ubiquity. While there are recorded instances of the use of the phrase as far back as 2015, it did not achieve the sort of widespread and systematic use required for meme status until early 2019, and did not gain any mainstream notoriety until later that same year. The spread and influence of the meme can be attributed largely to its popularity on the social media video-creating platform TikTok, a platform whose userbase is largely made up of young people. One of the earliest and most popular examples of this is a video of a young woman holding up a handwritten sign that reads "OK Boomer" next to a video of an unidentified older man who is engaged in a diatribe about Millennials and young people in general, accusing them of having what he refers to as "Peter Pan syndrome." The man in the video references a number of longstanding Millennial stereotypes, such as that they are entitled, naïve, and that they fundamentally misunderstand the nature of the "real world."[9] Many other videos on the platform work as riffs on the original, incorporating either

the video or audio of the man speaking. One example shows a young woman awkwardly dancing while the audio plays in the background. As the video progresses, text appears on the scene that reads, "Boomers: wrecked the housing market, destroyed the environment, don't know how to convert a PDF, currently bankrupting social security."[10] Here we see an example of the explicit politicization of the meme. Though presented in a humorous and irreverent manner, the underlying message is clear: the Baby Boomer generation, while critiquing younger generations for a variety of perceived weaknesses and failures, is itself largely responsible for the conditions that have made the socio-cultural and political life of current generations difficult in the first place. The juxtaposition of the supposed misdeeds of the Boomer generation with the tone-deaf condescension of the Boomer avatar is meant to be illustrative of a certain mindset (call it the "Boomer mindset"). Specifically, the Boomer mindset adheres to what we might think of as a certain type of generational bootstrapping narrative: "nobody has ever had it easy," says the Boomer, "but you certainly have it easier than I did, and I made my way just fine." This sentiment is particularly offensive from the perspective of the Millennial because it seems to ignore, or at least minimize, the myriad structural factors that contributed both to the relative ease with which many Boomers were, and are able to, achieve many of the traditional markers of middle-class success, and that have made it much more difficult for Millennials and younger generations to attain the same. As the user-generated online pop culture dictionary website "Urban Dictionary," aptly defines the phrase, "OK Boomer" refers to a situation "[w]hen a baby boomer says some dumb shit and you can't even begin to explain why he's wrong because that would be deconstructing decades of misinformation and ignorance so you just brush it off and say okay."[11] More will be said about this in subsequent sections, but it is important to note here the fundamental antagonism at stake in the OK Boomer meme, and the distinct mindsets being addressed by it.

Though presented in a humorous and irreverent manner, the underlying message is clear: the Baby Boomer generation, while critiquing younger generations for a variety of perceived weaknesses and failures, is itself largely responsible for the conditions that have made the socio-cultural and political life of current generations difficult in the first place.

The OK Boomer meme spread incredibly rapidly from its inception on TikTok, finding its way into a wide variety of mainstream media. The meme even made an appearance on the global political stage, when Chloe Swarbrick, a 25-year-old member of New Zealand's parliament, responded to heckling from one of her older colleagues during a debate on carbon emissions and climate change with "Ok, Boomer."[12] Predictably, because of the somewhat combative nature of the meme, and the various generational dynamics

of blame, guilt, frustration, dismissal, and the like at play, the OK Boomer meme has elicited a barrage of strong responses from people who felt themselves to be (often unfairly) targets of the phrase. Responses ranged in level of offense-taken from the generally sympathetic but gently chiding, [13] to the fed-up and reactive, [14] to the fully hysterical, a tone that was reached when conservative talk radio host Bob Lonsberry referred to the term "Boomer" as "the n-word of ageism."[15] Lonsberry was roundly and rightly criticized for this comparison, but it is illustrative of the incredibly high emotional and political resonance the OK Boomer meme has been able to achieve in a short span of time. We argue that the rapidity with which the meme broke into, and shaped, popular discourse is a testament to the potential political power of memes.

Millennials, Material Conditions, and Memes

To further contextualize OK Boomer, over the past several years, Millennials, the generation of Americans born between 1981 and 1996 who are currently anywhere from 22 to 37 years old, have been the subject of unique scrutiny. Indeed, generalizations surrounding Millennials' shortcomings related to disposition, work ethic, and political leanings abound, and such assumptions have thoroughly permeated our cultural ethos. Millennials are often described as entitled and lazy, and have received criticism for being responsible for the demise of consumer commodities ranging from cereal to diamonds.[16] This generational ire has inspired the authoring of countless books aimed at helping frustrated members of older generations better understand Millennials, problematically positioned as akin to a different species, in their temperament and outlook on the world.[17] As both a generational and cultural descriptor, the concept of what it means to be a Millennial is a contested identity category.

An interesting moment of such generational tension occurred in August of 2018 with the headline in *Philadelphia Magazine*, "How Millennials Killed Mayonnaise."[18] Both the impassioned publication of such an article—the subject of which could only be described as puzzlingly mundane—and the subsequent fervent backlash it garnered indicated the arrival of a singular cultural moment. It too demonstrated the deep cultural chasm between these two generations. On the one hand, younger Americans are centrally concerned with navigating a sociopolitical and economic landscape that structurally impedes the promise of basic economic stability amidst the existential threat of climate crisis. On the other hand, an older generation laments the decline of a beloved condiment. [19] While such generational misgivings are certainly not a new social phenomenon, which we explore in greater detail in what follows, the overlapping of this particular historical moment with the immediacy of the production, consumption, and reinterpretation of memes presents a unique set of circumstances and, we argue, opportunities.

In this way, OK Boomer as a mimetic discourse is rooted in a critique of the shifting political and material conditions that continue to deepen inequalities by increasing structural barriers to stable economic lives such as access to healthcare, living wages, affordable housing, or higher education. Here, the OK Boomer critique is not without its shortcomings. For example, it may be considered a failure of imagination to merely call for younger generations to get a fairer shake under a "kinder, gentler, capitalism" rather than demanding a reimagining of our social lives entirely—a project we see as the ultimate goal. Nonetheless, the OK Boomer discourse articulates important critiques of sociopolitical and economic structures that can serve as an entry point for identifying such problems on the road to more radical dispositions.

For example, the rising cost of living compared to overall wage stagnation over the last several decades has made the dream of homeownership—the key for upward social mobility—far less attainable for Millennials. In fact, research indicates that projections of long-term quality of life and "absolute income mobility," or earning more than one's parent's, has significantly declined for the Millennial generation. While the cost of everyday consumer goods such as television sets and clothing have dropped in recent years—due in large part to the replacement of American jobs by exploiting cheap labor in the developing world—the cost of education, childcare, housing, and healthcare have risen considerably. [20] As Jordan Weissman notes, "[p]rices are rising on the very things that are essential for climbing out of poverty."[21] Indeed, a 2017 study found that rates of economic social mobility have fallen from "90% for children born in 1940 to 50% for children born in the 1980s."[22] The price of housing now constitutes more than one-third of a family's spending, whereas it accounted for only a quarter of spending in 1995.[23] Many are left to attempt to subsidize their income with second and third jobs. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 53 million American workers are currently subsidizing traditional 9-5 work days by working in the "gig economy," where workers notoriously forfeit any labor protections in exchange for flexible work provided, typically, via online applications. By the year 2020, 42 percent of these workers will be between the ages of 22 and 37 years old—Millennials.[24]

Memes to Movements

We understand that one might reasonably question whether it is appropriate to conceptualize something as amorphous, leaderless, and slippery as the OK boomer meme as a youth movement at all. Rather, one might argue that the meme is simply a form of cultural expression, like many other common hashtags or memetic images. Indeed, political movements and activism are traditionally associated with specific leaders, statements of goals, or other traditional markers of political engagement, things that memes, at least at first glance, patently lack. While we appreciate these potential objections, a central aim of this project is to expand and update the way we conceptualize social movements and how they behave in the digital age.

With the advent of the internet, and specifically social media network technologies, the question of how, where, and if such technologies can be considered political activity has been a central concern of those studying the development of political movements. With respect to many

of the most prominent contemporary examples of social movements (e.g. the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter), the internet, and memes specifically, played an indispensable role in the development and dissemination of those movements' messages. As Xiao Mina notes in her discussion of the role memes and other internet trends play in social movements today, "It's nearly impossible now to think of a social movement without the internet, and as the world comes online, communities advocating for change are popping up globally, in places large and small, channeling their energies to streets and to the web."[25] Indeed, it is arguable that the connective possibilities, the ability for quick and wide dissemination of messages and concepts, and the inherently leaderless nature of internet spaces make them particularly conducive and effective as both sites and conduits for social movement politics. For these reasons, we believe that the OK Boomer meme merits consideration as a type of internet proto-movement, taking advantage as it does of so many of the features of the internet that lend themselves to political movement building, despite not yet meeting the criteria for a full-fledged movement.

> *In situating the OK Boomer meme in a liminal space between full-fledged movement and mere emoting, we are drawing on a long tradition of radical thinking on the role of individualized resistance as a necessary but not sufficient condition for the sort of consciousness building that is necessary for genuine movements.*

In situating the OK Boomer meme in a liminal space between full-fledged movement and mere emoting, we are drawing on a long tradition of radical thinking on the role of individualized resistance as a necessary but not sufficient condition for the sort of consciousness building that is necessary for genuine movements. Robin D.G. Kelley, for example, frames his study of radical African American labor movements with a consideration of the various ways that he and his co-workers at a McDonalds in the 1970's used self-expression, subversion, and even sabotage to fight against (albeit in small ways) the daily oppressions they felt in their workplace. For Kelley, though these types of political expression and participation are often denigrated or overlooked in traditional historiography and political thinking, they are essential to understanding how individuals form their political identities. He writes, " If we want to make sense of those McDonald's workers…those of us committed to writing working-class history must look way, way, way, below, to the places where the noble and heroic tradition of labor militancy is not as evident."[26] For Kelley, and many other thinkers of radical resistance, both the fundamental evils of oppression and the origins of resistance to those evils, are at the subjective, individual level. Again, the individual and subjective are never substitutes or replacements for community development and group movements, but we argue that the sorts of ground-level, subjective experiences of oppression are important

precursors to those larger-scale forms of political expression.

Manuel Castells, who has arguably developed the most wide-ranging theory of the role of networks in movement politics and the ways that the internet can help or hinder those movements, has argued that "the diffusion of Internet-based social networks is a necessary condition for the existence of these new social movements in our time. But it is not a sufficient condition."[27] However, as Castells continues, "proto-social movements could become social movements in an environment of communicative autonomy" such as the internet. [28] Social movements are always grounded in a shared sense of frustration, anger, despair, or a wide other variety of uniting and motivating emotions. Castells considers these sorts of resonant emotional connections, in addition to a set of objective material conditions, to be critical to the success of social movements, writing "[y]et, social movements do not arise just from poverty or political despair. They require an emotional mobilization triggered by outrage against blatant injustice, and by hope of a possible change…"[29] Memes are incredibly, perhaps uniquely, well-suited for this task of emotional mobilization, both activating the individual experiences of those who experience injustice and also tying them to larger-scale political goals and ideals. As Limor Shifman puts the point, "*memes serve as pivotal links between the personal and the political.* Since they are based on shared frameworks that call for variation, memes allow citizens to participate in public, collective actions, while maintaining their sense of individuality." [30] It is in this space of potentiality between simple expression of political frustration and full-blown political movement that we see the role of the OK Boomer meme as a marker of group consciousness, and perhaps as a bridge between the two. From a pedagogical perspective, building on students' mimetic knowledge can serve as an entry point for cultivating more radical imaginations. It is important to specify here the particular group that is meant to be isolated when we talk of group consciousness and consciousness building in the context of the OK Boomer meme. It is tempting to think that the meme is meant to refer exclusively to the Baby Boomer generation, which covers roughly those born between the years of 1945-1965, [31] especially since the term "Boomer" has generally historically referred to that group. However, we argue that OK Boomer is best understood not as identifying exclusively individual Boomers, but rather to draw attention to a certain set of ideological attitudes, beliefs, and predispositions; a mindset toward the current younger generations and their particular struggles that can be held by anyone, traditional boomer or otherwise. Indeed, as Taylor Lorenz argues, "[i]n the end, boomer is just a state of mind."[32] Ultimately, it is meant to refer to a person who is resistant to change, does not have a sense of urgency with regard to addressing issues of inequality, or is unable to appreciate the unique challenges facing the next generation of global citizens. In this way, OK Boomer is not meant to essentialize an entire group of people. Rather, it is to isolate and critique attitudes of ambivalence toward the harrowing conditions faced by our nation's young people.

As discussed above, the current material conditions that have directly resulted from both neoliberal and neoconservative policies of the last several decades inflict daily economic, racial, and sociopolitical violence on our young people. Many members of these generations have reacted to these circumstances, predictably, with frustration and anger, feelings that are amplified when they are accused of being "entitled," "lazy," "snowflakes," and the like. For younger generations, as reflected by OK Boomer, there is a widespread sense of being thrust into an unworkable situation not of their own making and then being blamed for feeling helpless, cheated, and apathetic. By conceptualizing the OK Boomer meme as a proto-movement at least contributing to the sort of consciousness raising that lays the groundwork for deeper political engagement, we can understand that the frustrations behind it are not simply with the sense of being given a raw deal by previous generations, although this is certainly at play. Instead, the primary target of OK Boomer is the attitude that considers younger generations *themselves* to be at blame for their struggles, and that ignores the concerns expressed by younger generations about their own futures. OK Boomer is best thought of not as a blanket dismissal of a generation that is perceived as having failed at its duties toward future ones, but as a shorthand for a much deeper expression of frustration. OK Boomer says, "you have dismissed my concerns and blamed me for aspects of the world around me that are patently out of my control all while offering no help or solidarity of your own, and you have therefore revealed yourself to be my enemy." This sentiment is in no way tied to any member of a specific generation, and expresses a sense of material solidarity with those who are subject to the same conditions that motivate it, and with those who seek to remedy or alleviate those conditions. There is, to put it another way, a reason that nobody uses the phrase OK Boomer to refer to former presidential candidate Senator Bernie Sanders, despite his falling within the range of the Boomer generation. Sanders, to many members of the younger generation, is seen to take their concerns seriously, to recognize that their apparent "failures" in life are not for a lack of effort, of willingness to work, or anything under their control, but are rather attributable to larger-scale, structural social forces. At the height of his presidential campaign, Sanders enjoyed the support of nearly one third of voters under the age of thirty-five.[33] On the other hand, many younger political figures and commentators who espouse traditionally conservative or right-wing views on the plight of younger generations (e.g. bootstrapping narratives) are regularly subjects of the OK Boomer meme.

This usage of generationally charged language to express larger-scale political animosity and distrust is by no means new, and the OK Boomer meme can also be seen as another stage in the evolution of this type of political discourse. Perhaps the most famous example of this type of discourse is the New Left counterculture slogan, coined in 1964 by UC Berkley free speech activist Jack Weinberg, "Don't trust anybody over thirty." Weinberg would recall later that the original motivation for the saying was to demonstrate the independence and organic nature of the movement at the time, that they were not being directed from behind the scenes in some way.[34] Weinberg's slogan became a rallying cry for much of the youth counterculture

after it first appeared, expressing both the grassroots, organic nature of youth anger at the conditions of the world they had been birthed into, and their frustration at the apparent indifference expressed by the conservative elements in the culture to their plights. Similar to the OK Boomer meme, Weinberg's slogan, though couched in explicitly general terms, was meant to signal something more than simple generational hostility. As Mario Savio, another leader of the Free Speech Movement at Berkeley, said in a now famous speech:

> The things we are asking for in our civil rights protests have a deceptively quaint ring. We are asking for the due process of law. We are asking for our actions to be judged by committees of our peers. We are asking that regulations ought to be considered as arrived at legitimately only from the consensus of the governed. These phrases are all pretty old, but they are not being taken seriously in America today…[35]

The important thing to note here is that the motivating force behind the anger of the Free Speech Movement was that they felt that their concerns and interests were "not being taken seriously" enough by those in power, be they over thirty or under. Like OK Boomer, "don't trust anyone over thirty" was meant to be taken not literally, but ideologically. Indeed, much like the role of Bernie Sanders today, many of the icons of the youth counterculture of the 60's, such as Jack Kerouac, William S. Burroughs, and Timothy Leary, were much older than thirty. However, since their political attitudes and sympathies were in-line with those of the counterculture, they were not seen as proper targets of the "don't trust anyone over thirty" dictum. Again, what is at work here is not simple ageism, but politics.

Given that the OK Boomer meme is motivated by class-based material conditions, is mobilized by members of a certain class to express shared feelings of anger and solidarity with one another across socio-cultural and generational contexts, and participates in a longstanding tradition of voicing political dissent in generationally charged language, we argue that the OK Boomer meme, and memes more broadly, can expand the toolkit of critical educators seeking to engage students in the sort of consciousness raising that is a precondition for deeper political engagement.

OK Boomer, Public Pedagogy, and The Call to Conversation

We want to conclude our discussion of the OK Boomer meme with some reflections on what this mimetic discourse, and the conditions that it is responding to, mean for pedagogy both inside and out of the classroom. If, as we have suggested above, OK Boomer is best understood as a form of political consciousness development and expression, we suggest here that it also serves as a form of public pedagogy,[36] calling attention to a set of political and economic issues that younger generations see as having been problematically overlooked by the dominant power structures. Rather than serving to shut down conversation, as it is often accused of doing, OK Boomer should be taken as a challenge to engage more seriously with those who

might be otherwise deemed less worthy of political dialogue. By drawing the attention of those with more political influence to a different set of issues, OK Boomer is not a dismissal, but an invitation, both to action and to conversation.

We fully acknowledge that the OK Boomer meme may appear terse and even combative, as far as invitations go. However, it is important to be clear that, from the perspective of younger generations, as elucidated by Mario Savio in his Berkeley speech, these issues are not new, but are only now gaining political traction and public interest because of agitation from younger generations. Indeed, this type of confrontational politics has been at the core of many of the most successful internet-based political movements, from the Arab Spring to Black Lives Matter. Peter Lindsay has recently done preliminary theorizing on what we might call an emerging "pedagogy of irritation," by which interest and investment, which are preconditions of education, are achieved through a certain type of friction and prodding. He writes, in the context of a college classroom, "One effective way to capture their [students] interest is to raise their hackles – to get them invested in a subject by…well…irritating them."[37] He goes on to suggest that it is pedagogically fruitful to interrogate feelings of irritation both within ourselves and those with whom we are engaged in discourse: "If you were irritated, why – for some of you – did your irritation motivate you to read further, and why – for the rest of you – did it tempt you to quit altogether?"[38] It is this fine line between motivating irritation and alienating offense that the OK Boomer meme walks, and it is in that tension that its pedagogical value lies. As pedagogues, we must take seriously the challenge of OK Boomer whether or not it irritates our sensibilities, or even our senses of ourselves. The animating conditions that have pushed the younger generations to the point of feeling so unheard and unfairly maligned should push those of us who may embody certain aspects of the Boomer mentality to not only examine what it is about the OK Boomer meme that agitates us so much, but what we have done to contribute to its taking hold. As with so many other instances of marginalized voices rising to make themselves heard, and in sometimes uncomfortable ways, OK Boomer should push us as pedagogues toward more compassionate listening, self-reflection, and ultimately allyship in what we have suggested is best understood as a grassroots, nascent, youth proto-movement.

Notes

1. See Morgan Anderson and Gabriel Keehn, "Tweeting from the Tower: Exploring the Role of Critical Educators in the Digital Age," Critical Questions in Education vol. 10, no 2 (Spring 2019): 135-149.

2. For the purpose of this paper, we use "internet meme" and "meme" interchangeably.

3. Simon J. Evnine, "The Anonymity of a Murmur: Internet (and Other) Memes," British Journal of Aesthetics vol. 58, no. 3 (July 2018), 303.

4. Simon J. Evnine, "The Anonymity of a Murmur: Internet (and Other) Memes," British Journal of Aesthetics vol. 58, no. 3 (July 2018), 307.

5. Max Haiven, Crises of Imagination, Crises of Power: Capitalism, Creativity, and the Commons (London: Fernwood Publishing, 2014).

6. Deianira Ganga and Sam Scott, "Cultural 'Insiders' and the Issue of Postionality in Qualitative Migration Research: Moving 'Across' and Moving 'Along' Researcher-Participant Divides," Forum: Qualitative Social Research vol. 7, no. 3 (May 2006), 1.

7. Nikki Graf, "Today's Young Workers are More Likely Than Ever to Have a Bachelor's Degree," Pew Research Center (May 16, 2017).

8. See, for example, Peter Auer, Code-Switching in Conversation: Language, Interaction, and Identity (London: Routledge, 1998).

9. https://www.tiktok.com/@linzrinzz/video/671478 2003637521670.

10. https://www.tiktok.com/@torschach/video/67485 20592888106246.

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15. Sara M. Moniuszko, "Radio Host Schooled after Comparing 'Boomer' to N-Word; Dictionary.com, More on Twitter React." USA Today. Gannett Satellite Information Network, November 5, 2019. https://www.usatoday.com/story/entertainment/2 019/11/05/radio-host-bob-lonsberry-criticized-after-comparing-boomer-n-word/4163037002/.

16. Kate Taylor, "'Psychologically Scarred' Millennials are Killing Countless Industries From Napkins to

Applebee's—Here Are the Industries They Like the Least" Business Insider (October 31, 2017).

17. See, for example, Bruce Tulgan, Not Everyone Gets a Trophy: How to Manage the Millennials (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.), 2018; Jean M. Twenge, Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—and More Miserable Than Ever Before (New York, NY: Atria Paperback), 2014; Chip Espinoza and Mick Ukleja, Managing the Millennials: Discover the Core Competencies for Managing Today's Workforce (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.), 2016.

18. Sandy Hingston, "How Millennials Killed Mayonnaise," Philadelphia Magazine (August 11, 2018).

19. Here, we are being intentionally cheeky. However, as we discuss later, the spirit of OK Boomer is to provoke in order to inspire dialogue.

20. See Derek Thompson, "Why America's Essentials Are Getting More Expensive While Its Toys Are Getting Cheap," The Atlantic (May 2, 2014). https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2014/05/its-expensive-to-be-poor/361533/.

21. Jordan Weissman, "Why Poverty Is Still Miserable, Even If Everybody Can Own an Awesome Television," Slate (May 1, 2014). https://slate.com/business/2014/05/why-poverty-is-still-miserable-cheap-consumer-goods-don-t-improve-your-long-term-prospects.html

22. Raj Chetty, David Grusky, Maximilian Hell, Nathaniel Hendren, Robert Manduca, and Jimmy Narang, "The Fading American Dream: Trends in Absolute Income Mobility Since 1940," Science vol. 356, no. 6336 (April 2017): 1-16.

23. Alicia Adamczyk, "Here's Why Millennials Have to Fight Harder Than Their Parents Did to Stay in the Middle Class," CNBC (April 12, 2019) https://www.cnbc.com/2019/04/12/oecd-why-millennials-are-falling-out-of-the-middle-class.html.

24. Ibid.

25. An Xiao Mina, Memes to Movements: How the World's Most Viral Media is Changing Social Protest and Power (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2019), 3.

26. Robin D.G. Kelley, Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 13.

27. Manuel Castells, Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2015), 226.

28. Ibid. 227.

29. Ibid, 248-249.

30. Limor Shifman, Memes in Digital Culture (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2014), 129.

31. There are of course debates about the exact window, but this span covers most of the plausible accounts. See Doug Owram, Born at the Right Time: A History of the Baby Boom Generation (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997).

32. Taylor Lorenz, " 'OK Boomer' Marks the End of Friendly Generational Relations," The New York Times (October 29, 2019).

33. Hardwood, John. "Joe Biden and Elizabeth Warren Separate Themselves from the 2020 Democratic Pack in New NBC/WSJ Poll." CNBC. CNBC, September 17, 2019. https://www.cnbc.com/2019/09/17/biden-warren-lead-in-latest-nbcwsj-2020-democratic-poll.html.

34. The implication from some observers was that the free speech movement was secretly funded by Russian Communists. See Paul Galloway, "Radical Redux," Chicago Tribune (Chicago, IL), Nov. 16, 1990.

35. Quoted in Seth Rosenfeld, Subversives: The FBI's War on Student Radicals, and Reagan's Rise to Power (New York: Picador, 2012), 219.

36. We use an inclusive and value-neutral definition of "public pedagogy" here, meaning to refer to "spaces, sites, and languages of education and learning that exist outside of the walls of the institution of schools." Jennifer A. Sandlin, Brian D. Schultz, and Jake Burdick, "Understanding, Mapping, and Exploring the Terrain of Public Pedagogy," in Handbook of Public Pedagogy: Education and Learning Beyond Schooling, eds. Jennifer A. Sandlin, Brian D. Schultz, and Jake Burdick (New York: Routledge, 2010), 1-6, 1.

37. Peter Lindsay, The Craft of University Teaching (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), 87.

38. Ibid. 95.