The Routledge Handbook of Queer Rhetoric

Jacqueline Rhodes, Jonathan Alexander

Queer Memes as Rhetorical Scenes

Publication details
Abbie Levesque DeCamp
Published online on: 26 Apr 2022

How to cite :- Abbie Levesque DeCamp. 26 Apr 2022, Queer Memes as Rhetorical Scenes from: The Routledge Handbook of Queer Rhetoric Routledge
Accessed on: 28 Nov 2023

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
In 2016, an unusual disruption happened on Netflix. Its algorithm sorted the horror movie *The Babadook* under its LGBT movies category. Or did it? Memes and their constructions disrupt even our notion of a history of memes. Some sites claim the queer memes came first, followed by a doctored screenshot of Babadook being mis-sorted. Others claim the mis-sorting came first, genuine or not, and circulated on Tumblr.

Whether real or not, this small error turned into one of the widest spread queer memes of the decade with one post: Tumblr user ianstagram, a college acquaintance of mine, posted that “Whenever someone says the Babadook isn’t openly gay it’s like?? Did you even watch the movie???” This led to a back and forth about whether the Babadook was gay, culminating in the conversation being screen capped and passed around on Twitter. For perspective, the screenshot of *The Babadook* under “LGBT movies” on Netflix, posted on Tumblr, has hundreds of thousands of notes, including responses and reblogs. This was no small phenomenon. From there, the “Babadiscourse” only grew. The Babadook was photoshopped onto pride flags and videos of *RuPaul’s Drag Race*. People dressed as the Babadook for pride parades. Gay Babadook memes reigned in queer meme circles, disrupting the movie’s initial intent, where the Babadook is a frightening specter of mental illness, turning the monstrous into a fun, campy icon.

Queer memes, like the Babadook, represent the ultimate form of the meme’s rhetorical, disruptive power. They seek to claim content and remake, remix, and resignify its meaning. I recount the history of the queer Babadook meme to illustrate a few points. First, that memes rarely have a clear starting point—instead, they are often the result of community members having fun together. This act of reading and writing in play together is vital to understanding memes not just as material, networked rhetorical objects, as Laurie Gries explores in *Still Life with Rhetoric*, but also objects that queer rhetors use to explore both their own queer identities and their connections to queer communities. I will put queer memes in conversation with scholarship on queer community literacy in the first part of this chapter. Second, that memes are weird. They act in unexpected ways, and they resist easy definitions. I seek to build on current definitions of memes, and to connect more explicitly the laughter, humor, and play of memes to their disruptive rhetorical power. Finally, that queer meme community members already use memes in these rhetorical ways to understand themselves and their connections to the communities more deeply—it is this purposeful exploration through consuming, reposting, and creating memes that best showcases one of the ways queer community forms in a digital space. They also, however, often fail to live up to their liberatory possibilities, sometimes...
reifying a queerness steeped in white, cis, male, gay experience and excluding those who have intersectional queer identities. I highlight this in the final section on voices of queer meme community members and connect their insights to academic queer rhetoric.

Queer memes aren’t the only way I, and many other queer meme readers and writers, explored our queerness, made queer friends, constructed a queer identity. We consumed media, chatted in forums, and read books. Serkan Gökremli highlights some of these forms of digital queer community writing in his book *Grassroots Literacies: Lesbian and Gay Activism and the Internet in Turkey*. But many of us, especially those of us who grew up being “very online” in the social media age, reckon with our queerness by reading, sharing, and making memes. They taught us a language and aesthetic of queerness steeped in joy that let us become a cohesive community, where we felt mutual responsibility and care for each other. As I had more and more discussions with others in the queer meme community, I began to see clearly how memes truly act as a community literacy practice. Queer meme circulation is a way for us to learn our own language, explore our queerness through a community that reads and writes together to each other. Memes allow us to reckon with our own pain, transforming the traumas of queer oppression and marginalization into community-making by laughing—together.

I want to return now to the idea among queer meme community members that memes give them a way to understand both themselves and their own queer identity, and simultaneously give them connection to the larger queer community. I spoke to many of these queer meme readers and writers to get a better understanding of how they conceptualized their experiences. I asked Summer, for instance, what she most wanted me to know about her experience. She responded,

I would say that memes are really important to me as a queer person, and I feel like to the larger queer community, especially because I grew up in a suburb that is white heteronormative … I would say it was not instrumental, but very important in sort of me coming to terms with my sexuality and being okay with it and feeling like a part of the community.

In her own words, Summer sees the community literacy practice of memes as a way of her coming to terms with and negotiating her sexuality. Many others echoed this during our conversations. They would try new names, pronouns, identities, and ways of writing and identifying, changing themselves within queer meme groups first before facing the world at large.

This aligns interestingly with Jacqueline Rhodes and Jonathan Alexander’s *Techne: Queer Meditations on Writing the Self*. They write that

On the one hand, queer composing is a demand born out of anger, resentment, pain … This is a right we take in the full ugly face of how our lives have often been composed in ways that we not only do not recognize but that harm us. At the same time, our “full, nasty, complicated lives” often require acts of de-composition, of un-composing and re-composing dominant narratives of sexuality, gender, and identity … We work and rework those dominant forms, both to counter and to assert, to say no to the damage done to us but also to use that damage to make livable lives. (Composing While Queer” *Techne*)

At first, I saw Rhodes and Alexander’s argument against queer rhetorical practice being about affirming an identity as being at odds with the ways queer meme creators were using memes for identity. But rhetorically, they were not really affirming an identity—in fact, they seemed to be doing exactly what Rhodes and Alexander described. Among other queer people, they would read and compose ways of being in opposition to what was available outside these queer spaces. They de-composed homophobic memes (which I will discuss more later) and un- and re-composed themselves through and into queerness, often to soothe the harm done to them through humor, and to imagine a new self.
This queer, digital writing of the self through memes is a process of deconstructing and reconstructing, rhetorically, but it is not done in isolation. In fact, memes cannot and do not really function in vacuums. They always require the rhetor and the reader to be in a network together—and they work best in community. To constantly de-, un-, re-construct the self rhetorically requires literacy of the composition practices of both rhetor and reader. Eric Darnell Pritchard, in their book *Fashioning Lives: Black Queers and the Politics of Literacy*, states, “For literacy, composition, and rhetoric I maintain, as decades of scholars have argued, that everyone has identities and that all literacy narratives are stories that tell us something about identity, and vice versa” (181). This vice versa is precisely what I think entwines Rhodes and Alexander’s queer rhetoric to a queer community literacy to queer memes: memes are stories that tell us something about identity of both the self, and of one’s relationship to others in the community. Thus, memes are bound up in queer rhetorical practices that are impossible to separate from community literacy.

So then, what exactly are memes? Limor Shifman, in *Memes in Digital Culture*, defines them as:

(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance;
(b) that were created with awareness of each other; and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users. This definition is helpful for analyzing Internet memes as socially constructed public discourses in which different memetic variants represent diverse voices and perspectives. (7–8)

Later in the same volume she connects this to memes as genre, writing that

[Users] tend to follow the same beaten tracks of meme creation. These paths can be thought of as meme genres. Defined as ‘socially recognized types of communicative action,’ genres share not only structures and stylistic features, but also themes, topics, and intended audiences. (99)

She borrows this definition from Wanda Orlikowski and JoAnne Yates, who are specifically discussing genre as part of rhetorical genre studies.

I would like to add a bit to this definition: memes (conceptually) are a metagene, as defined by Michael Carter: the large ways of knowing and doing that writers (in Carter’s particular case, students) use while writing. For instance, Carter describes scientific or empirical thinking as a way of doing that becomes a way of knowing when applied in the writing of the lab report genre (388). Metagenres for memes generally help us better understand the variations in exigence and social action for different memes, while still recognizing the similarities across them. In essence, individual kinds of memes and meme paths could be conceptualized as genres. This retains many of Shifman’s observations, while leaving open a broader way of understanding the constantly evolving ecology of memes as metageneric. That is, that memes are a way of thinking and composing genres.

This explains what memes are in the context of cultural and social writing, but it is also worth considering what memes are as a form. Understanding form can also help to better understand the ways memes function as rhetorical (meta)genres. Amy Devitt, a rhetorical genre studies scholar, notes that this re-fusing of form to social action gives us a deeper understanding of genres, since form and context cannot be divorced:

The answer, instead, is to acknowledge the two-sidedness, the simultaneity, the inseparability of form, meaning, and action, of individual, social, and cultural context, of actual genres and genre-ness. Such a fusion is far more difficult and far more satisfying as genre study continues into its next twenty years of vital research. (46)
Queer memes, at the core of their form, are about intertextuality. All memes point outside the composition. Take, for instance, the Babadook memes. First, the image of the Babadook was referential to the original Babadook movie. The meme assumes some level of cultural familiarity through which the rest of the joke could make sense. This points toward an aspect of memes that can feel particularly queer: intertextuality or citationality. These terms, which I use interchangeably, signify the practice of a text referring outside itself in order to demonstrate its influences or communities.

Not all citation is about gender or sexuality. However, all identity, and especially gender and sexuality, is about citation. Literature scholar George Piggford notes that there have been many conversations, especially among notable philosophers like Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler, about the relationship between identities and citation. In his 1997 article, “Who’s That Girl? Annie Lennox, Woolf’s Orlando, and Female Camp Androgyny,” he writes that, “for Butler, as for Derrida, any signifier of identity, any signature, is citation: Discourse can be neither original nor authoritative” (286). In particular, queer art uses citation as a way to seek community and kinship lines. If heterosexual kinship is about reproduction, then non-heterosexual kinships can use a non-reproductive model. Some of these kinships will focus on lineages filled with queerness. That is, some of these kinships will be a way of claiming other queer work in a non-reproduction-oriented lineage. This is a way of forming a community that shapes aesthetics because it shares community resources.

The alternative to this form of community-based kinship is citation done in opposition. Memes have often utilized this form of oppositional citation. The “hit me with that gay shit” meme, for instance, was originally homophobic (Miss me with that gay shit) and featured, in various iterations, characters dodging the words “that gay shit.” Queer meme makers turned this into a “hit me with that gay shit” meme (the latter of which became much more popular than the original). These new iterations feature various characters drinking or otherwise ingesting or showering in items labeled with the text “that gay shit.” This is part of a lineage of queer oppositional citation—queer pornography, in particular, often visually acknowledges what normative society marks as “deviant.” Critical theorist Shawna Lipton, in her 2012 article “Trouble Ahead: Pleasure, Possibility and the Future of Queer Porn,” argues one of the practices of queer porn is the practice of citationality, pointing (often with humorous or playful intent) at other porn films (197).

What she describes is another kind of lineage—one where queerness injects itself into a non-queer lineage by re-staging traditional heterosexual porn scenes with homosexual acts, which Lipton argues subverts the original heterosexual porn scenes and their power dynamics (203). This is a way of claiming an oppositional kinship, where the creator claims it by aesthetic force. We see this same aesthetic and rhetorical force being used to claim oppositional kinship in reaction to homophobic content and claim it as queer.

I’m not the only one to notice how memes have this citational nature. Kyle Wholey, a scholar of queer pop culture, notes in a TikTok that “a meme uses a popular image with someone’s chosen caption. A TikTok uses someone else’s sound with their own chosen caption.” (mxunderworld [aka Kyle Wholey]). What Wholey notes here is that TikToks are recognizable as memes because both use an original formal element (text, image, sound) to make the meme relatable or humorous, and another formal element to be the citational or referential element to make the meme signal certain kinds of community knowledge and humor. This definition is also consistent with Shifman’s own reasoning around memes vs. viral objects.

Having discussed memes as queer community literacy and given a working definition of memes and their forms, I want to return to the ways people in queer meme communities understand the reading and writing they do in those spaces. Overwhelmingly, a few themes stood out during my conversations with these queer meme community members: memes were a way of connecting to the queer community, memes were a way of understanding their own queer self, and queer memes offered comfort and laughter to their lives.
It is useful to theorize a bit about this laughter, and why it is so vital to understanding memes as disruptive rhetorics. This laughter, though it can seem innocuous, is a kind of revolutionary imagining. Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai write that “Comedy helps us test or figure out what it means to say ‘us.’ Always crossing lines, it helps us figure out what lines we desire or can bear” (235). To queer humor, then, helps define who and what makes up queerness, and what the desires for a queer world may be. What Berlant and Ngai do not discuss is the other need humor fills: the need to laugh as a way to break through the bonds of a world that marginalizes.

Jo Anna Isaak captures this idea in The Revolutionary Power of Women’s Laughter, when she writes that “this laughter or jouissance may be a catalyst that could enable a break or subversion in the established representational and social structure” (15). Laughter allows not just critiques of cultures, but ways of imagining states of the world. I see this as akin to what Drucilla Cornell terms “a feminist hope,” where “we represent what psychic laws we think are ethically desirable in order for a woman to have a chance at becoming a person” (xxi). Cornell’s desire for a world that is structurally livable for women and recognizes their personhood in many ways requires an imaging of a new world. A queer hope works similarly, where we must imagine a new world that breaks through the heteronormative old world—and queer laughter is one way we do that.

I do caution against seeing all queer memes as revolutionary or subversive, however. The form has the potential for this kind of queer hope, but just as often my participants noted the prioritization of white, cis, gay, male experiences, to the detriment of other queer identities. This included conversations about the appropriation of AAVE (African American Vernacular English) in queer meme culture, the lack of discussion around the intersectional queer racialized experience, and a lack of recognition (and sometimes outright demonization) of trans members of the community. EBY100, a queer meme community member, points to the shortcomings of white queer spaces when they say,

I think in a lot of queer groups, the majority, or at least it feels like the majority of the participants are white … it’s the thought of, “Hey, bringing up your struggles with race or being disabled or something in this space is not what we’re looking for here. We’re looking to have fun and be queer.” So in that, I don’t feel super represented a lot of the time. I think that’s a big failing of these groups.

EBY100, and many other participants, highlight the ways these groups have not yet reckoned with intersectionality (Crenshaw) in many queer meme communities.

So, memes have disruptive potential through their humor, but rhetors do not always use that disruption. What is it, then, that makes some queer memes part of that queer hope and imagining? I want to highlight an answer from Stac, a non-binary trans person. I asked them what their favorite queer meme was at the moment:

Abbie: And what is your current favorite queer meme?
Stac: Hm. I’ve been seeing a lot of the Dress Go Spinny memes, and those are just always fun to see people having a good time.
Abbie: Can you describe the visuals and text on those memes for me?
Stac: So, the idea of a Dress Go Spinny meme is usually a recently transitioning trans feminine person trying on a dress for the first time, and making a picture or small gif of themselves spinning around in their dress or skirt. And then some sort of comment or anime girl picture underneath with like dress go spinny and a smiley face.
Abbie: Sorry, that’s so wholesome.
Stac: It’s just, they’re super cute, and I’m like, I’m glad you guys are having a great time right now. Abbie: Yeah, what is—
Stac: Definitely the most uplifting meme thing I’m seeing.
Abbie Levesque DeCamp

Abbie: What is funny about that for you? What makes that your favorite meme?
Stac: It’s funny in like a heartwarming way … I don’t know, right now, there’s just so much shit going down, that—
Abbie: A little extra serotonin goes a long way.
Stac: Seeing someone having fun wearing a skirt, I’m just, I don’t know, it brings a smile to my face and it usually makes me giggle.

Stac touches on several of the themes I mentioned earlier here. At the time of this interview, COVID-19 had just started. It was early in the summer, and it was still unclear how long the pandemic would last or what the final toll would be. Still, Stac (along with many others) knew that things were bleak. Stac’s interaction with queer memes seemed to bring a light into a trying time—even though those memes did not necessarily apply to Stac themselves. We can see this when they say: “I’m glad you guys are having a great time right now.” “You guys” as a phrase marks a group that one is not a part of, as noted by Stephanie Kerschbaum in her discussion of rhetorics of difference. She writes that “close attention to their interaction reveals how they [the students] orient to one another, and considered over time, patterns in the markers of difference they display could productively inform understanding of how broad identity categories matter to interaction” (148). Here, by using “you guys” instead of “we” or other similar terms, it appears Stac is marking a rhetoric of difference—that they do not belong to the broad identity category of people who would post a Dress Go Spinny meme of themselves. And yet, it is also a rhetoric infused with warmth and community.

One can see this community feeling despite the rhetorical marker of difference throughout our conversation, since as Stac notes, in order to view many of these memes you have to join the digital space they show up in. They mention that

A lot of it was friends showing me a meme, and me realizing what the group was from and joining it myself. Or on Reddit, someone cross posting to a different subreddit, and me seeing a subreddit pop up a lot in the cross post, and just subbing to that subreddit.

So, there is both the aspect of them joining the group, which could be interpreted as belonging to (or at least wanting to belong to) a queer meme community, as well as the fact that it would often come to their attention through other community members—like friends or groups they already participate in—sharing content that led Stac to joining the new groups.

Despite marking themselves as distinctly not one of the people having fun wearing a skirt, the joy of the people who are having fun becomes their joy. While they might not share experiences, they share a language and a space here that spreads laughter beyond the people experiencing the dress-spinning joy for themselves.

Essentially, the takeaway is that queer community literacies like memes can help spread ideas via multimodal composition across difference within the community—they can bring us to intersectional understandings. Taking joy in experiences across community difference is a strong way to build coalitions and strengthen communities, instead of flattening all experiences to the unmarked baselines. As noted before, this is the difference between queer memes that help build communities and queer hope, and queer memes that default to cis, white, gay, male experiences and leave those who experience other forms of queerness out in the cold.

While Stac did not specifically mention what community they mostly see the Dress Go Spinny meme on, they mentioned earlier in the interview that their primary meme consumption happened on Reddit. This was a bit of an anomaly compared with the majority of my interviewees, who for the most part preferred sites like Facebook, Tumblr, and Twitter, due to Reddit’s toxic reputation. Having some context for the digital space that Stac likely saw these memes helps highlight both the
citationality of queer memes, and the ways memes can help build queer communities even in potentially hostile environments.

Reddit is a social media site based around sub-communities called subreddits. Each post appears in its subreddit and can also appear on the front page, where it is seen by users outside those communities, and even those without reddit accounts. Posts can be text, images, links, or videos, and each post contains a thread of responses. Posts, as well as comments in each thread, can be up or downvoted by users, with the most popular comments usually appearing toward the top, though users can change how the interface sorts on an individual level. (For instance, one can sort by “most controversial” instead of “hottest” comments). Stac mentioned spending a lot of time on a queer humor subreddit for trans individuals, which focuses entirely on memes. This sort of content restriction is common for meme groups in order to keep things on topic. Stac mentioned that for their normal Reddit usage, “Usually that’s more of me waking up and scrolling through the front page to see what’s going on on Reddit, and depending on how I’m feeling or if I see something happening in the real world, I will go to a specific subreddit” and that for their front page, they have “curated it. There’s a lot of stuff that would not make it onto the traditional Reddit front page.”

Stac has taken a social media platform that is often viewed as hostile to marginalized people and curated their reading and writing experiences to make it a space where they can find community. Like many people who love queer memes, Stac reads more than they compose, but this reading (scrolling, viewing) process is just as vital to Stac feeling connected to their identity and community, and gaining the joy they need among that community to sustain queer hope. Not all queer meme experiences mimic the possibly hostile nature of Stac’s platform usage. And again, Stac did not mention that Dress Go Spinny was on Reddit specifically, but just that Reddit is where most of the memes were viewed generally. What I want to unpack here is that Internet spaces are a powerful part of the community literacy practices queer memes are part of, and that they share many of the aspects of space and place queer people face in the real world, including using and reading queer composition to carve welcoming community spaces among hostile places.

Having laid out a case of a queer meme and its rhetorical scene, a few broader questions are worth returning to. How do queer people make community connections across disparate spaces and places? How do marginalized people navigate writing on the Internet and Internet culture?

Memes are important to queer community literacy in a way that is worth paying attention to, both because of the ways their multimodality and humor make them unusual and because of their ubiquity and proliferation in the digital age. While they are not the only way queer people make connections across disparate places, they are an increasingly noticeable one. For a community like ours, this is vital, since so many queer people lack access to the physical spaces where this work might otherwise happen. As well, memes help us understand one way marginalized people might navigate Internet writing and composition, and how digital literacies are built through both understandings of technologies and platforms alongside understandings of community literacies.

Queerness also helps us better understand memes, which resist easy categorizations like public or private. Memes can help queer communities build queer hope through laughter, can help us find joy in the many kinds of queerness and difference within the community, and through that understanding of difference build stronger bonds and coalitions, helping take steps toward queer liberation.

I want to end with the words of the community again to highlight that this knowledge of memes as rhetorical, while articulated here by me, is not knowledge I built. My participant Emily noted in her interview that

linguistically, they’re really fascinating. There’s a lot of jokes where you’re like, you just kind of tweak the language a little bit … Like people making jokes about say Kylo Ren, and they always call him Kyle. Things like that … I think those quirks are really relevant.
Abbie Levesque DeCamp

Emily, here, clearly recognizes that there is something unique about the language and rhetoric of memes. I hope to have given clear scholarly language to highlight and bring attention to the knowledge and language-making that queer memes are already enacting.

Notes

1. The Babadook is an Australian horror film about a monster that comes to life from a pop-up book and that becomes stronger and more violent the more the characters deny and fight it. The character itself is an eerie, vaguely human, black-and-white figure in a top hat.


Works Cited


EBY100. Personal interview. 2020.

Emily. Personal interview. 2020.


Summer. Personal interview. 2020.