

## WHAT'S GOING ON HERE

This zine is part of a series of footnote zines to the project “Memetic Engines of Anticapitalism.” Due to a whole lot of complications (mainly involving chronic illness) the version of this zine is at some stage of draft, not the polished and complete edition.

All of these zines will be available for free online and in perpetuity when they're finished, and updated regularly in the meantime.

If you want to follow up, the QR code on the front of this zine will take you straight to the most recent web page edition and an archive of each iteration that was separately published.

For more general updates and information on the whole project, this QR code will take you straight to [memeticengines.com](http://memeticengines.com), where you can see the overview and any news about the works, sign up for the mailing list, or get in touch with me to ask clarifying questions.

### ZINES IN THE SERIES:

Replicate, Mutate, Select  
The Memetic Landscape

This Is Propaganda

Ethical Hypocrisy

Little Ideas in Memetics

Capital's Not Capitalism

What Are Pacta

Some other awful things that are inevitable under capitalism

The Third Derivative of Value

This Is George

Self-Destruct, LLC.

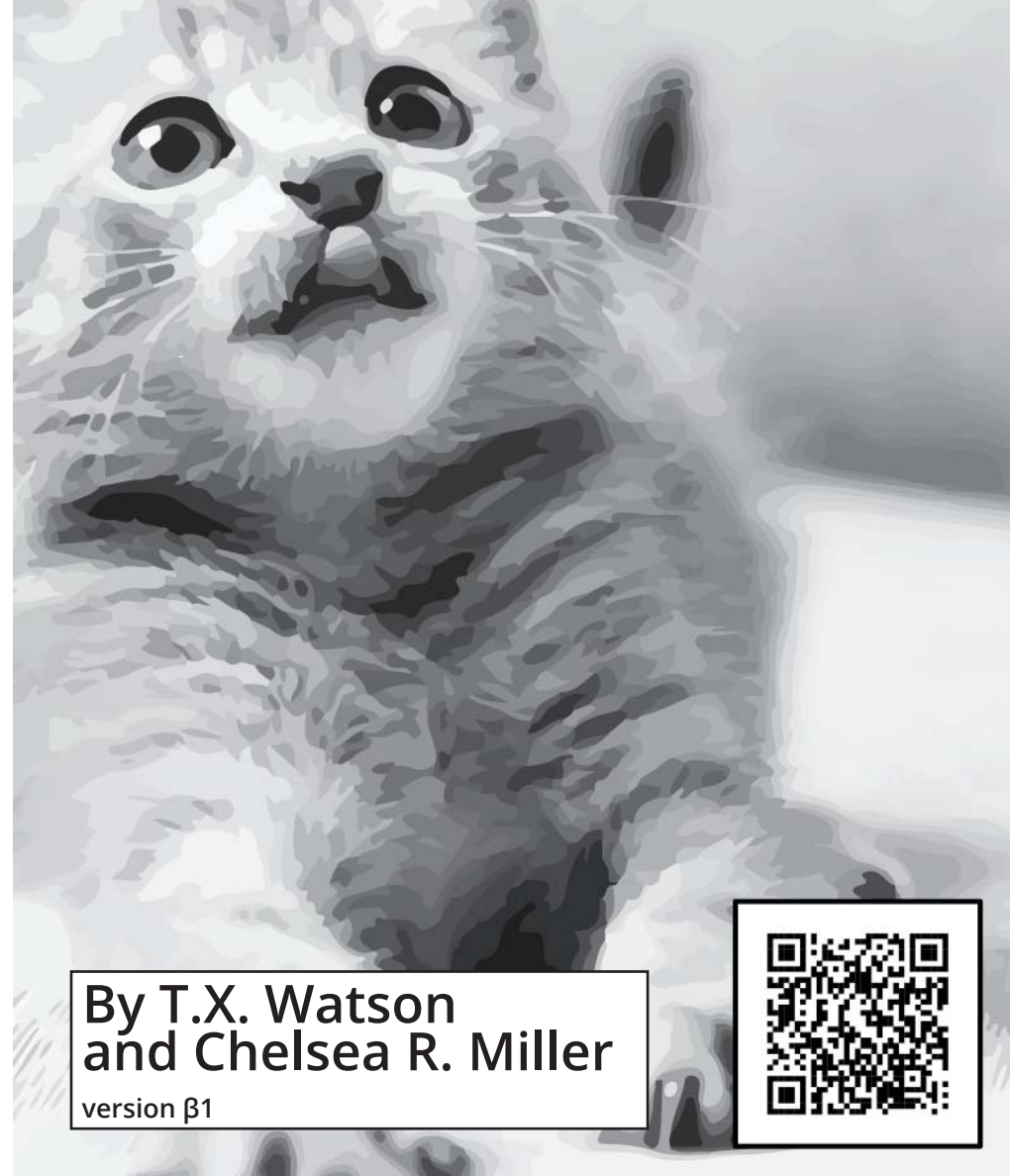
### AND COMING SOON,

My Chronic Illness as a Case Study in the Shortcomings of Capitalism



MEMETICENGINES.COM

# LITTLE IDEAS IN MEMETICS



By T.X. Watson  
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version β1



# Meme Culture

The term “meme” is frequently used in common parlance to refer to a vague set of “jokes on the internet.” The term itself was founded by evolutionary theorist Richard Dawkins as a concept for discussion of evolutionary principles in explaining the spread of ideas and cultural phenomena:

We need a name for the new replicator, a noun that conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation. ‘Mimeme’ comes from a suitable Greek root, but I want a monosyllable that sounds a bit like ‘gene’. I hope my classicist friends will forgive me if I abbreviate mimeme to meme. If it is any consolation, it could alternatively be thought of as being related to ‘memory’, or to the French word *même*. It should be pronounced to rhyme with ‘cream’.

But in many cases the meme-as-in-joke is a relatively simple memplex. Lolcats<sup>1</sup> are a great example of this: while generally understood as a singular meme (and they are, in the colloquial sense of the word) lolcats actually consist of three distinct memes:

- Amusing pictures of cats
- Image macros -- the trend of adding text on top of images, usually in white IMPACT font text in all caps
- lolpeak -- a specific style of colloquial misspelling and breaches of conventional English grammar for humorous effect

Short of these three features, with few exceptions, what you have is not a lolcat.

The communities surrounding this style of joke, which I’m calling

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<sup>1</sup> I’m not even going to try to be current on what’s going on with memes at time of publication.

Phonographic recording wasn’t developed so that someone could invent the record-scratch. It was invented to document and reproduce styles of music that existed entirely independent of the recording material -- styles of music that were previously documented with paper notation, and had to be recreated by human performers.

David Byrne of Talking Heads has a great TED talk about how musical styles were literally shaped by the shape of the room they were performed in.<sup>5</sup> He talks about the tiny rooms where he started his career -- rooms where detailed and fast-paced lyrics stayed intelligible enough to center songs around them. Rooms where you could only fit a few band members, enforcing the now massively standard 3-5 member line-up of contemporary musical acts.

The same is true of the pop song, which was initially shaped by the amount of music you could put on a 45 rpm record: about 3 1/2 minutes.

This edition of the zine ends here, but a future edition will have a proper closing paragraph! (And maybe even more content!)

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<sup>5</sup> David Byrne, “How architecture helped music evolve,” TED.com. February 2010. [https://www.ted.com/talks/david\\_byrne\\_how\\_architecture\\_helped\\_music\\_evolve](https://www.ted.com/talks/david_byrne_how_architecture_helped_music_evolve).

a fistfight between two taxonomists.<sup>4</sup>

Memes and memplexes often appear in distinct ways that can be classified. But meme taxonomies are even more provisional, and fall apart even faster than biological taxonomy.

Speaking of a kind of memplex that has a pretty coherent taxonomy, let's consider the history of music genres.

## The Replication of Music

Music iterates in ways that are pretty easy to follow, memetically speaking. In the United States, for example, over the course of the previous century, both rock 'n' roll and country music both grew out of genres rooted in live performance and became major forms of recorded music as a commodity. As they became commercial products both mutated in different ways in response to white customers' discomfort with the Black musical histories from which they originated.

Apart from larger genre movements, though, music is also a fantastic way to highlight that different recording media and reproductive circumstances provide different opportunities for mutation.

Take the record scratch, for example. This sound -- an immediately recognizable characteristic of music in the last forty or so years -- comes from a manipulation of the vinyl record (which by the way is a great name for a memetic substrate: vinyl, the material, and record, the function that material serves) in a manner that wasn't intended.

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<sup>4</sup> Two shitty taxonomists, that is. Good taxonomists know that their field is approximative by nature and will explain exactly the same thing I'm explaining to anyone who tried to make them apply the contemporary definition of "chicken" to something that was walking around in 2000 B.C.E.

"meme culture," have in common a number of social norms that evolved alongside the style of the joke, and that foster the growth and spread of new jokes in the style.

One such norm is the absence of specific credit. While it's sometimes possible to identify who created the original version of a meme, that information is rarely treated as important, and when people iterate on the meme, they rarely keep any kind of citation alongside their versions.

Another is radical inclusion: in most cases, there is no barrier to entry to participate in a meme. They don't ask the participants to meet any particular level of technical expertise or creative training to create iterations on a meme.

Memes get shared a lot; and it's very common for memes to be selected based on a very strong intuitive grasp of the rules of grammar -- because memes often break those rules in ways that are understood to be characteristic of the form.

Doge memes, for example, have a characteristic disagreement between adjectives and nouns: "such text, very memes, wow." For another example, the poetic form of the "I Lik the Bred" meme has been compared to that of Chaucerian Middle English, both for its scansion, the characterization of the narrator, and spelling conventions.<sup>2</sup>

## Lolcats aren't a species of meme

That kind of distinction is the closest that anything gets in memetics to speciation, the evolutionary process by which populations evolve to become

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<sup>2</sup> Allthingslinguistic. Tumblr post. <http://allthingslinguistic.com/tagged/lik-the-bred>.

distinct species.<sup>3</sup>

The notion of ‘separate species’ is an approximation already, but it works alright for biological evolution. One of the ways that biologists decide whether two populations are separate species is whether they can produce viable offspring together: for example, cats and fish can’t mate and have children together. Or, horses and donkeys can, but the offspring -- mules -- aren’t ever capable of reproducing themselves.

But because memes replicate far more fluidly and in far more ways than biological entities, there’s no way for two populations of memplexes to become so structurally different from each other that the product of combining them can’t reproduce.

For example:



By creating that image I’ve proved that doge and lolcats can be smashed together to create a third, distinct thing, and by printing it in dozens of copies of this zine, I’ve proved that the outcome of that union can replicate.

Whether it’ll be successful is a very different question, and I’m certainly not expecting this extremely purpose-specific illustration to replicate at the rate of an image like “I can has cheezburger.”

As I mentioned earlier, the idea of “species” in biology is already a kind of fuzzy approximation. It’s a useful way to think about populations of animals, but it pushes aside the fact that, over time, all species are fluidly connected to each other in a continuity of lineage, and it’s nonsensical to try to find a specific point where a line can be drawn between a prior species and current ones. “Which was the last non-chicken, who laid an egg that hatched into a chicken?” This is a bad question: all you’d come away with is

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<sup>3</sup> Definition cribbed directly from the first sentence of the “Speciation” Wikipedia page: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Speciation>.