



PROJECT MUSE®

Online Culture Wars

Sarah Whitcomb Laiola

American Book Review, Volume 39, Number 4, May/June 2018, pp. 13-14
(Review)

Published by American Book Review

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/abr.2018.0043>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/698968>

Online Culture Wars

Sarah Whitcomb Laiola

**KILL ALL NORMIES:
ONLINE CULTURE WARS FROM
4CHAN AND TUMBLR TO
TRUMP AND THE ALT-RIGHT**

Angela Nagle

Zero Books

www.zero-books.net/books/kill-all-normies

136 Pages; Print, \$16.95

Since Barack Obama's 2008 election, the influence that both the mainstream social web and digital networked media hold over political elections has become undeniable. In 2008, we saw the rise of a "millennial president," as Obama demonstrated his social media savvy, using Facebook, Twitter, and similar sites to connect with his voters. Obama's own use of these, young, "hip" technologies was bolstered by the vitality of his iconic "HOPE" poster that, originally designed by street artist Shepard Fairey, was soon distributed all over the web as an internet meme. As with any meme, the poster was parodied with a wide range of subjects: from figures like the Pope and Hillary Clinton promoting HOPE, to *Star Wars*'s R2D2 promoting NEW HOPE, *Batman*'s The Joker (as portrayed by Heath Ledger) promoting JOKE, and the web's own Trollface promoting TROLL. In 2016, we saw much of this play out again, as a presidential candidate rose to prominence through the shared power of his own social media savvy, and a viral media army of internet memes. This time, however, the drama played out in distortion. Where Obama impressed with his engaging, humanizing use of Facebook, Donald Trump shocked with his crass, inflammatory use of Twitter. Where the 2008-9's social web was earnestly peppered with the HOPE poster, the 2016 web was awash with Pepe the Frog memes that featured the character transformed from his original role as an "everyman" into a white nationalist decked out with Nazi insignia and unapologetically promoting inflammatory, racist, homophobic, xenophobic, and misogynist ideas.

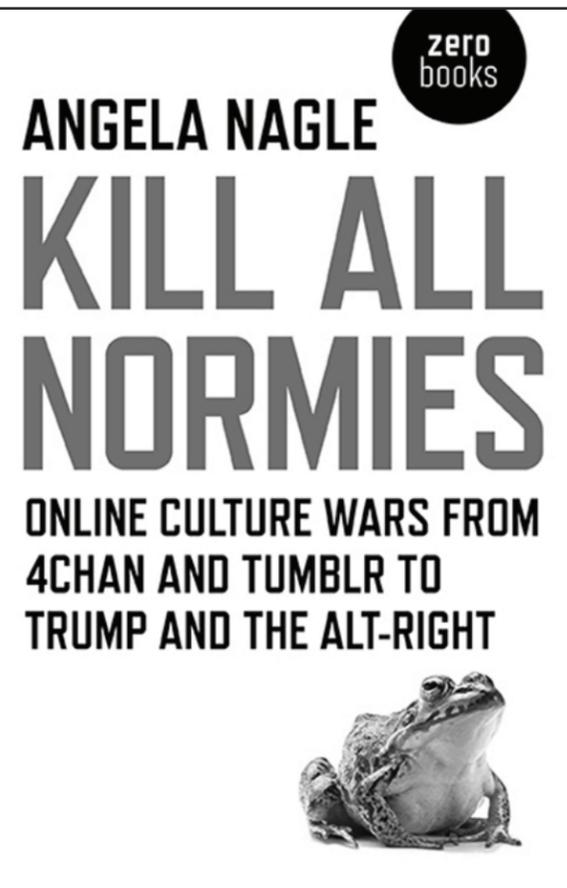
So what happened? "How did we get from those earnest hopeful days broadcast across the media mainstream to where we are now?"

Having spent eight years closely watching rightist forums on the web, and in 2015 earning a PhD from Dublin City College following the successful completion of her thesis, "An Investigation into Contemporary Online Anti-Feminist Movements," Angela Nagle is acutely well-positioned to answer this question. In *Kill All Normies*, she aims to do just this by "map[ping] the online cultural wars that formed the political sensibilities of a generation," while providing "understand[ing] and [keeping] an account of the online battles that may otherwise be forgotten but have nevertheless shaped culture and ideas in a profound way." Finally, in what may be its most ambitious goal, the text "place[s] contemporary culture wars in some historical context and attempts

to untangle the real from the performance, the material from the abstract and the ironic from the faux-ironic." This account ultimately offers a short, critical history of the ways the overt misogyny, unchecked harassment, and anti-feminism of the rightist social web—illustrated in the text through the anonymous forum, 4chan—became normalized and entered mainstream culture as the alt-right. As Nagle chronicles, the alt-right will rise in direct opposition to the sensitivity and identity politics of the leftist, mainstream social web—illustrated in the text through the microblogging network, Tumblr.

As it provides a critical history of the online culture wars from 2008 to 2016, *Kill All Normies* makes an important contribution to two growing bodies of work: that which attempts to understand the 2016 election, and that which focuses on the rising toxicity, harassment, and anti-feminism of online and other media spheres. To the first area, Nagle's text provides a necessary divergence from a preoccupation with the role that back-end algorithms and data-manipulation played in the election, as it focuses instead on the role played by user-generated content and user communities at the web's front-end. Through this focus, her text offers an important alternative to the idea that the entire 2016 election was the result of web-based media running rampant, uncontrolled, and beyond its people. To the second area, Nagle's history of the anti-feminism and misogyny of the alt-right provides a useful complement to texts like Anastasia Salter and Bridget Blodgett's *Toxic Geek Masculinity in Media: Sexism, Trolling, and Identity Policing* (2017), and the recent special issue of *Communication, Culture, and Critique* on "Media and the Extreme Right" (eds. Laurie Ouellette and Sarah Banet-Weiser).

Before turning to a discussion of the text's content, it is worth noting that by Nagle's own admission, she is writing from a left-leaning position of feminism. This position, however, does not release her text from being critical of the leftist web and the role that these communities have played in the recent online culture wars. Her criticism of the leftist web has earned the text quite a bit of critique from popular left-leaning publications, with some reviewers going so far as to claim that the book makes the left look worse than the alt-right, and, as Jordy Cummings says, that it is "not a book about the alt-right. It is an anti-left polemic." I do not read her text as one that is anti-left as much as one that is critical of the ways identity politics, call-out culture, virtue signaling, trigger warnings, and similar practices have come to dominate contemporary, mainstream liberalism. Further, Nagle does not shy away from describing the ways these practices can be (and often are) deployed as if to grant the user a free-pass for activity that is effectively harassment and bullying, or in her words to effect "simultaneous victimhood and callousness." One of the most salient examples of this that she offers are the following responses by Twitter user "Brienne



of Snarth" to a two-year-old's death at a Disney resort when he was dragged into the lagoon by an alligator: "'I'm so finished with this white privilege lately that I'm not even sad about a 2yo being eaten by a gator because his daddy ignored signs,' and 'You really think there are no fucking consequences to anything. A goddam sign told you to stay out of the water in Florida. FUCK A SIGN.'"

These critiques, combined with her notes early in the text that many of the 4chan users who make up the alt-right, imagined themselves victimized by what they saw as an increasingly anti-male, anti-white, anti-heterosexual, and anti-cisgender mainstream, are likely responsible for readings of her text as "anti-left." However, though she certainly calls out these left-leaning spaces for fostering their own cultures of intolerance, she is careful not to let this critique fall into a logic that would posit the alt-right's rise as somehow inevitable or the fault of the left. Indeed, the bulk of her critique of the leftist web is confined to one chapter. The remaining six chapters detail the cyber-bullying, harassment, and off-line violence perpetuated by members of rightist web cultures that, despite claims to victimization by the left, is clearly motivated by overt misogyny, anti-feminism, racism, and white supremacy. The sheer weight of this content, combined with the degree of harassment and violence perpetuated by the rightist web—Brienne of Snarth's tweets, though certainly callous and insensitive to the death of a two-year-old, are in no way equivalent to Elliot Rodger's shooting spree against women at the University of California, Santa Barbara which was both planned through rightist 4chan forums and continues to be hailed as heroic there—makes it clear that this is in no way an apologist or celebratory account of the alt-right, but a critical, cultural history of their rise to mainstream prominence.

Opening with an introductory reflection on the web's tonal shifts from 2008 to 2016, *Kill All Normies*' first half provides historical perspectives to ground the rise of the alt-right. The first of these chapters offers a recent history of what Nagle calls the "digital counterrevolution" of the 2010s: A leaderless, networked movement rooted in the deplorable cultures and shock aesthetics of the anonymous forum 4chan by users who found themselves both left out of and (in their words)

Laiola continued on next page

CUNEIFORM
POETRY, TYPOGRAPHY, & ARTISTS' BOOKS
www.cuneiformpress.com

victimized by the mainstream liberalism of the web. This leaderless counterrevolution sought to bring down these mainstream web spaces and provide a corrective to the politics and cultures of linguistic inclusivity, intersectional identity politics, trigger warnings and other features of “liberal snowflake” user-cultures. One of the most illustrative examples of this counterrevolution’s politics and tactics can be found in the 2014 Gamergate Controversy. Ostensibly about maintaining ethics in games journalism, the Gamergate Controversy was a months-long “geeks vs. feminists” battle wherein (primarily) male gamer communities organized on 4chan to launch a series of cyberattacks on female gamers, game critics, and game designers for the “intolerable crime” of publicly examining and/or criticizing—however benignly or accurately—the treatment of women in games and gaming cultures. Major figures who found themselves under attack include Anita Sarkessian, Zoe Quinn, Brianna Wu, Felicia Day, and Jennifer Allway, and the attacks ranged from posting explicitly violent comments online, to falsifying and circulating nude or pornographic images, to doxxing, a practice of exposing someone’s personal details to user forums to enable mass harassment that can, and in many cases did, go offline. Besides highlighting both the geeks vs. feminists theme and tactics of cyber-harassment that will characterize the rightist culture wars, this event is notable within the history of the alt-right’s rise for the ways it brought “gamers, rightist chan culture, anti-feminism, and the online far right closer to mainstream discussion” while “politiciz[ing] a broad group of young people, mostly boys, who organized tactics around the idea of fighting back against the culture war being waged by the cultural left.”

“Geeks vs. feminists” is a theme that runs throughout the book, accompanied by a second thematic thread that Nagle introduces in the second chapter: transgression. This chapter provides a history of transgression’s cultural shift from a socially

liberal virtue to a conservative one. As she notes, one-time alt-right champion Milo Yiannopoulos’ “favorite description of the unifying ‘troll-y’ sensibility across the new wave of the online right is ‘transgressive.’” Yiannopoulos appears throughout the text, joining a cadre of transgressive, rightist figures that Nagle identifies as the “alt-light” in order to differentiate them from the alt-right groups of 4chan. In chapter three, Nagle analyzes the ways these “alt-light” figures, who include Steve Bannon, Mike Cernovich, Richard Spencer, and The Rebel Media’s Gavin McInnes and Lauren Southern, adopted the Gramscian position that “political change follows cultural and social change” to create the web-based, counter-cultural media sphere that was highly influential in garnering Trump’s success. In the last of these historically focused chapters,

This text does not shy away from exposing the deep-seated, even normatively accepted positions of Western culture that have contributed to alt-right’s rise to the mainstream.

Nagle connects today’s conservative culture wars to those of the 1990s, highlighting the ways the alt-right’s embrace of transgression that toes—and very often crosses—the line into violence and harassment radically differentiates it from the conservatism of the 1990s exemplified by figures like Pat Buchanan.

Over the book’s final three chapters, Nagle looks to contemporary web cultures as they relate to and diverge from the transgressive, conservative counter-culture of the alt-right. It is in the first of these chapters that Nagle turns her attention to Tumblr and the leftist web to offer a critical view of a platform that typifies the alt-right’s “enemy online culture.” As noted, she brings particular focus to the effects of “call-out culture” and the “currency of virtue” that characterize these social media spaces, noting both the ways these behaviors have normalized a different kind of intolerance to that of the alt-right, and the ways these cultures have resulted in the left turning on itself for not being sensitive, intersectional, and progressive enough. Complementing this chapter’s deep dive into left-leaning spaces like Tumblr is the following chapter’s deep dive into the “manosphere”: chan and “geek” cultures’ response to Tumblr’s liberalism, and a term that “has been used to describe everything from progressive men’s issues activists dealing with real neglect of male health, suicide and unequal social services to the nastier corners of the Internet, filled with involuntary celibacy-obsessed, hate-filled, resentment-fueled cultures of quite chilling levels of misogyny.” Though one of the most important chapters for understanding such toxic forms of masculinity, this is one of the harder chapters of the text to read given its increasingly unsavory subject matter. The chapter includes unflinching discussions of Reddit’s “Red Pill” subforum, Roosh V’s supposedly satirical piece arguing for the legalization of rape, vigilante doxxing sites like Paul Elam’s register-her.com, and Elliot Rodger’s videos detailing his day of retribution against women that would culminate in his shooting at the University of California, Santa Barbara in 2014.

In the final chapter of the text, Nagle looks away from the counter-cultural spaces of 4chan and Tumblr to focus on the titular normies. “Normie” is a term originating in chan cultures as a derogatory, disdainful way to describe normal, “agreeable, mainstream members of society who have no knowingly abhorrent political views or unsavory hobbies.” In this chapter, Nagle reconciles the ways the alt-right was able to grow out of a community that “had long been characterized by an extreme subcultural snobbishness toward the masses and

mass culture” and yet now holds up the rhetoric of Trump as “the populist president” who represents ordinary folks left behind by mainstream liberalism. Her analysis of this apparent disconnect will culminate in a call echoed in her conclusion for a wider cultural recalibration, that turns away from both valorizing the transgressive and the counter-cultural as such, and from celebrating the web as the ideal space for fostering the transgressive and counter-cultural. As she notes, our cultural delight in and valorization of such values has resulted in an ugliness “beyond anything we could have possibly imagined.” Though she does not propose a way out of this mess, she does close with the “hope that the online world can contain rather than further enable the festering undergrowth of dehumanizing reactionary online politics now edging closer to the mainstream but unthinkable in the public arena just a few short years ago.” While this specter of hope is certainly comforting, such containment of the online world does not seem likely until policy makers begin seriously challenging and holding accountable those who make and design our online technologies—a moment that, if Mark Zuckerberg’s April 2018 hearing is any indication, is not likely to describe US policy any time soon. What might bring this moment closer, however, is moving the critical work being done in digital humanities and science and technology studies from academic spheres into greater mainstream circulation to influence the making of both policy and technology. This work includes texts like Safiya Noble’s *Algorithms of Oppression* (2018), Cathy O’Neil’s *Weapons of Math Destruction* (2016), and Stanford University Press’s forthcoming collection *Your Computer Is On Fire*.

Despite the weakly grounded hope of its conclusion, *Kill All Normies* is necessary critical reading for understanding the alt-right, its rise to prominence, and the cultures of the social web. Nagle’s style and the book’s overall brevity mark it as an accessible read within this growing field of cultural studies work. That said, the text is limited by its almost exclusive focus on the gendered politics of the alt-right. That is, the text acknowledges but does not critically engage with the alt-right’s racism, nativism, anti-immigrant, homophobic, and transphobic stances, so the reader who is interested in these aspects of the alt-right would need to look beyond Nagle’s book. As well, the reader who is completely unfamiliar with web spaces like 4chan and Tumblr, or the phenomenon of trolling might find the text challenging and even inaccessible at times, despite Nagle’s glosses and introductions. Overall, though, the text deserves a wide readership, for its exquisitely detailed history and analysis of social media’s counter-cultures that does not shy away from exposing the deep-seated, even normatively accepted positions of Western culture that have contributed to alt-right’s rise to the mainstream.

Sarah Whitcomb Laiola is an assistant professor of Digital Culture and Design at Coastal Carolina University. She received her PhD in English from the University of California, Riverside in August 2016 and specializes in new media poetics, contemporary digital technoculture, and twentieth/twenty-first century American literature. Her most recent publications appear in the journal Television and New Media as well as the edited collection, Civic Media: Technology, Design, Practice (2016), while she has work forthcoming in American Quarterly, Criticism, and Hyperrhiz.

Calling Innovative Writers!

&NOW 2018

A Festival of
New & Innovative Writing

October 5-7, 2018
University of Notre Dame

now open for proposals.

www.andnow2018.com

Come be a part of the conversation!

