Because Potato

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Because Potato
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Because Potato

by Candice Evers

Abstract

This thesis project explores the phenomenological qualities of the internet; asking, since the internet is difficult to grasp, what other modes of investigation might we have available? Using an investigative framework set forth by Jack Halberstam, this thesis declines to come to knowledge solely through understanding the formal, the structural, the highly visible and mainstream. The literature that I have gathered provides a range of modes for interrogating the simultaneously central and inconsequential subject of my thesis itself: the potato. Juxtaposing the physical, political and material conditions of the potato the internet’s least academic mode of knowing: the meme. Analyzing the potato alongside the meme allows us to discuss the role of the mundane among the proposed modes of investigation.

Introduction

You know that thing where people invoke internet—you know, as if it were the fifth element¹—often without a (sometimes annoying²) degree of irony, i.e. “lol internet.” Others conceive of the internet like a public utility, with visions of regulating it alongside water and electricity.³ For many people, the internet feels necessary, a tool of daily life, while, simultaneously, forever, infinite, and eternal. But we know that this is untrue. The internet is fundamentally knowable, even if on an individual level, even when fleeting. I remember it coming into my life. My family got our first computer when I was about to enter the first grade. I was pretty sure that the accompanying 1996 Encarta Encyclopedia CDROM was the most futuristic thing possible. Finally, in 1998, after some amount of profanity and a late night for my father, we got the internet. I vividly remember using it to write my first research assignment (a riveting overview of the triceratops using the website for the Indianapolis Children’s Museum). This is my understanding of the beginning of the internet. And it was the beginning of the internet - for me. What of its actual beginning? My understanding here might be a bit hazy, but it was the Department of Defense, and government researchers during the Cold War, looking to create a system of communication that could disseminate information post-nuclear attack.⁴ Years later and a series of tubes is organizing most of the lives of many people I know.

¹ No, not that one. Also, I recognize here the added layer of irony that the elements themselves are taking a very particular place in the collective consciousness right now. Forest fires. Polluted air. Rising, also polluted water. That is to say nothing of earth.
² Generation attributes are non-universal and are a step away from horoscopes, but I would hazard a guess that millennials play no small role in this kind of usage. See “cheugy,” a word that has haunted my dreams since it was introduced to me, and popular discourse writ large, in 2021.
As New York University associate professor of media, culture, and communication, Nicole Starosielski, explains:

[ Fiber optic cables] carry almost all internet traffic across continents and underneath oceans. They facilitate transactions between financial centres. They are the means by which air transportation and shipping is coordinated. And they transport the bulk of all messages between people around the world. Undersea cables are a primary medium of foreign relations.

These undersea cables don’t just connect us to our jobs and our families at home, they stretch across continents, and connect us in ways that both challenge and activates nationalism. At times, tensions have risen between the United States and Russia as Russians investigate fiber optic cables. The United States Department of Justice openly opposed Facebook and Google’s 8,000-mile cable to Hong Kong, citing an abundance of risk and opportunities for Chinese espionage. Several countries have faced intentional internet blackouts as their governments seized the internet as a means of asserting national interests.

Humans continue to destructively impact the environment and climate which risks new and greater disruption internet connectivity. Environmental impacts shape the landscape itself through erosion and rising sea levels which threaten technology that was not intended to be fully waterproof. Humans are also less able to access and repair infrastructure in increasingly extreme weather.

Despite this vulnerability and increased threats of disruption, there isn’t presently international cooperation to shore up this resource. Okay, there is one source of international cooperation: within corporations. Domestically and internationally, fiber optic cables were installed by corporations whereas, within the United States, the rural electrification and interstate highway projects were carried out by state and local governments. But not fiber optics as maintenance and expansion and such fall to private entities—meaning that much of our internet infrastructure is older and more at risk.

These are the physical, political and material realities of the internet, the preconditions, really for any internet service/flow/magic to exist between or inside countries. Just like in many other areas of life that we consider automatic and background (like purchasing food to eat or driving a car), the internet lays bare the logics at the heart of our systems of commerce and life: law, sovereignty, and private property, to name a few. So, layered on top of the above the natural and social dynamics/dramatics mentioned in the preceding paragraph, exist the multiple sites of our individual daily internet rituals. Like the physical cables themselves, the virtual spaces you and I inhabit online are largely owned and controlled by non-public entities—companies, which have their own terrain.

What can we say about virtuality more generally? Last year, Facebook, one of the largest players in this space domestically, announced its rebranding as “Meta” and

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7 Starosielski, “Internet Infrastructure.”
9 Starosielski, “Internet Infrastructure.”
10 Borunda, “The Internet is Drowning.”
Because Potato

Fig. 3 (above, bottom)
Noah Jodice. This is (most of) the Internet.

Fig. 2 (above, top)
Greg Miller. “Undersea Internet Cables Are Surprisingly Vulnerable.”
development of an online virtual space called “metaverse.” Some may see the move to more complete, immersive virtual spaces as the next frontier of human and internet evolution, but others point to the corporate controlled metaverse as an “enclosure of the virtual” for capitalist ends. How do we make sense of the multiple worlds we inhabit, including the online world, in a way that lays bare these overlapping realities - the corporate, the infrastructure, the social. Since the internet is difficult to grasp, what other modes of investigation might we have available? How might we best characterize the internetness of the internet?

What Next?

I look to the work of queer theorist, Jack Halberstam, for methodology for unwinding this question. Halberstam’s 2011 work, The Queer Art of Failure, proposes finding alternatives to “approved methods of knowing,” in academia and elsewhere. Halberstam’s positions “low theory” as an alternative, a mode of thinking and writing that moves between many different levels of knowledge, drawing conclusions from the juxtaposition of non-traditional sources such as films, Finding Nemo and Dude Where’s My Car?; noting that “[f]ailure sometimes offers more creative, cooperative, and surprising ways of being in the world,” as does forgetting. I find these particularly useful positions for thinking about the internet - a space that is full of both failure and forgetting. From the age-old “epic fail” compilations to the breakneck pace of new news and information, sliding by, certainly faster than I can remember. Some scientists have argued that the existence of the internet itself is changing our memories. That might just be the generational hand wringing of the internet age, but while the internet may never forget, people do, all the more so when we have the accumulated knowledge of generations at our fingertips. Queering is a “heuristic that acts to dismantle ‘the dynamics of power and privilege persisting among diverse subjectivities.” And, as we’ve previously discussed, the dynamics of power are at play in the internet, from the choices made about its infrastructure to the corporatization controlling its form and function. In this sense, queer studies is a critical position. Making use of these ways of thinking, I will explore the ways in which a non-traditional analysis might lead to new insights about the internet-ness of the internet itself.

In particular, I will turn to the internet’s least academic mode of knowing: the meme. First, a quick detour to determine what a meme is. If you’re looking for a Wikipedia rabbit hole to fall down, check out their definition of meme, “an idea, behavior, or style that spreads by means of imitation from person to person within a culture and often carries symbolic meaning representing a particular phenomenon or theme.” Or perhaps you’re looking for the definition from a more established institution. Miriam-Webster defines memes as “an amusing or interesting item (such as a captioned picture or video) or genre of items that is spread widely online, especially through social media.” In Dominic Pettman’s essay in the collection, Post-Memes: Seizing the Memes of Production, he describes memes as “cultural units’ of compressed affect.” Having looked other places as well, I’ll spare you a more exhaustive list, and cut to the chase: the crucial attribute common across definitions is the spreadability, often humorous, of images, words and/or ways of being. This spreadability is organic. What Wikipedia and some other more of-the-internet sources embrace is the way that memes morph and change through their sharing, how signifiers take on new meaning, or get warped, abstracted, changed through their contact and attachment to more people in the web of the internet. Some memes may spill into the general lexicon, whereas some may be internal to distinct linguistic or social communities. Memes work, as Pettman is describing, through feeling, through shared affect. And if the universe tends towards entropy, what memes seem to tend towards is some of the same - absurdity, ridiculousness, obscurity. Depending on who you ask and when, the meme is either a brand new...

12 Cooper, “Fiber”  
14 Halberstam, Queer Art of Failure, 2-3  
format of internet or simply the latest version of communication patterns as old as human community. It is a place where humans and the vast network of our creations intersect and create new meaning. As Brown and Bristow write, “The human is always already posthuman. The human is the animal that relies on technology in order to realize its humanity.”

Alfie Bown and Francis Russell ask, “[i]f the subject matter embraces indignity, stupidity, and crassness, and a joyful frivolousness, would the thinker be missing the point to hope to show the reader that the popular phenomena in question has been demanding—though secretly, and in a language that only the theorist understands—to be taken seriously?” Memes are a site of complex human communication, a place where our selves butt up against the spaces (virtual and otherwise) that we inhabit.

Perfect Example

All of this talk of the complexity, the physicality and also ephemerality of the internet can lead us back to that same notion of the internet as unknowable. But, as Halberstam gestures at, we aren’t going to come to new knowledge solely through understanding the formal, the structural, the highly visible and mainstream. And, in order to consider the internet, we have to start somewhere. If starting with something...anything, would be a good way to begin, then what about the potato? This is the way that I chose the overall theme for my zine Pot80 (pronounced po-tay-toe or pə-tā’tō).

Like choosing something to draw, the subject doesn’t really matter. What matters is what you bring to the exercise. To my mind, the work of trying to untangle the internet, especially with queer failure as a lens, is not unlike the exercise of drawing—it is not about the final product so much as the journey, through a complex web of symbols, relationships and meanings. Of course, there are ways of choosing something that is counterproductive to the effort, so onto why I chose the humble potato. The potato comes to mind because of its commonplace nature. Common. That’s a word we’re going to keep coming back to, particularly in the next section. As summarized in John Reader’s comprehensive retelling, Potato: A History of the Propitious Esculent, “the potato is something that is viewed, simultaneously as something nutritious and also, as a peasant food, one that can be used to finger the blame at the downtrodden themselves.”

We will continue to ask ourselves, can we find a similar narrative in the internet? Analyzing the potato allows us to discuss the role of the mundane among the proposed modes of investigation. The literature that I have gathered provides a range of modes for interrogating the simultaneously central and inconsequential subject of my thesis itself: the potato. What are the ways in which the potato, in its ordinariness and its complexity, can elucidate the unknowableness of social relations via the internet? Given the content of my thesis itself, further exploration of the potato as a cultural object would be an obvious immediate next step.

Round, somewhere between fleshy and hard, but obviously consumable. A tuber. A root. A more welcoming color after the dirt has been scrubbed off. Unoffensive in smell. A tad bitter-flavored when raw. Fits well within the hand. Unexpectedly underground, where one might imagine a more average root might be. The potato is a caricature

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21 Bown, Post Memes, 25
22 Bown, Post Memes, 277
Candice Evers

Candice Evers

nutritious. Hundreds of edible varieties have been raised there, many of which are smaller than the one we know, and many are highly poisonous. The foliage is highly poisonous. After millennia of aggressive breeding, the potatoes that we know in the United States today are bigger and taste better than their ancient counterparts. Species-wide, potatoes are bitter, owing to glycoalkaloid compounds, some of the most poisonous things that humans eat. The origins of the domesticated potato as we know it began its journey with the colonization of South America. There were 9 million people in the Andes in 1520 by 1620, only 600,000. As the Incans were slaughtered and subjugated by the Spanish, the potato quietly entered Europe. It was, at that time, known to be a peasant food belonging to a ravaged population, nothing much to think about, just a lesser spoil of colonization. Given its unremarkable introduction to Europe, how did it come to be the Irish and/or All-American staple that it is today? The potato took off in Europe as a staple at a time when the prices of wheat were moving past the means of most households making it an important cornerstone of the industrial revolution. Despite a long-running historic commitment to forcing very specific agricultural food practices on the rest of the world, Europe’s climate isn’t great for agriculture. Their mercurial seasons couldn’t support a large population through agriculture at this time. Malnourishment

of the real; it involves dirt. But also a sign. It signifies: Irishness? Or does it just signify poverty? White poverty? White rural poverty of a specific era? Americana? Ugliness? Fast food, cheaply produced, and unhealthy? It signifies possibility. While picturing a potato in all of its dirt-clad ugliness, we know that it can turn into something delicious to people of all stripes. It is not a sheaf of wheat or something that takes mechanical processes to turn into food on a commercial or individual level. Even for those who are strangers to the kitchen, there is a popular culture understanding of how the potato becomes something. You cut it up. It has no complex parts. When you cut it open the inside is consistently textured. The outside is similarly very homogenous. It smells like dirt. It is a thing of myth.

Many American children through time have whispered about what happens when a person eats a green potato chip. Or of potato chips coming out looking like celebrities or religious figures, often Jesus or Mary. You squeeze it at the grocery store to make sure it isn’t too soft. You look for eyes which you have been told will make you sick. When you cut it open, it is very slightly slimy. It’s not immediately obvious that it is something to be eaten.

The specifics of a potato lend something else. A whole different perspective. Just as it is not immediately apparent that those ugly, mechanical tubes (figure 3) serve as an important figure in maintaining daily information transfer, it has not always been clear what the potato is meant to do, or mean, either.

Native to the Andes, the potato was domesticated some 8,000 years ago by the pre-Inca people. It is highly nutritious. Hundreds of edible varieties have been raised there, many of which are smaller than the one we know, and many are highly poisonous. The foliage is highly poisonous. After millennia of aggressive breeding, the potatoes that we know in the United States today are bigger and taste better than their ancient counterparts. Species-wide, potatoes are bitter, owing to glycoalkaloid compounds, some of the most poisonous things that humans eat. As the Incans were slaughtered and subjugated by the Spanish, the potato quietly entered Europe. It was, at that time, known to be a peasant food belonging to a ravaged population, nothing much to think about, just a lesser spoil of colonization. Given its unremarkable introduction to Europe, how did it come to be the Irish and/or All-American staple that it is today?

The potato took off in Europe as a staple at a time when the prices of wheat were moving past the means of most households making it an important cornerstone of the industrial revolution.

Despite a long-running historic commitment to forcing very specific agricultural food practices on the rest of the world, Europe’s climate isn’t great for agriculture. Their mercurial seasons couldn’t support a large population through agriculture at this time. Malnourishment

24 Reader. Potato, 4
25 Reader. Potato, 74
was rampant and harvest failures were frequent.₂⁶ But was already adapted to flourish in the rocky soil of the Andes.

For the obvious reason, we’ll look at Ireland in particular, a site of reliance on, and, ultimately, tragedy owing in part to the potato. Before the potato landed in the early 1600s, the island supported around 1–1.5 million people; but by 1700, there were more than 2 million people living there. By 1845, the population was 5 million; and by 1845, 8.5 million people lived in Ireland. The overwhelming majority of whom depended on the potato as a staple in their diet.

Before the British forced industrialization and the enclosure of common land for pasture, the people in Ireland were semi-nomadic pastoralists, using land for grazing animals and animals more for milk than meat. The British forced the Irish into the industrialized labor market, which drove rural Irish people to convert arable land into pasture. The industrial production allowed the British to meet and profit from the increased international demand for animal products. Where the Irish had once consumed grain, the land was used only as grass for livestock. This left the Irish to live where the land was too unproductive for grass which eventually led them to starvation.

The potato, which grew well in Ireland’s landscape and climate, came just in time to slow that starvation; starvation caused by new market forces. “Government legislation enacted in specific ‘to encourage the reclaiming of unprofitable bogs’ by allowing Roman Catholics (till then barred from occupying vacant land) to claim acres of bog, together with half an acre of adjoining arable, was a significant factor in the expansion of potato cultivation.” ²⁷

So, the Spanish colonized the Andes and brought the potato to Europe, among other things. Within Europe, the potato moved from Spain to England. The British colonized Ireland and forced the Irish into industrial capitalism; the resulting displacement and starvation created conditions which, alongside Irish growing conditions uniquely hospitable to the potato, led to its rapid proliferation.

We know how this story ends. The Irish Potato Famine, or Great Famine, as it’s known in Ireland, involved the death of over a million people and led another million to emigrate. Ireland lost a quarter of its population. This horrific loss of life and existential rupture had untold consequences. One of which was the potato coming to America—or coming back to it at least.

How the Potato Became White

And so the potato came with the Irish over into the US, fleeing famine. Including potatoes, Irish immigrants post-famine brought along with their class affiliations, and an undesirable status in the economic and political structure of the industrializing US. There is intense historical debate on whether discrimination against Irish immigrants was racialized, or merely classed and xenophobic, but that’s the subject of another essay.²⁸ But for the purposes of our story, let’s just go with the old narrative—the Irish, and perhaps by association the potato, weren’t always “white,” but rather they became white.²⁹ As James Baldwin writes throughout his work, “no one was white before he/she came to America. It took generations, and a vast amount of coercion, before this became a white country.”³⁰ In his essay, “On Being White and Other Lies,” Baldwin describes the consequences of this political affiliation based on the justification of slavery and genocide. Throughout the essay, he returns to the same sentiment: “there is, in fact, no white community” because “no community can be established on so genocidal a lie [of denying Black presence and justifying Black subjugation].”³¹ Whiteness, as described here by Baldwin, is at once empty and full. Empty of community, of humanity, of life. And full too: of power, of oblivion, of lies, of safety for white people.

The potato, too, might be this sort of vessel—it is full, literally, of nutrients, of cultural significance, of history. And yet, in 2022, it is also empty, stripped of its history in the public eye. It is often thought of as a filler food, a cheap carb, an unhealthy fast food, to be enjoyed in moderation, or not at all if you’ve adopted one of many fad diets concerned with carbohydrates and starches. The potato is both meaningful and meaningless, the subject of history and an object of it. In many ways, the way it is prepared determines more than the raw potato itself—a potato can be a tiny dish, served on a Michelin star plate, something your grandparents prepared night after night the year the

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²⁶ Reader. Potato, 108
²⁷ Reader. Potato, 147
³¹ Black on White, 178
farm wasn’t doing so well, or the perfect oily, salty side to a Happy Meal.

**Circulation and Its Discontents**

Like the potato, the internet itself is also constantly shifting and evolving. In this ever-evolving light, how do we make meaning of the world, especially the world we share online? I am of the perspective that there is no meaning but that which we make together. How do we make meaning together? How or what do people do, say, and know together? How are there these online relationships that are entirely text and/or image-based? In the ever-changing economy of text and image, the relationships between people can become clear or further obscured, and the smallest things can get twisted and changed over and over again, becoming increasingly absurd.

Within one particular essay, *Circulation and Its Discontents*, Scott and Mckenzie Wark look at a few different forces/flows to argue for a different dialogue. This essay, like the work of a hacker, programmer, mathematician, or philosopher, is largely an exercise in defining terms before putting them into dialogue with each other. These definitions help us make sense of the circulation of ideas, images, and more through our digital platforms.

Step one: distributed, platform-based networks, where most of us spend our internet lives, need discrete content. Content describes that which contains something else, itself an empty form. In light of markup languages, content is a set of parameters that allow modular compartments to be filled. *Markup languages (CSS, SML, Java, etc.)* make content more circulable, inverting the traditional concept of content.

So, then because the network needs content, it must need the user. The user (or digital subject) puts the content into circulation and is a platform construct. *Circulation* is a capacity of platforms that emerges when markup languages automate the presentation of discrete media by fixing their parameters, dividing “technics and labor from value or culture.”

And now, we have turned in on ourselves again. *Technics* are “the wider or deeper logic (social, economic, mechanical) nested within technology itself”—why the network is the way it is. *Labor and technics (flesh-tech hybrid)* that platforms obfuscate “free labor.” The technics are the logics of the whole network system, the way it functions, and what it demands. In these sorts of network-based platforms, labor is obscured, and we don’t all see it equally. The *asymmetry of information* is what could be called a class relation; it describes ownership and control; “the means to produce data is decentralized to us [...] that data is recentralized to the proprietors of the platform-based service we use.” We the users make the content, which the platform needs, and in making the content we produce data that that network uses to make money, which, having been alienated from our labor, we do not always know or see. Finally, *The Warks* use “double incomensurability” to describe the fact that the data is unseeable to us, as is the labor used to sustain it. This leads us to call what it does “magic.”

The meme-ness of memes, which the Warks call “meme magic.” Really, the occult quality of memes owes to memes’ place beyond our understanding. This is because we don’t know how to code or how platforms interact with the world more generally. The Warks argue that neither circulation nor “meme magic” is adequately theorized. “Both grapple with the production of culture at scale.” The Warks then gently suggest that we are actually unintentionally building a myth of the meme’s magic.

Like the potato, the meme does not actually spring forth from the ether of the internet (or the earth) fully formed. Memes have distinct producers, histories, and

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32 There is another possible discussion about the mediating form of file formats but we will set that aside for now.
33 According to the Warks, media theory uses the word circulation to explain and resolve questions, encouraging a tautology. For them this is a central concern. For the sake of this essay we will not be situating ourselves firmly in media theory but this is an important note.
Because Potato

Because Internet

“[T]he Internet as a medium [...] puts us in a new relation to writing.”
—Gregory Ulmer, author of Internet Invention

As you may have guessed from my introduction, I am a millennial. One with only a layman’s understanding of linguistics. Because I am a millennial, I, like many of my peers, have a range of hunches about the ways in which digitally-mediated relationships operate in a vaguely sociologically-minded way. This folk science knowledge came slowly, over countless hours of interacting with people through some sort of machine; machines that mediate my work, entertainment and social interactions. That understanding morphed and grew as the internet did. I acknowledge that some of my hunches are perhaps built on only a handful of recallable anecdotes - like how a coworker ended every email sentence with “...” or how my father professes his love for Microsoft Teams. For this reason, Gretchen McCulloch’s book Because Internet had me consistently pumping my fists in the air and yelling “I knew it!” This book instantly found its way to the core of my critical essay source list. Because Internet is a study of the ways in which digital language is changing English, a result of the exploding number of opportunities for informal writing ushered in by the digital age. McCulloch's conclusions are hard-won, resting on a thorough analysis of the linguistic patterns of a vast range of internet users. McCulloch finds that these patterns mirror and diverge from non-internet speech in a number of ways. McCulloch’s Because Internet features a broad survey of informal internet speech, leading to conclusions that are a mix of quiet confirmations and absolute head-scratchers.

However, people have adopted that language differently depending on how they orient themselves with regard to the internet. Helpful here is McCulloch’s model of five different “waves” of internet users which she describes thoroughly. Key to Because Internet's analysis is the concept of internet subcultures as having unique vocabularies which, like their counterparts in the non-internet world, are related to their virtual communities and simulated locations. Working from descriptions of linguistic communities and informal internet language, McCulloch describes how language moves through tight and loose relationships.

Digital Rot

I ran into a number of dead links and new paywalls while following footnotes in my research for this paper. While informal language as it is discussed in McCulloch's above-mentioned work is able to be analyzed and stored, it captures a very limited dimension of the digital landscape, which is as visual and experiential as much as it is social and textual. While we have moved on from a discussion of cultural script, running in the background of the script of this essay will be the concept of “digital rot,” a term to describe the ever-growing number of broken links, a counterforce to the ever-growing archive. Though digital rot is a concept known to many areas involving data storage—photographers for example—it can be used to describe the slow process of entropy on the internet more generally. In Kaitlyn Tiffany's Atlantic article, “You Probably Don't Remember the Internet,” Megan Ankerson, specialist in

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38 Gregory L. Ulmer. Internet invention : from literacy to electracy. United Kingdom: Longman, 2003, 2


40 We can set this question aside for future investigation, but how might the traditional publishing landscape play a role here? Academic publishing?

41 Something to explain what this is to people who don’t know?
internet history remarked, “The whole experience of what Facebook is or what it feels like to use it would not be able to be reconstructed in the archive.” What are the implications of this? Are they merely aesthetic? I believe that memes offer a site to investigate these questions. Now onto a delightful subject that will be a great site to play with these questions.

**Memes**

We’ve gotten this far considering structure, history, and context. But what does this process of investigating the intersection of the potato and the internet look like in practice? There it is, stage left, just out of sight - a meme! But not just any meme, a meme at the intersection of our two glorious subjects - A Potato Flew Around My Room. It’s the year 2014, Vine is all the rage, and a user by the name pg bree uploaded herself singing. In the video, a white ceiling fan spins slowly against a backdrop of a soft blue wall, a string of lights shining. Spinning slowly, secured by a red string, a large potato. pg bree sings, “A potato flew around my room before you came, excuse” before the short format of Vine cuts her off. From this source, over 1,400 vines were onto a delightful subject that will be a great site to play with these questions.

At its very heart, this meme is a joke about a misheard lyric from an earlier Frank Ocean song, Thinkin’ Bout You, in which he sings “a tornado flew around my room before you came, excuse” before the short format of Vine cuts her off. From this source, over 1,400 vines were born, and countless other pop-cultural references. So, what does it mean?

At my room before you came, excuse the mess it made.” Like most songs, it is not about potatoes, but a rich poetic text. The meme is an absurdist joke on the misheard lyric, a joke wherein the user has asked the question, what would it be like if a potato flew around your room? Perhaps the meme strikes at the core shared experience of the hilarity of a misheard lyric, the unlikely introduction of a form like the potato into a song. Or maybe it’s just funny to watch a potato, leashed by a red string, slowly float around someone else’s bedroom.

The platform Vine no longer exists—many of its videos are lost forever in the absence of a mechanism to play them back. I did not know potatoes originated in the Andes. Platforms—and their masters—only care that we’re communicating, not about what. Expression functions as a commodity in this environment. When the makers of Vine released it into the world, surely they were not building a place there for potatoes. The potato attached to the fan spins on in the memories of some, and never entered the consciousness of others. The Potato Flew Around My Room Vine itself was removed. In nothing I have found to date is there any clarity on whether pg bree removed it herself deliberately, or it was removed by accident or intervention from the platform. I have found no information on the user who created the content to which I now refer. I don’t recall how or when I became aware of the Potato Flew Around My Room. When I found it again, it was copy that YouTube user badweather had saved previously and uploaded in October of 2014, when Vine still existed. When I found it again, I felt delight, lightness, absurdity, maybe it even elicited a little snort. Judging by the comment section, many other viewers felt the same. The experience of Potato Flew Around My Room is the very experience of the internet I am trying to capture - this strange and fleeting delight, this social interaction with someone who I will likely never meet, this brief moment where the series of tubes leads me toward something, before it slips away.

**Pot80**

My zines, the series Pot80, capture some of that something. In Eyes, the protagonist finds community in the forum full of others who have made the same mistake that she has: eating the eye of the potato; a food and a process so common that of course she is not alone in her mistake. This found community sits in tension with the horror of her transformation into an actual potato. In Tots, the protagonist looks to the tater tot as common comfort. In Amy, the protagonist notes the specific markers of a potato that

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44 “A Potato Flew”
46 I would like to note the fact that the account badweather has not uploaded any other videos but still has 13,000 followers because the video has been viewed 9.8 million times; Original | A Potato Flew around My Room before You Came, accessed May 6, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/shorts/zLTZPK8HfPI.
Because Potato

is elevated above the commonness of the average potato. Her friend and foil only eats organic, fair trade potatoes. In Mommy, the most general of internet searches leads to a very human feeling of obsession. These stories juxtaposition the strange and fleeting feelings mentioned above alongside a magical realism belonging to the non-internet world. Though these stories end without a clean resolution, they invite the reader into this ongoing conflict through the concluding page which is in the form of an open question posted to a common forum. Encountering (less fantastical) questions such as these often lead me to a bizarre moment of the liminal space between being on the internet and not being on the internet. Sometimes this leads me to really feel my agency in my own life. I hope that readers feel the same.

**Conclusion**

Like the potato, the internet is bitter. Grown under very specific conditions. Cultivated under capitalist conditions to sustain the masses, the origins are obscured, fractured, and winding. When and where it crumbles, due to our human faults, or multinational corporate or government neglect, it will disrupt every task in our networked existence. Now it has become a weird symbol. And we don’t understand its history, its multiplicity, its possibility.

The internet is not a thing we can fully know by carefully plotting out its every webpage, archiving every graphic file or examining each deep sea tube. It is not a thing we can know alone, in isolation. The internet is alive, confusing, shifting, rotting, evolving. It creates its own meanings, works through its own logics. At this moment, it is one of the very clearest facts of our human lives.

What better way to understand then to try to get a feel for the shifting affects of digital space - for the feeling of asking a forum of internet strangers for help, or sharing the minute details of your life with people far and wide, or managing the critiques and demands of the public on one’s business - than through the mode of the humble potato. Maybe from there we can build the world that we want together. Standing in what we learn this way, we can know which things we’ll pull down.
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