

Nation of Shitposters: Ironic Engagement with the Facebook Posts of Shannon Noll as Reconfiguration of an Australian National Identity

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This paper considers the recent rise of ironic engagement with the Facebook posts of Shannon Noll, or “Nollposting”. It is a form of “shitposting”, or online engagement that is characterised by its disruption of previously established standards of discourse. I argue, following Nissenbaum and Shifman (2015), that it serves as an opportunity for users to accumulate cultural capital through the act of taste distinction (Bourdieu, 1986), mocking those not familiar with Internet standards of discourse through ironic imitation of their forms of speech and cultural consumption. Following recent work on the cultural logic of trolling (R. M. Milner, 2013; Phillips, 2015a), I aim to situate this phenomenon within broader media cultures around Australian national identity. I argue that we cannot understand Nollposting without understanding Noll himself as reconstituted figure of the mythic Australian battler in a postmodern media environment. Like other comedic icons before him (McCallum, 1998), the figure of Noll becomes a renegotiation of Australian identity.

Introduction

Recent work on the cultural logics of trolling (R. M. Milner, 2013; Phillips, 2015), argues that their behaviour should be situated in broader media cultures in order to be understood. Building upon this work, this paper considers ironic engagement with the Facebook posts of Shannon Noll (Nollposting)¹, both as a vehicle for the accumulation of cultural capital by users, and ultimately within an Australian comedic tradition of negotiating national identity through mockery (McCallum, 1998).

This paper begins with a definition of “shitposting”, a form of Internet interaction predicated upon thwarting established norms of discourse in favour of seemingly anarchic, poor quality contributions. Far from being random, however, I argue that shitposting functions to accrue cultural capital, a form of social standing within a particular environment defined by knowledge and recognition of cultural artifacts, and the ability to place them within hierarchy (Bourdieu, 1986). Bourdieu uses the term *habitus* to describe the embodiment of this cultural capital; it is a “structuring structure, which organises practices and the perception of practices” (1986; 170). Following work by Nissenbaum and Shifman (2015) on cultural capital in meme environments, I

¹ For the purposes of brevity, I have chosen to focus chiefly on Shannon Noll content that has been posted to Facebook. I believe there is ample room for analysis in the ways different platforms, such as Facebook, Reddit and Tumblr, alter content and the reception thereof, but as I cannot do it justice in the space available I have decided upon a narrower scope.

explore users' ironic engagement as a way to generate cultural capital at the expense of those that do not share their *habitus*. I do this with particular attention to what Zizi Papacharissi calls "the habitus of the new", a "performative fluency" of/within social media environments that emphasises user's ability to "produce" identity (Papacharissi and Easton, 2013, p. 181). I track the history of "Nollsy" as avatar of the "Aussie Battler" throughout his initial Australian Idol run, through to his subsequent memetic re-birth and ironic re-appreciation, in petitions to have him play Groovin' the Moo and creation of pages such as "Shannon Noll was robbed of winning hit TV show Australian Idol 2003". Focusing on Nollposting in particular, I find that a typical Nollpost has three features: an opening with sexual innuendo related to the original post, a request for an item that Noll has borrowed back, and an extended sign-off, usually in Australian slang. The ironic deployment of an offline pattern of communication is a demonstration of the user's embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Indeed, the act of ironic engagement with Noll himself is a form of taste distinction, playing into a long history of the Australian humour at the expense of the "bogan", or Australian "white trash" figure, who act as "repositories of negative value, bad taste"; they are positioned as the antithesis of the absent but ever present normative middle-class subject" (Pini, McDonald and Mayes, 2012, p. 146).

Despite this potential critique, I argue that Nollposting serves in the last instance as renegotiation of this Australian national identity, pointing to similarities between it and engagement with other kitsch comedic icons such as Edna Everage. Like the television series Kath and Kim before him, Noll has become subject to an extradiegetic narrative that casts his resurgent popularity as a triumph of the Battler (Turnbull, 2004). Nollposters are both self-critical and self-celebratory, distancing themselves aesthetically from Noll while re-appropriating from him his authenticity as "the quintessential good Aussie bloke", thereby reifying a dichotomy of battlers under threat from elites (Whitman, 2013). It is not that Nollposting is wholly ambivalent, but that in the act of defining themselves in reference to Noll's exaggerated Australiana, Nollposters position themselves as arbiters of Australian national identity.

That Post Gave Me Cancer: A Definition of Shitposting

Nollposting, and the Facebook page *Shit Memes* from whence it ultimately derives, is an opportunity for shitposting, a form of internet rhetoric characterised by its "content of aggressively, ironically, and trollishly poor quality" (Klee, 2016, no page). Key to shitposting is the assumption that it derails active discussion, and sends threads off-topic through low-quality posting, often using inflammatory, (ironically) falsifiable, provocative, or vulgar content (Mercer, 2014). Shitposting is about misbehaviour, about not following previously established rules of discourse and discussion. Shitposting recently came to mainstream media attention with the work of "Trump trolls" who attempted to derail discourse (Biggs, 2016; Griffin, 2016) in order to sway the election to favour Trump. The archetypal shitposting on Facebook is "ShitpostBot 5000", which utilises an algorithm that "randomly selects a user-submitted template, then fills it in with user-submitted source images" (Biggs, 2016, no page), posting every half hour. Several notable groups have arisen on Facebook that are dedicated to shitposting, including "Simpsons Shitposting", "Bernie Sanders' Dank Meme Stash", and "Rick and Morty Schwiftposting". Activity in these groups typically consists of posting images from, or related to, a guiding topic (the Simpsons, Rick and Morty), but of a particular bent: "[i]ncoherent jokes, hasty Photoshopping, mashups, irrelevance, errors in spelling or grammar—all are hallmarks of the shitpost" (Klee, 2016, n.p.). This is not to say that

shitposting is merely about posting shit, so to speak, but rather, it describes a specific aesthetic and mode of engagement characterised by its flippancy.

Shitposting, as a formal term, has not received much attention in academic literature so far, hence my reliance on non-academic sources for these definitions. I believe, however, there can be a productive similarity drawn between shitposting and what Nick Douglas calls “Internet Ugly”, “an imposition of messy humanity upon an online world of smooth gradients, blemish-correcting Photoshop, and AutoCorrect”. Douglas describes the Internet Ugly as an aesthetic that seeks to create its own standard of beauty in opposition to a presumed mainstream value, that emphasises “symmetry and purity” (Douglas, 2014, p. 315). Like the Internet Ugly, shitposting is a “cultural dialect, used not just to frame certain propositional content but to communicate things about its user” (Douglas, 2014, p. 315).



Fig. 1. A Simpsons Shitpost: The humour relies upon a familiarity with the content of a famous joke from the Simpsons’ episode “Itchy and Scratchyland”, where Bart is only able to find a “Bort” licence plate. Here, he finds his licence plate. Collected March 2017.

Shitposting is also a form of *memetic discourse*, that is, related to the propagation and production of Internet memes: “group[s] of digital items sharing common characteristics... that were created with awareness of each other...[,] circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users” (Shifman, 2015, p. 7-8). As a form of memetic discourse, shitposting requires a certain literacy of meme templates and a knowledge of “shared popular culture experience and

practices” (Knobel and Lankshear, 2007, p. 217), as seen in Fig. 1. The joke relies upon the manipulation of images to present itself as a real screenshot from *The Simpsons*, yet those familiar with the media it references understand the subterfuge on display. Memetic discourse is also characterised by its rich *intertextuality*, with humour coming from the absurd juxtaposition of images or video from wildly differing contexts, as in Figure 2 (Knobel and Lankshear, 2007).



Fig. 2. The image features Martin Prince “coming out of his cage, and doing just fine”, a reference to the Killers’ seminal 2004 hit “Mr. Brightside”, from their seven-times platinum album *Hot Fuss*. Collected March 2017.



Fig 3. ????. Collected March 2017.

As Milner argues, this literacy functions as a gatekeeping device, as a way to distinguish between those who get the joke, the “in-crowd”, and those who do not (R. M. Milner, 2012). This leads to shitposting images that are totally incoherent to outsiders, such as Figure 3.

It is this emphasis on gatekeeping, and of “forming and signifying communal belonging” (Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2015, p. 485), that is the focus of my analysis of Nollposting. Users posting in shitposting groups are demonstrating their superior literacy: the barrier of entry required to engage serves as a mark of their distinction from a “mainstream” audience (Miltner, 2014). Shitposting, then, is a way to accrue cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) through a double mastery of norms of discourse: both by *recognising* these “mainstream” norms (ie, of standardisation), and *discarding* them in favour of subcultural value. In this way I would argue that it functions similar to how Bourdieu describes the appropriation of “kitsch” objects, an “exclusive appropriation which attests the owner’s unique ‘personality’” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 282). Without the ability to hold a monopoly over the use of certain forms of art, i.e., the works of culture that form the nucleus of the shitpost, the focus is instead on the uniqueness of the relationship that the user has to the art. Or, as Bourdieu puts it,

Liking the same things differently, liking different things, less obviously marked out for admiration - these are some of the strategies for outflanking, overtaking and displacing which, by *maintaining a permanent revolution in tastes*, enable the dominated, less wealthy fractions... to secure exclusive possessions at every moment (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 282, emphasis added)

Shitposting, like Bourdieu on kitsch, then, is a way to “constitute insignificant objects as works of art, or... to give aesthetic redefinition to objects already defined as art” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 282), thereby increasing the user’s cultural capital. As Skeggs, drawing on Bourdieu, describes the use of the term “kitsch”, it implies that “the classifier knows of the prior negative signification and association of the object, a positioning which can be seen to give it authentic value” (2004, p. 108). Key also here is the emphasis on the permanent revolution in tastes, and the re-signification that comes with this struggle, which I will discuss in another section.

With its focus on the disruption of norms, shitposting (and Nollposting) is also a form of *subcultural trolling*: it has a “simultaneously symbiotic and exploitative relationship to mainstream culture” (Phillips, 2015a, p. 21). Without a (nebulously defined) mainstream to antagonise, and thereby valorise oneself in opposition to, shitposting would lack a driving ethos. But like Phillips’ work on trolling before me, I would suggest that Nollposting is not as far from mainstream Australian discourse as an initial reading may indicate (Phillips, 2012). Rather, like Australian comedic icons Kath and Kim, and Kenny Smyth before him, the production of Noll relies upon a reification of a problematic “Battler” identity (Turnbull, 2004).

“Catch ya at the Byford this arvo for a few coldies and a flutter on the dish lickens”: What is Nollposting?

A key element in the development of Nollposting is the contradiction that Nissenbaum and Shifman describe “between following conventions and supplying innovative content [that] leads to memes’ configuration as unstable equilibriums” (Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2015, p. 483). That is to say, Nollposting is always (d)evolving, searching for new opportunities for cultural capital, and this sketch is best viewed as a snapshot of Nollposting at a particular point in time, rather than a

definitive study that outlines some Platonic form of Nollposting. With this in mind, there are several elements that successful (in terms of likes and replies accrued) Nollposts employ.

The first is an opening of sexual innuendo, positioning Noll-as-Adonis, that relates to the post by Shannon Noll himself. This is demonstrated in the *Ur-Text* of Nollposting itself, a comment upon a post of Noll enjoying a fish taco, posted on January 12 2016:



Fig. 4. Facebook comment, collected March 2017².

As the memetic form of Nollposting developed, an apology was added to this initial ribbing:



Fig. 5. Facebook comment, collected March 2017.

Users here are, through ironic adoption, mocking Noll as a representative of those that do not understand the habitus of the new, thereby distinguishing themselves. The precedent here is “I;m Thinking About Thos Beans” (Kang, 2015), a shitpost that mocks an elderly man for posting on the Facebook wall of a corporation, expressing his desire for their product. There are notable similarities, from the mockery of patterns of speech, to the petition that was started in support of the elderly man starring in a Bush’s Beans advertisement (O’Shields, n.d.). It also has precedent in the meme “Naked Banana”, which describes an interaction on Facebook shown in Figure 6:

² Unless the user is a public figure, such as the later example of Dave Callan, I have (crudely) anonymised these images for the sake of users’ privacy. I have also chosen not to include direct links to these images, as this would make this anonymisation pointless.



Fig. 6. Naked Banana. Taken from pointofdeparture (2014).

The object of mockery here is very clearly the users' inane discussion of the mediocre picture, but more specifically, what it represents: a breach in the discourse standards that govern online interaction, which marks these participants as outsiders. There are several forums devoted to such mockery, such as the subReddit r/OldPeopleFacebook ("cracker bargel," n.d.). Whereas shitposters have fully inculcated this "a set of dispositions that are invited and regenerated via a state of permanent novelty" (Papacharissi et al, 2013, p. 600), these users are laboring with archaic (earnest) forms of communication, unsuited to social media.

They do not have the "feel for the game" (Bourdieu, 2014, p. 111), and in mocking them, shitposters again demonstrate their dual mastery: both of this habitus of the old *and* their own, preferred habitus. They are, in effect, *beating these users at their own game*. As time wore on, the

apology soon developed as an opportunity for cultural capital itself, with users taking the opportunity to post more elaborate Australian slang:

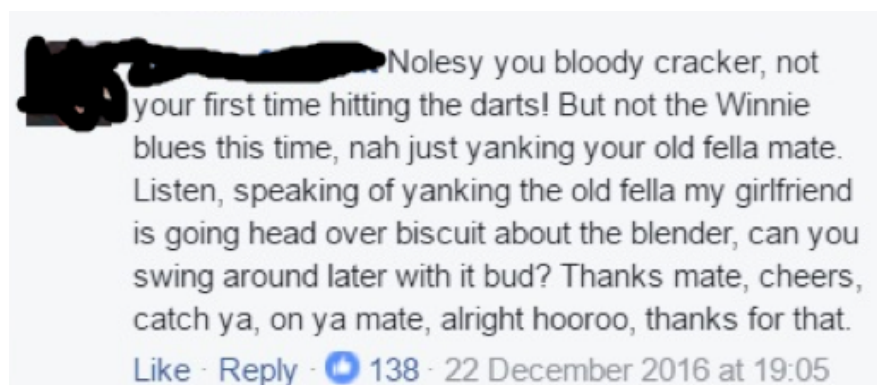


Fig. 7. The hypersexualisation of the Noll character is shared with other earlier posts in the development of Noll-as-meme, such as those from Shit Memes. Facebook comment, collected March 2017.

As we see in Figure 7, the opening sortie is followed by a request for an item that Noll has borrowed back, with the item's absence assigned blame for recent marital troubles. The item is typically mundane, such as a "Whippa snippa" or other tool (Woods, 2017), but over time, this has again been weaponised as its own source of capital, with the item in question increasing in obscurity, yet at the same time, denoting a very particular Australian cultural experience. In several cases the item is a piece of Australian media from the 1990s or early 2000s, such as a *Water Rats* DVD or a copy of *So Fresh: The Hits of Autumn 2004*. This should be seen as a reflection of Bourdieu's argument for the need of a *permanent revolution in tastes*, and the accelerated reflexivity of the habitus of the new. As the traditional avenues for cultural capital lose their exclusivity, the shitposts become more and more convoluted in order to outrun the risk of appearing stale. The return of the item also promises the return of domestic bliss to the poster's household, and is claimed to act as an aphrodisiac. The posts adopt a distinctly heteronormative framing, particularly with the trope of a shrew-like "trouble and strife" who withholds sex from the long-suffering partner as punishment for misdeeds.



Fig. 8. Facebook comment, collected March 2017.

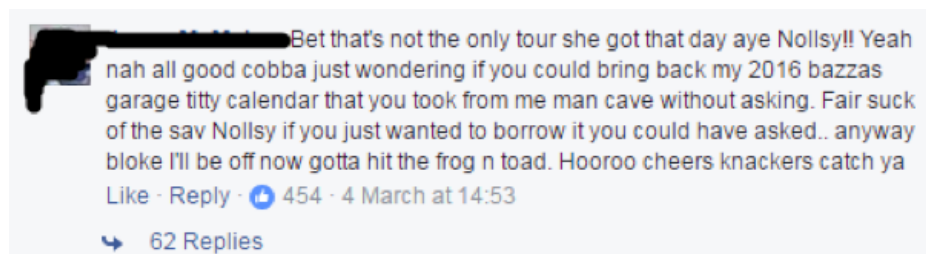


Fig. 9. Facebook comment, collected March 2017.

The use of sexual vulgarity and excessiveness, such as in Figures 8 and 9, has a long association with representations of (Australian) working-class, and thereby ‘authentic’, identities, which savvy users can then re-appropriate for cultural capital (Skeggs, 2004). The ironic hyperbole that is both the positioning of Noll-as-Adonis and the ravenous sexual appetite of the poster’s wife upon receipt of an household item is a way to “condemn to ridicule... men and women who simply fall short, in the eyes of their judges, of the right way of being and doing” (Bourdieu 1986, p. 511). The mundanity of this object and the extreme reaction to its return reflects the “absence of cultivated aesthetics or tastes” (Gibson, 2013, p. 64) against which the user is distinguished against.

Posts are typically closed with an extended sign off, which is also an opportunity for users to demonstrate “signifiers of authoritative status” (Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2015, p. 483) through use of strine, Australian slang:



Fig. 10. Facebook comment, collected March 2017.

Again, I must stress that I am painting a broad picture of memetic engagement with Shannon Noll posts, and this does not represent an exhaustive study of every particular nuance of the form, or indeed a strictly linear timeline of this change. Given the the contingency of contemporaneous Internet phenomena, that have the potential to change with each and every iteration, I believe our focus should not be on developing normative frameworks to which these forms of interaction may adhere to one day and not the next. There exists a certain difficulty in analysing the posts here, in that these engagements are fatuous; obviously, none of these posters are actually seeking these items back, nor is an answer from Noll actively sought. They are not fans of Noll, as such, but rather using his status as a cultural icon to produce *themselves*, through negative relationship to him. Their affected “blokeyness”, that is, their exaggerated portrayal of this imagined Australian masculine

working class culture (Winter, 2016), and their mockery of Australian slang all point to an ironic re-appropriation of a “wrong” form of expression, thus creating “differential social positions among those members posting memes” (Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2015, p. 486). As detailed, users post requests for items Noll has borrowed, give extended sign-offs, make inappropriate jokes, all of which go against this habitus of the new, under which such requests would be made in private message or without such fanfare. That they do not know Noll notwithstanding, they are very clearly parodying an imagined Australiana. The increasing complexity of the vocabulary involved (to the point of fiction), and the specificity of culture referenced, offer an opportunity for Nollposters to be a truer blue than Noll himself.

Towards a Genealogy of Nollposting, or: “Who I Am”, the Production of Shannon Noll as Meme-subject

Unlike other forms of shitposting groups on Facebook, i.e., the aforementioned *Simpsons Shitposting*, there is no “Shannon Noll Shitposting” group that I was able to find. Rather than work with an established canon of media as their “clay”, so to speak, with which to make memes, the primary texts of Nollposting are the posts of Noll himself. There are two points to take from this. The first is that this places, I believe, an upper limit on the esotericism involved in the humour of Nollposting. Because users lack a centralised hub with which to post and re-post new permutations of Shannon Noll related content, there are less “in-jokes” or metahumour involved in Nollposting. One of the few examples I was able to find merely outlined the attributes of a typical Nollpost, without any further recombination:



Fig. 11. Facebook comment, collected March 2017.

Compare this to Figure 3 from *Simpsons Shitposting*, with its own closed meme ecosphere: it is oblique even for fans of the show, being the product of constant metatextual combination and re-combination.

With this in mind, I argue that we should read Nollposting as an intersection of meme-literate posters with broader Australian cultural tropes: the “clay” that they use to make memes out of is the Australiana, and cultural moment, that Noll represents. This accounts for the increasing complexity in Nollposting developing not around the locus of the works of Shannon Noll or his posts, but rather the corpus of an imagined Australian working class experience: it is an engagement with the *character* of Noll as Barnesian working class man, what he *represents*. The

opportunities for cultural capital lie in the evermore novel expressions of Australian collective identity, to the point of (near-Shitposting 5000) *absurdum*. It is successful to the extent it plays with this familiarity: while the development of Simpsons Shitposting may be oblique to fans of the show, Nollposting will be accessible to those familiar with Australian vernacular. It is a way to both “constantly constitute both communal identities and the positioning of individuals in relation to them” (Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2015).

The particular success of Nollposting should be historicised within the context of Noll as ex-*Australian Idol* contestant in the Howard Era. As Fairchild argues, the *Idol* phenomenon is designed to build affective investment in contestants through development of them into recognisable brands (Fairchild, 2007). Throughout his run on the program, Noll was presented “as a kind of throwback to a brand of classic Australian masculinity summed up in the words “good Aussie bloke” (Fairchild, 2007). He “was the embodiment of the bedrock values of country Australia... the symbolic foundations of the entire nation” (Fairchild, 2007, p. 371). That Noll was an “authentic” character was solidified by his association with Australian pub rock and vignettes that focused on his background as a down-on-his-luck farmer (Carah, 2016, p. 177). The presence and success of Noll also validated *Idol* as meritocratic structure: if a salt-of-the-earth type such as Noll could make it to the final two, then it was more than mere factory line, but in the business of unearthing authentic talent. Noll lost, but his presence was established: his debut album *That’s What I’m Talking About* was certified five times platinum (ARIA, n.d.) and his debut single “What About Me” was the fifth highest selling single of the decade (Sebastian’s debut was the first) (ARIA, 2010).

Noll’s popularity during this time should be understood in reference to the dominance of the “Battler” identity as political subject during the Howard Era. Although it has long been a central figure in white Australian national imaginary (Elder, 2007), under the Howard government the term “Battler” took on special significance. As Dyrenfurth writes, the deployment of the term by Howard “imparted a hitherto unimaginable political legitimacy” (Dyrenfurth, 2007, p. 216). These battlers were constructed within a “new three-tier class system, sandwiched between powerful elites, and powerful unionists and welfare dependents” (Scalmer, 1999, p. 9), and facing constant attack from both sides. Howard’s great success with this rhetoric relied upon divorcing it from class considerations: anyone could be a battler, and the existence of a working class was made obsolete “by its aspiration to middle-class membership” (Dyrenfurth, 2005, p. 188). It was, at the same time, enshrined within a kind of privatised egalitarianism: in “rhetorical combat with his imaginary mainstream were ‘the designer forms of discrimination... race, gender and sexual preference’... [that] unnecessarily divided Australians” (Dyrenfurth, 2005, p. 187). As free market entrepreneurship was constructed as a universal value, Australia remained the land of the fair go, so long as it protected an idealised, “ordinary” middle class. Howard even encouraged identification of himself as a “political battler”, making reference to his struggles to attain leadership of the Liberal Party (Johnson, 2007, p. 7). It is within this ideological environment that the persona of Noll as Battler found traction. Henk Huisjer uses Noll as an example of Battler persona (Huijser, 2009), while one music journalist called his single ‘Shine’ “an unofficial WorkChoices soundtrack that celebrates the advancement of one over the good of many” (Mathieson, 2011, p. 195). There is perhaps no better example of Noll’s battler credentials than his breakout single, ‘What About Me’. A cover of a Moving Pictures original, the single is a plaintive call for the “little people” to be *noticed*; it is an anthem from the perspective of one who merely “wants my share”. The empty signifiers that abound match perfectly with the Howard battler who works hard to “get ahead”, or to “have a go” (Dyrenfurth, 2007, p. 218). There is no concrete demand or expression of solidarity,

as in similar songs (the aforementioned Jimmy Barnes hit ‘Working Class Man’): as such it is easily colonised by (neo-)Liberal values.

It is important that following his initial success, Noll faded largely from mainstream media attention, aside from appearances in advertisements (Wilson Everard Advertising, 2013) or scattered articles that degraded him for his national anthem rendition (Van Boom, 2014; Zanotti, 2014). This, I argue, made him an object of *kitsch*, primed for the sorts of ironic re-appropriation earlier described in Bourdieu: he became, as mentioned earlier, an object “less obviously marked out for admiration” (1986, p. 282). This narrative of rebirth and rediscovery will become important to his development as a meme.

The history of Shannon Noll-as-meme dates back to two pages: the first being *Shit Memes*, and the second the more blunt “Shannon Noll was robbed of winning hit TV show Australian Idol 2003” (Adams, 2016). Noll is not the only cultural product to have been subjected to this memetic rebirth: many Australian-focused meme pages also indulge in a kind of parochial nostalgia, choosing as their content cultural icons from the 1990s and early 2000s (“Aussie music of the 90s & 00s memes - Home,” n.d.). He is, however, by far the most successful. Posts typically placed Noll as the feature in pre-existing meme formats, focusing on his desirability as sex symbol, or victimhood.



Fig. 12. From Freeman (2016).

This ironic popularity online soon translated into an explosion of interest, with petitions for Noll to play regional concert series *Groovin' the Moo* (Dunn, 2016), and bookings on university campuses (Heyer, 2016). Fans spammed event pages with memes of Noll (Williams, 2015), bands released tracks focused on the injustice of his loss (Louder, 2016), parody articles released claimed that he was robbed of the triple J Hottest 100 crown, (“Shannon Noll Robbed of Hottest 100 Win For Twelfth Year Running,” 2016), petitions were organised to have him represent Australia at Eurovision (Conors, n.d.), and faux memorials were held commemorating his loss to Sebastian (Mack, 2016). This flurry of activity led to renewed interest in Noll in more traditional mainstream media outlets (Adams, 2016). It is at this same time that Nollposting began. Important to note here is the two key components that both Nollposting more formally and his earlier use in

memes share: his status as a victim and his framing as a hypermasculine, hypersexual being. Noll himself, in this earlier period of memetic development, occupies a specific enough in the Australian cultural imaginary that he denotes this particular Australian identity, “the battler”, by mere invocation. The references to his staid masculinity and grievances further strengthen this association.

We’re (Not) All Someone’s Daughter, (Nor) Someones’s Son: The Suffocating Battler

But in my description of Nollposting, and Noll’s success as a meme more broadly, I have not accounted for his incredible popularity *specifically*. As previously mentioned, other memes pages co-opt Australian artifacts of nostalgia and shoehorn them into memes, especially Shit Memes, which is more concerned with Guy Sebastian than his runner up (Freeman, 2016). Why Shannon Noll? Why not, for example, Daryl Braithwaite, the vocalist of Australian 1970s glam band Sherbet? He occupies a similar place in Australian music hierarchy, recently finishing the regional Red Hot Summer Tour alongside Noll. He has as his ironic champion comedian Dave Callan, who calls him “our Lord and Saviour” in both shows and popular Facebook posts (Bowden, 2017). He was also the subject of a recent viral response to the Triple J Hottest 100 announcement, where one user commented “ya jokin should have been higher” #100-2, before commenting:

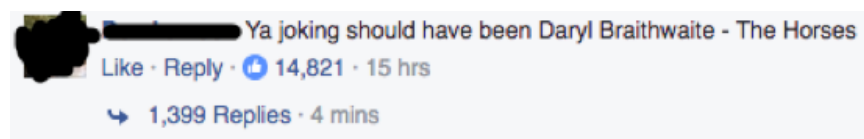


Fig. 13. From Sargeant (2017).

There appears to be many of the same qualities that Noll possesses: his song “Horses”, in particular, is an exemplar of Australian kitsch. Yet he does not occupy the same place in the popular imagination, and his success as a meme stalled. We can make a number of readings about their difference in musical style that contribute to this, with Braithwaite’s soaring vocals and propensity for falsetto indicating a femininity that stands in stark contrast to Noll’s frankly limited vocal range, a gruffness that communicates the masculine authenticity of a pub rocker. Braithwaite’s association with the naff pop group Sherbet also does not help him in this regard. But the over-determining explanation is that Noll is a *battler*, or at least is *constructed* as a battler. Nobody could confuse Daryl Braithwaite with a *battler*; Shirley Strachan, maybe. As discussed earlier, the importance of the battler to the formation of Australian identity during the Howard era was crucial, and this was the fire in which Noll was forged. Not only does Braithwaite lack the rugged, self-sufficient masculinity that is associated with this performance of battling, he has not been subject to any extra-diegetic narratives regarding his own battles. He remains an unremarkable journeyman of the Australian music scene, with or without the memes. The ironic revival in Noll’s popularity, however, is able itself to be reconstituted as a triumph of the battler: the second time as farce.

The dominance of the battler identity in Australian popular culture, and its continuing relevance, problematizes any reading wherein Noll posters are merely making fun of him. I do not

preclude this possibility, but I do not believe that simply because one engages an object in jest one negates its importance or influence: this is also the thrust of Whitney Phillip's later work on trolling, focusing on its *effects* rather than the *intent* of the actors involved (Phillips, 2015b). We might investigate this in relation to another battler created at the same time as Noll, that of the plumber *Kenny*. As Kirsty Whitman argues of the film *Kenny*, "centralising working class masculinity is closely associated with mainstreaming, authenticity and averageness, and it is often at the centre of cultural and social understandings about what it means to be Australian." (Whitman, 2013). There is a productive similarity between the characters of Kenny Smyth and Noll. Like Noll, Kenny was framed as the archetypal Aussie battler, humbling eking out his existence in a world with the odds stacking against him. They are also particularly products of the Howard era, wherein "working-class identities are acceptable, only insofar as they are aligned with neo-liberal capitalist constructs" (Whitman, 2013, p. 61). In the same way that Kenny has an almost fetishistic commitment to his job, Noll's constructed personality is humble and uncomplaining, merely striving to get by. When he does complain, his rallying cry is "What About Me?", bemoaning that he is not getting *his share*, what he is *owed*. It is not, pointedly, "What About Us?". Both Noll and Kenny's success during a similar time period can be in large part attributed to how they legitimize "the delegation of 'Aussie values' to the safe-keeping of an idealised and "ordinary" Australian - an imaginary but powerful figure of national rhetoric" (Collins, 2007, p. 90). The through line of supposed *invisibility* is shared by both characters, but as argued by Whitman, this is something that "allows them to utilise the language of the oppressed, while denying voice to other, more oppressed people and groups within Australian society, making systems of inequality and privilege invisible." (Whitman, 2013, p. 60). That is to say, when we are concerned with the little boy waiting to be served at the counter of a corner shop, our gaze does not include those not present in the shop to begin with, whether due to being priced out by the small retailers' markup, or because they live in a food desert which renders the concept of a "corner shop" itself a distant dream. This granting of victimhood status is especially pertinent when we consider how much of Noll's early ironic popularity had to do with memes that featured a comic overreaction to him being "robbed" of the Australian Idol title by Guy Sebastian, casting it as some epoch-ending disaster. With this in mind, I argue that Nollposting has more to do with a *renegotiation* of this Australian identity within a new, postmodern media environment that it does a *critique* of it.

Furthermore, there is a long history of Australian comedy that wrests with national definition, especially the battler (McCallum, 1998), which I believe is worth using as context to Noll's ironic appraisal. Describing such previous comedic icons such as Norman Gunston, Edna Everage and Paul Hogan, McCallum attributes to them a mixture of both "apology and defiance" (1998, 207). They are presented as characters to be both mocked and celebrated, depending on the context in which they are presented or their development as characters. The character of Edna Everage, for example, began as a parody of suburban housewife inanity but transformed, over time, into a "colonial triumph" as audiences became more familiar with her routine and her success overseas became "Australian nationalist aspiration" (McCallum, 1998, p. 215). Her transformation into an icon of kitsch (Siemienowicz, 1999), allows her viewers to re-appropriate these signifiers of suburbia into something to be (un)ironically celebrated. This is further explored in Sue Turnbull's discussion of Edna and television series *Kath and Kim*, whose humour she argues often involves "gleeful recognition rather than ironic distance" (Turnbull, 2008, p. 27). *Kath and Kim* is an obvious precedent to Nollposting, particularly its focus on the minutiae of cultural experience. Much of its humour, based in speech patterns, accent, slang and humorous malappropriations, all

recall Nollposting's evermore specific strine and use of cultural markers, albeit aimed towards a lower-classed figure.

We might integrate this with the recent history of class humour in Australia, focused around the “bogan”, or white working-class poor (Pini and Previte, 2013). Investigating what visions of the working class are used in this humour helps reveal “ongoing efforts of the middle class to reinscribe boundaries and differences, and focuses attention on the way in which middle-class values, attitudes and tastes are normalized and naturalized” (Pini et al, 2012, p. 145). Similar to Nollposting, depictions of the bogan falls into established Australian media practice of portraying the imagined working class as “potentially violent and aggressive as well as sexually degenerative and promiscuous” (Pini et al, 2012, p. 146). I would argue that Nollposting itself represents a continuation of this tradition in humour, an example of how the “historical arc of class-based humour in Australian media is now refracted through new electronic and social networking platforms” (Gibson, 2013, p. 66). But as I have argued, as well as being a way to fix figures like Noll in the social hierarchy, it is also a way for users to distinguish themselves in relation to Australian national identity. As Gibson writes, humour around “battler-bogans and bogan-heroes tread[s] a fine line between condescension and celebration but nevertheless tap into entrenched nationalist sentiments and values appealing to Australianness” (Gibson, 2013, p. 72).

Nollposting also follows from several other memetic representations of Australian identity *ad absurdum*, such as Sam Kekovich's advertisements for Meat and Livestock Australia, promoting the consumption of lamb on Australia Day. These advertisements consisted of Kekovich addressing the nation “Lambassador”, bemoaning the rise of “un-Australianisms” such as vegetarianism, which he blamed on “long-haired dole bludging types” (Ma, 2015). Whilst this ostensibly satirises the hypermasculine Australian identity, it does through without challenging several of the central conceits of the “white Australian rural tradition” with which it engages (Han, 2007, p. 365). The satirical value of the advertisements were limited at best, as noted in one complaint to the advertising standards bureau, which noted that they gave “the wider community a feeling of validity in ridiculing those who are different or fail to fit their ideal mould of a “true blue Australian” (Advertising Standards Bureau, 2009).

so many upset veggy poofs. If you don't want to celebrate Australia day and you don't want to honour our traditions, you can get absolutely fucked. I'll remember to have an extra cutlet next Australia day for you veggies though, might even get an extra tray of the delicious fuckers.

Fuck yeah yeah nah straya cunt.

Fig. 14. From vtk94lude (2006)

YouTube comments on the advertisement, as in Figure 14, suggest that ironic use of strine (“fuck yeah yeah nah straya cunt”) can easily be reconciled with hate speech.

As McCallum argues, there is a profound difficulty in attempting to read the impact of Australian comedy of national identity, especially when there is “different ways of reading the work available to a large heterogeneous audience” (McCallum, 1998, p. 201). But I would suggest that it is the *parsing* of this ambivalence that distinguishes *the users themselves*. In showing their ability to mock Noll and others like him, they demonstrate what I would call the Goldilocks

theory of Australian nationalism, drawing from (Kimmel, 2013, p. 52). They are neither too Australian, like the hyper-masculine figure of Noll, but neither are they too effete and high-minded to not recognise a truth to the character of Noll. Their taste is just right; at risk of making a truly horrendous pun, as Bourdieu says, “taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier” (1986, p. 6). The true judge of being Australian is making the judgement of what counts as Australian.

This Isn’t How it Has to Be, Little Darling

As Nissenbaum & Shifman write, “paradoxically, memes’ unstable nature keeps this community’s shared culture at the center of discussion, reinforcing its importance” (Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2015, p. 498). Even when Nollposting is critical of this imagined working class culture it distinguishes itself against, it does so by uncritically accepting several of its basic fictions, thereby breathing new life into them. Beating someone at their own game still means that you are playing their game, not your own. Nollposting, like Kenny before him, succeeds “because it registered the new configuration of lived experience” (L. Milner, 2009, p. 161). Whilst my study is by no means exhaustive, I believe it points to productive areas for future research, particularly regarding the relationship between articulation of national collective identity under late capitalism and memetic discourse. As Figure 15 indicates, there is a persistent association within certain internet subcultures of Australians with shitposting.



Fig. 15. From Ignore Australian Threads (2015)

Further study could investigate this link. This is not to suggest, of course, that there is essentialized quality of Australian culture that grants us a predilection to shitposting, but that there is a significant overlap between our masculinised battler and the gendered discourse standards that govern participation on the Internet. Ostensibly satirical pages such as *Yeah the Boys*, that are hubs of unironic sexism and homophobia (Economos, 2016), would be objects of particular concern here, as would the popularity of the “Alf Stewart Rape Dungeon” meme, that “parodies” the character from the soap opera *Home and Away* by portraying him as an inveterate rapist and unapologetic racist (Bub, 2012). More quantitatively minded scholars than myself might investigate

the back-end of Australian meme communities, particularly how Facebook algorithms sway how content is delivered.

Nollposting has so infected discussion of Shannon Noll that news articles announcing his latest single releases engage in ironic hyperbole regarding its quality (Barden, 2017; Pitney, 2017). This is not unlike Sue Turnbull's discussion of *Kath and Kim*, which possesses an "ambivalent impulse, being either self-celebratory or self-critical" (Turnbull, 2004, p. 108) that is ultimately made irrelevant by the program's position within broader media contexts that made it into the "little Aussie battler triumphing over the odds" (Turnbull, 2004, p. 108). I would argue that a similar impulse is at work within Nollposting. Whilst its form may not conclusively be a self-critical examination of Australian mythology or a self-congratulatory celebration of it, within a broader media context that still valorizes battler tropes uncritically, and given Noll's background as a Howard era relic, I argue that Nollposters are contesting over the correct amount of (ironic) Australianism, merely than dispensing with it entirely. Nollposters cannot have their fish taco and eat it too: as the old adage goes, "ironic shitposting is still shitposting".

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