

Study of the 'nature is healing' memes that dominated social media during pandemic

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A screenshot of a "nature is healing" meme shared on social media.

A giant rubber duck floating on the Thames. Dinosaurs exploring Times Square. Lime scooters at the bottom of a pond.

The "nature is healing" jokes that circulated widely on [social media](#) last year amid COVID-19 lockdowns have been called the pandemic's best [meme](#). And they are the subject of a newly published paper that grew out of a Virginia Commonwealth University class.

In "The bad environmentalism of 'nature is healing' memes," published in the journal *Cultural Geographies*, Kai Bosworth, Ph.D., an assistant professor of international studies in the School of World Studies in the College of Humanities and Sciences, writes that the memes were an extension of ideas put forward in Nicole Seymour's 2018 book, "[Bad Environmentalism: Irony and Irreverence in the Ecological Age](#)," that argues in favor of a "low environmental culture" that employs humor and irony in educating about [climate change](#) and environmentalism.

"Implicitly critical of nefarious arguments that the death-dealing pandemic would provide a 'pause for nature' and thus that 'humans were the real virus,' the formal and easily reproduced 'nature is healing' genre subverts conventional understandings of 'the natural' as well as the naturalization of social order and [political economy](#)," Bosworth writes. "In particular, I extend Seymour's argument—and pop cultural studies of the environment—by parsing five modes through which the 'nature is healing' genre plays ironically on differing understandings of the natural. These are the out-of-place in nature; nature out-of-place; drawing attention to a naturalized social order; naturalizing social transformation; and absurdity in the natural world."

The project originated in Bosworth's fall 2020 class Nature/Culture/Justice, which examines the origins and development of

"environment" and "nature" as cultural phenomenon, with special attention paid to global environmental justice, race, class, gender and sexuality. Toward the end of the course, Bosworth asked his students to bring in something that made them laugh and that is connected to the environment, the [natural world](#) or climate change, in conjunction with a reading from Seymour.

"I find that such an exercise is pedagogically really compelling, as—much like "environmentalism" writ large—our courses concerning climate change can make one feel depressed or powerless," he said. "Internet memes—easily reproducible images that convey humor via circulation and participation—are the language through which many [young people](#) today interpret political events, so many of the submissions were in that format."

This spring, Bosworth hired three students from the class—Margaret Brooks, Mable Henry and Thomas Muradaz—as research assistants. They helped compile, sift and categorize hundreds of memes from Twitter, Reddit and Instagram that served as the basis for the study.

"Though I'm not totally out of touch yet, it was helpful to have some young people to decipher some of the more obscure cultural references in some of these memes, too," Bosworth said.

Brooks—who graduated this month with a degree in interdisciplinary studies with a concentration in international studies, environmental studies and sociology—said she enjoyed working on the project because it was timely and because it explores the important questions of what we consider to be "nature" or "natural."

"These feelings that 'things just need to get back to normal' aren't new or unique to our time or place in history, and I think working on the project allowed me to explore how neoliberal environmentalism, which has

historically been white, elite and exclusionary, has shaped modern discourse around preserving a 'natural state' and how this is perpetuating issues like the COVID-19 pandemic, eco-fascism, and environmental racism," Brooks said. "Memes are a great vehicle to understand these phenomena because they're more accessible, ubiquitous, re-creatable and easily distributed than theory or policy. Plus, we had a good laugh every day of research and collaboration."

When people think about environmentalism, Bosworth said, they often associate it with emotions like piety, humorlessness, chauvinism, gloominess, earnestness or sentimentality. A broader range of emotions—such as joy—will be needed, he said, to build a durable movement for social and environmental justice.

"Our research on 'nature is returning' memes extends Nicole Seymour's examination of such transgressive 'bad environmentalisms' by looking at ecological humor in the digital realm," Bosworth said. "The 'nature is healing' memes poke fun at the overly-sentimental images of swans and dolphins supposedly returning to Italian rivers (or whatever), while implicitly criticizing an incorrect and deeply cruel interpretation of the COVID-19 pandemic as 'earth healing itself' demonstrating that 'humans are the real virus.' [And] 'nature is healing' memes riff on this sentimentality by displaying seemingly 'unnatural' returns: animals in weird urban spots, trash and waste in nature, the return of a transformed social life, and so on."

He added that the format was also flexible, with people using the memes to criticize the return of "natural" political events, such as the policing of Black Lives Matter protests or their alienation from available electoral choices around the world.

And the meme genre fell within the tradition of camp, which has long been used by queer movements to critique the supposed "naturalness" of

gender norms, he said.

"In doing so, I argue that such low humor could thus evidence an emotional register more inclusive of queer, Black, feminist, and/or Indigenous parodies of conventional environmentalist performance," he said.

The memes, he said, also are an example of digital participatory media that can provide an alternative narrative to popular culture, where TV and movies often portray environmentalists at the villains.

"I have a lot of hope in the capacities of young people—like these students—to deeply challenge the assumptions of scholars, policymakers and the public to fight for the kinds of radical social and political transformation necessary to yield better ecological futures, what the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change calls 'rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society,'" he said.

More information: Kai Bosworth, The bad environmentalism of 'nature is healing' memes, *cultural geographies* (2021). [DOI: 10.1177/14744740211012007](https://doi.org/10.1177/14744740211012007)

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