

This book examines the visual-sexual turn in social media discourses in the field of online activism with a particular focus on the extraordinary protest years of 2018–2020.

Presenting a socially engaged theory of “tit-for-tat media” and including case-studies on activist movements such as the Euro-American alt-right, the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong, and revolutionary artists in China, this study reveals how visual cultures, including gendered or sexualized imagery, are utilized to influence public perception. By presenting in-depth explorations of online ethnography, interviews with activists and studies of the political histories and urban protests-environments, the volume uncovers how local artists, netizens and citizens are using media and digital imagery in contemporary activism.

Covering a broad spectrum of social media content, from hyper-cute manga and cartoons to satirical pornography and sexualized hate-speech, it will be of huge interest to students and scholars of media and communication studies, political communication, sexuality and gender studies.

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The Contentious Bodies and
Sex Imagery of Political Activism



 ROUTLEDGE

4

Pepe the Frog, Emotion Politics and Gender Inclusivity at the Hong Kong Anti-Extradition Movement

Introduction

Pepe the Frog, a cartoon designed by American artist Matt Furie, which in 2016 became a mascot of USA alt-right groups, was again hijacked and re-worked by the Hong Kong Anti-Extradition Movement in the summer of 2019. Pepe the Frog was integrated into a larger “family” of Hong Kong animal-mascots that had been popularized on the Cantonese protest-forum, the LIHKG forum (連登討論區 *lin dang tou leon keoi*).¹ Specifically, the “LIHKG-pig,” a little pig that was rendered as a low-resolution image, had become the favorite mascot of the movement. The pig figure and other animal-mascots were mostly circulating by means of digital emoticons and stickers used in personal chats, but they also appeared widely on public digital forums, as well as urban sites by means of posters, graffiti, stuffed animals, and even life-size puppets. Pepe arguably reached his apex of popularity in the city on December 8th, 2019, when a group of protesters dressed as Pepe the Frog by donning large handcrafted masks. They had been invited to join a workshop organized by the pro-democracy internet radio station, Sing Jai (城寨 *sing zaai*), to craft these large masks and wear them during one of the pro-democracy rallies.

But aside from these street appearances, Pepe the Frog was used by anonymous designers in drawings, or cartoons, or multiple series of emoticons and digital stickers that included pro-Hong Kong themes (Figure 4.1). The digital stickers could be downloaded for free, and were thus extensively shared and re-distributed through various social media platforms. Comic artist Justin Wong observed that the Anti-Extradition Movement as a leaderless movement was characterized by coordinated cartoons and visual designs as a strategy for activists to cooperate and easily reach large audiences. The Pepe-figure and the family of LIHKG animals were some of the most widely used and agreed upon icons of activist struggle, resilience and emotional relief (Wong, 2020).

到時見！
See you there!



FIGURE 4.1 Pepe and the LIHKG animals with the 5 protest demands. Digital drawing by Watchit Comics

The Anti-Extradition protests were a political movement that made use of lush visual cultures and digital trends to target the government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) under Chief Executive Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor (林鄭月娥 *lam zeng jyut ngo*), who became directly aligned with the Chinese Communist Party of the People's Republic of China. The Pepe the Frog icon was widely regarded as a mascot of emotional relief during months of raging conflict between protesters and the riot police. It was used to express a wide range of positive and negative emotions and engage in “emotion politics” (Ng and Chan, 2017). Several female activists interviewed for this study stated that they liked the icon precisely because it was “so sad,” “so funny” and also “innocent” and “safe enough” to display activist statements publicly (Personal interviews, October 2020). Pepe's facial expressions

specifically became an ideal conduit for airing the euphoric and dark emotions related to Hong Kong's struggle. But since Pepe had been officially classified as a figure of xenophobic and misogynist hate speech by the USA Anti-Defamation League in 2016, and since some groups of Hong Kong protesters were aware of this designation, it was also important to think about the identity politics associated with this icon. As will be shown, Pepe addressed a discord within the movement between gender-inclusive, pro-democracy activists and Hong Kong localists fighting for a nativist identity.

Research Methods

In making a selection of Pepe-figures that were created during the Anti-Extradition Movement in fall 2019, we archived thousands of stickers and emoticons (about 40 sticker-series), cartoons and memes that were extracted from mainstream social media platforms, as well as the LIHKG forum and protest-related Telegram groups. There were specific Telegram groups that focused on the promotion of the Anti-Extradition Movement, and many promotional art materials were being released and exchanged among these groups. In interpreting this collection of Pepe-figures, we also tried to situate their relevance within urban protest environments by means of street posters or graffiti. Scholars have argued that online media should be studied in how they impact hybridized online/offline public spaces (Boy and Uitermark, 2018; Shifman, 2013). Similarly, this chapter will look at how tiny icons were (re)created within different mediums and reflected the larger hopes of civic engagement of digital youth. In order to make an argument about Pepe's affect and transformed identity in Hong Kong, I selected the following Pepe themes: EyeforHongKong (還眼香港 *waan ngaan hoeng gong*), ProtestToo, SadPepe, BadPepe, and Pepeway (Pepe 人鯉 *jan lin*).

From mid-August 2019 onwards, these themes and designs began to play an important role in the movement and protesters also made use of them during the most violent conflicts in October–November 2019. These Pepe themes will be related to specific movement episodes and also how they reflected a concern with women's participation and issues of gender and violence. Thematically, many Pepe stickers represented positive role-models or heroic activists who were depicted charmingly in order to build solidarity, or boost morale and maintain the high spirits of the movement. But they also included negative role-models whom protesters wanted to “shame,” such as police officers and members of the political establishment.

I collaborated with two Cantonese-speaking research assistants and looked at the ways that Pepe was making appearances on social media and as well as in urban sites. Additionally, we held an interview with Watchit Comics (觀賞用 *gun soeng jung*), one of the Pepe-designers who was invited to explain the importance of the icon and his view on online activism. Several designers were pioneering the format of digital stickers as a protest-artform, arguing that they would be more widely used and downloaded for a long period of. As Watchit Comics explained,

the digital sticker is a “time resistant” medium and the designs were also being replicated on larger posters in the city (Personal Interview, October 2019).

Finally, a few months after the movement ended, in March 2020, the research team organized a group-interview with three anonymous female activists to further comment on the Pepe-designs. We asked them to comment on our own selected Pepe imagery, while they also brought along their own digital icons and commented on their meaning and the emotional memories they evoked. The interviewees were all aged in their mid-twenties and had participated in various social movement, but not necessarily as frontline activists. They included: “Mami,” an artist who attended many rallies but did not go to the frontline; “Kayin,” a secondary school teacher from a pro-Beijing family, who had occupied the streets during the Umbrella Movement of 2014 and who also offered assistance to younger people during the 2019 Anti-Extradition Movement; “Ger,” a research assistant at a university who has participated in rallies and online activism. Since the topic of this interview had become politically highly sensitive, we decided to only feature a few anonymous interviewees, whose statements will be used intermittently in the chapter.

Pepe's Prehistory: USA Mascot of White Supremacy and Toxic Masculinity

Before detailing the Hong Kong Pepe themes, it is also important to briefly outline the icon's adoption within different groups and subcultures in the USA. After the comic figure's creation by Matt Furie in 2005 as a “stoner-frog” with a subversive-transgressive edge, Pepe was gradually hijacked as one of the dominant mascots of alt-right and white supremacist movements. The figure was mobilized by specific right-wing groups as a hate-figure in their fight for cultural hegemony. Once Pepe became a highly favored cartoon figure on the more mainstream social media, right-wing groups issued a call to save Pepe from becoming a bland commodity associated with “normie” (mainstream) culture (Pelletier-Gagnon and Diniz, 2018).

The 2020 documentary by Arthur Jones, *Feels Good Man*, focuses on how Matt Furie struggled to wrench the figure back from this right-wing adoption by initiating cultural and legal actions.² The figure originally had been embraced by the digital generation as a symbol of otherness, abjection and loneliness, and to express excessive feelings of joy or sadness. Pepe had been welcomed as a socially withdrawn or un-adapted youthful character who would provide camaraderie and support. But at the same time, the figure morphed into a figure of male resentment on Reddit-forums and the free-speech image boards 4chan/8chan. It started supporting white nationalism and patriarchal supremacy (Maly, 2018: 193). Young men wanted to revert to reactionary and rigidly male or “alpha-male” sexual identities as a counter-reaction to novel sexualities and LGBTQ+ identity politics. These activists also started a severe backlash against the “feminization” of modern-day masculinity, while alt-right leaders started promoting gender inequality and sexual violence as lost “amoral freedoms” (Nagle, 2017: 165).

A specific subculture of “involuntary celibates” (incels) started thriving on anger at, and dissatisfaction with, modern women and feminists. For instance, Pepe became a mascot on 4chan’s/r9k forum for lonely men and involuntary celibates (“incels”) dedicated to the anonymous sharing of personal feelings and anecdotes. Some of the most well-known posts on/r9k are called “spaghetti stories,” in which men recall socially awkward moments, mostly during their encounters with women. The stories recall moments of anxiety and often end up with the male protagonist having spaghetti falling out of his pockets. In two comics found on that forum, we can see a development from self-mockery to acts of resentment. In the first, a well-known “lonely male” cartoon character, Wojak, is celebrating his birthday and the only friend who shows up at his party is Pepe the Frog. In the second comic, Wojak and Pepe go out together and abuse or rape women. These comics represent a trend from male emotional bonding towards hatred and violence.³

At the same time, as explained in *Feels Bad Man* by political analyst John Michael Greer, Pepe was thought to be spreading its “meme magic.” This notion originally supported a conspiracy theory that certain online images would have direct effect in actual life. It also led to the belief that Pepe would “make the Internet real” and aided the election victory of presidential candidate Donald Trump, who had tweeted a picture of himself as Pepe the Frog in front of the White House seal a year prior to his election victory in 2016. Pepe gradually became part of the funded social media campaigns of Trump, which still increased his popularity (Jones, 2020).

Matt Furie continued his struggle against the right-wing colonization of the Pepe meme, not only to defend his own ownership, but to contest the reactionary political ideals surrounding the icon. In 2017, he explicitly commented on this history of hijacking by means of three online comics. He issued a “visual explainer” of his “enigmatic” brainchild, which consisted of gorgeously hedonistic and perverse images.⁴ He also issued two drawings in which he decommissioned Pepe. In the first comic he detailed how Pepe gradually turns into president Trump and then gradually explodes into a monster. A second drawing portrays Pepe’s death and burial in an open casket, flanked by a flattering headshot as would be commonly seen at a funeral.

The Hong Kong Reawakening of Pepe the Frog

The Hong Kong adoption of Pepe the Frog happened when Watchit Comics and other protest-designers more or less around the same time recreated the figure and integrated it into local iconology. As explained by Watchit Comics, there had been some dispute amongst protesters about Pepe’s ability to represent ethnically Chinese Hong Kongers but he was ultimately seen as an ally and was welcomed by the other animals (Personal interview, October 2019). Watchit Comics posted a reply-drawing to Furie’s buried Pepe in August 2019, portraying a young and smartly dressed Pepe who jumps out of his casket and is surrounded by his family



FIGURE 4.2 The reawakening of Pepe the Frog in Hong Kong, drawing posted on several social media. Digital Drawing by Watchit Comics

of “LI-animals,” the animal-mascots of the LIHGK forum. The text states that: “Pepe is Love, Hongkongers Love Pepe. That’s all. Don’t label Pepe. Don’t judge Pepe” (Figure 4.2).

Watchit Comics decided to redeem Pepe from being a defamed icon in the USA and started drawing Pepe-related cartoons on a daily basis. He did not have an artistic nor activist background, but was an “average” hotel worker with a tertiary degree from a community college. In the interview, he started out by saying that his entire life had been transformed by the movement. With his art works, he was mainly trying to offer emotional relief for the various hardships experienced by activists. As he stated: “Because in this movement, there are many negative emotions, such as sadness, anger, hate, so we need something positive to support us, because we can’t only keep the movement going on negative emotions. We would break” (Personal Interview, October 2019). He became a fervent protest-designer and launched his comics and stickers on various mainstream and smaller media platforms—Facebook, Instagram, Telegram, and LIHGK.

Pepe was also frequently drawn on pavements and Lennon Walls, appeared on banners and posters in street rallies and also as a stuffed animal carried by protesters. The Hong Kong Pepe was also extensively reported on by local and overseas media, such as *South China Morning Post*, *Hong Kong Free Press*, *Apple Daily*, *HKET*, *Bloomberg Tictoc*, *The New York Times*, *Buzzfeed*, *Wired* and *Business Insider*. The overseas news media and journalists who were residing in Hong Kong because of the Anti-Extradition protests, were acquainted with the hate-speech controversies around Pepe in the USA. They overall were laudatory of the Hong Kong takeover of a white supremacist icon and

conducted interviews with protesters concerning their love for Pepe and the reasons behind adopting the comical figure.⁵

Women Protesters, EyeforHongKong and Protesttoo

There was a high participation of women in the Anti-Extradition Movement, who also helped designing and fine-tuning the collectively chosen icons and art-forms. Looking at one of the archives of the Anti-Extradition Movement compiled by Hong Kong University, one can see that 25% of protesters in the different age-ranges were women. A majority of protesters were in the age group of 18–25 years and many of them were university students.⁶ “Mami Liu,” Hong Kong artist and activist, testifies in a personal interview that frontline activists also included a high percentage of young women (Personal interview, August 2020). Yu is a female journalist who has documented that young women in school uniforms were seen in street rallies, both as front-line warriors and in softer forms of activism (Yu, 2020). For instance, she describes one of the “human chains” carried out by secondary school girls at the time when all street rallies were already forbidden: “They have paired protective goggles and hard hats with their cheongsam, holding hands to form a human chain outside the century-old school, with placards that showed a quote from a Song Dynasty poet, ‘I’d rather die than live in silence’. The line was so long that the girls could physically connect with the boys from neighboring school, who were also decked out in masks and helmets” (Yu, 2020: 25). The young activists who made long human chains also often brought along their stuffed “Pepe” animals which further contributed to generating the Pepe icon.

When we interviewed activists about what they thought about Pepe’s “gender or gender identity,” Ger stated that: “Pepe is gender-fluid. if it can be female, can be male, can be gay, can be anything, can be someone you hate. It is very multi-dimensional.” (Personal interview, June 2020). Other interviewees agreed that the figure allowed them to project a gender identity, that it lacked a gender, and that this gender-fluidity helped them to think of Pepe as a suitable mascot.

From the onset of the Hong Kong recreation of Pepe, the figure was often “feminized” and partially merged with the EyeforHongKong symbol and its support for a female victim of police abuse. The EyeforHongKong symbol came about on August 11, 2019, after a female volunteer, nurse K., was shot by the riot police in the right eye with a bean bag. Protesters then began using the protest-gesture of covering one’s right eye with one’s hand. This refers to a double emotion of empathy with victims of violence and a desire for revenge. The image connoted the theme of “an eye for an eye” or was a call for revenge and/or more radical tactics against the police force (Ho-Kilpatrick, 2019; Figures 4.3 and 4.4).

The sister of nurse K. issued a statement in online forums, in which she urged people to keep fighting for Hong Kong and specifically take their anger to the Hong Kong international airport, where large-scale occupations had started to

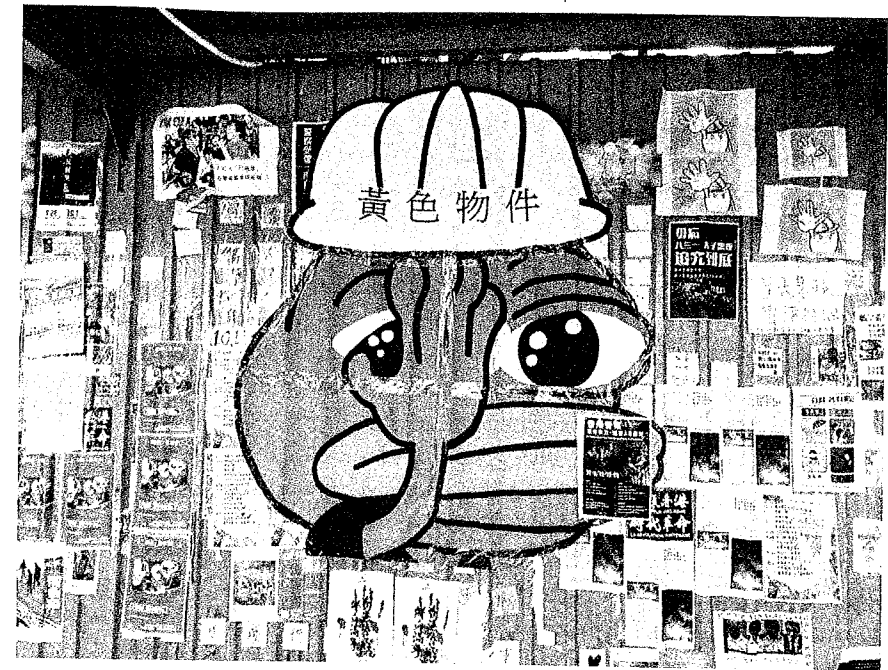


FIGURE 4.3 Large Lennon Wall sticker of Pepe the Frog and the EyeforHongKong gesture. Photograph by Katrien Jacobs



FIGURE 4.4 Stuffed animals of Pepe the Frog and the EyeforHongKong theme. Photograph by Katrien Jacobs

take place. The airport was chosen as a demonstration site as it would have exposed the Anti-Extradition protest to an international audience via massive air traffic arrivals as well as exposing or conversely ameliorating the hardline police crackdown. Protesters started using the EyeforHongKong gesture in support of nurse K. and the other victims of police violence. In the attendant iconography, the right eye is sometimes covered with a white patch or with a bloody patch. This eye-patch and eye-gesture were widely used in the airport occupations and stayed with the movement until its final days. Protesters took on the theme creatively and in many different ways, for instance, by taping eye patches on gorgeous-looking fashion models of large advertisements in the Hong Kong international airport.

A second female victim was shot in the eye on September 29, 2019, the Indonesian journalist, Veby Mag Indah. She was shot with a rubber bullet and was permanently blinded in her right eye. She worked for *Suara Hong Kong News*, an Indonesian media outlet that serves the thousands of Indonesians working in Hong Kong, as well as their friends and families back home and around the world. On a news video in *South China Morning Post* she testifies that she was standing with a group of journalists who were identified by their yellow jackets. They were clearly identifiable and warned the approaching police that they were journalists, but one of them fired a shot directly at the journalists as they were retreating down the stairs of a pedestrian bridge. In her video-testimony, Indah cried and explained that she was not sure if she could continue her work as a journalist (Lau, 2019). The police force made a statement the next day arguing that they did not intentionally shoot her or the other journalists. Indah made a video-statement out of fear that the incident was just going to be erased, as well as for "all the injured people in Hong Kong." The police later identified the police officer without releasing his name, and also stated that the reporter had not necessarily been blinded by their actions (Siu, 2020).

The incident with Indah mirrored that of the first victim whose incident initiated the EyeforHongKong theme. These incidents initiated discussions about women's role in the movement and their experiences with police violence. For many people, as also explained by Watchit Comics, the fact that the police were targeting nurses or journalists meant that the Hong Kong police had reached their bottom line: "When the police attack women, it means that police can hurt anyone. No one will be exempted, like elderly ladies who stand in front of them and try to talk to them, they aren't even attacking the police, but the police will always fire teargas at them, this is why a lot of people pay attention to these incidents" (Personal Interview, October 15, 2019). The Hong Kong police did escalate its tactics and expelled excessive amounts of tear gas into shopping malls, railway stations and housing estates, thus often injuring non-violent activists as well as journalists, bystanders or people who just happened to be walking by. While male protesters were equally targeted or injured, the figure of a female injured activist became a symbol of the movement and its inclination to express excessive emotions of pain, sadness, and hurt.

After the first incident, the Pepe the Frog image started being used in rallies to protest against sexual violence and police abuse. A rally especially dedicated to sexual violence was organized on August 28, which was titled Protesttoo. It was an official merger between the Anti-Extradition Movement and the Metoo movement and it used Pepe on one of its posters to announce the rally. On this poster, we see Pepe's sad facial expression, a black shirt and yellow helmet, and a bloody eyepatch on the right eye. Pepe is also out for revenge and sticks a right bandaged arm and middle finger up to the police and the image is captioned with the slogan "Fuck the Popo Too" (Tong, 2019). This slogan was directed at the "popo," slang for the police force who were now being specifically accused of sexual violence. The rally took place in Edinburgh Place in Central District and attracted about 50,000 participants. During the rally several protesters verbally testified, showing solidarity with other victims of police sexual abuse. Chinese University of Hong Kong student Sonia Ng spoke about being sexually abused by a police officer, while a male protester provided an account of being tortured at the San Uk Ling Detention Center. There was an acknowledgment within the movement of cases of sexual abuse and the feminized Pepe was one of the figure to help garner support for these victims (Cheng, 2019).

While at this rally, Yenni Kwok of AFP Fact-Check tweeted that she found it strange to see the Pepe the Frog icon at a rally against sexual violence. She asked a participant about what Pepe meant to her and then reported: "Pepe looks funny and has a sarcastic attitude. She (i.e the participant) knows the alt-right in the US has co-opted Pepe, but she says in Hong Kong, Pepe has a different meaning." The use of Pepe as a mascot for this rally was indeed unusual within an international context, but in Hong Kong it meant that women were taking their part in the pro-democracy movement and using the figure to protest against police violence. At the same time, male protesters used the EyeforHongKong meme to feminize the movement and create a gendered symbol of suffering and victimization.

As well as addressing these issues, the Protesttoo rally paid homage to the Slutwalk movement, in which women re-appropriate and revamp negative stereotypes, such as "slut," which have been imposed upon them. Rhodes explains that the first Slutwalk in 2011, held in Toronto, was borne out of a negative "slut shaming" comment made by a police officer (Rhodes, 2018). Nguyen explains: "By marching under the banner of 'slut', the protesters take the poison out of the word, to change social attitudes about women's bodies and to empower women with the potential of their own sexualities. Women wrote messages on their arms, legs, chests, and faces" (Nguyen, 2013: 159). In a similar vein, activists distributed magic markers during the rally for people to write slogans on their arms and legs. The strategy of bodily-writing was adopted by Hong Kong protesters of different genders to reclaim their bodies from physical assault

Sad Pepe and Emotion Politics

A second Pepe-theme that is important in understanding Hong Kong's adoption of Pepe the Frog is the Sad Pepe figure. A popular incarnation of an overwrought figure, Sad Pepe unleashes his emotions and lets his tears flow. Sad Pepe had become a source of relief and sarcasm amongst the right-wing manosphere in the USA, often drawn in a hyperbolic way with tears streaming all over his face and into his mouth. In the Hong Kong variations of Sad Pepe, the frog is mourning and crying while carrying the Hong Kong protest flag (Figure 4.5). Pepe is crying for Hong Kong. The official Hong Kong flag shows a white Bauhinia flower on a red background, while the protest flag shows wilted white flowers on a black background. There were also Facebook profile image filters that showed the bauhinia flower in various degrees of disappearance, while other people turned their profile picture totally black. Black was also the official color of the protests, as people wore black outfits and "black blocs" added goggles and/or black face coverings. Hence the combination of Pepe's blubbing tears set onto morbid iconography set a specific tone for grievance and sacrifice.

Ng and Chan have coined the term "emotion politics" to highlight the importance of discourses of emotional relief as part of a new repertoire of non-violent modes of resistance during Hong Kong's pro-democracy movements (Ng and Chan, 2017). For instance, as they write, the Umbrella Movement of 2014 was characterized by hopeful and joyful emotions and rituals of celebration taking place in the occupied streets. But as the Umbrella Movement made room for a political radicalization and stalemate in 2019, activists started airing negative emotions such as desperation, anger, sadness, fear and resentment. An excessive emotional outpouring of despair about Hong Kong's future had been previously



FIGURE 4.5 Protest-sign of Sad Pepe with the black Hong Kong flag and bloody eye-patch. Photograph by Kevin Cheng

explored in other works of cinema and music in the years preceding the Anti-Extradition protest. For instance, the movie *Ten Years* (2015) (十年 *sap nin*), which is made up of short films by different directors, portrays a bleak future Hong Kong after it has been fully handed over to the auspices of the Chinese Communist Party. An atmosphere of utter desperation is also demonstrated by local Hong Kong indie bands such as My Little Airport, whose intimate personal lyrics convey a sense of lost hope for a "home" and extreme sadness at being lost in Hong Kong and not achieving freedom. The songs' lyrics convey emotional confusion and absurdity about drifting around and no longer being at home in the place one was born.

But these artistic expressions also reflected an actual deterioration of mental health as it became clear that several groups of people had been thoroughly traumatized by the political movement. For instance, a longitudinal study about Hong Kong youth and "depression trajectories" was conducted six months after the Umbrella Movement of 2014, which indicated that political protests affected people greatly, similar to other traumatic events such as terrorist attacks or natural disasters (Ni, 2017, 2020). Four years later this situation had dramatically worsened, as *The Guardian* reported that a study in the medical journal *Lancet* showed that this effect had multiplied by six since 2014. The study suggested that one third of the adult population was suffering from severe mental health problems such as PTSD symptoms due to being immersed in the ongoing struggles and concurrent violence. These mental trajectories were also aggravated by frequent social media usage during these protests. (Agence France Press, 2020).

Pepe as a figure of humor and sadness thus became an ideal mascot to alleviate a collective state of political fear and despair. Interviewee Ger is an activist who participated in the movement and is very well acquainted with its related social media. I asked her when she came across the Pepe icon and what it meant to her, and she answered that it was the Sad Pepe figure that drew her into using the icon. As she states:

My friends started sharing the digital stickers with me and I immediately thought that they were cute. I remember the first batch of stickers they sent me usually were those of Pepe crying. They (the crying ones) were not explicitly related to the movement, yet at that time I felt that I had a lot of like negative sentiments inside myself. I had no idea how to express that or what to watch. So, the stickers actually helped a lot because I didn't know what to do even amongst my friends, the ones I care about and want to help out. So, I just sent them stickers like Pepe.

The first sticker I got was a Hong Kong Pepe wearing a mask. Actually, the mask shows a smiling face. But behind that mask, Pepe is actually crying. I think this is the first one I got. And then I used it quite often at that time. Because like everyone I wanted to stay strong, pull it together. But we were

all crying deep down inside. And we had a lot of sadness and stuff. So that was how I started to using Pepe. Then I also saw that Pepe had a family of animals, it was the nuclear family of LIHKG—animals I think. And I noticed that all of them were crying (Personal Interview, November 2020).

Collective feelings of sadness were also captured in an official melancholic “Hong Kong anthem” that was composed during the movement and frequently performed by crowds in public spaces such as street squares, universities and shopping malls.⁸ This bombastic song of mourning “May Glory Be To Hong Kong” (願榮光歸香港 *yun wing gwong gwai hoeng gong*) states in its opening line that people are crying over Hong Kong’s demise. This song was also “Pepefied” into a series of emoticons by Watchit Comics that became highly popular⁸ (Figure 4.6).

Another example of how people were using Pepe to mourn the demise of Hong Kong appeared on the campus of the Chinese University of Hong Kong.



FIGURE 4.6 The digital sticker series “PepeMayGloryBeToHK.” Digital drawing by Watchit Comics

On October 1, 2019, China’s National Day and the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic, the campus was plastered with a gigantic carpet of posters, along with slogans and graffitied artworks referring to the death of Hong Kong and the need to be reborn. A long walkway of posters also commemorated each day of the protests. These large public installations, which documented daily clashes and police violence, were swiftly condemned and torn down by the university administration, yet they made use of Pepe and the other LI-animals figures to lighten up the otherwise dark turn that Hong Kong had taken.

Pepe the Frog and Hong Kong Nativism

While the Anti-Extradition Movement used Pepe the Frog to provide emotional relief, such as empathy with the victims of sexual and police violence, the figure was also used by other factions of the movement to fight for a nativist Hong Kong identity. The Anti-Extradition Movement was not cohesive and nurtured conservative-nativism as well as progressive concepts of a Hong Kong identity. Pepe was used by pro-democracy fighters to denote gender and ethnic inclusivity. The figure was also used by Hong Kong localists who were fighting for a nativist identity and who used hate-speech against people of mainland China. The Hong Kong “localist” movement, as such, had long been polarized over ideologies of inclusivity and xenophobia. As explained for instance by Chen and Szeto, there are two kinds of localism in Hong Kong, i.e. one whose logic is based on anti-China blaming and one whose modus operandi is to rebuild local communities by means of progressive, participatory, democratic values of inclusion, diversity and empowerment of the weak (Chen and Szeto, 2015: 436).

Lowe and Ortman have documented how the Anti-Extradition Movement was driven by Hong Kongers’ resentment towards China, framing Hong Kongers as economic victims of China and in need of “cultural nativism.” Cultural nativism would imply that Hong Kong culture and mainland Chinese culture are distinct and incompatible and cannot coexist within one state (Lowe and Ortman, 2020: 7). It is similar to the Western alt-right/new-right idea of ethno-nationalism, that ethnically homogenous populations should be kept apart to prevent forces of cultural hybridity and weakening. Lowe and Ortman researched graffiti messages and noticed a discord within the Anti-Extradition Movement between visions of inclusion and nativism. They found that many graffitied slogans envisioned a “new Hong Kong” (新香港 *san hoeng gong*) with inclusive pro-democracy values, while many others expressed rage and resentment against mainland Chinese government and citizens. These included derogatory terms about mainland Chinese people to ward off their “invasion” or entry into Hong Kong. Ong and Lin have documented how Hong Kong localists have historically used social media as a shaming apparatus toward mainland Chinese visitors. For instance, localists have recorded behaviors that failed to achieve standards of moderation and respectability. With references to swarms of “locusts,” there has been a tradition of hate-photos and video-collages that frame the mainland Chinese

“as uncivilized *nouveaux riches* who invade, devour and multiply like their namesake insect” (Ong and Lin, 2017). These models reflected a deep-seated historical Sinophobia and vision of nativism that flourished during the Anti-Extradition Movement.

In the Pepe sticker series entitled Bad Pepe we can see two similar examples of the cultural nativist logic. The stickers contain negative depictions of mainland Chinese women who work as singers and dancers (大媽 *daai maa*) in a public park in Hong Kong’s Tuen Mun who are also known to seduce elderly men. The Anti-Extradition protesters also occupied the Tuen Mun Park (屯門公園 *tyun mun gung jyun*) and physically harassed these women who mostly sing songs in Putonghua (the mainland Chinese language). Other activists wanted to defend a stance against the noise pollution caused by the mainland singers even though they did not defend a nativist Hong Kong identity. Interviewee Petit says that she grew up in Tuen Mun and liked that the Pepe stickers were bringing up this issue. She says that the Tuen Mun Park is very dear to her and she also went to secondary school there. As she explains, “This has been a huge issue since I was small. I mean, the people who usually go there and singing and they made a huge amount of noise during the daytime. Through Pepe I was finally able to express a little anger with this situation” (Personal Interview, October 2020).

Petit adds that she had mixed feelings that there was a lot of debate online in defense of the elderly men who hang out in the park and dance with those mainland singers. She says that it was an unusually level-headed debate. Kayin agrees that this conflict was a typical fight between Hong Kongers and “new Hong Kongers.” The new Hong Kongers are claiming a space and the old Hong Kongers are very critical of them, and the funny Pepe figure encapsulated that conflict (Personal interview, October 2020). These statements show a moderate stance towards nativism while radical localists referenced the alt-right conspiracy theory about the “Great Replacement” of Hong Kong culture through its mainland-friendly migration policies.

More specifically, it was purported that the Chinese Communist Party would try to use “flexible methods” and introduce mainland Chinese women into the Hong Kong population. This argument was forwarded by Wan Chin (陳雲 *can wan*) in 2014, one of the godfathers of Hong Kong localism who developed an ethnic theory of Hong Kong’s difference. He had warned Hong Kongers about mainland women and their “Chinese Vaginas” as one of the “barbaric tools of the Chinese Communist party to take over Hong Kong.” As he wrote: “The Communist Party cannot slaughter Hong Kong men or blatantly rape Hong Kong women. It uses flexible methods to send the mainland vagina to Hong Kong and uses the roles of wives, lovers and prostitutes.” Similarly, on an August 2019 Reddit thread about the Hong Kong Anti-Extradition Movement entitled “Take Pepe Back” nativists argued that Pepe would defend Hong Kong from “mainlandization.” They stated that only Pepe “can Make Hong Kong Great Again.” They made use of the MAGA (Make America Great Again) slogan of Donald Trump and applied it to their vision of Hong Kong localism: “T_D is

proud that Pepe is being used to challenge the establishment in the same way that The_Donald uses it.”¹⁰

But others within the movement formulated a sense of identity that would be inclusive of mainland migrants and other ethnic minorities who respected a Hong Kong based pro-democracy political ideology. These factions within Hong Kong’s diverse protest movement forwarded a civic identification model based on respect for Hong Kong laws and institutions, civic rights and duties. As one English-language poster spotted on a Lennon wall in October 2019 stated, “Hong Konger is not a race. It’s an identity, a common bond, a fighting spirit.” At certain times, there was a fair amount of solidarity between Anti-Extradition protesters and ethnic minorities who were also targeted by the riot police. This happened specifically on October 20, 2019 after a rally in which the police used its massive “blue water cannon” which along with its powerful blast, contained a toxic blue liquid used to disperse and identify protesters. On that date it unaccountably splattered a prominent Islamic mosque on Nathan road in Tsim Sha Tsui. After this incident, sympathetic Hong Kong protesters helped the Muslim community in removing the blue die from the walls of the mosque. For several weeks after this incident, Hong Kong people queued up in large groups in front of the Chung King Mansion (a well-known ethnic minority gathering place and market) to partake in South Asian and Indian meals in the small eateries that were the labelled as protest-friendly.

In our interview with Watchit Comics concerning these different ideological camps and their use of Pepe the Frog, he stated that Hong Kong identity should be inclusive rather than defending nativism. He portrayed a notion of inclusivity by integrating Pepe into the LIHKG-family of animals, an idea which was adopted by many other designers. He stated that it was fortuitous that Pepe was internationally known mascot, so that the Hong Kong protests could become a global phenomenon and be more widely understood.

For instance, he also designed a Pepeway series based on the HongKongWay human chain-rallies that were organized on August 23, 2019, copied from the 1989 Baltic Way protest in Eastern-Europe, in which individuals hold hands on the street to make as long a chain as possible. HongKongWay was a non-violent mainstream protest strategy that attracted a wide range of people. In the Pepeway digital stickers designed by Watchit Comics, there is a touch of humor in how he decided to depict the “typical Hong Konger” (Figure 4.7).

There is an office lady with a Gucci bag, a Mongkok girl-type and Mongkok boy-type, or working-class type youths wearing remarkable fashions, as well as a typical schoolgirl in uniform. The series also includes extraordinary Hong Kong-specific legends such as Ah-Yuen (阿源 *aa jyun*), the sad otaku who was interviewed by RTHK in 2005, who stated he didn’t have a job, stayed at home most of the time and felt like he had nothing. A second otaku-type included in the sticker series was a young man who became famous when he ranted online (around 2018) that his graduation dinner was too expensive, that nobody would take him out and everyone else besides himself was dressed up like an adult.¹¹

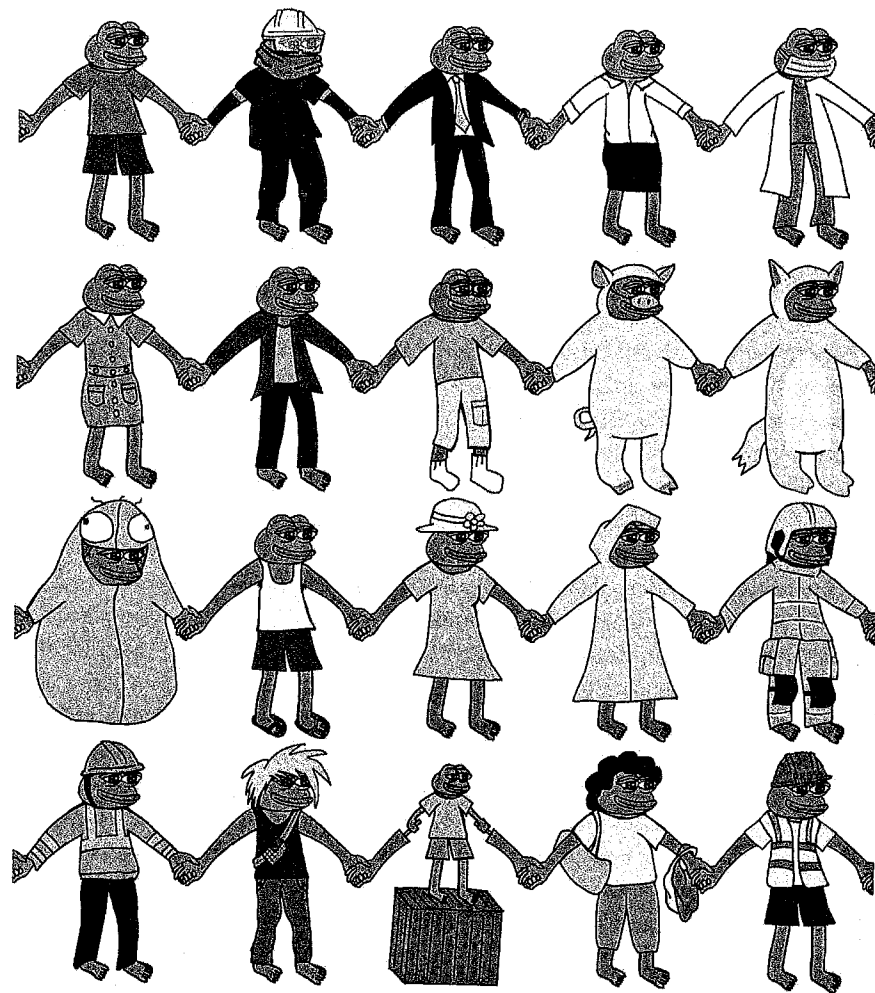


FIGURE 4.7 The digital sticker series “Pepeway.” Digital Drawing by Watchit Comics

These “loser-figures” were included in imagined “Pepefied” acts of civil disobedience against the encroaching authoritarianism from mainland China. But other than these examples there was no clear attempt at making the series inclusive of sexual minorities and ethnic minorities, which was also a shortcoming in his ideas about Hong Kong inclusivity.

Conclusion

In September 2019, the international media in Hong Kong reported that the Hong Kong Anti-Extradition protesters had liberated Pepe the Frog as a mascot who had previously been adopted by alt-right and white supremacist groups. The frog figure was reinvented by anonymous designers to support the Hong

Kong pro-democracy movement and specifically to release feelings of hardship and depression associated with long-term political struggle against a totalitarian regime. This essay has outlined the several ways in which the Pepe figure was adopted with a focus on emotional release and visions of gender and ethnic inclusivity. Pepe was redeemed from its association with white, male dominance as it was used by female activists and portrayed as a feminine, gender-fluid or a-gender icon. It was used to support female protesters specifically and their willingness to testify about sexual violence. Pepe merged with Metoo initiatives and was used to show empathy with the female victims of sexual violence.

The frog also became an icon who provided a touch of humor and tearful relief from a perceived political dead-end. The fact that several factions fell in love with the cute frog also saved the movement icon from becoming a one-sided Sino-phobic tool of rage. The Hong Kong icon appealed to localists who were pursuing a nativist Hong Kong identity. The inclusive pro-democracy camp had tried to liberate Pepe from its “shady past” but the Hong Kong movement also thrived on resentment and Sinophobia. The meme magic was fractured and tentative and delivered emotional charms and political aspirations to Hong Kong, but it gradually disappeared after the government’s suppression of the movement in July 2020.

Notes

- 1 See photo gallery by SGHK featuring large-size posters of the LI-animals and Pepe the Frog pasted on various Lennon-walls, November 15, 2019, <https://imgur.com/gallery/O83uzii> (accessed February 11, 2021).
- 2 See the 2020 documentary by Arthur Jones, *Feels Good Man*, Sundance Institute Documentary, <https://www.sundance.org/projects/feels-good-man> (accessed February 11, 2021).
- 3 For background information about spaghetti stories see <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/spaghetti-stories> (accessed August 11, 2021).
- 4 The three comics posted on thenib.com by Matt Furie can be found at <https://thenib.com/pepe-an-explainer/>; <https://thenib.com/rest-in-peace-pepe/>; <https://thenib.com/pepe-the-frog-to-sleep-perchance-to-meme> (accessed February 11, 2021).
- 5 A compilation of major news articles featuring the liberation of Pepe the Frog in Hong Kong can be found here QuickTake by Bloomberg (2019), “Why is Pepe Used in Hong Kong Protests?”, *Bloomberg*, September 17, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/videos/2019-09-17/why-is-pepe-used-in-hong-kong-protests-video>; Ko, Christine (2019), “How Pepe the Frog became face of Hong Kong protests – despite cartoon being a symbol of hate in US”, *South China Morning Post*, August 17, <https://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/arts-culture/article/3023060/how-pepe-frog-became-face-hong-kong-protests-despite-cartoon>; Bourke, India (2019), “Hong Kong protesters transform alt-right Pepe the Frog into pro-democracy symbol”, *Hong Kong Free Press*, October 3, <https://www.hongkongfp.com/2019/10/03/hong-kong-protesters-transform-alt-right-pepe-frog-pro-democracy-symbol/>; Echevarria, Gina (2019), “Extremists turned a frog meme into a hate symbol, but Hong Kong protesters revived it as an emblem of hope”, *Business Insider*, October 25, <https://www.businessinsider.com/pepe-frog-meme-hate-symbol-hope-hong-kong-protesters-2019-10>; Ellis, Emma Grey (2019), “Pepe the Frog Means Something Different in Hong Kong—Right?”, *Wired*, August 23, <https://www.wired.com/story/pepe-the-frog-meme-hong-kong/>; Victor, Daniel (2019),

"Hong Kong Protesters Love Pepe the Frog. No, They're Not Alt-Right", *New York Times*, August 19, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/19/world/asia/hong-kong-protest-pepe-frog.html>; 阿唯 (2019), "How does pepe become the icon for the resistance?", *Medium*, August 22, [HKET, August 20, \[Hong Kong Apple Daily, August 27, <https://hk.appledaily.com/special/20190826/BUYDPHJ3MMAO5C3DGGLOY5MJNI/>; 譚舒雅 \\(2019\\), "Artist Explains that Hong Kong is Where Pepe is Liberated", *Hong Kong Apple Daily*, August 26, <https://hk.lifestyle.appledaily.com/lifestyle/20190825/GWWBG6IG2XR6EKNDVXTJYX7WPI/>; 林諺 \\(2019\\), "Pepe the Frog: This is a Revolution of Freedom about a Frog", *Madame Figaro*, December 24, <https://www.madamefigaro.hk/10427/art-pepe-frog%EF%BD%9C%E9%80%99%E6%98%AF%E4%B8%80%E5%A0%B4%E5%B1%AC%E6%96%BC%E9%9D%92%E8%9B%99%E7%9A%84%E8%87%AA%E7%94%B1%E9%9D%A9%E5%91%BD/>; NC \\(2019\\), "Popular frog Pepe is Dead?", *Metropop*, October 3, <https://www.metropop.com.hk/%E4%BA%BA%E6%B0%A3%E9%9D%92%E8%9B%99Pepe%E5%B7%B2%E6%AD%BB> \\(all articles accessed February 20, 2021\\)\]\(https://inews.hket.com/article/2431513/%E3%80%90%E5%8F%8D%E4%BF%AE%E4%BE%8B%E3%80%91%E7%BE%8E%E5%9C%8B%E4%BB%87%E6%81%A8%E8%B1%A1%E5%BE%B5Pepe%E9%9D%92%E8%9B%99%20%E5%8F%8D%E6%88%90%E9%A6%99%E6%B8%AF%E8%87%AA%E7%94%B1%E9%AC%A5%E5%A3%AB; 譚舒雅 \(2019\), \)](https://medium.com/@veryotaku/pepe%E5%A6%82%E4%BD%95%E6%88%90%E7%82%BA%E9%A6%99%E6%B8%AF%E6%8A%97%E7%88%ADicon-33a8583690dd; 林建忠 (2019),)

6 The Antielab Research Data Archive can be found at <https://antielabdata.jmsc.hku.hk/> (accessed February 11, 2021)

7 See the Tweet by Yenni Kow, August 28, 2019, <https://twitter.com/yennikwok/status/1166687606152679424> (accessed February 11, 2021).

8 See an English subtitled version of the Hong Kong anthem, posted by dgx music, August 30, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y7yRDOLCy4Y> (accessed February 11, 2021) and an instrumental version, posted by Wiring HK, September 11, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ulera9c18F0g> (accessed February 11, 2021).

9 See Wan Chin's Facebook post, June 25, 2014 (the post was deleted later on) A copy of one of Wan Chin's deleted Facebook message was circulating on social media and tracked by our research team. 陳雲：中港融合的性別主義。中港融合，第一個犧牲的群體，就是香港女性！香港女人今次聽仆街啦。好多香港的繭 X 線女性主義者（左膠、社福界、大學發瘋教授），採取普世價值觀，支持中港融合，呼籲包容大陸弱勢，並責罵香港本地人驅蝗。他們不知道，共產黨採用的是蠻族統治技術——陽具、精蟲、陰道和子宮，正是蠻族的作戰工具。共產黨不能屠殺香港男人，也不能公然強姦香港女人，就用柔性方法，送大陸陰道來香港，用妻子、情人和妓女的角色，令香港女人的陰道和子宮報廢，除非香港女人願意採取蠻族女人的淫蕩態度，同流合污。共產黨送大陸子宮來香港，用母親的角色駕馭下一代香港人的血統、語言和家教，並控制香港男人。共產黨的性別主義，香港學界，識條春咩？

Translation: There is sexism in the merging of China and Hong Kong. The first group that would be sacrificed in the merging are Hong Kong women! Hong Kong women are well damned. There are many f*cking crazy feminists in Hong Kong (leftards, social welfare workers, crazy-sick professors in universities), who employ universal values to support the merging of China and Hong Kong. They call for tolerance for the weak minorities from mainland, and they condemn Hong Kong locals for their actions of "repelling the locusts." They didn't know that CCP utilizes the ruling techniques of the barbarians - penis, semen, vagina and womb. These are the combat tools of the barbarians. The CCP cannot kill Hong Kong men, nor can they openly rape Hong Kong women, so they use a soft/feminine method. They send mainland vaginas to Hong Kong, use the roles of wives, mistresses and prostitutes to get rid of the vagina and wombs of Hong Kong women, unless Hong Kong women are willing to be as vulgar as the barbarian women. CCP sends mainland wombs to Hong Kong, they use the role of

mothers to control the blood, language and education of the next generation of Hong Kongers, and they control the men of Hong Kong. This is CCP's sexism, about which scholars in Hong Kong know nothing.

10 See the Reddit thread "光復 Pepe! Take Back Pepe!", posted by U/chocobean, August 6, 2019, https://www.reddit.com/r/HongKong/comments/cmra8l/%E5%85%89%E5%BE%A9pepe_take_back_pepe/ (accessed February 12, 2021).

11 See "阿源", posted by 香港網絡大典, <https://evchk.wikia.org/wiki/%E9%98%BF%E6%BA%90> (Accessed February 12, 2021); See the "Grad Din 要夾成千蚊咁 X 貴 毒 L : 同去飲一樣，都係合法打劫!", posted by 膠 Hub - 膠閩, <https://www.plastichubdaily.com/25836/%e7%9c%9f%e5%bf%83%e8%86%a0/graddin-%e8%ac%9d%e5%b8%ab%e5%ac%b4-%e6%af%92/> (Accessed February 12, 2021).

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5

Tit-for-Tat Nudity and Female-Figures at the Hong Kong Anti-Extradition Movement

Introduction: Drawing and Smearing the Female Body

The chapter explicates a collection of sexualized online visuals that circulated on different social media platforms during the Hong Kong Anti-Extradition Movement of 2019. These "female-figures" were found within larger collections of protest-visuals and artworks that became the online discourses of a Hong Kong protest generation. The use of provocative visuals during the Anti-Extradition Movement was consistent with the overall radicalization of protest tactics and a move away from a historically "peaceful and non-profane" protest ethos (Palmer, 2020; Wu, 2020). Former pro-democracy legislator Emily Lau has described the ethos of Hong Kong social movements as a four-point code: peaceful, rational, non-violent, non-profane (PRNN, 和理非非, *wo lei fei fei*) (Tong, 2020: 2). During the political movements of 2014 and 2019, a new generation of female activists emerged who used radical tactics of online activism and civil disobedience. Many of them had been moved into action because of the escalation of police violence in 2019, and specifically violence against women. As Marchetti recounts a dialogue she held with a protester during the Anti-Extradition Movement:

She [the protester] said that the extradition bill did not motivate her to take to the streets, but that police brutality, specifically targeting women, radicalized her. Women fear violence against women associated with police states, and they are willing to take to the streets, risk arrest, injury, and harassment in order to secure their rights to suffrage, representative government, an independent judiciary, individual liberty and the rule of law that limits the exercise of state power over their bodies.

(Marchetti, 2020)