



CULTURAL STUDIES

Did Storming Area 51 Teach Us Anything?

No good meme goes unpunished.

Michaela Ripley, 21, from Olympia, Wash., at the fence to Area 51. Credit...Roger Kisby for The New York Times

By Jessica Klein

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When Bob Lazar, the original Area 51 “whistle-blower,” emailed me late last month to tell me his thoughts on the Storm Area 51 meme, he wrote that he was “glad my information has reached so many people.”

The meme he was talking about grew out of a mock Facebook event called Storm Area 51, They Can’t Stop All of Us, which jokingly proposed that people ambush a military base in Nevada to find the aliens the government was supposedly hiding there.

The event spawned countless alien rescue memes, whose levity, Mr. Lazar thought, sent the wrong message.

“The meme absolutely cheapens a serious matter,” he wrote. “I liken it to the Weather Service giving local residents a warning about a dangerous hurricane approaching and the residents responding with a ‘Woo-Hoo Hurricane Party!’ There are secrets in the Nevada desert, and it’s a crime to keep the truth from the public.”

Mr. Lazar, 60, is known for saying that he had reverse-engineered alien spacecraft at a classified military base in the Nevada desert. He first delivered this information during a 1989 interview with George Knapp, a reporter for KLAS Las Vegas, under the pseudonym Dennis.

In late June Mr. Lazar was on Joe Rogan’s podcast, and the interview inspired Matty Roberts, a 21-year-old petroleum engineering student, to create the mock Facebook event. In addition to the memes, it spurred nondigital activity: three separate, E.T.-centric events in Nevada between Sept. 19 and Sept. 22: an EDM concert in downtown Las Vegas thrown by Mr. Roberts; a Burning Man-like event in the approximately 35-person town of Rachel hosted by the town’s only business, the Little A’le’Inn; and a gathering of U.F.O. enthusiasts at the Alien Research Center, a glorified gift shop in Hiko.



Matty Roberts at the location for Alienstock at the Downtown Las Vegas Events Center. Credit...Roger Kisby for The New York Times

Since then, other Storm copycat events have emerged, from an unserious proposal to Storm Loch Ness to find the notorious cryptid, to the possibly real protest Storm BlizzCon 2019, They Can't Censor Us All, targeting the video game company Activision Blizzard's censorship of a gamer who spoke in support of Hong Kong protesters.

There was even a Halloween stoop devoted to the whole shebang in the Fort Greene neighborhood of Brooklyn.

It's 2019, and no one can stop the spread of an internet joke gone too far.

After all, we're living in the era of Pizzagate, a time when outrageous Twitter claims about a child enslavement ring involving Hillary Clinton inspired a man to fire a gun into an unsuspecting pizza parlor in Washington, D.C.

Politicians and journalists repeat and retweet hoax news stories on the regular, like one about Syrian refugees being relocated to Navajo reservations, repeated by Sean Hannity and Donald Trump.

Yet you can hardly blame people for taking digital jokes seriously, a practice codified in 2005, when someone with the user name Nathan Poe posted to a Christian forum: "Without a winking smiley or other blatant display of humor, it is utterly impossible to parody a Creationist in such a way that *someone* won't mistake for the genuine article."

Poe's Law has been made manifest live in events from United States political protests started on Russian computer screens to Fyre Fest, the infamous festival that never happened, "produced" by the grifter Billy McFarland and the rapper Ja Rule.

But if Fyre Fest was a spectacular failure that media outlets couldn't cover until after it didn't happen, Storm Area 51 was a disaster journalists could prepare for.

Image



A car at the E.T. Fresh Jerky store in Hiko, Nev. Credit...Roger Kisby for The New York Times Image



Danny Philippou, a YouTube creator, does a Naruto run toward a gate at Area 51. Credit...Roger Kisby for The New York Times

In Living Twitter

On the evening of Sept. 20, about 14 hours after the scheduled 3 a.m. “storm” time Mr. Roberts had designated in his original Facebook post, law enforcement, reporters and YouTubers milled about the gates to the “top secret” Nevada military base.

The head of a U.F.O. research center walked past a Roomba meme creator, a pornographic film star and another meme come to life: two men wearing giant Pepe the frog heads.

It was as if Twitter had walked off the internet and started to breathe. Costumed attention seekers stood front and center, chanting Storm Area 51's mantra ("Clap them cheeks!") while journalists looked on, ready to capture the moment and add commentary.

When a Facebook hoax about rescuing aliens from a fabled government facility thus comes to life, it imposes the absurdity of online culture onto real people and places, eroding the boundary between truth and fiction.

Laura Prater, 65, got arrested on Sept. 20 for crossing this boundary. The only person to "storm Area 51" in earnest during the whole event, Ms. Prater ducked under the gate and continued on until she became a dot in the forbidden distance.

I watched this in a video captured by her husband, Charlie Prater, as he calmly headed to follow the cars that had driven his wife to the nearest jail. He would have to pay \$1,000 to bail her out (better than her getting shot, which could have easily happened to someone breaching the gates on any other day).

Image



Chris Tate, 37, from Marfa, Texas, in his alien-themed hotel room at the Sunset View Inn in Alamo, Nev. Credit...Roger Kisby for The New York Times

Ms. Prater plans to run for president as an independent in 2020 and saw Storm Area 51 as a perfect platform. "It's about freedom of access and freedom of getting the information that the government has," Mr. Prater said.

Storm Area 51 also dissolved physical boundaries between those who otherwise communicate only online. Chris Tate, 37, a rancher visiting from Marfa, Texas, booked the single alien-themed room at the Sunset View Inn near Rachel for Sept. 20 to "see what kind of people this idea resonated with," he said.

When he arrived at sunrise, he immediately befriended a band of strangers, who had all mistakenly thought everyone there knew everyone else.

"I've never been in an experience where everyone was like, 'Why did you come?'" Mr. Tate said. "Everyone was almost seeking to explain their own narrative through other people."

That's what social platforms let us do. Online, we can (and *must*) filter ourselves through the lens of others if we want to get noticed. Last month in Rachel, people could do this for real.

One millennial cult leader, Unicole Unicron, was forced to, having booked a room with internet access at the Little A'le'Inn for the cult's first retreat, only to find the internet wasn't working in the desert.

Image



Unicole Unicorn, center, at the Little A'Le'Inn with members of Unicult, a cult Unicorn founded in 2012. Credit...Roger Kisby for The New York Times

The internet means a lot to Unicorn, who grew up with AOL chat rooms, instant messenger and LiveJournal. There, Unicorn posted about being bullied by fellow high school cheerleaders, and got kicked off the squad.

"When the internet first happened in our houses, most people were pretending to be other people," Unicorn told me through matte blue lipstick, sitting in Unit 4 of the Little A'le'Inn. "I was just myself."

Today, Unicorn, who uses the pronoun they, identifies that self as a "star seed" inhabiting a human body. Their alien relatives, the Arcturians, are "glowing, blue beings," both "very humble and very powerful."

Unicole arrived at this belief after attempting suicide 10 years ago, they said. To want to stay alive, they decided to believe in things that made them happy, like aliens and unicorns — an ethos they're now sharing with Unicult's geographically disparate members, who pay \$11 to join for a lifetime, gaining access to Unicorn's private livestreams.

For Unicorn, Storm Area 51 was a way for people to confront the fact that "reality is more flexible than we can begin to imagine."

"Think about an augmented reality filter on your face that turns you into an alien, or an augmented reality filter that puts an alien dancing in your room," they said. "That is preparing our minds to actually see these entities."

Image



It's a sign: "Population: Humans YES. Aliens?" Credit... Roger Kisby for The New York Times Image



A festivalgoer at Alienstock in Rachel, Nev. Credit...Roger Kisby for The New York Times

Spooking the Locals

The isolated town of Rachel, which residents once described as “a scatter of mobile homes spread out like buckshot across a Mars-like valley” and “a planet of its own,” is home to mostly retirees, according to locals.

Antelope sometimes come to relax on the driveway of Bob Clabaugh, a retired pilot, but otherwise, he doesn't expect many visitors.

Mr. Clabaugh, 76, only learned his planet was being invaded on Aug. 11, when he came across an unsettling message on the Alienstock website's "About Us" page about Rachel. "We're basically taking over the entire town and morphing into a festival!" it read. "The landowners are totally on board."

The landowners weren't on board; they were scared to learn their town was getting "taken over" thanks to something that had happened on the internet. Numerous media outlets spread the word that 10,000 to 30,000 people would descend on the town of roughly 35 full-time residents to storm a heavily protected military base.

"We could see another mass shooting here," Joerg Arnu, a resident of Rachel, told me a week before the event. He spent \$1,100 on lights, signs and fencing to guard his property.

Another retired pilot, Pat Jordan, spent \$200 on signs and posts (physical ones). If any media reports predicted that the following week Rachel would grudgingly welcome just 3,000 peaceful weirdos, easily half of them press, then they were drowned out by the louder voices crying, "Emergency!"

Image



From left, Pat Jordan, Joerg Arnu and Bob Clabaugh, who are locals in Rachel. Credit...Roger Kisby for The New York Times

The hype, more than the event itself, drained the town of resources. For the roughly 19 agencies summoned to address a possible 30,000-person influx, Rachel's county of Lincoln now must pay \$200,000 to \$250,000 in taxes. "This is a poor county," Mr. Jordan said. "We don't have the money."

As the media storm descended on Rachel on Sept. 20, I drank Alienstock-branded Bud Lights on Mr. and Mrs. Clabaugh's blanket-covered couches while Mr. Jordan told stories of his flying days and joked with his friends. "This right here, this is the real Rachel," Mr. Clabaugh said.

He calls the visitors "the aliens that came to town."

Residents wanted to blame Mr. Roberts (no longer welcome in Rachel) for starting the hype, and Connie West, the proprietor of Little A'le'Inn, for fueling it. But they too suffered from the event.

Image



Alienstock takes over the Downtown Las Vegas Events Center. Credit... Roger Kisby for The New York Times

Mr. Roberts had watched the Downtown Las Vegas Event Center's recap video of his Alienstock concert "probably 37 times" by the time we spoke on Sept. 25. His 15 minutes stretched into days, then weeks, now months.

Venues in Miami and Kansas City, Mo., want him to host Alienstock parties, and he plans to take them up on it.

But no good meme goes unpunished, and he and Ms. West are now trapped in what could be an endless legal battle. She is suing Mr. Roberts and his associates, saying they cost her and the Little A'le'Inn upward of \$15,000 by failing to provide what she claims were promised funds for the festival in Rachel (before they backed out and hosted Alienstock in Vegas instead).

Mr. Roberts's business associate, Frank DiMaggio, texted me on Sept. 29, saying that they are considering "pressing criminal charges" against Tim Harrison (Ms. West's associate) and Ms. West "for extortion and intimidation."

Ms. West, who had been hard to track down among the swirling dirt devils and tinfoil-heads circling her small inn during the festival, didn't ask for any of this, either. She amateurishly welcomed the business, charging \$1,000 for "media parking."

But according to locals, Ms. West has been doing that for years in some way or another. She had turned her mother's late husband's neighborhood bar, the Little A'le'Inn, into a tourist attraction, raising beer prices.

Image



Connie West, center, giving a speech onstage at Alienstock. Credit...Roger Kisby for The New York Times

Of the festival, Ms. West said, “I didn’t have a choice,” riding around town in her cream-colored VW Beetle during the event, the floor coated in plastic cups and bottles she had picked up off the ground. “It came to me.”

“It” was in other places too. A week before Mr. Roberts posted his fateful Facebook event, the small town of Spruce Pine, N.C., hosted its first annual Alien Conference & Expo. Attendees wore bright green bodysuits and bug-eyed glasses.

Roswell, N.M., home to a supposed U.F.O. crash in 1947, hosts a yearly festival complete with an “alien pet contest,” and “this rubber alien has 1.5 million Insta followers and parties with Rihanna” (that’s the Vice headline).

Onward to BlizzCon

Lately, the idea of aliens has gone beyond kitsch obsession to hot topic. Cosmologists and astronomers win Nobel Prizes; the Hubble Space Telescope continues to reveal habitable, “Earth-size” planets; and The New York Times reports on shady government programs investigating “aerospace threats.”

Believing in aliens — or at least the possibility of other life — is no longer taboo in many circles.

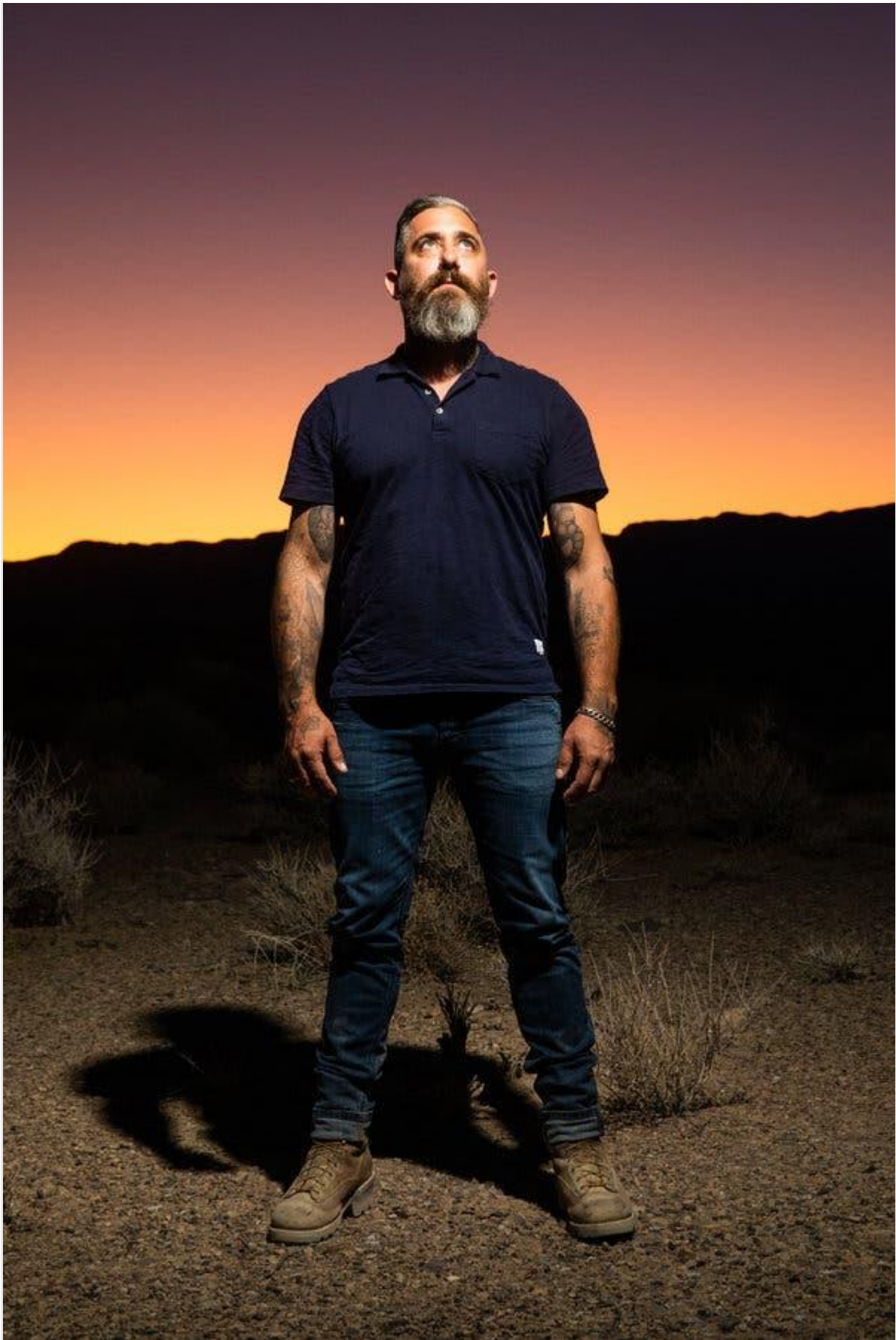
Maybe that’s because people *want* to believe. Ravaged by us, our planet is dying. While billionaires plan expensive journeys to Mars, the rest of us can only hope that the government is reverse engineering alien technology in the Nevada desert. It may be our only means of escape.

Jeremy Corbell, a documentarian who has chronicled Mr. Lazar and Area 51, wants Storm Area 51 to become a “global yearly event,” where people from all over the world come together to bring awareness to our “relationship to secrecy.”

Even Mr. Clabaugh told me another event in Rachel next year is fine. “But I would hate to see it start morphing into Burning Man,” he said.

The idea of storming Area 51 didn’t originate with Mr. Roberts’s Facebook post. “I’ll bet there’s at least a half a dozen times over the years that groups have come to me with that proposal, ‘Let’s all get in RVs and storm across the line. They can’t stop us all,’” Mr. Knapp said. However, the Facebook event was the first to give it real life.

Image



Jeremy Corbell outside the Alien Research Center in Hiko, Nev.Credit...Roger Kisby for The New York Times
Image



Festivalgoers at the Alien Research Center in Hiko. Credit... Roger Kisby for The New York Times
Others have gotten arrested before, and even shot, when they got too close to the base. But in late September by those foreboding gates, instead of purporting to rescue aliens, people dressed up like them.

The easy moral here would be to tie people's alienated, online selves to the physical versions they expressed jubilantly, in costume, with other seekers dancing at the edge of the unknown. As Twitter users watching the alien memes unfold, we were alienated. As attendees wearing alien-eye sunglasses, we were not alone.

But the media also wants to capture a disaster.

Reports of what happened during Storm Area 51 made it sound like a bust. Barely anyone showed, and we were fools for sending camera crews about 50 miles from the nearest gas station to photograph some guy in a mask kicking up dust.

With reporters rapt but ultimately dismissive of the event, we all moved onto the next viral oddity — mostly. Others are still proposing “storms,” like that of the video-game company convention BlizzCon on Nov. 1 in Anaheim, Calif., to make a serious political statement in a perplexingly lighthearted way.

On the Storm BlizzCon Facebook page, the memes are proliferating. Many feature Winnie the Pooh, banned by Chinese censors after the character has been used to mock the country's president Xi Jinping.

The memes are funny, like those about rescuing aliens from Area 51, but a lot less fanciful, as they're talking about an actual oppressive regime, not the possibility of E.T.s in the desert. So far, the event's poster is calling for a “peaceful protest” of BlizzCon, encouraging attendees to “dress up as Pooh Bear and show the people of China this character again.”

It's difficult to tell if the post is fully a joke or an off-color way to take a stand. If a peaceful protest stems from it, will it “cheapen a serious matter,” as Mr. Lazar felt Storm Area 51 did for government secrecy?

LDG Station, the Facebook account that posted this event, is also a [YouTube channel](#) that has been active for about two years. Its information page reads, “We're going to entertain you ... by any means necessary.”

Its [most viewed video](#) (watched almost 39,000 times) was posted on Sept. 20, featuring live footage from Storm Area 51 in Rachel, which [people saw](#) from all over the world.

Storming Area 51 brought the channel its highest traffic ever, so why not create similar content to keep people watching?