

SONJA ŽAKULA

Institute of Ethnography SASA

zakula.sonja@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-003-0174-6771>

The People's Pygmy Princess and Female Rage: Memes featuring Moo-Deng

Born in summer 2024 at Khao Kheow open zoo in Thailand, Moo-Deng (eng. "Bouncy pork") is a female baby pygmy hippopotamus whose photographs and videos have become a viral sensation online. She was chosen by zoo staff to promote awareness of her endangered species, but images of Moo-Deng quickly went viral, and owing to her expressive facial features, took on a life of their own, becoming memes and (more importantly) being turned into fan art by people around the globe. The fact that Moo-Deng is female (or, as the sometimes accompanying text puts it: "just a girl", fig.1)¹ led to a somewhat unexpected association between the pygmy hippo and female rage. This paper will analyze memes and other visual content shared on Instagram, that features Moo-Deng, as ways of articulating female rage which becomes socially acceptable through visual association with a cute animal, as well as delve into the ways in which an animal's facial expressions become interpretable and interpreted by a global human audience in the wider context of human-animal relations.

* This paper is the result of work in the Institute of Ethnography SASA which is financed by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia, and based on the Agreement on the Realization and Financing of Scientific Research Work of a Scientific Research Organization in 2025 number: 451-03-136/2025-03/200173 from February 4th 2025.

¹ On an interesting note – the author has been following the rise of Moo-Deng since the beginning, and noticed that this image of a hippo biting a keeper's leg wearing a boot was around long before other images. As it turns out, this image is actually of Moo-Deng's older sister, Moo-Wan, but **has** been inextricably tied to the Moo-Deng phenomenon online. In addition, there are plenty of images of Moo-Deng herself biting people.

Keywords: Moo-Deng, pygmy hippopotamus, memes, female rage, human-animal relations.

Народна патуљаста принцеза и женски бес: Мимови са Му-Денг

Рођена у лето 2024. у Као Кеу отвореном зоолошком врту на Тајланду, Му-Денг (срп. „Ћуфтица која одскаче“) је женска беба патуљастог нилског коња чије су фотографије и видеи постали вирална сензација на интернету. Одабрана је од стране особља зоолошког врта како би подизала свест о својој угроженој врсти, али фотографије и видеи Му-Денг су убрзо постали вирални и, захваљујући њеном експресивном лицу, започели сопствени независни живот тако што су их људи широм света претварали у мимове и (важније) од њих стварали фановску уметност. Чињеница да је Му-Денг женка (или како то текст који некад прати њене слике каже: „само девојчица“) довела је до, донекле, неочекиване асоцијације између ове женке патуљастог нилског коња и женског беса. У овом тексту ћу анализирати мимове и друге визуелне садржаје који се деле на Инстаграму и укључују Му-Денг као начине артикулације женског беса који постаје друштвено прихватљив кроз повезивање са сликама слатке животиње. Такође ћу се дотаћи и начина на које се изрази лица једне животиње од стране глобалне људске публике тумаче у ширем контексту људско-животињских односа.

Кључне речи: Му-Денг, патуљаста нилска коња, мимови, женски бес, људско-животињски односи.

INTRODUCTION

The pygmy hippopotamus (*Choreopsis liberiensis*) is one of two extant species in the family Hippopotamidae, the other being the “common” or Nile hippo (*Hippopotamus amphibius*).² Pygmy hippos are smaller in

² This paper is the result of the presentation titled “A baby hippo and female rage: memes featuring Moo-Deng”, given at the third Serbian-Greek conference *Folklore in Contemporary On- and Off- Line world*, held online on November 29th, 2024. The conference was organized by the Institute of Ethnography SASA in cooperation with the Laboratory of Social Sciences, Department of Pedagogy and Primary Education, School of Education NKUA, Athens (Republic of Greece). I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the participants for their engaging presentations and the lively discussions that followed. I would especially like to thank Dr. Kleio Gougouli,

size, relative to the Nile hippo, typically weighing around 272 kg, and standing around 84cm at the shoulder (Stroman & Slaughter 1972, 126). "The species is listed as 'endangered' on the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) Red List and distribution is limited to fragmented populations in Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone in West Africa (Eltringham, 1999; Lewison & Oliver, 2008). Primary threats to survival include habitat loss, lack of adequate legal protection, and poaching for bush meat (Lewison & Oliver, 2008; Robinson, 2013). An often unstable political climate in the region also leads to insecurity of protected areas, unregulated logging and hunting, and inhibits scientific research efforts" (Flacke et al. 2015, 235). Pygmy hippos are nocturnal, non-social herbivores, and prefer living in solitary fashion in the thickets of their native rain forests, but will swim if the situation warrants it (Stroman & Slaughter, 1972, 126). As they are reclusive in the wild, most of what is known about them comes from observations of captive populations – they have been kept in captivity as far back as the late 1800s (Stroman & Slaughter 1972, 127). Nowadays, ex-situ conservation efforts undertaken in zoos face a number of challenges when dealing with the pygmy hippopotamus: polycystic kidney disease (PKD), a female-biased sex ratio, obesity, a high neonatal mortality rate, and failure of many breeding pairs to reproduce (Flacke et al. 2015, 235).



(Fig.1, @life_off_hippo, November 8th, 2024)

of the University of Patras (Republic of Greece) for her comments about my inclusion of the ideas of Conrad Lorenz in the original presentation, as our discussion has led me to rethink the direction this paper has gone in and, I believe, made it much better overall.

Pygmy hippopotamuses are also sometimes considered to belong to the category of “charismatic megafauna” (Flacke et al. 2015, 234), a term used in ecology and conservation to designate large animal species that have widespread popular appeal or symbolic value, and are used by environmental activists to raise awareness and gain public support for environmentalist goals. Enter the peoples’ pygmy princess,³ Moo-Deng (fig. 2).



(Fig. 2, @bustle, October 2nd, 2024)

Born on July 10th 2024 at Khao Kheow Open Zoo in Bang Phra, Thailand, Moo-Deng is a female pygmy hippopotamus calf. Her name was chosen by popular vote and translates, roughly, as “bouncy pork”, a popular Thai food dish. Small, feisty, adorable and active, with an unusually expressive face, Moo-Deng was chosen by her keepers to become an advocate for pygmy hippo conservation (with, thus far, limited effects; Hance 2025), and has become what Harriet Ritvo (1987) refers to as a “zoo pet” – an individual animal, with a personal name who is especially favored by audiences and is often followed by and written about in the press. In the case of Moo-Deng, her popularity has skyrocketed online, turning the baby hippo into a global phenomenon.

However, while photos and videos of Moo-Deng shared on social media have, at least to some extent, raised awareness about the existence of pygmy hippos and their plight in the wild, and helped double attendance at Khao Kheow zoo (Hance 2025), with people flocking to see Moo-Deng and her family (there is even a YouTube livestream of Moo-Deng on the zoo’s YouTube channel), the images and videos have been received, adapted and contextualized in some unexpected ways by their global internet audience.

³ The phrase was coined by Guardian journalist Emma Beddington, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2024/dec/26/the-peoples-pygmy-princess-how-moo-deng-captured-the-worlds-hearts> (7.4.2025)

In Limor Shifman's (2014) terms, Moo-Deng content started out as viral, and later became memetic. More specifically, as the website Know Your Meme (<https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/moo-deng-the-baby-hippo>) states: the first image of Moo-Deng that went viral (fig. 3), did so in late August 2024, with the first fan art appearing on September 5th. The author of this paper, an anthropologist interested in digital anthropology and human-animal relations, and with a special interest and professional expertise in zoos, has been following and documenting the Moo-Deng phenomenon since its inception.⁴ It is through participant observation that I have witnessed a specific shift in meaning and meaning-making within Moo-Deng content when it became widely known that the adorable baby hippo is female, or, as it were, *just a girl*.⁵ Namely, what occurred was a shift and an uptick in specific meanings and associations ascribed to Moo-Deng content, often associating it with *female rage*.



(Fig. 3, @khaokheow.zoo, August 27th, 2024)

⁴ I would like to take this opportunity to thank my friend Edi Frcovski of the Biology Students' Research Society of Skopje, North Macedonia and the Institute for Zoology of the Faculty of biology of the University of Belgrade, for helping me collect Moo-Deng visual content on Instagram.

⁵ As the website www.knowyourmeme.com puts it: "*I'm Just a Girl* is a catchphrase traditionally used, often ironically, by women to excuse poor behavior and avoid accountability on the basis that they're "just a girl" — meant to conjure stereotypical ideas of women being innocent, ditzy and naive. The phrase has been compared to the more male-centric expression "boys will be boys," similarly used to excuse men for their poor behavior. The phrase was popularized online throughout the 2020s as a meme, becoming notably prevalent on TikTok between 2023 and 2024, including as a meme in which the song "Just a Girl" by No Doubt plays over videos in which women do things relatable primarily to other women... The song's lyrics repeat the phrase "I'm just a girl" and qualify it with lyrics like "little old me" and "pretty and petite," ironically using the phrase to portray the subject of the song as a defenseless, helpless girl". (<https://www.knowyourmeme.com/memes/im-just-a-girl> 8.4.2025).

In this paper I will attempt to uncover how this association came about, by analyzing Moo-Deng visual content (including memes, image macros, fan art and even tattoos) shared on the Instagram social media platform under the hashtag #MooDeng from August 2024 to, roughly, March 2025. The aim of the paper is twofold: to attempt to uncover how the association between Moo-Deng's myriad facial expressions and actions and female rage was established, leaning on ideas about the expression of emotions in humans and other animals pioneered by Charles Darwin (Darwin 1872; Darwin 2009), and to consider the ways in which Moo-Deng content serves as a means of articulating (making palatable or even normalizing) female rage within global popular culture.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

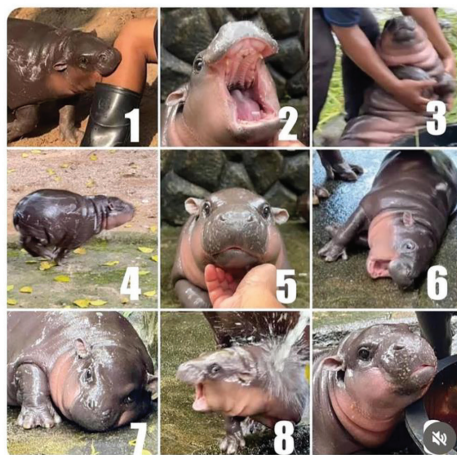
The theoretical framework for this paper has been surprisingly tough to nail down which, I believe, goes to show how complex global online phenomena are, and underscores the importance of studying them as they appear and develop.⁶ Overall, the theoretical framework for this paper will borrow from two main areas of scholarship: the study of human-animal relations in the social sciences and humanities (Žakula & Živaljević 2018, Žakula & Živaljević 2019), and digital anthropology, more specifically the anthropological study of memes and digital folklore (Banić Grubišić 2023). The main hypothesis of the paper is that associating (mostly) female rage⁷ with images of an adorable animal is a way of making this kind of rage socially acceptable and expressible, which has not often been possible in popular culture, thus I will also borrow from feminist scholarship on the topic, where appropriate.

⁶ It also underscores the importance of scientific conferences such as the *Folklore in Contemporary On- and Off-Line world*.

⁷ It is important to note that Moo-Deng content on Instagram is mainly shared by women and LGBTQ+ users, with one straight male user even remarking how he would have completely missed out on the Moo-Deng craze had it not been for his wife sharing this content. This goes to show that it is not just female rage, but a generalized sort of rage of the oppressed that is being articulated and expressed through Moo-Deng content.

THE EXPRESSION OF THE EMOTIONS IN MAN AND ANIMALS⁸

Which Moo Deng are you today?



(fig. 4, @girlstthinkimfunny, September 23rd, 2024)

The above set of photographs of Moo-Deng (fig.4) invites the viewers to associate themselves with one of the perceived emotional states of the depicted animal. The “joke” is that only some of the emotions (those depicted under numbers 5 and 9 that seem to depict calmness, and possibly 7, that hints at silent anger) are socially acceptable or “adequate” in social settings (especially for women), while biting (1), “screaming”⁹ (2), struggling to get away (3), running away (4), despair (6) and outrage (8) are to be refrained from in polite, everyday settings. The larger meaning hints at the emotional repression demanded from humans in everyday settings, and posits Moo-Deng, an animal held captive in a zoo,¹⁰ as “more

⁸ The title of this subchapter was borrowed from Charles Darwin, it is the title of his seminal book (first published in 1872, and first translated as *Izražavanje emocija kod čoveka i životinja* in Serbian in 2009), that laid the groundwork for the study of emotions in both humans and animals.

⁹ To my surprise – as I had mainly seen photographs and videos of Moo-Deng with overlaid music – while pygmy hippos do occasionally vocalize through grunting and squealing, they do not, in fact, scream.

¹⁰ Philosopher Joan Dunayer (2004) argues for the use of non-speciesist language, wherein zoos should be referred to as “animal prisons” or “zoo-prisons”. However, for the purposes of this paper I believe that remarks regarding Moo-Deng’s imprisonment in the zoo are sufficient, as the zoo itself is not the focus of the paper.

free” to express her emotional states than the “free” humans who observe her, whether through the bars of the zoo or the screens of phones or computers. The metanarrative that questions the freedom of humans through stories about zoo animals seems to be a common occurrence (see: Žakula 2013), but what I am more concerned with here is the *ascription* of emotional states *to* – or, why not, the *reading of* emotional states *of* a non-human animal, from the animal’s facial expressions. While Moo-Deng visual content floating around on the internet is by no means a good way of experimentally testing scientific hypotheses, the sheer eagerness with which humans embrace and interpret her facial expressions¹¹ and movement, hints at something deeper, and I would argue, quite extraordinary, in its amplified, global variety.

Namely, anthropologist Rebecca Bishop coined the term “intercorporeal iconographies” (Bishop 2004) in an attempt to explain the behavior of humans visiting zoos, and answer the question of why we go to zoos in the first place. In her terms, intercorporeal iconographies refer to the ways in which humans behave, the bodily positions they assume and the actions they undertake when standing in front of an animal’s enclosure in a zoo. This might, for instance, entail roaring and imitating the act of scratching in front of a lion or tiger enclosure, or hitting one’s chest with one’s fists in front of a gorilla enclosure – these are attempts at finding a *common language* with beings that are considered utterly and completely Other (Žakula 2017, 165–199), and of initiating some form of contact event, which might just entail getting the animal’s attention. While the myriad historical, sociological, philosophical, anthropological and other reasons for this yearning for contact far surpass the scope of this paper, my own research (Žakula 2017) has shown that, to put it bluntly, humans do not go to zoos in order to look at animals, they go to zoos in order to *be seen by animals*, especially those they would not normally encounter in their daily lives. The thrill of being perceived by the Other is what drives zoo ticket sales, and has done so since the first collection of exotic animals was made available to the wider public.¹² What, in turn, drives this urge to be perceived by the Animal Other, is the sneaking suspicion that, despite what the globalized Western narrative about other animals might have us believe (see: Žakula 2013a), there might be *someone* there behind the animal gaze, *someone* who, while radically different, might

¹¹ And post “Same” comments on photographs of her.

¹² This would be the Schönbrunn menagerie in Vienna, the first truly public zoo was the Jardin Des Plantes in Paris, that opened its doors to the public in 1794.

still be somewhat *like me* (Žakula 2017). The images and videos of Moo-Deng, her facial expressions and reactions to various stimuli do just that – they show us, close up, a radically different, even exotic Other *someone* who we can identify and empathize with. This is a strange, powerful and uplifting feeling.¹³ The fact that Moo-Deng is ostensibly adorable only helps this along.

The global phenomenon of Moo-Deng, however, doesn't (only) entail humans *ascribing* emotional states to the pygmy hippo calf, because animals are not (and I cannot stress this enough) *things*, they are sentient beings, capable of emotional expression (Darvin 2009, Todorović 2014, 2021), and we as humans (a species of ape) are quite capable of understanding their emotional states, with a high rate of accuracy, based on their facial expressions and bodily stances. We might not always be right in the case of Moo-Deng, especially since some of the images are frozen motion and do not depict her emotional state accurately, and in these cases it is clear that viewers are reading her emotional states into the images, but that is not always the case. Charles Darwin himself was one of the first scientists to study the expression of emotions in both humans and other animals (Darvin [1872] 2009). His basic hypothesis was that the similarity of emotional expression in humans and other animals is the result of evolutionary continuity: emotions and emotional expression evolved in a common ancestor as an adaptive trait in the past and helped organisms survive.¹⁴ At least the basic emotions and their expression (joy/happiness, sadness, anger, fear, surprise and disgust) (Darvin 2009, 346, cf. Todorović 2021, 22), seem to be innate and similar across various animal species. It is, therefore, quite possible for humans to recognize the emotions of other animals (especially mammals), without having to “anthropomorphize” them.

Furthermore, philosopher Kay Milton (Milton 2005) critiques the idea of “anthropomorphism” or anthropomorphizing as a “necessary” or even “inevitable” step humans take in understanding other animals: “By referring to people's understanding of non-human animals as ‘anthropomorphic’, we are implying that it is not based on the direct experience of mutual understanding, as we assume much interpersonal interaction among

¹³ Philosopher Jacques Derrida famously wrote about the shame he felt when being observed naked by his cat (Derrida 2002).

¹⁴ Contemporary neurobiological research recognizes more complexity in these processes (which is beyond the scope of this paper), but still backs Darwin's findings (Todorović 2021).

humans is, but that it requires a detour into metaphoric thought” (Milton 2005, 266). The gist of the matter is that even culturally constructed meanings cannot be fashioned out of meaninglessness (Milton 2005, 267), and while most of the viewers of Moo-Deng content will never interact with her personally, their interpretations are based on direct observation (granted, of images, not the hippo herself). Anthropologist Eduardo Kohn (2013) goes even further, positing that *semiosis*, or meaning-making and interpreting, is a universal trait of life on Earth, and that interspecies understanding is a *sine qua non* of species survival. While some of Kohn’s arguments (see: Žakula 2018) are still too anthropocentric, the idea that not all communication need be symbolic in order to *be communication* is an old one in anthropology (see for instance: Lič 2002, 16-28), yet its implementation within the study of human-animal relations is quite new (Kohn 2007, 2013), and might lead to some new and interesting avenues of thought in the field.



(Fig. 5, @softcore_trauma, September 26th, 2024)

In essence, a global human audience’s fascination with Moo-Deng cannot be boiled down to her simply being “cute”;¹⁵ there are larger issues

¹⁵ An article published by Olivia Campbell on the National Geographic website on October 18th 2024 argues, following Conrad Lorenz, that we are „hardwired“ to like cute things and lumps Moo-Deng together with other baby animals that rode the wave of her popularity in order to make the argument. However, none of the others (a penguin, a sloth and a seal) reached Moo-Deng’s level of online stardom. It’s not just about cuteness, it is about identification.

at play. Issues that involve our, human, understanding of “the expression of the emotions” in other animals, and our capability to empathize and identify with them. One such emotion – one of the primary ones the expression of which is similar in humans and other animals (Darvin 2009, Todorović 2014, 2021) – is *anger*, the one Moo-Deng is especially famous for (fig. 5).

CONTENT CLASSIFICATION (WOES)

In her book *Internet mimovi između folklor i popularne kulture* (eng. *Internet memes between folklore and popular culture*), anthropologist Ana Banić Grubišić (Banić Grubišić 2023) gives a detailed overview of theories and scholarship on and about internet memes, their classification and their spread.¹⁶ While the title of this paper (and, indeed, the presentation it is based on) contains the word “meme”, and some of the analyzed content can be classified as memes proper, I have been referring to the object of study as “Moo-Deng visual content” and will continue to do so, as I believe that the, well, *visual content* surpasses just memes in the strict sense of anonymous reinterpretations – especially when it comes to fan art – but has a lot in common with how authors such as Limor Shifman (2014) define memes and their spread. Shifman’s work is especially pertinent here as she makes a distinction between “virals” and “memes”, and describes the process through which one can become the other. “Moreover, there is a strong temporal element lurking here: many memetic videos started off as viral ones. Thus, if we think of the viral and the memetic as two ends of a dynamic spectrum, a more accurate differentiation would be threefold: (1) a *viral*: a single cultural unit (formulated in words, image or video) that is spread by multiple agents and is viewed by many millions. A “viral” may or may not have derivatives (see, for example, the Kony 2012 campaign, <http://invisiblechildren.com/kony/>, or the Evian Roller Babies, <http://youtu.be/XQcVllWpwGs>); (2) a *founder-based meme*: an Internet meme that is sparked by a specific (often viral) text, video, or photo (such as “The Situation Room” or the “Pepper-Spraying Cop”). The “founding” unit is followed by many versions, each viewed by fewer people; and (3) an *egalitarian meme*: comprising many versions that seem to have evolved simultaneously without a clear founding text” (Shifman 2014, 58, cursive in the original).

¹⁶ I would like to thank the author for sending me her book, and pointing me in the direction of other relevant work on the topic of internet memes and digital folklore.



Rel/Zinnia
@DewEnjoyer

Follow



Obsessed with this one baby hippo that looks
fucking MORTIFIED



(Fig. 6, @x__antisocial_butterfly__x, September 8th, 2024)

In this sense, Moo-Deng visual content can be classified as a *founder based meme*, as the floodgates were opened by a single photograph (fig. 3) published on Kheo Kheow zoo's Instagram, that went viral in late August 2024. Further photographs and videos followed, lending themselves to memetization. One of the first mentions of Moo-Deng the author came across was cross-posted to Instagram from Twitter (fig. 6), and consists of a collage of 4 images wherein, as the comment states, Moo-Deng looks "fucking mortified". This specific collage, for instance, was made before the world knew that Moo-Deng is female, and the images have no deeper associated meaning other than depicting a funny animal with a humanlike facial expression. However, as news broke that Moo-Deng is, indeed, just a girl, and more images from the zoo were posted online, Moo-Deng content began taking the shape of memes as defined by Shifman: "(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which (b) were created with awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users" (Shifman 2014, 41).

The trouble is, however, that the visual matrices and the overall "look" of Moo-Deng memes and other content are by no means uniform, and while certain images appear in various contexts and accompanied by varying commentary, there are (at least not on Instagram) no templates for Moo-Deng memes. Speaking of the futility of attempts to categorize memes according to certain stable criteria, Marta Dynel argues: "This only

proves the complexity and heterogeneity of the constantly developing and mutating memescape, which any study can only represent in a state-of-the-art picture that will be outdated in a matter of months, if not weeks” (Dynel 2016, 663). Keeping this in mind, I will not attempt to classify Moo-Deng content, but will focus on some of its attributes that seem to be stable across all content, be it static images or videos.



(Fig. 7, @midnightsnacks, September 17th, 2024)

Most Moo-Deng content arises, in Shifman's terms, as a *founder based meme* in the sense that all the original images and videos that are later interpreted and reinterpreted by users, come from the Khao Kheow zoo's social media. And while there is no typical template to be found, Moo-Deng content is often intertextual – both within itself (often focusing on Moo's anger and/or juxtaposing it with her calmness and/or cuteness), and without, interacting with other items of popular culture. For example, fig. 7 displays a variation of the quote widely attributed to Marilyn Monroe.¹⁷ The visual-verbal joke (Dynel 2016, 670) here is multilayered, juxtaposing a quote attributed to a Hollywood star famous for her beauty and femininity with the feisty little hippo biting her keeper's leg in one image and being serene in the other. The second layer communicates with

¹⁷ In its entirety the quote states: "I'm selfish, impatient a a little insecure. I make mistakes, I am out of control and at times hard to handle. But if you can't handle me at my worst, then you sure as hell don't deserve me at my best." (https://www.reddit.com/r/todayilearned/comments/1f10fs/til_marilyn_monroes_famous_quote_cant_handle_me/?rdt=56200) (7.4.2025).

other Moo-Deng content, displaying what is interpreted as rage (although the actual behavior is playful – a fact most users are aware of) in one image and serenity in the other, with the whole thing communicating that rage, even female rage, is a normal part of life and should be accepted and treated accordingly.

I believe that the overarching theme of anger or rage, especially female rage, which unites much of Moo-Deng content, is vital to understanding its appeal.

ON FEMALE RAGE



(Fig. 8, art by @amyhartelust, September 22nd, 2024)

Scholarship on female rage in popular culture is still surprisingly rare,¹⁸ much of it focusing on film studies. The reason for this seems to be the fact that female rage has only relatively recently begun to be depicted in Hollywood movies, with earlier scholarship such as Laura Mulvey's influential essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (Mulvey [1975] 1989) focusing on the depiction of women as sex objects and the lack of more nuanced (and angry) female characters. While things seem to be changing, expressions of female rage, whether

¹⁸ A cursory search of the term "female rage" on Google Scholar yealds a number of results, however the most pertinent on page 1 of the results are all Ba and MA theses awarded within the last 3 years (Kee 2022, Nordahl Petersen 2023, Bryson 2025). As it seems, the study of female rage is a relatively new research topic in academia.

in pop-culture or society at large, are still seen as a sort of taboo, as unfeminine and unladylike. Writing about the aptness of anger as a reaction to injustice, philosopher Amia Srinivasan (Srinivasan 2018) notes that women (and other oppressed groups) have historically been taught that anger is counterproductive within the political arena as displays of anger can, essentially, scare off potential allies. It does not help matters that, in many societies, women are taught not to get angry, to “grin and bear it”, and that anger is an unfeminine emotion which is to be repressed at all costs. In popular culture women’s rage is seen as too much. While the thorny issue of the politics of female rage goes beyond the scope of this paper, suffice it to say that female rage is still rarely depicted in pop-culture outside genre films. In that sense, the association of Moo-Deng with female rage provides an outlet for its depiction that allows everyone (and, as it seems, especially women and queer people) to participate. The association of female rage with a cute animal makes it palatable, and while it may be argued that this dulls its edge, it keeps the conversation going.

One peculiar thing about the Moo-Deng phenomenon is that much of the content featuring the pygmy hippo on Instagram is made up of fan art. Actual digital or hand-painted drawings and pictures and animated videos produced by human artists (as opposed to generative AI), that often include text, and take the general form of image macros. I believe that this peculiarity comes from the fact that Moo-Deng is, in fact, viewed as an individual with a personality (one, at least to some extent, curated by her keepers who are the source of her images and videos), as opposed to a stock photo of a hippopotamus. As was noted before, one of the famous images attributed to Moo-Deng (fig.1) actually depicts her older sister Moo-Wan, however that image was swept up in the Moo-Deng craze. While the image itself is older, it had not generated as much attention or fame for Moo-Wan when it first appeared. It was the context and the *story*, along with Moo-Deng’s expressive face (and her keeper’s intent on making her famous)¹⁹ that made the difference.

¹⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/sep/13/moo-deng-hippo-tiktok-khao-kheow-open-zoo-thailand-viral> (7.4.2025)

BECOMING UNGOVERNABLE WITH MOO-DENG



(Fig. 9 art by @v.steiner, September 22nd, 2024), (Fig.10, art by @airidescence, September 23rd, 2024), (Fig. 11, art by @goth_salt, September 22nd, 2024)

There seems to be a curious discrepancy in reporting on the Moo-Deng phenomenon. British newspaper *The Guardian* alone, for example, has dedicated four articles²⁰ to the “people’s pygmy princess” between September and December of 2024, National Geographic²¹ has written about her twice (once in September and once in October 2024), with a host of other online and physical news outlets joining in. Some of the articles deal with pygmy hippos as a species and the role of the Moo-Deng phenomenon in conservation efforts,²² others try to uncover why we find Moo-Deng “cute”, and most treat the phenomenon as a feel good story, both in reporting and as an attempt to get to the gist of her popularity: in a world that is plagued by political turmoil, climate change and genocide, Moo-Deng content is treated as a welcome respite from bad news, a way for people to escape, laugh and relax. While this is ostensibly true, it

²⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/sep/13/moo-deng-hippo-tiktok-khao-kheow-open-zoo-thailand-viral>; <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/commentis-free/2024/sep/20/moo-deng-pygmy-hippo-khao-kheow-open-zoo>; <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/oct/08/things-worth-celebrating-moo-deng-pygmy-hippo>; <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2024/dec/26/the-peoples-pygmy-princess-how-moo-deng-captured-the-worlds-hearts>

²¹ <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/article/moo-deng-pygmy-hippo-differences>; <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/article/baby-animal-cute-evolution-brain>

²² For instance: <https://news.mongabay.com/2025/02/has-the-moo-deng-craze-helped-wild-pygmy-hippos-at-all-analysis/>

completely glosses over content that contextualizes Moo-Deng as an icon of female (and other oppressed people's political) rage.

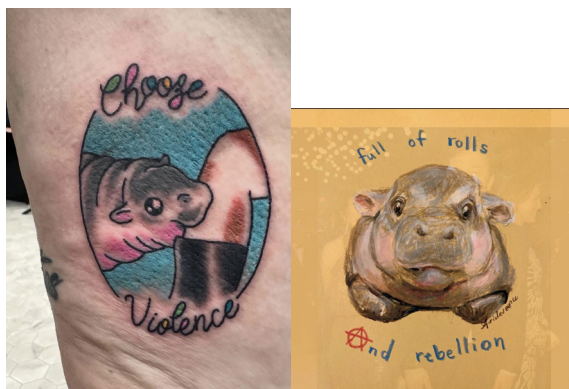


(Fig. 12, art by isopodcore on tumblr, September 20th, 2024), (Fig. 13, needlepoint by @stephxstitch, September 21st, 2024), (Fig. 14, tattoo done by @frogbellys, December 1st, 2024)

While Moo-Deng content is difficult to pin down and fit into extant scholarly definitions of memes, an ample amount of fan art – including digital and hand painted drawings and paintings and even tattoos – memetizes Moo-Deng as an “advice animal” in Dynel’s terms (Dynel 2016). Moo-Deng’s advice? BECOME UNGOVERNABLE (figures 9-14).

Marta Dynel defines advice animals following the popular definition on knowyourmeme.com: “Advice Animals are “a type of image macro series featuring animals of some kind (including humans) that are accompanied by captioned text to represent a character trait or an archetype that fits the role of a stock character. While many Advice Animals use a color wheel background, some use unedited versions of the original photo” (<http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/advice-animals#fn1>)” (Dynel 2016, 663). She also notes that not all text on “advice animal” images needs to qualify as advice, it can also be

an aggressive imperative (in the case of Moo-Deng's advice, it can be both). On image macros the author notes: "On the whole, the image macro genre captures the essence of a prototypical Internet meme: it brings together the old and the new by combining the novelty and creativity of text with the stability of an image" (Dynel 2016, 667). Moo-Deng content just goes to underscore Dynel's previously mentioned stance on the ephemeral nature of categories, even memes as such: fan art shared on Instagram is produced, by hand, by specific users, using a sort of "meme template" (but not quite) in order to create original art that acts as a meme for all intents and purposes. In the case of "become ungovernable", a sort of inversion happens – it is the accompanying text that is stable, while the image and indeed the medium of production of the image (digital or hand drawing, needlepoint, tattoo; figs. 9-14) and the image itself changes, but is still Moo-Deng. It is interpreted and interpretable because it is intertextual and communicates with other Moo-Deng content. This is especially true of other variations on the theme (figs. 15-17) that represent Moo-Deng accompanied by text alluding to rebellion and violent confrontation with agents of the system such as police. While produced by specific named individuals, these images mimic the meme format and become widely shared (with or without credit to the original authors).



(Fig. 15, tattoo done by @nickihoverson, November 9th, 2024), (Fig. 16, art by @airidescence, January 22nd, 2025), (Fig. 17, art by @airidescence, January 21st, 2025)

The visual-verbal joke, as mentioned before, is based on juxtaposing Moo-Deng's cuteness with a message of political anger and rebellion. Such messages could be seen as dangerous and socially disruptive, but become palatable, even funny, through association with images of an adorable animal. Such unprecedented creative and participatory engagement with content that is not backed by big money and marketing agencies speaks, I believe, to new and emerging (political) uses of memes and a sort of "reverse flow", wherein art imitates memes in order to proliferate certain messages online. In the case of Moo-Deng, these messages can be placed on a kind of "spectrum of rage" – from normalizing individual female rage and presenting it as palatable, to representing the political rage of entire groups and populations through asking the viewer to "become ungovernable". In that sense, I believe that newspaper articles that insist on Moo-Deng's cuteness as the main driver of her popularity are missing the point: her cuteness is just a vehicle for her unbridled rage, and in today's world most of us have plenty to be angry about. And Moo-Deng tells us that it's OK to be furious, even if you are "just a girl".

CONCLUSION

In his (rather depressing) 1980 essay "Why Look at Animals?" philosopher John Berger (Berger [1980] 2009) tackles the question of why people go to zoos to look at captive wild animals. While he's probably right on many counts, his essay denies any sort of agency to the zoo animals themselves as a point of argument – to him zoo animals are completely marginal and completely marginalized, and constitute mere objects for the human gaze to consume. However, Rebecca Bishop's (2004) paper, as well as my own research (Žakula 2017) on zoos shows that this is not entirely the case. The "zoo-going gaze" (Bishop 2004) is a *searching one* not (or not only and not entirely) a consuming one. Humans initiating contact events and attempting to communicate with animals in zoos is par for the course of zoo visits and points to the fact that it is precisely the animals' *agency*, their capability to *return our gaze* and perceive us that appeals to zoo visitors. More broadly, I believe that it is the search for similarity in any kind of animal behavior that makes looking at animals (whether in zoos or on screens) appealing. Whether we choose to anthropomorphize them (as is often the case in documentaries about wild animals, see: Candea 2010) or base our understanding of them on direct observation (Milton 2005) is largely context dependent. As the Moo-Deng phenomenon (as well as the larger phenomenon of the enormous popularity of animal videos online) shows, we humans *like* looking at other animals, especially when they display humanlike features, reactions or

behavior. And as Charles Darwin (Darvin 2009) has shown, we often really do share ways of displaying and expressing emotional states – we can, in short, understand other animals (to a certain extent). On the other hand, human folklore has always been rife with animal fables populated by sly foxes, hardworking ants, faithful dogs and other beings serving to teach us about the world. I believe that adding an angry pygmy hippo to the roster is not much of a stretch, even if her antics come from and narratives are shaped by the World Wide Web. On a more serious note, this paper argues that Moo-Deng's popularity is not tied only to her perceived "cuteness", as visual content featuring the princess became associated with (especially female) rage very early on in her popularity. While it is true that Moo-Deng content, much like other cute animal content online, often serves to alleviate people's frustration in an increasingly terrible world, I believe that it is her unbridled rage, and her (at least perceived – she is still, in fact, a zoo animal) freedom to express it that captures our attention. Over the course of its development from viral to memetic content (Shifman 2014), and especially through its various subsequent forms of memetization, Moo-Deng content, or "memes featuring Moo-Deng" went from snarky representations of women's misbehavior to revolutionary calls to "become ungovernable" (a logical progression if there ever was one), all the while utilizing Moo-Deng's cuteness in order to "lean in" and make the unacceptable and dangerous palatable. Moo-Deng's revolutionary potential – like, ultimately, her potential to advocate for her conspecifics in the wild – is limited and her online popularity waning²³. However the memes, fan art and (especially) tattoos remain an enduring legacy of the human fascination and identification with the marginalized (animal) Other as active, angry agent in her own right.

References

- Banić Grubišić, Ana. 2023. *Internet mimovi između folklora i popularne kulture*. Beograd: Odeljenje za etnologiju i antropologiju Filozofski fakultet Univerziteta u Beogradu i Dosije studio.
- Beddington, E. 2024. "'The people's pygmy princess!' how Moo-Deng captured the world's hearts." *The Guardian*. 6. Decembar 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2024/dec/26/the-peoples-pygmy-princess-how-moo-deng-captured-the-worlds-hearts>

²³ As she grows and matures, and becomes "less cute", a striking parallel to what happens to human women as they age.

- Berger, John. 2009. *Why Look at Animals?* London: Penguin Books.
- Bishop, Rebecca. 2004. "Journeys to the Urban Exotic: Embodiment and the Zoo-going Gaze". *Humanities Research* 11(1):106-124.
- Bittel, J. 2024. "How Moo-Deng the pygmy hippo is different from common hippos." *National Geographic*. 17. Septembar 2024. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/article/moo-deng-pygmy-hippo-differences>
- Bryson, Emma Claire. 2025. *If I Were Fury: Reclaiming the Sacred Performance of Feminine Rage*. Major's thesis, Florida State University, College of fine arts.
- Campbell, O. 2024. "Why we're hardwired to love baby animals." *National Geographic*. 18. oktobar 2024. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/article/baby-animal-cute-evolution-brain>
- Candea, Matei. 2010. "I fell in love with Carlos the meerkat: Engagement and detachment in human-animal relations". *American Ethnologist* 37(2): 241-258.
- Darvin, Čarls. 2009. *Izražavanje emocija kod čoveka i životinja*. Beograd: Dosije studio.
- Derrida, Jacques. 2002. "The Animal That Therefore I Am". *Critical Inquiry* 28(2): 369-418.
- Dunayer, Joan. 2004. *Speciesism*. Derwood: Ryce Publishing.
- Dynel, Marta. 2016. "I has seen Image Macros! Advice Animals memes as visual-verbal jokes." *International Journal of Communication* 10(29): 660-688.
- Eltringham, Keith, S. 1999. *The Hippos – Natural History and conservation*. London: Academic press.
- Flacke, Gabriella L., Brian K. Chambers, Graeme B. Martin, and Monique CJ Paris. 2015. "The pygmy hippopotamus *Choeropsis liberiensis* (Morton, 1849): Bringing to light research priorities for the largely forgotten, smaller hippo species". *Der Zoologische Garten* 84 (5-6): 234-265.
- Hance, J. 2025. "Has the Moo-Deng craze helped wild pygmy hippos at all? (analysis)." *Mongabay*. 3. Februar 2025. <https://news.mongabay.com/2025/02/has-the-moo-deng-craze-helped-wild-pygmy-hippos-at-all-analysis/>
- Kee, Sarah. 2022. *Nasty Woman: An Analysis of Women's Rage in Popular Culture*. Honor's thesis, University of Nebraska, Lincoln.
- Kohn, Eduardo. 2007. "How dogs dream: Amazonian natures and the politics of transspecies engagement". *American Ethnologist* 34(1): 3-24.
- Kohn, Eduardo. 2013. *How forests think: Toward an anthropology beyond the human*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Lewis, Rebecca, Oliver, W., & (IUCN SSC Hippo Specialist Subgroup). 2008. *Choeropsis liberiensis*. IUCN 2012; IUCN Red List of Threatened

- Species*. Version 2012.1. Downloaded on 19 September 2012. <http://www.iucnredlist.org>
- Lič, Edmund. 2002. *Kultura i komunikacija*. Beograd: XX vek.
- Mahdawi, A. 2024. "As the world falls apart, a few things are still worth celebrating – like Moo-Deng the pygmy hippo." *The Guardian*. 8. Oktobar 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/oct/08/things-worth-celebrating-moo-deng-pygmy-hippo>
- Milton, Kay. 2005. "Anthropomorphism or Egomorphism? The Perception of Non-human Persons by Human Ones". In: Knight, John (Ed.) *Animals in Person: Cultural Perspectives on Human-animal Intimacies*. Oxford: Berg, 255-271.
- Mulvey, Laura. 1989. *Visual and Other Pleasures*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Pettersen, Victor Nordahl. 2023. *Expression of Female Rage: Defining a New Genre*. Bachelor's thesis, NTNU.
- Ratcliffe, R. 2024. "'I set a goal to make her famous': the baby pygmy hippo who became a giant online." *The Guardian*. 13. Septembar 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/sep/13/moo-deng-hippo-tiktok-khao-kheow-open-zoo-thailand-viral>
- Ritvo, Harriet. 1987. *The Animal Estate: the English and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Robinson, Philip T. 2013. "Choeropsis liberiensis Pygmy Hippopotamus". In: Kingdon, Johnatan & Mary Hoffman (Eds.). *Mammals of Africa, Volume VI – Pigs, Hippopotamuses, Deer and Bovids*. London, UK: Bloomsbury: 80-83.
- Shifman, Limor. 2014. *Memes in Digital Culture*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.
- Srinivasan, Amia. 2018. "The aptness of anger." *Journal of Political Philosophy* 26 (2): 123-144.
- Stroman, H. R., and L. M. Slaughter. 1972. "The care and breeding of the Pygmy hippopotamus (*Choeropsis liberiensis*) in captivity." *International Zoo Yearbook*: 126-131.
- Sullivan, H. 2024. "A baby pygmy hippo named Moo-Deng: She is all we want to look at." *The Guardian*. 19. Septembar 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/commentisfree/2024/sep/20/moo-deng-pygmy-hippo-khao-kheow-open-zoo>
- Todorović, Zorana S. 2021. „Evolucioni kontinuitet između ljudi i ne-ljudskih životinja: emocije i emocionalno izražavanje." *Theoria* 64 (4): 19-36.
- Todorović, Zorana. 2014. „Evoluciono poreklo emocija: kontinuitet između životinja i ljudi". *Glasnik za društvene nauke* 6, 45-62.
- Žakula, Sonja. 2013. „(Ne) razumeti Darvina: evolucija i konstrukcija granice između ljudi i životinja". U *Zbornik radova Etnografskog instituta SANU –*

Kulturna prožimanja: antropološke perspektive, prir. Srđan Radović, 31–48. Beograd: Etnografski institut SANU.

Žakula, Sonja. 2013a. „Narativizacija jednog događaja u Beogradskom zoološkom vrtu: priča o keruši Gabi i jaguaru”. *Etnoantropološki problemi* 8(4): 1047-1069.

Žakula, Sonja i Ivana Živaljević. 2018. „Izučavanje ljudsko-životinjskih odnosa u antropologiji i arheologiji I.” *Glasnik Etnografskog instituta SANU* 66 (2): 255-270. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2298/GEI1802255Z>

Žakula, Sonja i Ivana Živaljević. 2019. „Izučavanje ljudsko-životinjskih odnosa u antropologiji i arheologiji II.” *Glasnik Etnografskog instituta SANU* 67 (1): 153-172. <https://doi.org/10.2298/GEI1901153Z>

Žakula, Sonja. „O antropologiji koja nadilazi ljudsko”. Review of *How Forests Think* by Eduardo Kohn. *Antropologija* 18 (2): 167-171.

Žakula, Sonja. 2017. „Zoološki vrtovi u antropološkoj perspektivi”. Doktorska dis. Filozofski fakultet, Univerzitet u Beogradu.

Примљено/Received: 30. 04. 2025.

Прихваћено/Accepted: 28. 08. 2025.

