Last Friday, we learned that Ebola-infected Dallas nurse Nina Pham has been declared Ebola-free, meaning we can all finally stop panicking about our imminent deaths, take off our creepy surgical masks, and get back to living our lives. Yes, now that the recovery of Pham — as well as her fellow infected nurse Amber Vinson, who also recently tested negative for ebola — has shown us all that catching Ebola in the U.S. isn’t a death sentence, we can all...
take the first steps down the long road of chilling out about a disease we are not going to catch (because even if you were at the Gutter, the Brooklyn bowling alley where New York City Ebola victim Craig Spencer was on Wednesday night, you are probably not going to catch Ebola).

Luckily for all of us, the real heroes of the Internet have been hard at work making super-helpful Ebola memes for the past two weeks, weeks that you wasted staring blankly at news websites and giving the side-eye to anyone who coughed on the bus.

The value of Ebola memes is, of course, debatable — hey, you know what this terrible disease that’s killed nearly 5,000 people in West Africa needs? A joke about Kermit the Frog! Some come from a good place, and aim to cut the tension that’s permeated the nation with facts or humor, bringing panicking people back down to Earth.

Then there are the others — the cruel, racist Ebola memes clogging our social media feeds — that are clearly just the heartless work of someone with a “NOObama” t-shirt and way too much time on their hands. And though it’s tempting to write those ones off as just jokes (or avoid to them completely), they give us needed insight into the array of American reactions to Ebola, particularly the racism that’s crept into every aspect of Ebola in the U.S. from its media coverage to the actual quality of care received by Ebola-infected patients.

Looking at popular memes lets us take our cultural temperature, which makes them important — even if some are profoundly awful. With that in mind, we assess 17 memes of both genres below, ranked from kind-of-OK to
totally offensive.

1. Ricola

Ebola
Swiss Cherry
Herb Throat Drops
SUGAR FREE

EBOLAAAAAA
Maybe, in your darkest moments of pointless Ebola panic last week, a caring friend sang “Ebola!” to the tune of the Ricola jingle to you, and for one shining moment, it lightened your privileged-nonsense-worry load. But even if that didn’t happen to you, you still have to admit that this is as crowd-pleasing an infectious disease meme as you’re ever gonna find. This is the *Wedding Crashers* of Ebola memes — not mind-blowing, but you’ll watch it when it comes on TBS on a Sunday afternoon.
THOUSANDS DIE OF EBOLA IN AFRICA AND NO ONE BATS AN EYE

ONE CASE OF EBOLA IN THE US AND EVERYONE LOSES THEIR MIND
Oh yeah, that panic you were indulging in last week? It was pointless and racist, and turned a very real problem on another continent into an excuse for you to feel sorry for yourself because someone sneezed on you at CVS.

3. Things Deadlier Than Ebola
NOT TODAY

NOT TODAY EBOLA

NOT TODAY!!!!!!
We get it, we get it: germs are scary because they’re invisible, people are scary because they’re covered in germs, airplanes are scary because they’re covered in people, and you wish you could wrap yourself in plastic forever and also have your mommy feed you with a baby bottle for the rest of your life. Got it.
5. Vegas

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Yes, this meme makes almost no sense. No, the people sharing it don’t care. This meme is like your friend who loves to string three or four random catchphrases together at a time, and still yells “Can you hear me now?!?” during phone calls. God, why are you still friends with this person? Anyway, he’s definitely already posted this to Facebook nine times.
6. More Cowbell

I GOT EBOLA

AND THE ONLY PRESCRIPTION, IS MORE COWBELL

Jay Caruso
@JayCaruso

Another funny Ebola meme. #MoreCowbell

11:36 AM - 5 Oct 2014

14 retweets 7 likes
Much like it’s Vegas-loving cousin above, this meme just shoehorns ebola into another meme, and doesn’t trouble itself with making much sense once it gets in there. But I guess it isn’t hurting anybody (except those who actually try to use more cowbell as a topical solution for their Ebola).
When Ebola spreads to the U.S. and your homeboy starts coughing.
Alternately:

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These memes are definitely not helping people have a calm and even-handed discussion about Ebola in the U.S. — it’s fall and some of us are very sensitive to ragweed, of course we’re coughing! — but it’s probably not actively hurting anyone. Probably?
Could this really be a meme epidemic without the spirit of Mr. Norris weighing in? Just like the Ebola panic itself, this is an old, played-out thing that we were all done with years ago, but which has been given new life by everyone’s love of jumping on social media and talking about infectious diseases.
A charming piece of Internet dumbness, a la the "Taylor Swift/Becky" meme, with points deducted only because I’m sure that some people actually believe this.
10. More Americans Have Been Married to Kim Kardhasian

Content unavailable
Also: Taylor Swift

Content unavailable
Pro: reminds people that there has been only one U.S. death from Ebola, and the odds of their catching the disease are not very likely. Con: The slut-shaming element keeps these memes from being something we can feel good about.

Why not say that, I don’t know, Cate Blanchett has won more Academy Awards than Americans have died from Ebola? Because that’s also true, and a meme about that wouldn’t require me to defend Rush Limbaugh from slut-shaming, which I would really appreciate.
Note:

If you are a doctor coming back from West Africa, chill out for a few days. This dude was running around like he was in "Home Alone 2".
Instagram: the Internet's only reputable source for advice on managing infectious diseases.
12. Surgical Mask Selfies
Alternately: Public Surgical Mask Shots
Are surgical mask selfies mocking Ebola panickers or feeding them? Are surgical mask selfies creating an Orson Welles’ *War of the Worlds* situation, where their fake panic is creating real panic? The most important lesson to take away from this: Don’t get your news from some random person’s Instagram feed. Ya know, if you can.
13. Ebowling
Fine, fine, I made an “Ebowling” joke within moments of being assigned this piece. I’m not proud of it, but I feel like I need to be honest here. Yet at least I can take comfort in the fact that I didn’t screenshot it and send it all over the Internet. I have few things to be proud of in my life, but that is one of them.
YOU'RE WORRIED ABOUT EBOLA

WHEN YOU SHOULD BE WORRIED ABOUT THESE BOLAS IN YOUR MOUTH
Maybe I’m the problem if none of these memes are making sense to me? Maybe I’m out of touch, and don’t understand how people communicate now. Maybe I am clinging to an outdated paradigm when I think about people and media. Or maybe this is a really, really stupid joke about balls.
When she got ebola but you still want to fuck
So the joke is ... sex is gross? The male sex drive is gross? Women are gross? Condoms are gross? What do we talk about when we talk about Ebola condoms?!
16. The Real Person Who Brought Ebola to the United States
Has it really come to this? Using *Mean Girls* for racist purposes? Et tu, Internet?
17. I Went to High School with Ebola

Content unavailable
Listen, I’m not naive. I understand that there’s a whole universe of memes out there circulating out there all day, every day, where the “joke” is basically, “Here is some terrible and disgusting racism, just for you!” But “humor” that basically amounts to an attempt to stigmatize people with dark skin and the very concept of Ebola has real-world consequences.

It’s the kind of mentality that’s allowed African children in Dallas with no connection to the disease to be referred to as “Ebola’s Kids,” and that’s led to Ebola victim Thomas Duncan’s neighbors to be turned away from jobs. This isn’t “edgy” humor — not only because, honestly, it’s just not a very funny joke, but because it serves no purpose but to create divisions between people in a crisis. It’s a shitty, cowardly thing to do, and I hope that everyone will think twice when scrolling past this in your feed.

This isn’t just harmless dumbassery. Memes are a representation of our culture. That is their very definition.
Not crazy about exploiting the image of a starving black child to get people’s attention, but at least it makes a real damned point.