

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Theorising the memescape: The spatial politics of Internet memes

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Abstract

Despite the increasing centrality of Internet memes for everyday political circulations and practices, their emergent implications as low-cultural artefacts of global politics have received little theoretical attention. In this article, I develop a critical theory of memes to provide a conceptual apparatus to understand the global political implications and possibilities of this pop-cultural phenomenon. I argue that, in order to attend to the emergent implications of memes and consider their differentiations from other pop-cultural phenomena, we need to unpack the spatial logic through which memes emerge and circulate. Analysing this spatial logic through the concept of the ‘memescape’ and deploying Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s notions of striated and smooth spaces, this article articulates the spatial logic of the memescape as comprising rhizomatic, decentralised circulations of digital content; nomadic, playful, and humorous disruptions of once-stable signs; and affective congregations of a multiplicity of subjects. Through two examples exploring how these smooth spatial tendencies produce divergent political potentials in the resistant memes of Indigenous digital communities and reactionary memes of the Alt-Right, I conclude that the global politics of the memescape is open-ended and undetermined which requires careful and nuanced political and ethical attention to actualise its futures for emancipatory horizons.

Keywords: Humour; International Relations Theory; Internet Memes; Social Media; Space; Pop Culture

Introduction

Internet memes are everywhere. From niche online subcultures to social movements and protests, everyday online and offline practices are increasingly infused with the visuals, aesthetics, behavioural logics, and circulations of silly, playful, and non-serious artefacts called memes. Briefly, memes are (predominantly humorous) online images, videos, and texts that become viral through a collective process of sharing, imitation, and remixing. In a contemporary global media landscape dominated by the user-generated content of Web 2.0 social media platforms,¹ a wide variety of political subjects are increasingly engaging with, producing, and circulating Internet memes in order to interpret and mediate political and cultural events humorously,² express complex affective states,³ organise dissent,⁴ communicate grievances and create loose

¹Rhys Crilly, ‘Where we at? New directions for research on popular culture and world politics’, *International Studies Review*, 23:1 (2021), pp. 164–80.

²Maria Francesca Murru and Stefania Vicari, ‘Memetising the pandemic: Memes, covid-19 mundanity and political cultures’, *Information, Communication & Society*, 24:16 (2021), pp. 2422–41.

³Clara Eroukhmanoff, ‘Responding to terrorism with peace, love and solidarity: “Je suis Charlie”, “Peace” and “I Heart MCR”’, *Journal of International Political Theory*, 15:2 (2019), pp. 167–87.

⁴Seyda Barlas Bozkus, ‘Pop polyvocality and Internet memes: As a reflection of socio-political discourse of Turkish youth in social media’, *Global Media Journal TR Edition*, 6:12 (2016), pp. 44–74.

publics⁵ around shared political issues and understandings. ‘Politics (today) both in its broad sense as the societal construction of power and its narrow sense as a system of governance – is deeply intertwined with the construction and consumption of Internet memes.’⁶ As Jonathan Dean argues, we are currently witnessing a rising ‘memeification of politics.’⁷

Despite the increasing centrality of Internet memes for everyday political circulations and practices, the emergent implications of Internet memes as low cultural,⁸ seriously non-serious artefacts of global politics and international relations, broadly conceived,⁹ have received little theoretical attention. While visual, aesthetic, and pop-cultural studies of world politics¹⁰ as well as recent scholarly interests in humour in world politics¹¹ emphasise how seemingly trivial, everyday, and non-serious cultural and political productions constitute a vital and potentially transformative site of world politics, questions of how memes differentiate themselves from these other pop-cultural and aesthetic phenomena, what forms of resistance and transformation they make possible, and what futures they hold remain largely unanswered. In this article, I offer a critical and spatial theory of Internet memes in order to engage with these questions. Expanding and building on the literatures above, I argue that, in order to understand, reflect, and act on this emergent site of everyday politics, we need to unpack the spatial logic through which memes circulate, connect, and relate digital subjects, aesthetic objects, political discourses, and collective affects of global politics.

In order to unpack this spatial logic, I first introduce and develop the concept of ‘the memescape’, which denotes the wider spatial configuration over which memes and wider memetic politics circulate. Using Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s underdeveloped conceptual apparatus¹² of smooth and striated spaces and their relational ontology of space, I argue that the memescape constitutes a space of relative openness which by the virtue of its particular spatial logic, potentialises novel sites for political transformation and relation in connection to and sometimes against the international as a space of bordered governance. I put forward three spatial features that constitute the memescape. Firstly, the memescape enables the *rhizomatic* and decentralised circulation of political discourses and affects that potentialise the production of alternative sites of knowledge outside mainstream/hegemonic sites of production. Secondly, the memescape constitutes a *nomadic* site of continuous play and humour through which the relative stability of signs and meaning in the international become open to ambiguous, subversive, and unstable changes and interruptions. Thirdly, as affectively resonant artefacts that enable the circulation and exchange of various collective affects, the memescape brings and connects a *multiplicity* of political subjects together that may be heretofore distributed across various lines of difference. Through these three spatial features, I show, the memescape offers a novel site of potential transformation in global politics.

However, crucially, I contend that these spatial features do not engender a singular or determined political path. In fact, as the memescape interacts with and clashes with the international, it produces divergent political paths. To exemplify these divergent paths, I look at two examples:

⁵Zizi Papacharissi, *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁶Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2014), p. 120.

⁷Jonathan Dean, ‘Sorted for memes and gifs: Visual media and everyday digital politics’, *Political Studies Review*, 17:3 (2019), p. 256.

⁸Jutta Weldes, ‘High politics and low data: Globalization discourses and popular culture’, in Dvora Yanow and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea (eds), *Interpretation and Method* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2006), pp. 176–87.

⁹Kathleen P. J. Brennan, ‘MemeLife’, in Mark B. Salter (ed.), *Making Things International 1: Circuits and Motion* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), p. 251; Saara Särämä, ‘Collaging Internet parody images: An art-inspired methodology for studying laughter in world politics’, in Laura J. Shepherd and Caitlin Hamilton (eds), *Understanding Popular Culture and World Politics in the Digital Age* (London, UK and New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016).

¹⁰Kyle Grayson, Matt Davies, and Simon Philpott, ‘Pop goes IR? Researching the popular culture: World politics continuum’, *Politics*, 29:3 (2009), pp. 155–63.

¹¹Alister Wedderburn, *Humour, Subjectivity and World Politics: Everyday Articulations of Identity at the Limits of Order* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2021); James Brassett, *The Ironic State: British Comedy and the Everyday Politics of Globalization* (Bristol, UK: Bristol University Press, 2021).

¹²This conceptual apparatus while being widely used in critical geography and cultural studies, have been significantly underutilised in international studies.

one resistant and one reactionary. First, I look at how Indigenous peoples across the globe engage with the memescape to not only deconstruct, destabilise, and mock colonial myths and bordered, racialised imaginations that erase their political existence but also as spaces to draw lines of affective connection between differing Indigenous communities and other political movements for racial justice. The memescape, here, enables the extension of sites of Indigenous resistance against a particular racialised international. Second, as opposed to this site of resistance, I analyse the emergence of violent and reactionary politics of an Alt-Right sensibility, which circulates and resonates through the memescape as exemplified in the role memes and memetic logics play in the manifestos of various white supremacist attackers across the globe in recent years. Here, differing radically from Indigenous politics of resistance, the memescape engenders the global resonance and cross-border articulation of a reactionary politics of resentment: an alternative site through which what is otherwise frowned upon in the so-called respectable spaces of the international become open to articulation. Through these two examples, then, I conclude that the memescape is a non-determined and increasingly important space of transformation through which global politics become open to new potentials.

What is the memescape?

The memescape, as I define it, is the relational space of pop-cultural production, circulation, and consumption of textual, visual, and aural artefacts called memes that traverse online and offline media through a process of mutative imitation and collective production. Memes are primarily (but not necessarily)¹³ humorous artefacts and often involve a shared sensibility of non-seriousness and playfulness through which everyday social and political conditions and situations can be mocked, criticised, and/or subverted. As highly mutative and viral products, they are not contained by singular platforms but rather circulate various digital and non-digital spaces through practices such as remixing, sampling, collaging, and reposting in continuous variation. However, what I call the memescape cannot be reduced to the simple circulation of such meme artefacts. In fact, as these micro-cultural memetic products circulate, they weave into and become productive of a wider social ecology of discourses, affects, and intersubjective modes of behaviour that increasingly impact how politics and political thought are constituted, lived, and acted on by various digital subjects. As Olga Goriunova argues, then, ‘a meme is not only content, but a behaviour, or rather systems of human-technical performances. A meme emerges from multiple sites, agents, and ecologies, which dynamically interlock to form networks that propel its coming into being.’¹⁴ Although memetic interactions have existed throughout history, the particular configuration of the memescape has chiefly been a product of a specific entanglement between the increasing dominance of the technological infrastructure of the Web 2.0 model of horizontal digital sociality¹⁵ and the widespread postmodern sensibility of ironic and referential pop-cultural production that have become prominent in the twenty-first century.¹⁶ Through this entanglement, I argue, emerges the political space of the memescape that restructures political relations between subjects of knowledge and objects of popular culture. These relations then potentialise novel modes of affective, discursive, and intersubjective relationality revolving around playful digital interactivity. If as Goriunova contends, ‘memes are an aesthetic trend that entices and moulds subjective, collective, and political becoming,’¹⁷ the memescape is the relational space that makes possible, orients, and transforms such political becoming.

¹³This article focuses specifically on humorous, playful memes as they are both the predominant mode of expression in the memescape as well as the distinct mode of interaction that makes the memescape an interesting site of analysis for this article. However, there is further space for research on the role of non-humorous memetic interactions.

¹⁴Olga Goriunova, ‘The force of digital aesthetics: On memes, hacking, and individuation’, *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, 24:47 (2016), p. 56.

¹⁵Christian Fuchs, ‘Web 2.0, prosumption, and surveillance’, *Surveillance & Society*, 8:3 (2010), pp. 288–309.

¹⁶Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991).

¹⁷Goriunova, ‘The force of digital aesthetics’, p. 54.

What thus differentiates the politics of memes and the memescape at large from other visual¹⁸ and pop-cultural¹⁹ phenomena analysed in International Relations is not only the ‘content’ of memes or the message produced through them, but the *spatial* logic through which such content produces, transforms, and opens up relationalities between political subjects, objects, discourses, and affects. In order to fully conceptualise the global politics, possibilities, and limits of the memescape, therefore, one ought to unpack its spatial logic as embedded within and/or clashing with the contours of the international as a particular political spatialisation structured around nation-states, racialised borders, international law, and global capital accumulation.

To understand the spatial logic of the memescape and critically analyse how it relates to, transforms, and clashes with the international, Deleuze and Guattari’s spatial ontology of smooth and striated spaces offers a strong conceptual apparatus.²⁰ Against predominant notions of spatiality that prioritise stability, atemporality, and immobility, Deleuze and Guattari’s conceptualisation argues for a relational and differential ‘ontology of space’²¹ that is centred on the notion of ‘potentiality’. Here, they show, spaces are a diverse ‘product of interrelations’²² where a variety of disparate elements come together, interact, clash, and mutate through their various connections and co-productions, which enable or disable various political and social potentials. The memescape, for example, produces a spatial relation as it brings various digital subjects, aesthetic objects called memes, political discourses, and collective affects together, which creates a site through which these elements may move, interact, and mutate in their interrelations within this relational space. As I argue below, these spatial relations enabled in the memescape, then, potentialise the articulation, circulation, and production of particular political discourses and affects. In Robert Topinka’s ‘Politically Incorrect Participatory Media,’²³ for instance, the subreddit r/ImGoingToHellForThis becomes a space of interrelation that brings together memes that satirise the dead body of Syrian boy Alan Kurdi, racist nationalist discourses, humourous affects, and transgressive digital subjects in potentialising the circulation and articulation of a particular understanding of the refugee crisis.

Not all spaces, however, are the same. In fact, Deleuze and Guattari crucially argue, spatial relations are distributed across differential lines of potential. Spatial relations differ from one another according to the potential connections, movements, and interactions that are allowed across their politically, socially, materially, and culturally organised contours. Spaces ‘subtend politics ... they create openings that will enable (or disable) becomings,’²⁴ which means that different spaces potentialise varying transformations and movements of the elements within. What can be politically articulated in the memescape is decidedly different than what can be expressed in a diplomatic meeting or an academic conference as they have different spatial configurations for what forms of subjective interactions, affective connections, and political discourses are allowed and disallowed

¹⁸See Lene Hansen, ‘How images make world politics: International icons and the case of Abu Ghraib’, *Review of International Studies*, 41:2 (2015), pp. 263–88; Roland Bleiker (ed.), *Visual Global Politics* (London, UK and New York, NY: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2018).

¹⁹See Jutta Weldes, ‘Going cultural: Star Trek, state action, and popular culture’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 28:1 (1999), pp. 117–34; Klaus Dodds, ‘Screening terror: Hollywood, the United States and the construction of danger’, *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 1:2 (2008), pp. 227–43; Marcus Power, ‘Digitized virtuosity: Video war games and post-9/11 cyber-deterrence’, *Security Dialogue*, 38:2 (2007), pp. 271–88.

²⁰Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), pp. 551–83.

²¹For critiques of immobile ontologies of space in IR and examples of relational ontologies, see Doreen B. Massey, *For Space* (London, UK and Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2005), R. B. J. Walker, *Inside/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory* (Cambridge, UK and New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Gerard Toal, *Critical Geopolitics: The Politics of Writing Global Space* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Daniel Lambach, ‘Space, scale, and global politics: Towards a critical approach to space in international relations’, *Review of International Studies*, 48:2 (2022), pp. 282–300.

²²Massey, *For Space*, p. 9.

²³Robert J. Topinka, ‘Politically incorrect participatory media: Racist nationalism on r/ImGoingToHellForThis’, *New Media & Society*, 20:5 (2018), pp. 2050–69.

²⁴Verena Andermatt Conley, *Spatial Ecologies: Urban Sites, State and World-Space in French Cultural Theory* (Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 2014), p. 95.

within these spaces. Memes allow, for example, more vulgar and non-serious expressions than institutional sites of knowledge production, which thereby potentialise the articulation of more direct and radical political expressions.

Such spaces with differential political potentials, additionally, do not exist independently of one another but rather remain in a continuous relationship of interaction and connection through which they may mutually constitute and transform each other. Relationships sustained and potentialised in the memescape may shift and change the subjective understandings enabled in institutional political spaces and vice versa. Spaces are not fixed, independent, or stable, but are in constant, dynamic, and processual becoming as objects, subjects, discourses, and affects within are configured and reconfigured through internal relations of change as well as outer encounters with other spatial configurations.²⁵ The memescape, in this case, I argue, is in a continual relationship with the spatial arrangement of the international as a bordered space of governance. Here, we need to attend to how the memescape as a space differs in its spatial logic from the international with regards to the political relations it potentialises as well as how it interacts with and potentially clashes with its organisation of the world.

To conceptualise divergent potentialities embedded within differential spatial configurations, Deleuze and Guattari put forward the ideal oppositional notions of smooth and striated spaces which provides a way to distinguish between the memescape and the international in their spatial logic. Striated spaces are spatial configurations marked by a relation of hierarchical, segmented organisation based around a central overarching logic governing and delimiting the movements, potentials and identities of the elements positioned within their structures. As Anna Hickey-Moody and Peta Malins argue, 'striated spaces are those which produce particular, limited movements and relations between bodies.'²⁶ The international, as a political regime of differentiation and segmentation that is organised around a series of material, discursive and affective practices and processes, I argue, can be conceptualised as a striated space. The international is a hegemonic regime of fixation and differentiation that defines and delimits where subjects, objects, and material products belong in space and how and through what discourses and affects they can relate.²⁷

As critical border theorists²⁸ contend, the myriad structures of differentiation and bordering practices that regulate 'the international' cannot be reduced to a so-called 'line in the sand' of state borders. Bordering does not solely contain state sovereignty. Rather, 'borders are everywhere,'²⁹ continually producing and reproducing striated relations through everyday performative processes of differentiation. As Nick Vaughan-Williams argues, the logic of the international, cannot be characterised as a logic of 'fixed territorial borders located at the outer-edge of the territorial state, but [is] infused through bodies and diffused across society and everyday life' as a 'generalised bio-political order.'³⁰ This continual, diffuse process of bordering and striating manifests itself in various sites: from airports³¹ to visual news photography³² to popular culture.³³

²⁵Elizabeth Grosz, 'Deleuze, theory, and space', *Log*, 1 (2003), p. 80.

²⁶Anna Hickey-Moody and Peta Malins (eds), *Deleuzian Encounters: Studies in Contemporary Social Issues* (Basingstoke, UK and New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 11.

²⁷Benjamin Herboth, 'Denying the international', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* (2021), p. 7.

²⁸Nick Vaughan-Williams, *Border Politics: The Limits of Sovereign Power* (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2009); Chris Rumford, 'Towards a multiperspectival study of borders', *Geopolitics*, 17:4 (2012), pp. 887–902.

²⁹Etienne Balibar and Erin M. Williams, 'World borders, political borders', *PMLA*, 117:1 (2002), pp. 71–8.

³⁰Nick Vaughan-Williams, 'The generalised bio-political border? Re-conceptualising the limits of sovereign power', *Review of International Studies*, 35:4 (2009), pp. 732–3.

³¹Noel Parker and Nick Vaughan-Williams, 'Critical border studies: Broadening and deepening the "lines in the sand" agenda', *Geopolitics*, 17:4 (2012), p. 729.

³²Lene Hansen, Rebecca Adler-Nissen, and Katrine Emilie Andersen, 'The visual international politics of the European refugee crisis: Tragedy, humanitarianism, borders', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 56:4 (2021), pp. 367–93.

³³Jason Dittmer, *Popular Culture, Geopolitics, and Identity* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010).

Positioned against striated spatial configurations such as the international and their respective bordering processes, Deleuze and Guattari situate smooth spatial configurations that tend towards and configure ahierarchical, non-determined, and multiple interrelations between various political, cultural, and social elements. Such spaces potentialise new and unexpected movements, creative associations, and transformative connections across their contours. Three interrelated logics of spatial relation, I argue, define the configuration of smooth spaces: rhizomaticity, nomadicity, and multiplicity. A *rhizomatic* configuration, in the work of Deleuze and Guattari, designates relations between elements that are not organised through the hierarchical lens of a structuring centre but those which emerge through decentralised, horizontal, and processual relations in reciprocal and differential determination.³⁴ That is, a rhizomatic configuration is decentralised and reciprocally constitutive. A *nomadic* configuration, on the other hand, refers to the continuous and varying mobility of elements that escape fixity.³⁵ A nomadic relation, whether between subjects, objects, signs, or affects is always in movement: ‘in continuous variation.’ Finally, a *multiple* relation implies that a smooth spatial configuration gives way to relations between a heterogeneous ensemble of elements that cannot be reduced to an overarching, singular mode of identification but only relate in and through differences together.³⁶

My argument is that, in order to understand the spatial logic of the memescape and its divergent political possibilities, we can make use of this concept of a smooth space. While the memescape is not a perfectly smooth space, its spatial logic contains configurations that open up various smooth tendencies. In this article, I identify three interrelated spatial features of the memescape that provide it with such smooth tendencies, defined through three axes: (a) through the *rhizomatic* circulation of contents, that is, who gets the right to circulate political content; and how (b) through the *nomadic* smoothness of signs, that is, how humourous, non-serious production reshapes political reality through the playful movement of signs; and (c) how this humorous circulation affectively brings together *multiple* political subjects heretofore unconnected. Through the conjunction of these three features, the memescape offers novel potentialities for how global politics can be navigated.

It is important, before further developing a theory of the memescape, to clarify and not mystify the material conditions under which the memescape becomes possible. While the memescape, through the various relations it enables, potentialises certain smooth tendencies, its technological underpinnings are nonetheless undergirded by a ‘communicative capitalist’³⁷ model of extracting creative labour and informational surveillance data from digital subjects that engage with social media platforms. In this article, I therefore am not putting forward a cyber-utopian model of Internet romanticism that posits that social media platforms alone deterministically enable smooth relations by virtue of their technological affordances. In fact, in their algorithmic, extractive, and infrastructural conditions, social media platforms are largely striated spaces for capital accumulation and state surveillance.³⁸ The memescape’s smoothness is instead the product of a particular mode of social and collective engagement with these striated platforms that impart political potentialities in excess of those determined by these structures. It is more than the Internet, social media platforms, and the technological infrastructures and affordances it creates. The memescape exists above these as a collectively produced and relationally enabled space.

As such, it should be noted that the notions of striated and smooth spaces do not denote ideal concepts that refer to a perfect binary. Deleuze and Guattari do not posit or even desire the actual existence of perfectly striated and smooth spaces of absolute delimitation or openness. The

³⁴Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 22.

³⁵Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 36.

³⁶*Ibid.*, p. 182.

³⁷Jodi Dean, ‘Communicative capitalism: Circulation and the foreclosure of politics’, *Cultural Politics: An International Journal*, 1:1 (2005), pp. 51–74.

³⁸For more on communicative capitalism, see Jodi Dean, *Blog Theory: Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive* (Cambridge, UK and Malden, MA: Polity, 2010); Nick Srnicek and Laurent De Sutter, *Platform Capitalism* (Cambridge, UK and Malden, MA: Polity, 2017).

memescape is inevitably delimited by various power relations, historical traces of injustice, and material conditions of access, despite the relatively smooth tendencies it potentialises. Similarly, the international's regime of differentiation is almost always suffused with cracks and relations that destabilise and disentangle its striated space.³⁹ Instead of a strict binary, then, Deleuze and Guattari offer these oppositional concepts as an apparatus to trace the potentialities and tendencies embedded within the spatial logics of any given relational and differential formation. As a conceptual apparatus, it allows us to ask what forms of relation, movement, and articulation become possible within a spatial configuration such as the memescape and to observe how striated and smooth tendencies conjunct, entangle, and clash with one another within different configurations. Importantly, striated and smooth spaces do not indicate and reproduce an inside/outside relationship of a delimited inside and a romanticised outside but instead, the conceptual apparatus works to question how striated and smooth spatial logics entangle and co-interact. As Deleuze and Guattari contend, 'what interests us in operations of striating and smoothing are precisely the passages or combinations: how the forces at work within space continually striate it, and how in the course of its striation it develops other forces and emits new smooth spaces.'⁴⁰ Moreover, striated and smooth spaces do not refer to a normative understanding of space where we can conclusively claim that a spatial configuration such as the memescape is 'better' than the international for political emancipation by the virtue of its relative smoothness. As I will show below, the memescape has engendered both resistant and reactionary political potentials. As Deleuze and Guattari explain, 'Smooth spaces are not in themselves liberatory. But the struggle is changed or displaced in them, and life reconstitutes its stakes, confronts new obstacles, invents new paces, switches adversaries. Never believe that a smooth space will suffice to save us.'⁴¹

In what follows, similarly, I theorise and read through the memescape's smooth spatial tendencies in relation to the striated international to think through the potentials and limits embedded within their interaction. How does the memescape change and shift the stakes of political discourse and relationship? In what ways do subjects, objects, discourses, and affects move across and in relation to the memescape that enable novel ways of transforming the contours of the striated international: whether emancipatory or reactionary? After an analysis of three spatial features of the memescape – rhizomatic circulation, nomadic play, and affective multiplicity –, I show how these features produce divergent political possibilities in the resistant politics of the Indigenous memescape and its humorous deconstruction of colonial border histories and the reactionary politics of an emergent Alt-Right sensibility and its reconstitution of racial resentment through memetic interactions.

The memescape as rhizomatic: Circulation and decentralisation

The memescape distributes and circulates discourses and affects through largely⁴² rhizomatic relations where aesthetic artefacts propagate in a horizontal, decentralised, and ahierarchical manner. As Deleuze and Guattari conceptualise it, 'in contrast to centred systems with hierarchical modes of communication and pre-established paths, the rhizome is an acentred, non-hierarchical, non-signifying system without a General and without an organising memory or central automaton, defined solely by a circulation of states.'⁴³ Meme-artefacts and related content do not disseminate primarily in a top-down manner from the hegemonic spatial logic of active content-producers (either a corporation, the state, an institution or a 'professional artist') to the masses as reactive

³⁹Mark B. Salter, 'Theory of the / : The suture and critical border studies', *Geopolitics*, 17:4 (2012); David Campbell, 'Political excess and the limits of imagination', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 23:2 (1994), pp. 365–75.

⁴⁰Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 581.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, p. 581.

⁴²It is important to recognise that not all memes circulate in a decentralised manner. Some are produced centrally and deliberately by striated structures such as states, political parties, and corporations. See Dmitry Chernobrov, 'Strategic humour: Public diplomacy and comic framing of foreign policy issues', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* (2021).

⁴³Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 22.

bodies. Memes, rather, are artefacts of reciprocal co-production: propagating ‘gradually through many interpersonal contacts.’⁴⁴ They are cheap and easy to make, which means there are ‘relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement.’⁴⁵ They are not subject to formal aesthetic standards or review. With access to publicly available cheap software such as ‘Imgflip Meme Generator’ or ‘Microsoft Paint’, almost anyone can view, make, and spread these cultural products without any expectation of professional quality. Within the memescape, therefore, the segmentary nature of traditional media structures previously analysed in visual, aesthetic, and popular culture studies in which the relationship between producers of aesthetic knowledge and their audience is largely situated in a hierarchical binary gives way to a more rhizomatic relation where aesthetic production is reciprocal, collective, and decentralised. This relational space creates a site of potentiality from which various political subjects can circulate discourses and affects outside traditional media structures. This rhizomaticity, I argue, creates space for an alternative ‘distribution of the sensible’⁴⁶ making possible smooth interventions into dominant circulations of the bordered international which may work to subvert, disturb, or de-border its striated structure. Dean Cooper-Cunningham’s visual analysis of the Gay Clown Putin meme in Russia, for instance, demonstrates how this rhizomatic structure of the memescape creates a queer disruptive space for ‘critical political interventions that might challenge [the] international security policy’⁴⁷ of Russia, which relies on the articulation and securitisation of cisheteronormative nationhood. The memescape, here, allows queer subjects to intervene in the dominant circulations of Russian foreign policy through the collective production of the Gay Clown Putin meme.

Furthermore, as collectively circulating artefacts that are open to change, sampling, subversion, and reimagination, memes are in continuous variation, refusing to be fixed into a singular ideological state. Memes do not have a predetermined path of dissemination and circulation. They take unexpected shapes, seep into, and traverse unexpected places and groups, create non-determined associations between cultural products and are always open to being taken up and moulded towards divergent paths. Anyone can intervene in a meme’s circulation and take it to a radically different space of articulation. Thus, neither the ownership nor the meaning structure behind a meme is fixed. As objects in continuous variation, memes are open, invite change, and engender collective production. In their collectivity and unfixity, memes thus are often considered somewhat ‘author-less.’⁴⁸ ‘In meme culture, flow takes primacy over origin, as the creator of an object and even the conditions in which it was made often remain unknown to the legions of users who remix it and pass it on.’⁴⁹ As they are subject to constant change, imitation, and mutation, and can be shared anonymously between hundreds of thousands of people, it is often quite impossible to trace memes to a singular source. Analysing the case of memetic subversions against the authoritarian Azerbaijan regime, for instance, Katy E. Pearce and Adnan Hajizada argue that ‘memes eschew attribution and the anonymity of them enables a type of freedom, especially in cases where a meme is transgressive.’⁵⁰ In their capacity to escape dominant knowledge-production routes and

⁴⁴Limor Shifman, ‘Memes in a digital world: Reconciling with a conceptual troublemaker’, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 18:3 (2013), p. 363.

⁴⁵Henry Jenkins, *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009), p. 5.

⁴⁶Jacques Rancière and Steve Corcoran, *Dissensus on Politics and Aesthetics* (London, UK: Continuum, 2010).

⁴⁷Dean Cooper-Cunningham, ‘Security, sexuality, and the Gay Clown Putin meme: Queer theory and international responses to Russian political homophobia’, *Security Dialogue* (2022).

⁴⁸While most memes can be considered author-less, there is also a significant community of precarious meme-makers that derive profit from their individual memetic productions. See Idil Galip, ‘The “grotesque” in Instagram memes’, in Chloë Arkenbout, Jack Wilson, and Daniel de Zeeuw (eds), *Critical Meme Reader: Global Mutations of the Viral Image* (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2021).

⁴⁹Laine Nooney and Laura Portwood-Stacer, ‘One does not simply: An introduction to the Special Issue on Internet memes’, in Laine Nooney and Laura Portwood-Stacer (eds), *Journal of Visual Culture*, 13:3 (2014), p. 249.

⁵⁰Katy E. Pearce and Adnan Hajizada, ‘No laughing matter: Humor as a means of dissent in the digital era: The case of authoritarian Azerbaijan’, *Demokratizatsiya*, 22 (2014), p. 79.

their particular collective anonymity and untraceability, memes open up spatial potentiality for the production of 'counter-publics', 'parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs.'⁵¹ These circulations, as made possible by the rhizomatic spatial arrangement of the memescape, in turn, potentialise disruptions and interventions into the hegemonic meaning structures of striated spaces.

The rhizomaticity of the memescape, in its decentralised, ahierarchical, horizontal, and anonymous circulation of discourse in continuous variation is one aspect of what configures the memescape towards smooth relations. However, rhizomaticity does not indicate an absence of power relations. A rhizomatic relation designates the relational space in which those power relations are differently potentialised and actualised. While these relations can open up potentials where certain power relations are subverted or escaped, the everyday circulation of memes still involves myriad discursive, affective and material power relations that are (re)iterated, (re)produced, and disseminated through these decentralised, ahierarchical, and horizontal co-productions. In that regard, the memescape is not 'outside' the striated space of the international. Rather, it is a relational space where the power relations of the striated space impart divergent potentialities.

The memescape as nomadic: Play and humour

Deleuze argues that a nomadic spatial configuration, 'even when it concerns the serious business of life, is more like a space of play, or a rule of play.'⁵² In the memescape, the predominant mode of expression and interaction, similarly, is of play, non-seriousness, and humour, which I argue creates a similar nomadic spatial tendency. Here, the so-called stable constants of knowledge, truth, and meaning as produced by striated, segmented spaces instead orient towards the playful instability of constantly moving signs, which are often ambiguous and ambivalent.⁵³ Whereas the international is often a space where the dominant affective relation is 'seriousness'⁵⁴ and respect for a hegemonic understanding of 'truth', the memescape's predominant playfulness and humour enact an alternative, smoother spatial configuration where meaning structures begin to lose their seeming stability. In fact, the majority of the content that circulates within the memescape does not necessarily exist for the purpose of (re)producing a correct, serious, or functional representation of reality. Rather, they work through enacting playful, humorous interventions that ambiguate the subject's seemingly stable relation to that very reality. This playful relation to reality, as Aggie Hirst argues, is 'characterised by movement and process, as opposed to existing in a static form, and because this movement has productive effects on the actors and objects it touches, play takes the ordinary and the given and changes them into something qualitatively different.'⁵⁵ In the nomadic and playful space of the memescape, therefore, meaning starts moving in unexpected and ambiguous directions as signs shift in producing ironic, absurd, humorous, and silly memes.

These playful, humorous relations enabled by the nomadicity of the memescape are productive of various political potentialities where the striated logic of the international can be differentially affected. As Alister Wedderburn argues, 'humour can function either to maintain the continuity of social systems or as an engine of change: it is a mode of discourse and a field of practice through which the social and political fields can be delimited, organised, reproduced, negotiated,

⁵¹Nancy Fraser, 'Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy', *Social Text*, 25/26 (1990), p. 67.

⁵²Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, p. 36.

⁵³Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Milner, *The Ambivalent Internet: Mischief, Oddity, and Antagonism Online* (Cambridge, UK and Malden, MA: Polity, 2017).

⁵⁴Jenny Edkins, *Poststructuralism & International Relations: Bringing the Political Back In* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999), p. 32.

⁵⁵Aggie Hirst, 'Play in(g) international theory', *Review of International Studies* (2019), p. 897.

and transformed in any number of contingent and provisional ways.⁵⁶ The memescape's playfulness certainly potentialises disruptions and interventions into stable, hegemonic understandings dominating knowledge-production in the international. As Simon Critchley contends, humour may 'defamiliarise the familiar'.⁵⁷ Through absurd, ironic, parodic, or subversive play on once-stable signs, it may reveal the vulnerable ground on which political reality is constructed and naturalised. In the memescape, as signs lose their expected stability, lines between sincerity and irony, reality and mockery, and seriousness and non-seriousness become muddled and ambivalent, which potentialise conditions for novel relations towards the political world surrounding the subjects within. For instance, as demonstrated by Marcella Szablewicz in her work on Chinese youth engagement with humorous Internet culture, the playful configuration of the memescape can carve out spaces for disenfranchised subjects to escape the seriousness of official discursive domains. As she shows, against the 'culture of official-centricity, the Internet Culture of humour and play assumes special significance' as it creates 'an alternative locus of power, permitting the transgression of existing social and cultural hierarchies'.⁵⁸ The smoothness of the memescape, in its digital enactment of continuous play, here, potentialises a space where the seemingly stable injunctions of the Chinese government become open to disruptive transgression.

However, humour is not necessarily subversive or positive.⁵⁹ Most humorous production nonetheless relies on and (re)iterates striated lines of division and hegemonic structures of expectation and meaning for its consumption and socialisation. As Nicholas Holm writes, 'Humour is never just anarchic negation, but rather also assumes a set of beliefs and structures against which incongruity can be perceived and ridicule mobilised'.⁶⁰ Humorous movement of signs do not only subvert or destabilise political reality but often become non-official sites through which various striated hierarchies and power relations can be reproduced through unseeming, everyday circulations.

Consider the once-famous First World problems⁶¹/Third World problems⁶² memes that satirise living conditions in the so-called first and third worlds and the ironic contrast between what is perceived to be First World ingratitude and Third World gratitude. These playful, silly memes, in their everyday circulation, while seemingly moving signs through which an ironic, comic effect is produced, in fact, work to reproduce and entrench stereotypical images and expectations of not only stable and homogeneous First/Third worlds with monolithic economic conditions but also a gendered image of the ungrateful first world woman – always complaining about 'silly' things (Figure 1). In contrast to the ungrateful woman, the infantilised Third World subjects find gratitude despite the horrid political and economic conditions they are situated in (Figure 2). Through these various comic effects, the 'First World problems/ Third World problems' memes reinstate and recirculate images of racialised and gendered difference through which a particular construction of the international is thereby sustained. On the other hand, however, as open to

⁵⁶ Alister Wedderburn, *Humour, Subjectivity and World Politics: Everyday Articulations of Identity at the Limits of Order* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2021), p. 13.

⁵⁷ Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London, UK and New York, NY: Routledge, 2002).

⁵⁸ Marcella Szablewicz, 'The "losers" of China's Internet: Memes as "structures of feeling" for disillusioned young netizens,' *China Information*, 28:2 (2014), p. 262.

⁵⁹ Helle Malmvig, 'Jesting international politics: The productive power and limitations of humorous practices in an age of entertainment politics,' *Review of International Studies* (2022), pp. 1–22.

⁶⁰ Nicholas Holm, 'Against the assault of laughter: Differentiating critical and resistant laughter,' in Krista Bonello Rutter Giappone, Fred Francis, and Iain Mackenzie (eds), *Comedy and Critical Thought: Laughter as Resistance* (London, UK and Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2018).

⁶¹ Know Your Meme, 'First World Problems,' available at: <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/first-world-problems> accessed 19 July 2019.

⁶² Know Your Meme, 'Third World Success,' available at: <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/third-world-success> accessed 19 July 2019.



Figure 1. Examples of First World problems memes.⁶³



Figure 2. Examples of Third World success kids memes.⁶⁴

continuous variation and further movement by the virtue of the memescape's undetermined spatial configuration, the same memetic circulation also becomes potentially productive of a space

⁶³Know Your Meme, 'I'm So Tired of Eating ...', available at: <https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/196738-first-world-problems> accessed 7 August 2019; Know Your Meme, 'Someone on the Internet ...', available at: <https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/196748-first-world-problems> accessed 7 August 2019.

⁶⁴Know Your Meme, 'Found Water ...', available at: <https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/209251-third-world-success> accessed 7 August 2019; Know Your Meme, 'Got Pepper Sprayed ...', available at: <https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/209243-third-world-success> accessed 7 August 2019.

where these expectations can be disrupted, mocked, and de-bordered. In Reddit, for example, the absurdity of the simplistic binary of First World/Third World problems created and circulated through memes are creatively satirised through the creation of subreddits such as *r/fifthworldproblems*, *r/sixthworldproblems*, and *r/thousandthworldproblems* which move and disrupt the racial and gendered expectations of the original memes themselves by posting silly, fake complaints set in absurd, alternative realities (Figure 3). Here thus lies the divergent potentialities of the memescape's nomadicity: its playful relation to reality is productive of multiple political horizons for engaging with the international's striated space. The memescape doesn't determine the outcome but opens up a space of smooth tendencies where multiple novel relations are potentialised.

The memescape as multiplicity: Affective relations

While memes move rhizomatically and move stable signs nomadically, they also *move* a multiplicity of subjects through their affective resonance. Memes are affective artefacts. In their circulation and resonance, they promote, enable, and invite relations between subjects orienting towards one another through shared laughter or other affective relations. As Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai argue, laughter and jokes are 'invitations' towards a shared relationality.⁶⁵ When a meme or memes are liked, enjoyed, shared, and then circulated across platforms, subjects, and borders, they create resonant affective spaces and atmospheres⁶⁶ around productive sentiments such as levity, joy, excitement, possibility, as well as 'sad passions',⁶⁷ such as anger, frustration, injustice, cynicism, and resentment. These shared affective spaces as potentialised by the memescape work to bring together subjects heretofore unconnected or distributed across various lines of difference in producing heterogeneous and multiple coming together of diverse political subjects while also mobilising pre-existing and/or novel communal relations for the cultivation of political sensibilities. A meme's simple, immediate, and resonant impact, as well as its instant translatability and templatability, potentialise lines of relation between and across different languages, ideological lines, cultures, and borders where affective sentiments can be circulated, embodied, and felt in commonality.

These affective relationalities, as they move subjects together, produce multiplicities of subjects that connect through shared resonances. A multiplicity, in Deleuze's conceptualisation, 'does not designate a combination of the many and the one, but rather an organisation belonging to the many as such, which has no need whatsoever of unity in order to form a system'.⁶⁸ Memes often do not work intentionally towards a functional production of stable unified groupings, instead, they move subjects towards momentary, spontaneous, or undetermined connections created through their resonant affective force. Consider the case of Turkey's Gezi Park protests and Occupy Protests in the United States about which Zeynep Tufekci argues that the memescape's 'shared culture allowed common sentiment and connections to develop between a deeply religious Muslim woman and the defiant occupiers in Zuccotti Park despite starkly different beliefs about religion, family, modesty, and other issues'.⁶⁹ As subjects of varying political and cultural beliefs and understandings clashed against forces of the state, the memescape's affective space of levity produced a momentary, spontaneous site for the cultivation of a shared force of movement. As Zeynep Tufekci, again, observes,

⁶⁵ Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai, 'Comedy has issues', *Critical Inquiry*, 43:2 (2017), pp. 233–49.

⁶⁶ Ben Anderson, 'Affective atmospheres', *Emotion, Space and Society*, 2:2 (2009), pp. 77–81.

⁶⁷ James Williams, 'Diagrams of comic estrangement', in Giappone, Francis, and Mackenzie (eds), *Comedy and Critical Thought*.

⁶⁸ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, p. 182.

⁶⁹ Zeynep Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest* (New Haven, CT and London, UK: Yale University Press, 2017), p. 83.

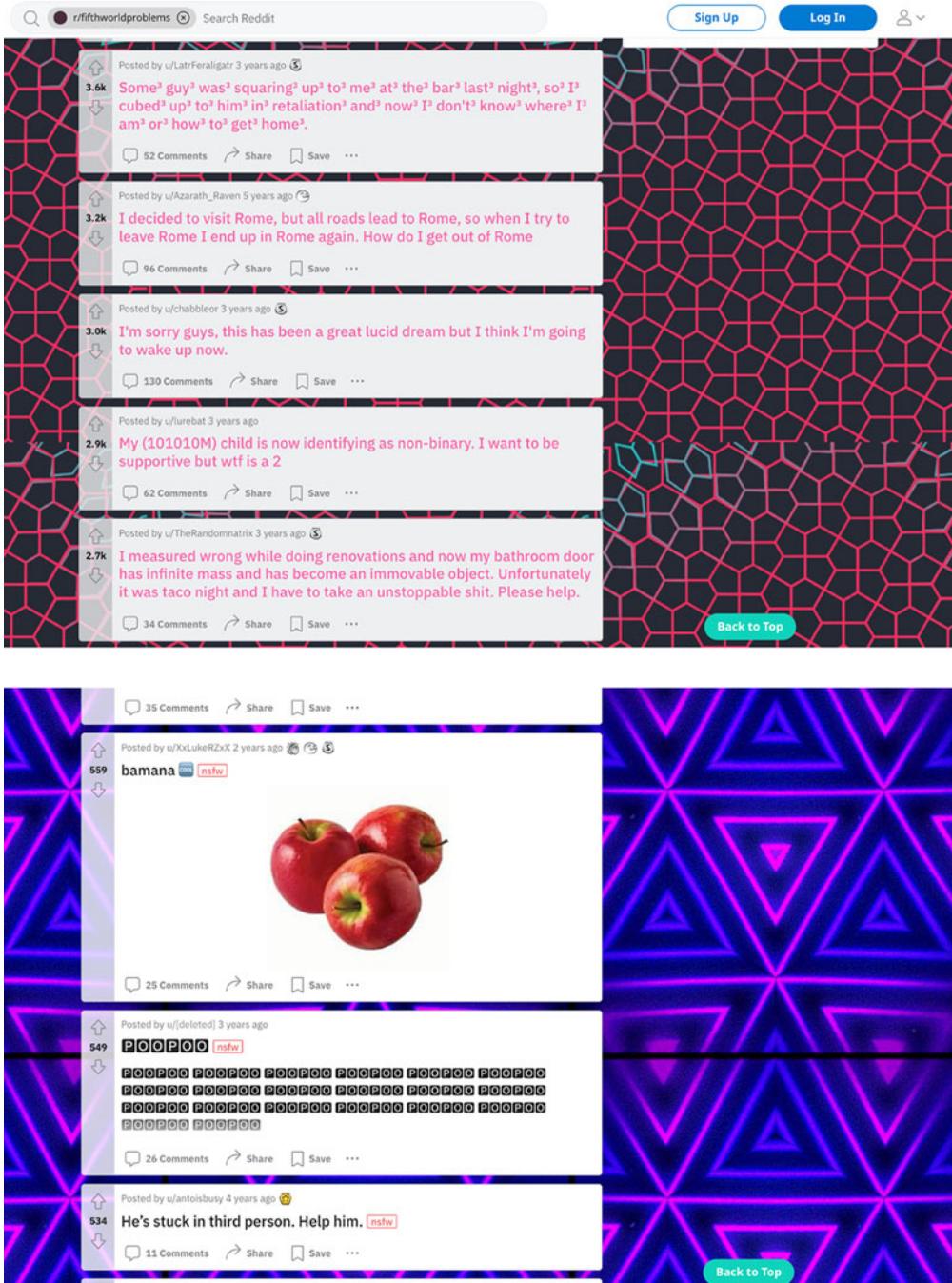


Figure 3. Screenshots taken from r/fifthworldproblems and r/sixthworldproblems.

I watched people go to the front lines of the park during clashes (where the barricades kept the police away), get tear gassed, return to the back of the park to catch their breath, take out their phones to catch up, and then start laughing at the latest meme making fun of the authorities.⁷⁰

⁷⁰Ibid., p. 111.

These momentary relationalities created by shared affects such as laughter potentialised politically congregated multiplicities of subjects that came together in and through the memescape.

Affect and the multiplicities created by the memescape, however, are not detached from the social, material, and political conditions making them possible. While affective atmospheres created by the memescape are potentially productive of de-bordered lines of connection, the situated subjects of laughter, enjoyment, or other affective sentiments circulating the memescape nonetheless carry traces from striated lines of differentiation constituted through the international, which impact, distribute, and determine which memes resonate affectively and which do not across political subjects. The memescape is not a space free of situated, embodied subjectivity or a cyberutopian space where identities are made null. When subjects enter the memescape, they bring with them the differential subjective, discursive, and affective dispositions they were interpellated with in striated spaces of the international. Affect distributes differentially⁷¹ and this distribution affects the lines of connection and dis-connection established in the memescape. Whereas a meme circulation can become productive of cross-border connections, therefore, they may also impart their own striations where resentments, angers, and hatreds amplify through the distribution of memes, creating or accelerating relations of animosity and antagonism across national, racial, and gendered lines. This is exemplified in the recent work of Renée Marlin-Bennett and Susan T. Jackson where they argue that ‘the spread of cruel memes normalises hatreds, contributing to a negative global politics in which hatred becomes acceptable and in which we begin to expect a general climate of antagonism with Othering as the norm.’⁷² Here, the memescape connects and brings together subjects through resonant affects. However, these resonances are animated by resentment, hatred, and antagonism instead of forces that may lead to more productive relationalities.

These affective striations are further enabled by the mechanisms of communicative capitalism where algorithmic structures of feedback and recommendation pick up on the affective orientations of subjects engaging with memes and provide them with similarly resonant products. As Richard Seymour argues, thus, algorithms work to ‘distil tendencies’:⁷³ extracting desires and behavioural codes hidden underneath to ‘pick on dark yearnings simmering below the supposedly consensual surface of politics’⁷⁴ and ‘digitalise the unconscious’.⁷⁵ Algorithms rechannel affects and pick on what resonates towards enabling a continuously relatable and enjoyable stream of meme content that not always enables politically productive connections but entrap subjects in loops of addictive and increasing consumption of memes.⁷⁶ Here, the memescape, in enabling movements of affect, does not always act against or organise connections against striated structures of differentiation and accumulation but becomes a contributive component of it.

The affective force of the memescape creates the potential for relation between a multiplicity of subjects. Some of these relations enable connections across and disruptive of striated lines that may engender novel modes of political togetherness. Some of these, on the other hand, bring together a multiplicity of subjects through affective forces of differentiation, segmentation, and otherness: thus reproducing and even accelerating the very striated relations encoding the international. Such divergent potentialities of the memescape can be observed in each spatial feature explored above. The memescape is a space of potentiality with smooth tendencies enabling a multitude of novel sites and relations for politics in and in relation to the international. How we read through, navigate, and act within these tendencies and potentialities will condition the horizons of the memescape. In the next section, I explore two opposite examples of how the memescape’s smooth spatial tendencies potentialise divergent political subjectivities and movements.

⁷¹Sara Ahmed, ‘Affective economies’, *Social Text*, 22:2 (2004), pp. 117–39.

⁷²Renée Marlin-Bennett and Susan T. Jackson, ‘DIY cruelty: The global political micro-practices of hateful memes’, *Global Studies Quarterly*, 2:2 (2022), p. 2.

⁷³Richard Seymour, *The Twittering Machine* (London, UK: The Indigo Press, 2019), p. 142.

⁷⁴Ibid., p. 169.

⁷⁵Ibid., p.170.

⁷⁶Dean, *Blog Theory*.

Resistance and the Indigenous memescape

Racialised, marginalised, and otherwise othered subjects and groups have historically found in novel technological and pop-cultural spaces⁷⁷ opportunities for resisting structures of violence, domination, and oppression. While such technological and pop-cultural spaces are often dominated, both numerically and infrastructurally, by majoritarian discourses, affects, and subjectivities,⁷⁸ their spatial features often also open the path towards the expression of these resistances. As Andre Brock Jr shows,⁷⁹ while a digital divide certainly exists that determines the differential level of access marginalised subjects have to social media platforms, these very subjects often invent creative and collective modes of relating to these platforms and spaces through which they can substantiate their political and cultural existence. The memescape is brimmed with dominant discourses and affects that work to reify the striated structure that makes the international and its bordered regime of differentiation. However, when entangled with histories and cultures of resistance and relationality⁸⁰ that define Indigenous existence across the planet, it also provides a space through which these resistances can be extended, histories of settler colonialism overturned and mocked, and affective relationalities between Indigenous people across borders made possible.

The striated space of the international, in its political, disciplinary, pop-cultural, and everyday production of knowledge, is predominantly a spatial configuration exclusionary of Indigenous experiences and histories of settler colonial violence.⁸¹ Indigenous experiences and histories are often either not acknowledged or falsely represented in mainstream media and education apparatuses leading to their predominant exclusion from political and cultural spaces of the international. While racialised understandings of Indigenous peoples as ‘primitive’, ‘irrational’, and ‘traditional’ structure the imaginations of Indigenous existence across public consciousness,⁸² Indigenous subjects engage with rhizomatic spatialities of the memescape in order to constitute and extend their political claims and resistances against dominant exclusionary knowledges erasing the violences (historical and contemporary) that they face. Similar aesthetic and visual claims, challenges, and subversions of recognition that Indigenous people make have been analysed previously in Roland Bleiker and Sally Butler’s analysis of diplomatic art exhibitions of Indigenous Australians.⁸³ In the memescape, the spatial configuration of these challenges move from the largely enclosed, striated arenas such as state-commissioned art exhibitions towards a more expansive, smoother space of memetic collective production engendering wider and immediately accessible practices of resistant expression.

Ryan Frazer and Bronwyn Carlson’s work on Aboriginal Indigenous Meme communities in Australia offer strong examples of how these knowledges are resisted through the memescape. In their analysis of various memes posted on the Aboriginal Facebook page ‘Blackfulla Revolution’, which has around 200,000 followers, they unravel the playfully nomadic ways through which Indigenous memes unmake myths of Australian history and sovereignty. In doing so, they argue, these memes ‘function as an anti-colonial assemblage by contributing to the invention of a people’.⁸⁴ In one example, for instance, they show the ‘Well, This is Awkward’ (Figure 4) meme. The meme,

⁷⁷ For more on this, see Alexander G. Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (New York, NY: Grove Press, 2007).

⁷⁸ Christopher McGahan, ‘Racing Cybercultures: Minoritarian Art and Cultural Politics on the Internet’ (2014).

⁷⁹ André L. Brock, *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2019), p. 17.

⁸⁰ Jarrad Reddekop, ‘Against ontological capture: Drawing lessons from Amazonian Kichwa relationality’, *Review of International Studies* (2021), pp. 1–18.

⁸¹ Ananya Sharma, ‘Decolonizing International Relations: Confronting erasures through Indigenous knowledge systems’, *International Studies*, 58:1 (2021), pp. 25–40.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁸³ Roland Bleiker and Sally Butler, ‘Radical dreaming: Indigenous art and cultural diplomacy’, *International Political Sociology*, 10:1 (2016), pp. 56–74.

⁸⁴ Ryan Frazer and Bronwyn Carlson, ‘Indigenous memes and the invention of a people’, *Social Media + Society*, 3:4 (2017), p. 2.

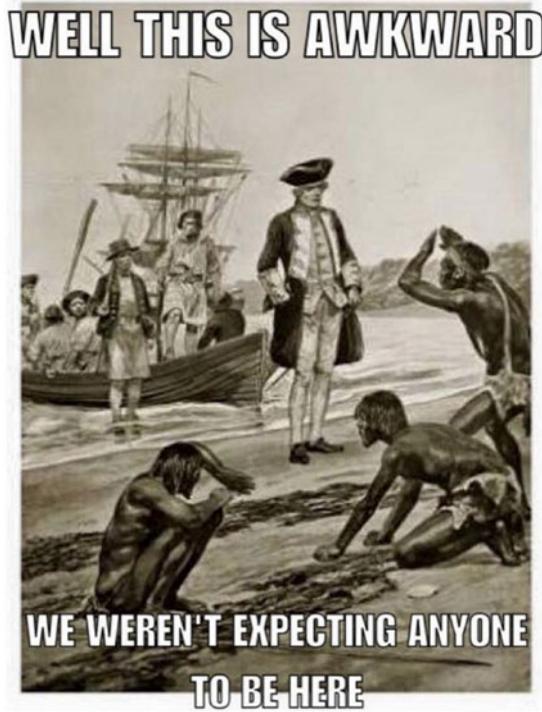


Figure 4. 'Well This is Awkward' meme.⁸⁶

firstly, relies on the repeatedly performed and reiterated colonial knowledge of the 'terra nullius' principle that established Australia as a 'nobody's land' before the arrival of settlers such as James Cook, which made possible the invasion and colonisation of Indigenous land. Through a nomadic play on an iconic image of striated Australian myth making depicting this arrival, the meme superpositions an incongruous and anachronistic dialect of 'well, this is awkward' on the image for comedic effect. The bottom text, 'we were not expecting anyone to be here', on the other hand, furthers the nomadic play on this historical narrative by replacing the terra nullius principle with the literal existence of Aboriginal people before the arrival. The meme, through these nomadic plays on multiple expectations and narratives, produces a humorous yet also significantly political renarration of Australian settler colonialism. Using a concise and accessible modern dialect, it disrupts a hegemonic historical narrative and replaces it with an alternate telling that repositions and reinstates Aboriginal people in the 'arrival'. The full text next to the meme reads: 'Well this is awkward. We weren't expecting anyone to be here. Never mind. We'll tell the folks back home it's terra nullius.' These nomadic, playful retellings, as Frazer and Carlson argue, thus 'act as a pedagogical device, pulling apart the sanitised account which perpetuates the myths of terra nullius and peaceful settlement and encouraging others to contribute to this deconstruction.'⁸⁵

Similar Indigenous memes of resistance traverse the memescape in myriad ways. In doing so, they not only destabilise the myths that entrench settler colonialism, but also establish affective modes of resonance between other racialised struggles around the world: debordering not only in discourse but also in potentialising political connections across borders. The affective force of these

⁸⁵Ibid., p. 9.

⁸⁶Imgur, 'Well This Is Awkward ...' (23 November 2015), available at: {<https://i.imgur.com/vtZ4std.jpg>} accepted 7 August 2019.



Figure 5. Illegal Immigrantes meme.⁸⁹

memes, as argued above, enables anti-colonial multiplicities to come together in and through the memetic practices. Frazer and Carlson's analysis reveals how the memes on Blackfulla Revolution not only resonate with Aboriginal people but also allow 'oceanic connections'⁸⁷ to emerge between other Indigenous peoples and struggles of racial and colonial emancipation. These connections are not determined solely by memes. Such solidarities and connections have been continually made and remade through centuries of struggles. The memescape's rhizomatic and multiple features, rather, allow and constitute a pop-cultural space of relation that enables an extension of these relations of struggle. Memes resonate and move. They build connections. In comments under Blackfulla Revolution memes, Frazer and Carlson find Māori, Irish, and Native American people sharing their own experiences and injuries of settler colonial violence,

I am Native American ... meaning Indigenous to North America. It infuriates me when non native ppl [people] of the world make excuses and turn the blame on us and tell us what should and should not offend us. 100 MILLION NORTH AMERICAN NATIVES MASSACRED. Guess what ... as hard as the Euros tried ... they could not get rid of us just as they could not get rid of the Aborigines of Australia. They are still TRYING to colonize us ... we still fight the stereotypes about us ... we still fight against them polluting our lands.#WeAreStillHere #IdleNoMore.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Robbie Shilliam, *The Black Pacific: Anti-Colonial Struggles and Oceanic Connections* (London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015)

⁸⁸ Frazer and Carlson, 'Indigenous memes and the invention of a people', p. 9.

⁸⁹ Welcome To Country, 'Top 50 Aboriginal Resistance Memes', available at: {<https://www.welcometocountry.org/top-50-aboriginal-resistance-memes/>} accessed 7 August 2019.

In this comment, one can observe how such memes do not only move subjects situated within the particular struggle of Indigenous Australian politics, but also affectively move across borders and political struggles, resonating in the context of Indigenous struggles in North America. The memescape does not only connect peoples through playful affects such as levity. Indeed, the humorous affect translates to and instantiates other affective connections. The humorous meme, in the comment above, for example, allows a translation into a shared affective experience of frustration, trauma, and pain.

Other Indigenous memes also extend support for refugees and immigrants coming to Australia who face significant racial exclusion. Here, the Indigenous meme does not only allow connections across Indigenous struggles, but extends to wider struggles against carceral, racial border regimes, and nationalist violence. The ‘Illegal Immigrants Go Back Home’ (Figure 5) meme, nomadically shifting signs on seemingly stable notions of who belongs to Australia ‘legally’ and who is ‘illegal’ by playing with the nationalist trope of ‘go back to your country’ from an Indigenous perspective, destabilises and questions structures of settler colonial sovereignty and its exclusionary, racialised border regime. This meme, again, functions by restating and renarrating the existence of Indigenous people back into stable notions of Australianness. Through its play with signs, it makes the ‘legal’ citizen, illegal again, made subject to its own exclusionary regime through a staging of irony.

Of course, Aboriginal people are not the only subjects of the Indigenous memescape. There is a vast, rhizomatic network of Indigenous and Decolonial meme communities and meme makers across the memescape that produce a smooth space of playful, nomadic knowledge production and affective connection against striated structures of exclusion and nationhood that routinely and violently disregard or diminish the experiences and existence of Indigenous peoples and struggles. From communal subreddits such as r/Indiancountry and r/DankPreColumbianMemes⁹⁰ to myriad Instagram meme accounts like ‘Decolonial.Meme.Queens’,⁹¹ ‘Indigenous_Fememeisms’,⁹² and ‘DecolonialIndigenousMemes’,⁹³ Indigenous subjects produce and circulate everyday memetic artefacts that playfully deconstruct and disentangle colonial and racial structures of violence and domination and build coalitions and alliances across lines of difference. These meme pages sometimes bring queer and feminist perspectives as well as anti-capitalist critiques for the cultivation of their various practices of resistance. In their pages and subreddits, they also offer informational, theoretical, and historical sources for Indigenous critique. The relations created, therefore, are not only humorous connections but also wider relations of solidarity building and consciousness raising as an extension of anti-colonial struggles.

The smooth spatial tendencies of the memescape, therefore, have potentialised a relational space through which cross-border Indigenous connections, politics, and resistances can be made and extended. In its rhizomaticity, it provides a space outside traditional striated structures of knowledge-production dominated by a particular settler colonial state apparatus where a network of Indigenous meme communities and subjects may distribute and circulate anti-colonial and decolonial knowledges and experiences. In its nomadicity, it allows playful, humorous, and widely accessible subversions and deconstructions of widespread and entrenched settler colonial myths and understandings. In its multiplicity, it instantiates various affective connections between cross-border Indigenous experiences and subjectivities as well as wider global struggles against myriad structures of violence and oppression.

⁹⁰Reddit, ‘r/DankPreColumbianMemes’, available at: {<https://www.reddit.com/r/DankPreColumbianMemes/>} accessed 7 July 2022.

⁹¹Instagram, ‘DMQ (@decolonial.meme.queens)’, available at: {<https://www.instagram.com/decolonial.meme.queens/?hl=en>} accessed 7 July 2022.

⁹²Instagram, ‘Indigenous Fememeisms (@Indigenous_Fememeisms)’, available at: {https://www.instagram.com/Indigenous_fememeisms/?hl=en} accessed 7 July 2022

⁹³Instagram, ‘Decolonial Indigenous Memes (@DecolonialIndigenousMemes)’ available at: {<https://www.instagram.com/decolonialindigenousmemes/?hl=en>} accessed 7 July 2022

The reactionary memescape

A smooth space is not determinately a space of emancipation or liberation. Neither power relations nor racialised, gendered, and myriad other structures of domination disappear into thin air. Rather, smooth spaces change the stakes of the conflict. How these power relations manifest and play out transforms in a smooth arrangement. In Deleuze and Guattari's multiple cautions against rhizomatic, smooth spaces one can indeed find that such spatial configurations always hold the potentials of accelerating and enabling fascisms, reactionary sensibilities, and desires.⁹⁴ The meme-dominated, chaotic, and vulgar spaces of an emergent white supremacist and misogynist 'Alt-Right' sensibility exemplifies this tendency. A smooth space enables relations, promotes affective connections, and produces nomadic movements where the stability of signs gives way to ambivalences and ambiguities. Such a spatial figuration equally makes possible leakages and diffusions of reactionary, racist, and sexist sensibilities that are pushed outside (but never eliminated) from the performatively 'respectable' colour blind public sphere of the striated international.⁹⁵ The smooth tendencies of the memescape, as Alexandra Deem contends, have indeed potentialised 'affective economies of transgression where the relational, fluid, and felt dimensions of a burgeoning right-wing sensibility and related set of digital speech practices that exceed the bounds of political parties, social movements of individual actors'.⁹⁶ This reactionary memescape both disrupts and intervenes into a particular striated fantasy of a Western-led, post-racial, and post-gendered neoliberal international where such enmities are considered a thing of the past or as belonging to the temporally past Global South,⁹⁷ while simultaneously reproducing and accelerating the very differentiations and violences upholding and underlying this fantasy. In my analysis of these disruptions below, instead of specifically analysing the content of reactionary memes, to avoid the reproduction and widespread circulation of their racist and misogynist aesthetics, I instead focus on what forms of reactionary connections are potentialised through the memescape and what kind of political impact these memetic relations create in global politics.

On 15 March 2019, a 28-year-old Australian white supremacist opened fire in a mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand and murdered 49 people. Minutes before live-streaming the shooting online, he published a manifesto titled 'The Great Replacement' on the infamously vulgar and far-right leading imageboard '8chan'. The document, according to journalist Robert Evans, was 'dotted, liberally, with references to memes and Internet in-jokes that only the extremely online would get'.⁹⁸ Its tone was deliberately and provocatively ironic and playful, threading the ambiguous and ambivalent lines of trolling and shitposting⁹⁹ and demonstrating mastery in memetic languages and understandings. During the live stream, the shooter told his viewers to 'Subscribe to Pewdiepie', referencing a popular Internet meme that circulated on platforms such as Youtube and Reddit for months before the shooting. A few months later, another white gunman in Halle, Germany shot two people in a synagogue with homemade weapons. His white supremacist manifesto uploaded to the Internet before the shooting carried an eerie likeness to the ramblings of the Christchurch shooter; it was brimming with popular Internet memes and references to his favourite anime shows, and was written in a manner that paralleled the aesthetics of video game reward systems where the plans for the massacre were described through a ludic language of achievements, objectives, and

⁹⁴Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*.

⁹⁵Alana Lentin, 'Racism in public or public racism: Doing anti-racism in "post-racial" times', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 39:1 (2016), pp. 33–48.

⁹⁶Alexandra Deem, 'Extreme speech | The digital traces of #whitegenocide and Alt-Right affective economies of transgression', *International Journal of Communication*, 13:0 (2019), p. 3184.

⁹⁷Aurelien Mondon and Aaron Winter, *Reactionary Democracy: How Racism and the Populist Far Right became Mainstream* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso Books, 2020), p. 2.

⁹⁸Robert Evans, 'Shitposting, Inspirational Terrorism, and the Christchurch Mosque Massacre', available at: <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/rest-of-world/2019/03/15/shitposting-inspirational-terrorism-and-the-christchurch-mosque-massacre/>, accessed 12 August 2019.

⁹⁹Shitposting is the act of posting deliberately offensive and/or non-sensical content on social media for the purposes of entertainment or 'the lulz'.

bonuses.¹⁰⁰ Then, in 2022, a white supremacist attacker in Buffalo, United States killed ten people, mostly black shoppers. His manifesto stated that he first became interested in such violently racist ideas through memetic channels in 4chan; that he 'learned through infographics, shitposts, and memes that the White race is dying out, that blacks are disproportionately killing Whites, that the average black takes \$700,000 from tax-payers in their lifetime, and that the Jews and the elite were behind this.'¹⁰¹

These white supremacist attacks and the memescape, evidently, were intimately interconnected. While the ambitions, race, and gender hierarchies, and worldviews of these white supremacist subjects were deeply striated and reproductive of a bordered structure of oppression and exclusion, the spatial means and modes of their political, aesthetic, and cultural practices tend toward and make use of the smooth tendencies of the memescape. These attacks are connected, but not through a hierarchical, centred mode of organisation. As Josh Vandiver argues, rather, the so-called 'Alt-Right' functions rhizomatically: 'leaderless, networked, and acentric.'¹⁰² In this rhizomatic structure, the equally rhizomatic possibilities for decentralised, reciprocally constitutive relation potentialised by the memescape assume a fundamental role. As often-anonymous, ephemeral, and continually moving and mutating products that cannot be traced to a singular source of emergence but rather circulate online and offline structures through collective production, memes provide a space for the expression and rapid dissemination of violent ideas and affects that would be frowned upon in the public sphere. As small, concise, and resonant viral products, memes allow reactionary thought to percolate in and traverse pop-cultural online spaces. The Buffalo shooter was certainly aware of this potentiality as he called his readers to 'create memes, post memes, and spread memes. Memes have done more for the ethno-nationalist movement than any manifesto.'¹⁰³

As important as its rhizomatic mode of dissemination, however, what makes the memescape a fundamental site for reactionary, fascist desires and circulations is its nomadic mobility of signs where the production of ironic, non-serious memes enable a muddling of the lines between the serious and non-serious through which reactionary thoughts can leak into and/or traverse under unseemly spaces or conversations.¹⁰⁴ As Raúl Pérez argues, 'in a post-civil rights society where overt racist discourse became disavowed in public, racist humour allows interlocutors to foster social relations by partaking in the forbidden fruit of racist discourse.'¹⁰⁵ While the humorous play of signs, as seen in the case of Indigenous memes, can function to defamiliarise the familiar by attacking normative ontologies and expectations, the situated subjectivity of those who laugh and whom they laugh at fundamentally alters the context and possibilities of these nomadic mobilities. Humour is always relational and always embodied. 'Jokes only work successfully when participants are in agreement about the social world and have an implicit shared understanding as to what constitutes joking.'¹⁰⁶ Reactionary memes, although working through a nonsensical, vulgar, and transgressive subversion of signs, rely on historically conditioned and racially situated understandings of superiority and inferiority for the resonance and execution of their comedic effect. The muddling of lines in these ironic and nonsensical productions, while producing ambiguities and ambivalences for those outside, thus simultaneously work to constitute lines of inclusion and exclusion for those that are familiar with and knowledgeable of subcultural memetic vernaculars and

¹⁰⁰Ryan Broderick, 'Far-Right Halle Shooter Allegedly Posted a Manifesto with Xbox-Like "Achievements" to Anime Message Board before Livestreaming Attack', available at: {<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/ryanhatesthis/halle-germany-shooter-meguca-anime-manifesto>} accessed 30 October 2019.

¹⁰¹Payton Gendron, 'Manifesto' (2022).

¹⁰²Josh Vandiver, 'Alt-virilities: Masculinism, rhizomatics, and the contradictions of the American Alt-Right', *Politics, Religion & Ideology*, 21:2 (2020), p. 156.

¹⁰³Gendron, 'Manifesto'.

¹⁰⁴Viveca S. Greene, "'Deplorable" satire: Alt-Right memes, white genocide tweets, and redpilling normies', *Studies in American Humor*, 5:1 (2019), pp. 31–69.

¹⁰⁵Raúl Pérez, 'Racism without hatred? Racist humor and the myth of "colorblindness"', *Sociological Perspectives*, 60:5 (2017), pp. 956–74.

¹⁰⁶Critchley, *On Humour*, pp. 4–5.

in-jokes, expanding and instantiating an underground network of reactionary subjects building communal ties through relations of detached irony, transgression, and shitposting.

These reactionary memetic circulations also work through the production of affectively congregated multiplicities. As Marc Tuters and Sal Hagen observe in their analysis of the reactionary 4chan imageboard, ‘memes function as floating signifiers that bring together a cross-section of actors who may not necessarily share a common political agenda, but who are nevertheless temporarily united through affective bonds.’¹⁰⁷ Against debilitating boredoms, senses of disenfranchisement, and hopelessness conditioned by a neoliberal world in crisis, the memescape offers a way of experiencing affective pleasures and enjoyments by subjects that direct such boredoms, resentments, and nihilisms towards falsely and violently identified others. Ben Anderson and Anna Secor show, that the affective structures of enjoyment the memescape enables positions the ‘intensity of a violent fun against a background of potential boredom’¹⁰⁸ leading to the ‘dynamic and contingent emergence of the people as a political subject mobilised against a range of vilified others.’¹⁰⁹ This is evident, again, in the Buffalo shooter’s manifesto where before stating how he came across white supremacist memes, he states, ‘I started browsing 4chan in May 2020 after extreme *boredom*.’¹¹⁰ The memescape opens up a space of affective connection through promises and momentary sensations of pleasure and enjoyment situated against felt sad passions such as anger, resentment, and hatred bringing together a cross-border multiplicity of reactionary subjects from New Zealand to Germany to the United States. In doing so, it makes possible the acceleration of a ‘reactionary international’.¹¹¹

The reactionary memescape, therefore, actualises and circulates largely through a smooth spatial logic. It reaches across borders through producing rhizomatic, horizontal relationalities, affectively congregated multiplicities of white supremacist enjoyment and nomadically ambiguous lines of irony that escape and disseminate knowledge outside (but seeping into) mainstream channels of striated communication. These smooth potentialities, however, circle back to entrench and violently maintain the various hierarchical differentiations of race, gender, and coloniality that underlie the bordered striations of the international. This is a form of striation potentialised, produced, and ensured through the smooth spatial tendency of the memescape.

Conclusion

This article aimed to offer a theoretical framework to provide a set of conceptual and analytical tools, which can be used to understand, think through, and navigate the increasingly complicated and conflicting politics of Internet memes in global politics. Analyses of memes in political research so far have primarily focused on what Jonathan Dean calls a ‘consequentialist’ approach to their impact in which ‘social media is seen as a medium through which political campaigns are directed, or as something that may have consequences for (electoral) politics, but it is tacitly framed as not, in and of itself, constitutive of the texture and practice of politics.’¹¹² In moving beyond such an approach, this article offered a spatial ontology of what it called ‘the memescape’ to conceptualise a novel and potentially transformative site of global politics that fundamentally shifts the ways in which digital subjects, aesthetic objects, political discourses, and collective affects interrelate and are constituted. In this approach, memes do not only act upon the striated site of the international, but, in the relational space they open, exist in tension with its politically organised contours.

¹⁰⁷Marc Tuters and Sal Hagen, ‘(((They))) rule: Memetic antagonism and nebulous othering on 4chan’, *New Media & Society*, 22:12 (2020), pp. 2218–37.

¹⁰⁸Ben Anderson and Anna Secor, ‘Propositions on right-wing populism: Available, excessive, optimistic’, *Political Geography*, 96 (2022), p. 2.

¹⁰⁹Ibid., p. 3.

¹¹⁰Gendron, ‘Manifesto’, emphasis added.

¹¹¹Pablo de Orellana and Nicholas Michelsen, ‘Reactionary internationalism: The philosophy of the New Right’, *Review of International Studies*, 45:5 (2019), pp. 748–67.

¹¹²Dean, ‘Sorted for memes and gifs’, p. 257.

A spatial approach to memescape, here, allows us to see memes as more than just singular artefacts that can be used instrumentally to direct politics, but as a broader space of interrelation that constitutes and impart new potentials for how global politics can be navigated and transformed by a multiplicity of actors.

The memescape, as a novel and potentially transformative space of global politics, is one that holds multiple, often conflicting futures and limits by the virtue of what this article conceptualised as its smooth spatial tendencies. Through careful navigation of its spatial logic, which functions through opening up rhizomatic spaces for aesthetic production and circulation, nomadic mobilities of once-stable signs through humour and play, and multiplicities through its affective resonance, we can analyse, reflect on, and act on this emergent site of political potentiality. In this article, I showed two divergent examples of these potentialities: in the cross-border anti-colonial myth deconstruction of Indigenous memes and the white supremacist enjoyments and ironic transgressions of an emergent Alt-Right sensibility. In both examples, the memescape's smooth tendencies provided a space against traditional structures of bordered, serious, and hierarchical knowledge-production of the striated international that offered new configurations of relation, subjectivity, and political possibility in the everyday production of global politics. With the rise of white supremacist attacks that embed themselves in the discursive and affective resources of the memescape and the subsequent emergence of a security apparatus that aims at 'deradicalisation'¹¹³ and prevention, it can be argued that the consequences of the reactionary memescape are more widely felt than the possibilities emerging out of resistant memetic movements. However, as seen by the examples of the Indigenous memescape, and the wider presence of the memescape in recent movements for racial and economic justice such as Occupy and Black Lives Matter,¹¹⁴ the memescape nonetheless potentialises a site where these very reactionary and hierarchical structures can be fought against, problematised, and subverted. In fact, it is important to recognise that the resistant and reactionary memescapes do not only relate themselves against the 'striated international' but also respond to, clash with, and react to one another in continuous variation in what some authors have called 'meme wars'.¹¹⁵ Here, the memescape emerges not only as a spatial configuration situated in political relation to the international but also as a relational space where political conflict *occurs*. It is enticing to focus on only one of these two potentialities and declare the memescape either a utopian space of resistance or a dystopic space of chaotic reaction. However, the real nuances and potentialities of this space become revealed when we engage with it in its multiplicities and its entanglements. 'Never believe that a smooth space will save us.'¹¹⁶ The memescape's presents and futures are not determined but will only be actualised through sustained and careful engagement with its spatial logic.

I argue that a spatial conceptualisation of the memescape provides us with the initial analytical and conceptual tools to begin formulating means through which this nuanced space can be navigated academically and acted on politically. As the 'memeification of (world) politics' becomes more and more tangible, international studies scholars ought to engage with the new spatial politics of the memescape, its possibilities, and its limits more (non-)seriously. This article, in emphasising both the resistant potentials and the reactionary dangers of the memescape, has aimed to caution against a simplistic reading of this site and open space for further research to develop upon its framework. Developing such a framework, furthermore, is crucial to create an ethics of acting on and through this space. How should one think through, write about, and act on the memescape? When one enters the memescape, what forms of political potentials and limits lie ahead of them? What forms of connections can we animate in and through the memescape? How do we act against

¹¹³Ozge Ozduzen et al., 'Stakeholders of (De)-Radicalisation in the UK' (Zenodo, 2021).

¹¹⁴An Xiao Mina, *Memes to Movements: How the World's Most Viral Media is Changing Social Protest and Power* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2019).

¹¹⁵Joan Donovan, Emily Dreyfuss, and Brian Friedberg, *Meme Wars: The Untold Story of the Online Battles Upending Democracy in America* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2022).

¹¹⁶Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 581.

reactionary politics emergent out of this space? Conceptualising the memescape in spatial terms, we can start developing such an ethics of engagement and navigate such complicated and difficult questions.

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