

Unpacking vulgar internet content on the ‘Aboriginal memes’ pages

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Abstract

This paper closely examines 14 offensive internet memes that appeared on racist social media pages set up to vilify Indigenous peoples. An internet meme combines a picture with a catchphrase that communicates short messages to viewers on the web. Since 2012, Internet users have created social media pages as spaces to distribute several messages informed by abhorrent derogatory stereotypes about Indigenous peoples. Whilst meme-creators focus excessively on Indigenous peoples in each meme, this paper examines how these internet memes are a vehicle to assert dual narratives of white colonial superiority and victimhood.

Introduction

Since 2012, non-Indigenous social media users have created and circulated several macro-image internet memes as a way of expressing anti-Indigenous racism across digital spaces. On Facebook.com, these internet users have constructed social media pages that are usually titled ‘Aboriginal memes’, and these pages unite racists who mutually engage in processes of vilifying Indigenous peoples. On these pages, meme-creators share internet memes that feature several toxic narrations of Indigenous peoples as ‘inferior’, ‘criminal’, ‘backward’, and ‘incapable’ of self-determination. These spaces are opportunities for racists to regurgitate settler colonial tropes, and a digital social media platform empowers them to circulate these tropes with a large online audience of likeminded internet users.

Whilst these so-called ‘Aboriginal memes’ explicitly focus on Indigenous peoples, they are in fact opportunities for meme-creators to celebrate a white colonial narrative in each meme. In

drawing upon racist stereotypes to misrepresent and vilify Indigenous peoples, meme-creators imply that a white colonial identity contrasts such depictions. I argue that each meme is an opportunity for meme-creators to assert fragments of a white colonial identity by contrasting it to particular anti-Indigenous racist stereotypes, which is mediated on a spectrum of white superiority and white victimhood. Thus, the content on the ‘Aboriginal memes’ pages is a digital space where racist internet users are empowered to assert fragments of a white colonial identity on this spectrum that significantly contrasts the targets of their racism. In this paper, I firstly explain the formation of the ‘Aboriginal memes’ pages and how it operates as a space for racist stereotypes. Secondly, I outline how I researched these memes and the common findings that were attained. Thirdly, I contextualise two popular racist stereotypes asserted by meme-creators. And finally, I unpack how these notions of white superiority interplay with notions of white victimhood on a spectrum in each meme.

Meme-creators used the term ‘Aboriginal’ rather than ‘Indigenous’ or ‘Torres Strait Islander’ when these internet memes first appeared online. This was apparent within the text and designs of each meme (discussed below) and in that social media groups were called ‘Aboriginal memes’. Arguably, this narration speaks volumes of how non-Indigenous internet users operationalise the term ‘Aboriginal’ interchangeably with ‘Indigenous’. This is not to neglect or minimise anti-Torres Strait Islander racism, rather to identify that meme-enthusiasts used the term ‘Aboriginal’ specifically in these racist memes. Interestingly though, some of the internet memes were about issues impacting both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Considering this ignorance was central to every meme, it is difficult to determine whether in the minds of anonymous meme-creators that they were able to differentiate between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, or whether they used these memes in trying to comment on all Indigenous people that they thought could be collectively categorised as ‘Aboriginal’. Thus,

it is important to point out that while the content exhibits memes that operationalise the term ‘Aboriginal’, the memes examined exhibit anti-Indigenous racism on a digital frontier.

Racist stereotypes and the ‘Aboriginal memes’ pages

In his publication *The Selfish Gene*, Richard Dawkins (1976) birthed the term ‘meme’ from the Greek word ‘mimeme’ that refers to a process of imitation, a fluid set of cultural ideas that adapt and transform as they move through society. The recent invention of internet memes is supposedly based on a high-jacked version of this idea (Fazal, 2018). Online memes have been defined as ‘viral images, videos, and catchphrases under constant modification by users, and with a propensity to travel as fast as the internet can move them’ (Coleman, 2012, p. 109). Often, memes over the internet include images, text and videos that feature comedy spoofs or satirical interpretations of particular phenomena (Knobel & Lanksear, 2007). Specifically, macro-image memes consist of pictures combined with text that enable social media users to communicate messages to an online audience (Carlson & Frazer, 2020; Dynel, 2021; Yus, 2021). Macro-image memes are increasingly popular across the internet as they are usually produced easily by a memes generator, where any internet user ‘can contribute their own version of the meme by adding text, normally in the form of two lines... Some memes have millions of hits online and have become a cultural phenomena’ (Herborn, 2013, p. 17). Whilst some studies of macro-image memes focus on how they enable internet users to produce social commentary, political critiques, satire and parodies (Knobel & Lanksear, 2007), others have highlighted that memes are a vehicle for social media users to express racist views (Al-Natour, 2021; Frazer & Carlson, 2017; Williams, Oliver, Aumer, & Meyers, 2016; Yoon, 2016).

Within the Australian digital sphere, racist internet users have utilised macro-image memes as opportunities to insult, mock and vilify Indigenous peoples. Since 2012, several social media pages on Facebook.com have featured internet memes that empower racist non-Indigenous

social media users to anonymously post and/or share racist views about Indigenous peoples. Specifically, these pages were labelled ‘Aboriginal memes’ (Caldwell, 2012; Carroll, 2012; Chester, 2014), and they collectively articulate a variety of abhorrent messages ranging from stereotypes of alcoholism, welfare dependency and drug use, to vile comparisons of dark skin tones with human excrement and suggestions that a mass murder of Indigenous children relieves Australian society of criminals (Al-Natour, 2021; Herborn, 2013). These Facebook pages exhibited ‘platformed racism’ that exploits online ‘platforms as tools for amplifying and manufacturing racist discourse both as a means of users’ appropriations of their affordances and their design and algorithmic shaping of sociability’ (Matamoros-Fernández, 2017, p. 931). Indigenous athlete, Anthony Mundine, spoke out in the press that Facebook alarmingly enabled the circulation of these racist materials (Moses, 2012). Aboriginal artist, Raymond Zada, noted how the initial pages gathered over forty-thousand supporters and used their comments to create an art piece called ‘Racebook’ (Crawford, 2012). Frazer and Carlson (2017) observed that as these Facebook pages featuring these memes gained popularity, they ‘became the centre of a heated public debate around racism against Aboriginal Australians, free speech, and Facebook’s responsibility in mediating between the two’ (p.5). As these ‘Aboriginal memes’ pages became popular, Indigenous internet users and their allies reported these pages for hate speech. These initial complaints about these racist pages were rejected, as the social media giant claimed that the memes were ‘controversial humour’ and ‘not racism’ (Carroll, 2012). A petition that received twenty-thousand signatures called for the pages to be removed from Facebook, and complaints were submitted to the Australian Human Rights Commission and the Australian Communications and Media Authority (Carroll, 2012; Chester, 2014). In August 2012, Facebook eventually deleted the pages and since then, some pages have surfaced temporarily (Crawford 2012) and are usually removed after they are reported by Indigenous social media users and their allies.

It is necessary to overtly state that while meme-creators utilised online technologies to racially vilifying Indigenous peoples, the crude stereotypes in each meme predate the 2012-to-present emergence of racist phenomenon of ‘Aboriginal memes’ pages. The practices that form the emerging racist digital movement of creating and sharing memes evidently found agency on the internet in terms of rapidly and widely circulating such abhorrent tropes. In creating and distributing these memes, internet users seek applause from likeminded folk who show their appreciation by sharing, ‘liking’ and posting a positive comment indicating that they agree with the stereotype and/or find it entertaining. To state the obvious, the meme-creators did not make up these stereotypes on their own, rather they already existed in Australian society (Paradies, 2005) and internet racists appropriated them into a digital space. For Indigenous internet users, social media can operate ‘as a key self-representational tool to communicate their Aboriginal identity’ (Carlson, 2013, p. 147) and challenging online racism can be exhausting (Carlson & Frazer, 2018a, 2018b). Indigenous scholars have identified how derogatory stereotypes function to further colonise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2016; Bond, Mukandi, & Coghill, 2018; Green, 2017; Kennedy, 2020; Mellor, 2003; Paradies, 2005; Sarra, 2014). Within colonial Australia, non-Indigenous social media users often ‘portray Indigenous peoples as a deficit model of humanity... overrepresented as always lacking, dysfunctional, alcoholic, violent, needy, and lazy’ (Moreton-Robinson, 2015, p. xiii). Everyday stereotypes of Indigenous peoples ‘conform to a widely accepted mental picture or type, idea or attitude... Stereotypes of ‘the Aboriginal’ [sic] included our representation as passive, diseased, dirty, alcoholic and lazy’ (Maynard, 2011, p. 3). Indeed, social media is a space that reproduces power hierarchies that involve fierce expressions of anti-Indigenous racism (Carlson & Frazer, 2018a). Thus, the ‘Aboriginal memes’ pages are opportunities to regurgitate racist stereotypes onto a digital platform, participating in these reproductions of these racist power hierarchies.

Researching racist internet memes

I examined 3000 internet memes that appeared on social media pages at various times between 2012 and 2018. As a diaspora Palestinian with an interest in antiracism, I observed how these memes exhibited typical colonial racist efforts to dehumanise Indigenous populations on a digital sphere. My positionality as an Indigenous person to Palestine and a settler of colour in Australia shaped my observations of how these obscene internet memes exhibited racism typical in settler colonial societies. Using my personal social media account to monitor and report memes as they appeared on ‘Aboriginal memes’ pages, I compiled this sample by documenting the pictures and text within popular memes before they vanished as a result of being reported by myself or another internet user. A benefit of this method is that internet content can be easily accessible on virtual platforms, yet a limitation lies in the ability to identify which memes were most popular across the Web. It would be impossible to argue that the internet memes in this sample were representative of all content that appeared on these racist Facebook pages, as evaluating popularity involves considering number of views, ‘likes’ and shares (Aichner & Jacob, 2015). Within this sample of 3000, memes varied in their messages yet were collectively vulgar. Due to scope and word count in this paper, I chose to unpack 14 memes that had interconnected narrations about white colonial identity. My use of content analysis as a methodology enabled me to examine these memes with a focus on semiotics (Quraishi & Philburn, 2015), whereby I examined the text in relation to the photoshopped image and colour choices on each meme. The actual process of analysis involved identifying how the text on each meme related to the picture and colours in the background, the overall message that meme-creators were trying to send into the digital world, and whether such messages related to current issues facing Indigenous peoples. The ideas from semiotics that were important to this analysis were the text/picture combination and how meme-creators used these aspects to send racist messages across social media platforms.

Researching these toxic internet memes became a process of researching several racist stereotypes across the internet (Jakubowicz, 2012; Paradies et al., 2014). Online racists created a meme-template generator that involved photo-shopped faces of (usually) Aboriginal men onto a red, black and yellow background. These colours are representative of the Aboriginal flag and further affirm how meme-creators seek to insult and vilify Indigenous communities as a whole - not just the individuals' that were cruelly photo-shopped into a meme. For meme-enthusiasts, these individuals became symbolic of Indigenous peoples, thus their comments on each meme were a comment on Indigenous peoples as a whole. The two most common pictures of individuals were (1) a screenshot of an Aboriginal actor from the film *Where the Green Ants Dream* (Koeser, 1984), and (2) a stolen picture of another Aboriginal man from a British photographer called 'Old Aboriginal Gent' (Peter Puddiphatt Photography, n.d.). Meme-creators violated several copyright laws in cropping the original pictures. Further, meme-creators intentionally selected these two Aboriginal men who had dark skin to affirm their perception of collating dark skin tone with supposed authentic Aboriginality (see for example discussion on authenticity in Carlson, 2016). In this paper, one of my dilemmas is analysing these memes without participating in an obscene process of distributing them, so I have recreated each meme discussed in this paper by placing the text of the original meme onto a blank silhouette.

Results

After examining this sample of 3000, I focused on how meme-creators imposed racialized descriptors and racist slurs upon images that were designed to intentionally insult Indigenous peoples, and arguably the anonymity privileges afforded to meme-creators accelerated this process. Meme-creators focused on racially vilifying Indigenous people, and I was interested in the subtle messages they were sending about white Australia. While the descriptors of

‘white’ and ‘Australian’ appeared in some of the memes, most of them focused on racially vilifying Indigenous peoples. Across these pages, meme-creators used racialized descriptors (‘Aboriginal’/‘Aborigine’/‘Black’) as though they were insults in several memes, as highlighted in Table 1 below. In few cases, meme-creators used ‘brown’ in crude descriptions of skin tone/appearance (see Figure 1). Further, it was no surprise that these racist memes used anti-Indigenous racist slurs (eg. ‘Abo’/ ‘Abbos’) in a few instances, with a clear intention to offend and insult.

Table 1 Common racist and racialized descriptors.

Primary word	Frequency in memes	% of all memes in this study
‘white’/ ‘Australia’	483	16%
‘Black’	500	17%
‘Aboriginal’/ ‘Aborigine’	134	4%
‘Abos’/ ‘Abbos’	66	2.2%
‘Brown’	46	1.5%

Table 2 Most common text on these internet memes.

Primary word	Frequency in memes	% of all memes in this study
Invented Stick/ Sticks/boomerang/tube	764	25%
Centrelink/Dole/Welfare/‘Bludging’/Benefits	643	21%
Liquor/Drinking /Grog/Alcohol /Drunk /Drinks/Drink	413	13%
Steal/Steals/Stealing/Jail/Gaol/Prison/ Crime/Raping/Rapist/ Bashes/Bashing	475	16%
Ape/Monkeys/Monkey	238	8%
Petrol/Petrol Sniffing/‘Unleaded’ (Fuel)	197	7%
‘Entitled To . . .’	136	5%
‘Complains About . . .’	76	3%

Due to scope and word count, this article investigates 14 racist internet memes from an overall sample of 3000 that appeared on social media pages. Indeed, 14 memes of 3000 is a small number, yet it’s worth noting that several memes were repetitive in terms of their concepts, ideas and messages. For example, several memes featured identical texts or similarly written text, or would convey similarly messages that were shared across Facebook pages for a short time until they were reported and eventually deleted. The ‘Invented a Stick’ meme was

extremely popular on these pages as it kept appearing on social media, and the data results indicated that similar messages appeared on other memes, such as ‘invented a bent stick’, ‘invented sticks’, ‘invented a boomerang – a bent stick!’ or a reference to didgeridoos through ‘invented a tube’. Similarly, the second most common meme was based on a widespread racist stereotype that associated Indigenous peoples as collectively dependent on government welfare. The key words that appeared included ‘benefits’, ‘dole’, ‘Abstudy’, ‘bludging’ and ‘Centrelink’. Whilst racist stereotypes informed meme-creators, there was a common trend in the ways each were structured using both first- and third- person pronouns. The first-person expression was an attempt to speak on behalf of an imagined ‘Indigenous’ subject, whereas third-person intended to speak about this imagined subject.

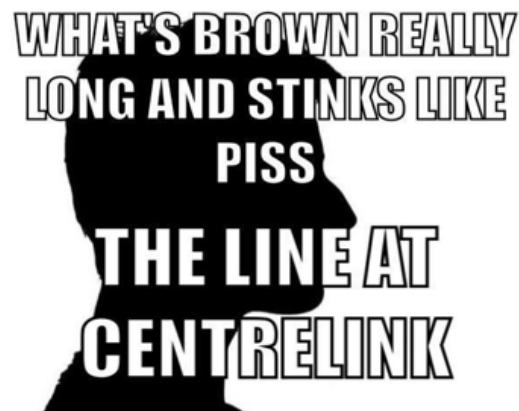


Figure 1 What's brown really...



Figure 2 Centrelink pay day...



Figure 3 I just...

In investigating these results closely, it became clear that meme-creators would combine different regurgitated stereotypes of alcoholism, welfare dependency, laziness and ‘special privileges’. Further, meme-creators specifically positioned Indigenous peoples as a ‘burden’ upon supposedly hardworking white taxpayers, and such views did not apply to white Centrelink recipients in the same way. Figure 1 connects representations of alcoholism and skin colour, showing how trolls amalgamated different derogatory ideas in forming their messages. Figure 2 mocks Indigenous notions of ‘tribe’ with alcoholism and welfare dependency. This is emphasized in the crude term coined by the meme-creator ‘crackatinnie’ (referring to ‘crack open a tin of alcohol’). The text from figure 3 features a mockery of a popular song called ‘Call Me Maybe’ by Carly Rae Jepsen and the original lyrics are ‘Hey, I just met you, and this is crazy, so here’s my number, call me, maybe’ (AZ Lyrics, n.d.). The meme-creator changed these lyrics in ways that draw on racist stereotypes of Aboriginal people as being welfare dependent and lazy. Further, the creator utilizes the first-person pronoun in ways that position an imagined Aboriginal man stating ‘I just met you, and this is crazy, give me welfare, because I’m just lazy’. Through first-person pronouns, this meme-creator combines derogatory stereotypes of ‘laziness’ with ‘welfare dependency’. Whilst the next section unpacks the two most popular tropes of ‘Invented a Stick’ and myths about privileged

access government support payments, it is important to identify how these regurgitated stereotypes are networked and multi-layered.

Investigating ‘Invented a Stick’ and myths about ‘special’ welfare privileges

The first known memes that appeared on social media in 2012 concerned the trope of ‘Invented a Stick’, and when the initial ‘Aboriginal memes’ pages were reported and deleted, these pages were (at times) resurrected in the form of new pages titled ‘Invented a Stick’. This aspect needs to be interrogated further as 25% of all memes were about ‘Invented a Stick’ or a similar trope. To state the obvious, the actual ‘stick’ or ‘bent stick’ is a reference to a boomerang, and meme-creators use this trope to argue that they believe it is the only thing invented by Indigenous peoples. Further, it could be argued that the focal point of the message here is not merely that the boomerang was invented by Indigenous peoples, but rather that (in the minds of racists) the achievements of Western civilisation exceed it. The prominence of this meme and the ‘invented a stick’ narrative is tied to a stereotype that Indigenous peoples were ‘noble savages’ (Graulund, 2009; Rowland, 2004) prior to colonisation.

The noble savage trope originates in European worldviews that position Indigenous peoples as ‘primitive’ and ‘backwards’, and thus are supposedly deprived of the comforts of ‘modern civilisation’ (also interchangeably used to describe ‘Western civilisation’) (Broome, 2010). Placing this meme in the Australian context, I would argue that such views not only inspire the popular ‘Invented a Stick’ memes, but are widespread and shape common non-Indigenous narrations of Indigenous peoples. Within Australian society, these perceptions of Indigenous peoples as ‘backwards’ and ‘primitive’ that are promoted by racists are increasingly challenged, particularly in the scholarship of Pascoe (2018) and Gammage (2011) who both argue that Indigenous people engaged in arguably unmatched and sophisticated systems of agriculture, aquaculture, fire-burning and farming (Muller, Hemming, & Rigney, 2019). Most

noteworthy is the resistance among non-Indigenous people who have demonstrated an unabated defensiveness of this ‘noble savage’ trope, which is particularly apparent in their earnestness to label Indigenous peoples as ‘hunters and gathers’. Most recently, white conservative commentator Andrew Bolt used his television program, *The Bolt Report*, as a platform to regularly make disparaging comments about Pascoe, his work, and his identity as an Aboriginal person. Bolt even requested that the Australian Federal Police conduct an unprecedented investigation into Pascoe’s ‘claims’ to be Aboriginal (Morton, 2019). The crux of Bolt’s attacks usually concern the identity of Aboriginal peoples, as previously in 2011, he was convicted of racially vilifying several Aboriginal women and men mounting similar accusations that they were ‘not Aboriginal’ (Carlson, 2016; Heiss, 2012). Interestingly, Bolt’s attack on Pascoe’s Aboriginal identity had stemmed from his criticisms of his work. Most recently, two white academics similarly took issue with Pascoe’s work, centring a claim that the ‘Hunter/Gatherer’ label is appropriate in characterising Aboriginal societies (Sutton & Walshe, 2021). In a wider context that reeks of a desire to latch onto racist and derogatory tropes of ‘hunter and gatherers’, it is perhaps no surprise that such views are manifested in several internet memes that are championed among racist internet users.

The data from the 3000-meme sample further highlighted that the second most common theme concerned stereotypes of ‘welfare dependency’ (Pedersen, Dudgeon, Watt, & Griffiths, 2006) in relation to Indigenous peoples. For example, Figure 4 demonstrates how a meme-creator falsifies statistics to uphold a view that Indigenous peoples are dependent on colonizers. Similarly, Figures 3 and 5 portray Indigenous peoples as being incapable of self-determination and autonomy, thus in need of ‘white taxpayer’ funded welfare. This ‘welfare’ stereotype

functioned to portray Indigenous peoples as a financial burden upon white Australia, even though there is a history of stolen wages that took place in the 20th century (Gunstone, 2017). The term ‘stolen wages’ refers to the earnings of Indigenous workers that were ‘withheld’ in



Figure 4 0.5%...

government controlled-accounts (Kidd, 2006). In recent times, these workers and their descendants took class action against the Government (Anthony, 2014). Yet, in contrast, racist internet users narrate an opposing image that positions Indigenous peoples as taking fiscal advantage of white Australians – even though history has shown the opposite to be the case.



Figure 5 I had a ...

The desire among meme-enthusiasts to continuously resurrect a shared space to maintain a racist digital fellowship (Al-Natour, 2021) was so strong that proponents would name their pages ‘Centrelink memes’ under the guise that it was a not a racist page as it was about any welfare recipients. In one case, I came across a user that imposed a hybrid

'Centrelink'/Aboriginal flag icon on their page (Figure 6). These efforts exhibited racial gas-lighting (Davis & Ernst, 2019) attempts to continue the movement's digital presence and functioned as another outlet for racist meme proponents to gather digitally and share their anti-Indigenous racism. These internet memes expressed widely circulated myths that Indigenous peoples receive higher support payments than other people from the Australian Government. This was apparent in Figure 7. Usually, such narratives claim that the existence of 'Abstudy' is proof that Indigenous people allegedly receive 'special privileges' over white Australians (Pedersen, Clarke, Dudgeon, & Griffiths, 2005). In reality, Abstudy is a support payment available to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. It is equivalent to the mainstream Austudy payment available to non-Indigenous students, and an Indigenous person's access to Abstudy excludes them from accessing Austudy.

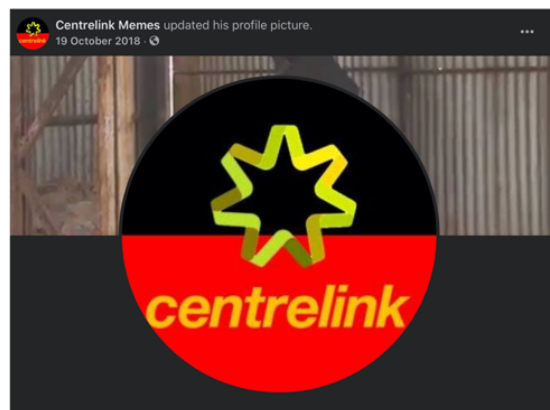


Figure 6 'Centrelink'

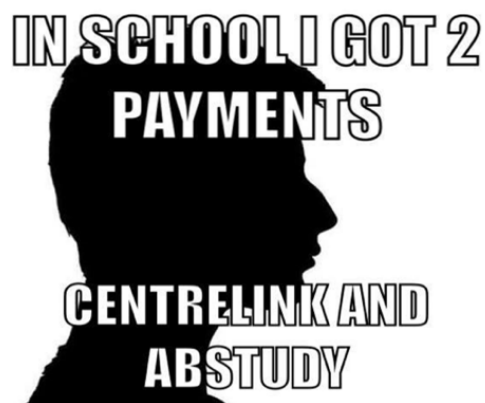


Figure 7 In school...

The spectrum of white superiority and victimhood

Whilst meme-creators operationalise ‘Aboriginal memes’ pages to crudely focus on Indigenous identities through vulgar stereotypes, this final section unpacks how these memes are narratives about white colonial identity. Indigenous peoples are the most discriminated against and structurally disadvantaged peoples in Australia, yet there is a thirst among meme-creators to uphold myths about Indigenous peoples as paradoxically advantaged through colonisation. Meme-creators use internet memes as vehicles to transport stereotypes into a digital landscape, enabling them to distribute several derogatory messages to a wider online audience. The messages sent in these various internet memes are typically colonial, purporting that white Australia emerges from Western civilisation and therefore is ‘superior’, and that ‘all’ Indigenous peoples are on or require welfare support. Thus, a meme-creators assertion of racist stereotypes that regurgitate ‘Invented a stick’ tropes or fabrications that Indigenous peoples access several support payments both function to communicate an image of white colonial identity – namely that is not any of these things and is thus superior.

In asserting white superiority, meme-creators portrayed Indigenous peoples as thieves, rapists, and perpetrators of incest and sexual violence against woman. In setting up a binary between themselves and Indigenous peoples, meme-creators positioned themselves as ‘superior’, and in particular, there was an effort to vilify Indigenous men as ‘threatening’. There is a particular history of tropes that position Indigenous men as a threat to white women (Moreton-Robinson, 2015) which functioned in colonial constructions of gender (O’Sullivan, 2021). The particular tropes in these internet memes need to be contextualised in relation to the Northern Territory Emergency Response (also known as The Intervention’). In 2007, the Australian Government suspended the Racial Discrimination Act to specifically make changes to Indigenous access to support payments, the legalisation of alcohol and pornography in certain communities, and the

management of health, education and employment services in regional Indigenous communities across the Northern Territory (Carlson, 2016; Maddison, 2008). The findings of a Government report called *Little Children are Sacred* was misused and the Australian Government claimed that the purpose of the Intervention was to protect Indigenous children from child sexual abuse (Schwartz, 2007). The dominant discourses that shaped the Intervention roll out involved stereotyping Indigenous men as rapists, paedophiles, and sexual predators within Indigenous communities.



Figure 8 Won't get ...



Figure 9 What do I do...

It is perhaps little wonder that such tropes manifested in the racist memes phenomenon that began five years after the Intervention. Whilst such tropes predate the Intervention, the dominant discourses that involved criminalising Indigenous men were apparent in several internet memes. Figures 8 and 9 highlight examples where Indigenous men are criminalized as

perpetrators of incest and rape. The text in figure 10 utilized both first and third-person pronouns to mock the overrepresentation of Indigenous peoples in the criminal justice system. The meme in figure 11 suggests the abortion of foetuses is a long-term crime prevention strategy. The criminalization of Indigenous men is further displayed in Figure 12 which suggests there is something biologically innate about Indigenous men, making them prone to criminal behaviour ('wife beater' is a colloquial word for a singlet). Collectively, these images racialize Indigenous peoples in ways that place them as sexually deviant and inherently criminal individuals who need to be policed and monitored. In examining how white colonial identities underlie these memes, it is evident that the criminalisation of Indigenous men implies that white Australian men are superior and positioned as the antithesis to these vulgar constructions.

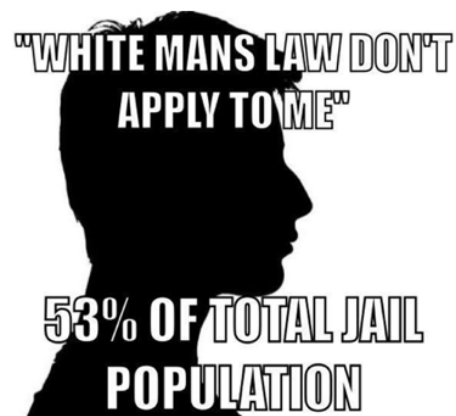


Figure 10 'White mans...



Figure 11 Gets an abortion...



Figure 12 I don't need...

Whilst a significant portion of these memes regurgitated abhorrent tropes about Indigenous peoples that aimed to portray white society as superior, an adjacent message in several internet memes communicated narratives of white victimhood. Marcks and Pawelz (2020) argue that it is common for right wing ideologies to focus on ‘depicting threats and orchestrating myths of victimhood while simultaneously promoting slogans of cultural and physical strength’ (p.3). In recent times, narratives of white victimhood are increasingly common and mainstreamed, particularly in extreme right circles (Sengul, 2021), and the most common claims of white victimhood are of ‘anti-white racism’ or ‘reverse racism’ (Nelson, Hynes, Sharpe, Paradies, & Dunn, 2018). In the context of these internet memes, white victimhood is asserted as meme-creators attempt to address the issues of Australian racism against Indigenous peoples. It is arguably one of the biggest paradoxes among meme-creators, to portray themselves as victims of anti-white racism while constructing racist content in the form of an internet meme. Figures 13 and 14 highlight explicitly how white people are supposedly further victimized; here, meme-creators positioned themselves as victims of racism. The aforementioned depictions of Indigenous peoples as both dependent on colonisers and simultaneously a criminal threat affirms common extreme right narratives of victimhood.



Figure 13 Why you racist...



Figure 14 Says you're...

Each internet meme asserts fragments of a white colonial identity as something mediated between dual assertions of white superiority and victimhood. From the ‘Invented a stick’ trope, to false claims that Indigenous peoples rely on welfare payments from ‘hard-working’ white taxpayers, to criminalisation efforts that portray Indigenous men as a threat to white Australia; these internet memes aim to affirm derogatory stereotypes into a digital sphere. Whilst Indigenous peoples are the obsessive focus in each meme that appeared on racist social media pages, the underlying message about white colonial identity is that it is either ‘better’ in that it is ‘superior’ or threatened by the very peoples they aim to continue colonising. By drawing on racist stereotypes, these internet memes tell a story about how meme creators work to articulate

a white colonial identity by vilifying Indigenous peoples on a digital space. Evidently, this white colonial identity is mediated in each meme on a spectrum of white superiority and white victimhood, and the regurgitation of settler-colonial stereotypes is inherently significant to this process.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have outlined a process where I researched internet memes that reproduced racialised stereotypes and other offensive depictions of Indigenous peoples. I have described examples of how meme-enthusiasts use internet memes as an avenue to bring toxic stereotypes into the digital sphere. In doing so, I have shown how meme-creators assert a white colonial identity in their attacks on Indigenous peoples. While explicit and extreme public expressions of anti-Indigenous racism are outlawed, social media still offers spaces and opportunities for anti-Indigenous meme-creators and consumers to continue a colonial tradition of oppression and subjugation. In examining versions of 14 racist memes, I unpacked how racist stereotypes inherently shape every meme that boosts a colonial ego of a (usually) anonymous internet bigot. Further, a racialised Indigenous subject is reproduced in these memes and represented as either an inferior burden or a threat to white society. I argued that the content on the 'Aboriginal memes' pages enables meme-creators to assert fragments of a white colonial identity by contrasting it to particular anti-Indigenous racist stereotypes, which is mediated on a spectrum of white superiority and white victimhood. The findings in this paper aim to contribute to the studies of racism that are increasingly present across the internet. Anonymity is a privilege afforded to racists online, which means that anti-Indigenous cyber racism will continue the aspirations of colonisation into digital spaces. Meme-creators have attempted to empower a racist online narrative about Indigenous peoples on social media, and the memes are a vehicle for such expressions. Their aims are about focusing on an imagined Indigenous subject to

vilify, yet this paper is an attempt to re-shift the focus back onto meme-creators. As the internet continues to shape human relations, it is important to chart how there is a relationship between colonial ideas and how they manifest in online spaces.

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