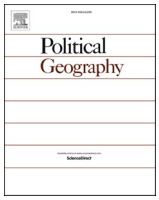
Political Geography 102 (2023) 102857

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Political Geography

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/polgeo



Full Length Article

Tringapore – Singapore in geopolitical comics

Simon Wellisch *

Department of Geography, National University of Singapore, Singapore

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Reddit
Polandball
Popular geopolitics
Assemblage theory

ABSTRACT

Geopolitical imaginations are disseminated in a variety of media forms. Looking at everyday user-generated content, popular culture on the internet enables insightful encounters. This paper analyses a community on the social platform Reddit, where so-called Polandballs are shared. These satirical comics, where countries are portrayed as ball-shaped characters, coloured according to national flags, represent diverse geopolitical assemblages. The paper argues for utilising an assemblage approach to track the dynamic and interlinked content creations and discussions by members of the community. Contrary to the Western-centric orientation in the community, the representations of Singapore by Singaporeans and non-Singaporeans are analysed. This highlights narratives which are usually subdued in general geopolitical discourses, which concentrate on countries perceived as important on the world stage. The findings indicate that content creators discuss economic prosperity, international relations, and structural vulnerabilities from different angles. There are popular depictions, yet some offer alternative discourses. Further, audiences challenge perceptions through their active engagement in the assemblages and through including external discursive elements. Hence, the paper shows a suitable application of assemblage thinking when discussing everyday negotiations of geopolitical discourses in hitherto neglected social media spaces and emphasises the role of non-institutionalised geopolitical content creation.

1. Introduction

Did you know that Singapore is a triangle? You may not come to this conclusion by looking at its national territory or symbols, but in the sheer endless world of internet humour, Singapore becomes Tringapore, a triangle-shaped character in so-called Polandball comics. These feature ball-formed representations of countries, coloured accordingly to national flags, who "poke fun at national stereotypes and the 'international drama' of their diplomatic relations" (Polandball, 2022). The satirical depiction of geopolitical content on social media fits neatly with critical geopolitics' increasing attention to digital content. Besides popular media such as comics, books, movies, or games, the internet enables another range of research objects, which offer insights into 'everyday' geopolitical articulations (see Dittmer & Gray, 2010). These are particularly interesting when they take up non-institutionalised forms. Turning the perspective towards digital spaces provides the opportunity to look at a variety of user-generated geopolitical (re)imaginations. The widespread popularity of social networks around the globe calls for more engagement by geographers.

There is a growing body of literature analysing different digital geopolitical contexts on art (Zebracki & Luger, 2019), bulletin boards (Woon, 2011), music videos (Woods, 2021), social media platforms (Suslov, 2014, 2017), or travel blogs (Henry, 2021). Although the topics differ greatly, all these studies consider users not only as consumers, but also producers of geopolitical imaginations, turning attention to mundane encounters with geopolitics. I want to extend the focus on user-generated content production through looking at a specific online community on the social network Reddit. With over 57 million daily active users and rising numbers, Reddit is one of the biggest social networks worldwide (Reddit Inc., 2023). It is organised in so-called subreddits, separate communities for more or less specific interests, e.g., world politics, cats, or football clubs. There, users can post content as text, picture, or video, and others can engage via up- and downvotes or comments. One of these subreddits represents a phenomenon of peculiar geopolitical interest: r/polandball,[1] which attracted only sporadic attention so far (see Borkiewicz, 2021; Hagen, 2017; Procházka, 2019, 2020).

The subreddit hosts a range of comics who feature linguistic jokes, self-referential humour, specific events, or all at once. Thus, I argue that r/polandball is a site of geopolitical assemblages who exemplify random

* 1 Arts Link, #03-01 Block AS2, 117570, Singapore.
E-mail address: simon.wellisch@u.nus.edu.

[1] https://www.reddit.com/r/polandball.

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2023.102857
Received 18 July 2022; Received in revised form 21 February 2023; Accepted 22 February 2023
Available online 2 March 2023
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and historicised expressions of geopolitical imaginations. The subreddit reflects simultaneously the "decoupling of space and time" (Woods, 2021: 465) as well as the continuities and negotiations of geopolitical imaginations. Assemblage theory provides a useful framework for analysing these processes in the dynamic environment of a social media platform. The emergence and contestation of geopolitical assemblages (de/territorialisation) as well as the attribution and revocation of characteristics (de/coding) are traceable on the studied subreddit. Hence, the following work will utilise assemblage thinking to achieve a complex understanding of user-generated geopolitical comics in digital space. This is particularly necessary for neglected representations on the Western-dominated sphere on Reddit and r/polandball. Countries who are perceived as small and unimportant in the grand schemes of classical geopolitics can add valuable disruptions of geopolitical narratives.

Singapore serves as interesting case study. Its hard power options are very limited, yet the country is well-embedded in the global financial system and engaged in international organisations, e.g., in the Forum of Small States at the UN, the Arctic Council, or ASEAN. Since geopolitics on the subreddit are discussed around global players and Western countries, Singapore provides the opportunity to look at divergent representations of international relations. The articulation of those is supported by two factors: Almost 100% of households have internet access and English is the most-spoken language at home (Department of Statistics Singapore, 2020; Infocomm Media Development Authority, 2023). The Singaporean government endorses digital media literacy as economic driver despite some regulatory measures curtailing freedoms on the web (Weninger, 2017: 505). While it may be seen as marginal in global politics, Singapore has a favourable environment for online engagement. Thus, the paper wants to explore the role of Singapore in Polandball comics.

First, the theoretical framework of assemblages with their dynamic features will be laid out, exemplified by existing case studies. Then, more information around the Reddit community will be provided, followed by a description of the methods. Afterwards, the main representations surrounding Singapore by Singaporeans and non-Singaporeans will be analysed before concluding on the findings.

2. Assemblages in digital space

Assemblage theory, notably DeLanda's (2006) refinements of Deleuze and Guattari, has attracted attention for various geographical lines of inquiry, which leads Kinkaid (2020: 459) to imply that this "may demonstrate the idea's currency and utility, or it may demonstrate a lack of analytic clarity and purpose." Indeed, assemblages seem like a rather big net to cast, catching all varieties of prizes. One way to approach this critique is to point out the understanding of assemblages and its use for discussing geopolitical articulations in the digital sphere.

The incorporation of poststructuralist thought, i.e., the rejection of essentialism and fluid understandings of ascriptions and identities, are apparent in the "relations of exteriority" (DeLanda, 2006: 18), which define assemblages. Rather than operating with inherent characteristics or organic unities, assemblages are constituted by heterogeneous component parts. They are "*contingently obligatory*: entities are affected by relations and by the other terms they are related to but they are not fully determined by those relations/terms" (Anderson et al., 2012: 179). This line of thought is useful when questioning power relations and the "naturalisation of hegemonic assemblages" (Müller, 2015: 32), continuing the scholarly focus of critical geopolitics. Thinking in geopolitical assemblages also helps considering the various scales where geopolitical thought is articulated. While it remains hard if not impossible to provide any holistic account, assemblage theory "dissolves the macro/micro scalar tensions" (Dittmer, 2014: 386). This redefines producer and consumer in geopolitical discourses: Receptors of geopolitical imaginations are more than that. They are not a passive audience any longer, they are active component parts in an assemblage, contributing to its composition.

Active audience studies in critical geopolitics and in popular culture and world politics take a renewed look at the everyday negotiations of geopolitical imaginations in various media, where receivers of these imaginations have their own "constituent power" (Dittmer & Gray, 2010: 1669). For instance, readers of books (Dittmer, 2008), comics (Dittmer & Larsen, 2007), or newspapers (Woon, 2014), viewers of cartoons (Thorogood, 2020), movies (Dittmer & Dodds, 2013; Dodds, 2006; Hastie, 2021), or tv series (Pears, 2016), and players of digital games (Bos, 2018, 2021) were investigated as to how they make sense of what they consume. Rather than solely engaging in deconstructing generalisations in the medium, these works shifted the methodological and analytical foci to the recipients (see Dittmer & Dodds, 2008). In the digital realm, Woon (2011), Suslov (2014, 2017), and da Silva and Crilley (2017) show how Chinese, Russian, and British internet users contrast or reproduce geopolitical narratives emanating from other scales, e.g., the state. They point to the continuity of geopolitical assumptions and the possibilities to subvert them. These are two findings which are useful for the discussion of Polandball comics, where both effects can be observed. Further, Henry's (2021) study of North American volunteer teachers in Namibia travel blogging and Zebracki and Luger's (2019) discussion of digital public art highlight the role of non-institutionalised disseminations of popular discourses. Without editorialisation, the everyday negotiations of imaginations are not intentionally influenced by external actors. Still, sponsors of professional bloggers or terms and conditions of social media platforms can impact how discourses are shaped. On r/polandball, there are not only guidelines but certain technical rules, which must be followed by users if they want to publish comics, e.g., regarding the representation of countries. Moderators[2] may delete publications but appear to be lenient at times if the comic generates greater attention. Therefore, apart from official Reddit terms and conditions, community-based rules act as soft, technical (self-)editorialisation on the subreddit. Lastly, Woods (2021) illustrates how space and time are decoupled in music videos by grime artists from different cities reacting to each other. This perspective resonates with many Polandball comics, who refer to past events and provide historicising views, for example on World War II. History is retold and with it the continuation of dominant geopolitical narratives of the past (Harby, 2019: 3). Contrary, incidents on the world stage can trigger almost instantly responses by the community, adding to the "increasing relevance of satirical venues" (Holland & Levy, 2018: 12) as sources of information. For example, the outcome of the 2022 men's football World Cup final in Qatar was featured in a lengthy comic less than half an hour after the final whistle was blown (MilkCultLeader, 2022).

These findings help framing the processes at work when user-generated content is created in digital spaces. They set the context for a dynamic understanding of the component parts in the geopolitical assemblages. In their relation to and interaction with other parts, components are not exclusive for one particular assemblage, but can be incorporated in other assemblages as well. Additionally, whole assemblages are only temporary; durability but no continuous fixation can be achieved (Anderson et al., 2012: 180). This becomes apparent in two processes: de/territorialisation and de/coding. First, assemblages are subject to territorialising and deterritorialising or, in other words, continuously formed and dissolved. A simple example on r/polandball would be the same user creating various comics. While the author stays the same, they[3] can feature different topics, influenced by previous comments or submissions, which territorialise as new comics. If users reject the representations put forth by the creator, they deterritorrialise the assemblage and can reterritorialise it anew with their comments.

[2] Moderators are volunteers, who manage the subreddit and can enact certain powers, e.g., set up rules or ban users.

[3] Single users will be addressed in a gender-neutral way using 'they'. The subreddit is—as Reddit in general—dominated by male users.

Second, coding and decoding are processes of "ordering matter" (Bonta & Protevi, 2006: 69), consolidating or flexibilising identity. For instance, countries are coded in specific ways on the subreddit. The depiction of some countries is fixed, e.g., USA wearing sunglasses or the United Kingdom sporting top hat and monocle. This coding already hints at geopolitical backgrounds and creators can transfer the coding to other countries, supporting their narrative, or decode them through rejecting or playing with the dominating drawing practices. With almost eight posts and over 500 comments on a daily average in 2022, r/polandball is a very dynamic and interactive space, where de/territorialisations and de/codings can be observed frequently (Lexyr Inc., 2023). The subreddit exemplifies how internet users engage with geopolitical assemblages beyond shared laughter about (inter)national relations. These processes are not restricted to the Polandball community on Reddit but extend to other platforms as well—although r/polandball is certainly the most influential (Hagen, 2017). A brief account of the history contextualises the role of Polandballs as satirical geopolitical comics.

3. Polandballs' origin and humour

Polandballs are no 'traditional' comics or caricatures. They are a combination of comic and meme. While they are usually organised as small comic strips with several panels, they are also part of 'viral' (pop) cultural content with their main purpose being entertainment. Users act as active spreaders of these memes on the internet (Conte, 2000: 114). The first instance of depicting countries as balls in meme-form is presumed to be the events on Drawball[4] in August 2009 (Oleksiak, 2014). On this webpage, users filled a circular canvas and presumably Polish visitors gained temporary dominance, creating the Polish flag on this ball-shaped drawing. Inspired by this, a British user (*Falco*) on the international subforum of the imageboard Krautchan,[5] a German version of 4chan, created an upside-down ball-shaped Poland, mocking a Polish user (*Wojak*) because of their poor English skills (Moskopp & Heller, 2013: 86). *Falco* is attributed with starting some of the key tropes for the format: shaky drawings, eyes as sole facial feature, broken English (Engrish[6] as it is called by the community), simple plot/jokes, and references to (geo)political events. Due to their rising popularity, other users quickly joined in on the meme and created their own comics. Over time some of the features in Polandballs changed, e.g., authors exhibit an elaborate art style or plots become more complicated. However, the popularity of the comics is mainly based on their initial simplicity and easy reproducibility, consisting of balls with the respective national flag imprinted on them. Although they represent the expansion of banal nationalism into the digital realm, Polandballs are not determined by official discourses and offer users the possibility to express their perception of national and international issues (Ahmad, 2022: 311).

Polandballs have been disseminated on other platforms, such as 4chan, Facebook, YouTube, Reddit, and have established their own online (fandom) encyclopaedias (KnowYourMeme, 2020). Thus, the Polandball community is one example of a highly specialised yet loose community with the shared interest of humorous nation-related content (Castells, 2010: 388–389). Additionally, they spawned a variety of other topics displayed in ball-shape, from planets to national subunits to political ideologies. While all platforms underlay some fluctuations in activity, Reddit provides an interesting case example. Started in 2011, the subreddit r/polandball has now over 640,000 users (January 2023). While only members can create posts on the subreddit, viewing the comics is possible for all visitors. The community on the subreddit consists of users, creators, and moderators, although these roles are overlapping. Moderators are usually recruited from users, users can submit comics, and creators can comment on other publications. It is a highly interactive albeit unequal space, as research on online communities shows that only a fraction of users contributes new content (Nielsen, 2006).

Still, making fun of stereotypes and international relations appeals to a large audience on the subreddit and beyond. On the one side, Polandballs usually have a simplified drawing style, which turns the reader's attention to the meanings rather than the drawings themselves (McCloud, 1993: 30). Some knowledge is required, e.g., about national flags, historical facts, or insider jokes, to fully comprehend the comics. There is little contextual help compared to political caricatures where elements are sometimes labelled. On the other side, they are also strong simplifications of what they display. Creators and users are aware of this and jokingly refer to the missing accuracy of what is displayed.[7] Instead of 'accurate' representations of history or international relations, the comics should be entertaining after all. In this sense, Polandballs are a prime example for Ridanpää's (2009: 731–732) observation:

> "Popular culture provides 'easy access' to the events of the geopolitical world in a simplified form, often ready digested and interpreted. As for the common citizens, so also for researchers, cartoons may help to understand geopolitical discourses more easily, although their interpretation often requires sensitivity towards their contextuality."

Further, these humoristic accounts "enable us to think about resistance and hegemony" (Dittmer, 2013: 498). Indeed, some representations are sexist and racist, e.g., female characters are signified with a ribbon and non-white minorities are represented with colours taken from cue balls. While explicitly discriminatory or xenophobic content is not tolerated on the subreddit, it is certainly a space, where a particular sense of humour is cultivated (Dodds & Kirby, 2013: 51). The interactive possibilities on Reddit, where comments can be quickly made and creators can easily exchange ideas, disclose the everyday negotiations of geopolitical humour. The comics, creators, and users are "both internally multiple and reciprocally influential" (Hones, 2011: 252). This does not necessitate diversity of discourses, as the Western dominance is apparent. Still, the question remains: What Polandball themes achieve reactions by the community, or in other words, what assemblages display high affect by the audience? Looking at Singapore as non-Western example illustrates the main logics at work on the subreddit as well as potentially subversive geopolitical imaginations. Before elaborating on Singaporean geopolitical assemblages, the data gathering methods will be laid out.

4. Singaporeans on r/polandball

To gain data about Polandballs, Reddit offers common search options, restricted to subreddits. Key terms can be entered and all entries containing the term in the title or post are displayed. This was used to access comics where a depiction of Singapore was hinted at.[8] In the next step, key Singaporean producers were identified, mostly via looking through comment sections. Then, all comics made by these producers were searched and skimmed for featuring Singapore.[9] While it is

[4] The website was discontinued in May 2020, according to https://web.archive.org/web/20200815000000*/drawball.com (25/02/2023).

[5] The website was discontinued in February 2018, according to https://web.archive.org/web/20180901000000*/krautchan.net (25/02/2023), however https://krautchan.rip/ is a follow-up of this community.

[6] Although the dialogues are mainly in English, many countries display local variations, e.g., mixing in non-English phrases or words. Together with a specific grammatical style, so-called Engrish is formed, supported by a guideline on how to use it, see polandballmod (2015).

[7] Users often link to the specific representation: https://www.reddit.com/r/Polandballart/comments/42hf2l/accuracy_in_my_rpolandball/.

[8] The search terms singapore, tringapore, triangapore, triangle, and asean were used.

[9] The search command *author:username* was used, going through all suspected Singaporean creators, e.g., author:Dlimzw.

generally difficult to discern where internet users are located, r/polandball provides a simple signifier: so-called flairs. Indeed, it is even required 'to flair up' to fully participate in the community, which means to appear with a small representation of a country and message. Together with a selective analysis of activity in other subreddits, e.g., r/Singapore, or simply comments, where their nationality was communicated, there is strong reason to believe that the users indeed identify as Singaporean. Further, these flairs can already featurevarying perceptions of Singapore. For example, "Benevolent Dictatorship" (*bluesydinosaur*) and "Is not sekret PAP spy" (*Dlimzw*) hint at how the relation between government and citizens is perceived. All flairs are mentioned in square brackets if users are quoted in this paper. The usernames were not anonymised, because they are already clouding identities.

The data collected spans nine years from 2014 until 2022.[10] There are 23 content creators who flaired up as Singaporean. They have produced a total of 137 comics, which were posted 165 times. Comics can be reposted by the creator repeatedly, thus the total number of posts can be greater. These reposts are taken into consideration because they enable new possibilities to interact with the contents of the comic. Singaporean content creators provide a suitable starting point to analyse how they portray their country for an international audience; a country which is perceived as small state and rather talked about than articulating its position itself. On the subreddit, other users feature Singapore as well and their representations are useful material for comparison. To fully grasp differences and commonalities of imaginations among Singaporeans and non-Singaporeans, a lengthy endeavour skimming through thousands of comics would be necessary. Thus, I will only discuss comics which I found using the same keywords as for Singaporean content creators in the last analytical section. All analysed comics were saved via Zotero[11] for quick access and overview. Then, codes were assigned to systemise certain discourses. The outcomes will be presented in the following.

5. Lesser known Singapore

The bare statistics of post quantities already offer some observations. Apart from great fluctuations in numbers throughout the years, which is linked to the activity of single creators, the month of publication is a revealing factor. In 2014 the so-called *Lesser Known September* was introduced. During this month, users are only allowed to feature countries which are rarely used. The banned countries change from year to year; for 2014 "Russia, Ukraine, Israel, Palestine, Syria, Iraq, Sealand[12] and those in the West, as defined by the UN" (polandballmod, 2014) were excluded. Following this announcement, ten comics showing Singapore were posted in September alone, with another four following in October, constituting more than half of the comics featuring Singapore in 2014. The same trend can be observed in 2020 and 2021. Here, user *il0vegaming123456* published five of their six posts in September 2020 and user *havefun0235* three of nine original posts in September and another one in October 2021, see Fig. 1.

While the *Lesser Known September* inspires Singaporeans and other creators, it also exemplifies the deeply Western orientation of the subreddit. As the whole of Reddit, North Americans and Europeans dominate the community and the decision to promote other countries has been heavily discussed since the first event.[13] Banning popular nations for a month was not primarily driven by the desire to give those representation who are neglected, but rather to preserve a variety of jokes and content. Additionally, it highlights classical geopolitical logics at work. Western countries and spaces occupied by wars, disputes, or conflicts are very prominently depicted on r/polandball and therefore barred in September. Alternative geopolitical visions are certainly appearing, but not as popular. One user explains their aversion to the event:

> *Bloocrusader [#1 country]*: […] Chances are if i need to read a fuckin wikipedia page to understand the comic, then it wont be funny anymore.[14]

Here, enjoyment is utilised as justification against the unusual heavy editorialisation of submissions by the moderators based on contents rather than on technicalities. It further implies that if jokes are not understood and laughter is not shared, humour may fail to work as social cohesion in the community (Ridanpää, 2009: 746). Contrary, others voice their approval of the event and the stimuli it provides, for example Singaporean creators:

> *LenoM8 [Singapore]*: Finally, I can more triangles[15]

> *il0vegaming123456 [South East Asian Jew]*: Oh boy I love lesser known history.Imma work on one[16]

Indeed, *Lesser Known September* forces users to consider nations they might have only superficial knowledge about. For one month, the geopolitical assemblages are impacted by specific rules regarding the content which disallows certain territorialisations. Hence, the event fosters encounters with unfamiliar geopolitical imaginations and enriches perspectives on the subreddit.

Singapore is one example which received increased attention during *Lesser Known September*. It is situated in the company of so-called irrelevant states, as only 'important' ones are banned, another example for classical geopolitical assumptions. But Singapore incorporates a special role on r/polandball, as it is coded in a unique way. Instead of a ball, it is drawn as triangle. There are only a few countries which share a similar fate: Israel is a cube, ridiculing the label of 'Jewish physics' coined by Nazi Germany, Kazakhstan is a brick, relating to the origins on Krautchan, where moderators forgot to assign Kazakhstan a ball and hence it remained a rectangle flag, and Nepal is a 'monster', derived from the shape of the flag.[17] Bermuda is the only other commonly used triangle form, referring to the Bermuda triangle.

In the case of Singapore, the Singaporean-Malaysian-Indonesian Growth Triangle or SIJORI (Singapore, Johor, Riau Islands) Growth Triangle is claimed to be the reason for Singapore's depiction (Alex-Teddy888, 2013). This cannot be confirmed with utmost certainty; indeed, the concept of growth triangles was very popular in the 1990s, but it had its most prominent examples outside of Southeast Asia (Hutchinson & Chong, 2016: 13). So, why Singapore? It may have been simply because Singapore's apparel was not yet 'standardised' in Polandballs and a unique characteristic could be established. Regardless of its origins, looking at the argumentation as growth triangle discloses a popular representation of Singapore as embodiment of success in economy and international relations, two repeating motives in the geopolitical assemblages on the subreddit.

6. Function follows form

Singapore's economic prosperity is often coded in comics with

[10] Data collection was conducted from 21/03/2022 to 27/03/2022, again from 01/06/2022 to 22/06/2022, and lastly from 30/12/2022 to 01/01/2023.

[11] Zotero is a free data and reference manager, see https://www.zotero.org/.

[12] Sealand, an unrecognised 'micronation' on an offshore platform near the UK, was popular in jokes surrounding its small size.

[13] See www.reddit.com/r/polandball/comments/2egfuy/announcement_introducinglesser_known_september/ (25/02/2023).

[14] Comment available at https://www.reddit.com/r/polandball/comments/3j7816/comment/cuop2bi/?context=3 (25.02.2023).

[15] Comment available at https://www.reddit.com/r/polandball/comments/cy4389/comment/eypo8j8/?context=3 (25.02.2023).

[16] Comment available at https://www.reddit.com/r/polandball/comments/ika391/comment/g3j9yfl/?context=3 (25.02.2023).

[17] For an overview of depictions, see https://i.redd.it/1s9q65ss9nj51.png#shelf-book-of-boerk (25/02/2023).

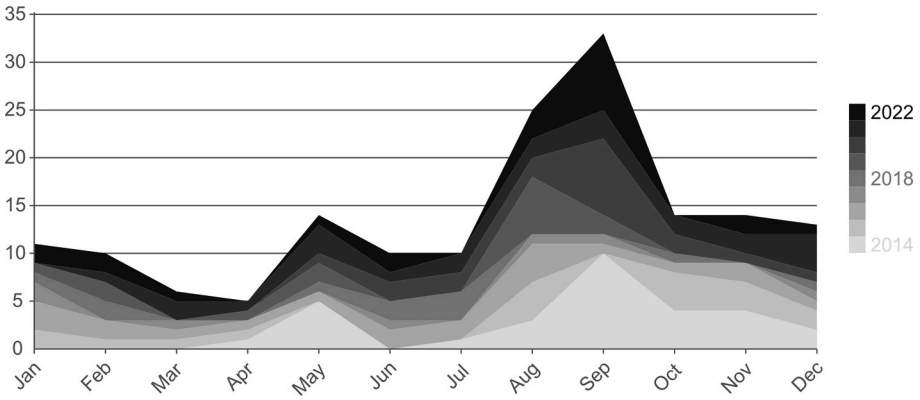

Fig. 1. Number of posts and reposts featuring Singapore from 2014 to 2022 (own figure).

certain attributes: money, e.g., coins, banknotes, etc., and architecture, i.e., Singapore's Central Business District, which place Singapore firmly in the global financial system, when interacting with other countries. Other signifiers are top hat and monocle. 'Wearing' clothes is very restricted on the subreddit and the combination of top hat and monocle is usually reserved for the United Kingdom. However, creators recode this imagination which refers to the imperial past for former colonies at times. In the case of Singapore, drawing it with top hat and monocle territorialises an assemblage of colonial past and current wealth. Rather than a symbol for dependency, it is used to separate it from its less successful neighbours.

While Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and others are coded with less flattering characteristics, Singapore is the poster child of Southeast Asia and within rather dysfunctional ASEAN. ASEAN is represented as unable to solve the conflicts of its members, e.g., the territorial dispute around Pedra Branca (tungstencompton 2014c, 2015). This invokes perceptions of a weak supranational organisation facing outspoken nation-states, where *tungstencompton* compares ASEAN with the EU in terms of history, configuration, and conflicts. Generally, ASEAN is rarely used as actor in comics, emphasising the focus on nation-states and view of ASEAN as non-interfering and non-confrontational based on realist assumptions (Beeson, 2016: 10).

Therefore, Singapore predominantly interacts directly with its neighbours. Particularly the role of Indonesia and Malaysia is striking. The former is often coded as heavy smoker, a reference to hazes. The latter is portrayed as lazy, signified by routinely holding so-called 'lepak time', bluntly explained by one content creator:

> *Dlimzw [Is not sekret PAP spy]*: It's when lazy Malays gather in one corner to sit and relax while the Chinese do all the work.
>
> Source: experience.[18]

Indonesia, Malaysia, and other Southeast Asian countries often simply serve as other to the hard-working, disciplined, and successful Singapore, yet there are more facets to this. In the comic *The Origin of Love, or the Secret Origin of Tringapore* (tungstencompton 2014b), the user creates their own background story on why Singapore is a triangle: It is simply a slice of Malaysia. The brief history displays the context of racial riots and gaining independence as hurtful process for both sides, where Singapore is separated as triangle from the spherical Malaysia. The "postcolonial hauntings" (Law, 2006: 63) of violent conflicts or terrorism along ethnic lines are embedded in the assemblage. In the last panel, Singapore and Malaysia are looking at each other sadly, with Malaysia still missing its Singaporean part.

This depiction has provoked different affects by commentators over time. In the original post in 2014, mainly the historical context was discussed. The first repost in 2016 sparked jokes about the resemblance of Malaysia with a pizza or Pacman, and clearer contradictions:

> *ValleDaFighta [Danskjävel in disguise]*: Implying Singapore is sad about all this.
>
> *tungstencompton [Uniquely Singapore]*: The government and the economy, not at all. The people who have families on both sides of the Causeway/Second Link, a little bit.
>
> *Dlimzw [Is not sekret PAP spy]*: 9/8/1965 best day of life.[19]

Here, the audience disputes the portrayal, prompting the creator to point to the impact of the split on personal lives, a topic often neglected in geopolitical discourses. In 2019, the geopolitical assemblage is reconfigured again in the second repost. Although previous jokes are repeated, users argue that Singapore's success helped overcoming the split, linking back to the theme of wealth and prosperity. The reposts illustrate how the different assemblages have reterritorialised with continuous component parts, i.e., the creator and comic itself, and fluid ones, i.e., users and their reactions. They also show how past events are historicised within contemporary readings. At the time of separation, there could be no securities regarding Singapore's future. The split is decoupled from its contemporary circumstances and territorialises with current discourses. Another comic literally draws the comparison to Czechoslovakia, which dissolved amicably in 1993 (ninjabear613, 2016b). Contextualising it as romantic relationship, Singapore is fighting its grief over the break-up. Nevertheless, the creator makes clear that Singapore remains fortunate in terms of personal success, reinforcing Singapore's representation as prosperous country.

Singapore's form can be also instrumentalised in a different way. Referencing the North Korea-United States of America Summit in 2018, Singapore serves as base of a seesaw between the two countries, which face each other angrily, see Fig. 2. The picture is a simple animation, where USA and North Korea use the seesaw in a loop. The contemporary geopolitical event shapes the assemblage on the subreddit with great affect: Almost 13,000 upvotes make it the highest upvoted Polandball featuring Singapore by a Singaporean user. But the assemblage is challenged by critical views in the audience:

> *songbolt [4.9 mil 17% poverty 3% foreign]*: lol this comic realizes (or visualizes) that "legitimacy" I saw pundits critique the meeting for – i.e. "NK is only meeting with the US to gain the appearance of legitimacy, and Trump is foolishly giving them this legitimacy": This

[18] Comment available at https://www.reddit.com/r/polandball/comments/2ftihr/comment/ckcki97/?context=3 (25/02/2023).

[19] Comments available at https://www.reddit.com/r/polandball/comments/4wvdcr/comment/d6abika/?context=3 (25/02/2023).

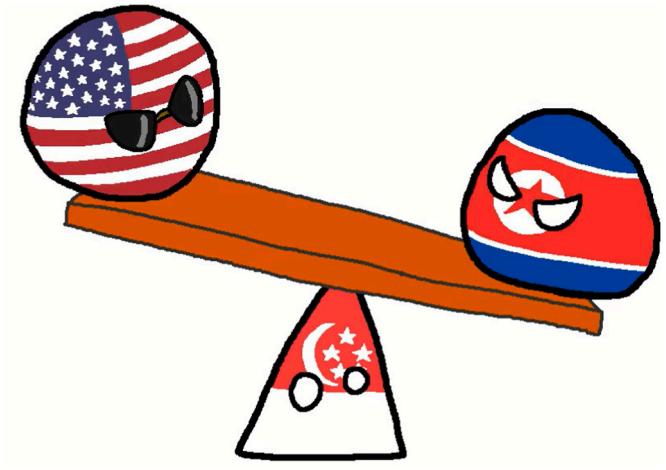

Fig. 2. North Korea-USA summit in Singapore, 12 June 2018 (bluesydinosaur 2018).

> comic represents them as equals, whereas in fact the US are far larger with far more money and weapons. (i.e. that seesaw should be firmly planted with US outweighing NK)
>
> but I like it anyway, because the residents have equal human dignity and dialogue is good.[20]

In their critique, the user remains in classical geopolitical thinking, arguing with military and economic power. They do not dispute the implications of the seesaw. There can be only one dominant country, making it a zero-sum game (Dodds et al., 2013: 5). However, they still favour the message of portraying both parties as equals. The comment displays nuanced views based on a relatively simple drawing. Yet, Singapore is neglected in the discussion. The agency of the country is rarely talked about.

Singapore was chosen as host because it upheld diplomatic relations to both countries. In fact, it is a clear objective of the government to promote Singapore for such events. Marketed as destination for MICE (meetings, incentives, conferences, and exhibitions), Singapore can serve as location where international politics take place without taking part itself (Seol, 2020: 147). This is a deeply rooted geopolitical perception of Singapore as small state, where "the need to balance between hostile neighbours, regional powers and global powers was preordained from the start" (Guo & Woo, 2016: 30). Thus, geopolitical assemblages on the subreddit echo state agendas. They are also able to spin the narrative further. A comic covering the meeting between Taiwan and the PRC two years prior uses the same seesaw analogy (ninjabear613, 2016a). Here, Singapore actively wants to serve as fulcrum, but multiple other countries join in on both sides, leading to the punchline that the weight becomes too much to bear. Although this assemblage uses similar component parts, its message is quite different: A satirical critique on the limitations of small-state diplomacy, when different countries with contradictory agendas are tried to be balanced out. Thus, the same motive, Singapore as seesaw base, can be used to repeat and challenge predominant geopolitical imaginations. These alternative to representations apply to internal matters as well.

7. Benevolent Dictatorship

The roots of success of the 'benevolent dictatorship', as the user *bluesydinosaur* calls Singapore in their flair, are self-made according to various comics. One striking example is the commemoration for the death of Singapore's first prime minister, called *The Passing of an Era* (Dlimzw, 2015). In an unusual serious tone, the People's Action Party (PAP) and Lee Kuan Yew in particular are portrayed as instrumental for Singapore's successful history. Almost all commentators join in to honour this legacy. Again, achievements outweigh any misfortunes. But the geopolitical discourse around Singapore's prosperity and its origins has its rivals, for instance during the celebrations of Singapore's Independence Day in 2015 and 2016.

Various content creators collaborated to draw a special design for the subreddit, displayed on the top of the webpage. In 2015, Nepal and the Philippines are shown as cleaning the street following a military parade.[21] In 2016, four characters in the front are dressed in traditional Chinese, Malay, Western, and Indian clothing.[22] The former references the importance and role of the migrant workforce in Singapore, where especially the manual labour sector heavily relies on foreign workers. The Ministry of Manpower governs employment, "permitting only certain nationalities to access work in particular industries" (Ye, 2016: 46) and leading to a segregated and often precarious environment. This contradicts the narrative of *Passing of an Era*, which shows only Singaporeans as building up the country. The success is not equally distributed nor was it a solely domestic achievement. The latter wants to highlight the unison of Singapore's ethnic groups, relating back to its postcolonial hauntings. The content creators incorporate popular discourses around "racial harmony" (Law, 2006: 64), caused by fearing ethnic clashes or even terrorist attacks. Still, in the background, Bangladesh and India can be seen working on a construction side. Therefore, both assemblages do not directly oppose each other but have distinctive emphases, exemplifying the ambiguous relation between treating foreign workers and promoting multiculturalism. Both show the military parade, a symbol for a strong state protecting its citizens from dangers. Indeed, providing a safe environment is a key legitimation for the ruling party. Threats may arise from outside and inside, as the fears around terrorism show (see Woon, 2013). With Singapore's water security, another important internal fear is featured on the subreddit.

Singapore imports 35%–50% of its water from Johor, Malaysia with plans to achieve water autarky by 2060 (Ghangaa, 2018; Tortajada & Wong, 2018: 86). Water security is one of the national issues identified by the Singaporean government. These discourses around environmental security are recalled in geopolitical assemblages, for example in the comic *Singapore Takes Its Water Very Seriously* (tungstencompton, 2014a). At the beginning of the comic, the USA disguises itself as Malaysia to trick Singapore into believing that it will not provide any water, which leads to Singapore taking up arms in the final panel, see Fig. 3. Hence, with a side blow to NATO (no action—talk only), water supply serves as legitimation for military action in the comic. Although 'water wars' are not common, this links to the instrumentalisation of water security as geopolitical factor (MacQuarrie & Wolf, 2013: 182). The assemblage is even extended by one commentator through bringing in the book *Defending the Lion City* (Huxley, 2000). Referencing the book, the user outlines how a possible attack on Malaysia would be carried out in case water supply was stopped, causing further discussions by others. The rather imaginary scenario reflects Singaporean geopolitical discourses around its vulnerabilities, which are manifested as "structural anxieties" (Chong & Chan, 2017: 381). However, these anxieties are not unchallenged. The geopolitical assemblage is in flux and takes a different form in another comic, called *water (in)dependence* (alsoandanswer, 2016). Here, Singapore and Malaysia are described as companions in fate, both needing water. The creator links to news articles reporting how Singapore aided Johor with water during draught. In both comics external sources of information are added to the geopolitical

[20] Comment available at https://www.reddit.com/r/polandball/comments/8qctdp/comment/e0idpjm/?context=3 (25/02/2023).

[21] Archived webpage available at https://web.archive.org/web/20150809145900/https://www.reddit.com/r/polandball/ (25/02/2023).

[22] Archived webpage available at https://web.archive.org/web/20160809234040/reddit.com/r/polandball (25/02/2023).

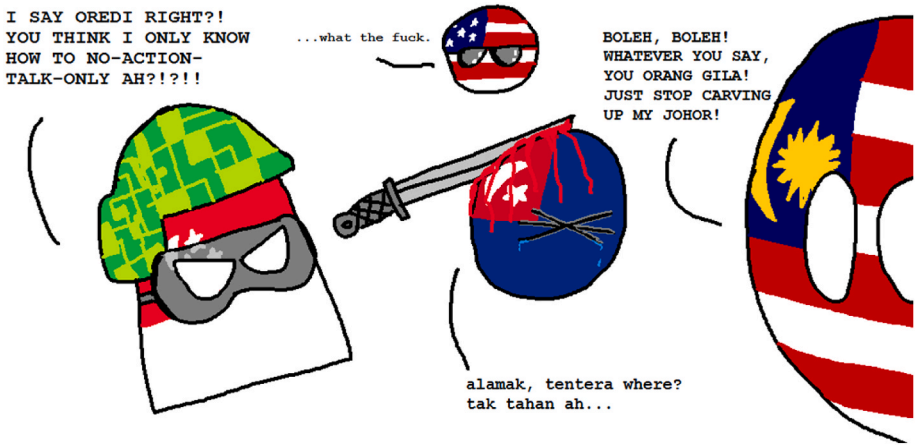

Fig. 3. Singapore takes its water very seriously (tungstencompton, 2014a).

assemblages, explicitly linking it to discourses beyond the subreddit. While the topic stays the same, contrary narratives territorialise and are discussed by other users.

Another contradiction becomes visible regarding the perception of the state. Singapore's government may be displayed responsible for the economic success and overcoming structural problems, but its authoritarian character is not ignored. Here, Singapore is commonly coded with fines and the cane. If rules are broken, punishments are executed without hesitation. One example takes *Singapore's Birthday* (ThisCakedoesntlie, 2019) as context, where various countries throw a surprise party with confetti for Singapore in its apartment. In the punchline, the less than delighted Singapore fines the birthday guests for littering. The commentators join in on the joke, connecting it to broader conceptualisations of Singaporean domestic policies:

> *MedievalGuardsman461 [Sleepy global overseer]*: I mean, that party clearly didn't have a permit and was not supervised by any authorities. That's a violation right there … [23]
>
> *Burgernow [Philippines]*: Philippines not invited, really? Who will clean the mess, singapore?[24]
>
> *jcubeXD [Republic of China]*: Theres 6 clays there. Singapore can arrest them for illegal assembly.[25]

Thus, the audience quickly adopts an authoritarian perspective in a satirical manner exhibiting the playful interactions on the subreddit. They even bring in the issue of migrant workers, exemplifying the interconnectedness of assemblage components.

The cane doubles as element for another theme: the culture of high expectations, so-called 'Asian parenting', with its strong focus on achieving excellence in education. In several comics, Singapore is punished for not performing not as desired. One author applies this social critique on a broader level (GodzillamanTheGamer/Ok-Army-9509 2020). In their comic, beatings are claimed to be the reason for Singapore's prosperity, prompting Indonesia 'to try the same' with East Timor. Referencing another geopolitical conflict, the comic casts a different light on Singapore's success story. PAP adopted restrictive laws from its past colonial rulers and expanded them to solidify their power, with the improvement of living standards serving as argument for its tightening grip (Ortmann, 2010: 68–69). The comic brings forth the negative consequences, when economic performance is played off against civil freedoms. Thus, Singapore is depicted quite differently to the success story and the official narratives are challenged. Humour's "oft-cited potential to be subversive" (Dodds & Kirby, 2013: 56) and the diversity of assemblages on the subreddit become apparent.

8. Singapore by non-Singaporeans

Not only Singaporeans depict Singapore at r/polandball. Many comics are created by users from geographically close countries, e.g., from Malaysia, Indonesia, or the Philippines, some from the USA and Canada. Utilising the same search criteria as for the previous analysis, 67 comics, posted 71 times, created by 44 users, plus some by now deleted accounts, were identified. Naturally, these must not be considered representative for geopolitical discourses of their respective countries. They are rather a general indication of how assemblages form without the direct participation of Singaporeans. Indeed, almost all themes featured in comics by Singaporeans are used by non-Singaporeans as well. The Malaysian-Singaporean history, economic prosperity, relations with other ASEAN countries, and harsh punishments are popular. However, the tone of the comics differs.

Starting with the history between Singapore and Malaysia, various comics by non-Singaporeans depict how independence was forced on Singapore. Different to the examples above, Malaysia actively kicks out Singapore. In the process, Singapore shows more distress, e.g., by breaking out in tears, contrasting the slightly nostalgic yet pragmatic perspective by Singaporean users. What remains the same is the intervention by the audience, who again point out that the split was advantageous for Singapore in economic terms.

Economic prosperity remains one of the few positive codes. Comics who feature other achievements, e.g., during the celebration of Singapore's Independence Day on the subreddit, are rarely found among non-Singaporeans. Further, Singapore's agency is not highlighted as done at least tentatively with the comics around the USA-North Korea summit; one comic with this theme chooses to make a joke about how Singapore fines North Korea instead of addressing Singapore's role in international relations, reinforcing Singapore's irrelevance on the global scale (SgtShickamabob, 2018).

Further, multilateral relations in Southeast Asia with the role of ASEAN seem to be more prominent than for Singaporean users, with some content creators being based in other member states. The dysfunctional portrayal of ASEAN is carried on by non-Singaporeans. The organisation is shown as suffering from internal fights and unable to act, equal to the comics of *tungstencompton*. Fig. 4 takes the protests in Myanmar and violent crackdown by the military junta in early 2021 as example. Singapore is asking its fellow members on the course of action, but none follows. Commentators discuss the consequences of the Treaty

[23] Comment available at https://www.reddit.com/r/polandball/comments/cnw8lk/comment/ewegk8q/?context=3 (25/02/2023).
[24] Comment available at https://www.reddit.com/r/polandball/comments/cnw8lk/comment/ewer3u1/?context=3 (25/02/2023).
[25] Comment available at https://www.reddit.com/r/polandball/comments/cnw8lk/comment/ewf2wp7/?context=3 (25/02/2023).

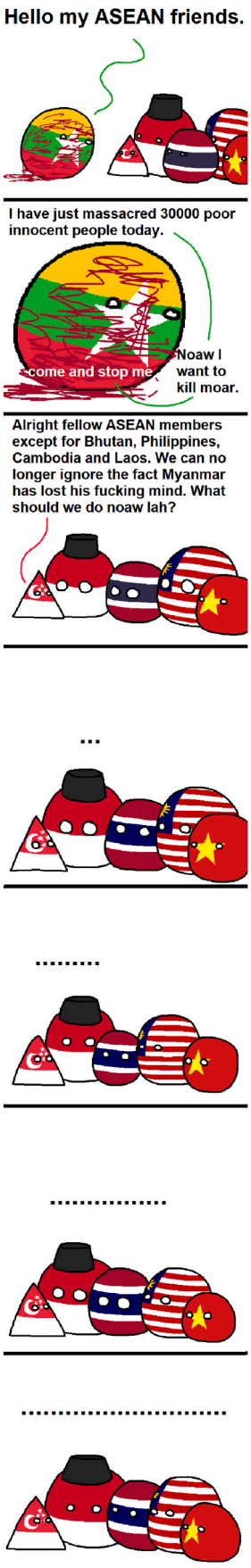

Fig. 4. An ASEAN intervention (wildeofoscar, 2021).

of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia controversially:

> *freedompolis [Kick ass or chew bubble gum. The latter's banned]*: ASEAN has a principle of non-interference. Member states are discouraged from meddling with one another's domestic affairs and supporting political revolts in neighbouring states.
>
> *BananaLee [New Zealand]*: Makes sense when literally everyone in ASEAN has their fair share of messed up stuff.
>
> *BNKhoa [South Vietnam]*: ASEAN is the only reason why South East Asian countries don't jump on each other
>
> *NecroHexr [Singapore]*: This is mostly thanks to Singapore being the de facto leader and their diplomacy style is Swiss-level neutrality
>
> *simonbleu [Argentina]*: I always wondered why the hell isnt there a multinational UN-like army that if doesnt intereferes directly at the very least gets in sets a base and protects people (and themselves).
>
> *monkeyboy0077 [United + States]*: well that's kind of dumb[26]

The views on interventionist policies differ among commentators as does the conception of ASEAN, which is rarely as directly credited as in this comment section. Singapore's role is highlighted by one Singaporean user, although another Singaporean qualifies the claims made. This represents the diversity of the affected audience, who challenges or reinforces the geopolitical imagination put forth by the comic.

The coverage of the last broader theme, the 'benevolent dictatorship', has strong similarities between Singaporean and non-Singaporean creators. Fines and caning are recurring codings, which serve in various situations as punchline. However, non-Singaporeans connect the exercise of harsh punishments not to social issues, as did Singaporeans to 'Asian parenting' and the role of the state. This adds to the general observation that comics by non-Singaporean evolve more around stereotypical depictions, despite notably exceptions, who exhibit a profound understanding of domestic issues. Nevertheless, these comics are also more accessible for viewers who may not understand all layers incorporated by Singaporeans in their Polandballs. The brief look at non-Singaporean submissions emphasises the necessity of incorporating local creators as they offer rich geopolitical imaginations of their country. The re/territorialisations by non-Singaporean show a different tonality with similar component parts.

9. Polandball as assemblage space

The presented examples demonstrate how the subreddit r/polandball can be understood as digital space for geopolitical assemblages with three component parts: comics, users/creators, and discourses. First, comics are a materialisation of satirical geopolitical content, insider jokes, communal inspiration, and individual motivation. They are the initial territorialisation of geopolitical assemblages as imagined by the author. Second, other users are able to deterritorialise these assemblages through their comments. Other creators can also reterritorialise the setting put forth by other comics and de/code ascriptions. Generally, creators incorporate more constitutive power than other users and are in turn affected by the comments and popularity of their drawings. Third, the assemblages are not only interconnected with each other but also linked to external discourses and discursive elements, e.g., state narratives, books, or newspaper articles.

Additionally, the territorialisations of comics are shaped by several factors. Historical and contemporary events interpreted as geopolitical serve as stimuli, and current narratives dominate the portrayal of history. Despite the existing "playful memetic satire" (Procházka, 2019: 370), r/polandball has rules and moderators enforcing these. The rules

[26] Comments available at https://www.reddit.com/r/polandball/comments/m4qx3u/comment/gqvw2r8/?context=3 (25/02/2023).

restrict but can also foster how geopolitical discourses are articulated, as the example of *Lesser Known September* showed. Lastly, the subreddit must be understood as heavily Western-orientated male-dominated social media platform. Geopolitical discourses are shaped accordingly although there is room for diverging representations. Thus, the subreddit allows both reinforcing and disrupting hegemonial geopolitical discourses. The analysis of Singapore provides dedicated examples.

First, Singapore's success story after its independence may be dominant at first sight, but economic achievements are questioned through highlighting domestic issues such as restrictive policies. Next, Singapore's role in international relations is illustrated with nuances, where Singapore is accredited agency instead of only serving as meeting location. Lastly, vulnerabilities and anxieties are controversially discussed. Official discourses around the endangerment of the 'little red dot' are repeated but alternative perspectives on water security and multiculturalism are offered as well. Both Singaporean and non-Singaporean creators cover these themes, although Singaporeans offer more depth when challenging dominant discourses. Their background gives legitimacy to their drawings, e.g., commentators lauding an accurate Singlish. Still, the audiences are engaged in both cases and actively discuss these geopolitical depictions and give further perspectives for readers of the comics.

Therefore, Polandballs featuring Singapore or Tringapore offer neglected perspectives in view of the popularity of Western-centric content. The subreddit illustrates how official discourses can stretch to mundane digital spaces and how they can be contested in the guise of humorous content. Thinking in assemblages is a useful approach to highlight these dynamic diversities and interconnectedness of online and offline spaces. The satirical depictions of (inter)national relations with mostly ball-shaped characters presents a unique insight into everyday negotiations of geopolitical imaginations in a digital community.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

Acknowledgements

I want to thank the three anonymous reviewers whose feedback greatly improved the paper and Chih Yuan Woon and James D. Sidaway for their thoughtful advice throughout writing and revising. Further, I want to thank Laura for her comments on the initial draft and her ongoing support.

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