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TRACING A MEMETIC JOURNEY: FROM SOUTH AMERICAN DEATH FLIGHTS TO FREE HELICOPTER RIDE MEMES

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Abstract

This paper examines how a traumatic South American symbol—the *death flights* used by Southern Cone dictatorships in the 1970s–1980s—has been repurposed as a viral meme. Over the past decade, this symbol of extrajudicial execution resurfaced as the “*free helicopter rides*” meme on platforms such as 4chan, circulating as coded alt-right rhetoric. This transformation ruptures historical memory, as a symbol of state terror is appropriated, recast through U.S. political antagonisms, and reshaped within Global North digital cultures. While research has mapped alt-right speech and meme dynamics, little examines how Global South symbols are decontextualized, commodified, and re-exported. Using a mixed-methods approach—combining computational analysis of 2013–2023 /pol/ posts, qualitative meme tracing, and cross-platform digital ethnography—the study reconstructs six stages in the meme’s trajectory: from disappearance regimes to U.S. alt-right adoption, commodification via global marketplaces, and reentry into South America as consumer products. The findings show how memetic far-right cultures, together with platform infrastructures, detach and monetize historical trauma, producing memetic trauma extractivism in which Global North actors recode, commodify, and resell symbols of Global South violence. The analysis underscores the need for interdisciplinary, data-driven research on how digital culture circulates and commercializes traumatic memory, reshaping global relations of meaning and power.

Introduction

The phrase *free helicopter rides* is defined by Wiktionary as a “humorous, chiefly alt-right euphemism for death flight” (Wiktionary, n.d.). *Death flights* refer to a method of extrajudicial execution used by military regimes in Chile, Argentina, and Brazil during the 1970s and 1980s, in which political dissidents—including the elderly and pregnant women—were thrown alive from helicopters or planes into the sea (Feitlowitz, 2011). Originally a grim symbol of state violence, this imagery resurfaced on the 4chan

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platform in 2015, gaining traction during the 2016 U.S. presidential election (Roberts, 2023). Since then, far-right online communities, particularly on 4chan's /pol/ board, have repurposed it to promote political violence against ideological opponents.

4chan, an anonymous and minimally moderated imageboard launched in 2003, is a long-standing hub for radical discourse characterized by racist, misogynistic, and extremist rhetoric (Colley & Moore, 2020). Its /pol/ board uses irony and parody to normalize hate speech, and its anonymity facilitates both unrestricted discussion and the spread of ideologies with real-world violent implications (Merrin, 2019). These dynamics are tied to memetic processes through which socio-political ideas replicate and evolve in digital culture (Hagen & Venturini, 2024). Prior research on 4chan has examined memes' role in far-right radicalization (Tuters & Hagen, 2020; Tuters, 2021; Hagen & de Zeeuw, 2023) and the connections between meme culture, conspiracy theories, and extremism (Merrin, 2019; Buntain et al., 2023).

Yet scholarship on toxic symbology and online radicalization remains largely focused on the Global North, with little attention to how violent imagery from the Global South becomes embedded in Northern alt-right vernaculars. This study addresses that gap using a mixed-methods approach combining computational analysis, qualitative tracing, and digital ethnography. It shows how the *free helicopter rides* meme's transnational journey detaches historical trauma from its origins while amplifying its symbolic force.

Methodological Framework

This study uses a mixed-methods approach. Data collection began with Know Your Meme (KYM), a community-curated archive of early visual instances, metadata, and source links, systematically archived to establish a baseline of the meme's genealogy. Broader diffusion was reconstructed from an archived version of 4chan /pol/ (2013–2023) downloaded from 4plebs, extracting 538,249 posts via a trilingual keyword strategy in English, Spanish, and Portuguese (e.g., “helicopter,” “Pinochet,” “vuelo de la muerte”). Supplementary sources contextualized 4chan activity within broader online visibility, including Google Trends by region, manual 4search queries, cross-platform searches on Reddit, Facebook, and Memedroid, and references in news media. Computationally, memes are treated as objects whose multimodality can be computationally analyzed (Kiela et al., 2020; Sharma et al., 2022; Martinez Pandiani, 2025) to track their evolution across formats and platforms (Zannettou, 2018; Qu et al., 2023). Quantitative analysis identified temporal peaks, frequent co-occurring phrases, and thematic clusters through topic modeling of texts and image filenames. Qualitative analysis of KYM entries, news coverage, and manually traced memes reconstructed the meme's trajectory from South American state violence, through far-right digital subcultures, to its circulation back into local contexts.

Findings: Evolution of the Free Helicopter Rides Meme in Six Stages

Six phases in the meme's evolution were identified. Initially, the helicopter symbolized extrajudicial executions during 1970s–1980s dictatorships, embedding it as a marker of state terror (Verbitsky, 1995; Feitlowitz, 2011) and forming the substrate for later digital circulation. Its online life began in 2015 on Facebook and shortly after on 4chan /pol/, where early posts linked Pinochet's violence to U.S. left-wing politics, especially Bernie

Sanders. Frequent co-occurrences included “commies,” while qualitative tracing shows migration across Tumblr and YouTube. By 2015–2016, the meme became codified in the Trumpist alt-right ecosystem, evolving into a transnational signifier of anti-left ideology through linguistic, visual, and ironic registers.

From 2017 to 2018, the meme entered U.S. offline spaces, appearing on merchandise, flags, and public alt-right demonstrations, while simultaneously returning online to South America via Facebook pages, translated into Portuguese and Spanish but retaining U.S.-based alt-right lexicons. Between 2018 and 2020, commercial exposure in Chile and Argentina intersected with judicial prosecutions of historical atrocities: t-shirts, mugs, and other products provoked media coverage and public outrage. From 2020 onward, the meme persisted despite resistance. The board game *Dilo con un Meme (Say it with a Meme)* sold in Chile sparked controversy with a card depicting Pinochet throwing people from a helicopter, prompting a U.S. manufacturer apology. Yet the meme has remained active online across social media, meme boards, and novelty commerce sites, showing how global circulation resists eradication.

Conclusions

The meme’s trajectory shows how digital cultures allow violent political symbols to expand, mutate, and circulate with striking ideological elasticity. Using large-scale computational analysis alongside close qualitative tracing, this study demonstrates that such elasticity is structured—not random—shaped by the affordances and recommendation systems of the platforms through which the meme moved. Following the meme across digital and material domains reveals how historical trauma becomes a profitable aesthetic. Prior research on the commodification of hate (Forest 2020; Squirrell & Martiny 2022; Postma 2022; Stabile 2025; Askanius & Stoencheva 2024) shows how marketplaces normalize extremist iconography; this analysis extends that work by recovering Global North–South supply-chain dynamics: memes travel from Southern historical trauma, to Northern sellers, to standardized global products sold back to the South.

From a coloniality perspective, this lifecycle constitutes a sort of trauma extractivism: Latin American histories of state violence are stripped of context, recoded through U.S. political antagonisms, and monetized by actors far removed from affected communities. The original death flights have long been central to Argentina’s and Chile’s struggles over memory, truth, and justice (Verbitsky, 1995; Rabotnikof, 2007; Feitlowitz, 2011; Yankelevich, 2016). Their digital revival reopens these contested memories in a global, participatory arena, where trauma is commodified and repurposed even in local contexts (Fernández-Villanueva & Toscano 2021; Varela 2024). The meme’s reentry into Chile and Argentina—during renewed judicial reckoning with *vuelos de la muerte*—shows how platform economies return historical violence to its point of origin as novelty, irony, or brand.

Together, these findings demonstrate that the meme’s global spread is not merely a matter of virality but of infrastructural power: platforms, sellers, and marketplaces collectively detach, repackage, and redistribute traumatic symbols along neocolonial lines. Future work should build on data-driven approaches that track how violent

symbols circulate across digital and commercial ecosystems, and should examine more closely the political–economic arrangements that govern the extraction, monetization, and re-insertion of Global South trauma within global far-right cultures.

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