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Clashing cyphers, contagious content: The digital geopolitics of grime

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THE DIGITAL GEOPOLITICS OF GRIME

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to expand popular geopolitics in line with the digital worlds in which many of us now live. By interpreting geopolitics as a method of cultural (re)production, it becomes a creative tool that can be used to shape and elevate the affective appeal of content. Digital technologies are centrally implicated in the production of such content. By decoupling space and time from their physical anchors in the real world, digital technologies imbue them with a creative latency that can be deployed in both agentic and affective ways. Specifically, decoupling creates spatio-temporal openings that offer new opportunities for content to be territorialised, and for artists and audiences to be engaged. Digital geopolitics thus considers the ways in which the decoupling of space and time can foreground new types of digitally mediated geopolitical praxis. Through an analysis of music videos exchanged between two grime artists involved in a "clash", I show how digital technologies enable them to mediate between the different spatio-temporal logics of the digital and real worlds. Doing so reifies the affective power of space, and the expansive role of popular geopolitics in the digital age.

KEYWORDS

Digital geopolitics, space-time, decoupling, territorialisation, cypher, grime.

You're not real – Skepta

1   INTRODUCTION

As tools of socio-spatial reproduction, digital technologies empower users to participate in geopolitical praxes in new, and implicitly more innovative, ways. They enable the formation of digital assemblages of content that mediate between the spatio-temporal logics of the digital and real worlds, and provide new opportunities for the realisation of agency and affect (Müller, 2008, 2015). Whilst this means that there are now potentially unlimited ways in which the digital reproduction of space can inform the everyday practices and applications of geopolitics, the fact remains that 'there is surprisingly little research into the popular geopolitics of internet-based mediums' (Henry, 2019: 6). Notwithstanding such paucity, Ó Tuathail (1998: 90) recognised the geopolitical potential of new technologies over two decades ago, when he asserted that:

> Territory and territoriality are not discrete ontologies but social constructions entwined with technological capabilities […] Human society produces, reworks and, creatively and otherwise, destroys territory and territoriality. Our task is to theorize critically the polymorphous territorialities produced by the social, economic, political and technological machines of our postmodern condition.

This paper brings the geopolitical potential of digital technologies into alignment with previous work that has explored how 'geopolitical claims and scripts are produced and circulated within *popular* cultural forms' (Hughes, 2007: 979, original emphasis). By exploring the ways in which digital technologies can enable the products of popular culture to

be territorialised in spatially and temporally contingent ways, it offers a new perspective from which popular geopolitics can be advanced. In other words, whilst the past two decades have seen scholars of popular geopolitics respond to the observation that 'geopolitics is a much broader cultural phenomenon than is normally described and understood by the 'wise men' of statecraft' (Ó Tuathail and Dalby, 1998: 2-3), this paper attempts to expand the canon even further. By extending Dittmer and Gray's (2010) notion of "popular geopolitics 2.0", it responds to Bos's (2018: 62, emphasis added) recent lament that 'research into media and popular culture has yet to sufficiently, both theoretically and methodologically, address the ways in which individuals and groups *actually engage* with cultural items in patterns of everyday life'. In doing so, it considers alternative geopolitics of cultural reproduction; those in which friction is constantly being (re)produced through processes of digital mediation. Friction emerges from the ways in which content creators represent themselves in relation to other people and places. Through these representations, they keep their audiences engaged and entertained through the creative exploitation of difference. As such, digital geopolitics can be seen as a method deployed to enhance the affective appeal of digital content.

Digital logics underpin the production and distribution of such content. By enabling 'the triumph of speed and the defeat of proximity' (MacDonald, 2006: 57), they have led to the creation of "digital circuits" of cultural content that transcend, but are also entwined with, the specificities of physical space and time (Shipley, 2013; Ash et al., 2018; Woods, 2019a). Indeed, whilst Ó Tuathail and Dalby (1998: 1) once suggested that 'the de-territorializing consequences of new informational technologies seem to have driven a stake into the heart of geopolitics', I contend that they have transformed geopolitics by imbuing content creators with the potential to reproduce space and time ways that augment the affective appeal of digital content. The digital domain thus becomes a deterritorialised space of representation

that can be reterritorialised through the specific space-time configurations of the content that is posted there. Compounding this is the fact that digital technologies decouple space and time from their physical anchors in the real world, and, in doing so, imbue them with the potential to be deployed in ways that reproduce inter-personal and inter-territorial frictions. Decoupling refers to the 'break between the social and the geographical' which in turn 'heralds a new age of unplaced human interaction' (Elden, 2005: 9; see also Kong et al., 2020). In response, then, to Graham's (2013: 181) observation that 'geographers are well placed (both theoretically and methodologically) to take the lead on employing more suitable and appropriate ways of talking about, and materialising, the internet', digital geopolitics considers how the decoupling of space and time that the internet has enabled can foreground new types of digitally mediated geopolitical praxis.

To illustrate these ideas, I use grime – a disruptive genre of urban music that emerged in Britain in the early 2000s – to show how digital production techniques are used to decouple space and time in ways that maximise the agency of artists, and the affectiveness of their content. Grime is "disruptive" insofar as it has traditionally been portrayed by the mainstream British media in sensationalist terms that conflate its cultural form with systemic issues of drugs, gangs, knife crime, and inner-city deprivation. These conflations once caused the performance of grime to be excluded from public spaces, with artists reclaiming agency by exploiting the boundary-transcending potential of the digital domain. By highlighting the ways in which decoupled space and time are used by grime artists to reterritorialise content, I therefore build on existing work that shows how rap-based musical genres 'display a clever transformative creativity that is endlessly capable of altering the uses of technologies and space' (Forman, 2000: 65; after Rose, 1994). Specifically, I consider how two artists – one based in London, the other Manchester – engaged in a "clash" using the content-sharing

platform, YouTube, exchange music videos in ways that reproduced friction between themselves, and the cities they represent. Whilst existing scholarship has done much to unravel the resistant nature of urban music (Forman, 2000; Lamotte, 2014; Simões and Campos, 2017; Woods, 2019b, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c), there has been no consideration of how digital technologies can be catalysts for the reproduction of agency and affect. Moreover, in view of the need to understand the 'interdependence between digital circuits and the 'real' worlds to which they refer' (Simões and Campos, 2017: 17l), this paper develops an understanding of the interplay between different representational registers, and their geopolitical effects. Affective content is contagious content, meaning the content produced by grime artists provides unique insight into the ways in which 'affect is central to an understanding of our information-and-image-based late capitalist culture' (Massumi, 2002: 27). In a more applied sense, this paper also demonstrates how grime artists use the digital tools at their disposal to overcome their once-marginal position in Britain, and thus responds to Elwood's (2020) recent call for digital geographies to more directly engage with issues of intersectionality.

The empirical analysis below draws on the lyrical and symbolic content of 14 music videos exchanged between two grime artists – London-based Chipmunk ("Chip") and Manchester-based Bugzy Malone ("Bugz") – over a nine-month period in 2015. The videos represent a "clash" or "battle" whereby insults, challenges and threats are exchanged within a mutually understood framework of creative engagement. Whereas rap battles were once conducted face-to-face and "performed" to a live audience, they have since become more spatially and temporally dispersed due to the prominent role of digital technologies in the production and

consumption of grime[1]. Websites like YouTube enable the distribution of content to geographically dispersed audiences, whilst the proliferation of Digital Audio Workstations (DAWs) have helped reduce barriers to musical production. The ''road' or 'hood' video is one that is shot on a small budget and has a gritty feel to it' (White, 2017: 410), and has become so entwined with the subcultural affectiveness of grime that there have been recent calls for them to be interpreted 'as an ethnographic resource, as 'data'' (Barron, 2013: 531). Accordingly, the empirical analysis below focusses on identifying how the frictions embedded within the lyrical and symbolic content of grime can provide insight into reproduction of digital geopolitics. Before that, I consider the role of (geo)politics in popular culture, and develop a conceptual understanding of "digital geopolitics of the cypher".

2 (GEO)POLITICS IN/AND POPULAR CULTURE

Over the past two decades or so, popular geopolitics has undergone two notable expansions. The first has been to embrace a wider range of cultural mediums as 'new sites of poststructuralist analysis' that are 'central to the growth of a new geopolitical imagination' (Gibson, 1998: 166). This "new geopolitical imagination" has been expanded through analyses of the cultural representations most obviously found in films (Carter and McCormack, 2006; Dodds, 2006; Hughes, 2007), but also other media such as video games, photography, literature and music (Gibson, 1998). Yet, as much as these bodies of work have contributed to an expansion of popular geopolitics, so too have they been criticised for

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[1] As a British researcher who has lived outside the UK since 2006, my exposure to grime has primarily been through YouTube and other digital platforms. This highlights the extent to which my understanding of grime has been shaped by the interpretive lens of "the digital".

'fail[ing] to attend to everyday citations of geopolitical power' (MacDonald, 2006: 55). In response, the second expansion relates to the exploration of more agentic, affective and everyday reproductions of geopolitical power. This shift away from cultural representations of global politics has since been formalised as "popular geopolitics 2.0", and is defined by a focus on the 'practices and performances that mark much of the everyday experiences of the geopolitical' (Dittmer and Gray, 2010: 1664). This paper augments both of these expansions by exploring the role of digital technologies in democratising access to the production and circulation of content. Through democratisation, they have created new possibilities for otherwise marginalised communities to reproduce their own geopolitical narratives and affects. Notwithstanding the disruptive potential of these technologies, their implications for geopolitics have, with a few exceptions (Woon, 2011; Henry, 2019; Woods, 2019c), gone unnoticed.

The following subsections explore these ideas in more detail. First, I consider the theoretical implications of bringing popular geopolitics into alignment with the digital domain. Specifically, I draw on feminist critiques to show how digital technologies can enable the rethinking of geopolitical agency and affect. Second, I provide an overview of the emergence of grime, and consider how its territorialised nature can enable the rethinking of representation in a digital age. The ideas raised in the first and second subsections foreground the subsequent section, which conceptualises the digital geopolitics of the cypher.

2.1   The digital turn in popular geopolitics: rethinking agency and affect

In many respects, digital technologies define the worlds in which many of us now live. They are increasingly embedded within the fabric of daily life, and increasingly, therefore, shape

the ways in which we understand and engage with people, content and place. This is an irreversible trend that foregrounds the need to reimagine how popular geopolitics are produced, distributed and consumed in the contemporary world (Henry, 2019; Woods, 2019c). Yet, whilst digital technologies have made the production and circulation of content more accessible than ever before, discourses of popular geopolitics have not kept pace with the trend; in many respects, they lag noticeably behind. Calling for a "digital turn" in popular geopolitics is therefore an attempt to develop new theoretical insights that are aligned with these shifts (Ash et al., 2018). To begin, I suggest that the digital presents an opportunity to rethink how agency and affect are implicated in the production and consumption of popular geopolitics.

In the first instance, the democratisation of access to media associated with digital production techniques offers new methods and opportunities to disrupt the circulation of power associated with mainstream media outlets. Responding to feminist critiques concerning the need for more subjective, partial and particularistic accounts of how geopolitics can be understood (Dowler and Sharp, 2001; Hyndman, 2004; Sharp, 2007), scholars have become increasingly attuned to the ways in which popular geopolitics are biased by the 'elite visions' (Dittmer and Gray, 2010: 1664) of mainstream media producers. Specifically, they have started to explore the consumption of content through explicit analyses of "fandom" and audience dynamics (Dodds, 2006; Bos, 2018). This recursive shift is augmented by the digital domain, as digital content is subject to real-time audience feedback through the digital currencies of views, (dis)likes, shares and comments. Indeed, because the digital domain foregrounds the (re)balancing of power in favour of the audience, content producers need to become more reflexive and participatory in their production practices. Digital technologies empower individuals to engage with content when and how they want to, and to produce and

circulate their own (counter-)productions online. To this point, Adams (2017: 366, original emphasis) explains in more detail how mediated communication goes beyond the linear transmission of content, and instead creates an 'event in which two or more agents encounter each other and come away altered by the *event*'. By interpreting digital content as an "event" that brings producers and consumers into close/r contact with each other, it becomes a new *locus* of agency. What this means is that producers have the power to reflexively adapt their content in response to real-time audience feedback, whilst audiences have the power to share content, and to contribute to its dissemination and spread. Processes like these highlight the productive potential of the digital to realise new forms of geopolitical agency.

These new forms are a result of the fact that the production and circulation of digital content causes it to become decoupled from its spatio-temporal anchors in the real world. Decoupling can, in the second instance, create new opportunities for the (re)production of affect. As the field of popular geopolitics has expanded, so too has its theoretical engagement with the role of affect in the 'performative enactment of space and spacing' (Carter and McCormack, 2006: 228). The digital adds a new dimension to these representational spaces; indeed, it can enable the reproduction of *more* affective forms. By 'de-centering… agency from its long-time association with subjective intentionality' (Dittmer and Gray, 2010: 1668), the digital domain becomes implicated in "more-than-human" reproductions of affect that augment the shift towards non-representational popular geopolitics. As Dittmer and Gray (2010: 1668) explain, 'non-representational performance emphasizes the fundamental openness of time-space, its constant sense of becoming in contrast to the (still flexible) structuring effects of performativity'. Given that the digital domain is governed by logics that differ from – but also overlap with – those of the "real" world, it provides new insight into 'how the emergence and movement of affect is expressed and qualified as it performs, and disrupts, space-times of

experience – that is, the bifurcation of an event into multiple registers' (Anderson, 2006: 736). The affectiveness of the digital domain can, in other words, be indexed to the divergent ways in which space and time can be reproduced across the digital and real worlds. Divergence creates friction, and friction can become a tool of engagement. Through decoupling, then, the digital domain enables the 'fundamental openness of time-space' (Dittmer and Gray, 2010: 1668) to be realised, meaning space and time can be deployed in ways that enhance the affective appeal of content. I return to these ideas in the next section.

Before that, I provide an overview of the emergence and territoriality of grime. As with other genres of urban music, grime is known for 'blur[ring] lines between producers and consumers and official and unofficial, incorporating marginalized, disparate youth into communities of active participation' (Shipley, 2013: 364). Embedded within grime are a series of representational practices, the configurations of which can bring the digital turn in popular geopolitics to life.

2.2   The territoriality of grime: rethinking representation in a digital age

Grime emerged in London in the early 2000s, and soon came to be associated with disadvantaged youths living in inner city council estates. As much as the attitudes and values of grime artists have been forged by the socio-economic inequalities of inner-city life, so too has their music been subject to repression and censorship by the politico-cultural structures of the UK. One of the most punitive, and controversial, attempts has been to legislate against the public performance of grime through the (now defunct) Form 696. Form 696 required all live shows featuring a DJ or MC performing over a pre-recorded backing track to submit their

names, private addresses and phone numbers to the police[2]. Whilst the rationale for such

protocols was that grime performances were considered high-risk events, they also served to

reproduce the structures of inequality from which grime emerged by limiting its public

performance and expression (Woods, 2020a). In turn, measures like Form 696 have forced

artists to rely on alternative channels to disseminate their music. Pirate radio stations like

Rinse FM and Déjà vu FM originally provided these channels, but they have since expanded

alongside the mainstreaming of access to digital technologies. Music videos can now be

recorded on smartphones and handheld video cameras; backing tracks can be developed on

home computers; content can be shared through social media. With this expansion, we can

begin to see how grime has also been reinvented as an audio-*visual* phenomenon, the

implications of which are considered below. This entrepreneurial, do-it-yourself ethos has

enabled artists to produce content, develop fanbases and establish careers independently of

the mainstream music business. For example, Stormzy, one of the most well-known grime

artists today, recorded his breakthrough video for *Shut Up* in a single take in car park in

South London. As of May 2020, the video had been viewed more than 100 million times,

making him 'the most successful unsigned artist in UK history' (Vice, 01.03.17). Stripped of

the ability to perform in public, grime artists have embraced the power of the digital to

reclaim agency, and to (re)produce new, and more affective, forms of audio-visual content.

Whilst digital technologies have empowered grime artists to reclaim the right to the city, the

city has always been the focus of their representational practices. The sound of grime is 'built

around a heavy bass production and street aesthetic' (Swain, 2018: 2), and is delivered

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[2] These measures can be seen as discriminatory insofar as they asked which ethnic groups

were expected to attend events; moreover, they were not required for live bands.

through the rapping of self-referential, territorially situated lyrics. As with other genres of urban music, grime provides a 'diarization of the inner city, its leitmotif being the toughness of the council estate, the tower block and the streets' (Woods, 2020a: 301), and can be interpreted as a 'hidden transcript emerging from places of exclusion' and is thus 'inscribed in struggles for space in the city' (Lamotte, 2014: 686). Yet, despite their 'obsessive preoccupation with place and locality' (Forman, 2000: 88), the relationship between artists and the urban contexts goes beyond representation; it creates new codes of meaning, enshrined in a "narrative of dominance" that

> communicates hostile aggression towards potential rivals […] At their heart, the use of such lyrical content aims to demean others by 'murking' (beating) them through highly charged verbal messages, communicated through media content or via face to face confrontation (Swain, 2018: 3).

These confrontations – known as "clashes" or "battles" – are a defining feature of rap-based genres of urban music, and are understood through the concept of the cypher. Cyphers are the lyrics that are delivered and exchanged by rappers, which create a 'conceptual space' that is used to 'represent a territory that has to be conquered' (Lamotte, 2014: 688, 691). Lyrics are used to demonstrate an artists' primacy within a given territory, whilst also challenging other rappers to engage with them in order to enhance the affective appeal of the cypher. The cypher therefore provides a culturally-recognised framework for creative engagement and interaction; in doing so, it 'establish[es] the contexts for innovative referential practices' (Shipley, 2013: 368) that enable the creation and circulation of affect. Whilst cyphers are 'traditionally staged within geographical boundaries that demarcate turf and territory' (Forman, 2000: 68), since the early 2000s the incursion of digital technologies into everyday

life has transformed the ways in which cyphers are reproduced. They have removed the barriers to rappers recording, uploading and sharing audio-visual content online, and have expanded the territorial logics upon which the cypher is based. With digital reproduction, then, the cypher becomes implicated in a more complex web of representational practices, as artists are able to maximise the creative potential that comes with reterritorialising the city through digital production. Digital technologies enable rappers to clash with each other in less spatially proximate ways, thus giving rise to digital geopolitics of the cypher.

3   DIGITAL GEOPOLITICS OF THE CYPHER

Cyphers have always been geopolitical constructs, yet the geopolitical frictions that underpin them have evolved in line with the proliferation of digital technologies as a medium of representation, and a method of content creation. Friction can, in this sense, be understood as the representational practices that artists employ to construct an image of themselves in relation to other people and places; friction is often an outcome of such relationality. Whereas cyphers were traditionally constructed through face-to-face exchanges of lyrics between artists (meaning they occurred in real time, and *in situ*), digital recording and production technologies have enabled them to take on expanded (audio-visual) meaning, and an expanded, and implicitly more deterritorialised, geographical purview. Artists are no longer expected to just represent territory, but to territorialise their content in ways that push the spatial boundaries and affective potential of their representations (Forman, 2000, 2014). Thus, whilst grime artists remain semiotically grounded in 'the cultural contexts that are supposed to give them meaning in the first place' (Shipley, 2013: 363), through spatio-temporal decoupling, they are able to establish and challenge claims to territorial authenticity in more agentic and affective ways. Territory no longer plays a static or passive role in the

construction of the cypher; rather, it becomes an active, evolving and digitally mediated construct that can be manipulated for creative gain.

Conceptually speaking, whereas cyphers were once based on the interlocking logic of space-time (as artists had to be co-present to clash), they are now based on decoupled logics of space *and* time. This provides new opportunities for the cypher to be reterritorialised, and for friction to be reproduced. Müller (2015: 35) argues that, when produced through digital media, space becomes a "topological" construct as it can 'become folded or crumpled, almost like a handkerchief, whose ends, if laid out flat on a table, are far from each other but end up close together when scrunched'. Topological constructions of space provide insight into how and why the geopolitical potential of the cypher can be maximised through digital reproduction. Specifically, with decoupling, the space-times of the digital domain can be reterritorialised in ways that juxtapose those of the real world. These juxtapositions create "openings" and "closings" that 'can be applied differently to various relational dimensions' (Brighenti, 2010: 58). As a result, the cypher becomes an assemblage of 'spatial and non-spatial territories [that] are superimposed one onto the other and endowed with multiple linkages' (Brighenti, 2010: 57). The idea that there are multiple territories that are "superimposed one onto the other" reveals how digitally reproduced cyphers draw artists into a more complex framework of engagement that intersects with various reference points and representational registers.

In more concrete terms, spatio-temporal decoupling provides artists with more ways in which friction, and by extension affect, can be reproduced. Grime artists now have the ability to clash with anybody, anywhere, and anytime; the ability to augment their lyrics (and their claims therein) with visual cues; and the ability to choose when and where they film their

videos, and, relatedly, when they release them online. As a result, they are embroiled in the constant struggle to 'mak[e] diverse elements hold together as a whole for a while (territorialisation)… [amidst] continuous centrifugal forces at the same time (deterritorialisation)' (Müller, 2015: 32). Digital geopolitics can therefore be understood as the ongoing attempts by artists to reterritorialise the cypher in ways that generate some sort of competitive and/or creative advantage. The pervasiveness of the digital domain means that the distance – both real and imagined – between artists and audiences is eradicated, meaning the cypher can be constantly accessed and reproduced. The threat of an opposing artist engaging with the cypher, and thus establishing an advantage over another artist, becomes pervasive. Decoupled space and time can, therefore, be used to augment the narrative of threat that underpins the cypher, causing it to become a more affectively charged geopolitical construct. These ideas are now illustrated through an empirical analysis of the clash between Chip and Bugz.

4   CLASHING CYPHERS, CONTAGIOUS CONTENT

The clash analysed below lasted nine months (from March to November 2015), and yielded 14 music videos between London-based Chip (nine videos) and Manchester-based Bugz (five). Bugz initiated the clash during his performance on BBC Radio 1Xtra's *Fire in the Booth*, in which he challenged Chip's authenticity as a grime artist. In doing so, he attracted more than 23 million views on YouTube. This, and subsequent exchanges, are documented in Figure 1, which shows the schedule of video releases between the two artists, the location and timing of each video, and the number of YouTube views that each video attracted. Drawing on an analysis of the videos outlined in Figure 1, the following subsections identify key characteristics that underpin the digital geopolitics of grime.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

4.1   Territorial assertions of authenticity

Grime is geopolitical in that it 'offer[s] a medium for young people to go to war with each other, activating violent conflicts over territory and reputation' (White, 2017: 412). Clashes between artists are often, therefore, implicated in more broad-based competitive logics that feed into the ways in which they associate with the cities (or, more specifically, localities) that they represent. The city is weaponised as a territorial marker of authenticity; as such, the territorialisation of the city by artists renders it vulnerable to attack by competing artists. Place matters for grime artists, as place associations serve to (re)create distance and difference between artists, and provide vantage points from which friction can be reproduced (Simões and Campos, 2017). For example, in his initial *Fire in the Booth* performance, Bugz territorialises the cypher by establishing himself as the foremost representative of Manchester's grime scene:

> *They say I put Manny on the map*
> *So I hashtag 0161[3] […]*
> *You're lookin' at Manchester's best*

When Chip responds to Bugz's challenge in *Pepper Riddim*, he turns Bugz's associations with Manchester against him, rapping: *Don't tell me nothin' about grime, like it startin' in*

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[3] *0161* is the Manchester dialling code.

your city. Here, Chip claims that London-based artists are more pioneering and sophisticated than their counterparts from other cities. Over subsequent videos, he further develops the link between himself and London; for example, in *The End*, he raps *Sick MCs come from Tottenham*, whilst in *96 Bars of Revenge*, he claims *Riot on mic/Got Tottenham in me*. In doing so, he claims that because London is the epicentre of grime, his talent is both indisputable and inherent. These assertions serve a dual purpose. First, they help artists develop their fanbases through 'assertions of authenticity in relation to locality and place' (Reitsamer and Prokop, 2017: 3); second, they do so in order to undermine their opponent's place associations, thus creating inter-territorial friction. For example, in *Hat-Trick* Chip warns Bugz not to clash with him, being a London-based, and therefore more lyrically sophisticated, artist:

> *When it comes to wordplay*
> *Boy don't play here*
> *This is London*
> *Fresh out the Dungeon*
> *I ain't gotta scream it*
> *Niggas know where I come from*

In the digitally mediated space of the cypher, representations of place go beyond physical or geographical territory, and are used instead to create a representational terrain upon which the status of an artist is validated. Chip depicts London – and therefore himself – as the cultural epicentre of grime, whilst Bugz depicts Manchester – and therefore himself – as an emergent challenger to London's/Chip's primacy. He creates a spatial hierarchy that not only provides a point of territorial differentiation, but also asserts the implicit value of being a London-

based artist (Forman, 2000). In doing so, however, Chip also creates an opportunity for Bugz to leverage the spatio-temporal contingencies of digital reproduction to use these associations *against* him. In this sense, rather than the place-based cachet of grime artists 'collid[ing] with the acceptance of a 'virtual' realm apparently disconnected from the real world' (Simões and Campos, 2017: 27), the interplay between virtual and real, online and offline, becomes part of the competitive friction that is reproduced through the territorialised logics of the cypher. Specifically, the decoupling of space and time enable them to be deployed as creative tools through which the cypher can be reterritorialised, and new forms of friction can be (re)produced. Two examples illustrate what I mean by this. The first is when Bugz travelled to London to film *Relegation Riddim* outside Tottenham Hotspur Football Club (THFC), the second is when Chip uploaded a video called *Dickhead* within just five[4] hours of Bugz uploading *Wasteman* onto YouTube.

4.2 Reterritorialisation and the digital decoupling of space and time

In the first instance, the video for *Relegation Riddim* depicts Bugz reterritorialising the cypher in a spatially contingent way. He does this by travelling to Tottenham, occupying Chip's territory, filming a music video there, and then circulating a counter-representation online. In doing so, he undermines Chip's claims to territorial sovereignty by colonising what Chip asserts as *his* territory. In the video, Bugz is filmed with his crew outside THFC at night; drinking, smoking, and threatening Chip with aggressive hand gestures. Against this backdrop, Bugz raps lyrics like *How can a Chipmunk fight with a lion?* and *You see Chippy*

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[4] The video was actually released eight hours after *Wasteman*; the three-hour delay was purportedly due to technical problems.

in the distance/Climbing over the fence like Vega[5] whilst repeating in the chorus *These bullets will make man run for their lives/Now your career's on the line*. Here, Bugz plays up the ease with which he is able to colonise Chips' territory by drawing on a variety of metaphors that show Chip running away when threatened, and thus undermining Chip's claims to both territory, and artistic supremacy. Bugz goes on to ask *When the fuck did a pop star send*[6] *for a real grime MC? Especially one from Manchester?* He then uses the words "premiership" and "relegation" as metaphors to create a parallel framework of competitive advantage. This framework references the physical recording of his video outside THFC (the physical colonisation of Chips' territory) and Chip's status as a "pop star" (his inauthenticity as a grime artist):

> *I don't know what's going on in the pop premiership, but this is the grime premiership, bro*
> *And I'm relegatin' you, fam*
> *Trust me*
> *There's a new kid on the block*
> *Manny on the map*

The last assertion to put *Manny on the map* enforces the idea of colonisation, showing how the video outside THFC has secured Bugz's (or Manchester's) place in the heartland of grime (London). Friction is created by juxtaposing Chip's territorialised assertions of artistic primacy with his own reterritorialised representations depicted in *Relegation Riddim*. The

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[5] *Vega* is a character from the beat-em-up computer game, *Street Fighter*.

[6] To "send" for someone is to issue a challenge, and thus initiate (or continue) a clash.

boldness of such a move galvanised audiences, with the video being the second most watched

of the clash, and attracting over 15 million views on YouTube. Recognising the creative

potency of such spatial manoeuvring, Chip challenged Bugz to return to Tottenham in *Light*

Work:

> *You wanna come to the ends*[7]
>
> *With all your friends*
>
> *When no-one's about*
>
> *Come with all your jewels*
>
> *When everyone's there*
>
> *See what Tottenham's about […]*
>
> *Plus, he never came no one's block*
>
> *Tourist, he was outside the stadium*

He repeats the challenge in *Run Out Riddim*, which was filmed in the same location as

Relegation Riddim, and released just three days after *Light Work*:

> *You wanna film here?*
>
> *Tweet the time one day before*
>
> *You'll get run out the ends*
>
> *Run out the ends*

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[7] *The ends* is British slang that refers primarily to the locality that someone comes from, but

secondarily references both the lack of prospects associated with such areas, as well as the

role of the streets in making money ("the means to an end").

Get run out the ends

Waste of petrol

Don't try that again

Chip's response tries to nullify the symbolism of Bugz's territorial conquest by initially calling him a coward for coming at night (*when no-one's about*) and for being a "tourist" by visiting THFC rather than "the block". These messages are brought to life by the symbolism of the video, which starts with Chip casually chatting with the owner of a chicken shop (that was shown in Bugz's video, but closed), before joining his crew outside THFC. He then goes on to issue a challenge to Bugz to come back and *see what Tottenham's about* before threatening that he will *get run out the ends*. The fury of Chip's response can be interpreted as an admission that the clash started to shift in Bugz's favour through his strategic manipulation of space. Bugz tapped into a new source of creative advantage by demonstrating how he was able to physically occupy a space associated with Chip at a time when Chip was not there. In doing so, he highlights the inconsistencies in Chip's claims to territorial sovereignty, and thus undermines them. Indeed, Bugz predicted the effects of these mediations by rapping *I'm from a little town called Manchester/I'm about to do this billion views ting*. This combination of humble self-deprecation and boastful foresight reveals Bugz's awareness of the affective power of deploying space as a creative tool. In response, Chip leverages the contingencies of time to prove his artistic skill in *Dickhead*.

In the second instance, the video for *Dickhead* depicts Chip reterritorialising the cypher in a temporally contingent way. In doing so, he can be seen to rebut the effects of Bugz's spatial manoeuvres. Online sharing platforms like YouTube promote a more 'dynamic and interactive' style of content distribution that reduces the distance between artists and their

audience, and also 'enabl[es] rappers to follow and assess the impact their works have' (Simões and Campos, 2017: 25). That said, digitally mediated cyphers remain slower, and less reactive, mediums for battle than face-to-face engagement. This creates a temporal logic that can be manipulated for strategic gain through, for example, the timing of video releases. Whereas the production of music videos is, by definition, a time-consuming process, in *Dickhead* Chip turned these time-based logics of production to his advantage by responding to Bugz's video *Wasteman* in just five hours. Indeed, in *Wasteman*, Bugz criticises the fact that it previously took Chip five months to respond to *The Revival*, rapping:

> *Wait, wait, it's five months too late […]*
>
> *You can bring out six tracks in one week*
>
> *But a hat-trick sounds like a desperate attempt*

Here, Bugz claims that despite the fact that Chip retaliated with three videos within one week (#6, #7, #8), they lack impact because they were "five months too late". Chip responded to this challenge by retaliating with just one video – *Dickhead* – in an unexpectedly short period of time. The fact that Chip had the creative capacity to watch Bugz's video, write lyrics that responded directly to Bugz's, develop a backing track, record the song, shoot and edit the accompanying video, and upload everything onto the internet – all within five hours of Bugz uploading *Wasteman* – highlights the creative agility and reactiveness of grime. As arts and culture magazine, Vice (18.11.14), puts it:

> The beauty of the genre [i]s its uncompromising and jagged form, all razor sharp innovation, savage realism, and the unmistakeable air that shit was about to go off. Fuck release dates, exclusives, studio time, and the singular artistic identities that the

music industry institutionally favoured, grime was releasing a song with ten people on it, half an hour after exporting it from Fruity Loops[8].

Dickhead epitomises the "razor sharp innovation" and the "unmistakeable air that shit was about to go off" of grime. During the intro, Chip is filmed in a recording studio, leafing through a book of lyrics, explaining *So obviously this is my AK-47 man, this is my AK*, before going on to highlight his reactiveness: *Man try drop tunes at 6[pm] today/I said "Dickhead" 11pm tonight*. Through these lines, Chip first serves to weaponise his lyrics, before highlighting the threatening immediacy of his response. In turn, this becomes evidence of his lyrical mastery when he claims: *You can't keep up with the pace/So shut up and don't come back*. This latter claim suggests that temporal responsiveness (*pace*) is a more accurate indicator of artistic skill than spatial responsiveness, which in turn can be read as an attempt to nullify the effects of Bugz's spatial manoeuvres (i.e. *don't come back* [to Tottenham]). As a result, the audience is drawn into the spectacle of content being created in a spontaneous and relational way. For example, in *Wasteman*, Bugz makes fun of Chip's dress sense, rapping: *He got relegated and kicked straight out of the league/Wasteman/Now he comes back in a velour tracksuit, how you mean?* Chip responded by not only wearing a tracksuit top in *Dickhead*, but also rapping: *Velour tracky, gladly/Velour tracky, swaggy/I would send you one/But no, you make the ting look trampy*. Similarly, Bugz challenges Chip's popularity and financial solvency by rapping *I know that you've been struggling to pay rent/You don't get shows and your EP flopped/And I've got an EP in the top ten*; Chip responds in *Dickhead* by rapping from the driving seat of a BMW car, before asserting: *Struggling to pay rent, are you on crack?/Dickhead, I own my home*. Verbal assertions are enforced by visual cues,

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[8] Fruity Loops is an example of a DAW.

which turn the cypher into a digital assemblage of ideas and reference points, the inter-referencing of which help to augment its affective power.

4.3   Inter-referencing and the digital reproduction of affect

As much as the cypher can be deterritorialised and reterritorialised in spatially and temporally contingent ways through the use of digital production techniques, so too do these techniques enable artists to make the cypher a more inter-referential construct. As such, the digital geopolitics of grime goes beyond the territorialisation of music videos, and includes the referencing of parallel narratives that augment the friction that artists reproduce through the cypher. Inter-referencing is a method through which friction is reproduced, and which integrates the real and conceptual differences between artists into one narrative. Indeed, whereas rap artists once used the cypher to 'expound their own versions of alienating power, drawing on the imagery and codes of the street' (Forman, 2000: 82), the inflections and expansive access to audiences, markets and opportunities associated with the digital have encouraged them to become more wide-ranging in their appeal. As a result, the 'layering [of] various registers' enables the creation of a 'multimodal and multireferential sign' that is able to elevate the affective power of the creative product and mitigate against the problem of "digital fatigue" (Shipley, 2013: 363). "Layering" enables the affective power of space to be realised. It provides opportunities for artists to mediate between the differences that come from decoupling the space-times of the digital and real worlds, and the representational differences that separate the artist-as-avatar from the artist-as-self. By exploiting these differences, artists are able to create friction by inter-referencing the symbolic cues that give structure and meaning to the cypher, and which cause digital geopolitics to manifest.

For example, Chip and Bugz often associate themselves with icons of popular culture, the aim being to reference another layer of representation that adds a humorous dimension to the cypher and thus soften its aggressive underpinnings. In *Relegation Riddim* Bugz makes fun of Chip's haircut by comparing him with computer game character, Sonic the Hedgehog, rapping *With that shit on the back of his head/He looks like Sonic the Hedgehog from Sega*. Three videos later, in *Light Work*, Chip takes the comparison and returns it to Bugz, using "sonic" as a homophone to refer simultaneously to a song that Bugz previously released called *Sonic Boom*, as well as the aftershock caused by the impact of his lyrics:

> *About Sonic the Hedgehog*
>
> *You drop-lip monkey*
>
> *This here's Sonic Boom*

In response to Chip's sophisticated use of homophones and metaphors to prove his artistic skill, Bugz changes strategy in *Wasteman*, claiming that representing themselves as cultural avatars is an unsatisfactory substitute for a real fight. He references characters from the beat-em-up game, *Street Fighter*, in order to emphasise his physical superiority in the real world[9]. In doing so, he evokes three layers of friction that inter-reference the cultural narrative of *Street Fighter*, the cypher itself, and the real world in which fighting is a physical act:

> *We can't have a fight like Ryu and Ken*
>
> *Cuh we know you can only get brave with a pen*

---

[9] Bugz is an amateur boxer.

In this case, Bugz admits that Chip's lyrics are effective, but does so in order to highlight his physical weakness (*you can only get brave with a pen*) in the real world. Through these narratives, they are able to deliver a more encompassing message that, 'through the constitutive work of the imagination' (Ekdale, 2018: 211), enables them to construct a more engaging dialogue between themselves, and by extension, their audiences. Not only that, but through cultural avatars, grime artists become disembodied representations of who they really are, thus offering audiences an expanded of the artist-as-self that is rooted in the materiality of the body, but is represented in multiple, and sometimes (in)congruent, ways. As a result, the cypher expands to become an assemblage of reference points that feed off each other to engage and stimulate their audiences. Affect, then, emerges from the space in-between these reference points; it is an outcome of the friction generated through the inter-referencing of the digital and the real, the artist and the avatar, the producer and the consumer of content. The digital augments these processes, as it gives artists full control over the ways in which they represent themselves to, and engage with, each other. It enables them to become more expansive versions of the artist-as-self, which in turn can be used to engage more people (in more ways), thus causing affective power to emerge from the webs of engagement that connect artists and audiences to each other. Digital reproduction, can, in other words, lead to the creation of uniquely personal geopolitical narratives. Chip recognises these dynamics in *Hat-Trick*, when he offers a profound understanding of the clash:

> *Fuck, look at the power of the Internet, nigga*
> *Never seen him in my life, he's just an Internet figure*

In describing Bugz as *just an Internet figure*, Chip belittles Bugz whilst ironically implicating himself in the same insult. As *Internet figure[s]*, both artists become abstracted

representations of their actual selves; as abstracted representations, they are able to reach out, and appeal, to more people in ways that enable them to overcome the limitations of the real worlds that they inhabit (Woods, 2020a, 2020d). In other words, Chip claims that the Internet enables Bugz to become *more than* just a grime artist from Manchester; instead, he becomes an omnipresent opponent that Chip can digitally engage with in order to reproduce creative content. Digital technologies have thus enabled grime to become a more accessible musical genre; they have contributed to its growing popularity amongst mainstream audiences. Its earlier forms, which comprised in-person cyphers performed inside physical venues, tended to be 'rowdy and aggressive, which probably scared some potential fans' (The Guardian, 27.03.14), whilst its more contemporary forms, defined by digital mediations, are more encompassing in their appeal. Digital geopolitics creates channels through which artists can expand themselves and their creative potential. In doing so, it also offers more opportunities for audiences to be engaged, causing grime to become a more inclusive, and appealing, musical genre. The clash has since come to be known as one of the events that "dominated grime in 2015" (BBC Music, 17.12.15), and contributed to Bugz's emergence as one of the UK's leading grime artists. It publicly ended in late-2017, when a photograph of Chip and Bugz at a Christmas party was circulated on Instagram. The photo shows the artists posing next to each other, smiling. When reporting the end of the clash, BBC Music (13.12.17) observed how 'some fans have questioned whether [the photo] means the whole feud was faked'. Faked or not, the clash does reveal the affective power of digital geopolitics, and its emergent place within the reproduction of popular culture.

5   CONCLUSIONS

The lyrics used to open this paper are Skepta's opening gambit in *Nasty*. Skepta is a London-based grime artist, and *Nasty* is a track directed at Devilman, a Birmingham-based artist. The two were engaged in a protracted clash throughout 2006-2016. For the purposes of *Nasty*, Skepta states upfront his refusal to take Devilman seriously, thus undermining his legitimacy as an artist. For the purposes of this paper, the idea of (un)reality provides insight into many of the themes that are raised and discussed. To state that *You're not real* is to suggest that the digital representations of grime artists – whether Skepta or Devilman, Chip or Bugz – are abstractions that are divorced from, but are intimately implicated in, the real-world struggles of forging a successful career as an artist. The affective power of grime stems not just from the ways in which artists represent themselves, and the places they associate with, but also the ways in which they use the digital domain to decouple space and time from their physical anchors in the real world. In doing so, they are able to realise the affective power of space and time as *contingent* constructs that can be deployed to reproduce digital geopolitics, and thus elevate and expand the appeal of the cypher. Thus, whilst 'speed and ubiquity threaten to erase music's place-based specificity and market potential' (Shipley, 2013: 376), the reproduction of digital geopolitics provides a territorialising strategy used by grime artists to overcome these potential problems. Not only that, but as much as Chip and Bugz compete to generate new affects through the digital reproduction of the cypher, so too do they compete to reterritorialise it, and thus '[de]stabilize a certain distribution of respect by setting up a visible stage for the taking place of the relationships which are played out interactionally' (Brighenti, 2010: 68). In many respects, the success of grime artists is dependent on – and a reflection of – their ability to leverage digital geopolitics in ways that bring the cypher to life.

With this in mind, we can begin to appreciate the extent to which digital geopolitics are every*where*, and can be reproduced by any*one*. The creative potential that stems from such

pervasiveness is clearly observed within the grime community, which reflects the 'desire to transcend its parameters, to move beyond specificities through the universality that digital mobility promises of a potentially worldwide audience' (Shipley, 2013: 376). Whilst digital channels have enabled grime artists to expand the scope of appeal beyond their territorially situated selves, digital geopolitics offers new opportunities for friction to be reproduced through the inter-referencing of difference. These differences include the decoupling of space-time through the digital domain, and the distinctions between artist-as-self and artist-as-avatar. Inter-referencing enables artists to be more agentic, and more affective, in their content creation efforts, and to push the limits of how they represent themselves and/to others. In turn, they become '(powerful) bodies actively making geopolitics' (Sharp, 2020: 3) *through* the digital. Yet, the affectiveness of grime goes beyond representation and performativity; it emerges from the states of in-betweenness that the digital domain gives rise to, and that grime artists actively reproduce by (de)territorialising the cypher. The digital geopolitics of grime can therefore be understood as a 'digital practice of thriving' (Elwood, 2020: 2) that emerges from the digitally mediated lives of artists and audiences, the structural inequalities of inner-city deprivation, and the ongoing need – and desire – to rework the boundaries of creative expression in response.

The digital has caused the narrative of popular geopolitics to become a more pervasive and participatory construct; it is constantly becoming. It emerges from an ongoing conversation between digitally engaged individuals; a conversation that creates, works around, and can both expand and overcome the frictions that emerge from the recognition and exploitation of difference. Digital geopolitics thus foregrounds a shift in the locus of power to those who are *willing* and *able* to reproduce friction through the digital domain. They involve mediating between different representational terrains, and arbitraging the differences that can emerge

within and between them. For the producers of content, this can be a source of empowerment that enables positions of marginality to be overcome, and otherwise muted voices to be heard. Conversely, it also poses a threat to established authority figures. The digital thus 'presents the condition of possibility of the social and comes from everywhere. The "who" of power and hegemony is, therefore, indeterminable – power cannot be owned, appropriated, or seized' (Müller, 2008: 328; see also Müller, 2015; Gomes et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2020). Yet, as much as digital cultures have brought about an expansion and democratisation of popular geopolitics, so too do they contribute to its hollowing out by permeating the practices of everyday life (Sharp, 2020). Every post, comment, or like on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram or YouTube can become minor geopolitical acts that coalesce to build consensus and debate, difference and division. They can, in other words, cause geopolitical narratives – mundane, popular, or otherwise – to adopt greater reach and promiscuity through the flat ontology of the digital (after Dittmer 2014). In turn, the boundaries of popular geopolitics expand and dissolve, and the distinctions that once separated popular geopolitics from other subfields are overcome. Digital geopolitics, in its broadest and most expansive sense, encapsulates these theoretical and discursive integrations, providing a framework through which new geopolitical imaginations can be forged. Exploring the full extent of digital geopolitics – from production *and* consumption standpoints – will consolidate the digital turn in popular geopolitics, and align it with the digital worlds in which many of us now live.

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Figure 1: Schedule of video releases between Chip and Bugz on YouTube

#	Artist	Title	Video location (and time)	Release date on YouTube (all 2015)	Elapsed time since previous video	YouTube broadcast channel	Number of YouTube views (as of 10.05.20)
1	Bugzy Malone	*Fire in the Booth*	BBC Radio 1 recording studio	14th March	-	BBC Radio 1Xtra	23,497,001
2	Chipmunk	*Pepper Riddim*	Production studio	20th March	6 days	Chiptubeofficial	4,179,406
3	Bugzy Malone	*Relegation Riddim*	Outside Tottenham Hotspur Football Stadium (night)	25th March	5 days	Link Up TV	15,844,219
4	Chipmunk	*The End*	Chipmunk's home, Tottenham (night)	3rd April	9 days	Chiptubeofficial	1,678,484

5	Bugzy Malone	*The Revival*	Bugzy Malone's home, Manchester (night)	7th April	4 days	Link Up TV	11,497,646
6	Chipmunk	*Light Work*	Production studio, (day)	11th September	5 months, 4 days	GRM Daily	4,477,202
7	Chipmunk	*Run Out Riddim*	Tottenham street (night)	14th September	3 days	Link Up TV	4,643,571
8	Chipmunk	*Hat-Trick*	Tottenham street (day)	17th September	3 days	SBTV	2,782,041
9	Chipmunk	*96 Bars of Revenge*	Car park (night)	9th October	22 days	GRM Daily	4,194,007
10	Bugzy Malone	*Wasteman*	Manchester street (night)	21st October	22 days	Link Up TV	7,222,023
11	Chipmunk	*Dickhead*	Petrol station (night)	21st October	8 hours	GRM Daily	4,996,922
12	Bugzy Malone	*Zombie Riddim*	Manchester street (night; pre-recorded)	21st October	6 minutes	JDZ Media	6,332,027

| 13 | Chipmunk | *Duppy Riddim* | NA (audio only) | 22nd October | 1 day | GRM Daily | 926,572 |
| 14 | Chipmunk | *#Alone* | Chipmunk's home, Tottenham (night) | 6th November | 15 days | GRM Daily | 1,434,490 |