

Introduction

Pacific Media Cultures and the New Empire Talk

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On 1 August, 2019, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo arrived in Bangkok, Thailand, where he was scheduled to deliver remarks as an invited guest of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).¹ The visit came amid rising tensions between the world's two largest economies—the United States and China—which for some months had been (and, at the time of writing, remain) locked in a bruising trade war centered on matters of improper government subsidies to key industries, alleged intellectual property infringements, and asymmetrical trade deficits. Punitive tariffs and retaliatory responses thereto quickly emerged as the weapon of choice in this transoceanic dance of puffed chests, wagging fingers, and rhetorical bombast. As US President Donald Trump and General Secretary of the Communist Party of China Xi Jinping announced round after round of such tariffs, neoliberal visions of the Pacific as a smoothly integrated space of friction-free circulation—visions that, as recently as 2015, seemed altogether within reach thanks to multilateral trade agreements like the Trans-Pacific Partnership, one of Trump's favored political whipping boys—began to wither on the vine.

Though to date, this tedious performance of economic brinksmanship has implicated sectors as varied as automobile manufacturing and agribusiness, the telecommunication and media industries have emerged time and again as one of its principal protagonists. Pompeo, in particular, has made a mission of casting the Chinese telecom giant Huawei as a near existential threat to

global security, repeatedly suggesting that if nations like Hungary and Germany permit the use of Huawei equipment in the construction of their next-generation mobile data networks, they risk not only the security of their citizens' data, but indeed the global balance of power.² That Pompeo can so blithely rehearse this narrative without so much as wincing at his own government's past and ongoing use of global ICT networks to surveil domestic and foreign nationals, to keep tabs on allied and rival states, and to run protracted overseas drone wars is, by turns, alarming and astounding. Indeed, while there surely are ample grounds on which to stage a good-faith critique of Huawei as part of a vast and differentiated global apparatus of technopolitical governance, one can only imagine the hubris required to warn Germans off Huawei under the auspices of privacy and security less than a decade after the Snowden revelations, which made clear that the US National Security Agency had been conducting unwarranted data surveillance on high-level German officials for years.³

Undaunted by such inconvenient details, Pompeo has persisted in constructing Huawei's global ambitions as a metonym for Chinese geopolitical appetite, writ large—a task that has benefitted handsomely from such mediagenic episodes as the December 2018 arrest of Huawei CFO Meng Wanzhou at Vancouver International Airport by Canadian law enforcement, acting at the behest of the US government.⁴ What he so routinely offers as a story about Huawei, then, is quite clearly meant to be heard as a story about a new kind of Chinese empire in wait; a story about a rapidly expanding political, economic, technological, and infrastructural project whose tendrils, already transoceanic, lap at the shores of the global. During his remarks in Bangkok, however, Pompeo made a curious decision to shed the metonymic pretense altogether, appealing to ASEAN member states to abandon Chinese state investment in favor of private, US capital precisely on the grounds of anti-imperialism.⁵ Said Pompeo: “Our investments don't serve a government, or a political party, or a country's imperial ambitions. . . . We're not building roads to pave over your national sovereignty. We don't fund bridges to close gaps of loyalty.”⁶ Setting aside the rather dizzying speed at which Pompeo's use of the collective article “we” collapses the very distinction between private capital and state interests he aims to install, what is perhaps most remarkable here is his willingness to revive the figure of empire—a figure that many in the US political mainstream have, since the mid-twentieth century, worked diligently to suppress. Whether it is the US historian Arthur Schlesinger insisting that however expansive its overseas holdings, the US constitutes at most an “informal empire,” not explicitly “colonial in polity,” or

whether it is former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld asserting in the early days of what would become a years-long military occupation of Iraq, that “We don’t do empire,” empire talk has for decades been verboten among ‘serious’ students and practitioners of US foreign policy.⁷

Certainly, as Ann Laura Stoler writes, this obstinate refusal of US empire to face itself, especially in the years following 9/11, rests on shaky ground.⁸ The argument runs roughly thus: because most US overseas interventions are not strictly equivalent with the colonial techniques proliferated globally by the modern European empires in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early-twentieth centuries, it is simply false to declare the US imperial. Unlike those earlier empires, which extended their sovereignty over foreign territories in a domineering fashion, definitively extinguishing prior social arrangements and establishing in their place a fully articulated colonial modernity, US foreign policy pursued a more ambiguous mode of control in which quasi-colonial and legally fungible administrative arrangements carried the day.⁹ However, the claim that this informality renders US overseas interventions *ipso facto* non-imperial turns on what Stoler calls a “bare-boned and simplified template of early imperial governance often culled from a historiography drawn from imperial scripts themselves.”¹⁰ While this template surely reflects a familiar *vision* of empire as a great ordering and sorting out of otherwise unwieldy worlds, it obscures a more fine-grained understanding of empire as a *material practice*—a practice characterized less by the smooth, outward extension of national sovereignty than by the proliferation of “partial forms of sovereignty, opaque legal terms of jurisdiction, illegible rights to intervention in the intimate spaces of people’s lives.”¹¹ “Temporary exclusions, partial inclusions, and legal exemptions,” Stoler continues, “are not occasional and *ad hoc* strategies of rule but the racialized modus operandi of imperial states.”¹²

Such has been the texture of US empire through the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. And indeed, such has been the texture of imperialism in the (Asia) Pacific since at least the mid-nineteenth. Consider, for instance, the race to “open” China—known at the time as the “Sick Man of Asia”—to foreign intervention. Like so many imperial endeavors, this project on the development of telecommunication infrastructures and the making of modern communication markets. While communication technologies like wired and radio telegraphy have often been conceptualized as the technological handmaidens to modern empire—the very tools that made it possible for imperial powers to remotely govern their far-flung colonial

holdings—Dwayne Winsek and Robert Pike have shown that until the media reform movements of the early twentieth century, the relationship between the imperial state and telecommunications was ambiguous, at best.¹³ For much of the nineteenth century, communication markets tended to develop not through the will of any one imperial state, but rather through a “Byzantine” choreography of inter-imperial competition, national concession, reluctant subsidy, corporate shell gaming, and outright deception.¹⁴ Winsek and Pike offer the demonstrative example of the Commercial Cable Company, which despite being based in the US, [owned]

a stake in the German Atlantic Telegraph Company, claiming to be British as it sought subsidies for two ‘British’ companies that it owned—the Halifax and Bermudas Company (1890) and the Direct West India Company (1892)—and ‘all-American’ when standing before the US Congress to promote why it should be chosen to lay a US-owned cable across the Pacific (1904) and as it fronted another firm—the US and Haiti Telegraph Company (1896)—that was registered in New York but in reality owned by French interests.¹⁵

The situation was much the same in China, where divergent foreign policy strategies among the Western powers collided both with one another as well as with internal power struggles between “Chinese reformers and radicals [who] offered their own diagnoses of the old kingdom, their critiques of imperialism, and their prescriptions for a new China.”¹⁶ The result was a complex and highly fractious landscape of technological, legal, and political negotiation that nonetheless became a key theater for the pursuit and eventual consolidation of imperial ambition.

Pompeo’s late turn to empire as a method for knowing and analyzing what Yiman Wang, in a special contribution to this issue, calls “cross-Pacific power geometries,” is thus no mere rhetorical flourish. Conjuring potent such images as the road that “paves over” national sovereignty, or the bridge that commits a nation to a future of dependency and underdevelopment, Pompeo revives a particular theory of empire as order, as formal conquest. What’s more, he projects this theory outward onto an ascendant geopolitical rival, constructing Chinese capital as fully identical with and ordered by the Chinese state, once again monopolizing for US interventionism the supreme privilege of “informality.” The very theory of empire that so many in the US political mainstream (both Democrat and Republican) have done so much to disavow thus returns to the center of transpacific geopolitics. Though it

returns less in the guise of good-faith analytic and more in that of the cudgel, that it returns at all tells us something about just what is at stake in present realignments of political, economic, and cultural power across the world's largest ocean. More importantly, it tells us something about the *persistence* of empire in the making and unmaking of (trans)Pacific worlds; empire circulates both as a potent memory, variously cited, recited, and invoked, as well as an immediate and ongoing present.

This special issue takes seriously (though certainly not at face value) this late revival of empire and the imperial as lenses through which to understand the historical and contemporary Pacific. We aim to do so by exploring a variety of Pacific media and technocultures that together, invite a critical rethinking of the imperial broadly construed—the forms it takes, the practices and tactics by which it obtains, the modes of resistance and refusal it provokes. Thinking with and through media, we aim to recover something of the variety, the instability, and the contingency of imperialized Pacific life, and to convene a set of critical conversations about how media and technology both intersect with and help to focalize that dense tangle of Pacific knowledges, experiences, and practices that Pompeo's bombastic dramas not only fail to capture, but seek to discourse out of existence.

As Stoler writes, we critics of the imperial order of things are at our best when we jettison those "bare-boned and simplified template[s]" that risk historiographically reifying empire as what it has always imagined itself to be: ordered, legally transparent, politically sturdy. We do better to sensitize ourselves both to the sinuous, meandering itineraries of imperial power and the innumerable sites of resistance that frustrate its operations. Such an approach is central to this issue, which homes in on the Pacific not only because the region coincides with our research interests as editors, but also because recent geopolitical dramas—including but certainly not limited to Pompeo's crusade against Huawei and the China for which it has been made to stand—have thrust the region to the forefront of global attention. Today, renewed nuclear saber rattling between the US and North Korea sits awkwardly astride the fledgling promise of Korean peninsular reconciliation; ballistic warnings, some valid and some false, rattle residents in Hawai'i and Guåhan, drawing unexpected attention to the oft-repressed colonial histories of those islands and the unique vulnerabilities that follow therefrom; intense environmental anxieties attach to the heaps of plastic waste that mass in Pacific waters, even as they flow and drift from the damaged reactors of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear facility.

All the while, around and across the basin, new forms of political imagination and enactment take shape: Kānaka Maoli vigorously protest the construction of a giant telescope atop Mauna Kea on Hawai'i Island, performatively linking the designs of global science to a deep history of colonial dispossession and engaging in the difficult, tenuous work of nation-building; in Santiago de Chile, insurgent protests against the punishing effects of an exacting and exasperating neoliberal capitalism come to a fiery head; in Hong Kong, where competing imperial desires and colonial projects have long converged, demonstrators strive for various democratic rights in the face of intense police repression, by turns inspiring, alarming, and confounding outside observers. Such sites and emergences serve as potent testaments to the abiding force of imperial histories in shaping present political realities in the Pacific, as well as the abiding *instability* of empire as a social and political project.

Media study provides a compelling aperture onto these overlapping and oftentimes incommensurable vectors of political aspiration and social practice. Media, after all, take shape as analytic objects precisely where the orderly promises of technical and institutional design meet the contingency of representation, signification, and affective investment. As such, they offer an especially apt means of thinking through how differently located Pacific peoples encounter, negotiate, and struggle against imperial visions of the region as, variously, a frontier to be conquered (as in modern imperialism), a set of circulations, distributions, and potentialities to be rationalized and harnessed to particular ends (as in neoliberal or other 'informal' imperialisms), and/or as a vast sea of racial and cultural differences to be taxonomized and hierarchized (the cultural politics that cuts across both). Indeed, in the essays gathered here, contributors demonstrate how careful attention to mediated and mediating practices reveals the deep complexity of Pacific worlds, pointing to the cultural and social heterogeneity that these different imperial visions strain to contain. What emerges across these papers, then, is not so much *a* vision of *the* Imperial Pacific, but a picture of differently imperialized Pacific peoples, worlds, and cultures in constant de/formation; many Pacifics, churning around one another, breaking into a series of swirling eddies. While always local and particular, these eddies also impress upon and shape one another in consequential ways, extending beyond themselves with the aid of diverse forms of mediation.

Perhaps nowhere does this vision of the Pacific as a space of turbulent circulation come more clearly into focus than in Cindy Mochizuki's "Japan Sea(s)," which opens the issue. Poetic, sensorially attuned, and allusive, Mochizuki offers a personal reflection on her own efforts, as a visual artist and storyteller, to channel the troubled spirits that haunt Koganecho, Japan, where as a resident artist, she began the task of assembling her 2014 screen and installation work, *Port of Memory*. Lodged in a state of *kanashibari* (sleep paralysis), and quietly called upon by the specters of the women who once worked the city's *chon-no-ma*, Mochizuki radically reframes the work of representing Pacific imperialism and its afterlives—less a project of scrupulous documentation than of clairvoyant divination, less about reciting history than telling ghost stories, and listening to ghosts' stories. Mochizuki's words are an invitation to know and feel the (trans)Pacific differently, to make room in our geopolitical accounting for that which resists being counted.

If Mochizuki invites us to sit by, listen to, and think with ghosts, in a somewhat less fantastic register, Julia Alekseyeva also engages with the critical potential of fabulation in accessing the variegated politics of Pacific imperialism. Focusing on the 1960 film *Nihon no Yoru to Kiri/ Night and Fog in Japan*, Alekseyeva explores how director Oshima Nagisa indulges a self-conscious theatricality to dramatize the rift (and the possibility for reconciliation) between two anti-imperialist factions at two pivotal historical junctures in postwar Japan: the factionalism and infighting of the Zengakuren protests and the ANPO struggles ten years later. Far removed from the jarring rhythms and graphic juxtapositions of Eisensteinian montage yet still avowedly Marxist, Nagisa, Alekseyeva suggests, reaches for and enacts an alternative cinematic language for anti-imperial struggle.

In keeping with this focus on how cinema might provide a means of telling more nuanced and complex histories of Pacific (anti-)imperialism, Shota Ogawa explores the peculiar aesthetic and institutional dynamics of the many travelogue films produced by imperial Japan in the interwar period. Mostly shot in Mainland China, and thus aesthetically and ideologically bound up in the imperial ambitions of an ascendant Japanese state, these travelogues were also highly mobile objects, exhibited abroad at various World's Fairs, and sometimes cowritten by US motion picture studios. While Ogawa is quick to note that the travelogue is, in many ways, the colonial genre *par excellence*, attending to the circulatory dynamics of these particular films reveals that cinematic imperialism obtains not simply textually, but also through the

transnational choreography of distribution, exhibition, and coproduction. What's more, these collaborative enterprises make clear that no imperial project is ever an island unto itself; that all empires are, in some sense, inter-imperial formations, constituted across a shifting set of geopolitical and cultural allegiances that may or may not align precisely with stated national policies.

So much is made especially clear in Peter Bloom's special contribution to this issue. Tracking the dizzying 1MDB (1Malaysia Development Berhad) embezzlement scandal, which has implicated such high-profile Hollywood releases as Martin Scorsese's *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013) in a vast money laundering scheme that has rocked the Malaysian political establishment in recent years, Bloom explores the surprising links between the history of colonial developmentalism and the contemporary economy of excessive gifting that consolidates around transnational film production. Caught up in an almost incomprehensible tangle of financing arrangements and shell corporations, the representational status of films like *Wolf of Wall Street* begins to waver—becoming the very sort of fraudulent financial product it aims to represent. Bloom's work invites us to consider the colonial genealogies of this *mise-en-abyme* of late capitalist financialization.

If the essays that comprise the first half of this issue detail the highly varied ways in which imperial power insinuates itself into Pacific media and technocultures, those that comprise the second half constitute something like a collective *refusal* of those parameters. Emphasizing the ongoing failure of empire to monopolize the representational, cultural, and political potentialities of media, together, these essays sketch a lively anti-imperial and decolonial Pacific imaginary. Working deftly across the history of photography and new media theory, Susanna Collinson considers what landscape photography—historically, a potent tool of colonial knowledge production and administration—fails to enclose; what burns through the placid surface of the image, and how the instability of photographic capture might open toward a “counter-colonial reading” capable of stymying settler mythologies both of Aotearoa/New Zealand and Moana-a-kiwa/the Pacific Ocean. Maggie Wander similarly engages the history of colonial media production in pursuit of emergent practices that disrupt the aesthetic codes and political entailments of the ethnographic gaze. Specifically, Wander considers the work of the Karrabing Film Collective, tracing how its members—about thirty Indigenous Australians and their close colleague, US anthropologist and theorist Elizabeth Povinelli—critically appropriate and

invert the conventions of ethnographic filmmaking to render legible the overlapping colonial violences of Indigenous cultural extinguishment and resource extraction in Australia.

Marion Cadora, in her contribution, extends this line of analysis into the realm of museum studies, weighing the critical potentials, as well as the potential limits, of “decolonizing” collection and exhibition practices. Taking the case of the Tropenmuseum in Haarlem, the Netherlands, host to a vast collection of photographs, artefacts, and documents drawn primarily from the former Dutch colonies in what is now New Guinea, Cadora recounts recent efforts to decolonize the collection by, for instance, embedding exhibitions within alternative narrative frameworks and juxtaposing ethnographic objects with critical interventions by Indigenous artists. But if these efforts strike a (re)conciliatory note, Cadora suggests, they do not for this reason necessarily lend themselves to a decolonizing politic, and in fact risk installing the Dutch colonial subject, rather than the colonial *relation*, as the proper object of museal repair. In his contribution, Manuel Cruz goes a step further, making it clear that newly self-reflexive colonial institutions like the Tropenmuseum are by no means exhaustive of the breadth of contemporary decolonization projects. On the contrary, by providing an account of the emergence of digitally-mediated activist networks on Guåhan—an island that has long been central to US imperial and military ambitions in the Pacific, a fact brought home in dramatic fashion when, in early 2018, the North Korean regime issued a ballistic missile threat against it—Cruz shows how contemporary CHamoru are building a robust anti-imperial and decolonial media culture on the island. Paying particular mind to the role of social media platforms in fomenting solidarity among CHamoru, Cruz suggests that these emergent networks also join a broader effort among colonized Pacific Indigenous peoples to build a different and more just future for the region as a whole.

Yiman Wang, finally, joins this attempt to formulate alternative frameworks for conceptualizing transpacific contact and exchange that, while critically attuned to both historical and emergent modes of imperialism, do not indulge the sort of reductive, exceptionalist fantasies propagated by the likes of Pompeo. Returning to the idiosyncratic history of film production and distribution in, around, and across the Pacific, and focusing in particular on the vexed cultural politics of cinematic exchange between the United States and China through the twentieth century, Wang draws on the likes of Yan Hairon and Daniel Vukovich to propose the cross-Pacific as a *method* of and

for media study. As the essays gathered here make abundantly clear, the Pacific is a fractious, contested formation. And likewise, Pacific imperialism, though violent and often deadly in its thrashing extensions, can hardly be taken as something coherent, bounded, neatly knowable. This being the case, thinking Pacific media cultures requires, for Wang, thinking the Pacific as “a contentious terrain for enacting new modes of knowledge production, which turn upon concatenation and entanglement, rather than hierarchization, demarcation, and a reified identity politics.” Such is the approach we have pursued in the making of this special issue, and such is the vision our contributors pursue across its pages.

Notes

- 1 “Pompeo Rips into China as Trump Slaps New Tariffs on Beijing,” *Aljazeera*, 1 August 2019, www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/08/pompeo-rips-china-trump-slaps-tariffs-beijing-190802023646524.html.
- 2 David Brunstromm, “Pompeo Tells Germany: Use Huawei and Lose Access to our Data,” *Reuters*, 30 May 2019, www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-germany/pompeo-to-germany-use-huawei-and-lose-access-to-our-data-idUSKCN1T10HH; Lesley Wroughton and Gergely Szakacs, “Pompeo Warns Allies Huawei Presence Complicates Partnership with US,” *Reuters*, 10 February 2019, www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-pompeo-hungary/pompeo-warns-allies-huawei-presence-complicates-partnership-with-u-s-idUSKCN1Q0007.
- 3 “Pompeo Warns Germany on Consequences of Buying Huawei,” *Reuters*, 31 May 2019, www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-germany-china/pompeo-warns-germany-on-consequences-of-buying-huawei-idUSKCN1T10ZY; “NSA Tapped German Chancellery for Decades, WikiLeaks Claims,” *Guardian*, 8 July 2015, www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/jul/08/nsa-tapped-german-chancellery-decades-wikileaks-claims-merkel.
- 4 Dan Bilefsky, “What You Need to Know About the Huawei Court Case in Canada,” *New York Times*, 6 March 2019, nytimes.com/2019/03/06/world/canada/huawei-meng-wanzhou-arrest.html.
- 5 It is worth noting that such rhetorical strategies are not without precedent in the region. Historically, Japan has similarly traded in a putatively anti-imperial discourse of Pan-Asianism in order to justify its own imperial incursions into China. See Eri Hotta, *Pan-Asianism and Japan’s War, 1931–1945* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Cemil Aydin, *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia: Visions of World Order in Pan-Islamic and Pan-Asian Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).
- 6 “Pompeo Rips into China.”
- 7 Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Cycles of American History* (New York:

- Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 141; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "The American Empire? Not So Fast," *World Policy Journal* 22, no. 1 (2005), 43–46.
- 8 Ann Laura Stoler, *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 173–204.
- 9 For more on these sort of "fungible" arrangements, particularly in the Pacific, see Brian Russell Roberts and Michelle Ann Stephens, "Archipelagic American Studies: Decontinentalizing the Study of American Culture," in *Archipelagic American Studies*, ed. Brian Russell Roberts and Michelle Ann Stephens (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017): 1–54; Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2019); Ruth Oldenziel, "Islands: The United States as a Networked Empire," in *Entangled Geographies: Empire and Technopolitics in the Global Cold War*, ed. Gabrielle Hecht (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 13–42.
- 10 Stoler, *Duress*, 175.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 176.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 177.
- 13 On the status of telegraphy as "handmaiden" to empire, see, for instance, James Carey, "Technology and Ideology: The Case of the Telegraph," in *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (New York: Routledge, 1988): 201–31; Dwayne Winseck and Robert Pike, *Communication and Empire: Media, Markets, and Globalization, 1860–1930* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).
- 14 Winseck and Pike, *Communication and Empire*, 4.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 5.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 114.