

Pacific Parables

Raqs Media Collective

[Address to the Pacific Rim New Media Summit, ISEA2006 and Zero One Festival, San Jose, August 2006. Published in in PLACE: Local Knowledge and New Media Practice, Edited by Danny Butt, Jon Bywater & Nova Paul. Cambridge Scholars Press, Newcastle, 2008]

The Pacific Rim as a Fiction of Place

The Pacific Rim is a fiction about place, a filter through which you can look at the world if you choose to and confer more or less arbitrary meanings on to a set of latitudes and longitudes. There have been previous fictions about place straddling this water, one was called the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, and unleashed havoc in the name of the solidarity of oppressed peoples of Asia, another thought of the Pacific as a Californian frontier, a kind of Wild Blue West. A third spoke French, and drew naked women in Tahiti, and dropped hydrogen bombs in the water. A fourth, the South Pacific Bubble, was one of the first episodes of global financial speculation that shaped the turbulence of the economy of our modern era.

Meanwhile, Sikh peasants from the Punjab, Chinese railroad workers from Canton, Agricultural workers and sugarcane cultivators from the hinterland of North India traversed the ocean, Mexicans swam, or walked along the coastline, Australian sailors, New Zealanders on whaling ships, Japanese factory workers, Filipina nurses and itinerant Pacific Islander communities traversed the Pacific, and the wider world, buffeted by the rough winds of recent history. They grew fruit trees in Napa valley, felled timber in British Columbia, mined tin in Peru, pressed grapes in Chile and made what some of choose to call the Pacific Rim what it is today. In time, agricultural labourers were joined by software programmers. And roads from Napa Valley began to lead in and out of Silicon Valley.

Ringed by fire, held together by fragile surfaces that slide on to each other, girded through with pipelines, beset by storms. You could say that the Pacific Ocean, apparently endless and bottomless, almost sounds like the internet. Which is not altogether inappropriate considering that the Pacific Rim, between California, East Asia and Australasia probably contains within it the highest density of internet traffic.

The first question we want to ask you is as follows - how can this fiction of location, this imaginary map, the ones that you, and we all are currently engaged in drawing not reproduce the boundaries that beset all map making exercises? How can you as map-makers avoid the predicament of an expression of mastery over the landscape you intend to survey?

Dead and Living Reckoning

We forget that Cartography is as variable a practice as any. There are maps and then there are maps, and there are different kinds of map making. Modern maritime navigational charts, based on latitude and longitude, determine a principle of navigation known as 'Dead Reckoning'. Dead Reckoning, in our limited understanding, is the method by which the position of a moving body is deduced in advance by taking fixes from previously known positions and then reading them against calculations with variables such as speed, direction, wind speed, tide patterns and currents. Prior to GPS, most navigators had to rely on dead

reckoning, with a little help from a compass, an astrolabe, star charts, chronometers and longitude tables. Dead Reckoning models itself on the dynamics of the relationship between a moving object and a notionally inert surface.

We say most, but should qualify it immediately, because for most of human history, the largest water body in the world was navigated using a different system of reckoning. The Pacific Island cultures, who were probably the most prolific seafarers that the history of humanity has known, actually used the opposite navigational principle. Reckoning was taken on the basis of a metaphorical assumption of the still navigator interfacing with a world that courses towards or away from him or her. Thus, it is not the sailor that approaches an island, but the island that advances towards, and then past the sailor. Meanwhile, the stars remain constant, thus marking general orientation. The course is set by the stars, and the world; a living, dynamic entity flows past under the navigator's gaze. For terminological convenience alone, one could call this method, 'Live Reckoning'. The relationship between dead and live reckoning is a study in the encounter of two knowledge systems, two practices and ethoi of information. The difference between them ultimately lay in how much gunpowder they had backing them. One had lots, the other, none. The ships that used 'dead reckoning' carried cannons and muskets; the canoes of the live reckoners were armed with arrows and spears. The knowledge system with guns won the day. Pacific Island navigation systems remain as relics, occasionally resuscitated by an anthropologist or a sailing enthusiast.

Today, we who are practitioners of information, artisans of knowledge, often forget that our practices are also guaranteed by sophisticated weapons, not only of the lethal kind. Modernity's edge is ultimately a matter of ammunition. What safeguards should we institute to ensure that our encounters with the few remaining knowledge, information and communication systems different from our own do not result in their extinction? How can the business of reckoning continue to remain alive?

Cargo Cults

We head now in the direction of the island of the long wait. We refer here to a quintessentially modern practice of faith, the Cargo Cult, that arose in the Pacific Islands in the late nineteenth century but gathered momentum during and in the wake of the second world war, as a poignant marker of the power that technology (even if it does not work) can wield over the human spirit. In a typical twentieth century Cargo Cult, contact with the accoutrements of modern Industrial civilization at war time (in the form of airdrops of food and other essential items from large transport or cargo planes for soldiers stationed in the islands) allegedly convinced the islanders that all that they needed for utopia to arrive was the ability to attract the right kind of airplane to land and disgorge its cornucopia of wealth (food, refrigerators, white goods, durables, clothes etc.) on the island. It had been observed that airplanes tended to land on airstrips that were complete with runways, observation towers, a few standing airplanes and radar. So replicant infrastructure and replica airplanes were built with locally available materials in the hope that such engineering efforts would attract the bountiful flying machines from the sky. Needless to say, the planes would never land. The islanders waited, and perhaps still wait.

Cargo Cults are a useful metaphor for thinking about many diverse phenomena in contemporary culture, ranging from shopping malls spreading across space to imitative work routines. When the success of shopping malls in a region spawns mall clones in adjoining areas that wait for customers that do not arrive, we can see a cargo cult like phenomenon at

work. Gigantic hulks of retail, arrayed for miles, stand girded by empty parking lots in many parts of Europe, North America and Asia. In time, the structures become bereft of their merchandise, and the distant consumer remains an elusive figure in a mirage constructed out of the shimmer of forever deferred prosperity.

Similarly, many organizations and initiatives (especially but not only in the 'new media' milieu) enthusiastically embrace the idea of 'outcomes and deliverables' with the notion that setting forth outcomes and deliverables in bold letters in an organizational document is enough to guarantee the actualization of their desires. This is often caused by pressures from funding agencies which are more content to see the documentation of fictional outcomes rather than the narrative of real processes.

Another 'Cargo Cult' like phenomenon is in evidence in the tendency to believe that distributing computers is a solution to social inequalities of knowledge and power. Computers are often distributed in village schools by well meaning initiatives beholden to the idea of combating what they believe to be the 'digital divide'. The fact that the sites where these computers are located have erratic electricity connections, rendering the equipment unusable, is one factor (among a host of others) which makes these initiatives closely resemble the ritual dynamics of a functioning Cargo Cult. The monitors and hard drives sit, gathering dust, eternally anticipating a brave digital future for the dispossessed of the world.

In time, the 'outcomes and deliverables' and the computers that remain encased in plastic sheeting in rural schools come to occupy valuable space, and are revered, not because they do anything, but because they remind people of what they may have desired (or what they may have been taught to desire) but could not attain.

Why do we wait for things to come to us? What guarantee is there that if we create replicas of the structures that house cultural expressions in other spaces, we will automatically create the conditions of a new culture? Why be in such a hurry to acquire the latest technology, and why wait so long for the perfect machine, the perfect piece of code, the killer application? What is it about our situation that makes us so afraid of being left behind? Why do we fear obsolescence?

Easter Island

What more remarkable reminders of obsolescence can there be than the stone giants of Easter Island. They too stand, as if waiting, scanning the horizon of the Pacific for a perpetually deferred future. We know almost nothing about the people and the culture that created them, and we do not know what they were trying to communicate to the big ocean by placing these standing figures. What we do have a sense of is the fact that this activity of intensive stone quarrying devastated the ecology and social structures of the island, and that ultimately, the culture could not bear the burden of its own communicative practices. Perhaps a useful object lesson. Sometimes it becomes useful to audit the social and ecological footprints of our communicative practices. The making of computer hardware and software, and also involves toxic materials, depressed wages and prison labour, and a great deal of this occurs on either side of the Pacific seaboard, in East Asia and in California. How can we reconcile the utopian promises that are made on behalf of information and communication technologies with the dystopic realities of their production in our societies?

El Nino

Sailing in the Pacific is a hazardous job, because depending on the direction in which you are going you could run across strong contrary winds. A combination of atmospheric phenomena and pressure conditions creates weather systems that may be specific to, or originate in the Pacific, but have global consequences. One of them is the El Nino, which together with its companion La Nina, arises in the waters off the coast of Peru, and creates weather conditions that lead to depletion in fish stocks in some waters, overabundance in other, hurricanes in some places and droughts in others. It was noticed sometime in the late Nineteenth Century that drought and famine struck India and Australia with remarkable concordance, and it was deduced that this had something to do with the way in which the phenomenon known as the El Nino Southern Oscillation affects the weather system of the Indian Ocean and its littoral region.

This is well known; what is less well known is the matter of a speculative economy, particularly in the fixing of global food and primary commodity prices that capitalizes on the eccentric but not irregular periodicity of the El Nino and La Nina systems. Here you have real time based weather report, statistical observation of meteorological systems going back at least a century, commodity price fluctuation indices and a globally integrated market working together to reap enormous profits from the tamed uncertainties of the weather. The futures market in primary commodities, in food and other natural products works on this basis, creating enormous wealth, based on speculation for some, and misery for billions of others. Here, data and disaster often go together. How can those of us who work with information in a creative manner begin to get a handle on the enormously significant ethical questions that arise from the handling of information in today's world, especially in the region that we describe as the Pacific Rim.

Nauru: Birdshit and Gold

The consequences of the generation of disproportionate assets through operations on information, knowledge and culture, require special and extended treatment, and this is probably not the best occasion to do that. But there is a Pacific Parable that can be drawn from the dots in the ocean that are composed of skeletons and shit. We refer to islands like Nauru in the Pacific, where I visited over a few years as a teenager, whose entire economy consisted of phosphate mining operations that processed fossil birdshit into gold. Nauru is a parable for the toxicity that accompanies a gold rush. The wealth that was produced within the span of few generations – the first ship with guano left in 1907 – was consumed within a generation, leading to a population that is unwell, intoxicated, and poor. Growing up in Nauru was not the most exhilarating experience, and my teenage utopia of a Pacific Paradise never matched up to the reality of dependence and decay that I saw around me. Today, Nauru is reduced to being a place where the Australian state out-sources the detention of people it considers to be potential illegal immigrants.

When the accumulated deposits of millennia are mined within a generation, people are left with little or no resources for the future. If the ruthless commodification of nature always produces a toxic culture, what would the relentless mining of a commons of culture produce? An unquestioning faith in the mechanisms of intellectual property takes for granted that the accumulated creative, imaginative and mental labour of our ancestors, which informs all our thought and creativity today, is a resource available for plunder. This engenders an acquisitive, proprietary attitude towards cultural production that inhibits growth, learning and

future creativity.

The epics, stories, songs and sagas that represent in some ways the collective heritage of humanity have survived only because their custodians took care not to lock them into a system of 'end usage', and embellished them, adding to their health and vitality, before passing them on to others.

The parallels that we are drawing between guano and intellectual property rest on a variety of resonances. It could be argued that some of the unilateral features of TRIPS agreements that definitively shaped the destiny of IP legislation across the world had a historical precedent, or at least shares a resonance with the piece of US Federal Law known as the Guano Islands Act (currently embodied in federal statutes as U.S. Code, Title 48, Chapter 8, Sections 1411-1419). The Guano Islands Act, which became law in August, 1856 (exactly 150 years ago) enabled any and all U.S. citizens to take possession (for the United States of America) of any island, rock or key, containing Guano deposits, anywhere in the world, provided they were not occupied or within the jurisdiction of any other government.

The intellectual property regime legislated by the TRIPS agreement allows citizens of several states to patent, trademark, copyright or otherwise assert their intellectual property claims on several forms of life, aspects of knowledge systems, cultural material and practices (wherever previous private intellectual property claims are absent). This renders much of human culture akin to islands of Guano, primed for possession and mining. They create enclosures where none existed before.

When codes or languages close in on themselves, allowing no 'interpolations' or trespasses after a point, they rapidly hemorrhage. How can we in our generation, immersed as we are in the language of property, ensure that there is space left for the cultivation of the commons. We ask this also because even initiatives like free and open source software, and the creative commons initiative, ultimately take recourse to the language of ownership and property, albeit an annotated notion of ownership, to make their case. Is there a language for culture, especially for the reproduction of culture that can elide the question of property? We are not sure we have an answer, but we are happy to leave you with this question.

The Kula Ring

Unlike commodities, gifts can accrue value to themselves as they pass from one person to another in a network of gift exchange. The ethnography of the gift exchange in the Trobriand Islands, made famous by the Anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski as the Kula Ring in his remarkable book, 'Argonauts of the Western Pacific', is an instance of this phenomenon; as is, in a less exotic sense the ways in which heirlooms add value to themselves as they pass down generations. In a digital environment it is not necessarily the patina of age or prestige that will lend value to a digital object as it passes between persons; rather, it is the possibility that it will be improved, refined, and have things added to it through usage (without doing any damage to an always available earlier iteration of the object itself, which can be recovered through the layers that gather to a work in a palimpsest).

It is this fact that gives to electronic piracy, and to any act that frees information from the prison of artificial or illusory 'originality', its true cutting edge. It does so not out of any radical intent to subvert the laws of property and the commodity, but because it makes eminent common sense for people to share information in any community through networks

of informal sociality, especially if the act of sharing brings with it no depreciation in the value of that which is shared. Rather, the person who shares more gathers prestige to herself, and by now we are all accustomed to extraordinary feats of electronic generosity (which sometimes carry with them an aura of 'bravado') as means of earning reputations within tightly knit online communities. The new pirates are just as desirous of chronicles of their adventurous heroism as their ancestors! The Pacific has distinguished histories of gift giving, complex circulation and custodianship principles for cultural material, pirate economies and mutinous sailors. How can this history of an adventurously redistributive generosity inform our practices with information and culture today? What can Pacific traditions of abundant reproduction and replication teach the contemporary global moment? How may we rediscover a robust ethic of transaction that does not lock culture into the dungeon of 'end user agreements' that inhibit circulation?

Depth, Shipwrecks and Dark Fiber

It is well known that the Pacific holds within itself the world's deepest spots. Many fathoms below the surface of the sea, the Mariana trench is the world's deepest place. Deep spots such as these are places where residues and remains accumulate. The depths of cyberspace, and what is beginning to be called 'information society' like the depths of the ocean, are places where all sorts of residual pieces of information accumulate. Here, amongst forgotten and shipwrecked media, one encounters strange, mutant electrical life forms. Beings made of what Geert Lovink has called 'Dark Fiber'.

So much of the discourse about information technology and communication is about light, about transparency and knowledge that we forget that information is crucial for the manufacture of disinformation. We are thinking right now of the enormous energy that is being put into the media, electronic, online and print, all over the world, but also especially here, in the United States, in justifying the naked aggression that the State of Israel is inflicting on the people of Lebanon. How can we begin to talk about the dark matter of information, or disinformation, and the political management of information, or at least with as much attention and energy as we do about information enlightenment? How can we render the deep and the dark in our work with light?

Lemuria: Lost Continent

We come now to our final destination. This time, we are sailing in a submarine. After all, we were plumbing the depths of the Mariana Trench a moment ago, so it makes sense to keep going under water, crawling along the sea floor in search of a lost, submerged continent. At the fag end of the age of geographical discovery in the late nineteenth century, the public imagination in many parts of the world, in its thirst for new worlds, hit upon the idea of lost and submerged continents. Mariners tales, philosophical speculations and utopian strains of thought were dredged from all across history to yield lost continents like Atlantis, and its variant in our neighbourhood, Lemuria. Lemuria first came into view as an attempt at explaining a zoological puzzle, the pattern of distribution of the Lemur family of primates, which hugged the shorelines of islands and continental landmasses of the Asia Pacific region, from Indonesia to Africa. Lemuria was invoked in explanations of everything from the missing link in the chain of human evolution, to the origin of diverse language families, the origin of the human species and the routes taken for the first human migrations.

What interests us here is not the project of recovering a fascinating imaginary history so

much as a speculation about the distribution of a life form yielding an image of a space and a continent. This can lead to a prospective, and not retrospective insight. Like Lemurs, many of us who occupy spaces within the media arts, hug the shorelines of landmasses of cultures, especially in the Asia Pacific region. We recognize that something, a family likeness perhaps, an eccentric sense of the kinship of our practices, the broad features of common questions and concerns, hint at some kind of extended lineage that we can draw from. These would include the histories of communication that we have inherited and the questions that our social, cultural and political milieux confront us with. If we are to create Cultural Futures for ourselves, we will have to place and ground our practices on the terrain of a recovered continent. How can we begin mapping this continent that awaits our recovery of its submerged landscape. What do we need to do now to explore the shorelines of all our practices?

References

Teaiwa, Teresa. K., On Analogies: Rethinking the Pacific
in a Global Context

The Contemporary Pacific, Volume 18, Number 1, 2006, pgs 71–87, University of Hawai'i Press

Turnbull, David : Masons, Tricksters and Cartographers: Comparative Studies in the Sociology of Scientific and Indigenous Knowledge
Routledge, London, 2000

Howe, K.R : The Quest for Origins.
Penguin Books. Auckland, 2003

Davis, Mike : Late Victorian Holocausts: El Nino Famines and the Making of the Third World
Verso, London, 2001

Diamond, Jared : Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed
Viking, New York, 2004

Harris, Marvin : Cows, Pigs, Wars and Witches: The Riddles of Culture Random House, New York, 1974

FitzGerald, John : Contemporary Cargo Cults
<http://www.actualanalysis.com/cargo.htm>

Nauru : Paradise well and truly lost, The Economist, 20 December 2001
http://www.economist.com/displaystory.cfm?story_id=884045

Article on the Guano Islands Act in Wikipedia
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guano_Islands_Act

Malinowski, Bronislaw : Argonauts of the Western Pacific
Waveland Press; Reprint edition (March 1984)

Raqs Media Collective : Value and its Other in Electronic Culture - Slave Ships and Private Galleons

DIVE, ed. Armin Medosch, FACT Liverpool, 2003

<http://www.raqsmediacollective.net/texts6.html>

Lovink, Geert, Dark Fiber, The MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 2003

Ramaswamy, Sumathi : Fabulous Geographies, Catastrophic Histories : The Lost Land of Lemuria

New Delhi, Permanent Black, 2005