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Geographing Empire

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Abstract:	This essay is guided by two key questions: first, is there a geographical theory of imperialism? And second, what can geographers contribute to the interdisciplinary study of empire and its unmaking? To answer these questions, I consider how political geographical work on empire has historically shored up a series of oppositions (between geopolitics and geoeconomics, the foreign and the domestic, globalization and race war, etc) that continue to animate and constrain contemporary debates on the subject. I argue that such conversations might be enriched by a closer engagement with more interdisciplinary work on practices of place-making and race war.

GEOGRAPHING EMPIRE: INHERITANCES, AFTERLIVES, FUTURES

In David Harvey's (2016: 171) response to Utsa and Prabhat Paitnak's *A Theory of Imperialism*, he expresses a preference for "abandoning the idea of imperialism … in favour of a more fluid understanding of competing and shifting hegemonies within the global state system." According to Harvey, the Paitnaks' "concepts of space, place, geography, environment [were] all wrong," meaning that their "new" theory of imperialism could not capture how "flows of value that expand the accumulation of wealth and power in one part of the world at the expense of another." Their "traditional" conception of imperialism, Harvey concludes, "do not work too well in these times."

Harvey's (2006: 1) critique here is haunted by his own mid-2000s "look at the current condition of global capitalism and the role that a 'new' imperialism might be playing within it." Armed with a historical materialist framework, Harvey theorizes the global war on terror as a moment of dialectical tension between the "territorial" and the "capitalist" logics of US imperialism. According to Harvey, crises of capitalism are increasingly being resolved through the violence of "accumulation by dispossession." US imperialists, in other words, had rediscovered "the original sin of simple robbery" as an effective method for jump-starting a sputtering capitalist economy. From Harvey's (2006: 182) perspective, then, "the 'new imperialism' appears as nothing more than the revisiting of the old, though in a different time and place."

I begin this essay with Harvey not because I am interested in parsing the "new" imperialisms from the "old." I am struck, however, by how Harvey's dismissal of the Paitnaks turns on an indictment of their simplistic geographical imagination. While I agree that we must understand empire through its complex geographies, I am less taken by Harvey's insistence on narrowly explaining the shifting terrain of global hegemony through (not)-imperialism's "capitalist logics." By reaffirming the Marxist approach to geography that he has been honing since his radical turn in the 1970s, Harvey follows other geographers of empire in finding it difficult to "rethink the relevance of old questions and formulate new ones," as Ann Stoler and David Bond (2006: 93) challenged them to do in 2006. This was a time when political geographers were intensely debating empire. Prompted by 9/11, but also by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's (2001) infamously deterritorialized theorization of capital-e Empire, political geographers asserted the geographical underpinnings of not only the war on terror, but also imperial war making more generally. While this work underscored the enduring relevance of political geography concepts such as geopolitics and geoeconomics, it also recognized the need to complicate our understandings of empire's geographies. Feminist geographers began to think geopolitics differently, sketching the contours of a more inclusive political geography that encompassed gender, the body, the household, and the intimate as key terrains of research. Over time, political geographers developed a language for critically theorizing empire as a geopolitical economic project that unevenly subjects classed, gendered, and marginalized communities to various forms of discursive and material violence.

In retaining geopolitics and geoeconomics as conceptual lodestars, however, political geographers have remained constrained in their efforts to build a geographical theory of empire capable of reckoning with its everyday workings and contradictions, across spaces and scales, and at home and abroad. This is to say, political geographers need new frameworks for mapping

the "micromovements of" – and, by extension, the "strange encounters" between – the "people who are subject and scarred, beholden to and invested in these empires on the ground" (Ahmed, 2008; Stoler and Bond, 2006: 93). This is not to suggest that empire is *not* about state- and market-making; but rather, to emphasize how such broader geopolitical economies of power and violence have always been experienced at the scale of the everyday as a more intimate politics of relation-, difference-, and place-making. This is an intellectual and methodological commitment to (re)narrating empire's stories in ways that require political geographers to think with like-minded colleagues who are differently positioned *within* and *outside* of our discipline.

In this essay, I revisit longer-standing debates on the political geographies of empire with the aim of identifying missed opportunities for intra- and inter-disciplinary conversation. These reflections are guided by two "reformulated" questions that promise to stretch political geographical writing on empire in "new" ways. They are: how has empire always been a *racial* project, grounded in the production of "group-differentiated vulnerabilities" at home and abroad? And how has imperial race-making historically gone hand-in-hand with imperial place-making? Both questions force us to reckon with empire as a multi-scalar project that unsettles the neat conceptual divides between the foreign and the domestic, the intimate and the global, and so on. Such questions also bring political geography into conversation with other small-g geographers of empire inside and outside of the discipline, whose work has largely been absent from inward-looking conversations about the geopolitics and the geoeconomics of the everywhere war. From this perspective, Black and indigenous geographers writing on the everyday violences of racial capitalism and settler colonialism have as much to contribute to a geographical theory of empire as the (largely white) critical geopolitical economists who have previously driven such conversations.

To build this case, I consider the political geographical approach to empire that crystallized in the post-9/11 moment. I focus on the work of Neil Smith (1994, 2003, 2003a, 2004), who was noteworthy for foregrounding *empire* as a category of analysis. While Smith's writing is class-forward, it nonetheless contains the germs of an alternative geographical theory of empire: one that not only attends to the linkages between domestic race war and global empire, but that also understands how these transnational entanglements are made concrete through intimate forms of place- and relation-making. These openings point us towards some contemporaneous geographers of race, such as Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2002, 2007), Katherine McKittrick (2011), Brittany Meché (2020), Beverly Mullings (2021), and Elizabeth Lee (and Sexton, 2006), who were drawing on Black studies to critique the racial projects of empire. By asserting how *Black geographical life* has always been a problem for empires, the above scholars might be productively read alongside historical geographers like Alan Lester (2006), David Featherstone (2012), and Stephen Legg (2014), who all theorize the centrality of place- and relation-making to empire-building. At the time, these research streams were siloed off from broader disciplinary conversations about the global war on terror. In their haste to develop a geographical theory of empire *through* the in-house concepts of geopolitics and geoeconomics, political geographers turned away from potential intradisciplinary interlocutors who were thinking imperialism differently.

In recent years, however, geographers are asking new questions that are pushing their theorizations in more interdisciplinary directions. While Pavithra Vasudevan, Sara Smith (and

Vasudevan 2020), Patrick Vitale (2021), Mona Domosh (2015, 2018, 2023), and Emma Shaw Crane (2023) all attend to the imperial connections between the fragmented periphery and the racialized metropole, Lisa Bhungalia (2023) and Deborah Cowen (2020) focus on the bloody entanglements between settler colonialism and transnational militarism. What these scholars share is an investment in better understanding how the geographical management of race and indigeneity has historically played a role in linking the US' *inner* and *outer* wars on insurgency and unrest. While this literature remains US-centric, it nonetheless opens intellectual and political spaces for thinking relationally across the multiple spaces, times, and scales of imperialism and its unmaking.

CRITICAL GEOGRAPHIES OF EMPIRE

The geopolitics-geoeconomics dialectic

In 1994, the late Marxist geographer Neil Smith (1994: 494) published an essay taking stock of peers who were exploring the "entanglements of geography and empire." Smith (1994: 497) was wary of how these geographers were following Edward Said in privileging *discursive* analyses of pre-1945 imperial imaginative geographies "over there" instead of more materialist approaches that attend to the *lived practices* and *landscapes* of empire in the here and now. Smith was not wrong to insist that questions of empire remained important in the post-Cold War moment in which he was writing. He would go on to subject the First and Second Gulf Wars to a scathing geographical critique, laying bare the political economic contradictions that lay at their heart (Smith 2004).

But it is in *American Empire* – Smith's biography of *the* imperial geographer, Isaiah Bowman – where he offers a generative blueprint for a materialist analysis of US empire-building. A Harvard-trained geographer who rose to a position of disciplinary leadership as the president of the American Geographical Society and then of John Hopkins University, Bowman also moonlighted as the "top State Department geographer" during the First and Second World Wars (Smith, 2003: 21). In addition to helping the US "settle" these conflicts, Bowman also founded the Council of Foreign Relations, where he infamously called for the post-World War II establishment of an "American *Lebensraum*" across the globe.

What we can glean from *American Empire* are key elements of Smith's geographical theory of empire. Through Bowman, Smith emphasizes how a geoeconomic commitment to market expansion, rather than a geopolitical investment in securing territory, has served as the animating logic of US imperialism, especially in the post-1945 moment. According to Smith (2003: 345), Bowman wanted to build a US-led world where "economic circulation and fluidity could proceed on stable ground, unhampered by geopolitical struggles." This imperial vision required "global economic access without colonies," which would be secured through a planet-spanning infrastructure of military bases (Smith 2003: 349).

American Empire closes with Bowman's death in 1950, right at the moment when the US "police action" in Korea would bring free world soldiers into conflict with the global forces of decolonization. This is a curious end point because the Korean and Vietnam Wars are now regarded as key inflection points in the everyday work of US empire-building across the

decolonizing world. Both Monica Kim (2019: 5) and Simeon Man (2018: 9) help us understand how these "globe-spanning moments" – in which "the legacies of multiple colonialisms converged and were fought over by workers on the ground" – expanded the remit of imperial warfare, which came to "exceed sovereign territorial borders" and encompass "the most intimate corner of humanity – the individual human subject." As conventional conflicts gave way to counterinsurgencies and "competitive coexistence," imperialists and decolonizers fought over the right to "re-create the template for the legitimate human subject for a post-1945 global order" (Kim, 2019: 3). The upshot is that decolonization, as Man (2018: 8) emphasizes, "was not antithetical to the spread of US global power, but intrinsic to it." The US empire-state seized an opportunity to weaponize its public investments in democracy and racial equality to coopt the forces of anticolonial liberation and reorient them towards more inclusionary futures of capitalist modernization.

Smith's (2003a: 250) truncated treatment of U.S. Cold War imperialism unfortunately sidelines the thorny questions of decolonization and racial management in his own geographical theory of empire. When Smith (2004) jumps to the US' post-9/11 invasion of Iraq, it is the dialectic between geopolitics and geoeconomics that remains important. Writing with Cowen, Smith argues that Operation Iraqi Freedom reveals how the "imperial power of market rationalities" continued to "[challenge] the bordering of national territoriality, and so too the geographical mapping of population and state security." Here, Smith and Cowen are in lock-step with the political geographers who were responding to Hardt and Negri by stressing the continued relevance of geographical concepts in the post-9/11 world. John Morrissey (2017) drags *American Empire* into the 1990s when he theorizes the establishment of US Central Command as inaugurating a strategy of "geoeconomic deterrence" in the Middle East and Central Asia, grounded in the violent work of "enabling commercial markets." Matt Sparke (2003: 367) similarly cites *American Empire* to emphasize how the US empire-state has historically obscured its geopolitical claims by circulating a vision of "globalist geoeconomics" that, like Hardt and Negri, paints economic integration as "inevitable, unstoppable, and unchangeable." Sparke (2003: 385) calls on geographers to refuse such fictions by exposing globalist geoeconomics as a "neocolonialism" which reproduces entrenched forms of uneven development "through the unfreedoms of the free market itself" (Sparke 2003: 377).

What Smith, Cowen, Morrisey, and Sparke (2005: 245) share is a methodological commitment to "[exploring] the interconnections and contradictions" of the "two imagined geographies" that supposedly animated US empire-building in the post-9/11 moment: the "deterritorialized imagined geography" of "economic globalization," and the "rougher edged … imagined geography of uneven and occupied space associated with ideas of an assertive and unilateralist American empire." While these texts are useful for helping us better understand the macroscale geographies of "policy, strategy, security, and design," what fades from view is the everyday work of empire (Stoler and Bond 2006: 95). Political geographers have compensated by critically mapping the martial geographies of the war on terror. This field was jump-started in 2004 by Derek Gregory's *The Colonial Present*, which tracks how the post-9/11 invasions and occupations of Afghanistan, Iraq, and Palestine were haunted by the bloody histories of British and American colonialisms across the Middle East. Gregory inspired others to track how the geographical contours of military violence have evolved under the sign of the "everywhere" (Gregory, 2011) war on terror, focusing on innovations in counterinsurgency (Belcher, 2014,

2018; Bhungalia, 2015; Greenburg and Camp, 2020; Gregory 2008, 2010), stability operations (Greenburg, 2017; Morrisey, 2015), and drone warfare (Gregory, 2010; Jones 2020). Other contributions have explored the military's intensifying entanglement with other modes of imperial governance, including the law (Jones 2020; Morrissey, 2015), development (Attewell, 2015, 2023; Bhungalia, 2012; Morrissey, 2017), logistics (Cowen, 2014; Gregory 2012; Khalili, 2018, 2021; Moore, 2019) humanitarianism (Attewell, 2023; Bhungalia, 2015; Gould, 2018; Greenburg, 2023; McCormack 2018; McCormack and Gilbert, 2022), the prison-industrial complex (Gregory, 2006; Lee and Sexton, 2006; Nisa, 2015, 2019), strategic communications (Whyte 2023), financial instruments (Gilbert, 2015, 2017), and global health regimes (Jones, 2022; Loyd, 2009; McCormack, 2022; Patchin, 2020).

What links these mappings of our colonial present is their commitment to showing how war is waged through spatial practices. They are also notable for emphasizing how modern war-making has always been "refashioned" through the "civil realm," as most recently exemplified by the post-9/11 turn to counterinsurgency warfare in Afghanistan and Iraq (Bhungalia, 2023: 8). These "other" wars for "hearts and minds" have historically spilled off the battlefield into the most intimate spaces of everyday life where soldiers worked alongside development professionals, NGO workers, educators, healthcare providers, and other technical experts.

Beyond geopolitics?

These "smaller" narrations of (para)military violence usefully linger on the intimate encounters that have always given "stories of war" their "allegorical power" (Kim, 2019: 3). This brings them into conversation with another stream of political geographical research that has tried to write the intimate back into geopolitics. As feminist geographers such as Jennifer Fluri (2009, 2011), Jennifer Hyndman (2001, 2007), Lorraine Dowler, and Jo Sharp (2001) remind us, the embodied experiences of gendered bodies have been obscured by the masculinist stories that conventionally document the lived realities of war and military violence. What began as an attempt to offer an explicitly *feminist* account of geopolitics – one that "draws attention to the ways in which the seemingly 'apolitical' or 'a-geopolitical' realms of the body, the home, and intimate relationships are key sites at which discursive and material relations of geopolitical power are continually reproduced and challenged" (Massaro and Williams, 2013: 574) – gradually came to offer a series of ever more nuanced elaborations on Hyndman's initial intervention, each one emphasizing a different dimension of the broader project, ranging from the popular to the subaltern to the alternative (Sharp 2001, 2011; Koopman, 2011).

While critical military geographers and feminist geopoliticians have tracked how imperial projects of rule have always brought the small and the intimate into relation with the global, they have nonetheless shied away from explicitly engaging with *empire* as a discrete category of analysis. Charles Tilly's (2005: 134) review of *The Colonial Present* is revealing, noting that "Gregory speaks of the 'colonial present' rather than using the currently fashionable term 'empire'." Tilly claims this helps "focus readers' attention on the continuities between older and newer colonial interventions in Afghanistan, Palestine, and Iraq," but the review also significantly positions *The Colonial Present* as a welcome departure from the mainstreaming of *empire* by Hardt and Negri. Given Gregory's (2004: 12) suspicion of "grand narratives in which moments clip together like magnets," it is possible that he valued colonialism as a framework

that made it easier to understand the settler military occupation of Palestine *in relation* to the more classically imperialist counterinsurgencies that were unfolding in Afghanistan and Iraq.

While Gregory invokes Haraway's comments on the partiality of vision to justify his contrapuntal mappings of the colonial present, his turn to the geographies of war-making laid the foundation for a literature that continues to have a complex relationship with more "masculinized" studies of "militarism that [favor] the spectacular and the sublime" (Crane, 2019). For this reason, critical military geography has always existed in productive tension with feminist political geographers such as Vanessa Massaro and Jill Wiliams (2013: 574), who seek to "decenter dominant geopolitical narratives and challenge exclusions inherent in geopolitical scholarship." But what Massaro and Williams leave undisturbed is geopolitics itself. They argue that "feminist geopolitics drives a reconsideration of its very object of study," opening new spaces for challenging "what counts as geopolitics." This work, however, remains hemmed in by its disciplinary commitment to geopolitical frameworks, which has the effect of orienting it in particular ways: not only towards mainstream political geography, but also towards other social science disciplines like international relations. Given how Jennifer Hyndman (2001: 212) envisioned feminist geopolitics as a framework for understanding the relationship between "the global economy in which Mexican women work in multinational maquiladoras" and "drug enforcement in the US inner city," the above path-dependencies have obscured as much as they have revealed.

Here, Hyndman is pointing to methodological problems in political geographical analysis that have, until recently, remained unresolved. Her call to think relationally across the Mexican special economic zone and the US inner city highlights the necessity of unsettling the distinction between foreign and domestic spheres of militarized violence. This conceptual separation threads through much of the political geographical literature on geopolitics and geoeconomics, where imperialism is equated with globalization and globalization with international financialization. There are moments where even Smith (2003: 187) acknowledges how the specifically *liberal* form of imperialism Bowman and others championed necessarily entailed a "radical severance and protection of the domestic from foreign politics" that was not functional in practice. This is most obvious in Smith's (2003: 230) reading of how Bowman repurposed Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis into a "powerful ingredient in the ideological weaponry of an emerging American empire." Here, Smith finds himself on similar terrain as Nikhil Pal Singh (2017: 28), who argues in *Race and America's Long War* that "violent contestations of physical frontiers and internal borders gave shape to a conception of foreign relations insular in its knowledge and understanding of peoples elsewhere and at the same time boundless in its sense of entitlement to involve itself with those peoples and their lands, markets, and resources – what might be termed an effort to domesticate or annex the foreign, unknown world." But where Smith and Singh diverge is in their analysis of what globalizing the frontier meant in practice. According to Smith, the racial and settler colonial project of frontier violence was reformulated by Bowman and others into a class project of market expansion and integration. Singh (2017: 15), in contrast, was critiquing class-forward Marxists like Smith for downplaying the racial underpinnings of capitalism when he argued that "the vernacular practices of US Cold War intervention in the post-1945 moment carried forward the 'more primal terms of American race war,' and by extension, longer-standing fantasies of achieving 'national, social, and economic regeneration through (frontier) violence.'" The geographical implication here is that imperial warfare abroad

must be theorized as in an "intimate relationship to a persistent, ongoing, undeclared race war at home" (Singh, 2017: 21). It is this "active disconnect between the foreign and the domestic" that is key to "[understanding] the evolution of US empire in the global age" (Singh, 2017: 30)

Political geographers have been slow to link the US' wars on terror to domestic geographies of racialized order management. While feminist political geographers have emphasized the necessity of exploring how geopolitics is experienced and practiced by stakeholders back home, they have nonetheless found it difficult to track how "policies, people, and processes" have historically (re)crossed the "divisions of civilian and military, foreign and domestic" (Schrader, 2019: 15). While there have been important exceptions – including Deborah Cowen's (2008) book on military workfare in Canada – feminist political geographers such as Sharp (2020: 1167) are still stressing the need for a new kind of geopolitics that accounts for how the global and the intimate form an "indivisible continuum." It might therefore be time to move beyond the concept as a way of "holding the foreign and the domestic together in a single analytic frame," especially since critical military geographers have also demonstrated a hesitancy to think relationally across the variegated landscapes of empire. While they, following Andrew Friedman (2013: 13), have "forcefully described the varied and underappreciated ways in which the United States most certainly [claims] space at home and abroad … as a significant feature of its empire," their inquiries have generally exposed "[singular] moments of imperial warfare, violence, or occupation," rather than the "stretched out and sequential connections" that have historically organized the everyday work of imperialists. The result is a curiously parochial story of US empire-building that obscures how foreign geographies of military violence have long been undergirded by domestic histories of settler colonialism and racial management.

This methodological problem has broader intellectual implications. Despite recognizing how Orientalist "architectures of enmity" have historically structured (para)military violence, political geographers – apart from Mona Domosh (2015, 2018, 2023) – have had less to say about the centrality of *racial management* to the everyday work of *empire abroad*, preferring instead to narrowly conceptualize it as a *domestic* problem. Smith's (2003: 20) discussion of how the US globalist project was mirrored at home by a "domestic strategy of class and race assimilation, highlighted earlier by the optimistic invention of 'ethnicity' as a refraction and domestication of national differences and foreignness onto the domestic landscape" is revealing. Smith (2003: 178) claims that the American "language of ethnicity" came to structure the US' geopolitical relationships after the world wars, "[supplanting] 'race' and flattening intra-European differences into a safe Americanism."

But as Singh (2017) and others have shown, US empire-building has always been an evolving racial project. If the US' first counterinsurgencies in the Western frontier, Hawai'i, and the Philippines were organized by the eliminatory violence of white supremacy, such "vulgar" forms of racism became a liability in the post-World War II period, when American imperialists struggled to reorient surging movements for decolonization across the globe away from the orbit of Communism (Fujitani, 2011). As Singh (2017: 125) explains, the US needed a way to "cleanse [imperial] sovereignty of its colonial-racial taint," for it could not "claim to be fighting 'Communist slavery'" while "continuing state-sanctioned discrimination against the descendants of US slaves." It therefore made sense for the US to incorporate an "inclusive, modestly ameliorative form of racial liberalism" as part of its day-to-day workings (Singh, 2017: 125).

This is not to suggest that the US empire-state no longer trafficked in lethal forms of white supremacy. As Singh emphasizes, the "infrastructures of violence" that the US developed to "manage a [domestic] population sharply divided among racial lines" – reserves, plantations, and internment camps – were also put to work in hotspots of insurgency across the decolonizing world. Rather, it is simply to emphasize that overt forms of race war came to coexist uneasily within a framework of foreign intervention that "conceived of racism as prejudice and promised to release liberal freedoms from racial restrictions by extending equal opportunity, possessive individualism, and cultural citizenship" to marginalized populations. The US first perfected such forms of "racial liberalism" at home, where "civil rights" showed great promise at managing race relations. Over time, frameworks of racial liberalism came to "structure the fields of [US] global intervention" (Melamed, 2011: 10).

All of this speaks to the importance of developing a geographical theory of empire that not only attends to the multifaceted connections between the foreign and the domestic, but also acknowledges how communities living under US imperial rule experience its domestic histories of race war as an inheritance. In what follows, I identify two ways of jump-starting this project. The first is to take seriously work by Black and historical geographers who have engaged with the problem of empire from more intersectional perspectives. The second involves considering newer research on empire that brings together geography and humanities fields like American studies, critical ethnic studies, and history. These scholars are turning to geography as a way of better understanding how the post-1945 break in the US domestic racial project reconfigured the everyday violence work of imperialism overseas. This convergence is important, giving geographers an opening to build new spaces of interdisciplinary engagement.

EMPIRE AS RACE WAR

Racial imperialism

Writing in the shadows of 9/11, Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2002: 15) called on geographers to center the "fatally dynamic coupling of power and difference signified by racism." In a move that foreshadows Gilmore's theorization of racism – as the "state-sanctioned or extra-legal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death" (Gilmore 2007: 247) – she argues that racial projects "exploit and renew" a "death-dealing displacement of difference within and between the planet's sovereign political territories" (Gilmore 2002: 16). For this reason, race, as both a "condition of existence" and a "category of analysis," has always been central to political geographers seeking to understand the "territoriality of power" (Gilmore 2002: 22).

Gilmore (2002: 20) deploys this "political geography of race" to uncover the role that the US Keynesian welfare state played in building the "most extensive warfare apparatus in the history of the world." It is well-known how skyrocketing defense spending in the post-1945 moment underwrote a significant redistribution of wealth, inaugurating the "golden age" of US capitalism. When this unsustainable engine of economic growth stalled in the 1970s, it was the welfare state that shouldered the blame, obscuring the structural crises unleashed by the global operations of military Keynesianism. What Gilmore (ibid.) presciently recognized was that "the legitimate domestic US state is the national security or defense or warfare state." Under such

circumstances, various forms of "domestic militarism" – chattel slavery, settler colonialism, internment, urban renewal, and so on – have historically been "foundational to US economic and territorial growth." Gilmore carries these insights into her seminal work on prison building in California, which she connects to other, more globalized empire-building projects. Gilmore (2002: 179), significantly, gestures towards the importance of rethinking prison as an "[(anti)]development problem." She emphasizes how the "particular forms and relations of developmentalism" that "further the underdevelopment of regions" in the global South must be understood through their relations with the geographies of capital flight and state revanchism that "unfix" rural and urban landscapes in the global North, subjecting marginalized communities to intensifying forms of slow violence, organized abandonment, and premature death.

Gilmore's turn towards international development resonates with recent work tracking how rural uplift programs targeting Black households in the Jim Crow south traveled abroad after 1945 as community development initiatives, which boomeranged back to America's sweltering inner cities during the 1960s as participatory self-help programs (Domosh, 2023; Schrader, 2016). But it is Gilmore's reframing of mass incarceration as a form of *domestic militarism* that has been most generative for carceral geographers. Orisanmi Burton's (2023: 3) *Tip of the Spear* is exemplary for theorizing domestic prisons as "state strategies of race war, class war, colonization, and counterinsurgency." Burton's (2023: 19) historical geography of the Long Attica Revolt rescripts "carceral spaces as zones of undeclared domestic war" that are "inextricably linked to imperial … wars abroad." Through a juxtaposition of carceral and Black radical sources, he shows how psychological warfare techniques, pacification strategies, and "enhanced interrogation" methods first developed in counterinsurgency hotspots across the decolonizing world were put to work in the carceral landscapes of upstate New York, refined, and then traveled to black site prisons like Abu Ghraib. As he argues, "the reconfiguration of 'national security' discourse and practice after 9/11 reflected the metastasis of a longstanding … domestic war," effectively rescripting the US prison-industrial complex into a "method for analyzing and resisting the relations of power and techniques of rule that shape the broader world" (Burton, 2023: 229).

As it happens, Burton's (2023: 210) assertion that "the imperatives of carceral war are never separate from those of empire" picks up threads left dangling by Jared Sexton and Elizabeth Lee (2006) in the mid-aughts when they published a searing indictment of the leftist commentary on the 2004 exposé of US soldiers who were torturing prisoners of war in Abu Ghraib. Geographers contributed to these conversations by tracking the topological geographies that had *produced* global war prisons as "spaces of exception," simultaneously within and beyond the legal jurisdiction of empires (Gregory, 2006; Reid-Henry, 2007). Sexton and Lee (2006: 1005) argue that such critiques did not go far enough, representing a "failure to think about the nature of imprisonment as such." What was lost from view were the "prerequisites of torture": namely, "the forms of captivity, immobilization, and confinement that represents state building at its least contested" (Sexton and Lee, 2006: 1007) Here, Sexton and Lee draw attention to an urgent need to think through the ligatures connecting domestic mass incarceration and the global war prison. While commentators were highlighting the bloody lineages linking Abu Ghraib to chattel slavery, Sexton and Lee (2006: 1012) critiqued these gestures as evidence of how "black suffering circulates everywhere as a criterion of political appraisal, but resonates nowhere … as a cause worthy of its own name." What they demanded was an *abolitionist critique of the global*

war prison that not only takes seriously the historical linkages between the racial projects of internal and external warfare, but also *explicitly centres ongoing struggles* for Black freedom in the US domestic context.

Sexton and Lee were not the only geographers writing about empire from a Black studies perspective. Katherine McKittrick's (2011: 951) theorization of "black geographies" foregrounds "practices of place annihilation" as a key "conceptual tool that can make sense of the interlocking and connective tenets of place, poverty, and racial violence in the Americas." Here, McKittrick is writing blackness *back into* a geographical literature on urbicide, which has focused on the destruction of *foreign* urban spaces. Extrapolating from McKittrick, there is a thread connecting the annihilation of black geographies in the US – through plantation economies, mass incarceration, or urban renewal – and the Israeli Defence Force's "walking through walls" in Gaza, the targeted destruction of urban infrastructures by sectarian insurgents in Beirut, or the razing of villages in occupied Afghanistan (Belcher, 2018; Bou Akar, 2019; Weizman, 2006).

In recent years, scholars have developed these ideas in exciting ways. While Afro-pessimist geographers like Adam Bledsoe and William Wright (2018) have stretched this argument to showcase the "anti-Blackness of global capital" – and, presumably, global empire – others have carried forward McKittrick's (2011: 959) insistence on attending to the "relational and connective life-force[s]" that "produce the conditions through which a radical black sense of place can be lived and imagined." This is to say, they take seriously her attempts at thinking through the interconnectedness of race, place, violence, *and* resistance. Beverly Mullings (2021) reads *maroon* geographies in (post)colonial Jamaica to reflect on how people have always endured conditions of extreme precarity and violence through "life-work": or, the work of carving out places where they can experience freedom and "exercise control over their lives." In these and the other "dark agoras" mapped by Black radical geographers such as J. T. Roane (2023: 5, 7), racialized communities engage in "quotidian practices of unsanctioned place-making and sabotage" that, "while not always disrupting dominant social-geographic relations, incubated within its inhabitants visions of urban futures askew, that queried the trajectory of racial capitalist stability prescribed by reformers and powerful crafters of state power's geographic functions."

These geographies of life-work are invariably framed by broader political projects. As Brittany Meché emphasizes in her narration of Birmingham, Alabama as an "imperial" city, Black international freedom dreams – whether they involve the martial "liberation" of racialized others sought by Condoleeza Rice, or the radical dreams of abolition that guide fellow Birmingham native, Angela Davis – have always been animated by an effusive Black sense of place. If, as Meché (2020: 149) argues, an "imperial city" like Birmingham remains "imperceptible within conventional security studies – perhaps the 'last place' one might think of in relation to the Global War on Terror" – the extent to which it has doubled as a "generative historical and geographical referent" for prominent Black internationalists who have worked towards the "advancement of something called freedom" should give geographers of empire pause. In a similar vein, Pavithra Vasudevan and Sara Smith (2023: 1161) show how "racial zones of toxicity and abandonment" in the US must be understood as the "shadow geographies of empire," reflecting a process of place annihilation that is "symptomatic of a colonial relationship

with the US imperial state." Drawing inspiration from the Black radical tradition, they "propose the term *domestic geopolitics* to describe a reconceived feminist geopolitics integrating an analysis of US anti-black racism as a form of 'internal colonialism,' with an expanded understanding of black women's social reproduction in 'the afterlife of slavery' as political work" (Vasudevan and Smith, 2023: 1162). Vasudevan and Smith (2023: 1173) use this framework to show how spectacular examples of environmental racism like Badin and Flint are not "isolated cases," but instead double as "key nodes of industrial production" in the US military-industrial complex, linking domestic geographies of racial capitalism with transnational infrastructures of imperialism.

What Black geographies offers, then, is a framework for thinking relationally across the foreign *and* domestic places that have been thoroughly transformed by racial capitalism and imperial violence. Whether we are talking about war-torn places like Vietnam, Abu Ghraib, Birmingham, Attica, Philadelphia, or Harlem, "occupied territory," as James Baldwin (1966) reminds us, "is occupied territory, even [when it is] found in that New World which the Europeans conquered." There is therefore a long, if overlooked tradition in geography of holding up racialized place-making as central to geographical understandings of empire. Black geographers, from this perspective, *have always been geographical theorists of empire.*

Placing empire

In attending to the "interconnectedness of race, place, and violence," Black geographers are grappling with questions that might be familiar to historical geographers who are researching non-US imperialisms across Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean. Alan Lester's (2006: 124, 133) contributions seem essential, especially his "networked conception of imperial interconnectedness" that seeks to "consider metropole and colony, and colony and colony, within the same analytical frame." Lester (2006: 135) usefully stresses how imperial spatial networks are precariously anchored by spaces and places that are "not so much bounded entities, but rather specific juxtapositions of multiple trajectories," which are "intersecting" and "being thrown together" in "different ways" across the globe. Invoking Doreen Massey's theorization of the "story-so-far" as the building block of spatial relations, Lester reminds scholars of empire to consider how metropolitan and colonial places are produced at the "specific meeting points of such trajectories, a coming together of them in specific ways at specific times." What Lester offers here is a geographical theory of (anti)imperial projects as always grounded in a relational politics of intimate encounter that "[carry] the traces" of interconnected geographies of power and violence (Ahmed, 2008: 10).

Lester's call has not gone unheeded. Within our discipline, David Featherstone's (2012) historical geography of revolutionary internationalism uses Massey to explore how anti-imperial movements intervene in the material relations between places to refashion them in more equitable ways. Featherstone uses the example of rioting seafarers in mid-1930s Cardiff to illustrate the centrality of "place-based political activity" to the "role of solidarity in shaping and transforming political relations" between supposedly "place-less subjects" (see also Khalili, 2024). Stephen Legg's (2014: 3) book on the gendered geographies of British imperialism in south Asia also follows Lester and Massey in how it "places scale at the [heart] of [its] methodologies, showing how the most intimate spaces of desire and intercourse were forever

enframed in broader scales of politics, terminology, and movement." He argues that a "scalar appreciation of the named divisions of the empire apparatus can make us more attentive to the problematized flows of technologies, people, and goods within the 'British space' of the 'world-empire-continent-nation-region-locality'" (Legg, 2014: 9) This exposes how networks of interdependence and interconnection made the everyday work of empire possible, even in the most intimate spaces of colonial cities like Delhi (see also Rangananthan, 2018). Not only did these networks "function as apparatuses that securitized, regulated, and surveilled," they also "fragmented borders, encouraged movements and migrations, and questioned the cartographic narrative of world spaces." The prostitutes, traffickers, and reformers that Legg (2014: 8) studies were, after all, mobile subjects who crossed borders and jumped scales. In so doing, they connected a highly localized colonial politics of sexuality and intimacy to "the geopolitics of the imperial state at the global scale."

Outside of our discipline, Andrew Friedman's (2013: 124) exposé of the covert imperial underpinnings of suburban Northern Virginia relies on Massey's idea of the "story-so-far" to narrate the contrapuntal "ways the United States claimed and marked imperial space in the post-World War II period." By tracking the "ghostly connections along the stories-so-far wrought and received by the home front of US empire and its covert capital," Friedman shows how the planning and execution of imperial violence has always been "hidden in plain view" (Friedman, 2013: 124). What Friedman pulls from Massey is his careful attention to the asymmetrical, yet mutually constitutive nature of imperial relation-making. It is not only white imperialists who initiate spatial "stories-so-far," but also the colonized subjects who support the everyday work of empire, as well as the insurgents who struggle to undermine it. While this is not a new idea to feminist and cultural geographers, their colleagues in political geography have paid less attention to how the success of imperialists – in war-torn Vietnam and elsewhere – is dependent upon their ability to nurture intimate relationships across racial lines. What Friedman shows is that these relationships were not abandoned in the afterwar moment. Rather, these spatial "stories-so-far" circulated across borders and oceans, shaping the production of suburban space in Northern Virginia. Through various forms of place-making, Vietnamese refugees "transfigured" Northern Virginia into a "pool of common space" where they could "still access the ghostly, exiled geography of the South Vietnam they [had only] recently left" (Friedman 2013: 184)

This story is not unique to Northern Virginia. Critical refugee studies scholars like Yen Espiritu (2016) foreground the material geographies that structured refugee flows in the afterwar moment, emphasizing how displaced Vietnamese were resettled by the same transnational infrastructures of imperial and (para)military violence that unleashed them in the first place (see also Loyd and Mountz 2018). But when refugees arrived in their suburban destinations, they found their new lives were not so much an escape from war and empire as a continuation of them (Nguyen 2019; Tang 2015). Many survived by selling their labour to the defense and tech contractors that tethered the U.S military industrial complex to places like San Jose, Garden Grove, and Torrington, "shor[ing] up the same [empire] that had set [their families] adrift" (Nguyen-Vo 2024; Tu 2022).

Reading Tu alongside geographers such as Matthew Farish (2010) can help us rediscover metropolitan cities as crucial sites for studying and resisting empire. Farish tracks how Cold War geopolitical projects "doubled" back to "haunt" domestic urban spaces, which became targets for

nuclear weapons, as well as "technical interventions that sought to turn them into "militarized 'laborator[ies] of conduct.'" At a time when Cold Warriors were trying to secure the borders between the racialized "noir" wolds of America's inner cities and the booming "atomic" suburbs that ringed them, Farish identifies the emergence of a domestic geopolitics that steered money away from urban improvement projects towards an increasingly suburbanized military-industrial complex. This story is picked up by Patrick Vitale (2023) in his book on the *Nuclear Suburbs* of Pittsburgh. By tracking Pittsburgh's role as "the center of a network of laboratories and plants that produced nuclear technologies that helped sustain the economic and military dominance of the United States," Vitale (2023: 19-20) emphasizes how suburban neighbourhoods were created and reproduced at the intersection of the US' inner and outer race wars on crime and insurgency.

Similarly, Emma Shaw Crane's (2023: 211) ethnography of Homestead showcases how the US suburb, "often understood as a narrowly domestic formation," is "produced through transnational processes of war, migration, and policing." A seemingly unremarkable suburb on the outskirts of Miami, Homestead is the site of a military base, a space of rest and rehabilitation for soldiers and mercenaries, a toxic Superfund site, a detention camp for migrant and asylum-seeking children, and an established plant nursery complex, fuelled by undocumented labor. Like Pittsburgh, Northern Virginia, Torrington, and San Jose, Homestead is one of the many domestic "meeting-up place[s]" of US empire. While Homestead's military base and detention camp are "easily recognizable as martial economies," Crane (2023: 211) shows how the plant nurseries that surround these military infrastructures are less obvious, yet equally generative places where one can find the lush aftermaths of war and counterinsurgent dispossession. By foregrounding the everyday struggles experienced by the indigenous agricultural workers who come to metro Miami as refugees from Guatemala, Crane maps the multiplicity of spatial "stories-so-far" that are set in motion by the day-to-day activities of the US empire-state, and that also brush up and grate against each other to produce Homestead as a settler imperial suburb: a lush product of violence that doubles as a place of tenuous refuge for the undocumented migrants whose exploited labour furnishes us with the "verdant plant life" that ornament our everyday spaces of life and work. By attending to the imperial underpinnings of place-making within the US, Crane invites us to consider how empire's spatial "stories-so-far" have always exceeded conventional political geographical approaches to studying geopolitics, geoeconomics, and the experiences of military violence.

What Crane underscores is the urgent need for an interdisciplinary theory that grounds the everyday work of empire in the geographical management of intimate relationships, racialized bodies, and transnational circulations. It is through such a "poetics" of place-making that geographers might begin to think relationally across the diverse spaces, times, and scales of imperialism. This will bring us up to speed with the organizers who are trying to up-scale place-based liberation struggles against empires, markets, and militaries into transnational movements for abolition, decolonization, and demilitarization. Geographers, as Cindi Katz (2001: 1229) emphasizes, are well equipped to "imagine a politics that maintains the distinctness of place while recognizing that it is connected analytically to other places along contour lines that represent … particular relations to a process." How might we leverage this expertise to build a geographical theory of empire and its unmaking?

THE ENDS OF EMPIRE

One way of answering this question might be to strike up conversations with small-g geographers working in fields – such as Black, Indigenous, and ethnic studies – not traditionally understood as being in relations with political geography. What might this look like moving forward? Researching the "meeting-up-places" of empire and the "residues" of race war and counterinsurgency that haunt them, Crane (2022: 361) argues, "requires a methodological engagement with fragments – both materials scattered across the landscape and archival fragments that might be pieced together to make sense of war debris." Following Crane, we might study these fragmented geographies of empire with a "Caribbean method." Crane (2022: 362) draws on Caribbean scholars such as Michel-Rolph Trouillot to "think across [the] fragmented geography [of Homestead]" and "see and name relationships that a sprawling and diffuse suburban landscape might otherwise render illegible." Political geographers might also productively engage with Caribbeanists such as Yarimar Bonilla (2015: xiv), who identifies a "non-sovereign politics" at work in ongoing struggles for decolonization across the region. Disillusioned by the "modernist project of postcolonial sovereignty," yet unable to shake off a "lingering attachment to its normative ideals," racialized communities in the Caribbean find ways of surviving under conditions of ongoing colonialism. In so doing, they "challenge the modernist premise of absolute sovereignty by revealing its insufficiencies," anticipating a "future characterized *by something other than the search for sovereignty*."

This is not a new direction in geography. In the late 1990s, Derek Gregory (1998) was reading Caribbeanists like Edouard Glissant to clarify how the West is a "project, not a place." A return to Caribbean studies might help geographers extend Glissant by showing how empire has always been a fragmentary *project* of *transnational place-making*. Bonilla's ideas have already been taken up by scholars like Christopher Chien (2021) and myself, who are trying to understand how the US empire-state intervenes in places where it has no formal jurisdiction, namely Cold War Hong Kong. And while Lisa Bhungalia (2023: 13) prefers the term *elastic* sovereignty, her groundbreaking book on the "refashioning of war through aid in Palestine" tracks how the weight of the US empire-state, despite having no concrete claim to sovereignty, is "viscerally felt most notably through its military aid and weapons contracts, its exertions of diplomatic pressure via supranational bodies, and the projection of regimes of sanction and punishment through financial and transnational aid flows." Elasticity, Bhungalia (2023: 14) writes, "provides a useful analytic for considering how the US security state embeds into the lifeworlds of those far away, at once stitching Palestine to Washington in at times exceedingly intimate ways, while at the same time creating vast distances between geographically proximate sites."

Bhungalia's writings on US complicity in the ongoing Israeli genocide in Palestine forces political geographers to reckon with the entanglements between empire and settler colonialism. Like Deborah Cowen (2020) – whose recent work exposes how the infrastructural making of settler colonial Canada "holds together seemingly disparate archives of Indigenous dispossession and genocide, of the transatlantic slave trade, and of unfree migrant racial labor regimes" – Bhungalia is "following the infrastructures of empire" to settler colonies that were shaped by other historical geographies of imperial violence (see also Pasternak, 2021). These timely reflections on settler imperialisms are being mirrored by scholars working at the intersection of ethnic and Indigenous studies, including Dean Saranillio (2018), Adrian de Leon (2023), and Juliet Nebolon (2017). These engagements with Black, Caribbean, Indigenous, and ethnic studies

are important because they force geographers to reckon with a different tradition of radical thought than the one that has dominated the discipline for the past 50 years. This rediscovery of Black and Indigenous geographies as central planks of our field is suggestive of how geographers are beginning to contribute to broader interdisciplinary conversations around empire, abolition, and decolonization. It therefore follows that political geography might productively take on McKittrick, Gilmore, and other Black and Indigenous geographers as *theorists of empire*. As Vasudevan and Smith recognize, Gilmore's contributions to the study of military Keynesianism, the prison-industrial complex, racial capitalism, and abolition must anchor any geographical theory of empire.

Gilmore, however, also crucially provides a language and praxis for unmaking imperial infrastructures. As Gilmore (2002: 16) reminds us, "freedom is a place" that we build for ourselves through *life-work* and other forms of marronage and fugitivity (Mullings 2021; Roane 2023). If empire *reproduces* Homestead as a counterinsurgent suburb, the implication is that these imperial "meeting-up-places" also double as key terrains of resistance. Crane has contributed to the organizing work of activists in Homestead who, in 2021, blocked the Biden administration from reopening the same child detention center that they had shut down in 2019. During both struggles, the centre served as a visible manifestation of the diverse violences that have come to structure the lifeworlds of Homestead's most marginalized inhabitants. What this and other movements for anti-imperial, decolonial, and abolitionist futures offer is an alternative vision of place-making grounded in life-affirming actions of mutual aid and abundance (Ansfield 2023; Chua 2020; Fujikane 2021). In distinct, yet related ways, they are all contributing to the urgent project of building what the *pasifika* historian Tracey Banivanua-Mar (2016) calls "counter networks at the end of empire."

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