



The Pershing Myth: Trump, Islamophobic Tweets, and the Construction of Public Memory.

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Abstract

One of the enduring narratives of the 2016 presidential election was the nostalgic journey President Trump took the American public on to construct his 'Islamophobic memory' surrounding General Pershing's actions during the American occupation of the Philippines. While the mobilization of memory by political actors is not new in Presidential elections, the mechanism utilized to impose and mobilize public memory was. This paper explores how the President Trump's tweets via the Twitter social media platform transform into 'mediated sites of contention' in the nurturance of public nostalgia. As a public 'site' that is visited by millions of people -the tweet not only memorializes events of the past but it mobilizes meaning, memory, and the society's sense of self, which has the ability to redirect and shape public memory. We argue that Trump's nostalgic colonial folklore via the tweet serves his ideological sentiments and larger political platforms in order to promote a vision of the past to provide his right-wing ideologies and movement supporters currency.

Keywords: Islamophobia, Donald Trump, Collective Memory, Twitter, Nostalgia, Post Colonialism

Introduction

In the 2016 US Presidential Election, the world witnessed the campaign of Donald J Trump, whose unconventional run for the presidency galvanized the American public through his vulgar rhetoric and nostalgic vision of a colonial past. His pomposity not only manufactured blind, McCarthyite patriotism, but also transformed the collective remembrances of the United States as a colonial power. Throughout his campaign President Trump utilized rhetorical devices of memory to validate his policies while seeking to mobilize a particular vision of the American colonial effort in the Philippines. One byproduct of romanticizing this colonial past was the manifestation of Islamophobic discursive attacks against Muslims in the United States. The decision to use his platform to systematically reconstruct a public memory of American colonial power in the Philippines as a military campaign against "radical Islam" is historically inaccurate and outright false. This revisionist history was nothing more than an attempt to exercise political control and naturalize Islamophobia.

The far-reaching projection by Trump to centralize an Islamophobic narrative in his campaign declaratively placed sentiments of imperial nostalgia unto his larger "make America great again" framework. This "frame" is an attempt to reconstruct a dominating narrative which superimposes the only way to deal with contemporary Islamic fundamentalism is through internalizing the colonial mentalities of brute force, violence, and expressive power. These frames break the shackles of history and allow support for the American colonial subjugation of the "Other". This contested history has been cheered on by his right-wing supporters who seek to build on Trump's anti-Islamic imperial nostalgia to reinforce nationalist's aspirations while legitimizing the use of force and violence in the present.

One of the ways that Trump has expressed his capacity for allegorical and networked forms of memory have primarily been through Twitter and the 'tweet' (Hoskins; Van Dijck). In the Trump era, tweets – or what we call mediated sites of contention - have become the living monuments of memory that are "living, vital, immediate and accessible," to all (Nelson & Olin 3). The monumentality of the presidential tweet enjoys multiple social roles including the power to symbolically shape the living milieu while manipulating public memory (Papailias 438). The American people, thus, congregate around Trump's tweets to create communities of memory around the American colonial heritage. This Hoskin's argues creates what he calls connective memory, a memory that "inhabits (connects) simultaneously with the realm of both present and past, or in media -memorial terms" (26)". In the post-Obama political context, these communities of memory have been a critical resource in the overall mobilization of right-wing ideological sentiments of loss and disempowerment from the grandeur of American economic and political power.

In light of the above, this paper will first discuss the nostalgic journey Trump takes us on to construct his "imagined memory" surrounding General Pershing's actions in the occupation and pacification of the Philippines. We will show how Trump's use of nostalgic colonial folklore serves his individual needs to validate his ideological sentiments and political platforms. Then the paper will evaluate the rise of President Trump in the context of the current political landscape to show how the mobilization of American colonial memory reflects an official attempt to promote a vision of the past to provide his Islamophobic, nativist, exceptionalist ideology currency. Finally, the paper will show how the President's tweets, as an official presidential record, transform into a mediated site of contention in the nurturance of nostalgia. We argue that the tweet - as a public site that is visited by millions of people - not only mobilizes meaning, memory, and the society's sense of self, but also has the ability to redirect and shape the present.



Pershing and the Tweet

Trump's mobilization of imagined memory during his campaign and throughout his administration is best captured in his usage of an infamous incident involving General John J. Pershing and the U.S. colonization of the Philippines. Following the Spanish-American war, the 1898 Treaty of Paris provided stipulations in favor of the United States, one of which was Spain's ceding of the Philippines to the US (Lacey 33). February 4th of the same year saw the beginning of the Philippine-American War, which lasted 3 years and led to the death of 20,000 Filipino and 4,200 American combatants, and the staggering loss of 200,000 Filipino civilians (Lacey 87). Arising from this conflict was Trump's hyperreal strongman, General John J. Pershing – a figure that takes a central role in Trump's nostalgic narrative, accentuating the flames of imperialistic longing by perpetuating a false, ahistorical narrative.

Trump's tweet, staging General Pershing as a central character in his collective colonial remembrances, was in the aftermath of the 2017 Barcelona terrorist attack. The irony can hardly be lost: the symmetry between the two temporal events is apparent by the fact that Pershing's terrorists were Muslim "Moros", whose insurgency initially targeted Spain then shifted towards the American occupation of the Philippines (Carroll 61). Immediately after the attack, Trump went on a twitter rant stating, "Study what General Pershing of the United States did to terrorists when caught. There was no more Radical Islamic Terror for 35 years!" (@realDonaldTrump). His tweet was referring to an alleged incident involving General Pershing in the early 20th century, where he supposedly captured 50 terrorists in the Muslim-majority province of Moro within the Philippines after the Spanish-American War, and shot 49 of the 50 "terrorists" accused of supporting the insurgency (Bitecofer 41). Trump's folkloric narrative stressed General Pershing's symbolic act of dipping the bullets used to shoot the 49 "terrorists" into pig's blood, as an attempt by Pershing to dissuade the Muslim insurgency. According to this widespread myth, Pershing believed the act of dipping bullets in pig's blood barred Muslims from heaven and instead damned them to hell (ibid.). Putting aside the questions of whether the Muslim insurgents believed in such damnation or not, Trump's explicit endorsement of such actions to deter terrorist's postulates that only colonial-era methods of expressing power will lead to triumph over enemies of Trump's America.

Trump conveyed this erroneous – and at best dubious – story before, including during a February 19th, 2016 rally in North Charleston, South Carolina, where the "Pershing Myth" was once more used to rally his crowd (Horton). Trump's discrepancies in conveying the Pershing Myth is characteristic of his semantic juggling, which in turn deemphasizes the centrality of truth while creating an "imagined memory" of a regressive nostalgic past. In the South Carolina iteration of the Pershing Myth, Trump physically displays the act of dipping bullets in pig's blood, then repeats a slightly altered claim that was stated in his aforementioned tweet: "And for 25 years [as opposed to 35 years], there wasn't a problem" (@realDonaldTrump). Trump concludes his trajectory of colonial mythologizing with an existential warning, "So we better start getting tough, and we better start getting vigilant, and we better start using our heads, or we're not going to have a country, folks" (@realDonaldTrump). Other versions of Trump's usage of the Pershing story include instances where Trump juxtaposes Pershing's relationship with Islam as hostile and unrestrained. In one account, with "multiple slips of the tongue", Trump states that Pershing had, "a huge problem with ... Islam ... terrorism ... radical Islamic terrorism" (Kramer).

Citing the Pershing Myth becomes even more problematic for Trump, when considering the episodes of competing narratives that paint a picture of a military leader that employed compassion to accomplish his duties. For instance, an authentic reading of history shows that Pershing was made aware of an American military tactic of burying Moros with pigs in an attempt to deter the insurgents, yet Pershing never implemented the policy himself (Lacey 66). Pershing's writings also demonstrate a more nuanced perspective towards the inception of the insurgency, in which he acknowledges that religion contributed less of a role than socio-political and tribal factors (Lacey).

The Pershing Myth was not only identified as a historical fabrication during Trump's campaign, but was also exposed and discredited when years earlier the widespread myth gained momentum through email chains and online discussion boards in the immediate post-9/11 context. Regardless of which story is circulated, the underlying symbolism remains consistent. The fabricated story conveys a powerful message that the United States in engaging with the Muslim world, must be brutal and unrestrained, in order to overcome a 'dehumanized enemy' that knows no language besides senseless violence. Aside from the fact that Trump's statements are sanctioning war crimes, Trump's continued perpetuation of a clearly false historical account seeks to rally his base towards an imperialistic, nostalgic vision of America.

Trumpism, Nostalgia, and Collective Memory

Whilst Trump's commemoration of the American occupation of the Philippines was specifically in reaction to ISIS, the expression of colonial nostalgia and the subsequent public memory gives rise to sentiments that transcends time. Trump coopted the paradigmatic views of right wing, conservative activists who believe the "western world is under attack, silently occupied by, or even at civil war with Islam (Ekman 1986)." As a result, Trump was able to mobilize the largely white working-class population, who were also most susceptible to internalize the production of public memory. This memory symbolizes a glorious past where Americans were leading in industry, innovation, and expressions of power without the constraints of international law, human rights, and globalization. In the post-truth political context (Davies), Trump's capability to construct alternative historical "facts" and impose them unto society is accomplished fairly easily. The nostalgic journey for President Trump is used not to evoke "commonality and continuity, [but] ... as a mode of social memory by emphasizing distance and disjuncture (Bissell 216)."

In applying De Saint-Laurent, et al. (148-149) three typologies of memory, we see how the Trump Republican campaign, and now presidency, has used colonial folklore in the imagery of General Pershing to create new identity frameworks for



the contemporary American public. As Lowenthal states: “memories are not ready-made reflections of the past, but eclectic, selective reconstructions based on subsequent actions and perceptions and on ever-changing codes by which we delineate, symbolize, and classify the world around us” (210). One way the continuity of memory is mobilized is by critiquing the present. Thus, Trump’s statements on twitter warning the American people that, “we better get tough with RADICAL ISLAMIC TERRORISTS and get tough now or the life and safety of our wonderful country will be in jeopardy!” (@realDonaldTrump) reflects a stern warning about the fleeting moments of the present. In other words, if his vision and nostalgic paradigms encapsulated in the Pershing Myth are not implemented, then the defeat of the American way of life is imminent. This exclusionary frame allows the public to engage with our past to negotiate and reconstruct the present.

President Trump’s hegemonic formulation of vulgar political narratives has excluded him from the responsibility of substantiating his claims. Moreover, as the legitimate authority within our political structure, Trump’s statements transcend the criterion of truth and take on Orwellian characteristics. As his presidency unfolds, the nostalgic links to the past through fascist slogans like “America First” provoke a discourse of hatred, xenophobia, and racism that set the basis for a new form of American authoritarianism. This “enables the internal division of a nation to be legitimized by creating shared political forms (colonial folklore) of experiencing and imagining internal divisions (Vrecko llc 23).” In the post-9/11 context, conservative and right-wing movements have mobilized the American colonial heritage and its “historical” relationship with the Islamic world through the lens of the War on Terror (Ekman 1986).

In the context of the Philippines, Trump’s Islamophobic accounts construct a nostalgic tale regarding the existential threat of “Radical Islam” beginning in the American colonial context through to the present. In this spirit, Pershing then becomes the contemporary counter-jihadist, who embodies Trump’s *deus ex machina* by setting the stage to overcome the Muslim antagonist who’s “incapable of reason and rationality, knowing only the language of violence” (Ekman 1989). As Kardas states, “the main premise of the ‘pig-bloodied bullet’ story was to expand the war on terror to the cultural/religious terrain, where on particular (religious) identity could be singled out in order to demarcate and augment in-group solidarity through engaging in a clash of civilizations (100)”.

Furthermore, nostalgia as a memory framework temporally legitimates Trumps vision of the future (De Saint-Laurant 2017). His use of colonial rhetoric reflects Trump’s larger Islamophobic vision for the United States and the Muslim world. As Bunzl states, Islamophobia doesn’t, “engage religious questions in a meaningful way..... What does stand at the heart of Islamophobic discourse is the question of civilization, the notion that Islam engenders a world view that [is] fundamentally incompatible with and inferior to Western culture (13).” Trumpist, proto-fascist policy frameworks and aggrandized promises inevitably produced far-reaching policies against Muslim refugees who were caricatured as an existential threat to the larger public. These policies also include the Muslim travel ban preventing “terrorists” from entering our borders and the removal of government aid from many Muslim countries. This indicates his larger policy orientation regarding how to deal with what many call the “Muslim problem” (Ekman). While the unrestrained Trumpist policies do not represent mainstream American views on Islam and Muslims, in reality, his discourses were popular beyond the fringe of society (Gokarikel & Smith 2016) where indifference to truth materialized into widespread conspiracy, glorification of past hatreds, racism, and violence.

Immediately after praising Pershing’s methods of dealing with the Moro resistance, President Trump tweeted, “Radical Islamic Terrorism must be stopped by whatever means necessary! The courts must give us back our protective rights. Have to be tough!” (@realDonaldTrump) For Trump, the nostalgia with the past legitimizes the tools of coloniality in the present to fight in the coming war with a religion (Islam) that Trump states “hates us” (ibid.). This nostalgic experiential frame then in turn releases unto the contemporary landscape the conspiratorial fairy tales surrounding American colonial power. This becomes the necessary resource to justify his pronounced need for, “military interventions in Muslim countries with indiscriminate bombings of populations, drone killings of presumed Muslim terrorists, torture of Muslim prisoners, imprisonment of Muslim fighters without a fair trial, through to ‘random’ security checks disproportionately targeting Muslims and general and informal surveillance of the Muslim part of the American population (Vrecko llc 32)”. Consequently, for Trump the incorporation of historical analogies in reference to Pershing and his perceived policies vis-à-vis the Muslim Moros, ameliorates any need for dialogue and understanding. In this sense, power expressed through violence is the preferred method to exercise political control. Thus, this vision of the future creates a temporal dualism of “us and them” which becomes the defining characteristic of the Trumpist worldview.

The social processes discursively constructing a narrative of commonality to colonial Philippines - and in particular to General Pershing - intrinsically allows Trump to connect to and fashion his image around him (De Saint-Laurent 2017). The objectification of Pershing’s image enables Trump to internalize the non-compromising, warrior framework that many of his follower’s support. The implications of this manufactured identity endow Trump with the discursive freedom to define his own identity in relation to the “vastly superior” qualities of Pershing in order to, as Trump emphatically states, to “get the job done” against “radical Islam.” (@realDonaldTrump). The political posturing as Pershing’s doppelganger situates Trump as a triumphant and unrestrained leader that conservative forces, right wing activist, and neo-Fascist movements can call their own.

For Trump, the only person who will be able to “make America great again” is himself. In his now infamous inaugural address he declares to the American people, “I will fight for you with every breath in my body, and I will never, ever let you down. America will start winning again, winning like never before.” In giving himself the power to construct the totalizing narratives about the Other as Truth, (e.g. Islam hates us, Obama is a Muslim) he is presenting himself, as one who can accomplish greatness and reinforce vulgar colonial masculinity and bravado. As Gorski states, “he does talk about himself in plainly messianic terms. ‘I am your voice,’ he told his supporters at the Republican National Convention, and ‘I alone can fix’ the nation’s problems, he continued. ‘Believe me folks,’ he often says, ‘I will do it.’ Don’t ask how, he assures his



followers. Just believe.” (347). In embodying the spirit of the past, an unrestrained Trump anticipates that he will be able to change and transform the present and the trajectory of the future. His narcissistic view of self as the savior of the political Right from “radical Islam,” “Mexican rapists,” and “Muslim refugees” inculcates within him the messiah complex to fulfill his prophesy and unlimited potential in the seat of the American presidency. As he states in his Republican nomination address, “nobody knows the system better than me, which is why I alone can fix it” (Appelbaum). In embodying the memory of General Pershing, Trump removes any obstacles in his path to champion the cause of white supremacy and xenophobia in a world that he perceives as hostile.

The imaginatively reworked image of Pershing in the American public sphere legitimizes a collective national saga that never existed historically. The discursive conflicts surrounding the Pershing-esque colonial language of power reified the regressive analogies of a glorified past. His “America first” policies along with his authoritarian persona created a hyper-real script that centralizes his role in saving America from itself and from outsiders who seek to undermine its power.

The Tweet

The deployment of memory via the tweet has been the primary tool of communication for Donald J Trump during the 2016 election. The role of the tweet as a “site” that is visited, debated, contested, and challenged allows for the American and global public to debate the tweet of a public figure like Trump on its merits. It also creates an inescapable monument that is forever codified online and in the consciousness of the masses. In making the past readily available via the tweet, it allowed President Trump to create and falsify memory whilst manufacturing this mediated site of contention. A site where political parties, activists, supporters, and the opposition gather around to debate the ideological profundities that emanates it. In the postmodern and post-colonial moment, the tools of nostalgia are no longer the traditional monuments of modernity, but instead the “new” omnipresent monument - that is simultaneously nowhere and everywhere at the same time – discursively plunges the whole of society unto the past. Thus, the tweet just like the monument, “expresses power and sense of the society that gives it meaning, and at the same time obscures competing claims for authority and meaning” (Olin and Nelson 7).

The Pershing tweets reinforce images of the past that appeal to the masses with little or no critical historical appraisal. The memory distortions displayed on and through twitter transform into a site of memory that individuals interact with to create new collectivities while extending their capacity for new memory forms. In evoking the American colonial heritage via the tweet, President Trump not only dismissed the past but constructs a view of the present that becomes the dominant overarching view of history. The ability of the tweet to transcend time and space mobilizes communities of memory around the tweet which for supporters becomes the site of legitimation and disagreement. This sustains the mythologies of the past while expressing explicit forms of ideologies that create tensions surrounding the present and future.

The intrinsic structure of Trump’s Pershing Myth via the tweet has dual functions: first, it inculcates an intended official meaning regarding the systematic ways Trump believes the American public should view the “fight against radical Islam” (@realDonaldTrump). Second, once the tweet is posted, it becomes divorced from any context and has no fixed meaning as its vulnerable to reinterpretation and manipulation by various actors in society. As a result, the tweet remains a site that is contested by the American public evoking communality and difference in our social and political terrain. As a mediated site of contention, the decentralized rhetoric surrounding the Pershing tweet have produced resistance and support affirming the larger Islamophobic networks narratives about American colonial power and Islamic-American relations.

For the right-wing news media outlets who unquestionably support Trump, the Pershing tweet was a validation of their ideological impulses. For these movements, the tweet acknowledges the perception that Muslims domestically and globally are blood thirsty savages that can only be dealt with through brute forms of overwhelming power. When the average American voter comes across Trump’s tweet and engages with the memory that is embedded within, it introduces to the visitor of the tweet to a hyper-real image of the American colonial legacy, while authenticating Trump’s image of Islam. Hence, when Trump stated on the campaign trail that “Islam hates us” (@realDonaldTrump) he is also subconsciously telling American society that ‘we hate Islam’. Consequently, the etching of the Pershing tweet on the American collective consciousness becomes a critical historical resource for the global Islamophobic network whose critique and mistrust of Islam and Muslims drive their new collectivities while reframing a nostalgic narrative around the American colonial experience.

Conclusion

Among the multiple stages that are utilized for Trump’s theatrical renditions, Twitter holds a primary position, where Trump’s performance reveals the importance and deep-seated impact that American imperialism has on our collective memory. In this way, Twitter and other social media platforms, combined with the sense of manufactured tension, creates new sites of memory by which political agendas are propagated. Trump’s attempts at reinvigorating America’s colonial past also gives rise to idiosyncrasies unique to the American colonial experience; whereas America has been traditionally critical of European imperialism, the US historically has buried our colonial memory. However, in the Trump era, the mobilization of colonial memory reemerges and besieges American society to reconstruct new forms of memory to shape the present, the future, and by extension, himself. Trump’s nostalgic references to colonialism via the Pershing Myth transform from merely being opinions to official declarations of policy, but also mediated sites of contention.

This paper argued that Trump’s rise to political power was connected to his attempts to mobilize American colonial memory to vicariously employ Islamophobic, nativist, and exceptionalist political views onto American domestic and



foreign policy. It was contended that Trump's tweet of the Pershing Myth was the vehicle by which American colonialism was romanticized into the contemporary landscape. In doing so, we challenged the efficacy of the Pershing Myth while revealing the role of Trump's policies in light of Pershing's collective memory to transform the present and change the future. Moreover, we showed that the objectification of Pershing's myth enabled Trump to project onto himself an image of Pershing's embellished colonial past. A past that sought to exercise unrestrained imperialistic forms of control to subdue the enemy (Islam, Mexican immigrant, Muslim refugees, etc.). Finally, we discussed the use of twitter and the tweet as a mediated site of contention to impose a nostalgic view of Trump's Pershing myth onto the public sphere.

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