

## Telepathy Tales

### *Tok Pisin, Communist Radio, and Other Channels of Illegitimate Circulation*

#### FROM IMPASSABLE TO POROUS

For all the talk about the ways that circulation seemed next to impossible in Papua New Guinea for various kinds of colonizers, there was another form of commentary that emphasized instead the incredible ease and speed with which Papua New Guineans could communicate, move, and connect with one another. A good example, reproduced in its entirety below, is a brief item in the Australian tabloid newspaper *Smith's Weekly* from 1946, when a large number of Australian troops were still stationed in Papua New Guinea in the immediate aftermath of World War II:

#### TELEPATHY?

Discharged from hospital and awaiting reporting to his NGIB [New Guinea Infantry Battalion], Putari acted as interpreter in an ANGAU HQ [Australia New Guinea Administrative Unit headquarters].

A cheerful cuss, even his wound had failed to upset him. But one morning he was very down in the lip.

Asked what was wrong, he replied "Sumting no good'e come up alone brother bi'ong me." (Sioni, his brother, was with the battalion three hundred miles away.)

Nothing we could say or do would cheer him up. Some of us were inclined to laugh but the Major, an old New Guinea hand, said:

"I've heard of this sort of thing before. Make a note in the diary and get in touch with his battalion for information regarding his brother." It was five days before we got a reply to our sig [signal], and it read "Sioni accidentally killed by aircraft propeller."

Date was that noted in the diary.<sup>1</sup>

The item—published on the paper’s “Unofficial History” page that collected stories sent in from Australian soldiers—was presented as a kind of oddity, something for the Australian audience to shake their heads at. But stories about Papua New Guinean or Pacific Islander telepathy appeared with surprising frequency in newspapers and magazines that circulated among the colonial classes in Papua New Guinea, so much so that their regular presence in the media suggests a more serious set of concerns than just the exoticizing entertainment of a Sydney tabloid reader. In fact, the story of Putari’s telepathic communication encapsulates a recurrent fear within the modernist circulatory imaginary: for Australian colonizers and foreign missionaries, Papua New Guinea might be horribly difficult to traverse and the people might be almost impossible to communicate with, but what if that is only true for them? What if others can communicate across the territory with ease? If so, how can colonizers access this form of communication? Or are they destined to always be on the outside of it?

All of the main features of what I will call a telepathy tale are present in the brief article about Putari’s telepathic update regarding his brother. Two different kinds of people, with disparate modes of communication, are put in contrast with one another: the telepathic “natives” capable of receiving news without any obvious means of doing so, and the critical “moderns”—who, as narrators in these stories, act as stand-ins for the reader—capable of forensically analyzing the accuracy and timing of the telepathic message through a technologically enabled communication system (it’s unstated how the “sig” was sent to Putari’s brother’s battalion three hundred miles away, but it was likely by teleradio). “An old New Guinea hand”—that is, an Australian who had been in the colony for a long time—is in this case set between the two, and can affirm that this story of telepathy is not singular, but just the most recent in a long line of similar tales.

In addition to the communities and their corresponding modes of communication are the two languages. On the one hand is Tok Pisin, presented here in particularly disheveled orthographic form. It can only gesture vaguely at what exactly happened with Sioni, through the nonspecific claim that “sumting no good” occurred. On the other hand is English, perhaps the maximally efficient version of it used for clipped military signals over radio. In English, we get the gruesome particulars of Sioni’s accident. But if Tok Pisin and telepathy seem to suffer in the comparison with English and radiotelegraphy by not capturing all the details of the deadly event, their trump card is the message’s timing: telepathy and Tok Pisin allow for instantaneous notification across three hundred miles, in contrast to the five long days of waiting for the battalion’s reply in English.<sup>2</sup> Telepathy moves faster than the electric charge of the telegraph or the waves of the radio, and it does so without any of the cumbersome wires, machines, stations, or operators that had been needed for Australian families to learn of the deaths of their own loved ones in the recently concluded war.

As with other modernist morality tales of technology leading to a disconnection from nature and from one another, the moral of this civilizational story is that “natives” have a capacity for connectedness that cannot be captured through telecommunications and that has become inaccessible to the moderns. For American Lutheran missionary Frederick Henkelmann, this was a consequence of constant warfare and social fragmentation. That is, for the modern looking down at what he perceived as the circulatory primitive, what he saw as a warfare-based lack of movement may have produced this other kind of connection: “Because the heathen regards every stranger as an enemy, he has developed his psychic powers to a superlative degree.” Henkelmann then quotes from another text, shifting his explanation into a more overtly racial frame: “‘Gifted spiritually to a profound degree, to the negro the spirit of another is transparent’ (Rutledge) [*sic*].”<sup>3</sup> Circulatory primitives may neither be able nor want to move about freely, but they have supernatural capacities for connection on those occasions when separation has been forced on them.

In this chapter, I look at the ways in which the circulatory imaginary of Papua New Guinea could sometimes get turned on its head. Instead of worrying over the impassibility of Papua New Guinea, colonizers could start to feel like it was an all-too-porous space, with communicative capacities that were far too promiscuous—to borrow John Durham Peters’s (1999) phrase—for colonial regulation and monitoring. As Tracey Banivanua Mar (2016) discusses, colonizers in the Pacific both emphasized the remoteness and inaccessibility of Pacific communities and yet also did a lot of work to regulate and limit the movement of people in them. By looking at the colonization of Papua New Guinea in terms of the discourses on circulatory primitivity, three seemingly distinct issues can be analyzed as inverting the prevailing imaginary from circulatory primitivity to circulatory porousness: stories of Papua New Guinean telepathy, fears of communist radio propaganda, and concerns about Tok Pisin being used for anticolonial projects. While stories of Papua New Guinean telepathy were a steady part of more lighthearted colonial reportage, the later fears of communist radio and Tok Pisin-enabled insurrection suggest that telepathy-like communicative systems that cross ethnic and cultural boundaries also cross over into categorization as threats to colonial order and colonial borders.

Telepathy tales not only cover the specific stories of telepathic communications, but more broadly point to colonial stories of magical, unregulatable modes of communication within what should be a context of secular modernity (see Mazzarella 2017). They are colonial stories because they are framed by the sense that the Pacific (and Papua New Guinea in particular) is a place in which circulation is impossible for colonizers. If local people are able to circulate, then those circulations must be supernatural, illegitimate, or simply non-modern. So while folkloric accounts of dead family members announcing their own deaths are relatively common cross-culturally, there is a particular colonial version of these tales that starts

from the perspective that legitimate communications in the Pacific are close to impossible without the technological expertise of colonizers. Telepathy tales provide narrative form for colonial concerns about illegitimate circulation (see Bayly 1996, White 2000, Luckhurst 2002, Gage 2020).

In the middle of the twentieth century, such colonial stories of illegitimate circulation took on a particular Cold War flavor. As Scott Selisker (2016: 49) argues in the American context, anti-Soviet partisans often focused on the illegitimate means by which communism was spread, via what seemed to be propaganda, brainwashing, or viral infection. Soviet influence was proof of how minds could become too porous (cf. Taylor 2007, Luhrmann 2020) if care was not taken to reinforce the boundaries of individualist selves. Concerns about control at a distance, about being able to affect others' minds, were bound up with concerns about Soviet aggression. As I will discuss more at the end of this chapter, Tok Pisin itself was seen by some as a potential medium for communist infiltration.

Telepathy tales, stories of surreptitious communist radio propaganda, and fears of Tok Pisin-based anticolonialism all feature moments in which the labor of Papua New Guinean colonial subjects is disrupted through secret communications transmitted to porous listening subjects. The sense of porosity present in these examples is particularly important because the porousness of the listener is what helps blur the boundary between code and channel: being open to telepathy means that there is no obvious material form mediating distance in time and space (see Guillory 2010).

One of the broader arguments of this book is that when you take problems of circulation as your perspective, language and other infrastructures can be viewed together under the single frame of being elements of communicative networks. But from a more standard linguistic anthropological account, language and media usually are separated. Using Roman Jakobson's (1960) definitions, language is important primarily as a code, whereas things like two-way radios or telephones are the technological bases of channels. Codes in this sense are defined as grammatical and semantic systems, the basic norms and knowledges that constitute a language as a system of communication. Channels, however, are the spaces or linkages created and maintained to enable the code to pass from a speaker to a hearer. But in contexts in which the nature of communication seems mysterious, secret, and immediate—as is the case with the colonial telepathy tale—there is no clear distinction between a system of communication and the medium through which elements of the system pass.

In the context of colonial frontiers organized by experiences of colonizer remoteness and uncertainty about the possibility of communication, where code and channel sometimes seemed to both be in doubt, telepathy tales were the basis on which other kinds of suspect communications came to be interpreted. The features that I identify here—secrecy, labor disruption, and porosity—together created a communicative framework in which the code/channel opposition

came to be blurred in this colonial space. For the circulatory moderns, Papua New Guinean telepathy offered instantaneous information transfer, but it did so at the cost of a sense of mental autonomy and self-control. Telepathic circulations made colonial subjects temporarily—and maybe even permanently—unwilling to work or unable to be governed by the administration through their forms of modern circulations.

#### TELEPATHY AND THE MYSTERIES OF KINSHIP CONNECTIONS

Stories about telepathic messages being sent among Pacific Islanders popped up throughout the first half of the twentieth century. They appeared in articles and letters to the editor in the *Pacific Islands Monthly*, a news magazine that catered to expatriates across the Pacific, as well as in Australian newspapers discussing Pacific Islander peoples. Australian private diaries and letters also make offhand mention of indigenous telepathy (e.g., Nelson 2007: 74, Taylor 2016: 333).<sup>4</sup> In many cases, a particular story of telepathy would make reference to a much wider collection of stories on this topic that circulated among expat Europeans about Pacific Islanders. In fact, a July 1933 item in *Pacific Islands Monthly* from Henry Dexter of Milne Bay was a call to readers to send in their stories of islander telepathy in order to create a written record of the many stories that were then in circulation orally.<sup>5</sup> It is fair to assume that the small but substantial collection of these stories in print represents only a fraction of the stories that were told in colonizer circles. But even if there were only a few such tales, the belief that there was surely a large corpus out there was an important component of the telepathy-tale genre itself. Any one story could be presented as representative of countless others just like it, as when the “old New Guinea hand” in the opening example says, “I’ve heard of this sort of thing before.”

Telepathy tales have two somewhat distinct flavors: kin-based death notices and intercommunity news (I’ll discuss the latter in the next section). The stories that involve unexplainable knowledge of the death of a close family member get told in elaborate detail, partly because they are treated as relatively unthreatening curiosities, fodder for reflection on “modern man” and his modes of circulation, more than as phenomena of administrative concern. For example, in a 1954 item published in *Pacific Islands Monthly*, a telepathy tale is told as a personal reminiscence of an unexpected interruption of a conversation the narrator was having with his friend over drinks one night in the Cook Islands. The two white men had been talking about the planned atom bomb tests in French Polynesia and their shared sense that this was proof that modern man was not in tune with nature anymore. “So the conversation drifted along, and we expounded some kind of theory that people who live simple lives close to nature have certain instincts or intuitions which we, as superior civilized beings, have irretrievably lost.” At just

that moment, a normally happy domestic servant named Mina cried out when a lamp-glass shattered, devastated by the immediate and certain knowledge that this indicated that her father, eight hundred miles away on a remote island, had just died. Like Putari in the earlier example, Mina was inconsolable. Weeks later, the telepathy was confirmed. Once again, it was a white man, this time with access to a boat rather than a teleradio, who verified the story. The narrator relayed this information to his friend with whom he had been discussing the atom bomb tests:

“By the way,” I said, “do you remember the scene at my place when the lamp-glass broke? Well, Mina’s father *is* dead. I’ve checked with Skipper Andy, off the schooner, and he well recalls the night on Manihiki, for he was ashore at the time and remembers asking what the crying and wailing in the village was about. Believe it or not, the old man died, as far as we can check up, at exactly the same time as that glass broke.”

Burton gazed at me for a long time. I can still see the look of amazement on his face. “But Mina,” he said finally. “How the deuce did *she* know?”

EDITORIAL NOTE: In 20 years, the PIM has heard of a number of such cases of what may be telepathic communication between natives of the Pacific Islands.<sup>6</sup>

Although published in an outlet that featured news reporting on colonial administrative and business concerns, this item appeared in the magazine section. It was placed alongside a number of other pieces that were presented as first-person realist reportage, but all veered closer to the genre of short story. The author, who used the nom de plume “Periti,” was a regular contributor to *Pacific Islands Monthly*, usually writing about Polynesia. Periti’s contributions ranged from poetry to realist fiction items like this one to straight news. In this story, the narrator’s description of his philosophizing friend Burton echoes the double-voiced descriptions of the bourgeoisie in Dickens novels that Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) was so fond of analyzing: “Burton was about sixty-five, looked about fifty, had a keen mind, a droll sense of humour and a private income. A very fine fellow, too.” Yet it is a short story that strains to be taken as fact, emphasizing the mundane details and by-the-way conversational notes. And if the writing seems too on-the-nose, too perfect to be anywhere close to a truthful accounting of an evening in the Cook Islands among two expats, the editorial note is there at the bottom of the page to affirm that this story represents many others just like it, too many to be considered purely fictional. In telepathy tales, there is always some authorial or editorial voice insisting that any one story is echoed by dozens of others. The rational, calculating perspective of the modern—the one who cross-references battalion diaries or the date and time of ritual wailing—likewise counts up these instances of telepathy, creating an archive of them, as Henry Dexter of Milne Bay was hoping to do.

Telepathy tales often concerned domestic servants, as is true of the two examples with Putari and Mina. Domestic servants would have been the only local people allowed in white colonizers’ homes for the most part, and thus the only people whom colonizers might see in such unguarded moments of emotional shock. Importantly, telepathy interrupts their labor: it stops Mina from continuing her

work and makes Putari too sad to be discharged back to his duties. One gets the sense that the colonial observers may register these moments only because their laborers stop laboring. Telepathy tales not only mark illegitimate circulation, but also lead to the loss of colonial power over local labor.<sup>7</sup>

The way that telepathy tales interrupted colonial labor through “natural” rather than “technological” modes of communication is a prominent part of an article titled “‘Black Magic’: How Do Islanders Communicate?”<sup>8</sup> The author, who wrote under the name L. Poole and who contributed several articles in the 1950s to *Pacific Islands Monthly*, was responding to a letter to the editor in an earlier issue. A ship captain had written in regarding one Malaitan (Solomon Islands) community’s telepathic knowledge of the death of a relative who had been working on the ship. The confused captain said at the end of his letter to the editor that “probably some PIM reader can tell me” how the community knew that there would be a dead body to collect on his ship.<sup>9</sup> Poole took up this charge, explaining that many communities, “too numerous to mention,” in the Coral Seas, Torres Strait, and other nearby areas, “were all adepts at sending messages of this sort—certain groups having a system of communication as correct as our wireless.” But this telepathic communication system was due to the “natural-born gift of people directly attuned to earth vibrations” rather than to technological advancement. Poole claimed that drums, well known to be a system of communication in parts of the Sepik River area for example, were not necessarily used to send messages themselves, but rather “were extensively used to stir up the warlike feelings of the people when they were expecting the receipt of such tribal messages.” As mysterious and possibly foreboding as colonizers might find the drumming communications of the Sepik, Poole says that these were just the audible announcement that later and completely inaudible telepathic messages were incoming.

As with the Lutheran missionary Henkelmann’s comments that telepathy was caused by warfare and isolation, in Poole’s account islander telepathy was not a mode of modernist circulation in the sense that it produced greater health, commerce, or information transfer. It was rather circulation that was produced by and encouraging of further isolation, most clearly visible to the colonizer in the ways that telepathy could be used to circumvent demands for islander labor: “In urgent cases [telepathy] was the only means of communication, and it was used to warn many a tribe of the approach of blackbirders [labor recruiters], giving the kanakas time to hide in the bush where, in those days, sailors dared not penetrate.” Telepathy was not just non-modern and a means of resistance against a system of coerced labor, but highlighted the extent to which much of the Pacific remained impassable to the modernist colonizers.

In many communities, there are traditions of supernatural knowledge of distant family members’ deaths. Dreams sent by spirits or the “wailing of the banshee” could foretell the imminent death of a loved one or announce their passing. But if such spiritual messengers were part of the ontologies of the Pacific Islanders

who feature in these tales, the colonial men and women who told the stories did not seem to know anything about them. The focus instead was on the temporally and materially immediate experience of knowledge. Part of a broader colonial and racist discourse that insisted that non-Western peoples did not have the same autonomy of self or mind, telepathy tales highlight the ways in which technologies of communication seemed to rationalize (in Max Weber's sense) spiritual connection. Confined to kin-based news only, these sorts of telepathy tales were ways of defining a divide between the modern world organized by technology and no longer governed by kinship on the one hand, and the "primitive" world connected to nature and defined by family on the other. Pacific Islanders were so connected to both nature and family that their thoughts could be linked together. There was no objectified linguistic code that traveled on a technological channel of connection, but only minds united by kinship and earth vibrations.

#### TELEPATHIC NETWORKS AND COLONIAL CONTROL

This porosity of mind, code, and channel allowed circulatory moderns to imagine their communicative others in relatively unthreatening contexts where kinship interrupted colonial labor. But telepathy took on different valences when it crossed into contexts beyond immediate kin-linked notifications of death. In the second major kind of telepathy tale, the channel of communication was unknown but the messages spread rapidly across different communities. Many of these tales were attributed to some variation of what was called the "bush telegraph." In reporting focused on Islanders, Aboriginal Australians, or white Australians, the term *bush telegraph* most often referred to the rapid spread of news (if it was considered true) or gossip (if it was not). Similar terms like *coconut wireless*, *coconut radio*, or the French *radio cocotier* seem to have been more common in Polynesia than in Melanesia. They tended to refer to the mundane, if still rapid, spread of rumors across wide social networks and territories, rather than to immediate, telepathic knowledge of the mortality of distant family members. These terms riff on the telecommunication systems that were widely transformational at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, uncannily bringing together technological advancement with the natural resources of "non-modern" environments. Indeed, short notes about the coconut radio or bush telegraph occasionally appeared in newspapers and magazines just one column over from notices of actual radio and telegraph connections being installed in various outposts across the Pacific.<sup>10</sup>

Stories of the coconut radio or bush telegraph as rumor mills or grapevines were sometimes treated as relatively harmless facts of life in the Pacific. The capacity for the colonized to know information faster than the colonizers was something to be remarked upon but not necessarily moralized about. Hank Nelson (2007: 74) notes that during World War II, "even without obvious human carriers,



news seemed to travel quickly. On 19 January 1942 on Witu Island, Gladys Baker at Langu Plantation was told by the 'natives' that Rabaul had been bombed, and soon after her radio went silent they told her, again accurately and within hours of it happening, that Rabaul had fallen."<sup>11</sup>

Yet there were times when journalists and other colonial authors considered stories of the rapid interisland or intercultural transfer of knowledge a source of deep threat to colonial stability. And when that was the case, commenters often fell back on tropes of telepathy to shore up what seemed to them to be the unexplainable speed of message circulation. In these instances of the rapid sharing of news among much wider beyond-kin networks of people, telepathy took on a potentially more sinister aspect, seeming more like broadcasts than point-to-point telepathic communication.

Colonial accounts of such intertribal or intercommunal messages made a correlation between the importance of a message to be conveyed telepathically and the success or accuracy of the message transfer, as if the currency of broadcast mental telepathy was emotional resonance. In a "School Section" of *The Age* in 1952, Melbourne area children were instructed that "scientists incline to the theory that only real 'thought transference' can explain the rapidity with which certain kinds of emotionally charged 'news' can travel among primitive people. It was undoubtedly true, for instance, that the negroes of the southern parts of the United States knew of the death of Abraham Lincoln long before their white masters, who had the telegraph and railroad to assist them."<sup>12</sup>

Since the emotional importance of a message could be assumed in the case of a family member's death, this feature of telepathy tales is remarked on explicitly only in stories about messages that spread to larger networks and involved other topics. A report in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, written in March 1942 as Papua New Guinea was just starting to get pulled into World War II, made the connection explicit:

You can't try to explain this 'bush telegraph.' District officers and magistrates who have spent 15 years among the New Guinea natives will not hazard a guess. The news just travels mysteriously through the jungles almost with the speed of an electric telegraph. . . . In recent weeks the natives have given erroneous reports of parachute landings by Japanese troops, of mysterious ships off the coast. *But when dealing with matters of deep concern to the natives themselves* the accuracy of these strange reports is unquestioned.<sup>13</sup> (emphasis added)

Two features of wider broadcast telepathy—insular proclivities for gossipy embellishment and broadcast strength being based on emotional resonance—could sometimes lead to dangerous effects. If telepathic messages were about things that local people cared about (or were embellished to seem that way), uncontrollable mobs could form. Coconut radio messages were blamed for an unruly crowd in Papeete that had spread the news that an incoming ship was loaded with pots

of gold (it was only copra). More consequentially, the March 1942 article just cited talks about how the telepathic features of the bush telegraph caused so much chaos and “mob hysteria” that “control was lost” after the announcement of the change-over from a civilian to a military government in Papua New Guinea.<sup>14</sup>

Telepathy tales of family death notifications wouldn’t be newsworthy if they were incorrect—if, for example, Mina was mistaken about her father’s demise. At best, they would be proof of indigenous irrationality. But even incorrect telepathic transmissions across ethnic lines could be newsworthy, because colonizers worried that they could instigate mobs or violence. At such times, telepathy tales stopped being curiosities and started being threats to colonial order.

These interethnic telepathy tales are in some ways akin to the hysteria over chapatis that circulated in colonial India in 1856 and 1857. For unknown reasons, chapatis (small, round flatbreads) were sent from one village to another across northern India in a pattern of circulation that many have compared to chain letters (Guha 1983, Bayly 1996, Downs 2000). The British were alarmed not only by the fact that they could not figure out the meaning of the chapati circulation, but also because one of the only things they could determine was that the chapatis were being circulated at a rate equal to or faster than the colonial postal system (Downs 2000: 81). In retrospect, the British in India thought that the chapatis had in some way signaled the start of the First War of Independence (or Indian Mutiny), which began a few months after the chapatis were first noticed. Later on, nationalist historians tended to agree with this account. Today, scholars suggest that the chapatis may have circulated so widely precisely because nobody, Indian or British, knew exactly what they signaled and they could add whatever meaning seemed most fitting. While they may have been part of a religious ritual aimed at warding off a cholera epidemic then circulating in the region, they were in other ways empty signifiers, able to materialize a growing and multifaceted sense of insurgency or discontent.

If the chapati circulation remained a mystery, it at least offered a material medium for inspection by the British administration: village watchmen who were taking the chapatis from one village to another could be questioned, and the chapatis themselves could be examined or tasted. In contrast, the bush telegraph and indigenous telepathy, while being pegged to more specific propositional content, offered no such material trace. There was no visible channel of communication to control. Both systems were able, in their different ways, to cultivate paranoid reflections on colonial circulation through the unanswered questions of either content or medium.

The formula for the interethnic telepathy tale was so well established that a parodic inversion of its form even made the papers. According to the July 1947 issue of the *Pacific Islands Monthly*, a young man in Mangaia (the Cook Islands again) got drunk and broke into the colonial administration’s radio room and started sending messages in Morse code asking when the next ship might be

coming. Someone at the Rarotonga station actually replied to his poorly tapped-out message, but the young man couldn't understand the Morse code answer that was sent too quickly for him to parse. Meanwhile, a colonial administrator had a telepathic sense to go check on the radio room, found the young man, and took him into government custody for trespassing.<sup>15</sup>

Here the roles are reversed, with a "native" operating the wireless and the inquisitive administrator having a telepathic sense that some trouble was afoot. Getting his hands on a telecommunication technology that was usually kept away from him, under lock and key, the intoxicated Pacific Islander bungles the message. Even when he has the proper technology in his hands, the article suggests, he is unable to take advantage of its ability to quickly send and receive detailed albeit mundane information about transportation. Instead of ending with the forensic certification of "native" telepathy (as when the narrator and captain compare notes to ascertain that the lamp-glass shattered at the exact time of Mina's father's death), the story ends with the Pacific Islander in jail awaiting trial.

In contrast to the stories of instantaneous family death notifications or the non-supernatural reports of gossip on the coconut radio or bush telegraph, interethnic telepathy tales that might incite chaos or violence were rarer. Yet they were established enough to be useful as a model for colonial concerns about uncontrollable communications among Pacific Islanders. Clearly, colonial actors were concerned that these "non-moderns" might take up radio, telegraphy, or telephony in unknowable or untrackable ways (although the story of the drunken attempt at communicating on the radio in Mangaia was perhaps useful in allaying fears that any attempts like that would work).

Any form of communication outside of colonial control became a version of a telepathy tale, a story of a non-modern subject too easily influenced from outside and susceptible to external messages. As I discuss in the next section, echoes of these concerns appear in the ways that administrators and other colonial actors worried over communist communications and Tok Pisin-based interactions. Concerns over communists and Tok Pisin speakers were versions of telepathy tales told somewhat differently.

"THIS PROGRAM COMES TO YOU  
FROM RADIO MOSCOW"

Telepathy tales did not just happen in the context of colonial "great divide" narratives attempting to separate the world into circulatory moderns and primitives. Messages coming unbidden into one's mind without obvious ways of turning them off or managing them are, in fact, a consistent feature of communication-based technophobias. Contemporary concerns are focused on social media saturation, yet each new medium has produced its own version of the fear that humans may be too porous, too open to messages from the outside (Peters 1999). If there are

telepathy-as-telegraphy tales that emphasize primitivist access to distant kin and emotionally resonant truths, or ones that emphasize female-based spiritual connection to the dead (Tomlinson 2019, Manning 2021), there are also telegraphy-as-telepathy tales that point to an ongoing fear that modernist communications make their users too susceptible to outside influence (for a discussion of the ways that young women were considered too susceptible to the dangerous influences of others through unregulated telegraphic communications, see Standage 1998). In other words, there is a constant fear that modernist communication systems turn moderns into “primitives” by making them subservient to the minds of others, incapable of using their autonomous rational, critical faculties. Tales of radio-as-telepathy or social-media-as-telepathy are stories of propagandistic or mesmeric claims on other minds.

A wide range of fictional stories in English have delighted in playing up these connections, with some entries celebrating telegraphy and other modern communication technologies as the salvation from primitive modes of control-at-a-distance, and others seeing telepathy as the way to free one from the domination of social control. The novel *Dracula* by Bram Stoker (2018 [1897]) is a story of a primitive non-modern who takes mesmeric control over women in the heart of the British Empire. When Count Dracula travels to London to prey on and then telepathically command its citizens, a strange quintet consisting of a doctor, a scientist, a lawyer, an aristocrat, and a cowboy from the United States band together through their copious use of telegrams, letters, and journals to defeat the monster (Richards 1993). Scientific telegraphy defeats primitive telepathy, but just barely. In a reversal of values, the science fiction classic *The Chrysalids* by John Wyndham (2020 [1955]) tells the story of a postapocalyptic and highly repressive frontier society whose purist dogma is transmitted by the relatively old media of scripture and signage. Freedom is available only for a small band of young children who are able to communicate telepathically. At the end of the book, when they are about to be captured and killed by their own kin, the children are rescued by members of a highly evolved society living in New Zealand (so remote as to have largely avoided the apocalypse that destroyed North America) in which neo-primitivist Rousseauian characteristics of telepathy, freedom, cooperation, and peace are shared among all. As Peters (1999), Taylor (2007), and others have noted, the boundaries of the mind seem only to get more fragile as modernist concepts of autonomous self-mastery get stronger and more important.

The expat colonials of the mid-twentieth-century Pacific brought a well-established archive of telepathy tales with them, then, whether they were stories that celebrated the immediacy of connection that “natives” unalienated from nature enjoyed or stories that feared the control-at-a-distance that an emotionally resonant (but possibly untrue) rumor could evince. Within this context, the Cold War’s dualistic structure of competing “worldviews” that could infect one side from the other was tailor-made for telepathy tales that would stoke fears of

new media. Indeed, the main players in the Cold War both tried to use telepathy in their global conflicts. Soviet researchers attempted to harness telepathy to help create the New Soviet Man (Velminski 2017), even as the CIA attempted to weaponize telepathy for defense purposes (see Lemon 2013, 2018: 104–5).<sup>16</sup> The apparent “brainwashing” of captured American GIs during the Korean War typified fears that communist influence could be anywhere, as the 1962 movie *The Manchurian Candidate* dramatically showed (Selisker 2016). Less mystically, both sides engaged in extended propaganda wars through the medium of radio (Nelson 1997). Radio waves were the more mundane version of telepathic influence at a distance (on radio as a prosthetic extension able to touch listeners, compare Blanton 2012).

In Papua New Guinea, broadcast radio was strictly a state project, run by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). According to a government report on mass communications, the administration considered radio the most successful medium for connecting with local people.<sup>17</sup> Early broadcasts during the war were celebrated for their ability to explain the basic outlines of the conflict and encourage Papuans to aid allied soldiers (Baskett 1991: 92–96). In the postwar years, radio remained in ABC hands, although non-state groups—missionaries in particular—were invited to produce short programs. The Christian Radio Missionary Fellowship (CRMF), whose two-way radio network I discussed in chapter 1, tried unsuccessfully for over a decade to get a license for its own broadcast network. We can look at the CRMF’s negotiations with the administration to get a sense of how the latter thought about the threat of unregulated media, and how the specter of the telepathy tale was never far from its considerations. While the administration felt that radio connection among colonizers who worried over remoteness and isolation was a legitimate issue, the concern with broadcast radio was that the boundaries of the colony and of the minds of its inhabitants would become too porous.

The CRMF originally applied for a missionary radio broadcast franchise at the time of its 1954 application for the private radio network. The application for the broadcast franchise was denied, as it was in 1959, 1963, and 1965. Across all that time, the geographic and social space described in the broadcast license application was fundamentally opposed to that described in the two-way-radio network license applications. The CRMF applied for the private network to overcome missionary isolation in a far-flung, mountainous terrain, yet the simultaneous plan to create a broadcast radio system was based on the claim that the broadcast system would be able to “deter the natives from congregating around missions and government posts with the attendant danger of the breaking down of tribal law and authority.”<sup>18</sup> Suddenly we have moved from an opaque and difficult-to-navigate Papua New Guinean terrain to one in which there is already far too much movement of colonial subjects. Instead of solving a problem of isolation, the broadcast system would solve a problem of social porousness, organizing and regimenting these “native” subjects so that they would remain evenly spread across the territory as a whole.

In both missionary and administration writing about broadcast radio for Papua New Guinea, the problem to be solved is consistently the problem of making Papua New Guinean listeners less accessible to outside influences. In the 1950s–60s Cold War context, there was a growing concern that Papua New Guineans, especially rural men who were employed temporarily as urban laborers, would be influenced by communism. Australian fears about communist influence in the Pacific need to be understood in terms of Australia's own colonial ambitions for the region, which in the years leading up to 1960 involved plans for Australian control over Melanesia as a whole.<sup>19</sup>

The fact that the Communist Party in neighboring Indonesia was gaining strength in the late 1950s and early 1960s added to Australia's concerns about Papua New Guinea's potential to go red. In pressing the case for the missionary broadcast radio system, one missionary argued that "the people in the Rabaul area were being adversely affected by the lying Communist propaganda from Peking Radio, and . . . there was an urgent need for the Missions to have radio facilities to tell the people the truth and guide them through the troubled waters that inevitably lie ahead as they are given more and more independence."<sup>20</sup>

While there are many instances of people discussing Radio Peking or Radio Moscow, few examples of broadcasts on these stations are available now. One of the few I have seen is from 1952, when an administration officer reported hearing English-language broadcasts from both Radio Peking and Radio Moscow that were jamming the shortwave signal that Radio Australia beamed into Papua New Guinea. In other words, Radio Peking and Radio Moscow were broadcasting on frequencies adjacent to those used by Radio Australia's 9PA channel. Because they were broadcasting from different countries, there was little that could be done about the long-distance transmission of shortwave programming into the territory. An extremely alarmed colonial officer stationed in Rabaul took quick notes on a broadcast he heard in 1952 that denounced US aggression on the Korean Peninsula, denounced the UN as a stooge organization legitimizing Western colonialism, and hoped for Stalin's long life and health (a hope that would be dashed the following year). The program ended with a sign-off that ensured that listeners knew the origin of the message: "This program comes to you from Radio Moscow." The only suggestion that the Australian officer could give to counter the broadcasts was that ABC needed to both switch the frequency for the 9PA broadcasts it was sending to Papua New Guinea and do some of its own work of jamming the communist radio broadcasts to try to close up the borders of the territorial space once again.<sup>21</sup>

In meetings between missionaries and administrators that took place biannually in the postwar years, communist radio influence was a recurring topic of conversation. Missions and administration were jointly convinced of the damage communist radio was doing, and convinced that at least some in Papua New Guinea were being moved by these broadcasts to have communist sympathies. John Kuder, head of the Lutheran Mission in the postwar years, mentions briefly

in a 1961 report how close Radio Peking's broadcast frequency was to Radio Australia's Port Moresby signal and how easy it was to hear "what kind of fare our New Guineans are lapping up."<sup>22</sup> Rev. Wesley Lutton of the Methodist mission was likewise concerned that communist radio was not just available for local people to listen to but was proving to be extremely popular as well. According to the official record of the 1961 Mission-Administration conference, Rev. Lutton

was, he said, quite sure that the communistic world had its aim directed at Papua and New Guinea because they probably thought the people were ripe for Communism. Everyone was familiar with the tendency in this country to look for something for nothing and consequently there were cargo cults, and Rev. Lutton believed that the Christian leaders in this Territory should try to counteract that tendency. Radio Peking was very much on the air and so was Radio Moscow and many people in the Territory listened to them.<sup>23</sup>

Beyond just a radio presence, the colonial Legislative Council of Papua New Guinea discussed their worries that "our friends in Moscow" could just enter the colony at any time.<sup>24</sup> And in fact the Australian security service, ASIO, kept tabs on the few people in Papua New Guinea who were actually suspected of being communists. In 1961, one young man, who was in Papua New Guinea as an agricultural cooperatives officer, was arrested and expelled for seeming to promote the idea that Papua New Guineans should stop laboring, rise up, and overthrow their colonial masters.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, the anthropologists Peter Worsley and Max Gluckman were denied entry to Papua New Guinea because of their links to the Communist Party (in 1952 and 1960, respectively). Both cases were discussed in the Australian Parliament and were the subject of sustained media attention across Australia.

Communists seemed then to be everywhere, making themselves accessible to Papua New Guineans at every turn. Even worse from the administration and missionary perspective, they were doing so in ways that seemed to possibly be entertaining the Papua New Guinean population. Thus, Radio Peking had to be jammed, new radio stations put up, communist agitators expelled, and communist organizations disbanded.

In what ways would the communist message be attractive to Papua New Guineans? There were two explanations that kept reappearing. The first was that communism spread because of resentment. In discussions about communism at the Missions-Administration conferences, the primary question was how to improve what was referred to as "race relations" so that resentment and bitterness, and eventually communism, was not cultivated (note that there was not a sense that resentment and bitterness was a current concern).<sup>26</sup> A few missionaries, Geoffrey Baskett most vociferously, used this threat of communist takeover to push the administration to abolish at least some of the segregationist laws in towns.

The colonizers' other explanation for why Papua New Guineans would turn to communism was their purported naiveté and gullibility: these listeners were



not autonomous enough to know how to critically encounter the radio messages. Colonial administrators worried that the Papua New Guineans might believe anything they heard. This attitude lasted well into the 1970s (and continues today in terms of how people discuss Papua New Guinean uptake of viral social media content). For example, in Edmund Carpenter's (1972) remarkable monograph on radio in Papua New Guinea, he suggested both that New Guineans took radio extremely seriously (p. 1) and that they understood almost nothing, particularly if the broadcasts were the English-language programs from Voice of America or Radio Peking (177; see also 170–71, 173).

Here the problem was not managing the impermeability of Papua New Guinea and the consequent isolation of colonial zones of whiteness through a point-to-point network (as was the case with the CRMF radio system, as discussed in chapter 1), but creating a bounded territory that could deflect a spreading Red Menace that was creeping into the as-yet-innocent minds of Papua New Guineans. Reports of communist radio transmissions jamming official state-sanctioned broadcasts appeared with the sort of regularity that was true of telepathy tales earlier. These reports and rumors updated the telepathy tales for Papua New Guinea's radio age. Ungovernable communications beyond the level of individual family members were dangerous threats to colonial order. Even if there was no scientific mystery about how the communist radio made its way into the territory, as was the case with the original telepathy tales, there was still a sense of subterfuge and porousness: other people were able to focus the minds of Papua New Guinean subjects in ways that administrators, missionaries, and other colonial actors found almost impossible.

#### TOK PISIN, LABOR, AND COMMUNICATIVE SECRECY

One of the contexts that helped encourage the circulation of telepathy tales was the colonial concern about the apparent difference in circulatory capacities of the colonizers and the colonized. Whereas colonizers experienced loneliness, remoteness, rough patrols through difficult territory, and confusion in the face of a dizzying array of languages, colonized Papua New Guinean subjects seemed to the colonizers to be able to communicate with mysterious ease. The new media and communication technologies might help a little, although they could not crack the nut of linguistic hyperdiversity. But that only underscored the impression that local people had access to some other hidden, supernatural capacity for communication that worked in ways that were beyond regulation and monitoring—even if the answer, in at least some cases, was just Papua New Guineans' tendency to be multilingual (Sankoff 1977). And even the new media that might aid in the colonial project seemed susceptible to subversion: communist radios jamming Australian state broadcasts offered a less mysterious but, for paranoid colonizers, no less effective version of an interethnic (indeed, international) telepathy tale.



Tok Pisin always seemed to hold out the hope of solving at least one of the communicative issues in the Territory of New Guinea by providing a common language for a wide and, during the postwar years, rapidly growing range of people. Yet the stories of Tok Pisin's growth in the postwar years recapitulated this basic circulatory story of colonizer difficulties paired against the surreptitious ease of communications among the colonized: Tok Pisin was seen as an impoverished means for basic communication from the colonizer to the colonized and yet at times as a medium of mysterious and sophisticated interethnic circulation.

Tok Pisin was, in the eyes of many colonizers, a brute-force solution to the problem of linguistic hyperdiversity, in the sense that for them it was less a language than a supplementary set of verbal cues that aided in physically moving laborers around (see chapter 2). As a government anthropologist, F. E. Williams, put it in 1936 regarding interactions between colonizers and local people in Papua, "at present the means of communication are pidgin Motu, pidgin English, telepathy, and swearing" (Williams 1936). But the supposed simplicity of the language was a feature, not a bug: colonizers thought that as long as Tok Pisin was nothing but a simple language, it did not have the grammatical or representational capacity to be used to foment trouble. For example, in Rabaul, colonizers were astounded to wake up one morning in 1929 to a general strike among laborers, since they believed that the linguistic and cultural differences among the laborers and the simplicity of Tok Pisin made such organization impossible (Gamage 1975). Part of the problem was that few colonizers bothered to learn Tok Pisin (see Wedgwood 1953: 107), and instead only spoke English with some Tok Pisin terms (*long*, *bilong*, *-im*) thrown in, what actual Tok Pisin speakers used to call "Tok Masta" (from Eng. *talk master*), the boss's language. In a 1956 "Territories Talk-Talk" gossip column in *Pacific Islands Monthly*, the pseudonymous author "Tolala" noted that the linguist Robert A. Hall Jr.'s work to standardize Tok Pisin's spelling and change its name to "Neo-Melanesian" was an attempt to remove the "master-slave" taint of the language. In a parenthetical comment that points to how happy at least some expat residents of Papua New Guinea were with the status quo, Tolala writes, "Why all this shuddering about 'master-slave' business where Tok Pisin is concerned, I cannot understand."<sup>27</sup> That is, Tok Pisin was fine as it was, in all its orthographic and linguistic messiness, since it was only needed for relatively basic speech acts of ordering workers around.

Given the extremely low expectations that many had for Tok Pisin, then, the discovery that it might be capable of something more than just communicating basic commands was both a disturbing surprise and a fact with potentially supernatural valances. In part *because* planters thought that it was just a bastardized form of English without the capacity for complex communication, Tok Pisin speakers on plantations were able to invent forms of disguised talk that allowed them to discuss, for example, the plantation owner or manager without being

detected. This eventually came to be a distinct register, called *tok bokis* (from Eng. *boxed talk*) or *tok hait* (from Eng. *hidden talk*), used both to keep European colonizers out of the communicative loop and to talk with other Papua New Guineans about taboo matters. Below is one example of the sort of hidden talk that was used in mid-twentieth-century Tok Pisin on plantations in which the boss was referred to as “ABC radio” (Brash 1971: 17):

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| A: Yu harim ABC nius long morning?  | Did you hear the ABC news this morning?   |
| B: Nogat, em i tok wanem?   | No, what did it say?  |
| A: I nogat gutpela tok—tok win bilong kranki man tasol.                                 | Nothing important—a load of rubbish.  |
| B: Tru ah, atink yumi no ken harim tok long dispela nius—yumi inap sekim tok bilong en. | Is that so? Well I don’t think we have to worry too much about what it says—we can ignore it. |

The possibility that colonial laborers could be concealing something from their overseers by using Tok Pisin was first raised in a set of 1949 articles by a Catholic missionary/school teacher/plantation manager, Albert Aufinger, who begins his article by asking, “Do secret languages exist in New Guinea? This is usually denied, even by Europeans who have spent considerable time in the country” (Aufinger 1949: 90). The tone of this two-part article is one of shocked surprise. He discusses the secret Tok Pisin register that uses regular words to refer to hidden meanings, as with the “ABC radio” example, as well as a form of “backwards” Tok Pisin used in both oral and written forms that reversed the order of the phonemes of a word. He suggests that this kind of language game was a postcontact invention as local people took up literacy practices. One example of this phenomenon that he provides is “Alapui kow, atsam i mak!,” which is the backwards version of the phrase “Iupala wok, masta i kam!” (“You all [get to] work, the boss is coming”). Aufinger concludes (114): “After what I have said, one will hardly go wrong in assuming, whenever one suddenly surprises a group of natives and they go on talking about apparently inconsequential and trivial matters, that they are unobtrusively continuing in secret language the same discussion which, until the white man came on the scene, they had been conducting in straight language.”

Aufinger was just starting to recognize that many communities in Papua New Guinea have well-established speech registers that use different forms of lexical substitution and metaphor for talking to spirits, for talking about taboo topics and people, or for talking about politically fraught issues. What linguists call avoidance registers (see Fleming 2015), these are known by different names across the country: “veiled speech” in Melpa (Strathern 1975), “turned over speech” in Kaluli (Feld 1982), “pandanus language” in Kewa (Franklin 1972), “mountain language”

in Awiakay (Hoenigman 2012), to name just a few. Schieffelin (2008) examines the relation between these avoidance speech registers and the development of Tok Pisin versions in Christian contexts. The plantation workers that Aufinger cited were using well-established communicative practices for indirection and avoidance, in this case using Tok Pisin to secretly discuss the colonial powers rather than using their indigenous language to obliquely discuss taboo topics.

A later and likely more influential piece than Aufinger's article was Peter Lawrence's book *Road Belong Cargo*, a widely read ethnography of the 1960s phenomenon of Yali's so-called "cargo cult," a new religious movement that was primarily conducted in a secret register of Tok Pisin (Lawrence 1964: 84, Brash 1971: 326). For both Aufinger and Lawrence, it was the capacity of Tok Pisin—as the language of school, administration, and plantation—to be used deceptively that was concerning or alarming. Even when treated in a more lighthearted way, as in Bob Browne's "Grass Roots" comics that appeared in the English-language *Post Courier* newspaper (collected in Browne 2006), there was a sense that Papua New Guineans were using Tok Pisin in ways that were opaque to colonial actors, especially those who really only knew Tok Masta.

From the later 1940s through the 1960s—in these situations in which people coerced into labor regimes had invented and spoke a language the colonizers considered useful but insipid—there was a growing recognition that Tok Pisin might not be as simple as it seemed. Anti-administration feeling and anticolonial ideologies were setting in, it was feared, through a hidden form of communication in the very medium that the colonizers had long discounted as incapable of abstract or complex representation.

Like the interethnic telepathy tales or the communist radio broadcasts jamming Radio Australia, Tok Pisin's secret forms were a matter of colonial paranoia about speech that was uncontrollable. Propagandistic radio and interethnic telepathy were forms of communication that could come to Papua New Guineans whether the Australians or even the Papua New Guineans themselves wanted it. In Peters's (1999) terms, they were forms of communication that emphasized the ways in which people were too porous, too open to the influence and even remote command of others. Tok Pisin offered a slightly different take on these communicative fears. As the language of labor—the language of, as the "Territories Talk-Talk" column had it, master-slave dynamics—the paranoid concern here was that the act of colonial rule was in fact spreading the capacity for anticolonial communications. The strange fear about Tok Pisin was that when colonizers used it and imagined themselves to be spreading it, they were in fact only enhancing the ability of laborers to upend the colonial order. If the paradigmatic case of propaganda saturation is a radio that cannot be turned off constantly broadcasting state news, Tok Pisin became a secretive subversion of this problem: a language of labor whose anticolonial capacities could not be turned off. Tok Pisin's trick, in Aufinger's telling, was that this language of labor was also acting like both the

communist radio and a telepathic message on the bush telegraph: sending signals that colonizers could in this case hear, but ones that they could never trust that they understood.<sup>28</sup>

In Aufinger's analysis, Tok Pisin goes from being a tool of colonial labor to becoming the communicative medium that threatens its future, all without the awareness of the plantation overseers. Necessarily a language of interethnic communication, Tok Pisin's version of the telepathy tale comes from its mysterious ability to communicate secrets out in the open. If the original telepathy tales offer mysterious media of unstoppable communication, and if communist radio jamming offers technologically knowable but still unstoppable communication, Tok Pisin manages both tricks at once: it is a secret and a "straight" version of a language unstoppably spreading throughout the territory.

The link between Tok Pisin and communism was most explicitly and publicly made in 1955, when the American linguist Robert A. Hall Jr. published a short book called *Hands Off Pidgin English!* It was written for the Australian public in response to a 1953 UN demand that Tok Pisin be "eradicated" from the Territory of New Guinea as quickly as possible (I discuss this in detail in chapter 5). In defending Tok Pisin, Hall for the most part used a line of argument about the adequacy of the language that linguists would repeat throughout the second half of the twentieth century: Tok Pisin was a stable, growing language with rules of its own separate from those of standard English; it was meeting the communicative needs of local people; and it should be encouraged in this growth in order to rapidly expand education to as many Papua New Guineans as possible.

Hall was a strange ambassador for Tok Pisin. A professor of Italian at Cornell University, he had a long-standing side interest in pidgins and creoles.<sup>29</sup> He had also worked in the US Army Language Training Institute during World War II, developing materials to rapidly teach GIs languages in combat areas, including Tok Pisin as well as Romance-language manuals (Moulton 1961). Perhaps stemming from his time with the army, Hall was a rabid cold warrior of the sort that flourished in the United States and Australia in the 1950s, and his defense of Tok Pisin made this particularly clear. What were the stakes of "eradicating" Tok Pisin for Hall? Nothing short of the advancing domination of a Soviet empire. If Australia gave up on—indeed, tried to suppress—the language of "the people," then not only would Australia lose whatever goodwill existed between it and its colonial subjects, but the "Russians" would quickly move in to take Australia's place. Making comparisons to the 1940s civil war in Greece in which anticommunists self-defeatingly tried to eradicate the popular (demotic) register of the Greek language associated with communist forces, Hall was sure that any Australian attempt to eradicate Tok Pisin would be the first step on the path to Papua New Guinea's loss to Soviet aggression. In Hall's view, Tok Pisin would be an excellent medium for Soviets to surreptitiously spread communist propaganda if Australia tried to get rid of it. A report to the government in response to the UN's recommendation to

eradicate Tok Pisin that was clearly influenced by Hall's main points also comments on the idea that if Papua New Guineans were forced to use English, they would start to feel inferior and this would "leav[e] the way open for subversive groups—influenced by those who, for their own purposes, loudly profess to treat the natives as equals."<sup>30</sup>

In that sense, Tok Pisin was always threatening to become an uncontrollable means of communication. Australia needed to nurture and guide it, rather than shun or eradicate it. Hall seemed to suggest that the Soviet antipathy to Tok Pisin that was expressed in the Trusteeship Council debate was nothing more than a ruse—an attempt to trick Australians into giving up on their best means of real communication with their subjects. Even as he promoted Tok Pisin as a language in its own right, he tied it to the problem of communist propaganda, suggesting that Australia had best be the one to use it, or else others would do so in their place. Hall's advocate in the Department of Education, W. C. Groves, likewise argued that the use of Tok Pisin could keep the kind of resentment and bitterness that bred communist sympathies at bay, because Papua New Guineans using Tok Pisin would not be embarrassed by their lack of knowledge of English.

Rumors of communist radio and secret Tok Pisin languages came together in the September 1953 issue of *Pacific Islands Monthly*. A brief item reported that neighboring Indonesia was now broadcasting in Tok Pisin and Motu on Radio Australia frequencies. Even worse, the radio receivers recently distributed to Papua New Guineans in rural villages had an unadjustable, fixed frequency, so it was impossible to tune to a different station if Radio Indonesia cut in. What was supposed to be a medium of Australian propaganda became instead a medium of Asian communism. The reporter writes:

I was informed in Moresby that, to assist in the work of establishing a common language—the Territories' biggest single problem—the Education Department has distributed no less than 5,000 Sparrow receiving sets (supplied by the Crammond firm in Brisbane) to native villages. They are on a fixed wave-length, and the plan is that from 4.30 to 6p.m. each day the villagers can listen to a half-hour of Pidgin, and an hour of Motuan, or any other selected language, broadcast from the Moresby station.

Some people are wondering if it is more than coincidence that a powerful Indonesian station should be broadcasting regularly on what is approximately the Sparrows' fixed wave-length, *and in Pidgin*. So far, the monitors have heard no recognizable Red propaganda—only apparently harmless social stuff.

Port Moresby officialdom is aware of the danger. Indonesia is drifting steadily under Communist influence.<sup>31</sup>

The fixed-frequency Sparrow sets were distributed in order to help solve "the Territories' biggest single problem" of a common language, yet this immediately became co-opted into a telepathy tale of its own, in which potentially communist propaganda would be impossible for local people to avoid if they used the

very radios that the administration had provided for them and asked them to listen to. Regardless of whether Australia made Tok Pisin its primary language of instruction, the threat of uncontrollable communications remained as the inverse paranoia of a colonial world focused on the mountains and languages hindering its own circulatory projects.

## CONCLUSION

Telepathy tales shift from curiosities to threats when they move away from just stories about communication among close kin. When the servant girl Mina realizes that her father has died, the colonial conversation about it can focus on the contrast between modernity and tradition, between technological media of communication and telepathic ones. But when people in one village alert those in another to some issue of concern, maybe some news about the colonial government itself, telepathy tales instead lead to questions of colonial opacity, of whether colonizers will quite figure out or have access to colonized peoples.

Stories of supernatural or secretive influence and communication extend beyond the colonization of the Pacific. Count Dracula is a figure from the mysterious East who stands in contrast to British colonial order and science. His supernatural control-at-a-distance over others is contrasted with the expository telegrams, letters, notes, written journals, and phonograph journals that make up the content of *Dracula*'s epistolary format. In the Pacific, the primary telepathy tales were told as straight journalism or with more literary flair, but they were always told in the plural: every story hinted at hundreds more just like them. The stories constituted a robust genre of colonial imagination, one that easily could be extended into further thinking about uncontrollable communications that had the potential to disrupt colonial labor by making connections to the too-porous minds of Papua New Guineans.

The overall conceptualization of colonial Papua New Guinea as a space of circulatory primitivity, in which colonizers could not seem to move people, goods, or information with any ease, also produced an interest in its opposite—"native" telepathy that was able to circulate information in mysterious, supernatural ways that were not open to the colonial moderns. One version of the modernist imaginary of circulation says that more circulation is better. But these tales show that there was always a countervailing claim that circulation had to be managed and curtailed, qualitatively channeled in ways that could produce the right kind of remoteness or the right kind of subject.

The robustness of the genre of telepathy tales—and of the opposition of telepathy tales to circulatory primitivity more broadly—affected the way that other new modes of communication also came to be part of colonial Australia's work in Papua New Guinea. Communist radio and Tok Pisin, not normally two things

that would seem to be closely connected, become species of the same paranoia about the capacity for intervillage or even international communications outside of Australian control. A circulatory perspective gives us a way to conceptualize not only the colonization of Papua New Guinea but, as I show in the next chapters, its decolonization as well.