

Circa 1898: Overseas Empire and Transnational American Studies

HSUAN L. HSU

Although it dates back to the nation's "messy beginnings," US imperialism intensified around 1898, with the massacre at Wounded Knee (1890), the Spanish-American War of 1898, the annexation of Hawai'i (1898), the bloody US-Philippine War (1899-1902), the China Relief Expedition in which US troops participated in 1900-1901, diplomatic interventions that set the stage for the Panama Canal, and economic support for the tyrannical regime of Porfirio Díaz in Mexico. This special forum investigates the contested role of cultural productions during the emergence of US overseas imperialism in these years. Drawing on the growing scholarship on events surrounding the War of 1898 and the US-Philippine War, the articles included here provide both innovative perspectives on familiar figures (war correspondents, colonial photographers, T.S. Eliot) and analyses of underexamined archives such as newspapers published by military personnel, the writings of imperial administrators' wives, and US travelers' favorable accounts of Mexico during the Porfiriato.

For nearly a century, the inequitable and often violent legacies of these interventions have been largely forgotten. Dominant narratives legitimating military interventions in the name of "freedom" and of "benevolent assimilation" are evident in political cartoons, history textbooks, hundreds of public monuments, and the widespread production of a *lack of knowledge*² regarding US regimes and interventions in Panama, Cuba, Puerto Rico, American Samoa, Guam, Hawai'i, China, and the Philippines. Particularly disconcerting are the ways in which the War of 1898, the US-Philippine War, and the "Insular Cases" in which the Supreme Court established the exceptional status of newly acquired islands as "unincorporated territories" have resurfaced in twenty-first century deployments of exceptional force: for example, the US lease of Guantánamo Bay in perpetuity was guaranteed in the Cuban-American Treaty of 1903, and the US systematically deployed torture and attacks on civilians as counterinsurgency techniques in the war to suppress the Philippine resistance.³

Only in the last two decades have scholars made a concerted effort to study the histories and cultures of US imperialism not as historical footnotes but as constitutive moments in the US's consolidation of global military, economic, and cultural influence. For example, Amy Kaplan's *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* redresses historians' tendency to marginalize 1898 by situating the aggressive imperialism of the 1890s at the center of a century of US imperial culture stretching from the "manifest domesticity" of antebellum housekeeping manuals and the Mexican-US War (1846-1848) to the St. Louis race riot (1917) and *Citizen Kane* (1941).⁴ Alfred McCoy and Francisco Scarano's edited collection, *Colonial Crucible: Empire in the Making of the Modern American State*, documents how twentieth-century domestic institutions were forged in the crucible of empire by investigating how "innovations in discrete areas of American colonial governance . . . migrated homeward to influence U.S. state formation in the early decades of the twentieth century."⁵ Elaborating on case studies of topics such as policing, education, public health, law, and environmental governance, McCoy, Scarano, and Courtney Johnson write: "The transformative processes engendered by American colonial rule in the Caribbean and Pacific after 1898 gradually radiated far beyond these small islands at the edge of empire. Over time, these changes, articulated through a distinctive alliance of public and private sectors, percolated homeward through the invisible 'capillaries of empire,' ultimately shaping the metropolitan American state and its society in subtle yet profound ways."⁶ Other studies have investigated how US colonial rule and its aftermath have influenced specific groups' experiences of migration, citizenship, and racial and national identity.⁷

By designating island possessions as "unincorporated territories" whose residents are "foreign in a domestic sense," the Supreme Court indefinitely curtailed the Constitutional rights of US colonial subjects.⁸ This special forum begins with essays and poems that investigate written responses to power over "unincorporated" subjects and territories. Nirmal Trivedi provides a nuanced description of the "imperial news apparatus" developed by figures such as William Randolph Hearst and James Creelman, which used spectacular language to fuel readers' desires for imperial interventions. Trivedi shows how the war correspondent and fiction writer Richard Harding Davis—commonly viewed as a pro-imperialist author—satirized this news machinery and the extraterritorial power for which it served as a support, in stories and sketches ranging from "The Reporter Who Made Himself King" (1891) to *Notes of a War Correspondent* (1912). Paul Lai's essay focuses on the history and poetry of Guam, an island that has played a pivotal role in the US's development and securitization of economic and military networks throughout the Pacific region. Lai considers how the Chamorro poet Craig Santos Perez's nomadic, oceanic poetics deploys typography, fragmentation, maps, and environmental history to "re-territorialize" Guam's Chamorro language and culture in the wake of centuries of colonial belittlement. Lai's article is followed by excerpts from Craig Santos Perez's *from unincorporated territory [hacha]* and a new poem, "The

Micronesian Kingfishers,” which critically reworks Charles Olson’s 1949 projective verse meditation on ancient Mayan civilization, “The Kingfishers.” Writing from California about how his native landscape has been decimated by US naval rule, “miseducation,”⁹ economic influence, and militarization, Perez takes on the problem of speaking from an “unincorporated” subject position. His poems attempt to repair and reimagine Chamorro language and culture, seeking “an arrangement ‘of opening/language/among common’ debris.”¹⁰

Colonial and neocolonial regimes abroad were legitimated by visual culture, including the international expositions, imperialist cartoons, and “faked” cinematic newsreels that were at the forefront of popular spectacle during this period.¹¹ Assembling a rich archive of narrative and visual depictions of Mexican president Porfirio Díaz across a range of popular media, Jason Ruiz extends the analysis of imperialism to US economic and cultural interventions in Mexico facilitated by Díaz’s conservative, dictatorial regime. Ruiz shows how popular texts and iconography aligned the Mexican president with the project of US “economic conquest” even as Díaz and other Mexican elites were subordinating Mexican citizens to the demands of US capital. Juxtaposing T.S. Eliot’s Modernist poetics with the widely attended Philippines Exhibit at the 1904 St. Louis Exhibition (which Eliot visited), Paul Stasi argues that Eliot’s concept of tradition works against ethnographic representations of indigenous populations as anachronistic and ahistorical. Stasi shows how Eliot’s transnational and dialectical concept of tradition “recuperates the kinds of cultural continuities imperialism tends to erase,” as well as how Eliot’s aesthetic practices have been appropriated from different colonial and post-colonial locations by Derek Walcott and Craig Santos Perez. In a comparative study encompassing three groups of colonial photographs (Spanish photographs in the Philippines and US photographs in the Philippines and Puerto Rico), Mark Rice shows how photographic representation performed different functions in disparate colonial contexts. Analyzing photographs collected in illustrated books, *National Geographic*, a set of stereographic views published by Underwood and Underwood, and the Helen Hamilton Gardener Photographic Collection, Rice shows how photographs of newly acquired US territories conveyed a sense of “inherent difference and cultural bifurcation,” as well as how representations of Puerto Rico (unlike more primitivist photographs of the Philippines) tended to depict the colony as “a calm, welcoming environment for Americans.” Cynthia Tolentino draws on US and Puerto Rican films from the 1950s to consider how Puerto Rico’s new commonwealth status was conceptualized in the sphere of popular culture. Tolentino contends that the visions of sentimental, translocal, and agricultural restructuring presented by *Sabrina* (1954), *El Otro Camino* (1955), and *Maruja* (1958) respond differently to Puerto Rican migration to the US, “defining it as a process of global significance that involves a reorganization of island resources and production towards Puerto Rico’s incorporation into an emerging postwar global economy.”

The next three essays turn from the spectacular to the quotidian, examining

aspects of everyday life among the agents and subjects of colonialism. James Berkey examines an archive of forgotten newspapers and periodicals written by and for US soldiers in Cuba and the Philippines. In contrast with romantic, sensationalistic and “yellow press” treatments of the Spanish-American War, Berkey argues, these soldier-newspapers helped normalize empire by rendering imperial experiences into the terms and temporality of everyday life. Bonnie Lucero draws on the extensive notarial records documenting interracial property transactions in Cienfuegos, Cuba, during the politically turbulent transition from Spanish to US rule in 1894-1899. Her archival research indicates that the US regime in Cuba marginalized men and women of color from desirable urban areas as the racial geography of Cienfuegos shifted under the influence of Jim Crow. Cecilia Samonte considers the role of sentimental relations and domestic life in the Second Philippine Commission by analyzing writings authored by the wives of US administrators. Particularly after Roosevelt declared an end to the Philippine-US War in 1902, women such as Helen Taft, Edith Moses, and Nanon Fay Worcester organized and attended social events where they forged affective connections with Philippine elites, gathered information, and helped “pacify” anti-US sentiments. Elaborating on the work of historians such as Kristin Hoganson and Alison Sneider, Samonte shows how the sympathies and political agency of these officials’ wives were underwritten by the programs of “pacification” and “benevolent assimilation.”

More than a century after the US wars, occupations, and annexations that clustered around 1898, these events continue to inform both public spectacles and the contours of everyday life. Collective memory and selective forgetting of these events continue to shape national identity, imperial ideology, and forms of counter-discourse ranging from the historically inaccurate memorials to the “Spanish American War”¹² that riddle public spaces throughout the US to the mournful anticolonial lyrics of Hawaiian pop singer Bruddah Iz. Bruce Harvey’s essay examines the role of mourning in responses to Hawai’i’s historical injustices. In a sweeping analysis that spans the incursions of early nineteenth-century missionaries, Queen Lili’uokalani’s forced abdication of sovereignty, contemporary Hawaiian nationalist statements, and President Obama’s invocation of “Aloha spirit,” Harvey shows how mourning has both informed and circumscribed Hawaiian pro-sovereignty discourses. Focusing on Sonia Sotomayor’s Supreme Court confirmation hearings and the public discourse surrounding them, Frances Negrón-Muntaner offers a bracing analysis of the erasures and compromises attendant upon Sotomayor’s “incorporation” as an exemplary Latina subject. The public debates surrounding Sotomayor’s confirmation hearings demonstrate how metanarratives of immigrant uplift and the “American Dream” obscure the specificities of “Nuyorican” migration—a migration not of foreigners but of unincorporated US subjects conditioned by the social and economic legacies of 1898 and Operation Bootstrap.

Even as they recuperate largely forgotten histories of US imperialism and colonial experience, the essays collected here raise questions about the ways in

which the events clustered around 1898 are remembered and historicized. How do US investments in Porfirian Mexico, the sentimental perspectives of colonial administrators' wives, and the coerced seizure of Hawai'i expand our historical understanding of the scope of US overseas empire? How does the pivotal role of Guam as a Pacific base that served as a staging ground during the Korean and Vietnam Wars contribute to our understanding of the legacies of 1898? To what extent does a critical focus on 1898 and "transnational American Studies" obscure the role of nationalist anti-colonial movements that had significantly undermined Spanish rule long before the US opportunistically declared war on Spain? The diversity of methods, geographies, and historical contexts explored in this special forum reflects the disparate but interrelated effects of US interventions overseas. In addition to enhancing our understanding of diverse cultural and historical offshoots of the events surrounding 1898, these essays indicate the importance of developing comparative methods of analysis that would cut across multiple sites of colonialism and resistance without re-centering the US.

Notes

Thanks to Yanoula Athanassakis and the *JTAS* editorial board for guiding this project through the editorial process and to Kristian Jensen for assistance with proofreading this Special Forum.

¹ See Malini Johar Schueller and Edward Watts, eds., *Messy Beginnings: Postcoloniality and Early American Studies* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003).

² See Robert Proctor and Londa Schiebinger, eds., *Agnotology; The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008).

³ Amy Kaplan, "Where is Guantanamo?" *American Quarterly* 57, no. 3 (2005): 831–58; Paul Kramer, "The Water Cure: Debating Torture and Counterinsurgency—a Century Ago," *The New Yorker*, February 25, 2008, http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2008/02/25/080225fa_fact_kramer.

⁴ Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

⁵ Alfred McCoy, Francisco Scarano, and Courtney Johnson, "On the Tropic of Cancer; Transitions and Transformations in the U.S. Imperial State," in *Colonial Crucible: Empire in the Making of the Modern American State* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009), 3. See also the special issue of *Radical History Review* titled "Islands in History: Perspectives on U.S. Imperialism and the Legacies of 1898" (vol. 73 [1999], edited by Pennee Bender and Yvonne Lasalle); the special section of *Social Text* titled "Forget '98" (vol. 17, no. 2 [1999]: 99–160, edited by Licia Fiol-Matta); and José David Saldívar,

“Looking Awry and 1898: Roosevelt, Montejo, Paredes, and Mariscal,” *American Literary History* 12, no. 3 (2000): 386–406.

⁶ McCoy, Scarano, and Johnson, “On the Tropic of Cancer,” 4.

⁷ See, for example, Vicente Rafael, *White Love and Other Events in Filipino History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); Angel Velasco Shaw and Luis Francia, eds., *Vestiges of War: The Philippine-American War and the Aftermath of an Imperial Dream, 1899–1999* (New York: NYU Press, 2002); Allan Punzalan Isaac, *American Tropics: Articulating Filipino America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Victor Bascara, *Model-Minority Imperialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Frances Negrón-Muntaner, *Boricua Pop: Puerto Ricans and the Latinization of American Culture* (New York: NYU Press, 2004); Louis A. Pérez, Jr., *The War of 1898: The United States and Cuba in History and Historiography* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Rob Wilson, *Reimagining the American Pacific: From South Pacific to Bamboo Ridge and Beyond* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).

⁸ Kaplan, *Anarchy of Empire*, 3.

⁹ See Renato Constantino, “The Miseducation of the Filipino,” in Shaw and Francia, *Vestiges of War*, 177–92.

¹⁰ Craig Santos Perez, “from tidelands,” in *from unincorporated territory* (Honolulu: Tinfish Press, 2008), 62.

¹¹ See Robert Rydell, *All the World’s a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876–1916* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); the assortment of imperialist and anti-imperial cartoons reproduced in Abe Ignacio et al., eds., *The Forbidden Book: The Philippine-American War in Political Cartoons* (San Francisco: T’Boli Publishing, 2004); Laura Wexler, *Domestic Visions in an Age of US Imperialism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Kristen Whissel’s discussion of war actualities and battle reenactments in *Picturing American Modernity: Traffic, Technology, and the Silent Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 21–116; Nick Deocampo, “Imperialist Fictions: The Filipino in the Imperialist Imaginary,” in Shaw and Francia, *Vestiges of War*, 224–36; Bonnie Miller, *From Liberation to Conquest: The Visual and Popular Cultures of the Spanish-American War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, forthcoming).

¹² These memorials conflate the events and participants of the War of 1898 with those of the bloody US–Philippine War while simultaneously omitting any reference to the latter, as well as the agency of Cuban, Puerto Rican, Chamorro, and Philippine nationalists who had been resisting Spanish rule for decades prior to 1898. See James Loewen, *Lies Across America: What Our History Sites Get Wrong* (New York: New Press, 1999), 136–44; and R. D. K. Hernan, “Inscribing Empire: Guam and the War in the Pacific National Historical Park,” *Political Geography* 27, no. 6 (2008): 630–51.