

“On Imperialism, see. . .”: Ghosts of the Present in *Cultures of United States Imperialism*

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I begin with a quotation: “On imperialism, see Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease, *Cultures of United States Imperialism*.” This language represents a now familiar endnote found in literary criticism and American studies scholarship that references the emergence of academic interest in empire, borders, transnationalism, neocolonialism, and war. This or similar phrasing surfaces in an endnote in Siobhan Somerville’s *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* (2000) to cement the connections between white supremacy at home and US interventionism abroad (1, 199); in David Leverenz’s *Paternalism Incorporated: Fables of American Fatherhood, 1865–1940* (2004) to explain the sway of imperialist romance (11, 207); in Rodrigo Lazo’s *Writing to Cuba: Filibustering and Cuban Exiles in the United States* (2005) to describe “the relationship of culture to U.S. imperialism” (15, 199); and in Antoinette Burton’s introduction to *Gender, Sexuality, and Colonial Modernities* (1999) to identify “the cultures of American imperialism” (3, 14). This unscientific gathering of citations starts us on the path of discerning the legacy and impact of Kaplan and Pease’s intervention. How does Anglo-American professional culture engage the culture of US imperialism? What are the politics of citation, in particular, citations to an entire volume that collectively spans 26 separate essays and several hundred years of American cultural history? What are we remembering—and, of course, any question about remembering is also a provocation to think about forgetting—about literature and history when we reference *Cultures of United States Imperialism* (1993)?

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*Cultures of United States
Imperialism*, Amy Kaplan
and Donald E. Pease.
Duke University Press,
1993.

The answers to these questions, I will ultimately argue, are bound up with readings that treat Kaplan and Pease's project as a history of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that stops there, breaking off well before that past might be seen to continue into the present. Segmentation, not continuity, as Wai Chee Dimock observes in broad terms, has been the rule of literary history, and its specific effect upon Kaplan and Pease's intervention is to prevent their book from intervening beyond its own history.¹ It is not that *Cultures of United States Imperialism* does not go "back" far enough (Myra Jehlen's essay uses Columbus and Montaigne to chart the long *durée* of colonization), but rather that readings of this book do not go "forward" far enough. Clearly, crises discussed in a 1993 book will no longer be contemporary 15 years later in 2008. Nonetheless, the present is there as a shadow or ghost that appears in the uncanny ability of *Cultures of United States Imperialism* to speak to Iraq, Afghanistan, and New Orleans.

Clearly, crises discussed in a 1993 book will no longer be contemporary 15 years later[.] . . . Nonetheless, the present is there . . . in the uncanny ability of Cultures of United States Imperialism to speak to Iraq, Afghanistan, and New Orleans.

For now, though, it is enough to start by taking the appearance of the present in an "old" book as acknowledgment of the influence that *Cultures of United States Imperialism* has had on our field since its publication. This influence cannot be measured by the number of works that cite this book. Still, it is instructive to examine moments when Kaplan and Pease's effort breaks out of the secondary status of endnote to find discussion in the text proper, often as a general marker of a salutary turn in American studies to confront the imperialist past that had so long been sidelined as extraneous to prevailing patterns of national culture. In this respect, Malini Johar Schueller states that "the essays in *Cultures of United States Imperialism* attest to the growing acceptance of imperialism as an important ideology in the study of U.S. literature" (20), and Colleen Lye summarizes that "in recent years interest in the 'cultures of United States imperialism' has importantly directed our gaze to the military events involving the U.S. annexation and occupation of Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines" (18).² Although I will want to wonder whether citations to the entirety of *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, like the total gesture of "On imperialism, see Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease," constitutes critical engagement and not merely the use of endnote as incantation, for now it is safe to say that the amassing of references to this collection provides evidence of a paradigm shift to correct for the amnesia that effectively decouples imperialism and culture in the historical and literary registers of "America."

The success of this intervention can be measured in the progression from Schueller's reference to Kaplan and Pease in her 1998 *U.S. Orientalisms: Race, Nation, and Gender in Literature, 1790–1890* to Lye's 2005 reference in *America's Asia: Racial*

Form and American Literature, 1893–1945. Each mention of *Cultures of United States Imperialism* sounds the same, but visually on the page there is a difference: while Schueller italicizes the phrase, as is proper for book titles, Lye capitalizes neither “cultures” nor “imperialism,” and does not use italics, but instead puts the phrase in quotes. What comes across in this transit is a canny recognition that the size and scope of this collection encompass even more than its own massive effort. *Cultures of United States Imperialism* has become part of our professional culture, starting its slide into the academic idiom, perhaps as “orientalism” or “discipline and punish” have so fully moved from title to phrase. This slide begins with the list, a gesture that allows critics to quickly catalogue scholarship on the connections between literary production and economies of empire. In summaries of prior research, often in the form of an omnibus footnote, the entire project of *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, as opposed to discussions of the individual essays that comprise it, is generally acknowledged.

“Cultures of US imperialism” represents not a nod to a book but a gesture to an overall shift in the field. Which is to say, this edited collection has become more than the sum of its parts. Before accepting such a pithy assessment, it may be worthwhile to mention some of the parts that get glossed over by global references to “On imperialism, see Kaplan and Pease.” In an analysis that remains instructive, Christopher Wilson looks at the cozy relationship between the US military and mainstream war correspondents, who “offered their reporting explicitly as advance scouting for future US-military operations” (343). Furthermore, in what is surely the most resonant but also most overlooked part of the book, the final section offers six essays that provide a lens for thinking about more contemporary US incursions in Asia, the Middle East, and other non-Western locales. The prevailing critical tendency, however, seems to prefer the whole to the part. To cite a recent example, Emory Elliott, in his Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, a genre that often serves as a compendium of landmark developments in the field, looks to Kaplan and Pease’s effort as one of two major edited volumes of the 1990s that helped prepare the ground for a new crop of scholarly output “exploring transnational and comparative approaches” (13). (The other edited volume is Pease’s *National Identities and Post-Americanist Narrative* [1994].) Elliott does not linger over this text; indeed, this signposting is what occurs when an idea or expression is accepted into the professional lingua franca. Neither should we linger, except to say that it is precisely the success of *Cultures of United States Imperialism*—the thoughtful way in which the essays speak to one another, the overall conversation

that is carried forward by the work of each author, in short, the coherence and consistency of its contributions—that allows its different parts to be usefully invoked as part of a single critical gesture. This consistency explains why *Cultures of United States Imperialism* acts as legitimate shorthand for understanding culture in global contexts.

But this emphasis on consistency comes at the expense of the volume's inconsistency—an attribute that is just as legitimate as and more disruptive than any consensus about its unified approach. As the emphasis on domestic spaces and international hot zones shifts from essay to essay, the book argues for the impossibility of referencing imperialism as a single expression. If space is uneven, time is even more radically out of joint here, as so many of the essays speak of the past in ways that describe the imperial history that was to come and is here now. In other words, *Cultures of United States Imperialism* is haunted by the present. This specter appears in Vicente Rafael's analysis of US attempts to design an "efficient and cost effective" occupation by enlisting the occupied in their own surveillance (189). It returns again in an insurgency put down by the US Army that José David Saldívar discusses in his reading of Américo Paredes's border writings. So, too, the present in the guise of the past confronts us in the connections that Kevin Gaines draws between "evangelical piety," conquest, and the labored avoidance of racist overtones in foreign missions of the US (447). The presence of this specter is most chilling in the final set of essays, which look at the narratives—films, television shows, ethnographies, theme parks, monuments—that produce an image of US culture as post-imperial. American literary and cultural studies have not paid enough attention to this ghost story. Readers have tended to focus on the history that is *in* the book rather than the book's history and its eerie capacity for reanimating the past in the figure of the present.

In their respective introductions, the editors mark the spectral position of American studies, up to and including their own contribution, in the long process of imperialism. In this way, *Cultures of United States Imperialism* implicitly engages the distinction that Walter Benjamin makes between the "attitude" and the "position" of literature. The question of attitude, for Benjamin, is a relatively safe one that isolates the work from any "living social context" because it stops short of inquiring into the material position of the work itself. Prepositions make the difference: attitude can only be *beside* history, as when we consider, for instance, the attitude of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) toward slavery rather than examining the novel's position *in* the "literary relations of production of its time," which is to say the position of

white sentimentality in relation to a national slave economy (Benjamin 223).

For Kaplan, the matter of position is spatial. As she puts it in the arresting first sentence of “Left Alone with America,” “The field of American studies was conceived on the banks of the Congo,” spring-boarding off Perry Miller’s epiphany that his perception of Africa as utterly foreign discloses the special, if not redemptive, importance of an American mythos (Kaplan 3). This longstanding intimacy between the US and its foreign other, despite frequent disavowals of any such connection, encapsulates the connections between US cultural criticism, violence, and war in the Philippines, Mexico, the Middle East, and “Indian territory.” For Pease, the matter of position is temporal. As he puts it in the first sentence of his introduction, “The idea for this volume germinated in the shadow of three macropolitical events—the end of the cold war, the Persian Gulf War, and the Columbian quincentennial” (22). Instead of taking the easy route by presenting their volume as a commentary on imperialism, each editor maps a position to the space and time of imperialism.

In refusing to offer imperialism as a history that occurred “back then” or “over there,” the editors’ spatiotemporal pointers suggest a difficult question: What does it mean to examine imperialism when the examination itself remains embedded in the continuing history of imperialism? A facile response to this question might be that it does not mean a thing since the critical project is only a commentary *on* imperialism and not intertwined *in* the still living contexts that produced American studies as a professional academic field. Footnotes and endnotes can enable just this sort of response by referencing the massive, ongoing “culture of US imperialism” as completed scholarship. Kaplan and Pease eschew this choice and instead chart the ghostliness of their endeavor, acknowledging its necessary but problematic relationship to an older American literary and cultural history that treated empire as an ancillary concern. Suggesting their troublesome continuity with scholarship that once viewed US imperialism as an aberration, marking their coincidence with “macropolitical” combinations of nostalgia, capitalism, and militarism, the editors situate their project amid the very conditions that wrap novels, plays, performances, and other forms of culture around imperialism.

These continuities and coincidences require a broad brush that some have critiqued. In addition to the sometimes overlooked work of Schueller, Shelley Streeby and Kirsten Silva Gruesz wonder whether *Cultures of United States Imperialism* adopts a “modernist” slant that overdraws 1898 as the high-water mark of the imperialist tide.³ Continuities and coincidences can also

appear as asymmetries. Consider the disciplinary portrait of American studies that Pease divides into four panels: “the ‘official nationalism’ of the myth-symbol school, spanning 1945–68, the ‘critical nationalism’ during the years of detente, 1968–80, the neocolonialism of the Reagan-Bush era, and the more recent post-nationalist initiatives of the so-called New Americanists” (23–24). Which one of these things is not like the other? In my reading, three apples are mismatched with one orange: the myth-symbol school, critical nationalism, and postnationalism all reference professional formations of knowledge, while the Reagan-Bush era seems a free floating image of Grenada, Panama, El Salvador, and Iraq that is unconnected to some mirror image within the academic field.

The four-part segmentation of American studies provides another indication of position, and it accomplishes this mapping by tracing the elusive relationship between academic work and the conditions of neocolonialism in the 1980s. A bit later in his introduction, Pease contends that New Historicism, in “its capacity to colonize resistance within already existing cultural spaces,” might “be said to reenact as its methodology the imperializing power of U.S. nationalism” (25). While the positioning of New Historicism as the scholarly mirror of neocolonialism in the Reagan-Bush era never comes across as an express charge, the suggestion remains important as a provocation to consider the position of cultural critique since the collection’s publication in 1993. The history of—as opposed to the history in—*Cultures of United States Imperialism* allows for a review of what academic culture remembers and what it forgets. This history is, of course, ongoing. In contrast to those who would see imperialism as an endnote or other legacy, recent imperialist hauntings alert us to the durable inconsistencies of *Cultures of United States Imperialism*. Take, for example, claims of human rights that were invoked to legitimate the Clinton administration’s military intervention in Kosovo. For Srinivas Aravamudan, this humanitarian action prefigures George W. Bush’s Iraq mess by conducting military bombings without United Nations approval. Calling for a “new form of American Studies,” Aravamudan suggests “Rogue Studies” as an alternative position, one that would look at how the present haunts the American studies past. In particular, he asks us to examine how “the hijacking of the state apparatus by oil reconstruction companies, mercenary armies and fundamentalist preachers” reappear in the rogues, mountebanks, and other popular frontier figures that the myth-and-symbol school gave us as the “shadow-history of the nation.”

In our capacity to see present-day ghosts walking through *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, the project remains useful for twenty-first-century critique. But this potential is diminished

by a prevailing critical tendency to invoke the book as part of a broad reference to the imperialism of another era. The problem is a paradox: by reading the book as history, we run the risk of forgetting, not the past, but the present. If Pease traces the volume's emergence back to "macropolitical events" of the 1990s, we need to refresh this geopolitical positioning in the wake of 11 September 2001, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and Hurricane Katrina. The collective effort of Pease, Kaplan, and their contributors to obviate conventional distinctions between the inward-looking focus of American studies and the outward perspectives of international relations and postcolonial studies can help us see the deep structures of state and bureaucracy that link these events. The war in Iraq and the bumbling response to the misery in New Orleans share a terrible logic that substitutes hostile privatization for collective mobilization. Collective mobilization, a phrase from George Lipsitz's essay, "Learning from New Orleans: The Social Warrant of Hostile Privatism and Competitive Consumer Citizenship" (2006), has all but dropped out of the picture in that city's "rebuilding," which adheres to the pattern of "participatory plutocracy" that also governs the "rebuilding" of Iraq: in each context, faith in no-bid contracts, faith in private management, faith in free market fundamentalism, and, finally, faith in faith itself displaces public political discussion (456, 462). Well before 9/11, Amitava Kumar appealed to similar criteria in his review of *Cultures of United States Imperialism*: "It is on the grounds of the effective mobilization of critical agency against those oppressions [of cultural imperialism] that this volume must finally be evaluated" (751).

Whether critical (as in Kumar's sense) or collective (as in Lipsitz's), mobilization is an impossible measuring stick for any book, let alone an academic one that weighs in at 672 pages long. The links between academic critique and political action are at best uncertain, and Kumar is quick to point out that he is not suggesting that scholarship needs to burst out into populist song, though he does wonder why discussions of pedagogy and classroom practice are absent from *Cultures of United States Imperialism*. Might we look for mobilization elsewhere, for instance, in the academic currency of this volume's intervention? And might we try to locate that currency in endnotes that begin "On imperialism, see Kaplan and Pease," each reference a sure sign of the extent to which this edited collection has legitimized inquiry into American empire as a significant scholarly concern? But memories of Cherokee removal, San Juan Hill, Wild West shows, Pancho Villa, and other totems of imperial imagining enacted both within and beyond the borders of the US that this book stirs are also occasioned by episodes of forgetting. The issue

is not what the editors have overlooked or not included, but rather what readers since the book's publication in 1993 have ignored in their citations of this book. References, particularly those of the omnibus sort, rarely acknowledge the final section of the volume, "Imperial Spectacles," where essays by Michael Rogin, Susan Jeffords, Pease, and Lynda Boose invoke the Persian Gulf War of 1990–91 as both foreground and backdrop.

Never infused with the contemporary charge of Rogin's insight into the dangers of imagining history as cinematic spectacle, or Boose's discernment of a retro-narrative that stigmatizes antiwar positions as wimpy, the endnote, "On imperialism, see Kaplan and Pease" has an archival function, invoking the book as past rather than present history. In overlooking the volume's individual essays, the endnote gestures to a massive history of imperialism that could be either the narrative of US foreign policy or the book itself. Here is where the slippage from book title, *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, to phrase, "cultures of United States imperialism," bespeaks a tendency within professional academic cultures of American studies to mistake its own productions for public discourse. While the nod to "cultures of United States imperialism" confirms the widening of Kaplan and Pease's argument into academic lexicons, it also represents the narrowing practice of a scholarly field that talks about history as though it were a book. The effect is to privilege the book's attitude (i.e., this is what this book says about imperialism) over its position (i.e., this is where the scholarly endeavor is located within ongoing histories of American imperialism). The politics of citation are bound up with temporality, which, if the lack of engagement with the essays in the "Imperial Spectacles" section is any indication, seeks to relegate both book and phrase to the past. The result is that *Cultures of United States Imperialism* becomes a history book rather than a document that is itself historical, its use, circulation, and status a clue about how US cultural criticism has—and has not—remembered earlier efforts to talk about the present effects of US militarism.

In contrast to concerns for mobilization voiced by Lipsitz and Kumar, *Cultures of United States Imperialism* presents a strange case of demobilization in which the final section of the book has more or less been lopped off from consideration, as though the treatment of the Persian Gulf War back in 1993 was then too presentist, too unconnected to the cultural past or the imperial future that we now inhabit. Such presentism gets quickly outmoded once the future arrives. How do critics renovate analyses that talk about movies such as *Sudden Impact* (1983), *Under Siege* (1992), *Home Alone* (1990), and other artifacts of the 1980s and

1990s? The answer is that they rarely talk about them at all; in effect, the final section on “Imperial Spectacles” has been moth-balled. Demobilization is, of course, a spatial term: within the language of temporality, it translates as forgetting.

This interplay of remembering and forgetting, for Lisa Lowe, constitutes one of the signal contributions of this volume, especially Kaplan’s introductory essay that explores the “absence of empire from study of American culture” as well as the “absence of culture from the history of U.S. imperialism” (Kaplan 11). Lowe cites this essay in her focus on Asian immigrants who remember the imperial contexts that the US nation labors to forget with practiced innocence (17, 191n45). So, too, we might wonder about memory and forgetting in the professional practices—the endnotes, the amassing of references, the helpful glosses on entire bodies of work—of American studies. We then might use Lowe’s point to interrogate what American studies has forgotten about *Cultures of United States Imperialism*. Perhaps essays about war culture that make use of examples such as Rambo epics or Schwarzenegger movies do not have a lot of staying power. (The 2008 cinematic release of *Rambo* and Schwarzenegger’s reprising of another actor’s role in moving from Hollywood to the governor’s mansion both suggest otherwise.) It would seem that Jeffords’s analysis of male managerial heroes or Boose’s discussion of mainstream misogyny need a dose of critical Viagra to reinvigorate critiques whose potency faded along with their popular currency after the mid-1990s. This irony is a side effect of American studies scholarship that remembers past cultures of US imperialism while forgetting more recent incarnations. Despite Jeffords’s focus on the intertwining of military systems and popular media representations “since the Persian Gulf War,” her call to examine the continuing present has largely been ignored. This present lives on as a specter: when Jeffords unsettles popular impressions that the “Persian Gulf War put to rest the memory of Iran/Contra,” her claim returns once more in the memories of Viet Nam supposedly put to rest by the claim of “Mission Accomplished” (554).⁴ Within this unquiet framework, *Cultures of United States Imperialism* is also a revenant, its academic position haunted by bombings in Kosovo in 1999, the start of war in Afghanistan in 2001, and the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

The temporality of the endnote “On imperialism, see Kaplan and Pease,” however, treats its object as an artifact, an obedient gesture of reverence to another era. The danger of this total gesture is the danger of history, of taking the culture of imperialism and treating it as though it were history. As we reread the forgotten parts of *Cultures of United States Imperialism* and simultaneously

consider the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, we acquire a perspective that views American studies as diachronically challenged, unable to confidently articulate the connection between historical scholarship and contemporary critique.⁵ This difficulty involves more than an activist evaluation of historical scholarship and its uses for what Lipsitz and Kumar describe as mobilization. Any mobilization concerns not merely historical scholarship but the history of scholarship, which in the case of *Cultures of United States Imperialism* is a history of being haunted by the present.

Notes

1. Wai Chee Dimock, "Introduction: Planet as Duration and Extension," *Through Other Continents: American Literature across Deep Time* (2006), 1–6.
2. For a similar use of "cultures of US imperialism" as a "phrase," see Susan Gillman, "Afterword: The Times of Hemispheric Studies," *Hemispheric American Studies*, ed. Caroline F. Levander and Robert S. Levine (2007), 328.
3. Kirsten Silva Gruesz points to the oversights created by the thesis that "modernist culture . . . must be read within the context of the push for global influence and colonial counterstruggles unleashed in 1898" (11); see also Shelley Streeby, *American Sensations: Class, Empire, and the Production of Popular Culture* (2002).
4. As an addition to this consideration about the position of American studies critique since the publication of *Cultures of United States Imperialism* in 1993, Pease's essay on monumental episodes within national narrative serves up another cogent reminder. "As a 'supplemental' recollection of the Vietnam War, the Gulf War can be described as having completed the screen memories projected onto the Vietnam Veterans Memorial," he writes (568). Such a description, Pease implies, would be flawed, since the trauma of US interventionism, then and now, has hardly been laid to rest. It seems, however, that the critique of the Gulf War in *Cultures of United States Imperialism* has been laid to rest before its time. This premature demise is one version of critical consensus produced by the cultures of US academia.
5. Wai Chee Dimock's *Through Other Continents: American Literature across Deep Time* (2006) offers a notable exception. Opening with a meditation on the 2003 destruction of the Iraqi National Library, Dimock seeks to orient the study of American culture, particularly its literature, around a long continuum that resists the sort of episodic referencing of imperialism I have been describing.

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