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A Parallel Narrative—Literature, Empire and Region at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

A Review

By Stephanie Tsank

Review of:

Schmidt, Peter. *Sitting in Darkness: New South Fiction, Education, and the Rise of Jim Crow Colonialism, 1865-1920*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008.

Stecopoulos, Harilaos. *Reconstructing the World: Southern Fictions and U.S. Imperialisms, 1898-1976*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008.

Wesling, Meg. *Empire's Proxy: American Literature and U.S. Imperialism in the Philippines*. New York: New York University Press, 2011.

The terms “Empire of Liberty” and “Empire for Liberty” were famously coined by Thomas Jefferson to characterize America’s nationhood. The latter was a revision which signaled the move toward a more aggressively expansionist ideology catalyzed by the enactment of the Northwest Ordinance and by the Louisiana Purchase in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.¹ In the past few decades, academics have reused and redeployed these phrases again and again to refer to the twin ideological and rhetorical enigmas of “empire” and “liberty” which continue to trouble contemporary scholars of U.S.

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history, literature, and culture. The fact that “Empire for Liberty” continues to be over-used to *label* studies of U.S. imperialism speaks beyond the “catchiness” of the term and instead points to several more recent developments: namely, the proliferation of studies of U.S. empire alongside the institutionalization of the field of empire studies, the ongoing polarization inherent in such studies, and finally the enduring question of what kind of space scholarship of United States imperialism itself occupies.²

Certainly, the evolution of empire studies—or the study of United States’ culture in a global, transnational, and imperial context—has enjoyed a complex evolution of its own. In 2005, literary critic Susan Gillman theorized that the field of empire studies was being institutionalized into academia by way of the more established field of American studies.³ Something new happened, in which a wave of scholarship rose to what Gillman termed “a disciplinary call to arms,” or rather, the rush to close a gap formerly filled by something that might be called denial.⁴ Meanwhile, academics have not only been questioning whether or not America should be labeled an empire; they have also been “picking sides” in the process. As per Gillman’s observation, scholars continue to ask: “For or against? Are you an imperial believer? Reluctant advocate or equally reluctant skeptic? Outright critic?”⁵ In addition, the concurrent analysis of literature, culture, society, and empire has brought new methodological concerns to the forefront of such scholarship. These include, but are not limited to: the relationship between the local, national, and international; the relationship between space and time as they are utilized in studies of empire; the interposing paradigms of American exceptionalism and imperialism; and finally the position of literature and critical scholarship within the ongoing study of empire.

In 2002, humanities scholar Daniel Herwitz called empire “categorically central to the study of modern literature.”⁶ Indeed, Edward Said’s seminal *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), and Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease’s widely-read anthology *Cultures of United States Imperialism* (1993) have long since established the study of literature in relation to imperialism. Since the publication of these texts, academics in various interlocking fields—including literature, American studies, and history—have further demonstrated the utility of such studies. Undoubtedly, literary narrative provides a ripe lens through which to explore the construction of the parallel rhetoric of the national, international, and imperial voices inherent in American culture. Likewise, the very act of analyzing the literary narrative helps structure the formative methodologies of empire studies as they continue to be forged by

scholars today, insomuch as these critical studies are themselves part of a canonized and highly charged arena of cultural production.

In particular, various studies have focused on the intersection of literature and U.S. imperialism at the turn of the twentieth century. The year 1898 marked the start and end of the brief Spanish-American War, which led to the U.S.'s acquisition of foreign territories in the Pacific and Caribbean, such as the Philippines, Guam, Puerto Rico, and Cuba. As all three monographs under review in some way point to (Meg Wesling's scholarship speaks the most to this), the *self-conscious* emergence of the United States as an imperial power at the turn of the twentieth century occurred in concert with the formation of the canon of American literature and the professionalization of the field of English in the United States. In effect, the power of literature to speak within and beyond borders, and to teach others to do so, has everything to do with the ongoing *narrative* of imperialism—the desire to weave and unweave the complex themes of “liberty” and “empire.” Indeed, the mirroring inherent in such a relationship still requires further explication. Even critical scholarship—which springs from similar creative processes as fiction—is intimately intertwined in these constructs.

In his recent review of Kaplan and Pease's 1993 anthology, literary scholar Russ Castronovo asks: “What does it mean to examine imperialism when the examination itself remains embedded in the continuing history of imperialism?”⁷ Although Castronovo is referring specifically to the self-referential aspect of Kaplan and Pease's scholarship, his observation also speaks to the relationship of American literature (within and outside of the canon) to U.S. imperialism. In other words, what does it mean to read literature in parallel to the narrative of United States imperialism? What effect does one have on the other? Essentially, we must ask ourselves the potentially uncomfortable question: to what extent has literature and scholarship within and outside the canon been shaped by U.S. imperialism since the turn of the twentieth century and onward? And vice versa?

According to Wesling, the traditional late-nineteenth-century canon included writers such as Longfellow, Emerson, Poe, Whittier, Whitman, and so forth.⁸ Additionally, several anthologies and instruction books published during the period argued for the inclusion of various Southern writers into the canon, such as Joel Chandler Harris, George Washington Cable, Mary Murfree, Thomas Nelson Page, James Lane Allen, Ellen Glasgow, Mary Johnston, and Grace King.⁹ One should also consider popular fiction at the turn of the century, such as the work of Thomas Dixon, Jr. and Owen Wister.¹⁰ And, as contemporary

scholars have done (and are doing at an increasing rate), one should certainly take into account the narratives of race, sex, and border crossing that have everything to do with the imperial narrative of the period.¹¹ As noted by humanities scholar John Carlos Rowe, American studies scholars have long been working to reclaim the literatures once subsumed by a Western patriarchal, Eurocentric nationalism.¹² Subsequent studies now, as Castronovo reminds us, are so tied to the issues of race, ethnicity, gender, and immigration that the spheres of empire studies and cultural studies are intimately intertwined.¹³ Furthermore, what would it mean to read any of these authors when their works inevitably speak to the very thing that in some way informs their creation? How might literature intersect with the imperial narrative in a way that is illuminating or unsavory? Of course, this is no “new” thing—scholars have always grappled and will always grapple with the fine line between reading literature as intervention or representation. However, what *is* new (or, at least, relatively new) is the introduction of American imperialism into the equation. This highly charged topic has everything to do with the uncomfortable border region between action and inaction, and, as Gillman fittingly points out, moral righteousness.¹⁴

I. Literature, Education, and Empire

Meg Wesling’s *Empire’s Proxy: American Literature and U.S. Imperialism in the Philippines*, scripts the word “empire” in bold orange across its front page, thereby positioning itself both visually and conceptually within a growing body of empire studies scholarship. Like Kaplan and Pease’s anthology, Wesling’s not only contributes to the analysis of literature and imperialism, but also intervenes in its ongoing narrative. Wesling theorizes that American literature served as a coercive tool for the building of empire overseas, specifically in the Philippines at the turn of the twentieth century. She also discusses the issue of structuring educational systems for African Americans in the South after the abandonment of Reconstruction in parallel to the U.S.’s civilizing, educative mission abroad in the Philippines. The crux of Wesling’s argument is that the move to create a foundational American literature and efforts to “civilize” Filipinos overseas were “unlikely twin births, emerging from the same body of cultural values and connected by a core set of values discernible to the careful eye.”¹⁵ The link between these twin births is somewhat tenuous because Wesling builds it almost solely by comparing the ideological imperatives of U.S. actors at home and abroad. However, she is nonetheless able to structure her argument in an

incredibly convincing way. She first explains these parallel imperatives through two simultaneously erected institutions: the Bureau of Public Instruction, which was in charge of implementing education in the Philippines; and the National Institute of Arts and Letters, which was given the task of structuring a national canon of American literature and English education in the states. Wesling notes that although there is no single public figure who could be linked to both institutions, there was, to use her term, a common “literary imperative” that inevitably tied these two educative missions together. Finally, Wesling convincingly identifies three tensions that the literary imperative springs from and attempts to resolve: to cover material exploitation in the Philippines, to identify the U.S. as an arbiter of culture, and finally to distinguish the U.S. from other imperial powers through a marked mission of benevolent assimilation.

Wesling’s identification of the literary imperative points to the use of literature, in particular, as both nationally unifying and coercive. She writes: “The academic study of English in the United States provided the ideological underpinning for the exceptionalist paradigm that invoked and justified the investment of English, as a language and a literature, as an ameliorative force.”¹⁶ At this point, one begins to further question the consequences and implications of these parallel ideological structures. How exactly did the ideological lessons of American literature translate overseas, and in what ways was the simultaneous creation of the canon of American literature affected? Wesling notes that although most members of the National Institute were ostensibly anti-imperialist, their texts were often redeployed in ways that promoted imperialist missions. For example, she writes extensively of Longfellow’s *Evangeline*—an epic poem published in 1847 about a search for lost love—which she asserts was read “as a reconstitution of the nation” through its “deferment of political sovereignty” in schools established for Filipino children overseas.¹⁷ This redeployment, Wesling claims, occurred in part because of Longfellow’s unwillingness to actively participate in the public political sphere; she writes that his “personal opposition to political activity . . . contributed to his malleability as a representative of American empire even as he disagreed strongly with its aims.”¹⁸ Of course, there is a stark contrast between an author such as Longfellow and that of a Charles W. Chesnutt, whose novels, short stories, and nonfiction writing spoke directly to American imperialism through their discussion of race, sex, and miscegenation, and who was an active public figure throughout his literary career on the subject. Clearly, the “redeployment” of Chesnutt’s work as “for” or “against”

propaganda would have been impossible. Yet one cannot help but feel a certain ideological backdrop seeping into the life and work of both authors. Despite what divisions remain regarding whether these literary works were more coercive or reflective, it is clear that the weight and relative position of empire to literature is present, pressing, and formative in ways we have yet to fully appreciate. And, although Wesling provides us with new frameworks through which to view these “twin births,” and offers an extensive look at Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *Evangeline*, and Carlos Bulosan’s *America*—one wishes she had provided a closer analysis of the literature of the turn of the twentieth century that most informs these ideological constituents.

II. Citizenship through Literature

The relevance of education to empire is embedded in the potential to revise and remap the national through citizenship. As literary scholar John Muthyala writes: “The very idea of an American literary history coincides with U.S. national self-definition, and a literary canon is formed comprising written and oral ‘texts’ that reflect or embody this process of self-definition.”¹⁹ Explored by both Wesling and Peter Schmidt—though in more depth by the latter—the ideological battle between the liberal arts and the dependency model of education promoted by the Tuskegee and Hampton institutes in the United States served as a backdrop for ever-growing restlessness surrounding the issue of citizenship at the turn of the twentieth century. Thus, the potential for education to make or un-make citizens of the nation—the potential for education to teach people how to think creatively or imitatively—held salience for the continuing production of literature and its creative counterparts. An author’s choice to produce an imperialist or anti-imperialist text in the socio-political climate after Reconstruction marked a deliberate support of one methodology over the other: advocating citizenship based on independence, innovation, creativity, and nation-making (or un-making), or a view of colonial education based on the imitative. Peter Schmidt, in his book *South Fiction, Education, and the Rise of Jim Crow Colonialism, 1865-1920*, approaches these paradigms with vigor, and does so specifically by looking at the so-called “under-studied” literature of his stated period.²⁰ He asks: “What role did fiction play in shaping or questioning these discourses of education?”²¹ Schmidt traces the parallel movements of the construction of a national education (and identity) and colonialism overseas—the “paradoxical mix of citizen-building and subjection at the heart of Progressivist discourse at

home and abroad.”²² In his view, these ideological and institutional constructs can best be understood through a close reading of a diverse and wide array of authors; accordingly, Schmidt unearths various authors’ stances on education, nation, citizenship, and colonialism. For instance, he reads Sutton Griggs’ *Imperium in Imperio* as advocating liberal arts education, Frances E. W. Harper’s *Iola Leroy* as a challenge to W.E.B. Du Bois’ uplift ideology, and George Washington Cable’s *Lovers of Louisiana* as wholly Progressivist. The list goes on. Nonetheless, Schmidt, who takes a page from Said, labels himself as one who “stubbornly believe[s] that the best literature intervenes in its era rather than merely [reproduces] that era’s ideologies.”²³ To him, literature is active, reactive, and fluid. Indeed, he would not be wrong to take this stance, specifically in light of the texts he chooses to discuss. Inevitably, as has been shown, the polarization inherent within the field of empire studies—whether one believes that the United States is an empire or not—will continue to ask its theorists to draw their battle lines in the sand. Yet one can not help but see, at times, the imposing nature of such a study—the way in which writers or canonizers of literatures “choose sides” in the battle of imperialism at the risk of obscuring the larger picture. Despite his assertion that fiction does not “present uniform views either for or against Jim Crow colonialism,” Schmidt’s consistent return to similar questions and characterizations tend to mark his analysis as polarizing.²⁴ Thus, we, as readers, writers, and theorists, continue to fall victim to the restrictions inherent in the “for” or “against” debate that remains embedded in the field of empire studies.

III. The “New” Regionalism

On the heels of postcolonial studies, cultural studies, and gender studies, American studies scholarship has moved into a progressive comparativism that attempts to account for the whole of the geography of the Americas with specific attention to the geographical and literary nodes of multiculturalism inherent in such a pursuit.²⁵ As such, the shift towards postnationalism as a critical framework for the study of literature and empire remains expected but also in many ways complex and uncertain in its expansiveness. In seeking to contribute to the discourse of postnationalism at the intersection of American studies and the study of American literature, Harilaos Stecopoulos, in his book *Reconstructing the World: Southern Fictions and U.S. Imperialisms, 1898-1976*, asserts that postnationalist studies have also inevitably spurred a somewhat unproductive post-regionalism. He writes that “seemingly

normative conceptions of region can still offer us valuable insights into the historic relationships that obtain among sub-national, national, and global geographic formations.”²⁶ In other words, in order to resolve what perceives to be the gap of knowledge within the emerging literary-imperial scope, he structures his study so as to keep region in perspective. In exploring imperial structures at both the regional and international level, Stecopoulos consistently compares the U.S. South to the global South in close readings of works by authors Charles Chesnutt, Thomas Dixon Jr., James Weldon Johnson, W.E.B. Du Bois, Carson McCullers, William Faulkner, Richard Wright, and Alice Walker. Schmidt also conducts a regional study by keeping the history and literature of the U.S. South central to his methodology. He asks: “What role, if any, could the New South have played in the invention of ‘American literature’ itself, especially as it was then being constituted in the universities?”²⁷ While Schmidt’s analysis of the South is indispensable to the core of his argument about education, Stecopoulos specifically chooses the U.S. South as a point of interest in order to fill a gap in the postnationalist “worlding” of American studies. Regardless, Schmidt’s and Stecopoulos’s approaches both ask us to consider the value of conducting a regional study within a field that is still rapidly barreling toward the postnational and global.

It is worthwhile to look closely at the ways in which multiculturalism and multiracialism have been wedded to the study of American imperialism. Surely, the regional U.S. South is associated with the study of American race relations (especially racial violence and discrimination) at the turn of the twentieth century. We are consistently led back to the South’s history and literature—to the presumed failure of Reconstruction and the legacy of racism that has long since endured, both as reality and stigma. Predictably, Castronovo locates the regional in literary narratives that illuminate race, ethnicity and gender paradigms. In his recent contribution to *The Cambridge History of the American Novel* anthology, he concludes: “Such narrative globetrotting always returns home, specifically to the U.S. South and the plantation economies of the Americas.”²⁸ Thus, the regional continues to operate as a nodal point for U.S. empire studies that must inevitably engulf the very crux of race and gender. In this way, the study of region in empire studies is perhaps more than necessary, it is inevitable. Yet, to return to Gillman’s observation, it serves us well to ask whether we can somehow remove the blinders that the “for” or “against” paradigm puts on us. While Stecopoulos rightly views the nation-state as primarily an object of critique among present-

day scholars, can the regional escape such critique? If we continue to “take sides” by viewing the nation-state (the U.S. empire) through a polarized lens that is in many ways unproductive and delimiting (hence the usefulness of the postnational), isn’t such a perspective simply inevitable (in ways *more so* inevitable) in an analysis of the U.S. South? To his credit, Stecopoulos’ comparativism of the U.S. South and the global South is nuanced. Able to view the U.S. South as intermittently victim and victor in his analysis of the literary works of various authors, he begins to move past the constructs that render the very site of empire studies problematic. Schmidt’s study is more inherently “biased”; which is perhaps due to the fact that Stecopoulos’ mission is ultimately to extract meaning directly from the regional itself, whereas Schmidt’s focus is so heavily steeped in the already-polarizing and sensitive topic of education and citizenship that it is impossible for a regional approach to ameliorate its tension.

As Stecopoulos’s scholarship demonstrates, although the path of the regional remains viable, and perhaps in many ways “forward-thinking,” we must still keep in perspective the specific paradigms that empire studies have heretofore imposed, and continue to question whether they are, in fact, useful or blinding. It is evident that many turn-of-the-twentieth-century authors imposed their own paradigms on how to view U.S. imperialism, and indeed chose sides in the process. It is up to us to interpret these narratives as we choose, and to likewise decide our own leanings. However, we should be encouraged to proceed with caution, as the parallel narratives of literature and imperialism remain inextricably linked in ways that may render our interpretations of them unreliable. One has the potential to move the other, and vice versa. Yet in a way, with this thought, the potential for further questioning becomes more expansive.

Similarly, it is imperative for us, as scholars, to consider the ways in which we ourselves contribute to the ongoing rhetoric of American imperialism and American exceptionalism. It is not only in how we structure our arguments and the methodologies that we choose to employ—whether it is breadth or depth of works we choose to read, whether it is nation or region that we choose to pay closest attention to—but it is also in how we write our arguments; the words we choose to utilize. (Surely, this work itself contributes not only to the ongoing discussion; it also helps feed the discussion. It is but one additional reminder that a place for empire studies continues to be forged and shaped not only by

primary, but also secondary material.) Ultimately, the language that we employ in order to write about American imperialism has the potential to be exclusionary or inclusionary. It can speak to closed circles and further enforce them, or it can possibly open those circles to include the voices that are most at stake.

Notes

¹ Richard Immerman, *Empire for Liberty, A History of American Imperialism from Benjamin Franklin to Paul Wolfowitz* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 5.

² For examples of titles that utilize these terms, see Immerman's *Empire for Liberty, A History of American Imperialism from Benjamin Franklin to Paul Wolfowitz* (2011); Gordon Wood's *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789-1815* (2009); Jessie Helms' *Empire for Liberty: a Sovereign America and her Moral Mission* (2011); Waichee Dimock's *Empire for Liberty: Melville and the Poetics of Individualism* (1991). This is not a comprehensive list.

³ Susan Gillman, "The New, Newest Thing: Have American Studies Gone Imperial?" *American Literary History* 17 no. 1 (2005): 198.

⁴ I refer here to the longstanding tendency to actively deny the U.S.'s place in the imperial landscape, or at least, to comparatively judge the U.S. empire as benign in relation to "true"/"other" formidable European empires. See Richard Immerman, *Empire for Liberty*, 6-8; Gillman, 196, 209. Also see Russ Castronovo, "Imperialism, Orientalism, and Empire," in *The Cambridge History of the American Novel*, eds. Leonard Cassuto and Benjamin Reiss (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009): 537.

⁵ Gillman, "The New, Newest Thing," 198.

⁶ Daniel Herwitz, "Modernism & Empire," *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 45 no. 4 (2002): 454.

⁷ Russ Castronovo, "'On Imperialism, see . . . ' Ghosts of the Present in *Cultures of United States Imperialism*" *The Journal of American History* 20 no. 3 (2008): 431.

⁸ Meg Wesling, *Empire's Proxy: American Literature and U.S. Imperialism in the Philippines* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 93.

⁹ Peter Schmidt, *Sitting in Darkness: New South Fiction, Education, and the Rise of Jim Crow Colonialism, 1865-1920* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008): 18.

¹⁰ Schmidt, *Sitting in Darkness*, 153.

¹¹ Castronovo, "Imperialism, Orientalism and Empire," 537-552.

¹² John Carlos Rowe, "Post-Nationalism, Globalism, and the New American Studies," *Post-Nationalist American Studies*, ed. John Carlos Rowe (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000): 23-24.

¹³ Castronovo, "Imperialism, Orientalism and Empire," 537-552.

¹⁴ Gillman, "The New, Newest Thing," 199.

¹⁵ Wesling, *Empire's Proxy*, 40.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 102.

¹⁸ Ibid., 103.

¹⁹ John Muthyala, "Reworlding America: The Globalization of American Studies," *Cultural Critique* 47 (2001): 98.

²⁰ I would argue that authors such as Lydia Marie Child, Frances E. W. Harper, Thomas Dixon Jr., Owen Wister, and George Washington Cable have by now been studied at length.

²¹ Schmidt, *Sitting in Darkness*, 28.

²² As a side note, when considering Schmidt's and Stecopoulos' texts in tandem, it is evident that each author takes a different approach – that is, Schmidt looks at a much wider range and number of authors (about 18), whereas Stecopoulos focuses in on eight public intellectuals. Which approach is more productive to an understanding of American literature and imperialism of the period? Is there a difference?

²³ Schmidt, *Sitting in Darkness*, 26.

²⁴ Ibid., 14.

²⁵ See Rachel Adams, "The Worlding of American Studies," also John Carlos Rowe's "Post-Nationalism, Globalism, and the New American Studies."

²⁶ Harilaos Stecopoulos, *Reconstructing the World: Southern Fictions and U.S. Imperialisms, 1898-1976*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008): 8

²⁷ Schmidt, *Sitting in Darkness*, 17.

²⁸ Castronovo, "Imperialism, Orientalism and Empire," 540.

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