FAYE CARONAN

LEGITIMIZING EMPIRE

FILIPINO AMERICAN AND U.S. PUERTO RICAN CULTURAL CRITIQUE
Legitimizing Empire
THE ASIAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

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Legitimizing Empire

*Filipino American and U.S. Puerto Rican Cultural Critique*

FAYE CARONAN

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In memory of Avelina Salvador Cruz.
My search for the stories you never told me led me here.
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Acknowledgments

The roots of this project reach back to a warm, spring day in Ithaca, New York. While in the Asian American Resource Center reading an assigned article by E. San Juan Jr. about the lasting legacies of U.S. colonialism on Filipinos, I heard some fellow students in the neighboring Latino Studies Resource Center discussing U.S. colonialism in Puerto Rico. Had I chosen to study elsewhere that day, I may never have written this book. Cornell University provided fertile ground for me to understand the related histories and cultures of Filipino Americans and U.S. Puerto Ricans. Claire Conceison, Moon-Ho Jung, and Sunn Shelley Wong showed me how understanding U.S. imperialism was crucial for understanding Filipino America. Mary Pat Brady guided me as I created a comparative framework for understanding U.S. empire through Filipino American and U.S. Puerto Rican literature. I will always be grateful for their attentiveness to my undergraduate research. Their encouragement was pivotal in my decision to pursue graduate school research and an academic career.

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The beautiful photograph featured in the introduction is a Diallo Jones-Brown original. It is one in a series he shot at the World War II Memorial on an exclusive trip to Washington, D.C., as a favor to me, a testament to his unbounded generosity to those lucky enough to be his friends. He is one of among many friends who have cheered me on from the sidelines as I worked on this project. I am so lucky, and thankful, to have been blessed with each and every one of you.

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Legitimizing Empire
Introduction

I was just a poet
wanting to read a poem
the first night I came here.
Since then
I have become a street poet
then somebody’s favorite urban poet
a new jack hip-hop rap poet
a spoken word artist
a born-again Langston Hughes
a downtown performance poet
—Willie Perdomo, “Spotlight at the Nuyorican Poets Café”

Willie Perdomo, a Nuyorican poet, articulates the power of naming in the above excerpt. He represents the disconnect between an author’s self-perception and the various ways an author and an author’s works are categorized and marketed for a mainstream American audience. The different ways he is packaged as a poet indicate his increasing success and notoriety. He starts off as a street poet, denoting his work to be new, edgy, and gritty. At the end he is a born-again Langston Hughes, a downtown performance poet. Comparing him to Langston Hughes legitimizes his work, placing it within the African American literary canon and larger multicultural American canon. No longer a poet from the anonymous streets, he now represents downtown, a gentrified urban space designed for the pleasure and convenience of young professionals. The process of becoming a legitimate part of American culture and becoming legible within hegemonic narratives of United States multiculturalism entails being co-opted and commodified by the literary market. Though Perdomo may regard himself as a Nuyorican poet who represents the Puerto Rican experience in New York, his work has been commodified as African American and/or urban poetry. The marketing of his work for consumption by a mass audience eclipses any critique of colonial and racial power. Consuming his work allows individuals to demonstrate their appreciation for multiculturalism and thus their tolerance of
differences. In other words, this packaging allows U.S. hegemonic culture to commodify and incorporate Perdomo’s work while simultaneously diminishing its critique.

In *Immigrant Acts*, cultural theorist Lisa Lowe argues that Asian American culture is “an alternative formation that produces cultural expressions materially and aesthetically at odds with the resolution of the citizen of the nation” because United States citizenship has historically been defined against Asian immigrants, who were regarded as incapable of assimilating and becoming American.1 Similarly, the racial logic of U.S. colonialism and the history of the United States in Puerto Rico strategically position U.S. Puerto Rican culture, and artists like Perdomo, to critique U.S. imperialism.2 A related history of U.S. colonialism in the Philippines likewise positions Filipino American culture to critique U.S. imperialism. Despite the fact that the United States took control of both the Philippines and Puerto Rico in 1898, Filipinos and Puerto Ricans have been differentially incorporated into the United States politically and differentially included in the U.S. cultural imagination. Between 1898 and 1934, Filipinos were classified neither as alien (though some states tried to apply laws targeting aliens to them) nor as United States citizens but occupied a liminal space as U.S. nationals allowed to travel freely within the U.S. empire. Puerto Ricans have been U.S. citizens since 1917, but as commonwealth citizens they are not afforded all of the rights that U.S. citizens residing in the fifty states enjoy. Filipinos and Puerto Ricans have historically been simultaneously a part of and apart from the United States. This is one example of their different but equally tenuous relationships to the United States. Understanding these different relationships and how they change in conjunction with shifting articulations of U.S. exceptionalism provides some insight into the uneven nature of U.S. imperialism as it transitions between covert and overt forms. As a result of this unevenness, Filipino American and U.S. Puerto Rican cultures are at odds with the mythology of U.S. exceptionalism in all the forms it takes: the historical amnesia of U.S. imperialism; the rhetoric of benevolent assimilation that deems the United States as uniquely responsible for spreading democracy and protecting human rights around the globe; and the construction of the United States as an egalitarian society promising social mobility to anyone willing to work hard.

Despite the critique of U.S. imperialism that Filipino American and U.S. Puerto Rican cultures offer, hegemonic narratives of U.S. exceptionalism delegitimize and obscure these critiques. U.S. policymakers and mass media culture strategically deploy the Philippines and Puerto Rico separately to support narratives of U.S. exceptionalism. Narratives that construct the United States as a land of opportunity for immigrants obscure the role U.S. imperial-
ISM plays in encouraging migration from the Philippines and Puerto Rico to the United States. Multiculturalism in the United States celebrates superficial ethnic differences in the form of cuisine, costumes, and ethnic performances without contextualizing these differences within histories of unequal global power, like U.S. imperialism, that explain how the communities that practice these differences came to be here in the first place. Constructions of race in the United States rely on simplistic cultural stereotypes applied to different ethnic groups lumped together based largely on geography. U.S. racial stereotypes maintain the racial power hierarchy and the myth of meritocracy by disciplining racialized groups to attribute experiences of social inequality to individual and/or cultural failings instead of to racial and class hierarchies. In this book, I critically juxtapose Filipino American and U.S. Puerto Rican cultures to foreground the critique of U.S. imperialism and global power that these hegemonic narratives delegitimize and obscure. Literary theorist Allan Punzalan Isaac argues that Filipino Americans are not only constructed through racialization in the United States but also through a racialization specific to U.S. imperialism based on the construction of an American Tropics, “a set of regulatory tropes and narratives that reveal a particularly U.S. American imperial grammar that create ethnic, racial, and colonial subjects.” For this reason, Filipino American culture can be better understood when read in conjunction with other U.S. colonial cultures.

I rely on Raymond Williams’s dual definitions of culture as both the experience of everyday life within a society and the cultural productions that circulate within society. In this book I examine the different ways that Filipinos and Puerto Ricans have been represented to affirm narratives of U.S. exceptionalism in the early twentieth century and today. I discuss how Filipinos and Puerto Ricans were represented to justify U.S. imperialism in the early twentieth century, how recent Filipino American and U.S. Puerto Rican cultures critique these justifications, and how the U.S. cultural market contains these critiques to reaffirm revised narratives of U.S. exceptionalism. In my analysis of Filipino American and U.S. Puerto Rican cultural productions across multiple genres, I contextualize their varying critiques within their conditions of production. As I will demonstrate, their production significantly affects the legibility and audience of a cultural production's critique. In other words, the cultural market actively obscures and marginalizes Filipino American and U.S. Puerto Rican cultural critiques of U.S. exceptionalism in order to legitimate narratives of U.S. exceptionalism and U.S. global power. The remainder of this introduction will further detail how Filipino American and U.S. Puerto Rican cultural critiques are obscured by narratives of U.S. exceptionalism and constructions of race in the United States.
Legitimating Empire

In the early twentieth century, foreign policy narratives of U.S. exceptionalism centered on the notion of benevolent assimilation. U.S. colonial policies were defined as a project of benevolent assimilation to distinguish the United States’ selfless intentions from those of established European empires that exploited their colonies. As a term, *benevolent assimilation* is no longer used to describe U.S. foreign policy, yet a central aspect of benevolent assimilation that defines recent U.S. military interventions as a democratization project remains vital to the construction of U.S. exceptionalism today. Benevolent assimilation entailed the establishment of political institutions modeled after U.S. institutions to teach residents of island territories how to become independent democracies. Metaphorically, benevolent assimilation was culturally represented as Uncle Sam’s successful courtships of a female Philippines and Puerto Rico and as Uncle Sam’s taking custodial responsibility of infantilized Philippines and Puerto Rico. Both metaphors conveyed the white man’s burden to ensure the safety of and care for people of color who are incapable of self-government.

Narratives of U.S. exceptionalism have been institutionally recognized, legitimized, and reproduced. In a discussion of healthcare practices, social theorist Michel Foucault argues that the process of institutionalizing knowledge legitimizes some knowledge and practices while delegitimizing others. For example, institutionalized healthcare recommends practices based on research that meets standards determined by the institution. Under this model, a mother’s observations on the best remedies for a common cold or an herbalist’s prescription do not qualify as legitimate knowledge because they do not meet institutionalized standards. In this way the institutionalization of knowledge also determines authority, legitimate sources of knowledge, and legitimate narratives. Becoming an institutionally recognized authority often requires training and certification that in turn requires access to certification programs and the resources to pay for these programs. The same process applies to the construction of the history of U.S. imperialism.

Though there was much public and congressional debate in the early twentieth century over whether or not the United States should retain overseas colonies, by midcentury U.S. historians legitimated U.S. exceptionalism’s claim that the United States’ territorial expansion differed completely from self-interested European empires. The institutional legitimization of benevolent assimilation disregarded the brutal, self-interested colonial policies implemented early in the administration of these islands by the United States. Millions of Filipinos fought against U.S. colonization and died between 1900
Introduction

and 1915. U.S. Congress refused to grant Filipinos U.S. citizenship on the
grounds that they were racially inassimilable, and though it granted citizen-
ship to Puerto Ricans, it did not accord Puerto Ricans with all the rights of
citizens residing in states. Philippine and Puerto Rican economies did not
foster domestic growth for the benefit of Filipinos and Puerto Ricans but
instead were developed with U.S. economic and business interests in mind.13
The Supreme Court ruled that the rights accorded in the U.S. Constitution
need not follow the flag to overseas U.S. territories.14 Due to their academic
credentials of historians representing U.S. imperialism through a narrative
of U.S. exceptionalism, the court’s objectivity remained largely unquestioned
until the movement for ethnic studies programs began in the 1970s.15

Instead, the institutionalized narrative of U.S. colonialism in the Philip-
pines and Puerto Rico is as follows: As the United States acquired noncon-
tiguous and overseas territory at the turn of the twentieth century, there
were heated arguments among legislators over the ultimate fates of these
territories, demonstrating the United States’ thoughtful hesitance to become
an imperial power. Would the Philippines and Puerto Rico become states as
territories had previously? Could the native populations of these territories
become American? Were they capable of democratic self-government? If
the answer to all these questions was no, could the United States govern
these territories without repudiating its anticolonial roots and becoming just
another imperial world power?16 To address the seeming contradictions of
the United States’ possession of overseas territory and government of people
without their democratically given consent, the United States constructed
itself as a different kind of empire. The United States was not a conqueror but
a liberator freeing territories from previous colonizers. It was not a colonizer
but a teacher demonstrating how democracies are built and run. Overseas
U.S. territories were first and foremost a burden, not a benefit. As the first
successful democracy, the United States had the responsibility to export this
system of government around the world.17 Recent iterations of U.S. excep-
tionalism still underscore the United States’ unique global responsibility to
help establish new democratic nations.18

The notion that the United States is only an imperial power when abso-
lutely necessary is another significant aspect of the narrative of U.S. excep-
tionalism. Whereas other imperial powers retain colonies indefinitely for
their own interests, the United States establishes democratic institutions,
teaches the native population democracy, and leaves as soon as it deems the
natives fit to govern themselves. The U.S. colonial era in the Philippines and
Puerto Rico officially ended shortly after World War II. One of the United
States’ significant rationales for participating in the war was its aim to fight