

Introduction

Reckoning with History and Empire

I believe in the Prince of Peace. I believe that War is Murder. I believe that armies and navies are at bottom the tinsel and braggadocio of oppression and wrong, and I believe that the wicked conquest of weaker and darker nations by nations whiter and stronger but foreshadows the death of that strength.

—W.E.B. Du Bois, *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil* (1920)

We are Asians, and as such, identify ourselves with the baddest motherfuckers alive. We can no longer be a witness to the daily slaughter of our people in Asia nor to the oppression of the Asians here in America and be afraid of death or prison. We must fight because that's what Asians are all about.

—Alex Hing, “The Need for a United Asian-American Front” (1970)

Pedro B. Bunuan's rage against the United States mounted the longer he stayed in the seat of empire. He was among the thousands of young Filipino men who migrated across the Pacific in the 1910s and 1920s in response to, as he put it, America's “call of humanity, equality and honesty, so that in time we will supply our country with Filipino American graduates to cooperate with you to bring the seed of democracy even to the darkest corners of the world.” Constantly shut out of better jobs, decent housing, and railroad cars in the incorporated United States, he soon realized the true state of affairs in the Philippines. “The American grafters that constitute the few have demo[n]strated themselves to take

the place of the catholic priests and pastors in the past, who were engaged in mental lying, debouchery [*sic*] and corruptions,” Bunoan wrote to the US Congress in 1927. He demanded Philippine independence from the US empire, as the only way for Filipinos, as enlightened men, to remain “loyal to the cause of America as we have shown and demo[n]strated during the World War.” Any lingering hope for America dissolved by 1935, when Bunoan applied for repatriation to the Philippines, now a colony called a “commonwealth.” “In conclusion, the American white insulting dogs has commit[t]ed the best lies to the world and the most interesting human law in . . . American history,” Bunoan protested sarcastically, as he bid America farewell. “God may further your fin[e] government, your wonderful educational institution and the moral of the white insulting dogs.”¹

W.E.B. Du Bois, the incomparable Black scholar-activist, felt the same rage in the wake of World War I. In *Darkwater*, he railed against the state of the world, within which the United States pretended to be a leader. “It is curious to see America, the United States, looking on herself, first, as a sort of natural peacemaker, then as a moral protagonist in this terrible time,” he noted wryly. “No nation is less fitted for this rôle.” Du Bois wanted to unveil the vicious logic of race, war, and empire and “its awful cost.” “The cause of war is preparation for war,” he argued, “and of all that Europe has done in a century there is nothing that has equaled in energy, thought, and time [more than] her preparation for wholesale murder.” And the US empire, he contended, stood “shoulder to shoulder with Europe in Europe’s worst sin against civilization.” But there was hope. Du Bois found hope among the colonized and racialized “dark world.” He prophesied a day of reckoning, more “wild and awful” than World War I, when “*that fight for freedom which black and brown and yellow men must and will make unless their oppression and humiliation and insult at the hands of the White World cease.*” Du Bois issued a warning, a manifesto. “*The Dark World is going to submit to its present treatment just as long as it must and not one moment longer,*” he declared emphatically.²

Menace to Empire traces both the colonial violence and the anticolonial rage percolating across the Pacific between the Philippine-American War and World War II. It is a history that can bring to light the ongoing racial and colonial order that has constituted the United States of America and the revolutionary dreams that its pretensions and machinations tried to smother and kill. To tell that history, I have to underscore some premises that will guide my interpretation. The United States was and is

an empire. White supremacy has fueled and justified that empire, even as liberal claims to universal citizenship have obscured that history of violence. The tensions and contradictions of race, nation, and empire generated revolutionary movements that exposed, confronted, and challenged the US empire. In response, the US state has sought to monitor, criminalize, and suppress those movements, in part by racializing and sexualizing particular politics and distinct communities as seditious to rationalize violence on those ideas and communities. That is, the US state emerged and expanded largely to secure empire, within and beyond the territorial borders it has claimed. That entangled history of colonial conquest, white supremacy, and anticolonial struggle is what I strive to uncover and understand. Radicalized by their opposition to the US empire, different peoples in and from Asia articulated and organized a revolutionary politics that, I argue, racialized Asians as seditious threats to US security and gave rise to what would become the US national security state, the heart and soul of the US empire ever since.

EMPIRE, HISTORY, SECURITY

To propose that the United States was and is the US empire poses a challenge to a teleology that posits nation against empire. Like the thirteen British colonies in North America, modern nations seemingly liberate themselves from tyrannical empires, across time and space. Although terms like Thomas Jefferson's "empire of liberty" muddled that notion, the idea of individual, liberal subjects forming a nation can appear incompatible with colonial subjects suffering under imperial rule. But the birth of the US state simultaneously marked its genesis as an empire. "The paradox . . . is one of a nation being born in the fires of an anti-colonial revolution while at the same time consolidating its state power and sovereignty on the basis of preserving the slavery variety of colonialism," Jack O'Dell, a major intellectual and organizer of the Black freedom movement, argued in *Freedomways*. Building a nation was not inconsistent with building an empire. Quite the opposite, they operated hand in hand, an ongoing process that has shaped and defined the United States. The abolition of slavery and the beginning and end of Reconstruction, O'Dell continued, took place in the context of Europe's partition and colonization of the African continent, unleashing a renewed era of imperial aggression and white supremacy around the world. From that perspective, it was possible and necessary to see that the US subjugation of Black and Indigenous peoples was "consistent

with, and part of, the Western capitalist world strategy of continued domination over the people of Africa, Asia and Latin America.”³

Empire, however, can often appear as exceptional in US history. The term *empire* usually conjures images of a distant past, a relic of yesteryear, as implied by the lead definition in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: “Anything considered as or likened to a realm or domain having an absolute ruler, such as heaven, hell, the oceans, etc.” Medieval Europe comes to mind, with lavish palaces, fancy crowns, and royal battles. In his influential treatise *Imperialism*, originally published in 1917, V.I. Lenin radically renovated the concept for the twentieth century, arguing that imperialism represented “the monopoly stage of capitalism” dominated by “finance capital” and “the territorial division of the whole world among the greatest capitalist powers.” From a different vantage point, the economic motive behind imperial expansion likewise shaped the influential Wisconsin School of US diplomatic history. Writing critically of the US empire in the 1950s and 1960s, when anticommunism—aligned with white supremacy and heteropatriarchy—haunted academia, William Appleman Williams, Walter LaFeber, Thomas J. McCormick, and others stressed US diplomatic efforts to expand capitalist markets, an interpretive framework that emphasized the “informal” essence of the US empire. The United States was accordingly an empire, but seemingly an exceptional empire, supposedly in search of markets, not territorial conquest. The insistence on the “informal,” presumably in opposition to “formal” empires, produced confusing geographies and chronologies that cumulatively, if unintentionally, naturalized “continental” expansion, cleansed generations of genocidal violence, and obsessed over singular “overseas” moments like the Spanish-American War.⁴

Reckoning with empire necessitates thinking against the nation, beyond the national myths of America. In her critique of modern liberalism, Lisa Lowe reminds us of the colonial world in which national histories of progress materialized. The simplification and the parochialization of the past, she argues, rendered invisible the subordination and exploitation of colonized and dispossessed peoples, whose labor and other resources had produced the conditions of possibility for conceptions of the universal human with liberties and rights but whose own freedoms were denied and exempted by liberal philosophy. Race and gender enabled and nurtured those processes. Demands for political liberty in Europe and North America, Lowe observes astutely, translated into new forms of imperial sovereignty and security apparatuses in the colonies, all under the banner of advancing freedom. Empire, slavery,

and race were not exceptions to the central tenets of liberal freedom: political emancipation through citizenship in a nation-state and economic independence through free labor and free trade. They set the stage for individual rights, declared universally but conceived and practiced provincially. Imperial sovereignty, chattel slavery, and white supremacy made liberal democracy imaginable, even as more recent celebrations of diversity have whitewashed that history into the “multicultural” nation. US nationalist historical narratives, where the colonial era evokes nostalgia for the thirteen British colonies and where all Americans or their forebears appear as “immigrants,” are not merely inaccurate representations of the past. They are acts of violence that coerce historical amnesia and national assimilation.⁵

In recent years, when the scale of imperial claims and state violence has reached unprecedented heights, the term *empire* has made a comeback. Some right-wing scholars continue to extol empire to glorify colonial misdeeds of the past and the present, unabashedly and unironically equating the US empire with “democracy, capitalism, and freedom.”⁶ More common, at least among US historians, have been efforts to disavow empire, to suggest its inapplicability to most periods of US history, more often than not by recycling the notion of informal domination without territorial rule. It then somehow becomes possible to interpret history without making “a judgment about the malign or benign consequences of empire” or to claim the “territories” on behalf of American “mainlanders” (yet again).⁷ Those subjected to the US empire’s brutal violence could not afford the luxury of weighing its benevolence and malevolence. “While bombs rain down on us and cruise missiles skid across the skies,” Arundhati Roy noted in 2003, “we know that contracts are being signed, patents are being registered, oil pipelines are being laid, natural resources are being plundered, water is being privatized, and George Bush is planning to go to war against Iraq.” That was empire, she said, “this obscene accumulation of power, this greatly increased distance between those who make the decisions and those who have to suffer them.” In my search for a concise definition of empire that could encompass different historical moments, I could find none more precise and expansive than Roy’s piercing words.⁸

Beyond definitions, reckoning with empire is fundamentally a historical project, a search for radical, alternative pasts. To commemorate the United States as a “nation of immigrants”—so habitual, so toxic—is to be complicit in its racial and imperial project, to discount Indigenous peoples’ and Black people’s struggles against empire and slavery and to

justify the mass violence of the US empire. History should be about disrupting and defamiliarizing what we thought we knew about the past, to open up new possibilities in our collective knowledge and in our collective politics. To contest teleological and nationalist understandings of history, Lowe calls for “a *past conditional temporality*,” arguing that “it is possible to conceive the past, not as fixed or settled, not as inaugurating the temporality into which our present falls, but as a configuration of multiple contingent possibilities, all present, yet not inevitable.” That project, she continues, can drive us to see “other conditions of possibility that were vanquished by liberal political reason and its promises of freedom” and “to open those conditions to pursue what might have been.” Roy likewise urges us to use our radical imagination. “Our strategy should be not only to confront Empire but to lay siege to it,” she proposed. “To deprive it of oxygen. To shame it. To mock it. With our art, our music, our literature, our stubbornness, our joy, our brilliance, our sheer relentlessness—and our ability to tell our own stories. Stories that are different from the ones we’re being brainwashed to believe.”⁹

Menace to Empire is my attempt to tell a different story, a history that presents peoples in and from Asia as racialized and radicalized subjects of the US empire, not as immigrants aspiring to become Americans. That history was part of an ongoing process of claiming and contesting imperial sovereignty that has made the modern world. Although I refer to the US empire over and over, I do not mean to reify a political authority that it has claimed over and over. Absolute sovereignty has never existed; it has always been claimed and contested. In that respect, I am invoking an obsolete use of *empire*, an intransitive verb until the nineteenth century. (The US military *empired* over us.) To read the verb behind the noun is to recognize an empire’s instability, incoherence, and constructedness.¹⁰ At the same time, we need to identify the United States for what it is and what it has always been, because it is the recognition of that thing—the US empire, a modified noun, so real, so violent—that can make us feel awakened, enraged, and politicized. In studying how colonized subjects based in and moving to or through the Philippines, Hawai‘i, and the Pacific Coast of North America engaged the US empire, I mean to illustrate how they pursued a politics, a world, against and beyond empire. It is a story of how they mocked and shamed the US empire, all the while suffering under its wrath.

If reckoning with empire compels us to think radically and historically, securing empire rests on butchering history with abandon to conceal its colonial traces. Rallying around euphemistic terms to rationalize

state violence speciously freed the US empire from the bounds of history. The United States was not killing people to subject them to colonial rule; it was engaging in acts of “pacification” to liberate them toward democracy. In US military parlance, pacification came to be increasingly rooted in counterinsurgency, a mode of warfare supposedly different from conventional conflicts. As the US empire rebranded itself as the last superpower, counterinsurgency seemingly took on greater urgency. More than ever, US military personnel required training as “nation builders” and ruthless “warriors,” as a field manual instructed in 2006, always “ready to be greeted with either a handshake or a hand grenade.” An enemy could be an ally; an ally could be an enemy. Counterinsurgency had to deal with both scenarios to fight “insurgents” who resorted to “all available tools—political (including diplomatic), informational (including appeals to religious, ethnic, or ideological beliefs), military, and economic—to overthrow the existing authority.” Counterinsurgents had to respond in kind, except toward an opposite end, to “use all instruments of national power to sustain the established or emerging government and reduce the likelihood of another crisis emerging.” Collapsing and delegitimizing insurgents across time and space, the field manual was inherently antihistorical, but it was littered with historical references that erased and glorified the US empire, beginning with the pacification of “the Philippine Insurrection.”¹¹

While US military leaders might have seen their mission, however chimerically, in a wider historical landscape of colonial rule and anticolonial struggles, academic scholars of national security have tended to preclude histories of empire altogether. National security—the signature emblem of the atomic age that was at once a discourse, an ideology, a policy, and an institution—ostensibly arose from the ashes of World War II. Writing in 1966 when the study of national security appeared to be cohering into an academic field, P.G. Bock and Morton Berkowitz attributed the formation to “two major changes in the international environment,” namely “the atmosphere of urgency generated by the unrelenting stress of the cold war and the emergence of a fabulous new technology of violence.” Not unlike counterinsurgency, that context made outright war “a self-defeating policy alternative,” forcing military officials and “civilian experts” to look for “methods of conflict containment and conflict resolution.” Bock and Berkowitz proposed a definition of national security that has endured: “*the ability of a nation to protect its internal values from external threats.*” Consumed by US relations with western Europe to contain “Soviet aggression,” those

studying US national security accordingly sought to identify “national interests,” “domestic core values,” and “foreign threats.” The preoccupation with transatlantic alliances naturalized nation-states and the “international” system that elided and supplanted histories of colonialism.¹² By tracing the colonial origins of the US national security state across the Pacific before World War II, *Menace to Empire* suggests the need to deconstruct the entire artifice of national security.

TRANSPACIFIC TRACES

When Alex Hing claimed a revolutionary pan-Asian identity in 1970, he was part of a movement that aspired to forge a collective identity beyond the nation that gave birth to Ethnic Studies and Asian American Studies. In most articulations, the Asian American movement was an unapologetically radical project, committed to democratizing higher education, to producing new forms of knowledge, and to critiquing the US empire, particularly its war in Southeast Asia. As Filipino students at San Francisco State College stated, “We seek . . . simply to function as human beings, to control our own lives. . . . So we have decided to fuse ourselves with the masses of Third World people, which are the majority of the world’s peoples, to create, through struggle, a new humanity, a new humanism, a New World Consciousness, and within that context collectively control our own destinies.”¹³ While Asian American activists looked to a revolutionary future across the Pacific and the world, the field of Asian American Studies had to wrestle with a longer intellectual pedigree that had cast anti-Asian racism, the “Oriental Problem,” within an entrenched, nationalist foundation. In the first half of the twentieth century, a legion of social scientists located anti-Asian racism in the minds and votes of white workers, whose socioeconomic insecurities, foreign sensibilities, and southern origins had led them to demand racial exclusion. For those academics, the Chinese and the Japanese after them were misunderstood, misrepresented, and betrayed by the “nation of immigrants,” whose core value was presumably its immanent capacity for inclusion.¹⁴

In *Menace to Empire*, I look for a revolutionary past across the Pacific, a past hardly visible in a sea of historical narratives promoting national inclusion and renouncing racial exclusion. Over the past half century, Asian Americanists and US historians have tended to retain and reinforce the fundamental assumptions of their liberal progenitors, reclaiming and proclaiming our American roots, as if the exclusion of Asian workers and the incarceration of Japanese Americans were