

Introduction: Narratives of American Colonization and Imperialism

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Just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography. That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings.

—Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (7)

A convergence of crises in 2020 has revealed a number of deep systemic contradictions in the United States. The already ailing American polity has had to hold out in the face of pandemic-induced precarity, the explosive frustration of the structurally disadvantaged, and an ensuing schism of virtually all levels of American society. In the midst of this climate of uncertainty, in what was one of the longest and most embattled presidential elections in US history, the specters of imperialism and colonialism haunting the country have taken center stage in the political theater. On the one hand, the nomination of Deb Haaland, a Native American woman, to the position of Secretary of the Interior, as well as the election of a record number of Native Americans to Congress, are taken to announce the beginning of the end of Native oppression (Lakhani). In battleground states such as Arizona and Wisconsin, Native voters played a key role in turning these states blue, thereby contributing decidedly to the victory of Joe Biden (Brave NoiseCat). However, there is undoubtedly still much reparative work to be done. Voter turnout in Native communities remained lower than in any other ethnic group, due in large part to several community-wide handicaps, such as lack

of Internet access, long travel times to register or vote, lack of access to transportation, intimidation at polling stations, and language barriers (Ferguson-Bohnee). These are lingering symptoms of a long history of Native American annihilation, suppression, disenfranchisement, and pressure to assimilate. Although this history has been acknowledged, the process of undoing its harms is decidedly flagging.

Similarly, looking beyond the nation's borders, it cannot be said that the United States has taken a more even-handed approach to diplomacy. One only needs to consider the uninterrupted line of wars waged or assisted in over the past decades, the ongoing conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, or Yemen, and the permanent military installations that the United States still employs across the world. The inward turn represented by the Trump administration's 'America First' policy appeared to run counter to this long-standing American tradition of 'world policing.' Compared to the Obama administration, however, itself far from peaceful, there was an increase in the number of drone strikes around the world under Trump (Ackerman), alongside a rhetorical shift in justification that appealed to national instead of international interests. It remains to be seen whether President Biden's promised return to 'normalcy' will entail a continuation of the Obama era's heavily interventionist style of foreign policy. The nomination of Antony Blinken, Deputy Secretary of State in the last years of the Obama administration, to the position of Secretary of State certainly seems to suggest as much. In any case, it is imperative, following Said, to remain attentive to both the symbolic and the material aspects of power—particularly when apparent gains made on the symbolic level are implied to offset continuing practices of domination on the material level.

For the fourteenth issue of *aspeers*, we called for papers on "Narratives of American Colonization and Imperialism," inviting graduate students at European universities to "explore the United States' long history and contemporary culture of colonial violence." As this headline indicates, contributors were asked to engage as much with the symbolic structures of colonization and imperialism—the ways in which these historical processes have been narrativized and fashioned into myth—as the material practices they signify. In the course of this introduction, we will outline the perennial debate concerning 'American empire' that informs this year's contributions and, more broadly, contemporary academia as a whole. How do we make sense of American imperialism and colonization? In what ways, by whom,

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and to what ends has American empire been narrativized historically as well as in our present juncture? And how is resistance to the discourses and practices of American imperialism conceptualized?

In the wake of decolonizing efforts in the Global South and the end of the Cold War, theorizing imperialism—the process of building and maintaining an empire—changed considerably. This happened partly due to the emergence of postcolonialism as a paradigm of critical inquiry into past and present hegemonic configurations. Whereas an empire has generally been defined as “a large, composite, multi-ethnic or multinational political unit, usually created by conquest,” scholarship conceives of colonized territories as “[a]ll distant areas subject to political rule or control by other, mostly European, states” (Howe 30, 26). Postcolonial studies has acted, in recent decades, as a field beneath which to subsume a wide array of academic work—from literary theory to social history—concerned with “virtually any aspect of colonization, from the Early Modern or pre-colonial period of European exploration of the globe up to the present day” (Buchanan 385). Specifically, recent discourses on colonialism, building, most notably, on works of Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha, have paid increasing attention to the ambivalence and hybridity of cultural practices in a shared and often contested intermediary space where multiple cultures coexist (Barry 195).

Influenced by these trans- and postnational perspectives, research coming from within American studies has offered important critiques of prevailing reductivist notions of imperialism. Instead of offering a binary distinction between an empire’s “dominant centre and subordinate [...] peripheries” (Howe 30) and focusing exclusively on the role of military or economic power, postcolonial scholarship has pointed out the complex interrelations between the imperial hegemon and its subject, shaping the identities of both colonizer and colonized. As Amy Kaplan argued in 1993, “imperialism as a political or economic process abroad is inseparable from the social relations and cultural discourses of race, gender, ethnicity, and class at home” (16). Prompted by Said, who shows how ‘high’ literary discourse in nineteenth-century Britain served to mask imperial anarchy (157-58), as well as by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, who describe present-day empire as a “*decentered* and *detritorializing* apparatus of rule” (xii), Kaplan specifies imperialism as a “network of power relations that changes over space and time and is riddled with instability, ambiguity, and disorder, rather than as a monolithic

system of domination” (*Anarchy* 14-15). The meaning of imperialism should, therefore, be understood as contingent on social and historical conditions, manifesting itself in multiple and contradictory modes of hegemony.

The close link between literary and postcolonial theory points to the centrality of narrative to imperialism not only in literary representations but, more broadly, as a cultural, social, and political form of sense-making. While, as Said illustrates, “the main battle in imperialism is over land,” narratives have negotiated “who owned the land, who had the right to settle and work on it, who kept it going, who won it back, and who now plans its future” (xii-xiii). Apart from justifying foreign domination, narratives function to construct ‘home’ and ‘nation.’ Understanding colonial narrativization as a meaning-making strategy in the shaping of American identity, Kaplan argues that it works to draw the line between foreign and domestic spaces (“Left Alone” 3-5). The development of white identity in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in particular, provided means and motive for the colonization of the continent and, later, overseas territories (Rowe 8). Narratives of exceptionalism claiming US supremacy and denying US imperialism have helped to reinforce both American nationhood and global hegemony. Thus, while constructing difference, imperial narratives simultaneously try to resolve the tension between “national particularism and international universalism,” which, in the end, only serves to demonstrate an underlying contradiction (Kaplan, *Anarchy* 16).

The history of the United States, A. G. Hopkins has recently argued, can be divided into three acts: colony, colonizer, and empire (ch. 1); each has been expressed in narratives that constructed as well as legitimated identity and purpose. Even though the emergence of the United States as a superpower is deeply embedded in the broader process of globalization that has swept the world over the past five hundred years (ch. 1), American politics have driven that development from within as much as external factors have. John Winthrop exhorted the Puritans of Massachusetts to build “a city upon a hill,” a community steeped in “Christian charity,” and sought to spread that ideology (qtd. in van Engen). The United States’ colonial project was part of the very fabric of the American nation-state, with Jefferson and Washington both spinning yarns of empire in the post-Revolution years and thereby paving the way for the bloody march of Manifest Destiny (Onuf 57). As their dreams of grandeur were taken up, the encirclement, enclosure, and erasure of Native Americans became a national calling.

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Developing into an industrialized powerhouse in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the United States expanded and consolidated its military presence around the globe over the following century. At the same time, European empires, most prominently Great Britain, witnessed a progressive decline. As a result, transnational political dynamics shifted dramatically in favor of the United States. In response to a series of Red Scares at home and revolutions abroad, a latent American fear of communism became something of a creed, manifesting itself as the basis of postwar foreign policy-making (Olson and Roberts 25). Domino Theory, the fear of communism's accelerating spread, informed much of American political practice during the Cold War and was invoked as justification for military interventions in Southeast Asia, Latin America, and Africa, as well as the permanent occupation of Europe (25). The lasting influence of these interventions is seen and felt to this day: in Germany, for instance, in the high number and importance of US Army garrisons across the country (Knight), as well as in the enduring economic and cultural rifts between 'old' and 'new' federal states.

In the twenty-first century, the story of American empire has been rearticulated in competing ways. Regardless of who is doing the narrating, it is clear that the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq in the wake of the September 11 attacks announced the start of a new chapter. For Arundhati Roy, writing in 2003, Noam Chomsky and others who were describing the United States in terms of empire were but "a small band of individuals fighting a whole industry" (220). But change was already underway. Google Ngram Viewer indicates that, by this time, usage of the terms 'American empire' and 'American colonialism' had already begun to surge. Of course, rehearsing older exceptionalist narratives, many were invoking these notions only to deny that the United States had a stake in either of them—so, indeed, went the official line, presented initially by Dick Cheney and subsequently taken up by Barack Obama (Nexon and Wright 253; Obama). Some conservative intellectuals, such as Niall Ferguson, have instead held that not only does the United States constitute an empire, but "this might not be wholly bad" (vii). And, at the opposite end of the political spectrum, the dominant position, typified by Chomsky and Roy, takes the classification of US foreign policy as imperial(ist) as grounds for a scathing moral critique.

Within this critical tradition, a great deal of emphasis has been placed on the 'soft' aspects of imperialist power—"the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments" (Nye x). This has especially been

understood as working through the vectors of cultural and economic globalization. American culture has certainly been attractive, strongly influencing daily life in Germany and the rest of Europe, from food to media to language, and, of course, to academia. But it would be wrong to presume that this is always just a one-way process. As Donald Pease, who is, along with Kaplan, a notoriously harsh critic of exceptionalist mythmaking, pointed out in the 2018 issue of *aspeers*: During the Cold War, “Europeans felt they had to emulate American models of research, critique, or criticism,” but “[t]oday, the relationship is much more reciprocal” (126).

American economic ideas, too, have been successful exports. The thought of the Chicago school of economics has been implemented across the world, whether by violent overthrow, as in Chile, or through the allure of loans from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Tied to the powers of creditorship, fiscal forms of control have led to the ‘structural adjustment’ of national economies along neoliberal lines—in effect remaking the world in the image of capitalist modernity. According to Vijay Prashad, supranational monetary institutions lie at the heart of a new geopolitical strategy, opening doors for American investors and building quasi-colonial relationships between the United States and the “darker nations” of the Global South (231-32). James Petras and Henry Veltmeyer would even go so far as to ‘unmask’ globalization as imperialism itself—the project of an “emerging class of transnational [but predominantly US-based] capitalists” (8).

Other scholars have suggested that the United States may once have been, but is no longer, properly imperial. Not long into the Iraq invasion, as the US military’s omniscience was being called into question for all to see, Michael Mann declared the United States the “first failed empire of the twenty-first century.” But it is Hardt and Negri’s account of a ‘decentered Empire’ which has been perhaps the most influential articulation of this agnostic discourse on American global power: “Imperialism is over”—“*the United States does not, and indeed no nation-state can today, form the centre*” (xiv, xiii-xiv). Trumpist protectionism and isolationist rhetoric amid a global rising tide of nationalist movements, as well as the ascent of China as a rival world power, have given some weight to this position. Donald Trump’s 2020 threat to withdraw a third of roughly 36,000 US troops stationed in Germany may be taken as paradigmatic in this regard. The fact, however, that the move was welcomed by a variety of oppositional voices, but harshly condemned by the governing coalition as a risk to the stability of Europe (Oltermann), speaks to

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the persistent and controversial imbrication of American military power into transnational political contexts.

In spite of its critics, then, imperialism remains a popular conceptual tool with which to understand—and rally resistance against—what is experienced as undue American interference in the self-determination of peoples around the globe. An understanding of it as such has strengthened resistance movements from Global North to South, ideological East to West, challenging American empire, condemning and defying it, both violently and nonviolently. The Vietnam War, to name but one of the most prominent instances, was met by decades-long opposition, both on the ground in Vietnam and on American soil. It gave life, in the form of the antiwar movement, to “the largest and most persistent organized opposition to any military conflict in US history” (Hall 674). Long marginalized communities, through groups such as the Black Panther Party or the American Indian Movement, staged armed and unarmed protests against the war, seeing their struggle against oppression as linked to that of the Vietnamese people (Bloom and Martin 41; Cronin 150). Not least, the events served to catalyze solidarity around the world. Today, anti-imperialist and anti-globalist movements have coalesced around the World Social Forum, launched in 2001. As Francis Shor writes in *Dying Empire*, the Forum, “[a]s a global space for the articulation of emancipatory grassroots democracy, [...] offered a countervailing vision of ‘one no and many yeses’ that clearly challenged US political-military and political-economic global hegemony” (24).

It is unsurprising, given the proliferation of imperial and counter-imperial narratives, that literary narration negotiates the ideological divide. While US imperialism has “challenge[d] the ‘relative autonomy’ of literary culture and often employ[ed] it directly to achieve economic, social, and political ends,” as John Carlos Rowe elaborates, “the very flexibility and adaptability of literary discourse can be used to challenge the[se] ideological purposes” (13-14)—the “power to narrate” cuts both ways (Said xiii). In the United States, the insurgent literary tradition reaches back, Rowe contends, as far as Herman Melville’s *Typee*, published in 1840 (17). Over the twentieth century and leading into the twenty-first, the corpus of literature reckoning critically with American imperialism has grown exponentially—there certainly has been no lack of material for authors writing in this vein. By today, the ‘genres’ of postcolonial prose, poetry, and play have become a staple in high school and university curricula, from the diverse work of the

Harlem Renaissance to the provocative narratives of James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, and Tommy Orange. The insurgent sentiment embodied by this literary tradition is perhaps best conveyed by Arundhati Roy, herself an acclaimed writer of fiction who has critiqued US imperialism, albeit from the former colonial ‘periphery’ of India: “Our strategy should be not only to confront empire but to lay siege to it. To deprive it of oxygen. To shame it. To mock it. With our art, our music, our literature, our stubbornness, our joy, our sheer relentlessness—and our ability to tell our own stories” (226). We might add: with our scholarship—which is, after all, simply another kind of storytelling.

ACADEMIC CONTRIBUTIONS

So far, this introduction has merely sought to provide an entryway into the complexity endemic to an issue entitled “Narratives of American Colonization and Imperialism.” Where we have opted to prioritize breadth of scope over analytical specificity, this year’s three featured articles fill in the detail, showcasing the range in which contemporary graduate scholarship in American studies probes into questions of US imperialism and anti-imperialism.

In “‘A Thing Apart’: Sonnet Poetics and Radical Politics in Claude McKay’s *Harlem Shadows*,” Andrew Wildermuth establishes Claude McKay’s poetry collection *Harlem Shadows* as a complex antiracist political project, arguing against critics who have claimed that the Harlem Renaissance poet’s use of the English sonnet tradition diminishes his poetry’s anti-colonial message. According to Wildermuth, McKay’s specific use of traditional poetic forms instead demonstrates an ironically profound understanding of racism in colonial spaces—the sonnet is, indeed, an inseparable and fundamental part of his texts’ anti-colonial politics. While situating his close readings of the poems “Subway Wind” and “Outcast” in the context of criticism such as that of Winston A. James, Edward Kamau Brathwaite, and William J. Maxwell, Wildermuth orients his analysis around the “currents” at play within McKay’s work, its images, and metaphors of colonial spaces (17). Wildermuth concludes that McKay “forg[es] new discursive worlds and world orders as he reorganizes colonial constraint toward liberatory action in the grammars of the sonnet form” (29).

Vincent Veerbeek takes up the inward look at American practices of ‘domestic’ colonization. In “To (L)earn Their Place in Society: Student Scrip and a Capitalist

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Education at Sherman Institute,” he presents the use of paper money—‘scrip’—as a didactic tool for assimilating Native American students to American ways of life at the Sherman Institute in California during the 1930s. Drawing on extensive archival research, Veerbeek analyzes how and to what effect the Sherman Institute’s Native American students were made to engage in the school’s scrip economy. He argues that spending habits were enforced by the school’s administrators to practically teach aspects of capitalist ideology, such as consumerism, to young Native Americans. Due to its immersive nature, Veerbeek illustrates, this pedagogy was successful in preparing Native Americans for participation in the American market economy. However, by also weaving in the occluded private histories of Sherman’s students who preferred to ‘turn the power’ against colonial authority, Veerbeek shows “that their participation in the capitalist dollar economy has historically been neither straightforward nor self-evident” (50).

“‘Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story’: Founders Chic and Narrative Awareness in Lin-Manuel Miranda’s *Hamilton*” by Emma Charlotte Weiher offers an innovative perspective on a contemporary musical that has often been thought to peddle the imperial myth of American exceptionalism. Frequently situated within the self-congratulatory genre known as Founders Chic, *Hamilton* has been criticized for omitting the shortcomings of the Revolutionary War and unapologetically celebrating the supposed heroism of the Founding Fathers. Building on assessments by Elissa Harbert and Matthew Brown, Weiher contends, however, that *Hamilton* deliberately engages in the glorification of the United States’ origin story in order to expose the malleability of hegemonic narratives, such as exceptionalism and unchecked individualism. Through its self-conscious storytelling, the titular Alexander Hamilton’s historiographic position is rendered porous, revealing the subjectiveness of revisionist works in the Founders Chic genre. Furthermore, Weiher posits that *Hamilton*’s historiography bridges academic and activist discourses, highlighting the necessity of self-conscious historical mythmaking as a way to effectively speak “through the past in order to express and contextualize the present” (73), as evidenced by *Hamilton*’s ongoing participation in political activism and social movements.

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We have sought to emphasize in this introduction that the United States’ history of imperialism and colonization is not merely history but a contested story whose

ending has yet to be written. What can be said here is that it is, at heart, a ghost story—one whose ghosts are all around us today. They can be sensed in a presidential cabinet jointly to be occupied by a Native American and a liberal hawk like Antony Blinken, and in another administration’s simultaneous perpetuation and disavowal of intervention by brute force and market promise. More generally, they are experienced as deepening inequalities, expressed as outrage, and encountered with resentment. If it is to weather these tempestuous times, the United States will do well to heed the advice of Jacques Derrida, who once wrote that we must “learn to live with ghosts, in the upkeep, the conversation, the company, or the companionship, in the commerce without commerce of ghosts. To live otherwise, and better. No, not better, but more justly. But *with them*” (qtd. in Shaw 9).

As Kimberlé Crenshaw suggested in the late 1980s, a good place to start engaging with these ghosts may be by “addressing the needs and problems of those who are most disadvantaged”—those groups who have been made to carry the burden of empire—and by “restructuring and remaking the world where necessary” (167). After all, the world has been remade once already. Why should it not be remade a second time? Our *aspeers* authors write of such communities, which continue to be ravaged by disadvantage, placing them at the focus of attention. Similarly, Crenshaw implores us to develop a manifold attentiveness to the intersecting plights of those overlooked within the heartland and, in extrapolation, at the farthest corners of the empire. ‘America First’ cannot be the watchword of such a project. Major global players are called to hold themselves accountable for their past and present control of bodies around the world—at the juncture of the COVID-19 pandemic, by providing no-strings-attached debt relief to the Global South, reforming supranational organizations, and by making vaccines accessible to everyone rather than merely the privileged. Now would be the chance for the incoming president of the United States to initiate lasting change for the better, at once working to reduce the nation’s historic stake in geopolitics and helping to repair some of the damage it has, at the very least, co-authored. In engaging critically with the repercussions of this damage, this latest issue of *aspeers* invites readers to revisit narratives and counter-narratives of colonization and explore different sites of imperial struggle.

To conclude, we would like to acknowledge those who have helped this fourteenth issue of *aspeers* come together. First and foremost, we want to thank our

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graduate contributors, who have been open to all of our suggestions and nothing but cooperative; we wish them all the best in their future endeavors, academic or otherwise. Furthermore, we much appreciate the assistance provided to us by founding editor Dr. Sebastian M. Herrmann and by Anne Bertram; their technical expertise and help in running the backoffice have been vital. We also thank Sabine Sietina for her art contribution, her exuberance, and her critical eye. Finally, we applaud Katja Schmieder, Stefan Schubert, and Daniele Puccio; as editorial ‘mentors,’ they have been there with us every step of the way while still allowing this issue to truly become *our* project. Supporting us from early-morning paper discussions to late-night line editing, they have gently ensured that we stayed true to *aspeers*’s tradition of academic professionalism. Their achievements are all the greater in view of the pandemic, which has disrupted all of our lives and thrown up one roadblock after another in the scramble to get this issue published. To have been part of this extraordinary project with them has been a privilege and a pleasure.

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