

## How Not to Write the History of U.S. Empire

Historical scholarship on U.S. overseas colonialism in the twentieth century, a crucial subset of a broader literature on U.S. empire, has blossomed with unprecedented vitality over the past two decades. Working on U.S. colonial rule and military occupation in the Philippines, Hawai'i, Guam, Samoa, Puerto Rico, the Panama Canal, Haiti, the Virgin Islands, and other locations under military-colonial control, from positions in U.S. history, American Studies, Southeast Asian history, Pacific history, and Caribbean history, scholars have produced a stunning variety of works that have complicated familiar narratives, uncovered the voices of previously silenced agents, excavated neglected events and processes, altered conventional timelines, and brought new analytic categories to bear on studied and unstudied pasts. Thanks to this scholarship, historians know more than ever about colonialism's complex impacts on the lands and people that came under U.S. control, the specific operations of a diverse array of colonial regimes, as well as and the many and conflicting roles played by colonized subjects in shaping U.S. impositions (resisting and delimiting, facilitating and enabling, initiating and enacting). Their research is wide-ranging, covering: the dialectical relationships between asymmetrical sovereignties and exceptionalizing ideologies of race, religion, gender, and sexuality; colonialism's political-economic operations, from modes of commodity production to regimes of labor discipline to systems of financial control; Americans' ideological, institutional, and material exchanges with other colonial regimes; the deep legacies of Spanish colonial history in shaping U.S. colonialism's outlooks, patterns, and institutional structures; and the limits of U.S. colonial power as it confronted popular and elite resistance, institutional dysfunction, environmental obstacles, and inter-imperial challenges.

They have also advanced the project of unraveling the formidable, counter-productive distinction between "formal" and "informal" empire by revealing both the spectrum of sovereignties that lay between "dependency" and "independence" in U.S. imperial practice, and the profound reliance of U.S. commercial expansion and military projection—the usual stuff of "informal empire"—upon U.S. overseas colonies, as infrastructural and commercial anchors, military platforms, and institutional and ideological laboratories. Finally, these scholars have seriously challenged the spatial frames with which many U.S. historians have confined overseas colonialism to a distant, fleeting

(and sometimes forgettable) “out there,” revealing the myriad ways that U.S. colonial empire came “home” to the metropolitan United States in the form of migrating colonial subjects, circulating commodities, refluxing innovations, and new, colonizing modes of nationalist, racialized, and gendered ideology. Without subordinating these histories to the requirements of U.S. national history, they have transformed the historiography of the United States in the world by insisting on and demonstrating the centrality of U.S. colonialism to twentieth-century U.S. history generally.<sup>1</sup>

This scholarship’s depth, richness, and sophistication make the field Daniel Immerwahr depicts in his 2016 essay “The Greater United States,” difficult to recognize.<sup>2</sup> Adapted from his SHAFR Bernath Lecture Prize address and published in *Diplomatic History*, the piece is an odd summons which calls upon U.S. historians to pay attention—finally—to what the author depicts as the still-neglected history of U.S. overseas colonies. Immerwahr’s essay is worth highlighting as an example of modes of thinking about U.S. empire that, despite many breakthroughs, stubbornly persistent.

The article’s main lines of argument are as follows. The United States’ post-1898 “formal” colonies have not been adequately studied by U.S. historians writing in “mainstream” settings, while historians of U.S. empire have long over-emphasized “informal empire” at the expense the United States’ “formal” empire. These territories and the people who lived there ought to be viewed as part of the “domestic” history of the United States. In framing the colonies this way, historians should follow the lead of early twentieth-century Americans, some of whom viewed them as part of a cartographic imaginary of “Greater America.” Approaching post-1898 history in this manner reframes nineteenth-century continental expansion as part of a longer, more global history of irregular “territory.” The United States’ overseas “territories” should be seen as significant, to historians and others, because if one adds up all the populations governed by the United States in the mid-twentieth century—not only the island colonies, but military bases and post-World War II occupation zones—they are impressive when compared to both other modern global empires and U.S. “domestic” society as conventionally understood. While the “Greater United States” experienced a striking expansion during and immediately after World War II, equally striking was the United States’ “unprecedented” shedding of territory immediately afterwards. Embarking on the study of the “Greater United States” will enable

1. According to Proquest Dissertations, for example, since 2007 alone, there have been at least thirty-six dissertations completed which deal with U.S. colonialism and the Philippines, and at least twelve in which Philippine-American themes figure significantly alongside other cases. There have been at least fifteen dissertations completed which deal with U.S. colonialism and Puerto Rico during the same period. Similar scholarship exists for other U.S. overseas colonies discussed here.

2. Daniel Immerwahr, “The Greater United States: Territory and Empire in U.S. History,” *Diplomatic History* 40, no. 3 (2016): 373–91.

historians to move beyond the traditional, schoolhouse “logo map” that conventionally defines the nation.

Every one of these arguments is problematic, but the article is nonetheless instructive: in just under twenty pages, it condenses, repackages, and celebrates nearly all the major flawed assumptions that have compromised the historiography of U.S. overseas colonialism since its beginnings, even as it brands this perspective a bold, original, forward-looking conception of U.S. imperial historiography. Strangely, the essay’s principle interpretive moves are precisely those which the best of the last decade’s scholarship have rejected. But there may be something here for historians: a conversational, easy-to-digest model of exactly how they should not write histories of U.S. overseas colonies, U.S. empire, or the United States in the world.

In what follows, I will discuss the main problems with this piece and others, with an eye towards what historians might take away. Much of the critique that follows may be obvious to the many scholars doing innovative work on the history of the United States in the world. But the effort is worth making, among other reasons, because Immerwahr’s article reflects problematic assumptions that have a long history and remain in wide circulation. What follows, then, is offered in the hope that a discussion of this essay’s shortcomings, common to many past and present-day histories of U.S. empire, might shed light on questionable, long-standing, and prevalent historical practices and, through this critique, point towards more generative modes of inquiry.

The first problem is the conflation of U.S. colonialism with “empire.” Here Immerwahr’s essay rides a wave of faulty nomenclature and periodization that began with the opponents of U.S. overseas colonialism in the wake of 1898. For many early twentieth-century critics of U.S. overseas colonialism—the self-described “anti-imperialists”—the conquest and annexation of overseas colonies represented a great, tragic break-point, the time and place where an American “empire” began. Built to gather the movement’s multitudes—liberal Republicans, white supremacist Democrats, labor activists, Northern intellectuals—around a racialized, nationalist jeremiad, this definition of empire as limited to overseas territorial annexation was and is notable for its strategic narrowness. It wrote off indigenous dispossession, the Mexican-American War, territorial annexation in North America, gunboat diplomacy in East Asia and Latin America, and navalist competition, for example. “Imperialism” cast the post-1898 colonialist surge as a reversible lapse, an exception that proved the rule of peaceful, commercialist, republican expansion across and beyond North American space.

Rhetorically and conceptually, this reduction of U.S. empire to post-1898 overseas colonialism proved a generous gift to those seeking to legitimate and depoliticize most expressions of American global power in the twentieth century. “Empire” was just a chapter in the textbook, a fleeting “moment” in U.S. history amid other moments. Shrinking U.S. empire to an island in history was helped along by the fact that post-1898 U.S. colonialism involved actual islands.

Despite the intensifying, asymmetrical impacts of U.S. metropole and colony on each other, and the structural necessity of overseas colonies to other projects of U.S. global power, the post-1898 U.S. colonies were and are separated off, the historical and ethical partitions built from oceans.<sup>3</sup>

There were, importantly, formidable efforts to challenge apologetic definitions of empire. During the interwar period, pacifist, socialist, feminist, and Christian opponents of U.S. great-power politics, arms build-ups, and military-colonial interventionism in the Caribbean enlisted idioms of empire to make critical sense of a far broader swath of American foreign relations than the late-Victorian critics, and often did so in distinctly structuralist, anti-nationalist, and anti-exceptionalist ways.<sup>4</sup> Later, the Wisconsin School reframed U.S. history around a concept of “informal empire” that, while rigid and in some ways exceptionalist, gained critical and analytical power among other things from its decisive break with early twentieth century framings.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, as the result of self-conscious politics and terminological inertia, “empire” and “imperialism” continued to cleave tightest to U.S. histories involving the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Hawai‘i, Guam, Samoa, the Virgin Islands, and the Panama Canal Zone. Permitted relatively free rein in this terrain, “empire” remains contested elsewhere. Indeed, to a significant degree, the uncomplicated presence of “empire” in discussions of the post-1898 U.S. colonies helped produce its necessary absence elsewhere. (To be sure, this kind of selective outrage is also a common feature of other historiographies: the especially brutal, scandalized colonialism that normalizes the other, quieter ones; the flagrantly exploitative capitalist who draws indignation away from more prosaic systems of exploitation, etc.)

This narrow definition of “empire” as territorial control is extremely common among influential historians working in a number of fields, and writing over many decades. On some occasions, this definition is presented openly, as when Ernest May wrote in 1968, on the origins of post-1898 colonialism, that

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3. Immerwahr employs this narrow, territorial definition of empire but, unlike many of the scholars who use it, does not isolate U.S. empire to a temporally bounded “moment.”

4. On the interwar anti-imperialist milieu see, especially, Michael S. Thompson, *For God and Globe: Christian Internationalism in the United States between the Great War and the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY, 2015); Robert David Johnson, *The Peace Progressives and American Foreign Policy* (Cambridge, MA, 1995). Classic works from this era include Scott Nearing and Joseph Freeman, *Dollar Diplomacy: A Study in American Imperialism* (New York, 1925); Charles David Kepner, Jr., and Jay Henry Soothill, *The Banana Empire: A Case Study of Economic Imperialism* (New York, 1935).

5. Among the key works of the Wisconsin School are William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (Cleveland, OH, 1959); Walter LaFeber, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860–1898* (Ithaca, NY, 1963); Lloyd Gardner, *Economic Aspects of New Deal Diplomacy* (Madison, WI, 1964); Thomas J. McCormick, *China Market: America's Quest for Informal Empire, 1893–1901* (Chicago, IL, 1967); Marilyn Blatt Young, *The Rhetoric of Empire: American China Policy, 1895–1901* (Cambridge, MA, 1968). For an anthology dedicated to the Wisconsin School, see Lloyd Gardner, ed., *Redefining the Past: Essays in Diplomatic History in Honor of William Appleman Williams* (Corvallis, OR, 1986).

his book “deals with imperialism narrowly defined as direct territorial acquisition. . . .”<sup>6</sup> In other cases, the definition is implicit in the kinds of intervention that are included and excluded from the category. In a 2009 essay that argues against the applicability of “empire” to nearly all aspects of U.S. foreign policy, Jeremi Suri makes an exception for the post-1898 colonies. “Beyond this band of islands in the Caribbean and Pacific where Washington acted as a colonial power,” he writes, “the term empire cannot capture the complexities of American influence in a wider global arena encompassing China, Europe, and the Middle East, as well as other regions.”<sup>7</sup> In a recent, monumental interpretation of U.S. empire, A. G. Hopkins writes that “the United States . . . had an empire between 1898 and 1959,” its “insular empire,” but that after 1945, it “ceased to be an empire” and was, rather, a “world power without having territorial possessions.”<sup>8</sup>

Despite the durable hold of this narrow definition of empire among some scholars, by the early twenty-first century, the conditions of possibility for critical histories of U.S. global power that used empire for more subtle analytical purposes were emerging. The fading of nationalist-exceptionalist commitments among historians of the United States in the world; the United States’ unbounded, unilateralist military engagements after 9/11; debates about the United States’ disproportionate consumption of ecological resources and contribution to global climate catastrophe; and the conceptual impact of colonial and post-colonial criticism within U.S. history and American Studies have, for more and more scholars, made the need for a critical vocabulary—including a more agile language of empire but not hemmed in by it—entirely obvious.<sup>9</sup>

But not here. Indeed, the territorial definition of empire Immerwahr’s essay offers would have been recognizable to most mid-twentieth century U.S. diplomatic historians and, further back, to the anti-colonialists of 1898–1902. Immerwahr’s essay is mostly typical in committing this misstep, even as the interpretation arrives after significant scholarship has moved past it. In revealing the importance of the post-1898 overseas colonies to U.S. history, Immerwahr is going to—at long last—put “empire” back in U.S. history. Where the Wisconsin School, in foregrounding the pursuit of American commercial and military dominance, neglected “the empire”—the colonies—he is going to fill in the map.

6. Ernest May, *American Imperialism: A Speculative Essay* (New York, 1968), 15, fn. 13.

7. Jeremi Suri, “The Limits of American Empire: Democracy and Militarism in the Twentieth and Twentieth-First Centuries,” in *Colonial Crucible: Empire in the Making of the Modern American State*, eds. Alfred W. McCoy and Francisco A. Scarano (Madison, WI, 2009), 525.

8. A. G. Hopkins, *American Empire: A Global History* (Princeton, NJ, 2018), 31–32.

9. It is important to note that the language of empire during this period was not always, or even mostly, a language of critique. After 9/11, many commentators, especially neoconservatives, embraced the concept of American empire, calling upon the United States to abandon its ambivalence and denial and to develop a greater imperial self-consciousness. See, for example, Niall Ferguson, *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire* (New York, 2005).

A second problem involves Immerwahr's adoption of historical actors' categories as his own. Specifically, the essay argues prescriptively that American historians ought to see U.S.-governed spaces overseas as "domestic" to U.S. history because many Americans in the early twentieth century themselves represented these colonies as part of a "Greater America."<sup>10</sup> The essay's discussion of this term's usage and "Greater America" maps from the era is novel and compelling. It raises many questions, beyond the article's scope, that are worth asking: Who used this imagery, and who didn't? In what venues did it circulate, and not circulate? Was it publicly or privately debated or contested? How important was it, given its rise and fall between 1898 and 1917, and why exactly did it disappear? And where did it come from in the first place? Strikingly, the essay neglects the obvious reference-point of "Greater Britain," a gap that is remarkable given that it quotes a primary source which compares "Greater America" to "Greater Britain" explicitly.<sup>11</sup>

While historians clearly need to know much more about "Greater America" as an actor's category, the argument that historians should take their analytical cues from early twentieth century Americans is ill-advised. Immerwahr is quite explicit that the term "Greater America" (from which he develops his "Greater United States") is a phrase he takes from the "intellectually transformative" years following the conquest of the remnants of Spain's overseas empire. He nonetheless finds the conception worth reviving. Immerwahr is not alone among historians in turning, problematically, to historical actors' framings for his analysis. When circling around fraught questions of U.S. empire, for example, U.S. historians have for a long time, in effect, asked permission from the historical actors they studied. The United States was not or did not possess "an empire," they have argued, because most Americans did not imagine or talk about themselves or their country using the lexicon of empire. Similarly, for historians on the other side of this (endless, fruitless) debate, the U.S. can be said to have been or had "an empire" because some Americans, especially between the late eighteenth century and the Civil War, at the turn of the twentieth century, and in the wake of 9/11, employed this vocabulary affirmatively.<sup>12</sup>

This collapsing together of primary document and analytical frame is characteristic of larger problems facing U.S. foreign relations history, a field still struggling—unevenly—to decolonize itself intellectually from the U.S. national-security state and its modes of knowing and legitimating itself. Within this field and others like it, power systems in the past have traditionally been

10. It is worth making clear that, unlike many early twentieth-century employers of the term "Greater America," Immerwahr does not advocate any particular form of U.S. colonial or military intervention.

11. Citation of Archibald Colquhoun, *Greater America*, 253, in Immerwahr, "The Greater United States," 381.

12. On the terminological politics surrounding U.S. empire see, for example, Lisa Jarvinen, "US," in *Miseducation: A History of Ignorance-Making in America and Beyond*, ed. A. J. Angulo (Baltimore, MD, 2016), 217–43.

allowed to provide many of the key analytic terms with which they are understood historically. Take, for example, Suri's discussion of why "empire" is of almost no analytical utility to U.S. foreign relations historians. Again and again, he relies upon historical actors' self-descriptions and statements of their intentions to determine the kinds of categories historians should and should not use. He writes, for example, that early twentieth century foreign policy should not be collapsed into the term "empire" because of "the significance and enduring influence of the anti-empire thinking about democracy and war that guided the American state. . . ."<sup>13</sup> In other words, what historical actors (or, at least, certain historical actors) thought and said they were doing was, in fact, what they were actually doing. Immerwahr's reliance on early twentieth century writers is somewhat different: rather than taking past actors' statements of their intentions as descriptions of historical reality, he takes his analytical lead from inherited categories without critically questioning them. But both create and spin conceptual revolving doors between historical actor and historical analyst that many other scholars seek to interrupt.

The contrast with robustly critical historiographies, which insist on breaking with the past's dominant vocabularies in order to properly historicize them, is striking. Take, for example, gender and critical-race historiography. Gender historians do not wait for past patriarchs to use the language of "patriarchy" to figure out whether they actually lived in male-dominated societies. While many white supremacists in U.S. history did and do use "white supremacy" as a self-designation, historians of racism do not feel the need to consult them about whether the term is within bounds as they make sense of racializing institutions, practices, and ideologies. Many past and present capitalists are skittish about the term "capitalism" (with its ambivalent connotations, some of them critical and/or Marxist) and prefer more marketable euphemisms; this does not mean that historians do not get to study American capitalism. This strange permission-seeking around the vocabulary of empire indexes continuities between Cold War and "war on terror" ideologies, and historians' willing and unwitting complicity in them.

Immerwahr is right that historians could use an intellectual, cultural, and cartographic history of "Greater America." But historians will only be able to learn what they need to about "Greater America"—and numerous other terms—to the extent that they establish analytical distance between past and present worlds. To make sense of the concept and its inventors, scholars cannot, by definition, continue their work. To understand, in the present case, "Greater America" as a rhetorical and visual salvo in a historically-specific struggle over the boundaries of the United States—spatial, juridical, representational, racial—historians need to maintain an understanding of "inside" and "outside" that is in self-conscious tension with actors' definitions, and not derivative of them.

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13. Suri, "The Limits of American Empire," 524.

A third problem is what can be called the sovereignty blender. Having begun with a discussion of the post-1898 overseas U.S. colonies—"U.S. empire" as narrowly defined—the essay swoops back to the origins of North American continental expansion, reminding readers of the heterogeneity of U.S. political space from the nation's founding. This is a worthwhile note for any twentieth century historians who might reify the "logo map" United States. But the casual leap back to the earlier Euro-American conquest of North America, and later segue forward to the United States' late twentieth and early twenty first-century globally networked empire of bases, involves a shell game: the homogenizing of radically different political spaces and modes of empire-building into a multi-stage, overlapping sequence of irregular "territory." What glues Oklahoma, Puerto Rico, occupied Germany and Japan, and Diego Garcia awkwardly together is that they and other "territories" are made to represent a unified exception to reified, "regular" U.S. space. Where the essay's other problems are common to much of the scholarship on U.S. empire, this one is relatively distinct to this piece, at least as far as it includes the post-1945 era; a sweeping together of Western continental empire-building and post-1898 overseas colonial empire was common to an older scholarship on American "expansionism" that used this expansive, nebulous category to stress continuities and similarities between U.S. imperial projects across North America and beyond.<sup>14</sup>

Attempting to prove the significance of these overseas "territories" for the United States, Immerwahr adds up the population figures for all areas outside the continental United States that were under some kind of U.S. control in 1945. The differences between these cases dissolve into the pleasingly fungible abstraction of numbers and the amorphous, undefined category of "territory." In the interest of building towards something—could it be a simple majority?—Immerwahr tosses population chunks into a kind of historical food processor. At one point, the whirring blades strike an enabling caveat—"To occupy a country temporarily is obviously different from annexing it"—but it does nothing to impede their progress. Sure enough, when you liquefy together every place the United States asserted some kind of politico-military control in 1945 outside of the continental United States, it represents "51%" of the U.S. population as conventionally defined: the "Greater United States" statistically revealed. All it has taken is the flattening of a spectrum of sovereignties into a polarized dichotomy between irregular territory and "normal" political space.<sup>15</sup>

14. See, for example, Albert Weinberg, *Manifest Destiny: A Study of Nationalist Expansionism in American History* (Baltimore, MD, 1935); Richard W. Van Alstyne, *The Rising American Empire* (New York, 1974); Walter Nugent, *Habits of Empire: A History of American Expansionism* (New York, 2009).

15. It should be noted that the technique of homogenizing different sovereignties through uniform shading was a widespread practice among colonialist cartographers in many of the world's modern imperial systems, an assertion of possession through monochrome. For the British imperial case see, for example, Felix Driver, "In Search of the Imperial Map: Walter Crane and the Image of Empire," *History Workshop Journal* 69, no. 1 (2010): 146–57; Shu-chuan

In turn, the artificial inflation of a “Greater United States,” especially through the addition of the occupations of Germany and Japan, allows Immerwahr to paint a misleading portrait of the post-World War II period, one that foregrounds a dramatic “shedding” of territory. This skewed emphasis turns the least surprising dimension of post-World War II American power—that Germany and Japan were granted formal independence and that the United States did not permanently take over additional territory on the scale of entire countries—into a major story. Given the clear priorities of postwar U.S. policymakers (global access to markets, resources and military bases, and dominance over alliance structures and multilateral institutions), a crisis of European colonialism, and key American officials’ increasingly sharp sense of overseas territorial control as retrograde, unnecessary and politically costly overhead, the fact that the United States did not hold onto or annex newly-occupied areas after 1945 is not counterintuitive or in need of elaborate explanation. Furthermore, the article’s emphasis on the significance of post-World War II territorial handovers channels apologetic narratives that date back to the mid-twentieth century itself. How, for example, are readers to square Immerwahr’s claim that the United States “set the Philippines free” after World War II with the 1946 Bell Trade Act, which required that the newly “independent” Philippines grant the United States preferential tariffs and Americans “parity rights” in the exploitation of Philippine natural resources; the 1947 Military Bases Agreement, which required the Philippines to allow the United States to retain its bases in the islands and use them as “required by military necessity”; or the violent suppression of Filipino radicals by U.S.-sponsored counterinsurgency?<sup>16</sup>

The piece also does injustice to the intellectual labor of scholars studying U.S. colonies within former and present-day U.S. colonies and the U.S. metropole.<sup>17</sup> While the essay concedes there are many histories of twentieth-century U.S. overseas colonies—indeed, an “accelerating avalanche” of them—Immerwahr argues that the colonies have not received sufficient attention in “mainstream” narratives.<sup>18</sup> He asks, for example, why Puerto Rican nationalist Pedro Albizu Campos is “not part of mainstream U.S. historiography?”<sup>19</sup> What exactly is going on with Immerwahr’s use of the term “mainstream,” with its unobtrusive marking of insider and outsider? Who is on the outside of “mainstream” history and why doesn’t their scholarship really count? Here the

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Yan, “Mapping Knowledge and Power: Cartographic Representations of Empire in Victorian Britain,” *Eur.America* 37, no. 1 (2007): 1–34.

16. Immerwahr, “The Greater United States,” 389.

17. This essay’s bibliographic appendix provides an extensive but non-exhaustive list of dissertations and books dealing with U.S. colonialism in the Philippines and Puerto Rico—Immerwahr’s most prominent cases—over the past decade. Of the 107 items completed between 2007 and 2015, the year before the essay “The Greater United States” was published, Immerwahr cites five.

18. Immerwahr, “The Greater United States,” 382.

19. *Ibid.*, 374.

relevant historiography is limited to works published in prestigious, U.S.-centered journals based in the United States, “our most prominent historical journals.” Scans of the *Journal of American History*, *Diplomatic History*, and the *American Historical Review* for references to U.S. overseas colonies serve as proxies for the state of the literature.<sup>20</sup> These scans say nothing about these fields’ actual locations, but do say a great deal about what nationalist maps of intellectual authority look like.

More straightforwardly, Immerwahr’s claim that U.S. overseas colonialism has long been inadequately studied is completely without basis. Academics, policymakers, intellectuals, writers, and activists in both the United States and its overseas colonies have subjected U.S. colonial empire to study—celebratory and condemnatory, scholarly and popular—beginning in 1898 itself. By the late twentieth century, they were joined by academic historians, as well as scholars located within Area Studies (Southeast Asian Studies and Latin American Studies, in particular) and American Studies, ethnic studies and cultural studies departments, many of whom used historically-informed methods.<sup>21</sup>

Then, of course, there was a burst of historical attention to post-1898 century U.S. colonialism during the “war on terror” and U.S. invasion of Iraq. Take, for example, the conference and edited volume organized by McCoy and Scarano, which gathered together dozens of scholars of the United States’ Caribbean, Pacific, and Southeast Asian colonies in wide-ranging explorations of the dynamics, variations, and multi-directional impacts of U.S. rule between colony and metropole.<sup>22</sup> The anthology makes it into the essay’s footnotes, but apparently does not clear the hurdle of the “mainstream.” Can “we” say that overseas colonies “drove key episodes in [U.S.] national history,” Immerwahr asks, using the analogy of African-American history: “Not yet.”<sup>23</sup>

Strikingly, the denial of a significant historical scholarship on U.S. empire is one recurrent feature of a decades-old historical scholarship on U.S. empire. As in Immerwahr’s essay, the usual move is not to deny outright that such a scholarship exists (which becomes increasingly challenging, but not impossible), but rather to bracket it wholesale as lacking some necessary feature which, once the decks are cleared in this way, the author will generously provide in the interest of properly starting the conversation. Writing on U.S. empire in the *Journal of American History* in 2002, well into a flourishing historical, American Studies and post-colonial literature on this topic, Ann Stoler noted that such a scholarship existed, even as she claimed in broad strokes that many U.S. historians were behind the times, “still unfamiliar with the new currents in scholarship

20. *Ibid.*, 382.

21. See the bibliographic appendix for recent additions to this scholarship.

22. McCoy and Scarano, eds., *Colonial Crucible*.

23. Immerwahr, “The Greater United States,” 376.

that have animated colonial studies over the last fifteen years,” specifically scholarship like her own work centering on empire’s “intimacies.”<sup>24</sup> In other cases, the minimizations and erasures are more ambitious. Hopkins writes—in a volume published this year—that books on U.S. colonial empire are “few in number” and have “rarely achieved popularity.” Studies of the war of 1898 “rarely give it the importance it merits”; after 1898, “the insular empire disappears from view” when it comes to treatment by historians. Like Immerwahr, he concedes that there is a “remarkable array of detailed studies of the islands that fell under U.S. rule,” but these have “yet to be coordinated and made accessible to a wider audience.” His own chapters on these themes, however, will “attempt to resuscitate a subject that has been left to wither from neglect.”<sup>25</sup> Doubtless versions of such sidelining can be found in many (maybe all) fields of scholarship, but one cannot help but wonder if historians who work on the topic of U.S. empire—which past actors have tried so hard to make vanish—are not themselves tempted to try and make the scholarship on U.S. empire that came before them vanish.

A final problem is Immerwahr’s assertion that histories of U.S. colonial empire matter because of what they can tell U.S. historians about U.S. history, as distinguished from the histories of colonized areas or those that connect across national divides.<sup>26</sup> This type of argument exemplifies what I will call nationalist transnationalism. Like the essay’s other problematic claims, this one is quite common among important historians. In Thomas Bender’s influential framing of a transnationalized U.S. history from the early 2000s, for example, he argued that the point of this innovation was not to “subvert the nation” through “post-national history” but, instead, an “enriched national history.” The point of U.S. historians reaching out into the world, in other words, was a more cosmopolitan history of the United States. Louis Pérez powerfully identified this as a “We are the World” sensibility.<sup>27</sup> Scholarship that widened historical frames might, as intended, challenge American exceptionalism, but where this scholarship merely followed U.S. actors, discourses or institutions or asked U.S.-oriented questions on a broader geographic terrain, without opening out onto or engaging with other sets of inquiries, it might serve to advance unacknowledged U.S. nationalist purposes. If going “global” simply meant enlarging U.S. national histories,

24. Ann Stoler, “Tense and Tender Ties: The Politics of Comparison in North American History and (Post) Colonial Studies,” *Journal of American History* 88, no. 3 (December 2001): 833.

25. Hopkins, *American Empire*, 38.

26. See, for example, Immerwahr, “The Greater United States,” 391: During 1898, colonialism “encouraged a new understanding of the United States as the Greater United States”; similarly, historians can now see “how the territorial extensions of the United States matter. . . .”

27. Louis A. Pérez, Jr., “We are the World: Internationalizing the National, Nationalizing the International,” *Journal of American History* 89, no. 2 (September 2002): 558–66. In his influential summons to a transnationalized U.S. history, Thomas Bender argues that one of the principal reasons to broaden historiographic frames is to enrich U.S. national historiography: “Historians, the Nation and the Plenitude of Narratives,” in Thomas Bender, ed., *Rethinking American History in a Global Age* (Berkeley, CA, 2002), 1–22.

then U.S. historians could venture “abroad” without ever really leaving “home.” Immerwahr’s essay represents a programmatic, annexationist version of this larger nationalizing of historiographic stakes.

What of Immerwahr’s specific criticism of the historiography: is it factually accurate to claim that the existing research under-addresses the impacts that colonized spaces had on the metropolitan United States? By this point, historians have powerfully shown colonial state-building to be a complex crucible of U.S. state technologies, from policing and surveillance to public health, many of which found their way from colony to metropole. Political-economic historians have explored in depth both the importation of commodities produced in overseas colonies to the U.S. metropole and political battles over their status, battles that involve metropolitan competitors and often charged, racialized debates about where the United States’ boundaries did and should lay. Scholars working across the disciplines have discussed the influence that colonial empire-building had on Americans’ popular culture and social imaginaries, in genres ranging from children’s books to expositions to motion pictures. Migration historians have reconstructed the lives of colonial migrants in often hostile metropolitan environments and the ways their presence prompted wide-ranging debates about their rights and duties vis-a-vis the United States, as well as the broader boundaries of U.S. citizenship and social membership to which this question was inseparably attached. An extensive scholarship on U.S. military basing is highly attuned to the ways that overseas and metropolitan installations were wired together in terms of infrastructure, logistics, economics, and mobility. In brief, the claims that existing scholarship insufficiently addresses the United States “proper” may reflect what scholars choose to neglect or ignore, but bears no recognizable relationship to the state of the field.

Recent approaches have challenged nationalist transnationalism, arguing that a transnationalized U.S. history requires not only a wider geographic and archival scope and post-exceptionalist commitments but a post-nationalist sense of which questions to ask, which concepts to employ and, ultimately, who constitutes the community of inquiry itself. From this point of view, the best histories of the United States in the world were likely to be generated by scholars positioned either “outside” of U.S. history or in the rich interstices between the United States and the rest of the world. By the mid-2010s, this sense of the field’s aspirations had become widespread, even if its actual implementation remained a work in progress. By stark contrast, this essay offers an analytically flimsy *We are the World* approach, and a cautionary example of what can happen when historians practicing nationalist transnationalism build walls.

To close, let’s return to Immerwahr’s account of Pedro Albizu Campos. At first glance, his choice to begin the essay with a Puerto Rican nationalist seems to suggest that he takes Puerto Rican history, culture, and agency seriously. But how exactly are readers introduced to this decisive Puerto Rican figure? Immerwahr’s approach illustrates a common pattern of selective memory in which the United States comes first. Readers are told that Albizu joined

the U.S. Army, “inspired by Wilsonian rhetoric of self-determination.”<sup>28</sup> (Did anything in Puerto Rico’s decades of struggle over the island’s relationships to Spain and the United States shape either his decision or his read of Wilson?) We learn that his followers blew up U.S. government buildings. (Was there any aspirational vision of Puerto Rican society in play here, or just an animosity towards federal architecture?) Assessing Albizu’s significance, Immerwahr could have quoted any of a number of accomplished scholars of Puerto Rican society and politics, but he turns instead to J. Edgar Hoover, who declares him Puerto Rican nationalism’s “guiding light.”<sup>29</sup> The fact that Albizu has not yet been mentioned in the *Journal of American History*—regardless of where and how he has been studied in the vast universe of scholarship—is made a very big deal. He has apparently not yet arrived, and it is not incumbent upon U.S. historians to learn about him by reading the journals in which he has long been discussed. (Incidentally, while Immerwahr’s essay stages a parade of canonical Americans who anoint the overseas colonies with significance through their involvement—Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, John J. Pershing, George C. Marshall, Douglas MacArthur, Dwight D. Eisenhower, etc.—Albizu Campos is the only person from the overseas colonies who goes named.)

So Albizu and the resistance movement he stands in for are legible and significant only to the extent that they reflect the glare cast by a narrow Americanist spotlight. Albizu matters, in other words, because the likes of J. Edgar Hoover had something to say about him; he commands “our” attention as historians when he or his followers explode something “American.” Searching for a palpable symbol of U.S. overseas colonialism’s enduring legacies, Immerwahr does not turn to poverty, unemployment, and inequality on the island, born of U.S. colonial policy and American-led corporate and agricultural concentration. He does not tell readers about the ongoing mass exodus of economically-displaced Puerto Ricans to the mainland United States. He provides instead a bullet hole Puerto Rican nationalists left in a desk in Washington, DC.

Ultimately, Immerwahr’s essay may prove most educational as a primary document, a telling artifact of the very histories it purports to describe, reflecting deep historical currents of nationalist arrogance and short-sightedness. Yes, these lands are already peopled, and those people may have their own maps, but the inhabitants only count once they are marked down on the “mainstream” charts. These regions seem strange at first, but they will soon be populated by faces readers will recognize, who will do away with place names they might otherwise have to learn. To the limited extent that these locales have histories that matter, those histories exist—like their land, their people, the inhabitants’ labor and the resources they produce—to serve “our” needs. To historians of empire—U.S. and otherwise—this is all too familiar territory.

28. Immerwahr, “The Greater United States,” 373.

29. *Ibid.*, 373.

Hopefully, the interpretive problems surveyed here, brought together and exemplified in Immerwahr's article, will not slow, halt, or redirect the momentum of exciting, ongoing research into U.S. colonial and military empire, or broader inquiries into the United States' imperial histories in which they play a central role. Scholars, writers and historians based inside and outside the contemporary boundaries of the United States have discussed and debated how to make sense of the U.S. imperial past and present for over a century. At their best, they have slipped their moments' mystifications and euphemisms and drawn from their eras' critical vocabularies, employing analyses of economic inequality, state violence, ecological destruction, and racialized, gendered and sexual difference, for example, in ways that have not only pointed to the fact of U.S. empire, but historicized and problematized it in fresh and striking ways. This work continues into our own time with unparalleled vigor and creativity. This essay concludes with a bibliographic appendix of dissertations and published books completed since 2007 dealing with U.S. colonialism in the Philippines and Puerto Rico; similar bibliographies can be compiled for other sites of U.S. empire. There are many more such works on the way.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHIC APPENDIX:

This appendix includes published books and dissertations relating to U.S. colonialism in the Philippines and Puerto Rico, published or completed since 2007. These dissertations are among those catalogued in the database *Proquest: Dissertations and Theses Global*, which claims "comprehensive historic and ongoing coverage" for North American works, and limited but "significant and growing international coverage." This database does not yet contain history dissertations written at the University of the Philippines. While extensive, this bibliography is not intended to be exhaustive; among other things, it does not include myriad article-length pieces published in peer-reviewed historical journals or edited volumes during these years.

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*Philippines, 1898–1941: The Mismanagement of an American Colony* (Singapore, 2015); Victor Román Mendoza, *Metroimperial Intimacies: Fantasy, Racial-Sexual Governance, and the Philippines in U.S. Imperialism, 1899–1913* (Durham, NC, 2015); Lou Antolihao, *Playing with the Big Boys: Basketball, American Imperialism, and Subaltern Discourse in the Philippines* (Lincoln, NE, 2015); Leia Castañeda Anastacio, *The Foundations of the Modern Philippine State: Imperial Rule and American Constitutional Tradition in the Philippine Islands, 1898–1935* (Cambridge, UK, 2016); Gerald R. Gems, *Sport and the American Occupation of the Philippines: Bats, Balls, and Bayonets* (Lanham, MD, 2016); Rebecca Tinio McKenna, *American Imperial Pastoral: The Architecture of U.S. Colonialism in the Philippines* (Chicago, IL, 2017); Nicholas Trajano Molnar, *American Mestizos, the Philippines, and the Malleability of Race, 1898–1961* (Columbia, MO, 2017).

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**Dissertations on U.S. colonialism in the Philippines include the following**, divided into thematic sub-categories:

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“Dangerous Intercourse: Race, Gender and Interracial Relations in the American Colonial Philippines, 1898–1945” (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2015).

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