

Book Review: *Soldiering through Empire: Race and the Making of the Decolonizing Pacific* by Simeon Man

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Asian Americans, Cold War Militarism, and Modern US Imperialism and Anti-imperialisms across the Pacific:

In December 2018, on a car ride from North to South Carolina, my brother and I talked about the harsh economic conditions with which Jamaicans were contending. My brother felt that the economic opportunities for black people in America and Jamaicans, in particular, were far greater and in his enthusiasm about his new life in the States (he had been living in the U.S for about 9 years at this point) announced “ Jamaica should have never gained independence, they would have been much better off”. In my surprise and frustration about this uncritical opinion, I responded, “I can't believe you just said that; I might have to disown you as a brother”. He laughed, insisting that “things ‘wudda’ (would be) betta (better)”, “more jobs” and “better infrastructure”. I wish at that moment I had the patience and the vocabulary to point out the violences of colonization and imperialism which are constantly at play...the way they hide under the guise of benevolence.

I start with this personal story as a way to pick up on important threads in Simeon Man's *Soldiering through Empire*; choices that are not choices at all. The choice between prison and war; between colonization and economic austerity; how seemingly disjointed histories and processes are imbricated and the frustrating but necessary labor of reframing those histories such that decolonization through solidarity becomes possible. While Man's theorization is grounded in the experiences of Asiatic and Pacific peoples and region, as Lisa Lowe has shown, the racialization of all people wherever they are coalesces around the racial capitalist and imperialist imperatives of the Global North. Thus, the dire economic conditions in the former colony of

Jamaica can be seen as resulting from global inequalities produced and fostered by imperial nations including the United States and is not, like my brother argued a result of breaking ties, ties which have not in fact been broken.

In his six-chapter book, Man offers an account of formerly colonized people across Asia and the Pacific who became actively involved in the U.S Military for the Vietnam war; a war that was supposedly and ironically a move for decolonization, for democracy and freedom. Citing the contradictions of how the U.S empire extended itself around the world, Man shows how much of the labor fell on formerly colonized subjects whose non-white racialized bodies were more violable, less valuable, and more dispensable- bearing disproportionate burdens of death. Taking the U.S military as the site of analysis and relying on the archives and oral histories, Man paints a damning and paradoxical picture of how; (1) racial liberalism and multiculturalism were celebrated at the same time a race war was being fought, (2) racial capitalism as both a cause and effect of the war, (3) Asians' attempt to assimilate into U.S citizenry via reinforcement of Asians as subversives but with bodies that the state could "let die"; (4) state-sanctioned violence against Vietnamese while posturing as benevolent with humanitarian aid (the media was used as a tool to circulate this idea), (5) decolonization as the terrain on which U.S Imperialism was facilitated and finally how the U.S presence in Asia facilitated transnational solidarity and modalities of resistance.

What becomes clear from Man's analysis is the survivance strategies that have historically and in the present moment been characteristic of non-white people as they labor toward nations outside the reach of imperialism; their delicate but deliberate dance with the subjection machine while attempting to dismantle it from within. The decisions (which were not

decisions at all) to take up arms and fight for example was narrated by Man as being largely tied to survival- to employment, ability to care for families and to access the 'benefits' of being counted as part of the nation. Although Man points to the limits of this kind of struggle for recognition and inclusion- the reproduction of racialized violence, his analysis marks and complicates categories typically considered discrete, that is, the good vs. bad Asian, complicity vs. non-complicity, freedoms vs. unfreedoms (to invoke Amartya Sen's notion of unfreedom to mean absence of choices) and violence vs benevolence. By centering the experiences of Asians in the context of war (care of soldiers for the people they were being made to fight (that care was in some cases reciprocal), and allyship between anti-war activists and U.S servicemen) Man shows how they are imbricated and why decolonization remains incomplete.

While militarization and soldiering (in an Asia and Pacific context) are the analytics employed by Man to make these points, his framework provides a way to think through the Imperialist reach into countries like Jamaica under the guise of benevolence for Human Rights (HR) and development. For example, market liberalization and Foreign Direct Investments, Structural Adjustment Programs through the World Bank (WB) and International Monetary Fund (IMF) with their exploitative conditionalities have been articulated as beneficial for countries like Jamaica- as a way to follow the western notion of development. In reality, these policies further cripple the economy as resources are sold off cheaply, production is virtually labor-intensive and employs cheap exploitative often politically influenced labor. There is, therefore, high levels of unemployment, an increase in crimes related to strain, and forced migratory movements to the Global North- where migrants are doubly dispossessed. Nevertheless, the United States and other European countries remain attractive to Jamaicans who

often do not connect the history of racial slavery and colonization to the way the United States has marketed itself as economically, politically and ethically superior.

Man's Transpacific methodology and framework of analysis have done significant work in revealing these intimacies (to again invoke Lisa Lowe). His work follows an interdisciplinary approach that synthesizes U.S history, Asian American history, and Transpacific Studies.