

Book Review: *The Anarchy of Empire in the making of U.S. Culture* by Amy Kaplan

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Early U.S Global Imperialism in and through culture

It matters what you call a thing

Solmaz Sharif “Look”

In *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture*, Amy Kaplan takes up an idea later explored by other writers including Solmaz Sharif, Yen Espiritu, and Sayak Valencia about the performative nature of language to create the reality that it articulates. In elucidating the imperial nature of the U.S empire, her argument decenters ideas that tend to stand in binary opposition and instead centers how they may be constitutive. She articulates the difficulty with demarcating the domestic from the foreign, the here from there, the national from international, the citizen from non-citizen, home from abroad, and so on. To do this, Kaplan does a close reading of biographical writing, legal documents, popular literature, fiction, and non-fiction to map a transnational account of U.S history thereby showing enmeshment of U.S imperialism and empire which structure and are structured by processes of dispossession in the global south.

Some of the central themes throughout the book include racialization, the construction of identity, and the anarchy of empire- a concept borrowed from W.E.B Du Bois, whose work forms a critical part of her argument. For Kaplan, “the monolithic system of order that empire aspires to impose on the world, an order reliant on clear divisions between metropolis and colony, colonizer and colonized, national and international spaces, the domestic and the foreign” (p. 12) constitutes the anarchy of empire. Her use of the Supreme Court case of *Downes v. Bidwell* in her introduction is perhaps one of her most useful examples for showing how identities are produced and for setting up how the state creates the “problems” it claims to be threatened by and must prevent. Here, she sets out to show the complexities of U.S expansionism specifically as it related to territories annexed or acquired through the Spanish-American War- territories the U.S simultaneously claimed and distanced itself from - an analysis that complicates U.S exceptionalism as created by its mechanisms of othering even as it presents itself as a model for civilization or modernity.

Kaplan employs an interdisciplinary and intertextual approach - an approach utilized by many Ethnic Studies scholars who understand the importance of visibilizing issues often foreclosed or elided by the traditional archive- an archive which has historically and in the present moment been structured by relations of power. Trouillot’s (1995) argument about the making of an archive has much resonance here. One of the four moments that Trouillot points out that silence enters historical production is at the making of the archive and is solidified in the continuous circulation of “facts,” and thus we are required to think through alternative strategies that can unmask what has been foreclosed. Kaplan is therefore very deliberate about exploring

her thesis from several vantage points which explains her combination of disciplines (American Studies and Cultural studies) genres (literature and film) and historical moments (1840s-1920s).

In this six-chapter book, Kaplan shows how American exceptionalism and imperialism not only impact material and political realities but shape the subjectivities of white and non-white racialized subjects as well. The very idea of whiteness, gender, and sexuality (cis-heteronormativity) as Kaplan gestures towards, emerged in the context of racial capitalism and empire. Kaplan's readings of the manuals for housewives by Stowe, Mark Twain's Travelogues from Hawaii and Du Bois' work *Darkwater* are central to her argument about the intersection of race, place, nation, and gender in our understanding of the world. She explores (1) the relationship between domestic fiction and manifest destiny, (2) evidence of American Imperialism in Mark Twain's travelogues, (3) the analogy of "new woman" heroine as a break from traditional, primitive and uncivilized societies and representative of U.S modernity, (4) Theodore Roosevelt's strategy of othering black soldiers in the Spanish-American war as a way to maintain power on the home front (5) dangerous single story narratives (through her examination of *The Birth of Nation*), and (5) the internalisation of nationalism through her treatment of Du Bois- to show how Americans, mainly white Americans but in some cases, as exemplified by Du Bois, Black Americans have been made to understand themselves as the answer to, and the model for civilization.

Her analysis of Du Bois is particularly poignant. Kaplan does not discount Du Bois' contributions as a critical thinker whose work has been foundational to our understanding of the intimacies of four continents (to invoke Lisa Lowe), but she analyzes one of less examined work and shows how despite his astute observations and understanding of how imperialism creates and

recreates itself through racialization, his own vision of black progress was shaped by white capitalist values. Kaplan's work is an excellent example of the value that can come from walking roads less traveled or not traveled at all. By looking outside of the canon and employing an interdisciplinary approach she was able to center contradictions that would need to address for any project of decolonization to be possible.