
John R. Eperjesi. *The Imperialist Imaginary: Visions of Asia and the Pacific in American Culture*. Dartmouth College Press, 2005. Pp. xii, 194. \$24.95 paperback. \$100 cloth.

As a critical category for literary and cultural studies in the U.S. over the last several decades, the “myth” of America looms large. The tendency of criticism has been to expose the myth, as does John Eperjesi in his illuminating monograph, *The Imperialist Imaginary: Visions of Asia and the Pacific in American Culture*. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Eperjesi argues, American culture had wittingly and unwittingly produced a discourse on and epistemology of the Pacific. From the literature of whaling and travel narratives to the trade strategies articulated by the American Asiatic Association, this Imperialist Imaginary envisioned the Pacific as a legible space—a space that could be codified, charted, and interpreted through an imperial hermeneutic for the sake of opening markets and expanding networks of U.S.-driven commerce throughout the region. Borrowing significantly from Roland Barthes’s theorization of myth, Eperjesi begins by asking, “Can one really point to the American Pacific on a map?” (14). He proceeds by turning the question inside out—revealing how U.S. imperial cartography has elided historical and geopolitical processes and has, instead, produced a “unified region,” an ostensibly naturalized and monumental “image” of the Pacific as the extension of American domain. Eperjesi’s intentions, therefore, are to “deconstruct the myth”—and the map—of an “America Pacific” and bare its catastrophes and violence (4). Recalling Henri Lefebvre and David Harvey, Eperjesi invents a critical historical geography that documents the Pacific as “a space of contradiction and conflict rather than temporal continuity and benign geographical contiguity” (15).

Examining works by Ralph Waldo Emerson, Herman Melville, Walt Whitman, among other nineteenth-century American writers, Eperjesi begins his first of six chapters with an analysis of what he describes as American Pacific Orientalism and the expansion of the American frontier into the Pacific. By placing these American Renaissance authors into the larger transnational, geographical, and geopolitical context of an Asia-Pacific, Eperjesi challenges deep-seated assumptions about both the regionalization of New England writers as well as, more importantly, the periodization of American imperial designs. Rather than marking the 1898 occupation of the Philippines by the U.S. as the “point of transition from continental to overseas expansion” (28), as some critics and scholars have suggested, Eperjesi’s reading of earlier nineteenth-century literature shows

that the vision of the Pacific as a space of conquest is not a late development in U.S. geopolitics but, instead, emerges with the ideologies and myths present at the very beginnings of the Republic.

The Imperialist Imaginary is heir to an extensive body of literary and critical studies on Asia and the Pacific, particularly interventions by New Americanists such as Arif Dirlik, Rob Wilson, John Carlos Rowe, as well as Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease. Eperjesi expands on this body of work, particularly in his pithy research on The American Asiatic Association. As he explains, the association had a pedagogical mission of educating “the American public into a clearer perception of the intimate way in which the future of this Republic is bound up with its prestige on the Pacific Ocean” (88). Eperjesi’s signature move is to read the strategic and economic policies, like those produced by The American Asiatic Association, with U.S. literature. Broadly conceived as cultural works, both policy and literature reveal the myth of the American Pacific that emerges over two centuries. Here Eperjesi shows again how the seemingly immaterial “image” or “myth” (one which, he suggests, American literary and cultural studies must continually struggle to deconstruct) can have profound effects on the shaping of policy and, therefore, on real material and political conditions.

If the myth and attendant politics of an America Pacific rely on a cartographic continuity and contiguity, as Eperjesi suggests, he disrupts this myth methodologically and theoretically by dislocating American literary works from their conventional geographies and assumed politics under imperialism. This is particularly true with his reading of Jack London and Frank Norris. Resituating Jack London from the Yukon to the Pacific where, as Eperjesi reminds us, London actually made his career, Eperjesi adroitly reads London’s representation of the Hawaiian tourist as a form of political unconscious. In his travelogues and writing on Hawaii, such as *The Cruise of the Snark* and *Our Hawaii*, London himself becomes what Eperjesi calls the “accidental tourist” (112). Even though London had detested the influx of visitors who had invaded Hawaii as the emerging tourist industry gained traction, his writing, ironically and unwittingly, contributed to the tourist perspective or image of Hawaii as an exotic and “dreamy antidote to the neurasthenic materialism of the Gilded Age” (113). In Frank Norris’s *The Octopus*, Eperjesi re-examines the role of political populism and Norris’s grander aspirations to create an epic commensurate with America’s imperial stature and ambitions. This reading provides Eperjesi the critical force to expose how populism is not necessarily a politics that is contrary to imperialism but, rather, is a political framework or condition of possibility that emerges with imperialism. Here, Eperjesi reads Norris against the populist grain, and he correctly suggests that

the novel's appeal to populism actually instantiates the imperial desire for the expansion of the "frontier."

Providing another layer to his critical geography of the Pacific, Eperjesi's final chapters examine Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men* as well as the film *Memories of a Forgotten War* by Camilla Benolirao Griggers and Sari Lluh Delana. In these works, Eperjesi finds an important revision or counter-myth to the Pacific as American frontier. The general narration of Kingston's *China Men*, for instance, traces the movement of Chinese peoples over the Pacific, but as Eperjesi notes, this movement doesn't come to resolution or rest within a homeland, neither in China nor in America. Instead, the movement and transience of this population retains a transnational status. Unlike the romanticized and heroic frontiersman who uproots himself for the freedom of the open territory or seas—as Eperjesi recalls of Melville's Ishmael—Kingston's narrative of modernity depicts a population who must find a "flexible relationship to capital" and strategies for survival within a transnational arrangements of economic and state powers (137).

If there is a shortcoming in Eperjesi's book, it may be that it, like previous criticism, has drawn so heavily on "myth" as a critical category for analyzing U.S. imperial power. As a mode of analysis and critique, "myth" can all too often constitute the limits of our thinking. Yet, as is made evident by the constellation of chapters that form *The Imperialist Imaginary*, Eperjesi has nevertheless offered a significant contribution to our understanding of an American Pacific discourse, specifically, and the modus operandi of American power, generally, within transnational configurations. This research and well-written text will be helpful for reshaping a field of knowledge that arises out of the intersections of American literary and post-colonial studies.

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Peter Childs. *Modernism and the Post-Colonial: Literature and Empire 1885–1930*. New York: Continuum, 2007. Pp.152. \$110 (\$137 Cdn).

What happens to our understanding of modernism when we read its texts through the lens of empire? The answer in brief, which Peter Child's study, *Modernism and the Post-Colonial* probes in detail, is that "British modernist writing provides fertile ground for further post-colonial contextualization" (1), since "modernism [was] itself a mulatto movement of hybrid texts