

Adam Nemmers

# A Janus-faced Empire

## The Decolonization and Recolonization of American Literature

### Abstract

*Upon gaining independence from Great Britain, the newly formed United States of America underwent a rapid process of cultural decolonization, including the development of a native and self-sovereign ‘American Literature’ throughout the long 19th century. Yet just as quickly, the US pursued a concurrent process of overseas empire-building that brought into the American cultural and literary sphere a number of (neo)colonies including the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Haiti, Nicaragua, Liberia, Alaska, and Hawai‘i. The result is a body of un- and under-studied literature from American-occupied territories, past and present, produced by subalterns who wrote while subject to the Stars and Stripes, often during a period of recolonization after the initial European colonizers had been supplanted. As I argue in my article, by using this innovative transcolonial framework we can chart and consider this concurrent process of decolonization at home and recolonization abroad, juxtaposing works of literature from US/American writers and gaining crucial insight into both the United States and the nature of colonialism itself.*

**Keywords:** *American literature, American Empire, (Post)colonial literature, British literature, national literature*

In the beginning, there was British literature. To be fair, the territory that would eventually become the United States did feature variegated writers who derived from a smattering of regions and traditions: settlers from Sweden, the Netherlands, France, Spain, Russia, and more, as well as migrants from nations without colonies on the North American continent (I would also be remiss not to mention the oral and vernacular literary traditions of the Africans and Native Americans who comprised much of the American population). All of these wrote; all of these were read and formed the literary fabric of the newfound United States. And, as John Gatta notes, “even within the context of British-dominated settlements, the sensibility of colonial writing was scarcely monolithic. It reflects the expression not only of Puritan New

Englanders but also of Anglicans, Pennsylvania Quakers, Deists, Southern planters, political revolutionaries, traders, explorers, and worldly adventurers” (2018). But it is also true that for the men (and they were almost all men) who composed the nation’s founding documents and later comprised its founding government, their literary tradition and aesthetic had been almost wholly inherited from the primary colonizer of the thirteen colonies: the British Empire. It was one thing to wage the War for Independence, an eight-year-long conflict that resulted in the legal and political dissolution of the parent-child relationship. Perhaps the more difficult task was the decolonization of American literature; or, put another way, the transition from a British colonial literature to an American national literature. Indeed, A. P. Thornton reports that literary decolonization is “a process dating back to 1776” (1980, 186), a claim buttressed by the first use of the term ‘American Literature’ “in the 1780s, in the immediate aftermath of the country’s political separation from Great Britain” (1980, 255), as Americans realized that the development of a distinct and sovereign postcolonial literature was an essential part of the decolonization process.

### 1. Decolonizing American literature

In colonial terms, the scholarly status of the United States is governed by considerable complication and contradiction. In *The Empire Writes Back*, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin suggest that the US “may be considered post-colonial only to the extent that it has established its own cultural identity” (1989, 133). Amritjit Singh and Peter Schmidt argue, in turn, that “The US may be understood to be the world’s first postcolonial *and* neocolonial country” (2000, 5). Helen Tiffin and Diana Brydon, in the introduction to their survey *Decolonising Fictions*, carefully distinguish among the various post-colonial conditions of neo-colonial, independent, and neoimperial nations, remarking that “The United States [...] as the only ex-British colony fully to become an imperial power in its own right, can no longer easily be grouped with countries whose cultures are still largely determined by dependency” (1993, 13-14). Finally, in her study of *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*, Elleke Boehmer excludes the United States from Commonwealth literature “because it won independence long before other colonial places, and its literature has therefore followed a very different trajectory” (1995, 4). Though critics differ in their precise interpretation, they do agree that, at least when it comes to (post)coloniality, the United States is in some way exceptional, a contention I explore at some length below.

If categorizing the nation as a whole has proven difficult, the question of when, and to what extent, that US literature qualifies as ‘postcolonial’ has been even more vexing, in large part

due to differing definitions of what, exactly, the label ‘postcolonial’ entails. The simplest and most common conception emerges from a binary chronology; through this lens, as Deborah Madsen explains, “post-colonialism refers historically to writing produced in a previously colonized nation after its independence from colonial control. In this sense, all literature produced in the United States after the War of Independence could be called post-colonial” (2003, 2). Another chronological view might consider postcolonial literature not as the literature that is written once the colonizer leaves, but as literature written by native inhabitants after the point of contact with colonizers. This would imply that all written literature produced by Native Americans is inherently postcolonial, but that literature produced by non-Native US-Americans is either colonial or still beholden to the colonizing nation. For his part, Alan Lawson entirely disagrees with the classification of postcoloniality according to chronology, arguing that “post-colonialism does not imply some naive chronological end of (or sequel to) colonialism (or end of history as has been suggested recently): like the ‘post’ in post-modernism, it means ‘engagement and contestation with the power and meaning of’” (1991, 156). Under this view, nearly any writing could be considered ‘postcolonial’ so long as it engages with or contests the power and meaning of colonialism. Still another schema classifies the nature of post(colonial) literature by authorship. Boehmer terms colonial literature as “written by and for colonizing Europeans about non-European lands dominated by them,” often embodying “the imperialists’ point of view” (1995, 3). Postcolonial literature, in turn, is “that which critically or subversively scrutinizes the colonial relationship. It is writing that sets out in one way or another to resist colonialist perspectives” (1995, 3). Colonial literature, through this lens, can only be written by Europeans, while postcolonial literature, then, must almost always (though not exclusively) be written from the perspective of the subaltern. Watts observes that this “colonizer and colonized’ binary applies to certain subjects and then might be projected to later eras: early American literature has both colonized writers (Phillis Wheatly, William Apess, John Marrant, Black Hawk) and colonizing writers (as benign as Timothy Dwight or as violent as Robert Montgomery Bird)” (2010, 451). As the above indicates, the scope of US (post)colonial literature is yet unsettled, and even the parameters for evaluation (theme, chronology, or authorship, or any combination thereof) have yet to be agreed upon.

Taken together, this definitional wrangling so complicates the matter as to blur or even collapse the distinction between colonial, postcolonial, and colonizing altogether—particularly when considering a unique case like that of the United States, which suffers from contradictions and paradoxes inherent to no other nation. As Lawson asks, “How does the colonizer become colonized while still colonizing?” (1991, 158). Peter Hulme, in turn, argues that “a country can

be postcolonial and colonizing at the same time. Such small complexities should not be beyond us, even as we recognize that they need more investigation than they have received thus far” (1995, 122). This article seeks to explore such “small complexities;” in offering “more investigation than [these questions] have received thus far,” I posit that the United States is indeed a nation that has been colonized and decolonized, postcolonial even as it was simultaneously colonizing. Thus, the notion of the “transcolonial” United States is an overarching conceptual umbrella that allows a more comprehensive examination of the nation’s history from infant dependency into the robust maturity of hegemony.

Immediately after the American Revolution, the newly formed US Republic set about on a project of cultural decolonization, which “required both the creation of an articulated and materially available American culture and the rejection of English culture” (Corse 1997, 28). Such a task proved difficult for the thirteen colonies operating under the new Articles of Confederation, for each counted its citizens from disparate traditions and different governance, and the geographical distance between settlements was great. As Sarah Corse writes in *Nationalism and Literature*, the newly formed republic of America was “from almost the beginning a conglomerate of diverse people with diverse languages, cultures, and traits. The building of the *nation* required a cultural unification, the establishment of an indigenous American ‘tradition,’ not simply political independence” (1997, 27). In some ways—due to its unique native flora and fauna, its geographical isolation from Europe, and its purportedly egalitarian sociopolitical system—the United States was well positioned to develop an indigenous ‘tradition,’ especially as the nation looked westward and began to incorporate newly discovered ‘native’ elements into its own. In the areas of arts and fine culture, however, realizing independence was much more difficult; to procure an element of refinement, the United States could look neither inward nor westward, and was forced to rely upon its (principally) British tradition to guide its art, architecture, cuisine, and music.

This debt was no more evident than in the fledgling field of American literature, which was written in the English language, using British literary forms and often printed by British publications, the vestige of a parent-child bond that could not be easily broken.<sup>1</sup> As Noah Webster wrote in an 1807 letter to Joel Barlow, of the infantilizing British influence, “we shall always be in leading strings till we resort to original writers and original principles instead of taking upon trust what English writers please to give us” (qtd. in Todd 1886, 248). Aspiring epic

---

<sup>1</sup> As mentioned below, domestic literary output was hampered by the lack of an international copyright throughout the 19th century, which allowed the American market to be flooded with cheap reprints of British books.

poet Phillip Freneau similarly despaired at his nation's plight, inquiring in his 1787 poem "Literary Importation" whether, "we [can] ever be said to have wisdom and grace / Unless it is brought from that damnable place?" (qtd. in Fairfield 1833, 285). In short, the American literary apparatus was inextricably indebted to that of the British, the US quest for a distinct and vibrant national literature seeming so hopeless that even in 1825, fifty years after independence, the aspiring poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was told: "it would be a century at least before the nation could ever dream of native professional litterateurs" (Pattee 1930, 409).

The notion of a 'national literature' itself was a relatively novel concept, originating "with late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century theorists of nationalism, particularly the German Romantic nationalists who first promulgated the now accepted idea that literature is defined by its national affiliation and should embody the unique characteristics of a nation" (Corse 1997, 7). Though the ideology was recent, American writers were well aware of the urgent need to develop their own literary tradition. James Russell Lowell, a poet from Massachusetts, summarized the prevailing attitude in the early part of the 19th century when he revealed that among his group of literary acquaintances "it had been resolved unanimously that we must and would have a national literature. England, France, Spain, Italy, each already had one. Germany was getting one as fast as possible, and Ireland vowed that she once had one far surpassing them all. To be respectable, we must have one also" (1899, 185). Fellow writer James Kirke Paulding, a member of the fabled Knickerbocker Group, similarly felt that America could never be "truly independent [...] till we make our own books, and coin our own words—two things as necessary to national sovereignty, as making laws and coining money" (1814, 408). Connecticut's Noah Webster was already busy at the work of coining words, publishing *A Compendious Dictionary of the English Language* in 1806, followed by his magnum opus, *An American Dictionary of the English Language* in 1828, which established a standard of lexicography for the new nation. But Paulding and Lowell demonstrated a keen awareness of American literary lack, an abiding irrelevance which was amplified by international commentators like the British critic Sydney Smith, who in the 1820 *Edinburgh Review* sneered at the prospect of American Literature: "In the four quarters of the globe, who reads an American book? or goes to an American play? or looks at an American picture or statue?" (1820, 79). Through the first fifty years of the republic, one could only conclude that Lowell, Paulding, Smith, and Freneau were correct: the initial American effort to establish a national literature had proven fruitless. Especially for the newly emerging United States, national independence

required literary independence, and decolonization could not be complete until it had formed its own literary tradition and corpus.

In that moment the task may have seemed insurmountable, but this initial setback was from a broader perspective only a bout of growing pains on the nation's path to maturity. The United States was the first former colony to embark upon a quest to develop a national literature, and "like every colonial literature," American theorist V. F. Calverton explains, "American literature inevitably suffered from all the handicaps of such a heritage: intellectual inferiority, artistic imitativeness, and cultural retardation" (1932, 1). In his 1932 volume *The Liberation of American Literature*, written some one hundred and fifty years after US political independence, Calverton retrospectively identified the four major stages of national literary development that every former colony must go through, and prescribed a path toward achieving a sovereign and respected literature:

first, the stage of determined adaptation, in which the colonials attempt to adapt their original culture to the new environment, stressing continuity between the old and new; second, the stage in which the colonials begin to become conscious of themselves, national-minded, as it were, and in which the new conditions have already begun to modify the old traditions to such an extent that differences become more important than resemblances, inaugurating the third stage in the process, the struggle for freedom from the mother culture becomes apparent and resolve in favor of a national culture takes on a definite turn; in the fourth and final stage the colonial literature, if the colony grows of itself and the environment provides it with sufficient strength definitely to sever its umbilical connections with the mother country, manages to create a national literature of its own. (1932, 2)

While he intended his hierarchy to apply to colonies across space and time, the primary example of the United States proves an excellent case study for Calverton's heuristic, as it was the first and most prominent colony to attempt to form a national literature of its own, and progressed through the initial stages in short order. The first stage—"determined adaptation"—had been achieved within years of American independence, and the second—"self-consciousness" and "national-minded[ness]"—within the first fifty. By 1840 or thereabouts (when attempts at a national verse epic had been exhausted, and those in prose were in the ascendency) the "struggle for freedom" had taken hold, and American "resolve in favor of a national culture" had taken a definite turn.<sup>2</sup> Using the same parent/child metaphor—"umbilical connections," "mother

---

<sup>2</sup> Ironically, while 'white' US-American men were striving to gain cultural independence from their colonial British parent, they were busy subjugating and colonizing others, with a shameful history including the mass enslavement of Africans, wholesale oppression of women, and genocide and dispossession of Native Americans. Thus from the beginning their own "struggle

country”—as had Americans a century earlier, Calverton foresaw a contingency between the third and fourth stages that required the former colony to spend an extended period “grow[ing] of itself” and gaining “sufficient strength” before it might “manage to create a national literature of its own” (1932, 2). Indeed, his analysis was correct in this case. American progress through the third stage of postcolonial literary development lasted nearly the entirety of the 19th century.

The third-stage effort to develop a vibrant and coherent national literature was significantly retarded by two factors that combined to keep American arts and letters largely factional and derivative for one hundred years after its birth. The first obstacle was regionalization, chiefly due to westward migration, geography, and entrenched cultural differences which kept populations small, removed, and isolated, with fealty to their region rather than to the overall ‘nation.’<sup>3</sup> As Corse argues, until the Civil War, forces for disintegration were “at least as strong as those which fostered unity,” for “the widely varying conditions in America, especially between North and South, meant that while there was a strong national feeling, there was also little assurance that the national would triumph over the regional—particularly once the external British threat was gone” (1997, 27). At least until mid-century (and, in some regions, for quite some time thereafter) Americans classified themselves along the Northern/Southern binary, a secondary signifier of nationhood which surpassed any unitary force. (If the ‘nation’ was in fact two nations—as was proven by the deep schism that emerged during the American Civil War—how could the US be said to have a ‘national culture’ or ‘national literature’?) Even after Reconstruction, the newly reconciled American nation was further diversified by the influx of European and Asian immigrants arriving on both coasts, as well as distended by internal immigration striving ever westward; insofar as the diaspora of US citizens were Americans by nationality, they still considered themselves a collection of local inhabitants rather than one coherent body of people.<sup>4</sup> Thus was the national impulse stymied throughout the 19th century, both politically and in literature, by a combination of geographic, linguistic, and cultural forces. Even if nominally independent, the newly declared American literature still displayed a concern (some might say a fascination) with all things England. Some early American literature (like

---

for freedom” was fraught and ambivalent, a contention I elaborate upon in this article’s second half.

<sup>3</sup> Much of this can be traced to US heritage as a loose confederation of thirteen distinct colonies. Americans throughout the 19th century retained a tendency to define themselves by their state, as Virginians or Pennsylvanians first and foremost, rather than by the national demonym American.

<sup>4</sup> Along similar lines, consider that common usage of ‘The United States is’ did not outstrip that of ‘The United States are’ until about 1890, a significant date we shall return to.

Washington Irving's *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.*) was set in England; other texts (such as Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple*) featured characters who journeyed from England to America. Still a third category, which might be considered British and American literature, featured Englishmen (Charles Dickens) and -women (Frances Trollope, Isabella Bird, or Frances Kemble) who toured throughout the United States, often remarking upon the crude, backward, and boorish appearance and behavior of the Americans they encountered. These British visitors and their travelogues were immensely popular among the American reading public, highlighting the dying embers of a colonial mentality still extant in the Republic. Of course these were not the only European visitors to the United States, as Alexis de Tocqueville and his *Democracy in America* would attest. Neither did Americans demonstrate an exclusive interest in England, as the 'Holy Land' travelogues of Mark Twain and Herman Melville reflect. But the predominant American focus lay upon British literary and linguistic traditions, almost to the eclipse of all others. To this end, Daniel Boorstin notes, "As soon as literary people in 18th century America became conscious of their own language, they expressed an excessive enthusiasm for the standard language of England. Perhaps this was a characteristically colonial phenomenon—people still insecure in their new culture trying to reassure themselves by showing that they could be even more proper than the people back home" (1958, 289). And we must not forget that the foremost American novelist of the late 19th century (Henry James) saw fit to undergo a form of repatriation, late in life abandoning his American affiliation to become a British subject. All of the above indicates that literary decolonization was an irregular and arduous process—though one might even argue that the continued, required study of British literature in our colleges means that US literary decolonization is far from complete.

Two developments in the late 19th century offered a path toward a self-sovereign literary future. The first is that the American literary market moved toward self-sufficiency with the passage of the International Copyright Act of 1891, which protected foreign titles and stimulated American domestic literary production. Well into the 19th century more literature was imported from England than published in the United States, and that which was sold domestically was often the pirated and plagiarized work of British authors. The advent of the copyright meant that the authors of foreign works had to be compensated just as US authors were, encouraging domestic authors to produce and export their own literary works with the knowledge that sales abroad would be remunerated in kind. The other is that American literature began to emerge as a scholarly discipline, as marked by Moses Coit Tyler's landmark 1874 class at the University of Michigan. Tyler later wrote the first scholarly book on the subject, *History of American Literature During the Colonial Time, 1607-1765*, a two-volume study that, according to Paul



Giles, sought to “reread ‘early’ American literature in order to bring it forcibly into alignment with the postrevolutionary world, so as to create discursive space for his narrative centered on an emerging ‘single nation’” (2018, 255). While Tyler’s contributions amounted to milestones in the century-long process of literary decolonization, American literature classes soon became common at US colleges and universities, and a cottage industry of professional criticism developed as a necessary apparatus thereunto. The preferential dictates of the professoriate extended to the curriculum level, where late-19th-century literature courses “embodied the earliest judgments of the American canon, prominently featuring the so-called Big Ten writers: Irving, Cooper, Bryant, Emerson, Hawthorne, Longfellow, Whittier, Holmes, Lowell, and Poe” (Corse 1997, 32). Of these canonical “Big Ten,” nine share the familiar profile of a white, well-bred, Anglo-Saxon man from New England, with Edgar Allan Poe as the sole outlier (though still adhering to the model in a number of ways). Thus the American literary canon-makers managed to ignore the manifest diversity of their nation, instituting a remarkably homogeneous collection similar to that being produced in England, ironically the very culture from which they were purportedly working to break free.

With a standalone lexicon, a robust domestic marketplace, prominent writers, university classes, and an accepted canon, American literature was nearly wholly decolonized entering the 20th century. Here emerges another sharp irony: just as soon as the United States had decolonized its literature (its culture, itself), it began to colonize others’.

## **2. Colonizing US literature**

The American effort at literary decolonization, as successfully performed across the long 19th century, was also conducted in service of the United States’ transition from colonies to colonizer, a process I have termed “transcolonial” (I argue elsewhere, at length, that the United States is unique in this regard). While it is true that American colonists initially participated in the British program of settlement (and its attendant depredations of Native Americans), they eventually grew apart and formed a subaltern identity separate from their English brethren. Though colonial American resentment toward Great Britain had been present from the beginning, public protest accelerated in the twelve-year period after the 1763 Treaty of Paris, and especially after the 1768 British military occupation of Boston, with grievances ranging from taxation to trial procedure to Parliamentary representation to the quartering of soldiers. But the Americans’ chief complaint was not of category but of kind; that is, they objected not to the system of colonialism as a whole, but against their being on the short and subjugated end of that relationship. To this end, incipient signs of American empire-building were evident

throughout the nation's first century, but accelerated once its decolonization neared completion, most notably a result of the Spanish-American War (1898) and the Dollar Diplomacy policy as exercised throughout Latin America and the Caribbean during the first decades of the 20th century. To some, this sudden burst of imperialism might appear at odds with foundational US principles of liberty, democracy, and equality. Yale historian Samuel Flagg Bemis, for one, considered US annexation a manifestation of "adolescent irresponsibility [...] the climax of American expansion." He also called it "a great national aberration," in other words, an unwise departure from the strict requirements of national interest (Gilderhus 1997, 1). In some respects this claim is logically and ideologically tenable: The United States was the first nation to achieve colonial independence, and much of its founding ideology was diametrically opposed to the European model of forced rule by fiat from afar. But a brief study of relevant episodes from American history shows that these "adolescent" efforts at colonization were far from an "aberration," but instead the culmination of an imperial impulse embedded in American DNA. To begin, there is considerable textual evidence that the so-called Founding Fathers of the United States envisioned their budding nation in imperial terms, certainly during the Early Republic period, and in some cases even while the colonies were engaged in rebellion against Great Britain. "America was but an 'infant empire,'" George Washington conceded to his former comrade-in-arms, the Marquis de Lafayette. "However unimportant America may be considered at present [...] there will assuredly come a day, when this country will have some weight in the scale of Empires" (qtd. in Immerman 2012, 1). Alexander Hamilton, for his part, called the United States "an empire in many ways the most interesting in the world" (1894, 11), while John Adams considered the islands of Cuba and Puerto Rico "natural appendages" of the North American continent (1859, 24). For his portion in founding the United States, Thomas Paine asserted that he had "contributed to raise a new empire in the world, founded on a new system of government" (1819, 70). As early as 1780, Thomas Jefferson called for the annexation of Canada, which would "add to the Empire of liberty an extensive and fertile Country thereby converting dangerous Enemies into valuable friends;" in 1809, he wrote that "I am persuaded no constitution was ever before so well calculated as ours for extensive empire & self government" (Holowchak 2014, 45). In Federalist #10 James Madison urged the nation to "extend the sphere" so as to "take in a greater variety of parties and interests" (1818, 55); his Presidential successor James Monroe, in his eponymous Doctrine, asserted that "the American continents, by the free and independent condition which they have assumed and maintain, are henceforth not to be considered as subjects for future colonization by any European powers," a prohibition that implicitly claimed these territories as the rightful domain of the United States

itself. Much of the preceding stemmed from Jefferson's conception of the United States as an "empire of/for liberty," a seemingly paradoxical rationale which would drive American imperialist ventures throughout its history. Just as the United States had mounted its own armed rebellion to secure liberty from the British Empire, the reasoning went, it might conquer other territories in order to set them free from their oppressors. Applied freely, this mandate spurred imperial ventures including the Spanish-American War (ostensibly fought to free subjects from the Spanish Empire), invasions into Latin America, Korea, and Vietnam (ostensibly fought to free subjects from Communism), and most recently Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom (ostensibly fought to free subjects from dictatorial Islamist rule, though achieving little more than political destabilization and civilian harm). Not all of these efforts were successful, and not all of the territory gained was kept as US 'territories,' but this accumulation of ambition highlights an essential American belief that other peoples ought to follow the path of the United States toward democracy and self-determination, an ideology that has driven US colonial ventures from the very beginning. To wit: in an 1899 *Atlantic Monthly* article, Abbott Lawrence Lowell argued "there has never been a time, since the adoption of the first ordinance for the government of the Northwest Territory in 1784, when the United States has not had colonies" (1899, 145); or, as Albert Bushnell Hart claimed in 1901: "The idea of national colonies is as old as the republic" (1901, 167).

Perhaps the first (and largely unremembered) US colonial venture came via the 1803 Louisiana Purchase, which saw the United States add 828,000 square miles of territory from France, doubling the size of the nascent nation. In addition to its millions of Indigenous peoples, the annexed territory was populated by creole residents of the Louisiana colony, who were accustomed to certain rights and privileges under French rule. Although Article Four, Section Three, Clause Two of the US Constitution stipulated that "Congress shall have Power to dispose of and make all needful Rules and Regulations respecting the Territory or other Property belonging to the United States," the document was silent as to the status of the peoples who inhabited annexed territories; American Louisianans were initially regarded as colonized subjects instead of citizens. As Andy Doolen explains, "Without the consent of the foreign residents, the United States, in 1804-1805, divided the Louisiana colony into upper and lower portions, suspended many legal rights and protections, threatened local norms, appointed federal administrators, and postponed any decision on the incorporation of the two partitions into a union" (2019, 4). US hesitancy on the colony's "incorporation" was partially due to the status of French creoles as an alien racial other, as Congress considered the territory as a "space of exception" and "reacted to this colony's racial, ethnic, and religious diversity by rationalizing

the indefinite postponement of political equality” (Doolen 2019, 5). Though Louisiana would eventually be incorporated into the Union, its instructive case foreshadowed the eventual treatment of colonized people in US ‘territories’ as the empire expanded westward across the 19th century.

While the Louisiana Purchase hastened the decline of the French Empire in the Western Hemisphere, the Early American Republic still had to preserve its sovereignty against the designs of the British Empire during the War of 1812. In a keen demonstration of British revanchism (both for the earlier War of Independence and the preceding US burning and sacking of York in Canada), the Redcoats invaded and occupied Washington, DC, razing several important governmental buildings and sending President Madison and his Cabinet afleet. The return of the British Army sparked a rallying cry against the return of British imperialism; the United States cited as *casus belli* the impressment of US sailors, British restriction of US trade, and various territorial border disputes. Ironically, thousands of miles away and a year earlier, US Navy Captain David Porter had taken a small but definite step towards US imperialism in the Pacific Ocean. During the South Seas Campaign in the Marquesas Islands (now part of French Polynesia), Porter landed his flotilla of warships on the island of Nuku Hiva, establishing a small naval base and the first US colony, which he named Madisonville after the President (cf. the British “Georgia” and French “Louisiana”). Though colonization had not been authorized by the US government, and there was no legal apparatus for him to do so, Porter proceeded to annex the entire island, declaring that the native inhabitants were ‘subjects’ of the United States and raising the Stars and Stripes on a nearby hill overlooking the newly christened Massachusetts Bay. After an intense period of local warfare the short-lived colony was abandoned, and the entire affair appears only as a footnote, even in the history of that mostly forgotten war. Yet Porter’s early effort at overseas settlement reveals how the United States and its citizens have consistently exhibited an imperialist, expansionist impulse, even as the nation was itself under threat of imperialist re-conquest.

The era of official overseas US territorial expansion can be traced to the Guano Islands Act of 1856, which stipulated that

when any citizen [...] of the United States may have discovered, or shall hereafter discover, a deposit of guano on any island, rock, or key not within the lawful jurisdiction of any other government, and not occupied by the citizens of any other government, and shall take peaceable possession thereof, and occupy the same, said island, rock, or key may, at the discretion of the President of the United States, be considered as appertaining to the United States.

For the first time the United States took official possession of territory considered discontinuous to the nation as a body, though the definition of “appertaining to” was unclear, and the islands claimed as such were never permanently settled. Still, harvesting guano to produce fertilizer proved quite valuable for American entrepreneurs, and “by the time the last claim was filed, in 1902, the United States’s oceanic empire encompassed ninety-four guano islands,” of which at least ten are still claimed by the US (Burns 2017, 53). Adam Burns writes that

The Guano craze of the latter 19th century demonstrated that the territory of the United States would not be limited to the continental mainland, and that the Guano Islands Act (GIA) conferred upon the United States the ‘mantle of empire’ and both the passage of the act and the possessions acquired as a result of it began the passage of official overseas imperialism for the United States. (2017, 57)

As with the Louisiana colony, the status and force of US law in areas ‘appertuning,’ ‘auxiliary,’ or ‘annexed’ to the United States was an open and unsettled question, especially as evinced by *Jones v. United States* (1890), wherein the Supreme Court decided that any island claimed under the Guano Islands Act was under the legal jurisdiction of the United States. As a result of this ruling, a murder trial proceeded against Henry Jones, who had killed his foreman during a worker revolt on Navassa Island; Jones was subsequently convicted and sentenced to death (later commuted by President Benjamin Harrison). The fact that Jones was a Black defendant who had killed a white man in self-defense foreshadowed the racial hierarchies and conflicts that would prove inherent to the US colonial enterprise.

Finally, formal territorial expansion of the United States took a sizeable leap between 1867 and 1917, a fifty-year period bookended by the purchases of Alaska and the US Virgin Islands, with the interstitial, turn-of-the-century Spanish American War adding another half-dozen colonies. Though these acquisitions were simply labelled “territories,” the fact that each had previously been colony of another nation—Alaska, the Far East outpost of the Russian Empire; the Virgin Islands, a last vestige of the Danish Empire in the West Indies—signaled that these new additions would function as US colonies, whatever their official label. These were buttressed by a swath of territorial additions achieved through warfare. Though Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines were also technically purchased or ceded from Spain via the 1898 Treaty of Paris, in reality the territories were spoils of war that had been pillaged from the declining Spanish colonial empire. It was also during this period that the US annexed Hawai‘i and American Samoa, both after a prolonged period of wrangling with various European powers vying for a forward foothold in the Pacific. Though clearly expansionist in nature, US actions during this period were frequently framed in defensive terms, under the doctrine of what Burns terms

“preclusive imperialism” (2017, 113). This took a number of forms. One—drawing from the Monroe Doctrine and Roosevelt Corollary—sought to claim overseas territory as a measure of resistance to further European colonization—primarily against Germany, which was desperately seeking to expand its own empire. Another rationale sought to establish an economic ‘sphere of influence’ in the Caribbean that would grow and protect American trade in the region, especially at the expense of traditional colonizing powers. A third measure of preclusive imperialism was devoted to securing key trans-isthmian Central American transportation routes (first in Nicaragua, and then Panama) in order to conduct maritime commerce between the US’s Atlantic and Pacific ports; this security was also designed to box out Great Britain, France, and Japan in their own attempts to establish a canal. By employing this ‘preclusive’ rhetoric, the United States framed its own interventions not as an effort to expand its own empire, but rather a self-justifying tactic that protected itself and less powerful nations against the (de)predations of those imperial powers that would seek to dominate.

Attendant to American imperialism was the promulgation of American ‘soft culture’ in areas such as cuisine, music, art, sports, entertainment, and shared standards. Daniel Immerwahr sees the latter as an essential function of empire, tracing back to antiquity. As he explains, “The ability of empires to promulgate standards was a major benefit of colonial conquest. Imperial standardization meant that even in faraway lands, the colonizers’ practices would be adhered to. Empires imprinted colonies with new laws, ideas, languages, sports, military conventions, fashions, weights and measures, rules of etiquette, money, and industrial practices. In fact, that’s what colonial officials spend much of their time doing” (2020, 303). But the bedrock of the program of American colonial culture was the massive US investment in colonial education, especially in areas of language and literature, designed to transform the subaltern populace and to facilitate colonial governance. To provide one notable example, when the United States took possession of the Philippines in 1898, it sent an army of teachers and missionaries known as the ‘Thomasites,’ under the stated rationale of ‘uplifting’ the Filipinos through the instruction of basic math, mechanical skills, and hygiene (such an action had antecedent in Native American ‘missions’ such as the Carlisle Indian School and in the Freedmen’s Schools established in the post-bellum US South). Instructors pushed aside both European (Spanish) and native (Tagalog, Cebuano) languages, installing instead the American tongue, often via the reading of American literature. In *Empire’s Proxy*, Meg Wesling reports that the teaching of literature in the Philippines

served two functions as an apparatus of imperial rule. First, American literature was held up as evidence of the cultural and moral superiority of America's Anglo-Saxon civilization, thus supporting the ideological justification through which the United States' imperial interventions were recast as 'civilizing' missions. [...] The literary text itself was understood to function as an ameliorative force, offering the promise of moral uplift and mental discipline that became crucial to the project of colonial rule in the US-occupied Philippines. (2011, 6)

In this way American literature became another tool of colonization, with its embedded notions of quality, superiority, and civilization a far cry from the situation a century previous when Britons like Smith sneered at the crude and backwater attempts of Americans to produce literature. Moreover, American literature was employed as didactic means to subjugate and sway Filipino subalterns toward accepting US rule. Wesling explains that "Whereas in the United States these stories are framed to inspire patriotism and national pride, in the Philippines they seem quite explicitly calculated to announce the moral and historical superiority of the colonial nation; emphasis is everywhere under the foresight of such men, often at odds with those around them, under whose leadership first Europe, then America, had moved upward along the scale of Progress" (2011, 92). In this discourse, as promulgated to Filipino learners in American schools, we again see the hallmark of colonial evolution: the foresight of the Founders, the transference of power from Europe to the United States, and the positing of Americans as exemplars of progress and civilization to be distributed to the rest of the world. Such scenes were replete across the American Empire. In Haiti, the American occupiers shuttered the schools of an erstwhile colonial competitor (Germany), then used the power of the purse to "starve the Haitian system while fattening [their] own" (Slawson 2014, 526). Under American colonial rule, instead of a French classical curriculum underpinned by Catholicism, the schools were "formally secular and emphasized the development of practical knowledge and skills" (Slawson 2014, 526), so much the better as to provide workers for American commercial interests on the island. In Puerto Rico, despite early promises from the US military to respect the subaltern inhabitants, what followed was "a brutal process of cultural assimilation and repression including anti-sedition measures, the imposition of the English language and a more general 'Americanisation' of the education system" (Burns 2017, 99). And in Liberia, the US colony with most direct American roots, "American educational patterns were adopted without proper analysis of the existing situation and proper modification of these patterns, thus making education for the most part unrelated to local needs" (Brown 1956, 46). These dispatches from various outposts of the American empire demonstrate the function of colonialism: to utilize American language, American literature, and American instruction to instill an essentially American worldview in colonized subjects.

We receive first-hand report of such instruction from Milton Murayama in his novel *All I Asking for is My Body*, set in colonial-era Hawai'i in the 1930s and 1940s, in the second generation after annexation but decades before the islands would become a collective state. His protagonist (surely modeled after his boyhood self) is Kiyoshi, a Japanese American nisei who is born to Japanese immigrants to the island. The plantation school he attends in Maui is taught by Mr. Snook, a white man and a newcomer to the island who encounters “the last surviving vestige of feudalism in the United States” (Murayama 1988, 33). Though Snook does instruct the students in basic science, history, and arithmetic, he also serves as something of a provocateur, questioning the morality of strike-breaking and encouraging students to think for themselves. When the plantation boss, Mr. Nelson, enters the classroom a day after a particularly subversive discussion, Snook quickly pivots to lecture on “dangling participle[s]” (1988, 34), a subject related to English language instruction and more palatable to American authority on the island. Snook eventually leaves Hawai'i and is replaced by a more straitlaced teacher who focuses on safe and rudimentary subjects—at least until the students drop out before graduation to work on the plantation. Decades later, Murayama, literally a transcolonial writer due to the Hawaii Admission Act passed during his lifetime, composed a novel about his experience growing up as a Hawai'ian subaltern. Though *All I Asking for is My Body* is primarily a bildungsroman that shows the clash between Japanese and American cultures, it also serves an important resource for understanding what life was like for subaltern and minoritized peoples in US colonies. As Murayama's dual example demonstrates, American literature was not only taught to colonized subjects, but also written by them, creating a dilemma that presents an opportunity for appropriation or decolonization.

### 3. Decolonizing United States literature

Having established the existence and exigence of US colonial literature, we must now inquire as to the nature of that literature. Angela Noelle Williams makes the link between colonial scholarly instruction and literary production, arguing that “the importation of American education” in US colonies produced a cohort of “English-language authors” (2003, 132): perhaps not the goal of the colonization process, but a consequence nevertheless. Adam Lifshey further posits that the US authors were made not only through instruction but also through annexation, asserting that “the moment the United States gained overseas colonies, it gained overseas colonial writers” (2015, 2). From this viewpoint, colonized writers became US writers at several junctures: when the United States invaded their homelands, when they became governed by the United States, and when treaty arrangements passed territories into United States custody



(more complicated are US pseudocolonies like the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Nicaragua, which were US-occupied but not strictly annexed). In the process, writers like Aurelio Tolentino (and Cléante Valcin, and Augusto Sandino), who had previously been only identified with their homelands, suddenly became US colonial writers. This sudden shift in affiliation broaches a larger set of questions, however. Lifshy declares that “like it or not, these Filipino authors were American subjects, American nationals, and American thinkers” (2015, 4). Indeed, such authors wrote under the US flag, were governed by US officials, and in some cases worked in the US government or served in the US military. So, American subjects, American nationals, American thinkers, yes. But does that make them American writers? And does it place them in the canon and discipline of American literature?

There are two ways of addressing this question. The first takes its cue from the history of European colonial literature, which has produced a number of (post)colonial writers such as Salman Rushdie, Frantz Fanon, Chinua Achebe, Jamaica Kincaid, and Edward Said. By and large these writers are categorized in the tradition of their own homelands—seen as Caribbean, Palestinian, Indian, or African—rather than being subsumed into the greater body of their colonizer’s national literature. On this note, we might look as well at British American colonial writers like Anne Bradstreet, William Byrd, and Michael Wigglesworth, all of whom lived and died before the United States was formed. Even though at the time of their writing they were British subjects and considered themselves as such, they are not usually featured in British literary canon, British literature anthologies, or British literature classes, which is to say that they may have been technically British but are not regarded as such. Similarly, in a US context, American literature classes and American literature anthologies very rarely, if ever, feature writers from American Samoa or the United States Virgin Islands, much less better-known US colonies like Philippines, Hawai’i, Alaska, or Puerto Rico. While these omissions may be performed unconsciously, or perhaps even for beneficent reasons, US colonial writers, like the colonies themselves, are regarded as not wholly American but instead ‘appertuning,’ ‘auxiliary,’ or ‘annexed’ to the United States and its literature—to quote one of the opinions from the *Insular Cases*, “foreign in a domestic sense.” This invisibility is the status quo at the moment, as it has been throughout the (literary) history of the United States.

The second approach is more difficult and complex, and will require a paradigm shift in the way Americans view the United States, its colonies, and its body of literature. In order to actually decolonize US colonial literature, we must first recognize US colonial writers as fully part of American (literary) identity. This path proceeds from a frank acknowledgment of America’s imperial history, past and present, including the colonies it currently holds. Doing so brings

colonial subjects in from the margins, as it were, and invites serious scholarship on the aims and achievements of this literature (as I perform in my forthcoming monograph, *Transcolonial American Literature*). This approach is not without its downsides, however. Any effort toward (re)claiming American transcolonial literature must skirt the Scylla and Charybdis of arrogation and appropriation—lest the literary output of colonial writers also be annexed to the glory of the metropole, as the Aztec gold that was plundered and added to the royal coffers of Spanish monarchs. Some colonized writers—for instance the Chamorro poet Craig Santos Perez—refuse to embrace the promise/burden of American nationality, even as they acknowledge the US citizenship forced upon them. In his poem, “*ginen* (sub)aerial roots” Santos Perez reports that “after arriving at the London airport, I give the customs declaration form and passport to the customs officer. ‘You’re American,’ he says. I reply, ‘No, I’m not American, but I’m a US citizen.’ Then I explain what a ‘Guam’ is” (2014, 79). To lump Santos Perez into a corpus of ‘American’ literature risks reinscribing colonialism on US subalterns. And yet, if performed with concern and care, readers and critics might recognize Santos Perez as Chamorro person, a Guamanian national, and a US citizen, in that order, considering his work under an American literary umbrella while stipulating that he does not consider himself an American. Though this may bring US colonial writers into conversation with their subaltern contemporaries and their own colonizers, it is preferable to not reading from them at all, which is the American status quo.

In a way, this re-vision of the US literary corpus would be akin to the sea change that Native American literature has undergone within the last half-century. Native Americans, who have been internally colonized by the US military and government and classified by the Supreme Court as “domestic dependent nations,” are a close analogy to US-colonized people abroad; their literary tradition and output, too was historically dismissed as ‘uncivilized’ and ‘unworthy,’ set outside the parameters of the American literary corpus. Especially since the advent of the Native American Renaissance, however, Indigenous literature has been brought into the mainstream and embraced by the American reading public; several academic programs now devote serious study to Native American literature(s) and languages, which are taught regularly in the college classroom, even at the doctoral level. At the highest levels, Native writers such as N. Scott Momaday, Louise Erdrich, and Natalie Diaz<sup>5</sup> have won the Pulitzer Prize for their writing, a sure sign of increasing recognition and incorporation into the pantheon of American literature (there has been no such recognition or attention for any US colonial writer outside of

---

<sup>5</sup> The title of Diaz’s award-winning collection, *Postcolonial Love Poem*, offers a sense of the anguish and ambivalence of the US colonial writer.

the Lower 48). Valuing Native American literature has been an important part of decolonizing Native Americans living in the United States, and would perhaps serve as one small step toward the decolonization of current US colonies (and colonized peoples) as well.

The United States is ultimately a Janus-faced empire, duplicitous with regard to its own status as a one-time colony and many-time colonizer. Via the study of US colonial literature—a literature forever stuck in the third stage of its colonial development—the process of decolonization that began in 1776 might come into its full fruition. In the end, there will be only American literature—but a diverse, honest, and fully American literature that accurately represents all of the people who live and have lived under its flag.

**Adam Nemmers** is an Associate Professor of American Literature at Lamar University in Beaumont, TX. Notable recent publications include essays and articles on subjects like the Great Plains Ecogothic, standardization and suburbanization, and the fairy godfather in American Literature. His forthcoming monograph on American Transcolonial Literature expands upon the ideas and tensions pertaining to this article.

## Works cited

- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Burns, Adam, *American Imperialism: The Territorial Expansion of the United States, 1783-2013*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017.
- Boehmer, Elleke. *Migrant Metaphors: Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Boorstin, Daniel J. *The Americans: The Colonial Experience*. New York: Random House, 1958.
- Brown, Mary Antionette. "Education in Liberia." *Educational Horizons* 35.2 (1956): 46-50.
- Brydon, Diana and Helen Tiffin. *Decolonising Fictions*. Sydney: Dangaroo, 1993.
- Calverton, V. F. *The Liberation of American Literature*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932.
- Corse, Sarah M. *Nationalism and Literature: The Politics of Culture in Canada and the United States*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Doolen, Andy. *Territories of Empire: US Writing from the Louisiana Purchase to Mexican Independence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.
- Fairfield, Sumner Lincoln. "American Poetry: Freneau's Works." *The North American Magazine* 1 (1833): 275-289.

- Gatta, John. "Colonial Writing in North America." *Oxford Research Encyclopedias* 25 June 2018. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.553>. Last visited 29/05/2023.
- Gilderhus, Mark T. "Founding Father: Samuel Flagg Bemis and the Study of U.S.-Latin American Relations." *Diplomatic History* 21.1 (1997): 1-13.
- Giles, Paul. *The Global Remapping of American Literature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018.
- Hamilton, Alexander. *The Federalist: And Other Contemporary Papers on the Constitution of the United States*. Edited by E. H. Scott. Chicago: Scott, Foresman, and Company, 1894.
- Hart, Albert Bushnell. *The Foundations of American Foreign Policy*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1901.
- Holowchak, Mark. *Thomas Jefferson and Philosophy: Essays on the Philosophical Cast of Jefferson's Writings*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014.
- Hulme, Peter. "Including America." *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 26.2 (1995): 117-123.
- Immerman, Richard. *Empire for Liberty: A History of American Imperialism from Benjamin Franklin to Paul Wolfowitz*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012.
- Immerwahr, Daniel. *How to Hide an Empire: A Short History of the Greater United States*. London: Vintage, 2020.
- Lawson, Alan. "Comparative Studies and Post-Colonial 'Settler' Cultures." *Australian Canadian Studies* 9.1-2 (1991): 67-78.
- Lifshey, Adam. *Subversions of the American Century: Filipino Literature in Spanish and the Transpacific Transformation of the United States*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015.
- Lowell, Abbott Lawrence. "The Colonial Expansion of the United States." *The Atlantic Monthly* 83.296 (1899): 145-154.
- Lowell, James Russell. *My Study Windows*. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, and Company, 1899.
- Madison, James. "Number X." *The Federalist, on the New Constitution: A New Edition, with the Names and Portraits of the Several Writers*. Philadelphia, Benjamin Warner, 1919. 49-56.
- Madsen, Deborah. *Beyond the Borders: American Literature and Post-colonial Theory*. London: Pluto Press, 2003.
- Murakama, Milton. *All I Asking for is My Body*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1988.
- Paine, Thomas. *Rights of Man, Part II*. London: R. Carlisle, 1819.
- Pattee, Fred Lewis. *The New American Literature, 1890-1930*. New York: The Century co., 1930.
- Paulding, James Kirke. "Americanisms." *Analectic Magazine* (1814): 404-409.

- Santos Perez, Craig. *from unincorporated territory [guma']*. Richmond: Omnidawn Publishing: 2014.
- Singh, Amritjit and Peter Schmidt. "On the Borders Between US Studies and Postcolonial Theory." *Postcolonial Theory and the United States: Race, Ethnicity, and Literature*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000. 3-72.
- Slawson, Douglas J. "Rev. John J. Burke, the National Catholic Welfare Conference, and the American Occupation of Haiti (1915-34)." *The Catholic Historical Review* 100.3 (2014): 514-554.
- Smith, Sydney. "America." *The Edinburgh Review* 33 (1820): 69-80.
- Spencer, Benjamin. *The Quest for Nationality: An American Literary Campaign*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1957.
- Thornton, A. P. *Imperialism in the Twentieth Century*. New York: MacMillan, 1980.
- Todd, Charles Burr. *Life and Letters of Joel Barlow, LL.D.: Poet, Statesman, Philosopher*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1886.
- Watts, Edward. "Settler Postcolonialism as a Reading Strategy." *Early American Literature* 45.2 (2010): 447-456.
- Wesling, Meg. *Empire's Proxy: American Literature and U.S. Imperialism in the Philippines*. New York: New York University Press, 2011.
- Williams, Angela Noelle. "Border Crossings: Filipino American Literature in the United States." *Beyond the Borders: American Literature and Post-Colonial Theory*. Edited by Deborah L. Madsen. London: Pluto Press, 2003. 122-134.