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The critic W. J. T. Mitchell once wrote that images are “a drink that fails to satisfy our thirst; their main function is to awaken desire, to provoke a sense of lack and craving by giving us the apparent presence of something and taking it away in the same gesture.”[1] This is certainly true of the iconographies of America, which gained their staying power as indexes of a nationalism that, as historians have argued in the last few decades, coalesced at the very moment that the United States became an overseas empire. But did the colonial subjects where these images landed want them—and thus, want America—there? What work did it take for the visual and material culture of US nationalism to take root abroad, and at with what consequences did this symbolic colonization take place? And how did the colony and the metropole wrestle with the new meanings of sovereignty and liberty that invaded their mind’s shores?

The global proliferation of nationalist images—and, more importantly, both their production and their reception—after the 1898 Spanish-American War is the subject of *Imperial Material*, the debut book of historian Alvita Akiboh. In the tradition of scholars of nationalism like Benedict Anderson, Akiboh follows what the late political scientist might have called the vernacular creation of an imagined community within the circulatory milieu of print capitalism. But in this book, Akiboh takes two major points of departure from Anderson’s foundational work, *Imagined Communities* (1983). First, the machinery of national symbols included not just the printing presses (as previous historians of US empire have long studied) but also flag-makers among private citizens, the stamps printed by the US Postal Service, the coins and bills produced by the US Mint, the quilts woven by native women, and all manners of material culture around the world. And second, nationalism was also imposed from without, and not
just cultivated from the vernaculars within; indeed, the synchronization of the post-1898 overseas colonies toward an American national space-time was often met with negotiation and resistance against other nationalist movements.

In clear prose, Akiboh's historical gaze follows the symbolic regime of the US empire in the twentieth century, from the Spanish-American War in 1898, through the age of formal decolonization and Hawaiian statehood. Early in the book, she notes that the birds-eye view that the study takes might obfuscate the granular local histories in each colonial context. Yet, this is, in my view, the book's major strength: a model for cultural historians to follow the transits of a subject whose movement is often in excess of the epistemic borders of the nation-state.

Central to *Imperial Material* is the aftermath of the 1901 Supreme Court rulings now known as the Insular Cases, which asked, “Does the Constitution follow the flag?” In a series of landmark decisions, the courts declared that the United States’ new colonial acquisitions were to be governed not as American states but as unincorporated territories, and its subjects were to be exempt from the constitutional rights and privileges of US citizens. In turn, the book begins with a provocation: If the Constitution did not follow the flag, as the US Supreme Court fervently debated, what did? For Akiboh, this question is both material and discursive. Readers can see the important of this in the questions that she raises around the surplus value of American national icons and in the machineries that were mobilized around the proliferation of these images.

Chapter 1, “What Followed the Flag,” is an astute answer to the rhetorical question that the Insular Cases posed. Here, Akiboh contends that the matter of whether or not the Constitution followed the flag—and the ways that later scholars often take this question up as a mnemonic—“assumed that the flag was already there” (p. 19). In turn, this chapter follows the various efforts, including material, ideological, and political, to bring the American flag—the literal flag itself—to the US colonial empire. The actors at the front lines of planting the flag (as well as challenging it) were not just the invading soldiers after the Spanish-American War, they also included writers and critics, native collaborators and civil officials, and students and teachers alike. A standout moment in this chapter is the role of private citizens and patriotic organizations in the establishment of American symbolic imperialism, namely the Grand Army of the Republic, its zealous representatives in Puerto Rico and the Philippines, and its members who produced and exported hundreds of flags to the colonies in collaboration with the insular governments.

In chapter 2, “Pocket-Sized Imperialism,” Akiboh brings our attention to stamps and coins, two genres of imperial objects that reveal the efforts in state expansion into America’s new territories. The analytical continuity between the machinations of the colonial state and these everyday objects is a particularly powerful move here. On the matter of coins, this chapter disagrees with the burgeoning literature on US imperial finance, such as Peter James Hudson’s *Bankers and Empire* (2017) and Allan E. S. Lumba’s *Monetary Authorities* (2022), by arguing that financial institutions and the symbolic power of currency equally mattered to the imperial role of the US Mint. It reminds the reader of Karl Marx’s notes on money as both a symbolic index for the standardized value of socially necessary labor-time and as a commodity itself. On stamps, Akiboh reveals the myriad debates over the imagery to be used by the US Postal Service in colonial contexts, in which anxieties over the circulation of a symbolic regime accompanied the deepening role of American textual and communicative infrastructures all over the colonial empire. As in the rest of the study, this chapter foregrounds the surplus value of these objects and images, whereby Americans’ expectations at a unidirectional mode of symbolic meaning making were frequently challenged by colon-
ized natives themselves. Put differently: if empire attempted to make the signifier (national symbols) neatly index the signified (American power), natives reminded the United States that this relationship is arbitrary.

Chapter 3, “Symbolic Supremacy,” convincingly argues that contestations over symbolic regimes were neither “a sideshow” nor an index of an underlying conflict—they were the battlefield themselves (p. 87). Akiboh’s ability to shift between the feminist histories of native women’s material culture and the political histories of flag bans makes this chapter, in my opinion, the strongest in the entire volume. Ranging from the Hawaiian queen Lili’uokalani’s lamentation over the dominance of the American flag to the sedimentary work of quiltmakers, I found a nascent argument over the symbolic sovereignty of women’s work that, through the collective labor of weaving a luxurious and intimate garment, challenged the iconographic hegemony of the US empire in a terrain beyond the purview of the colonial state. Jumping through flag contestations in Guam and Puerto Rico, the chapter then blueprints the vernacular insurrections that led to the banning of the revolutionary Philippine flag in 1907, against the backdrop of an unruly population that insisted (among other things) on seizing the means of symbolic production for their own ends. Toward the end of this chapter, Akiboh notes the galvanizing force of World War II for the symbolic regime of US empire. The looming specter of the Japanese empire in the US Pacific colonies was also accompanied by actual Japanese boats themselves, who entered the fray of a symbolic battlefield by flying the Philippine flag underneath that of imperial Japan.

The Pacific War’s Philippine and Guam fronts are the subject of chapter 4, “The Object(s) of Occupation.” Akiboh’s treatment of the material culture of the occupation, most notably the cheapness of the paper money and the uses of Philippine nationalist symbols, is superb and reveals much about the tenuousness of an occupation that took the form of a nominally independent puppet state (much like Manchukuo). However, it is in this chapter where the limits of Imperial Material’s bird’s-eye view are most pronounced. As a trans-imperial history (as Kristin Hoganson and Jay Sexton’s 2020 Crossing Empires might put it) of the US colonial empire under Japanese occupation, the chapter’s engagement with the imperial history of the rival power becomes thin, while the previous sections benefit from the robust historiographical scaffolding of the history of US imperialism. I am enticed—but not yet analytically convinced—by the comparative possibilities between the symbolic regimes of Americanization and Japanization. At the level of racialization and imperial subject formation, they were certainly convergent, as historians like T. Fujitani and Keith L. Camacho have argued. But there are distinctions in the Japanese racialization project in its colonies, such as the shifts between dōka (cultural assimilation) and kōminka (complete Japanization) in occupied Taiwan. Along the grain of the symbolic regime, this chapter reads as if Filipinos were subjected to something akin to the former; however, the occupation of the Philippines is contemporaneous with Japan’s efforts at a totalitarian subject formation, in which its non-Japanese subjects must be so thoroughly Japanized that they would lay down their lives for the empire. My sense (acknowledging the thinness of the literature of the field itself) is that, as a later (and less resourced) colony within the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, the biopolitical and ideological project of Japanese imperialism had not had the time to take root that, say, Korea and Japan had experienced. The chapter breaks open another opportunity to think comparatively about the ideological apparatuses of Japanese puppet states, in the tradition of historians like Prasenjit Duara; Akiboh notes that Filipino politicians themselves made the comparisons between the Philippines and Manchukuo, through the emptiness of the flag’s display, an observation which can be scaled up by
future historians of imperialisms in the Asia-Pacific (p. 141). I mention these limits and questions not to highlight a perceived weakness in this book but rather as an invitation for future cultural historians to take on the granular work of fortifying the literatures on US-Japan relations. As such, this chapter is a major contribution to an underdeveloped subfield in the history of US foreign relations.

The final chapter, “Symbolic Decolonization,” turns to global reorientations in US imperialism during the postwar period, in which the political futures of the colonies diverged. I appreciate the way that Akiboh’s prose emphasizes the anxieties (as opposed to the narrative dominance of post-World War II victories) of the American imperial order, whose symbolic regimes were subjected to the scrutiny of the new international community. Two specters of Japanese imperialism haunt the efforts at symbolic decolonization by the United States. The first is the geospatial cannibalization of the former empire by the latter. And the second is a rival ideological and symbolic force, the “Asia for Asians” ideology of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, which anticolonial nationalists around the world took on for themselves in their various struggles for decolonization. The picture that emerges in this chapter, both at the material and the symbolic level, is a sleight-of-hand: the United States granted only one of its colonies (the Philippines) formal independence, while also acquiring even more territory than it had ever held before the war. In clear and convincing analysis, Akiboh argues that symbols and material culture were not just in the background of the decolonizing moment—they were at the front and center of the remaking of the American Century. Indeed, by arguing that symbolic decolonization was as meaningful as formal decolonization itself (rather than its insidious simulacrum), American officials defanged a global movement on the international stage. And at the tail end of Akiboh’s study, we find that the symbolic sleight-of-hand became all the more effective because of a new rival power whose symbolic role in the US empire was that of a boogeyman: the Communist bloc.

One might ask (as I have done for Imperial Material’s fourth chapter) a book with such a broad scope to do more at the granular level, not just to name the differences between each colonial context but to take into account the complexity of the divergent and convergent spacetimes of de/colonization across the archipelagic empire of the United States. However, as I have mentioned, this is not the purpose of the book, nor (in my view) should it be. The major contribution of Imperial Material is not just a scalar (pan-colonial) and methodological (material culture) one, though these are certainly among them. Rather, it is in the book’s call for a systematic analysis of the entirety of the US imperial project, which is at once a patchwork of violent occupations and a symbolic attempt to refashion the colonial world in America’s own image. The bird’s-eye view thus yields a startling transmogrified picture of US empire’s relationship to its national metropole: a horrific and disfigured funhouse mirror, revealing the consequences of a symbolic regime whose icons were painted in blood.

Imperial Material is as teachable as it is readable. I can imagine its various chapters across all manners of graduate and undergraduate US history syllabi, ranging from the twentieth-century survey to the history of US imperialism, as well as in classes on material culture and cultural history. I myself have taught Akiboh’s early article “Pocket-Sized Imperialism” (which became the roots of chapter 2) to a range of undergraduate students as well as in doctoral qualifying exams. I might also recommend that it be suggested as a reading for high school history teachers, as I believe it will be useful for curricular development, especially in classrooms that are looking for ways to infuse US history with interactive pedagogies (e.g., having students bring stamps and coins, or taking tours of relevant museums). And as a public historian, I also envision the book as a resource for commem-
orative organizations and historical societies, for all manners of exhibits (fixed and traveling) and local events.

Note


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