

Philippines: Conquest for Civilization or Oppression?

From the perspectives of Elihu Root and Senator John C. Spooner, to those of David Fagen and W.E.B. DuBois, twentieth century United States imperialistic policy in the Philippines proved divisive. While many espoused views in favor of occupation, numerous others vehemently opposed such actions. Both sides, however, frequently used racial and gendered language, often influenced by historical treatment of minority groups, to defend their stances. While Senator Spooner drew attention to the “vulnerable” European women living in Manila, who needed to be protected from “dark-skinned rapists”¹, professor Theodore S. Woolsey at Yale University² lamented at the resources which would be wasted trying to colonize “savage” Filipinos. In both cases, terminologies used domestically to label minority groups found their way to descriptions of Filipinos. United States foreign policy began to find itself increasingly entangled with the country’s historically oppressive and violent treatment of dark-skinned people and women. This essay will use a racial and gendered lens to explore how the United States’ treatment of African Americans, Native Americans, and American women informed stances on imperialism and the country’s treatment of Filipinos, and will also analyze how American expansionism was used to attempt to preserve the domestic status quo.

Racial and gendered language, influenced by domestic contexts, was frequently used to label Filipinos and justify the annexation of the Philippines in a variety of instances. Filipinos were often thought of lacking values considered to make “men”, such as honesty, truth, justice, and pity³. This was also emphasized by Elihu Root, who portrayed Filipinos to be riddled with “oriental treachery”⁴. Furthermore, while imperialists considered the martial spirit “manly” in white American men, the same was not said for Filipinos⁵, indicating the overt racial overtones surrounding traditional masculinity. These characterizations were similar to those of minority groups in the United States. Apart from lacking values, Filipinos were referred to as “savages”⁶, a portrayal paralleling those of African Americans, who were represented as “bestial rapists” by white

¹ Kristin L. Hoganson and Kristin L. Hoganson, “The Problem of Male Degeneracy and the Allure of the Philippines,” essay, in *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 133–155, 134.

² Nerissa S. Balce and Nerissa S. Balce, “Skin Lynching, Empire, and the Black Press during the Philippine-American War,” essay, in *Body Parts of Empire: Visual Abjection, Filipino Images, and the American Archive* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2016), 91–125, 99.

³ Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood*, 134

⁴ Elihu Root, “Speech by the Hon. Elihu Root, Secretary of War, at Canton, Ohio” (Ohio: Canton, October 24, 1900), 12.

⁵ Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood*, 134

⁶ Balce, *Body Parts of Empire*, 101

supremacists⁷. Filipinos were also compared to Native Americans, in which Frank D. Millet of Harper's Weekly wrote of their "uncivilized warfare"⁸. Such comparisons were perhaps made to increase relatability and encourage more support amongst white Americans⁹, but also emphasized how America's domestic context informed its characterizations of Filipinos.

The use of gender was also prevalent to complement racial stereotypes of Filipinos. The reversal of Western gender roles in the Philippines served to justify Filipino men as "feminized", rendering them inept at self-governance¹⁰. Christian marriage vows also likened the United States' relationship to the Philippines as a consensual marriage, in which the islands, portrayed as the woman, would always stay in the subordinate position to the United States, emphasizing how women would presumably always remain women¹¹. Thus, while imperialists acknowledged that changing the Philippines would prove unlikely, these descriptions still served to justify annexation.

Nevertheless, it is interesting to note how the Philippines' gendered portrayal contradicted other imperialists' views. Numerous imperialists represented Filipinos to be children, drawing from rhetoric on Native Americans being "wards of the state"¹². This was shown through cartoons, in which the "little native" Emilio Aguinaldo was being held in a rocking chair by Uncle Sam¹³. The infantilization served to justify colonization, in which the United States would benevolently provide necessary guidance to the Filipinos. Such ideas were also emphasized by Elihu Root, who, using examples of Lincoln, implied that the United States would eventually bring Filipinos liberty after rendering them fit for self-government¹⁴. These examples essentially contradict the idea of the Philippines being unchangeable. Thus, while both viewpoints serve to justify annexation of the Islands, one implies permanency while the other implies temporality in occupation.

Despite such striking contradictions as well as negative racial characterizations, pro-imperialist views also found themselves amongst certain African American populations. Many, such as Reverend Theophilus Gould Steward, were documented to be professing ideas such as "race pride" for the military prowess of the

⁷ Hoganson, Fighting for American Manhood, 134

⁸ Balce, Body Parts of Empire, 104

⁹ Balce, Body Parts of Empire, 110

¹⁰ Hoganson, Fighting for American Manhood, 138

¹¹ Hoganson, Fighting for American Manhood, 138

¹² Hoganson, Fighting for American Manhood, 135

¹³ Balce, Body Parts of Empire, 105

¹⁴ Root, Speech by the Hon. Elihu Root, Secretary of War, at Canton, Ohio, 8

“valiant black soldier”¹⁵. They implored “colored men of the republic” to enlist so that the “Negro race” could claim cultural citizenship in white America¹⁶. This example serves to show the relationship between American foreign policy and its domestic context as symbiotic, in which while the domestic landscape was used to justify empire, empire was used to justify the domestic empowerment of minorities.

Yet, while perceived qualities of Filipinos and domestic empowerment were key motivating factors to colonize the islands, so too were fears surrounding the increasingly effeminate qualities of American men and their position vis-a-vis women¹⁷. Increasing industrialization and the comforts brought forth saw men becoming increasingly “effeminate”¹⁸, and women increasingly exercising assertiveness. Imperialists saw the changing gender roles as threatening to the health of the human race, and advocated for retaining the “delicacy of women”¹⁹. Thus, numerous figures, such as Theodore Roosevelt turned to empire as a remedy to “civilization’s dangerous tendency to make young, middle class, and wealthy men soft, self-seeking, and materialistic.”²⁰ Such thought, while rooted in historical observations of past American wars, was influenced by racially-implicit observations of the British, who mentioned how “India makes men”²¹, emphasizing links between colonialism and preserving traditional masculinity. Thus, colonizing the Philippines would counter womens’ increasing political activism and dispel the “propaganda” surrounding womens’ equality, restoring gender roles domestically²².

The reasoning behind preserving masculinity through imperialism was also complemented by paternalistic concepts. By checking their youthful charges in the Philippines, American men would assume fatherly responsibilities. They would learn to wield authority²³, which could be used domestically to govern households and return women to domestic pursuits. Such examples show the use of American foreign policy to ultimately inform its domestic context, by maintaining the status quo surrounding gender roles. Imperialists were also frequently concerned with the perception of American men abroad. With the Spanish American war

¹⁵ Balce, *Body Parts of Empire*, 96

¹⁶ Balce, *Body Parts of Empire*, 94

¹⁷ Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood*, 139

¹⁸ Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood*, 138

¹⁹ Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood*, 140

²⁰ Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood*, 139

²¹ Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood*, 140

²² Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood*, 154

²³ Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood*, 154

proving to Europeans that American men were not “fat”, and elevating the reputation of the United States²⁴, imperialists supported the colonization of the Philippines to further bolster the masculine image of American men²⁵.

The domestic racial and gendered landscape was also used by those who vehemently opposed American imperialism in the Philippines. For a country which could not protect its minority groups domestically, most African Americans saw the annexation of the Philippines as a civilizing mission to be hypocritical²⁶. Furthermore, the idea of the Filipino’s “black body” created an image of solidarity²⁷, in which African Americans began to view them as “kith and kin”²⁸. Given such strong racial ties drawn by imperialists, many feared Filipinos encountering similar types of violence as encountered by minority groups domestically. The resistance to American imperialism in the Philippines was also strongly reflected in literary writings, in which anti-imperialists wrote parodies to pro-imperialist works. This was the case of “The Brown Man’s Burden”, which, written in response to Rudyard Kipling’s “The White Man’s Burden”, exposed American imperialism as a motivation driven by greed rather than benevolence²⁹.

It is important to note that African American fears of imperialism also dated before the start of the annexation of the Philippines. Black women writers revealed how lynching and rapes against black women in the South and American expansion in the Pacific were attempts by white supremacists to regain control of emancipated “nonwhite” bodies³⁰. Furthermore, black feminist critiques against United States imperialism advocated for social justice for all oppressed races, and transnational solidarity³¹, foreshadowing much of W.E.B DuBois’ writings as well. These examples, apart from explaining resistance felt to expansionism in the Philippines, further emphasize a strong connection between United States foreign policy and its domestic landscape.

Despite such opposition, the United States eventually decided to colonize the Philippines. Yet, it found itself, as feared by anti-imperialists, eventually dealing with the increasing exportation of its domestic situation.

²⁴ Root, Speech by the Hon. Elihu Root, Secretary of War, at Canton, Ohio, 5

²⁵ Hoganson, Fighting for American Manhood, 141

²⁶ Balce, Body Parts of Empire, 93

²⁷ Balce, Body Parts of Empire, 94

²⁸ Balce, Body Parts of Empire, 93

²⁹ Balce, Body Parts of Empire, 100

³⁰ Balce, Body Parts of Empire, 93

³¹ Balce, Body Parts of Empire, 93

African Americans in the Philippines were treated the same as they were in the United States. Those who served in the army found themselves to be racially segregated from their white counterparts due to fears of desertion and betrayal³². Furthermore, they were frequently labeled racially explicit terms such as “nigger” and “gugu”³³, indicating desires to maintain racial discrimination overseas. The magnitude of such discrimination is also exemplified by exploring the views of pro-imperialist African Americans. Those who advocated for expansionism, such as Reverend Theophilus Gould Steward, found themselves simultaneously denouncing the exportation of Jim Crow to the Philippine Islands³⁴. The exportation of racial discrimination onto African Americans in the Philippines was also seen through the example of David Fagen, whose desertion was met with racial language such as “lynching” and “picket rope”³⁵. Such examples were further exemplified by the constant stream of letters written by African Americans to the “colored press”³⁶, indicating the sheer magnitude of discrimination.

The exportation of domestic racial constructs onto African Americans overseas also found its way to Filipinos. Akin to African Americans, Filipinos were denied service at American owned restaurants and labeled similar terms. Furthermore, the racial labeling of “bandits” and “outlaws” appeared to justify military atrocities such as rape, massacres, and torture³⁷, similar to practices of lynching against African Americans domestically. These examples serve to show how racial violence domestically was being exported as a “race war” not just on African Americans, but on Filipinos as well. Moreover, the similar treatment experienced by both groups emphasized the feeling of solidarity felt by African Americans, and the idea of Pacific expansionism being a tool for oppression.

Nevertheless, the exportation of racial violence and language, while used for marginalization, was also taken advantage of by the Filipinos, who were well aware of the country’s domestic context. Soldiers frequently would find placards directed at African Americans, asking them to consider their history and the blood of their brothers before waging war on their “friends”, the Filipinos. These writings exploited the already existing

³² Balce, *Body Parts of Empire*, 91

³³ Balce, *Body Parts of Empire*, 92

³⁴ Balce, *Body Parts of Empire*, 96

³⁵ Balce, *Body Parts of Empire*, 98

³⁶ Balce, *Body Parts of Empire*, 92

³⁷ Balce, *Body Parts of Empire*, 93

feelings of solidarity felt by African Americans, and served effective in discouraging African American soldiers and encouraging defection³⁸.

It is hence evident that the Philippines conquest was one riddled with racial and gender connotations. It showed a United States foreign policy deeply intertwined with its domestic landscape. On a racial aspect, the domestic treatment of African Americans informed how the United States would address Filipinos, and encouraged support amongst white Americans. Yet, it simultaneously created movements of solidarity against conquest. This racial landscape was complemented by gender, in which the feminization of Filipinos, as well as the desire to subjugate women back to traditional gender roles by preserving traditional masculinity served as justification for empire. It is, however, important to note that such assumptions surrounding Filipinos were unfounded. Filipinos such as Emilio Aguinaldo were well aware of the United States' domestic situation, and frequently pointed out hypocrisies relating to the granting of independence³⁹. They were also adept at self-government, as exemplified by Aguinaldo's decree⁴⁰. Thus, pro-imperialist views were centered not around "civilizing" Filipinos but rather to maintain the dominance of the white American male. The increasing assertiveness of women and outspokenness of African Americans served to challenge this hegemony. Thus, the colonization of the Philippines served to reinforce elements of racial violence, gender stereotyping, and reinstate governing skills in white upper class American males in order to maintain the domestic status quo. What would soon ensue, unfortunately, would be thousands of Filipinos massacred, tortured, and violently suppressed until the eventual granting of independence in 1946.

³⁸Balce, *Body Parts of Empire*, 121

³⁹Emilio Aguinaldo, "Memorial to the Senate of the United States" (Philippines: Manila, January 30, 1899), 6.

⁴⁰Aguinaldo, *Memorial to the Senate of the United States*, 7