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# Welcome

to the eighth edition of the *Netherlands American Studies Review*, the bi-annual student journal of the Netherlands American Studies Association (NASA). Our aim is to showcase excellent student work related to North American history, politics, literature, and society written at Dutch universities.

In this second issue of 2023, you will find six carefully selected pieces that reflect the topical diversity and interdisciplinary nature of our field in the Netherlands. Our contributors cover a variety of issues, ranging from the role of anti-Vietnam War activism and transnational connections to the development of Asian American identity to environmental activism and narrative strategies in Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*. These papers were written by students in different stages of their higher education, ranging from the early stages of their bachelor's to the final stages of their master's.

The continued success of the journal is due to the efforts of all our student authors who have chosen to submit their work with us, the editors who have worked tirelessly to select and fine-tune these papers, and, of course, the NASA Board, which has supported us throughout the process. This last year, an enormous amount of effort has been devoted to improving the journal, allowing student authors to work more closely with our editors in improving their work for publication. We are proud of the final product and hope it will inspire you as much as it did us. We want to thank all contributors and look forward to continue working with you on future editions.

Best wishes for the new year,

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## Paper

# Young Ambassadors or Agents of Empire? Military Children in the Cold War MENA Region

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*This paper was written for the course 'Arsenal of Democracy?: The United States and the World since 1945' for the RMA program in History*

It was a cold Saturday afternoon in 1969, the weekend after Thanksgiving. Students crowded around the football field to cheer for their team in the Homecoming game. Signs read “Stomp ‘em Sultans!” and school spirit was high. Yet this scene, typical of high schools across the United States, had a crucial difference: the cheerleaders rode in on camels.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, this particular Homecoming game did not take place at one of America’s thousands of small-town high schools, but on the US military compound of Izmir Air Station in Turkey. The jarring difference between the culture of this military community and its North African surroundings was not an isolated occurrence. Microcosmic US societies sprung up all over the world throughout the mid-twentieth century, as the US consolidated its power through the dispersed and strategic placement of military bases. The combination of military and cultural influence that was enacted through these bases was part of a broader program to assert US dominance throughout the world.<sup>2</sup> These bases, therefore, are representative of an empire-building project supported by the American communities living on them.

This article argues for the necessity of incorporating the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region into our overall understanding of the US military’s strategies for achieving global US influence in the Cold War period, emphasizing the sometimes forgotten cultural aspects of these strategies. Doing so, this article undertakes a detailed study of an underutilized source, the high school yearbook, to demonstrate how American teenagers living on US bases played an ‘ambassadorship’ role that contributed to and legitimized the United States’ broader Cold War imperial project.

The mid-1950s to late 1960s was a crucial period for the United States’ strategic goals of expanding its influence in the MENA region and establishing dominance as a global superpower. This period was marked by increasing challenges to US domination in the so-called ‘Third World’ and a deepening of Cold War conflict.<sup>3</sup> The causes of the US’ increasing entanglement in the MENA region were manifold, including the growing importance of the region’s oil, a desire to stem the rise of leftist movements, and geopolitical conflict with the Soviet Union. Establishing authority in the region stretched beyond pure military power, as the societies of the MENA region were depicted as inferior in economic and cultural terms as well, signaling the broader US takeover of earlier colonial structures.<sup>4</sup>

To entrench itself as a global superpower, in the early Cold War the US expanded its network of bases, air stations, and naval commands. Scholars have described this military network as neo-imperial to capture the cultural and political oppression enacted by the US military in its relations with host societies.<sup>5</sup> The ideological framework supporting this oppressive apparatus was not only enacted by the growing body of military personnel themselves, but also by the many non-military residents of the bases, including the families of military personnel, who were increasingly joining their parents and spouses in their new homes. By 1960, over a million people resided in American communities on military outposts across the globe, turning large and small bases into ‘little Americas’.<sup>6</sup>

Though a narrative of friendly relations with local populations was endorsed, the reality was often different. In some localities, relations can be most clearly described using the lens of occupation (such as on the Japanese island of Okinawa). Other places were more subtly affected by the United States’ sphere of influence. Across the globe, local populations living in and around military outposts were forced to sacrifice space and sovereignty, while a developing neo-colonial system infringed on their everyday.<sup>7</sup> Lauren Hirschberg speaks of a “military-industrial *colonial* complex” to connote the specific form of empire-building adopted by the US government and military around the 1960s. This complex involved a conscious instrumentalization of the entire population of military bases to foster the United States’ global power.<sup>8</sup> Hirschberg argues that the entrenchment of US global domination was the ultimate goal, regardless of the price paid in human health or environmental sustainability.

Recent scholars of the military base empire have followed the broader trend of diffusing the social and cultural into the more traditional, top-down field of US military history.<sup>9</sup> Feminist historians have demonstrated that the US imperial project was enacted through every facet of society. For example, Donna Alvah argues that non-military actors were just as much political actors as those employed by the state.<sup>10</sup> Labor historians have shed light on those at the receiving end of the US’ imperial strategies, examining instances of oppression in the economic sphere.<sup>11</sup> Lastly, historians of race and empire have illustrated the interplay between domestic issues of race (the period covered by this article seeing, of course, the culmination of the Civil Rights movement) and racial and cultural oppression on military outposts abroad.<sup>12</sup> These studies reveal that the military base empire of the US was not just a strategic operation, but also deeply rooted in cultural, social, and political spheres throughout the Cold War.<sup>13</sup>

In terms of the specific actors on military bases, historians have so-far focused on military spouses, laborers, and other adults, but have yet to give significant attention to children, despite them being included in the strategic mission of the bases. High school students were tasked with being ‘young ambassadors’ for their nation in a period of global political upheaval. This reflected a broader increase in the significance of children and young adults during the 1960s, which has been described as “the decade of the breakthrough” for American high school students.<sup>14</sup> With the increase in spare time that came with the post-war economic boom, American teenagers began living lives that increasingly took place outside of the family home. Consequently, they

became protagonists in the growth of social and political movements, both domestically and internationally. However, the voices of children are hard to locate, as they were often filtered by parents and teachers. Consequently, children are largely ignored as historical actors by scholars of diplomatic and military history, including in the growing body of studies on US military bases. In this respect, high school yearbooks are an underutilized resource, constituting a rare form of expression for American teenagers, including those living abroad on military bases. This article analyzes these sources to add an underheard perspective to our growing understanding of the construction of US empire, exploring the significance and limitations of ‘young ambassadorship’ during the long 1960s.

This study responds to the dearth of scholarship on the social interactions and experiences around military bases in the MENA region, which could shed light on the racial and Orientalist attitudes infused in the US’ imperial project. The focus on MENA offers a new way to think about the operation of Orientalism in relation to US empire. Orientalism, as outlined by literary scholar Edward Said in 1978, refers to the exotification and commodification of the ‘East’ by the ‘West’, often in the context of colonial relations. The West is viewed as the superior, enlightened, progressive bloc in contrast to the underdeveloped, culturally inferior East. After the Second World War, Orientalism was adjusted to the United States’ cultural and political spheres, as the US gradually replaced the declining colonial powers as an international hegemon.<sup>15</sup> The Islamic Middle East and ‘the Arab’ became cultural figures and caricatures across popular culture, academia, and policymaking. Far from being harmless stereotypes, these attitudes had deep repercussions for both American decision-making and the experiences of those living in the MENA region. Building on Said’s argument, historian and cultural theorist Melani McAlister has argued that cultural products played a crucial role in “establishing the parameters of US national interests in the region” through the politics of representation.<sup>16</sup> Representing ‘Middle Eastern culture’ in an inferior, paternalistic manner both reflected and maintained power structures. This paper argues that the interactions between Americans on US bases and the surrounding communities in the 1950s and 1960s established a cultural paradigm that paved the way for paternalistic and alienated attitudes towards Islam and the Middle East that persist today.

Aside from the innovation of the topic itself, the previously overlooked source of high school yearbooks provides a necessary insight into the role of teenagers in embodying US foreign policy abroad. A collaborative project between the Department of Defense Education Abroad (DODEA) and the American Overseas Schools Historical Society (AOSHS) has brought together yearbooks donated by former students, allowing for unprecedented access into the experiences of teenagers on military bases.<sup>17</sup> For the period of the mid-1950s to the late 1960s, there is a well-ranged selection from high schools on American bases in Turkey (Izmir and Ankara), Morocco (Kenitra and Nouasseur), and Libya (Tripoli). While these are primarily yearbooks from individual schools, from 1957 to 1963 the collection also includes *Vapor Trails* yearbooks, which are collaboratively published yearbooks by the students at the high schools of

the United States Air Forces on various bases across the globe. The international dimension of the *Vapor Trails* project demonstrates the sense of unity felt by American students spread across several continents. This article's scrutiny of these sources is structured around the following themes: the expectations of educators and other adults of high school students to be 'ambassadors' of the US; experiences related to Middle East and North Africa foreign policy or strategic goals; the existence of either cultural diffusion or isolation between American and host communities; and, lastly, an awareness of international political developments versus domestic US politics. Within each theme, this paper observes and analyzes the progression and change of the students' experiences throughout the mid-1950s to late 1960s, foregrounding exchanges and relations with local communities.

In the decades following the Second World War, the students experienced the development of Cold War superpower politics, major cultural and political upheaval, and an increasingly globalized world. The pages of their yearbooks offer new perspectives on this crucial moment of transition, exhibiting their unique position at the intersection of these developments. This article demonstrates that high-school students both consciously and unconsciously contributed to and legitimized American empire-building strategies in the MENA region, facilitating a broader reshaping of our understanding of the role of military bases in the United States' ascension to regional and global dominance.

The military, educators, and other adults involved in education had high expectations of their students. As liaisons to local communities and 'leaders of tomorrow,' the role of the students was clear. They were to embody the proclaimed goal of the United States in the Cold War: bringing democracy and freedom to the world. Students were not to stray from this path in their cultural and political expression, certainly not while they were living under the authority of the US military. These expectations can be seen in letters by principals, opening statements by military base commanders, and even advertisements at the end of yearbooks.

During the mid-1950s to early 1960s, 'Letter from the Principal' pages made clear that students were expected to represent the United States. As "junior ambassadors for America," these letters emphasized, students were tasked with "[demonstrating] the meaning of democracy."<sup>18</sup> As stated unambiguously by the principal of the Thomas Mack Wilhoite High School in 1963: "There is no neutral ground. You are either an influence for good or for ill in every contact that you make."<sup>19</sup> Teenagers were not allowed to forget that they were in the privileged position of having an American education abroad, which was to make them responsible future voters and leaders.<sup>20</sup> The forewords of *Vapor Trails* books often asserted that the students' unique experiences of living abroad gave them invaluable skills in "getting to know first hand diverse languages, customs and cultures of the peoples of these lands," which would aid them in becoming "America's leaders of tomorrow."<sup>21</sup>

Later in the 1960s, expectations transformed as adults and students reacted to domestic and international counter-cultural movements. This is reflected in new rules and messages



attempting to suppress a rise of protest movements on military bases. One example, the response to the trend of young men growing their hair longer, was humorously dubbed “Guillotine Day” by students in Izmir. When “all the higher-ups in the military decided that it would be mandatory for all male civilians and dependents to wear close-cropped military-type haircuts or be denied access to local American facilities,” this led to “a long day of outraged frustration for the forces of youth.”<sup>22</sup> A similar example can be found in an advertisement at the back of a yearbook for ‘Turk Tuborg,’ a beer brewed in Turkey. It instructs graduates with the following message:

“You may be a part of today’s movement by young people to criticize the establishment (...) What is not read is that many young people today can and do criticize and improve without violence. We sincerely hope that you as an individual can become a constructive part of this movement.”<sup>23</sup>

This advertisement displays the diffusion of Cold War cultural and political expectations into every facet of daily life, including commercial spaces such as advertisements. The emphasis placed on not using violence indicates the potential threat that young people posed to the establishment. Like the previously discussed advice to high school students, this passage exemplifies that every attempt was made to influence students and set them on the ‘right path’ towards patriotism and duty.

These pressures meant that American high school students were keenly aware of their country’s strategic goals in the MENA region, although this did not mean that they were afraid to formulate their own political opinions about the countries they resided in and the United States’ relation to them. Principally, the students proudly took on the role of cultural ambassador that was assigned to them by their elders. Especially in the early 1960s, students often demonstrated that they took their task of being young ambassadors very seriously. Students of Nelson C. Brown said that they felt “proud to grow with the [Nouasseur Air] Base and share in its strategic mission.”<sup>24</sup> In the 1962 *Vapor Trails* dedication, we see the most literal evocation of this argument: “Young ambassadors without portfolios, we try to make friends for America wherever we go.”<sup>25</sup> The wording of this dedication echoes the rhetoric of the United States’ Cold War propaganda, emphasizing that the US was to be a ‘friend’ who could protect against the looming enemy of communism. The softening and simplifying of Cold War ambitions into a framing of ‘friend or foe’ was even more effective when espoused by young people. It exemplifies the evocation of an “empire of innocence,” actively pursued by the American military as a cover for their otherwise oppressive, neo-colonial engagements in the regions hosting US military bases.<sup>26</sup>

A different sense of ambassadorship was felt by female students, compared to male students. In a similar way to the unofficial ambassador role of military wives described by Donna Alvah, teenage girls seemed more acutely aware of the indirect ways in which diplomacy could be conducted, than their male counterparts. This can be seen in the membership of ‘International



Relations' or 'Host Nations' clubs. A club at Wheelus High in Tripoli hoped to help "cement Libyan-American relations," whereas the goal of the Izmir club was "to strengthen Turkish-American relations."<sup>27</sup> Across all yearbooks, one trend persists in the membership of these clubs: they were predominantly female. The cultural activities of these clubs were those more expected of young women than of men in this period. These involved book discussions, viewing traditional dances, and household visits.<sup>28</sup> Such activities opened up space for more informal interactions with local populations – for example, over a cup of tea. Consequently, female students were able to engage with their ambassadorship role in subtle ways often denied to their male counterparts.

Students complied with their obligations by learning local languages, although the compulsory nature of these classes varied per school. There were, for instance, regular Turkish classes in Izmir.<sup>29</sup> In Kenitra, Arabic was taught for several years by a teacher from Jerusalem, Jawad Mughrabi. Interestingly, in 1960 Mughrabi was from "Jerusalem, Jordan," but from 1961 onwards he was from "Jerusalem, Palestine."<sup>30</sup> The naming of this region was highly contested, as it is today. Subtle shifts such as these echo the evolution of American political involvement in the Middle East.

Notably, students residing in Turkey seemed to hold more admiration for the political character of their host nation, than those living in Libya or Morocco. A whole page of the *Sultana* was dedicated to the "Prophet of Turkey," Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, and his role in modernizing the nation.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, students living in Ankara gave special tribute to Turkey in the *Citadel* as a country which "afford[ed] the American student an opportunity to watch the rapid development of a strong nation."<sup>32</sup> Conversely, in Libya and Morocco the students' admiration was restricted to the cultural rather than the political, a difference that may have been reflective of Turkey's important role as a NATO ally to the US, or the slightly more familiar culture of Turkey compared to those of North African countries.

More than a touch of paternalism can be found in many of the passages pertaining to the (political) character of host nations, echoing the language of contemporary foreign relations. When describing interactions with local communities, the dedication of the *Vapor Trails* of 1961 stated: "We talk seriously too, and show [the local communities] that America's new dominance in today's world is a challenge we are prepared to meet soberly and conscientiously. We leave them feeling much wiser about the world and we hope we've been of use to them, as well."<sup>33</sup> The students of Nelson C. Brown considered themselves "moderns in Morocco," observing the "progressing Moroccan people and their changing country" while seeing scenes of "people living the same lives lived by familiar Biblical characters."<sup>34</sup> This relates to the problematic Western concept of 'modernity', which in Orientalist discourse enforces the notion of a 'backwards' East, especially in the context of a 'pre-historical' Middle East.<sup>35</sup> In the *Sultan* yearbook of the Thomas Mack Wilhoite school, the Pasha of Kenitra's visit to the US is described in a condescending manner, highlighting visits to Disneyland and a fire truck ride facilitated by the generosity of a State Department leadership grant.<sup>36</sup> Despite the intention of international friendship, these statements betray the assumed hierarchical relationship that teenagers felt in relation to host

communities. In taking on their prescribed role as harbingers of democracy, they implicitly contributed to the Orientalist, imperial attitudes that persisted across American political culture in this period.

By the late 1960s students were making more overt statements concerning their country's political role within the region. In 1968 a wave of largely left-wing student protests took place in Turkey, echoing similar protests occurring around Europe. These protests were partially against US military involvement in Turkey and were followed by waves of workers' strikes, one of which lasted six weeks at the Izmir military base.<sup>37</sup> The students of Izmir High were not indifferent to this. The *Sultan* of 1969 features an article titled "Seniors Stage Sit-In," describing how students protested the strike after they were asked to share lunches with striking personnel. One sign read "sharing lunches is Communism."<sup>38</sup> In the *Nomad* of Wheelus High, there was some disdain at "our nation's defense or pursuit of oil," which was framed as the sole cause of the students being "constantly on the move" around the world.<sup>39</sup> Such instances of dissent did not occur that frequently, however. Overall, students appeared happy to align themselves with the United States' ambitions and strategies in the region, at least in public.

The cultural and social spheres constituted other spaces in which the attitude that the US was superior to local cultures was expressed, especially in cases involving exchange between American and 'host' communities. At times, the two communities appear to have been expressly isolated from each other. In many ways, the contents of the yearbooks could have been produced by students living in Texas or California: high school dances and sports such as football and basketball are a staple part of each publication. Another way that the students set themselves apart as American citizens was in their patriotism, conveyed through pictures, poems, yearbook quotes, and other parts of the yearbooks. In the 1969 yearbook of Wheelus High, there was a full-page picture of students recreating the iconic photograph 'Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima' in what appears to be a coastal area in Libya. It is accompanied by the statements "love is found in one's freedom, and through this freedom, love is found in one's respect for his country" and "love is hearing the 'star spangled banner' being played and getting chills."<sup>40</sup> Evidently, patriotism was deeply rooted in the hearts and minds of these American students, despite their spatial distance from the continental United States (with many students not having lived there for many years). Patriotic statements and pictures such as these did not ebb throughout the 1960s, despite other potentially controversial political opinions seemingly becoming the norm towards 1970.

Over the course of the 1960s, broader cultural changes can be found in the yearbooks, echoing similar changes occurring in the continental United States. In 1960 the girls have short, high hairstyles and dress conservatively. Photographs from a decade later show a different cultural landscape, with miniskirts making a regular appearance. We can only wonder how these fashion trends were perceived in a Muslim-majority country such as Libya, but perhaps the isolation of a military base allowed for such clothing.<sup>41</sup> Rock music also seems to have reached the bases. One senior's quote, accompanied by a Mick Jagger-esque photograph of a young man with wild hair and an uncaring gaze, states: "Why should the devil have all the good tunes?"<sup>42</sup>

Students attempted to redraw the boundaries of accepted behavior in concurrence with the hippie movement in the United States. In an edition of the *Sultan* dedicated to the “Age of Aquarius,” two full pages made numerous implicit references to smoking marijuana.<sup>43</sup> Again, the students embody cultural artefacts from the United States more than the countries they live in, signaling their closer affinity with their home country.

On the other hand, students were keenly aware of the unique position they found themselves in as American teenagers living in the MENA region. They happily took on local traditions such as tea ceremonies and ‘fantasias’, made frequent excursions to historical sites, and scattered their yearbooks with photographs and passages about their surroundings and local people.<sup>44</sup> The *Citadel* of George C. Marshall High, for example, began with a dedication to “our Host Nation’s teacher, Miss Dumlu.”<sup>45</sup> The *Sultan* of Thomas Mack Wilhoite had a whole section appraising Moroccan culture, cities, and important events like King Mohammed’s funeral. Additionally, a page was dedicated to “Moroccan Students at Thomas Mack Wilhoite,” suggesting an awareness and acceptance of these fellow students within the American community.<sup>46</sup> Of course, it is significant that these students stood out as ‘foreign’ in the Americanized setting of the military base community. The local teacher Miss Dumlu mentioned above was also described as “a foreigner.” In many cases, American students took on traditions, costumes, and other objects from local communities for the sake of entertainment, thus exoticizing these cultural artefacts. An example of this can be seen in a snapshot from a costume party in Nouasseur in 1958. Here, the ‘characters’ of Bo Peep and Fatima stand side by side, the first a fictional character from a nursery rhyme, the second a generalized depiction of a ‘typical’ Middle Eastern woman.<sup>47</sup> While terms like ‘cultural appropriation’ were not in widespread use during the late 1950s, these repeated depictions track the same narrative of Orientalist representations described by Melani McAlister, revealing the hierarchical relationship that students embodied in the ways they viewed local communities.

Finally, another trend exhibited by the yearbooks is that students seemed to be more in tune with US domestic political developments than international ones, despite a general awareness of Cold War events throughout the decade. This is particularly striking considering that the students often lived on the very sites where Cold War politics were enacted. For example, mentions of the space race and other technological feats signaled the students’ support for the United States’ growing status as a technological superpower on the world stage.<sup>48</sup> Overt references to the ideological battle with the Soviet Union were made in the form of senior quotes such as: “In America we say believe it or not; in Russia, they say believe it or else.”<sup>49</sup> A more obvious example of students supporting America’s fight against communism was the dedication of the 1969 *Sultan* “to our brave men fighting all over the world, and especially to those in Vietnam, through whose efforts and sacrifices we continue to live in a free country.”<sup>50</sup> Students also addressed political developments in the US. The year of John F. Kennedy’s death, the students of Izmir and Ankara mourned the passing of their president.<sup>51</sup> Many schools also held mock presidential elections in the years that elections were held in the US.<sup>52</sup>

Outright political statements occurred more explicitly as the 1960s progressed, with steadily less subtle messages about race, gender, and other politicized issues. In terms of gender politics, there were significant changes in the depiction of women and their ambitions for the future, reflected by quotes such as “God has given more understanding to a woman than to a man” and “well, I try my best to be just like I am—but everybody wants you to be just like Men.”<sup>53</sup> This stands in contrast to the early 1960s, when female students appeared to conform to more traditional roles and jokes were made at the expense of women.<sup>54</sup> Regarding issues of race, while students of color appear in all of the yearbooks throughout the decade, it was not until the *Citadel* of 1970 that an overt statement about race was made: a full-page dedicated to students of color titled “BLACK IS BEAUTIFUL.”<sup>55</sup>

While these statements range from less to more controversial, what they have in common is their clear occurrence within the microcosm of American communities on these military bases. Although sporadic, the political statements that the students did make tended to be more about American issues than about those happening in the regions where they lived. Missing, for example, is any mention of the Arab-Israeli conflict or anti-American protest movements (aside from the one instance in Turkey noted above). This suggests that, despite their frequently stated love and appreciation for the countries they lived in, students kept themselves at arm’s length from political or cultural integration. Activist or not, at their core the students were American citizens, viewing the gap between them and local communities as ultimately unbridgeable.

This study has incorporated a previously unused source, the high school yearbook, into the expanding field of scholarship concerned with the many forms that US empire-construction took throughout the Cold War period. It sheds light on the experiences of young people who are generally overlooked as historical actors in diplomatic and military history. The experiences of high school students on US military bases in the MENA region offer a fresh perspective on the US empire-building project of the Cold War era. On the one hand, we see students engaging with political realities in which they were active participants who manifested and espoused US foreign policy goals. On the other, somewhat paradoxically, the students sometimes appear to have been living not on a military base in the Middle East or North Africa but in any generic American town, maintaining an amazingly high level of cultural isolation. In both manifestations of the students’ experiences, Orientalist attitudes are engrained in the students’ high school yearbooks, with paternalistic and racially charged attitudes and perceptions towards the inhabitants of the MENA region as a part of everyday life on military bases. Locals were seen as foreigners, while surrounding environments were mere backdrops to the central objective of enforcing American culture and ideology. The juxtaposition of these two experiences highlights the fluid nature of US power consolidation: a sense of superiority towards other cultures and a unity with the ‘home base’ of the continental United States were simultaneously perpetuated as part of the ideological underpinnings of the US’ Cold War ambitions. Ultimately, this paper demonstrates that no man, woman, *or child* was left behind in the all-encompassing goal of

constructing an American empire. Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in the first-hand accounts of young people themselves, who lived, learned, and engaged with the world at the outposts of the American military empire.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Izmir American Dependents High School, *The Sultan* (Izmir, Turkey: 1970), 68, American Overseas Schools Historical Society, <https://aoshs.org/collections/yearbooks/us/zz/722/>, accessed on May 30, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Catherine Lutz, ed., *The Bases of Empire: The Global Struggle against US military outposts* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Sarah B. Snyder, *From Selma to Moscow: How Human Rights Activists Transformed US Foreign Policy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 2.

<sup>4</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1978), chap. 3, sec. IV, EBSCO.

<sup>5</sup> See for example: Lutz, *The Bases of Empire*; Lauren Hirshberg, *Suburban Empire: Cold War Militarization in the US Pacific* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2022); Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> Donna Alvah, *Unofficial Ambassadors* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2007), 2.

<sup>7</sup> Lutz, *The Bases of Empire*, 4.

<sup>8</sup> Hirshberg, *Suburban Empire*.

<sup>9</sup> Two excellent examples are: Hi'iilei Julia Kawehipuaakahaopulani Hobart, *Cooling the Tropics: Ice, Indigeneity, and Hawaiian Refreshment* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2023); Michael C. Green, *Black Yanks in the Pacific: Race in the Making of American Military Empire After World War II* (Cornell University Press: 2010).

<sup>10</sup> Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990); Alvah, *Unofficial Ambassadors*.

<sup>11</sup> See for example: Dario Fazzi, "Imperial Constraints: Labor and U.S. Military Bases in Italy, 1954-1979," *Diplomatic History* 45, no. 4 (2021): 743-766; Lauren Hirshberg, "Nuclear Families: (Re)producing 1950s Suburban America in the Marshall Islands," *OAH Magazine of History* 6, no. 4 (2012): 39-43; Jana Lipman, *Guantánamo: A Working-Class History between Empire and Revolution* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press: 2009).

<sup>12</sup> Green, *Black Yanks in the Pacific*.

<sup>13</sup> Amy A. Holmes, *Social Unrest and American Military Bases in Turkey and Germany since 1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2014), 21.

<sup>14</sup> Izmir High School, *Sultan* (Izmir, Turkey: 1969), 3, Overseas Schools Historical Society, <https://aoshs.org/collections/yearbooks/us/zz/722/>, accessed on May 25, 2023.

<sup>15</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, introduction, sec. I, EBSCO.

<sup>16</sup> Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East, 1945-2000* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), 2.

<sup>17</sup> "Yearbooks," American Overseas Schools Historical Society, accessed March 20, 2023, <https://aoshs.org/collections/yearbooks/>.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Mack Wilhoite High School, *Sultan* (Kenitra, Morocco: 1963), 7, American Overseas Schools Historical Society, <https://aoshs.org/collections/yearbooks/af/ma/603/>, accessed on May 23, 2023; USAFE Senior High Schools, *Vapor Trails* (Heidelberg, Germany: 1960), 9, American Overseas Schools Historical Society, <https://aoshs.org/collections/yearbooks/us/zz/722/>, accessed on May 22, 2023.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>20</sup> USAFE Senior High Schools, *Vapor Trails* (Heidelberg, Germany: 1960), 8, American Overseas Schools Historical Society, <https://aoshs.org/collections/yearbooks/us/zz/722/>, accessed on May 22, 2023.

<sup>21</sup> USAFE Senior High Schools, *Vapor Trails* (Heidelberg, Germany: 1957), 8, American Overseas Schools Historical Society, <https://aoshs.org/collections/yearbooks/us/zz/722/>, accessed on June 4, 2023.

<sup>22</sup> Izmir American Dependents High School, *The Sultan* (Izmir, Turkey: 1970), S-7, American Overseas Schools Historical Society, <https://aoshs.org/collections/yearbooks/us/zz/722/>, accessed on May 30, 2023.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>24</sup> USAFE Senior High Schools, *Vapor Trails* (Heidelberg, Germany: 1961), 407, American Overseas Schools Historical Society, <https://aoshs.org/collections/yearbooks/us/zz/722/>, accessed on May 22, 2023.

<sup>25</sup> USAFE Senior High Schools, *Vapor Trails* (Heidelberg, Germany: 1962), 7, American Overseas Schools Historical Society, <https://aoshs.org/collections/yearbooks/us/zz/722/>, accessed on May 22, 2023.

<sup>26</sup> Hirshberg, *Suburban Empire*, 5.



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- <sup>27</sup> Izmir American High School, *Sultana* (Izmir, Turkey: 1968), 62, Overseas Schools Historical Society, <https://aoshs.org/collections/yearbooks/us/zz/722/>, accessed on May 24, 2023; Wheelus High School, *The Uaddan* (Tripoli, Libya: 1963), 64, American Overseas Schools Historical Society, <https://aoshs.org/collections/yearbooks/us/zz/722/>, accessed on May 23, 2023.
- <sup>28</sup> George C. Marshall High School, *Citadel* (Ankara, Turkey: 1968), 81, American Overseas Schools Historical Society, <https://aoshs.org/collections/yearbooks/us/zz/722/>, accessed on May 24, 2023.
- <sup>29</sup> USAFE Senior High Schools, *Vapor Trails* (Heidelberg, Germany: 1961), 309, American Overseas Schools Historical Society, <https://aoshs.org/collections/yearbooks/us/zz/722/>, accessed on May 22, 2023.
- <sup>30</sup> Thomas Mack Wilhoite High School, *Sultan* (Kenitra, Morocco: 1960), 11, American Overseas Schools Historical Society, <https://aoshs.org/collections/yearbooks/af/ma/603/>, accessed on May 22, 2023; Thomas Mack Wilhoite High School, *Sultan* (Kenitra, Morocco: 1961), 5, American Overseas Schools Historical Society, <https://aoshs.org/collections/yearbooks/af/ma/603/>, accessed on May 22, 2023.
- <sup>31</sup> Izmir American High School, *Sultana* (Izmir, Turkey: 1963), 31, American Overseas Schools Historical Society, <https://aoshs.org/collections/yearbooks/us/zz/722/>, accessed on May 23, 2023.
- <sup>32</sup> George C. Marshall High School, *Citadel* (Ankara, Turkey: 1968), 2-3, American Overseas Schools Historical Society, <https://aoshs.org/collections/yearbooks/us/zz/722/>, accessed on May 24, 2023.
- <sup>33</sup> USAFE Senior High Schools, *Vapor Trails* (Heidelberg, Germany: 1961), 7, American Overseas Schools Historical Society, <https://aoshs.org/collections/yearbooks/us/zz/722/>, accessed on May 22, 2023.
- <sup>34</sup> USAFE Senior High Schools, *Vapor Trails* (Heidelberg, Germany: 1960), 317, American Overseas Schools Historical Society, <https://aoshs.org/collections/yearbooks/us/zz/722/>, accessed on May 22, 2023.
- <sup>35</sup> McAlister, *Epic Encounters*, 13.
- <sup>36</sup> Thomas Mack Wilhoite High School, *Sultan* (Kenitra, Morocco: 1962), 95, American Overseas Schools Historical Society, <https://aoshs.org/collections/yearbooks/us/zz/722/>, accessed on May 22, 2023.
- <sup>37</sup> Holmes, *Social Unrest and American Military Bases*, 75-77.
- <sup>38</sup> Izmir High School, *Sultan* (Izmir, Turkey: 1969), s-7, Overseas Schools Historical Society, <https://aoshs.org/collections/yearbooks/us/zz/722/>, accessed on May 25, 2023.
- <sup>39</sup> Wheelus High School, *Nomad* (Tripoli, Libya: 1965), 4, American Overseas Schools Historical Society, <https://aoshs.org/collections/yearbooks/us/zz/722/>, accessed on May 23, 2023.
- <sup>40</sup> Wheelus High School, *Nomad* (Tripoli, Libya: 1969), 9, American Overseas Schools Historical Society, <https://aoshs.org/collections/yearbooks/us/zz/722/>, accessed on May 25, 2023.
- <sup>41</sup> Wheelus High School, *Nomad* (Tripoli, Libya: 1970), 130, American Overseas Schools Historical Society, <https://aoshs.org/collections/yearbooks/us/zz/722/>, accessed on May 30, 2023.
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.
- <sup>43</sup> Izmir American Dependents High School, *The Sultan* (Izmir, Turkey: 1970), 99, American Overseas Schools Historical Society, <https://aoshs.org/collections/yearbooks/us/zz/722/>, accessed on May 30, 2023.
- <sup>44</sup> USAFE Senior High Schools, *Vapor Trails* (Heidelberg, Germany: 1962), 439, American Overseas Schools Historical Society, <https://aoshs.org/collections/yearbooks/us/zz/722/>, accessed on May 22, 2023; Wheelus High School, *The Uaddan* (Tripoli, Libya: 1963), 96-97, American Overseas Schools Historical Society, <https://aoshs.org/collections/yearbooks/us/zz/722/>, accessed on May 23, 2023.
- <sup>45</sup> George C. Marshall High School, *Citadel* (Ankara, Turkey: 1968), 2-3, American Overseas Schools Historical Society, <https://aoshs.org/collections/yearbooks/us/zz/722/>, accessed on May 24, 2023.
- <sup>46</sup> Thomas Mack Wilhoite High School, *Sultan* (Kenitra, Morocco: 1961), 123, American Overseas Schools Historical Society, <https://aoshs.org/collections/yearbooks/us/zz/722/>, accessed on May 22, 2023.
- <sup>47</sup> USAFE Senior High Schools, *Vapor Trails* (Heidelberg, Germany: 1958), 339, American Overseas Schools Historical Society, <https://aoshs.org/collections/yearbooks/us/zz/722/>, accessed on June 4, 2023.
- <sup>48</sup> Thomas Mack Wilhoite High School, *Sultan* (Kenitra, Morocco: 1962), 93, American Overseas Schools Historical Society, <https://aoshs.org/collections/yearbooks/us/zz/722/>, accessed on May 22, 2023.
- <sup>49</sup> Thomas Mack Wilhoite High School, *Sultan* (Kenitra, Morocco: 1967), 17, American Overseas Schools Historical Society, <https://aoshs.org/collections/yearbooks/us/zz/722/>, accessed on May 24, 2023.
- <sup>50</sup> Kenitra High School, *Sultan* (Kenitra, Morocco: 1969), 4, Overseas Schools Historical Society, <https://aoshs.org/collections/yearbooks/us/zz/722/>, accessed on May 25, 2023.
- <sup>51</sup> Izmir American High School, *Sultana* (Izmir, Turkey: 1964), 3, American Overseas Schools Historical Society, <https://aoshs.org/collections/yearbooks/us/zz/722/>, accessed on May 23, 2023; George C. Marshall High School, *The Citadel* (Ankara, Turkey: 1965), 91, American Overseas Schools Historical Society, <https://aoshs.org/collections/yearbooks/us/zz/722/>, accessed on May 23, 2023.

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<sup>32</sup> Thomas Mack Wilhoite High School, *Sultan* (Kenitra, Morocco: 1961), 79, American Overseas Schools Historical Society, <https://aoshs.org/collections/yearbooks/us/zz/722/>, accessed on May 24, 2023.

<sup>33</sup> George C. Marshall High School, *Citadel* (Ankara, Turkey: 1968), 26, American Overseas Schools Historical Society, <https://aoshs.org/collections/yearbooks/us/zz/722/>, accessed on May 24, 2023; Thomas Mack Wilhoite High School, *Sultan* (Kenitra, Morocco: 1967), 16, American Overseas Schools Historical Society, <https://aoshs.org/collections/yearbooks/us/zz/722/>, accessed on May 24, 2023.

<sup>34</sup> USAFE Senior High Schools, *Vapor Trails* (Heidelberg, Germany: 1960), 48, American Overseas Schools Historical Society, <https://aoshs.org/collections/yearbooks/us/zz/722/>, accessed on May 22, 2023; Wheelus High School, *The Uaddan* (Tripoli, Libya: 1963), 2, American Overseas Schools Historical Society, <https://aoshs.org/collections/yearbooks/us/zz/722/>, accessed on May 23, 2023.

<sup>35</sup> George C. Marshall High School, *Citadel* (Ankara, Turkey: 1970), 18-19, American Overseas Schools Historical Society, <https://aoshs.org/collections/yearbooks/us/zz/722/>, accessed on May 30, 2023.



## Book Review

### *Fear of a Black Republic: Haiti and the Birth of Black Internationalism in the United States*

Leslie M. Alexander (University of Illinois Press, 2023)

Debby Esmeé de Vlugt | Utrecht University

*This book review was written independently for the Netherlands American Studies Review*

As the first sovereign Black nation to have emerged from the slave societies of the Western Hemisphere, Haiti has long occupied a unique position in the American imagination. As scholars have shown in the past, the successful 1791 uprising of Toussaint L'Ouverture, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, and other enslaved Africans set off an immense panic among white communities in the United States. Frightened that enslaved Africans at home would follow the Haitian example, the American government set out on a full-blown smear campaign against the new republic, undermining its every effort to become recognized as an independent state. This continued until at least 1862, when Congress reluctantly acknowledged Haitian autonomy.

Yet, not all nineteenth-century Americans supported the demonizing campaign of their government. As Leslie M. Alexander shows in *Fear of a Black Republic: Haiti and the Birth of Black Internationalism* (2023), an alternative narrative existed among African American revolutionaries, who saw in the Haitian Revolution a model for Black liberation and an opportunity for diasporic solidarity, while cherishing the new Haitian republic as a beacon of Black freedom and a potential haven for those who wished to leave the United States. Drawing from a diverse range of archival materials, Alexander argues that this narrative not only ran parallel to that of the American government, but was deeply intertwined with it, as African American support for Haiti reinforced politicians' fear that recognition of its independence would jeopardize white power domestically.

In the epilogue to *Fear of a Black Republic*, Alexander further builds on this argument to place Haiti's contemporary challenges into a historical perspective. She explains that many of the recent challenges faced by Haiti, including its debts and corrupt regimes, can be traced directly to the United States' efforts to intimidate and sabotage the nation in its formative years. While there is no denying that Haiti still carries the burden of these legacies today, this argument may be seen as overly deterministic, with big jumps between the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries. Nonetheless, *Fear of a Black Republic* is a must-read not only for those interested in the Haitian Revolution or Black internationalism, but for anyone wanting to learn more about the history of international relations, foreign policy, or decolonization.

## Paper

# The Asian American Movement, Vietnam, and the Construction of Asian American Racial Identity, 1968-1972

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*This paper was written for the course 'Arsenal of Democracy?: The United States and the World since 1945' for the MA program in North American Studies*

More than a thousand people were in Detroit on the 31st January 1971 to hear the 26-year-old Vietnam veteran Lt. William Crandall open the Winter Soldier Investigation, organized by Vietnam Veterans Against the War to publicize American war crimes in Vietnam.<sup>1</sup> The temperature overnight had dropped to minus five degrees and there was fresh snow on the ground, making Crandall's comparison to the "bleak winter of 1776" all the more resonant as he told the audience and assembled journalists that "America is [again] in grave danger." The threat was "not Redcoats or even Reds," but instead "crimes that are destroying our national unity": a "genocide" which was turning "Vietnam into a series of concentration camps."<sup>2</sup> 1776 was not the only historical comparison that Crandall made, he ended by invoking Mark Twain's 1901 "indictment of the war crimes committed during the Philippine insurrection," in which Twain warned that "[w]e have invited our clean young men to [...] do bandits' work."<sup>3</sup> Crandall's invocation of American imperial aggression in the Philippines highlights this article's core theme: the relation of ideas about American empire in Asia to understandings of American identity, a linkage that became increasingly central to the anti-Vietnam War activism of Asian Americans. Specifically, this article uses California as a case study to argue that between 1968 and 1972 anti-war activism produced a combination of transnational linkages and cross-racial solidarity that played a key role in the construction of a new 'Asian American' racial identity.

The focus is on the Asian American Movement (AAM), an umbrella term for a collection of political and social groups demanding racial justice for Asian Americans. The organization's origin is usually traced to the November 1968-March 1969 Third World strikes at San Francisco State College and the University of California, Berkley.<sup>4</sup> These strikes were led by the Third World Liberation Front, a coalition of Black, Latino/a, and Asian American organizations calling for the establishment of autonomous ethnic studies programs for minority students.<sup>5</sup> The term 'Asian American' itself dated to May 1968, when it was coined by the Asian American Political Alliance, one of the groups later involved in the strikes, to represent a new identity that bridged the divisions of national origins.<sup>6</sup> Given these beginnings, earlier studies of the AAM tended to make it appear as simply an outgrowth of the student movement or straightforwardly explainable through the lens of Black civil rights, for example in an important but flawed 1993 overview by William Wei.<sup>7</sup> This led the historian Diane Fujino to describe the AAM in 2008 as "one of the most invisible social movements" of the 1960s.<sup>8</sup>

This article looks beyond the well-trodden terrain of the student movement to draw attention to two different themes raised by the strikes: the development of the AAM in relation to broader movements for racial and ethnic justice; and the centrality of the ‘Third World’ and transnationalism to the AAM. These themes have begun to be explored in innovative recent works focused on the AAM, particularly those by Diane Fujino; the cultural historian Daryl Maeda; the political scientists and historians Michael Liu, Kim Geron, and Tracy Lai; and the Asian American Studies Professor Judy Wu.<sup>9</sup> These works particularly push against an earlier approach that fits the AAM into a civil rights framework and ignores the more significant linkages with Black Power.<sup>10</sup>

If the AAM’s beginnings are widely agreed upon, the endpoint is contested by historians, with options ranging from 1974 to 1990.<sup>11</sup> This study ends in 1972, which represents a moment of transition in the political circumstances underpinning this article’s key themes, particularly President Nixon’s first meeting with Mao Zedong and a second major withdrawal of US ground forces from Vietnam (leaving just 24,000).<sup>12</sup> The focus on California similarly reflects the article’s central themes. First, California was a center of anti-war activism, with many of the founders of the AAM emerging from this background.<sup>13</sup> Second, it was a major military center and gateway to the Pacific, making it an ideal place to examine questions of imperial entanglement.<sup>14</sup> Third, it was historically a leading destination for Asian immigration, and by the 1960s the Asian community in California was both large and diverse.<sup>15</sup>

Beyond studies that have focused specifically on the AAM, this article intervenes in two other strands of historiography. The first of these looks at Asian American identity more broadly, with key works by Christopher Douglas and Daryl Maeda.<sup>16</sup> Douglas, a professor of English, develops the work of the theorist Walter Benn Michaels, who has argued that while the multicultural understanding of identity purports to base itself on a performative notion of culture, it ends up relying on an essentialized view of race.<sup>17</sup> Douglas historicizes this argument to the 1960s and connects it to the rise of racial nationalist movements like the AAM.<sup>18</sup> This article takes Michaels’ and Douglas’ framework and examines how the construction of Asian American identity interacted with broader processes of racialization in the US. In particular, this article builds on Maeda’s argument that Asian American racial identity was uniquely produced by the twin pressures of domestic US racial politics and transnational radicalism.<sup>19</sup> Other relevant histories of Asian American identity come from Richard Jensen and Cara Abeyta, Yen Le Espiritu, Rychetta Watkins, and Susan Koshy.<sup>20</sup> These works all share an emphasis on the ways in which Asian American identity has been constructed in dialogue with notions of both Blackness and whiteness. As such, they offer crucial background to the ‘domestic’ side of Maeda’s schematic for the construction of racialized Asian American identity.

The final historiographic strand takes a more transnational approach, developing the second element of Maeda’s schematic. Two important works come from Ellen Wu and Cindy I-Fen Cheng.<sup>21</sup> Both place Asian American identity into the context of the Cold War, although neither focuses on Vietnam or the AAM. Instead, they argue that the integration of Asian

Americans was overstated by the US to support claims of racial equality, burnishing America's pro-Asian and liberal credentials during the Cold War in Asia. This geopolitical context also underpins the notion of the 'Third World', which was coined in 1954 to describe the non-aligned nations.<sup>22</sup> In this study, however, I primarily follow the usage of AAM activists themselves, who used 'Third World' to capture the commonalities among people of color within and beyond the United States. Similarly, my usage of notions of US empire to explore the transnational linkages of the AAM is also guided by the approach of the activists. While Judy Wu, Ellen Wu, and Cheng all hint at this approach, my key interlocuter here is Simeon Man, who offers an analysis of race-making in relation to US empire in the Pacific. I share Man's understanding of US empire in this period as based on "a growing military apparatus" and "assertions of [US] moral authority as [...] inclusive, even liberating."<sup>23</sup> In foregrounding this notion of empire I am echoing the approach of the AAM itself in making empire both an analytical tool and an object of study. Works emerging from the fields of cultural studies, particularly those of Jodi Kim and Ann Laura Stoler, help to further reinforce this understanding of empire as enmeshed in an epistemological project.<sup>24</sup>

The siloing of these three strands of scholarship - on the AAM, on Asian American identity, and on transnational or imperial concerns - has created two gaps this article fills. First, while Judy Wu's work has located the AAM in a transnational frame, she spends less time thinking through how ideas of US empire shaped that transnational engagement. Second, while Asian American identity has been examined in relation to both US empire and the Cold War, the role of the AAM in forming that identity and shaping the nature of its engagement with those concepts remains underexplored. The Vietnam War is an ideal starting point for addressing these issues. First, as a war waged in Asia and against Asians, Vietnam represents a key moment in the racial self-understanding of Asian Americans. Second, the protest movement generated by the war was critical in the development of Asian American identity. Third, viewing the Vietnam War through the lens of US empire offers fresh insights into the ways Asian American identity formation was influenced by the shifting views of the AAM on the entanglement of US militarism and imperialism. This builds on Man's call to see "war not as a backdrop of racial politics but as an active site of Asian American racial formation."<sup>25</sup> My key claim is that the Vietnam War provides a framework through which the interaction of the two elements of Maeda's schematic - the domestic and the transnational - can be seen shaping Asian American racial identity. The construction of Asian American identity in relation to Vietnam is shown at three overlapping sites: racial stereotyping in the military, cross-racial and pan-Asian linkages within the US, and the disruption of norms facilitated by transnationalism.

I draw on four main sources to make this argument: first, key works produced by activists and scholars for *Gidra*, a radical newspaper founded by five UCLA students in February 1969 and a major publication of the AAM; second, images and photos in *Gidra* and elsewhere; third, interviews with those involved in the AAM; and fourth, the testimonies of Asian American soldiers.<sup>26</sup> Two of these soldiers spoke at the Winter Soldier Investigation, with both Mike

Nakayama and Scott Shimabukuro appearing on the event's final day on panels dedicated to "Racism" and the "Third World."<sup>27</sup> In his remarks Nakayama made another use of American history, suggesting a parallel between the relocation of Vietnamese civilians to camps and the internment of Japanese Americans during the Second World War. For Nakayama, Vietnam was not an aberration but simply a continuation of what has "been happening in the United States since the Third World people have lived here."<sup>28</sup> In making this claim he exemplifies how the Vietnam War reframed Asian Americans' understandings of themselves as racialized subjects of a transnational American empire.

Nakayama enlisted in the US Marine Corps in the summer of 1967, as one of over 34,000 Asian Americans who served in Vietnam.<sup>29</sup> Although they represented just one percent of US forces in Vietnam, their presence was critical to the changing understanding of many Asian Americans about their own racialized identity.<sup>30</sup> One way in which this racial understanding developed was through the term 'gook'. Historian David Roediger traces its usage back to the US empire in the Philippines at the beginning of the twentieth century. During World War Two and the Korean War the term expanded to include Asians more broadly. In the Vietnam War, 'gook' was therefore firmly established as a racial epithet used against both North and South Vietnamese, including those fighting for the Republic of Vietnam.<sup>31</sup>

This construction of racial Otherness was a key focus for Asian American antiwar activists, who drew on the usage of 'gook' to understand the racial position of Asians in America. In an essay on "The Nature of G.I. Racism" in the June/July 1970 issue of *Gidra*, Norman Nakamura, a Vietnam veteran, explained how "gookism" operated in constructing the Vietnamese as "inferior, unhuman animals," allowing GIs to be relieved of "human responsibility" and commit "numerous barbarities."<sup>32</sup> Nakamura traced this attitude back to Basic Training, during which GIs were told "not to trust any Vietnamese, because any one of them may be a Viet Cong terrorist or sympathizer."<sup>33</sup> Other accounts make clear how the construction of a racialized notion of the Vietnamese in Basic Training had implications for Asian American soldiers. Nakayama recounted at the Winter Soldier Investigation: "[a]s soon as I got off the bus at my boot camp, I was referred to as Ho Chi Minh[,] 'Jap' and 'gook'."<sup>34</sup> Shimabukuro placed even more emphasis on this in his Winter Soldier testimony, saying that "once [people] get into the military, they go through this brainwashing about the Asian people being subhuman - all the Asian people - I don't just mean the South Vietnamese. All Asian people."<sup>35</sup> He illustrated this with an example from his Basic Training, in which "the first words that greeted [him] were, [...] 'Oh, we have a gook here today in our platoon.'" Shimabukuro was then "used as an example of a gook," with the instructors pointing to him as an example of what the Vietnamese enemy looks like.<sup>36</sup> Shimabukuro's focus on the way racialization impacted all Asians is striking, demonstrating how 'gookism' as a process of anti-Asian racialization suggested to Asian Americans the commonalities in their racial experiences.

The shared racialization of Asians through Vietnam was not only examined as a phenomenon by the AAM but also deliberately deployed. For example, the May 1972 cover of *Gidra* showed an archetypal GI (“Joe”) instructing an Asian American soldier to “kill that gook you gook.”<sup>37</sup> This irony suggests that the US military’s racialized stereotyping could have the unintended effect of encouraging pan-Asian solidarity. This was true even for those Asian American soldiers who came to accept the dehumanization of the Vietcong. Vincent Okamoto recalled how his Basic Training made him realize that “Damn, I’m a gook, I’m a zipperhead, I’m a slant,” even though “it didn’t take long before my mentality became just like theirs [his fellow non-Asian soldiers]” so that “if it became a question of maximizing protection for your men or giving some Vietnamese civilian the benefit of the doubt, after a while there was no choice on my part.”<sup>38</sup> The racialized term ‘gook’, although emerging from the history of the US empire in the Pacific, was reexamined and utilized in the construction of pan-Asian identity through opposition to the Vietnam War.

Growing pan-Asian solidarity can be seen in the signs that Asian Americans displayed at anti-war demonstrations, which signaled the racial connection they felt with the victims of a war that primarily killed Asians. In April 1972, *Gidra* ran an article accompanied by photos of an anti-war march. Signs on the march used the language of “Asian genocide” and the “Asian people,” suggesting that the protestors understood Vietnam as a racial war.<sup>39</sup> The article itself made explicit that Asian Americans had unique reasons for protesting the Vietnam War: “(1) American policy is a policy of genocide. (2) Genocide is racism because it justifies the extermination of an entire people, who are fighting to be free, with the lie that Asian people place less value on life. (3) The systematic dehumanization of “gooks” in the military affects Asians in America.”<sup>40</sup> As this makes clear, the Vietnam War helped Asian American activists connect militarism with anti-Asian racism.

Nakayama was brought into the anti-war struggle by Pat Sumi, who he met shortly after returning from Vietnam in the fall of 1969.<sup>41</sup> Sumi was a Japanese American who became involved in the anti-war movement because of the disproportionate presence of Black troops in the front-line infantry.<sup>42</sup> In May 1971, shortly after the Winter Solider Investigation hearings in Detroit, Nakayama spoke alongside Sumi at an Asian Americans for Peace rally in Los Angeles.<sup>43</sup> In an article prompted by the rally, Nakayama repeated his experience of racial stereotyping in Basic Training.<sup>44</sup> He also explicitly presented the Vietnam War as imperialist, saying that “[t]his is a U.S. imperialist war against the people of Vietnam to exploit her mineral resources and enslave her population.”<sup>45</sup> He related the war back to the domestic situation of the US, suggesting that “[t]he rich military, political and business elite who are controlling this war, have not only sent imperialist armies to Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and Asia, but are exploiting Third World people here in the U.S.” so that “we in the U.S. will be facing increasing armed repression in our own communities.”<sup>46</sup> He linked this insight back to his pre-military experience, in which he “resented the white dominant culture and ran with various groups of Asians and blacks.”<sup>47</sup> Nakayama’s linking of Vietnam to the broader struggle of so-called ‘Third World’



people *within* the US turns our attention to the broader connections between groups of non-white Americans.

Sumi offers an example of how cross-racial connections operated through the framework of the Vietnam War and US empire. In the summer of 1970, shortly after meeting Nakayama, she travelled to North Korea, North Vietnam, and the People's Republic of China (PRC) as part of the U.S. People's Anti-Imperialist Delegation, organized by the Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver.<sup>48</sup> Of the delegation's eleven members only two had Asian heritage: Sumi and Alex Hing, a Chinese American who co-founded the radical, Maoist-influenced Red Guard Party in San Francisco in early 1969.<sup>49</sup> Hing's activism began with opposition to the Vietnam War,<sup>50</sup> and some of the Red Guard Party's earliest activities were supporting the Third World Strike at San Francisco State College.<sup>51</sup> The Black Panthers played a key role in both Sumi's and Hing's political formation. As Hing made clear in a later interview, it was with the Panthers that he began studying Mao, Che Guevara, Fidel Castro, and Frantz Fanon, and it was at a Free Huey rally that he first realized there was wider community support for the Red Guard Party program.<sup>52</sup> The transnational and cross-racial nature of the intellectual material Hing mentions is notable, as is the irony of the Black Panthers being the ones to introduce a Chinese American to Mao. Similarly, Sumi was inspired by Malcolm X and the Panthers to organize active-duty troops against the war, hosting public talks where soldiers could hear speakers like Angela Davis.<sup>53</sup> In the case of both Hing and Sumi, their connection to Black Power was crucial in the construction of their Asian American identities, but that connection was refracted through the lens of Vietnam.

Differences in Hing's and Sumi's backgrounds, as Chinese and Japanese Americans, highlight some of the challenges of constructing a shared Asian American identity. Hing was raised in a San Francisco environment in which support for the Republic of China – the anti-PRC government based in Taiwan – dominated.<sup>54</sup> This was a common position for Chinese Americans, who were incentivized by the climate of the Cold War to continue identifying with the US-backed Republic of China.<sup>55</sup> Despite this, for Hing and other Chinese American radicals, their connection to the PRC became a source of identity – as suggested by the Red Guard Party name. In 1972, when Nixon visited China, the visibility of communist China increased and *Gidra* responded by more regularly praising the PRC. For example, in February 1972, an article based around the views of Dr Philip Huang – the former director of the Asian American Studies Center at UCLA (a product of the 1969 strikes) – commended China for its success at reducing poverty and for its peaceful nature (the suffering caused by the Great Leap Forward was not widely understood by activists during this period). Revealingly, Huang engaged in his own Orientalizing in putting these successes down to the different character and values of the Chinese, suggesting they are less focused on individualism and the desire for liberty than Americans.<sup>56</sup> Judy Wu characterizes this kind of 'positive' stereotyping as "radical orientalism", which reflected how "American activists romanticized and identified with revolutionary Asian nations and political



figures.”<sup>57</sup> Similarly, Chinese women were seen as providing a model for Asian American women in achieving independence and liberation.<sup>58</sup>

For Japanese Americans, Japan provided a more troubling legacy because of its imperial history during the Second World War and its later role as a US ally.<sup>59</sup> On one level, publications like *Gidra* explicitly connected American actions during the Second World War, such as the nuclear bombing of Japan, to American atrocities in Vietnam. This can be seen from the front and back cover of the August 1972 issue, which twinned images of Hiroshima and the use of chemical weapons in Vietnam.<sup>60</sup> In the same issue, a link was made back to Asian Americans in the US: “Hiroshima and Vietnam and Asian American communities are integrally tied to each other because American history is that of racism and genocide.”<sup>61</sup> The interrelation of racism in the US and abroad that Nakayama raised at the Winter Soldier Investigation can again be seen here. This tying together of America’s various wars in Asia built links between different groups of Asian Americans and between Asian Americans and Asia. Japan itself, however, was implicated in the US empire in the Pacific, attacked as “playing an increasingly important military and economic role in the [Vietnam] war in partnership with the U.S.”<sup>62</sup> This was linked to Japan’s militaristic, imperial past earlier in the twentieth century, so that “Japanese re-militarization is not a threat, not an event in process, but an accomplished fact.”<sup>63</sup> Asian American radicals were drawing a line from the Japanese empire to the American empire and Vietnam.

The Anti-Imperialist Delegation foregrounded some of the complexities in the positions of different Asian Americans. For example, in North Korea, Sumi had to confront the legacy of Japanese imperialism against the Koreans. Hing, on the other hand, pushed for a visit to the PRC.<sup>64</sup> In an article for *Gidra*, Hing explicitly drew a linkage between the PRC and Chinese Americans: “The representative of the People’s Republic of China expressed solidarity with the anti-U.S. imperialist struggle with Amerika [...] I, on behalf of the 300 thousand Chinese-Americans expressed our wishes that Chairman Mao live ten thousand years!”<sup>65</sup> Hing also drew a broader connection with the US empire in Asia, saying that “the Asian War [Vietnam] being perpetrated by the U.S. imperialists may spread throughout the whole continent of Asia at any moment.”<sup>66</sup> For Hing, this meant that “[a]ll Asian-Americans should pledge to become volunteers [in the North Vietnamese struggle against the US] and not die a natural death unless U.S. imperialism is defeated.”<sup>67</sup> Reflecting in 1997, Pat Sumi also made connections with the US empire in Asia, saying that “[b]y the time I came back from Asia in 1970 it was clear to me that the Asian American community needed to know more about what was going on in Asia besides the Vietnam War.”<sup>68</sup> She began this process once she returned to the US with an article in *Gidra* in December 1970 in which she too drew linkages between US imperialism and ongoing Japanese militarism.<sup>69</sup> Sumi was also shown in a Mao suit, for example on the cover of the AAM magazine *Rodan*, suggesting that the PRC became a source of pan-Asian, rather than just Chinese American, identification.<sup>70</sup> Despite the differences in their backgrounds, both Hing and Sumi were reshaped by their engagement in activism against the Vietnam War, coming to understand the conflict through a broader lens of US imperialism and pan-Asian solidarity. Both also drew

on the category of Asian American to not only draw connections between different groups within the US, but also emphasize the wider linkages across Asia against US imperial power.

It is notable that it was a trip organized by an African American, Eldridge Cleaver, that created the space for Sumi and Hing to make these broader connections. This reflects the broader influence of Black Power on Asian American identity. In a crucial early essay in *Gidra*, Amy Uyematsu laid out the concept of “yellow power.”<sup>71</sup> She suggested that Asian Americans had “assumed white identities, that is, the values and attitudes of the majority of Americans,” but in so doing came to face a “critical mental crisis” of self-identity.<sup>72</sup> By aligning themselves with whiteness, Asian Americans had allowed themselves to be used as a “‘successful’ Oriental image” to be held up “before other minority groups as the model to emulate,” allowing white America to justify the position of African Americans.<sup>73</sup> Uyematsu made clear that the shift among Asian Americans against this came from the “‘black power’ movement”, which had “caused many Asian Americans to question themselves.” Indeed, the very terminology of ‘yellow power’ testified to the influence of Black Power.<sup>74</sup> For Uyematsu “[t]he fact that all Asian Americans [were] suffering from white racism because of their common yellow skins [was] the basis for overcoming their national differences.” More than this, “blacks and yellows [had] suffered similar consequences as Third World people at the hands of American capitalist power.”<sup>75</sup> The central point of Uyematsu’s argument was to resist both Asian American assimilation into whiteness and a politics of racial segmentation, instead aligning Asian Americans with other groups victimized by white racism, in particular African Americans and the broader ‘Third World’.

The relationship with Black Power was more complex, however, than pure emulation.<sup>76</sup> In particular, Maeda argues that “[p]erformances of blackness catalyzed the formation of Asian American identity.”<sup>77</sup> The performative nature of this connection would be crucial in constructing a shared *racial*/heritage for Asian Americans, with implications for understandings of gender and masculinity among Asian Americans. The example of the Free Huey campaign, a cross-racial protest against the 1967 murder charge for the Black Panther co-founder Huey P. Newton, suggests how this worked in practice. Members of the Asian American Political Alliance, one of the groups later involved in the Third World strikes, joined a 1968 Free Huey rally holding signs in Mandarin, Japanese, Tagalog, and English.<sup>78</sup> Maeda points out that this participation achieved three key goals for Asian American activists: the use of Asian languages expressed that support for Newton emerged directly from their Asian racial identities, the linkage with the Black struggle drew a parallel with racial discrimination against Asian Americans, and the range of languages on display brought together different groups under a single Asian American banner.<sup>79</sup>

The performance of Asian American identity through Black Power, however, brought considerable baggage around gender and masculinity. In particular, the Panthers emphasized a quasi-militaristic and confrontational style.<sup>80</sup> Hing himself suggested in a later interview that performing a version of Black masculinity – playing jazz and soul music, wearing field jackets and sunglasses, shooting pool and smoking cigarettes – was a way to disrupt a “stereotype of

Chinese youth [as being all about] slide rule, go to school, glasses.”<sup>81</sup> As with questions of Asian American racial identity, transnational connections framed by the Vietnam War provided a way to explore and disrupt these gender norms. For example, Sumi and Nakayama attended the Indochinese Women’s Conference in Vancouver in April 1971, which brought together female anti-war activists from North America with women from Southeast Asia.<sup>82</sup> The conferences were extensively covered in the May 1971 issue of *Gidra*, and in the following issue there was a column on women’s issues and a long article from Sumi on the Vietnamese Women’s Union in Hanoi.<sup>83</sup> *Gidra* had already dedicated a specific issue to female liberation in January 1971, which included an article on GI attitudes towards Asian Women.<sup>84</sup> This article suggested that sexist attitudes towards Asian women were being utilized by the military to achieve two goals. First, by using “Asian women as a symbolic sex object,” the military was creating a desire that could not be gratified during Basic Training, making GIs both more malleable and more aggressive. Second, through racist ideas (like Asian women’s vaginas being slanted), they were dehumanizing Asians as a whole, making it easier to kill the North Vietnamese.<sup>85</sup> Gregory Daddis has suggested that pulp magazines of the 1950s and 1960s similarly reimposed racial hierarchies through the sexualized presentation of Asian women,<sup>86</sup> a move that later generated violence in the context of Vietnam when these expectations were disappointed.<sup>87</sup> In a January 1971 article on “G.I.’s and Asian Women” *Gidra* included an image from the GI’s servicemen guidebook of a bikini clad Asian woman that accords with the kinds of stereotypical images – presenting Asian women as sexually available – identified by Daddis.<sup>88</sup>

Asian American women made linkages with North Vietnamese women to resist such stereotypes. For example, the March 1970 and June 1972 issues of *Gidra* showed women as active participants in the war, wielding guns rather than appearing as passive sexual objects.<sup>89</sup> The March 1970 image is particularly striking, with a woman depicted as both armed and protectively holding a baby. The implication is that the armed struggle for women was not in conflict with their gender but was a necessary corollary of it. Women could be liberated as both soldiers *and* mothers.<sup>90</sup> This image also appeared in September 1969 in *Basta Ya!*, a Latino/a magazine distributed with *The Black Panther* magazine, suggesting the interconnectedness of the various radical groups and Vietnam’s role as a common reference.<sup>91</sup> The various engagements with women’s issues in *Gidra* shows that as Asian American racial identity was being constructed, a debate took place over the nature of gender in that identity. This debate was refracted through the Vietnam War, with Asian women presented as simultaneously warriors and victims.

The Vietnam War played a key role in the construction of Asian American racial identity in three key areas. First, the experience of Asian American troops serving in Vietnam highlighted the racial stereotyping inherent in ‘gookism’, allowing the AAM to understand the war as racialized in a way that created the space for a new shared Asian American racial identity. Second, the Anti-Imperialist Delegation of 1970 showcases how Asian American identity was constructed both in dialogue with Black Power and through an engagement with Vietnam, China,

and Japan. This transnational lens facilitated the AAM's integration of domestic issues of race with the wider framework of US empire. Third, while Maeda is right that performances of Blackness offered one path for the development of Asian American racial identity, transnational connections created the space for alternative understandings of Asian American identity, particularly in relation to gender.

Unifying these areas is this paper's emphasis on the transnational character of the AAM, an approach which reveals new aspects of the construction of Asian American identity. Rather than seeing this identity as emerging straightforwardly from the student movement or as constructed purely in relation to Blackness, I argue for an ongoing relationship between domestic processes of racialization and the disruptive potential of ideas of pan-Asian solidarity and transnational anti-imperialism. Asian American activists returned continually to the Vietnam War in the 1960s and 1970s to understand their own position as Asians at the heart of the American empire, and to secure alternative ways of framing their identity in relation to a war that they came to understand as both imperialistic and racially motivated.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Eddie Wong, "Mike Nakayama and Scott Shimabukuro Speaking Truth to Power at Winter Soldiers Investigation, 52 years ago," *East Wind*, January 17, 2023, <https://eastwindezine.com/mike-nakayama-and-scott-shimabukuro-speaking-truth-to-power-at-winter-soldiers-investigation-52-years-ago/>.

<sup>2</sup> Vietnam Veterans Against the War, *The Winter Soldier Investigation: An Inquiry into American War Crimes* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1972), 1. This published work is an edited version of the oral testimony – elsewhere I draw on the full transcript at the University of Virginia's "Winter Soldier Investigation," *The Sixties Project*, accessed May 11, 2023, [http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/sixties/HTML\\_docs/Resources/Primary/Winter\\_Soldier/WS\\_entry.html](http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/sixties/HTML_docs/Resources/Primary/Winter_Soldier/WS_entry.html).

<sup>3</sup> *The Winter Soldier Investigation*, 3. The original text was Mark Twain, "To the Person Sitting in Darkness," *The North American Review* 172, no. 531 (February 1901): 161-176 – Crandall's quote is from 174.

<sup>4</sup> Both William Wei, *The Asian American Movement* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1993), 15-24 and Daryl J. Maeda, *Rethinking the Asian American Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 9-12 place the strikes at the start of their accounts.

<sup>5</sup> Wei, 15-18 and Maeda, *Rethinking*, 27-51.

<sup>6</sup> Maeda, *Rethinking*, 9.

<sup>7</sup> Wei, 134-144.

<sup>8</sup> Diane C. Fujino, "Race, Place, Space, and Political Development: Japanese-American Radicalism in the 'Pre-Movement' 1960s," *Social Justice* 35, no. 2 (2008): 58.

<sup>9</sup> Maeda, *Rethinking*. Diane Fujino has produced several works exploring the intersections of the Black and Asian American struggles, most relevantly *Heartbeat of Struggle: The Revolutionary Life of Yuri Kochiyama* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005) and *Samurai among Panthers: Richard Aoki on Race, Resistance, and a Paradoxical Life* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012); Michael Liu, Kim Geron, and Tracy Lai, *The Snake Dance of Asian American Activism: Community, Vision, and Power* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2008); Judy Wu, *Radicals on the Road: Internationalism, Orientalism, and Feminism during the Vietnam Era* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> For this tendency, see Diane C. Fujino, "Who Studies the Asian American Movement: A Historiographical Analysis," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 11, no. 2 (June 2008): 138-141.

<sup>11</sup> For the 1974 end date see Asian Community Center Archive Group, *Stand Up: An Archive Collection of the Bay Area Asian American Movement, 1968-1974* (Berkeley, CA: Eastwind, 2009). For the 1990 end date see Liu, Geron, and Lai – they locate the mature movement in 1976-1982 on 93-120.

<sup>12</sup> David L. Anderson, *The Columbia Guide to the Vietnam War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 286.

<sup>13</sup> Maeda, *Rethinking*, 116-120.

- <sup>14</sup> The presence of the US military in the Pacific and the relation to empire is a large and growing field of study – some key recent works include Sasha Davis, *The Empires' Edge: Militarization, Resistance, and Transcending Hegemony in the Pacific* (University of Georgia Press, 2015) and Lauren Hirshberg, *Suburban Empire: Cold War Militarization in the US Pacific* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2022).
- <sup>15</sup> For the importance of California as a site for Asian American identity see Christine Bacareza Balance, “California Dreaming: An Introduction,” in *California Dreaming: Movement and Place in the Asian American Imaginary*, ed. Christine Bacareza Balance and Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2020), 1-16.
- <sup>16</sup> Daryl J. Maeda, *Chains of Babylon: The Rise of Asian America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009); Christopher Douglas, *A Genealogy of Literary Multiculturalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009).
- <sup>17</sup> Walter Benn Michaels, “Race into Culture: A Critical Genealogy of Cultural Identity,” *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 4 (Summer 1992): 655-685.
- <sup>18</sup> Douglas, 184-219.
- <sup>19</sup> Maeda, *Chains*, 73-96.
- <sup>20</sup> Richard J. Jensen and Cara J. Abeyta, “The Minority in the Middle: Asian-American Dissent in the 1960s and 1970s,” *The Western Journal of Speech Communication* 51 (Fall 1987): 402-416; Yen Le Espiritu, *Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions and Identities* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992); Rychetta Watkins, *Black Power, Yellow Power, and the Making of Revolutionary Identities* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2012); Susan Koshy, “Morphing Race into Ethnicity: Asian Americans and Critical Transformations of Whiteness,” *boundary 2* 28, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 153-194.
- <sup>21</sup> Ellen D. Wu, *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014); Cindy I-Fen Cheng, *Citizens of Asian America: Democracy and Race during the Cold War* (New York: New York University Press, 2013). Both works are indebted to Mary L. Dudziak's landmark study *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).
- <sup>22</sup> Robert G. Lee, “The Cold War Origins of the Model Minority Myth,” in *Asian American Studies Now: A Critical Reader*, ed. Jean Yu-wen Shen Wu and Thomas C. Chen (Ithaca, NY: Rutgers University Press, 2019), 266.
- <sup>23</sup> Simeon Man, *Soldiering through Empire: Race and the Making of the Decolonizing Pacific* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018), 3.
- <sup>24</sup> Jodi Kim, *Ends of Empire: Asian American Critique and Cold War Compositions* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010) and *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History*, ed. Ann Laura Stoler (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).
- <sup>25</sup> Simeon Man, “Empire and War in Asian American History,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Asian American History*, ed. David Yoo and Eiichiro Azuma (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 254.
- <sup>26</sup> For a broad overview of *Gidra* and other key publications of the AAM see Wei, 102-131.
- <sup>27</sup> “Winter Soldier Investigation.”
- <sup>28</sup> “Third World Panel,” *The Sixties Project*, accessed May 18, 2023, [http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/sixties/HTML\\_docs/Resources/Primary/Winter\\_Soldier/WS\\_33\\_3d\\_World.html..](http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/sixties/HTML_docs/Resources/Primary/Winter_Soldier/WS_33_3d_World.html..)
- <sup>29</sup> Man, *Soldiering*, 136. Man draws on an interview he conducted with Mike Nakayama and Nick Nagatani on September 19, 2009.
- <sup>30</sup> Man, *Soldiering*, 137.
- <sup>31</sup> David Roediger, “Gook: The Short History of an Americanism,” *Monthly Review* 43, no. 10 (March 1992): 50-54.
- <sup>32</sup> Maeda, *Chains*, 110. Norman Nakamura, “The Nature of G.I. Racism,” *Gidra* 2, no. 6 (June/July 1970): 4.
- <sup>33</sup> Nakamura, 4.
- <sup>34</sup> “Third World Panel.”
- <sup>35</sup> “Racism Panel,” *The Sixties Project*, accessed May 18, 2023, [http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/sixties/HTML\\_docs/Resources/Primary/Winter\\_Soldier/WS\\_16\\_Racism.html](http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/sixties/HTML_docs/Resources/Primary/Winter_Soldier/WS_16_Racism.html).
- <sup>36</sup> “Racism Panel.”
- <sup>37</sup> *Gidra* 4, no. 5 (May 1972): cover.
- <sup>38</sup> Christian G. Appy, *Patriots: The Vietnam War Remembered from All Sides* (New York: Viking, 2003), 358.
- <sup>39</sup> Steve Tatsukawa, “April March,” *Gidra* 4, no. 5 (May 1972): 12.
- <sup>40</sup> Mike Murase, “Why an Asian Contingent?” *Gidra* 4, no. 5 (May 1972): 13.
- <sup>41</sup> Man, *Soldiering*, 136.
- <sup>42</sup> Ryan Yokota, “Interview with Pat Sumi,” in *Asian Americans: The Movement and the Moment*, ed. Steve Louie and Glenn Omatsu (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center Press, 2001), 18-19.
- <sup>43</sup> Man, *Soldiering*, 151.
- <sup>44</sup> There was also a later essay about the rally – Steve Tatsukawa, “Peace Sunday – A photographic essay,” *Gidra* 3, no. 6 (June 1971): 11.



- <sup>45</sup> Mike Nakayama, "Nam and U.S.M.C.," *Gidra* 3, no. 5 (May 1971): 17.
- <sup>46</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>48</sup> The fullest account of this trip is Judy Wu, 107-189.
- <sup>49</sup> Maeda, *Rethinking*, 14-18.
- <sup>50</sup> Fred Ho and Steve Yip, "Alex Hing - Interviewed by Fred Ho and Steve Yip," in *Legacy to Liberation: Politics and Culture of Revolutionary Asian Pacific America*, ed. Fred Ho, et al (San Francisco: AK Press, 2000), 282.
- <sup>51</sup> Ibid., 286.
- <sup>52</sup> Ibid., 285-287.
- <sup>53</sup> Yokota, 19-21.
- <sup>54</sup> Judy Wu, 129-130.
- <sup>55</sup> Ellen Wu, 111-114.
- <sup>56</sup> Ted Hulbert, "China: Through Chinese Eyes," *Gidra* 4, no. 2 (February 1972): 6-7.
- <sup>57</sup> Judy Wu, 4.
- <sup>58</sup> Yvonne Wong Nishio, "Women in China," *Gidra* 4, no. 9 (September 1972): 12-13.
- <sup>59</sup> Judy Wu, 134.
- <sup>60</sup> *Gidra* 4, no. 8 (August 1972): cover and back cover.
- <sup>61</sup> Mike Murase, "Hiroshima-Nagasaki...to Vietnam," *Gidra* 4, no. 8 (August 1972): 5.
- <sup>62</sup> Bruce Iwasaki, "Yen To Control: Japan's Role in Vietnam and Speculation on the Future of Asia," *Gidra* 4, no. 8 (August 1972): 11.
- <sup>63</sup> Ibid., 9. My emphasis.
- <sup>64</sup> Yokota, 25. Judy Wu, 150-151.
- <sup>65</sup> Alex Hing, "Dear Comrades," *Gidra* 2, no. 9 (October 1970): 6. Sic.
- <sup>66</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>67</sup> Ibid. Sic.
- <sup>68</sup> Yokota, 26.
- <sup>69</sup> Pat Sumi, "December 7, 1971," *Gidra* 2, no. 11 (December 1970): 7.
- <sup>70</sup> The *Rodan* cover is reproduced in Yokota, 17. For the history of *Rodan* see Wei, 102.
- <sup>71</sup> Amy Uyematsu, "The Emergence of Yellow Power in America," *Gidra* 1, no. 7 (October 1969): 8-11. This essay is central to several accounts of the emergence of Asian American identity, including Watkins, 35-36 and Wei, 43; and was subsequently anthologized in the landmark 1971 UCLA Asian American Studies Center collection *Roots: An Asian American Reader*, eds. Amy Tachiki, Eddie Wong, Franklin Odo, and Buck Wong (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center, 1971).
- <sup>72</sup> Uyematsu, 8.
- <sup>73</sup> Ibid., 9.
- <sup>74</sup> Ibid., 8.
- <sup>75</sup> Ibid., 10.
- <sup>76</sup> For more on that myth and its relation to US Cold War policy, see Ellen Wu. For more on the pre-history of Black-Asian community relations, see Fujino, "Race, Place, Space, and Political Development".
- <sup>77</sup> Maeda, *Chains*, 75.
- <sup>78</sup> "Free Huey, Free Huey"—An Awesome Outburst," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 16 July 1968.
- <sup>79</sup> Maeda, *Chains*, 80.
- <sup>80</sup> Ibid., 93.
- <sup>81</sup> Ho and Yip, 284.
- <sup>82</sup> Judy Wu, 193-265.
- <sup>83</sup> There were five articles in *Gidra* 3, no. 5 (May 1971) on pages 9-13. Carol Mochizuki, "Women's Column," *Gidra* 3, no. 6 (June 1971): 6 and Pat Sumi, "Vietnamese Women's Union," *Gidra* 3, no. 6 (June 1971): 7-9. Pat Sumi's article was built from notes she had made during the Anti-Imperialist Delegation trip.
- <sup>84</sup> Evelyn Yoshimura, "G.I.s and Asian Women," *Gidra* 3, no. 1 (January 1971): 4 and 15.
- <sup>85</sup> Ibid., 4.
- <sup>86</sup> Gregory A. Daddis, *Pulp Vietnam: War and Gender in Cold War Men's Adventure Magazines* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 115-119.
- <sup>87</sup> Ibid., 173.
- <sup>88</sup> Yoshimura, 4.
- <sup>89</sup> *Gidra* 2, no. 3 (March 1970): cover and *Gidra* 4, no. 6 (June 1972): cover.
- <sup>90</sup> Judy Wu, 159.

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<sup>91</sup> *Basta Ya!* 4 (20 September 1969): 3. For more on the history of *Basta Ya!* see Jason Ferreira, “‘With the Soul of a Human Rainbow’: Los Siete, Black Panthers, and Third Worldism in San Francisco,” in *Ten Years That Shook the City: San Francisco, 1968-1978*, ed. Chris Carlsson (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2011), 30-47.



## Paper

### Producing ‘The Iron Curtain’ (1948): Encoding Atomic Anxiety

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*This MA Thesis was written for the program Research Master’s Modern History and International Relations*

*“This is a force as powerful as nature. Uncontrolled, it could destroy the world” (The Iron Curtain 36:50)*

On 20 November 1947, prominent film reviewer Jay Carmody from the *Washington Evening Star* announced “That Anti-Communist Movie Is in the Works in H’Wood”.<sup>1</sup> He was referring to *The Iron Curtain*, directed by William A. Wellman and produced by Twentieth Century-Fox. The spy thriller was based on a real espionage affair that came to light in 1946 and is regarded by many historians as Hollywood’s first anti-communist propaganda film.<sup>2</sup> “Count on ‘The Iron Curtain’ to start a whole cycle of anti-Communist films,” Carmody predicted, “which will have to be only reasonably well made to be popular”.<sup>3</sup> The film was also shrouded in controversy.<sup>4</sup> As soon as production of *The Iron Curtain* was announced, pro-communist groups in the United States began protesting the release of the film. They appealed to the president of Twentieth Century-Fox to stop the funding the venture, and when that failed, they appealed to the president of the Motion Picture Association of America.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, *The Iron Curtain* premiered on 12 May 1948, accompanied by a picket line comprised of members of the New York Committee Against War Propaganda and a group of counter-protestors from the Catholic War Veterans.<sup>6</sup> Despite the uproar, *The Iron Curtain* was shown in American and international theaters, and Carmody’s predictions were not far off from the truth.

It is not surprising that such a strong response attracted the attention of the press, but the newspapers did not just report on the reactions of the public. As the controversy started early in the production process, attention also focused on the producers and their intentions for the film, notably Darryl Zanuck, the head of production at Twentieth Century-Fox and the brain behind *The Iron Curtain*. Zanuck vehemently denied the allegations that he was making a propaganda flick. Yet among scholars of film history, the propagandic nature of *The Iron Curtain* is never in question; rather, the debate centers on the motivations of the producers. There are several possibilities: fear of the McCarthyistic wind that was blowing through Hollywood, true ideological commitment to anti-communism, or old-fashioned profit.<sup>7</sup> I argue that it is not the motivations behind the production that matter, but rather the intentions behind the message of the film.

In this article, I argue that the producers of *The Iron Curtain* were highly aware of the impact the film would have given rising Cold War tension. Moreover, I contend that they tailored the film to play into the fears and anxieties of the American public. I show that by presenting the film through a specific format and utilizing recognizable narrative themes, the producers encoded *The Iron Curtain* with a very specific political message. Firstly, I provide a short explanation of the historical events the film was based on and how they

affected the social and political climate in the US. Then I provide an analysis of the intentions of the producers based on newspaper articles and interviews, supported by secondary sources. This is then followed by my own analysis of *The Iron Curtain*, in which I identify three main themes: anti-communism, atomic paranoia, and the nuclear family. I argue that these themes fed into some of the most prevalent political narratives in American society.

The plot of *The Iron Curtain* is based on the reports of a real Soviet espionage plot in Canada that was brought to light by Igor Gouzenko a few years prior to the production of the film. This became known as the Gouzenko affair, which shook the already fragile foundation of the solidarity between the Allied forces. I will shortly summarize the events of the Gouzenko affair, as well as the public's reaction and the press coverage. This context is not only necessary for the film analysis of *The Iron Curtain*, but also because the affair played a role in the rising fear of atomic espionage in the United States. This shared sense of paranoia is partially what inspired the producers of *The Iron Curtain* to create an anti-Soviet spy thriller, and therefore requires some elucidation.

On 6 September 1945, Soviet cypher clerk Igor Gouzenko approached a local newspaper in Ottawa with a story about a Soviet spy plot, and several stolen documents. The documents indeed contained evidence that there was an extensive network of spies working in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom, with many of the culprits being Soviet-sympathizing citizens from these countries. The espionage ring included scientists and engineers, government, and army personnel, and even a Canadian Member of Parliament. The newspaper did not believe Gouzenko's story, but the Canadian Ministry of Justice did. The affair put the Canadian government in a difficult position. They could not hide the plot from their allies in the U.S. and the U.K., but the matter was complicated by the fact that the power behind the espionage ring had also been a part of the wartime alliance. World War II had also significantly shifted the global power balance and the U.S. and the Soviet Union had come out on top as the two main superpowers. Although the war had come to an official end after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the peace was tentative. It was for this reason that Canadian Prime Minister Mackenzie King chose to inform President Truman and Prime Minister Atlee of the affair in secret.<sup>8</sup>

King managed to keep the Gouzenko affair out of the public eye until February 1946, when the story was leaked to the American media. This leak has mostly been attributed to Edgar J. Hoover, the head of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). Historian Dennis Molinaro argues that the British government had motives for leaking the story as well. The most important Soviet spy had been a British atomic scientist, which was something that placed the U.K. in an awkward position towards the U.S. Molinaro writes that the British may have leaked the story to the American media in order to relay focus upon the American angle of the espionage plot.<sup>9</sup> Whoever contacted the media managed to force King's hand in forming a Royal Commission to investigate the suspects, making it impossible to bury the story of the Gouzenko affair any longer. The case quickly gained international attention. The case touched upon many wounds that had already started festering, like the increasing distrust towards the Soviet Union in the United States. Only a month after the public became aware

of the espionage scandal, Winston Churchill made his famous “Iron Curtain” speech.<sup>10</sup> The Gouzenko affair did not start the American paranoia about Soviet atomic espionage, but it served to accelerate it.

Popular anxiety regarding the destructiveness of atomic warfare also played a role in the crisis. The idea that such a powerful weapon existed was anxiety-inducing for many people, and the possibility that it could fall into the hands of the enemies contributed to the Gouzenko affair having such an explosive effect on Americans. The American public was starting to look towards the Soviet Union and communism as the next big threat to the American way of life, but the knowledge that the Soviet Union had spied on their allies during wartime to gain access to nuclear secrets terrified the public.<sup>11</sup> It is no surprise that when Darryl Zanuck decided he wanted to touch upon the anxiety of the American public in his big anti-Soviet spy thriller, he was determined to bring the Gouzenko affair to the silver screen.

*The Iron Curtain* was the first in a whole string of Cold War anti-communist propaganda films produced by Hollywood. These films were generally not well-received by film critics, as they are seen as formulaic and inaccurate, and the motivations of those who produced these films are often questioned.<sup>12</sup> Many scholars, such as Russell Shain and Colin Shindler, have suggested that many Hollywood producers chose to make these anti-communist films in order to appease the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) and present themselves as ‘friendly’ to the American cause. The anti-communist witch hunt and the affair of the Hollywood Ten had frightened many producers, and even at the time, it was suggested by journalists that “production of anti-communist films stemmed from a desire to ease the pressure that HUAC had created”.<sup>13</sup>

Other scholars reject this argument as too simplified. Daniel J. Leab provides two different reasons why Hollywood producers would consider making an anti-communist film. The first reason would be sincere ideological commitment: although there were communist sympathizers in Hollywood, there were also some staunch opposers. A famous example of this would be John Wayne, who had strong right-wing beliefs and played a HUAC process server in the 1951 film *Big Jim McClain*.<sup>14</sup> Wayne was happy to play this role, because it clearly aligned with his own personal views, and not out of fear of the Committee. Moreover, Leab argues that Zanuck was more focused on turning a profit than promoting anti-communism. On the contrary, when he first announced his plans for an anti-communist film, he argued that the story should be exciting and entertaining first, and that a strong focus on ideology would be “ponderous and dull.”<sup>15</sup>

With the 1945 success of *The House on 92nd Street*, Zanuck had discovered that socially relevant films could be profitable.<sup>16</sup> This spy film follows an American student who is recruited by the Nazis to infiltrate the FBI. Zanuck had made this film with the full cooperation of the FBI and sought to do the same thing for *The Iron Curtain*. This did not come to fruition, however, because Zanuck and J. Edgar Hoover had different goals for the film. Hoover wanted to cooperate on films that showed the FBI in a positive light, while Zanuck wanted to create a film that tapped into the postwar sentiments of Americans, while

also turning a profit.<sup>17</sup> Zanuck was clearly planning a repeat of the success of *The House on 92nd Street*, as he noted in an early memo on the idea of a film about Gouzenko:

*The Iron Curtain* is a story to be written in the technique of *The House on 92nd Street* dealing with the activities of recent foreign agents in the United States and Canada and the subversive activities of the Communists.<sup>18</sup>

The technique referred to here is the style of the 'semi-documentary', which was arguably adopted by *The Iron Curtain*.

The production process of *The Iron Curtain* was a tumultuous one. Darryl Zanuck sent a telegraph to the studio's New York office to buy the rights to Gouzenko's story on 17 April 1947. It took a while before the studio's representative, Bert Bloch, had convinced Gouzenko and his negotiator that it would be in good hands with Twentieth Century-Fox. After multiple meetings and a showing of *The House on 92nd Street* and another semi-documentary, the contract was signed on 28 April.<sup>19</sup> What speaks loudly here is the dedication on the part of Twentieth Century-Fox to stick to the format of a semi-documentary, as well as Gouzenko's personal enthusiasm about this genre. We can see this again during the screenwriting process, as there were two different screenplays by two different writers. The two screenplays varied immensely, but the main thing that they had in common was the omniscient narrator, as well as a written foreword, that made the film feel more like a documentary.<sup>20</sup>

The change in screenwriters reveals more about the intentions of Zanuck and Twentieth Century-Fox. The original choice of writer was Martin Berkeley, a former newspaperman and member of the Communist Party.<sup>21</sup> One could imagine that the studio may have changed directions because Berkeley was too positive about the communists, but nothing could be further from the truth. Leab describes an annotated screenplay by Berkeley that preached about the horrors of communism and the Soviet Union and was highly ideological in nature. The comments of those who reviewed the script beg Berkeley for more subtlety and criticize him for taking the anti-communism too far.<sup>22</sup> They decided to turn to Milton Krims, who had become famous for writing *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*, a similar propaganda spy thriller. Although Krims did attempt to include anti-Red elements, he was more interested in writing another thriller.<sup>23</sup> It appears that the creators of this film felt similarly to Krims, because his version of the screenplay was filmed. This suggests indeed that for Zanuck and Twentieth Century-Fox, the profitability of *The Iron Curtain* was a priority.

Zanuck, however, also made public comments about his intentions with *The Iron Curtain* after the attention and outrage it had garnered. The picture is calculated to and does arouse the public to vigilance against a menace," he wrote in response to a particularly scathing review from the *New York Times*. "As proof I need only cite the fact that the majority of the (Canadian) conspirators were convicted and sentenced to prison."<sup>24</sup> This phrasing suggests a deep concern for the influence of the Soviet Union and communism in the United States, and Zanuck's desire to raise awareness to this issue. He later also compares

*The Iron Curtain* to *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) by author John Steinbeck, writing that they are similarly inflammatory because they both stand up for what is right. He writes that "our picture does not preach hatred of the Russians, but of the hatred they have for our democratic way of life", and "I intended them to arouse feeling[s] against what was wrong."<sup>25</sup> Zanuck also dismisses the accusations that *The Iron Curtain* is a propaganda film by stating: "Such propaganda as there is in the picture happens to be based on the truth".<sup>26</sup> These statements, however, do not necessarily speak of a strong conviction in accordance with the stance taken by the film. The changes in direction with regards to the screenplay especially speak to this, as well as Zanuck's falling out with the FBI.

This production process eventually led to a film with three main themes, which could be easily understood by casual viewers. These themes are not separate, but constantly in interaction with each other. The first of these is the overt anti-Soviet and anti-communist stance the film takes. The Soviet Union is depicted as a ruthless dictatorship, where the people who live there barely have a roof over their head and food in their belly. The portrayal of Russia in *The Iron Curtain* is very interesting, in the sense that we never see it, yet it always seems to loom over the characters. If the Russians working at the military attaché's office do not follow instructions, they are threatened with a return to Russia. This is heavily implied to equal a death sentence. When Major Kulin (Eduard Franz) breaks down in front of Gouzenko (Dana Andrews) and Ranov (Stefan Schnabel) and is faced with the same punishment, he laughs and says: "The threat of threats, to be sent back to Russia".<sup>27</sup>

*The Iron Curtain* does not make any moral or ideological judgement about Marxist theory, but rather about those who call themselves Marxists. Leonard Leitz (Mauritz Hugo), the fictional member of parliament who is a part of the communist spy ring, makes a sneer towards the Marxists who have a theoretical interest. "To some Marxism is kind of a game they play, to rid them of their frustrations. (...) To others, it's kind of a fashionable cult".<sup>28</sup> He makes a clear distinction between these "talkers" and "doers", and states that the "doers" are the ones the spy ring is interested in recruiting. This scene is followed by the narrator explaining the web of spies hidden within the Canadian governmental structure. These spies are, according to the narrator, "all Canadians, all Party members".<sup>29</sup> These scenes feed into the distrust that lived among Americans, that all Marxist study groups are either fronts for un-American organizations or at least fertile recruitment grounds. It is an early display of that McCarthyistic sentiment that would grow and fester throughout the next decade.<sup>30</sup>

The film makes a clear distinction between the Russian communists and the Canadian communists. The Russians are almost treated with more sympathy, since they are almost forced to believe in the Communist cause. Gouzenko says as much to his wife. "These people are politically uneducated," he tells her one evening as he is doing the dishes. "They have no leadership to help them think."<sup>31</sup> It becomes clear that he is not whole-heartedly devoted to the communist cause, he just believes what he is told and keeps his head down. How different is he from the Canadian Party members, who have chosen to believe in communism? These "doers" Leitz talks about, who "understand the class struggle and are ready to make every sacrifice for it".<sup>32</sup> These people grew up in a "free democracy", yet they chose to forsake and



betray it to further the communist cause. This is, according to the *Iron Curtain*, the bigger sin.

It could also be argued that the film takes a pro-capitalist stance, but it is more likely that the scenes that glorify capitalism and Canada are mostly used to serve as a stark contrast with the cruelty of the communist regime in Russia. By showing everything that is good about capitalism and Canada, the audience learns more about the horrible realities of living under a Communist regime. When Anna Gouzenko (Gene Tierney) arrives in Canada to join her husband, she is overwhelmed with the "plentiful" capitalist country. She describes the size of the buildings she saw on the train from San Francisco to Ottawa and is absolutely in awe when she finds out that they have a flat of their own.<sup>33</sup> The intended audience of the film is either used to or aware of these things; they are not new information. The core of this scene is Anna's surprise and awe at something as mundane as a home. Her response to the everyday experience of many Americans and Canadians works to show how different the life is of those in the Soviet Union. When Gouzenko is caught trying to escape with the secret files, Ranov confronts Igor and says: "You didn't want to leave this lovely apartment. This plentitude of food. This easy living".<sup>34</sup> This, again, is not Ranov musing about all that the capitalist Canada has to offer, but rather a bleak observation of what would await the Gouzenko family in Russia.

The second theme of *The Iron Curtain* is the paranoia, especially in relation to atomic espionage, that is almost tangible in the film. It is, of course, the national sentiment that Zanuck wanted to play into when he decided to produce this film, and Wellman delivered strongly in that aspect. The film starts with the introduction of the code of conduct for Soviet spies and this scene does two things: firstly, it introduces the protagonist, Igor Gouzenko. We learn that he is a cypher clerk for the Russian intelligence service, but also that he might be slightly too honest to be a spy, as he fails to recite the background story that was constructed for him by Moscow to his superiors.<sup>35</sup> This scene, perhaps more importantly, also sets up a basic premise that permeates through the rest of the film: no one is to be trusted, anyone could be lying. It is this premise that prevents Gouzenko from making meaningful connections with anyone other than his wife and son, which makes the viewer distrustful of any new character that is introduced to us.

One specific type of paranoia that is perpetuated in *The Iron Curtain*, is the fear of the existence of a 'fifth column' in Western society. A 'fifth column' refers to the idea that there is a hidden faction of subversive agents operating within a nation to sow discord and sabotage the state from the inside. This term was originally coined in the 1930s during the Spanish Civil War, but it was popularized during the Cold War, as communist sympathizers within the U.S. were often referred to as a 'fifth column'.<sup>36</sup> In *The Iron Curtain*, the idea of a 'fifth column' is brought to life through the character of John Grubb (Berry Kroeger), codename "Paul". Grubb is the fictional founder of the Canadian Communist Party and he is the one who pulls the strings of the Canadians who betray their country in order to further the communist cause. "My orders are to build a large organization", he says when we first meet him.<sup>37</sup> Throughout the film, he recruits a member of parliament, a captain of the Royal Canadian Airforce, and a British scientist who worked on the atomic bomb. It is through

John Grubb that we see how deep the communist espionage network could penetrate Canadian - and by extension American society.

Grubb's most dangerous recruit is not the politician or the army official, but rather Dr. Harold Norman, a nuclear scientist. He is the one who is tasked with reporting on the research into nuclear energy and the atomic bomb in Canadian and American laboratories, as well as stealing a sample of uranium so Russian scientists could test it.<sup>38</sup> The danger of the atomic bomb 'falling into the wrong hands' is constantly emphasized in the film. "This is a force as powerful as nature," Dr. Norman tells Grubb. "Uncontrolled, it could destroy the world."<sup>39</sup> This interaction is then followed by Gouzenko coming across several terms related to nuclear energy and weapons, like "plutonium" and "neutron", in the messages he is tasked to decipher. As he looks them up in the dictionary, we hear an intense classical piece playing in the background, with haunting strings and hastened drumbeats. The narrator tells us that these were terms "belonging to an atomic age being born in the laboratories of Canada and the United States."<sup>40</sup> It is this scene that shamelessly exploits the growing fear and paranoia of nuclear warfare of the film's audiences and uses it to build tension and urgency in its plot.

The third theme of *The Iron Curtain* is that of the 'nuclear family'. The 'nuclear family' is perhaps one of the most iconic images of the postwar years and it carried a lot of weight in this period. It is the well-known ideal picture of the working father, the stay-at-home mother, and their children.<sup>41</sup> The Gouzenko family is of a similar construction, Igor is out at work all day, while Anna stays at home with their son Andrei and manages the house. It is this recognizable image that is both constantly under threat from the Soviet Union and eventually motivates Gouzenko to act against his leaders.

The first threat to his family actually arrives before Anna has even moved to Canada. Gouzenko's security chief Ranov does not trust Igor to keep to his rehearsed background story, so he sends his secretary Nina Karanova, played by June Havoc, to seduce him into revealing his secrets.<sup>42</sup> Havoc's character is the classic femme fatale archetype, which was the most common way female spies were portrayed in the first half of the nineteenth century.<sup>43</sup> However, Gouzenko responds, "My wife is very beautiful."<sup>44</sup>

The statement is revealing. Gouzenko is not an idealist in any way. He dutifully repeats the Soviet government's arguments when he engages in political discussion with his wife and even when he chooses to defect from the Soviet Union, he does not do it for his strong belief in Western democracy. It is Anna Gouzenko who first raises her concern about the war-mongering ideals of the Soviet Union and confronts her husband about how they would affect their son. "Poor little fellow. It would be a pity, him having to grow up thinking the world is his enemy", she says to her husband, while looking at her son sleeping in his crib.<sup>45</sup> When Igor finally makes the decision to steal the classified documents and bring them to the Canadian authorities, he does so "for his sake."<sup>46</sup> In the end, it was not the enticing femme fatale who broke Gouzenko's loyalty to his government, but the duty he felt to his wife and son.

The nuclear family as a central theme in a Cold War propaganda film may seem unrelated to the intended message, but it is very connected to American public defense strategies from the postwar years. The 'nuclear family' was a key element in the plans of civil



defense planners when they were looking for private solutions to public security issues. The image of the working father, the caring mother, and their loving children had a strong symbolic power. "[T]his ideal represented an organic unity, a model of commitment and cohesion for a diverse citizenry fighting a common enemy," writes Laura McEnaney.<sup>47</sup> This idea of the family as an unbreakable unit fighting against communism is exactly what we can see in *The Iron Curtain* in the build-up towards the climax. When Igor Gouzenko runs around Ottawa to speak to the authorities, he takes his wife and child with him. When the assistant to the Minister of Justice literally closes the door on the Gouzenkos, we see a shot of a desperate family looking defeated.<sup>48</sup> It is this very image that shows not only what is at stake if the Soviets are left unchecked, but also the strength of the West that opposes it.

There is one strong leitmotif in *The Iron Curtain* that supports this argument. Throughout the first half of the film, whenever multiple Russians are speaking with each other, we can see a portrait of Joseph Stalin in the background.<sup>49</sup> It serves as a reminder of who these people serve, but also as a warning: their oppressive government is always watching. This changes, however, when Gouzenko makes the decision to steal the documents and take them to the Canadian authorities. While he is mulling this over and thinking about the world his son might grow up in, we see a portrait of baby Andrei in the place where Stalin would be.<sup>50</sup> The message is clear: Gouzenko is no longer acting in the name of the Soviet regime, he is now acting for his son.

Based on both this film analysis and his comments and actions during the production process, we can conclude that Darryl Zanuck wanted to create a film that touched upon the main concerns of the American public in the postwar years. He saw the fear of the Soviet Union as well as the increasing paranoia about the betrayal from American communists and sought a story that matched it. His efforts resulted in *The Iron Curtain*, and its precisely these motivations that make the film such a significant and influential film. Not only would it serve as a blueprint on which a plethora of anti-Soviet propaganda films would later be based, but it also provides a glimpse into those concerns that Zanuck hoped to exploit. Whether Zanuck's motivations were profit or ideology, or something different entirely, the result is a cultural text that reflected and even exacerbated the anticommunist and anti-Soviet sentiments in postwar American society. This, as well as the public outrage the film first met, makes *The Iron Curtain* a picture with historical and cultural relevance in the study of film and propaganda in the early Cold War.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Jay Carmody, "That Anti-Communist Movie is in the Works in H'wood," *Evening Star* (20/11/1947)

<sup>2</sup> This is argued by both film historian John Rossi (1994) and historian Daniel J. Leab (1988), whom I refer to in this article.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> John Rossi, "The Iron Curtain: A Premature Anti-Communist Film," *Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies*, Volume 24, Numbers 3-4 (1994): 102.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>6</sup> "Rival Pickets Battle in New York Over 'Iron Curtain' Movie," *Evening Star* (12/05/1948)

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- <sup>7</sup> Daniel J. Leab, "The Iron Curtain' (1948): Hollywood's first Cold War movie," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (1988): 156
- <sup>8</sup> Paul Dufour, "'Eggheads' and Espionage: The Gouzenko Affair in Canada," *Journal of Canada Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 3&4 (1981): 189.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.
- <sup>11</sup> Molinaro, "How the Cold War Began ... with British Help: The Gouzenko Affair Revisited," 154.
- <sup>12</sup> Leab, "The Iron Curtain' (1948): Hollywood's first Cold War movie," 155.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.
- <sup>16</sup> Rossi, "The Iron Curtain: A Premature Anti-Communist Film," 102.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.
- <sup>18</sup> Darryl Zanuck, in Leab, "The Iron Curtain' (1948): Hollywood's first Cold War movie," 156.
- <sup>19</sup> Leab, "The Iron Curtain' (1948): Hollywood's first Cold War movie," 162.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.
- <sup>23</sup> Rossi, "The Iron Curtain: A Premature Anti-Communist Film," 104.
- <sup>24</sup> "'Twaddle!' Cries Critic as Producer Zanuck 'Defends' Attack on Film," *Oakland Tribune* (18/07/1948)
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>27</sup> *The Iron Curtain*, 49:09.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 19:25 to 19:40.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 20:40.
- <sup>30</sup> Edwin R. Bayley, *Joe McCarthy and the Press* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1981): 5
- <sup>31</sup> *The Iron Curtain*, 27:08.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 19:50.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 23:33 to 24:05.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:17:59.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 02:45 to 03:50.
- <sup>36</sup> Richard J. Samuels, *Encyclopedia of United States National Security* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2005): 261.
- <sup>37</sup> *The Iron Curtain*, 14:32.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 32:48 to 36:50.
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 36:47.
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 37:38 to 38:05.
- <sup>41</sup> Laura McEnaney, *Civil Defense Begins at Home* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000): 69
- <sup>42</sup> *The Iron Curtain*, 08:45 to 11:45.
- <sup>43</sup> Rosie White, *Violent Femmes: Women as Spies in Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2007): 34
- <sup>44</sup> *The Iron Curtain*, 11:45.
- <sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 43:56.
- <sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 54:30.
- <sup>47</sup> McEnaney, *Civil Defense Begins at Home*, 69.
- <sup>48</sup> *The Iron Curtain*, 1:06:30.
- <sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 02:47; 07:03; 30:39; 41:21; 46:35.
- <sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 55:25 to 55:43.

## Book Review

### *Water in North American Environmental History*

**Martin V. Melosi (Routledge, 2022)**

**Amedeo Gasparini** | Utrecht University

*This book review was written for an internship at the Roosevelt Institute for American Studies*

Historians are increasingly studying the ways the environment has shaped history and Martin V. Melosi's book *Water in North American Environmental History* (2022) represents a valuable contribution to this body of literature. Across twenty-five short case studies, Melosi explores the multifaceted interactions between water and commerce, society, and the environment. Focusing on the United States, Mexico, and Canada, Melosi challenges the traditional perspective of water as simply a natural phenomenon, framing it instead as a political element, symbolized by the recurring metaphor of water as a "medium." This perspective allows Melosi to offer thought-provoking examinations of water's various uses, covering not just expected topics such as agriculture, sanitation, and fire protection, but also military defense, transportation, and power generation.

The author makes clear that water has played a crucial role in urbanization and sanitation with the case of Philadelphia's early 20th-century city-wide waterworks system. The book also explores topics such as disinfection and canal construction and their demographic impacts. Additionally, it touches on water's aesthetic value (for example, Niagara Falls) and its role in trade (the Houston Ship Channel), while addressing natural disasters linked to water, such as the Mississippi River flood of 1927. The social dimension of water emerges as a recurring theme, encompassing issues such as racial segregation in swimming pools. Melosi acknowledges the growing awareness of water's importance since the 1960s, which has given rise to "utilitarian conservationism" against corporate exploitation.

The book comprises eight chapters, each covering a distinct historical period such as water's significance in indigenous societies, early colonization, or westward expansion. This structure allows readers to focus on particular periods of interest, although at the cost of drawing out broader themes across these periods. This is less of an issue in the second half of the book, which focuses on developments after the Second World War, and draws out the contemporary relevance of Melosi's argument within the context of ideas of "New Ecology" and "Environmental Justice." Melosi pays particularly close attention to water's connections with issues of race, gender, and class, and the environmental consequences of its misuse, emphasizing its status as the Earth. He draws parallels with ancient "hydraulic societies" - civilizations based on water - such as the Aztecs, highlighting the historical exploitation of water resources.

Despite its breadth, the book does have limitations. It lacks in-depth political analysis, failing to delve into governmental policies or political positions regarding water. Geopolitical aspects also receive limited attention, particularly how water contributed to the US's emergence as a global power. These small reservations aside, Melosi's book offers an

expansive overview of water's multifaceted history in North America, serving as a vital resource for understanding the intricate relationship between water and the continent's development. Melosi's case studies will not only be of use for those undertaking detailed research on aspects of social and environmental history, but the book will also be valuable for readers inexperienced in the field of environmental history who want an example of how this burgeoning area can offer new perspectives on old debates.

## Paper

### The (Un)heard Voices of Kosawa: Environmental Activism in and through Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*

Maaïke Siemes | Leiden University

*This paper was originally written for the course American Climate Fictions for the MA program in Literary Studies.*

Today, seven out of the twenty largest global corporations are oil companies.<sup>1</sup> Oil is one of the most important commodities in the world; the trade and transport of energy is enormous with over three trillion dollars in international transactions.<sup>2</sup> The transport of oil occupies over one third of the overall global shipping fleet and two million kilometers of pipelines push oil deliveries to destinations all over the world.<sup>3</sup> Enumerating these numbers only reveals the economic side of the global oil industry, since the human and ecological costs of it cannot be expressed in numbers. Imbolo Mbue's latest novel *How Beautiful We Were* (2021) is a good example of how storytelling can reveal the realities behind numbers. The novel exposes the exploitation of the fictional village Kosawa in Cameroon by Pexton, an American oil corporation. The conglomerate establishes itself in the surroundings of the village and intoxicates their water, air, and food supplies. Even though many children of Kosawa pass away from the contamination, Pexton continues to expand the company during the fifty-year time span of the novel.

Literary scholar Teresia Muthoni Biama has argued that the novel voices various resistance approaches to fight against environmental degradation such as media, education, revolution, and acts of civil disobedience.<sup>4</sup> Building on this analysis, I will argue that *How Beautiful We Were* is also a mode of activism in itself, which can be seen through the application of its narrative strategies in telling the story of the exploitation of Kosawa by the American oil company. In this sense, Mbue's novel serves as an illustration of how literary works play an important role in activism against climate changes.

In order to do so, I will close read the novel in accordance with Mary Louise Pratt's theory of 'force' in *Planetary Longings* (2022), which argues that certain categories, structures, or systems – such as (neo)colonialism – appear as unpredictable and mutable *forces* rather than fixed categories.<sup>5</sup> According to Pratt, humans and other life forms, such as animals and nature, are increasingly subject to processes they do not control and this new unpredictability calls for a shift out of society's systemic ways of thinking.<sup>6</sup> She bases her theory on the concept of 'friction' which researches the unplanned effects of the traction between forces.<sup>7</sup> The force of coloniality, for instance, considers the still evolving afterlives of colonial world-making; it analyzes how this force interacts with other forces or returns and mutates in the present and future.<sup>8</sup>

The interaction between forces is particularly present in *How Beautiful We Were*. As a result of the novel's setting in Cameroon, a former colony of various European countries, the interaction between ecological and other forces, such as historic, socio-

economic, political, and cultural forces, are pervasive. The colonial exploitation of natural resources has led to the destruction of habitats of animals and plants, degradation of natural resources, and the loss of biodiversity.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, historical struggles in the colonial landscape involve important environmental questions. Correspondingly, as scholars Bonnie Roos and Alex Hunt have argued, in order to solve environmental problems in former colonies, issues such as poverty, wealth inequality, overconsumption and resource scarcity need to be addressed.<sup>10</sup> For this reason, addressing Pratt's theory in relation to the American oil corporation and the environment around Kosawa will allow me to analyze in more depth how the forces of corporate greed, corruption, modernity, and capitalism interact with the natural and cultural forces of the African village.

Mbue's novel is mostly written from a first-person plural perspective, which both emphasizes the marginalization of Kosawa's voices and empowers them. The narrators are the children of Kosawa. Most of their names are not revealed in the novel and they recount the story on behalf of their village; thereby representing the village as a collective. This narratological decision reminds readers how the children, who are the next generation, are mostly the victims of this climate disaster. This first-person plural narration also creates a feeling of 'us versus them;' it is the children of Kosawa versus Pexton. The narrative centers on what the children, and its citizens in general, have done to prevent the ruin of their village against Pexton. This 'us versus them' feeling is immediately evoked in the first paragraph of the novel:

*We* should have known the end was near. How could *we* not have known? When the sky began to pour acid and rivers began to turn green, *we* should have known our land would soon be dead. Then again, how could *we* have known when *they* didn't want us to know? When *we* began to wobble and stagger, tumbling and snapping like feeble little branches, *they* told us it would soon be over[.]<sup>11</sup>

From this paragraph, it becomes clear that the novel centers the voices of the unheard children in Kosawa and simultaneously creates a binary between Kosawa and Pexton. Literary scholar Rachel Weidinger argues that polyvocality is a way to resist certain power structures and creates the possibility for narrative shifts.<sup>12</sup> Through the centering of many voices - and the plurality within these voices - polyvocality forces "a rethinking and questioning of ways of knowing."<sup>13</sup> Similarly, it repeats the same values and worldviews in different ways, which not only expands "the bandwidth and frequencies of a narrative", but also transforms and undermines dominant narratives.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, polyvocality empowers the marginalized voices in the novel.

Likewise, the first-person plural narration in Mbue's novel shifts the narrative focus from a Western perspective toward the perspectives of Kosawa's children. Instead of the 'we,' through which most Western readers usually associate themselves, the 'we' now stands for Kosawa's perspective and the 'they' for the American corporation and their standpoint.



This narrative shift undermines the dominant Western perspective. According to the concept of ‘othering’, only dominant groups are in a position to construct hierarchal groups by stigmatizing discursive differences (the self, ‘us’ versus the ‘them’).<sup>15</sup> They impose the value of “its particularity” while simultaneously devaluing the ‘other’ groups by ascribing problematic or inferior characteristics to them.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, dominated groups are subjected to the categories of the powerful groups.<sup>17</sup> According to historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot, they are also subjugated to the narratives of dominant groups.<sup>18</sup> Trouillot emphasizes that as a result of uneven power in the production of histories, only dominant groups have the power to create their own (historical) narratives because they have access to the networks through which information is disseminated.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, narratives and even terminologies (e.g., the power to name something ‘the truth’ or a ‘fact’) imposes an account of power on the ‘other.’<sup>20</sup> In Mbue’s novel, this asymmetrical power relationship is switched around through its first-person plural perspective. Kosawa’s children now construct their own narrative about American corporations in Africa, in which they essentially take control of the narrative discourse. This switch in perspective forces readers to rethink their knowledge about oil corporations in Africa because it compels them to sympathize with African villages like Kosawa.

Mbue’s novel alternates between plural and singular narration, creating a kaleidoscopic overview of the various perspectives and following the notion of polyvocality by showing the plurality within Kosawa’s residents. While all characters stand against Pexton, they also have their own views on the matter. For instance, Thula, one of the children of Kosawa’s village, reveals the urgency of the climate disaster in Kosawa. She explains in detail the ecological consequences of Pexton’s oil corporation, for example, how Pexton’s oil well exploded near her village or how a new oil well led to “increasing wastes dumped into [the river]”, which killed “whatever life was left in the big river.”<sup>21</sup> As such, Thula’s perspective makes Kosawa’s climate disaster personal and concrete for readers.

The kaleidoscopic overview of perspectives also allows readers to compare and contrast singular perspectives with each other. For instance, Thula’s perspective, which symbolizes the views of the younger generation within the village, is juxtaposed with Yaya’s perspective, Thula’s grandmother. Her narration exposes how Pexton’s exploitation of African villages is connected to centuries of Western exploitation of Africa. She notes, for example, how Kosawa was spared in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, but was not from the Europeans using African laborers on rubber plantations in Africa: “Nowadays young people talk about the oil as if it’s our first misfortune; they forget that, long before the oil, the parents of our parents suffered for the sake of rubber.”<sup>22</sup> By including Thula and Yaya’s perspectives, *How Beautiful We Were* not only points out how Kosawa’s climate disaster is a contemporary issue with contemporary causes, but can also be placed in a historical framework. It reminds readers that coloniality and slavery should not be forgotten when discussing environmental disasters in Africa, because they are entwined with each other; not only were people commodified under colonialism, but the African soil as well.<sup>23</sup>

As literary scholar Ursula K. Heise argues, the trope of ‘nature in crisis’ frequently stands in for social, political or historical problems that include, but go beyond the mere

ecological ones, because ecological processes are an essential part of networks of power and communication.<sup>24</sup> Under colonialism, nature became part of these global power structures because its resources could be harnessed to generate profit for Western countries.<sup>25</sup> This key point is reflected in Yaya's example of slavery in the nearby villages, the forced labor on rubber plantations, and when she discusses the reasons behind her village's introduction to capitalism: "[The European men] introduced us to money, not because we needed it but because we had to learn how it worked for their sake. ... If they were to make us a part of their world, we had to integrate into our lives the principles by which they lived."<sup>26</sup> It is her chapter which continually reminds readers of how Western principles have been imposed on African countries by Western countries in order to take work forces and natural resources for their benefit for centuries.

Moreover, Yaya's perspective opposes traditional Western ideas that international trade and companies bring forward progress and development. Franklin Obeng-Odoom, a scholar of global development studies, argues that "the conventional wisdom" is centered on the idea that capitalism and corporate-led oil drilling is needed for development.<sup>27</sup> However, Yaya's perspective undermines these conventional ideas by emphasizing how enslavement has been replaced with forced work on rubber plantations, which in time was replaced for cheap employment in oil refineries.<sup>28</sup> Instead of progress, she delineates how global forces have mutated over time (e.g., coloniality with neo-coloniality and corporate greed). Hence, her perspective reveals the subjectivity in narratives about Western corporations in African countries.

Her narration also sheds light on the hypocrisy of the West. Although Western countries have formally been decolonizing, historian David van Reybrouck argues that they continue to "colonize" African countries today through its transnational corporations under the false pretense of bringing 'progress' to African countries.<sup>29</sup> The oil extraction of international corporations has long-lasting socio-economic and ecological consequences, which increases the imbalance of global power structures and, in turn, enforces the dependency of African countries on the West in the future.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, Yaya's narration emphasizes how historical and contemporary forces are intricately entangled with each other, thereby not only illuminating the complexity of these mutable forces, but also undermining traditional Western capitalist ideas.

Mbue's novel does not focus on the people who work for Pexton. Altogether, only two representatives are mentioned by name: Mr. Kumbum and Mr. Fish. All other employees are not given a name, but are rather described in general terms, such as the 'Leader', the 'Sick One', or the 'Round One'.<sup>31</sup> The anonymity of Pexton's employees accentuates how the corporation functions as one abstract entity in the novel. As a result of its facelessness, there is a distance between readers and the company. Consequently, readers cannot relate to the policies of the oil corporation. Moreover, the facelessness of Pexton can be understood to represent all Western oil corporations in Africa.

Yet, paradoxically, the company is also personified in the novel. As a character, Pexton moves through the novel as the antagonist. The American corporation directly causes the deaths of Kosawa's residents through slow violence. According to Rob Nixon, a scholar

in postcolonial and environmental studies, this kind of violence happens gradually and is dispersed across times and space.<sup>32</sup> As a result, it remains mostly out of sight of the spectacle-driven corporate media because customarily violence is still characterized as an event or action which is immediate in time and spectacular in space.<sup>33</sup> This invisibility of Pexton's slow violence permits its representatives to drill oil wells indifferently. It is only after the sudden abduction of two of Pexton's officials, which ends in the massacre of most of Kosawa's citizens by Cameroon's army, that the press starts publishing Kosawa's story in American newspapers. However, even then the corporation makes hollow promises for offering support for the village in order to shift the attention from the violence and pollution they have caused. By depicting Pexton both as an antagonistic character and a faceless entity in the novel, Mbue's novel creates a distance between readers, Pexton, and its capitalist ideology. As a consequence, it becomes again easier for readers to sympathize with the traditional community of Kosawa than with the free-market imperatives of Pexton.

These examples of Pexton also reveal how the corporation functions throughout the novel. Pexton's corporate greed and capitalist ideals can be seen as global forces in the novel which come into conflict with other forces at any scale. The most obvious example of this is the friction between Pexton and the local environment around the corporation. The natural world around the conglomerate is subjected to Pexton's oil drilling, which causes the air, water and soil in the local environment to be polluted. However, Pexton's force is more unpredictable than these direct consequences of human domination over nature. According to Pratt's theory, all life forms interact continuously with animate and non-animate forces in big and small ways.<sup>34</sup> As a result, "[n]onanimated actors determine the conditions for life and death of all living things."<sup>35</sup> In *How Beautiful We Were*, Pexton causes a chain reaction, in which the natural world around the corporation imperils human lives in Kosawa. In the village, the environmental degradation caused by Pexton leads to an increase in miscarriages, and babies and children die.<sup>36</sup> Underscoring the entanglement between past, present and future forces, it is the future generation of Kosawa that suffers from the contemporary actions of Pexton because the corporation indirectly kills most children and babies, thereby negating Kosawa's possibility of a future. In this sense, Mbue's novel reveals that when nature is destroyed, it will cause chain reactions in which future human survival is also imperiled.

Pexton does not only affect the local environment, but it also interacts with other forces, such as the national government of Cameroon. Whereas the company creates disasters for the climate and the residents of Kosawa on a local scale, it influences political decisions on a national scale. As a result of the instability and corruption within the national government, which in turn are caused by forces of coloniality, Pexton can bribe policymakers on various levels to "shut their eyes, or turn them to the ground, or to the sky to anywhere but the children dying in front of them."<sup>37</sup> In this manner, Pexton can get the oil they want, while the "government [can get] more of their money" from which His Excellency can profit.<sup>38</sup> This collaboration between the two parties gives readers insight into how the children's voices are almost powerless compared to Pexton's money. Indeed, these two examples point out how the future generation of Kosawa, are essentially disenfranchised in today's policy making of Cameroon even though the environmental policies concern them most. As political

scholar Jonathan Boston writes, governments often face pressures to prioritize short-term benefits over superior (but less liquid) long term investments; they prefer policies that have an earlier payoff, while they shift the long-term costs to the next generation.<sup>39</sup> In Mbue's novel, Pexton bribes Cameroon's government into prioritizing their short-term economic benefits over Kosawa's future. Consequently, Kosawa's children are subjected to these larger socio-economic and political processes they cannot control.

In addition, the collaboration between Pexton and the national government of Cameroon also enables a vicious cycle in which Kosawa's citizens reinforce the very same institutions that caused their problems. The narration of Juba, Thula's brother, emphasizes this cycle. After he and his mother Sahel move away from Kosawa to Bézam, the capital city of Cameroon, he gets into the "sole government leadership school in the country" in order to change the corruption within the government: "[My classmates and I were] convinced that we would never be corruptible like the older generation."<sup>40</sup> However, Juba's vision changes while working for the government, since he has started to take on bribes as well: "I have amassed riches from payoffs I take after [my partner] tells me how much a requested favor is worth."<sup>41</sup> Juba's example points out how Pexton's force indirectly overtakes the citizens of Kosawa and that they have now become part of the institutions that caused Kosawa's problems in the first place, thereby enabling the forces of the government and Pexton to continue growing. Thus, although (neo)colonialism seems like a set system or structure, it appears in the novel as an unpredictable force, which interacts with socio-economic, ecological, historical and political issues.

The characters in *How Beautiful We Were* also continually ask rhetorical questions, which stimulate readers to critically assess the causes of Pexton's environmental disaster. When Thula narrates about the broken pipeline of Pexton, she asks: "why should Pexton replace it when the cost of its negligence would be borne largely by us?"<sup>42</sup> Although she clearly condemns Pexton for the climate disaster in her village, the phrasing of the question emphasizes the hypocrisy of the oil corporation. Thula knows very well no American corporation takes responsibility when there is no institution to hold them accountable, and her question is thus indirectly addressed to the readers. Other rhetorical questions further highlight Kosawa's problems regarding the environment and human rights. For instance, when the children ask: "was the death of one Pexton man more tragic than the deaths of all our friends and siblings combined?"<sup>43</sup> The question addresses how human lives are valued differently in the world and while readers instantly know what the answer to the question should be, the phrasing of it emphasizes the reality of the matter. In this sense, the questions force readers to think critically about these global problems, because it motivates them to examine the underlying causes of the problems addressed in the novel.

Another narrative strategy which forces readers to reflect on Kosawa's situation is the novel's writing style. Like an elegy, which is a piece of writing, or a song that reflects and mourns the dead, the novel laments the death of the children and adults of Kosawa.<sup>44</sup> This lamentation returns in the title of the novel, since it comments in the past time on the beauty of the village and its residents: *How Beautiful We Were*. The collective narration of the children can also be interpreted as a chorus lamenting the events happening in Kosawa, which

adds to the elegiac writing style. They emphasize the urgency of Kosawa's story: "This story must be told, it might not feel good to all ears, it gives our mouths no joy to say it, but our story cannot be left untold."<sup>45</sup> When telling its story, the novel gives voice to the perspectives of Kosawa's children. At the same time, it reflects on Kosawa's tragedy and enforces readers to reflect on it as well.

Additionally, when grieving the loss of the village, Mbue's novel again emphasizes the complexities of Pexton as a force, since it eradicates Kosawa's culture and traditions as well. At the end of the novel, the loss of the village is mourned:

We were refused one last chance to enter Kosawa and empty our huts. The government decided the land had become too contaminated for human presence. His Excellency ordered Kosawa burned. What once were our huts became ashes. Our mother's kitchens, ashes. Our barns and outhouses, ashes. Our ancestors' pride, ashes.<sup>46</sup>

In this passage, the children narrate (as adults now, since the novel has progressed fifty years in time) about the loss of their village. They not only grieve the physical loss of their village, but also its culture. The village symbolizes their traditional ways of living, such as their ways of cooking, their ancestor's pride, and their self-sustainability. Unlike the contemporary Western gaze, which views the earth as an entity with no intrinsic meaning, Kosawa's citizens regard the village and in particular the natural environment in which they lived as a realm which is fundamentally interconnected with the spiritual landscape and their (genealogical) histories.<sup>47</sup> Since Pexton caused Kosawa's citizens to be dispersed into various villages and cities, the bond between them and their ancestral land is broken.

Two concrete examples of this broken connection are discussed through the spirit of the leopard and the umbilical-cord bundles. All residents know about the myth of the leopard. During the founding of the village, three brothers encountered a leopard in their trap in the forest. Instead of killing the rare animal, the brothers set the leopard free and as a gift, the leopard "forged a blood pact with each brother," ensuring that their descendants will live as "indomitable men."<sup>48</sup> Yet, the chorus children note how this guiding legend is not passed on to the next generation anymore, because they do "not recognize our spirit" in the modern world.<sup>49</sup> Likewise, the children narrate at the end of the novel how they took the "umbilical-cord bundles before [they] fled Kosawa, hoping to pass them on to [their] children."<sup>50</sup> Similar to the spirit of the leopard, the umbilical-cord bundle represents the bloodline of the town. It is "the essence of [Kosawa's] existence", because every person in the village ties their umbilical cord to the bundle, which binds each generation to their past and future in the village.<sup>51</sup> However, the next generation has "no use for them" anymore.<sup>52</sup> Instead, they "have good jobs with the government [and] with corporations in Europe and America."<sup>53</sup> They drive new cars, which use oil, and they do not think about "the children who will suffer as [their parents] once did."<sup>54</sup> Tragically, as the future generation of the village has integrated into Western culture, the traditional cultural values of Kosawa are overtaken by Pexton's modern force, which again reveals the interaction between traditional and

modern forces. More ironically, the next generation works for transnational corporations like Pexton and uses the resource of oil themselves, a resource their parents suffered for. This irony emphasizes how the next generation enforces the very same forces their parents tried to resist.

Although the content of *How Beautiful We Were* might suggest the tragedy of activism against Pexton, Mbue's novel itself is a form of activism. It is through Mbue's act of writing – and the narratological devices she uses – that the complexities and consequences of Kosawa's climate disaster become most visible. To be more precise, the polyvocality of perspectives in the novel subverts Western dominant narratives and allows Kosawa's voices to be heard. In addition, the rhetorical questions, elegiac writing style, and the seemingly paradoxical personification of Pexton as a character and abstract entity increases the sympathy the reader feels for the village. Likewise, it is Pexton's depiction that reveals its interaction with various forces on local, national, and global scales. It does not only affect Kosawa's local environment, but the corporation also influences local and national government policies, and stimulates cultural adaptation on the next generation of Kosawa's children. Hence, Pexton's force increases over time, which causes the next generation of Kosawa's people to become part of these dominant forces. In delineating the devastating effects of Western corporations such as Pexton, Mbue's novel opposes forces of corporate greed and neo-coloniality.

Using a novel as a vehicle to give voices to marginalized perspectives is a powerful act of activism, because it enables new insights into the consequences of corporate greed. Simultaneously, it creates discursive legitimacy for these marginalized voices, and it allows the legacy of villages like Kosawa to continue, if only symbolically. In this sense, Mbue's novel demonstrates the possibility of literature to promote social change. *How Beautiful We Were* is a powerful example of how novels can be a form of activism against transnational corporations and climate change.

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## Notes

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Biama, Teresia Muthoni. "A Voice of Resistance and Activism: A Critique of Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*." *African Educational Research Journal*. Kenya: The Catholic University of Eastern Africa, 2022, 312. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1361912>.

<sup>5</sup> Emphasis added. Pratt, Mary Louise. *Planetary Longings*. Duke University Press, 2022, 7.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 20.

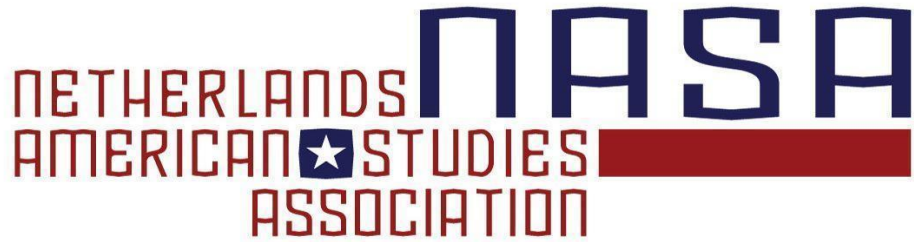
<sup>9</sup> Roos, Bonnie & Hunt, Alex. *Postcolonial Green: Environmental Politics and World Narratives*. Edited by Bonnie Roos, University of Virginia, 2010, 85. 85.

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<sup>11</sup> Emphasis added. Mbue, Imbolo. *How Beautiful We Were*. Penguin Random House LLC, New York, 2021, 3.



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- <sup>13</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>15</sup> Staszak, Jean-François. "Other/Otherness." *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*. 2009, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/social-sciences/otherness#:~:text=Definitions,a%20motive%20for%20potential%20discrimination>. Accessed September 23, 2023.
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- <sup>17</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>18</sup> Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2015, 27.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid., 114.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid., 114-115.
- <sup>21</sup> Mbue, *How Beautiful We Were*, 32.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid., 222.
- <sup>23</sup> Ghosh, Amitav. *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis*. John Murray Press, 2022, 37.
- <sup>24</sup> Heise, K. Ursula. "Postcolonial Ecocriticism and the Question of Literature." *Postcolonial Green: Environmental Politics and World Narratives*. Edited by Bonnie Roos, University of Virginia, 2010, 255-256.
- <sup>25</sup> Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse*, 37.
- <sup>26</sup> Mbue, *How Beautiful We Were*, 224.
- <sup>27</sup> Obeng-Odoom, Franklin. *The Commons in an Age of Uncertainty: Decolonizing Nature Economy and Society*, University of Toronto Press, 2021, 134.
- <sup>28</sup> Mbue, *How Beautiful We Were*, 222.
- <sup>29</sup> Van Reybrouck, David & Ghosh, Amitav. "On the Relationship between Colonialism and Climate Changes." Interview by Marcia Luyten, *International Literature Festival Utrecht: Exploring Stories*, September 30, 2023. <https://ilfu.com/agenda/david-van-reybrouck-en-amitav-ghosh-over-de-verknooptheid-van-kolonialisme-en-klimaatbeheer>.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>31</sup> Mbue, *How Beautiful We Were*, 7.
- <sup>32</sup> Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Harvard University Press, 2011, 2;6.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid., 6.
- <sup>34</sup> Pratt, *Planetary Longings*, 135.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>36</sup> Mbue, *How Beautiful We Were*, 28;49.
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- <sup>38</sup> Ibid., 137.
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- <sup>46</sup> Ibid., 355.
- <sup>47</sup> Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse*, 35-36. & Brown, Ras Michael. *African-Atlantic Cultures and the South Carolina Lowcountry*. Cambridge University Press, 2012, 34.
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- <sup>53</sup> Ibid., 358.
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