Welts and All: Portrait of American Nation-Building Via Landgrab
A Review of *1898: US Imperial Visions and Revisions*

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At Washington DC's National Portrait Gallery, the function of portraiture is put to task. *1898: US Imperial Visions and Revisions*, which ran from April 28, 2023 to February 25, 2024, recasts portraiture not as mere mimicry or the quest for accurate or idealized likeness, but an indexical approach to power, expansion, imagination, and omission. The National Portrait Gallery of DC's collection consists of pictures of men and women who built the United States. Yet how is nation-building done through American exceptionalism and manifest destiny? This exhibition highlights not just the personalities of America's ascent but provides an apt picture of how this nation is built: via nation-culling and land grabbing. The Smithsonian, of which the National Portrait Gallery is part, describes this exhibition as an examination of US intervention—an expansion involving Cuba, Guam, Hawaii, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines.

From the exhibition website, this is touted to be the "*First Major Smithsonian Exhibition to Examine the U.S. Intervention in Cuba and U.S. Expansion into Guam, Hawai'i, Puerto Rico and the Philippines.*" Such an interesting choice of words: "expansion" and "intervention." What is being intervened? How is expansion congruent to nation-building? The layout of the exhibition offers a clue. It opens with a portrait of American President William McKinley (Fig. 1) standing regally with his hand on the table, clutching a road map of Puerto Rico.

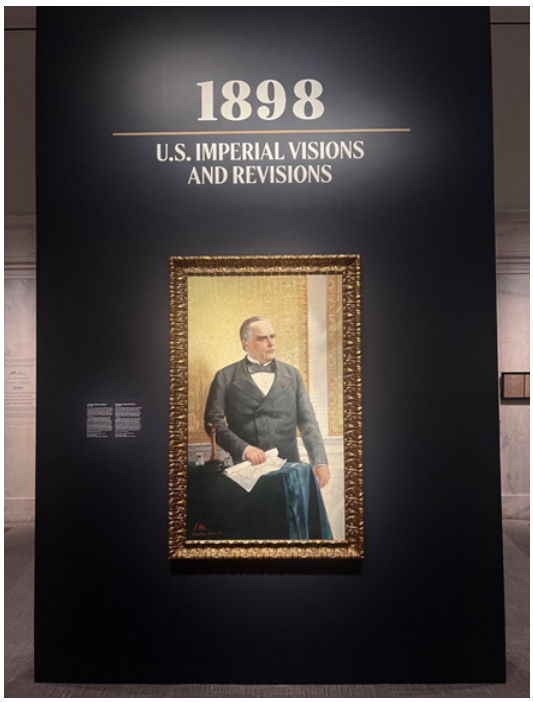

Fig. 1. Oller y Cestero, Francisco. *Portrait of President McKinley.* 1898, Oil on canvas, 147.3 × 83.8 cm (58 × 33 in.). Collection of Dr. Eduardo Pérez and family, National Portrait Gallery, Washington, DC.

The start of the exhibit features a gilded portrait of American President McKinley gripping an unfurled map of Puerto Rico. Photo by the author.

This pose could be read as a literal land grab by the president. It must be said that the dominant color of the walls where the portraits are hung is navy blue, the color of the sea where America became a global superpower via its maritime power. McKinley does not look directly at the viewer; his gaze is on some invisible horizon. Such positionality is that of a promised domination and fortification of power from a leader who glances at a distance, at a certain future, at a certain promise by seizing territory with one look and a firm grasp.

At the tail end of the exhibit, at the far side but parallel to the portrait of McKinley and his visibly strong grip of a map, signifying corralling, is a depiction of the violent reality of expansion. It bears mentioning that the map in McKinley's portrait is in front of his figure as if to foreground his eventual legacy of expansion. Interestingly, Jonas Lie's *The Conquerors* (Fig. 2) depicts the development of the Panama Canal. Thus, the exhibit opens with McKinley's portrait, and at the far end is this painting of American business interests carving the canal.

Fig. 2. Lie, Jonas. *The Conquerors*. 1913. Oil on canvas. 152.4 × 127 cm (60 × 50 in.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art; George A. Hearn Fund, National Portrait Gallery, Washington DC.

To bookend Pres. McKinley's portrait, this painting of a landscape of expansion and pollution instructs on the history of the construction of the Panama Canal to serve American and corporate interests. Photo by the author.

This is a violently distressing landscape emerging from American imperial interests as a bookend to highlight what America did in 1898 and after— a violent cartography and colonization through the establishment of global networks of exploitation and "uneven development" (David 2019). This unevenness is the very operation of expansion that speaks from the painting. The tendrils of smoke and pollution are a series of slashing marks of American exceptionalism; it is clear the United States arguably formed the country of Panama to gain a foothold on this crucial location to eventually commandeer global commerce by connecting the Pacific Ocean and the Atlantic Ocean. Panama used to be a part of Colombia but the latter demanded an exorbitant amount from the United States to develop the Panama Canal. The American solution, as it would be evident in the future in different iterations, was to collude with the provincial and disenfranchised elite to create a new country. Colonialism then is a glacial— steady and forceful— carving of the landscape, be

it cultural or topographical, with striations of exploitation and extraction. All of these emanate from this painting of tendrils and torment over land while forcefully connecting two oceans to suit American supremacy.

In between the portrait of McKinley and the painting of the carving of the Panama Canal, the exhibition is organized in suites composed of different locations featuring portraits of personalities involved within that geopolitical area. The Philippines suite is composed of men who had a direct hand in helping an emerging and forming nation characterized by both conflict and collaboration with the United States. Interestingly, the Philippine embassy in Washington DC as well as the National Museum were involved in lending the portraits and assisting with curatorial direction, hence the usual portraits of Jose Rizal and Apolinario Mabini (Fig. 3).

Fig. 3. Museumgoers take a look at a display of weaponry used during the Philippine-American War.

The portraits of Jose Rizal and Apolinario Mabini sandwich the painting of charging American soldiers into Philippine soil. Photo by the author.

One artwork in this suite perfectly sums up the revision discussed by the exhibition is Frederic Remington's *In the Philippines – A Bayonet Rush of United States Troops* (Fig. 4).

Fig. 4. Remington, Frederic. *In the Philippines – A Bayonet Rush of United States Troops*. 1899. Oil on canvas. 81.3 x 114.3 cm (32 x 45 in.). Courtesy of the Center of Military History, Museum Division, US Army, National Portrait Gallery, Washington DC.

The charging Americans are in heroic poses. At the center of the upper horizon is an American soldier pointing the gun directly at the viewer, as if positioning that we are witnessing this eventual triumph. Filipino soldiers have Africanized features as they sprawl and cower at the ground trampled by American superiority. Photo by the author.

The work shows the courage and heroism of American soldiers rushing to the enemy. The viewer and the painter are positioned behind enemy lines, witnessing the assault of white American male power as if about to spill out of the frame. The Filipinos are dark bodies scrambling cowardly or being trampled upon. The "Africanized" features of the Filipinos demonstrate the undergirding of American nation-building: racism. The truth of "might" in this work is crucial because the artist never set foot in the Philippines and this portrait of American military superiority is thus imagined. In this art of portraiture, representation shows its power in entrenching political ideologies. "Representations of those who can't see or speak for themselves are and must always be engendered by outsiders—those who can

see and speak" (Nodelman 1992: 19). This exhibition is mostly about American utterances in the formative years of what eventually becomes the American Century (Eckes and Zweiler 2003 and Nye 2015OH).

The impressive curation did not only focus on portraits, but also included maps, flags, cartoons, weapons, and, the most insidious in the opinion of this reviewer, board games for American young boys (Fig. 5). Such games deploy certain ideologies of white supremacist America for the consumption of those who could be possible cogs in the imperialist machinery.-

Fig. 5. Rough Riders and Naval War boardgames were made available in the late 1890s and early 1900s to engage the war with the public. The Rough Riders board game was in fact based on Theodore Roosevelt's book of exploits in San Juan Hill in Cuba, which captured the imagination and patriotism of the Americans. Behind them are strategic maps of the Spanish-American War in the Cuban theatre. Photo by the author.

These game boards have an umbilical association with the imagined portrait of the above-mentioned American soldiers. Boyhood and masculinity are part of the American imagination of expansion and exceptionalism. In 1898 and the years that followed, there was an uptick in children's literature showcasing adventures in encountering the Other, demonstrating the "correctness" and the superiority of white America. These books emphasized the difference between the two while

asserting the civilization of the United States. As the different game boards feature military incursions in various areas such as Cuba, the point of the games is not just to finish first, but to gain the most ground first. The latter and its attendant "standing your ground" dictum are emblematic of American machismo, from American football to the romanticized sacrificing of one's life for the nation. In fact, there are certain states whose laws integrate the concept of "Stand your ground": "Stand Your Ground (SYG) laws—to allow their citizens to use force, including lethal force, in self-defense when there is reasonable belief of a threat, without having any duty to retreat" (McClellan and Terkin 2017:622). There is a strong belief in one's presence as an assertion of ownership. The refusal to relinquish is based on what is felt to be one's outright ownership. Whatever the intention of the curators of this exhibition, viewers from the former colonies and the currently marginalized would think that America is all about accumulating or defending their accumulated territory. These board games remind us of how popular video games of today could serve as recruiting platforms for the American military-industrial complex.

The exhibit demonstrates that portraiture is built upon visuality, which is "both medium for transmission and dissemination of authority, and a means for the mediation of those subject to that authority" (Mirzoeff xv). Visuality is a colonizing implement, policing its emergence and propagation. The depiction of the Other is necessary for the securing of borders and expansion of territory. Visuality seeks the maintenance of its power that is reliant on the temporal and the spatial. The portraits in this exhibition are indexical of power imbalance; there are portraits of those who believed in expansion, while there are depictions of those who vehemently disagreed with the ambitions of the United States. The meaning of portraiture differs in manner and in context.

It may be too optimistic to think of this exhibition as an admission of the United States of the violence brought by its imperial motions. If the exhibit were about accountability, there would have been portraits of the misery left behind by colonization as this still feeds the political and economic problems of today. Serving as the context of this exhibition is a period in which the current political landscape in the United States is witnessing the antagonism between the Republicans and Democrats. Republican Texan Governor Greg Abbott and Republican Florida Governor Ron DeSantis have enacted changes in their curricula. Florida history lessons claim that slavery was beneficial to black people. Considering current American flashpoints, the 1898 exhibit may be showing that the museums and other institutions focusing on culture and history are bastions of ideology supported by the current Democratic-led federal government against Republican revisionism. Yet, even though this exhibition features violent imperial rhetoric,

the purpose of such historical reckoning is not clear, if there is reckoning at all. The word "intervention" in the website's description of the exhibit as the "First Major Smithsonian Exhibition to Examine the U.S. Intervention in Cuba and U.S. Expansion into Guam, Hawai'i, Puerto Rico and the Philippines" plays down the effects of US colonialism (this is similar to how US history labelled the Philippine-American war as mere "insurgency".) "Intervention" is a deflation of atrocities. The word may even be seen as a necessary act: to intervene. How is this intervention seen by those who have been colonized or those who are *still* suffering from the legacies of colonialism? Although many Global South scholars have condemned the extractive nature of colonialism, some, like Prospero Covar, see colonialism as an impetus to emerge from its damaging clutches. Colonialism is "interruption." Furthermore, "colonialism was only a temporary detraction, no matter how long and pernicious it was. It was merely a temporal setback" (Covar 25). Covar does not diminish the excesses of colonialism but would rather focus on the need to see it as an obstacle to overcome and, more importantly, to learn from. Perhaps this is a more adequate lens in looking at the exhibition: burns and craters in the road to self-actualization for those who were oppressed. The exhibition is at the victor's house, which gives the United States the privileged position of introspection without true accountability. What this exhibition succeeds in doing is demonstrating that there is another way of considering portraiture: that it is not about human likeness. In the place alloted for portraits of American exceptionalism, there is an exploration of themes and ways of looking at events related to land grabbing and expansion. The subject of the portrait is no longer its main focus as likeness is not the main function of portraiture in this exhibit, but positionality. The subject/person rendered is seen alongside other images that are not as visible as the artifacts from dominant cultures, such as the traditional Hawaiian flags. The mostly stoic faces of usually white Americans look askance at landscapes of destruction, where warships appear on the horizon and lands are carved violently to fulfill the need for resources by the colonizers. Amidst people dressed in their finery and imperial regalia, there are maps to rout out the recalcitrant rebels fighting for *their* land. In this regard, perhaps one of the most popular songs of America should not be titled "America the Beautiful" but "America the bountiful."

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