

## THE CASE OF THE DISAPPEARING FILIPINO AMERICAN HOUSEBOY: SPECULATIONS ON *DOUBLE INDEMNITY* AND UNITED STATES IMPERIALISM

**Victor Bascara**  
**Asian American Studies**  
**University of Wisconsin-Madison**  
[\*\*\*vbascara@wisc.edu\*\*\*](mailto:vbascara@wisc.edu)

### Abstract

The creations of a new cultural formation, US imperialism, development, and globalization are traced in this article by the use of James M. Cain's 1936 pulp novella-turned-film *Double Indemnity*. Representations of the Fil-Am houseboy, his disappearance and re-appearance in the texts, provide an impetus for discovering the cultural transitions from the colonial to the postcolonial periods.

### Keywords

colonialism, panopticism, surveillance

### About the Author

Victor Bascara, Associate Professor of English and Asian American Studies at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, was a Lecturer in Asian American Studies at the University of California at Los Angeles from 2006 to 2007. In Spring 2007 he taught a course on "Asian Americans and War" that included extensive discussion of both the Philippine American War and the Vietnam War. He is the author of *Model-Minority Imperialism: Understanding the Legacy of US Imperialism through Asian American Culture* (2006). His research interests include Asian American literature, cultures of United States imperialism, Critical Race Theory, and turn-of-the century (19th to 20th) American literature.

Like much textual criticism, this essay is an extended examination of a fairly small detail. That small detail comes from the history of *Double Indemnity*, James M. Cain's pulp novella serialized in 1936 and adapted in 1944 into one of the greatest American films ever made. Specifically, this essay focuses on the literary appearance and cinematic disappearance of the Filipino American houseboy employed by Walter Huff, the narrator of both the film and novel. *Double Indemnity* remains a canonical film noir, that cinematic genre emerging from the 1930s writings of Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, and Cain, among others. With this canonical status in mind, I propose that the ways in which mainstream American culture, as instantiated by *Double Indemnity*, mobilizes Filipino American difference that can be read as an index for tracing the jagged cultural transitions from the territorial colonialism of the Age of Empire to the current world order of neo-liberalism under globalization. This article posits that the ideal of American isolationism that had a popular resurgence in the interwar period (c. 1919-1941) in the United States

conveniently converged with the rise of anticolonial consciousness throughout the colonized world. The figure of the Filipino American houseboy, with all his trappings of a waning colonial order, seemed altogether erasable, even desirably so. By 1944 he was written out of the film with little fuss. Yet the dictates and methodologies of revisionism in the contemporary period have made him important, in ways that are probably well out of proportion to his significance at the time of his emergence and even his disappearance. In recognizing that houseboy's significance—to 1936, to 1944, and to the present—we recognize the curious uses to which American culture has put "difference" in the triumphal narrative of its shepherding of the world into its vision of modernity.

But first, allow me to offer a brief and heuristic word about the approaches taken in this essay and the cultural politics of literary criticism in the United States. For anyone who has been following developments in cultural studies in the United States over the past three decades or so, the generalities that follow are quite familiar. Broadly speaking, with the rise of insurgent academic fields such as Asian American and Ethnic Studies in the United States, there emerged two main forms of revisionist cultural criticism for exploring the interplay of major and minor traditions, and two offshoot forms. One main method involves the critical reading of hegemony in canonical texts in order to recognize, say, patriarchy, racism, and imperialism in a major work, such as *Moby-dick* or *Huckleberry Finn*. In this well-worn form of criticism, enshrined classics are read for symptoms of dominant ideologies on the wane. These critical reappraisals of the status of monuments of culture have been celebrated as a long-overdue displacement of outdated ideas that tragically made the nation what it is, and these exegetical labors have been excoriated as a shrill erosion of the bedrock beliefs that gloriously made the nation what it is.

The other main method of reading involves the interpreting and championing of texts comprising a minor tradition, often with attention paid to the minority status of the author. This method would help make a text like Maxine Hong Kingston's autobiography, *The Woman Warrior*, one of the most widely taught texts (by a living author) at US universities (see Patricia Chu 86-96). These critical reappraisals of that which has been marginalized have transformed both the content of what counts as American culture as well as the structures and institutions in which that counting takes place. Depending on whether one views the present as tragic or glorious, those transformations are either welcome or disturbing.

Broadly speaking again, the two offshoot reading practices are what we might call pendular corrections of the first two. The main correction for the championing of a minor text has been is the recognition of some of the same tendencies found in major texts. The

precondition of such a critique is the notion that a minor text has gotten so conventionally successful that it has begun to serve a major function. As for the other swing of the pendulum, the main correction for the reading of hegemony in a major text is the location of counterhegemonic possibilities that radically undermine the very ideologies that seemed to be unproblematically reproduced in a *Moby-Dick* or *Huckleberry Finn*. For better or for worse, the major status of a major text remains.<sup>1</sup> With its focus on one of the most respected films in American history, as well as its differently respected source material, this essay most fits this last form of criticism: a symptomatic reading of hegemony.

### AN INSIDE JOB

At heart, *Double Indemnity* is the story of an abortive inside job. In this caper, a world weary insurance salesman, Walter Neff (Neff is his name in the film; Huff is from the novella) uses his considerable knowledge of his own firm's policies and investigative methods in an effort to profit, monetarily and romantically, from another man's death. His accomplice in this affair is the murdered widower's second wife, Phyllis, who most likely killed her husband's first wife. The two conspirators meet when Walter makes a house call to renew an automobile insurance policy. The eventual murder victim, Mr. Nirdlinger (Nirdlinger is his name from the novella; Dietrichson is from the film) is not home. But his comely wife is. The murder-for-profit plot is hatched when she offhandedly inquires about buying an accident insurance policy for her husband. Neff tells us this is a dead giveaway for bad intentions: "Maybe that don't mean to you what it meant to me ... [W]hen there's dirty work going on, accident is the first thing they think of" (108). As an inside job narrative, *Double Indemnity* gives equal time to law enforcement and lawbreakers, or more precisely, insurance investigators and committers of fraud and, of course, murder.

The police and state power are virtually absent from *Double Indemnity*. "They're satisfied. It's not their dough." So says Barton Keyes (Edward G. Robinson), the bulldog of an insurance investigator who works with Walter Neff. He is explaining why police detectives are less tenacious than he is when it comes to sniffing out foul play. Keyes's instincts—what he calls his "little man"—will not let the corpse of Mr. Dietrichson, which was tossed off the back of a slow-moving train, rest in peace. In this pronouncement, Keyes articulates the dividing line between the state and private enterprise: namely, "dough." But the border between state power and private industry in *Double Indemnity* is not limited to profit motive. In grasping the supple conception of the state in *Double Indemnity*, I argue that we can read the uneasy ascendance of the United States as the new world power by

mid-century.

The storied lost ending of the film of *Double Indemnity* illustrates a point at which state power diverges from private interest. In its final, released form, the movie ends with salesman Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray), near death on the floor of his firm, the Pacific All-Risk Insurance company. He slowly bleeds to death from a gunshot administered by his partner in crime, the widow Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck). Yet this death scene was not the original shot. Paramount spent more than \$150,000 on a set depicting Walter's execution in prison. They built an exact replica of the actual gas chamber at San Quentin Prison and dramatized the dropping of the poison gas pellets used to end a convict's natural life. In characteristic bravado, Wilder "frequently called [this scrapped scene] one of the best scenes he ever made" (Schickel 63).<sup>2</sup>

This execution scene, as well as a few depicting Neff's trial, never made it into the release print. Somehow this resolution did not work for the film. Ostensibly, Wilder says that he wanted to depict Neff as "a victim, not a murderer." Analyses of film noir, which frequently cite *Double Indemnity* as a "paradigm movie" for the genre whose name would not be coined until the after WWII, would say the Neff was a victim of the "femme fatale." In this article I offer an alternate for understanding this landmark film's famous and studied finale. The film ending may tell us something about the meaning of United States imperialism, more specifically, about the cultural logic of the disciplinary institutions of United States imperialism, institutions that creatively sidestepped direct state power, and in doing so, sidestepped the label of formal colonialism. Another part of the novel that did not make it into the film when it was adapted from Cain's admittedly inferior serialized novel is Walter's Filipino American houseboy. In some respects, this unnamed servant performs the role of the "domestic woman," the film noir figure who functions as the polar opposite to the femme fatale. He maintains the comfortable home that the femme fatale wrecks.

These most likely coincidental erasures provide an interesting moment in American culture from which we can read emergent US imperialism. If we reinscribe empire into this canonical film, in its form as well as its content, we can begin to see the formation of disciplined subjects constituted by and constitutive of a new cultural formation that goes by such names as United States imperialism, development, and globalization. Indeed, as I will discuss below, references to the American colonization of the Philippines were explicit in Cain's short novel but entirely invisible in Wilder's (and Raymond Chandler's) adaptation of it. The disappearance of Huff's Filipino American houseboy is a cold case that the postcolonial and multiculturist present can now reopen.

## FINDING THE LOST FILIPINO IN AMERICAN CULTURE

“Boonie” is a favored word in the study of the relationship of the United States and the Philippines, as it is perhaps the most widely used signifier in colloquial American English that has a philology and etymology that links the US with its former colony in the Pacific. Other favorites are “cooties” and “manila folder.” Lost and forgotten and forgetful are adjectives commonly applied to Filipino Americans, as Oscar Campomanes has instructively noted. Like many linguistic items assimilated into American English, “boonie” is uttered by a great many speakers who are not burdened with its history. The word can effectively function without reference to its origins or its history of assimilation and usage in an expansionist American culture; indeed the word may function well precisely because it has, by and large, managed to outrun its past and circulate as relatively unmarked by distracting particularity. After all, pondering the specific history of every signifier would make communication radically difficult. And in recent times, the pedantic pondering of such histories is for, say, contributors to conservative talk radio, the textbook example of political correctness gone too far.

But, as the aphorism goes: ontology recapitulates philology. That is, the existence of term contains its history of usage. In broader terms, everyday life – from the products we consume to the labor we perform to the culture we reproduce – is suffused with secreted histories. Putatively innocent usage – of words, of commodities – is the precondition that makes historical revisionism possible and necessary. Such revisionism has occupied politically engaged scholarship and cultural production in the post-Civil Rights era in the United States, particularly in Ethnic Studies (see Palumbo-Liu’s *Ethnic Canon*, Lisa Lowe’s *Immigrant Acts*, and Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark*). In tracing, say, the history of a word’s usage and circulation, as well as the disappearance of that history, we trace the genealogy of an absence, and in doing so, shed light on interests that that disappearance may serve.<sup>3</sup> Narrating the genealogy of an absence then illuminates a history of hegemony, a history that flows from the by-now familiar act of defamiliarizing the quotidian. Not surprisingly then, the recognition of the forgotten pasts of everyday life – found in objects from commodities to words to persons to boonie hats – has become perhaps the defining trope of cultural critique.<sup>4</sup>

This revisionism has, for better or for worse, become well established in the United States and, in the wake of multiculturalism, somewhat formulaic and even facile (see Kyung-jin Lee). Finding the Filipino in American culture is not simply a matter of meticulously cataloging as many examples of Filipinos as possible but more a matter of appreciating the how traces of difference come into existence and go out of visibility in

American culture. A small but growing corps of scholars have devoted their energies to combing through archives precisely for these eruptions of Filipinos in American culture. The actual abundance of material in American discourse about the Philippines, even prior to the events of the war in the Pacific, does not mitigate claims of US amnesia about its colonization project in the Philippines. Rather, this abundance makes that amnesia all the more amazing. A Filipino in *Double Indemnity* is not quite the same thing as, say, a parse on *The Pequod*. The fact of a racially and ethnically diverse labor force, culled from every corner of the globe and redefining notions of gendering and public and private, is an important feature of US history. The specificity of Filipino difference in US culture is as exceptional as American exceptionalism. That is, the diversity of differences that American capitalism put to work, ideologically as well as in terms of political economy, requires an equally diverse range of ways of apprehending their historically situated significances. The modifier “boonie” for a type of hat that appeals to new US army recruits is but the tip of the proverbial iceberg when it comes to recovering the history of United States imperialism.

The “boonie” for this essay is a Filipino American houseboy, specifically the one in *Double Indemnity*. He is certainly not the only houseboy to appear and disappear in American literary history. Yet his placement and displacement is crucial, both for the supreme canonicity of Wilder’s film in cinematic history as well as for the reasons why *Double Indemnity* is such an interesting representation. By examining his appearance in the novel and his disappearance from the 1944 film adaptation we can speculate on the ways in which something undeniably visible in American history can vanish from American culture. I argue that we can begin to discern a new formation of the long-cherished myth of American isolationism that was particularly ascendant in the era of Cain’s novel and in remission in the violent years that saw the production and initial distribution of that novel as a film. Under that isolationism, American culture seeks to maintain the modern world order while preserving the sanctity of the domestic. A necessary casualty of that blend of isolationism and internationalism in “the American century” was an unnamed Filipino American houseboy and the prickly histories for which an ethnically-labeled domestic stands. While “Filipino” certainly emerges in non-literary discourses with predictable frequency, the term in mainstream American literature of the pre-WWII era is less common and often quite curious. For example, the first paragraph of Carson McCullers’s 1941 novel *Reflections in a Golden Eye* contains a fascinating juxtaposition of “Filipino”: “The participant of this tragedy were: two officers, a soldier, two women, a Filipino, and a horse” (3). (Thanks to Alfred McCoy for calling my attention to this work.)

The recovering of this unnamed Filipino American houseboy owes a debt to the



revisionism of the past quarter century or more. A small and disposable detail like this Filipino American houseboy becomes somewhat less small and less disposable when reflected in postcolonial eyes. This small detail takes on new significance to a future that is discovering newly usable pasts. Such pasts can then be considered, in the terms of Raymond Williams, “emergent,” “new formations” that tilt at the dominant. In postcolonial studies, such lost-and-found figures have been dubbed “subaltern.” The discovery and activation of these lost pieces of the past have ushered in a new age of cultural criticism that has been rereading the classics for both their hegemonic and counter hegemonic capabilities. Edward Said has called this form of reading “contrapuntal,” a form of reading that accounts for multiple histories and interests in an effort “to formulate an alternative both to a politics of blame and to the even more destructive politics of confrontation and hostility” (12). In our nominally postcolonial age, we can now readily appreciate moments when the postcolonial was emergent in the face of colonialism’s then-dominant status. A famous anecdotal instance of this is when a reporter asked Mahatma Gandhi what he thought of “Western civilization,” he famously remarked, “I think it would be a good idea.” Gandhi’s response is an example of the ways in which postcolonialism erupts as humor that is at once jarring and urbane. The reporter, presumably looking for a response that takes as a given the existence of Western civilization, receives instead a witty reply that casts Western Civilization as a dream deferred. The reporter, and the Western Civilization of which she is a product and producer, are both enlightened and delighted at this wordplay. Gandhi’s unexpected response has a dry cleverness worthy of a moment from Oscar Wilde. Gandhi demonstrates a virtuoso performance of British humor, with its long tradition of cool irony that mocks propriety, particularly easy to do in the Victorian era. Yet Gandhi’s comment marks a break from the witty tropes of Wilde or of Gilbert and Sullivan. It took, and perhaps had to take, someone like Gandhi, with his elite education in English law at Oxford, to declare that there is no Western civilization and, further, to have such a declaration be funny, devastating, and true. The history of colonialism, decolonization, and postcolonialism is filled with moments like this, moments that dramatize the displacement of the authority of the West and the playful seizure of that authority by those formerly unable to represent themselves, not to mention represent “Western Civilization” as such.

Millions and millions of viewers probably know Gandhi’s droll and pointed sound bite from its staging in *Gandhi*, Richard Attenborough’s multiple Academy –Award-winning biographical film from 1982.<sup>19</sup> By 1982 if not long before, the joke is less jarring perhaps but still clever and funny. Late 20th-century viewers could imagine how Gandhi’s reply might have felt to early 20th-century audiences, back then in the waning days of

colonialism's legitimacy. Indeed, that sense of times past and time passed is a particular pleasure of period pictures; we apprehend how characters are both of their moment in some ways as well as prescient of our own in others. This presentism of moviegoers is not only hard to avoid, it is relied upon for dramatic effect. The characters do not know how history turned out, but we do. We watch them live their lives in ignorance of developments they necessarily cannot know. In this instance, anticolonialism seemed controversial in the 1930s, but less so today. Gandhi helps us to mind the gap of time between colonialism and what came after. And so the global emergence of anticolonial consciousness is effectively packaged for consumption. The irony then is that such packaging may be the ushering-in of the next imperialism.

Grasping imperialism has become a fixture in the teaching and study of culture texts. Reading for imperialism in canonical literature has become a common and institutionalized practice in the past two decades or more in the United States. In the wake of such transformative reading methodologies, finding traces of imperialism in dominant culture is not as challenging as it once was; imperialism is what makes dominant culture the dominant culture. We have come to appreciate the constitutive role of Orientalism in making the West the West and we read monuments of Western civilization as symptomatic of the need of the West to cast an alterity to its modernity. In the wake of this institutionalization, it is useful to map a genealogy of this method and remember that, in the US academy, postcolonial criticism emerged as an interested revisionist project seeking to read for empire in places where one might not have expected it to turn up. The result is what Gayatri Spivak referred to as an "anthropology of the west" (Spivak 1991). In such a field of study, the task is to turn a critical gaze on an eroding center, to resituate major texts along neglected and/or unformulated historical trajectories. This project has found institutional legitimacy in literary and cultural studies through such scholarship as, say, Spivak's reading of Bertha Mason and Jamaica in *Jane Eyre* (in "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism") or Edward Said's reading of Antigua and slavery in *Mansfield Park* (80-97), and even Fredric Jameson's reading of modernism and imperialism in *Howards End*. Readings like Said's and Spivak's showed how any understanding of English culture in the 19th century must come to terms with the dialectical relationship of the cultural and the material and with the ways in which this literature, as Said put it, "synchronizes domestic with international authority" (87).

Not surprisingly, the anthropologists undertaking this task often, but of course not always, occupy the subject position of the formerly colonized. Post-colonial critics look at canonical texts—many of which contain only incidental depictions of colonies and



colonial subjects—to see how such cultural monuments are symptomatic of the ideological demands of imperialism at a given historical moment. The houseboy in *Double Indemnity* is clearly an instance of incidental reference to empire rather than overt and putatively mimetic renderings of colonial reality, like, say, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* or Kipling's "The White Man's Burden," both from 1899.

I return yet again to Spivak who provocatively declared:

It should not be possible to read nineteenth-century British literature without remembering that imperialism, understood as England's social mission, was a crucial part of the cultural representation of England to the English. The role of literature in the production of cultural representation should not be ignored. These two obvious 'facts' continue to be disregarded in the reading of nineteenth century British literature. This itself attests to the continuous success of the imperialist project, displaced and dispersed onto more modern forms. (261)

Keeping this in mind, we have come to better recognize what Said called "those tendencies—whether in narrative, political theory, or pictorial technique—that enabled, encouraged, and otherwise assured the West's readiness to assume and enjoy the experience of empire" (80). Jameson also argued that in era of high modernism, colonial reality was real but culturally unintelligible and this unintelligibility was what fueled the desire for the formalism characteristic of modernism: "This new and historically original problem in what is itself a new kind of content now constitutes the situation and the problem and the dilemma, the formal contradiction, that modernism seeks to solve; or better still, it is only that new kind of art which reflexively perceives this problem and lives this formal dilemma that can be called modernism in the first place" (51).

With this methodology we now read for the immanence of empire in any major text, from *The Tempest* as the ur-narrative of New World colonialism, by scholars ranging from Roberto Retamar to Ronald Takaki, to the representations of British overseas campaigns in Tennyson's "The Idylls of the King" (see Kiernan, qtd. in Said 105) to the fascinating dynamics of race, gender, and consumer culture in twentieth century British soap advertisements (McClintock 207-31). In furthering these critiques of empire, scholars have continually managed to bring fresh insights that reinvigorate the urgency of the act of reading representations within our own empire formations today. (This is what historian William Appleman Williams called "empire as a way of life.") Through such interpretive work the structural features of empire have been explicated as structural features. We

can then formulate critical elaborations of the terms of so-called postcoloniality as well as critiques of persistent neocolonialism, for example, Lisa Lowe's nuanced discussion of the heterogeneity of readings of *A Passage to India* elaborates the workings of literary criticism as a medium of orientalism (102-35).

We are now in an age of the United States and its imperial canon on which the sun never sets. But this canon is not Emily Dickinson and Nathaniel Hawthorne as much as it is Eminem, Tiger Woods, and, as always, Hollywood. In light of such work on the British canon, reading the United States as the empire *du jour*—that is, examining an empire in vivo instead of in vitro—through rereading the American canon means reading the new imperialism.

What is that new imperialism? In critical American Studies as well as in popular consciousness, a growing body of commentary—including my own—focuses on the informality of United States imperialism. The new globalization displaced a declining colonization, a practice of dubious legitimacy and questionable profitability. In the wake of such banner lowering events as the early-1990s closing of US military bases in the Philippines and the late-1990s handover of the Panama Canal to Panama, various turn-of-the-century chapters of America's colonizing adventures seemed to be coming to a close as the next turn of the century approached. Recent events since that turn have placed United States personnel in smoldering hotspots, tragically proving that reports of the waning of territorially-defined and militarily controlled cartographies of empire have been exaggerated. In what may then seem to be a retromove, I turn to a canonical American text manifesting the symptoms of both the dominant territorial colonialism and the emergent informal formation: James M. Cain's 1936 novella *Double Indemnity*.

### FILIPINO AMERICAN = "BEATING CLARK GABLE TO IT"

We arrive finally at the detail at the center of this essay: the appearance and disappearance of a Filipino immigrant houseboy. Bakhtin remarked that "servants are the most privileged witnesses of private life." This observation seems quite apt in the case of the Filipino American houseboy in *Double Indemnity*.

As he makes his careful preparations before murdering his lover's husband, Walter Huff, the protagonist and narrator of James M. Cain's 1936 novella *Double Indemnity*, offers the following observation about "the Filipino":

I got home around six and the Filipino was all ready to serve dinner... I had hardly

finished my coffee when he had everything washed up, and he changed to his cream-colored pants, white shoes and stockings, a brown coat, and white shirt open at the neck, ready to go out with the girl. It used to be that what a Hollywood actor wore on Monday a Filipino houseboy wore on Tuesday, but now, if you ask me, it's the other way around, and the boy from Manila beats Clark Gable to it.

In this brief and passing observation we can read for the complex set of conditions we have come to call globalization, or the social, cultural, political, and economic alignment of the modern world in the American century. We see the spread of American consumerist culture, as evidenced by the influence that a Hollywood actor has on the sartorial habits of Filipino American houseboys. The quest for new consumer markets for United States manufactures — what turn-of-the-century pundit Matthew Frye Jacobson dubbed “the terrible surplus” — has been an engine of expansionist, capitalist development. Even in 1936, this sort of influence is so obvious that Huff finds it necessary to use the “used to be” tense when discussing the global influence of American media consumer culture.

Along with these consumer markets go labor markets. From the Cain passage we see a manifestation of the migration of cheapened labor from sites of relative underdevelopment to overdevelopment, as embodied by the fact of a Filipino American houseboy working in 1930s Los Angeles. It should be noted that Huff is not wealthy; indeed he is about to commit murder for money (gotten through insurance fraud) as well as for lust (gotten through his coupling with his accomplice, Mrs. Phyllis Dietrichson). Despite Huff's fairly humble occupation as an insurance salesman, he can readily afford the reproductive labor provided by an immigrant Filipino American.

Huff is quite explicitly the master of his servant in professional terms, but he also prides himself on being able to predict his servant's desires. That is, he delays giving the houseboy his paycheck by two days, thereby ensuring that his stylish manservant will manage his time in such a way that would allow him to hotfoot it to a dancehall the evening he finally gets compensated for his labor.

I got home around six, and the Filipino was all ready to serve dinner. I had seen to that. This was June 3, and I should have paid him on the first, but I pretended I had forgotten to go to the bank, and put him off. Today, though, I had stopped at the house for lunch, and paid him. That meant that when night came he could hardly wait to go out and spend it. I said O.K., he could serve dinner, and he had the soup in the table before I even got washed up. I ate, as well as I could. He gave me steak,

mashed potatoes, peas, and carrots, with fruit cup for dessert. I was so nervous I could hardly chew, but I got it all down somehow.

Yet also in this 1936 representation of the consumerist tastes of a racialized immigrant domestic laborer, we see an extrapolation from a waning structure in which the United States sets trends to an emergent and somewhat playful inversion of that authority. That is, Clark Gable, who famously caused the sales of undershirts to plummet from his not wearing one in *It Happened One Night* (1934), now follows in the fashionable footsteps of “the boy from Manila.” The joke is that it is somewhat absurd that a megastar like Clark Gable would take his cue from a domestic on his day off. And yet, Huff’s observation of mainstream American culture leads him to imagine the ludic possibility of clairvoyant Filipinos anticipating and determining the length of hemlines in the coming season, of the mimic becoming the master.

The figure as this globally influential “boy from Manila” seems to exceed Homi Bhabha’s ideas of subversive colonial mimicry and even Jean Baudrillard’s notion of “simulacra,” or a copy without an original. That is, Huff positions the Filipino American houseboy as taking the colonial project to a logical conclusion: those who imitate have somehow become the imitated. The houseboy is not merely a bad copy who shows the illegitimacy of the colonial model. Nor is he a pure entity unsullied by the taint of colonialism. He has become an instrument of a new kind of imperialism, capable of sublating itself through a successful transferal of cultural authority from those who have historically civilized to those who received that civilization.

*Double Indemnity* is a canonical text that provides an instance of incidental US colonial reality in the curious figure of Walter’s Filipino American houseboy, a character from the novel who did not make it to the big screen.<sup>5</sup> Huff tells us of this character in chapter two: “Daytime, I keep a Filipino house boy, but he don’t sleep there” (378). Huff offers what seems to be excessive description of his houseboy. That is, he mentions that his houseboy does not board with him; the houseboy does his labor without requiring shared living space, as would the domestic staff of, say, an English manor house of that same period. But, as we have seen from the passage analyzed earlier in this essay, the house boy is more than just window-dressing that gives Cain’s story of depression-era Southern California a regional and period flavor. This Filipino American houseboy comes to stand in as a mechanism of surveillance, both watching and being watched. The morning after the murder Walter says, “I gulped down some orange juice and coffee, and then went up in the bedroom with the paper. I was afraid to open it in front of the Filipino” (417).

In the 1930s, especially in California, it was considered chic to have a Filipino American houseboy. Even an insurance salesman with questionable grammar can keep one. By the 1930s, as many as a third of all Filipinos in the United States and half of all Filipinas were employed in some form of domestic service (Amott and Matthei). It is therefore not particularly remarkable to have such a character in a novel. What is more remarkable is this character's removal for the film eight years later.

Both the 1944 film and the 1936 novel emerged during the commonwealth period of the Philippines. The Tydings-McDuffie Act, a.k.a. the *Philippine Independence Act*, was passed in 1934 stipulating a ten-year commonwealth period, thereby also reclassifying Filipinos as aliens to the US and making them ineligible for New Deal programs. In 1935 Congress passed the ineffectual *Repatriation Act* which provided free transportation for Filipinos back to the Philippines, that is, on condition that they waive their right to reenter the US. Approximately two thousand Filipinos left under this act (see Fujita-Rony; and Ngai). The Filipino American houseboy, who lives not with Huff, occupies a new niche of labor that eschews old world class structures while maintaining an affordable price for reproductive labor. In the film, the Filipino houseboy becomes Charlie, "a colored attendant in coveralls and rubber boots" who is the primary audience for Neff's deceptive carrying-on of his usual routine. Neff, in his recorded audio memo to Keyes, calls this "another item to establish my alibi." Charlie is someone who is strategically privy to Neff's participation in the burgeoning car culture shaping the geography of Southern California but he is not an insider to Huff's domestic sphere as a houseboy of any stripe would be. In either case, Neff counts on the legal subjectivity of a service worker, both of whom are racially marked, for possible witness testimony.

The absence of the Filipino American houseboy may even be more surprising because the film was made and released in 1944. That is, *Double Indemnity* is a war-time picture, despite technically taking place in the late 1930s. In 1944, Douglas MacArthur had yet to return to the Philippines after the Japanese had effectively occupied the US colony in early 1942; the atrocities of the Bataan Death March had made headlines (although the "great raid" of Cabanatuan had not yet been mounted).<sup>6</sup> Suffice it to say, from the time of the printing of the novel in serial form in February and March of 1936 to the release of the film in early September of 1944, the fate of the relationship of the United States and its former possession had become a considerably unresolved issue. One might then speculate: Would representing Huff's prewar Filipino servant have been a sensitive point to an America that had lost and not yet recovered its only benevolently assimilated colony? Was America not in the mood to see a reminder of what it had lost? Short of asking Billy Wilder



for an explanation, the exact reasons for this incidental excision from the film are basically unknowable. Besides, Cain readily—and rightly—acknowledged that the film improved on his novel, especially the implausible double-suicide ending (see Schickel).

### AN INSIDE JOB IN AN INTERNATIONAL FRAME

Rather than seeking to establish a simplistic certainty about what caused these content decisions, we can more profitably ask, What function does this Filipino, and his unceremonious omission, serve in the workings of this major American cultural representation? What might *Double Indemnity* tell us about the United States as empire? I suggest that it instantiates what Said described as “those tendencies ... that enabled, encouraged, and otherwise assured the West’s readiness to assume and enjoy the experience of empire” (Said 80). Yet the meaning of empire was undergoing change since the days of the British East India Company and image of Cecil Rhodes straddling Africa. Coming to terms with empire today demands an understanding of the cultural and material ascendancy of American culture over British culture. With the shifting nature of the global economic order and its continual ideological revisions of the rationale for its virtual totality, the project of reading the United States as empire must not simply be a wholesale transposition of a British model.

A host of commentators, from Lenin and Hobson, to Hardt and Negri, have characterized the ascendance of a new imperialism as the rise of a new form of capitalism, based around finance and informality rather than state-sponsored bureaucracies. Essentially, the American system of world domination emerged as faster and more efficient, due much in part to developments in telecommunications technology, especially the zippy flow of electronically rendered capital. The displacement of nineteenth-century territorial imperialism of the British dominated world by the international division of labor of the American-dominated globe is not least an economic shift. This economic shifting has been described by “world systems” theorist Giovanni Arrighi in *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times* in which he outlines the past 700 years or so to explain capitalism’s domination of the world. His basic thesis in a nutshell is as follows:

The strategies and structures of capital accumulation that have shaped our times first came into existence in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. They originated in a new internalization of costs within the economizing logic of capitalist enterprise. Just as the Dutch regime had taken world-scale processes of capital accumulation

one step further than the Genoese by internalizing protection costs, and the British regime had taken them a step further than the Dutch by internalizing production costs, so the US regime has done the same in relation to the British by internalizing transaction costs. (239)

Basically, with these respective internalizations of protection, production, and finally transaction costs, the result is a faster and more efficient global economy, a faster and more efficient chain from “primary production” to “final consumption.”

What then might be the cultural ramifications of notions of internalization and the shift from so-called “economies of size” to so-called “economies of speed”? The shrinking of the world under internalizing global capitalism can either valiantly produce a more democratic order of resource redistribution or, in failing to realize that order, vividly reveal the coexistence of oppression and exploitation on one hand and opulence and ignorance on the other. Just as consumerist individuals place certain demands on an economy to accelerate, this new economy places certain demands on the individuals who comprise this social formation. What may seem like a world of new possibilities—a global village, let’s say—is also a world of new and improved disciplinary and surveillance structures. In this regard, Michel Foucault’s ideas around “discipline” and “the disciplinary society” in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* are particularly helpful at illuminating the stakes of these formations of power. Most notably, we can see how his notion of “panopticism” articulates how mass culture emerges as a mechanism for effecting new forms of internalization. These internalizations are not so much the related phenomena of the West’s internalization of world territory (up to 85% Western-controlled in 1914) or the internalization of costs (protection, production, transaction), but of the individual’s internalization of regulatory structures, including his own servants. I argue that these regulatory structures enable, encourage, and otherwise assure the US’s readiness to assume and enjoy the experience of a new kind of empire cautiously but unmistakably built on the decline of the old. In other words we can recognize the emergence to dominance of the new cultural formation in which we are now living.

The medium for US cultural imperialist disciplining was and still is American mass media. Yet to simply catalogue a taxonomy of “positive” and “negative” images is to fall short of more fundamental issues of how film operates as what Foucault calls a “disciplinary mechanism: a functional mechanism that must improve the exercise of power by making it lighter, more rapid, more effective, a design of subtle coercion for a society to come” (209).

*Double Indemnity* is then a curious example of a representation that is difficult and categorize and therefore both a problem and an asset for apprehending US imperialism. The film's status as a canonical film noir may then be important to consider. Film noir was not even named until some time after World War II. It was never really a hugely successful genre commercially, if indeed we can call it a genre. Film noir is certainly a style, of lighting, of themes— "a distinctive and exciting visual style, an unusual narrative complexity, a generally more critical and subversive view of American ideology than the norm" (Walker, qtd. in Bordwell and Thompson 8) —of stock characters— "focus on a lone, often introverted hero" – and surely, of mood. Critics have found it difficult to define film noir because it is not limited to a list of constitutive elements or a predictable set of possible narrative emplotments, like, say, a western or a musical or a romantic comedy. I want to suggest that mood is the characteristic effect of a recognizably noir movie. The discursive slipperiness of mood is what produces the particularly disciplined subjects of US imperialism, subjects that are not simply in a manichean relationship of colonizer and colonized. Modern institutions do not codify power so simply. "Panopticism," named for the Panopticon, the ideal prison envisioned by Jeremy Bentham and whose major effect were described by Foucault

to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers. (201)

The modern institution that is the overt obsession of *Double Indemnity* is insurance, while the implicit institution is film itself. Similar to the ideological apparatuses of past empires, such as the Catholic Church in Spanish colonialism (see Rafael), or British educational system in British imperialism (see Viswanathan), modern insurance provides a model as a defining institution of United States imperialism. While the cinema has enjoyed the status as the medium par excellence of cultural imperialism, film and insurance employ similar "discipline-mechanisms" and these mechanisms are brilliantly dramatized in *Double Indemnity*. Insurance is an industry that orders the world by managing risk; the discourse of insurance prescripts narratives. Insurance narratives became somewhat oddly

popular through Cain. When *Double Indemnity* was written serialized in *Liberty* magazine in 1936, it caused the circulation of the magazine to increase by some eight million subscribers as Cain was already famous for his controversial 1934 novel *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, another story about a husband killed by his wife and her lover for insurance money. After the immense popularity of *Postman*, Cain, urged by some of the insurance people he had consulted while writing the earlier work, decided to explore further the possibilities for plots involving insurance companies. "With company money at stake, insurance claims investigators [can be] more implacable than the police in pursuing suspicious deaths" (Schickel 22).

The mechanisms of policing and surveillance no longer are the exclusive responsibility of the state, nor is the state necessarily the most feared watcher. This shift from overt state power to privatized risk management is an allegory of putatively laissez-faire US neocolonialism versus increasingly oppressive British imperialism with all its cumbersome administrative apparatuses. Insurance provides a material practice and a metaphor for these structures as the internalization of protection, production, and transactions requires security, stability, and totality. The layout of the Pacific All-Risk Insurance company bears considerable resemblance to a panopticon and this opening image sets up a mood of surveillance that disciplines the protagonist. The original shooting script describes the layout of the office that does indeed appear in the film:

Note for set-designer: Our Insurance Company occupies the entire eleventh and twelfth floors of the building. On the twelfth floors are the executive offices and claims and sales departments. These all open off a balcony which runs all the way around. From the balcony you see the eleventh floor below ... Two colored women are cleaning the offices. One is dry-mopping the floor, the other is moving chairs back into position, etc. A colored man is emptying waste baskets into a big square box. He shuffles a little dance step as he moves, and hums a little tune. (Meyer 9)

With the efficacy and tenacity of insurance in *Double Indemnity*, there is an absence of the repressive state apparatus. Despite Walter's death coming at the hands of his co-conspirator instead of the gas chamber, we cannot go so far as to say that the state is moot in *Double Indemnity*. However, the representation of overt state power is removed; its display is somehow superfluous.

I conclude with a return to the description of the Filipino American houseboy to grasp his disappearance. The night of the murder, Walter needs to get the house boy out

early so he withholds his wages for a couple of days thereby making his servant especially eager to go out and spend his meager earnings:

I got home around six, and the Filipino was all ready to serve dinner. I had seen to that. This was June 3, and I should have paid him on the first, but I pretended I had forgotten to go to the bank, and put him off. Today, though, I had stopped at the house for lunch, and paid him. That meant that when night came he could hardly wait to go out and spend it. I said OK, he could serve dinner, and he had the soup in the table before I even got washed up. I ate, as well as I could. He gave me steak, mashed potatoes, peas, and carrots, with fruit cup for dessert. I was so nervous I could hardly chew, but I got it all down somehow. I had hardly finished my coffee when he had everything washed up, and he changed to his cream-colored pants, white shoes and stockings, a brown coat, and white shirt open at the neck, ready to go out with the girl. It used to be that what a Hollywood actor wore on Monday a Filipino house boy wore on Tuesday, but now, if you ask me, it's the other way around, and the boy from Manila beats Clark Gable to it. He left around a quarter to seven. When he came up to ask if there way anything else for him to do, I was taking off my clothes getting ready to go to bed. I told him I was going to lie there and do a little work. (138-9)

Walter's contention that things are now "the other way around" is both an acknowledgement of the success of cultural imperialism as well as his own sense that the gaze has not simply reversed but been pluralized. Walter's guide for measuring this reversal is Hollywood and its engendering of consumerism and surveillance. The witness he had so carefully set up is at risk of seeing more than Walter can control. In the passage cited earlier, Walter is worried that his act of reading the morning newspaper will betray his guilt: "I gulped down some orange juice and coffee, and then went up to the bedroom with the paper. I was afraid to open it in front of the Filipino" (153). Walter's prior relationship to "the Filipino" deliberately made him a visible object whose movement could be witnessed in legal testimony. But now Walter has become so visible to someone who "beats Clark Gable to it" that he, an influential archetype of the "solitary introverted hero" of film noir, feels so much paranoid anxiety that after the murder he must retreat to his bedroom, away from the domestic in the kitchen, to escape the knowing gaze of his now authoritative house boy. Through a panopticism that allows the authority of observation to "even [the master's own] servant" (Foucault 202), there opens up a space for



the formerly voiceless to enter the scene. Yet, when the novella becomes the movie, gone is this ambivalently empowering moment that gives “the Filipino” an authority in American culture that the Clark Gables and Walter Neffs can no longer anticipate and control.

## NOTES

- 1 A rather bloated catalog of books, some scholarly and some popular, emerged in the 1990s and especially the 1980s, to address these cultural transformations. See, for example, Henry Louis Gates. *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars*. New York: Oxford UP, 1993.
- 2 Jeffrey Meyers notes that Wilder may have exaggerated the sum as Paramount's records show only \$4,700 budgeted for the elaborate set (xiv).
- 3 While the venerable Oxford English Dictionary is built on historical principles because it traces the earliest known appearances of any given word as well as its significant deviations, conventional dictionaries like Webster's are not.
- 4 See Kristin Hoganson's "Cosmopolitan Domesticity," in which she analyzes the ways in which well-to-do American homes of the late 19th and early 20th centuries used the space of the home as an arena for demonstrating worldly acquisition. Perhaps the two main theorists of everyday life are Pierre Bourdieu and Michel de Certeau. See also Avery Gordon's *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*.
- 5 Elaine Kim's *Asian American Literature: An Introduction* begins with very insightful readings of early mass culture representations of Asian Americans. See also Robert Lee, *Orientalism*.
- 6 The Cabanatuan raid took place in early 1945. MacArthur's drive began in October 1944, Manila was recaptured February 1945, and the rest of the Philippines was effectively reoccupied by the US by July 1945.

## WORKS CITED

- Althusser, Louis. *Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971.
- Amott, Theresa, and Julia A. Matthei. *Race, Gender, and Work: A Multicultural Economic History of Women in the United States*. Boston: South End, 1991.
- Arrighi, Giovanni. *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times*. London: Verso, 1994.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Bordwell, David, and Kristin Thompson. *Film Art: An Introduction*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001.
- Cain, James M. *Three Novels by James M. Cain*. New York: Bantam, 1973.
- Campomanes, Oscar. "The New Empire's Forgetful and Forgotten Citizens: Unrepresentability and Unassimilability in Filipino-American Postcolonialities." *Critical Mass* 2.2 (1995): 145-200.
- Chu, Patricia P. "The Woman Warrior: Memoir of a Girlhood Among Ghosts, by Maxine Hong Kingston." *A Resource Guide to Asian American Literature*. Ed. Sau-ling C. Wong and Stephen H. Sumida. New York: MLA, 2001. 86-96.
- Double Indemnity*. Dir. Billy Wilder. Perf. Fred MacMurray, Edward G. Robinson, and Barbara Stanwyck. Paramount, 1944.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage, 1979.
- Fujita-Rony, Dorothy. *American Workers, Colonial Power: Philippine Seattle and the Transpacific West, 1919-1941*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2003.
- Gandhi*. Dir. Richard Attenborough. Perf. Ben Kingsley, Candice Bergin, John Gielgud, and John Mills. Goldcrest Films International, 1982.
- Gates, Henry Louis. *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars*. New York: Oxford UP, 1992.
- Gordon, Avery. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997.
- Hoganson, Kristin. "Cosmopolitan Domesticity: Importing the American Dream, 1865- 1920." *American Historical Review* 107.1 (2007): 55-83.
- Jacobson, Matthew Frye. *Barbarian Virtues: The United States Encounters Foreign Peoples At Home and Abroad, 1876-1917*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2000.
- Jameson, Fredric. "Modernism and Imperialism." *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature*. Ed. Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson, and Edward W. Said. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 1990. 41-66.
- Kim, Elaine H. *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple UP, 1980.
- Lax, Eric. *Woody Allen: A Biography*. New York: Da Capo, 1992.
- Lee, James Kyung-jin. *Urban Triage: Race and the Fictions of Multiculturalism*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2004.

- Lee, Robert G. *Orientalism: Asian Americans in Popular Culture*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple UP, 1999.
- Lowe, Lisa. *Critical Terrains: French and British Orientalisms*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1991.
- Lowe, Lisa. *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1996.
- Maram, Linda España. *Creating Masculinity: Working-Class Filipinos and Popular Culture in Los Angeles's Little Manila*. New York: Columbia UP, 2006.
- McClintock, Anne. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*. New York: Routledge, 1995.
- McCullers, Carson. *Reflections in a Golden Eye*. New York: Bantam, 1941.
- Meyers, Jeffrey. *Introduction to "Double Indemnity."* Berkeley: U of California P, 2000.
- Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. New York: Vintage, 1993.
- Ngai, Mae M. *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2004.
- Palumbo-Liu, David. *The Ethnic Canon: Histories, Institutions, and Interventions*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1995.
- Rafael, Vicente. *White Love and Other Events in Filipino History*. Durham: Duke UP, 2000.
- Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage, 1993.
- Schickel, Richard. *Double Indemnity*. London: BFI, 1992.
- Spivak, Gayatri C. "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism." *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1985): 243-61.
- Viswanathan, Gauri. *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1989.
- Wilder, Billy and Raymond Chandler. *Double Indemnity: The Screenplay*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2000.
- Williams, William Appleman. *Empire as a Way of Life: An Essay on the Causes and Character of America's Present Predicament Along with a Few Thoughts About an Alternative*. New York: Oxford UP, 1980.