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Book Review

[*Painting US Empire: Nineteenth-Century Art and Its Legacies*](#), by Maggie M. Cao

The University of Chicago Press, 2025

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How has US empire shaped what we see? Maggie M. Cao's *Painting US Empire* resituates canonical nineteenth-century art within the preoccupations of US empire, including extractivism, labor coercion, and the invention of global racial hierarchies. Cao emphasizes that nineteenth-century artists broadly diverged from European precedents in both focus and approach, making it necessary for art historians to develop methods for "the unique visuality of US empire" (7). Through an exploration of "themes, styles, [and] material conditions" that constitute "colonizing infrastructures," Cao models a studied approach to the latent ideas and ambitions of empire in nineteenth-century art (8, 9). *Painting US Empire* traces the fashioning of global ecologies into recognizable genres—such as landscape, still life, and seascape paintings—for affluent US subjects who may not otherwise have seen these places.

Each chapter advances through a loosely chronological presentation of roughly twenty images: Cao carefully articulates what we can see, what we should see, and what is effaced. She also pairs each chapter with the performances and installations of contemporary artists responding to colonial legacies. Cao's "interventions" include work from the oeuvres of Maria Thereza Alves, Tavares Strachan, Nicholas Galanin, Yuki Kihara, and Carlos Martiel. In an era in which our eyeballs are trained to scroll, Cao explains what looking closely can teach us about the construction of images and their complicity with empire.

Throughout her core chapters, Cao does not reject the work of white male artists whose paintings and sculptures typify the nineteenth-century US art canon. She argues that there is more to be seen in their work, which Cold War-era scholars positioned as "American" in their search for lineages that confirmed US exceptionalism. As the US overthrew democratically elected governments around the world, postwar curators turned especially to the nineteenth-century genre of landscape painting that they also adapted for nonterritorial subjects like ice and water.

For readers conversant with settler colonialism, nineteenth-century landscape paintings seem to be clear representations of territorial expansion. They either show

natural environments as emptied of Indigenous communities (presumably through war and displacement), or they present Indigenous peoples as caricatured traces who are always already vanishing. Cao explains that the genre typically features an open place that “viewers” take in from a grounded vantage. Chapter 1 lingers on US painter Frederic Edwin Church’s *The Vale of St. Thomas, Jamaica* (1867) as an evocative mountain range, winding river, and forested expanse with an ashy sunset on the left and a prominent fern palm on the right. Cao notes that Church encouraged viewers of his landscape paintings to use opera glasses to examine their details, which were composed from multiple sketches stitched together as a “full” composite. Given its title, the painting would seem to be inspired by the Blue Mountains in eastern Jamaica. Nevertheless, emptied of Maroons, emancipated Afro-descendant residents, and the Taíno who named the island, it emerges as a generic rendering of sunset over wilderness. Despite having derived from sketches during Church’s 1865 visit to Jamaica, *The Vale of St. Thomas* appears to me as though it could have been composed anywhere.

When nineteenth-century painters attempted to translate landscape conventions to ice and water, the genre broke down. Chapter 2 attends to a cultural obsession with navigating the Arctic alongside the global reach of the US ice industry during the 1850s and 1860s. Cao explains that US artists like Church and William Bradford applied the openness and groundedness of landscape paintings to icebergs, despite the latter’s formless and floating qualities. Akin to nineteenth-century landscapes, the resultant seascapes convey an imperious quality: Ships, manned by sailors and naturalists, encounter vast expanses, eliding the Indigenous individuals—such as the Inuk man Ipiirvik—who guided their expeditions (90). Cao observes that artists sometimes struggled to sell these compositions: She argues that Church was initially unable to find a buyer for *The Icebergs* (1861), which features a monumental iceberg and an aquamarine cove, because ice and sea were incompatible with the fixity of a territorial genre (82). As one solution, artists turned to narrative vignettes and companion memoirs in order to bring out human interest for unfamiliar viewers.

Cao’s final chapter pushes past the limits of the landscape genre in an exploration of US painter Winslow Homer’s late nineteenth-century renderings of submerged figures at sea. Cao encourages viewers to approach the ocean not as an abstraction, but as a “wet, salty reality” (199). Building upon a wide range of scholarship in the blue humanities, Cao argues that Homer’s oeuvre invites consideration of waterlines that do not rely upon nearby ships or landmasses. Instead, she suggests, Homer’s wet brushwork illuminates the water’s transparency in the Bahamas after the Spanish-American War, which traditionally marked the advent of US imperial expansion with its assertion of control over Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines. Cao suggests that Homer’s particular interest in Black mariners engages the legacies of African chattel slavery in the hemisphere, including racialized labor hierarchies. She reminds readers that his interest in Afro-descendant boatmen served white audiences: Viewers of his initial *The Gulf Stream* (1899), which features a Black sailor scrambling

away from sharks on a capsized boat, apparently found it so ominous that he revised the composition and relaxed the subject's posture.

Cao's chapter meets a growing corpus on Black divers, seafarers, and fishers in the South Atlantic and the Caribbean. Scholars such as Kevin Dawson, Sharika D. Crawford, and Mary E. Hicks¹ have asked what knowledge of water afforded enslaved and free Afro-descendant peoples. Because these perspectives are difficult to approximate using colonial records, paintings like Homer's form part of a broader cultural archive of songs, recipes, and oral histories that help to narrate sea-based survival work. Although Cao is right to underscore that painted representations of empire ventriloquize colonial subjects, it seems worth asking why so many Afro-descendant residents turned to diving, fishing, and ferrying after emancipation in the Caribbean. Although Homer's subjects, who are predominately male, can be portrayed as though resigned to the sea's enormity, I wonder whether their water skills may have meant autonomy or reprieve from the hierarchies of land.

In her penultimate chapter, Cao suggests that "artworks can register the epistemological effects of imperialism in ways that political, legal, and economic histories cannot" (152). Some of the legacies of canonical nineteenth-century art include its nonspecificity, bias toward territory, and failure to convey the lifeworlds of colonized peoples. Major US art museums such as the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York typically feature these representations without contextualizing who or what was subjugated through their making. In the very final pages of *Painting US Empire*, Cao invites personal reflection, reminding readers that visibility does not presume voice. Nevertheless, following Cao's own use of contemporary artists' interventions, I wonder whether we might try to read these featured and other historical paintings for the knowledge, refusal, or sovereignty of their subjects.

My favorite "intervention" appears first in the book: It highlights multidisciplinary artist Maria Thereza Alves's investigation into ballast dump sites through *Seeds of Change* (1999–ongoing). Before the twentieth century, ships took on steadying ballast—heavy earthen materials such as sand and rocks—from their ports of departure, then dumped it in ports of arrival. Alves extracted core samples from former colonial ports and germinated any dormant seeds in the excavated organic material. The plants that grew out of these digs originated from around the world and especially from nodes of colonial trade. Alves's resultant ballast flora gardens, which could be viewed most recently in Manhattan in 2017, refigure these ties while also challenging their pastness. They also demonstrate the regenerative properties of rogue seeds roughly a century after imperial botanists attempted the transfer and propagation of more profitable specimens.

Twenty years ago, transnational American studies developed as a response to ongoing and resurgent narratives of US exceptionalism. The field built upon growing interest in US empire, including within the twenty-six essays featured as part of the foundational edited volume *Cultures of United States Imperialism* (1994).² In their

introduction, Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease famously argued that culture had gone unrecognized in histories of US imperialism while empire had been ignored in the study of US culture. Cao's monograph builds upon two decades of scholarly work that bridges this impasse. *Painting US Empire* reminds us that prominent visual genres in the United States are rooted in tourism, trade, and expansion without respect for the sovereignty of other nations, peoples, or environments.

Notes

- ¹ Kevin Dawson, *Undercurrents of Power: Aquatic Culture in the African Diaspora* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), <https://www.pennpress.org/9780812224931/undercurrents-of-power/>; Sharika D. Crawford, *The Last Turtlemen of the Caribbean: Waterscapes of Labor, Conservation, and Boundary Making* (University of North Carolina Press, 2020), <https://uncpress.org/9781469660219/the-last-turtlemen-of-the-caribbean/>; and Mary E. Hicks, *Captive Cosmopolitans: Black Mariners and the World of South Atlantic Slavery* (Omohundro Institute for Early American History and Culture and University of North Carolina Press, 2024), <https://uncpress.org/9781469671468/captive-cosmopolitans/>
- ² Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease, *Cultures of United States Imperialism* (Duke University Press, 1994).

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