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Staging Unincorporated Power: Richard Harding Davis and the Critique of Imperial News

NIRMAL TRIVEDI

He was the cable operator at Jucaro; and he sits all day in front of a sheet of white paper, and watches a ray of light play across an imaginary line, and he can tell by its quivering, so he says, all that is going on all over the world.

—Richard Harding Davis, *Cuba in War Time*

In war correspondent Richard Harding Davis's farcical short story "The Reporter Who Made Himself King" (1891), diplomacy and conquest collapse to provide a new vision of US imperialism. The story profiles Albert Gordon, a young journalist from New York who craves a war to fulfill his ambitions of becoming a war correspondent. Taking on the role of secretary to the American consul for the imaginary North Pacific island of Opeki, Gordon finds himself in the middle of an international war involving German colonization of the island on the one hand and an internecine battle between the native Opekians on the other. Imposing a "treaty" of unification upon the warring islanders, Gordon confronts a German captain to whom the island was given, and announces: "I represent the King of this island. I also represent the United States Government, that does not tolerate a foreign power near her coast, since the days of President Monroe and before." Ignoring the American's warning, the German marines claim ownership of the island, prompting Gordon to claim sovereignty over the island for himself—making himself King—and precipitating the war that he so desired. "Don't you see what that means?" he exclaims, "it means war. A great international war. And I am a war correspondent at last!" (200).

Critics have often framed Davis as supporting the imperial cause, associating him with Roosevelt and US Admiral Alfred T. Mahan.² Reading his novel *Soldiers of Fortune* (1897), Amy Kaplan, for example, argues that Davis constructs a vision of imperialism that relies on historical romance's spectacle to re-constitute a kind of

American (meaning Anglo-Saxon) manhood threatened by the “anarchy” of incorporating foreign lands into the republic.³ This is not to discount important contributions to Davis scholarship in recent years in assembling his diverse works. Notably, John Seelye’s *War Games: Richard Harding Davis and the New Imperialism* has extended discussion of Davis to include substantive analyses of his news reporting, revealing in the process variations in Davis’s ideological bearings. Nonetheless, most readings of Davis discount these variations to assert that he was indeed an apologist for US imperialism.

Focusing on Davis’s critical relationship to what I call the “imperial news apparatus,” however, provides a more complex picture of his attitudes concerning US imperialism. I follow Davis’s development from his fictional representation of the new war correspondent in “The Reporter” to his own war correspondence before and after the Spanish-American War as collected in the memoirs *A Year From a Reporter’s Notebook* (1897), *Cuba in War Time* (1897), and *Notes of a War Correspondent* (1912). In these twenty years, Davis witnessed the US redefine its sovereignty through arbitrary legal “unincorporation” with policies such as the Roosevelt Corollary (1904), which he presaged in “The Reporter.”⁴ As a war correspondent, he experienced first-hand the “imperial news apparatus,” a corporate-driven news industry that removes authorial content and historical context from reporting and replaces it with “dispatches,” or fragments of information produced for and with commercial interests. The dispatches trafficked in a romanticized vision of American masculinity and a sensationalized vision of imperial (i.e. Spanish) rapacity to an increasingly media-conscious American public. Worst of all, the apparatus placed publishers in a position to manufacture events that only the reporter had witnessed. For Davis, the apparatus was becoming a colonizing force in itself by changing the profession of journalism.

Imperial News

It is not surprising to find turn-of-the-century journalistic narratives that tell of US intervention in the political affairs of nations in its hemisphere. Perhaps the most persistent (if disputed) legend of the era was war correspondent James Creelman’s claim that William Randolph Hearst eased artist-correspondent Frederic Remington’s worries about the absence of war in Cuba in early 1897 by telling him that—despite the absence of battles at the moment—he should simply “furnish the pictures” since “[he] will furnish the war.”⁵ While the “yellow journalism” of Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer is most often criticized for having fabricated the news in the interest of greater circulation and profits, this was common practice at the turn-of-the-century.⁶ Such “imperial news” characteristically conveyed what appeared to be essential truths about people and cultural attitudes while diminishing, if not ignoring, the violence necessary to sustain these attitudes.

War correspondent James Creelman’s reporting on the Port Arthur massacre

during the Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895) exemplifies the approach that Hearst's *Journal* mandated. A colleague of Davis, Creelman embraced what Davis could not, namely representing sensationalist accounts of atrocities abroad in order to justify US intervention in foreign lands. Creelman's rendering of Port Arthur itself is highly visual, written with attention to dramatic conventions. Writing that the "most dramatic scene in the battle was yet to come," Creelman clears space upon his theatrical stage for the killing.⁷ Watching his play from a hilltop alongside British and American attachés, he claims to see all the details of the battle that ensued. A typical scene portrays "one trembling old woman, and only one, in that great scene of carnage, her wrinkled face quivering with fear, and her limbs trembling as she wandered among the slain" (112). How from a hilltop on the edge of the city Creelman was able to see the old woman is unclear. Journalism historians have described how the US State Department investigated the claims of the massacre, concluding that Creelman's narratives were "sensational in the extreme and a gross exaggeration of what occurred."⁸ But it is in fact precisely because he could not see the scene at such close proximity that he is able to imagine what happened—the imagined scene was vivid to such an extent that Creelman could see the wrinkles on the woman's face. At one point, Creelman asks, "Where was she to go? What was she to do?" (112). The questions function as a rhetorical call to arms for US involvement in a conflict in which the US had little interest at the time.

Certainly Creelman's sensationalism was geared towards meeting a demand for sensationalist accounts in strategic regions, but reporters themselves were largely under pressure to produce such stories regardless of their personal ideologies. An assignment system, for example, required reporters to transmit their stories to "rewrite men," who would transform news stories into palatable versions amenable to the interests of newspaper publishers. Decentralized newsroom organization and the advent of the deadline further marginalized the reporter's autonomy. The reporters were given fewer opportunities to cover events that forced them to learn a local culture. Subjects covered by a newspaper increased, but individual reporters were given more of the same kinds of events to cover in an effort to promote specialization.⁹ In other words, correspondents were asked to cover the maximum number of events without following up on any particular one, hastening the production of a "template" approach to the news. To promote "newness," many reporters resorted to "faking" stories when unable to make deadlines.

Correspondents routinely objected to several aspects of the profession: the rise of private enterprise in controlling the means for both gathering and disseminating the news, the drive towards "professionalization" of war correspondents, and the emphasis on "facts" over narrative in producing "stories" about global events. With the US publicly asserting itself as a global financial and military power, imperial news was facilitating the production and dissemination of information primarily through the channels of private enterprise. Hearst was the symbolic head of this development; he owned the telegraph agencies and ships that

served as transport vehicles for war correspondents. Likewise, Pulitzer and Cornelius Vanderbilt financed newsgathering expeditions across Central and South America. These financiers were invested in a staunch belief that war correspondents were better at constructing an empire through rhetoric than the empire-builders themselves. Their private ventures revealed that imperial news was less an arm of cultural imperialism than a *parallel power* that sometimes intersected with state power in revealing and productive ways.

For news reporters, the imperial news apparatus—especially its adherence to the marketplace—was an equal and sometimes more imposing force than statist cultural imperialist narratives. While common, these latter narratives were sensational reports of mass killings by despotic regimes, abductions of Westerners in foreign lands, and journalistic “stunts,” which dominated the headlines whether or not the journalist belonged to the “yellow press” standards *Journal* or the *World*. These narratives, however, competed with “non-narrative,” fact-based news that did not embellish the events that the reporters allegedly witnessed. This fact-based journalistic style—the “inverted pyramid” model—appeared in textbooks on journalism as early as 1894, signaling the convergence of the writing style and marketplace pressures at the turn-of-the-century that valued the empirical as “new” and authoritative.¹⁰ The telegraph hastened this trend towards fact-based reporting as dispatches were transmitted from around the nation to publishing centers, which turned them into “a commodity that would be palatable to all.”¹¹

This professionalization and the growing self-awareness of war correspondents coincided with a proliferation of international wars. The US was entrenched in several international arenas of interest to newspapers and war correspondents alike, most notably in Cuba where the confrontation with Spain took the US into the Philippines among other sovereign states along the Pacific Rim.¹² This increase in the number of international events might have countered the push towards short news “briefings” on political developments throughout the world as the complexity of these events might have necessitated having more experienced reporters in specific regions of the world for longer durations in order to develop a deeper understanding of a region. International news, however, did not proliferate in variety. Instead, it became increasingly centralized: more reports emerged, but more of the same *kinds* of reports. Syndication and the institutional establishment of centralized repositories like the Associated Press (1848), the German Wolff Telegraph Agency (1855), and Reuters (1858) facilitated this “template-ing” of the news as they became standard organs of local, national and international news apparatuses that were made available for general, rather than targeted, consumption. Just as local newspapers emphasized “exclusives,” the same set of war correspondents and their publishers promoted the “inventiveness” of their stories, even if that involved journalists “faking” the news through exaggeration or outright fabrication.¹³

By the end of the nineteenth century, imperial news had become its own “empire of news,” ruled by private enterprise, professionalization, and marketplace

dynamics—all processes that contributed to the marginalization of war correspondents. In other words, the news apparatus was internally consolidating its representations of culture and beginning to distinguish itself from state-centered discourses of empire, thus developing into a rival power to statist-oriented imperialism that targeted the correspondents themselves as the problematic subject.

Davis's Critique of Corporate Imperial News

Davis's unique insight into the news apparatus at the turn-of-the-century was largely informed by his reporting for some of the most prominent periodicals for literary fiction and war reporting during the Spanish-American War: *Harper's Weekly*, *Scribner's Magazine*, *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, *Collier's Weekly*, *Metropolitan Magazine*, and *New York Times Magazine*. His travel writing and war correspondence from 1896 to 1898 reveal a growing awareness of a news industry that colluded with imperial power. He saw the news industry as largely performative and arbitrary—a level of awareness lost on fellow correspondents like James Creelman whose sensationalism and xenophobia drove much public enthusiasm for the Spanish-American War.¹⁴ Unlike Creelman, Davis considered the more pressing geopolitical issue not to be US imperialism per se, but rather the construction of imperial news via transnational routes of corporate power. In his depiction of war journalism at the turn-of-the-century, Davis effectively *stages* and thus exposes US sovereignty as what Amy Kaplan has rightly termed an “unincorporated power”: that is, a juridical power that legitimates arbitrary application and withdrawal of the law in foreign lands. But in the moment when war itself was actually witnessed—years prior to the juridical rationale provided by the Insular Cases of the Spanish-American War—Davis wrote about “unincorporated” power in an additional sense. He recognized the juridical power as working through an imperial news apparatus. In particular, legal unincorporation relied upon the “privatization of knowledge” through changes in journalism as a profession, especially the profession's promotion of the war correspondent as nothing more than a spectator and purveyor of atrocity.¹⁵ In other words, as the war correspondent became the witness of lawlessness in foreign lands, legal arguments could be more easily made to “incorporate” (i.e. colonize) these foreign lands. With financial incentives for publishers to promote such sensational stories, incorporation took on a double meaning: to incorporate the land in a juridical sense *and* to make the land a source for corporate profit.

The corporatization of news production turned news into the kind of commodity that could be reused and redeployed in a variety of different contexts. Reporters, like Creelman and Davis, became increasingly symbolic as a certain kind of journalist. Davis was a consummate “professional” in the public eye, whereas in practice he articulated a dual awareness (and unease) of being both a spokesman for US imperial power and a *subject* conditioned by the imperial news apparatus that legitimated that power. Resistant to adapting his journalism to the exigencies of

imperial news, Davis instead wrote on emergent transnational routes of power that demonstrated how US sovereignty was being defined by the whims of American capitalists across the hemisphere. His travel memoir, *Three Gringos in Venezuela and Central America* (1896) details these observations by pointing out how these long-standing, unequal relationships have fomented political and economic crisis in Central America.¹⁶ His observations on the embedded nature of corporate power in the port city of Cornito are particularly revealing. Approaching the Pacific border between Honduras and Nicaragua, Davis writes,

We had come to Corinto from the little island of Amapala, which lies seventy-five miles farther up the coast, and which guards the only port of entry to Honduras on the Pacific seaboard. It is supposed to belong to the Republic of Honduras, but it is in reality the property of Rossner Brothers, who sell everything from German machetes to German music-boxes, and who could, if they wanted it, purchase the entire Republic of Honduras in the morning, and make a present of it to the Kaiser in the course of the afternoon. You have only to change the name of Rossner Brothers to the San Rosario Mining Company, to the Pacific Mail, to Errman Brothers, to the Panama Railroad Company, and you will identify the actual rulers of one or of several of the republics of Central America.¹⁷

Mapping a hemisphere controlled by European and American corporations, Davis indicates as a matter-of-fact how economic dominion disenfranchises the local leadership. “His country,” he writes, “no matter what her name may be, is ruled by a firm of coffee-merchants in New York city, or by a German railroad company, or by a line of coasting steamers, or by a great tradinghouse, with headquarters in Berlin or London or Bordeaux” (85).

Foreign corporations maintain their presence in the Central American republics by partnering with British, German, and American consular agents. These agents, as Davis reveals, are exempt from local law by force of an *exequatur* granted by the “host” nation—a legal document granted by the sovereign that allows an agent to operate outside the sovereign’s law. Davis was hardly naïve about the financial and military force required to maintain exceptional status, stating frankly that the local government will not revoke an *exequatur* as long as the host nation owes money to the consul, his partnering corporation, or the foreign government. Furthermore, a local merchant “is not going to suffer from the imposition of a forced loan, nor see his mules seized, as long as the tin sign with the American eagle screaming upon it is tacked above the brass business plate of his warehouse” (85–86). The manner in which Davis alerts us to the transnational economy in *Gringos*

suggests that the real objective for turn-of-the-century foreign correspondents was in detailing the transformation of sovereignty. He observed the growing dependence of nationalism on “unincorporated power”—that is, power underwritten by corporate interests, but exempt from the law, and largely unimpeded by national boundaries. This power manifested itself most actively in this hemisphere of new transnational routes of exchange that curtailed foreign sovereign authority on the one hand and expanded imperial sovereignty on the other hand.

The effect of these exchanges for Davis was a problem not only for Central Americans, but for US citizens as well. In an essay in *Three Gringos* entitled “The Exiled Lottery,” Davis describes the outsourcing of the Louisiana state lottery to Puerto Cortez in Honduras. When the Postmaster General, John Wanamaker, convinced Congress to outlaw the sale of lottery tickets through US mail in 1890, lottery directors moved the operation to Honduras. The country was amenable to the “investment,” as Davis points out, because of its heavy debt burden to the US (25). That the lottery directors themselves had been indicted on embezzlement charges in the US mattered little to elites of both nations, or so it seemed. Davis turns his attention to those affected, and impoverished, by the outsourced lottery: “Even the keeper of a roulette wheel has too much self-respect to continue turning when there is only one man playing against the table, and in comparison with him the scramble of the lottery company after the Honduran tin dollar, and the scant savings of servant-girls and of brakemen and negro barbers in the United States, is to me the most curious feature of this once great enterprise” (37). Davis exposes for his readers an “underworld” of gambling schemes, “robb[ing] a whole nation willing to be robbed,” in back rooms with “gaping Indians,” and “unwashed Honduran generals” (38). Certainly, a part of his essay relies on the very sensationalist imagery that he despised. The term “unwashed” when describing Honduran generals, and his caricaturistic depiction of General Valeriano during the Spanish-American War are typical examples. When describing the representations of Americans that were available to the Central Americans, however, Davis was concerned that sensationalism compromised hemispheric relations. He complains, for example, that every house he entered in Guatemala “is papered throughout with copies of the New York *Police Gazette*, which must give the Guatemalan a lurid light on the habits and virtues of his cousins in North America” (20). The “lurid light” of the *Gazette*, it seemed, deflected attention away from what Davis preferred to show his readers—that transnational corporate interests pose a risk for citizens foreign and domestic.

Davis’s choice to single out the *Gazette* was not insignificant. He associated such news sources as inhibiting the familial, largely paternalistic relationship between the US and its southern “cousins.” As Seelye has put it, if Davis is a cultural imperialist, he is an unconventional one: he “debunks contemporary myths, including those which licensed the imperial excesses of the day.”¹⁸ I would say, more emphatically, that Davis undermines the collusion of the imperial news apparatus with state power by repeatedly shifting attention away from sensationalism. For

example, writing before the American invasion of Cuba in 1898 in *Cuba in War Time*, Davis shows how the violence of the colonial encounter witnessed by correspondents should chasten one's provincial pursuit of spectacle. With his attentiveness to the proliferation of zones where violence was becoming the norm rather than the exception, he hesitates to compromise on describing the gravity of this violence by underwriting the aims of the imperial state with jingoistic journalism. In these reports, his concern is in honestly reflecting on what can be done when a neighboring country is indeed in the midst of an asymmetrical war. He distances himself from the role of the American government, writing that "I do not know that the United States will interfere in the affairs of Cuba," and that his reports "might have some weight in helping to decide the question with those whose proper business it is to determine it" (54). While acts of "charity might help to better," the war should be understood as "a condition which deserves the most serious consideration from men of common sense and judgment, and one not to be treated with hysterical head lines nor put aside as a necessary evil of war" (55). Reflective about the cost and consequence of war, Davis in his reports is more concerned with the task of reporting the seriousness and complexity of the crisis with Spain than in becoming an arm of the imperial state.

Even Davis's commonly-cited promotion of the Rough Riders can be read less as a celebration of virile masculinity than a mockery of it. On the one hand, Davis reproduces the spectacle in *Notes of a War Correspondent* (1910), describing Roosevelt as "without doubt the most conspicuous figure in the charge . . . mounted high on horseback, and charging the rifle-pits at a gallop and quite alone, [he] made you feel like you would like to cheer."¹⁹ On the other hand, Davis's description in "Battle of San Juan Hill" stages the limitations of newspaper renderings of the battle as far too "regular" and "heroic," incomprehensibly depicting "men running uphill and swiftly . . . their eyes aflame . . . hair streaming . . . invincible" (97). While Kaplan suggests that Davis's representation reproduces a spectacle of masculine heroism, Davis also frames the battle as a blunder, a "terrible mistake," characterized by men "blindly following out some madman's mad order" (97).

Davis's interrogation of spectacles of sovereign power that characterizes his Spanish-American War reporting was largely influenced by his foreign correspondence in Russia and Bulgaria between the months of May 1896 and June 1897—just before collecting material for *Cuba in War Time*. Writing for *Harper's Magazine* and the *New York Journal*, he reported on two events that epitomized the spectacle: the coronation of Czar Nicholas II in Moscow and the Bandarium celebration in Budapest, which Davis described as "the nobles of all the counties of Hungary [meeting] to swear allegiance to the King and his crown."²⁰ Both events were performances of sovereign power, the coronation "a play at the royal boxes of Europe and the grandstands of the world," and the Bandarium a "moving panorama" of Hungary's history played out as a procession of royalty, past and present (35; 44–45). In these reports, Davis is at once seduced by the spectacle, conveying his

enthusiasm for the ceremony, and yet self-conscious that the event itself pretends to be nothing more than spectacle—that is, it refuses the pretense that sovereign power can indeed function through “unincorporation” without resulting in a challenge to the meaning of citizenship. He writes, “it would have been too theatrical and fantastic had it not been that it was an historical pageant, and correct in every detail, and that the fairy princes were real princes, the jewels real jewels, and the fur the same fur that a few months before had covered a wolf or a bear in the mountains of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which had been hunted by these same men who now wore their skins” (43). Davis’s search for authenticity is revealing as it suggests that he was indeed much more skeptical of the imperial news apparatus’s treatment of the Spanish-American War precisely because it struck him as thoroughly inauthentic. In other words, US sovereignty was not merely representational; its performative gestures had real consequences.

Davis’s insights, while unique among his peers, may appear limited to the contemporary reader. In *Gringos*, for example, he does not consider the possibility of resistance to corporate interests or the existence of alternative local economies. Nor does he reflect on his own role as a tourist who is able to travel by virtue of these corporations. What he does reveal throughout his correspondence, however, is perhaps a more fundamental condition that allows for such transnational commerce to occur in the first place, namely the extension of US sovereignty to foreign soil via a corporatized journalistic practice.

“The Reporter” and the Spectacle of Sovereignty

Davis’s interest in the making of imperial sovereignty began well before the Spanish-American War. In fact, the cascading effects of sovereign power on citizens is perhaps most evident in his early short story “The Reporter Who Made Himself King” (1891). The story is a satire, a cautionary tale in the spirit of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1902), Kipling’s *Kim* (1901) and, most obviously, the latter’s “The Man Who Would Be King” (1888). Like his British contemporaries, Davis warns of the corruption of imperial power. But while Conrad and Kipling express deep moral reservations about the civilizing mission, Davis is more concerned with how the discursive, technological, and cultural pressures of an influential imperial news apparatus were remaking US nationalism.

By publishing “The Reporter” in a collection of fiction entitled *Stories for Boys* in 1891, Davis appeared to be anticipating what later became commonplace in the making of US imperialism at the turn-of-the-century—a coming era that saw the US redraw its sovereignty multiple times to facilitate imperial expansion. Paradigmatic of these moments were the Insular Cases, the series of Supreme Court decisions, concentrated in 1901, on the constitutional status of the insular possessions gained in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War: Puerto Rico, Guam, the Philippines, and Cuba. The new possessions were to be treated as colonies, or as Amy Kaplan notes,

“unincorporated territories” belonging to the United States, but whose people would enjoy fewer constitutional rights and protections than would the inhabitants of the United States.²¹ These cases allowed for the US to maintain territorial sovereignty over lands that were “foreign in a domestic sense” while preventing the peoples of those lands from “contaminating” the citizenry. To Davis, in fact, it appeared as if this new way of constructing an empire—with legally-defined inclusions and exclusions about who counts as a citizen—would no longer be exceptional, but rather the norm. If the US was going to distinguish itself from “monarchical pirates,” Davis’s Gordon says, it will need to perform like a sovereign, but govern in a manner that leaves citizens “unincorporated” into the body politic.

The short story exposes how the burgeoning imperial news apparatus turned correspondents into proxies of empire, undermining what Davis believed the correspondent should be, namely an independently-minded witness of geopolitical change. The story ironizes that which imperial news celebrated: the coming together of technologies of communication with private enterprise and its corporate obsession over profits. Such a convergence is not without its consequences. When Gordon “becomes” a war correspondent, he becomes both a witness to violence and blissfully oblivious of his own complicity in facilitating it. It is this latter ignorance that Davis seems to acknowledge as the underside of a profession that was becoming less interested in reporting and more interested in becoming an arm of the imperial state.

The narrator of “The Reporter” is a youthful, ambitious, sardonic journalist who seeks to move beyond what appears to him as the provincial, feudal world of old journalism. Contrasting Victorian notions of apprenticeship with the global perspective of journalism in the rapidly changing political world of the late nineteenth century, the narrator of “The Reporter” distinguishes what he calls the “Old Time Journalist” from the new journalist. While the former works his way up the ranks, from “office boy” to typesetter, to stenographer, until he becomes a “real reporter,” the new journalist enters the fray of reporting without much training, but rather simply with a desire to work—not for pay—but “for the paper”: “[h]e gives his time, his health, his brains, his sleeping hours, and his eating hours, and sometimes his life, to get news for it” (142). Davis’s contemporary, Julian Ralph, expressed a similar sentiment in his memoir *The Making of a Journalist* (1903), writing that the journalist’s goal is to be completely faithful to the newspaper. The reporter is best when he bypasses education, the professions of “learned” classes, and reports what he thinks will “make the story,” even if that means that he must transgress international law.²²

For Davis, internationalism is in fact what young men needed to embrace if they were to practice journalism at the turn-of-the-century. He believed that antebellum preoccupations with American nationalism should be relinquished just as should be expectations of a journalistic profession centered on editor-author relationships and patronage systems. For example, when in “The Reporter,” the former Civil War hero and newly-appointed American consul to Opeki, Captain Travis,

complains about the boat ride to the island, Gordon responds with a racialized fantasy of reunion after the Civil War: “‘Oh, it won’t be so bad when we get there [Opeki],’ he claims; ‘they say these Southern people are always hospitable, and the whites [consulate members] will be glad to see anyone from the States’” (149–50). Gordon projects the racialized Reconstruction reunion narrative of whites and blacks working together for the unity of the nation, upon an international arena, where the narrative is marshaled to create a sense of hemispheric solidarity. Needless to say, Travis does not stay in Opeki. He bluntly summarizes the reasons for his departure: “‘Opeki,’ he says, ‘is just a bit too far from civilization to suit me’” (159). With the representative of a nation-state-centered politics taken off stage, Davis sets Gordon up to represent the US and its role as an international power unbound by racial prejudices.

Just as the Civil War hero is uneasy with the new “post-racial,” internationalist America, the British in “The Reporter” are similarly limited. Exiles from a British warship, the Bradleys—two English subjects—literally become servants to Stedman, an American operator for the San Francisco-based Yokohama Cable Company. The “stock company” is responsible for laying a cable to Yokohama; Stedman’s role until the arrival of the war correspondent, Gordon, is to simply relay messages. With the threat of European monarchical rule (in this case, German), Stedman exclaims that a new imperial attitude is required despite reputed American democratic idealism: “[d]emocratic simplicity is the right thing at home, of course; but when you go abroad and mix with crowned heads, you want to show them that you know what’s what” (163). Stedman’s militaristic anti-monarchical sentiment, Davis shows, is aimed not to usurp native rule on the island per se, but to unseat imperial power more generally by whatever undemocratic means necessary. The irony, and one that Davis exposes for his readers, is that Gordon makes himself king, thus embodying the new, circular logic that defines the exceptionalist paradigm. By claiming for himself the position of sovereign through a performative act, Gordon effectively becomes exempt from a (pre-existing) law.²³

In addition to representing the new American sovereignty as antagonistic to British (or even antebellum) models of nationalism, Davis depicts Gordon as shockingly detached and uncritical about violence. As Davis writes, before Gordon’s arrival at Opeki, he covered domestic events with a lust for violence, “dream[ing] of shattered locomotives, human beings lying still with blankets over them, rows of cells, and banks of beautiful flowers nodding their head to the tunes of the brass band in the gallery. He decided when we awoke the next morning that he had entered upon a picturesque and exciting career” (144). Davis paints Gordon as reflective—not about the human costs of the tragedies he covers—but about the potential of these events to be rendered visually, as Remington did for Davis’s illustrated memoirs of the Spanish-American War.²⁴ Davis portrays this desensitization to violence ironically, as a kind of “training” needed to become an arm of the imperial state.

When a German warship arrives on the scene claiming the island as a colony, Gordon is drawn away from his diplomatic and literary pursuits and turns into a bombastic anti-colonial warrior poet, seeking to protect the island from foreign invasion. Davis depicts him as rapidly becoming a sovereign ruler of the island by protecting one tribe from another. Mirroring the colonial misadventures of Conradian heroes, Gordon's protection of the island becomes a conquest of it. He lambasts the Germans, reinvoicing domestic metaphors in an international arena: "that's just like those monarchical pirates, imposing upon a poor old black" (186). Davis projects Gordon's own piratical lawlessness onto the Germans, showing how this reversal allows Gordon to *simultaneously* be anti-imperial and more imperialistic than the Germans. When Gordon discovers that one of the kings had previously sold the island to the German ship of war, his anti-imperial bravado ratchets up, and he vows to usurp German rule. Davis renders Gordon as arrogantly oblivious to the irony of anti-imperial imperialism, mocking the correspondent as glibly stating that the mission is simple: "all we want . . . is to improve [the island], and have the fun of running it for them and meddling in their affairs of state" (186). In an effort to circumvent German claims to the island, Gordon creates "treaties" and agreements *ex nihilo*, consolidating power through a specious, yet legally-binding agreement with the Opekians. Leaning on the authority of the Monroe Doctrine, the new sovereign exercises an arbitrary juridical power in this foreign land, and effectively remaps US sovereignty through an act of transnational incorporation.

When recounting the news of this "transition" of power over a telegraph wire to the domestic newspaper office, Davis describes the two kings as having relinquished control of the island to Gordon, having bestowed on the correspondent the name of "Tellaman," or "Peacemaker"—a name that of course ironizes Gordon's actions. When the German ship fires a shot and dislodges an American flag, Gordon wires a message about the damage to the "home office." The office proceeds to receive "over two hundred queries for matter from papers all over the United States and Europe" (209). The correspondent quickly realizes that the night editor has rewritten his bloodless account, embellishing it to describe a great massacre. The night editor, a product of the assignment system, becomes the filter through which imperial news is communicated. Davis proceeds to satirize the process by which these events become news via transmission through the professionalization of journalism and the privatization of the means to disseminate the news via telegraph companies. Knowing that such sensationalism would drive up the stock price of the Yokohama Cable Company, the editor embellishes news stories with one hand and invests in the company stock with the other. He explains: "I killed off a hundred American residents, two hundred English, because I do not like the English, and a hundred French . . . and then I waited anxiously to hear from you to substantiate what I had said" (216). Davis describes Gordon as nervous about fabricating a massacre—though he is unclear about the precise reasons for his disapproval. Without recourse to undo the editor's exaggerations, Gordon wonders if he should

“kill a few people [himself]” (209).²⁵

Davis illustrates the way in which imperial news and state power converge to effectively “professionalize” Gordon into a war correspondent. He also shows how the manufacturing of a massacre on the island makes Gordon nervous about the implications of his actions. Ruefully, he claims that he “never wrote more and said less in my life. . . . I had to pretend that they knew all that had happened so far; [the editors] apparently do know more than we do, and I have filled it full of prophecies of more trouble ahead, and with interviews with myself and the two ex-Kings. The only news element in it is, that the messengers have returned to report that the German vessel is not in sight, and that there is no news” (211). Despite the fact that Gordon is committed to propounding war if only to further his career as a war correspondent or to make a name for himself as a real professional, he is reluctant to manufacture the news. He is portrayed here as a victim of the editor’s need to promote a war and the telegraph company’s need to increase its stock value.

For Davis, this critique of a corporatized news industry that seemed to “auto-generate” the news was not only important in sustaining war reporting as a noble calling—as he certainly believed it was—but also in ensuring that witnessed accounts of the violence of the war zone, its colonial contexts and geopolitical import, were not effaced. The representation of such violence is evident when, for example, Gordon’s manufactured news reports in “Reporter” cause Opeki to be bombarded by imperial powers competing for dominion over the land and enacting retribution for massacres against their citizens. It is this violence made possible by the news apparatus’s reliance on spectacle that fundamentally disturbs Davis.

The satire exposes several different historical phenomena of the nineteenth century: the use of the Pacific islands as client-states, the theft of Native American land by the US government, transnational competition to gain spheres of influence, the fluidity of sovereign control during the rise of US imperialism through the juridical logic of “unincorporating” territories and the rights of peoples in those territories, and the convergence of finance capital in the making of imperial news. Throughout the story, Gordon is concerned about the rightful ownership of the land, from both the rival king and the Germans, using this cause to support his own interests in taking control of the island. The travel to Opeki becomes a proxy for waging an anti-imperial imperialist war that attempts to retain the Pacific islands as either friendly client states or American colonies. At the same time, Davis shows how the war correspondent at the turn-of-the-century was entrapped by a series of occupational pressures that compromised eyewitness accounts with spectacles that presumably counted more as news.

Narrating the Subject of Unincorporated Power

Davis’s own reporting from Cuba before and during the war further explored the subjects of transnational power who were left “unincorporated.” The striking

realization from Davis's war correspondence is that US sovereignty at the turn of the century was becoming increasingly defined by gaps in its structure where subjects could easily find themselves disenfranchised by transnational power, without recourse to state protection on the one hand, and victimized by it on the other hand. In other words, in Davis's rendering, the violence of sovereignty lay as much in the *application* of power as in the sovereign's ability to "unincorporate" subjects from the body politic—to withdraw from the arenas where it might be responsible for them.

The war reporter at the turn-of-the-century was caught in a dilemma. How does one render the consequences of unincorporated power, especially since these consequences were largely unrepresentable within the confines of imperial news? One characteristic aesthetic element of Davis's late war reporting is his special interest in the unseen and in the impossibility of fully witnessing. For example, instead of manufacturing spectacles as Creelman consistently did (whether or not he actually witnessed the "spectacle"), Davis ironically titles his report from the Sino-Japanese War as "Battles I Did Not See."²⁶ As evident from the title, the piece acknowledges the failure of the spectacular accounts to explain the conditions of war. It is clear from the writing that Davis is constrained by the mandates of the newspapers for which he worked to relate something spectacular regardless of the conditions on the ground. In the case of the Sino-Japanese War, *Harper's* asked him to follow the rules set up by the Japanese. Davis's discovery that this would entail outright censorship of battles signaled his entrapped position between the newspaper and his sources. He resolved not to report at all since he was only allowed within four miles of the scene. Joking that he went on a "camping trip" rather than to a war zone, Davis quips that he "never went on a campaign in a more delightful country nor with better companions" (221). Sarcastically referring to the war zone as a "camp," Davis exposes the manufactured nature of all other reports from the Sino-Japanese War, especially those of Creelman. In his reports, in contrast, Davis refuses to manufacture a subject from sights unseen.

Davis, nonetheless, was entrapped insofar as he needed to produce something "magnificent" in the vein of Creelman and something he actually witnessed. The pressure effectively resulted in Davis producing a vitriolic diatribe against the Japanese whom he dismissed as duplicitous for leading the correspondents away from the war. No doubt aware of the spectacle-oriented nature of imperial news at the turn of the century, the Japanese authorities successfully thwarted US and British war correspondents from covering the war. Davis, however, did manage to produce a witnessed account—one unseen by the conventional reporter. Upon finally leaving the Japanese authorities, Davis describes how he ventured to Hai-Cheng, where he was imprisoned along with other correspondents: "[w]e found the compound glaring in the sun, empty, silent, filled only with memories of the men who, with their laughter their stories and their songs had made it live" (225). This brief reflection on the failure of being "on the spot" illustrates

Davis's difference from his fellow correspondents: his story did not fit the needs of the newspapers, even though he certainly saw the imprisonment of the journalist as the real story of the war.

Written shortly after the Sino-Japanese War during the Cuban War for Independence (1885–1898), “Death of Rodriguez” is a portrait of the Cuban insurgent Alfonso Rodriguez just before his execution at the hands of the Spanish colonial authorities. The portrait is particularly noteworthy for how it takes the experience of a political subject caught between empires—in this case, Rodriguez—as the very object of war correspondence. More than any of his other works, “Death” marks Davis’s effort to extricate war reporting from the imperial news apparatus and to render it as a distinct art form that narrates the life of the subject.

“Death of Rodriguez,” reflects the kind of “intimate storytelling” that Davis and other war correspondents employed to pivot around the trappings of spectacle-oriented correspondence.²⁷ In this case, however, Davis relies on an image of Rodriguez to glorify the anti-Spanish insurgency that ultimately served to incite support for the annexation of Cuba. In the portrayal, Davis puts himself in the position of an “unwilling spectator” to Rodriguez’s execution, struggling to reconcile the fact that he is indeed a spectator and as such prevented from having adequate insight into Rodriguez’s internal plight. Neither sensational nor sentimental, Davis writes that “although Rodriguez could not know it, there was one person present when he died who felt keenly for him” (3). He seems resigned to being a spectator, albeit one who is self-conscious of the fact that such a position is thoroughly bereft of political agency. Davis both renders and implicates himself in a spectacle, aware that his only capacity for political critique lies in generating common “feeling” for Rodriguez: sympathy unseen.

Amy Kaplan argues that in such works as “Death of Rodriguez,” Davis constructs a recuperated masculinity in imperial adventures abroad which, through “triangulat[ing] with the reporter and the domestic audience, [Davis] denies the existence of political resistance to imperialism, even in the act of war against those resisters. . . . This invisibility also had to be produced ideologically, to deny Cubans and Filipinos representation as equal contestants in political struggle . . . denying [the colonized soldier] political agency and by extension masculinity.”²⁸ One can further argue that Davis recuperates his masculinity via his depiction of Rodriguez. Because Davis is insufficiently convinced that spectatorship—his own included—can lead to political action, the colonized soldier in this circumstance would not be denied political agency: in fact, it is through Rodriguez’s masculinity that he maintains agency. Davis repeatedly emphasizes Rodriguez’s body throughout the piece: his “gentle face,” “wistful eyes,” and “curly black hair” (7).²⁹ Imbued with “bravado” and “fearlessness,” Davis compares him, somewhat scandalously, to Nathan Hale, an American spy executed by the British during the Revolutionary War.

A revealing moment in the portrait is the instant of the execution itself:

The officer had given the order, the men had raised their pieces, and the condemned man had heard the clicks of the triggers as they were pulled back, and he had not moved. And then happened one of the most cruelly refined, though unintentional, acts of torture that one can very well imagine. As the officer slowly raised his sword, preparatory to giving the signal, one of the mounted officers rode up to him and pointed out silently that [t]he firing squad were so placed that when they fired they would shoot several of the soldiers stationed on the extreme end of the square. . . . The man had steeled himself to receive a volley of bullets. He believed that in the next instant he would be in another world; he had heard the command given, had heard the click of the Mausers as the locks caught—and then, at that supreme moment, a human hand had been laid upon his shoulder and a voice spoke in his ear. (26–27)

Here, Davis shows that Rodriguez is not simply a martyr for an independence movement, but also a figure caught between competing claims over Cuban sovereignty. In bringing attention to momentary suspensions of his execution, Davis focuses on the ability of imperial power to hold in abeyance an assumed right to kill the colonial subject at any given moment. Davis renders Rodriguez as experiencing a state of suspension where he is subjected to the blunt force of sovereign power. However, while the suspension is indicative of a dominion over life, it is also an indication that sovereign power itself is precarious—that it is arbitrary and therefore liable to be undermined, or even reimagined through memorialization. Rodriguez is indeed executed. As the executioners scatter, Davis keeps his attention on the subject, “the figure . . . lay on the grass untouched, and no one seemed to remember that it had walked there of itself” (12). Davis’s strategy, if not always consistent or explicit, was certainly suggestive of a writing aesthetic that attempted to memorialize the human costs of those perpetually abandoned by the dynamics of imperial sovereignty.

Notes

¹ Richard Harding Davis, “The Reporter Who Made Himself King,” in *Stories for Boys* (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1891), 195.

² For a consensus view on Davis as an apologist for imperialism, see Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003); Kristin L. Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press,

1998); Eric J. Sundquist, "Realism and Regionalism," in *Columbia Literary History of the United States*, ed. Emory Elliott (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); Marilyn C. Wesley, "'The Hero of the Hour': Ideology and Violence in the Works of Richard Harding Davis," *American Literary Realism* 32.2), 109–24. For an alternative reading, see John D. Seelye, *War Games: Richard Harding Davis and the New Imperialism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003).

³ Kaplan, *Anarchy*, 100–6; 111–17. Kaplan's limited reading can partly be accounted for because she is largely interested in Davis's historical romances rather than news memoir, arguing that fictional texts better provide "a cognitive and libidinal map of the geopolitical shift from continental expansion to overseas empire" (95). In contrast to his historical fiction, I suggest that the news memoirs are better reflections of this geopolitical shift as they are multivalent texts that at once convey the exigencies of on-the-spot witnessing that tend to de-emphasize territoriality in favor of "libidinal" energy, on the one hand, and the geographically-bound pronouncements made in the aftermath of battle, on the other hand. The doubleness of the memoirs thus conveys an ambivalence, even hesitation and uncertainty, that is largely suppressed in the historical romances.

⁴ The Roosevelt Corollary extended the Monroe Doctrine by asserting the right of the United States to use "police power" to intervene into the financial affairs of states in the Caribbean and Central America by making sure they fulfilled their obligations to international creditors. In practice, the policy was used to keep European empires from annexing nation-states like Venezuela while justifying US intervention.

⁵ James Creelman, *On the Great Highway; the Wanderings and Adventures of a Special Correspondent* (Boston: Lothrop, 1901), 177–78. See W. Joseph Campbell for a thorough refutation that such a telegram was ever sent (W. Joseph Campbell, *Yellow Journalism: Puncturing the Myths, Defining the Legacies* [Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2001], 75). While unlikely to have occurred, the event remains in popular memory as defining the role of the press concerning the Spanish-American War, most notably in Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* (1941).

⁶ W. Joseph Campbell writes on how the yellow press, while usually confined to the newspapers of Hearst and Pulitzer, influenced many other "non-yellow" papers in Chicago and New York alike. In 1900, for example, Chicago newspapers tried to increase circulation by adopting yellow journalism's characteristic large headlines, color Sunday editions. Among many business-related reasons, one explanation for the spread of yellow journalism's graphical and typographical innovations was to appeal to an increasing non-English speaking immigrant population in metropolitan centers (52–53).

⁷ Creelman, *On the Great Highway*, 105.

⁸ Campbell, *Yellow Journalism*, 75.

⁹ Christopher P. Wilson, *The Labor of Words: Literary Professionalism in the Progressive Era* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985), 28.

¹⁰ David Mindich, T. Z., *Just the Facts: How “Objectivity” Came to Define American Journalism* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 65; 109. The inverted pyramid refers to a journalistic standard by which the outcome of an event begins the report, followed by the broader context of an event.

¹¹ Mindich, *Just the Facts*, 9.

¹² In addition, several non-US theatres of war were covered by newspapers, namely the Franco-Prussian War, multiple wars involving the dissolving Ottoman Empire (Turkish-Serbian Wars, the Graeco-Turkish War, the War for Bulgarian Independence), and the Sino-Japanese War. Phillip Knightley, *The First Casualty: From the Crimea to Vietnam: The War Correspondent as Hero, Propagandist, and Myth Maker* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), 49–63; Robert Beisner, L., *Twelve Against Empire; the Anti-Imperialists, 1898–1900* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968; Mitchel P. Olson Roth, James Stuart, *Historical Dictionary of War Journalism* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1997).

¹³ Wilson, *The Labor of Words*, 33–38.

¹⁴ Creelman’s coverage of the Sino-Japanese War is a case in point of the rhetorical formation of anti-imperial imperialism as he couches a salvific narrative within a fetishistic attraction to massacre. The depiction of the Port Arthur Massacre details the alignment between imperial power and the discourse employed in imperial news wherein moral authority relies upon one becoming a spectator to the world’s tragedies. Creelman complains about the lack of US intervention into what appears to him a humanitarian crisis. In describing the moments before the event, Creelman provides a fantastical portrait of the Japanese commander, Yamaji. Standing above a battlefield, he describes him: “the battle seemed to bore him; it was too easy. There was not enough bloodshed.” Creelman, *On the Great Highway*, 103.

¹⁵ H.L. Mencken recalls in *Newspaper Days* (1941) how Davis and Julian Ralph were models for the kind of journalists he and his colleagues would become. H. L. Mencken, *Newspaper Days, 1899–1906* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1941), 239.

¹⁶ Seelye, *War Games*, 165. Seelye places *Three Gringos* in an Anglo-American tradition of travel writing about the North American continent that share an interest in journeys through areas without a “coherent pattern of settlement, territory [that] can be properly—which is to say profitably—exploited only through the imposition of some law and order, often by military presence.” Contrary to this reading, I argue that Davis was in fact observing a state of economic exploitation that already existed in Central America.

¹⁷ Richard Harding Davis, *Three Gringos in Venezuela and Central America* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1896), 84.

¹⁸ Seelye, *War Games*, 11–12.

¹⁹ Richard Harding Davis, *Notes of a War Correspondent* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1912), 96.

²⁰ Richard Harding Davis, *A Year From a Correspondent's Notebook* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1898), 6–47.

²¹ Several scholars have pointed to the relevance of the Insular Cases in characterizing US imperial sovereignty. See Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 3. Kaplan writes on how *Downes v. Bidwell* in particular created a “new legal category of the ‘unincorporated territory,’ a classification . . . that positioned Puerto Rico in a liminal space both inside and outside the boundaries of the Constitution, both ‘belonging to’ but ‘not a part’ of the United States . . . in a state of limbo in space and time, where [Puerto Ricans] were neither citizens at home nor aliens from another nation” (3). For more on the cases, see Bartholomew H. Sparrow, *The Insular Cases and the Emergence of American Empire* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2006); Christina Duffy Burnett, and Burke Marshall, *Foreign in a Domestic Sense: Puerto Rico, American Expansion, and the Constitution*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001) on the origins and enduring legacies of the court cases.

²² Julian Ralph wrote primarily for *Harper's Weekly* and *Harper's Monthly*. His “non-ideological” professionalism serves to displace awareness of the geopolitical circumstances of the United States as an empire with stories of citizen-journalism where he portrays himself providing a service to the public presumably left undone by the state. Julian Ralph, *The Making of a Journalist* (New York and London: Harper & Brothers, 1903), 60–63; 69. The filibuster was an inspirational figure for many journalists precisely for being a “mercenary.” As Robert May has written, the filibuster was an “American adventurer who raised or participated in private military forces that either invaded or planned to invade foreign countries with which the United States was formally at peace.” May, Robert E. *Manifest Destiny's Underworld: Filibustering in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), xi.

²³ My thinking on sovereignty is informed by Giorgio Agamben's (borrowing from Carl Schmitt) definition of the sovereign as he who can call the state of exception, that is to say that the sovereign can suspend the law from applying at any given moment. *State of Exception*. Translated by Kevin Attell. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 1. This seemingly arbitrary, but ultimately scheduled suspension within an itinerary of state formation, illustrates how sovereignty is constituted by doubleness: the absence of the law on the one hand, and the potential enforcement of it at any given moment on the other.

²⁴ In *Notes of a War Correspondent* (1912), Davis suggests that the fundamental challenge of modern war correspondence was to resist re-producing a spectacle. Giving in to marketplace demands would result, in his view, in an abrogation of both the realities of war and the subjectivity of the war correspondent as a witness. The most famous

moment that highlighted Davis's dislike of spectacle came with his famous resignation from the *Journal* when Hearst changed a story about a strip search of Cuban women by women to one conducted by Cuban men, publishing the story alongside suggestive illustrations by Remington. The incident represents a larger pattern in Davis's work where he satirizes how his fellow correspondents rely on spectacles in their war correspondence and criticizes the foolishness of the manufactured image of the war correspondent as a romantic hero.

²⁵ In a report from Jucaro, Cuba, Davis relates a suggestive observation of a telegraph reporter that illustrated the minor, seemingly insignificant nature of what is eventually large-scale geopolitical change, representation and geopolitics of a telegraph operator. "He was the cable operator at Jucaro; and he sits all day in front of a sheet of white paper, and watches a ray of light play across an imaginary line, and he can tell by its quivering, so he says, all that is going on all over the world." Richard Harding Davis, and Frederic Remington, *Cuba in War Time* (London: W. Heinemann, 1897), 87.

²⁶ Davis, *Notes of a War Correspondent*, 213–35.

²⁷ Davis, *Notes of a War Correspondent*, 3–14.

²⁸ Kaplan, *Anarchy*, 115.

²⁹ Conventional readings of "Death of Rodriguez" characterize Davis as "de-racinating" Rodriguez for his American readers. For example, John Chettle argues that such statements like "[he] looked more like a Neapolitan than a Cuban" indicate how Davis was attempting to speak to and in contention with "his readers and their prejudices." John H. Chettle, "When War Called, Davis Answered—the First Modern War Correspondent, Richard Harding Davis Covered the First Modern Wars," *Smithsonian* 31.1 (2000), 94.