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# “The future holds more than the past has yielded”: T. S. Eliot’s Invention of Tradition and the St. Louis Exposition of 1904

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PAUL STASI

We are only just beginning to take the measure of the extent to which modernist literary production is connected to the imperial world out of which it was born.<sup>1</sup> And yet when considering the case of T. S. Eliot, scholars have tended to view his work primarily in the context of the British Empire.<sup>2</sup> In this essay, I argue that Eliot’s central concept of tradition emerges out of the complex relationship between past and present, primitive and modern, generated by an experience of empire closer to home: that of the American conquest of the Philippines and its representation in the 1904 World’s Fair held in Eliot’s hometown of St. Louis. Against the stated ideology of the modern—which dismisses tradition as part of what Anne McClintock has helpfully called “anachronistic space”—Eliot, in his seminal essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” recuperates the notion of tradition, showing how it is always engaged in a dialectical relation to the present.<sup>3</sup> In this way, Eliot attacks one of the central ideological concepts of the imperialist project: namely the way a notion of progress virtually requires the construction of the “traditional” whose role is immediately to be superseded. Despite what scholars have often identified as the ahistorical content of Eliot’s famous essay, then, we can see how it engages its historical moment *conceptually*. When seen through the lens of the imperial construction of history, modernist tradition can be read as a critique of the never-ending temporality of imperial modernity, which relegates traditional ways of life to the dustbin of history in the service of a “progress” that is only another name for colonial exploitation. This understanding of imperial temporality can best be understood, I argue, via a comparison with the imperialist ideology on display at the 1904 World’s Fair with its image of the premodern Filipino, untouched by time and

subject to the “benevolent assimilation” of a burgeoning American Empire. Eliot’s tradition becomes an alternative way of thinking about the relationship among cultures, one that recuperates the kinds of cultural continuities imperialism tends to erase.

At the same time, reconceptualizing Eliot’s notion of tradition through an examination of the 1904 World’s Fair suggests a direction for how we might continue the project of historicizing literary production. The danger inherent in any historicizing work is the potential for reifying either the base or the superstructure. In the first case, a complex historical structure becomes the explanatory key for understanding a work of art. Or, in what is the inverse of the first structure and, therefore, its complement, history provides the raw material that the sophisticated work of art transforms. My aim, here, is to avoid both forms of positivism, and suggest instead that literary works emerge out of an engagement with the *forms* of history, and that these forms are legible as conceptual frameworks that structure both historical and aesthetic events. The ideas animating American Imperialism, then, can be best observed in a concrete historical event such as the St. Louis Exposition, particularly since the Exposition explicitly stages the relationship between empire and culture. Knowing, as we do, that Eliot attended the Exposition provides a useful connection between his lifelong concern with the idea of culture and the concepts on display at the Exposition. The deeper connection, however, comes from the larger social structure conditioning both forms of production. Thus, the vagaries of personal history are less important than the claim that time and place condition the range of conceptual possibilities with which subjects work, regardless of the precise level of subjective awareness of these forces. In this reading, Eliot’s essay is something like the new work, which can only be understood in its dialectical relation to an imperial tradition.

### **Imperial Time**

Within the time of a brief generation it has become evident that some smattering of anthropology is as essential to culture as Rollin’s Universal History.

—T. S. Eliot “War-Paint and Feathers”

In 1904 the fifteen-year-old Thomas Stearns Eliot visited the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, commonly known as the St. Louis World’s Fair, described by the magazine *The World’s Work* as both “a colossal work of art” and “a method of expressing the large facts of industrial activity.”<sup>4</sup> To this end, the fair featured exhibitions of industrial developments in electricity and locomotion, metallurgy and agriculture, which the magazine discussed with reverence under titles such as “The Marvels of an Electrical Age” and “The Agricultural Conquest of the Earth.” The Fair, *World’s Work* gushed, presented a “new conception of the magnitude, the variety, and the richness

of our land and of our people. Any American citizen who studies it all intelligently will carry away a new and enlarged notion of his country, of his countrymen, and of the time in which he lives.”<sup>5</sup> This time is, indisputably, one of immense potential and as yet unrealized progress: “We are yet in the exploiting era of our development . . . The future holds more than the past has yielded.”<sup>6</sup>

What the past has yielded, it turns out, is the Exposition itself, which “illustrates the national expansion of which the great event that it commemorates was the first step.” Indeed the Louisiana Purchase is celebrated in terms that serve to concretize the rhetoric of agricultural conquest: “The stupendous result of this transaction,” claims the anonymous author of a section entitled “What the Fair Commemorates,” “rendered inevitable all the acquisitions of territory that have taken place since; it made it certain that the United States and not England or any other country would dominate the Western Hemisphere; it gave the republican experiment a success and a prestige which have liberalized the political system of every other nation on the globe.”<sup>7</sup> The Westward expansion of the United States is here rendered a historical inevitability, just as the American political system seems virtually to spread itself throughout the globe. The engine of this inevitable modernity is, of course, technological innovation, represented by the fruits of industrialization, the “uncanny whirrings and snappings” of the “strange machines” available for mass production.<sup>8</sup> Following in the train of the Crystal Palace Exhibition of 1851, the St. Louis World’s Fair, and the many exhibitions that took place throughout the period, displayed a burgeoning mass market as one of the agents of national and imperial development.<sup>9</sup> The fair itself becomes a crucial space wherein these identities—national, consumptive, imperialist—are constructed. “No experience at the Fair,” the magazine intones, “is more inspiring than to realize the unity of the nation in watching the United States become acquainted with itself.”<sup>10</sup>

One of the most popular and “most instructive” attractions in this national self-discovery was the Philippines Exhibit, which presented “the condition of the savage tribes” and illustrated “what the United States has accomplished during its rule of the archipelago.” In contrast to the Spaniards, who “encouraged the natives to speak only their dialects,” the United States is dedicated to education, its teachers believing that even the Igorots “can be emancipated from savagery.”<sup>11</sup> And the natives, themselves, seemed to agree. While “the natives have displayed pride and enthusiasm” in their own customs, “[t]hey have showed, too, that they are ready and willing to adapt themselves to our civilization and our culture,” willing, for instance, “to turn from . . . primitive methods of farming to modern means of tilling the soil.”<sup>12</sup> American imperial power is here rendered benign, its civilizing mission a service performed for the natives who themselves request it, and are, ultimately, one industrial fact among many: “What has been done for corn has been done for Transportation also; for Electricity; for the Philippine peoples and their industries.”<sup>13</sup> The Filipinos are, here, a cipher of American desire, a blank other that helps

constitute America's modernity: imperial, progressive and one with the spirit of history.<sup>14</sup>

Strikingly, this rhetoric reveals a simultaneous investment in the Filipino as a remote and primitive other and as a potentially modern subject, competing desires that erupted into controversy over what the natives would wear.<sup>15</sup> Ronald Bush summarizes this controversy succinctly: "Fearing in an election year that the unclothed tribes would create the impression that Filipinos were savage beyond the powers of Americans to civilize," President Roosevelt ordered them clothed.<sup>16</sup> Immediately there was public outcry, for the native's authenticity seemed in danger of being compromised.

This authenticity was, of course, one of the fair's promised spectacles. The anthropology building, for instance, displayed the tools of early humans, "exhibit[ing] a record of the development of prehistoric men" replicated in the exhibition villages themselves, which showcased "people untouched by the march of progress still living in a similar crude manner."<sup>17</sup> But how, we might ask, was it possible to imagine these villages as "untouched by the march of progress" when they were present at a fair in St. Louis, which was explicitly dedicated to the latest advances in technology? Transfixed by progress in the process of consolidating a national identity that was, at the same time imperialist, American citizens were also transfixed by the primitive.

On the one hand, this interest in the primitive reflects a projection of specific fears about the United States itself, the fantasy of an unspoiled primitive past that was disappearing in favor of the homogenizing forces of the "unrestricted opportunity of our democracy."<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, it illustrates a more general feature of modernity "which gains its meaning from its dialectical relations to tradition."<sup>19</sup> The ceaseless progress of modernity meets its opposite, described clearly, if pejoratively, by the Chinese exhibit, showing "the formal things the Chinamen have labored on for centuries. . . No advance is represented in the exhibit; only the adherence to a tradition of patient mechanical work."<sup>20</sup> Only with the advent of modernity is it possible to look with fascination and suspicion at traditional forms, since, as Peter Osborne argues, summarizing Walter Benjamin, "the meaning of what is lost appears as internal to the perspective by which it is destroyed." In this way, modernity constructs "the image of tradition to which it is opposed."<sup>21</sup> To constitute itself as modern, America *required* that the Filipinos remain primitive, even as America's imperialist expansion *necessarily* altered their ostensibly "untouched" traditions. Here we have the simultaneous destruction and construction of traditional characteristics in the Age of Empire.

This conceptual framework is further supported by concrete research into what Eric Hobsbawm has called "the invention of tradition." Describing the "thirty or forty years before the first world war" as a particularly salient moment in the invention of tradition, Hobsbawm argues that the entrance of the masses into politics led to the subsequent rediscovery "of the importance of 'irrational' elements

in the maintenance of the social fabric and the social order.”<sup>22</sup> A range of public ceremonies and monuments, as well as the interconnected realms of public school and sports, filled this affective void, organizing larger and larger masses of people into new forms of social cohesion, which reach their pinnacle in the mass crowds of National Socialism.

And this national invention of tradition, as Terence Ranger has argued, was only enhanced by the Scramble for Africa. Needing to “define themselves as natural and undisputed masters,” newly arrived British settlers drew upon “invented traditions both to define and justify their roles.”<sup>23</sup> These invented traditions “were marked by their inflexibility . . . [t]hey gave reassurance because they represented what was unchanging in a period of flux.” In contrast, actual African traditions were “loosely defined and infinitely flexible. Custom helped to maintain a sense of identity but it also allowed for an adaptation so spontaneous and natural that it was often unperceived.”<sup>24</sup> And yet, “since so few connections could be made between British and African political, social and legal systems, British administrators set about inventing African traditions for Africans.”<sup>25</sup> The result was that the British ended up transforming flexible African customs into the rigid traditions of their own recent invention. As Ranger goes on to demonstrate, a great number of African traditional structures were, quite literally, invented by the colonizers themselves.

Despite the considerable historical differences between these two colonial enterprises, we can nevertheless locate certain conceptual similarities between the Philippines Exhibit at the St. Louis Fair and the perceived rigidity of African traditions in the British Empire. In each case tradition is opposed to modernity, to the progressive temporality of Western colonialism. Furthermore, the St. Louis Fair—and the colonial displays of England’s contemporaneous exhibitions—illustrates the commodification of culture. Hypostatizing traditions by making them consumable, the Fair presents culture not as a “whole way of life,” but rather as a series of things—trousers, weapons, dances—that are separable from location and yet, paradoxically, “untouched” by the journey to St. Louis.

It is, of course, impossible to ascertain what the fifteen year old Eliot took away from this Exposition. What is clear, however, is that when images of the primitive appear in his work they are almost always juxtaposed with scenes of modernity, suggesting an understanding of the common ground between tradition and progress that the easy historical narratives of the Exposition simultaneously depend upon and yet fail to acknowledge. In making this claim, I would like to develop a line of thinking articulated by Ronald Bush. Writing about Eliot’s lifelong interest in anthropology, Bush argues that the poet’s earliest work is marked by a standard “Romantic primitivism” that he comes to criticize “for postulating an evolutionarily continuous human ‘uniformity of mind’ rather than recognizing the social conditioning of mental categories.”<sup>26</sup> This latter view Bush associates with Durkheim, and he draws on two favorable reviews of Durkheim’s *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* Eliot published in 1916 and 1918, to demonstrate the

substantial agreement between the two thinkers. Summarizing the concepts Eliot takes from Durkheim, Bush writes, “Durkheim holds that, because of the way we depend on an ‘impersonal,’ socially produced and collectively shared ‘world of stable ideas,’ our thinking must be grounded in sociohistoric categories. . . . In this sense the substance and force of twentieth-century science cannot any more than primitive religion, claim to be true: it depends on collective agreement . . . primitive mentality in its social production of mental concepts is fundamentally no different from our own.”<sup>27</sup> This view, I would argue, is consistently represented in Eliot’s poetry, where the primitive is imagined not as some atavistic alternative to contemporary consciousness, but as structured in a fundamentally similar fashion. In “Portrait of a Lady,” for instance, after hearing the “latest Pole / transmit the Preludes,” the speaker hears the beating of a drum, tied both to Chopin and to the poet’s own burgeoning creation:

Among the windings of the violins  
And the ariettes  
Of cracked cornets  
Inside my brain a dull tom-tom begins  
Absurdly hammering a prelude of its own,<sup>28</sup>

Offering no escape from the drawing room the drum is, here, subsumed to its boredom. Similarly in “Rhapsody on a Windy Night” the speaker wanders in a bleak urban scene where “Every street lamp that I pass / Beats like a fatalistic drum.” Again the primitive is coterminous with the modern—drums equal street lamps—an idea best expressed in an early review entitled “The Beating of a Drum.”

Arguing for the premise that drama is related to ritual, Eliot raises the question of whether the origin of our actions is conscious or instinctual. Dr. Oesterley, a writer on primitive dance, is adduced to provide the rationalist view, suggesting that “the origin of the sacred dance was the desire of early man to imitate what he conceived to be the characteristics of supernatural power.”<sup>29</sup> Eliot is dismissive: “It is equally possible to assert that primitive man acted in a certain way and then found a reason for it. An unoccupied person, finding a drum, may be seized with a desire to beat it; but unless he is an imbecile he will be unable to continue beating it, and thereby satisfying a need (rather than a ‘desire’) without finding a reason for doing so.”<sup>30</sup> Rationalization follows instinct. Ritual may begin with unconscious actions, but the intellect soon follows, even for “primitive man.” Eliot refuses to either elevate or denigrate the primitive, and so he rejects the evolutionary scheme of history that would posit the modern as its progressive descendant. And he will bring this anti-progressive historical view to his literary and poetic practices, for “art never improves, but . . . the material of art is never quite the same.”<sup>31</sup> Cultural practices—whether those considered primitive or those considered modern—operate in the same way.

Eliot's critical effort, I will argue, is to understand the "social production of mental concepts" he claimed was lacking in a Romanticism he associated with both imperialism and the progressive view of history.<sup>32</sup> In doing so, Eliot attacks two inter-related forms of contemporary consciousness that rely on an excess of subjectivity which makes "the past less real to us."<sup>33</sup> On the one hand, there is the primitivist search for elementary forces of consciousness—a search which would project the Philippines into a mythic past. On the other hand, the Victorian faith in progress which would seek to modernize them. In each case the result is a form of narcissism present in a contemporary consciousness that views "everything in the past" as "a necessary evil—evil in itself, but necessary because it led up to the present."<sup>34</sup> This consciousness is thus a version of Gijatri Spivak's transparent subject, whose relationship to the other—both historical and cultural—proceeds by appropriation.<sup>35</sup> In contrast Eliot articulates a notion of tradition as precisely the space wherein the present understands its simultaneous distinction from and continuity with the past.

Only by situating Eliot's use of tradition within its modern invention, linked as I have suggested both to imperialism and the never-ending process of capitalist modernity, can we appreciate its true force. For with this particular background in mind we can see that Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" attempts to overcome the reified divide between tradition and modernity, inventing his own sense of the traditional that is more like the flexible and endlessly adaptive African customs Ranger describes. Eliot's turn to the cultural tradition should not be seen as a form of primitivism, then, for it rejects the reifications of both the static archeological model of tradition *and* the primitivist valorization of a supposedly more immediate pre-modern consciousness. In contrast, Eliot views the cultural past as the lens through which contemporary consciousness perceives its historical and cultural situation. Tradition becomes, for Eliot, the social grounds within which individuals situate themselves historically.

Eliot thus argues against the commodification of culture which the Philippines Exhibition represents, imagining culture not as a series of reified "things," but rather as a form of history that both produces and is produced by the individual subject. Tradition, in Eliot, is precisely the space of the "social production of mental concepts" Bush locates in Durkheim. And in the early twentieth century this space was being newly colonized by a flood of mass marketed objects, commodities existing in an endless present, serving directly the interests of the social transformations of imperial capital. Eliot's critical and poetic practice emerges, here, as a response to this contemporary situation, a strong defense not of aesthetic autonomy, but of culture's communal capacities for imaginative transformation, of art's ability to satisfy a significant need, rather than the artificial desire enclosed within inverted commas in the quotation above. It is this notion of the cultural object that will become the cornerstone of Eliot's version of modernism and it can perhaps best be understood by returning to that old chestnut of modernist criticism: "Tradition and the Individual Talent."



## Tradition

What is permanent and good in Romanticism is curiosity . . . a curiosity which recognizes that any life, if accurately and profoundly penetrated is interesting and always strange. Romanticism is a short cut to the strangeness without the reality, and it leads its disciples only back upon themselves. George Wyndham had curiosity, but he employed it romantically, not to penetrate the real world, but to complete the varied features of the world he made for himself. It would be of interest to divagate from literature to politics and inquire to what extent Romanticism is incorporate in Imperialism.

—T. S. Eliot, “Imperfect Critics”

Eliot never did undertake the interesting inquiry he here suggests, but the terms this inquiry might take are relatively easy to spot. Generously, Eliot suggests that imperialism begins, like romanticism, with curiosity—the impulse to investigate variety in all its forms. This effort, however, falters on an inability—perhaps even a refusal—to see the “real world,” a failure, we might say, to meet the other *as other*, as something that exists concretely outside of the perceiving subject. Instead the romantic/imperial subject falls back upon appropriation by assimilation. The other becomes, simply, a player in the perceiving subject’s mental landscape. Each is in his prison, as Eliot might say, with the impulse to connect remaining unrealized.

This drama should be familiar enough to readers of Eliot’s early poetry, which takes as a starting premise this form of Romantic subjectivity, which it then seeks to overcome. His prose, too, is filled with critiques of romanticism, which he consistently reads as excessively subjective, impressionistic in its critical judgments and narcissistic in its inability to observe reality. To correct for this deficit, exaggerated and perpetuated by Romanticism’s Victorian successors, Eliot advocated a return to the poetic object.<sup>36</sup> The good critic, in his estimation, must “enable us to see literature all round, to detach it from ourselves, to reach a state of pure contemplation” (SW 40). Similarly in the introduction to *The Sacred Wood*, Eliot argues that the critic’s business is “to see literature steadily and to see it whole” (SW xv). Here we find one of the roots of modernism’s supposedly ahistorical ideology, for Eliot has seemingly revised Matthew Arnold’s famous dictum, inserting the word “literature” where Arnold had written “life.”

At the same time, however, Eliot argues that criticism is a fundamentally interested endeavor. “The important critic,” he claims, “is the person who is absorbed in the present problems of art, and who wishes to bring the forces of the past to bear upon the solution of these problems” (SW 37–38). How is it possible both to detach the poetic object from ourselves and yet read it with a continual eye

to our present day concerns? How, that is, can we avoid effacing the art object by assimilating it to our contemporary moment?

The answer, for Eliot, emerges from a dialectical understanding of the way subjects and objects constitute one another, an argument he gives a fundamentally historical cast. It is the “work of the critic,” Eliot asserts, to engage in the “conscious creation of the field of the present out of the past” (SW 46). And this work requires engaging with the poetic tradition, the sedimented history that poetry contains, both within its form and within the history of its reception. Those present day concerns with which we view works of the past are themselves created out of our confrontation with those works. As Eliot famously argued, we know so much more than the writers of the past, and “they are that which we know” (SW 52). This quotation comes, of course, from “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” an essay that, I would argue, has been persistently misread. Leonard Orr, for instance, reads “the heavenly realm of literary monuments described by T. S. Eliot in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” to be “floating in the timeless, apolitical high modernist ether” while Eliot’s work is consistently associated with the New Criticism that claimed him as its guiding spirit.<sup>37</sup> When we read the essay closely, however, what we find is not a realm of eternal values, but rather a continually shifting landscape, as tradition is transformed by novelty even as novelty depends on tradition. Only by situating this understanding of tradition within the imperialist degradation of the past I have been outlining, can we understand the precise nature of Eliot’s intervention.

The essay begins with a recuperation of the word tradition, which generally appears as a “phrase of censure” (SW 47). To be positive at all, it has to refer to “some pleasing archeological reconstruction” (SW 47). Traditions, then, are in the past; they seem to have no relevance for a contemporary world defined by the search for “what is individual, what is the peculiar essence” of the new work of art (SW 48). “We dwell with satisfaction,” Eliot continues, “upon the poet’s difference from his predecessors . . . we endeavour to find something that can be isolated in order to be enjoyed” (SW 48). We can see, here, the two forms of temporality I have already identified with imperial consciousness. There is the relentless search for the new—associated with the never-ending progress of modernity—and there is the reified world of traditions, consigned to an archeological past. Furthermore the modern interest in novelty rests on reading the work of art in “isolation,” outside, that is, of the determining ground of tradition itself. But it is only by understanding that ground that the work of art can be perceived in the first place.

Tradition is not, then, a corrective for the thirst for innovation, a balm applied “to the negativity of modernity”; Eliot does not recommend that we simply become traditional.<sup>38</sup> Nor is tradition simply an object available for the subject’s contemplation, for then it would be as isolated as the individual work of art, or the commodified culture of the Exhibition craze. Rather tradition is, much like it was for Marx, the very space within which historical change is articulated.<sup>39</sup> Consider the

following passage, so oft-repeated as to be almost invisible, nearly impossible to read with fresh eyes:

Tradition . . . cannot be inherited and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense . . . [which] involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity. No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. (SW 49)

“The past,” Eliot continues, is “altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past” (SW 50). Tradition, here, interrupts chronology, rescuing the works of the past from the dustbin of history and asserting their relevance for a contemporary world that insists on their *irrelevance*. Eliot confronts a world in which tradition is no longer given, but rather something for which the subject must actively work, going beyond the immediacy of the present moment to understand the network of historical relationships upon which it stands. And these relationships extend out in concentric circles, moving from the artist to his “own country” to “the whole of the literature of Europe.” Artistic creation rests on a form of transnational labor—the acquisition of a tradition that extends beyond the nation—which is also a form of historical knowledge, a totalizing vision Eliot calls the historical sense.

Having gotten this far, it is important to acknowledge the obvious limits of Eliot’s vision. What I refer to as Eliot’s “transnational” concept of literature remains fundamentally European in content, and so Eliot can be seen to remain within the imperialist categories I’ve been arguing he resists. But if my gambit to read Eliot’s relation to empire *conceptually* rather than *thematically* has any value, it is to the intellectual structures of the argument we must turn. And here we find an Eliot who resists the imperialist denigration of tradition. In his dialectical understanding of the past, Eliot foregrounds the very contradictions on display in the St. Louis Exhibition of 1904, contradictions imperial ideology seeks to obscure. Modernity is chastised for its desire to efface the past, even as the construction of the present out of the conditions of the past is described as an active endeavor. History, here, does not

simply happen, but it is the active construction of the subject who is able to activate the past in order to situate him/herself in the present. The false separation of endlessly progressive modernity and timeless tradition—a separation that would posit the Filipinos as the premodern other, rescued by American empire—is overcome, through a conception of their dialectical inter-relation.

The new work of literature is, then, grounded in the sociohistorical category of tradition, illustrating the “social production of mental concepts” Eliot found in Durkheim. Tradition becomes the social ground out of which mental concepts emerge, and in doing so, it bridges the divide between the seemingly static forms of premodern cultural production on display at the Exhibition—dance, dress, ritual—and the supposedly more complex productions of (Western) high art. For, as we have already seen, Eliot argues that the beating of a drum is analogous to the writing of a poem. Each satisfies a need, each is only legible in relation to a larger communal background, and each is defined by the kind of flexibility Ranger describes as the hallmark of African customs. Situating Eliot’s notion of tradition alongside its imperial background, then, is a way of describing the social production of this crucial concept. In contrast to the Exposition’s emphasis on novelty, where the future displaces the past, Eliot finds that the past is the place from which the future will emerge.

### **Coda: Imagined Territories**

There is no writer of poetry in English who does not owe him a debt.

—Derek Walcott, on T. S. Eliot

[also, we reject symbolism] [and Eliot]

—Craig Santos Perez, “Recidivist Manifesto”<sup>40</sup>

I have noted the limits of Eliot’s transnationalism, but those limits are present at the level of content. Conceptually, however, there is no reason that the concentric circles Eliot describes need stop at Europe. Reading Eliot in the manner I have suggested, then, not only offers a further understanding of how imperialism helped shape the ideology of modernism; it might also help us to understand how Eliot’s conceptual framework has been productive for poets who work outside of Eliot’s Europe. By way of conclusion, I would like to look, briefly, at Derek Walcott’s *Omeros* and Craig Santos Perez’s from *Unincorporated Territory [hacha]* to suggest how one might approach the question of Eliot’s relevance for postcolonial poetry. What, we might ask, could these poets take from Eliot?

The answer, I think, is the idea of tradition, not as a force to “control, order and give shape” to the chaos of modern life, but rather as a set of resources with which to situate oneself in the contemporary moment.<sup>41</sup> It is in this way that we can

read *Omeros*, as much indebted to Homer and Dante—who supplies the model for Walcott’s loose *terza rima*—as to the modernist poetics of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, a work better described by the Eliotic ideal of tradition I have outlined, than through Eliot’s programmatic account of what he called Joyce’s “mythic method.” For Walcott, like Joyce before him, uses *The Odyssey* as a lens through which to examine the continuities and distinctions between the Caribbean and the Western cultural tradition to which it is only partially indebted. “There, like ants or angels” the narrator’s father tells him, speaking of the women of his village, “they see their native town, / unknown raw, insignificant. They walk, you write.”<sup>42</sup> “And your duty,” he concludes, “is the chance you now have, to give those feet a voice” (75, 76). In performing this duty, Walcott is, in a curious way, following Eliot’s lead, claiming the importance of a tradition that the imperial world has typically ignored by reading it through the lens of a work from the cultural past. “For those to whom history is the presence // of ruins,” Walcott writes, “there [the Caribbean] is a green nothing” (192). In seeking to re-value what has been devalued, Walcott is in no way positing the Western canon as that which stabilizes his own reality. Instead he is reflecting, precisely, on the transnational culture in which he finds himself, helping to recover a cultural heritage obscured by the pursuit of imperial gain.

Closer to the Filipino context with which I have situated Eliot’s work, is the poet Craig Santos Perez, who hails from the “unincorporated territory” of Guam. Despite his manifesto’s half-playful, half-serious disavowal of Eliot, his first collection of poetry—from *Unincorporated Territory [hacha]*—works in what is a recognizably modernist mode. The volume’s preface begins with two epigraphs. The first is from the US Constitution, the next from John 6:12–13: “When they were filled, he said unto his disciples, Gather up the fragments that remain.”<sup>43</sup> Perez’s fragments include the history of the achote plant, “transported across the pacific to southeast asia by the spanish colonialists,” diagrams of the routes by which the Spanish might have sailed, memories of his grandparents and a wealth of historical materials about the vexed past of Guam (17). Speaking from a place that “on some maps. . . doesn’t exist,” for a people living in a territory where only certain provisions of the US Constitution apply, Perez tries to secure “a strategic position for ‘Guam’ to emerge from imperial ‘reduccion(s)’ into further uprisings of meaning” (11).

Though the intensely fragmented form and incorporation of a variety of different texts is clearly indebted to Ezra Pound, the correlation of private and public histories is more characteristic of Eliot, whose great virtue, in the words of Charles Altieri is, his dissection of “the conditions of feeling history imposes upon us.”<sup>44</sup> In this vein, some of the most moving sections of Perez’s book concern the speaker’s grandfather who in one of several poems entitled “from TA(LA)YA,” interrupts his wife’s singing to speak two phrases in Japanese:

he says “doko ne ekamashu?”

he stands at attention, says it’s Japanese and spells it to me      he says it means: “where  
are you going?”

he continues: “ya-ma-uchi-ekamasho”      he bows deeply  
he says it means “i’m going to my house in the hills” (80)

Here, in this compressed section of verse, Perez demonstrates the way history makes itself felt in personal details such as the martial stance of an older man whose few phrases of Japanese betray their imperialist origins. For these words, which could be taken from an introductory language lesson, are, clearly enough, part of the repertoire of surveillance and control by which the Japanese monitored the movements of the natives of Guam during the occupation of World War II. That the grandfather then translates these words into English only serves to highlight the connection between one imperial power and another. Perez builds his volume, then, out of concrete historical material, personal reminiscence and a range of inter-textual detail. That his sources tend towards the postcolonial—*Dicteé*, Aimé Césaire, Jorge Guillén rather than Homer, Dante or Milton—does not negate the *conceptual* similarity between his poetry and the formal procedures of Eliotic modernism.

Working in recognizably modernist idioms, writers such as Derek Walcott and Craig Santos Perez suggests that we are too Manichean when we imagine a strict divide between modernist and postcolonial poetics. Thinking about this relationship through the concept of tradition allows us instead to see continuity, as writers as diverse as Eliot and Perez fashion places for themselves out of the material of the cultural past. That it is possible to view such work as a reimagining of one of modernism’s key formal procedures, attests, ultimately, to the anti-imperialist potential long buried within the ideology of modernism.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Fredric Jameson raised the issue nearly twenty years ago in his seminal essay “Modernism and Imperialism,” and since then many scholars have followed in his wake. My claim is not that work hasn’t been done, but that it is only recently—and particular with what has been called the transnational turn in modernist studies—that something like a general consensus has emerged about the *constitutive* relationship between modernism and empire. See Fredric Jameson, “Modernism and Imperialism,” in *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature*, ed. Seamus Deane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990). For work on transnational modernism, see, in particular, the excellent edited volumes of Laura Doyle and Laura A. Winkiel, eds., *Geomodernisms: Race, Modernism, Modernity* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005), Michael Valdez

Moses, ed., *Modernism and Colonialism: British and Irish Literature, 1899–1939* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), among many others.

<sup>2</sup> Work on Eliot and empire has focused primarily on *The Waste Land* and arguments about whether the poem is for or against imperialism. Works include Eleanor Cook, “T.S. Eliot and the Carthaginian Peace,” *ELH* 46, no. 2 (1979), Paul Douglass, “Reading the Wreckage: De-Encrypting Eliot’s Aesthetics of Empire,” *Twentieth Century Literature* 43, no. 1 (1997), Michael Levenson, “Does the *Waste Land* Have a Politics?,” *Modernism/Modernity* 6, no. 3 (1999), David Trotter, “Modernism and Empire: Reading the *Waste Land*,” *Critical Quarterly* 28, no. 1 & 2 (1986). For an excellent discussion of *The Four Quartets* in relation to Britain’s imperial decline see Joshua Esty, *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> For McClintock this trope denies “the agency of women, the colonized and the industrial working class” by imagining them as “prehistoric, atavistic and irrational, inherently out of place in the historical time of modernity.” See Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 40.

<sup>4</sup> The evidence of Eliot’s visit and continuing interest in the fair has been described in a series of articles by Tatsushi Narita. See Tatsushi Narita, “Eliot and His First Beating of the ‘Bhghon’,” *Studies in Social Sciences and Humanities*, no. 32 (1988), “Eliot and the St. Louis Fair’s Phillipine Exposition—Another New Piece of Fact,” *Studies in Social Sciences and Humanities*, no. 29 (1985), “Eliot and the World’s Fair of St. Louis—Collateral Evidence of His Fair Outing,” *Studies in Social Sciences and Humanities*, no. 28 (1984), “Eliot and the World’s Fair of St. Louis—His ‘Stockholder’s Coupon Ticket’,” *Studies in Social Sciences and Humanities* 26 (1982), “Eliot’s Imagined World of Matahiva: A Hidden Aspect—on His ‘the Man Who Was King’,” *Studies in Social Sciences and Humanities*, no. 30 (1986), “T. S. Eliot’s ‘the Man Who Was King’ and Some Cross-Cultural Documentary Evidence,” *Studies in Social Sciences and Humanities*, no. 34 (1990), “The Young T. S. Eliot and Alien Cultures: His Phillipine Interactions,” *Review of English Studies* 45, no. 180 (1994). Ronald Bush builds upon Narita’s detective work in an article discussing Eliot’s anthropological interests. See Ronald Bush, “The Presence of the Past: Ethnographic Thinking/Literary Politics,” in *Prehistories of the Future: The Primitivist Project and the Culture of Modernism*, ed. Elazar Barkan and Ronald Bush (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995). *The World’s Work*—started by Walter H. Page, who also founded Doubleday, Page & Company and served as Ambassador to Great Britain under Woodrow Wilson—dedicated its August 1904 number entirely to the fair. The first half of the issue contains articles written by many prominent journalists of the time—including Page himself, Isaac F. Marcosson and Alfred C. Newell—as well as various unsigned pieces. The second half contains ads from the various exhibitors from the fair. The quotations are from “The World’s Fair at St. Louis,” *The World’s Work* VIII, no. 4 (1904): 5054.

<sup>5</sup> “The World’s Fair at St. Louis,” 5057.

<sup>6</sup> Walter H. Page, “The People as an Exhibit,” *The World’s Work* VIII, no. 4 (1904): 5113.

<sup>7</sup> “The World’s Fair at St. Louis,” 5083, 5079.

<sup>8</sup> From an unsigned article entitled “The Marvels of an Electrical Age,” *The World’s Work* VIII, no. 4 (1904): 5088.

<sup>9</sup> For details see Peter Hoffenberg, *An Empire on Display: English, Indian, and Australian Exhibitions from the Crystal Palace to the Great War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), Thomas Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851–1913* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990). In the American context see Robert Rydell, *All the World’s a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876–1916* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

<sup>10</sup> The World’s Work Staff, “The Inspiring Displays of the States,” *The World’s Work* VIII, no. 4 (1904): 5164.

<sup>11</sup> Alfred C. Newell, “The Phillipine Peoples,” *The World’s Work* VIII, no. 4 (1904): 5128.

<sup>12</sup> Newell, “The Phillipine Peoples,” 5145, 5129.

<sup>13</sup> “The World’s Fair at St. Louis,” 5056.

<sup>14</sup> My analysis of the rhetoric of the World’s Fair is corroborated by Andrew Hebard’s claim that “The project of state building in the Philippines was a pedagogical project whereby the Filipinos were to be trained to be ‘like’ Americans. This project posited a fundamental similarity between Americans and Filipinos. Although clearly paternal, the underlying assumption of this project as that Filipinos (though not modern) existed within the same sliding scale of historical progress.” See Andrew Hebard, “Romantic Sovereignty: Popular Romances and the American Imperial State,” *American Quarterly* 57, no. 3 (2005): 810. Hebard is here building on the work of Vicente L. Rafael, whose reading of the 1903 Census suggests the various ways McKinley’s doctrine of “benevolent assimilation,” required Filipinos to produce themselves as subjects for the US imperial state. See chapter 1 in Vicente L. Rafael, *White Love and Other Events in Filipino History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

<sup>15</sup> The strange dual temporality of this move—the Filipino as simultaneously modern and primitive—is a kind of spatial analogue to the curious situation of Puerto Rico, famously defined in the 1901 Supreme Court case *Downes v. Bidwell* as “foreign to the United States in a domestic sense,” quoted and analyzed in Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 2.

<sup>16</sup> See Bush, “The Presence of the Past,” 28.

<sup>17</sup> W. J. McGee, “Strange Races of Men,” *The World’s Work* VIII, no. 4 (1904): 5186. McGee, the then President of the American Anthropology Association, was in charge of the fair’s anthropology exhibit.



<sup>18</sup> Page, "The People as an Exhibit," 5111.

<sup>19</sup> Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and the Avant-Garde* (New York: Verso, 1995), 114.

<sup>20</sup> The Chinese are here opposed to Japan: "China's civilization is thousands of years older than Japan's, yet her exhibit at the Fair is one that could have been made two hundred years ago. Japan's represents the most advanced industrial achievements. China's building shows a primitive architecture." Both quotations are from the unsigned article "Other Foreign Countries," *The World's Work* VIII, no. 4 (1904): 5159.

<sup>21</sup> Osborne, *The Politics of Time*, 135.

<sup>22</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, "Mass-Producing Traditions: Europe, 1870–1914," in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 268.

<sup>23</sup> Terence Ranger, "The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa," in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. E.J. Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 211.

<sup>24</sup> Ranger, "The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa," 247.

<sup>25</sup> Ranger, "The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa," 212.

<sup>26</sup> Bush, "The Presence of the Past," 33.

<sup>27</sup> Bush, "The Presence of the Past," 37.

<sup>28</sup> All quotations from Eliot's poems come from T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems, 1909–1962* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1963), unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>29</sup> T. S. Eliot, "The Beating of a Drum," *The Nation and the Athenaeum*, October 6 1923, 12.

<sup>30</sup> Eliot, "The Beating of a Drum."

<sup>31</sup> T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood* (New York: University Paperbacks, 1964), 51, hereafter referred to parenthetically as SW.

<sup>32</sup> "Goethe was a conscious romanticist, aware of the period as none of the Englishmen was aware of it." See T. S. Eliot, "The Romantic Generation If It Existed," *The Athenaeum*, July 18 1919, 617.

<sup>33</sup> T. S. Eliot, "A Commentary," *The Criterion*, October 1932, 75.

<sup>34</sup> Eliot, "A Commentary," October 1932, 75.

<sup>35</sup> I refer here to Spivak's seminal "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In that essay, she critiques both the epistemic violence of "appropriating the other by assimilation," and the "self-contained version of the West" that "ignore[s] its production by the imperialist project."

See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 308, 291.

<sup>36</sup> On the continuity between Romantic and Victorian poetic subjectivities, as perceived and critiqued by modernist poetics, see Charles Altieri, *Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry: The Contemporaneity of Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), particularly 59–107.

<sup>37</sup> Leonard Orr, "From High-Modern Aesthete to Postcolonial Subject: An Introduction to the Political Transformation of Joyce Studies," in *Joyce, Imperialism, & Postcolonialism*, ed. Leonard Orr (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2008), 6. Alex Davis and Lee M. Jenkins are one of many to link Eliot directly to New Critical premises, while also asserting the timelessness of *The Waste Land*. See Alex Davis and Lee Jenkins, "Locating Modernisms: An Overview," in *Locations of Literary Modernism: Region and Nation in British and American Modernist Poetry*, ed. Alex Davis and Lee Jenkins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>38</sup> Osborne, *The Politics of Time*, 115.

<sup>39</sup> "Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please in circumstances they choose for themselves; rather they make it in present circumstances, given and inherited." See Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," in *Marx's 'Eighteenth Brumaire': (Post)Modern Interpretations*, ed. Mark Cowling and James Martin (Sterling, Virginia: The Pluto Press, 2002), 19. In an excellent reading of this passage, Neil Larsen has argued that "Tradition, or the 'given circumstances,' confers on events not merely the historical disguises in which to cloak their authentic content but also, and in a much more powerful maneuver, their meaning as 'events,' the sense that, in them, anything has happened at all." See Neil Larsen, *Modernism and Hegemony: A Materialist Critique of Aesthetic Agencies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 22.

<sup>40</sup> Walcott's comment comes from a 1965 essay in the *Trinidad Guardian* and is quoted in Charles W. Pollard, *New World Modernisms: T. S. Eliot, Derek Walcott, and Kamau Brathwaite* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004), 2. Perez's manifesto can be found online at: <http://craigsantosperez.wordpress.com/2006/11/19/the-recidivist-manifesto-as-a-whole/>. In addition to Pollard, both Simon Gikandi and Peter Kalliney have discussed the relationship between modernism and Caribbean literature, though neither discusses Eliot in depth as Pollard does. See Simon Gikandi, *Writing in Limbo: Modernism and Caribbean Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), Peter Kalliney, "Metropolitan Modernism and Its West Indian Interlocutors: 1950s London and the Emergence of Postcolonial Literature," *PMLA* 122, no. 1 (2007). That this relationship should be more studied than the nearly non-existent literature on modernism and the poetics of America's imperial territories in the Pacific is due, no doubt, to the professed admiration of Walcott as well as Kamau Braithwaite, who has stated that

Eliot is the “only ‘European influence’ I can detect and will acknowledge . . . The tone, the cadence and above all the *organization* of my long poems . . . owe a great deal to him.” See Kamua Braithwaite, “Edward Braithwaite,” in *Contemporary Poets of the English Language*, ed. Rosalie Murphy (London: St. James Press, 1970), 129. And then there is Wilson Harris’s seminal “Tradition and the West Indian Novel,” with its obvious play on Eliot’s essay. See Wilson Harris, *Selected Essays* (London: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>41</sup> The phrase, of course, comes from Eliot’s essay on Joyce, but it is echoed by Pollard in his introduction. See T. S. Eliot, “Ulysses, Order, and Myth,” *The Dial* (1923), Pollard, *New World Modernisms: T. S. Eliot, Derek Walcott, and Kamau Brathwaite*.

<sup>42</sup> Derek Walcott, *Omeros* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), 75.

<sup>43</sup> Craig Santos Perez, from *Unincorporated Territory [Hacha]* (Kane’ohe, HI: Tinfish Press, 2008), 7.

<sup>44</sup> Charles Altieri, “‘Preludes’ as Prelude: In Defense of Eliot as Symboliste,” in *T.S. Eliot: A Voice Descanting*, ed. Shyamal Bagchee (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990), 10.