

## AGAINST EMPIRE AND TOWARD A POLITICS AND PRAXIS OF HOPE: REFLECTIONS ON E. SAN JUAN, JR.'S *RACISM AND CULTURAL STUDIES*

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### Abstract

E. San Juan Jr.'s *Racism and Cultural Studies: Critiques of Multiculturalist Ideology and the Politics of Difference* (Duke UP, 2002) offers a fresh and timely critique of the ways in which racism and the ideology of white supremacy function in the creation of the US nation-state and the current intensification of US imperialism. *Racism and Cultural Studies* provides an impressive inventory—and unique synthesis—of a variety of historical materialist methods to cultural studies that enable us to challenge the insidious ways in which US imperial hegemony is ideologically and materially produced and maintained.

This review highlights how E. San Juan, Jr. creates alternative “methodologies of the oppressed” (a politics and praxis of hope), which recognize the agency of people of color/Third World peoples to envision and collectively organize for radical transformative social change.

### Keywords

ideology, multiculturalism, US imperialism

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... needless deaths, suffering, humiliation, and violation of human rights can be attributed to racism ... Racists are worldwide, planting their seed of racial superiority and national chauvinism. The real danger is when racists wield their evil with economic and political power to enforce policies that destabilize others, neutralize others, curtail the self-development and self-determination of others. We must not let the roots of racism spread for it is contagious. We must all work in concert with each other to stop the continuous creation of this dreadful disease—this scourge that has cursed this world. Much of this happens right here in our own backyard.... “Our backyard” is USA—quite a large territory, but this is where the concentration of work must be.

—Yuri Kochiyama, Asian-American activist

On February 15, 2003, eleven million people around the world passionately and critically denounced the US “war against terrorism,” and proclaimed it to be a racist war. We emphatically argued that the a war on Iraq will destroy the lives of millions of innocent Third World peoples as well as the lives of the US multiracial working class, many of whom will be sent to the front lines to sacrifice their lives. Despite massive global opposition to war, during the third week of March, the Bush administration began dropping bombs on the people of Iraq in the name of “regime change.” Three months after “Day X” (the start of the war) and thirteen years after the imposition of harsh sanctions, it is now clear to the whole world that the Iraqi people have been denied the right to determine their own future—to develop their own forms of resistance against Saddam Hussein and to fight for a country free from US imperialist domination (see Chomsky). The US attacks on the rights of Third World peoples to self-determination and national sovereignty—Iraq, Palestine, Cuba, the Philippines, etc.—must be situated alongside on-going assaults on the civil liberties of immigrants and communities of color within the United States, for example the new Patriot 2 Act and other Homeland Security measures.

Everyday, we Filipino Americans learn of new cases of civil liberties abuses within the “belly of the beast” and countless gruesome human rights violations in the Philippines. For some time now, Filipino American youth and students across the nation have been organizing community and university based educational forums and rallies to raise awareness about the interconnectedness between the racial profiling and deportation of hundreds of Filipino/Filipino Americans and the repression of the mass movement for Philippine national liberation.

The Philippines, a US neocolony, captured the world’s attention as the second front in the “war against terrorism” after Afghanistan. In 1898 the Philippines (from which E. San Juan, Jr. hails) was violently colonized by the United States; it shares this history with Puerto Rico, Cuba, Guam, and Hawai’i. The Abu Sayaaf bandit group is used to justify the domination of the Philippines by the presence of thousands of US troops. Last summer (2002), Colin Powell, considered to be G.W. Bush’s “house slave” by prominent Afro-Caribbean American performer Harry Belafonte, declared the major progressive insurgency groups, the peasant-based New People’s Army and the Communist Party of the Philippines, part of the coalition called the National Democratic Front of the Philippines, as terrorist groups.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, in his *The Souls of Black Folk*, DuBois wrote, with extraordinarily keen foresight, that the “problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men

in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea” (16). By centering racism in our critique of US imperialism in the twenty-first century, are we in danger of blatant reductionism? Filmmaker Michael Moore doesn’t seem to think so. In the popular *Bowling for Columbine*, Moore attempts to make sense of the senseless massacre at Columbine high school (Colorado) several years ago. Deftly using the technique of collage, Moore situates the question of gun control within the larger context of the historical development of the US nation-state, which includes a long series of bloody US imperialist conquests of Third World countries. In a candid interview, when asked why the United States is the most violent industrialized country in the world, Charleston Heston, the celebrity face of the NRA, pathetically mumbles something about the “ethnic conflict” in this country. Heston not only betrays his racist desire to protect, by bearing arms, his investment in whiteness (and all the psychological and material privileges that come with that subject position), but also touches upon the central nerve of the US imperial imaginary—that of white supremacy and the racist subjugation and exploitation of millions of working and poor bodies of color around the globe. In this milieu of intensified global crisis and emergency, Cultural Studies must broaden its scope to include the hinterlands of Empire and engage with the many worldwide who, because they are deeply concerned with peace, genuine democracy, and social justice, are taking a firm stand to challenge the brutality of US imperial hegemony.

E. San Juan, Jr., one of our most important and prolific Filipino cultural theorists and a major critic of Establishment postcolonial discipline, offers a crucial intervention for our times. In his previous book, *Beyond Postcolonial Theory* (1998), San Juan argues that the progressive insurgent forces of the Philippine National Democratic mass movement play a vital part of the “postcolonial” subaltern resistance, but have been muted and silenced by post-colonial studies. San Juan’s latest book, *Racism and Cultural Studies* (2002) expands this critique in fresh and innovative ways that speak directly to our current collective desire for liberation and freedom for all.

Boldly pushing against the historical limitations of fashionable theoretical trends of the academy, San Juan urgently asks us to reclaim the various rich and dynamic Marxist traditions (both Western and Third World Marxisms) of theorizing the connection between culture/knowledge production and the struggle for radical social transformation (the twin tasks of ideological and material struggle). In *Racism and Cultural Studies*, San Juan offers a rigorous historical materialist method for regrounding the dominant “new times=new politics” model of contemporary Cultural Studies. This alternative methodology allows us to shift from reified notions of difference to a dialectical regrounding in which difference is conceived as, in the words of feminist Teresa Ebert, “difference within a material system

of exploitation” (see her *Ludic Feminism* for an excellent critique of post-al difference). This shifting of grounds enables San Juan to bring to the fore the importance of analyzing the complex ways in which difference—race, gender, sexuality—is historically produced and reproduced within class society. A leitmotif of this book is the advancement of Marx’s challenge to idealism. It is not enough to interpret the world. We must collectively and creatively struggle for a radically transformed society in which difference will no longer be produced by a racialized and gendered division of labor (exploitative social relations of production). Instead, genuine differences will emerge: so that each can live “according to his/her needs and abilities.”

One of the main goals of San Juan’s *Racism and Cultural Studies* is to confront the insidious ways in which racism is gendered, sexualized, and “naturalized” through US nationalism. This is an advancement of the central argument of San Juan’s earlier, groundbreaking *Racial Formations/Critical Transformations* (1992), now a classic in US Ethnic Studies. There, he argues that one of the major achievements of the organizing efforts and the intellectual/cultural production of people of color and their allies during the late 1960s/early 1970s is a deeper and more sophisticated historical materialist analysis of the following: 1.) the US nation-state as a “racial-socioeconomic formation,” and 2.) racism as “an international political force” (45). Instead of falling prey to an orthodox Marxist rendering of race as epiphenomenal, race and class are theorized as dialectically intertwined via the concept of internal colonialism (see the early writing of Robert Blauner, 1972). The underlying assumption of this “Third World” political worldview is that “racially categorized groups [within the US nation-state] like Blacks, Chicanos, Native Americans, and Asians are both exploited as workers and oppressed as colonized peoples” (Blauner 11). Using this analytic framework of internal colonialism, people of color within the United States aligned themselves in solidarity with the national liberation movements of the Third World. Asian American activist-teacher Glenn Omatsu recalls that the Asian American movement, which emerged from grassroots organizing, developed an international theoretical perspective. The movement linked, in theory and in praxis, various lessons gained from struggles both within the internal US colonies as well as within the Third World. Asian American activists were drawn to “Frantz Fanon, Malcolm X, Che Guevara, Kim Il-sung, W.E.B. DuBois, Frederick Douglass, Paulo Freire, the Black Panther Party, the Young Lords, the women’s liberation movement, and many other resistance struggles” (31).

Drawing upon his earlier 1992 work and the accomplishments of past insurgent struggles of Third World peoples in the belly of the beast, San Juan posits the thesis of the

United States as a racial polity as the cardinal premise of his *Racism and Cultural Studies* (25). The philosopher Charles Mills proposed this thesis in *The Racial Contract* (1997); however, scholars of US Ethnic Studies have not engaged it. San Juan elaborates the idea of a US racial polity and offers us sharper theoretical tools at a time when our intellectual landscape is almost completely saturated by contemporary “ludic” globalization theories (Hardt and Negri come to mind) that valorize civil society (abstracted from the state) in ways that culturalize hegemony and ultimately displace collective working class and subaltern agency. San Juan, in his examination of US nationalism, emphasizes the civil society/state dialectic in the production and reproduction of US imperial hegemony.

San Juan returns us to the basics of understanding the centrality of racism within US society, while simultaneously offering an inventory and an advancement of dialectical methodological approaches that we can use to critique how the US racial polity came to be, so that we can radically transform it. San Juan resituates racism within the larger framework of US and global capitalism. Racism, particularly its justifying ideology of white supremacy, is the organizing principle of the division of labor and unequal distribution of resources and wealth within US society. And, now, given the immense asymmetrical power relations between the global North and South, one can no longer ignore how racism organizes global capitalism (the international racialized and gendered division of labor) and sustains US imperialist aggression around the globe.

Just as Engels, in his *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (1880), reminded his readers of the late nineteenth century that the difference between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat is one that is historically created by capitalism in order to maximize profits, San Juan reminds us of how contemporary global capitalism produces and utilizes “difference” (racialized and gendered) to reproduce itself as a system of exploitation. San Juan acknowledges that we do, however, live in “new times,” but this “new-ness” must be properly contextualized: “New post-Cold War realignments compel us to return to a historical-materialist analysis of political economy and its overdeterminations in order to grasp the new racial politics of transnationality and multiculturalism” (*Racism* 82). Richard Appelbaum’s meditation on capitalism and “difference” can help us contextualize our “new times.” He argues that capitalism “has always reinforced class divisions with divisions based on race, ethnicity, gender, and other forms of ascription” (299). San Juan refers to recent scholarship that illustrate Appelbaum’s claim. Edna Bonacich critiques how multiculturalism, as an ideology, ultimately justifies the exploitation of the surplus labor of immigrant women of color in the Los Angeles garment district. Glenn Omatsu examines the role of racism in a “one-sided class war” against the US multiracial working class. Racism divides people of

color, for example Korean Americans and African Americans in Los Angeles, in order to bolster the “fierce class war waged by the US corporate elite against both the US working masses and their international rivals (Japan, Germany)” (42). Transnational corporations, under the control of the US corporate elite, are able to move across borders to exploit the surplus labor of Asian and Latina women in the internal colonies of the United States as well as in the “free-trade zones” of the global South. It is time that those on the US Left who believe in international proletarianism must reckon with the fact that eight million Filipina domestic workers, or overseas “contract workers” (OCWs), are exploited all around the globe—the Middle East, Hong Kong, Singapore, Japan, various European countries (Omatsu 42). On an average, four OCWs return daily to the Philippines in coffins (Aguilar). To be sure, many Third World peoples do not have time for ludic games that posit transnational corporations (TNCs) as “free floating signifiers,” a post-al reading that renders TNCs completely unaccountable to any one nation-state. What is needed is an unflinching critique of the US nation-state and its ideology of white supremacy/racism. US imperialism, then, must be at the center of our analysis if we are truly committed to the struggle for social justice.

San Juan unequivocally argues that the problem of the 21<sup>st</sup> century continues to be the color-line, and that we must advance the race-class dialectic, developed by past insurgent subaltern struggles, for our contemporary times. This project includes not only grasping the historical trajectory of the US nation-state as a racial order, but also seriously critiquing the purpose and function of US nationalism in late global capitalism. In other words, given the re-composition of global capitalism within our post-Cold War moment, we must give priority to interrogating the race/nation dialectic upon which the US nation-state operates. The way to understand this particular dialectic is twofold. First, we must understand how the US nation-state developed as a racial formation within the context of global capitalism (in relation to other nation-states, the formation of a core and periphery, etc.). The US nation-state continues to rely upon its racialized genocidal history, which is situated “around the axis of white supremacy,” in order to legitimate its imperial hegemony around the globe. Second, we must then understand how US nationalism -- “the self-identification of peoples based on the perceived commonality of symbols, beliefs, traditions, and so on” — functions as the very ideology that produces and reproduces racialized class exploitation within and without the boundaries of the US nation-state. This process of disentangling US nationalism and the US nation-state as separate, yet interconnected historical constructs, is extremely useful for our efforts in fusing both ends of the civil society/state dialectic against the current of ludic post-al logic. The overarching



emancipatory vision of RCS is one that anticipates the collective counterhegemonic struggles that must, and will, emerge from the US internal colonies. San Juan expresses this crucial task for the US Left in the following passage:

What is imperative for the oppressed working masses, especially the internally colonized people of color in the United States, is a radical critique of US nationalism as the enabling ideology of racialized class domination (Giroux 1995; San Juan 1999b). White supremacist practices inform the functional core of this ideology. Given the historical specificity of US capitalism, class struggle cannot be theorized adequately outside the conjunctures of the racial formation in which it acquires valency. (*Racism* 33)

The struggle for Black reparations is just one of the many movements for social justice that are currently developing within the US internal colonies. Prominent African American activist-academic Manning Marable argues in the on-line site *ZNet Commentary* that the demand for Black reparations exposes how racism has deeply penetrated both US civil society and the state: “the unequal distribution of economic resources, land, and access to opportunities for social development... was sanctioned by the federal government.” The demand for Black reparations forces white society to confront the violent history of the United States, and how that history (genocide, slavery, colonization) is replicated, by the state and its various ideological and repressive apparatuses, in the daily lives of people of color. Without a doubt, the fight for Black reparations is a necessary first step toward the abolition of “whiteness” and white supremacy within US society (see Roediger). San Juan emphatically argues for the need for a radical structural transformation of our racist class society: “without a thoroughgoing overhaul of the social division of labor and legally sanctioned property relations sedimented in state and civil society, any claim to achieving genuine equality will remain a hypocritical formality” (27). Mobilizing for this kind of structural transformation also requires a flexible, yet historically concrete analysis of ideology, culture, and the development of collective human agency. This is where Cultural Studies can intervene.

Cultural Studies must engage current movements for social justice, both here and abroad, if it is committed to social transformation. Only social movements (Black reparations, anti-war mobilization, multiethnic labor struggles, working-class and peasant based Third World national liberation movements, international Palestinian support movement, etc.) have the power to break open a space for intellectuals to unlock the

liberatory potential of cultural studies. The history of Cultural Studies, from working-class British Cultural Studies to US Ethnic, Women's, and Lesbian/Gay Studies, proves this point. By aligning itself with, and committing itself to building, mass movements for radical social transformation, cultural studies will be able to challenge how it has been institutionalized by the corporatized academy and eventually claim its historic responsibility. Marx reminds us that it is within the site of culture that oppressed and exploited women and men begin to challenge their dehumanizing conditions. It is that space where they struggle to make sense of the racialized and gendered contradictions of class society. Gramsci's theories of hegemony and counterhegemony are extremely useful as we attempt to critique the ideology of US nationalism. At this historical moment, only a multiethnic united front mass movement against the US drive to war with Iraq can liberate the repressed radical traditions of struggle within the field of Cultural Studies, ranging from Raymond Williams and Jean-Paul Sartre to radical US "Third World" cultural workers of color such as Carlos Bulosan and Audre Lorde. The emerging anti-war movement will be able to envision a radical alternative to global capitalism only if people of color/Third World peoples play a central role, and only if white progressives challenge, with every fiber in their bodies, their investment in whiteness/white supremacy, which undergirds the US nationalism of this impending imperialist war.

Far from advocating a return to economically deterministic, vulgar Marxism, San Juan's *Racism and Cultural Studies* provides a breathtaking inventory and synthesis of various figures from both Western and Third World Marxist traditions—running the gamut from Antonio Gramsci to Frantz Fanon—that provide examples of how to dialectically challenge current post-al ludic temptations of abstracting civil society from the state, culturalizing hegemony, divorcing nation from class, and conflating the nationalism of oppressed neocolonial nation-states with the nationalism of oppressor nation-states. Each chapter within *Racism and Cultural Studies* expands upon the critique of the US nation-state as a racial polity. San Juan addresses an extraordinarily broad range of critical topics within Cultural Studies such as the following: sexuality and US nationalism within late global capitalism, Asian American literary studies, critiques of ethnicity paradigms, postmodern and postcolonial literary and cultural criticism, the interchange between Western and Third World Marxisms (San Juan provides an important reading of Raymond Williams and Frantz Fanon).

The extended afterword, which focuses on the current Philippine mass movement for genuine national sovereignty in relation to the Filipino Diaspora, illustrates the dialectical method of global cognitive mapping proposed throughout the book. Here, San



Juan unleashes a powerful critique of the use of post-al theories of transnationalism within contemporary studies of Filipina/o experiences. San Juan critiques Nicole Constable's *Maid to Order in Hong Kong: Stories of Filipina Workers* (366-8). He argues that the anti-foundationalist analytical framework of Constable's study, whether unintentionally or not, ultimately flattens the unequal relations of power between the United States and the Philippines (the latter being a neocolony of the former). In other words, political economy and history are sacrificed for micro-politics. The agency of the Filipina domestic worker, then, is located purely in the politics of consumption (asking for more catsup and napkins at McDonald's, an example from Constable's work). The politics of production—and the process by which exploitative social relations of production can be transformed—are completely erased. Filipina subalterns have always spoken, but, unfortunately, theories of transnationalism only muffle their voices of struggle and disregard their potential for collective transformation. The dialectical interaction between organized forms of resistance within the Diaspora and the progressive mass movement for genuine national sovereignty in the Philippines will ensure the development of collective Filipina/o agency (San Juan, *Racism* 380-1).

An interdisciplinary tour de force, *Racism and Cultural Studies* offers timely critiques and suggestions for advancing a unique “methodology of the oppressed” that may, for the moment, seem submerged or repressed in the industrialized global North, but is, as I write, being tested and refined in the overexploited global South where the wretched of the earth have been proclaiming through protracted organized mass struggle (based on a worker-peasant alliance) that “another world is possible.” In the “Third World,” subalterns have uttered this expression long before it became the clarion call of the young and courageous anti-globalization movement in the North. I urge all of us to engage San Juan's *Racism and Cultural Studies*—to learn from his lessons in dialectical analysis and his suggestions for creating strategies for cognitive mapping, to listen to his impassioned appeal to activists, insurgent intellectuals (both organic and academic), and all democratic minded people to critique the central roles that racism and US nationalism play in the process by which global capitalism wrecks havoc on the daily lives of millions all over the world. After a careful reading of this book, one will appreciate its ability to articulate in new and imaginative ways a politics of hope in these perilous times—its ability to provide an intervention that can, to quote Raymond Williams, “make hope practical, rather than despair convincing” (qtd in San Juan, *Racial* 313).

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