

Saving María, Mitsu, and Mahsa— U.S. Imperial Feminism from the Mexican- American War to the “War on Terror”¹

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Abstract

When the George W. Bush administration maintained that a central goal of military intervention in Afghanistan was to liberate Afghan women from Taliban oppression and the *burqa*, it deployed *imperial feminism*, invoking women's rights to justify an imperialist invasion. The United States thereby continued the logic of British colonialism in nineteenth-century Egypt, which referenced Islam's alleged oppression of women to legitimize its imperial presence, and demanded that veiling be abolished. However, the “War on Terror” is but the latest incident in a long history of U.S. imperial feminism. Contemporaneous discourses framed the Mexican-American War (1846-1848) as a chivalrous quest in which U.S. soldiers saved Mexican maidens from exploitation by Mexican men. During the U.S. occupation of Japan (1945-1952), granting Japanese women the franchise and other civil rights was the highest priority of occupation policy. The United States' emancipation of Japanese women was subsequently showcased to the world to prove the benevolence of the U.S. empire. Historically, imperial feminism has done the most damage to those it avowedly sought to save: “Native” women. When women of societies once subjected to imperial feminism seek to engage in feminist critique, they are frequently accused of continuing the usurpation of their communities that Western imperialism initiated in the name of women's rights.

Key Words: U.S. Empire; imperial feminism; Mexican-American War; U.S. occupation of Japan; “Global War on Terror”

“Because of our recent military gains in much of Afghanistan, women are no longer imprisoned in their homes. They can listen to music and teach their daughters without fear of punishment. The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women,”

¹ The author wishes to thank John Carlos Rowe, Tanfer Emin Tunç, Eva Boesenberg, and Ina Kerner as well as the two anonymous peer reviewers for their invaluable comments on earlier versions of this essay.

² Ahmed uses the term *colonial feminism*. Since Western countries' embrace of feminist rhetoric to justify military intervention in the Global South is an instance of neo-colonialism (see Nkrumah) rather than franchise colonialism, I use the term "imperial feminism" to refer to any franchise-colonial, settler-colonial, or neo-colonial power's instrumentalization of women's rights. Feminists of the Global South have also used "imperial feminism" to criticize white women's domination of the feminist agenda (see Amos and Parmar; Mohanty). Gabrielle Dietze has coined the term "ethnosexism" (29); my translation) to reference the discrimination of those marked as ethnic Other to which an allegedly backward sexuality is ascribed (for instance, male Muslim migrants).

³ It appears as though U.S. settler imperialism has also deployed the rhetoric of saving vis-à-vis Native American women. In the nineteenth century, Native American women were seen "as the main impediment to the racial progress of the Indian race" (Newman 163). That Native American tribes adopt patrilineality and send their children to boarding schools ranked among the central demands of the "Indian" reform movement, in which white middle-class women played key roles. The movement brought about the Dawes Act of 1887, which coerced Native Americans to adopt the model of the nuclear family and brought a sizable amount of Native American land under the U.S. government's control.

⁴ John Carlos Rowe was the first to connect the United States' post-9/11 mission of liberating women in the Greater

said First Lady Laura Bush in a radio address on November 17, 2001. From the moment U.S. plans to invade Afghanistan first surfaced in the wake of the 2001 terrorist attacks, freeing Afghan women from Taliban rule and the *burqa* ranked among the central justifications made in favor of military intervention. By framing the invasion of Afghanistan as liberation of oppressed Muslim women, the George W. Bush administration deployed *imperial feminism*, evoking the Orientalist *topos* of Islam's inherent misogyny to justify an imperialist project. This strategy had first been deployed by the British empire in Egypt in the late nineteenth century. Referring to the British colonial strategy in Egypt, Leila Ahmed describes imperial feminism as follows: "[T]he Victorian colonial paternalistic establishment appropriated the language of feminism in the service of its assault on the religions and cultures of Other men, and in particular on Islam, in order to give an aura of moral justification to that assault" (*Women and Gender* 152).² While Islamicate cultures have been prominent targets, as Frantz Fanon's discussion of the French attempt to unveil women in colonized Algeria underscores, imperial feminism is to be understood as an *inter-imperial* practice various imperialist formations have brought to bear on a diverse set of cultures; Gayatri C. Spivak has described this dynamics as "White men saving brown women from brown men" (297). For instance, Spivak and other scholars of British colonialism in India have shown that the British justified their presence with the need to intervene in local practices considered harmful to women such as *sati* (a widow's self-immolation on her husband's funeral pyre) or child marriage (see Spivak; Mani).

The invasion of Afghanistan in the "War on Terror" was not the first historical instance of U.S. imperial feminism. As I will show, the Mexican-American War (1846-1848) was framed as a chivalrous battle in which U.S. soldiers rescued Mexican women from Mexico's allegedly good-for-nothing men. To my knowledge, this was the first time a U.S. imperial project was cloaked in the language of women's liberation.³ The United States' self-conception in this war as disseminator of freedom and emancipator of women is strikingly similar to the role the United States proclaimed for itself in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars of the twenty-first century. About a century after the Mexican-American War, Japanese women gained the franchise under U.S. occupation, which the United States subsequently showcased as proof that it had bettered the lives of the Japanese in order to legitimize its imperial presence—much like the Bush administration in the early "Global War on Terror" referenced the improved lives of Afghan women since the Taliban's removal from power to justify the United States' presence in Afghanistan.⁴

This essay, then, has a two-fold aim: first, to show that the justification of the invasion of Afghanistan with women's rights rhetoric—in which liberal U.S. feminists were complicit—continues the logic of nineteenth-century Western colonialism in the Islamicate world. And second, to reveal that the Afghanistan war's feminist cloak is but the

latest instance in a long history of U.S. imperial feminism. This essay thus constitutes the first systematic study of the United States' mobilization of feminism to justify imperialist endeavors, whereas previous studies (on which I build in this essay) have each focused on particular cases of U.S. imperial feminism.

I have opted against a chronological structure of the essay in order to better convey the two points I seek to underscore: after discussing the specificities of U.S. imperial feminism in Afghanistan, I focus on British imperial feminism in Egypt in the late nineteenth century, epitomized by the British consul general Lord Cromer. I subsequently highlight the parallels I see between Lord Cromer's policies in Egypt and the U.S. "liberation" of Afghan women in the "Global War on Terror." In order to show that there is a long history of U.S. imperial feminism dating back at least to the mid-nineteenth century, I then, in chronological fashion, discuss U.S. imperial feminism in the Mexican-American War and during the occupation of Japan. After highlighting that hegemonic feminist theory and practice, according to feminists of Color and critical feminists, are organized around a colonial logic and advance white⁵ domination, I conclude this essay with a brief discussion of the obstacles that imperial feminism has created for those it allegedly sought to help: "Native" women. As the case of contemporary Arab (American) feminists elucidates, when women in countries once or currently subjected to imperial feminism engage in feminist critique, their communities frequently accuse them of continuing the usurpation Western imperialism initiated in the name of women's rights.

Feminists of Color and critical feminists have long noted that the U.S.-led invasions of Afghanistan and—to a lesser extent—Iraq were legitimized with feminist rhetoric (see Jamarkani; Mahmood; Russo; Abu-Lughod). The Bush administration and its allies consistently mentioned the oppression of Afghan women in public speeches after 9/11. To illustrate, in his address to the UN General Assembly of November 2001, President Bush said: "[W]omen are executed in Kabul's soccer stadium. They can be beaten for wearing socks that are too thin" ("President Bush Speaks"). Spokespersons for the Bush administration hailed the U.S.-led coalition's toppling of the Taliban in mid-November 2001 as a distinct improvement of Afghan women's living conditions. For instance, in his 2002 "State of the Union Address," Bush maintained that "the mothers and daughters of Afghanistan were captives in their own homes, forbidden from working or going to school." Because of the U.S.-led military intervention, Bush continued, "[t]oday women are free, and are part of Afghanistan's new government" ("President Delivers"). Even though the Bush administration mobilized feminist rhetoric to a lesser extent to justify Operation Iraqi Freedom than it had vis-à-vis Operation Enduring Freedom, it still rhetorically linked its invasion of Iraq to the empowerment of Iraqi women. For instance, when announcing the appropriation of \$10 million for the Iraqi Women's Democracy Initiative, founded to

Middle East to the U.S. emancipation of local women in the Mexican-American War and occupied Japan. In this essay, I seek to investigate in both systematic fashion and depth what Rowe merely mentions as an aside (in an essay on Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*).

⁵ I decided against capitalizing "white" in this essay, because I share the Associated Press's concern that "capitalizing the term white, as is done by white supremacists, risks subtly conveying legitimacy to such beliefs" (Daniszewski).

foster Iraqi women's participation in elections and civil society, Secretary of State Colin Powell said in 2004: "The worldwide advancement of women's issues is not only in keeping with the deeply held values of the American people; it is strongly in our national interest" (qtd. in Newman 157). By establishing a connection between the promotion of women's rights abroad and U.S. national interest, Powell unwittingly provided a glimpse into the "heart of darkness" of U.S. imperialism: imperial ambitions and national interest are being concealed with a professed concern for women in Other cultures, with a façade of benevolence.

My aim is neither to downplay the extreme oppression of Afghan women under Taliban rule nor to deny that Japanese women profited from the franchise and other civil rights; however, as I will highlight when discussing each instance of U.S. imperial feminism, governments professing an interest in "saving" women abroad have been curiously opposed to policies advancing women's rights domestically, revealing their feminism to be mere subterfuge. Moreover, policy always depends on the means by which it is enacted as well as on the rhetoric with which it is communicated to the public. As we shall see, the United States has continuously portrayed itself as *savior* / *emancipator* of local women, disclosing its paternalistic view of the latter, whereas it could have represented itself as emboldening the voices of Afghan women's rights activists or Japanese suffragists; notably, as Operation Enduring Freedom indexes, the United States' implementation of its supposedly feminist agenda has frequently been coupled with violent means, which were bound to alter local women's lives for the worse. Lastly, even though some may argue that the ventures under discussion in this essay were not exclusively driven by a cold will to power, but may have been co-produced by humanitarian concerns, military interventions in the name of humanitarianism (and even humanitarian efforts such as disaster relief in the Global South) are necessarily organized around a power differential between armed parties or aid agencies from the Global North and unarmed civilians or destitute populations in the Global South; as such, they run the risk of advancing colonial logics and Eurocentrism (see Fassin and Pandolfi; Barnett; Calhoun). Craig Calhoun, for instance, acknowledges that after the end of the Cold War, humanitarianism has increasingly been instrumentalized to justify war:

Humanitarianism appeals to many who seek morally pure and immediately good ways of responding to suffering in the world. But of course, the world is in fact so complex that impurity and mediations are hard to escape. Recently, to the horror of many humanitarians invested in nonstate, purely ethical approaches to mitigating human suffering, the United States presented its invasion of Iraq as a "humanitarian intervention." [...] [T]o the extent there is a field of humanitarian action, most of its leaders are set sharply against this notion. (18)

But even in cases where humanitarian efforts are not implemented through warfare, Calhoun continues, humanitarianism is necessarily enmeshed in power differentials, capitalist imperatives, etc. He ac-

knowledges “how hard it is to keep immediate ethical response sharply separate from entanglements in politics and development and indeed, in issues of security” (18).

British Imperial Feminism in Egypt: Establishing the Trope of Islam’s Misogyny

By claiming that the invasion of Afghanistan had the interests of oppressed Muslim women at heart, the Bush administration continued an imperial strategy in the Greater Middle East that British colonialism had pioneered in late-nineteenth-century Egypt. The second Western power in modern history to colonize an Arab country,⁶ the British prominently pointed to Islam’s alleged oppression of women in justifying their colonial rule in Egypt, which commenced in 1882, and advocated that Muslim women discard the veil. As previously mentioned, Ahmed argues that appropriating feminism allowed Britain to give its assault on Egyptian society a benevolent appearance. That the British establishment applied women’s rights rhetoric in Egypt “at the very same time as it combated feminism within its own society,” she adds, reveals the disingenuousness of its concern for Muslim women (*Women and Gender* 152). Lord Cromer, who *de facto* ruled Egypt from 1883 to 1907 as British consul general, epitomizes British imperial feminism in Egypt.

Although the British had initially promised to end the occupation of Egypt within a short period, Lord Cromer (whose civil name was Evelyn Baring) opposed this, maintaining that Egyptians were incapable of self-government and required “European assistance in the work of reform” (Baring 179; see also Owen 243–46). After his tenure in Egypt ended, Cromer published the views that had guided his policies toward Egyptian society in his book *Modern Egypt* (1908). “The reasons why Islam as a social system has been a complete failure,” Cromer alleged, “are manifold” (Baring 134). “First and foremost” among them ranked the fact that “Islam keeps women in a position of marked inferiority” (134). Quoting Stanley Lane-Poole, an influential contemporaneous British Orientalist, Cromer stated: “The degradation of women in the East is a canker that begins its destructive work early in childhood, and has eaten into the whole system of Islam” (134). Islam’s degradation of women, he maintained, was most evident in the practices of veiling and seclusion, which had “a baneful effect on Eastern society” (155). Since the British aristocrat saw the oppression of women in “Mohammedan countries” as “the fatal obstacle” to Egyptians’ “attainment of that elevation of thought and character which should accompany the introduction of European civilisation,” he recommended that veiling and seclusion be abolished (539).

Even though Cromer rhetorically championed improving the position of women in Egyptian society (albeit in a framework of “white man’s burden” ideology), the policies he pursued as consul general effected the opposite. He did not expand education for girls despite Egyptians’

⁶ While Napoleon Bonaparte had invaded Egypt in 1798, France did not successfully establish colonial rule there. France did, however, colonize Algeria in 1830.

continuous requests, but even curtailed free education (Ahmed, *A Quiet Revolution* 29). By the time Cromer's tenure in Egypt ended, free education in government primary schools had been "practically abolished, as he proudly proclaimed (Baring 540). Moreover, Cromer limited the few professional opportunities Egyptian women could aspire to by refusing to fund a medical school for female doctors that had been operative since the 1830s, commenting "I conceive that in the civilised world, attendance by medical men is still the rule" (qtd. in Tucker 122). Cromer's interest in the advancement of Egyptian women, we can thus infer, was mere subterfuge. In fact, he was an active opponent of women's rights: Serving as president of Britain's National League for Opposing Woman Suffrage, Cromer maintained that giving British women the vote would "invert the natural role of the sexes," with disastrous consequences for England and the empire (qtd. in Owen 375).

U.S. Imperial Feminism in Afghanistan: Seeking to Abolish the *Burqa* through Bombing

The George W. Bush administration followed in Lord Cromer's footsteps when it declared that the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan had the interests of Afghan women at heart, who were leading oppressed lives underneath the *burqa*. Eminent Western women such as First Lady Laura Bush, who was previously quoted, helped spread this message. Cherie Blair, the wife of Tony Blair, U.K. prime minister at the time and Bush's closest ally in the "War on Terror," also campaigned on behalf of Afghan women: "[T]he women of Afghanistan still have a spirit that belies their unfair, downtrodden image. We need to help them free that spirit and give them their voice back, so they can create the better Afghanistan we all want to see," she said on one occasion, betraying the expectation that Afghan women would use the freedom bestowed upon them by the West to reform their society in a way that pleased the West (Ward).

Perhaps more surprising than the first ladies' recruitment for the "War on Terror" was liberal U.S. feminists' support of the invasion of Afghanistan.⁷ Eleanor Smeal, who testified before Congress in her capacity as president of the Feminist Majority Foundation on October 10, 2001, said the following shortly after her testimony, when asked to clarify her organization's position: "In removing the Taliban, the US and its allies must rescue and liberate women and children, who have suffered so terribly under the Taliban's rule [...]. The link between the liberation of Afghan women and girls from the terrorist Taliban militia and the preservation of democracy and freedom worldwide has never been clearer" (qtd. in Laville 95-96). Smeal's appeal to *liberate* Afghan women by force constitutes an explicit subscription to U.S. global hegemony. In the words of Arab American feminist Amira Jamarkani, the Feminist Majority Foundation "worked from the position of savior rather than one of solidarity with feminists in Afghanistan, and therefore developed

⁷ Gender studies scholars may have been surprised that three decades after feminists of Color (e.g., the Combahee River Collective) first offered a sustained critique of mainstream feminism's support of white domination, U.S. feminists should still want to "rescue" women in the Global South by means of war (see Amos and Prabhar; Mohanty). Then again, Ruby Hamad maintains that "we shouldn't be surprised by white women's complicity" (Hamad, "We Shouldn't"): In her study of white women's actions in the United States and the (former) British empire, Hamad concludes that "[t]hroughout settler-colonial history, white women have aided and abetted the spread of white supremacy" (Hamad, *White Tears* 98).

a position easily appropriated in the service of militarism” (228). The Feminist Majority Foundation and other proponents of war as a solution to women’s oppression neglected to consider that war exposes women to heightened risks of sexual assault, kills their children, and threatens their own lives—this is hardly liberation. Rather than abet U.S. neo-colonialism in order to halt the Taliban’s indubitably grave violations of women’s human rights, the Feminist Majority Foundation could have searched for ways to support Afghan feminist groups such as the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), “whose members have courageously worked since 1977 for a democratic secular Afghanistan in which women’s human rights are respected, against Soviet-backed regimes, or U.S.-, Saudi-, and Pakistani-supported conservatives” (Abu-Lughod 787).

The Western conviction that Afghan women would experience the war as liberation was coupled with the expectation that they would discard the *burqa*. Consider this *NBC News* report from 2004: “The burqa, a symbol of Taliban repression of women, remains a common sight in Afghanistan, nearly three years after the hard-line government was ousted by U.S. forces” (Itasaka). However, it is important to remember that the *burqa* existed before the Taliban came to power; it was the local form of covering that Pashtun⁸ women in Afghanistan and Pakistan used when they left their homes. While the Taliban defended the *burqa* in religious language and enforced its use, the garment is not of Islamic origin, but a local custom (Abu-Lughod 785; Papanek 190–216).⁹ Anthropologist Hanna Papanek has conceptualized the *burqa* as “portable seclusion,” that is, as a strategy that allows women to participate in society while upholding cultural norms (Papanek 195). While one may argue that the *burqa*, unlike other covering practices in the Greater Middle East such as the *niqab* or the *chador*, covers women’s eyes, symbolically disavowing their subjectivity and materially making them dependent on a companion to guide them as the cloth net covering the eyes impairs their vision, the only individuals who may be able to convince Afghan women to exchange the *burqa* for another form of covering are probably Afghan women who do not believe in the *burqa*.

In her seminal article “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?,” Lila Abu-Lughod, veteran scholar of gender in the Middle East, provides ethical reflections on how Western individuals genuinely concerned about human rights abuses in the Global South can avoid both the pitfalls of imperial domination and cultural relativism. Put succinctly, Abu-Lughod advocates seeking ways to act in solidarity with and to amplify the voices of oppositional individuals and organizations in a given country:

Where we seek to be active in the affairs of distant places, can we do so in the spirit of support for those within those communities whose goals are to make women’s (and men’s) lives better [...] Can we use a more egalitarian language of alliances, coalitions, and solidarity, instead of salvation? (789)

⁸ An ethnic group originating in southern Afghanistan and north-western Pakistan.

⁹ In a similar vein, female genital cutting originated as a local North African custom (see Ahmed, *Women and Gender*).

To sum up, the United States' posing as liberator of Afghan women, which mobilized the age-old Orientalist trope of the oppressed Muslim woman, gave its invasion of Afghanistan an air of benevolence. As Ann Russo argues, the discursive emphasis on the U.S. emancipation of Afghan women "evades any accountability on the part of the USA for the roots of the interlocking systems of oppression impacting Afghanistan, including patriarchy, colonialism, capitalism and imperialism" (573). The fact that the Reagan administration "elevated Wahhabism to the status of liberation theology" in its support of anti-communist forces during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which helped bring the Taliban into power, was rarely mentioned in the corporate media's coverage of Operation Enduring Freedom (Ahmed, *A Quiet Revolution* 177).

But the reference to oppressed Muslim women is not the only continuity between British colonialism in Egypt and twenty-first century U.S. neo-colonialism in Afghanistan. Like Lord Cromer, Bush battled women's rights domestically while "saving" Muslim women abroad. To name but one example, his administration lobbied against the United States' ratification of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women; the United States finds itself in the company of such non-signatories as Iran and Sudan—states which the Bush administration regularly reprimanded for human rights abuses. Moreover, Bush's domestic "War on Terror" had detrimental consequences for Muslim women in America and their families, as Muslims were subjected to state surveillance, denied principles attendant to the rule of law, etc. (see Cainkar; Cole).

The fact that twenty years after the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan, the local women's lives are back to what they were under Taliban rule in the 1990s, cannot be termed anything other than bitter irony. When, upon the withdrawal of U.S. troops in 2021, the Taliban re-established power, they prohibited women from working, forbade girls from attending secondary school, and banned women students and faculty from university campuses. The Taliban also stipulated that women must wear the *burqa* and be accompanied by a male chaperone in public (Maizland). According to a study by Brown University's Watson Institute, between 2001 and 2021, 243,000 local individuals have been killed in the Afghanistan / Pakistan warzone, among them more than 70,000 civilians, including children ("Afghan Civilians"). Twenty years of war have also left half of the Afghan population below the poverty line, have exposed 92 percent of the population to food insecurity, and have severely limited access to clean drinking water and health care ("Afghan Civilians"). In sum, the U.S.-led invasion has resulted in Afghan women losing their own lives or losing their children and husbands, and facing living conditions that are worse than they were before the Bush administration launched Operation Enduring Freedom, largely in the name of liberating Afghan women. However, the "War on Terror" was not the first historical instance in which U.S. imperialism was masked with feminist rhetoric, as I will show in the following.

The Mexican-American War (1846-1848): A Chivalrous Land Grab

In his cultural history of the Mexican-American War, *To the Halls of the Montezumas*, Robert W. Johannsen demonstrates that contemporaneous U.S. narratives framed the war in the language of chivalry, rendering U.S. soldiers as knights freeing Mexican *señoritas* from exploitative Mexican men. Thus, a U.S. invasion doubly aimed at territorial expansion—seizing Mexican land to expand U.S. territory to the Pacific also meant adding land to the slave-holding territories—was framed as an act of benevolence toward Mexican women. Justice, benevolence, self-sacrifice—these were the values that the U.S. government under President James K. Polk, a firm believer in Manifest Destiny, sought to project when it declared the Mexican-American War “a war of reconciliation” fought to topple Mexico’s tyrants in defense of the Mexican people (Johannsen 72). The war occurred at the height of Romanticism; the era’s popular culture encompassed a profound fascination with medieval culture, particularly with chivalry. A veritable “cult of chivalry” existed, “most forcefully articulated in the South perhaps but influential throughout the United States” (71). Sir Walter Scott’s historical romances set in the Middle Ages, Johannsen highlights, particularly captured the American imagination at the time (68–78). As Scott conveyed in a prose essay, chivalry blended “military valour” with the “strongest passions which actuate the human mind, the feelings of devotion and those of love” (40). Moreover, Scott maintained, there was nothing “more beautiful and praiseworthy” than “the soldier drawing the sword in defence of his country and its liberties, or of the oppressed innocence of damsels, widows, and orphans” (21).

Scott’s ideals clearly resonate in the way U.S. discourses of the time framed the Mexican-American War. The “age of chivalry has returned,” proclaimed the *Southern Quarterly Review* (52). “[W]e rejoice less at the success of our army than at that chivalric generosity, that enlightened moderation, and fraternal beneficence which ally both officers and men to the best days of Knighthood,” enthused one writer in 1847 (qtd. in Johannsen 72). Central to the U.S. military’s chivalric mission in Mexico was to save the local “damsels,” as Scott would have it, from exploitation by Mexican men. U.S. soldiers, Johannsen synthesizes, “were indignant at the attitude of contempt in which the women seemed to be held by the men, and they charged Mexican males with treating their women as little more than slaves or beasts of burden” (170). Milton Jamieson, an officer with the Second Regiment of Ohio Volunteers, wrote: “Often fifteen or twenty *peon* women could be seen trotting along with heavy loads on their backs, and their lazy husbands trotting by their sides carrying nothing” (49).¹⁰ While U.S. soldiers and war correspondents scorned Mexican men of all social classes, they lavished praise on the women of Mexico. Correspondent Thomas Bangs Thorpe wrote: “To an

¹⁰ *Peon* denotes the condition of debt servitude.

American, a Mexican gentleman appears incommoded with trappings, and absurd from his gaudy display. On horseback or on foot, there is a theatrical air that betrays the most superficial thinker" (121). However, "the female population," Thorpe continued, "are of a higher order of beings, and most worthy of admiration; they are possessed of all the good qualities so wanting in the opposite sex" (121). Representing Mexican men as ignorant exploiters of virtuous Mexican women enabled the United States' knightly rescue fantasy.

That American men viewed Mexican women through a racialized lens is obvious in a statement by U.S. Navy Commander Raphael Semmes: "They [Mexican women] are as artless in their manners as children" (269). Attributing child-like characteristics to groups racialized as non-white was, of course, a well-established strategy to deny them self-government, as contemporaneous discourses on Black people in the slave-holding South underscore.¹¹ But there is yet another dimension to the way cultural discourses framed the *Mexicana*. Consider the song "They Wait for Us," which enjoyed great popularity at the time:

The Spanish maid, with eye of fire,
At balmy evening turns her lyre
And, looking to the Eastern sky,
Awaits our Yankee chivalry
Whose purer blood and valiant arms,
Are fit to clasp her budding charms.

The man, her mate, is sunk in sloth—
To love, his senseless heart is loth:
The pipe and glass and tinkling lute,
A sofa, and a dish of fruit;
A nap, some dozen times by day;
Sombre and sad, and never gay.

As Mónica Russel y Rodríguez has pointed out, this song deploys the "budding" *Mexicana* beckoning U.S. soldiers westward as a metonymy for fertile Mexican land (67). Not only is the *Mexicana* / Mexico portrayed as awaiting U.S. soldiers, which casts the U.S. invasion as a selfless duty; the *Mexicana* / Mexico is also declared the rightful bounty of American men, since the "emasculating assertions" of lethargy, dullness, and gluttony attached to the Mexican man render him unable "to properly enjoy the benefit of the woman/land" (Russel y Rodríguez 67–68).

The image of the eager *Mexicana* awaiting U.S. soldiers and the metonymy of woman and land that are operative in this song intertextually reference depictions of the "discovery" of "America": These cultural texts juxtapose the figure of the fully dressed, male European explorer and the figure of the supine Indigenous woman, who allegedly eagerly awaits the European explorer's embrace and whose scant clothing symbolizes the Indigenous population's lack of civilization.¹² These depictions create an analogy between the "Native" woman waiting to be conquered by European explorers and land waiting to be possessed. "They Wait for Us" mo-

¹¹ While one could argue that hegemonic discourses in Victorian America considered women as child-like in general, regardless of their racial background, Semmes contrasts Mexican women with (white) American women in this passage, which suggests that the comment is informed by *Mexicanas'* racial background.

¹² See Flemish painter Jan van der Straet's drawing "Allegory of America" from the late sixteenth century for a prominent example, available [here](#).

bilizes this metonymy operative in “discovery” narratives, which served to justify colonialism and settler imperialism, for the purpose of casting the imperialist annexation of Mexican territory as legitimate, since the United States, coded as male, was merely taking what it was naturally / rightfully entitled to take (Mexican territory, coded as female).

The U.S. critique of Mexican women’s exploitation was not at the same time a call for their self-determination; on the contrary, many U.S. soldiers eyed women’s rights critically. Semmes used his appreciation for Mexican women’s gender conformity to deal a blow to the nascent women’s movement in the United States: “Perfectly feminine in character, they [Mexican women] are indeed the vine to cling around the oak, which nature designed the sex to be. They would be shocked at the idea of holding public meetings or discussing, in open forum, the equal rights of women, as unsexed females sometimes do in other countries” (269). Jamieson, on the other hand, thought that gender equality already existed: “Well may the women of the United States feel proud and love the land in which they live, for it is the only land in this wide world where they are considered as man’s equal, and where, in fact, their worth is truly appreciated” (49). This statement—and the U.S. critique of Mexican women’s exploitation in general—came at a time when half of all U.S. states still allowed slavery and thus the exploitation of Black women in various ways. But even white women’s lived experience in 1840s America was a far cry from gender equality, as the Seneca Falls Convention of July 1848 highlighted, which *inter alia* brought women’s ineligibility to vote to national attention. A century after the Mexican-American War, during the occupation of Japan, the United States launched “what may be the world’s greatest experiment with feminism outside a revolutionary context,” according to political scientist Susan J. Pharr (29).

The Occupation of Japan (1945-1952): Votes to Prove the U.S. Empire’s Benevolence

Granting Japanese women the vote and other civil rights was the highest priority of the United States’ democratization project in occupied Japan (1945-1952), as Lisa Yoneyama has demonstrated. U.S. media coverage of occupied Japan likewise focused on the improved status of the previously “unhappiest women in the world” under the tutelage of General Douglas MacArthur (Moscicki 19, 37). These discourses showcased the American liberation of Japanese women as proof of the occupation’s success, thus serving the U.S. empire’s self-legitimization. Framing the United States as liberator of Japanese women, of course, occluded the violence inherent in occupation. It also disavowed the agency of Japanese women, who had significantly contributed to their country’s war effort and were expecting the franchise as a reward. Finally, the depoliticization of U.S. efforts towards gender equality in Japan once

the Cold War escalated reveals the anti-communist impulse behind the U.S. democratization project in Japan.

While U.S. discourses had expressed considerable anxiety about the “Japanese woman warrior” in the early years of the war scenario in the Pacific (see Yoneyama 890–91), once Japan’s defeat became foreseeable, newspapers and magazines printed pieces such as “The Unhappiest Women in the World” and “Slave Women of Japan.” The former article bemoaned “the legalized traditional sadism of the Japanese,” informing readers that Japanese women were “not regarded as a person” by law, but were “intended as either the servant or pretty toy of men,” who demanded “unquestioning obedience” (Moscicki 19, 37). The latter article, published in *Woman’s Home Companion*, criticized that Japanese women “have gained little or no public recognition” despite the fact that “millions of women have entered industry, managed farms single-handedly and made the major sacrifices in the spectacular decline of Japan’s standard of living” in a war caused, the reader was meant to infer, by Japanese men (Bellaire 64). Such discourses established Japanese women as victims of Japanese men’s tyranny, but also of the war, for which Japanese men’s militarism was held culpable. Once Japan capitulated and was occupied by the United States, Yoneyama found, the “occupation authorities encouraged and sometimes actively propagated the view of Japanese women as exclusively victims of Japanese men and traditional gender norms” (892).

Women’s suffrage was at the top of the “Five Great Reforms” General MacArthur instituted as Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP); in mid-October 1945, the Japanese election law was amended accordingly. American women assumed key roles in the U.S. promotion of women’s rights: Lieutenant Ethel B. Weed promoted gender reforms through the SCAP Civil Information and Education Office; Beate Sirota Gordon drafted the gender equality clause of the new Japanese Constitution. However, as Yoneyama writes, although “MacArthur is known to have not been particularly keen on women’s equal rights [...], the U.S. media presented Japanese women’s liberation and enfranchisement primarily as his accomplishments” (893). The parallel to Britain’s Lord Cromer is obvious.

In the early stages of the occupation, U.S. media reported extensively on Japanese women’s enfranchisement and other improvements in their legal status. The candidacy of a number of women in the first post-war general election of 1946 was reviewed favorably, as was the considerable female voter turnout, which in some areas even surpassed that of male voters. *Newsweek* reported: “The humble, plodding little female for untold centuries has trotted quietly along in the footsteps of the lordly Japanese male. But last week Japanese women made history on their own account. Of the 2,500-odd Diet candidates who applied for certification in the April 10 general elections, 75 were women” (“Free Butterfly” 51). A *New York Times* article from summer 1946 entitled “New Laws to Free

Japanese Women” reported on SCAP efforts to reform the Japanese civil code aimed at ending the “ancient custom” of primogeniture and making women “the equal economic partners of their husbands.”

Media discourses frequently illustrated the idea that Japanese women welcomed the U.S.-initiated reforms of their legal status with images that depicted bodily intimacy between Japanese women and white U.S. soldiers. If we read these images metonymically—the Japanese woman represents Japan, the soldier represents the U.S.—they also signify that Japan welcomed the U.S. presence. A *New York Times* article from October 1945 which reported on women’s enfranchisement, for instance, featured two photographs that each depicted a U.S. soldier and a Japanese woman dancing, both smiling. One was captioned “Bob Johnson, Reading, Mass., is assisted by geisha girl, Miss Gama, in the selection of a new record for their next dance”; the other caption reads “Corp. Orvel Stone, Randolph, Wis., waltzing with geisha girl, Teru Shiduse, in the Japanese capital” (“Japanese Cabinet”). However, anxiety surrounding “miscegenation” was present in much of the news coverage of occupied Japan. News on Japanese women’s first voting, for instance, was accompanied by commentary that warned of the dangers of “promiscuous relationships” between U.S. occupation troops and local women (“Chaplain’s Aid”).

Why did the enfranchisement of Japanese women assume such a prominent position in U.S. occupation policy and in the media, which reflected “Washington’s and SCAP’s overall propaganda policy” (Yoneyama 895)? The United States’ emancipation of Japanese women, quite simply, was showcased to the world as evidence that the U.S. occupation had improved the lives of the Japanese and, thus, was beneficent. This narrative had various obfuscating effects, of course. Most glaringly, it marked occupation as a space of benevolence, glossing over the violence inherent in imperial ventures.¹³ As Yoneyama argues, “[t]he insistence on the United States’ granting of constitutional rights to Japanese women obscures the occupation as a space of unfreedom, a place of nonrights, and thus masks the paradox of its simultaneous violence and benevolence” (889). The emphasis on women’s enfranchisement at the hands of the United States also concealed the existence of a vital pre-war Japanese suffrage movement. Since Japanese women had contributed considerably to their country’s war effort—some had even taken up arms—they would likely have gained the franchise regardless of the U.S. occupation, as Fusae Ichikawa, who had co-founded the Women’s Suffrage League in 1924, suggested in a post-war interview (Parrot 10; see also Ichikawa and Nuita). Portraying Japanese women as victims of a war fuelled by Japanese men’s militarism also contributed to a cultural amnesia about women’s active participation in Japanese colonialism and wars of aggression (Yoneyama 903).

As the Cold War escalated, the U.S. promotion of democracy in Japan morphed into a promotion of anti-communist, anti-labor posi-

¹³ As a German citizen, I am grateful that the United States entered World War II, helped end Nazi terror in Europe, and subsequently promoted the re-democratization of (West) Germany. There likely are Japanese citizens who feel the same way about the United States’ having defeated Japanese fascism, ended Japanese colonialism, and promoted democracy in Japan. Still, the United States could have referenced the Japanese suffrage movement and other pre-war democratic groups, portraying itself as emboldening Japanese democratic forces, while it did, in fact, occlude the existence of these movements by representing itself as liberator of Japanese women and of the Japanese people in general.

tions (Yoneyama 898). U.S. efforts to foster gender equality in Japan now no longer focused on political and legal rights, but on equality within the cultural and private realms. For instance, a *New York Times* article written around the three-year anniversary of women's suffrage dwelt primarily on the occupation's efforts in "building confidence" to increase women's leadership and participation in various cultural and community organizations, rather than commenting on women's participation in elections or the ratification of the new civil code (qtd. in Yoneyama 899). Yoshie Kobayashi has described how the Bureau of Women and Minors, established in 1947 to oversee women's issues, became ultimately "ineffective in resolving the problems of de facto gender inequality in employment and society," because Cold War SCAP policy alienated the majority of Japanese women's associations from the Bureau, since these women desired more radical reforms (81).

The American liberation of Japanese women developed such symbolic power that half a century later, the "success" of the U.S. occupation of Japan was invoked in discussions of occupied Afghanistan and Iraq. For instance, Beate Sirota Gordon, who had drafted the women's rights clause of the Japanese Constitution, argued that Japanese women who lived through the U.S. reconstruction of their country could help rebuild Iraq and Afghanistan. Gordon maintained that Japanese women, who "had no rights" prior to the new constitution, are successful in "politics and business" today and that, as "a colored people" [sic], they could "bolster U.S. credibility with Iraqis and Afghans" by testifying that the U.S. military occupation "did not run their islands into a colony" (qtd. in Yoneyama 903). Ironically, the subjects of U.S. occupation in Japan are being called upon here to become agents of contemporary U.S. neo-colonialism by convincing Afghans and Iraqis that U.S. imperialism is not, in fact, imperialism.

Hegemonic Feminism's Coloniality and White Privilege

Notably, it is not only Western imperialism at the state level that has subjected other countries to violence and paternalism in the name of women's rights; as the examples of Gordon and the Feminist Majority Foundation underscore, white women have actively supported or even attempted to personally profit from empire building and / or racist policies. For instance, in light of Victorian gender ideologies, which both confined (white) women to the domestic sphere and praised their civilizing influence, some white women strove for more fulfilled lives by seeking to "civilize" Indigenous populations; while doing so, white women in Australia disparaged the mothering qualities of Aboriginal women (see Hamad, *White Tears*), just as white American women lobbied for Native American babies to be removed from their mothers in infancy (see Schuller). Hamad concludes that white suffragists, female educators of Indigenous children, female social workers in tenements, to name but

a few, sought individual empowerment and white women's advancement "by not merely neglecting, but actively throwing other women under the proverbial bus" (Hamad, "We Shouldn't"). Some feminists of Color and critical feminists go so far as to argue that hegemonic—that is, non-intersectional—feminist theory and practice are organized around a colonial logic and tend to further white domination (see Schuller, Kendall, Zakaria). In *The Trouble with White Women*, Kyla Schuller argues:

Since the days of the suffrage movement, white feminism has posed such trouble because of the specific ideology it advances, one that has been remarkably consistent over time. First, white feminist politics promotes the theory that [white] women should fight for the full political and economic advantages that wealthy white men enjoy within capitalist empire. Second, it approaches the lives of Black and Indigenous people, other people of color, and the poor as raw resources that can fuel [white] women's rise in status. Finally, white feminism promises that [white] women's full participation in white-dominated society and politics will not only improve their own social position; thanks to their supposedly innate superior morality, their leadership will redeem society itself. (4)

Schuller concludes: "White feminism is an active form of harm," since its "objectives work to liberate privileged women while keeping other structures of injustice intact" (4).

Further analyzing the historical complicity of white American women in empire building and further comparing the specific contexts of the U.S. imperial feminist projects presently discussed—westward expansion; containment / the Cold War; the "Global War on Terror"—are two worthwhile directions that future scholarship on U.S. imperial feminism could take. Moreover, the dearth of information on the United States' practices toward Filipinas during its colonization of the Philippines (1898–1946) and toward women in occupied Cuba (1898–1902) ought to be remedied. Comments Cynthia Enloe has made suggest that imperial feminism was practiced in the Philippines, but more research is warranted to uncover the specificities.¹⁴ Since the Cuban woman was referenced conspicuously in U.S. media discourses on the Spanish-American War and the United States' subsequent occupation of Cuba,¹⁵ one can likewise infer that imperial feminism was operative, but a systematic study is lacking as of yet. It is crucial to further develop scholarship on Western imperial feminism, not least because it has hindered feminist critique in the societies subjected to it.

The Conundrum of Arab (American) Feminists

The situation feminists face in the Arab world (and in the Arab diaspora in the West) serves as a prime example. According to Ahmed,

colonialism's use of feminism to promote the culture of the colonizers and undermine native culture has ever since imparted to feminism in non-Western societies the taint of having served as an instrument of colonial domi-

¹⁴ Enloe intimates that the figure of the oppressed Filipina figured prominently in the popular culture of the late nineteenth century: "One of the things that was used to promote the value of Americans' colonization of the Philippines was expressed in the tableaux that were put up on the Midway in the World's Fairs [of the 1870s, 1880s, and 1890s]. The 'benighted woman,' usually carrying a heavy burden, was put there by the fair designers to make the American fairgoers think, 'Oh, that's terrible,' to sympathize and thus feel reconfirmed in their own advanced civilization" (260).

¹⁵ For instance, in a *caricature* by Louis Dalrymple, published in *Puck* magazine in May 1898, a Cuban woman metonymically represents the Caribbean island; the woman is situated in a frying pan emblazoned with "Spanish Misrule" that is broiling over a Cuban island on fire. The caption reads "The Duty of the Hour: To Save Her Not Only from Spain but from a Worse Fate."

nation, rendering it suspect in Arab eyes and vulnerable to the charge of being an ally of colonial interests. That taint has undoubtedly hindered the feminist struggle in Muslim societies

and in Muslim communities in the West, one might add (*Women and Gender* 167). To this day, parts of the Arab American community accuse Arab American feminists of betraying their people. At the same time, the trope of the oppressed Muslim woman prominently referenced by nineteenth-century Western colonialism informs how the West sees Arab and Muslim women to this day. As a consequence, Western feminists tend not to take Arab feminists seriously, “as if Arabs were ‘inherently’ or genetically incapable of understanding, advocating, or fighting for an end to gender and sexual oppression” (Abdulhadi et al. xxxvi).

The contributions in the seminal compilation of Arab (American) feminist thought, *Arab and Arab American Feminisms: Gender, Violence, and Belonging* (2011), elucidate how weary of allies contemporary Arab (American) feminist critique needs to be, and they also propose a new way of thinking about misogynist violence in the Greater Middle East. First, the United States’ imperial feminist projects in Afghanistan and Iraq are not only supported by so-called compassionate conservatives, some U.S. feminists and liberals, and the organizers of Islamo-Fascism Awareness Week, who pressured Gender Studies departments across the United States to include Islam’s oppression of women in their curricula, but also by Muslim women such as Ayaan Hirsi Ali, who—as native informants funded by neoconservatives—are reaching mass audiences with their testimonies of the horrific life women in Muslim-majority societies are doomed to lead.¹⁶ Second, the writers represented in *Arab and Arab American Feminisms* draw attention to the translation of state violence into misogynist violence. Acutely aware of the prevalence of war and autocracy in the Middle East—for which Western colonialism and U.S. interventionism are partly responsible—Arab (American) feminists propose structural modes to explain (rather than exonerate) violence against Arab women, while hegemonic Western discourses see Muslim culture at fault. In a sense, the great-granddaughters of the women Lord Cromer proclaimed to liberate are liberating themselves from Cromer’s legacy, who appropriated feminism and promoted the trope of Islam’s misogyny. As I have shown in this article, the Bush administration positioned itself as Cromer’s ideological heir by shoring up the trope of Islam’s inherent oppression of women to legitimize two wars on Muslim-majority countries that have claimed several hundred thousand lives, predominantly of Afghans, Iraqis, and Americans. However, while the “Global War on Terror” was the first instance in which the U.S. empire justified its presence in Muslim-majority countries with feminist rhetoric, as I hope to have shown with regard to the Mexican-American War and the U.S. occupation of Japan, there is a long history of U.S. imperial feminism, dating back at least to the mid-nineteenth century.

¹⁶ Ina Kerner has warned that a feminist politics that decries positions such as Ali’s as abetting Western imperialism and Islamophobia, in effect “silences the feminist critique of culture and religion by women of Color” (86; my translation).

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