

Writing the History of the Greater United States: A Reply to Paul Kramer

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Paul Kramer is a luminary in the field of U.S. foreign relations, known especially for his penetrating book on the colonial Philippines, *The Blood of Government*, and a series of influential and wide-ranging reflections on historiography. In “How Not to Write the History of U.S. Empire,” Kramer offers another historiographic intervention. This one, however, is focused on a single work, my 2016 Bernath Lecture, “The Greater United States,” given at the American Historical Association and published in *Diplomatic History*. In that lecture, I propose a different unit of analysis for the field of U.S. history. Rather than thinking of the United States as the contiguous blob, bounded by Canada, Mexico, and the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, I invite historians to consider all the land under U.S. jurisdiction as part of the United States, and therefore as part of its history. Borrowing a term from the past, I call this wider geography the “Greater United States.”

As his article’s title suggests, Kramer finds much to fault with my approach. I encourage interested readers to judge that approach by its fruits in my book *How to Hide an Empire*, which offers not a methodological sketch but an in-depth consideration of what U.S. history look likes with the Greater United States as its geography.¹ Still, Kramer’s criticisms raise questions about how and why we should study U.S. empire that are relevant to all scholars in the field and worth addressing here.

Defining the United States, defining empire

Kramer begins with definitions, noting that the categories we choose shape the arguments we make and that those arguments have potentially serious political consequences. The “Greater United States” emphasizes formally administered territory. But, Kramer asks, what about other kinds of imperial control? Empire is an expansive phenomenon, he writes, unfolding across a “spectrum of sovereignties.”² To restrict one’s understanding of it to places under U.S. jurisdiction would be to adopt a “narrow definition” that, in its narrowness, exempts the United States from much of the charge of imperialism. It is an “apologetic” definition that provides “a generous gift to those seeking to

¹ Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019).

² Paul A. Kramer, “How Not to Write the History of U.S. Empire,” *Diplomatic History*, forthcoming, 1.

legitimate and depoliticize most expressions of American global power in the twentieth century.”³ With dollar diplomacy, CIA-backed coups, and the Vietnam War ruled conceptually out, U.S. empire becomes a more modest and consequently less malign affair. In that sense, a focus on territory is unacceptable because it does not sufficiently challenge and delegitimize twentieth-century U.S. foreign policy.

Whether that ought to be the measure of our analytical concepts is an open question. But one thing is clear: it’s perfectly possible for historians to insist on the importance of territory without limiting their definitions of empire to it. I am one example of this. In nominating the Greater United States as a useful cartography, I am proposing to define the United States broadly, not to define empire narrowly. Understanding Puerto Rico to be part of the United States doesn’t mean you can’t also understand, say, U.S. counterinsurgency campaigns in Cold War Asia to be an imperial project (as I do in my book *Thinking Small*, in a chapter titled “Grassroots Empire”).⁴ My point about definitions of empire is merely that “to think of the United States as having an informal empire *only* would be to miss something important.”⁵

A more pertinent example of a historian who has emphasized territorial empire without definitionally excluding other imperial forms is Paul Kramer. His book, *The Blood of Government*, focused diplomatic historians’ attention on the largest U.S. colony, the Philippines. In it, Kramer offers a historiographic meditation that arrives at the same conclusion my lecture does: that the Wisconsin School of diplomatic history, in its eagerness to paint the United States as an informal empire, passed too easily over formal territories. “Philippine history did not matter in and of itself” to these historians, Kramer writes, “but only in so far as it bore weight in the larger architecture of informal empire.”⁶ I couldn’t agree more, and I am not alone my gratitude to Kramer for having helped rebalance the historiography by prominently stressing the importance of colonies.

After criticizing too-narrow understandings of empire, Kramer then objects that the concept of the Greater United States is too *broad*, in that it yokes together Indian Territory, western territories, overseas annexations, occupations, leased lands, and military bases. These are not the same, Kramer notes. He’s

³ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴ Daniel Immerwahr, *Thinking Small: The United States and the Lure of Community Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), chap. 4.

⁵ Daniel Immerwahr, “The Greater United States,” *Diplomatic History* 3 (2016): 389.

⁶ Paul A. Kramer, *The Blood of Government: Race, Empire, the United States, and the Philippines* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 17.

right, they aren't. The Greater United States is a "heterogeneous polity," I write, encompassing many different kinds of space.⁷ Even if one were to write only of annexed lands, one would be writing about a diverse set of territories, from the naval fiefdom of American Samoa to the incorporated territory of Alaska to the commonwealth of Puerto Rico.

Is it illegitimate to toss all these areas into the "sovereignty blender," as Kramer calls it, and count, in a single statistical category, all the places outside of the states over which Washington has claimed jurisdiction?⁸ I would argue that it is not only legitimate but sometimes necessary. Empires routinely generate a plurality of legal and administrative forms, which make counting, comparison, and alliances among the colonized difficult. For that reason, analysts of empire have long understood the importance of cutting across these differences. My own calculations—of the number of colonized subjects in the United States, of the number of those in colonies and occupied zones together, of the total area of U.S. territory outside of the states—were inspired by W. E. B. Du Bois's *Color and Democracy* (1945), where Du Bois decried empires' tendency to conceal even the most basic facts about themselves and offered his own eye-opening counts. One was of the size of empires by population, in which he showed what surely must have been surprising to his contemporaries (as it was to me), that the United States had the fifth-largest colonial empire in the world, containing nearly twenty million people.⁹

Du Bois was, of course, counting unlike objects, and he insisted on naming as colonies places that bore different administrative designations (commonwealth, mandate, condominium, territory, protectorate, etc.). As historians, we must be cognizant of these distinctions, because they often mattered greatly. Yet we needn't be bound by them. Indeed, without a willingness to run the sovereignty blender from time to time, it's hard to know how we could ever deploy "empire" as a category at all. Certainly, it's hard to know how we could deploy that term in the capacious way Kramer advises, so that it covers not only the heterogeneous spaces formally administered by Washington but other imperial arrangements as well.

This leads to Kramer's third definitional question: the use of actor's categories. "The Greater United States" isn't my term. It was one of a number of

⁷ Immerwahr, "Greater United States," 377.

⁸ Kramer, "How Not To," 8.

⁹ W. E. B. Du Bois, *Color and Democracy: Colonies and Peace* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1945), chap. 2. The United States would soon, after the dismantling of the Japanese Empire, have the world's fourth-largest empire.

new names that turn-of-the-century writers gave to the post-1898 United States, to convey their sense of how thoroughly the recent colonial acquisitions had changed it. But should we ourselves use our historical subjects' terms? Kramer doesn't say that we never should (after all, "empire" itself is an actor's category), but he warns that taking "analytical cues from early twentieth century Americans is ill-advised."¹⁰ He urges emulating the "robustly critical historiographies, which insist on breaking with the past's dominant vocabularies."¹¹

This strikes me as an area where multiple approaches are desirable, perhaps even necessary. Sometimes it's helpful for us to map the past differently than our subjects did, to reject their terms and employ our own. But the reverse is surely also true: sometimes we gain great insight by recuperating past vocabularies, by apprehending the past via the categories of those who lived through it. A fine example of this is Kramer's *The Blood of Government*. Its title is taken from an 1898 speech by the imperialist Albert Beveridge, and the book advertises itself as "a history of the novel connections and transformations exemplified in Beveridge's addresses."¹²

The "Greater United States" is a similarly clarifying past concept. As I say in my lecture, terms like it were used largely by champions of empire, and nationalists in the territories had and have different terms, but the "Greater United States" is nevertheless valuable. It can be used, I explain, much as Gary Wilder has used the similar concept of "Greater France" (also an actor's category) to challenge the notion of France as a hexagonal nation-state.¹³ To my eyes, one of the most promising features of the term is precisely that it is an actor's category. It comes from a time when powerful men spoke openly of the United States as an empire, both in its overseas ambitions and in the preceding century's continental conquests. To use their terminology is to remind that empire was not just a haphazard collection of miscellaneous lands acquired in a fit of absent-mindedness, but a self-conscious project of such far-reaching significance that it required renaming the country. Taking imperialists at their

¹⁰ Kramer, "How Not To," 6.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹² Kramer, *The Blood of Government*, 2. Soon after in his book, Kramer names the British imperialist Rudyard Kipling as one of three "prophetic voices" capable of "opening Philippine-American history outward" (7).

¹³ Gary Wilder, *The Imperial Nation-State: Negritude and Colonial Humanism between the Two World Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). And see Wilder's helpful discussion of the challenges involved in getting French historians to conceptually redefine "France," in spite of ample research on French overseas territories, in "From Optic to Topic: The Foreclosure Effect of Historiographic Turns," *American Historical Review* 117 (2012): 723–7245.

word—or, better said, taking the words of imperialists—is a way of refuting those who would deny or minimize the United States’ territorial empire.

Storming the citadel of mainstream U.S. history

Is there still a need to refute empire-deniers or empire-minimizers? Or has our voluminous scholarship on a wide range of topics already established territorial empire’s centrality and importance? This is the second core question raised by Kramer’s article. In it, he challenges my argument that mainstream U.S. history—the kind that appears in textbooks, overviews, and venues such as the *Journal of American History* and the *American Historical Review*—has been negligent in its treatment of overseas territory. It has been negligent, I explain, because “most U.S. historians, especially when working on the zoomed-out, textbook level, implicitly take as their unit of analysis only a part of the United States, the contiguous part.”¹⁴ Hence my thesis: U.S. historians should adopt a different, larger unit of analysis.

Kramer finds this troubling. His objection is not to my claim that the above-named venues largely ignore overseas territory. It is, rather, to my identification of them as “mainstream” and my special concern with them. “What exactly is going on with Immerwahr’s use of the term ‘mainstream,’ with its unobvious marking of insider and outsider? Who is on the outside of ‘mainstream’ history and why doesn’t their scholarship really count?”¹⁵ In targeting mainstream U.S. history, am I perhaps diminishing research produced in other venues or from non-U.S. perspectives? That charge looms large in Kramer’s article, which accuses me of doing “injustice to the intellectual labor of scholars studying U.S. colonies,” indeed of wishing their scholarship would “vanish.”¹⁶ In what is apparently intended as a chastening gesture, Kramer appends a long list of books and dissertations published since 2007 on the Philippines and Puerto Rico.

But my claim is not that the territories have been “inadequately studied,” as Kramer states.¹⁷ We have, just as Kramer says, produced a rich, deep, and growing body of research on the topic (an “accelerating avalanche,” as I describe it in my lecture).¹⁸ My claim is rather that U.S. historians, when editing textbooks or offering surveys, have largely failed to absorb that research and rewrite

¹⁴ Immerwahr, “Greater United States,” 376–77.

¹⁵ Kramer, “How Not To,” 9.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 9, 11.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁸ Immerwahr, “Greater United States,” 382.

their grandest narratives in light of it. It is this failure that consigns the territories to a single chapter, set in 1898, in the textbooks used in mainland schools. It is this failure that leads extremely prominent and talented U.S. historians to write about the overseas territories in ways that seem to betray an unfamiliarity with their history. “It is true and important that with the unhappy exception of the annexation of the Philippines and the somewhat more successful instance of Puerto Rico at the end of the Spanish-American wars of 1898, the United States did not formally colonize any overseas territory,” Thomas Bender has written, leaving one wondering what Bender thinks happened in the guano islands, Alaska, Hawai‘i, Guam, American Samoa, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and the Northern Marianas.¹⁹ Or consider John Gaddis’s assertion that in World War II the United States “experienced no significant attacks apart from the initial one at Pearl Harbor,” which misses the Japanese invasions of Guam, Wake Island, western Alaska, and the Philippines—violent conquests that ultimately resulted in the deaths of somewhere around a million U.S. nationals.²⁰

Do such omissions matter? If textbooks, journals, and prominent historians fail to appreciate the significance of decades of scholarly work on all the ways the United States has controlled land and people beyond its mainland, Kramer suggests, so much worse for them. They are not the centers of intellectual authority on empire, so why single them out for concern? Kramer further worries that my focus on mainstream U.S. history reveals a lamentable U.S.-centricity. Appraising the literature on colonialism for its ability to transform familiar narratives of U.S. history casts the mainland as the protagonist of the historiographical drama. Doing so, Kramer writes, not only exhibits “nationalist arrogance” but is “annexationist.”²¹ The desire to incorporate scholarship on overseas territory into mainstream U.S. history is thus likened to the desire to incorporate foreign lands into the United States via imperial conquest.

Yet the reason I take mainstream U.S. history seriously is not because it’s the best or only history and not because ideas only “count” once they have made their mark on it. Rather, I take it seriously because it is an intellectual edifice of profound significance, both for the inhabitants of the United States and the billions who dwell in this uniquely powerful country’s shadow. The vast apparatus of knowledge production and dissemination that connects major research universities to flagship field journals to textbook publishers to

¹⁹ Thomas Bender, *A Nation among Nations: America’s Place in World History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), 183.

²⁰ John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 8.

²¹ Kramer, “How Not To,” 13, 12.

middle-school classrooms informs how hundreds of millions conceive of the United States and of who belongs to it. To the degree that historical conceptions have political consequences—a point Kramer stresses in his objection to narrow definitions of empire—mainstream U.S. history is surely among the most consequential historical frames imaginable.

Recently, thousands in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands died as a result of the 2017 hurricanes. Though storms were the precipitating event, the deaths were caused in large part by Washington’s longstanding neglect, a neglect clearly enabled by the fact that most mainlanders know and care very little about the overseas territories. I want that to change. I am sure Kramer does, too.

But we won’t make a dent in mainstream U.S. history simply by waving our bibliographies in the air. We’ll need to show our colleagues why, by their own lights, empire should matter to them even if it’s not their specialty. We’ll need to show them how and why their narratives should change in the light of our research. Luckily, as Kramer notes, there is a *lot* of that research, much of it highly pertinent to this task.

To say that the history of the territories can transform fundamental understandings of U.S. history is not to say that that’s all it can do. Obviously, the history of Hawai‘i can and should be local history, Polynesian history, Pacific history, indigenous history, Japanese diasporic history, and many other things besides. Kramer is right to stress the importance of colonial history within these many contexts and to insist that its value cannot be reduced to its relevance to U.S. history. But it nevertheless *is* relevant to U.S. history. Shouldn’t we want the U.S. narrative to make room for Polynesia? Especially now, as there has been a president, Barack Obama, born and raised there?

As I mention in my lecture, this question of transforming mainstream U.S. history has an analogue in far earlier debates about African-American history. For decades, scholars of black life in the United States insisted, against considerable resistance, that not only was their subject important on its own terms, but that it held to the power to reshape U.S. history. They won that argument conclusively. Beyond the subfield of African-American history, beyond history departments, beyond academia, people have come to think of the United States differently. A recent national survey that asked 4,000 children and adults to name the “most famous Americans in history,” not counting presidents and

first ladies, found that the top three—Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, and Harriet Tubman—were African American.²²

That is what storming the citadel of mainstream U.S. history looks like. It need not and should not be our only objective, but in my view it's an essential one. I worry that following Kramer's counsel—forget mainstream U.S. history, it's irredeemably wedded to nationalism and doesn't speak for us—would have us all marching in the opposite direction. And U.S. history would be left far worse for it.

²² Sam Wineburg, *Why Learn History (When It's Already On Your Phone)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), chap. 8.