

PREFACE

Our Island Frontier

THE PHILIPPINES, GUAM, HAWAI‘I,
PUERTO RICO, AND CUBA

This is a very personal story. I was raised at the intersection of empires, the waning British one of my mother and the expanding U.S. version I live in. The latter was obvious in ways I explore intuitively, an awareness I gained from the presence of U.S. empire in the Philippines, where my father is from, and Hawai‘i, where I was born. I often wondered why the United States seemed so powerful in those places, an object of both awe and contempt. While living briefly in Makaha, O‘ahu, in the 1980s, my siblings and I heard bombing practice in Makua Valley so frequently that it became just part of the daily noise; it was even vaguely exciting to be close to so much danger. That danger is persistent and ongoing. After the U.S. military commandeered the valley, its training exercises polluted it with explosives and toxic chemicals, and Native Hawaiians continue to struggle to have it cleaned up and returned. We were kids who had no idea about the ominous nature of those sounds or what they represented. Similarly, in the film *The Rum Diary* (2011), adapted from the novel by Hunter S. Thompson, Johnny Depp’s character experiences the clamor of bombing practice on Vieques, Puerto Rico. Yet he has a more conscious and adult reaction to it: he cringes and ducks. He is there as part of a tour of the island by developers who want to build a tropical resort. To him, it seems paradoxical that such a place could ever be a desirable tourist destination. *The Rum Diary* is set in 1959, when tourists were forced to find another playground in the Caribbean to replace Havana. San Juan was a good proxy for its neighbor, but Conrad Hilton had already colonized and cornered the tourist market on it; the smaller Vieques was wide open for development. Around the same time, popular culture began its love affair with

Hawai‘i and tiki culture, and the invention of the jetliner made the distant islands seem closer than ever before.

It is easy for mainlanders to forget that Guam is part of the U.S. insular empire. Guam is always a point of reference in the military complex of the Pacific, and it shares with Puerto Rico the dubious status of being one of the oldest colonies in the modern world. The superferry debacle in Hawai‘i brought Guam, nominally, back into the imperial picture first imagined in 1898—when the United States gained a slate of colonies and protocolonies in the Pacific (Hawai‘i, the Philippines, and Guam) and the Caribbean (Cuba and Puerto Rico). In 2007, Hawaii Superferry put two high-speed superferrys, the *Alakai* and the *Huakai*, into service from O‘ahu to Maui, despite a Hawai‘i Supreme Court ruling that the company had to first complete an environmental impact statement (EIS). Governor Linda Lingle, who had secured a \$140 million dollar loan to Hawaii Superferry on the condition that the company would not have to complete an EIS, overrode the ruling, allowing the fleet to set sail. Lingle courted this lucrative new industry and its military-connected owner and board of directors in order to curry political favor—the superferrys were prototypes for navy vehicles and were to ferry army Stryker tanks to Maui for practice runs before their deployment to Iraq and Afghanistan. (For more information on this incident, see *The Superferry Chronicles: Hawaii’s Uprising against Militarism, Commercialism, and the Desecration of the Earth* (2009), edited by Koohan Paik and Jerry Mander.) The superferrys were docked in early 2009 because of political pressure brought by a coalition of activist groups pushing for adherence to the original Hawai‘i Supreme Court ruling. In a twist of fate, that turn of events ultimately benefited the military. The U.S. Navy purchased the ferrys at a foreclosure auction and renamed them the USNS *Guam* and the USNS *Puerto Rico*, in homage, no doubt, to the longest-standing colonies in the world.

I weave together these personal, political, and pop-culture points of reference because it is in this piecemeal yet deeply connected manner that empire makes sense and becomes visible. And it is in this fragmentary way that I piece together a portrait of U.S. empire from its symbolic origin in the successful campaign against Spain in 1898, which yielded control over Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines. That year garnered even more symbolic resonance because it was also when the United States annexed Hawai‘i. I have been gathering articles, films, pamphlets, and images of these places for years, out of fascination with how often they are paradoxically both interchangeable and yet com-

pletely distinct and unrelated in the U.S. national psyche. That is, they are perceived as repeating tropical pieces of U.S. empire, but each had a different role and status within it throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Yet this imagined interchangeability has incredible potential and significance; it bespeaks an interconnectedness that may form the basis for alliances among the global peace and antimilitarism movements—for example, the World Social Forum, the Occupy Movement, the (De)Occupy movement in Hawai‘i, the numerous groups protesting against the Group of Eight and the World Trade Organization in Seattle and Cancún, among others.

After 1898, the cardinal question in the United States about the new “island empire” was what to do with them. While the country was working out its imperial strategy, each place was struggling with the persistent and ongoing question of how to achieve self-rule within the force field of empire. Perhaps one way this might be achieved is through the accretion of small and large acts of resistance. The success in shuttering the superferries in Hawai‘i is one sign of how a coalition of groups seeking global peace and justice can work together to throw a wrench in the imperial machine and thus stop one small part of its operations.

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