
Brady Harrison. *Agent of Empire: William Walker and the Imperial Self in American Literature*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004. 238p.

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In the years preceding the Civil War, William Walker invaded Sonora, Nicaragua, and Honduras with small bands of American filibusters. His most successful mercenary adventure came in 1856 when he seized control of Nicaragua and installed himself as president. His rule was brief, but his exploits as a filibuster propelled Walker to fame during his lifetime. And although his name largely disappeared from the American consciousness shortly following his 1860 death by firing squad in Honduras, Brady Harrison's *Agent of Empire: William Walker and the Imperial Self in American Literature* seeks to prove that Walker is a key exemplum of American imperial desires and ambitions. Harrison traces Walker's influence through American texts from Walker's own time to the 1980s. He makes broad claims for the continuing influence of Walker's largely forgotten story, suggesting that American writers have long turned to Walker for "a ready-made story of imperial desire, conquest, and disaster and, in the process, bring forward the history of the American imperium" (13). To support these claims Harrison explores a wide variety of American texts—from obscure Romances like Richard Harding Davis' *Captain Macklin* to critical and popular successes such as Joan Didion's *Book of Common Prayer*. Harrison contends that in the literary figure of Walker lies "one of the most important, if understudied, narrative paradigms in the literature of American imperialism" (5).

Harrison's most convincing arguments focus on writers' repeated turns to William Walker's story to illuminate U.S. imperial policies. He compellingly argues that since Walker's death, writers have frequently revisited the contours of Walker's life at times when U.S. imperialism and interventionism resurface. Through the figure of the filibuster, writers from Davis to Didion, and from Bret Harte to Ernesto Cardenal, have explored various impetuses and consequences of imperial intervention. In many ways modeling his argument after Richard Slotkin's discussion of Daniel Boone in *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860*, Harrison argues that the writers he examines draw parallels between Walker's filibustering and their own imperial moment. From late 19th-century economic interventionism in the "Banana Republics" to the Spanish-American War to the Cold War and Vietnam, writers engage Walker's literary figure to alternately celebrate, decry, and examine U.S. foreign policies of their own historical moment. Harrison then complicates this framework by asserting that it also explains why despite these frequent retellings Walker is largely absent from popular memory. Even as writers continue to tell versions Walker's story because it resonates so strongly with

the history of U.S. interventionism, this correspondence also reveals truths about American foreign policy that are too difficult to bear. Harrison argues, “An imperial self and would-be emperor, [Walker] represents, in part, U.S. imperialism at its most unapologetic, its most unmasked, and his story contains within it the history of the oppressed, the history of the Indian Wars, slavery, and the exploitation—and often the destruction—of the less powerful” (197). Because Walker embodies the injustice and violence embedded in American history, his story is repressed almost as soon as it is remembered, only to reappear again and again.

Such perceptive and intriguing arguments, however, are weakened by claims that are overly vague and forced. Harrison seems to be trying too hard to develop a monolithic definition of the imperial self that is articulated by Walker’s story. In doing so, he tends to flatten out important differences and nuances. For example, was Walker’s recollection of his “calling” to become a filibuster really inspired by Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “Transparent eye-ball” passage? Suggesting that Walker “may have” read *Nature* doesn’t seem like a strong enough support for this claim. Similarly, does the rather generic shared biography Harrison provides (frail boyhoods in which both read adventure stories, political aspirations, personal loss, and a desire for power) really support his argument that Theodore Roosevelt and Walker were “remarkably alike” (81)? Also, several times throughout the text, Harrison mentions Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* as another retelling of Walker’s story; however, he never offers an explanation for this assertion. Is *Blood Meridian* connected to Walker simply because “the kid,” like Walker, is from Tennessee and briefly joins a group of filibusters in Mexico? Or are there deeper similarities readers are supposed to guess? Such loose links between Walker’s story and other texts and other historical figures point to a lack of nuance and specificity in some of Harrison’s comparisons. Harrison’s study would have been strengthened had he allowed for more differences and divergences between representations of the imperial self. While he convincingly argues about the significance of the frequent resurfacings of Walker’s story, the moments when he seems to force Walker’s story onto other narratives or histories threaten to dismantle his larger argument.

Yet, despite these moments of forced and questionable analysis, Harrison’s text does offer readers some intriguing arguments about the place of mercenary romance in the shaping of American culture, the repressed history of imperial intervention, and the fascinating figure of William Walker, who “exists for us now as a complicated series of textual representations and traces” (10). *