

“Don’t they know that we are a part of the United States?”: Children, Race, and Citizenship in the Interwar American Empire

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Panel 32: *Children and Youth in the American Empire*

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Abstract:

Between World War One and World War Two, there was a robust exchange of items, including letters, school correspondence portfolios, and material aid, between young people living in the American Empire. These exchanges were part of the burgeoning commitment to cross-cultural understanding and internationalism among liberal educators in the interwar years. While a growing scholarship considers this education in order to draw attention to the interwar years as a period of internationalism in U.S. history, few scholars give sustained attention to how the United States’ colonial presence in places like Hawai’i, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines shaped and were shaped by these efforts.¹ In considering the place of U.S. territories in interwar educational exchanges, this paper recasts early intercultural and international education as not only a reaction to domestic race relations and foreign policies, but also a growing anti-imperial movement.

Using a rhetoric of global citizenship, this paper argues, educators invited children and youth to see themselves as part of the same imperial family through these exchanges. Meant to remind young people throughout the empire that they could—and should—be friends, in reality, these exchanges were tools of Americanization in U.S. territories and encouraged young people throughout the empire to see the United States’ presence abroad as benevolent. Turning to young people’s voices in the letters and schoolwork they exchanged, however, indicates tensions in the American imperial project. These exchanges were also avenues through which young people living in U.S. territories challenged mainland misconceptions about their homes and asserted themselves, their national identities, and their place in the world. In doing so, they shaped discourses about race and citizenship in the interwar years. This paper thus draws attention to education as a tool of empire building and children as international and imperial actors who can both support—and resist—adults’ vision for the world.

I invite scholars to visit my Twitter feed [@katcartw](https://twitter.com/katcartw) for more information about my talk and to email me at kscartwright@email.wm.edu

¹ Diana Selig, *Americans All: The Cultural Gifts Movement* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011); Julia Irwin, “Teaching ‘Americanism with a World Perspective’: The Junior Red Cross in the U.S. Schools from 1917 to the 1920s,” *History of Education Quarterly* 53, no. 2 (2013): 255–79; and Katie Day Good, *Bring the World to the Child: Technologies of Global Citizenship in American Education, 1900-1946* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020).