

In Memoriam: Amy Kaplan (1953-2020)

Amy Kaplan, 1953-2020, was the Edward W. Kane professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania, the past-president of the American Studies Association, and a renowned interdisciplinary scholar of U.S. culture and empire. She was the author of three single-authored books, a widely-influential anthology, and dozens of academic articles and general audience essays, on everything from the discourse of “homeland security” to the anti-imperialism of Mark Twain. She was the recipient of numerous awards, including fellowships from the Institute for Advanced Study and the NEH. And she was a fierce intellectual presence, a generous mentor, and an extraordinary scholar.



Kaplan was a border-crossing thinker. Her work focused on the United States in the world, but the borders she crossed were intellectual and disciplinary rather than national. Starting in the 1990s, Kaplan began to ask questions about culture and American empire—specifically about the role of U.S. culture in shaping the moral geographies of the powerful. One of the first generation of Americanists to take imperial culture seriously, she was influenced by Edward Said, as well as the work done by a range of postcolonial scholars such as Inderpal Grewal, Lisa Lowe, Ali Behdad, and Paul Gilroy, who were unpacking the work that culture does in contexts of European colonialism, imperialism, and expansionist power.

Kaplan co-edited the groundbreaking 1993 collection, *The Cultures of United States Imperialism*, with Donald Pease. The book had an impact that few anthologies can claim, reshaping the fields of U.S. cultural studies, American Studies, and, eventually, the history of the United States in the world. Kaplan’s now classic introduction to the volume spoke powerfully of “the absence of culture from the history of U.S. imperialism; the absence of empire from the study of American culture; and the absence of the United States from the postcolonial study of imperialism” (11). That telling description soon came to serve as an agenda, as U.S. historians, historians of empire, American Studies scholars, and those from postcolonial studies, literature, and cultural studies began to produce rich and diverse analyses of the cultural politics of U.S. empire.

Kaplan certainly was not alone in taking up the project. The very fact that *Cultures of United States Imperialism* was such a massive volume (672 pages) was an indication its time had come. Essays by scholars such as Donna Haraway, Vicente L. Rafael, Kevin Gaines, Myra Jehlan, Walter

Benn Michaels, and Vicente M. Diaz made clear how much work there already was to draw on—and how urgently the questions were in Americanist scholars’ thinking. Perhaps it was the end of the Cold War and the spectacle of the 1990-91 Gulf War that brought U.S. academics back to the kinds of questions that William Appleman Williams had raised decades before: what does “empire as a way of life” look like, culturally and politically, for a nation built on denial of its own imperial logics?

Speaking personally, I can say that I was already well aware of Kaplan’s work as a graduate student in the early 1990s. Her first book—a sophisticated, careful study of realism in American literature—would come out in 1992, but it was an essay

published in *American Literary History* in 1990, on empire and masculinity in popular novels of the 1890s, that had captured the attention of those of us in American Studies at Brown. I remember sitting at a bar on Thayer Street in Providence talking animatedly about what it would mean to “read for empire.” That conversation must have been happening at a lot of bars in college towns, because in the decade after the publication of *Cultures of US Imperialism*, there would be tsunami of work on U.S. empire and transnational cultural formation: Penny von Eschen’s *Race Against Empire* (1997); Kristin Hoganson’s *Fighting for American Manhood* (1998); Vicente Rafael’s *White Love and other Events in Filipino History*, Laura Wexler’s *Tender Violence*, and Andrew Rotter’s *Comrades at Odds: The United States and India*—all published in 2000; Mary Renda’s *Taking Haiti* and my own *Épic Encounters* in 2001; Christina Klein’s *Cold War Orientalism* and Laura Brigg’s *Reproducing Empire: Race, Sex, Science and US Imperialism in Puerto Rico* in 2003; and Nikhil Singh’s *Black is a Country* in 2004, among many others. It wasn’t necessarily that Kaplan’s work directly inspired all of these projects, but both her individually-authored writings and the crystallizing work of the anthology were remarkably influential, giving name and shape to a diverse set of investments and projects, and creating a conversation that included people trained in parts of the humanities that rarely engaged each other—for example, diplomatic history and cultural studies, to name just two.

Kaplan herself entered this field with her remarkable, agenda-setting second monograph, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of US Culture*, published in 2002. In this, Kaplan offered detailed and compelling readings of how the logics of empire had been constructed for domestic consumption, created through fiction, journalism,

and early film. The book was perhaps best known for its attention to the ways race and gender shaped the intersection of nationalist imaginaries and expansionist power. Kaplan's arguments about the intersection of the domestic and the "foreign" were encapsulated in her wry phrase, "manifest domesticity"—vividly marking not only the ways in which women were mobilized into empire, but the (highly enabling) misdirection at the heart of the ideology of separate spheres. There was, Kaplan insisted, a deep interdependence of home and empire that was far more than a division of the ideological work of social reproduction. "'Women's true sphere', Kaplan wrote, 'was in fact a mobile and mobilizing outpost the transformed conquered foreign lands into the domestic sphere of family and nation' (25). Kaplan was not the first feminist to notice how white women were recruited into imperialism, but she brought home the ways in which gender was a useful category of analysis for those who cared about the history of U.S. expansion.

But Kaplan's argument was also methodological; she insisted that our analyses of U.S. power should not assume its coherence or its solidity over time. The book was published during the early days of the U.S. war in Iraq, and it seemed to speak presciently to a moment when "empire" was very much at hand. Whether or not we would call empire by its name, and take as our task the challenge of seeing how broad and deep it went—these were the questions Kaplan raised.

Yet she was in some sense disentangling herself from Said's argument in *Orientalism*, that the heterogenous expressions of imperial logic were powerful precisely because of their "knitted-together strength"—the ways they undergirded each other through citation, repetition, and timely reworkings. Nikhil Singh's review in *American Quarterly* captured the stakes of the "anarchy" in Kaplan's title. "Anarchy is thus the specter that haunts the imperial fantasy of a historically advancing, smooth, and ordered world. It reflects the ways in which modern imperialism remains uniquely dependent upon, and in fact is constituted by and reconstitutes, the very figures of disorder—violence, tyranny, customary power, racial difference, patriarchy—that it proposes to subordinate, once and for all, to the 'rule of law.'" A nation bent on expansion even as it anxiously policed difference, a gendered logic of home that was mobilized for conquest, a cacophony of voices that insisted the United States was not an empire while mobilizing for American hegemony: these were not just ironies or hypocrisies; they were the structure itself.

The year after *Anarchy of Empire* was released, Amy was elected president of the American Studies Association. This made sense, given Kaplan's reputation as a scholar and a mentor to younger scholars, but it was also a statement. At the height of the Iraq war, the ASA chose a person who had made analysis of empire the heart of her work. Her presidential speech in 2004, published in *American Quarterly*, made good on the promise of her election. The essay was and innovative, political, and deeply influential analysis of the locations of U.S. global power. "Where is Guantanamo?" asked about that liminal space of a U.S. base, housed in another country, a Cold War remnant now repurposed for the War on Terror. "Guantánamo lies at the heart of the American Empire, a dominion at once rooted in specific locales and dispersed unevenly all over the world," Kaplan wrote, launching an essay that closely analyzed questions of sovereignty, exploring how the "legal black hole" of Guantánamo was shaped by a long history of U.S. military intervention in the Caribbean and the ways that the U.S. government both claimed and denied its control over its most notorious carceral encampment.

It was somewhere during this time that Amy and I became friends. She had been a generous, demanding outside reader for the manuscript of *Epic Encounters*, and I

was an admiring young professor. But we soon got to know each other as colleagues and friends. Mostly, that happened in Beirut. Starting in about 2005, Amy and I were both for several years on the International Board for the Center for American Studies and Research (CASAR) at the American University of Beirut. We went to the bi-annual conferences that during those years were one of the most exciting intellectual sites for American Studies scholars from the Middle East, the United States, and Europe with an interest in empire. At one of those conference, the CASAR staff organized a tour of southern Lebanon, which had been heavily bombed in Israel's 2006 invasion. I didn't go (I was doing interviews for my second book), but Amy and I had dinner after. She was deeply shaken by the trip, seeing—not for the first time, but newly—the devastating impact of Israel's military power in the region.

That tour was part of the process of Amy's beginning to work on her most personal, most difficult book, the one that would become *Our American Israel*. Writing it meant not only distancing herself from the liberal Zionism of her younger life, but a willingness to do so in detail and publicly. As she turned her critical eye to the history of the American embrace of Israel, she was determined to analyze that history not just as the particular preoccupation of American Jews, or American evangelicals, but as a broader story about the cultural narratives that made so many people "come to feel that the bond between the United States and Israel was historically inevitable, morally right, and a matter of common sense." Kaplan's argument was careful but unsparing: there has been a history of myth-making in which Israel is figured as the "invincible victim"—a nation marked as perpetually in danger but militarily masterful. The win/win model draws on the love affair that Americans tend to have with action-movie ready military power and well-executed violence, as well as the ideological and moral force that can accrue to those who are seen as victims.

For me, the most powerful chapter in the book is the one on the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, since it was there, Kaplan argues, that Israel's image as righteous underdog began to unravel. The images of the siege of Beirut and the destruction of the city shocked American audiences. "This is not the Israel we have seen in the past," commented John Chancellor of NBC News. It was not, although not because Israel had not already been involved in destroying the homes and lives of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. But this was a television war, and although Israel's allies pushed back hard, it set the stage for a slow (very slow) change in views. By the time of the first *intifadah* in 1987, there was a sense of change afoot. The U.S. conversation on Israel, Palestine, and US policy has moved fitfully and in limited ways, but it has moved, and Kaplan's book helps us understand both how that alliance evolved and how hard it has been to challenge.

This was a hard book for Amy to write, and one she did not publish without anxiety. Her public stances in favor of the BDS movement had already led to a number of personal attacks, and she expected that the book would lead to more of the same. That happened some, but not in the ways she feared. Instead, *Our American Israel* book was widely reviewed not only in academic journals but in general audience publications, with positive, often glowing assessments in the left and liberal media—the *Nation*, *Mondoweiss*—but also in less expected places like *Foreign Affairs*, the (UK) *Spectator*, the *New York Review of Books*. The conservative-leaning *Jerusalem Post* reviewed the book with far less enthusiasm, as did a number of conservative and/or pro-Israel websites, but it was striking that so many outlets did not feel they could ignore the book. That mattered.

Our American Israel was published in October 2018, 70 years after Israel's founding—and just a few months after Amy was diagnosed with brain cancer. Her first and only book talk was hosted by the University of Pennsylvania,

where a number of colleagues from Penn and beyond talked about the book's contributions. Amy had just been through surgery, but she came, listened, and spoke briefly. For the next two years, she struggled with her illness and the difficulties of treatment, surrounded by her family and friends. She was happy to know that her last book was having an impact, and she followed politics closely until the final months of her life, protesting against Trump or police violence when she could.

Amy's vision of politics was anti-imperialist, anti-racist, and feminist; she lived that through her writings and also through her engagement with her students and colleagues. Unlike some star academics, she did all of the hard work of being an academic with seriousness: reading dissertation chapters closely, writing recommendation letters, writing manuscript reviews, serving as department chair. One of her former graduate students, Phillip Maciak, described her as "brilliant, unsparing, unindulgent reader." Indeed. Many scholars' research and writing are far better as a result of her engagement, her willingness to support the intellectual work of her students and colleagues. But even for those who never met her, Kaplan's ethical commitment to her scholarship and to the politics that informed and inflected it have served, and will continue to serve, as a model for students, scholars, and activists alike.

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