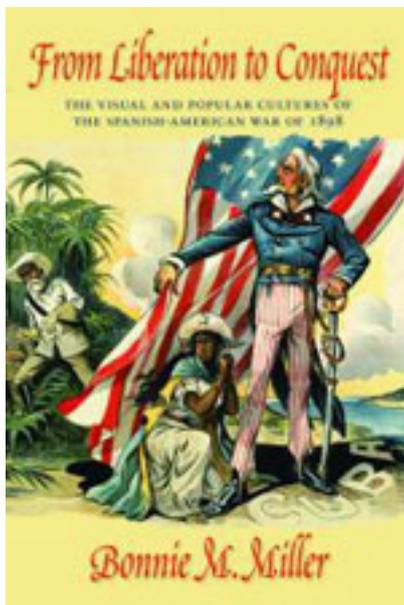


From Liberation to Conquest: The Visual and Popular Cultures of The Spanish American War of 1898, by Bonnie M. Miller

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In recent years, the turn of the twentieth century has emerged as a particularly rich terrain for literary, visual, and cultural historians investigating the construction of American identity. From critical readings of the photographic albums W.E.B. DuBois compiled for the 1900 Paris Exposition, to cultural studies of spaces like Coney Island, to the now almost canonical circulation history of lynching postcards, the desire to distill how visual culture codifies racial and national identity has never seemed more pressing.

In *From Liberation to Conquest: The Visual and Popular Cultures of The Spanish American War of 1898* Bonnie M. Miller intervenes into this exciting field. Currently an Associate Professor in American Studies at the University of Massachusetts in Boston, Miller's expertise in visual culture and print culture emerges as she assembles an expansive arsenal of archival materials, including performances, photographs, parades, stage plays, and newsprint, that narrate the Spanish American War. From the earliest pages, Miller explores how “cultural producers promote attention to the projects of war and empire”(2). Revising the common account of the War in which “yellow” journalism is figured as the only form of media to influence both the publics’ knowledge and policy makers’ decisions, Miller traces the development of war-images across media. She argues that by drawing upon “shared visual typographies of race, gender, and sexuality as

well as conventions of melodrama, romance, and spectacle” (4) a diverse range of media shaped the public’s consent to the war. Importantly, while *From Liberation to Conquest* works to reconstruct how the media shaped knowledge of the war by attending to reading practices, circulation patterns, and viewing trends, the perspective is necessarily limited. Indeed, Miller explicitly narrows her scope to media produced and consumed by white Americans. In spite of her admission, some of the most exciting moments come when Miller turns her attention to the layered and complex way that national African American newspapers like *The Colored American* negotiated the racialized discourse of war, empire and race.

Each of the seven chapters chronologically charts the United States’ involvement in the Cuba liberation movement of 1897, and later the Spanish American War through analysis of one aspect of media. Chapter one begins by looking towards the US media’s construction of Cuban-American relationships as ones that revolved around a humanitarian crisis. Miller argues that in the months leading up to the War, the press leveraged cartoons and drawings to create a “spectacular melodrama” (20) in which the United States played savior to a Cuba being tormented by Spain. Calling on familiar tropes of the pained body, helpless female captives, and white heroes, as Miller argues, the white American press justified their initial interest in Cuba. Here Miller’s sophisticated archival practices emerge as she charts, in detail, the diverse media practices that were deployed to stir the public’s interest in a *Cuba Libre* movement that ultimately shifted to justify imperial ends. Framed by the popular appeal of violent spectacles of death and mass destruction, Chapter Two considers how the paradox of amusement and misfortune was used to depict the 1898 explosion of the USS *Maine*. Here Miller draws focus to the ways in which the white American press carefully constructed a narrative of terrorism in motion pictures, simulations at world’s fairs, and drawings. Cutting across critical arguments in which “Historians describe this journalistic moment as one in which newspaper editors, particularly the yellow press, tried to outdo their rivals through excessive fabrication and sensationalism” (63), Miller suggests that the popular and press depictions of the Maine hinged upon “claims to authenticity” (63). From this vantage point, Miller assesses each “spectacle” performance of the USS Maine as an attempt to objectively register the “facts.”

Chapters Three through Five turn their attention to the representations of the war itself, exploring the shift from figuring the war as fight for freedom to an imperial grab. The expansive coverage was mirrored by the dramatic shift in racialized representations of Cubans, making it impossible for the public to imagine these countries as capable of self-rule. Importantly, as Miller explains in the third chapter, “The Visual Script Changes,” the persistent shift in the media representations of Cuba registers a larger ambiguity underwriting U.S. actions in Cuba and Hawaii, revealing a more nuanced perspective of “imperialism” and “empire.” For instance, the peoples of Hawaii, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines were alternately figured as babies, savages, harlots, or slaves. While Miller suggests that these print and visual “spectacles” both reveal and mask a fractured narrative of imperialism and war, but ultimately became leverage to justify US imperial actions. The last two chapters chart relatively unexplored territory and attend

to how popular culture mediated imperial debates about the Philippines in particular

In addition to bringing together an unusual and archive of visual and popular culture to reveal a different account of the United States' role in the Spanish American War and its subsequent rise as an imperial world power, Miller's work also relays a counter history of American visual culture. It is from this vantage point that Miller's work performs the most innovative critical labor. Indeed, the wonder of the Spanish American War is owing to its overlap with developments in visual technologies, print culture, and popular obsession with uncovering objective "truths." That is, as Miller frames it, the United States role in war was a unique product of a unique cultural and historical moment. Rather than highlighting tools like photography's indexical status as "truth" and journalism's ability to narrate objective "truth pictures" Miller tells a story of an anxious, unstable, and inconsistent visual moment. Indeed, the incongruity in the war's initial goals (freedom) and its outcome (imperialism) echo the shifting status of visual evidence. Miller's treatment of the USS *Maine* disaster in Chapter 2, "The Spectacle of Disaster", for example, details the visual inconsistency of images of the explosion. With a continually shifting visual frame that corresponded with accounts that the explosion was caused by internal or external forces, the images of the ship became equally unstable. From this vantage point, Miller begins the work of texturing our knowledge of turn of the century visual culture, figuring it as imaginative spectacle rather than truth bearing apparatus. *From Liberation to Conquest* thus proves to be an important contribution to a growing body of scholarship uncovering the vital place of visibility, print culture, and race at the turn of the century.

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