

## **1898 and Its Aftermath: America's Imperial Influence**

Jonathan Cortez, Dartmouth College

Throughout the late 19th century, Cubans and Filipinos led calls for independence against Spanish colonial rule. Conflicts between island independence fighters and colonizers reached a global audience by the eve of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As a result, the United States entered the conflict under the guise of supporting liberty and democracy abroad and thus declared war on Spain. The *Treaty of Paris of 1898*, which ended the War and thus Spanish colonial rule, resulted in the U.S. acquisition of territories off its coasts. 1898 marked a monumental turn for global politics. This micro-syllabus, *1898 and Its Aftermath: America's Imperial Influence*, touches on different articles that use the 1898 Spanish-Cuban-American War as a jumping-off point to understand how issues such as labor, citizenship, weather, and sports were impacted by America's racism and white supremacy across the globe.

Prior to 1898, the United States' policies were largely continental, save for Alaska in 1867. Acquiring overseas territories was not a mission for the federal government, and in fact the U.S. criticized Britain and Germany for their imperial endeavors. However, in the decades leading up to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the U.S. slowly built its presence through global military initiatives, its global communication networks, and its transportation infrastructure. Extensive foreign policy and military initiatives during the Gilded Age ensured America's position in this global competition for power against the likes of Spain, Russia, Japan, and Britain. Like other imperial powers, the United States relied on increasingly solid racial hierarchies to create distinctions between "civilized" and "uncivilized" nations. This understanding, steeped in notions of Anglo-Saxon superiority and white supremacy, determined which nations were incorporated into the global markets as leaders and which were incorporated as resources; further, the world was being divided into those who were "fit" to govern and those who were "unfit" to govern. The United States' views on acquiring off-shore territories had completely shifted by the eve of the Spanish-Cuban-American War when the nation began its largest imperial empire-building project under the guise of dutiful democracy-building abroad for "uncivilized" peoples.

*1898 and Its Aftermath: America's Imperial Influence* represents a wide-ranging set of historical interventions on the historiography of U.S. imperialism in places impacted by 1898 and its aftermath. From the shifting legal status of citizenship for Puerto Ricans to weather reports and its impact on agriculture in Cuba, these articles underscore how and why the Spanish-Cuban-American War of 1898 and its aftermath is a critical moment on which to pause and reflect on issues of racism, white supremacy, and American exceptionalism. Articles by Pietruska, Ventura, and Rouleau show how people, technology, and novels created knowledge infrastructures that served the U.S. imperial project. As Rouleau writes, "Empires need stories as much as they need guns" (480). But as Julie Greene and Giovannetti-Torress would argue, empires also need labor. Movable labor was critical to the functioning of the global economy as seen in the two previously mentioned and McGreevey. Further, citizenship, migration, and labor are all critical themes prevalent in the texts by Erman, McGreevey, Greene, Zeiler, and Giovannetti-Torress. All these articles and books utilize different entry points into the Spanish-Cuban-American War and its impacts across the globe, but all stay focused on a critique of Anglo-Saxonism, U.S. imperialism, and empire building at the turn of the twentieth century.

The articles included in this micro-syllabus originate from the annals of *The Journal of the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era* in an attempt to bring forth histories published in the journal about racial violence, racism, and white supremacy imbedded in U.S. Imperialism. Other publications by Cambridge University Press are included to provide greater contextual history. The making of this micro-syllabus also revealed considerable gaps in GAPE scholarship. Areas where scholars can and should pursue questions in relation to *1898 and Its Aftermath: America's Imperial Influence* include: the Philippine-American War, the annexation of Hawai'i, and the occupation of Haiti. These histories could further lend to this micro-syllabus. Increasing the number of texts on this topic provides a more robust understanding of the imperial reach of the United States during the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era. Further, these texts could reveal more direct relationships between the U.S.'s imperial reach and its accumulation of capital, its solidification of racial hierarchies, and its continual atrocities at home and abroad.

### **References**

**Erman, Sam. *Almost Citizens: Puerto Rico, the U.S. Constitution, and Empire*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019.**

In his first book, *Almost Citizens: Puerto Rico, the U.S. Constitution, and Empire*, Sam Erman tells the story of how Puerto Rico became part of the United States' territorial expansion at the turn of the twentieth century. More specifically, Erman explores the shift from what he terms the Reconstruction Constitution – that is, the constitution in the second half of the nineteenth century that determined rights and citizenship to those before not granted these privileges, therefore, opening up citizenship – to the notion of territorial non-incorporation – which limited and made ambiguous notions of citizenship. Erman shows this shift by looking at how legal cases, judges, presidents, and Puerto Ricans debated how Puerto Rico would be incorporated into the U.S., if at all. The debate about whether Puerto Ricans would be granted the rights and privileges of U.S. citizenship is the nexus towards which Erman writes.

**Giovannetti-Torress, Jorge L. *Black British Migrants in Cuba: Race, Labor, and Empire in the Twentieth Century Caribbean, 1898-1948*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018.**

Jorge Giovannetti-Torres writes about how Black British Caribbean migrants who traveled to the independent nation of Cuba post 1898 experienced social, political, and economic strife. The United States' military intervention in Cuba in the aftermath of 1898 gave way to foreign investors and corporations, which led the creation of sugar plantations and the encouragement of an influx of foreign labor. His focus of intra-Caribbean migration into Cuba is crucial for understating how particularly Black laboring migrants from the British Antilleans negotiated differing treatment dependent on their island of origin. Giovannetti-Torress does a fantastic job at situating the history of Afro-Caribbean labor within the historical context of both 19<sup>th</sup> century independence movements amidst increasing *miedo negro* ("black fear") and the unstable political context in 20<sup>th</sup> century Cuba. "[Black British Antillean's] presence on Cuban soil raised concerns among those who envisioned Cuba as a White Hispanic nation" writes Giovannetti-Torress (11). *Black British Migrants in Cuba* maintains a strong critique of how blackness was used as a scapegoat for various state instabilities and, further, how Afro-Caribbean migrants from Jamaica, Haiti, and Eastern Caribbean islands facilitated commonalities amongst the African diaspora. Over ten chapters Giovannetti-Torress' work entangles the histories of Cuba and the Caribbean working-class, the Afro-Caribbean diaspora, Britain, and the United States.

**Greene, Julie. “Movable Empire: Labor, Migration, and U.S. Global Power During the Gilded Age and Progressive Era.” *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 15.1 (Oct. 2016): 4-20.**

In her 2015 presidential address for the Society for Historians of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, President Julie Greene argues that the movement and mobility of labor, and especially racialized labor, was foundational to the expansion of U.S. empire. She writes, “Their [imperial migrants’] labor built the empire from the bottom up; their mobility was essential to the empire’s strategy, and hence became central to working people’s experiences throughout these decades” (4-5). Foundational is the argument that the U.S. empire was malleable – able to move to other places for different missions quickly and efficiently. Further, the parallel global movement of labor ensured that these missions could be carried out. By exploring the stories of Afro-Caribbean laborers in Panama and white U.S. military personnel in the Philippine-American War, Greene reveals how labor, race, and class functioned across the empire. While she tells a story of U.S. global empire at work, she more importantly highlights how workers also utilized mobility to advocate for themselves, pursue economic mobility, and ensure security. In this way, “migration became a terrain of struggle between workers and government officials” (4).

**McGreevey, Robert C. “Empire and Migration: Coastwise Shipping, National Status, and the Colonial Legal Origins of Puerto Rican Migration to the United States.” *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 11.4 (Oct. 2012): 553-73.**

Puerto Rican migration and citizenship has largely been at the discretion of the U.S. However, McGreevey provides a detailed example of how Puerto Ricans themselves also challenged the legal boundaries and categorizations of citizenship. McGreevey incisively focuses on the contradiction between the denial of Puerto Rican migration to the continental U.S. and Puerto Rican ports, and thus movement of goods, being considered within U.S. domestic shipping channels. “Even as the legal definition of the island as ‘coastwise’ placed Puerto Rico and its exports within the American economy,” McGreevey writes, “Puerto Rican migrants were routinely categorized as racial others firmly outside the bounds of American citizenship” (559). The United States wanted the benefits of the Puerto Rican economy but not Puerto Rican people. By centering various court cases between colonial migrants seeking entrance to the U.S. and the Bureau of Immigration policing borderlands, this article depicts the legal battles over whether people from Puerto Rico were considered “foreign” or “domestic.” Ultimately it was the case *Gonzalez v. Williams* (1904), McGreevey notes, that defined a new legal category in the form of a “U.S. National” – a category in between citizen and alien.

**Pietruska, Jamie L. “Hurricanes, Crops, and Capital: The Meteorological Infrastructure of American Empire in Western Indies.” *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 15.4 (Oct. 2016): 418-45.**

By exploring the history of the U.S. Weather Bureau’s West Indian weather service at the turn of the century, Pietruska offers an example of the mutually constitutive relationship between government science and American empire. As the U.S. began its military occupation of Cuba in 1899, the Weather Bureau also thought itself the architects of a new imperial meteorological infrastructure by building stations in various locales throughout the West Indies. Beginning as a military endeavor to protect naval vessels from harmful weather, the expansion of American meteorological infrastructure quickly became a database for U.S. agricultural investors. Through

mapping, collecting climatological data, and crop reporting, the West Indies agricultural harvests were predicted, operationalized for commercial growth, and entered into the global commodity exchange in the United States. Overall, “Hurricanes, Crops, and Capital” brilliantly exemplifies how imperialism was not simply militaristic or economic, but also dependent on knowledge infrastructures that, withheld, could have disastrous possibilities on the lives, livelihoods, and economies of the West Indies.

**Rouleau, Brian. “Childhood’s Imperial Imagination: Edward Stratemeyer’s Fiction Factory and the Valorization of American Empire.” *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 7.4 (Oct 2008): 479-512.**

Youth series fiction concerning imperialism at the turn of the twentieth century targeted boys in the United States for the continuation of imperial boosterism. As Rouleau writes, “Through the repetition of racial dogma and patriotic slogans, these books inculcated a sense of personal and national superiority in the project of American aggrandizement” (510). These books reproduced notions of Anglo-Saxon superiority, dichotomies of civilized and uncivilized peoples, and manliness, all largely dependent on global racial hierarchies and anti-Blackness and anti-Indigeneity. The author recounts the impact on pop culture by Edward Stratemeyer, noted as one of the most successful youth series fiction writers for boys during this time. American boys could imagine themselves in the act of conquest. As Rouleau writes, “Juvenile literature shaped and reinforced the shared mental images of empire entertained by the nation’s boyhood” (487). Youth fictional novels aimed at boys during, and in the aftermath of, 1898 solidified the continuation of ideologies about the benevolence of U.S. influence abroad for decades.

**Ventura, Theresa. “‘I am Already Annexed’: Roman Reyes Lala and the Crafting of ‘Philippine’ Advocacy for American Empire.” *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 19.3 (2020): 426-46.**

Theresa Ventura tells the story of how Roman Reyes Lala, a Manila-born author who migrated to the U.S. and became a citizen just before 1898, fashioned himself into a public intellectual in pursuits to recast the perception of an entire archipelago. Through his writings, Lala encouraged U.S. annexation of the Philippines and by the turn of the century became known as an authority on the history of the islands and a patronage of the Republican party. Lala offered himself as proof that a civilized Filipino was possible, and thus capable of achieving U.S. citizenship; however, his Republican supporters offered him to the public as “evidence of U.S. benevolence and Philippine civilizational potential shorn of citizenship” (428). Ventura defines this as an ‘embodied contradiction’ that Lala held within himself. A contradiction dependent on commerce as a medium of colonial knowledge – gaining riches and notoriety in exchange for his American imperial boosterism. While Lala’s career goals to move from authors to administrator were never realized when he was denied an appointment to the Philippine Commission, his writings were heavily pulled on to justify the expansion of the American empire in the aftermath of 1898.

**Zeiler, Thomas W. “Basepaths to Empire: Race and the Spalding World Baseball Tour.” *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 6.2 (Apr. 2007): 179-207.**

In this article, Thomas Zeiler argues how the Spalding world baseball tour of 1888-1889 “implanted rationales for racism to be exploited by later imperial practices” (206). Zeiler recounts moments of how the white baseball tourists treated racialized peoples and cultures – such as Hawaiians and Egyptians – differently while claiming Anglo-Saxon colonial societies –

such as Australians and Europeans – as “civilized.” For example, the players attempted to throw baseballs over the Egyptian Great Sphinx of Giza and punch the sculpture in its eye. Spalding later excused these acts as “mere fun” (203). However, the article makes clear that the player’s youthful antics abroad stemmed from their understanding of American exceptionalism, white supremacy, and anti-Blackness. Zeiler argues that the Spalding tour strongly represented and maintained racial hierarchies present in the United States during the Gilded Age and then exported these hierarchies overseas.

**About the author:** Jonathan Cortez is currently the César E. Chávez Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Latin American, Latino, and Caribbean Studies at Dartmouth College. They are a historian of twentieth-century issues of race, labor, migration, space, surveillance, relational Ethnic Studies, and Latinx Studies. Jonathan’s manuscript, “The Age of Encampment: Race, Surveillance, and the Power of Spatial Scripts, 1933-1950,” reveals underlying continuities between the presence of threatening bodies and the increasing surveillance of these bodies in camps throughout the United States.