*The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* (2021), **20,** 548–565

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS



TEACHING THE GILDED AGE AND PROGRESSIVE ERA

# Exploring Racial Violence During the Gilded Age and Progressive Era: A Microsyllabus Project

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**Keywords:** Racial violence; African American history; Indigenous history; U.S. imperialism; teaching resource

## Introduction

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doi: 10.1017/S1537781421000463

The police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis in May 2020 (just twenty-two city blocks from where I write) sparked global demonstrations and renewed long-standing struggles for change. At the southern border, government agents separated migrant children from their families and confined detainees in cages. Politicization of the pandemic made Asian Americans targets of violent racist outbursts. Indigenous women continued to suffer disproportionate harm with little attention to their plight. Finally, the right-wing insurrection at the U.S. Capitol in Washington, DC, in January 2021 marked the moment as especially volatile.

Even as protesters decried state-sanctioned violence and white supremacy politics devolved into open sedition, students and citizens alike began asking questions about the many varieties of racial violence in U.S. history. Historians know that racial violence—a central feature of both the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era—takes many forms. The deep roots of violence in American history display continuities with today's terrifying examples. Making sense of the present depends on making sense of the past. The history of racial violence in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era is more important than ever.

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Thankfully, scholars have worked hard to expose and elucidate the centrality of violent injustice (and resistance to it) in our nation's history. Since 2002, articles and essays published in the *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* explored this complicated terrain via careful, thoughtful, evidence-based analysis. Their collective insights make the journal a perfect resource for helping educators and students to consider (or reconsider) what they know about racial violence in U.S. history.

With all this in mind, a working group derived from the editorial board of the *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* came together to consider how the journal might best serve readers and educators during these especially tumultuous times. After much deliberation, we asked the co-editors to deploy the considerable resources collected in past issues of *JGAPE* (as well as other publications). Taking our cue from an ongoing initiative at the *Radical History Review*, we wanted to offer up microsyllabi to help students and teachers better understand the multiple trajectories of racial violence in the United States.

In full agreement, the co-editors turned to emerging scholars, who scoured past issues of *JGAPE* and other journals. Strikingly creative and thoughtful, the microsyllabi they created point us in useful directions. These brief summations of entire periods and wide-ranging literatures serve as a starting point for you to engage recent work, reintroduce yourself to classic pieces, and prepare yourself for both the classroom and public engagement in the months and years ahead.

Jae Tyler-Wolfe, a doctoral student in history at Kent State University, uses their microsyllabus "Where Did This Come From?" to direct our attention to the racism embedded in the structures around us. The essays they selected show that the "United States exists as it does because of how racial prejudice and violence shaped the logic and function of American institutions." In fact, "racism, these articles show, is a foundational part of the structure of American governance." From anti-Chinese immigration laws to anti-radical racism, the pieces they highlight make it clear that racism was (and is) a root cause of violence and inequity in nearly every facet of daily life.

In "Racial Violence in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era," Aaron Jacobs, a PhD candidate in history at Brown University, makes the point that the "exercise of state power is deeply entangled with processes of racialization." He uses this insight to make connections between anti-Black violence and other forms of state-sanctioned racial formation. The articles gathered here range widely, examining racial violence and its complicated relationship to American law, as the root of intense resistance to racism, and as a mainspring of empire.

Anthony Stamillo, a PhD student in U.S. and public history at Loyola University Chicago, focuses tightly on anti-Black racism in popular culture. In so doing, he rightly claims that while in 2021, "activists push for recognition of the right to black life, celebrities attempt to shine their spotlights on justice initiatives, and public figures debate solutions to systemic racism," our contemporary "discourse parallels that of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era." In "Anti-Black Violence and Popular Culture," Stamillo pulls together scholarship on Black celebrity, Jim Crow rule, cultural representation, and nationalism to show us how public discourse simultaneously shaped and was shaped by racist perceptions and racial realities.

Recognizing the widespread presence of racial violence in the United States after 1865, John Legg, a PhD student in history at George Mason University, insists that we see the connections between anti-Black violence and anti-Indigenous violence. As his micro-syllabus "Indigenous and Settler Violence During the Gilded Age and Progressive Era" makes clear, Jim Crow and the continental empire fed off each other. Legg reminds us that settler violence—"the living structure of erasure, removal, and eradication of Indigenous

nations committed by a settler state"—extends to modern historiography and even the terminology used by historians. The ongoing reality of this violence in Native nations and communities marks the memory making of today.

Because racial violence shaped experiences outside, as well as inside, the United States, Jonathan Cortez, the César E. Chávez Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Latin American, Latino, and Caribbean Studies at Dartmouth College, focuses our attention on overseas empire making in 1898 (and the years that followed). In "1898 and Its Aftermath: America's Imperial Influence," Cortez makes it clear that "issues such as labor, citizenship, weather, and sports were impacted by America's racism and white supremacy across the globe." Indeed, this collection of readings shows that, under the "guise of dutiful democracy-building abroad for 'uncivilized' peoples" the United States committed itself to not only sustaining racial hierarchies at home but also spreading them throughout the world.

Laid bare by the global pandemic, precarity and austerity intensified racism—and resistance to it—in 2020 and 2021. Again and again, unapologetic racists asserted themselves even as new coalitions of Americans took to the streets to resist the latest anti-democratic turn. Resonating with the animus of the past, racial violence in our time demands historical analysis. Emphasizing continuity and connections, these microsyllabi make it clear that the history of the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era remains especially relevant. Thankful for the time and talent they display, we share these microsyllabi with you in the ongoing hope that our collective work in *JGAPE* will help in the ongoing effort to create an anti-racist future.

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

Jonathan Cortez

doi: 10.1017/S1537781421000438

Throughout the late nineteenth century, Cubans and Filipinos led calls for independence against Spanish colonial rule. In 1898 the United States entered the conflict under the guise of supporting liberty and democracy abroad, declaring war on Spain. The Treaty of Paris of 1898, which ended the war as well as Spanish colonial rule, resulted in the U.S. acquisition of territories off its coasts. This microsyllabus, "1898 and Its Aftermath: America's Imperial Influence," collects 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.

"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 empires also need labor. Labor, migration, and citizenship are all critical themes in the articles by Erman, McGreevey,