

Editors' Note

Brian M. Ingrassia and Rosanne Currarino 

What color was turn-of-the-century civilization?

Many, if not most, Anglo-Americans assumed that “civilization” and “whiteness” were synonymous. And yet, as scholars from Gail Bederman to Matthew Frye Jacobson have shown, making “civilization” white was never a straightforward process. It required persistent effort. The articles in this issue show how complex and difficult it was to make—and maintain—the correlation between whiteness and civilization in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era.

The issue begins with David Cox’s article, “Blue Gums, Black Bodies, White Supremacy: Narratives of Racial Contagion in the Late Nineteenth Century.” Cox shows how eugenicists and journalists drew upon the pseudoscience of Social Darwinism, as well as African American folklore traditions, to invent the trope of the savage Black man with blue gums and a venomous bite. Newspapers contrasted these fictitious violent “blue gums” with ostensibly normative white bodies (and their red gums) to argue that emancipated African Americans were regressing, or returning to an earlier, more bestial, stage of development. White Americans in the age of Jim Crow did not need more evidence of supposed Black savagery and atavism—indeed, this was a perfect case of confirmation bias—but the intersection of modern media, biological science, and criminology took an old superstition and imbued it with new fears and modern urgency.

In Johnny Fulfer’s article, “The Goldbugs Go Global: The Philippines, China, and the Foundations of Development,” turn-of-the-century civilization may have been golden. In an age of empire, following so soon after the United States’ own intense debates over “free silver” and bimetallism, proponents of the gold standard saw nations that hewed to silver, especially China and the Philippines, as less than civilized. This so-called “silver savagism” seemed like a problem American imperialism could fix, and it resulted in the 1903 Philippine Coinage Act, which imposed the gold standard on the United States’ newest territory (while also pegging the Filipino peso to the American dollar). With the right monetary system, perhaps people in East Asia could become American colonial subjects and consumers. In this case, the element sometimes referred to as the “white metal” was not civilized enough for those North Americans who saw stable currency based on gold as the sole foundation for international trade.

Similarly, in the era of the First World War, American bankers sought to create a standardized global financial order based on American-style capitalism and hierarchy. Perhaps, for these elite “men of capital,” postwar civilization would be green: the color of notes issued by the U.S. Federal Reserve in the years following its founding in 1913. Olga Koullisis’s article, “Organizing Minds and Managing People: J.P. Morgan Bankers on Transatlantic Consolidation of Communication and Capital, 1917–1920,” shows how a coterie of financiers labored to create an international economic order where deliberation and negotiation, spearheaded by ostensibly civilized white men, eliminated the need for military violence. Koullisis’s three case studies—dealing with the development and growth

of the U.S. Red Cross, the Allied Maritime Transport Council, and the League of Nations—illustrate how networks of capitalism and global governance emerging from Progressive Era financial institutions shaped the postwar world.

Finally, Shannon Bontrager compels us to consider how civilization in an era of foreign imperialist wars may have been white, but that white bodies returning from overseas conflicts had to be sanitized. During the Spanish-American War, U.S. military officials determined that the bodies of soldiers who had fallen from diseases such as dysentery, cholera, and yellow fever—diseases that caused the majority of American casualties in the “Splendid Little War”—needed to be disinfected upon their return to American soil. Caskets were filled with chemicals and then punched with drainage holes, so they could be safely repatriated to the continent. Speakers like President William McKinley subsequently built upon Civil War memory to portray these sanitized remains as martyrs to the long arc of America’s republican project. In this way, argues Bontrager in “Disinfecting the Dead, Sanitizing Empire: The Cultural Memory of Fallen Soldiers in Cuba,” imperialists obscured the realities of America’s overseas excursions and created a collective memory of pristine, white sacrifice for the global good.

Taken together, these fine articles show how the meanings of civilization were still being worked out in turn-of-the-century America, especially as the United States expanded its global role politically, militarily, and financially. Writers, scientists, financiers, and federal officials were, by the early twentieth century, creating the expansive (and inherently unequal) networks that would herald what has come to be known as the American Century. This was a colorful time, albeit in the most problematic of senses. Please join us for these exceptional and incisive articles, as well as several thoughtful and perceptive book reviews.