

ANTI-US IMPERIALISM AS ASSERTION OF BLACK SUBJECTIVITY AT THE TURN OF THE LAST CENTURY

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Abstract

US imperialism of the Philippines at the turn of the last century raised difficult and painful issues for African Americans struggling to gain justice and equal rights in American society. Kelly Miller, an African American academician and active polemicist for Negro rights, wrote in 1900, at the beginning of the Philippine American War, his essay "The Impact of Imperialism on the Negro Race" to exhort his fellow black Americans to oppose the US colonization of the Philippines and to support Philippine independence. Miller saw through the American government's policy of "benevolent assimilation" toward the Philippines and recognized its racist underpinnings. For Miller the imperialist wars revealed the moral bankruptcy of the American government in violating the principles of the Declaration of Independence and reneging on its promise of equal rights to black Americans. In this essay I will argue that Miller espoused anti-imperialism as an assertion of a morally ascendant black subjectivity. In the face of rabid violent exclusion of blacks in American national life, Miller proposed an alternative narrative of history that contested the white narrative of racial supremacy. African Americans, in remaining loyal to the principles of equality and justice, would suffer so much more but would eventually and inevitably constitute a superior civilization based on moral principles. I will show, however, that like most other black middle class antiracist thinking of his time, Miller's alternative narrative of black ascendancy was undermined by his acceptance of Western ideological paradigms of civilization and standards of moral superiority. Yet, Miller's position raises important questions about the discursive "containment" of uplift ideology in the context of the imperialist debates.

Keywords

Kelly Miller, Philippine American War , US imperialism

About the Author

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Matthew Frye Jacobson, in *Whiteness of a Different Color*, studies the reconfiguration of "whiteness" during the turn-of-the-century American imperialist wars. Non-Anglo European immigrants—the Irish, Russian Jews, Poles, Italians, and Greeks—who had not been considered white enough by the Anglo-Americans were nonetheless, conferred (as citizens) "the fruits of white supremacist conquest" (206). The Anglo-Americans drew the color line around the newly constituted fellow Caucasians in the face of the perceived threat of savagery represented by blacks and the other colored

peoples in the territories abroad (7). Those outside the color line—the colored peoples, especially the Blacks who lived within the national body—were constituted as enemies (Kaplan 219).

For African Americans who had been struggling to gain justice and equal rights in US society, this period would be one of the most difficult, what Raymond Logan described as “the nadir,” in black American history (qtd. in Gaines 437). As interest in overseas expansion rose in the last decade of the 19th century, black Americans experienced renewed onslaught of political and social repression. They saw their hard-worn political rights being worn away by the unabating tides of racism. William Loren Katz, in his preface to *The Black Press Views American Imperialism (1898-1900)* by George Marks, describes the sufferings of the blacks at the turn of the last century:

Beginning in 1890 each state of the old Confederacy wrote into law, often into its constitution, provisions for the disfranchisement of its black citizens and their segregation in public schools, conveyances, and facilities.

In the South, mob action accompanied discriminatory laws and decisions. From 1889 to 1901, when overseas expansion escalated, 2,000 black men, women and children were lynched, often with unspeakable brutality. (viii)

He narrates too, how African Americans elected into government office were murdered and black voters terrorized (viii). The racist rhetoric around the Cuban crisis, and especially in the Philippine-American War, betrayed a “homologous identification” of the black Americans with the Cubans and the Filipinos from the whites’ point of view.

[T]he Cubans’s perceived racial identity (as Negro) bolstered the argument about their incapacity for self-government—the power to represent themselves. Filipinos were similarly portrayed as stereotypically “Negroid” in popular writing and political cartoons. (Kaplan 228)

The conflation, especially of the Filipino rebels (called “Niggers” by white soldiers) with the African Americans betrayed how the whites regarded the blacks (Bresnahan 164-8).

Amy Kaplan, in her study of black soldiers during the Spanish-American War, “Black and Blue on San Juan Hill,” points out that this “homologous racial identity” was

nevertheless “open to conflicting political interpretations.” Southern Democrats used the same argument—the inferiority of colored races, black or brown—to oppose annexation of the Philippines so as not to add more Negroes to the republic (228).

African American communities were divided on the question of American imperialism (Marks xvii). Booker T. Washington, who was recognized by the government as spokesman for black Americans, campaigned vigorously among his people to support the Republican foreign policy (Katz x). Some blacks saw the colonization of the Philippines as a chance for black imperialism, to enrich themselves as Negro colonists (Marks 101). Majority of the black writers—members of the press, novelists, essayists—however, took a strong position against American imperialism:

Many editorials in the black press took the side of their “brown brothers” and decried the exportation of post-Reconstruction disfranchisement, Jim Crow laws, and the resurgence of violence and virulent racism to the new outposts of empire. (Kaplan 228)

This present study will focus on one black American’s formulation of resistance to American imperialism—Kelly Miller’s, an academician and active polemicist for Negro rights, whose writings have been largely ignored by contemporary scholars. Miller’s “The Impact of Imperialism on the Negro Race,” written in 1900, at the beginning of the Philippine-American War, encapsulates many of the issues imperialism raised for black Americans. The article is among the very few extant fully articulated essays on the Philippine-American War written by a black American during the period.

Roger Bresnahan, in *In Time of Hesitation: American Anti-Imperialists and the Philippine-American War*, comments that Miller realized in 1900 what W. E. B. Du Bois understood only much later, “that suppression of brown men in Asia would lead to further suppression of black men in America” (13). Miller saw through the American government’s proposed policy of “benevolent assimilation” toward the Philippines and recognized its racist underpinnings. For Miller, the imperialist wars revealed the moral bankruptcy of the American government in violating the principles of the Declaration of Independence and reneging on its promise of equal rights to black Americans. I will argue that Miller espoused anti-imperialism as an assertion of a morally ascendant black subjectivity. In the face of rabid violent exclusion of blacks in American national life, Miller proposes an alternative narrative of history that contests the white narrative of racial supremacy. African Americans, in remaining loyal to the principles of equality and justice, suffered so much more but eventually and inevitably constituted a superior civilization based on

moral principles. I will show, however, that like most other black middle class antiracist thinking of his time, Miller's alternative narrative of black ascendancy was undermined by his acceptance of Western ideological paradigms of civilization and standards of moral superiority. Yet, Miller's position raises important questions about the discursive "containment" of uplift ideology in the context of the imperialist debates.

KELLY MILLER'S LIFE-TIME WORK OF DEFENDING AFRICAN AMERICAN RIGHTS

Kelly Miller, educator and essayist, was born on July 23, 1863 in Winnsboro, South Carolina. He is the sixth of ten children of a free Negro, Kelly Miller, Sr., a tenant farmer, and Elizabeth Roberts, a slave. His father served in the Confederate army and he had a paternal uncle who later became a member of the South Carolina legislature. The young Miller rose from poverty through scholarships and graduated from Howard University with a degree in mathematics in 1886. While studying in college, he worked at the US Pension Office and was able to buy a farm out of his savings as gift to his parents at his graduation. After college, he continued working at the Pension Office, at the same time pursuing his studies in mathematics, physics, and astronomy. Miller became a mathematics professor at Howard, in 1890, where he also earned a master's degree in 1901 and a doctorate in 1903. In 1894, he married Annie May Butler, a teacher in Baltimore Normal School, by whom he had five children (Frazier 456).

Miller was appointed Howard's Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences from 1907-1918 and is credited for developing the university's curriculum, broadening it to include the physical and biological sciences and sociology. Through all his years with Howard, Miller wrote and lectured extensively throughout the country on the race issue. Miller turned from the teaching of mathematics to sociology, in the interest of defending and promoting his race (Woodson 138). Miller, during his lifetime, was best known for his "significant contribution to the higher education of the Negro" (Frazier 456) and his "open letters" to Thomas Dixon, Jr. and to Presidents Roosevelt, Wilson and Harding in defense of African American rights and dignity (Review of *The Everlasting Stain* 573). It was his presentation and analysis of the state of Negro education that the US Bureau of Education chose for its 1901 *Report* (Eisenberg 182). He assisted, together with others, W.E. B. Du Bois in editing *The Crisis*, the journal of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (Johnson 15). Miller was the founder of the Negro Sanhedrin Movement, the first attempt to form a coalition of all black American groups in the US in the early 1920s (Hughes 3).

A colleague at Howard University described Miller as “one of the most conspicuous publicists of the race, being the author of several books and numerous pamphlets, beside making frequent contributions to periodicals, both in America and abroad” (Holmes 377). He was one of the first African American academician to write regularly for the black press, with articles appearing weekly for twenty years, in “more than 100 newspapers” (*The New York Times*). The Associated Publishers, in its notice for Miller’s *The Everlasting Stain*, called the author as “the greatest pamphleteer of the Negro race, having distributed over half a million documents in this form” and “the greatest essayist the Negro race has yet produced” (Review of *The Everlasting Stain* 573). Moreover, Miller traveled extensively throughout the country, giving speeches before groups of blacks and even whites (Eisenberg 183).

Given Miller’s involvements, it was inevitable that he would be drawn into the fierce public debate at the beginning of the twentieth century between W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington on the issue of “industrial education” and “higher education.” Though Miller defended Washington vigorously, he could see the “narrowness of the views of the advocates of the industrial education” and advocated “higher education for the Negro because he thought that only through a liberal education could the nature of men be ‘uplifted’” (Frazier 456). For Miller, the two poles, representing two different approaches to the Negro problem (“conservative” and “radical”), were both strategically necessary to win Negro rights. Miller, the mathematician that he was, described the dispute as an “attempt to decide whether the base or the altitude is the more important element of the triangle.” (Miller, *Race Adjustment* 11-2, 28)

Miller’s approach to the race problem was characterized as “analytical and rational ... an appeal to reason and ... to conscience” (Frazier 456). Miller, in all of his writings, flatly rejected the white supremacist theory of black racial inferiority, brilliantly refuting the claims of “scientific racism” (e.g., Miller “A Review of Hoffman’s Race Traits”). He believed in the basic equality of races and in the important contribution Negroes could make to the nation. Miller’s published essays are collected in four volumes: *Race Adjustment* (1908), *Out of the House of Bondage* (1912), *An Appeal to Conscience* (1916), and *The Everlasting Stain* (1924).

MILLER’S ANTI-IMPERIALISM AS ASSERTION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN SUBJECTIVITY

“The Effect of Imperialism on the Negro Race,” one of Miller’s earliest essays,

written at the beginning of the Philippine-American War, allows us to look at the issues imperialism raised for the black Americans. The article gives us an idea of Miller's views on imperialism and his formulation of the Negro subjectivity and position vis-à-vis the dominant white Americans.

For Miller, the connection between domestic and global racism was very clear. Miller opens his essay: "The welfare of the Negro race is vitally involved in the impending policy of imperialism" (157). The whole essay is an illustration of this *vital* connection between imperialism and the African American. Miller discusses imperialism in the context of the entire history of black struggle for justice and equality in American society. He goes back to two significant moments in this history: the adoption of the Declaration of Independence and the amendment of the federal constitution. Miller claims the Declaration of Independence as "the emancipation proclamation of the human race" (158). For the black slaves "this has been the one ray of hope which has been held out to the Negro amid more than a century of trial and vicissitude" (157).

The fact that Miller calls on the entire black American history to discuss imperialism indicates what he recognizes as the grave importance of the situation: American imperialism is a landmark event in black-white relationship in America, an event that will impact black Americans radically, just as the Declaration of Independence and the amendment of the constitution did, but toward the opposite direction of repression and disempowerment. In such a crisis, Miller calls on the full force of African American revolutionary legacy.

Miller's stress on the significance of the Declaration of Independence is crucial, too, to his critique of US imperialism and his formulation of the Negro subjectivity. The principles of the Declaration become for Miller the benchmark of morality that defines being an American, and ultimately, being civilized. Miller twits the Anglo-American for his "bad logic" though having a "good sense": "the Revolutionary fathers did not dare apply the logic of their principles. They lacked the courage of their conscience." It took a hundred years before the abstract principles were given "the first step toward its realization" (157).

Miller critiques contemporary US society as controlled by might rather than principles: "all sensible men know that might is still the effective force in government. In spite of constitutional compacts or written promises, the strong will rule the weak, the rich will control the poor, and the wise man will dominate the fool." Miller, in his version of Social Darwinism, sees this status quo, characterized by the domination of the weak by the powerful, as a product of "social forces at work" but which will give way to a higher form of civilization (158).

Miller points out that the present form of American government is predicated on “equality of power and prowess” and “any element which falls obviously short of the general average will be illy used, and especially so if characterized by a physical or social brand which renders them easily distinguishable” (158). Democracy is equality of privileges but only for those with the power to maintain and protect them. Miller gives the example of the red man who has been excluded from the republic (158). Miller recognizes that in the world of Anglo-American *realpolitik*, principles do not count for much.

For the blacks, who are “characterized by a physical and social brand” of inferiority, the struggle for equality and justice will both be long and arduous: “The Negro has suffered much and must suffer much more.... So great is the gauntlet of difficulties that the Negro must run before he reaches the mark and the high calling of American citizenship.” Note that the “American citizenship” Miller refers to here is a citizenship in a future, more perfect America, not the America he critiques acerbically in the previous paragraphs. “The cruelties, outrages and political repression,” however, “which the Negro suffers are but temporary obscuration of the light” (158). Characteristic of Miller’s writing is a pervading sense of confidence that the blacks will achieve justice and equality: “This glorious transformation is of necessity a slow and gradual process.... We must be patient with the inevitable” (158).

Implicit in Miller’s presentation of black subjectivity is the narrative of the morally ascendant black. His idea of the moral black partakes of the powerful black jeremiad tradition. The black jeremiad, the Negro version of the Puritan jeremiad, sees Negro suffering in terms of biblical topology and interprets this suffering as a sign of being “chosen” (Hubbard 342). Miller, in relating the long history of black suffering uses the *topos* of the Israelites in the wilderness and in Egyptian slavery, and even points to blacks outdoing St. Paul in his sufferings.

In the wilderness of sorrow he was sustained by a vista of the promised land. What though the African was ruthlessly snatched from his native land where he basked in the sunshine of savage bliss and was happy? That during the hellish horrors of the middle passage the ocean basin was whitened with his bones and the ocean currents reddened with his blood? That for centuries he labored and groaned under the taskmaster’s cruel lash? That down to the present day he has had to endure more than Pauline perils of fire and sword and wrath of race? (157)

Note the image of the suffering Christ when he says, “The Negro has suffered much and must suffer much more” (158).

Miller's version of this black tradition is reworked in a theory of history cast in the scientific discourse of the time. This theory, of which we get glimpses of in "The Effect of Imperialism on the Negro Race" is developed more fully in another essay written five years later, "As to the Leopard Spots." Miller published this essay to refute Thomas Dixon's racist article in *The Saturday Evening Post*. Dixon, author of *The Leopard's Spots*, a white supremacist novel, on which Griffith's controversial film, *Birth of a Nation*, was based, claimed that "no amount of education of any kind, industrious, classical or religious, can make a Negro a white man or bridge the chasm of centuries which separates him from the white man in the evolution of human history" (30-1). In his refutation, Miller debunks the claims of "scientific racism" as long discredited and cites social scientists' declaration that there is no scientific basis to claims of innate superiority or inferiority of races (36).

As an alternative to a racial determinist theory, Miller proposes a theory of human civilization that posited a pattern of growth and decay in the development of "races and nations," a republican cyclical trope that was quite common in the nineteenth century and earlier:

In the course of history the ascendance of the various races and nations of men is subject to strange variability. The Egyptian, the Jew, the Indian, the Greek, the Roman, the Arab, has each had his turn at domination. When the earlier nations were in their zenith of art and thought and song, Franks and Britons and Germans were roaming through dense forests, groveling in subterranean caves, practicing barbarous rites, and chanting horrid incantations to graven gods. (34)

Miller sees the environment and social forces as the source of the differences in the levels of development of cultures, with superiority as a relative label. For example, Miller points out that the Anglo-Saxon civilization may be dominant now but it would not be in the future.

In the great cosmic scheme of things, some races reach the lime-light of civilization ahead of others. But that temporary forwardness does not argue inherent superiority as evident as any fact of history. An unfriendly environment may hinder and impede the one, while fortunate circumstances may quicken and spur the other. Relative superiority is only a transient phase of human development. (33)

In Miller's version of social darwinism, human civilization advances as "the torch

is handed down from race to race and from age to age, and gains in brilliancy as it goes” (41). Achievements of genius by each civilization are passed on to the next and belong to no particular race or nation. For example, the multiplication table belongs to the whole human race, “it is the equal inheritance of anyone who can appropriate and apply it” (42). That is why Miller, in the essay, “The Effect of Imperialism Upon the Negro Race,” can claim the Declaration of Independence as a declaration for all mankind (158). The principles of the Declaration does not belong only to Anglo Americans in what has been described as Miller’s narrative of “a moral progress of mankind” (Frazier 456).

In this theory of history, Miller locates the Negro as a young race: “The Negro represents a belated race which has not yet taken a commanding part in the progressive movement of the world.” This however is not to be taken as a sign of inherent inferiority, but rather, simply that there has been “an unfriendly environment” that “hinder and impede” (“As to the Leopard’s Spots” 33).

This theory underpins much of Miller’s analysis in “The Effect of Imperialism Upon the Negro Race.” Miller can confidently proclaim that the Negro will “work out his salvation,” his sufferings in the past and his situation now are necessary “in order to fulfill the law of sociologic righteousness” (158). Given this teleology, the black American can, therefore, endure all kinds of suffering, can consider all “cruelties, outrages and political repression” as mere “temporary obscuration of the light” (158). But there is one thing that the Negro will not endure: “any policy which strikes at the vital doctrine of the Declaration of Independence would be, to him, like blotting out the sun from the sky” (158)—and imperialism was such a policy.

Miller captures clearly the African American dilemma in the imperialism debate. The Republican Party, the party that “effected freedom” for the blacks and “promised immediate fulfillment of abstract rights” (159) now espoused aggression and oppression: “The party of Lincoln and Sumner, in its latest declaration of principle, had so far forgotten the tradition of the fathers as to recognize them by only a faint and empty reference” (160). But the “unsophisticated black yeoman,” “the simple-minded black voter” (159), had given blind allegiance to this party. Miller bitterly comments that the ordinary black “ate the bread of their political enemies without the slightest suspicion of ingratitude” (159). Moreover, in the last four years, under the administration of this party, the black “race has suffered severer onslaughts on its political rights, a more cruel carnival of lynching and murder, and sharper proscription of civil privilege than at any time since emancipation” (160). Despite the shoddy treatment by this party of freedom, blacks continued to serve American society: “The Negro is the only American who practices political and civic self-

sacrifice; for what other class of citizens would proclaim to the country, 'Though you slay me, yet will I serve you?'" (159). This party was now playing with the emotion of the black people by calling on them to show their gratitude and loyalty to the US by supporting and participating in the war against Filipino freedom fighters (contemptuously referred to as "Niggers" by white American soldiers [qtd. in Bresnahan 166]).

On the other hand, the Democrats, the traditional enemy party that withheld equality and justice from blacks in the South, were now espousing anti-imperialism. But it was well known during this time that the anti-imperialism of the Democrats stemmed from racism as well: they were afraid that colonization would increase the number of inferior peoples in the republic (Jacobson, "Windows on Imperialism" 183). Miller graphically dramatized this painful irony:

One says to the other: "Although we suppress the Negro in the south, you shall not suppress the Malay in the Orient." The other replies: "You are stopped from protesting by your first admission," and then turning to the Negro, it says coyly: "Because these fellows suppress black men in Louisiana, you ought to resent it by helping us suppress brown men in Luzon." Between the two, the brother in black, or rather the brother in colors, finds cold consolation indeed. The Negro is thus placed politically between the devil and the deep sea. The logic of the situation suggests a stationary posture, with the hope that either the devil will withdraw or the sea recede. (161)

Miller's discussion of the two parties is a critique of the Anglo American. He points out how the Anglo-Saxon race has turned its back on the principles of the Declaration of Independence, both in its treatment of the blacks and its choice to follow the path of imperialism. The United States is not even attempting to hide its incursion with its favorite phrase "consent of the governed"; the war vs. the Philippines was naked aggression: "the United States is attempting to force, *vi et armis*, an alien government upon a unanimously hostile and violently unwilling people" (162). The Anglo-dominated American government had shown abuse of power, an utter disregard for the principles on which its country was founded.

The whole trend of imperial aggression is antagonistic to the feebler races. It is a revival of racial arrogance. It has ever been the boast of the proud and haughty race or nation that God has given them the heathen for their inheritance and the uttermost parts of the earth for their possession. It is always their prerogative to rule them with a rod of

iron and to dash them to pieces like a potter's vessel. Rudyard Kipling, the mouthpiece of the larger imperialism, has clothed this ancient doctrine in a modern dress in his famous "White Man's Burden." A glorious triumph, indeed for those who esteem themselves the "Lord's anointed," but it cannot be received so enthusiastically by "the lesser breeds without the law" (163-4).

Miller links American imperialism to the "larger imperialism" of the Anglo-Saxon race (163). Because of this "racial arrogance," the Anglo-Saxon race had proven itself unworthy of leading humanity to the higher form of moral civilization.

Miller sees through the seduction by Anglo American government: "the boasted benefactor has espoused a new doctrine whose principles are subtly subversive of all the benefits previously bestowed upon the black beneficiary" (161). Black support and participation in the imperialist war versus the Filipinos would pull under the blacks the moral ground on which their claim for justice and equal rights stands:

The Negro's just ground of complaint is that he has been violently deprived of rights which the nation has guaranteed him. It is his duty to himself and to the principle involved to make the nation live up to its pledges or stultify the national conscience....

Acquiescence on the part of the Negro in the political rape upon the Filipino would give ground of justification to the assaults upon his rights at home. The Filipino is at least his equal in capacity for self-government. The Negro would show himself unworthy of the rights he claims should he deny the same to a struggling people under another sky. He would forfeit not only his own weapon of defense, but his friends would lose theirs also. (162-163)

Miller acknowledges the Filipinos as the blacks' "equal in capacity for self-government" (162). In supporting the right of the Filipinos for self-determination, Miller rejects the Anglo-American supposed "civilizing mission" as "racial arrogance" (163). He implicitly asserts as well the right of the blacks for equal participation in the American national life. At the same time, Miller asserts the morality of blacks who are able to recognize and respect the human rights of another people, based on the principles of the Declaration of Independence.

Miller arrives at what for him was the only choice for the blacks: non-participation in the imperialist war vs. the Filipinos, even at the cost of more suffering and losing whatever

rights the blacks already have:

It is infinitely better for the black man, that he be, for the present, violently deprived of his rights in the South than that he should be lulled into acquiescence with the suppressive policy which must ere long steal away his own liberty. (163)

Miller says that “though all men should forsake it [the principle of the Declaration of Independence], yet should not he [the black American]” (164).

Miller sees a long, continuing black American struggle for justice and equality. His final image of the African American keeping his gaze on the Polaris (representing the principles of the Declaration of Independence) is a picture of hope, which at the same time underscores the darkness of this period of American imperialism. Miller uses here a symbol that has a central place in slave narrative and other forms of black writing, thus contextualizing the moment in the entire history of black struggle in America.

CRITIQUE OF MILLER’S FORMULATION OF BLACK SUBJECTIVITY

Despite Miller’s claims to an alternative theory of history and formulation of a morally transcendent black subjectivity, his propositions are undermined by his acceptance of Western paradigms of cultural superiority and moral ascendancy. According to Miller’s theory of civilization, for the black Americans to grow as a people, they would need to assimilate the superior Anglo American culture. African Americans have to be exposed to this civilizing process before they can take their rightful place of leadership of a higher form of civilization. Miller writes, “The aptitude of any people for progress is tested by the readiness with which they absorb and assimilate the environment of which they form a part” (Miller, “As to the Leopard’s Spots” 41). But wouldn’t assimilation of Anglo-American culture erase the distinct character of the African American culture? Isn’t the perceived need for assimilation an internalization of the Western regard for black American culture as inferior? Miller’s civilizing process can be interpreted as a version of the prevalent “uplift ideology” of the time. As Kevin Gaines writes:

The ethos of racial uplift was generally assimilationist in character, reiterating the so-called progressive era’s stock assumption of racial Darwinism and of “civilization as the scale upon which individuals, races, and nations, as contemporaries routinely put it, were ranked. Because it shared many of the assumptions of an evangelical

worldview, the rhetoric of racial uplift often resembled the imperialist notion of the “civilizing mission.” (434)

The criteria Miller uses for his formulation of moral ascendancy is Western, specifically, Puritan American. Miller proposes an ascendant Negro with middle-class Puritan Christian values for education, patience, hard work, generosity, forgiveness, spirituality, and gentility. Only a black elite with a high level of education and spirituality can aspire for Miller’s imagined black subjectivity. Miller’s class bias can be discerned in his criticism of the ordinary black: “the unsophisticated black yeoman” and the “simple-minded black voters” whose loyalty to the Republican Party was “marked by a blind hysteria bordering upon fanaticism” (“Effect of Imperialism” 159).

In the essay, “As to the Leopard’s Spots,” Miller explicitly pointed out that “the vast majority of any race is composed of ordinary and inferior folk.... It is only the few choice individuals, reinforced by a high standard of social efficiency, that are capable of adding to the civilization of the world” (35). It seems that Miller, though refuting innate racial difference, nevertheless, participates in marking certain people’s superiority and inferiority. According to Gaines, in his study of the antiracist works of Pauline Hopkins, such marking of difference by black middle class writers was the *modus operandi* of complicity with the dominant power:

[T]he tendency among marginalized racial, religious, and gender minorities who used the idea of civilization at the turn of the century to give credence to their own aspirations to status, power, and influence.... Writers like Hopkins believed that claiming affinity with dominant notions of race and civilization would oppose racism. Their assimilationist perspective was crucial to their claim for the status of bourgeois professionalism, leadership, and practice. (434)

Gaines quotes Wilson J. Moses’s observation: “The quest for gentility despite the many obstacles erected by the white majority is one of the important themes of Afro-American life in the Victorian age” (435). In attempting to replace the idea of “race” as locus of power struggle, Miller’s elitism enacts the same operation of branding certain people as superior and inferior. His formulation of an alternative theory puts him in a position of privilege, as a way of escaping the negative effects of racial discrimination.

Finally, Miller’s theory, aside from being assimilationist and elitist, can be interpreted as romantic as well. Though his theory of the inevitability of black rights could

provide psychic refuge from the rabid oppression during this time, it could be escapist as well, in its refusal to recognize the politics and violent struggle for power that moved those social changes. Positing a theory that located the cause of the rise and fall of races and nations to impersonal social forces through which no one could be held morally responsible for the destruction of peoples, can be a way of avoiding conflict with the more powerful dominant whites.

Yet, Miller's position in "Effects of Imperialism," raises important questions about the discursive "containment" of uplift ideology in the context of imperialist debates. Miller's support for the Filipinos' right to self-determination is a crucial point. In arguing for immediate independence for the Philippines, Miller is rebuking racialist theories of white supremacy and colored peoples' inherent uncivilizability, and is also repudiating his own theory of the cyclical growth pattern of civilizations. At this point, Miller stands on what for him is the foundational principle of all civilization—the principle of equality of all people enshrined in the Declaration of Independence—a principle which Miller ultimately grounds in his Christian belief ("Address to the Graduating Class" 4). Miller, at this moment of crisis for African Americans, stakes his claim for Negro dignity and rights in black Christian tradition. In this cultural legacy, Christian forbearance and suffering are profoundly revolutionary and transformative. Miller's own example of a whole life-time devoted to forceful and trenchant polemics against whites who spread the false notion of white racial supremacy showed that he was not teaching mere passivity or acquiescence. He meant blacks to defend their rights in a Christian manner consistent with the principles of the Declaration of Independence.

Richard Brodhead, in the essay, "Why Could Not a Colored Man," argues that "there is no such thing as total domination." He observes that "when one group is subjugated by another, its cultural institutions get carried into subjugation with it, and [these] institutions ... are remade into forms for possible resistance" (200). In "Effect of Imperialism," Miller harnesses the entire African American revolutionary tradition by retelling its history and projecting the powerful cultural symbol of the image of the slave gazing at the north star, in the context of the black jeremiad tradition.

CONCLUSION

Kelly Miller's essay, "The Effect of Imperialism Upon the Negro Race" encapsulates the important issues raised by imperialism for the black Americans at the turn of the century. His essay allows us to study the strategies of resistance to white supremacist

ideology that sought to erase black subjectivity. The study has shown though that despite the attempt to formulate an alternative narrative, Miller, like many other black middle-class antiracist writers were complicit as well with hegemonic conceptions of Western superiority. Questions, though, arise about the neatness of such a “containment” in the context of the imperialist debates.

Miller’s work remains important in studying the contestation of narratives deployed in the violent power struggle during this period of American history. Eric Sundquist’s criteria for evaluating the value of minority writing applies to Miller: “At the very least ... the value of a work of literature—what defines it as literature, for that matter—derives from its contribution to articulating and sustaining the values of a given culture, whether or not that culture is national or ‘racial’ in scope” (18).

Ultimately, Miller’s assertion of a counter narrative, seeking to unseat the “inevitability” linked to supposed Anglo-Saxon dominance, as well as his willingness to repudiate even his own theory, reveals that Miller saw racism for what it was, as “fundamentally a theory of history” (Saxton qtd. in Jacobson 6).

It [racism] is a theory of who is who, of who belongs and who does not, of who deserves what and who is capable of what. By looking at racial categories and their fluidity over time, we glimpse the competing theories of history which inform the society and define its internal struggles. (Jacobson 6)

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