The Image of Mexico in Letters from Mexico: Hegemonic relations between the U.S. and Mexico in the Late Nineteenth Century

Jungwan Kim

Abstract
Positioning itself as a guardian of the Western Hemisphere from European powers, the United States recognized and claimed its power and superiority over newly independent Latin American nations. This political agenda was based on perceived U.S. superiority and was justification for declaring war on Mexico in 1846. With the development of railroads, telegraph, and print during the mid-nineteenth century, the common misperceptions about Mexico disseminated nationwide. Griffin’s Mexico of To-day (1886) helped create this discriminatory position. Using postcolonial theory, this research analyzes texts and images in Mexico of To-day, reviewing the comparative contemporary literature and images to argue how the cultural and political hegemony of the United States over Mexico during the late nineteenth century was represented in texts like Griffin’s.

Keywords
Solomon Bulkley Griffin — Texas — Mexico — Art Historical Object-based Research

1 Department of Art Education and Art History, University of North Texas
*Faculty Mentor: Dr. Kelly Donahue-Wallace

Contents

Introduction 1
1 Solomon Bulkley Griffin 1
2 Illustrations in Mexico of To-day 2
3 Conclusion 6
Author Biography 6
References 6

Introduction
By establishing itself as the dominant military and economic power in the Western Hemisphere, the United States claimed superiority over newly independent Latin American nations. This political agenda was based on perceived U.S. superiority and was justification for declaring war on Mexico in 1846. With the development of railroads, telegraph, and print during the mid-nineteenth century, the misperceptions about Mexico disseminated nationwide. Griffin’s Mexico of To-day (1886) helped create this discriminatory position. Using postcolonial theory, this research analyzes Mexico of To-day, reviewing the contemporary literature and images to argue that this cultural and political hegemony affected the relationship between the United States and Mexico during the time, as represented in texts like Griffin’s.

In order to accomplish this goal, this paper asks how Griffin’s book reflects the social and political context of the United States and its relationship with Mexico during the late nineteenth century; how this book implies the unequal power relationship between the United States and Mexico at the time; how the U.S. superiority and Mexican inferiority are implied in Griffin’s texts and the choice of images, and how this book reveals the preconceived discriminatory images of Mexico that the United States had during the late nineteenth century.

The following paragraphs employ an art historical object-based research method to analyze the illustrated book, Mexico of To-day, written by Solomon Bulkley Griffin in 1886. My analysis uses the theoretical framework of postcolonial theory as practiced by Edward Said [1, 2]. Just as Said saw Orientalist practices in the West’s construction of the East, my research sees similar practices in Griffin’s illustrated book and its representation of American power over the emerging nation to its south.

1. Solomon Bulkley Griffin
Using the critical lens of postcolonial theory, my research method consists of reading Griffin’s Mexico of To-day and analyzing its texts and illustrations. The visual representations of Mexico in U.S. publications are analyzed by comparing the images in this book with relevant contemporary images. Furthermore, through reviewing Griffin’s other writings, how his journalism influenced the information about Mexico is analyzed.

Mexico of To-day, written by Solomon Bulkley Griffin in 1886, is an illustrated book that reports contemporary Mexico as viewed by a journalist from New York [3]. This 267-
The Image of Mexico in Letters from Mexico: Hegemonic relations between the U.S. and Mexico in the Late Nineteenth Century — 2/7

[Image 314x380 to 555x728]

The page book contains 24 illustrations including maps, elevation profiles, and portraits. Griffin was a journalist and an editor of The Springfield Republican from 1872 to 1919, and also was a member of the Pulitzer Prize board from 1917 to 1918. From its preface, this book was based on the letters that Griffin wrote to The Springfield Republican from Mexico to elaborate on the political, social, and cultural aspects of Mexico at the time. It was published by Harper & Brothers, a major publishing house in New York. As such, it was accessible to a large cosmopolitan audience [4].

Since Mexico won its independence in 1821, the United States considered itself as a “guardian” of the Western Hemisphere from European powers as indicated in the Monroe Doctrine in 1823 [5]. However, it was based on perceived U.S. superiority which was revealed later in O’Sullivan’s “Annexion” [6]. Manifest Destiny alluded to U.S. political and economic expansionism and was justification for declaring war on Mexico in 1846 [7]. The development of railroads and telegraph increased the spread of misinformation about Mexico and its culture. Furthermore, print became easier to publish, and the government’s policy on education increased literacy [4]. The wide publication of tales depicting Mexico, based on fragmentary evidence acquired by a limited number of people, contributed to the negative image forming about Mexico which cultivated a discriminatory position in the United States toward Mexico [8, 9].

Since there is no scholarly research on Mexico of To-day, studies on travel writings benefit my research. Paredes argues that American travelers’ personal observations and experience formed a negative image of Mexico and its people through analyzing those travel writings published in the early- and the mid-nineteenth century [9]. Frenkel also explains how the travel discourse generalized ideas about a certain area and a group of people [10]. William E. Lenz shows how illustrations within texts allowed a wide range of readers to participate in the writers’ journey, which demonstrates that wide published books could effectively manipulate the public culture [11]. Said’s argument that political and cultural hegemony empowers the superior group to stereotype and generalize the inferior group of people explains how Griffin’s Mexico of To-day implied that there existed a U.S. hegemonic position toward Mexico [2].

Additionally, Jason Ruiz’s article has been crucial in helping me to perform the analysis [12]. Ruiz examines the visual and textual media about Mexico during the latter half of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century through the lenses of postcolonial and theorist. Ruiz’s analysis of how U.S. superiority unconsciously permeated travel writings and images helps with my analysis of Mexico of To-day. He insists that the representation of “otherness” throughout the texts and images at that time justified U.S. desire for economic and political expansionism. Ruiz argues that both negative and positive discourse about Mexico in the past has continued to shape the image that Americans have of Mexico through the present. The method through which Ruiz draws this conclusion helps me draw conclusions in my own research.

2. Illustrations in Mexico of To-day

My research reveals that a group of illustrations in Mexico of To-day present Mexico as an exotic country that the United States could economically exploit. These illustrations depict exotic plants and untamed nature in exaggerated proportion and composition. For example, In “Tierra Caliente” (Figure 1) features a tall palm tree next to two comparably smaller people in size. The busy composition of thatch-roofed hut and the thicket with the clear sky projects the tall palm tree even more. This fertile but untamed Mexican nature not only indicates the need for aid from more developed countries like the United States, but also implies the presence of an economic opportunity for the United States.

Griffin continuously emphasized the abundance and beauty of Mexican nature in his text along with images. The economic opportunity that the U.S. had in Mexico is even presented in statistical analyses of crop production. The illustration “In Tierra Caliente” made visual the “natural” and “material possibilities” of Mexico that the ex-chief-engineer of the Mexican Central Railroad, Mr. Briggs believed to
The Image of Mexico in Letters from Mexico: Hegemonic relations between the U.S. and Mexico in the Late Nineteenth Century — 3/7

Figure 2. Currier & Ives, “American Homestead Spring,” 1869, hand-colored lithograph, Library of Congress.

be present. This image was originally published in William Henry Bishop’s travel book in 1883 that simply presented the appearance of the region [13]. However, this was reused in Griffin’s book to generalize the image of Mexican farmland which represented the agricultural value. It resembles Frenkel’s study about how the generalized image of jungles encouraged U.S. economic expansionism in South America [10].

The contemporary image of American farms differed from “In Tierra Caliente.” American Homestead Spring (Figure 2) presents how peaceful rural life in the U.S. farmland was. A brick house stands nearby a calm lake with small flowering trees which shows American land was already cultivated and controlled. Comparing this image to “Tierra Caliente” reveals the U.S. capability to develop the untamed nature of Mexico and to gain economic profit from it.

The economic inferiority of Mexico also appears through the illustrations of buildings and city environments which present Mexico as a regressive country. These images use vestiges of the Spanish colonial regime in old buildings, untidy streets, and desolate environments. Old Spanish Palace in the “Calle de Jesus” (Figure 3) exemplifies this type of image. It features the facade of an old palace that has classical architectural elements derived from the glorious civilization. Nonetheless, the light and shadows expose the dull surface of the building and the street. It creates a regressive image of Mexico by juxtaposing the worn-out legacy of Spanish imperialism and the stagnant economy of Mexico. The dilapidated, once majestic, building in the run-down neighborhood implies the inability of the Mexicans to maintain Western standards.

Analyzing the text in Mexico of To-day supports the interpretation of this image. Griffin compliments the city of Mexico on its European style and calls it “little Europe.” He continuously compares the city of Mexico with Western civilizations in a positive voice. The European influences in Mexico were mainly Spanish vestiges like the old palace. Unlike Old Spanish Palace in the “Calle de Jesus,” Griffin values the coexistence of the old and the new as “[t]he high human interest.” However, his textual praise of the westernized part of Mexico was diminished in the visual image, which implies that the current situation was not praiseworthy.

Comparing Old Spanish Palace with contemporary illus-
The Image of Mexico in Letters from Mexico: Hegemonic relations between the U.S. and Mexico in the Late Nineteenth Century — 4/7

Figure 3. “Old Spanish Palace in the Calle de Jesus,” published in Mexico of To-day, 1886, wood engraving.

Illustrations of U.S. cities reveals that the U.S. media portrayed Mexico as inferior to the U.S. For example, “Broadway, New York: From the western union telegraph building looking north” (Figure 4), shows a progressive America. Although the buildings in New York also feature classical architecture, these buildings look well maintained. It means the Western glory was not a vestige but a conserved legacy which indicates that the U.S. could afford to do it. Furthermore, many people and stagecoaches on the street, and factories demonstrate the productivity of the U.S. Therefore, “Old Spanish Palace” represented Mexico as a degraded nation that the U.S. could look down upon.

Throughout the book, Griffin complimented Mexican women’s beauty while he criticized Mexican people in general. He claimed that the fashionable women were “worth seeing” By directly considering women as objects to look at, women became subjugated by men. Originally titled “A Flower-show in the Zocalo” in Bishop’s book, this illustration was republished with the modified title “A Flower and Beauty Show” which placed women as the objects of the show [13]. Streeby argues that nineteenth century U.S. literature justified political expansionism by featuring Mexico as a woman demanding an American man’s protection [8]. Griffin even suggested the image of Mexico as an object that the U.S. could control.

The contemporary U.S. illustrations depicted more active women in public. For example, Charles Parsons’ “Central Park, Winter- The Skating Pond” (Figure 6) depicted women more independent and as men’s partners than as objects that men look at. The properly dressed women skating with their men do not stare at a certain spot but interact with other people. Although the patriarchal society is still implied in this image, U.S. women in this illustration look more alive and are rather subjects of the scene than objects like the women in “A Flower and Beauty Show.” Comparing those Mexican women to American women, they certainly reflect the exotic femininity identified by Said as one of the hallmarks of orientalist discourse.

The indigenous women portrayed in Mexico of To-day function similarly, but also embody the “otherness” of Mexico. These images use exotic clothing, darker skin, and hair styles to differentiate Mexicans from Americans. A “Glimpse of the Poor Quarter” exemplifies how the images of indigenous women in this book contributed to bias stereotypes of Mexico. There is a young indigenous woman wearing a long white skirt with a rebozo holding a jug. Her hair, bare arms,
and feet are exposed. This crafts an exotic and sexualized image of Mexican women which evoke the exotic aesthetics of “Oriental” women in Western European culture.

Griffin described Mexican life, especially indigenous life, as “Eastern.” He wrote “the Eastern color” and “Eastern in many of its features.” These “Eastern” images are accompanied by descriptions of their inefficient life, one that he even described as having “primitive and inadequate accommodations.” Furthermore, Griffin compares Mexican indigenous life to a work of art depicting Syria. As the image of Syria became the representation of the “Orient” in Said’s argument, Mexico was seen as the “Orient” in America [2]. European power created the stereotyped image of Arab people and culture to dominate them. Griffin’s description of Mexican women resembles the sensual image of Arab women that European men coveted [9].

The image of an American woman, published in Harper’s Weekly in 1869, “The Bible Woman” (Figure 8) shows a very contrasting image of women from that seen in “A Glimpse of the Poor Quarter.” This young woman reading a Bible is fully covered by a long dress and a shawl, and her hair is also covered by a scarf. The publicly exhibited image of women in the U.S. suggests that Mexican women were more pleasing than the chaste and modest American woman.

The illustrations in Mexico of To-day furthermore suggest the negative image of Mexico through people’s facial expressions, body postures, and clothing. Among these discriminatory images, “Mexican Soldier on Guard” (Figure 9) presents a weak and lethargic image of Mexican national power. His uniform is untidy, and his posture and facial expression show his disinterest toward his duty. This could be seen as a generalization of the Mexican military as a whole which implies the under-funding of the Mexican military and the poor economic situation of Mexico.

Griffin’s text about Mexican soldiers does not much differ from the illustration. He started describing Mexican soldiers as they paraded on the street. The look of the soldiers was unique: exemplified by them wearing sandals due to the climate and their disorderly marching steps. Perhaps, Mexican Soldier represents an army recruited from criminals who got sentenced to serving in the military. This illustration and his sarcastic praise for Mexican soldiers convey the poor condition of these soldiers and the weakness of Mexican military power.

As Griffin mentioned that he was used to the orderly and organized U.S. soldiers, the image of the U.S. soldier in contemporary illustrations shows the power of the U.S. military. Frederic Remington’s “U.S. Soldier, Spanish-American War” (Figure 10) in 1899 exhibits the confident and strong image of the U.S. soldier. His solidly closed lips show his commitment to his duty, and his contrapposto resembles classical statues like Michelangelo’s David, which implies his courage, power,
The Image of Mexico in Letters from Mexico: Hegemonic relations between the U.S. and Mexico in the Late Nineteenth Century — 6/7

Figure 8. Alfred R. Waud, “The Bible Woman,” 1869, wood engraving, Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown.

and perfection. Through comparing this stout U.S. soldier to the slovenly Mexican soldier, the superiority of U.S. military power is evident.

3. Conclusion

After the U.S.-Mexican War, U.S. hegemonic control over Mexico was indirect but firmly entrenched. In the late nineteenth century, the U.S. considered Mexico to be an economically beneficial neighbor but simultaneously as an inferior nation. U.S. superiority in this relationship was solidified through continuous negative discourse about Mexico and its people. From travel literature to dime novels, the unknown country of Mexico had been negatively stereotyped by supposed Anglo-American racial, social and political superiority. Mexico of To-day was one of those travel publications that contributed to this negative image of Mexico. In its preface, its author reported contemporary Mexico with “unprejudiced” eyes, and Griffin also emphasized the honesty and truthfulness of journalism in “Journalism and Service” (“Preface”) [3]. Nonetheless, his superiority as an educated Anglo-American man permeated the text and illustrations in Mexico of To-day. Griffin’s overall positive appraisal of Mexico was mostly sarcastic, compared parts of Mexico unfavorably to parts of the U.S., and made it worse by including depressing illustrations nearby. Mexico of To-day was a product of a feeling of superiority held by Americans and helped to solidify that feeling through the present.

Figure 9. “Mexican Soldier on Guard,” in Mexico of To-day, 1886, wood engraving.

Author Biography

Jungwan Kim earned her first B.A. in Industrial Design and was an interior designer in Korea. She earned a second B.A. in Art History at the University of North Texas in 2016. She is continuing her study of art history in the graduate program at the University of North Texas, concentrating on theories and methods in modern, post-modern and contemporary art history.

References


The Image of Mexico in Letters from Mexico: Hegemonic relations between the U.S. and Mexico in the Late Nineteenth Century — 7/7


