

Facing America: Iconography And The Civil War

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Interview

FACING AMERICA: ICONOGRAPHY AND THE CIVIL WAR

Samuels, Shirley

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Interview with Dr. Shirley Samuels

by Christopher S. Freeman

Shirley Samuels teaches English and American literature at Cornell University. In addition to Facing America, she is the author of Romances of the Republic: Women, the Family, and Violence in the Literature of the Early American Nation and editor of The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender, and Sentimentality in Nineteenth-Century America.

Civil War Book Review(CWBR): What is the methodology and purpose of iconography? How can we distinguish between the imagery that artists and authors create, and how that imagery is consumed and interpreted by viewers and readers?

Shirley Samuels (S.S.): Iconography literally means writing an image that has symbolic resonance, an image that mobilizes belief. The use of iconographic images once meant simply religious beliefs (the Puritans who became associated with the founding practices of the United States were iconoclasts because they wanted to destroy such symbolic images that represented belief in order to have a more direct relationship with God). Iconographic images have become associated with nationalism, especially insofar as national beliefs and religious beliefs tend to overlap. In the American context, in addition to the national flag, the images that came to convey such content most powerfully were first the engravings of George Washington and then the photographs of Abraham Lincoln.

In Facing America, I wanted to use iconography to open a conversation among historians, literary critics, and practitioners of visual culture. Visual culture is a term that has been used to designate a way of studying relationships

among visual elements of a culture and the producers and consumers of these images. Such images might include, as with my study, color lithography, photographs, and political cartoons. I also wanted to engage with how concepts of the visual appeared in written representations such as the invocation of color in the poetry of Walt Whitman or the short stories of Ambrose Bierce and the garish painting in Augusta Evans's *Macaria*.

These instantiations of color may or may not always appear as iconography, but they contribute to a pattern of iconographic formation. Since there are a limited number of samples available from 19th century readers and viewers detailing their responses, I do not attempt comprehensive claims about the effects of these images. Rather, I concentrate on an analysis of salient commentators, such as Oliver Wendell Holmes, who responds to photographs of the dead at Antietam by saying, Let him who wishes to know what war is look at this series of illustrations.

CWBR: How can the tools used in literary analysis be applied to images?

SS: Rather than saying directly that the tools of literary analysis can be applied to images, I use analytical terms derived from a number of sources, notably new historicism, feminism, and psychoanalysis, to work with both visual and literary texts in a cultural context. Classifications can be misleading. Both my books operate within an interdisciplinary format, but the Library of Congress has placed *Romances of the Republic* with literary criticism and *Facing America* with history (though historians might disagree!).

CWBR: Can you explain what you mean by Americans imagining themselves in a face-to-face relation with embodiments of the nation? How does this analysis contribute to existing scholarship?

SS: The work that this book carries out mostly exists in the interdisciplinary context of visual studies or American studies rather than either historical or literary studies. I do not seek to describe Civil War battles or political decisions. I do not attempt a comprehensive survey of Civil War literature. I do work hard to think about why authors and visual artists chose to present embodiments of American identity for their audiences and I asked what audiences might have found to mobilize them in these images.

CWBR: Some of the most well-known images of the Civil War are not included in your book. What criteria went into your selection of literary and visual texts?

SS:There were certain limitations such as the publisher's restriction from the outset about the number of images I would be able to include in the book. And I wanted to have a representative sampling of images from the different genres I considered. The images I chose were selected for their ability to convey the ideas that shaped the iconographic considerations involved. Several of the images might appear shocking at first. We are not used to seeing wounded soldiers photographed naked. The bawdy rendering in political cartoons of General Winfield Scott on a toilet or Abraham Lincoln in bed with his wife may usefully remind audiences in the 21st century that the 19th century was not that prudish. What drew me to these images was the question of what political energies they sought to convey along with the shock.

CWBR: How have issues related to gender, race, and sexuality shaped the way that the Civil War is represented?

SS:Thanks to historians such as Catherine Clinton, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, and Lauren Cook-Burgess, and critics like Drew Faust and Elizabeth Young, categories of gender, especially involving women's writing about and participation in war, have become dominant factors in considering the Civil War. Popular representations such as the movie *Glory* and Ken Burns's PBS series have affected the ideas of race in the Civil War. Recent work on the homoerotic practices of men in the nineteenth century has encouraged new attention to battlefield romances. I think there is still plenty of room for work that brings these categories together.

CWBR: You claim that anxiety and terror were significant forces in Civil War iconography. How does one measure terror? What is substitution panic?

SS:I certainly do not think it possible to measure terror and do not claim to do so. What I try to point out is that the strange substitutions that show up in the political cartoons, for example, that show Jefferson Davis trying to escape capture dressed as a woman, more than 25 examples of which I have seen, may indicate some sense that the unmaning of one's enemy can only be represented through this form of sexual humor. I call it substitution panic because it shows a form of sexual panic that appears elsewhere as a racial panic, or a homosexual

panic, that both exposes the actual horror beneath the surface of national identity and substitutes another horror.

CWBR: How did photography affect representation of the nation and the Civil War?

SS:One of the central arguments of the book is that the coexistence of photography as an easily reproduced medium (first developed as such in the 1850s) and the newly developed machinery of warfare such as the Minie ball, the repeating rifle, and the Gatling gun, meant that the first disappearance or mutilation of human beings on such a massive scale occurred at the same time as the first widespread and inexpensive ability to record their existence. I ask what effect this might have had on the questions of representative identity already present in the American character, questions posed, for example, by Ralph Waldo Emerson, in *Representative Men*, but also present from the time of John Winthrop's famous *City on a Hill* sermon with its attention to the visibility of the experiment of the American colonies.

CWBR: Why is it important To face the representation of America?

SS:This quotation from the last line of my book shows at once the sense of ethical responsibility that I bring to the project and the desire that I also have to keep in mind a disciplinary focus that suggests an attention to surface representation. In simpler language, that means that I understand that what I look at in the book is representation: how do writers, politicians, and practitioners in the visual arts show ideas about America? And I also understand that they take these representations very seriously as an ethical project, that they want to claim or reclaim an idea of an America that will be an ethical nation. The quandary of the Civil War, as represented in the nineteenth century, and as debated ever since, has been that to represent the unspeakable horrors of brutal slaughter as enacted for a noble cause has always been a painful act. What my book seeks to decipher are some of the ways that such representations function.