H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

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Christopher Robert Reed. *"All the World Is Here": The Black Presence at White City.* Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000. xvii + 230 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-33566-1; $22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-21535-2.

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Published on H-SHGAPE (July, 2002)

Hopes Alive at the Nadir

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In an early scholarly portrait of African-American participation in Chicago's World's Columbian Exposition, Elliott Rudwick and August Meier approvingly paraphrased Frederick Douglass: for African Americans "the fair symbolized not the material progress of America, but a moral regression–the reconciliation of the North and South at the expense of Negroes."[1] Rudwick and Meier both recounted and reflected the views articulated in 1893 in the pamphlet *The Reason Why the Colored American Is Not in the World's Columbian Exposition*, co-authored by Douglass, Ida B. Wells, Irvine Garland Penn, and Ferdinand L. Barnett.[2] This pamphlet, a classic document of the African-American protest tradition, placed African Americans' exclusion from the planning and leadership of the great fair in the context of heightened discrimination, segregation, disfranchisement, and white terrorism. The resulting image of African-American marginalization, confirming as it did Rayford Logan's depiction of race relations at their post- Reconstruction "nadir," has powerfully shaped historical perceptions.[3] For example, in an early and deservedly influential study in African-American urban history, Allan Spear portrayed a transition in Chicago's black leadership from an integrationist professional class to a group of black businessmen emphasizing racial solidarity, a shift conditioned by a worsening climate of race relations.[4] Spear's interpretive framework, dubbed the "ghetto synthesis" by Joe Trotter, was designed to elicit sympathy for oppressed African Americans by focusing on the impact of white racism.[5] In an ambitious work of revision, more wide-ranging than its title suggests, Christopher Reed seeks both to refute specific claims of marginality and to formulate a more inclusive strategy for understanding attitudes toward Chicago's lakeside extravaganza on the part of both continental and diasporic Africans. The attempt to trace attitudes toward the World's Columbian Exposition leads him into a re-analysis of local leadership and a reconstruction of fin-de-siècle debates over strategy and tactics.

Reed, Seymour N. Logan Professor of History and North American Studies and Director of the St. Clair Drake Center for African and African American Studies at Roosevelt University, argues that the picture of African Americans as marginal participants derives from a habit of seeing African Americans through European-American eyes. "If the basis of African American experience could only be understood in its relationship to what the white world permitted or prohibited," he asks rhetorically, "what would become of the desires, expectations, and dreams that were constructed free of the fetters of American racism? Indeed, what would become of efforts that produced successful results for one segment of a heterogeneous black population but not for another?-" (pp. viii-ix). Within the African-American world, Reed wants to replace the "unnatural binary choice" between integration and separation (p. 43) with a more complex and nuanced set of options. At the end of the nineteenth century, African Americans could balance evidence of regression with signs of progress. In "a world filled with so many paradoxes and ambiguities related to race," he points out, integrationists could and did embrace racial solidarity and voluntary separation as strategy (p. 47), and imaginative links with Africa stimulated by the continental African presences in Chicago could–and did–propel an ongoing debate over emigration by catalyzing racial pride. Furthermore, just as black exclusion made up only one part of the African-American

relationship to the Exposition, white racism was not the whole story of European-American attitudes and actions toward blacks: sympathetic heirs to the abolitionist tradition facilitated without controlling both continental and diasporic African participation.

Reed frames his attack on the image of marginality within an empiricist framework. He shows that people of African descent appeared at the Columbian Exposition in a wide variety of roles. They helped to excavate the site and served on the staffs of chief architect Daniel Burnham and several other managers. Waiters at Chicago hotels and restaurants not only enjoyed enlarged opportunities for remunerative work, but also gained leverage from the Exposition's stimulus to business, which they grasped during a series of strikes at the fair's onset. Although barred from playing on the Exposition grounds, local musicians gained wider audiences for their music, and composer Antonin Dvorak's advice to ground native American music on African-American melodies provoked white resentment. Jobs in light janitorial work were reserved for African Americans, and African-American college and university students shared with European-American students jobs as chair boys, wheeling exhausted fairgoers about the sprawling grounds. Although elite spokespersons rightly challenged black exclusion from nearly all supervisory and white-collar positions, the African-American working class enjoyed increased opportunities both on and off the fairgrounds.

In a chapter entitled "They Met at the Fair," Reed expands his focus beyond the fairgrounds to examine interactions and the forming of new relationships throughout Chicago during the period of the fair, not only at the Exposition site at Jackson Park. He describes the social structure of the local African-American community, which numbered more than 14,000, and claims that leadership divided along sociocultural, not ideological, lines. Rather than a single, monolithic leadership, Reed claims, different leaders emerged for different types of community activity. Local branches of national fraternal orders such as the Masons provided welcome support to brother and sister fairgoers. Chicago's thriving church networks scheduled special concerts, colloquia, and lectures. Scott Joplin played ragtime piano outside the fairgrounds, and 1893 marked the blossoming of ragtime's massive popularity. Contacts made and developed in Chicago helped spur the creation of the series of national women's organizations that eventuated three years later in formation of the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs. Despite his condemnation of marginalization, Frederick Douglass came repeatedly to the Exposition, and even delivered the keynote address on blacks' token day.

Within the fairgrounds, the Haytian pavilion became Douglass's receiving area. Presentations of African or African-American achievement appeared in the New York exhibit in the Women's Building, in the Atlanta University, Hampton Institute, and Wilberforce University displays in the Liberal Arts Building, and in the exhibits mounted by several African and New World societies. Reed takes particular care to describe the presence and impact of the one hundred Fon people of Dahomey, who lived in the "Dahomean village" on the Midway. While Douglass and subsequent historians regarded the Fon's inclusion as a demonstration of African barbarism in contrast to European and American civilization, Reed tries to suggest what perspective the Fon themselves may have held and also hints at the impact they may have made on both European and African Americans. A white youth–possibly the first "wigger"–imitated the Fon's drumming in his suburban neighborhood, and African-American composer Will Marion Cook returned repeatedly to listen, enthralled by their complex rhythms. Most important, at the conference of the Colored Men's National Protective Association, the World's Congress of Representative Women, the Congress on Labor, and the Parliament of Religions, African Americans both articulated their own perspectives and formed networks with each other and with sympathetic European Americans. This process culminated in the week-long Congress on Africa, where both continental and diasporic African voices predominated. As a result of all this activity, Reed concludes, "no visitor to the fair could have overlooked the involvement of the African American and continental African as lecturer, observer, patron, worker, and performer" (p. 190).

Reed has unquestionably made a convincing case that the African and African-American presence at the fair was greater and more diverse than we have previously realized. He accomplishes this without discounting the racist efforts to minimize and distort the achievements of both continental and diasporic Africans in the service of paternalism and imperialism. Occasionally his revisionism overreaches itself, as in his assertions about the structure of leadership in Chicago's African-American community, which require further analysis than he supplies here. But his critique of the rigid categories applied to African-American thought opens the way to a more supple approach to a complex topic. Furthermore, it resonates with other recent explorations of African-American options during the "nadir."[6] Methodologically, Reed's emphasis upon interaction is a valuable corrective to the tendency to evaluate participation by counting exhibits, speakers or officials. But Reed makes

his most significant contribution by demonstrating that sensitivity to agency and diversity can produce a richer account of African-American history than the protest tradition allows.

Notes

[1]. Elliott Rudwick and August Meier, "Black Man in the 'White City': Negroes and the Columbian Exposition, 1893," *Phylon* 26 (Winter 1965): 354-61. Quotation on p. 361.

[2]. A recent edition is Ida B. Wells, Frederick Douglass, Irvine Garland Penn, and Ferdinand L. Barnett, *The Reason Why the Colored American Is Not in the World's Columbia Exposition: The Afro-American's Contribution to Columbian Literature*, Robert W. Rydell, ed. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999).

[3]. Rayford W. Logan, *The Betrayal of the Negro: From Rutherford B. Hayes to Woodrow Wilson*, Enlarged edition (London: Collier-Macmillan, 1965) [Originally published in 1954 as *The Negro in American Life and Thought: The Nadir, 1877-1901*]. Works reflecting the image of marginality include David F. Burg, *Chicago's White City of 1893* (Frankfort: University of Kentucky Press, 1976); Reid Badger, *The Great American Fair: The World's Columbian Exposition and American Culture* (Chicago: Nelson Hall, 1979); Robert W. Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Views of Empire at American Expositions, 1876-1916* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); James Gilbert, *Perfect Cities: Chicago's Utopias of 1893* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); and Curtis M. Hinsley, "The World as Marketplace: Commodification of the Exotic at the World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago, 1893," in Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, eds., *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 344-65.

[4]. Allan H. Spear, *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto, 1890-1920* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1967).

[5]. Joe W. Trotter, *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915-45* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985), Appendix 7.

[6]. See, e.g., Robin D. G. Kelley, "'We Are Not What We Seem': Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South," *Journal of American History* 80 (June 1993): 75-112; Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua, "'A Warlike Demonstration': Legalism, Violent Self-Help, and Electoral Politics in Decatur, Illinois, 1894-1898," *Journal of Urban History* 26 (July 2000): 591-629.

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Citation: Jack Blocker. Review of Christopher Robert Reed, *"All the World Is Here!" The Black Presence at White City* and Reed, Christopher Robert, *"All the World Is Here": The Black Presence at White City.* H-SHGAPE, H-Net Reviews. July, 2002.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=6478

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