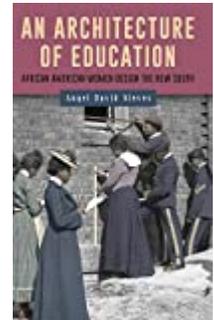


Angel David Nieves. *An Architecture of Education: African American Women Design the New South.* Gender and Race in American History Series. Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2018. Illustrations. 256 pp. \$49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-58046-909-8.



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In the post–Civil War South, as white Americans sought to shape national memory of the war and slavery, Black Americans promoted a counternarrative that acknowledged the trauma of enslavement and the ongoing struggle for full equality. *An Architecture of Education*, by Angel David Nieves, explores how they inscribed that counternarrative onto the southern landscape by designing Black institutions. Nieves focuses on two Black industrial schools, Voorhees College in South Carolina and Manassas Industrial School in Virginia, established by Black women in the late nineteenth century. He spotlights the respective founders, Elizabeth Evelyn Wright and Jennie Dean, sharing how we might “read” the material culture of their campuses for clues about their race uplift goals. In doing so, Nieves asserts that the institutions themselves became monuments to the intellectual and spatial activism of African American women.

An Architecture of Education showcases how interdisciplinary methodologies can help scholars overcome the silencing of African American wo-

men in traditional documentary archives. Written accounts of Black working-class women’s activities in the post–Civil War South are scarce, especially considering the “borderline” literacy of formerly enslaved women like Dean (p. 85). Nieves argues that studying the built environment, therefore, is central to understanding how Black women participated in a larger civic discourse around racialized landscapes in the South. As the author writes, “African American women were purposefully invested in the physical design of their many community-based institutions for racial uplift” (p. 5). Though Wright and Dean lacked architectural training, Nieves casts them as early designers of Black nationalist reform.

The first three chapters of the book lay the theoretical groundwork for the central case studies. Nieves demonstrates that Black Americans, who had seen race and design comingle in the public sphere during campaigns to build Civil War monuments and the 1893 Columbian Exposition, understood the power of shaping the built environment. Nieves argues that Black Americans ap-

propriated dominant architectural styles when building institutions to challenge prevailing Lost Cause narratives and inscribe their own contributions onto the southern landscape.

Within these early chapters, Nieves effectively links institution building to Black nationalist reform. He differentiates between the “public transcript” and “hidden transcript” produced by Black institutions interested in advancing Black economic and political self-determination (p. 28). Chapter 3 applies this framework to the example of Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. Based on his analysis of how Booker T. Washington designed the curriculum, main campus, and adjacent planned community, Nieves argues that underneath the institution’s façade of assimilation lay “a formal challenge to the accepted social norms of segregation, racism, and mass public lynchings” (p. 63). The book therefore adds to scholarship that reinterprets Washington and industrial education not as accommodationist but rather as embedded in Black political activism.

Chapter 4 introduces the two women at the center of this story. Wright and Dean represent how Black women helped reshape the southern landscape and uplift Black communities through institution building. Wright, an alumna of Tuskegee herself, benefited from formal education and a relationship with the Washington family that helped open doors for her when she set out to build Voorhees. By contrast, Dean, a formerly enslaved woman, was less literate and had fewer professional connections. Nieves creatively speculates about how we might fill in some of the gaps in her personal story. Then, he uses the sparse written records that do exist to show that the curriculum at Dean’s school cultivated racial pride among its Black students in the early Jim Crow era. That Manassas Industrial School emphasized teaching Black history and Black literature in addition to mechanical trades reinforces the author’s claim that Black Americans believed industrial schools were an important part of nation making.

The book reaches its crescendo in chapter 5, where it examines specific design elements of Tuskegee, Voorhees College, and Manassas Industrial School. The analysis is supported by an extensive inset of photographs, drawings, and architectural descriptions. Nieves argues that the campuses reveal their founders’ vision for independent Black communities. Here Nieves effectively situates Wright and Dean in a network of architects, designers, and donors. Wright, in particular, drew on her Tuskegee connections to collaborate with Black architects, including Robert Taylor, William Sidney Pittman, and William Wilson Cooke, as well as the students who applied skills learned in their industrial classes to help construct campus buildings. The chapter succeeds in feeling like the culmination of a compelling story about how we can understand these institutions as “living monuments” to their founders and to Black uplift (p. 105).

Some questions, however, remain unanswered. Unlike Voorhees, Manassas underwent a kind of top-down design from a northern white architect. How might that have affected Dean’s ability to direct the campus design? Given the sex-segregated industrial classes that were typical for institutions of the era, to what extent can we imagine Voorhees and Manassas reflected the design vision of not just their respective founders but also women on the faculty or among the student body? The subtitle of *An Architecture of Education* may provoke expectations to see Black women in action throughout the book, but readers will be more satisfied if they know the book is primarily concerned with how Black institutions contain a hidden transcript of Black nationalist reform.

With *An Architecture of Education*, Nieves adds to conversations taking place in academic and public spaces about how the history of slavery and its afterlives is implicated in monument making and institution building, especially on school campuses. Nieves inserts historically Black institutions and their founders into the discourse, reveal-

ing how late nineteenth-century Black reformers inscribed their own narratives onto the built environment. Readers interested in African American intellectual history, educational history, and the history of architecture will welcome this concise analysis of the contest over racialized landscapes in the “New South.”

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-sawh>

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