

Leonardo Buonomo

SHOWING THE WORLD:
CHICAGO'S COLUMBIAN EXPOSITION IN AMERICAN WRITING

Much has been written on the history of World's Fairs and their significance as powerful statements of the host country's view of both itself and the world, especially with regard to the politics of race and ethnicity. Signaling the emergence of the United States as a major player on the international scene, the World's Columbian Exposition, or World's Fair, held in Chicago in 1893, has understandably attracted considerable attention on the part of scholars and critics. What has been left largely unexplored is, surprisingly, the substantial body of writing which emerged from that event. The present essay intends to draw attention to this rich, intriguing literary legacy by analyzing a number of representative works.

The numerous texts inspired by Chicago's 1893 World's Fair include guidebooks, newspaper and magazine articles, memoirs, travelogs, as well as works of fiction and poetry published, for the most part, within a few years of the event.¹ Much like the Fair itself, which set the aesthetically ambitious and educationally-minded buildings of the so-called *White City* alongside the miniature ethnic villages of the Midway Plaisance, the Ferris Wheel, and Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, this body of writing varies greatly in terms of aspiration, ambition, and assumed audience. It runs the whole gamut from high-brow to low-brow. Among the many American authors who set their sights on the Fair, one finds a number of well-known names (Frederick Douglass, Henry Adams, Frances Hodgson Burnett, William Dean Howells) and a host of minor figures, now largely forgotten, of whom some at least once commanded a sizable readership (Clara Louise Burnham, Julian Hawthorne, Charles McClellan Stevens). In their effort to put into words their response to the Fair, they had recourse to a variety of literary genres and registers, but whatever their distinctive approaches and varying degrees of talent, these writers were united in recognizing the Columbian Exposition as a landmark in the

¹ See *The World's Columbian Exposition: A Centennial Bibliographic Guide*, eds. D. J. Bertuca, D. K. Hartman and S. M. Neumeister (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), 234-255.

political, social, and cultural history of the United States. They took note, in particular, of the ways in which the Exposition offered abundant matter for reflection on all aspects of American society. In a period marked by economic depression, massive immigration, and unabated post-Civil War racial tension, the Exposition brought together an unprecedentedly large number of Americans from all walks of life and confronted them with representatives and reproductions of foreign cultures and lifestyles. It thus provided American authors with a unique opportunity to gain insights into their country's distinctive traits and to ponder on its political and cultural ranking in the world. In what is, arguably, the best-known literary response to the Fair, Henry Adams significantly noted how an unprecedentedly coherent national identity emerged from the strange, gargantuan pageant staged in Chicago. While the spectacle that had confronted him there conjured up biblical images of heterogeneity and confusion ("Noah's Ark" and "Babel"),² it had ultimately left him with the prevailing impression that "Chicago was the first expression of American thought as a unity".³ What Adams had seen was, in Maurice Neufeld's words, the unity of a "newly industrialized nation", the first "challenge to the world that America was entering the world markets as a seller of goods", and the launching of "American imperialism".⁴

The Chicago Fair was called *Columbian* in honor of the four hundredth anniversary of Christopher Columbus's discovery of the New World. With that name it claimed the event, which for many marked the beginning of modernity, as part and parcel of the distinctive heritage of the United States. Moreover, it called attention to Columbus's place in the country's mythology, reconfiguring him as a proto-American:

For the United States, which had been prone to view the Western hemisphere as its special province, Columbus could be seen as the original prototype of the American adventurer/hero who, like Boone or Crockett or Carson, blazed trails into an unknown wilderness so that others might follow and begin building the American Empire.⁵

A showcase of American progress and achievement in technology and the arts, the Chicago Fair emphatically announced that the United States was ready to compete with, and even surpass, the countries that had hosted previous editions of the World's Fair, particularly France and England. In the intentions of its promoters and organizers, the

2 H. Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1961), 340.

3 Adams, *The Education*, 343.

4 M. F. Neufeld, "The Crisis in Prospect: Henry Adams and the White City", *The American Scholar*, 4, 4 (1935), 401.

5 R. R. Badger, *The Great American Fair: The World's Columbian Exposition and American Culture* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall Company, 1979), 43.

Columbian Fair “would conclusively demonstrate the passing of world leadership from the Old to the New World and would symbolize the fulfillment of the mission and vision of Columbus”.⁶ Admittedly, the very scope of these ambitions, and the unmistakably boastful tone in which they were expressed, betrayed the existence of a lingering inferiority complex that the United States, and particularly its cultured and wealthy elites, still felt toward Europe. This complex was further apparent in the choice of a neoclassical style for the White City, and the decision to entrust its realization primarily to East Coast-based, European-educated architects, much to the chagrin of those who, like Louis Sullivan, advocated the promotion of a modernist and authentically American style. Clearly the United States still had something to prove to the Old World, namely that even in the realm of aesthetics, harmony, and elegance, it could match the Europeans, and perhaps even beat them at their own game. As John E. Findling has observed, the “formal, distinguished styling of the buildings indicated good taste and signified that there was indeed an American civilization that could function on the same aesthetic plane as European civilization”.⁷

What distinguished the World’s Columbian Exposition from previous fairs was its hybrid nature, the fact that the meticulously planned and organized area that housed the Exposition proper was contiguous with a mile-long strip of land, called the Midway Plaisance, which was devoted to *live*, supposedly *authentic* ethnological shows – i.e. reproductions of foreign villages and towns – as well as to cafes, restaurants, and various forms of entertainment. If the lofty, elegant structures and grounds of the White City reflected the fastidious tastes of a cultured elite (“simulating for a mass audience its own sense of beauty, control, hierarchy, and self-secured success”),⁸ the Midway Plaisance had something of the vital, manic vulgarity of a country fair of old. A popular counterpart to, and a distorted mirror image of, the academically sanctioned paintings, crafts, and ethnological exhibits of the White City, the Midway Plaisance suggests the subversive energy Mikhail Bakhtin called *carnavalesque*.⁹ Significantly enough, while the Fair’s director of works, Daniel Burnham, and the renowned landscape designer Frederick Law Olmsted, maintained strict control over the look and management of the White City, the handling of the Midway Plaisance, initially entrusted to Harvard-educated Frederic Putnam, the Fair’s “chief of ethnology”, was later assigned to wunderkind impresario Sol Bloom (the child of Polish immigrants) by virtue of his exceptional ability – thanks to

6 Badger, *The Great American Fair*, 21.

7 J. E. Findling, *Chicago’s Great World’s Fairs* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 14.

8 R. K. Bank, “Representing History: Performing the Columbian Exposition”, *Theatre Journal*, 54, 4 (2002), 591.

9 M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. H. Iswolsky (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009).

his background in Vaudeville and other forms of popular amusement – to know exactly what the public at large wanted.¹⁰

The dichotomy between high and low, order and disorder, spiritual and worldly, which found expression in the heterogeneous layout of the Columbian Exposition as well as in its proximity to growing, noisy, dirty Chicago (tellingly nicknamed the *Black City*),¹¹ provided a rich source of inspiration for a number of writers who visited it. Conjuring up images of otherworldly purity and virtue with the dominant whiteness of its buildings, with its obviously exemplary character, and its seeming imperviousness to the debasing influence of money (access to all exhibits was free), the White City inevitably called to mind one of America's founding myths: John Winthrop's definition in his sermon "A Model of Christian Charity" (1630) of the Puritan settlement of Massachusetts Bay as "a city upon a hill".¹² In Winthrop's "vision", as Alan Trachtenberg has noted, "America itself might be a Celestial City, a city of man redeemed by the white city of God".¹³ Together with the Bible (the source of Winthrop's expression), the other book which could be found in most nineteenth-century American homes, John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678),¹⁴ offered popular children's writer Frances Hodgson Burnett (best-known as the author of *The Secret Garden* and *Little Lord Fauntleroy*), the perfect template for a story about Chicago's Fair.

In her retelling of Bunyan's allegory, *Two Little Pilgrims' Progress: A Story of the City Beautiful* (1895),¹⁵ Burnett follows the adventures of two orphans, Robin and Meg, who run away from the farm on which they live with their stern and unimaginative aunt, to travel to the Fair they have heard so much about. It is Meg, in particular, who repeatedly quotes Bunyan to her brother during their journey and subsequent exploration of the Fair, and interprets what she sees as the modern fulfillment of events forecast in that famous book, just as a typological reader of the Bible would.¹⁶ Thus the White City ap-

10 C. M. Rosenberg, *America at the Fair: Chicago's 1893 World's Columbian Exposition* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2008), 254-255.

11 J. Gilbert, *Perfect Cities: Chicago's Utopias of 1893* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 59.

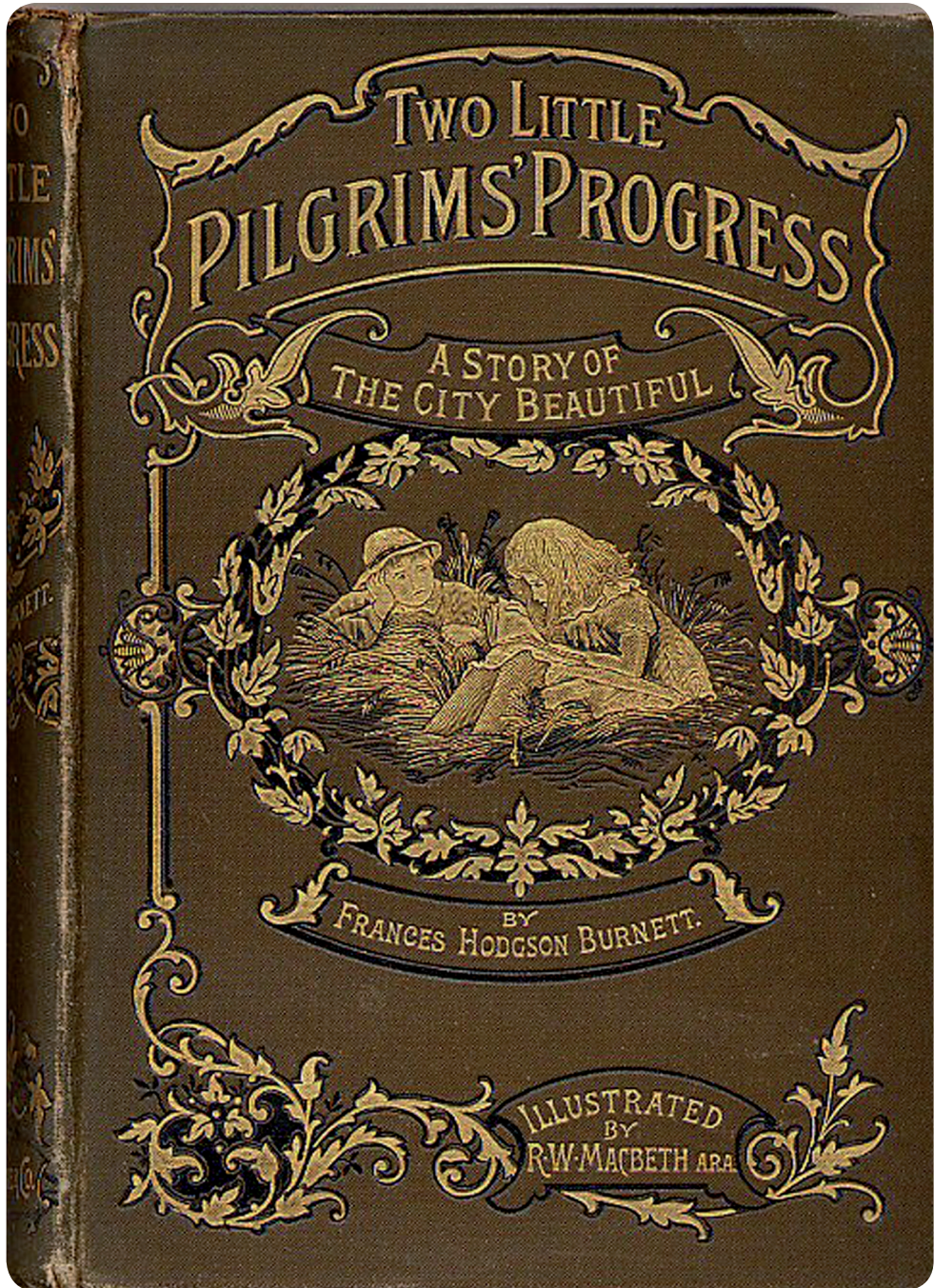
12 J. Winthrop, "A Model of Christian Charity", *The Puritans in America: A Narrative Anthology*, eds. A. Heimert and A. Delbanco (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 91.

13 A. Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), 102.

14 J. Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, ed. N. H. Keble (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

15 F. H. Burnett, *Two Little Pilgrims' Progress: A Story of the City Beautiful* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1895).

16 A similar interpretation of the Fair can be found in *The Adventures of Uncle Jeremiah and Family at the Great Fair* by Charles McClellan Stevens (who published it under the pseudonym of Quondam). In this book the character of the title is a Civil War veteran (he fought under General Sherman), a farmer, and a deacon, in short a representative of, and spokesman for, national unity, rural virtue, and piety. Upon his arrival in Chicago he declares he will not buy a guidebook to the Fair because the Bible has already prepared



Front cover, *Two Little Pilgrims Progress: A Story of the City Beautiful*, by Frances Hodgson Burnett.

pears to them as a new *Celestial City*, while the Midway Plaisance suggests a more exotic but considerably milder, less dangerous counterpart to Bunyan's notorious *Vanity Fair*.¹⁷ As for Chicago, where the children come into contact with the harsh realities of urban squalor, poverty and degradation, the analogy that inevitably comes to mind to anyone familiar with Bunyan's story is with the *City of Destruction* (i.e. this world) which Christian flees in search of salvation. Like many other works of fiction inspired by the Fair, Burnett's novel includes detailed descriptions of the buildings, grounds, and exhibits, but more often than not these scenes are transfigured through the eyes of the awe-struck children. Thus, for example, upon entering the area of the White City called the Court of Honor, the children walk

softly, almost as if they felt themselves treading upon holy ground. To their youth and unworn souls it *was* like holy ground, they had so dreamed of it, they had so longed for it, it had been so mingled in their minds with the story of a city not of this world. [...]

It was so white – it was so full of the marvel of color – it was so strange it was so radiant and unearthly in its beauty.¹⁸

It is only thanks to the *deus ex machina*-like intervention of a kindly and very wealthy widower, named John Holt, that Robin, Meg, and their friend Ben (a poor, sickly boy they meet in Chicago) can also experience the otherwise unaffordable wonders of the commercially-driven Midway. In addition to taking care of all expenses, Holt significantly takes on the role of protector of the children (he will end up adopting Robin and Meg in the novel's denouement) during their tour of the Midway. Even though there is nothing really sinister or unsavory about the Midway as recreated by Burnett, it is worth noticing that the children, who can walk freely and safely on their own around the American-made White City, need to be escorted when coming into

him for his visit to the White City: "I aint got no time on the grounds for reading or I'd a brought the Scriptures along, I judge it prophesied this when it spoke of signs and wonders appearing". C. McClellan Stevens, *The Adventures of Uncle Jeremiah and Family at the Great Fair: their Observations and Triumphs* (Chicago: Laird & Lee, 1893), 24.

17 Echoes of the dangers and temptations of Bunyan's *Vanity Fair* can be heard aplenty in a number of mystery novels which use the Columbian Exposition as their setting, such as: L. L. Lynch [E. Murdoch Van Deventer], *Against Odds: A Detective Story*, in *Fairground Fiction: Detective Stories of the World's Columbian Exposition*, ed. D. K. Hartman (Kenmore, NY: Motif Press, 1992), 1-252; A. K. Sims [J. H. Whitson], *Chicago Charlie: The Columbian Detective*, in *Fairground Fiction*, 259-433; and J. J. Flinn, *The Mysterious Disappearance of Helen St. Vincent: A Story of the Vanished City* (Chicago: Geo. K. Hazlitt & Co., 1895). With its kaleidoscope of faces, languages, and cultures, the Midway functions in these works as the perfect terrain for confidence men and assorted criminals, as a place that favors deception and disguise and where upright Anglo-Saxons venture at their peril.

18 Burnett, *Two Little Pilgrims' Progress*, 95.



The Court of Honor, The White City, World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago 1893.

contact with *foreignness*. For all the magical, fairy-tale aura in which Burnett envelops the Otherness of the Midway, the impression remains that its mixture of languages and ethnicities calls for the normative presence of an American adult alongside the children:

“We’ll go now. We will hobnob with Bedouins and Japanese and Turks, and shake hands with Amazons and Indians; we’ll ride on camels and go to the Chinese Theatre. Come along”.

And to this Arabian Nights’ Entertainment he took them all. [...] They rode on camels down a street in Cairo, they talked to chiefs of the desert, they listened to strange music, they heard strange tongues, and tasted strange confections.¹⁹

The exemplary quality of the White City is also strongly emphasized in William Dean Howells’s *The Letters of an Altrurian Traveler*, which appeared serially in *The*

¹⁹ Burnett, *Two Little Pilgrims’ Progress*, 155-156.

Cosmopolitan in 1893-1894.²⁰ A supplement to Howells's utopian novel *A Traveler from Altruria* (serialized in 1892-1893, published as a book in 1894),²¹ *Letters* gives us access to the descriptions and comments on American life that Aristides Homos, the "traveler" of the title, sends to his friend Cyril back home. Based, as its name suggests, on the spirit of altruism, the society to which Homos and Cyril belong was intended by Howells both as a model that the United States should strive to emulate and a device by which to set in bold relief, and denounce, the growing social inequality he saw around him. In his second letter to Cyril, Homos tells of his visit to the World's Columbian Exposition which Howells himself, personally invited by Daniel Burnham, had seen in September, 1893. As the Altrurian's letter eloquently testifies, Howells had been deeply impressed by the White City, which seemed to him the perfect example of what America could achieve if, for a change, the common good prevailed over selfishness, competitiveness, and purely economic concerns.²² With its elegant neoclassical buildings, the White City evoked the nation's capital and the promise of perfect democracy on which the United States had been founded, a promise whose fulfillment in Howells's time seemed to recede further and further into the distance.

Since Howells had conceived of Altruria as the ideal to which America should aspire, or as an alternative America, i.e. America as it was meant to be, it comes as no surprise that the prevailing feeling that Aristides Homos conveys in his letter is the pleasure of recognition. In the White City he feels at home because it is as if a piece of Altruria had been magically transported to Chicago, the metropolis that seemed to be well on its way to matching, and perhaps even surpassing, New York as the epitome of America's ruthless capitalism. What made the creation of the White City an extraordinarily significant event in American history was that "for the first time in their pitiless economic struggle, [...] [commercial] interests submitted to the arts, and lent themselves as frankly to the work as if there had never been a question of money in the world".²³ Admittedly, as James Gilbert has pointed out, "Howells could conclude that the White City was unblemished by commercialism only by referring to the exteriors of buildings, for inside the grand plaster buildings were thousands of commercial exhibits".²⁴ As seen from Howells's selective angle of vision, however, the White City owed its pristine beauty to the generous, lofty spirit in which it had been conceived and erected. It was that spirit which rendered

20 W. D. Howells, *The Letters of an Altrurian Traveler* (Gainesville, FL: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1960).

21 W. D. Howells, *A Traveler from Altruria* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1894).

22 In a similar vein, Howells's friend Hamlin Garland wrote in *Crumbling Idols* that "the Columbian Exposition has taught [Chicago] her own capabilities in something higher than business". H. Garland, *Crumbling Idols* (Chicago: Stone & Kimball, 1894), 152.

23 Howells, *Letters*, 21.

24 Gilbert, *Perfect Cities*, 93-94.



The Fisheries Building, The White City, World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago 1893.

it far superior to the surrounding buildings representing the various American states and a number of foreign countries. Designed for narrower motives, namely to bespeak local or national pride, these structures could at best aspire to the title of “picturesque”.²⁵ If the White City was Altruria writ small, or the ideal America, the Midway Plaisance, where “everything must be paid for”, was perfectly in tune with America as it really was, for there one could see “the competitive life of the present epoch”.²⁶ Subverting the widespread belief in Western and, more specifically, American superiority over other cultures, a belief which in many ways informed the World's Columbian Exposition, Howells suggested that the American model might be a corrupting influence:

You strike at once here the hard level of the outside western world; and the Orient, which has mainly peopled the Plaisance, with its theaters and restaurants and shops, takes the tint of the American enterprise, and puts on somewhat the manners of the ordinary American hustler.²⁷

²⁵ Howells, *Letters*, 32.

²⁶ Howells, *Letters*, 24.

²⁷ Howells, *Letters*, 24.

The contrast between the White City and the Midway, and the fact that Chicago had proved to be a happy, if highly unlikely, choice as the site for the Exposition (winning over New York, Washington, and St. Louis), are also very prominent in Clara Louise Burnham's *Sweet Clover: A Romance of the White City* (1894).²⁸ Chicago, then the American capital of the meat packing business, "had a reputation for vulgarity, crudeness, and commercialism that made something like the White City (in the very denial of these qualities) almost inevitable".²⁹ This reputation lent itself to an interpretation of the Fair in metaphorical terms, as did the tremendous achievement of its creators, most notably Daniel Burnham and Frederick Law Olmsted, who had managed to build a fairy-tale city on a stretch of scraggly and swampy ground on the shores of Lake Michigan ("the White City rose like a perfect superb lily from its defiling mud").³⁰ Like Burnett, Burnham drew upon *The Pilgrim's Progress* to describe the impact that the White City had on visitors: "It was with reverence and a species of awe that Van Tassel gazed about him. The Court of Honor had given him his first approach to a realization of the possibilities of the Celestial City".³¹ Tellingly, she used the character of a strict and pious New England spinster named Miss Berry, a living link to America's Puritan heritage, to drive home the dual nature of the Fair. As Miss Berry puts it:

That Midway is just a representation of matter, and this great White City is an emblem of mind. In the Midway it's some dirty and all barbaric. It deafens you with noise; the worst folks in there are avaricious and bad, and the best are just children in their ignorance, [...] and when you come out o' that mile-long babel where you've been elbowed and cheated, you pass under a bridge – and all of a sudden you are in a great, beautiful silence. The angels on the Woman's Buildin' smile down and bless you, and you know that in what seemed like one step, you've passed out o' darkness into light. [...] perhaps dyin' is going to be somethin' like crossin' the dividin' line that separates the Midway from the White City.³²

As the representative of an older, simpler America, Miss Berry perfectly embodies a type that can be found in several works about the Fair, both fictional and non-fictional.³³ Hers is the voice and point of view of small-town, rural, insular America that Burnham

28 C. L. Burnham, *Sweet Clover: A Romance of the White City* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, and Co., 1894).

29 Gilbert, *Perfect Cities*, 125.

30 Burnham, *Sweet Clover*, 152.

31 Burnham, *Sweet Clover*, 181.

32 Burnham, *Sweet Clover*, 201-202.

33 The list includes, among others: T. Dean, *White City Chips* (Chicago: Warren Publishing Company, 1895); J. Hawthorne, *Humors of the Fair* (Chicago: E. A. Weeks & Company, 1893); Lynch, *Against Odds*; Stevens, *Adventures of Uncle Jeremiah*.

and other American writers confronted with the exoticism of the Midway primarily as a way to poke gentle fun at the parochialism of a vast part of their country. Thus Miss Berry, referring generically to the “naked savages” she has seen in the Midway, argues that the only constructive way in which she could interact with them would be to “go into that Pleasance [sic] with plenty o’ hot water and Castile soap, and some sensible clothes [to help] those poor critters to a more godly way o’ livin’”.³⁴ It takes one of the most ambitious, intercultural events hosted in the White City, the World’s Parliament of Religions of September, 1893, to shake her previously adamant beliefs in the superiority of Western (more specifically, Anglo-Saxon) culture and Christianity (more specifically, Protestantism). Calling attention to the educational, enlightening influence that the White City could exercise on its visitors, Burnham notes that Miss Berry, a devout attendant of the interreligious congress, “was one of thousands whose complacent generalization of ‘the heathen’ received a blow”.³⁵

Both the White City and the Midway offer precious insights to the attentive observer in Julian Hawthorne’s *Humors of the Fair* (1893). Hosting an unprecedentedly large gathering of Americans of different provenances and backgrounds, the Columbian Exposition represented an ideal field of investigation for the student of the national character. Hawthorne thought that his fellow countrymen were no less on display at the Fair than the foreign delegations which, in various ways and in different parts of the Exposition, were expected to epitomize their respective nations: “It occurs to me that We, The Visitors, are not the least interesting part of the World’s Fair. We are the People”.³⁶ In addition, he suggested that the proximity of American and Foreign made all the more conspicuous what he regarded as the distinctive traits of the former. The multicultural spectacle that, however objectionably, the Exposition certainly provided, prompted Hawthorne to ponder on America’s own diversity which was becoming increasingly noticeable with the growing immigration of the early 1890s:

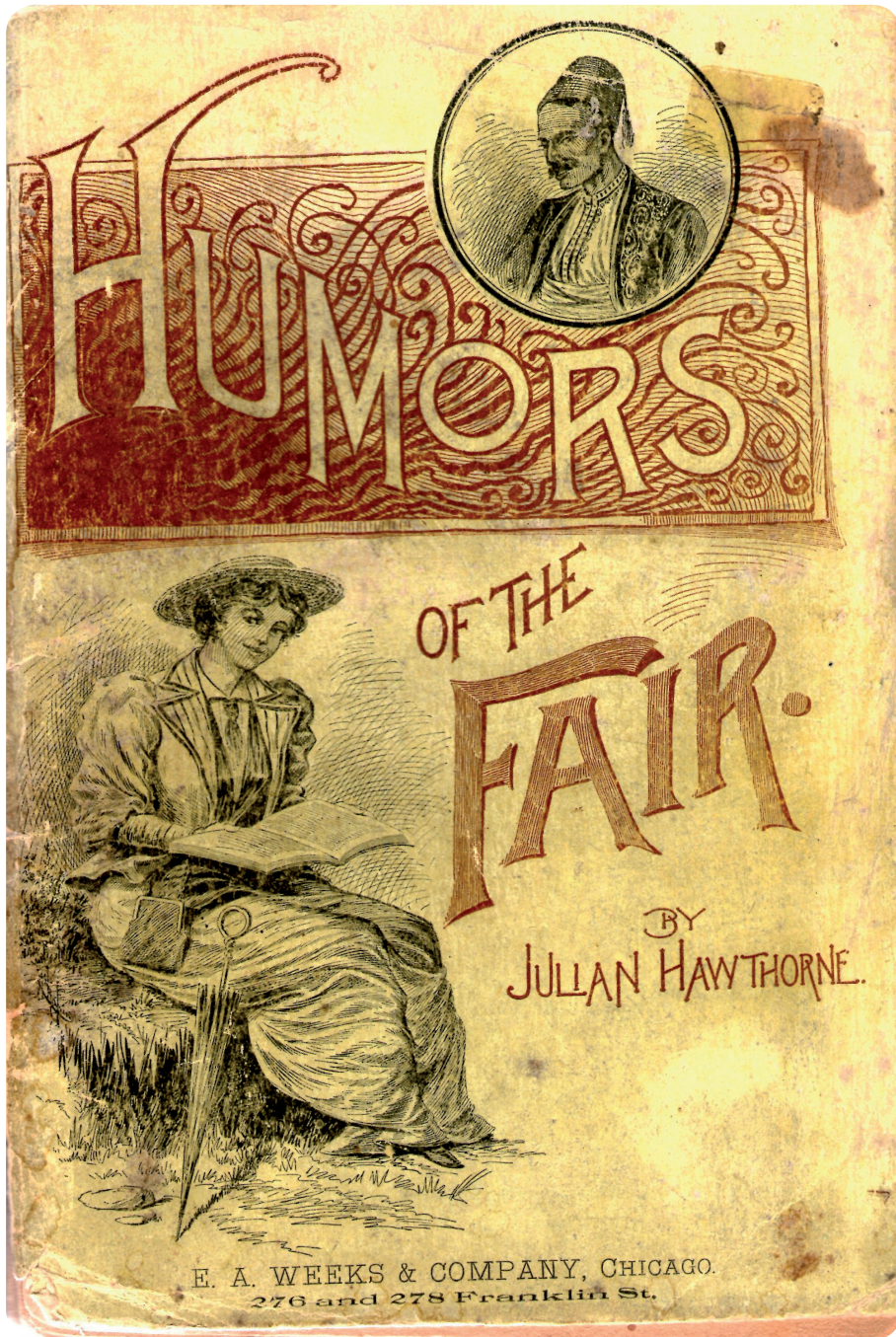
Well, we are a remarkable sight. We are not a homogeneous lot, by any means. The country has engulfed more than it has as yet been able to digest; but it has nevertheless set its stamp on all of them; you see they are all Americans. There is no American type of face and figure, as there is a French type, and an English and a German; but there is an American look, and an American manner, and an American language and way of speaking; the rest may or may not come in time.³⁷

³⁴ Burnham, *Sweet Clover*, 200.

³⁵ Burnham, *Sweet Clover*, 395.

³⁶ Hawthorne, *Humors of the Fair*, 34.

³⁷ Hawthorne, *Humors of the Fair*, 34-35.



Front cover, *Humors of the Fair*, by Julian Hawthorne.

What united the different American faces that met Hawthorne's gaze at the Fair was more than anything else an attitude, a way of confronting the world that evinced democratic, republican self-confidence. And one of the great merits of the Columbian Exposition, in his view, was that it had made this defining national trait more conspicuous than ever. Even though *Humors of the Fair* contains its fair share of blatantly racist remarks leveled at those who, in the language of the time, belonged to the *dark races*, its author is, significantly, at his most dismissive when he mentions the American upper classes. Given the egalitarian vocation of the United States, the upper crust of American society appeared to Hawthorne as the real *Other* at the Fair, the one truly *foreign* presence which was really incongruous there:

Fine Society [...] has no real power or place in America whatever; it is a *grotesque exotic*, and having no roots, it will presently wilt and be improved out of the way. The United States consists of the common people, and will be governed by it; they (the people) make it, own it, and will run it, as this Fair amply demonstrates.³⁸

Like many of his contemporaries who wrote about the foreigners *on display* along the Midway, Hawthorne never questioned the authenticity of the various *ethnic* villages or of the Street of Cairo ("Cairo Street... [is] the veritable Cairo in concentrated form"),³⁹ nor did he have any qualms about the ethics of having people *perform* their culture for the entertainment of their hosts ("The Plaisance... is a Universal Canal, in which the student of Human Nature cannot do better than fish").⁴⁰ His comments are also fairly representative in the way they rank foreign nationals, singling out for appreciation the Javanese, while reserving the most offensive observations for the people of the African Kingdom of Dahomey (now Benin). Interestingly enough, he mentioned with approbation the growing acquaintance between Americans and foreigners that the Fair promoted (at a time when social interaction between whites and non-whites in the United States was very limited) and was willing to admit that the comparison between local and foreigner was not always in favor of the former:

It must be confessed that in grace, adaptability and courtesy, and generally in dignity and self-possession, the Orientals have the better of us. They catch our style much quicker than we do theirs. At the same time they do not fall into the mistake of surrendering their own individuality.⁴¹

38 Hawthorne, *Humors of the Fair*, 40 (emphasis added).

39 Hawthorne, *Humors of the Fair*, 185.

40 Hawthorne, *Humors of the Fair*, 156.

41 Hawthorne, *Humors of the Fair*, 154.

The *authenticity* of the Javanese village derived, in Hawthorne's view, even more from the bearing of its inhabitants than from the accuracy with which their dwellings and customs had been recreated at the Fair. It stemmed from their ability to behave as if they were indeed back in their own country, secure in the comfort of age-old gestures and practices and seemingly impervious to the intrusive, sometimes downright uncouth scrutiny of the Americans.⁴² Inasmuch as the latter inevitably became themselves objects of observation within the great cosmopolitan spectacle of the Fair, they seemed to Hawthorne to suffer by comparison with the Javanese:

the inhabitants carry on their fairy handicrafts, with as absolute a composure and unconsciousness of observation as if they were in solitude on the other side of the planet, instead of being the cynosure of innumerable American stares. This self-possession, genuine and not assumed, is a touch beyond anything we could accomplish in that direction; we are always self-conscious when we are being stared at, and we show it. The Javanese can give us lessons in this, and in other points of dignity and good manners besides.⁴³

Hawthorne was not alone in thinking that his fellow Americans should be encouraged to abandon, or at least reconsider, their assumptions about themselves and the foreigners with whom they came into contact at the Fair. In a series of newspaper articles about the Columbian Exposition, which originally appeared in 1893 and were published in book form in 1895 as *White City Chips*, Teresa Dean called attention to the crucial question of point of view. Interestingly enough, she chose the reactions of American spectators to some of the ethnic dances performed at the Midway as an example of deplorable cultural rigidity. Describing the exhibition of the Algerian dancers, for example, she noted that it was "as much of a study to watch the people who attend it as it is to watch the dancers".⁴⁴ The study of the spectators' expressions (both facial and verbal) during and after the show plainly revealed that most of them had "great difficulty in understanding that they must view the performance from the standpoint of the customs of a very foreign country".⁴⁵ Judging on the basis of American cultural standards of beauty, elegance, and propriety, they inevitably found Algerian dancing "coarse" and indecent. Singling out

42 Like Hawthorne, Stevens singled out the Javanese as "the politest people of all", while he censured the customer-like rudeness and arrogance of his fellow Americans, ranking them *even* below the Dahomeyans ("the strangest of all" people) in terms of good manners: "But the palm is left to the American for a whole-souled disregard of the feelings of others. The show was brought here for the special benefit of the visitor; he has paid his money, and he has the right to do as he pleases". Stevens, *Adventures of Uncle Jeremiah*, 125, 126.

43 Hawthorne, *Humors of the Fair*, 182-183.

44 Dean, *White City Chips*, 89.

45 Dean, *White City Chips*, 90.

for censure the indignant response of two “respectable” elderly American ladies, Dean denounced their inconsistent, biased prudishness:

Two women [...] left the theater yesterday with anger written all over them from head to foot. And yet those two women would think nothing of attending burlesque opera, and expressing great admiration for the dainty scarcity of clothing, or the success of the most reckless high kicker.⁴⁶

Later in the book, telling of one occasion on which she accompanied three American ladies to see the notorious “danse du ventre” at the Egyptian Theater, Dean reminds her readers that

the dances of these people are peculiar to their country, and that the Arabian ideas of grace, refinement and science are not based on the American plan. And it takes an exceedingly generous mind not to view the performances from an American standpoint”.⁴⁷

Of particular interest to Dean was the presence of Native Americans at the Fair. She was keenly aware of the very peculiar nature of the roles in which they had been cast by the Fair’s organizers. Native Americans inhabited both the White City, as living *specimens* in the educational exhibits of the ethnological department, and the Midway, where a section had been reserved for them. In addition, they constituted one of the main attractions of the Wild West Show. Displayed as testimonies of North America’s pre-European past and as the local, flesh-and-blood material on which white anthropologists could conduct their research work, they were also grouped together with the foreign villages and settlements, and thus implicitly categorized as other than U.S. citizens. They were simultaneously claimed as part of the American heritage and denied admittance into modern America. Dean became particularly sensitive to their predicament after striking an acquaintance of sorts with a young Apache curiously named Antonio who was helping Frederic Putnam with the ethnological exhibit. Before meeting him, she had been told of his diffidence toward white visitors and the sarcasm to which he had recourse when he became the target of their curiosity:

he feels that he has become to the passing public a representative savage, and that they to him are worse savages than he has ever known before. As I said in yesterday’s column, he has dubbed them the “uncivilized white people”.⁴⁸

46 Dean, *White City Chips*, 90.

47 Dean, *White City Chips*, 156.

48 Dean, *White City Chips*, 217.

The disfranchised status of Native Americans⁴⁹ or, as she called them, “the first and only true Americans”,⁵⁰ appeared to Dean all the more egregious when compared to that of the mass of needy newcomers who were changing (and not for the better, to judge from her choice of words) the cultural and ethnic makeup of American society:

I looked at Antonio as he sat there with his keen appreciation of all situations and in his high intelligence, and I could not help but think how easy it was for the lowest scum of immigration to come to this country and become voting citizens and yet the rights of such men as he were questioned.⁵¹

Like all the writers we have encountered so far, Dean was conspicuously silent about the Exposition’s treatment of another minority: African Americans. That she and the other authors had few opportunities to notice their presence is very likely, for the very good reason that the African American presence was barely visible. Denied any public recognition in the form of a building, an exhibit, or a department, and excluded from all forms of decision-making, organization, and management of the Fair, and even from the ranks of the Columbian Guard (the Fair’s police), African Americans soon realized, to their dismay, that they were being left out of the self-portrait the United States proudly presented to the world. The only, much belated concession that the Exposition’s managers made to the outraged African American community was to set aside August 25th, 1893, for a *Colored Jubilee Day*, a decision that many African Americans found insufferably patronizing and one that only added insult to injury. In order to inform the public of this blatant discrimination, former slave and author Frederick Douglass, together with journalist and social activist Ida B. Wells, launched a fund-raising initiative to pay for the publication of a pamphlet in English, French, German, and Spanish to be distributed freely to the Fair’s visitors.⁵² In his introduction to the pamphlet, titled *The Reason why the Colored American is not in the World’s Columbian Exposition* (1893), Douglass expressed his discomfort at seeing his race represented in the most popular part of the Fair, the Midway, by the Dahomeyan village (recycled from the Paris Exposition

49 It was only in 1924 that the American Congress granted citizenship to Native Americans with the Indian Citizenship Act. However, they continued to be denied the right to vote, which was regulated by state law, well into the middle of the century. J. Page, *In the Hands of the Great Spirit: The 20,000-Year History of American Indians* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 354.

50 Dean, *White City Chips*, 48.

51 Dean, *White City Chips*, 219.

52 E. M. Rudwick and A. Meier, “Black Man in the ‘White City’: Negroes and the Columbian Exposition, 1893”, *Phylon*, 26, 4 (1965), 356.

of 1889). That presence, in his view, had no other purpose than to confirm widely held beliefs about black inferiority:

[America] has brought to her shores and given welcome to a greater variety of mankind than were ever assembled in one place since the day of Pentecost. Japanese, Javanese, Soudanese, Chinese, Cingalese, Syrians, Persians, Tunisians, Algerians, Egyptians, East Indians, Laplanders, Esquimoux, and as if to shame the Negro, the Dahomians [sic] are also here to exhibit the Negro as a repulsive savage.⁵³

Another contributor to the volume, F. L. Barnett (editor of the black newspaper the *Chicago Conservator*), was quick to recognize and point out the unintended, sinister implication of the color that characterized the Fair's most representative buildings:

Theoretically open to all Americans, the Exposition practically is, literally and figuratively, a "White City", in the building of which the Colored American was allowed no helping hand, and in its glorious success he has no share.⁵⁴

Emphatic confirmation of this assessment could be found in Frederick Douglass's own predicament, since he took part in the Fair not as a representative of the United States, but rather as a commissioner for the delegation of Haiti.

Two additional examples of the marginal African American presence at the Fair are also worth mentioning because they are fairly indicative of its racial policies. As Barbara Hochman has aptly reminded us, African Americans were present as characters in the text and illustrations of Harriet Beecher Stowe's anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852),⁵⁵ prominently displayed in the Woman's Building "to support a self-congratulatory narrative of moral and social progress in U.S. culture".⁵⁶ Safely framed within an exhibit that consigned the problem of slavery to the past and ignored the terrible racial violence which had never ceased to plague the country after the Civil War, African Americans could be displayed, as it were, as part of a landmark in America's social and cultural history. No less significant was the participation in the Fair of Nancy Green, a former slave who had been hired by the R. T. Davis Milling Company to bring to life the turbaned *mammy* figure associated with their pancake mix: Aunt

53 F. Douglass, Introduction to *The Reason why the Colored American is not in the World's Columbian Exposition*, by I. Wells et al., ed. R. W. Rydell (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 13.

54 F. L. Barnett, "The Reason why", *The Reason why*, 79-80.

55 H. B. Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life Among the Lowly*, ed. E. Ammons (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1993).

56 B. Hochman, "Uncle Tom's Cabin at the World's Columbian Exposition", *Libraries and Culture*, 41, 1 (2006), 83.

Jemima.⁵⁷ Welcoming visitors and making pancakes in a booth shaped like a giant flour barrel, Green presented an image of antebellum, nurturing, jovial, subservient blackness (derived from the tradition of the Minstrel Show) which most white Americans found immensely reassuring and which would remain a powerful popular icon for many years to come. The fact that even though no African American woman had been admitted onto the board of lady managers of the Fair, Aunt Jemima was nevertheless exhibited as the representative of black womanhood, spoke volumes about the image of racial hierarchy that the United States wished to present to the world.

Even though, as we have seen, the authors considered in this essay (and indeed the many others who could have been added to this selection) found in the Fair, and specifically in the White City, an ideal against which they could measure the shortcomings of American society, the majority of them overlooked one of its most glaring flaws: the marginalization of African Americans. It was as if, in harmony with the image that the organizers and creators of the Fair had intended to present to the world, the white American writers who portrayed this event *needed* to believe in, and sanction, the perfection of its *city beautiful*. Only as long as it appeared to be free of the defiling influence of the market, the more troubling aspects of industrialization and technology, as well as the pervasiveness of racial discrimination, could the White City function as the emblem of what America could and should become.

57 M. M. Manring, *Slave in a Box: The Strange Career of Aunt Jemima* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1998), 83.