

## CULTURAL AND RACIAL STEREOTYPES ON THE MIDWAY

### Josh Cole

In 1893 the World's Columbian Exposition opened in Chicago. This fair was not the first of its kind, but it was the first one to take place in the Midwest.<sup>1</sup> Chicago was viewed as the industrial capital of the region, so it made perfect sense for it to host one of the most extravagant spectacles of the nineteenth century. The fair itself was divided into two separate parts—the White City and the Midway Plaisance. The White City represented white, middle-class American society, while the Midway served a completely different purpose. The Midway served as both an “educational” example of inferior civilizations and as an amusement for the paying spectators. By examining the numerous exhibits and racialized “others” on the Midway, one is able to see exactly how strong these feelings of Anglo-Saxon superiority were on a national scale. Racial and cultural stereotypes were widespread on the Midway, and they were upheld by nearly all of the spectators and organizers. Therefore, the Midway serves as an excellent case study of both social and cultural history.

### *The Organizers and Visual Culture*

Frederic Ward Putnam of Harvard University headed the fair's anthropology section, with the assistance of Franz Boas. Their primary intent for the Midway was to make it educational for the spectators, and they hired a young man by the name of Sol Bloom to provide the Midway with this focus. Bloom frustrated Boas and Putnam; opting to bring entertainment, based on what he had seen in Paris in 1889, to the Midway instead. While Putnam and the fair board treated race in a

---

Josh Cole is a graduate student in History from Tuscola, Illinois, and a member of Phi Alpha Theta. He wrote this paper for Dr. Lynne Curry in History 4950, *Industrial America, in the Spring of 2006*.

<sup>1</sup>The battle for the privilege of hosting the exposition had been between the East and the West; Chicago had faced strong competition from New York. David F. Burg, *Chicago's White City of 1893* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1976), 42-43.

traditional hegemonic manner, placing the advanced technology of the Anglo-Saxon race at the center of the fairgrounds and the displays of the lesser races farther away from the center, Bloom's Midway relished the opportunity to make money from its commercialized exoticism.<sup>2</sup>

Bloom organized and coordinated the exhibits in accordance with racial and cultural stereotypes of the time. He knew that white Americans would simply be shocked and appalled with foreign and mysterious races and cultures while also being intrigued by their own curiosities. Exhibits were a very popular form of amusement during the era of industrialization. People did not just want to read about other lifestyles and exotic places, but they would rather like to experience them with their own senses. This notion was captured by Jacob Riis' *How the Other Half Lives*. In it, Riis visually detailed the slums of New York with photographs as well as words. David Leviatin, the most recent editor of Riis' masterpiece, believes that it offered its readers “a spellbinding glimpse of America's future.” By skillfully combining word and picture, Riis managed to capture a view of society that revealed modern America's vision of progress, and one that established Anglo-Saxons at the top of civilization.<sup>3</sup>

The transformation of the urban daily newspaper, the astonishing success of George Eastman's line of Kodak products, the growth of advertising, the popularity of the mail-order catalog, and the rise of the national illustrated magazine all helped to create an exciting new visual culture saturated with graphic images, as Riis' work demonstrated. These new realistic images were designed to entice the eye—to make viewers stop, look, and buy.<sup>4</sup> The world's fair in Chicago was no exception, and Bloom wanted to amaze and shock the visitors with

---

<sup>2</sup>Robert Rydell, John E. Findling, and Kimberly D. Pelle, *Fair America: World's Fairs in the United States* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000), 38-39.

<sup>3</sup>Jacob A. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*, ed. David Leviatin (New York: Bedford Books, 1996), 9-10.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 24-25.

something that they had never witnessed before—a visual hierarchy of race with Anglo-Saxons at the top of civilization. He planned to hit the jackpot with the notion that public spectacles such as the circus-like Midway were cultural phenomena, and he became rich as a direct result of it.<sup>5</sup>

### *Imperialism*

The overriding view on American foreign policy before the world's fair was one that stressed isolation. People in power wanted to concentrate on American economics and politics at home rather than getting involved in other countries' affairs. The world's fair was the result of a change in mindset of the American public. The citizens of the United States realized that their economy would never live up to its full potential if their aims were not set outside of their national borders as well as overseas. Only then would America be recognized as a true "world power."

Social historian Robert Rydell believes that the Midway offered legitimacy to an imperialistic view of the world, and one that would recognize America as a world power. It allowed Americans, whether it be elites or lower-class citizens, to establish their cultural hegemony as whites. Its anthropologically-validated racial hierarchy served several purposes during this time. It legitimized racial exploitation at home and the creation of an empire abroad. Spectators identified the exhibited peoples as primitives who could be conquered by the superior Anglo-Saxon race. The inferior races could only be improved by association with white Americans, and the foreign peoples would surely be open to the adoption of an industrially superior and civilized religion, government, and culture. Rudyard Kipling referred to this yearning as the "white man's burden," and Teddy Roosevelt bought into the idea as well. As Roosevelt saw it the United States was engaged in a millennial drama of manly racial advancement, in which American men "enacted their superior manhood" by asserting

---

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 40-43.

imperialistic control over races of inferior manhood, to prove their virility, as a race and a nation. American men needed to take up the "strenuous life" and strive to advance civilization – through imperialistic warfare and racial violence if necessary.<sup>6</sup>

I agree with Rydell that imperialism played a major role on the Midway, for all of the evidence already mentioned. Carefully designed exhibits of the nonwhites on the Midway illustrated ideas that had been used to justify the political and economic repression of Native Americans, African-Americans, and Asian-Americans. These ideas of conquering, nurturing, and ultimately exploiting less civilized peoples were then used to validate American imperial policy overseas. The emphasis on white supremacy created a combined sense of nationalism and racism for Anglo-Saxons.<sup>7</sup> The world's fair was a direct result of these feelings of nationalism and racism, and they were utilized more dramatically after 1893. The United States went to war with Spain in 1898, and the victory gave America a position in the western Pacific (the Philippines) which made it a sort of Asiatic colonial power. However, America was not satisfied, and used force to eventually make Hawaii a United States territory in February of 1900. Secretary of State John Milton Hay's "Open Door" Policy indicated that America wished to have an influence in China, and this was reinforced in the United States sending 2,500 troops to the international army sent to restore order there in 1900.<sup>8</sup> Teddy Roosevelt also acted upon his imperialistic desires, helping Panama to declare independence from Colombia in exchange for control of the Panama Canal Zone.

### *In the Name of Science and Education*

Americans did not want the Midway to simply be a symbol of imperialistic desires, so all of its exhibits were classified under

---

<sup>6</sup>Paul Kennedy, "The United States as New Kid on the Block, 1890-1940," *Major Problems in Gilded Age and program Era*, ed. Leon Fink (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001), 287.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 235-236.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 276-277.

the supervision of the Department of Ethnology and Archaeology, which gave them an air of scientific respectability; instruction and entertainment complemented each other on the Midway. The exhibits were organized to include “the civilized, the half civilized, and the savage worlds” in a racial hierarchy leading to a future utopia. Visitors passed between the walls of medieval villages, between mosques and pagodas, past the dwellings of colonial days, and past the cabins of South Seas Islanders and the Javanese, among them hints of ruder and more barbaric environments.<sup>9</sup> It was hailed as a great object lesson in anthropology by leading anthropologists in America, and it provided visitors with an ethnological, scientific sanction for the stereotypical American view of the nonwhite world as barbaric and childlike.<sup>10</sup>

At the fair in Chicago, visitors could witness and even take part in the scientific observation, of and research on, the racial characteristics of the exhibited peoples on the Midway. Phrenology, craniology, physiognomy, and anthropometry shared the assumption that in the outward shape and physical appearance of the body and the inner character—of different races, but also of criminals, prostitutes, and deviants—was manifest. These “scientific” methods are generally understood to be unacceptable in modern society, yet they held significant credibility during the late nineteenth century. The outward shape of the subject's body had to be measured and mapped meticulously. The results of these findings were collected, measured, classified, and filed at the fair's laboratory. At the same time this was occurring in Chicago, anthropological societies and museums of natural history around the nation accumulated tens of thousands of native skulls of exotic peoples in an effort to prove that these “scientific” practices clearly

---

<sup>9</sup>John R. McRae, “Oriental Verities on the American Frontier: The 1893 World's Parliament of Religions and the Thought of Mason Abe,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 11 (1991): 11-12.

<sup>10</sup>Robert Rydell, *All the World's A Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Exhibitions, 1876-1916* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 40.

illustrated differences between the superior Anglo-Saxon race and inferior foreign races by physical measurements.<sup>11</sup>

### *Evolutionary Scale of Civilization*

The World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago was not the first fair to use cultural and racial stereotypes as inspirations for their exhibits, whether it be for scientific experiments or ethnological observations. The world's fair in Paris was a major inspiration for the Midway in Chicago. Robert Rydell recognized the significance of these fairs. “These events,” Rydell says of the expositions, “were triumphs of hegemony as well as symbolic edifices.” As symbolic universes the fairs legitimate the “world order” they create. For Rydell, this symbolic universe represented in ethnological exhibits, was the product of a union between “Darwinian theories about racial development and utopian dreams about America's material and national progress.” In the exhibits fairgoers could walk from white civilization to dark barbarity, and experience the notion of social Darwinism for themselves. The Midway emphasized the inferiority of exotic and primitive races, while the White City showed the evident superiority of the industrialized white American race.<sup>12</sup>

Amusements on the Midway were based on the practices of the “inferior” ethnic groups or segments of a colony's population. For instance, all Native Americans might be thought to wear feather bonnets or all the inhabitants of French West Africa to be like the Dahomeyans shown at so many other exhibitions. These impressions were reinforced if the people on display were housed in structures associated with only one group—the wigwam, the igloo, the grass hut, the Indochinese temple, or the West African mud stockade. Organizers relied on these stereotypes of exotic peoples to attract more visitors who

---

<sup>11</sup>Raymond Corbey, “Ethnographic Showcases, 1870-1930,” *Cultural Anthropology* 8, No. 3 (August 1993): 354-355.

<sup>12</sup>Meg Armstrong, “A Jumble of Foreignness”: The Sublime Musayums of Nineteenth-Century Fairs and Expositions,” *Cultural Critique* 23 (Winter 1992-1993): 207.

wanted to see differing and primitive lifestyles.<sup>13</sup> The different lifestyles of colonial natives became standard fanfare at many expositions for the “education” and entertainment of westerners. The spectators and natives figured as categories in what Raymond Corbey considers western representations of “Self,” or characters in the story of the ascent to civilization, depicted as “the inevitable triumph of higher races over lower ones and as progress through science and imperial conquest.”

Ethnologist Charles Rau, who observed the Midway in Chicago, stated that “the extreme lowness of our remote ancestors cannot be a source of humiliation; on the contrary, we should glory in our having advanced so far above them, and recognize the great truth that progress is the law that governs the development of mankind.”<sup>14</sup> This statement serves as evidence that these sentiments of white superiority over exotic and foreign civilizations were shared by both the common people and the elites in American and western society. Lower- and middle-class citizens did not feel that their racist views were immoral or bigoted because they were supported by some of the most famous and established intellectuals in nineteenth-century society.

The living exhibits on the Midway were typically organized on a scale from civilized to barbaric so that the lower- and middle- class citizens could easily see the distinction between civilization and barbarism. The lower a people, or race, was deemed to be by white America the further removed it was from the “Indian school” that marked one pole of the scale, or that of civilization, and thus closer to the White City. Philippine Igorots and African Pygmies were situated near the pole of barbarity at the other end of the scale, and referred to as the ultimate bottom dwellers on the evolutionary ladder and furthest away from the White City. These peoples were presented in all of their

---

<sup>13</sup>Burton Benedict, “International Exhibitions and National Identity,” *Anthropology Today* 7, No. 3 (June 1991): 8.

<sup>14</sup>Corbey, “Ethnographic Showcases, 1870-1930,” 341-342.

uncivilized horror, to be jeered and hissed at by the paying customers.<sup>15</sup>

Social historian Robert Muccigrosso also notes this particular assemblage of foreign villages clustered along the Midway. He and many other critics of the Midway assert that the arrangement of these Midway settlements exhibited racial and ethnic biases and were consciously designed to proclaim the superiority of white culture. They charge that officials intentionally arranged for non-Western exhibits to be closer to the “black” city (Chicago) and farthest from the White City. According to these critics, this represented a ranking of cultural achievements, or a microcosm of the world of imperialism that exalted westerners over non-westerners.<sup>16</sup>

I agree with Muccigrosso's assessment that the placement of non-western exhibits was deliberately placed closer to the “black” city because this is exactly what Sol Bloom had in mind. The exotic and unknown peoples were arranged this way in order to represent their complete backwardness compared to the elegance of the White City. White City officials were not comfortable with its close proximity to the Midway due to its denigrating characteristics, so the two were placed as far away from each other as possible in order to maintain the purity and innocence of the industrialized White City.

Harlow N. Higinbotham, president of the board of directors of the Columbian Exposition, rationalized the Midway in his official report published five years after the fair concluded. His description of the fair's organization reinforced this separation of the Midway from the White City for moral reasons. He argued that “the eye and mind need[ed] relief” from the Court of Honor in the White City. The Midway granted the “opportunity for isolating...special features, thus preventing jarring contrasts between the beautiful buildings and the illimitable exhibits on the one hand, and the amusing, distracting, ludicrous, and noisy

---

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 345.

<sup>16</sup>Robert Muccigrosso, *Celebrating the New World: Chicago's Columbian Exposition of 1893* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, Inc., 1993), 164.

attractions" on the other. The low or popular culture of exotic and foreign peoples, in his mind, must not violate the sanctity of high white, industrialized culture.<sup>17</sup> Higinbotham, as well as other elite board members, is the reason why the Midway was allowed to racially and culturally stereotype other groups of people and heavily profit from it. The Midway institutionalized the concept of Anglo-Saxon racial supremacy and the uninterrupted progress of Western civilization and its organizers transferred this ideology to the organization of the fairgrounds.

Although the exhibited peoples were isolated due to their "low culture" as Higinbotham describes, they served several functions on the Midway. The American firm William Foote & Co. African American Characters exploited a show with African-Americans—as the letterhead of the firm stated—appearing as "Savages, Slaves, Soldiers, and Citizens." Crafts, hunting techniques, rituals, dances, and songs were among the activities staged, as well as stereotypical "authentic" performances like warfare, cannibalistic acts, and head-hunting. Igorots from the Philippines could be seen eating dog meat, a food taboo in the west, while African Pygmies illustrated decapitation. The Dahomey "Amazons," heavily armed, simulated fights for the amusement of the white visitors. Aborigines from Queensland, Australia were described on posters as cannibals and bloodthirsty monsters, further fueling the stereotype of them and other black peoples as animalistic abhorrences of nature.<sup>18</sup>

### *Egyptian and Dahomeyan Women, and the Media's National Influence*

These exhibits were meant to entertain the public, and the Midway certainly was full of amusements. It contained sensational spectacles such as exotic dance shows and racialized "others" performing their daily tasks. One of the most popular stops on the Midway was Little Egypt, which offered the exotic female as an object of sexual desire, clearly reflected in the form

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 154.

<sup>18</sup>Corbey, "Ethnographic Showcases, 1870-1930," 347.

of the "hootchy-cootchy" dance.<sup>19</sup> The women who performed these dances were linked to the ancient sphinx in printed media at the time, whether it was through writing or photography. The sphinx was not only a creature that was thought to be half-woman and half-beast, but also timeless and lifeless.

Popular white media sources did not stop there with their depictions, however. They also compared the modern Egyptian woman to Cleopatra, reinforcing the perception of these women as unchanging and timeless. This linking of the modern Egyptian woman with ancient monuments and thousand-year-old Cleopatras imprisoned her in a time capsule. Her clothing and expression were seen as part of her bondage at the same time that the stereotypical statements of the press served only to seal her in a civilization of the past. Meg Armstrong believes that this portrayal of the Egyptian woman made her less individualistic and more mythical while also making her more "masculine" as her powerlessness was unveiled to the white, superior public.<sup>20</sup>

While observing these exotic women on the Midway, white spectators also viewed them through their own definition of Anglo-Saxon beauty. Dahomeyan women had "dusky beauty" and "savagery" and were commonly depicted in *Midway Types*, a widely circulated *Chicago Times* portfolio of the exhibited people on the Midway. In addition to being viewed as the "savage tigresses" of the Midway, Dahomeyan women were depicted as lacking in the beauty and grace ascribed to favored races; one Amazon was ridiculed for carelessly dangling her legs over the edge of a hammock that was carrying her along the Midway. Impressionable young, white men were warned that dances and songs performed by these women, who enacted risqué caricatures of feminine allure, as one guidebook held, "deprive you of a peaceful night's rest for months to come."<sup>21</sup> The

<sup>19</sup>Armstrong, "A Jumble of Foreignness," 209.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 213-214.

<sup>21</sup>Judy Sund, "Columbus and Columbia in Chicago, 1893: Man of Genius Meets Generic Woman," *The Art Bulletin* 75, No. 3 (September 1993): 450-451.

intricacies and precision of these exotic dances and rituals by these foreign seductresses mesmerized many male spectators<sup>22</sup> Beauty on the Midway was determined by the eye of the white beholder, and this beauty was used as a common measure of civilization at the exposition. Dahomeyan women were gaped at in curiosity and awkward amusement as representatives from a non-industrial, non-Christian society during the era of social Darwinism.<sup>23</sup>

However, they still managed to become real, living persons through personalized use of their names in the newspapers.<sup>24</sup> As propaganda to bolster white claims to racial superiority, the newspapers served to convince fairgoers of what they might have missed at their first observation and, aided by racist narratives, how they were supposed to think when confronting the image of any exotic visitor.<sup>25</sup> The "Chinese Beauty" received little to no commentary in the media, while the "Javanese Beauty" was of a "people who were favorite types of study for all who visited them, their small stature, gentle ways and marked air of contentment winning the liking of all who saw them."<sup>26</sup> The status of nations as savage or civilized was determined by white superiors. The whiter the particular race was, the more beautiful the people were represented as a whole. Beautiful people were stereotyped as more civilized and closer to assimilation of American ideals as compared to darker-skinned Africans, for example.

Reporter and journalist Marian Shaw went through the entire fairgrounds and noted her own personal feelings, particularly on the backwardness of the Chinese and other races

---

<sup>22</sup>*Chicago Daily Herald* (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Library; Chicago: Stuart Paddock, July 9, 1893, text-fiche), 25.

<sup>23</sup>*Chicago Tribune* (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Library; Chicago: David Hiller, August 16, 1893, text-fiche), 1.

<sup>24</sup>*Chicago Herald* (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Library; Chicago: Stuart Paddock, August 19, 1893, text-fiche), 2.

<sup>25</sup>*Chicago Evening Post* (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Library; Chicago: Melville E. Stone, September 16, 1893, text-fiche), 5.

<sup>26</sup>Armstrong, "'A Jumble of Foreignness,'" 220-221.

and cultures exhibited on the Midway. She visited Old Cairo Street, where camels roamed around the campgrounds or donkeys "driven by barefooted, yelling little Arabs, who, clad in long, dirty white garments resembling night gowns, scream and hoot and pummel the long-suffering little beasts with their sticks." She regarded these Arabs as wretches who made shrilling sounds from their "barbarous little throats."<sup>27</sup> Her articles expose the nineteenth-century belief in the progress of the Anglo-Saxon race in America and Europe as contrasted with other primitive races. This distinction of the races was neatly packaged in the separation of the highly symbolic White City with its white, Italian neoclassic buildings, and the Midway, with living exhibits from Java, Samoa, Egypt, and other exotic countries. Shaw, like other fair visitors, looked to the Midway as a kind of living time-line showing the advances of the races.<sup>28</sup>

These people are they, who, in the mad race of nations for power and self, seem to have been left far behind, and, compared with the nations of today, are like untutored children. From the Bedouins of the desert and the South Sea Islanders, one can here trace, from living models, the progress of the human race from savagery and barbarism through all the intermediate stages to a condition still many degrees removed from the advanced civilization of the nineteenth century.<sup>29</sup>

These remarks clearly show that Shaw viewed herself as the social and cultural superior to these exhibited foreigners, but she did not view all of the peoples on display as uncivilized and heathen.

### *African-American Reactions to the Portrayal of Dahomeyans and Samoans*

African-Americans wanted to be very involved in the organization of the Midway, and wanted full creative control of

---

<sup>27</sup>Shaw, *World's Fair Notes*, 58-59.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 88-89.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, 56.

their own exhibits so that the darker-skinned natives that Shaw described would not be misrepresented by white organizers. African-Americans also wanted to show the more prominent and civilized features of black America, but they would be denied this active role. These people, who had vainly fought an unstated but effective color barrier in the exposition's planning phase were angered by the organizers ongoing display of Samoan and Dahomeyan male "savages" who were only capable of breaking bones and hunting animals. These groups of people were viewed as unable to achieve independent status in their own land due to their own inability to industrialize, which in turn meant becoming civilized.

Frederick Douglass was offended by these representations of black peoples on the Midway. He protested that the warriors of the Dahomey Village perpetuated the stereotype of blacks as primitive savages, but the Samoan Islanders on the Midway fared even worse. Billed as people "so recently rescued from cannibalism," the Samoans sang and danced but impressed visitors more with their size and reputed appetite for human flesh. The prevailing stereotype of people of color as barbarous and bloodthirsty brutes was simply too much for the Samoans to overcome with their more civilized and entertaining displays. Americans were not impressed with things familiar to them, and they wanted to see these inferior black brutes in all of their ferocity and vileness. White audiences still appreciated their playing "Yankee Doodle" on drums and gongs at the end of their staged presentation, but they were more impressed by their exoticism.<sup>30</sup>

Aside from these exotic portrayals of Africans, blacks were not favorably represented either in the industrialized White City or on the Midway. In fact, African-Americans were banned from participating in and organizing the fair. Ida B. Wells and Frederick Douglass joined forces and compiled a booklet "The Reason Why the Colored American Is Not Represented in the World's Columbian Exposition." Some 10,000 copies of it were

<sup>30</sup>Muccigrosso, *Celebrating the New World*, 164-165.

distributed during the fair. Wells and Douglass would disagree on the merits of the Colored Jubilee Day at the fair, a day specifically arranged in order to show national contributions of African Americans. Douglass saw it as a small victory for blacks, while the idealistic Wells scoffed at the notion of simply having one day to acknowledge all the successes of her people. The celebrated day did pass without Wells's participation, but Douglass' superb handling of the event changed Wells's perception of it from a belittling occasion to an enlightening experience.<sup>31</sup>

### *Interactions/Reactions of the Observers and Exhibited People*

While the exhibits frustrated and angered African-Americans, white visitors were amused with the exotic dances and rituals. It was also quite usual for them to physically interact with the exhibited natives. They even threw money to Dahomeyan performers, who were made to beg for it. Clearly, the intent of the promoters of the Midway attractions was to simultaneously turn a profit while presenting the world in all its diversity, based on observation and actual interaction.<sup>32</sup> Of course, the exhibited peoples' behavior and movements were strictly controlled in order to preserve the safety of the paying customers. The peoples on display were represented as "different" from the spectators and forced to behave in a manner that clearly demonstrated their inferiority to that of the Anglo-Saxon visitors. It was unthinkable that they should mingle spontaneously with the spectators in almost all situations, and there were few opportunities for contact between the two parties. The living exhibits had to stay in a certain circumscribed part of the exhibition space, which represented their world; a boundary lay between this world and that of the citizens visiting and inspecting them, between wilderness and civility, nature

<sup>31</sup>Christopher Robert Reed, *"All the World Is Here!": The Black Presence at White City* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 152-205.

<sup>32</sup>"The Fair as Educator," *Harper's Weekly* 37 (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Library; New York: J. & J. Harper, June 10, 1893, text-fiche), 543.

and culture, which had to be respected unconditionally. All signs of acculturation were avoided as long as the natives were on show because they were clearly heathen peoples compared to Anglo-Saxons.<sup>33</sup>

One key question that has to be asked is how did these exhibited individuals themselves, often more or less coerced into participation, experience and cope with the confining exhibits and the sometimes obnoxious spectators who viewed them as abhorrences of civilization? Many of the exhibited natives had to battle with homesickness, emotional confusion, difficulties of adjustment to the climate and food, and vicious infections. They often actively resisted the roles that were forced on them, for instance by running away, and they could be put back in harness only by force. The reality of the situation was that these "inferior" exhibited peoples basically had no means to escape their servitude to the organizers. It is obvious that they did not enjoy their time on the Midway, and received no real benefits from doing so. They were forced to display their inferior racial and cultural identities in order to entertain a superior white civilization.<sup>34</sup>

### *Native Americans*

Native Americans were one of the groups that had significant exposure on the Midway Plaisance so that they could demonstrate their inferior status. Although these "Indians" lived on American soil, they were still viewed as barbarians by a majority of white Americans at the end of the nineteenth century. On the Midway, they were set up in teepees, while going about their daily native customs such as cooking over a fire or making bead necklaces. Of course, the organizers insisted on the tepees as their habitats, although the majority of the native participants did not use tepees as their natural living quarters. Sometimes, the Native Americans performed certain rituals for the public. Marian Shaw, a newspaper reporter, noted

<sup>33</sup>Corbey, "Ethnographic Showcases, 1870-1930," 344-345.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 348.

one of the spectacles. They were "artistically painted in chrome yellow, vermilion and green, with feathers, knives, tomahawks and all of the horrid accoutrements of savage warfare."<sup>35</sup> She despised their war dances and ceremonial music because it was primitive in her mind, as well as in the minds of most white observers.

One sideshow that also constituted effective racism toward Native Americans was Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West Show and the cleverly named "Congress of Rough Riders." Indians were portrayed as murderous and warlike savages in these shows, and civilized white cowboys played the part of the courageous heroes and victors over the uncivilized heathens. They were very popular forms of entertainment and enjoyed enormous profits. At the opening ceremonies of the fair, several recently defeated Sioux chiefs (the Wounded Knee massacre had occurred only three years before) were made to appear at the climax of the festivities as the chorus was singing "My Country 'Tis of Thee." These ceremonies and shows symbolized the triumph of white civilization over the inferior Indian nations, through both the portrayal of whites as military victors and the willingness of Native Americans to represent themselves as a conquered and obedient race.<sup>36</sup>

Native Americans were portrayed as uncivilized savages, but there was also an effort on the Midway to show that they could be assimilated into white, mainstream society. This desirability of "civilizing" North American Indians was an important theme in the late nineteenth century. This American emphasis on educating and assimilating Native Americans and other dependent peoples was tempered by ideas of racial and social evolution which placed darker-skinned people much lower on an evolutionary scale than white civilization.<sup>37</sup> Commissioner Morgan of the Indian Bureau of Affairs

<sup>35</sup>Marian Shaw, *World's Fair Notes: A Woman Journalist Views Chicago's 1893 Columbian Exposition* (Chicago: Pogo Press, Incorporated, 1992), 59.

<sup>36</sup>McRae, "Oriental Verities on the American Frontier," 12-13.

<sup>37</sup>Benedict, "International Exhibitions and National Identity," 7.



envisioned an Indian exhibit which, in spite of a large dose of traditional flavor, would convince American citizens that the US government was making "United States citizens out of American savages."<sup>38</sup> Morgan turned to Carlisle's Richard Henry Pratt, the nation's best known Indian educator, to organize and supervise a Native American youth school on the Midway. He refused, citing that Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show would provide ample illustration of Indian ways, and the government should not degrade itself by "illustrating in any way the old Indian camp life."<sup>39</sup> By all accounts the Wild West performances, featuring plenty of mounted warriors, were a great success, enjoyed by a public obviously more interested in the Indians of old. The school did eventually open on the Midway, showing Native American youths performing arithmetic and choral singing in a classroom. However, the former stereotype of the Indian as savage warrior prevailed, and the school itself was rarely attended and a financial failure.

### *The Far East, China in particular*

Americans' attitudes toward the Japanese in 1893 were demeaning and patronizing. The Japanese were portrayed as "cousins" of the Chinese and visitors to the Japanese Village on the Midway were invited to view "part and parcel of the home life of the little brown men." The possibility that these foreigners might become full citizens of the beautiful American utopia was increasingly problematic for Anglo-Saxons. If, however, the Japanese were given at least a little respect in 1893, the Chinese were seen as replicas of the old stereotypes of the shrewd, cunning, and threatening "John Chinaman." References to "almond-eyed" and "saffron-colored Mongolians" abounded throughout the entire nation. Hubert Howe Bancroft, who in the 1880s had written that "as a progressive people we reveal a race prejudice intolerable to civilization," looked disdainfully upon

<sup>38</sup>Robert A. Trennert Jr., "Selling Indian Education at World's Fairs and Expositions, 1893-1904," *American Indian Quarterly* 11, No. 3 (Summer 1987): 205.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 205-211.

the Chinese theatre for the "oddity of the performance and for the nature of its themes." He stated that China "is a country where the seat of honor is the stomach; where the roses have no fragrance and women no petticoats; where the laborer has no Sabbath and the magistrate no sense of integrity."<sup>40</sup>

Charles Stevens' *Uncle Jeremiah* was a fictional story about a black family visiting the world's fair in Chicago. Uncle Jeremiah, the main character of the book, notes his reactions to the displayed people on the Midway. Through the dialogue and actions of Uncle Jeremiah, Stevens reveals his own feelings about inferior people from the Far East. His character expressed pleasure that a few "decent-looking Chinamen" who did not "look like rats and whose fluent English proclaims their long stay in 'Flisco' were serving tea at the entrance to the theatre," but he also stated his suspicion that the nearby temple probably contained the opium banks of the morally backward and drug-addicted Chinese actors. Stevens' use of Uncle Jeremiah's criticism and distrust of the Chinese is significant because it empowers African-Americans in a white-dominated society. Although African Americans were severely oppressed in late nineteenth-century America, Stevens believes that they were able to find some comfort in the fact that other people, the Chinese in this case, were less civilized and acculturated than them. Stevens' portrayal of the Chinese placed them below that of blacks on the scale of civilization.

*Harper's Weekly*, in an article on the Fourth of July parade staged by the villagers of the Midway Plaisance, had its own mixed view on the Chinese. "[They] are a meek people, but seem anxious to apologize and make atonement for their humility by the extraordinarily aggressive dragons and devils which they contrived. The dragon did much to raise the standing of the Midway Chinese among other more savage and not half so ingenious races."<sup>41</sup> The Chinese were thus viewed as creative and half-intelligent, which was much more than could be said

<sup>40</sup>Rydell, *All the World's A Fair*, 49-51.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 51-52.

for numerous groups of people on display. *Harper's Weekly*, *Uncle Jeremiah*, and other printed sources popularized national images of the "Chinaman" as timid but cunning and uncivilized, and were placed on the lower end of the evolutionary scale, but still exhibited superior traits over more barbaric people such as the Javanese and Dahomeyans. Jacob Riis agreed with this portrayal of the Chinese as cunning and manipulative, as well as a "constant and terrible menace to society, wholly regardless of their influence upon the industrial problems which their presence confuses."<sup>42</sup>

### *The Javanese*

The unknown both amused and frightened spectators, who favored their own cultures but worried that these racialized "others" might taint white civilization's progress with their own inadequacies. The Javanese village on the Midway serves as a good example of this fear. Although the Javanese lived in bamboo houses surrounded by tropical palm trees, spectators found the houses to be very awe-inspiring due to their strength, imperviousness to rain, and extreme lightness as to be unaffected by earthquakes. The houses were built on stilts to protect people from snakes, which infested their native soil in Java. The Javanese themselves entertained the visitors with jugglery, dancing, fencing, wrestling, and snake-charming. The "wajang-wong" or Javanese formed a pantomime which greatly impressed Shaw as well.<sup>43</sup> Although the Javanese appeared to be a primitive people, Marian Shaw thought that they were very efficient and civilized in how they lived their simple lives. It was this easygoing and romantic lifestyle that made Americans worry that their own superior lifestyles were being challenged by foreigners.

These Javanese were generally referred to as "Brownies" by the visitors, a term that was reinforced by popular newspapers and journals of the day. "About the shade of a well-done sweet

<sup>42</sup>Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*, 126-127.

<sup>43</sup>Rydell, *All the World's A Fair*, 57-58.

potato," the *Popular Monthly* reported, "the Javanese holds the position closest to the American heart of all the semi-civilized races." The Javanese men were described as industrious workers, while the women were viewed as tireless domestic matriarchs. Described as cute and frisky, mild and inoffensive, but childlike above all else, the Javanese were allowed to entertain white Anglo-Saxons as long as they remained in their evolutionary niche.<sup>44</sup> They were just a step above the Dahomeyans on this racialized hierarchical ladder of civilization.

### *The Lasting Legacy*

The World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago was designed to celebrate the four-hundredth anniversary of Christopher Columbus' landing in the New World.<sup>45</sup> The fair was meant to celebrate the progress of Anglo-Saxon civilization. Industrialization was the driving force of this progress of superior society, and this was represented in all of the technology and machinery on display in the White City. However, social and cultural progress was solely evident on the Midway Plaisance where a hierarchy of races was on exhibit for the spectators of all classes in American society. Most of these white observers judged the exhibited racialized "others" based on national stereotypes of exotic and foreign races as primitive, inferior, backward, and in the need of white guidance and nurturing. Through the new visual culture of America, whites viewed themselves as superior to darker-skinned Africans, warrior-like Dahomeyans, feminine Egyptians, and sly and odd-looking Chinese and Japanese. Imperialism required Americans to view themselves as the ultimate, civilized world society that was destined to dominate and influence lesser civilizations, and nowhere was this more evident than on the Midway in Chicago. As one observer noted, "To the layman not interested in the arts and sciences it will remain *the great attraction* of the fair. One leaves it with a delightful feeling of having seen the one spot on

<sup>44</sup>Rydell, *All the World's A Fair*, 65-66.

<sup>45</sup>Delays meant that it actually took place a year after the anniversary.

the globe which gives in a very comprehensive way an idea of the world's nationalities with their various customs and manners in surprising detail."<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>46</sup>*Frank Leslie's Illustrated Weekly* (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Library; New York: Stuart Paddock, June 25, 1893, text-fiche), 25.