
Becoming Global: Women at the 1884 World's Fair

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Abstract

This talk focuses on women's contributions to the 1884 New Orleans World's Fair to explore how gender and race structured the late nineteenth-century global imaginary. Looking at a variety of texts – poems, speeches, a quilt, and a love seat – I argue that these invite new ways of understanding the process of becoming a global subject. Late nineteenth-century Americans struggled to come to terms with an incomprehensibly vast and complex world political and economic system, and their own subjection to it. In addition to conceptualizing that system as a whole, they had also to conceptualize its relationship to their personal experience, negotiating the divide between an abstract global totality and what Fredric Jameson describes as "the most intimately local . . . our particular path through the world." For Jameson, Bill Brown, Tanya Agathocleous, and others, this negotiation entailed "overcoming" epistemic disjuncture in a quest for synthesis, a gradual and unconscious process of mapping oneself into encompassing networks. I am interested in how different the project of becoming global appears from the perspectives of women who organized, wrote about, and exhibited in the Woman's and Colored Departments at the 1884 World's Fair. Hailed as "the world's university," the Exposition functioned as a disciplinary apparatus for producing global subjects; and women – called upon to symbolize the ideal of international community even as they fought for standing within it – brought a particularly self-conscious awareness to such effects. Looking at Julia Ward Howe's ironic juxtaposition of Internationalist Womanhood with evidence of women's industrial accomplishments, Grace King's aggressively sectionalist cosmopolitanism, and Sarah Shimm's (literally) embroidered history of Toussaint L'Ouverture's transatlantic career, I argue these reveal an orientation to the disjuncture between global totality and subjective immediacy that is self-referential and playful. They re-frame the late nineteenth-century project of becoming global as a shared cultural problematic (rather than psychological impasse) and as self-production (rather than self-insertion), illuminating the gendered, racialized, and regionalist dynamics that mediated access to global identity at any scale.

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