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Abstract

During the nineteenth century international exhibitions and world fairs constituted an important apparatus of empire for European countries and the United States. Through the exhibitions these countries educated their masses on the merits of empire and industry while also trying to out-do each other by showing greater wealth and political power. One way of doing this was through the many displays of non-Western peoples usually under their imperial dominion.

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Race And Gender At The Chicago Columbian Exposition, 1893: A Cuban Woman's Perspective

During the nineteenth century international exhibitions and world fairs constituted an important apparatus of empire for European countries and the United States. Through the exhibitions these countries educated their masses on the merits of empire and industry while also trying to out-do each other by showing greater wealth and political power. One way of doing this was through the many displays of non-Western peoples usually under their imperial dominion. For European nations who controlled an empire, the showing of native villages,

placed hitherto unrelated peoples of different parts of the empire together, physically and psychologically, and it centred the empire on the controlling imperial nation. The public could see at a glance the extent of the imperial pickings and feel in a real sense that they belonged to them. More importantly, it 'revealed' the apparently degenerate state the conquered peoples lived in, making the conquest not only more acceptable but necessary for their moral rescue. (Greenhalgh 84)

Having arrived late to the spoils of empire, the United States was unable to boast its own imperial display until the Buffalo Pan American Fair of 1901 where Hawaiian, Filipino, and Cuban villages (Greenhalgh 101) celebrated its gains due partly to the Spanish-American War three years earlier.

Nevertheless, the United States had already initiated the genre of displaying non-Western villages, following the examples of France and England in particular, in its Chicago Columbian Exposition of 1893. In this Exposition, seventeen villages of non-Western peoples were built including Dahomeyan, Chinese, Javanese, Soudanese, Alaskan, Arab, South Sea Islanders, Algerian and American Indians (Greenhalgh 97). These displays, according to Paul Greenhalgh, were similar to 'freak shows':

In Chicago displays of people suffered more than ever before from exaggeration and caricature. Each day, the people from the villages, accompanied by various Arab groups from other exhibits, were paraded up and down the Midway Plaisance [the entertainment area] before returning to their display areas to commence their day of public living. The humiliating racism of this spectacle, apart from fulfilling a propaganda role for the co-operating foreign nations, had a distinct purpose for reactionary elements within American society. (Greenhalgh 98)

The reactionary elements to which he refers were the population of Native Americans, and Negroes, not to mention the Spanish speaking minorities of the conquered Southwest, which presented grave problems to the organisers who promulgated freedom and democracy as the ideals of the Exposition, but gave no position of equality to these groups.

Hence, the Chicago Columbian Exposition, commemorating Columbus' arrival on (what became) American shores four centuries earlier, excluded the American Negroes from the 208 person national commission for the exhibition, although they worked on the construction site. The American Indians were exhibited as a primitive foreign race while Black women were denied any part in the Women's Building, which, ironically, contained a fine collection of craftwork from women of all races (Greenhalgh 98–99). In light of these contradictions, this paper is concerned with issues of race and gender as represented by a Cuban woman, Aurelia Castillo de González, in her *Un paseo por América, cartas de Méjico y de Chicago* [A Trip Through America, Letters from Mexico and Chicago], an epistolary text written to inform the Cuban public about the Exposition.

Biographical information on Aurelia Castillo de González is limited since very little is known about her outside Cuba. She was born in 1842 and in 1870, at the beginning of the Ten Year War (Cuba's first independence war) she married a Spanish military officer, José Francisco González, for which she was greatly criticised by her compatriots who saw this as a betrayal of the anti-colonial war effort. Nevertheless, because of his public protest of the execution of a Cuban patriot, both were exiled by the Spanish government and went to Europe in 1875 returning to Cuba at the end of the war. In 1891, she published her first travelogue, *Un paseo por Europa, cartas de Francia — Exposición de 1889 — de Italia y Suiza* [A Trip Through Europe, Letters from France — Exposition of 1889 — from Italy and Switzerland]. In 1893, Castillo de González travelled with her husband to the Chicago Columbian Exposition, via Mexico¹ and two years later published *Un paseo por América*.

CUBA'S STRUGGLE FOR INDEPENDENCE

The issue of race, given expression in Castillo de González' text, is especially significant considering the historical situation of Cuba at the moment when she wrote her travelogue, a period in which various anti-colonial revolts went hand in hand with racial struggles. The Ten Years War, for example, was initially started by a handful of white male thinkers, but soon involved slaves and free men, both Black and mulatto, who not only fought as soldiers but who also held positions as captains, colonels and generals. The leader, Antonio Maceo, who became an icon of the wars for independence and a national hero, was, in fact, a mulatto whose racial origin had been largely 'whitened' in historical accounts (Stubbs 298).

Furthermore, there is historical evidence that freed black women contributed to the independence effort through military service (Green-Williams 162), while other black and mulatto women tended the wounded, using their knowledge of traditional African medicine, and fed the soldiers (Stubbs 312). During this war, elite white women made an historical impact with their demands for equality in the new republic — equating their condition with that of the slave (Stubbs 1995, 310). This view had already been voiced as early as 1841 in the feminist, antislavery novel, *Sab*, by another prominent Cuban author, Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda.

At mid-nineteenth century, the enslaved and free people of colour in Cuba constituted the majority of the population (Benítez Rojo 18). The Spanish colony was ruled by a minority of white Creoles who controlled the sugar industry built on the labour of enslaved Africans. Cuba was one of the last colonial possessions of Spain in the New World since its ruling class had no desire for independence. The white Creoles were initially afraid that if the island severed bonds with Spain it would become, following Haiti, the hemisphere's second black republic (Ferrer online) and, along with other privileges, they would lose all economic control. Although the Ten Years War did not succeed in obtaining independence from Spain, it was at least followed by the abolition of slavery in 1886.

The intellectual leader José Martí, a middle-class poet and journalist, who had established the Cuban Revolutionary Party while in exile in the United States, returned to the island in 1895 at the start of another armed struggle against Spain. Martí professed racial equality and was also against the annexation of Cuba by the United States, which already had enormous economic investment in the island. The final Cuban war for independence culminated in US intervention with the Spanish-American War of 1898, after which it appropriated Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippine Islands while Cuba became independent and impoverished.

The discourses of race and gender which circulate in Castillo de González' text are a reflection of these historical events at a time when European and North American thinkers linked biology to progress and divided the world into superior and inferior races.² In accordance with this thinking, the contemporaneous struggle for female emancipation initiated by the elite white women of these powerful nations was blind to the rights of women from all other races. It comes as no surprise then, that Castillo de González, an elite white Creole woman writing for the Creole public of her colonised land, represents the discourses of her social status and of her era.

THE ADMIRER 'WHITE ANGLO-AMERICAN RACE'

Castillo de González comments on three different racial groups in her text: the Indians (North American and Mexican), the Negro and the white Anglo-Americans. Upon crossing the Rio Grande and entering the United States, the

first thing she notices is the disappearance of the indigenous population which had been numerous throughout Mexico (45)³ and which she describes as idle (9), ugly, repulsive and dirty (41). In her opinion, Mexico's great problem is the masses of Indians which she believes, as did many intellectual and political leaders throughout Latin America at the time, should be 'whitened' by the importation of poor white European workers (22). The author positions the Indians at the very bottom of the social scale. They are represented as brutish and savage and it is the population that she can most easily disregard since the Indians in her homeland had long since been exterminated.

Though rare, the author does nevertheless mention a few encounters with native peoples in the Chicago Exposition. The first occurs when she describes the village of the natives of the islands of Vancouver whose carved wooden structures, possibly their totems, show 'monstrosity upon monstrosity' (104), and inside the hut where they live,

[s]everal natives of the islands were busy making wooden toys similar to the heraldic columns to sell. A woman squatting was rocking her son, whose crib was a coarse little canoe, and from time to time she would open the curtain of the bed behind her to talk to someone who was lying down and who I thought was her sick husband since she seemed very sad. These aborigines are not very graceful, with big faces and of pale colour, almost yellow. They are the same as the ones you see in the 'Eskimo Village'. (104)

The wooden handcrafts, which were probably sacred to the natives, are only toys to the author who emphasises their childishness. Additionally, the descriptions of the squatting position of the native woman and of the coarse canoe highlight their savagery. While the physical description of the natives of Vancouver — not very graceful, with big, pale, almost yellow faces — accentuates their ugliness (as ugly as the Mexican natives), the comment that they are the 'same as' the ones in the Eskimo village homogenises these people; to the author, they all look the same. Finally, Castillo de González creates a reason for the woman's sadness in the imagined illness of her husband and does not consider the possibility that such sadness might be due to the degradation of being put on display. This part of the exposition seems to be of little interest to her since it is the only description of such a display and since she prefers to devote her descriptions to the machinery, the inventions and the wealth of the exhibits; in other words to 'the progress of civilisation'.

Another comment on the Native American is her account of a Pottawatomie chief who was invited to ring the Liberty bell at the exposition's Chicago Day celebration. Chief Pokagon, whose father had sold 1,000,000 acres at 3 cents each to the government of the United States seventy years earlier, was still waiting for payment (111). This was the land on which Chicago had been built and which, according to the author, had a value of up to \$200,000 an acre at the time of her visit. On the day of the Chicago ceremony, the author recounts the speech

given by the Indian chief in which he urged his people to forget resentment against whites, to abandon their ancient nomadic, hunting and fishing customs, and instead to work the fields and industry in order to live happily as citizens of the United States (112). This information, however, is quoted from the *Chicago Daily Tribune* since the author was unable to hear it directly because of the enormous mass of people who attended the exposition on that day (110–112, 116–117). Here, Castillo de González's observation presents a fissure in her discourse; on the one hand, she reveals the Native Americans' betrayal by the government in the theft of their land, as well as their benevolent desire to forgive the white people. On the other hand, she portrays passive Native Americans willing to reject their cultural heritage for the sake of industry, peace, and, presumably, progress.

Despite apparent recognition of the incongruity of the Native American's social condition, Castillo de González claims the United States is a 'democratic' country where all are equal. To prove her point, she mentions that all trains are required to have extra wagons for people of colour (65). What she highlights here is not the segregation of the Negroes, but the fact that the wagons designated for them had to be as comfortable as those used by the rest of the people and that in Chicago and St. Louis this separation did not even exist (65). Apart from this, the only other references to Negroes and to slavery are in her lengthy description of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a text she compares to Manzoni's *The Betrothed* and Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (81).

The author asserts that Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel had greatly contributed to the abolition of slavery (81). Castillo de González denounces slavery because it separates families, and causes the abuse of young women, that often results in suicides and infanticides. It also provokes ignorance, vice and superstition in the plantations where each year 'tons of black flesh had to be converted into piles of yellow coins' (82). She describes, 'la negrita *Topsy*' [the little black woman *Topsy*], a character in Beecher Stowe's novel, as a first rate creation, 'destined to show the brutishness and insensibility' of slavery which through the harshness of physical punishment obscures understanding and decays the soul (83).

Thus for Castillo de González, the experience of the Afro-American is filtered through the eyes of Beecher Stowe, a white woman like herself, and the Negro becomes just a 'character' in a book. This facilitates her detachment from the issue of slavery so that racial tensions, particularly those of her homeland, are not mentioned in the travelogue. The only allusion to the issue of slavery in Cuba occurs when, after she has described the evils of slavery as shown in Beecher Stowe's text, she claims authority for herself by stating that as a Cuban woman she has the 'sad privilege of being an expert in the matter' (83). Nevertheless, though she poses as an expert, she never raises the topic of race or of the Negro in Cuba. Her discussion of slavery is merely intended to praise Beecher Stowe as a woman writer and the United States as a model of democracy and progress.

Another tension in Castillo de González's discourse appears when she describes the much-admired 'white Anglo-American race'. She is willing to forget any defects the race has because of its great qualities:

I know there is excessive ambition here; but the merchant does not cheat me in the price he asks, which is the same for all, nor in the goods he gives me. I know this race has greatly developed the spirit of monopoly and that it would not mind annexing the entire American continent but neither do I ignore that they govern and administrate well, and that the peoples who become part of the Union live happily and prosper rapidly. (65)

It is unclear from the text whether Castillo de González was in favour of Cuba's annexation to the United States, a controversial debate among intellectuals of her island at the time. Nevertheless, her admiration for the 'white skin' leads her to thank Columbus for having brought it to the continent (125). She concludes that, although the conquest had been difficult, in general humanity had benefited from it because, 'Completely happy peoples now inhabited America, without slaves, without kings, without a dominating theocracy ... and many other peoples could also live like that if they modified their ethnic character and lived in peace' (125). In other words, like Chief Pokagon's exhortations to his people, if Negroes and Indigenous peoples would discard their 'savage' traditions and their 'primitive' way of life and, instead emulate the civilised white race, they could progress happily and prosper.

THE WOMEN'S BUILDING

In contrast to the constraints applied to the topic of race, Gonzalez' discussion of gender is voiced directly and quite strongly in the text. As a travelled and privileged white woman, Castillo de González aligns herself quite smoothly with the feminist agendas of her era. From the beginning of the text she constantly observes and comments on the situation of women — that is white women — wherever she goes. In Saint Louis (53) and Chicago (63), she notices how women walk the streets alone or how they drive their own carriages. She claims that, although equality in education means that women are no longer afforded male gallantry, it is worth the sacrifice since they are now prepared to confront all situations in their lives (64), including divorce, which she considers a wise recourse (125).

The author admires women who contest traditional gender-related restrictions; nevertheless she herself is still bound by certain gender limitations especially when it comes to her own writing. Typical of the travel-writing genre of the period, the female author apologises for lacking the authority to speak about certain topics that have been generally considered to belong to the realm of the masculine. By way of illustration, Castillo de González excuses herself for being unable to describe the exhibitions in such buildings as Machinery, Electricity, Anthropology, and Transportation, in technical terms (119). Writing of the natural

history collection, she also apologises for descriptions, which, she thinks, must sound strange to scientists (127). In the Machinery Building, she limits herself to describing those machines, such as the sewing machine (128), which she is capable of operating and which, according to her, have helped women in their emancipation from domestic labour (129).

Castillo de González's discourse is underpinned by a gender-based categorization of writing — feminine writing is aligned with the domestic and masculine writing with the scientific. Further division along gender lines is revealed in the following description of Beecher Stowe. Castillo de González explains, 'the irresistible eloquence which is born from the feminine heart of the author, passes through her *entirely masculine brain* and runs through the pages of her book' (81 emphasis added). By referring to this woman's 'entirely masculine brain', the author limits the faculty of reason to the male gender while the heart is identified as a feminine characteristic. Nevertheless, she declares Beecher Stowe a 'prototype of what talented women will be like in the future of these countries which progress at great pace through the wide avenues of civilisation' (85). To illustrate this point, she describes in great detail one of the novelties at the Chicago Columbian Exposition, a Women's Building designed and organised entirely by women:

It is known that the design of the building was the work of a woman, that the collection, consignment and organisation of everything inside was done by committees of women and that they manage it entirely. Very well then! Women have achieved a superb feat. The building is beautiful, simple and elegant. The exhibit inside is rich in art and literature. The room for conferences, which are given by ladies, is extensive. There is another room for scholarly courses. The Catalogue of this particular exhibit is organised very intelligently. The restaurant in this building is one of the best served. Everything indicates that there is perfect order, expert management, the special care of those who wish to show that they deserve what they have so recently gained. (86)

No other exhibit is portrayed as extensively and with such praise as the Women's Building (85–95). The author describes in detail the different objects representing women's work from various nations including painting, sculpture, literature, music, scholarly studies, and scientific inventions (85–95). Her grandiose description of this building corroborates her ideas about the greatness of the 'white Anglo-American race' and of such a civilised nation that allows women to fulfil their talents.

Aurelia Castillo de González was a feminist by the standards of her time and much concerned with the condition of women of her social class — white Creole women. In this sense, and in comparison to her compatriots, her views are radical, especially regarding divorce. However, she was unable to see the relation between the oppression of the Negro and the Indian and that of women, nor did she consider the plight of women from those racial groups. The author does not

move outside the discourses of her era and instead propagates them despite the incongruity apparent today. Analysis of *Un paseo por America*, a text that has been given scant scholarly attention, reveals the constraints and the tensions generated by questions of race and gender with which its female author had to grapple.

NOTES

- ¹ First they travelled by sea to the port of Veracruz arriving on the 3rd July; then by land to Mexico city, where they stayed a few days; then Laredo, San Antonio in Texas, St. Louis in Missouri, arriving in Chicago on the 20th August.
- ² At this time also, Europe begins to denounce the institution of slavery as an 'evil' to society, an institution from which it had already received enormous profit.
- ³ All references are from *Un paseo por América, cartas de Méjico y de Chicago*, and translations from the Spanish original are my own.

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