

Negro Building: Black Americans in the World of Fairs and Museums by Mabel O. Wilson. University of California Press, 2012, 464 pages. ISBN: 9780520268425, Hardback, £27.95

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On a page entitled 'Our History' on the official website of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, a brief paragraph states that the institution was created by an Act of Congress in 2003.²³⁸ Wilson's *Negro Building* effectively contextualises, complicates and extends the history of this controversial new museum, providing a detailed account of black exhibitionary practices from Emancipation to the present day. Using extensive archival research, Wilson has made an important contribution to the story of black public history and to the narrative on representations of black identity in the United States.

Wilson's interdisciplinary approach – which combines cultural, visual, and urban histories – utilises theoretical models on the public sphere and urban space, in order to discuss a particular aspect of the African American social experience.²³⁹ Employing a chronological format, Wilson presents how the active 'black counterpublic sphere' promoted its agendas of 'social advancement, cultural identity, and national belonging' in public forums such as world's fairs, emancipation expositions and early black museums (p.8). One of the greatest strengths of *Negro Building* is the succinct yet thorough contextualisation of time and place that permeates each chapter. By locating her archival findings firmly within the political, economic, legal, social, and geographical framework of the moment, Wilson effectively demonstrates the challenges that the black grassroots movement faced.

In the first chapter entitled 'Progress of a Race: The Black Side's Contribution to Atlanta's World's Fair', Wilson details the activities of an emerging black elite as they attempted to negotiate the complexities of the New South and exhibit their hopes for the future of the race (p.30). She explains that the rationale for the exhibit's focus on industrial education was the white southern expectation for a new economy and the accommodationist stance exemplified by Booker T. Washington's infamous Atlanta Compromise speech.²⁴⁰ Wilson is careful not to suggest that the motivations, ideologies, or responses of those involved were monolithic, and instead provides a nuanced view of both black and white leaders and audiences. Her inclusion of contemporary newspapers – particularly popular black publications – proves to be invaluable in indicating the varied discourses surrounding the exhibition of black identity, which not only cut across racial lines but also across class and region. By tracing the people behind the displays, Wilson uncovers the network of individuals and organisations involved in early black public history, which indicates how ideas, ambitions, and in some cases exhibitions travelled throughout the nation.

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²³⁸ 'Our History', <<http://nmaahc.si.edu/About/History>>, page accessed 10/09/2012.

²³⁹ Wilson cites Jürgen Habermas, Nancy Fraser, Rosalyn Deutsche, and Henri Lefebvre as influential to her argument.

²⁴⁰ Booker T. Washington, the president of the Tuskegee Institute, announced a compromise between black and white southern leaders at the Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta, 1895. In return for basic education, black citizens would submit to white rule, participate in the economy through labour, and not push for equality and integration.

Subsequent chapters follow a similar format to the first, allowing readers to comprehend the development of the black counterpublic sphere's engagement with public history. The second chapter details the representations of and by African Americans at early American world's fairs and at the 1900 Exposition Universelle in Paris. The third and fourth chapters focus on the black-organised Emancipation expositions in Northern cities, reflecting on the influence of the urban environment on the politicisation of the grassroots message. The fifth chapter traces the history of Detroit's International Afro-American Museum against the backdrop of the Civil Rights movement. This structure effectively demonstrates the move from the accommodationist stance of early black exhibitions which looked towards a promising future, to the more politicised displays of the mid-twentieth century that reclaimed black history and called for equality.

Wilson's interdisciplinary approach allows for a broad analysis of specific exhibits, which not only details the production and content of the displays, but also their symbolism and spatial positioning within the wider exposition context. Her approach could benefit scholars of public history and museology, yet also makes an interesting contribution to the history of world's fairs. *Negro Building* not only discusses black participation in smaller international expositions that rarely receive scholarly attention, but also ensures that the negative portrayals of African Americans are not the central focus of the book, choosing instead to highlight examples where segregation and racism could be disrupted.

The epilogue moves the narrative up to the present day, therefore allowing Wilson to connect her historical research to the opening of the Smithsonian's first museum dedicated to African American history and culture (p.297). This may have worked better as an additional chapter, as Wilson seems to rush through several decades of developments without the conscientious approach that makes the other chapters so strong. Yet for a work that spans such a complex historical period, Wilson provides an impressively thorough overview of black public history that will hopefully inspire further study of this topic in a number of disciplines.