'This Is Our Fair and Our State': African Americans and the Panama Pacific International Exposition

Lynn Hudson, Macalester College
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By Lynn M. Hudson

It was an otherwise typical spring day in San Francisco when the journalist Delilah Beasley made the journey across the bay to the Panama-Pacific International Exposition (PPIE) from her home in Berkeley on June 10, 1915. Beasley, writing simultaneously for northern California’s mainstream daily and largest newspaper, the Oakland Tribune, and for the black newspaper, the Oakland Sunshine, had visited the world’s fair before. But this time, she went with a different purpose: to witness the Bay Area’s African American citizens as they marched in a parade at the state’s most spectacular event of the year. Beasley and other African Americans believed that the PPIE was an ideal setting to assert their presence as citizens. Black Californians looked to Beasley, one of the state’s most influential black reporters, to convey news about cultural events and the pressing political concerns of a population living through the age of Jim Crow.

Beasley had moved to California in 1910, already a newspaperwoman. Born in Ohio in 1871, she began her career in journalism in the Midwest, writing for the Cleveland Gazette as a teenager. She also studied to be a nurse and a professional masseuse, jobs that took her west to Berkeley with a client. But a lucky break—and a tremendous commitment to the progress of African Americans—landed her an extraordinary opportunity in the world of journalism: writing for the leading white and black newspapers of the East Bay’s largest city. A race woman and active member of the black women’s club movement, Beasley informed readers of the wonders of the world’s fair. But what did fairs—and their promise of education and entertainment on a grand scale—mean for the state’s African American population? And how would a black reporter interpret their possibilities?

The year of the fair, 1915, marked a pivotal moment in the history of black Californians. In that year, African Americans formed northern California’s branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and organized a massive outcry against the degrading portrayals of African Americans in Thomas Dixon’s play, The Clansman, and D. W. Griffith’s newly released film version, The Birth of a Nation. Beasley interpreted these events for a large California readership. Her viewpoint as a journalist and her role as a historian make her a compelling figure through which to examine the convergence of these events in state history. Her commitment to the women’s club movement and the rights of black citizens provides a
provocative lens through which to rethink the fair and the state of race and gender politics for black Californians.

Like other U.S. world’s fairs, the PPIE emphasized nation and patriotism for a largely European-American audience. African Americans’ participation in the fair underscored the ways in which all black citizens, and especially women, found themselves pushed to the margins in state and national politics. Though women had been granted full suffrage by California’s male voters four years earlier, they were not yet considered equal participants in matters of state. Yet black women refused to stand on the political sidelines; they took the lead in the state’s branches of the NAACP, moving seamlessly from their work in the black women’s club movement and churches to the “race work” of the nation’s earliest civil rights organization. Beasley and other African American women used the fair to carve out real and figurative spaces in which to articulate their political agendas and challenge Jim Crow. By harnessing the language and symbols of patriotism so prevalent at the fair, black Californians—men and women—claimed the nation as their own at the precise moment that the social and political influences of Dixon’s and Griffith’s works attempted to erase their history as citizens.
Asserting citizenship was a gendered affair, however, and the language and symbols available to women differed from those accessible to men. To counter negative stereotypes, Beasley and other club women sought to convey a message of respectable black womanhood. With imagery that often invoked family and domesticity, race women pushed at the definitions of state, nation, and womanhood. In their efforts to redefine possibilities for black Californians, they used every venue at their disposal: the press, the church, public parades, and exhibitions.3

When a new technology called motion pictures made its world’s fair debut at the PPIE, media-savvy Beasley anticipated its revolutionary potential to change hearts and minds. From her desk, she sensed the time was right to change African American history amid the intersection of two contested and highly visible cultural events: a world’s fair and a motion picture, both attended by millions and both launched in her new home state.

Scholars often have looked to world’s fairs, such as London’s Great Exhibition of 1851 or Chicago’s World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893, to understand particular societies at particular times. Robert Rydell, for example, has argued that fairs have helped to make sense of the upheaval and social disorder of industrializing societies by providing a “community of shared experience.”4 Society’s elites organized fairs in order to present particular visions of a well-ordered hierarchy that, not incidentally, married the ideas of progress and white supremacy.5 The sheer popularity of the eleven international expositions that occurred in the United States between 1876 and 1916 demonstrates that Americans were, at the very least, attracted to this shared experience and its unique combination of education and entertainment. If, as Rydell has posited, “elaborate racial fantasies about California’s history” permeated the PPIE, what were they and what did they mean for African Americans?6 What do the responses of black Californians to the PPIE tell us about African American citizenship and gender in 1915, at the height of the era of Jim Crow?

While there has been a significant amount of scholarship about the PPIE, most of it has focused on the exhibits, the architecture, and the planners. Less has been written about spectators and next to nothing about African Americans. This has partly to do with the difficulty in locating sources; we do not have records that indicate the number of black men and women who attended the fair or the names and backgrounds of the African American workers, for example. The story of black Californians and the PPIE also has been eclipsed in the historiography by the better known and dramatic history of African Americans and the 1893 Chicago exposition. But given the lessons that world’s fairs impart about the place of race in the state and the nation, the prominence of the PPIE in California’s history, and the timing of the fair with one of the most significant protests in California black history, the response of African Americans to the PPIE deserves further consideration.

JIM CROW FAIR, JIM CROW STATE

California conjured up dreams of a racial utopia for some African Americans, but the state was not immune to racial discrimination, having passed a series of discriminatory measures that are commonly known as Jim Crow laws. Since the nineteenth century, African American Californians customarily had been denied access to streetcars, public schools, theaters, bars, and courtrooms. Following statehood, black leaders and organizations campaigned vigorously to halt the spread of segregation. After much effort, they reversed the antitestimony ban, winning the right in 1863 for blacks to give evidence in court against white citizens. During Reconstruction,
African Americans sought to reverse discrimination through the courts, and black women in California initiated some of the most significant cases. Abolitionist and entrepreneur Mary Ellen Pleasant sued the North Beach & Mission Railroad Company in the 1860s when a driver refused to let her ride the streetcar. In the 1870s, the parents of Mary Ward took legal action when their daughter was denied admittance to her local school in San Francisco due to her race.

After the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment in 1869, black men across the nation agitated for change through the ballot box, and Californians proved no exception. A host of black political organizations formed chapters throughout the state. The Afro-American League of San Francisco, a branch of the national organization founded by the journalist and civil rights leader T. Thomas Fortune, was established in 1891 and worked to mobilize voters, as did the Colored Non-Partisan Leagues. Black women organized political associations and clubs, including the Woman’s Afro-American League and branches of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) at a fervent pace.

Indeed, when Beasley arrived in the state in 1910, she encountered a well-developed women’s club movement. Reporting in the NAACP’s journal, The Crisis, A.W. Hunton claimed that by 1912, “No state had more strongly and clearly demonstrated the blessing of a united womanhood than California.” Embracing the mission of the NACW and its motto, “Lifting as We Climb,” clubs such as
African American club women attended the July 27–29, 1915, meeting of the California State Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs in Oakland. In addition to their work in the social and educational spheres, the black women’s clubs fully embraced opportunities to influence the political climate and improve the profile of the African American community.

Courtesy, African American Museum and Library at Oakland (AAMLO)

the Mother’s Club and the Arts and Industry Club of Oakland provided the backbone of this movement. In the early years of the twentieth century, black women in California mounted an organized attack on discriminatory practices, utilizing judicial, nonviolent, and performative strategies decades before the official “beginning” of the civil rights movement in the 1950s.

With the dawn of the twentieth century, black Californians anticipated the dissipation of the previous century’s antiblack sentiment and hoped that newcomers to the state might find a more hospitable racial climate. In fact, when NAACP patriarch W.E.B. Du Bois visited California in 1913, he found much to celebrate, including the availability of single-family homes and jobs.11 Du Bois was not alone. National black newspapers such as the Colored American also sang the praises of the Golden State and encouraged readers to migrate there. Just four years before the fair opened, one editor of a black newspaper in Los Angeles, Jefferson Edmonds, claimed that California was “the greatest state for the Negro.”12

But the very attributes that Du Bois, Edmonds, and others commemorated—homes and jobs—often were segregated. Where some African Americans saw opportunity, many more saw discrimination, and for them, race relations in the Golden State were not something to celebrate. Between 1900 and 1930, African Americans in the Bay Area had few opportunities for skilled or semiskilled jobs. In other U.S. cities, black men had found work in large-scale manufacturing, but these jobs did not exist in the Bay Area,
which was home to the majority of the state’s black population. Black women found even fewer opportunities for work and most often were restricted to domestic labor.\textsuperscript{13}

In fact, it was the occasion of the PPIE itself that inspired the *Oakland Sunshine* to warn of the dismal employment situation—at least in northern California. “We hope members of our race will not come here expecting to find employment, as the conditions are not favorable,” the editors announced.\textsuperscript{14} Depending on where in the state one lived, housing could be equally bleak; many black Californians who had the income to purchase property found restrictive housing covenants an increasingly common practice.\textsuperscript{15} For renters, the situation might be worse. As early as 1907, black men and women in the Bay Area found that “real estate agents do not care to rent to Negroes.”\textsuperscript{16}

In 1915, partly as a result of Du Bois’ much-publicized visit, black Californians founded the Northern California Branch of the NAACP, with its headquarters in Oakland. That very first year, the branch’s 150 members made it one of the largest in the nation; two years later, membership figures soared to over one thousand.\textsuperscript{17} As soon as members convened, they faced a significant challenge: the opening of *The Clansman*—the stage adaptation of Thomas Dixon’s 1905 novel of the same name—that claimed to depict the history of Reconstruction. D.W. Griffith’s film version, *The Birth of a Nation*, soon followed. African Americans found the depictions deplorable and the messages straightforward: black men and women were not fit for citizenship, and with the aid of the Ku Klux Klan, white supremacy could be reinstated.

The film premiered in California in Riverside on January 1, 1915. On February 8, 1915, twelve days before the PPIE welcomed its first visitors, 2,500 filmgoers flocked to Clune’s Auditorium in Los Angeles.\textsuperscript{18} Black leaders and the black press called for a boycott. The Los Angeles branch of the NAACP secured a court injunction to ban the screening, but the injunction was ignored. The Northern California Branch pressured the mayors of San Francisco and Oakland to prohibit showing the film, a strategy that was adopted by other area offices across the country. Indeed, California’s NAACP branches set a precedent for the film’s national protest. But despite several meetings between the president of the Northern California Branch, John Drake, and the city fathers of Oakland and San Francisco, the film played in the Bay Area the rest of the year and throughout the entire exposition.\textsuperscript{19}

Angered by the film’s stereotypes and their implications, Beasley juxtaposed the film and the fair to highlight the fallacies of black inferiority. According to the black newspaper the *Oakland Independent*, “‘The Birth of a Nation’ was making people of all races very unhappy and promoting unfriendly feeling toward the Negro by playing in San Francisco during the entire period of the exposition. In an effort to counteract the effect of the [film] Miss Beasley began writing for *The Oakland Daily Tribune*, featuring the Negro exhibits in the Panama Pacific International Exposition.”\textsuperscript{20}

This was no small feat. Through her columns in the *Tribune*, one of the state’s largest daily newspapers, and the *Oakland Sunshine*, Beasley reached a wide and interracial audience.\textsuperscript{21} But convincing her readers that race pride and racial uplift could be exercised at the PPIE would not be easy. For the nearly nineteen million people who attended the fair between opening day on February 20 and December 4—and who wandered through eleven major exhibit halls, twenty-one national pavilions, and over twenty-five buildings devoted to states or regions—racial stereotypes would be hard to ignore.\textsuperscript{22} From the midway, or Joy Zone, to the ethnological exhibits and even the Palace of Food Products, visitors witnessed a range of representations of racialized subjects, including caricatures of African Americans. For many who crafted the vision of the
PPIE, the key to national progress was something called “racial progress” or “race betterment.” Coming as it did on the heels of the opening of the Panama Canal and in the midst of the First World War, the fair celebrated national progress and scientific triumph. With the input of anthropologists, ethnologists, and the state’s leading scientists, exhibitions and lectures featured the new “science” of eugenics. In fact, this world’s fair became the first to host such a panoply of eugenics-related displays and conferences.\textsuperscript{33}

Fairgoers could attend lectures on the subject or visit the extremely popular Race Betterment booth in the Palace of Education. Recently founded in Michigan by the cereal magnate John H. Kellogg, the Race Betterment Foundation enjoyed quite a receptive audience in California. David Starr Jordan, former president of Stanford University, attended the National Conference of Race Betterment held that year at the fair and soon became California’s leading eugenicist.\textsuperscript{34} Members of the Ninth International Congress of the World’s Purity Federation convened at the fair throughout July and August, and the lectures delivered at a meeting of the Education Congress addressed race betterment quite explicitly as well.\textsuperscript{35} The fair’s official chronicler, Frank Morton Todd, described the Race Betterment booth as “one of the exhibits that caught the eye of every visitor.”\textsuperscript{36} There, among sculptures of classical Greek figures, visitors could read charts warning against interracial marriage, or mixed-race breeding as it was called. Messages about eugenics were not restricted to one display; another popular booth belonging to the Department of Labor offered information about the weakening of America’s racial purity due to recent immigration trends.\textsuperscript{37} As one historian explained, “The nucleus of California’s eugenics movement converged at PPIE.”\textsuperscript{38}

Fair organizers thrilled to the concentration of eugenicists at the fair and wrote to the organizers of the Race Betterment Foundation, “You represent the very spirit, the very ideal of this great Exposition that we have created here.”\textsuperscript{39} As a reporter, Beasley was well aware of the eugenics themes; the Race Betterment conference received more press than any other meeting, more than one million lines of coverage by the Associated Press and the United Press.\textsuperscript{40} The prominence of racial discourse at the fair translated into dire predictions for black Californians. African Americans threatened racial purity, according to eugenicists, and their presence in the state could only be a hindrance.

California had proven itself receptive to this message long before the fair opened. Fears of race mixing had led Californians to enact one of the earliest antimiscegenation laws in the nation in 1890. The NAACP, formed in 1909, kept a watchful eye on the state and monitored similar laws. Intermarriage, and its criminalization in states across the country, received its own column in the pages of The Crisis.\textsuperscript{31} “Believing these laws to be unjust and degrade the colored race and especially the colored women, the branches have taken an active part against such legislation,” wrote W.E.B. Du Bois in the June 1913 issue. A bevy of states—Kansas, Iowa, Minnesota, Illinois, Washington, and New York—considered passing antiramarriage bills during the first decades of the twentieth century. The fear of racial degeneracy and even “race suicide” intensified among middle-class white Californians. Indeed, the state embraced this fear and its popular solution, female sterilization, passing its first eugenic-sterilization law in 1909, only the second such law in the nation.\textsuperscript{32} California was fast becoming a center of eugenicist thought and practice, a place where racial purity was championed and race mixing despised. It is no coincidence, then, that a film celebrating white supremacy and a fair promoting the selective breeding of humans found such enthusiastic audiences in the Golden State.
In the months prior to the fair’s opening day, newspapers carried innumerable stories of the preparations and the fair’s potential; the PPJE would bring thousands of jobs to the state, and African Americans knew this. In January 1915, one month before the fair opened its gates, the Colored Non-Partisan Leagues, a political organization that helped to educate and organize black voters in the state, charged that hiring practices at the fair had been discriminatory.31 In a letter to PPJE president Charles Moore, S. L. Mash, the organization’s president, wrote that he had confirmed with the superintendent of the Service Building, a Mr. Flynn, that “the [color] line had been drawn to the extent that no Colored Man [sic] would be allowed to be employed as Guards and other various positions at the Fair Grounds, and that it would be a waste of time for any Colored Man to make any such application.”34

The Panama-Pacific International Exposition was a meeting place for the nation’s practitioners of eugenics. The new “science” warned of the dangers of interracial contact, especially interracial sex, and lectures about eugenics were delivered throughout the fair. The Race Betterment Foundation, established by John H. Kellogg, the cereal magnate, sponsored such lectures in this booth at the Palace of Education.

SAN FRANCISCO HISTORY CENTER, SAN FRANCISCO PUBLIC LIBRARY

In his letter, Mash, an attorney, also reminded Moore that the Leagues had lobbied to have the fair in California because of the state’s antidiscriminatory legislation.35 Further, he noted that black voters were “a great factor” in securing the fair for the state, as was the black press. “There is no question, but that all the Colored Newspapers of the United States, as well as the Colored Press Association of which I am a member... assisted greatly in this matter, to the success of San Francisco.”36 Mash closed his letter with a
warning: should the discrimination continue, “[T]he same influence that was used favorably to San Francisco, might be the means of causing a great injustice to the fair minded good citizens of the State of California.”

Moore never replied to this accusation of discrimination. Unbeknownst to the Colored Non-Partisan Leagues, Moore’s attorney assured Moore in a memo that “a few tactful words will quiet these ‘wards of the nation.’”17 Two weeks after Mash’s letter, PPIE Secretary R. J. Taussig sent those tactful words to Mash, declaring that, “speaking officially, the Exposition has not at any time drawn a color line.”18 As for the complaint about employees, Taussig had conducted a personal investigation and had found “quite a number of colored men employed in the buildings and on the grounds. . . . So you must admit,” he wrote, “that there is no discrimination based on race.” When it came time to address the absence of black guards at the fair, Taussig’s excuse amounted to the fact that only “veterans of the Spanish war” had been hired in this capacity; and while the fair might entertain hiring a segregated unit of black men “just as it is done in the U.S. Army,” it “was out of the question at the present moment.”19 Moore’s responses perhaps were meant to quiet Mash and concerned black citizens, but they offered little comfort.

As confident as the secretary sounded, Mash was not fooled. In his letter replying to Taussig’s assertion of a Jim Crow–free fair, he offered to print Taussig’s assurances in the black press: “A copy of your letter will be sent to our Eastern correspondents . . . and our people may be made to feel welcome by the Officials of the Great Panama Pacific International Exposition.”40 But Mash did not leave it at that. He happily took up the secretary’s point about veterans serving as guards, reminding the secretary of the valiant service of the black soldiers of the Ninth and Tenth Cavalry and the Twenty-fourth and Twenty-fifth Infantry—commonly known as the Buffalo Soldiers—in the Spanish-American War. Mash continued: “And in the hope that all mark of discrimination may be removed, both in fact and in appearance . . . we most readily meet your suggestion, that a Colored Company of Guards be formed.”41 Unfortunately, there is no record of Taussig’s response to this letter, and despite Mash’s offer to organize that unit of veterans himself it seems unlikely that anyone took him up on his proposal.

This exchange of letters is a strong indication that black Californians consistently and quite pointedly voiced their concerns about segregation and racial discrimination at the fair. Whether the complaints from the Colored Non-Partisan Leagues made a difference in hiring practices is unclear. But the records tell us that the PPIE, the city of San Francisco, and the state of California came under intense scrutiny and that Jim Crow practices did not go unnoticed—indeed, they were advertised nationwide. By March, San Francisco’s mayor, James Rolph, had a letter on his desk from a different lawyer, James C. Waters Jr., an alumnus of Howard University Law School, training ground of the nation’s top civil rights attorneys. Waters made his requests quite simply: “What the colored folks want is equal treatment in all the purely public and quasi-public places such as are commonly open to all comers in the city of San Francisco. For instance, if they find themselves in need of food or drink, or both, they want to be able to enter the first restaurant they come to, and not have to trudge, mile after mile until they come to some ‘Jim Crow snack house’ or ‘chit’lin den’ . . . before they can get a mouthful to eat or a glass of milk.”42

Waters, an attorney at the Washington, D.C., firm Wilson & Waters, pulled no punches as he described the myth of racial equality in San Francisco: “[C]olored persons who propose to visit the Panama Pacific World’s Exposition in San Francisco during the current year, believing they will be accorded the same civil treatment accorded
Following the Spanish American and Philippine wars, soldiers of the Ninth Cavalry (above) and the Twenty-fourth Infantry, part of the black regiments known as the Buffalo Soldiers, were garrisoned at the Presidio. In her March 1918 article in The Crisis, Beasley recalled the honor of a “special day, which they called the ‘Lincoln Day’ bestowed upon the Buffalo Soldiers by officials of the Panama-Pacific International Exposition. “The exercises were opened by a Military Parade which was led by the entire Twenty-fourth Infantry . . . headed by a Negro band and bandmaster . . . The Negroes led the day.”

_Courtesy, U.S. Army Military History Institute_

decent, responsible members of other races, will find they are entertaining a wild notion.”43 Waters requested an honest assessment of the situation from the mayor.

Rolph chose not to respond personally to this matter and instead referred it to Secretary Taussig. Waters, like Mash, seemed singularly unimpressed with Taussig’s handling of the situation: a “32 word” letter that he “so generously sent” on March 15. Though no record exists of Taussig’s letter, it is clear from Waters’ response that the secretary resorted to the same policy he initiated when addressing the concerns expressed by the Colored Non-Partisan Leagues: deny the presence of segregation at the fair.44 Unfortunately, there is no indication that any further action was taken. The fair proceeded with a very limited presence of African Americans as workers; in addition, black fairgoers found themselves unwelcome at a variety of concession stands and restaurants inside and outside the fairgrounds.

Knowledge of Jim Crow practices at the fair at every level—employment, representation, services, and management—strengthened Beasley’s commitment to integrate the PPIE and claim it as an event that belonged equally to African Americans. Like Mash and Waters, she worked to expose discrimination. Whereas fair organizers
sought to erase the presence of African American workers or exhibitors, Beasley sought to make black people visible. In this way, she joined the ranks of other African Americans, including Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois, who recognized fairs and expositions as essential locations for demonstrating and representing the talents of black Americans.

AFRICAN AMERICANS AND THE WORLD’S FAIRS

African Americans have a long and complex history with U.S. world’s fairs. As spectators, exhibitors, workers, performers, and activists, they shaped the outcome of fairs and often countered the message that the elite white planners intended audiences to receive. In the nineteenth century, fairs were places where black Americans attempted to control their histories. The period from 1877 to 1915, the heyday of world’s fairs, coincided with some of the most offensive representations of black Americans in history, fiction, and film. Building on the antebellum tradition of black abolitionists such as William Wells Brown, who traveled the world with his diorama of slavery, postbellum black Americans understood the power of display. Fairs presented an extraordinary opportunity to counter the onslaught of damaging beliefs about the benefits of slavery and the impossibility of African American citizenship.

The best-known example of African American participation in a world’s fair occurred in 1893 in Chicago at the World’s Columbian Exposition, which was designed to commemorate the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus’ “discovery” of America. There the journalist Ida B. Wells and senior statesman Frederick Douglass debated publicly about the role of black Americans in the fair, particularly their participation in the so-called Colored American Day. The debates revealed significant differences in what black people thought fairs could be and do. Members of the elite class of black Chicagoans, including Fannie Barrier Williams, the only African American to hold an administrative position in the fair, believed that the exposition could showcase the achievements of the nation’s black population and was a tremendous opportunity that should not be missed. Others found the very notion of a single day devoted to black achievements patronizing and offensive.

The 1890s marked a period in post-Reconstruction America characterized by the worst offenses of Jim Crow: lynching, violence, and the erosion of rights that African Americans had achieved during Reconstruction. Not surprisingly, black men and women did not always agree on how best to stand up for their rights at the fair or otherwise. And Colored American Day became the focal point for voicing some of these disagreements. Addressing an exuberant crowd of over 2,500 people on August 25, 1893, Frederick Douglass delivered a blistering critique of slavery and the treatment of African Americans in the United States. The publication and distribution of the pamphlet “The Reason Why the Colored American Is Not in the World’s Columbian Exposition” helped galvanize some black Chicagoans against the segregation and exclusion of black Americans at the fair. In the pamphlet, Ida B. Wells, who had led an international crusade against lynching, and her future husband, Ferdinand Barnett, exposed the history of racism that had successfully disenfranchised African Americans and encouraged a boycott of Colored American Day.

Perhaps no fair better illustrates the significance of expositions as platforms for black political thought than the Atlanta Cotton States and International Exposition of 1895. Held only two years after the Chicago exposition, it sparked intense debate among black Americans. This time it was not Douglass who delivered the signature oration but Booker T. Washington. In what came to be known as the Atlanta Compromise, Washington laid out his vision for a new and unified South, which many African Americans, most notably
W.E.B. Du Bois and the founders of the NAACP, found accommodationist at best. By focusing on the political rift that developed between Du Bois and Washington, some have overlooked the commonalities of their approaches. Before he delivered his biting critique of Washington’s Atlanta exposition speech in his *Souls of Black Folk*, published in 1903, Du Bois chose another venue to fight the oppressive depictions of African Americans: the 1900 Paris exposition.

When the African American lawyer Thomas Calloway, state commissioner for the 1895 Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta, looked for assistance for a new project—a Negro exhibit in the Paris exposition—he turned to Du Bois, his classmate from Fisk University. Convinced that an impressive display of black churches, clubs, schools, farms, and homes would dispel the myths that circulated about African Americans, Calloway lobbied the black elite and Congress to support the special exhibit. In defense of his idea of a Negro pavilion at the fair, he wrote to black colleagues, “Everyone who knows about public opinion will tell you that the Europeans think of us as a mass of rapists ready to attack every white woman exposed . . . how will we answer these slanders?”

Securing $15,000 from Congress, Calloway was able to advance Du Bois $2,500 to prepare the bulk of the visual display for the Negro exhibit. Du Bois thought it best to counter the slanders with a small but fastidious display of photographs of African Americans and charts and graphs prepared with the help of his sociology students at Atlanta University. Whether this approach altered racialized notions is not clear, but the exhibit earned Du Bois a gold medal for his role as “Collaborator and Compiler of the Georgia Negro Exhibit” that did not go unnoticed by the black press in the United States. Though exhibits like those in Paris were intended to counter racial caricatures, the stereotype of the black male rapist had not yet reached its zenith; that would occur five years later in *The Birth of a Nation*, as millions of viewers watched a white female jump to her death while fleeing from the black male who pursued her. Beasley, like Du Bois and Calloway, thought Negro exhibits might be an effective way to “answer the slanders.”

By the time of the PPIE, Washington and Du Bois had come to represent distinct schools of black intellectual and activist thought. Du Bois embodied the civil rights and protest wing of black America, Washington the self-help school of thought. Though scholars consider this dual framework for black Americans’ responses to Jim Crow—resistance and accommodation to racism—a drastic oversimplification, it often has shaped the ways in which we interpret African American history of California, as well as of the nation. This false dichotomy obscures the complexities of club women, such as Beasley, who objected to antiblack representations, embraced civil rights, and championed African American
achievements while seeking ways to position the black American experience at public, mainstream venues. Bessley cannot easily be placed in either the Washington or Du Bois camps; although she worked for a decidedly Washingtonian newspaper, the Oakland Sunshine, she also championed the NAACP. Beasley’s story—and those of women like her—illustrates the problems with oversimplifying African American resistance to Jim Crow.

RACE PRIDE, PARADES, AND “THE JEWEL CITY”

The PPIE elicited mixed reactions from black men and women throughout the state. The discussion in the black press reveals that not everyone embraced the possibilities of the fair, and in fact, some worried it could reinforce messages of racial inferiority. In addition to the discriminatory hiring practices, stereotypical displays of Africans and African Americans were difficult for fairgoers to ignore, none more powerful than the attraction called the African Dip. Nestled between a concession stand selling orange blossom candles and a fruit pavilion, the African Dip, an enormous booth in the Joy Zone, recalled popular images of savage Africans. To experience the African Dip, fairgoers approached and almost entered the enormous body of a pierced African of indeterminate gender; then they tried to toss a ball at a target, which if successfully hit, would dunk or dip the African American who sat in the booth into a pool of water. Demeaning caricatures of African Americans at the fair were not restricted to the African Dip; at the Sperry Flour booth, women dressed as the stereotypic mammy figure made pancakes for the hungry crowds.

On March 27, in response to a proposed “special day” devoted to black Americans, the leaders of the Afro-American League, in the pages of their paper, the Oakland Sunshine asked its readers, “Do We Want a Negro Day at the Exposition?” The editors seemed skeptical about the merits of such a day and its feasibility: “Is it too late for the Negroes to begin planning for a Negro Day at the Exposition, when the whole grounds will be turned over to the Colored People of the United States... But do we really want a Negro Day and would it be a Jim Crow Day?” Readers were encouraged to mail in their “25 word answer” to this question for publication in the next issue.

Negro Day promised to be a grand affair, a display of sports, singing, reciting, and all sorts of talents. According to the Sunshine, fifty “ministers, business and professional men” were appointed to a committee by the fair’s president and directors to make arrangements. Attempts were under way to organize a choir of one thousand schoolchildren to perform in a singing contest. Races of all kinds were planned, including a “fat men’s and short men’s race.” And perhaps most significantly, the mouthpiece of racial uplift, Booker T. Washington, was invited to be the orator of the day. Members of the black elite took the fair, and the committee, quite seriously. “Let every race-loving, patriotic citizen join the committee in their endeavors to show the world that we have brainy, talented and skillful artists, poets, and musicians, both men and women in our race. To the thirty men in and around San Francisco and Oakland to whom this day’s program has been entrusted (in the main), do your full duty. This is a service you owe the race,” the Sunshine reported.

But Negro Day did not occur. Interest faded and attention shifted to other ways in which African Americans might participate in the fair. The Sunshine never published any readers’ responses to its question about holding a Negro Day. Most likely, it was too late to organize the event, as the Afro-American League suspected. Special days happened with much fanfare, but as the Sunshine warned, they required “elaborate preparation and expense.” It could be that black leaders had difficulty mustering up the funds and the enthusiasm that Negro Day demanded. Among PPIE planners, Negro Day was not a priority either.
Millions of visitors attended the exhibits in the Joy Zone, an amusement thoroughfare with more than 100 concessionaires, including the popular African Dip. Countering such negative stereotypes prevalent at the fair, Beasley enumerated the exhibits that reflected “credit upon the race,” including art exhibits; charts and pictures noting advances by African Americans in education, science, and industry; and the invention of the “citrus press” by an African American couple in Oakland.

San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library

Booths distributing edible samples lured visitors to the Palace of Food Products, whose Dome of Plenty “signifies the source of vigor in the fruits of the soil,” as a popular book about the fair reported. At the Sperry Flour booth, black women dressed in stereotypical mammy outfits made pancakes. The fair brought thousands of job opportunities to the state, but very few African Americans were hired.

Courtesy www.sanfranciscomemories.com
they were, perhaps, more concerned with other special days—and there were hundreds at the fair—such as Glacier National Park Day, Raisin Day, or Wells Fargo Day. Perhaps recalling that black Chicagoleans viewed Colored American Day as a way for the organizers of the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition to appease African Americans protests, black Californians in 1915 preferred to participate in a different kind of event, one that marked them as citizens, not “Negroes.” Finally, it is quite likely that the plan to secure Booker T. Washington as the main speaker fell through; Washington had been ill and died in November of that year.

By May, plans for Negro Day had been abandoned and a new avenue for black participation emerged. This time, it was not a race-specific day, but a matter of civic pride. The proposed Alameda County Day and its centerpiece “industrial parade” were considered a more appropriate venue for black Californians to demonstrate their contributions to the county and state. Black women took the lead, immediately organizing a forum to discuss the new event, which was planned for June 10. Myra V. Simmons, president of the Civic Center, a black women’s club, called a meeting at the Cooper Zion Church on Campbell Street in Oakland to decide the matter.

The Afro-American League supported the idea: “Now, to our mind we could, with a degree of pride go right into this day’s festivities with all our might as loyal citizens of Alameda County, not as Negroes or any other race, but as citizens, march together, ride together, sing if necessary together, and still be citizens of the county.”

Perhaps, some believed, attending Alameda County Day might impress upon fairgoers that African Americans considered themselves citizens, even though they may not be treated as such. Indeed, participation might convince some of the rightful place of black people in the state. “So we are quite in favor of just as many of our colored citizens turning out on Alameda Day,” announced the *Sunshine*, “and show to our visitors that this is our Fair and our State.”

Black women enthusiastically embraced the Afro-American League’s challenge to claim the fair and the state. Despite a forceful call to action in the black press and at the forum, the only organizations that planned to partake in Alameda County Day were the black women’s clubs—especially the Civic Center, which intended to commission for the parade a decorated car that could hold fifty women, the Fannie J. Coppin Club, and the Household of Ruth. Planning proceeded at a frenzied pace: a general committee formed, choirs rehearsed, children decorated floats. All fraternal organizations and political clubs were encouraged to march or ride in the parade.

Indeed, members of the organizing committee framed involvement as a responsibility that African Americans should embrace as a matter of race pride. According to the press, James Hackett, chairman of the committee, said that he “considers it the duty of every colored resident to rally at this time.” Clearly, black club women viewed participation in the parade as an extension of their activism on behalf of the race. Prior to the fair, the Civic Center had taken center stage in a protest against the dismal conditions faced by African American prisoners at San Quentin; the club also led the way in the protests against *The Clansman*.

The Alameda County Day parade began at 10 a.m. sharp at the San Francisco Ferry Building; it then proceeded along Market Street to Van Ness Avenue, which led to the eastern gates of the fair at the Joy Zone. Once inside the fairgrounds, the parade moved through the Joy Zone, past the African Dip, and down the Avenue of Progress, eventually finishing at the Band Concourse. The event drew hordes of spectators, and if the *Sunshine* accurately assessed the extent of African American participation, it was sizable. “Everybody shut up shop and [got] themselves across the channel to the big Exposition
Indeed, the San Francisco Chronicle claimed that the parade was “a revelation,” one of the best parades of the fair since its opening in December. The fair’s official band led the parade, and women of the Grand Army of the Republic marched behind it. Following in the tradition of Pasadena’s Tournament of Roses, lavishly decorated floats dominated the day. Everyone praised the entries from San Leandro, which were covered in cherry blossoms and “ripe cherries the size of plums.” Black women’s clubs had their own plan to impress the crowd. Two floats, one sponsored by the Colored Women’s Clubs and the other overflowing with seventy-five schoolchildren dressed in uniform and waving American and Bear flags, carried African Americans across the city and through the fairgrounds.

Black women also had a surprise: Earlier that year, PPIE officials and the Call-Post newspaper had announced a contest to name the fair. unbeknownst to them and to most others, an African American girl, Virginia Stephens, had won the contest with her submission, the Jewel City. The Civic Center and other black women’s clubs decided there could be no better way to enforce the message of black equality than to celebrate the winner by including her on the float of schoolchildren along with a showy banner declaring her patriotism. Members of the Afro-American League put it thusly: “As very few of our white friends knew that Miss Stephens was colored, the clubs took this means to inform the public by a large banner of her presence in the float of her nationality.”

African American women seized upon the fair and its very public—and newsworthy—opportunities to draw conspicuous attention to black Californians. That they did so through the spectacle of children might not seem surprising given gender constructions of the time that associated women with domesticity and mothering in particular. But by featuring children on the float along with Virginia Stephens riding “in state,”

Ideologies of self-help for African Americans were promoted by educator, philanthropist, and founder of the Tuskegee Institute Booker T. Washington (1856–1915), whose death was observed in a service at San Francisco’s African American Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. Members of the Oakland chapter of the Afro-American League had hoped Washington would deliver the keynote address for the proposed Negro Day at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition.

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black club women indicated their desire to merge the politics of family and respectability with the tropes of nationalism and patriotism. For African American women, emphasizing their roles as mothers and caretakers of the domestic realm must be done in conjunction with their insistence on citizenship.
Delilah Beasley understood, as all club women did, that notions of black womanhood framed all their social and political work; after all, the NACW had formed in response to a white editor’s claim that black women “were devoid of virtue.” The presence of scores of children atop flowery floats signaled a refutation of the claims of eugenicists that African Americans were incapable of “healthy” reproduction and bred deficient racial stock. Four years earlier, Du Bois attempted to counter these claims himself by publishing an annual children’s issue of The Crisis filled with photographs of healthy black children. In addition, the most popular fundraiser in the NAACP’s early years was the baby contest. That club women filled their floats with children signifies political strategy and intentionality.

Though a record number of spectators witnessed Alameda County Day, there was not one mention of African American participation in the Chronicle’s extensive coverage of the parade. Instead, the paper’s front page depicted a women’s float from the California Cotton Mill Company, whose enormous banner read “Cotton Is King.” For black Californians only a generation or two removed from slavery, the reference to King Cotton did not conjure up happy memories. It would be up to Delilah Beasley to emphasize black involvement in the parade and at the fair and to interpret its significance while drawing attention to a different history and memory—that of black citizenship, domesticity, and patriotism.

DELILAH BEASLEY’S CAMPAIGN

Delilah Beasley, who was hired by the Sunshine as a special feature writer in June 1915, championed African American participation in Alameda County Day. In the pages of the press, she reminded her readers that black people’s presence in previous civic parades had rattled more than a few members of the Bay Area’s elite. “There was a time,” she wrote, “when the mere mention of the colored people to even want to participate in a Fourth of July celebration with the white people called forth some very harsh criticism from one of the largest papers in San Francisco.”

Referring to the Chronicle and its legendary disdain for African Americans, Beasley set out to counter this hostility. For her, Alameda County Day signified nothing short of intervening in white people’s inclination to make exclusive claims not just to the county, but to the state, the nation, and patriotism. In her accounts, Beasley not only reminded readers of the fair’s patriotic possibilities, but provided history lessons on the long and devoted service of African Americans to the nation and the state. While she was not the first African American to utilize fairs as opportunities to interpret the role of black America in the nation at large, Beasley offered a different context: This fair occurred during a world war, on the eve of national women’s suffrage, and in the same year as the antiblack productions of The Clansman and The Birth of a Nation.

Beasley’s first special feature on the fair, published on June 26, was simply called “Colored Race at the Exposition.” It began by directing readers to an earlier concern and campaign: the staging of The Clansman in California theaters. Beasley had written repeatedly, as had her Los Angeles counterpart, Charlotta Bass, editor of the California Eagle, to encourage black Californians to protest and, if possible, ban the performances of both the play and film. She reported that the play was enjoying a “return engagement” in San Francisco and “we as a people will have to grit our teeth and ignore” it. But she did not feel that protests against the play by black Californians were in vain; in fact, she believed “and not without a reason” that the invitation to African
Americans to participate in Alameda County Day was a direct result of their protests. According to Beasley, black resistance to demeaning stereotypes had paid off; the state’s elite, as represented by the fair’s organizers, had taken heed of black Californians and their numbers, if not their political presence. As far as Beasley was concerned, “the mere fact that colored children marched through the streets of San Francisco, carrying the Stars and Stripes, showed a decided advance and change of feeling toward the colored race in these parts.” What may have looked like a cavalcade of cherry blossoms to some people to Beasley signaled a reinscribing of the rights of citizenship.

But Beasley’s initial report of the fair—and her account of the parade—ended on a less than positive note: the acknowledgment that in its appropriations for the PPPE, the U.S. Congress “adjourned without voting an appropriation for a colored exhibit and building.” Despite the fact that Congress had appropriated money earlier for the Negro exhibit at the 1900 Paris exposition, money was not forthcoming for one at this fair. Putting a positive spin on this negation of African American contributions to arts and industry proved difficult for the journalist. “We often say we have no building, no exhibits,” she wrote. Arguing that this fact should pose no impediment to black participation, she continued: “I often make the remark that Old Glory is good enough for me.” According to Beasley, attending the fair under the patriotic symbol of the flag should suffice. Stating that the “Stars and Stripes” flew at the fair and would “protect” Negro exhibits, Beasley tried, rather awkwardly, to encourage black Californians to claim patriotism at the fairgrounds as their own.

The headline of Beasley’s next article, and the paper’s lead editorial, “Negro under the American Flag at the PPPE,” helped to drive Beasley’s point home. In it, she offered detailed descriptions of some of the cultural and industrial exhibits highlighting African American contributions. In the Educational building, a display of historically black colleges and universities impressed visitors, she reported. Similar to the photos compiled by Du Bois for the Paris exposition, these images brimmed with “proof” of black achievement. It is also likely that this type of presentation did little to threaten the mostly white audience of the fair, since black men and women were safely contained in the segregated spaces of “colored colleges.” The same building housed an exhibit that “showed the progress of the race from the cotton fields to a clinic of Negro doctors and nurses in a colored hospital.”

Beasley found these exhibits “splendid” probably because they proved to be the places where the history and contributions of African Americans were most visible. The article included lengthy descriptions of the art of expatriate Henry O. Tanner, a favorite of France and a world-renowned artist whose painting Christ at the Home of Lazarus was exhibited in the Palace of Fine Arts and won a gold medal. But Beasley’s glowing account of Tanner’s work was not without blunt observation; even after graduating from Harvard, she wrote, “because of the one drop of negro blood in his veins,” he never received the recognition he deserved in the United States.

In addition to black history lessons, Beasley’s coverage of African Americans’ presence at the fair included commentary on what some might describe as the domestic arts. Her lengthy description of Margaret Hatton’s prize-winning Persian cats, for which Hatton received a first prize blue ribbon and a “handsome silver cup,” seemed designed not only to inspire race pride but also to draw attention to a domestic pursuit. Her report about the “two colored people living in Oakland” who invented a fruit juicer—which was displayed in the Palace of Food Products and which supplied all the fruit juice consumed at the fair—surely conjured up images of not only California’s abundant produce but also the couple’s domesticity.
Following these glowing reviews, Beasley returned to her other pressing concern: the protest of *The Birth of a Nation*. Indeed, as her reports make clear, she saw these campaigns as one and the same and used her coverage of black accomplishments to counter the degrading portrayals of African Americans on the stage and screen. In her September 4 column, she reviewed at length an August 26 benefit concert, held at Hamilton Auditorium in Oakland, in protest of the play. There could be no doubt about the concert’s goal: “to change public opinion from the damaging effect of *The Clansman*.” Beasley also reported on the choir formed by the Bay Area’s finest singers who sang a series of hymns, folk songs, and spirituals at the concert, closing with the theme song of the exposition, “I Love You, California.” Written just two years before the PPIE, the song was played in 1914 aboard the steamship *Ancon*, the first merchant ship to pass through the Panama Canal (whose opening was the occasion for the exposition), and is now California’s official state song. Beasley noted the opportunity to demonstrate patriotism at the concert with the song: “It required a genius to be able to write such a clever little verse just at the right time.”

But when all was said and done, what had black Californians gained in 1915? Neither the play nor the film had closed during the exposition. In fact, D. W. Griffith proceeded with his plans to distribute the film nationwide, where it enjoyed tremendous success. Had black people benefited from the fair in any tangible ways? Many called attention to the fair’s few measurable benefits and its many detrimental effects. At least one scholar has pointed to the PPIE as a marker for job cuts for Bay Area African Americans. Even the *Sunshine*, the standard bearer of the Afro-American League, expressed bitter disappointment: “The great Panama-Pacific fair is over,” the paper reported. “The radiant lights are out. The sparkling and rippling fountains have ceased to pour forth. . . . The Negro had not one day of his own and no building, etc., and derived but very little benefit outside of a few minor jobs as maids and helpers. The management did not solicit very largely of Negro product. The Hampton Quartet sang a few weeks, but our local promoters were not given any financial aid to put on a single production.”

Perhaps part of this disappointment stemmed from the vanquished hope that Negro Day would have made a difference or that Booker T. Washington would have appeared at the fair. In the fair’s closing months, in a column headed “What the *Sunshine* Would Like to See,” the paper’s editor had included in a wish list the following: “Booker T. Washington visit the Fair this year.” It was not to be.

**A DIFFERENT PLACE**

African Americans in California played marginal roles at the PPIE, but the story is not as simple as that. Black men and especially women did much to make the fair a messier place to “read race,” raising the ugly specter of Jim Crow in public discussions of Negro Day, commandeering considerable public and civic space for Alameda County Day, buttonholing fair organizers, and upending notions of racial progress and race betterment by winning the fair-naming contest. Never as simple as the charts in the Race Betterment booth, the meanings of race and segregation were contested daily in California’s press and shaped in streets, universities, and parades. It is not surprising that thousands of California’s African American residents might have seen the PPIE as a chance to reinscribe racial hierarchies and challenge the tenets of Jim Crow at the same time as their rights were mocked in the theater and on film. Staging race happens on and off the stage, as Beasley understood so well.

The fair provided its millions of visitors, including African Americans, a world of information about the country’s black citizens. Though some
of the sites, lectures, and exhibits reflected a deep commitment to racial hierarchies and white supremacy—especially the native villages, the African Dip, and the Race Betterment booth—other messages about race and black people were offered. Visitors could learn about black colleges and universities, sample the musical expertise of a number of ensembles, and witness the power and tenacity of black women’s clubs as they paraded through the fairgrounds. At least one black Californian, Delilah Beasley, hoped these exhibits of African American accomplishments would turn the tide and convince nonblack Californians that African Americans deserved the respect due all the state’s citizens. Despite the fair’s explicitly racist imagery and messages, Beasley believed that Jim Crow California should be challenged wherever it appeared.

But as memories of the fair faded—and with it the opportunity to alter presiding notions about African Americans—Beasley turned her attention and skills as a reporter and researcher to a much broader project and one that would have a more public and sustaining legacy: a history of black Californians. Four years after the fair’s lights were extinguished in 1919, she self-published her most ambitious work, *The Negro Trail Blazers of California*. In a remarkable effort, Beasley had conducted oral histories with African American pioneers, combed the archives of The Bancroft Library at the University of California, and queried scores of archivists and researchers in her quest to document the story of black Californians. Unlike her reportage of the fair, the book was not a laundry list of the accomplishments of black men and women; Beasley included copious material about antiblack sentiment, Jim Crow laws, and white supremacy in the state. She paid particular attention to the ways black Californians were subject to unjust laws, including the fugitive slave law of 1852, the antitestimony law, and the establishment of the state’s branches of the NAACP. Indeed, her text records verbatim the most momentous court decisions in the state’s black history up to that point. This is not surprising, as Beasley had studied history at the University of California, Berkeley, and had honed her skills gathering data and interviewing subjects as a journalist. In addition to traditional methodologies, she utilized folklore and oral sources to record the history of westerners often missing from official histories. In this way, she practiced new modes of social and public histories before the profession welcomed such efforts.

Sometimes characterized as an accommodationist and often ridiculed as an amateur historian, Beasley nevertheless made significant interventions in the stories we tell ourselves about the history of black Californians. While her coverage of the PPIE fits squarely in the tradition of those like Booker T. Washington, who championed the accomplishments of African Americans and promoted racial uplift, it also adhered to her broader philosophy: countering white supremacy and antiblack sentiment in California by chronicling the actual histories of African Americans living and working in the state. The fact that black Oaklanders invented the first juicer or that Virginia Stephens won the fair-naming contest may not strike the contemporary reader as transformative in state history, but to some black men and women, these achievements in the face of Jim Crow made the world—which the fair purported to replicate—a different place, one where African Americans could imagine themselves equal.

**LYNN M. HUDSON** is associate professor and chair of the History Department at Macalester College. She earned her B.A. at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and her Ph.D. at Indiana University, Bloomington. Prior to joining the Macalester faculty, she taught in the History Department at California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo. She is the author of *The Making of “Mammy Pleasant”: A Black Entrepreneur in Nineteenth-Century San Francisco* (2003), winner of the Barbara Penny Kanner Prize from the Western Association of Women Historians. Currently she is working on a project about segregation in California.