Background

May 1, 1893 – October 30 1893

● Also known as The Chicago World’s Fair
● Celebrated 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus coming to the ‘new world’ (1492)
● 27 million people attended in the 6 months it was open
● Covered 600 acres, containing almost 200 new (temporary) buildings
● Representatives from 46 countries in attendance
Planning, Architecture, and Design

- Planned in the early days of the Gilded Age – took inspiration from London’s 1851 Crystal Palace Exhibition
- Designed by Daniel Burnham and Frederick Law Olmstead
- Lots of French neoclassical architecture, symmetry, balance, grandiose
- Depicting an ideal city
Jackson Park – commissioned for Columbian Exposition, designed by Frederick Law Olmstead (also created NY’s Central Park).

The original Ferris Wheel (also referred to at the Chicago Wheel) – largest attraction at the Columbian Exposition, standing at 264 ft. Designed by George Washington Gale Ferris, Jr. and was a major attraction-saving the fair from bankruptcy.

The original Republic, sculpted for the Columbian Exposition by Daniel Chester French. Today, a scaled-down replica still stands, but the original was 65 feet tall. It is considered a Chicago Landmark.
Social Implications

- Purpose: re-establish Chicago as a major city after the destruction of the Great Chicago Fire of 1971
- Influential social and cultural event
- Produced on a grand scale: far exceeding other world fairs, became the symbol of “American Exceptionalism”- theory that the United States is qualitatively different from other nations, born of a revolution and based upon liberty, individualism, laissez-faire ideologies
- First fair to have National Pavilions with ‘delegates’ from countries, although not all delegates were examples of the country they represented (Fredrick Douglass was the delegate from Haiti)
Other interpretations of the Fair...

• Some felt that the fair was not a multicultural event, but rather used to help sustain an allusion of affluence which helped usher in the decadence of the early 20th century and the American ideas of materialism.

Rebecca Graff
“Things” that were introduced...

- The Ferris Wheel
- Phosphorescent lamps
- Spray paint
- Moving walkways
- Device that made plates that printed braille for books
- Fully electric kitchen WITH automatic dishwasher
- Flattened coin (squashed penny)
Edibles that were introduced...

- Cracker Jack
- Cream of Wheat
- HERSHEY CHOCOLATE!
- Juicy Fruit gum
- Quaker Oats
- Shredded Wheat
- PBR beer
- Aunt Jemima Pancake Mix
Jackson Turner’s Frontier Thesis

• One popular idea to come out of the Exposition was Turner’s thesis that American Democracy sprung from the American Frontier and not that of our European forefathers.

• Other ideas to spring from his thesis was the idea that everyone is equal. Although this is a pleasing idea, the actuality of the Exposition conflicted with the idea that everyone was in fact equal.
Instances of Racism at the Exposition...

Comics and performances by and from African Americans were under particular scrutiny:

• Some saw African Americans expressing themselves on a global stage as a move in the right direction of equality, there were still many racist undercurrents through the literature of the time.

• Peter Newall’s comic of the African American Johnson Family which “explored white American discomfort with racial and economic diversity through the antics of the imagery yet symbolically representative Johnson family” (Cooks 435).
Racism with Native Americans...

Many Native Americans were set as Performers at the Fair, however when many showed up looking “too western,” they were asked to change their appearance to look more like the stereotypical idea of the American Indian, some obliged, and some refused…

Fair leaders and investors did not care about offending the indigenous because the utmost concern was fairgoer entertainment!
“In a moment’s time, the profound ignorance of these fairgoers compelled Apache to resist providing them with a contrived Indian performance. Ignorant of the fact that short hair for many of these performers symbolized grief, tourists equated short hair with assimilation. They wanted traditionally clad Indians, and, initially, Apache wanted to appease them. Indian performers and their managers, like Apache, lingered between fact and fiction and real and imagined representation at the fair. However, by disposing of the wigs and having the troupe perform with short hair, Apache could demonstrate with his simple act of resistance that even in the most grievous circumstances, Native Americans responded to and resisted scrutiny from fairgoers and other personnel in their own ways at the World’s Columbian Exposition. This resistance ultimately spoke to their resiliency as an unconquered people directly countering the progressive theme of the exposition” (Rinehart 403-404).
Context in Class

• The World’s Columbian Exposition created a stage on which Americans could show off culture and affluence, cultivate American nationalism and consumerist ideals (ex.: American Exceptionalism)

• Important to “A Half Caste” because it mimics themes of cultural appropriation in the same way as the Columbian Exposition did, “pandering to the Orientalist desires of white readers” (Yao 855).
Works Cited


Wikipedia for initial starting point.