

LETTERE DALL'ESTERO

Libertà, lavoro e architettura negli edifici-simbolo della giovane nazione americana. Attualità di un dibattito

Intervista a Mabel Wilson (GSAPP, Columbia University)

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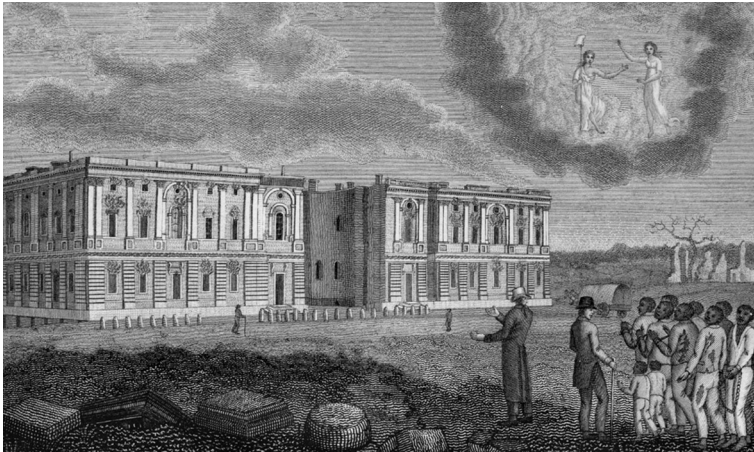
Il 13 luglio 2000 il Congresso americano sanciva l'urgenza del riconoscimento del lavoro degli afro-americani nella realizzazione del Campidoglio di Washington, D.C., promuovendo a tal fine la costituzione di una commissione dedicata allo studio del tema (Risoluzione 130, 106° Congresso, 2° sessione).

Una decisione che, oltre un secolo e mezzo dopo il completamento dell'edificio-simbolo della nazione, voleva riconoscere in via ufficiale il ruolo fondamentale svolto dalla forza-lavoro afro americana, restituendo in questo modo alla Storia una più esatta visione del processo che ha portato al suo completamento.

Benché il valore di questo atto governativo sia propriamente di natura simbolica, e seppure il dibattito sul tema inizialmente si sia svolto soprattutto sulle pagine di riviste nazionali non specialistiche e di quotidiani – ma di grande importanza, quali il *New York Times* e il *Washington Post* – il suo valore anche nel campo degli studi storici è notevole. Perché ai nomi dei presidenti e dei segretari di stato, degli architetti, degli artisti coinvolti nella progettazione dell'imponente struttura e del suo programma decorativo, hanno iniziato ad essere affiancati i nomi di chi contribuì significativamente ai processi di costruzione e ricostruzione del monumento, dalla posa della prima pietra in poi, per oltre mezzo secolo. Tale presa di coscienza collettiva ha intercettato cogenti dibattiti dell'attualità e ha incoraggiato l'avvio di studi di natura storica sul ruolo e le condizioni delle squadre di lavoratori forzati nei cantieri edili, basati su nuove campagne di ricerca archivistica, trasportando così il dibattito su basi scientifiche.

Uno degli aspetti che emerge con maggiore forza è la grande contraddizione dell'impiego del lavoro degli schiavi nella costruzione degli edifici simbolo della giovane nazione: il Campidoglio di Richmond, La Casa Bianca, il Campidoglio di Washington, D.C., quest'ultimo definito da sempre "il tempio della libertà e della democrazia". Una contraddizione che ritroviamo nel pensiero di chi, come Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826), uno dei padri fondatori della giovane nazione americana, aveva dichiarato il principio di uguaglianza di tutti gli uomini "creati uguali", pur possedendo una forza lavoro di oltre 600 schiavi.

Un recente saggio della studiosa Mabel Wilson (Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, Columbia University, New York, direttrice dell'Institute for Research in African American Studies nello stesso ateneo: <https://www.arch.columbia.edu/faculty/34-mabel-o-wilson>) dedicato alla realizzazione del Campidoglio di Richmond evidenzia alcuni punti chiave cruciali del dibattito storiografico su lavoro e architettura nel contesto americano. Anche in ambito europeo, d'altronde, con riferimento a più ampie cronologie, si delineano scenari analoghi – che solo sporadicamente sono stati oggetto di indagini mirate nell'ambito della nostra disciplina – in cui alcuni gruppi di lavoratori sfuggono allo sguar-



Chained Slaves in Front of the U.S. Capitol Building, Washington D.C., 1814.

(*Slavery Images: A Visual Record of the African Slave Trade and Slave Life in the Early African Diaspora*, <http://www.slaveryimages.org/s/slaveryimages/item/700>, ultimo accesso 5 giugno 2022)

do della storiografia, magari perché non organizzati in associazioni di mestiere. Anche alla luce di questa considerazione abbiamo chiesto a Mabel Wilson di aiutarci a comprendere l'attualità di tale approccio storiografico negli USA.

1. What are the main reasons and questions that propelled your research, and what are its main results thus far? What does the future of this research look like?

I've been interested in understanding racial difference in modernity as ontological and epistemic formation. Like capitalism, nationalism, liberalism, racial difference takes many forms (as ideology, practices, infrastructures, myths). It is rooted in Europe's colonial encounters with populations in Asia, Africa, and the Americas. Though it is in large part a fiction, according to science we are all one species, racial difference as race, anti-black racism, white supremacy, and so on, produces hierarchies that have been and are mobilized politically, economically, socially and culturally for the benefit of one group over another group. Racial difference underwrites and legitimates the power to dominate.

This is, however, the same period in which the "arts of building," that is architecture is codified as a discourse of building. Therefore I've been interested in better understanding the intersection of these two western discourses and practices-racial difference and architecture. My study of early American Civic architecture, like the Virginia Statehouse, the planning of Washington, D.C., the U.S. Capitol building, and the Smithsonian Castle, provides a perfect tableaux

through which to study and understand how “whiteness” is imagined and constructed in architectural projects that symbolically represent liberal democratic values of freedom but require the material deployment of enslaved laborers to erect buildings on land expropriated from indigenous nations.

2. What role did enslaved African-American people have in the creation of the nation’s architecture, and “white American culture”? In what instances did the theoretical “legitimization” of slavery occur?

The enslavement of Africans provided a labor source necessary for the extraction of resources by Europeans in the New World. The transatlantic slave trade provided a continuous four hundred year supply of Africans who labored in perpetuity as opposed to indentured servitude whose bonded contracts expired. Though the majority of enslaved Africans went to South America and the Caribbean, the United States did depend upon enslaved Blacks purchased through the vast network of the slave trade.

Enslaved peoples of African descent had knowledge of rice and indigo production, metal working and carpentry, and therefore their knowledge was essential for how Europeans settled lands taken from various indigenous nations throughout the New World. The State and Federal governments that built early American civic buildings in Maryland, Washington, D.C., and Virginia relied upon a mix of free, indentured, and enslaved labor, which would have included indentured white laborers and free Black craftsmen. Enslaved workers in the Middle Atlantic region were often rented from nearby plantations for specific tasks that might take a day or for longer periods of 12 months. Edward Voss, a white brickmaker who supplied bricks for the Virginia Statehouse in Richmond Virginia, owned, for instance, seven slaves.

The inferiority of Africans, Native Americans, and Asians in relation to superior Europeans, codified visually by skin color and positioned according limited intellectual capacity, was rationalized in natural philosophy and history, implemented by law and informal policies, and made popular through art works and cultural representations.

3. Did the use of enslaved people in construction sites eventually lead to the formation of specialized workers? Is it possible to talk about a “coerced circulation of knowledge” in this instance?

Enslaved workers had varying degrees of expertise.

Some were skilled stonemasons and carpenters. A good example of a skilled stonemason and carpenter was Thrimston Hern who was enslaved Monticello

and University of Virginia and became known as a “tolerably good stone cutter” (reference from timeline on the Memorial to Enslaved Laborers at UVA). Others were day laborers employed to clear stumps or haul away detritus. It was common for enslaved boys, for example, to press bricks into molds before firing. Depending up their owners, some enslaved workers could make money independently, which for some meant they could eventually purchase their freedom and the freedom of their family members. On rare occasion free Blacks had their own businesses like brick making but had to compete with white owned businesses which made them vulnerable due to a lack of rights and other forms of legal protection.

4. Which are the repercussions of these researches on public debate in the USA?

Many scholars, such as Paul Jaskot, have been interested in examining the labor that builds modern architecture. By focusing on who builds architecture, a very different historical narrative emerges about modernism and modernity. These narratives decenter the genius of the white male architect promoted by most architectural histories. More broadly, my interest in race and architecture helps us better understand the myriad of ways inequalities of race, ethnicity, gender, and class are built into the environments, neighborhoods and cities.

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