



# Netherlands American Studies Review

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# Welcome

to the fourth edition of the Netherlands American Studies Review, the bi-annual student journal of the Netherlands American Studies Association (NASA). After the success of our earlier issues, we present another collection of excellent student papers written in the field of North American Studies at Dutch universities.

In this Fall 2021 issue, you will find seven carefully selected pieces that reflect the topical diversity and interdisciplinary nature of our field in the Netherlands. Our contributors cover a variety of issues, ranging from the integration of Major League Baseball to the rise of celebrity activism and from the origins of the hot dog to the stigmatization of the inner city in discussions regarding the 1994 Crime Bill. These papers were written by students in different stages of their higher education, ranging from the early stages of their bachelor's to the final stages of their master's.

We are thankful for all the students who sent us their work, for the editors who worked tirelessly to select and fine-tune these papers, and, of course, for the NASA Board, which has supported us throughout the process. We are proud of the final product and hope it will inspire you as much as it did us.

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## **“A Fair Opportunity”: Fugitive Community Projects in Canada West and the American Abolitionist Movement of the 1850s**

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*This paper is based on a thesis written for  
the MA program in North American Studies*

Between 1852 and 1855, Bostonian abolitionist Benjamin Drew toured the province of Ontario, then known as Canada West, to compile interviews with the formerly enslaved people who lived there. Their testimonies, he hoped, would give his American audience “a clearer insight into the nature of American slavery.”<sup>1</sup> One of the more remarkable places he visited was the Elgin settlement, a Black agricultural community founded in 1849 by the Scottish Presbyterian minister William King, who had freed the slaves he had inherited from his wife, a planter’s daughter from Louisiana.<sup>2</sup> King, Drew wrote, had “full faith in the natural powers, capacity, and capabilities of the African race” and sought to bring out these qualities “by placing the refugees in circumstances where they may learn self-reliance.”<sup>3</sup> The resulting settlement had lived up to King’s expectations. Its fields were prosperous and “peace and harmony” reigned “among the people.”<sup>4</sup> One of the settlers interviewed by Drew at Elgin was Henry Johnson, who told Drew how he came to Canada “for rights, freedom,” and “liberty.”<sup>5</sup> Like many other settlers, Johnson did not only seek freedom from slavery, but also from discrimination in the northern states, having left Ohio when his children “were thrust out of the schools, as were all the colored children.”<sup>6</sup> He was doing well, now that he could work in freedom on lands he owned himself. “The people here are very prosperous,” Johnson stated: “They came into the woods without means, depending on their own hands; they never begged a meal here.”<sup>7</sup> Abolitionist accounts of the success of independent Black settlers, like the one Drew wrote of the Elgin settlement, demonstrated to the world that former slaves were both willing and able to bear the responsibilities of freedom.

The Elgin settlement was one of three abolitionist settlement projects established in the province of Canada West in the two decades before the Civil War. Apart from the Elgin settlement near Chatham, these were the Dawn settlement near Dresden, founded in 1842, and the Refugee Home Society’s settlement near Amherstburg, founded in 1852. The three settlements differed in their organization and specific aims but were all initiated or managed by philanthropic abolitionist organizations who sought to provide religion, education, and land to Black people living in Canada, especially fugitive slaves.<sup>8</sup> These three settlements came to have a strong exemplary value for the American abolitionist cause. By showing that Black people could be successful, independent landowners, they demonstrated the falsehood of the racist argument central to nineteenth-century American justifications of slavery: that Black people were incapable of taking care of themselves and, therefore, incapable of living in freedom.<sup>9</sup>

This paper explores the relation between the settlements and the abolitionist movement by studying articles on these communities published in abolitionist newspapers during the 1850s. It reevaluates how these communities were tied to the American abolitionist movement in William and Jane Pease's monograph on abolitionist Black settlements, *Black Utopia* (1963), and Robin Winks's standard on Black Canadian History, *Blacks in Canada* (1971), the earliest academic works studying the settlements to a significant extent and still central works of reference on the subject. These works tied the intended goals of the West Canadian communities to an American capitalist "middle-class success ethic," arguing that the abolitionists managing the projects had the aim of training Black people for freedom by "inculcating" this ethic in them.<sup>10</sup> This paper argues, instead, that the fugitive communities should be understood from the framework of "fugitive slave abolitionism," a concept defined by historian Manisha Sinha in *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (2016). This concept emphasizes the crucial, active role of former slaves in the abolitionists' "political struggle against slavery and racism."<sup>11</sup> This paper first describes the motivations behind the founding of the communities, then how the actions and testimonies of the Black settlers played a central role in making the communities tools in the abolitionist campaign against social and legal discrimination in the United States.

The initiators of the three settlements saw independent agricultural labor and education as key values in developing independent citizenship and founded their settlements, to a large degree, in reaction to racism and exclusion in Canadian society. The organization most strongly involved in the establishment of the Dawn settlement was the Canada Mission, an American philanthropic organization which set up schools for Black people in Canada West. The Canada Mission was founded by Oberlin-graduate Hiram Wilson and endorsed by the American Anti-Slavery Association.<sup>12</sup> While there were no formal distinctions made on the basis of race in British-Canadian law, school boards were legally free to exclude any student from attending their school if they voted to do so, which often led to the exclusion of Black students.<sup>13</sup> Wilson noted that there was a strong desire for education among Black people in Canada but that, for "reasons of prejudice," they could not get access to it.<sup>14</sup>

In 1841, a Black convention held in London, Canada West, resolved to set up a school of manual labor open to Black students, where they could pursue a secondary education. Wilson was appointed head of a committee to seek and buy lands for the school.<sup>15</sup> In 1842, the British-American Institute was founded on lands near Dresden, Canada West.<sup>16</sup> Agricultural labor formed a key part of its educational program, as Wilson saw this as one of the best professions someone could pursue. In one of his articles on the situation of Black people in Canada, he wrote that they were already "forsaking the monied and other occupations of cities and villages and turning (...) to the more honorable and useful employments of husbandry."<sup>17</sup> While the British-American Institute charged no tuition fee, students were expected to pay for their lodgings, which cost one dollar per week, by working on the institute's lands, for a rate of five cents per hour. Through their work, the students were trained "upon a full and practical system of discipline."<sup>18</sup> The Dawn settlement was

formed when Black people started to settle near the British-American Institute to pursue an education and eventually consisted of some 500 settlers owning 1,500 acres.<sup>19</sup>

William King's Elgin settlement was set up as a cooperative project with the anti-slavery Scottish Presbyterian Church of Canada with the aim of providing fugitives with a "Christian education."<sup>20</sup> The settlement was sponsored by a group of local abolitionist politicians and businessmen who formed a stock company, the Elgin Association.<sup>21</sup> This association bought some 7,800 acres of government lands in the township of Raleigh and resold those exclusively to Black settlers in fifty acre-lots, which they then cleared and cultivated.<sup>22</sup> The settlers paid two and a half dollars per acre, in annual installments, over a period of ten years.<sup>23</sup> At its peak around 1859, the settlement contained 200 families of together 800 individuals, working 9,000 acres.<sup>24</sup> King's motivations for setting up an independent Black settlement combined paternalistic ideas of Black improvement with the desire to create an environment where they were safe from discrimination. While pitching his project to the Scottish Presbyterian Church, he argued that Black settlers should form a self-subsistent community around the mission school for three practical reasons. The first was that, when Black people were living with whites, "prejudice excludes them in a great measure from the common schools and operates against their advancement."<sup>25</sup> The second was that Black people needed to own the lands on which they worked to prevent them from leaving the community and stop attending its churches and schools should they find a better job elsewhere.<sup>26</sup> Thirdly, King argued that "slavery has debased the mind and blunted the moral feelings" of the fugitive.<sup>27</sup> Only after receiving a Christian education would they be able to live in freedom without causing trouble to the white people around them.

The Refugee Home Society was founded when an American abolitionist group from Michigan and a Black abolitionist group from Sandwich, Canada West, joined together after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850.<sup>28</sup> This act gave slaveholders more power to retrieve fugitives from the northern states, and the Refugee Home Society made providing homes to the increased number of African Americans who now left for the safety of Canada its central aim.<sup>29</sup> It adopted a plan similar to, and inspired by, that of the Elgin settlement.<sup>30</sup> The Society bought a large tract of land and resold those to Black settlers in portions of twenty-five acres, which the settlers would pay off in installments.<sup>31</sup> By 1861, some sixty families had settled on lands from the Society.<sup>32</sup> The Refugee Home Society also saw landownership for fugitives as key to emancipation. At its founding convention in Detroit, on May 21, 1851, the Society declared as its primary aim to ensure the "elevation and self-support" of the fugitives.<sup>33</sup> A Black convention held in Sandwich expressed its approval of the Detroit-convention and stated that, in their estimation, four-fifths of the Black people living in Canada possessed knowledge of agriculture and would be glad to "follow it for their livelihood had they means to get land with."<sup>34</sup> The plan of the Refugee Home Society was, indeed, partly a reaction to the fact that Black settlers in Canada West had difficulty in acquiring lands. By offering Black settlers the opportunity to buy lands in small portions and paying these off in annual installments, they could acquire lands which were too expensive to buy at once.

Racism probably hindered Black people from buying and holding their own lands as much as it hindered them from attending public schools. An anonymous ‘American Missionary’ writing to *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* emphasized, in paternalistic vein, that “many (...) have, thro’ their ignorance, been cheated by their white neighbors, and lost (...) the labor of many years.”<sup>35</sup> Similar to Dawn, the Refugee Home Society considered self-subsistent agricultural work and landownership to be inherently valuable, creating character and emancipating an individual. The official mouthpiece of the Refugee Home Society, *The Voice of the Fugitive*, a Canadian newspaper edited by the African American couple Henry and Mary Bibb, argued that fugitives “must produce what they consume, and become owners and tillers of the soil on which they live.”<sup>36</sup> In a letter to the *Voice*, J.T.H. from Vermont expressed his support for Bibb’s plans, arguing that Black people may “lay the foundation of their own future greatness” by settling in “primitive communities” and working to sustain themselves.<sup>37</sup>

While ideas of ‘training’ Black people for freedom informed the ideas of some involved in founding the communities, they were primarily motivated to offer opportunities of education and landownership to Black people, which were denied them in Canadian society at large. These issues connected with the concerns and ambitions of local Canadian Black communities, who were strongly involved in the foundation and management of Dawn’s British-American Institute and the Refugee Home Society’s settlement. Finally, both the abolitionist organizations managing the communities and the communities’ settlers were aware that the settlements had a potent exemplary value to the broader American abolitionist cause. In its editorial “Address to the Colored Inhabitants of North America,” the *Voice of the Fugitive* stated that “every fugitive in Canada is a representative of the millions of our brethren who are still in bondage;” the whole “civilized world” was looking to see “whether we can take care of ourselves or not.”<sup>38</sup> At Elgin, the settlers wrote a letter to the association’s board, cited in its *Second Annual Report*. There, they declared that they intended “to show to our enemies that when placed in favorable circumstances we are able and willing to support ourselves.”<sup>39</sup> The Canada Mission emphasized the initiative and self-reliance of its Black settlers to the American public by pointing to their industrial entrepreneurship and specialized skills. It described how “two enterprising men of color, from North Carolina and Virginia” had started a rope-walk and were manufacturing quality rope “with hemp of their own growing.”<sup>40</sup> This was an example to be followed by African Americans in the United States, hopefully “introducing a new era among the colored hemp-growers.”<sup>41</sup> The settlement was also constructing a “steam sawmill” financed by Boston abolitionists, with a Black millwright from South Carolina as its “designer and master builder.”<sup>42</sup>

The fact that Black settlers successfully supported themselves by working their own lands stood central in depictions of the settlements in American abolitionist newspapers. Elgin, the largest of the settlements, was often explicitly referred to by American abolitionists as a practical test case of the idea that fugitives could successfully live in freedom. Reporting for *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* in 1858, Black journalist and historian William Nell wrote that King, with his Elgin settlement, was in essence “solving what is yet considered by some a problem, whether the colored people are capable of raising a self-sustaining and progressive

race.”<sup>43</sup> In an article reprinted in Washington’s *National Era*, the *Toronto Globe* reported that Elgin was founded by “several benevolent gentlemen” who thought that “the experiment” of the black man “as a tiller of the soil” had “not been fairly and fully tested,” and noted that earlier failed efforts had led some to think that Black people were constitutionally incapable of making an independent living.<sup>44</sup> While the *Globe*-reporter held the paternalistic assumption that Black people would, in any case, require guidance, Lewis Tappan, the white New York abolitionist who sent the excerpt to be reprinted, commented on the piece that its positive description of Elgin showed that the “native equality” of Black people readily became apparent once “crushing disabilities” were removed and they were treated “as equal before the law.”<sup>45</sup>

American abolitionists visiting the Elgin settlement during the 1850s unanimously praised its progress.<sup>46</sup> The settlers, they wrote, had made a living without receiving any outside aid, and, most impressively, had done so from a position of severe poverty. William Nell described how “most of the fugitives arrived here stripped of every thing but life, and (...) nothing was given them but a fair opportunity to develop their own resources.”<sup>47</sup> Nell and the Irish Presbyterian delegation he accompanied were hosted by a settler who had prepared a “bountiful dinner” for fourteen people, every item home-produced, all by “a man who, when an American slave, was deemed unable ‘to take care of himself.’”<sup>48</sup> Visiting Elgin in 1852, Samuel J. May, a white Unitarian pastor who served as secretary of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, wrote that the “thick, primitive forest” at Buxton had been cleared almost completely in only three years. The settlers had built substantial houses, and most could “raise provisions sufficient for their own families.”<sup>49</sup> Isaac Riley, the first settler at Elgin, told May that his family much preferred the hardships of the settlers’ existence to their former life in slavery, even though they had been treated well and had been economically secure. May concluded that the Riley family “evinced a clear sense of (...) the true purpose of life” and that the settlers “*for the sake of liberty*, had subjected themselves to the loneliness, the privations, and the severe labors of first settlers in an unbroken forest.”<sup>50</sup> He compared them to the “Pilgrim Fathers of New England,” as the settlers “had fled (...) and sought homes in the wilderness, that they might be free (...) count it all joy to suffer hardships, perils (...) if by so suffering they may secure to themselves and their posterity the boon of freedom.”<sup>51</sup> Descriptions of the settlers in the communities, in effect, made a claim to Black citizenship by showing that they possessed the qualities of the ideal American citizen and, as such, valued freedom as much as white people did. A similar observation has been made by historian Ikuko Asaka in *Tropical Freedom* (2017), a study of racially based climatic determinism in nineteenth-century debates on slavery and abolition, which devotes a chapter to Black settlers in Canada.<sup>52</sup> There, she argues that Black settlers made a claim to citizenship in the same way that former slaves made such claims in fugitive slave narratives, by demonstrating “independence,” a “love of liberty,” and “an ability to surmount obstacles while on a journey.”<sup>53</sup>

The smaller Dawn settlement and Refugee Home Society received less attention than Elgin in abolitionist literature. When these settlements were covered, however, they were similarly praised for their success. Nell only briefly described Dawn, but did so in poetic,



Arcadian terms, describing how the river Sydenham streamed “like a silver thread among the mills and farms, worked and tilled by colored proprietors.”<sup>54</sup> A journalist for *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* described how, while the institute has fallen short of its aims, “the industrious population in the neighborhood, attest the beneficial influence of the Institution.”<sup>55</sup> A visitor to the Refugee Home Society’s settlement, Josephine S. Griffing, wrote to the *Anti-Slavery Bugle* that she found the “condition of the fugitives (...) decidedly more comfortable and prosperous” than she had expected, demonstrating “that with very little assistance (...) they will elevate themselves to positions of equal intelligence, enterprise, and manhood, with their more favored brethren of the white race.”<sup>56</sup> It should be noted, however, that abolitionist accounts of the settlements often somewhat exaggerated the settlements’ actual success and independence from external aid. As essentially philanthropic projects, the settlements relied for a large part on outside financial aid for their existence. At times, all three communities experienced financial difficulties due to mismanagement, crop failures, or broader economic recessions.<sup>57</sup> Efforts to solicit funds were sometimes strongly at odds with the image of the independent Black settler the communities sought to convey; in one fundraising advertisement, the Refugee Home Society described newly arrived fugitives in Canada as “emphatically paupers and heathen from a Christian land.”<sup>58</sup> Such efforts even brought about a polemic in the pages of America’s most prominent abolitionist newspaper, the *Liberator*. There, a Black convention from Canada West condemned the Refugee Home Society’s “begging” efforts, arguing that they made Black people in Canada look like “a class of improvident, thriftless and imbecile paupers.”<sup>59</sup>

Where early works on the communities by Winks and the Peases saw them as philanthropic projects to inculcate fugitives with the values of a white American “middle-class success ethic,” more recent evaluations of the communities emphasize the importance of the agency of Black settlers in the abolitionist movement.<sup>60</sup> In *Crossing the Border* (2007), a monograph on the Elgin settlement, historian Sharon Roger Hepburn concludes that its community building by Black settlers constituted a resistance strategy similar to migration, forming “a dual means of minimizing racial oppression and increasing control over their destinies.”<sup>61</sup> In *Tropical Freedom*, Asaka compared the Black settler example as a form of activism to the fugitive slave narrative, demonstrating that African Americans possessed the ideal qualities of an American citizen through their personal testimonies.<sup>62</sup>

This paper contributes to these more recent evaluations of the communities, arguing that they fit the concept of fugitive slave abolitionism as defined by Sinha in *The Slave’s Cause*. The concept of ‘fugitive slave abolitionism’ posits that fugitives were central in shaping and driving the American abolitionist movement and their critiques of mainstream American society and democracy.<sup>63</sup> While some commentators and initiators of the projects, such as William King, did expect Black people to conform to white middle class norms, the communities were predominantly founded in reaction to discrimination in Canadian society. Abolitionist accounts like that of Lewis Tappan, Samuel May, William Nell and Benjamin Drew, did not conceive of them as efforts to ‘train’ Black settlers to be full-fledged citizens, but instead emphasized that Black people quickly proved themselves responsible citizens

after legal and societal obstructions were taken away. The key importance of the communities to the American abolitionism movement, ultimately, derived from the actions and testimonies of the Black settlers, which made these communities examples with which to counter the ideological underpinnings of slavery and, more broadly, social and legal discrimination in the United States.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Drew, *A Northside View of Slavery* (Boston, 1856), 14-15.

<sup>2</sup> William H. Pease and Jane Pease, *Black Utopia: Negro Communal Experiments in America* (Madison, WI: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1963), 90; Robin W. Winks, *The Blacks in Canada: A History*, 2nd ed. (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997), 209.

<sup>3</sup> Drew, 297.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 295.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 307.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 306.

<sup>8</sup> Pease and Pease, 112; Hiram Wilson, "Letter from Hiram Wilson," *National Anti-Slavery Standard* 2.5, July 8, 1841, 18, Slavery and Anti-Slavery: A Transnational Database; Winks, 179-180.

<sup>9</sup> Allen P. Stouffer, *Light of Nature and the Law of God: Antislavery in Ontario, 1833-1877* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992), 106. See for an overview of proslavery rhetoric Paul Finkelman, *Defending Slavery: Proslavery Thought in the Old South. A Brief History with Documents* (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martins, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> Pease and Pease, 161-162; Winks, 178.

<sup>11</sup> Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 299, 422.

<sup>12</sup> Hiram Wilson, "Letter from Hiram Wilson," *Liberator* 20.9, March 1, 1850, Slavery and Anti-Slavery.

<sup>13</sup> Pease and Pease, 12.

<sup>14</sup> Wilson, "Sixth Annual Report of the Canada Missions," *Liberator* 13.11, March 17, 1843, 41, Slavery and Anti-Slavery.

<sup>15</sup> Wilson, "Letter," *National Anti-Slavery Standard*.

<sup>16</sup> Wilson, "Sixth Annual Report."

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Pease and Pease, 12; Stouffer, 90; Winks, 179-180.

<sup>20</sup> King, "Report of the Mission to the Coloured Population," June 1849, William King Fonds: Miscellaneous Personal Manuscripts and Legal Papers, 666, Slavery, Abolition and Social Justice.

<sup>21</sup> Stouffer, 90; Winks, 210.

<sup>22</sup> William King, "Prospectus of a Scheme for the Social and Religious Improvement of the Coloured People of Canada," *Ecclesiastical and Missionary Record* 5.3, 39-40, January 1849, Canadiana Online; *Second Annual Report of the Directors of the Elgin Association: Presented at the Annual Meeting, held on the 3rd day of September, 1851* (Toronto, 1851), 11, Canadiana Online.

<sup>23</sup> Sharon A. Roger Hepburn, *Crossing the Border: A Free Black Community in Upper Canada* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 62-63.

<sup>24</sup> Peggy Bristow, "'Whatever You Raise in the Ground You can Sell it in Chatham': Black Women in Buxton and Chatham, 1850-65," in *We're Rooted Here and They Can't Pull Us Up: Essays in African Canadian Women's History*, ed. Peggy Bristow (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 90; Pease and Pease, 111-113; Winks, 204-210.

<sup>25</sup> King, "Scheme for Improving the Coloured People of Canada," 1848, William King Fonds: Miscellaneous Personal Manuscripts and Legal Papers, 653, Slavery, Abolition and Social Justice.

<sup>26</sup> King, "Report," 663.

<sup>27</sup> King, "Scheme," 652-653.

<sup>28</sup> Pease and Pease, 109-111.

<sup>29</sup> Ikuko Asaka, *Tropical Freedom: Climate, Settler Colonialism, and Black Exclusion in the Age of Emancipation* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2017), 119; "A Call to the Friends of Humanity in Michigan," *Voice of the Fugitive* 1.12, June 1, 1851, 2, INK - Our Digital World Newspaper Collection.

<sup>30</sup> Samuel J. May, "Condition and Prospects of the Fugitives in Canada," *Liberator*, October 10, 1851, Slavery and Anti-Slavery; "Refugees' Home Society. Constitution and By Laws of the Refugee Home Society," *Voice of the Fugitive* 2.4, February 12, 1852, 1, INK.

<sup>31</sup> *Voice of the Fugitive*, "A Call to the Friends of Humanity"; *Voice of the Fugitive*, "Refugees' Home Society," 1. Winks, 180, 207-208.

<sup>32</sup> *Voice of the Fugitive*, "A Call to the Friends of Humanity"; *Voice of the Fugitive*, "Refugees' Home Society," 1.

<sup>33</sup> "Homes for the Refugees in Canada," *Voice of the Fugitive* 1.12, June 1, 1851, INK.

<sup>34</sup> American Missionary, "Canada Mission," *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, November 27, 1851, Slavery and Anti-Slavery.

<sup>34a</sup> "Thirty Thousand Fugitives," *Voice of the Fugitive* 1.17, August 13, 1851, INK.

<sup>35</sup> J.T.H., "For the Voice of the Fugitive. Voice from the 'Green Mountains,'" *Voice of the Fugitive* 1.12, June 1, 1851, INK.

<sup>36a</sup> "An Address to the Colored Inhabitants of North America," *Voice of the Fugitive* 1.22, October 22, 1851, 1, INK.

<sup>36b</sup> *Second Annual Report of Elgin*, 11.

<sup>37</sup> "British-American Institute," *National Era* 1.46, November 18, 1847, Slavery and Anti-Slavery.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> William C. Nell, "Impressions and Gleanings of Canada West," *Liberator*, December 24, 1858, Slavery and Anti-Slavery.

<sup>41</sup> "A Visit to the Elgin Settlement," *Toronto Globe*, rpt. in *The National Era* 9, October 18, 1855, 168, Slavery and Anti-Slavery.

<sup>42</sup> Lewis Tappan, "The Elgin Settlement, Canada West," *The National Era* 9, October 18, 1855, 168, Slavery and Anti-Slavery.

<sup>43</sup> Apart from the accounts of Samuel J. May, William Cooper Nell and Benjamin Drew, which have been cited above, the Elgin Settlement was visited and described by Frederick Douglass and an unnamed reporter of the *New York Tribune*. See; "The Colony at Buxton," *New York Tribune*, November 11, 1857, 6, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*; Frederick Douglass, "First of August Celebration at Dawn Settlement, Canada West - Public Meeting at Chatham - Visit to the Elgin Settlement at Buxton," *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, August 11, 1854, Slavery and Anti-Slavery.

<sup>44</sup> Nell.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> "Samuel J. May Biography," Cornell University Library, accessed November 23, 2021, <https://rmc.library.cornell.edu/mayantislaverycoll/biography.php>; May, "Letter From Rev. S. J. May - No. IV," *Frederick Douglass' Paper* 5.39, September 17, 1852, Slavery and Anti-Slavery.

<sup>47</sup> Author's emphasis. May, "Letter from Samuel J. May - No. III," *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, rpt. in *Frederick Douglass' Paper* 5.38, September 10, 1852, Slavery and Anti-Slavery.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> Asaka, 2.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>51</sup> Nell.

<sup>52</sup> "Canada and the Colored People," *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, August 18, 1854, Slavery and Anti-Slavery.

<sup>53</sup> Josephine S. Griffing, "A Letter from Mrs. Griffing," *The Anti-Slavery Bugle*, October 28, 1854, Slavery and Anti-Slavery.

<sup>54</sup> Winks, 218.

<sup>55</sup> *Voice of the Fugitive*, "Thirty-Thousand Fugitives."

<sup>56</sup> Peter Poyntz, Elisha Robinson and Mary A. Shadd, "No More Begging for Farms or Clothes for Fugitives of Canada," *Liberator*, October 15, 1852, 167, Slavery and Anti-Slavery.

<sup>57</sup> Winks, 170.

<sup>58</sup> Roger Hepburn, 2-3.

<sup>59</sup> Asaka, 122.

<sup>60</sup> Sinha, 1-2.

## Drugs, Jargon, and Joe:

### Biden's Crime Bill and the Stigmatization of the Inner City

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*This paper is based on a thesis written for the MA program in American Studies*

“It doesn’t matter whether or not they’re the victims of society, the end result is they’re about to knock my mother on the head with a lead pipe, shoot my sister, beat up my wife, take it out on my sons. So I don’t wanna ask what made them do this[.] They must be taken off the streets.”<sup>1</sup> These sentiments expressed by Democratic Senator Joseph R. Biden, Jr. during a congressional debate on the 1994 Crime Bill exemplified the anxieties and assumptions of many white Americans regarding violent crime in the inner city from the 1960s until the 1990.<sup>2</sup> For many white Americans, the cause of the decline of the inner city was simple: as more middle-class white people started moving to the growing suburbs in the 1960s, extreme violence in the inner cities rose significantly. White Americans mistook the rising crime in the inner city as an essential feature of Black Americans rather than a product of de-investment, de-industrialization, and political apathy to the plight of the inner city. The problem of violent crime led to calls for more severe federal sentencing and mandatory minimum provisions for drug offenses.<sup>3</sup> However, with the rise of crime in the 1970s and 1980s, in addition to a series of Republican presidents with ‘tough-on-crime’ and ‘law-and-order’ rhetoric, white Americans even embraced more severe sentencing to deal with non-violent drug offenses and violent crimes.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, Senator Biden appeared to be indifferent as to whether the so-called criminals of the inner-city were ‘victims of society’. He colored the potential victim in the public’s mind as white (by referring to them as his family members, “my mother,” “my sister,” “my wife,” and “my sons”) and drew on common assumptions that most violent criminals and drug abusers were Black and lived in poor urban neighborhoods. Although the policies Biden promoted attempted to address some of the problems that inner city communities faced, he frequently returned to a tough-on-crime approach. Simultaneously, government programs and legislation designed to fight the so-called ‘War on Crime’ were “felt more regularly, and more acutely, by Black people in American cities.”<sup>5</sup> By increasing police practices in inner cities and public institutions in urban areas in an attempt to prevent crime, the bill disproportionately harmed Black people through severe punishment and penalties.

The rhetorical and substantial reverberations from Biden’s crusade against crime can still be felt today. The idea that major cities are plagued by crime and depravity still exists among many Americans. Commentators on the right have used the rising rates of homicides during the Covid-19 pandemic to revive the law-and-order fire that pushed the Republicans to victory in the 1970s and 1980s. However, overall crime rates continue to decrease and cities are safer than they were three decades ago.<sup>6</sup> Even in the present era of the Black Lives

Matter movement, victims of police brutality are still pilloried by conservative media, and peaceful protests meant to raise awareness for the victims of excessive police force are impugned as criminal actions. Following the assumptions, theories, and practices which guided Biden's Crime Bill, police still disproportionately arrest and brutalize African Americans. The demand from African Americans for community-led police reform is equally ignored in 2021 as in 1994. Considering the importance of law and order to Donald Trump's administration and Republican voters, Biden's role in the perpetuation of the War on Crime must be more closely examined.

This essay explores the positioning of Biden in the Senate debates on the 1994 Crime Bill and the racial stigmatization underlying the bill. It addresses how Biden and his arguments oversimplified the inner-city. As an immensely important senator and Democratic moderate in the War on Crime era, Biden heavily and negatively influenced public perception of inner cities, leading to the passage of tough-on-crime legislation which disproportionately harmed African Americans. This essay will discuss how such oversimplified arguments further stigmatized African Americans and inner cities. Despite the fact that liberals, among whom Senator Biden, wanted to improve the lives of many of them by going back to the roots of the problem and called for more efficient legislation, conservatives pushed for more tough-on-crime and law-and-order policies, gaining popularity in the 1970s and 1980s and eventually leading to liberal public figures who adapted a similar rhetoric that ignored the real problem of these 'victims of society.'

First, I will discuss how Biden positioned himself in the Senate in order to pass a bill that appealed to both political parties. Second, I will analyze how Biden normalized whiteness throughout the debate. Third, I will focus on how the Congressional debate stigmatized racial minorities and inner cities areas by drawing tight but mistaken associations between race, place, and crime.

Biden positioned himself in the Senate strategically to ensure the passage of his Crime Bill. As a member of the Democratic party in the 1990s, he was locked between controversy and conflict from both political parties. Conservatives and progressive Democrats approached the problem of violent crime in different ways and demanded political action along their partisan interests. On the one hand, Republicans demanded more severe sentences and tougher punishments. On the other hand, progressive Democrats pleaded for more social programs to eliminate the social roots of crime, as well as rehabilitate former criminals after they finished their sentence. In order to appeal more to Republicans in Congress, Biden, like President Clinton, positioned himself in the middle, as a moderate politician, taking a tougher stance on violent crime.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, Biden portrayed himself as the 'average Joe', using his white middle-class background strategically to appeal to the white middle- and lower-class voters the Democrats lost during the 1970s and 1980s. Finally, to make the Crime Bill more attractive to different constituencies inside and outside Congress, he used his masculinity to make gendered arguments and appeals to the protection of the family.

In the mid-twentieth century, the Democratic party had become a party of progressive reformers, New Deal liberalism, and civil rights. When Biden entered elected office as a

Democrat from the state of Delaware in 1972, the party was still ideologically diverse.<sup>8</sup> While Biden was not an ardent segregationist in the Southern Democratic tradition nor particularly conservative in his convictions, he used his position as a moderate politician to create less division within his party. Biden thus positioned himself as a new type of white politician, prioritizing a balanced budget and crime prevention and reduction, because he knew most victims of crime came from the African American community.<sup>9</sup> A tougher stance on crime was very popular among Black communities, who asked for efficient solutions to economic inequality and failing schools, rather than more police and prisons. But his agenda also appealed to another group of Delaware's electorate, the white voters, who also asked for tough-on-crime legislation.<sup>10</sup> Harmon Carey, head of the Afro-American Historical Society in Wilmington, concluded that Biden had used his "personal relationships to maintain his good standing in Delaware's Black community, while carefully legislating in the more conservative interests of white voters and law enforcement."<sup>11</sup>

Biden used three principal strategies to position himself as a centrist Democrat. First, he repeatedly showed that he was not simply representing ethnic minority groups and women (a charge often leveled against Democratic politicians after 1968), but that he spoke for all Americans: "I speak for JOE BIDEN, and I speak with as much honesty as all of us do, and sometimes occasionally clarity, as to what I think the American people want," he stated during the 1994 Senate debate.<sup>12</sup> With these words, Biden assumed the role of spokesperson of "the American people," while not specifying or acknowledging that different Americans had various interests. By using universal language, he failed to acknowledge the long history of police brutality, which would not be well received by the African American communities around the country.

Second, Biden made use of spatial language, which subtly divided Americans. Biden often referred to "our communities," or even more specifically to his home state, which did of course appeal to his (mainly) white constituents in Delaware, but it also appealed to many other people who lived in similar areas.<sup>13</sup> He claimed that with the passage of the Crime Bill he would "feel safer, because I live in a metropolitan area," and that his legislation would enable states to put more police on the street to fight crime.<sup>14</sup> Here Biden signaled that he was part of the suburban community and that he, like other suburban Americans, would be positively impacted by the bill: "I will live in a tri-State area. I live in the Delaware Valley. Anybody who does not want cops, then do not ask for them; send them my way. Send them to Philadelphia, Wilmington, Trenton, the area I live in."<sup>15</sup> His argumentation can be considered as controversial, because he failed to appeal to his minority constituents. Rather, he enforced the problem of segregation when using his personal white, middle-class life as an example of wanting to have more police on the street. In effect, more police on the street would not have made African Americans feel safer, because of their previous negative experiences with police brutality.

Third, he also positioned himself as the masculine protector to show how much he cared about safeguarding American families and why he wanted to push for tougher policies. In so doing, Biden created the understanding that drug addicts, not the average user, who committed on average 154 crimes a year, would benefit from in-prison programs to deal with

their addiction and drug testing, to avoid letting them go back on the streets still addicted to drugs. Without in-prison drug treatment programs “what do they [the addicts] do?” he asked, rhetorically. “They find my wife or a schoolteacher coming out of the mini mart, after teaching all day, going to get the groceries. They find her in a parking lot.”<sup>16</sup> Biden spoke to conservative men’s desire to protect their families with this bill, by keeping potential drug-addicted felons off the street and in treatment programs or prison. By applying this visual image to his personal life, emphasizing Jill Biden’s middle-class job, he also evoked a very normal everyday routine of a working woman, who also prepared dinner for her family and did the grocery shopping. Biden’s characterization of women as either schoolteachers or stay-at-home mothers embraced traditionally conservative ideas of the role of women in society. Moreover, Biden’s scenario assumed the defenselessness of women and the importance of men as protectors of the family. Whether consciously or unconsciously, Biden relied on conservative arguments to appeal to conservative white middle-class Americans and his Republican colleagues in the Senate.

Using his protective instinct as a father and a husband, Biden not only appealed to middle-class and Republican voters, but he also strengthened his own image as tough on crime, making himself politically appealing as a leader. His protective rhetoric proved appealing to many fathers and husbands, who took Biden’s word that the Crime Bill and its provisions would keep their families safer: “And my daughter will be safer, my wife will be safer, my mother will be safer, and I will be safer. And I will be happy.”<sup>17</sup> Once again, he did not acknowledge the different impacts more police would have on different groups of people. While Biden’s family, like other white, suburban families, might be positively impacted by more police on the street, this did was not necessarily true for other communities. Police brutality, a long-standing grievance in Black communities, remained prevalent and more police on the streets would further endanger Black neighborhoods.

As Biden positioned himself strategically to appeal to the middle-class voter and to show his own toughness on crime, he used rhetoric that contributed to the normalization of whiteness and white culture. Despite similar crime rates between Black and white people in terms of the sale and use of drugs, the Crime Bill and its attendant debates normalized white suburban life and stigmatized inner-city minority groups. Biden’s vivid descriptions of rampant crime and the endangerment of the white family mobilized the so-called ‘silent majority’, which targeted inner-city minorities in practice but without directly referring to race.<sup>18</sup> As Democratic Senator Moseley-Brown from Illinois said in one of the debates on the Crime Bill: “The public, the people, are frightened. Sixty percent of all Americans limit the places they travel to out of fear of crime. We are in danger of becoming a society of victims.”<sup>19</sup> While Moseley-Brown did not specifically state what places people tended to avoid out of a fear of crime, he implicitly referred to people moving to the safe suburbs while pointing the finger at the inner city. Consequently, Moseley-Brown’s implicit victims were the “frightened,” white suburban Americans, who avoided the inner city and feared the extension of crime into their own neighborhoods. The 1994 Crime Bill normalized the idea of the suburban, middle-class white American as the representative American in three key talking points repeatedly

discussed by Senator Biden: white suburban life, the boys and girls clubs, and the presence of both parents providing for and taking care of their children.

Biden presented white suburbs as the polar opposite of inner-city neighborhoods, arguing that suburbs were not criminal communities. Rather, suburbs were safe, community-minded neighborhoods where people looked out for each other and took care of one another.<sup>20</sup> The racially homogenous suburb was a place where residents could patronize movie theaters, bowling alleys, and miniature golf-courses and where children could meaningfully enjoy themselves.<sup>21</sup> The assumption that people from the suburbs always had something to do, that these types of family activities were what occupied inhabitants in their free time not only contributed to the normalization of mainstream white culture but also contributed to the idea of white innocence. Nothing bad could ever happen there, it was a safe haven, where parents spent time with their children and were involved in their lives, where children could go to movies together without any risk, where children would always have something to do and were never simply hanging around. Because “if you ain’t got nothing to do, you are going to get in trouble,” Biden said.<sup>22</sup> The idea that loitering and boredom would lead children to become criminals betrays the absurd slippery slope of white middle-class thinking. Even when they recognized that social conditions could drive children to crime, their solutions were nothing but a band-aid for the serious open wound which was structural inner-city poverty.

Biden sought to prevent crime by removing the conditions white suburbanites thought caused crime. The Crime Bill included boys and girls clubs, which provided inner city children, a place to go after school under the supervision of responsible adults. Biden envisaged such boys and girls clubs as a solution to prevent children from engaging in drug-related crime and other criminal activities, to avoid them from threatening the idyllic suburban society.<sup>23</sup> Through inner-city boys and girls clubs, Biden sought to recreate richly resourced suburban organizations like the scouts, club sports, and little league baseball teams, which he believed contributed to the absence of crime in suburban spaces. Moreover, these institutions were inherently linked to white middle-class family life, where fathers were present and volunteered in such activities, and most children engaged in some sort of club sports:

I wonder how many of the men in here work as Scoutmasters, as Cub Scoutmasters, as Explorers, give their time to Little League, Pop Warner League, Babe Ruth League, provide their time and energy to raise money for Boys Clubs, Girls Clubs, YMCA’s. Ask them why they do it? For the same reason the Federal Government is trying to help localities that do not have the money and do not have the fathers out there to do it. They do it because they know it helps the young boys.<sup>24</sup>

The picture he was painting here was that of a rich civil society in the suburbs, endowed by engaged parents. Biden argued that if similar facilities were provided for Black urban populations, these clubs would keep urban and underprivileged kids off the streets, because “kids who do not belong to anything [and] have no families (...) join gangs for identity.”<sup>25</sup>



Biden asserted that preventive programs were necessary in addition to severe sentencing and more ‘law and order’. As he explained in Congress:

These are the kids that are going to get caught up; because we know they have no parents, or they have parents that are in trouble, or they are kids who are doing very poorly in school and they cannot read, and they have no self-esteem, or they live in neighborhoods or communities and hang with people in the drug stream or the crime stream. It does not take a brilliant person to figure that out.<sup>26</sup>

By suggesting that it was easy to predict who would be likely to grow up to be a criminal, he stigmatized inner-city neighborhoods and the families who lived there by arguing that these were violent environments that offered little to children. By normalizing white people and rejecting the existence of white crime, Biden implied that inner cities, racial minorities, and single-parent households were inherently linked to crime, gangs, and drug use. Similar to the normalization of the white race, there are three topics in the Crime Bill where we can distinguish racial rhetoric: in the rehabilitative and social programs for at-risk groups, in the discussion of the urban family, and in the discussion of alcoholism, drug use, and crime.

First, while some of the social programs were aimed at former convicts and their rehabilitation, many of the programs were designed to prevent children from going into crime in the first place. These preventive programs were directed to at-risk groups of people, among which were single mothers, children growing up with single mothers or alcoholic parents, children without supervision or places to go, children hanging around in the streets, and children growing up in dangerous neighborhoods. For instance, Biden described how the Bill would provide:

\$3.8 billion in new spending for a whole host of programs that will provide the children of this country who must grow up in neighborhoods that are virtual combat zones, where there is nowhere to go and nothing to do but hang out on the corner—that will provide these kids with a safe haven. Programs that will provide them with a range of activities they can participate in that are supervised by responsible adults, not by the thugs out on the corner.<sup>27</sup>

While the measures aimed to help children who grew up in challenging environments, they also stigmatized Black urban areas as morally toxic and physically dangerous.

More specifically, the idea that these groups of children were more at risk than white children was also pointed out in specific stipulations of the bill, such as the preventive program of ‘midnight basketball’, intended to prevent children from hanging outside at night, and was aimed at Black communities and other minorities, who were far more likely to play basketball on the streets at night. Biden even directly stated that this idea was only focused on minority groups, which was a point of disagreement between Republicans and Democrats in Congress. Here, he accused Republicans of being unwilling to compromise on the bill’s social programs:

At least they stopped talking about midnight basketball. That was a saying. They liked that for a while, until they started looking at it and found out that this midnight basketball is going to get the jive folks — [B]lack, white, and Hispanic — who live in the inner city, who to try to see if they can be Michael Jordan; when they found out they were keeping schools open, so gangs could come off the street and instead of being out raping my mother, marauding me, robbing the local store, they are in a gymnasium.<sup>28</sup>

While he accused Republicans of being opposed to this particular social program, Biden himself contributed to the idea that these minorities were more likely to commit crimes saying that they would otherwise be out raping or robbing stores. Meanwhile, he positioned himself as a male protector, because the Crime Bill would protect his mother from being raped when he could not protect her himself. This was based on a very old racist idea of Black brutes, who were portrayed as terrifying predators who targeted helpless victims, especially white women.<sup>29</sup> Interestingly, none of the other senators questioned the assumption that these minorities would, without midnight basketball, be committing crimes.

Second, some of the preventive programs were designed to help out single-parent families, because these families were more likely to form at-risk environments for children. Biden stated that:

Almost 30 percent of all the children born in America last year ha[d] no father and they [we]re not likely to ever have a father. They [we]re born out of wedlock, without any possibility of a father ever darkening their doorway. And they [we]re born into poverty, because of a single mother. They need[ed] a little help.<sup>30</sup>

He made a reference to these households while arguing that these families needed a little help to supervise their children more and be more present in their lives, to prevent the children from becoming criminals because they lacked supervision or because they grew up in a poor environment and therefore were more at risk. Without directly mentioning racial minorities, it was assumed that this related to racial minorities, where single-parent households were more common than in white families. So, while Biden normalized the two-parent family, he assumed at the same time that having a father around created less risk for children to engage in criminal activities. This can be linked back to the masculine protector that he used to position himself strategically, appealing to white middle-class families and Republican congressmen.

Nonetheless, the Senator did acknowledge that, sometimes, having an abusive father around was an even greater risk factor. The Violence Against Women Act was therefore included in the Crime Bill, because, in Biden's words, children were "beat up at home; because their mothers get beaten in front of their children, and the mother has no place to go. So her last resort is the street."<sup>31</sup> Therefore, he argued, women needed to be protected in

the Crime Bill, positioning himself once more as the masculine protector of vulnerable women and children.<sup>32</sup> Regardless, it is likely to assume that women of the latter group of abusive men would have other places to go and are not likely to end up on the street. Third, many of the programs envisaged in the bill aimed at drug prevention in prison, to avoid that incarcerated people would fall back into their criminal behavior after their sentence. While Republicans were often opposed to these programs, Biden insisted on the importance of these programs by constructing the alternative scenario: “So, we let out of jail 200,000 people who are addicted to drugs. What are they going to do when they get out? They served their time. By the time that bus gets them into the center of the city, they are getting their next hit.”<sup>33</sup> As he positioned himself as a Third-Way politician, he specifically took a more liberal standpoint here when he argued that more severe sentencing was not simply the solution to criminal behavior. Rather, preventive programs should be added to avoid repeated criminal behavior from happening. He made no acknowledgment that many white people, who had addiction problems, were not criminalized in the same way. Thus, Biden contributed to an association between Blackness, drug use, and criminality.

Further, while Biden stated the statistics of the crimes an average addict committed per year, he also justified them in the following way:

Their dads and moms do not own banks. They need money to buy these drugs. So they steal, they rob, and they do it usually while they are high on this stuff. When they are high on this stuff and they steal and they rob, sometimes they gratuitously shoot and kill people.<sup>34</sup>

When he referred to the money these addicts did not have, he indirectly pointed to people growing up in poverty, compared to white people with parents with blue-collar jobs. While he did not directly refer to racial minorities, he contributed to the presumption that racial minorities grew up in poor households. At the same time, while drug use proved to be a cause for criminal behavior, he also contributed to the idea that racial minorities more often used drugs, because of the availability of drugs where they grew up.

Despite the fact that Biden positioned himself strategically in the Senate to appeal to both sides of the aisle to push for the passage of the Crime Bill, he also used his position to appeal to different groups of his constituents to ensure reelection. While he was popular among African Americans, much of his tough-on-crime rhetoric in the congressional debates was racially charged and reinforced the stereotypes of Black, inner-city crime while normalizing white, suburban life. While he advocated for more police officers on the street and more severe sentencing to create safer streets and less risk for his family and families like his, he normalized the white suburban life, arguing that white people were more likely to be victims of inner-city crime than to be perpetrators of it. As he pushed for more preventive programs to appeal to progressive Democratic voters, he bought into conservative arguments against those very programs and stigmatized minorities as a result. The logical result of bipartisan tough-on-crime policies and conventional racial stereotypes, the 1994 Crime Bill produced racially unequal outcomes.<sup>35</sup>

As the 1994 Crime Bill was aimed to solve a great set of issues, the debates and language oversimplified the problem of crime. The critical and awful endurance of the oversimplification of racial problems and arguments is what led to mass incarceration, tougher sentencing on minor drug offenses, and police brutality that all negatively harmed African Americans. Many people still believe that crime is a choice, rather than an effect of economic inequality. Sentiments like these can be directly linked to ideas from the 1990s. As Walgreens recently closed twenty-two stores in San Francisco because they failed to effectively control small thefts, the story became a national right wing talking point, because many people believed they legalized crime.

While it seems that people have become more aware of police brutality since the death of George Floyd and the subsequent Black Lives Matter movement, a Minneapolis police reform bill was rejected by the city's own voters. In Biden's inauguration speech, he acknowledged systemic racism and called for police reform by the one-year mark of George Floyd's death. While the House has passed such a bill twice, the Senate has not acted. At the same time, police reform only constitutes a small part of restructuring the criminal justice system. Since the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, several local communities and states have passed reforms, but they sound more promising than they are.<sup>36</sup> Despite the fact that the negative effects of the Crime Bill are widely known, the tough-on-crime rhetoric still dominates American society.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Joseph (Joe) R. Biden, "Joe Biden in 1993 Speech Warned of 'Predators on Our Streets'," recorded November 18, 1993 at C-SPAN, Washington D.C., MD, video, 03:28, <https://edition.cnn.com/videos/politics/2019/03/05/joe-biden-tough-on-crime-speech.cnn>.

<sup>2</sup> Full name: Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994.

<sup>3</sup> Douglas A. Berman, "A Quarter-Century of Sentencing Milestones: The 1994 Crime Bill: Legacy and Lessons – Tough and Smart: Federal Sentencing Provisions of the 1994 Crime Bill," *Federal Sentencing Reporter* 32.3 (2020): 178-180.

<sup>4</sup> Berman, "1994 Crime Bill: Tough and Smart," 178.

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Hinton, "Will We Ever Get Beyond 'The Fire Next Time'?" *The New York Times*, May 21, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/21/opinion/police-violence-floyd-protests.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Hinton, "The Fire Next Time."

<sup>7</sup> Berman, *From the Center to the Edge*, 47.

<sup>8</sup> Timothy Lombardo, "Why Joe Biden Should Answer for his Record from Decades Ago," *Washington Post*, June 20, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/06/30/why-joe-biden-should-answer-his-record-decades-ago/>.

<sup>9</sup> Sheryl Gay Stolberg and Astead W. Herndon, "'Lock the S.O.B.s Up': Joe Biden and the Era of Mass Incarceration," *New York Times*, June 25, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/25/us/joe-biden-crime-laws.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Stolberg and Herndon.

<sup>11</sup> Stolberg and Herndon.

<sup>12</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate, Senate Session August 12, *1994 Crime Bill*, 103<sup>rd</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 1994, S. Rep 140, part 16, 22060. (Statement of Senator Biden). Capitalization in the originals.

<sup>13</sup> In 1990, 80.3% of Delaware's population was white, compared to 16.9% Black. See Bureau of the Census, "1990 Census of Population: General Population Characteristics Delaware," *U.S. Department of Commerce*, April 17, 1992, <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1990/cp-1/cp-1-9.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate, Senate Session August 12, *1994 Crime Bill*, 103<sup>rd</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 1994, S. Rep 140, part 16, 22060. (Statement of Senator Biden).

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- <sup>15</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate, Senate Session August 23, *1994 Crime Bill*, 103<sup>rd</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 1994, S. Rep 140, part 17, 23857. (Statement of Senator Biden).
- <sup>16</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate Session Crime Bill, August 22, 1994 (Statement of Senator Biden), 23647.
- <sup>17</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate Session Crime Bill, August 23, 1994 (Statement of Senator Biden), 23957.
- <sup>18</sup> Wheelock and Hartmann, "Midnight Basketball," 316-317. The 'Silent Majority', a term used by President Richard Nixon during the demonstrations of the Vietnam War, referred to a majority of people who did not engage in the public debate on the war. The concept was later used in political speeches to address those people who do not express their political opinion. See Richard Nixon, "The Silent Majority Speech," recorded November 3, 1969, accessed on June 21, 2021, on <https://chnm.gmu.edu/hardhats/silent.html>.
- <sup>19</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate Session Crime Bill, August 22, 1994 (Statement of Senator Mosely-Braun (D-IL)), 23679.
- <sup>20</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate Session Crime Bill, August 22, 1994 (Statement of Senator Biden), 23650-23651.
- <sup>21</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate Session Crime Bill, August 12, 1994 (Statement of Senator Biden), 22062.
- <sup>22</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate Session Crime Bill, August 23, 1994 (Statement of Senator Biden), 23857.
- <sup>23</sup> Carl E. Pope, et al. "Boys and Girls Clubs in Public Housing," *Department of Justice* (March 1995): 38-40.
- <sup>24</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate Session Crime Bill, August 23, 1994 (Statement of Senator Biden), 23858.
- <sup>25</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate Session Crime Bill, August 23, 1994 (Statement of Senator Biden), 23857.
- <sup>26</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate, Senate Session August 22, *1994 Crime Bill*, 103<sup>rd</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 1994, S. Rep 140, part 17, 23648. (Statement of Senator Biden).
- <sup>27</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate Session Crime Bill, August 12, 1994 (Statement of Senator Biden), 22062.
- <sup>28</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate Session Crime Bill, August 23, 1994 (Statement of Senator Biden), 23857.
- <sup>29</sup> David Pilgrim, "The Brute Caricature," Ferris State University, last modified 2012, <https://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/brute/>.
- <sup>30</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate Session Crime Bill, August 23, 1994 (Statement of Senator Biden), 23857.
- <sup>31</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate Session Crime Bill, August 22, 1994 (Statement of Senator Biden), 23653.
- <sup>32</sup> Biden did acknowledge also that this does not necessarily happen in poor families or broken families. "By the way, we found that lawyers rape, doctors rape, businessmen rape, just like thugs rape, like anybody rapes. This idea that only poor folks rape is malarkey." See U.S. Congress, Senate Session Crime Bill, August 22, 1994 (Statement of Senator Biden), 23653.
- <sup>33</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate Session Crime Bill, August 22, 1994 (Statement of Senator Biden), 23647.
- <sup>34</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate Session Crime Bill, August 22, 1994 (Statement of Senator Biden), 23647.
- <sup>35</sup> Contrary to White Belief, "The 1994 Crime Bill and Police Status Quo," *New York University*, February 13, 2021, <https://wp.nyu.edu/contrarytowhitebelief/the-1994-crime-bill-and-police-status-quo/>.
- <sup>36</sup> Rashawn Ray, "One Year After George Floyd's Murder, What is the Status of Police Reform in the United States?" *Brookings Institute*, May 25, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/how-we-rise/2021/05/25/one-year-after-george-floyds-murder-what-is-the-status-of-police-reform-in-the-united-states/>.

## **Benefitting Benefactors: Live Aid 1985 and the Rise of Celebrity Activism**

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*This paper is based on a thesis written for  
the MA program in North American Studies*

On July 13, 1985, an enormous audience of at least 1.9 billion people all over the world gathered around their televisions to watch Live Aid. The stage was shared by some of the biggest stars of the moment, including Queen, Tina Turner, Phil Collins, and many others. After seeing horrifying images from famine-stricken Ethiopia, musician Bob Geldof had started an initiative in 1984 called Band Aid. The idea was to release singles in cooperation with famous singers and artists, with the profits earmarked for humanitarian aid. Band Aid's most well-known contribution was the 1984 track "Do They Know It's Christmas?" featuring Bono, Sting, and George Michael alongside other celebrities, who participated without getting paid. By emphasizing musical hits, Band Aid was able to unite people successfully through great popular appeal.<sup>1</sup> But Geldof wanted to do more in terms of fundraising and had an even bigger idea: Live Aid, a worldwide telethon to raise funds from all over the world for Ethiopia.<sup>2</sup>

The concert was a unique moment in time, in which several developments of the 1980s, such as globalization and neoliberalism, came together and fundamentally transformed cultural humanitarianism. Live Aid permanently changed the character of humanitarian aid, initiating a new way of showing compassion and expressing sympathy for people in need around the world.<sup>3</sup> With its international character, the event marked the start of a new era in cultural humanitarianism: an era of increasing globalization and neoliberal influence, and with it a wave of modern celebrity activism. This paper focuses on the connection between neoliberalism, Live Aid, and celebrity activism. Specifically, I argue that the 1985 Live Aid concerts exemplified the 1980s and marked a turning point in the history of cultural humanitarianism, especially in how they transformed the character of celebrity activism.

The growing importance of the free market and increasing consumerism made Live Aid different from earlier fundraising events. The neoliberal focus on the individual led people to donate more easily, especially in a consumerist culture that gave them something in return for their donation. Consumerism sparked the rise of a philanthropic market, a phenomenon exploited and fueled by increasing celebrity humanitarian activism. However, Live Aid also marked a shift in motivation: the incentives of customers to donate were no longer solely based on the sincere wish to help others, but also on a desire to participate in popular culture. At the same time, the motives of celebrity activists were compromised now that fundraising concerts actively made use of advertising possibilities, mass media, and merchandise.

Many scholars have made a connection between celebrity activism and the rise of the philanthropic market. In her book on celebrity philanthropy, political scientist Elaine Jeffreys argues that “humanitarianism only became a mass phenomenon when philanthropy became a commercial marketing venture.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, humanitarianism became bigger when the organizers of events like Live Aid started to treat donors as consumers. Likewise, social scientist Andrew Jones argues that Band Aid and Live Aid made clever use of the philanthropic-oriented market “as the globalized spectacle of Live Aid both satisfied and reinforced a consumer desire for charitable texts in the aftermath of the Ethiopian famine.”<sup>5</sup> In addition, historian Amy Edwards argues that Western governments like those of the United States and Great Britain began to consider consumerism as a basic part of active citizenship.<sup>6</sup> In this context, Jones argues, ‘consumer-led charity’ emerged and grew, thanks to a decade of “advertising, branding, marketing and celebrity culture.”<sup>7</sup> The organizers of Live Aid cleverly exploited all of these phenomena. Media scholar Louise Davis, too, points out that the incentives and goals of famine relief initiatives such as Band Aid and Live Aid increasingly blurred the lines between several economic interests: those of the charities, the celebrity activists, the sponsors, and the media. At the same time, all of these stakeholders worked together to reach a wider audience and thus more donors.<sup>8</sup>

Debates on the philanthropic sphere connect consumerism to a sense of individual morality. Sociologist Chris Rojek, for example, argues that global benefit events contain “a high level of self-gratification,” because they grant consumers the feeling that they have done their share in alleviating the burden of those who suffer.<sup>9</sup> The power of global events is that they encourage civic responsibility and stimulate people from different backgrounds to care for a global cause.<sup>10</sup> Global events achieve this engagement by “posit[ing] the consumer as the agent of social change,” according to anthropologist Anne Meneley.<sup>11</sup> Davis makes a similar point: when Pepsi became one of Live Aid’s sponsors, consumers came to consider Pepsi as related to the famine. Suddenly, drinking Pepsi had become an indirect act of providing aid.<sup>12</sup> The Western public, Jones argues, became “both an actor and a spectator in its own humanitarian performances.”<sup>13</sup> Celebrity activism and neoliberalism have since been entwined on multiple levels and their convergence has led to philanthropy as we know it today.

Taking place during the 1980s, Live Aid appeared in a world that had essentially moved to the political right. In addition to the economic climate of free market capitalism, government regulation was decreasing rapidly during Ronald Reagan’s first term.<sup>14</sup> Both Band Aid and Live Aid perfectly matched this climate: because these events offered consumers something popular (music) in return for their donations to famine relief, they are perfect examples of a marketized society. Furthermore, the “corporate climate of the 1980s” influenced the cultural humanitarian tradition in new ways.<sup>15</sup> For example, it gave rise to a philanthropic market, in which fundraising events such as Live Aid were not merely about the goal but also about the desires of the consumer. The new importance of the consumer also provided the celebrities involved with a new objective: making a name for themselves and earning money.

The music was great, the turnout was huge with a live crowd of over 70,000 people, and money was spent on food, drinks, merchandise, and donations. After all, the latter was the main purpose of Live Aid: to raise money for the victims of the horrible famine in Ethiopia. However, apart from some performers mentioning the situation in Africa and the continent's silhouette in Live Aid's logo, there was little visible indication of the motivation and the goal of the concert, which was the outcome of neoliberal trends of the 1980s.

The 1980s saw the acceleration of trends toward deregulation, market liberalization, and privatization that had started in the 1970s. President Gerald Ford had already committed himself to a conservative economic approach by the mid-1970s, for example by promising reduced government involvement in the economy.<sup>16</sup> The ingredients for free market capitalism had been present for some time and they now became the foundation of a dominant and persistent way of life in Western countries. The rise of this type of capitalism emerged when far-right politicians Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher came to power. Schaller writes that the Reagan administration “worked to shrink the social welfare system [and to] reduce government regulation of business.”<sup>17</sup> Similarly, Jones argues that Thatcher pushed for privatization and a common attitude of “hard work, discipline, self-reliance, and philanthropy.”<sup>18</sup> Marketization – the exposure of firms and industries to market forces – was stimulated by privatization. According to Jones, a “neoliberal ethos of individual responsibility” was emerging, tying into the deregulation of business and the rise of a free market.<sup>19</sup> These developments all started from the notion of individuality and made Live Aid what it was: an event aimed at getting individual people to take their responsibility by donating money.

Considering that Live Aid touched upon countless cultural developments such as new technology, new media, and the emergence of a global community, it was bound to be influenced by neoliberalism. Neoliberalism commodified every aspect of life, such as sports, music, non-profit organizations, and so on, reshaping people's lives around ideas of profit maximalization, competition, and privatization. According to Jones, Live Aid took place at a time when “market values [were extended] to all aspects of social life,” which “aligned with a broader trajectory of free market discourses penetrating into the public sphere.”<sup>20</sup> The impact of the free market set Live Aid apart from previous charity events.

Live Aid benefited from the rise of the free market, especially because limits for charity spending fell away. The loss of these boundaries meant that even greater amounts of money could be collected through events like Live Aid. The organizers repeated their call for donations over and over again, most notably Bob Geldof with his bold statements. This type of boldness was unprecedented in these kind of events. For example, Nancy Banks-Smith wrote in *The Guardian*:

Geldof appeared intermittently during the 16-hour show, looking understandably wild and white and demanding money with menaces: ‘We want to get a million pounds before 10 o’clock tonight. You’ve got plenty of money or, if you’ve got none, get on the phone’ (presumably to pledge it on a credit card).<sup>21</sup>



Furthermore, journalist Jon Pareles quoted Geldof in the *New York Times* saying: “I don’t need Paul McCartney to put in half a million dollars. (...) I need him to sing *Let It Be*, because that will bring in more money.”<sup>22</sup> Geldof’s money-oriented approach and methods were evident, and might have been dismissed as rude and overly bold if the times were different. However, these were the 1980s, in which a marketized society was dominant and this type of action was popular. As a result, Geldof could appeal to people’s purses as much as he wanted. After all, doing so would simultaneously appeal to people’s desire to consume. The public proved eager to spend money, as this was stimulated throughout society. As Geldof himself later admitted, he never saw Live Aid as a concert, but merely as a television show with the sole aim of making money.<sup>23</sup>

Live Aid definitely succeeded in reaching that goal: the concert eventually raised the unbelievable amount of 127 million dollars, an unprecedented sum at the time.<sup>24</sup> In a decade marked by increasing globalization, Live Aid made use of more and different opportunities to raise money. On the one hand, Live Aid was able to draw money from traditional sources like donations (127 million dollars), television broadcast rights fees (10 million dollars), and ticket sales (5.6 million dollars).<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, because of the rising trend of consumerism, Live Aid also raised money by advertising and selling merchandise.

Live Aid not only exploited the possibilities of neoliberalism, but also made its central ideas commonly accepted. By contributing to the trends of marketization and consumerism that rose to a high point in the 1980s, the concert helped to make neoliberalist principles inherent to the public’s way of thinking and acting. For example, the concert appealed to consumers by offering merchandise. In the Western world, which was taken in with marketization and consumerism, having the ability to buy things was very attractive. By anticipating this trend, Live Aid contributed to the acceptance of neoliberalism as a perfectly normal way of life. As philosopher Wendy Brown argues, neoliberalism started to influence the way people viewed virtually every part of life, from events like Live Aid to sports to government.<sup>26</sup> Brown’s argument underscores how neoliberalism encouraged people to view their entire lives through a marketized lens. Jones, similarly, argues that “Band Aid [and Live Aid were] ultimately all about maximizing their own fundraising potential, to raise money which could then be spent on aid projects.”<sup>27</sup> Considering the way Live Aid shaped its goals in relation to monetary ends, the concert clearly fits within Brown’s argument.

Consumerism occupies an important position in Brown’s theory, because the desire to spend money characterizes the marketization-inspired perspective and way of life. Consumerism, especially in relation to Live Aid, was popular for two reasons. First, consuming made people aware of their role and impact as citizens. Second, having a souvenir from the “Greatest Show on Earth” and “the biggest concert ever,” as journalist Richard Harrington described it, certainly gave the audience a sense of pride for having attended.<sup>28</sup> In this sense, merchandise was an extremely appealing possession that tied in perfectly with the desires of consumers. Just like people at rock concerts could buy shirts featuring all locations from the current tour, people at Live Aid could purchase a range of items. The options included concert footage, concert programs, books, clothes, and press passes.<sup>29</sup> Harrington

told readers of *The Washington Post* to expect “a glut of Live Aid merchandising featuring the official logo,” which everyone who followed the news would recognize.<sup>30</sup> Taking into account all these developments related to marketization, Band Aid and Live Aid exemplified, in Jones’s words, “a shift towards consumer-led charity.”<sup>31</sup> This shift in turn led to the philanthropic market.

“The price for saving a life this year is a plastic record,” Bob Geldof said upon receiving the Congressional Arts Caucus Award for his work with Live Aid.<sup>32</sup> He captured the essence of one of Live Aid’s legacies in this sentence: the rise of the philanthropic market. Not coincidentally, the philanthropic market mainly originated in a decade characterized by increasing marketization. Live Aid brought market thinking to philanthropy, which then led to the creation of a new tradition within cultural humanitarianism.

The influence of marketization on the creation of the philanthropic market can be defined as a shift in the legitimacy of philanthropy. Jones characterizes this as the shift “away from state-led welfare solutions towards more individualized and market-driven forms of action.”<sup>33</sup> These forms of actions were, as Jones argues, “articulated through the realms of consumption and culture.”<sup>34</sup> Because of this change in legitimacy, Geldof could address the public directly and make immodest requests for larger donations. Charity was no longer solely dependent on solutions by the state or other established parties, such as aid organizations, but also on the individual. Marketization undoubtedly contributed to this change, because it stimulated individualized action and non-state charitable aid provision. Individualism is a complex phenomenon in relation to changing the world, Geldof said in an interview with filmmaker Errol Morris: “The paradox at the heart of individualism (...) is that it only works when we act in concert for the common good.”<sup>35</sup> In saying so, he acknowledged the importance of the public in charity and fundraising events. Geldof did still appeal to governments for substantial funds, for instance asking Congress to provide additional aid for Africa.<sup>36</sup> However, the role of the public in charitable causes became increasingly important during the early 1980s. After all, because of the emphasis that marketization placed on individualism, the general public now represented a group of potential consumers.

The free market legitimized consumerism as a way to get involved in global affairs for both celebrities and the public.<sup>37</sup> For the public, this involvement meant that by actively participating in cultural affairs, they made a satisfactory contribution to easing other people’s suffering. By paying for Band Aid records or Live Aid tickets, for example, consumers felt they had contributed to relief efforts for crises such as the Ethiopian famine. This ethical consumer market, as Davis calls it, “was both identified and unified through acts of consuming and purchasing within the famine relief site.”<sup>38</sup> By participating in famine relief in the form of attending fundraising concerts such as Live Aid, or donating in another way, the public contributed to a structure that enabled people to buy off the call for aid. Jones argues something similar when he writes that “western consumers could position themselves as activists and donors, (...) compatible with an emerging neoliberal ethos of individual responsibility” by participating in Band Aid and Live Aid.<sup>39</sup> This way, consumerism allowed the individual to fulfil their perceived responsibility in the wake of a humanitarian crisis.

Live Aid clearly tapped into consumerist desires, and the merchandise available to visitors was only one aspect of that. Indeed, the entire set-up of the concert served as an example for consumerism. The essence of the concerts was that people would donate money by buying a ticket, and get a place at the concert in return for their donation. As scholar Kevin Rozario puts it, “donors began to be treated and courted as consumers who had to be entertained” in order to raise money for charity.<sup>40</sup> Again, Brown’s argument about neoliberalism affecting society to its core holds true: people who donated money were no longer simply donors. This change, I believe, exemplifies a broader shift in humanitarianism toward a kind of trading system in how people donate to good causes.

Rather than characteristic consumerism, Live Aid more closely resembled barter. Providing aid became primarily a transactional venue: visitors paid money to have some fun, while that same payment contributed to feeding starving people. Many consumers undoubtedly wanted to contribute to aid programs supported by Band Aid and Live Aid. Considering the time in which they were living, it is not strange that they made use of existing structures and events, like Live Aid and the philanthropic market. Therefore, consumerism became more prominent in notions of humanitarianism over the 1980s and especially after Live Aid, in events like Live Earth and Live 8. The same way that donors became consumers, donations became trading tools to acquire access to entertainment.

The entertainment side is where celebrity activism becomes relevant. Celebrities very much act within the realm of consumerism and they often enjoy an international public. They are therefore very useful to humanitarianism, because they attract worldwide attention – and donations. Celebrities also enjoy great popular appeal, which enables them to reach and convince a wider public. The organizers of Live Aid made clever use of the power of consumerism and celebrity appeal in order to make more money. Only when philanthropy was transformed into a commercial market tool did humanitarianism grow into a mass phenomenon.<sup>41</sup> By combining philanthropy with the market, Live Aid renewed humanitarianism and made it bigger than ever before.

Prior to Live Aid, celebrity activism already had an impressive resume. Ever since the First World War, according to Rozario, numerous charity organizations, such as the Red Cross, understood and used the opportunities that came with the new “mass culture of movies and mass-circulation newspapers” in order to persuade people to take humanitarian action.<sup>42</sup> During the Second World War, a number of well-known New York actresses set up a charity fund called Stage Women’s War Relief.<sup>43</sup> These women understood that their names were able to attract substantial attention to a good cause. Jones also acknowledges that “[m]any humanitarian agencies understood the advantages of being associated with popular culture” in the decades before Live Aid.<sup>44</sup> Celebrity activism and popular engagement were not new, but Live Aid marked a significant transformation. The concerts boosted a new kind of celebrity activism, which was affected not only by globalization, television, and other forms of mass media, but also by the new emphasis on free-market thinking and consumerism.<sup>45</sup>

Ultimately, Live Aid celebrity activism was distinct from previous forms because the drive to look out for one’s own interests and fame had increased over the years. The transnational nature of the event and the fact that it was widely publicized made Live Aid an

appealing boost for artists' musical careers. Live Aid's Executive Producer Michael Mitchell told *The Washington Post* that there were so many celebrities who wanted to participate in Live Aid that the organization had been forced to "shrink several sets down to 10 minutes" in order to give everyone a chance to perform.<sup>46</sup> Mitchell said, "A lot of people who've never sung together are going to sing together, just so they can be involved."<sup>47</sup> Performing was not only a way to help, but also a means of showcasing one's talent. As Davis argues, "compassion was redirected away from the famine victim toward the celebrity singing on behalf of the victim."<sup>48</sup> New technology and the growth of a global community thus offered more and faster ways to profit and gain additional fame. Telethons brought in the most money and that is why it made sense for celebrities to get involved.<sup>49</sup> Technology was an essential tool for celebrities to make their fifteen minutes on stage memorable since the concert was to be shown on a plethora of television screens.

Like their audience, celebrities were also motivated by consumerism. Their efforts as humanitarian actors became increasingly connected to both consumerist desires and the sense of feeling good about their provided aid. The attention celebrities attracted as humanitarian activists translated to higher record sales and a more prominent place in popular culture. Furthermore, as mentioned previously, attending events meant doing something about humanitarian issues and alleviating the suffering of others comes with an inherent feeling of self-gratification. If that is true for the public, it is certainly true for the artists who are employed to entertain the donating consumers.<sup>50</sup> The celebrity on stage felt good because they were donating precious time, talent, and well-deserved money. The celebrity was fulfilling the consumers' needs, as the public had bought tickets to see them perform, but by performing for free, the reward for this work went to a good cause.

However, there is more to this side of the story. By performing at Live Aid, celebrities also enjoyed worldwide fame. For example, after experiencing some difficult years in which they had not been together, Queen's performance at Live Aid renewed the band's popularity.<sup>51</sup> Queen's success does not necessarily mean that their commitment to the cause of famine relief was not sincere, but lead singer Freddie Mercury himself admitted that he was not participating for the good of others. In fact, Mercury declared:

I'm doing it out of pride, pride that I've been asked as well as that I can actually do something like that. (...) And so basically I'm doing it out of feeling that one way all the hard work that I've actually done over the years has paid off, because they're actually asking me to do something to be proud of.<sup>52</sup>

Even though many celebrities present at Live Aid wanted to contribute to humanitarian aid, for most of them their own interests also played a large role. Like Mercury, other celebrities at Live Aid also mainly recalled what they gained from it. Tina Turner, for example, said in an interview with Carl Wilkinson for *The Guardian* that "the only thing I remember of the day is stabbing Mick in the foot with my high heels in the middle of 'It's Only Rock and Roll'. And then they put us on the cover of *Life* magazine!"<sup>53</sup> Similarly, the band U2 gained huge momentum during Live Aid, as they had been relatively unknown until that point.<sup>54</sup> In fact,

after Live Aid they became known for their involvement in humanitarian causes. They participated in numerous charity projects and fundraising concerts in subsequent decades.<sup>55</sup> For several stars, the event seemed to overshadow the cause altogether, which is illustrated by the fact that a potential duet between Madonna and Rod Stewart could not be realized. According to Richard Harrington, “they couldn’t agree on a song.”<sup>56</sup> Personal objectives clearly weighed more strongly if artists were not willing to put such differences aside for the sake of a humanitarian cause.

In contrast to these celebrities, Geldof himself emphasized the cause of Live Aid in interviews throughout the 1980s. In an interview with *The Irish Times*, he said that “the reason for the event is more important than the event itself.”<sup>57</sup> This comment illustrates the difference between Geldof’s view and those of the celebrities who participated in Live Aid. Geldof appealed to the desire of celebrities to be famous by promising them that Live Aid would be huge. This promise, however, seems to appeal more an artist’s professional aims rather than a genuine desire to provide aid. When inviting Queen to perform, for example, Geldof reportedly told Mercury “it’s going to be the biggest thing ever,” knowing that he would react to this.<sup>58</sup> Seeing the situation in Ethiopia inspired Geldof to organize Band Aid and Live Aid, but he did not use the same motive to convince celebrities to participate. Instead, he used promises of fame and gain to draw them in.

As such, Live Aid transformed celebrity humanitarian activism by making their motives more transparent. This transformation, I have argued, finds its roots in neoliberal marketization. Because the market was a dominant factor in society, various cultural areas – including music, advertising, and events – adjusted to this perspective, and charity was no longer an exception. As a result, celebrities were no longer solely humanitarian actors when they contributed to a cause, because their motives were essentially compromised in a marketized and money-oriented society.

By exploiting celebrities as attention grabbers, the neoliberalist branch of celebrity activism that originated in the 1980s changed the tradition of cultural humanitarianism fundamentally in a way that is still visible today. Band Aid and Live Aid, according to researcher and World Peace Foundation director Alex de Waal, sparked a pattern of “publicity-driven emergency responses” in which “[t]he market for emergency relief is set by those who pay the bills, not those who eat the food, and donors wish to see their brand names on television when journalists arrive to cover the disaster.”<sup>59</sup> Live Aid was a key development in the rise of this emergency relief market. With celebrities acting as spokespersons in the humanitarian arena, public participation in the philanthropic market became very fashionable.<sup>60</sup> This innovation is one of Live Aid’s biggest legacies: celebrity philanthropy as a popular and effective means for charity organizations.

To conclude, marketization and consumerism were essential for Live Aid’s success: the concert very much relied on consumers, the power of merchandise, and the marketized culture of the 1980s. Furthermore, Live Aid was an indispensable landmark event in the rise of the philanthropic market: it gave this market significant room to develop by bringing together celebrity appeal, famine relief, and concert merchandise. In this way, Live Aid

combined humanitarianism with philanthropy, and renewed the humanitarian tradition in the process. Another way in which Live Aid altered cultural humanitarianism was by transforming celebrity activism. Live Aid as a product of marketization influenced the world around it, causing celebrity activism to be compromised from then on. Now that the world had become a global community, fame was within reach with every act of goodwill. Live Aid put celebrities on global television, making sure the world could see what they were doing for charity. In this respect, Live Aid has been essential for changing the motivations behind celebrity activism, and ultimately in transforming cultural humanitarianism. This transformation involves an ever-expanding, long-lasting legacy in which fame and famine, adoration and aid are closely connected.

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## Notes

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## Reviving Jackie Robinson: Assessing Memories of the Integration of Baseball

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*This paper is based on a thesis written for  
the MA program in North American Studies*

The Brooklyn Dodgers played the Boston Braves on Major League Baseball Opening Day in 1947. An ecstatic crowd of 26,623 cheered on Pete Reiser as he provided the winning runs with a go-ahead two-RBI double in the seventh inning.<sup>1</sup> This game, however, would not go into the history books because of Reiser's heroics. Rather, it was the fact that African American player Jackie Robinson was able to take the field for the Dodgers that day. Although his debut was uneventful – Jackie Robinson remained hitless in his first game for the Dodgers – his appearance was remarkable in itself. By stepping on the diamond in a Dodgers uniform, Robinson broke the color barrier, thereby breaking the ban on African American players in the Major Leagues that had been in place since 1887.<sup>2</sup> To honor his achievement, Major League Baseball decided in 2004 to celebrate Jackie Robinson Day annually on April 15, the day of his debut.<sup>3</sup>

The desegregation of Major League Baseball by Jackie Robinson became a celebrated event in American history. Legal scholar Kenneth L. Shropshire argues that “Jackie Robinson coming to the plate in Brooklyn on April 15, 1947, was the most visible, and therefore in some ways most important, moment in recent American Civil Rights history.”<sup>4</sup> That a legal scholar would say this about Robinson's debut, more than half a decade after it took place, shows how widespread the idea of Robinson's debut being a watershed moment in integration is in American history. Yet, Robinson's debut was not exclusively celebrated. Before Robinson broke the color line, Black athletes were constrained to playing in the separate sphere of baseball, called the Negro Leagues. At the time of his debut, many involved in the Negro Leagues believed Robinson was not the right player to break the color barrier. Most of them thought there were better players in the Negro Leagues and feared – probably correctly – that if he failed, it would take years before someone else got a shot. Therefore, they wanted a better player to desegregate Major League Baseball.<sup>5</sup>

Years after the integration of Major League Baseball, historians assessed its impact on the African American community. Although Robinson's debut had been a widely celebrated moment in the history of desegregation, sports sociologist David C. Ogden argues that the integration of the sport also caused the Black community to lose its interest in baseball in the long run. One of the reasons he gives to explain this is that with the demise of Negro League baseball, African Americans lost interest in the game, which they now had to play on ‘white’ terms. The Negro Leagues had a specific style which depended more on speed and aggressive baserunning. In order to be attractive for Major League teams, Negro League players had to adapt to the Major League style of play, losing their own characteristic playing style. A similar



argument had previously also been made by scholar Gerald Early.<sup>6</sup> As such, the narrative of Negro League baseball follows a familiar pattern in the history of African American community, the struggle for Civil Rights, and the cost of racial integration. Historian Adam Fairclough was among the first to develop the argument that African Americans felt ambiguous about integration in *A Class of Their Own: Black Teachers in the Segregated South*. Fairclough argues that, while Black teachers adapted to the integration of schools with relative success, Black students found adapting much harder.<sup>7</sup> According to Fairclough, “many black teachers blamed the failure of Black students to thrive in newly integrated schools on the one-sided manner in which courts and school boards implemented desegregation.”<sup>8</sup> The failure of Black students was thus, according to Fairclough, a product of a lack of commitment from white teachers and school boards to incorporate Black students into their new environments.

Scholarship on Negro League baseball has never dealt with the ambiguous success of the integration of Major League Baseball. This is unfortunate, considering the importance of Negro League Baseball for African American communities at the time. Several scholars have touched upon the subject of integration and how it was perceived as it unfolded. Historian Neil Lanctot, for example, argues that by the mid-1950s organized baseball – that is, the Major League clubs and their Minor League affiliates – employed around the same number of African Americans as the Negro American League and the Negro National League had in the 1940s. Employment in organized baseball supposedly brought better opportunities and the chance to get called up to the Major Leagues.<sup>9</sup> Baseball historian Leslie Heaphy disagrees. She argues that “opportunities to play organized ball actually lessened because the MLs [Major Leagues] were not completely open.”<sup>10</sup> However, Heaphy also states that the eventual demise of the Negro Leagues was necessary in the eyes of former players because they wanted to play in the Major Leagues.<sup>11</sup>

Among historians of Black baseball, the usual consensus is that despite Jackie Robinson integrating Major League Baseball in 1947, ‘full integration’ was still a long way off. Brian Carroll, an expert in sports communication, asserts that in the years leading up to the integration of the Major Leagues, the Black sports press’ primary objective was to make Negro League baseball a lasting institution. However, after Jackie Robinson made his debut in the Major Leagues, their coverage was almost exclusively aimed at making him a success. After all the stories about Robinson, there was no more room for coverage of the Negro Leagues. In this way, the Black press contributed to the demise of the Negro Leagues. According to Carroll, the integration of the Major Leagues thus did not exclusively mean progress. “As members of an integrated baseball scene,” he writes, “black ball players had to play by someone else’s rules and always as a minority.”<sup>12</sup>

But how did former Negro League players themselves look back at the integration of Major League Baseball? And could their integration have been handled differently? Those are the questions this paper aims to answer. In response to these questions, I will argue that former Negro League players reflected on the integration of Major League Baseball with mixed feelings, as many felt negatively impacted by development. While this paper looks at mixed reactions to the integration of Major League Baseball, it will not argue against

integration. Rather, it argues against one-sided integration only on the terms of the dominant group, which in this case negatively impacted African Americans whose participation in the Major League remained restrained. As such, the lesson learned from this paper should be that integration works best when the group being integrated is allowed to fully participate and take its unique aspects with it.

To answer these questions, this paper will take a qualitative approach and use a fresh set of sources previously not used in academic literature relating to Negro League baseball. The main source materials used here are interviews with former players that played in the Negro Leagues after 1947. These interviews can be found in several published digital oral history databases and were recorded in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>13</sup> While the first decades after the civil rights era brought a sense of optimism to Black America, the decades that followed brought disillusionment. Historian Robert D. Bullard explains that although conditions changed for African Americans in the 1970s and mid-1980s, “many social, economic, and political barriers have gone unabated.”<sup>14</sup> The failed promise of equality of the Civil Rights era is likely to seep through in these interviews. Therefore, it is interesting to look at whether this influenced the attitudes of Negro League players towards integration. Their memories will assess both their attitude towards Jackie Robinson and the extent to which the felt integration affected their baseball careers. There are two main reasons why interviews constitute the main archival source material for this paper. First, historians have tended to overlook interviews as source material for researching professional Black baseball; rather, they have relied on Black newspapers. These newspapers had shifted their attention from reporting on the Negro Leagues to reporting on the successes of Black players in Major League Baseball.<sup>15</sup> Thus, they are likely to contain only the opinions of players who succeeded in the Major Leagues. Shifting the emphasis to interviews will examine African American baseball from a different perspective, namely, the players overlooked by the Black press. Second, this paper is interested in what former Negro League players make of integration, looking back decades after it happened.

One of the first things that becomes clear from interviews with former Negro League players is that their initial opposition to Jackie Robinson had disappeared by the late twentieth century. This was primarily the case because they believed his experiences off the field made him a suitable candidate for the desegregation of Major League Baseball. Henry Mason was a regular Opening Day starting pitcher for the Kansas City Monarchs, one of the biggest teams in Negro League baseball in the 1950s. In 1952, he threw an impressive 16 innings for a 3-2 victory over the Philadelphia Stars.<sup>16</sup> Looking back at Robinson’s achievements several decades earlier, Mason stated that Robinson had been “the right person at the right time. Those other guys could not have withheld their tempers. If Jackie hadda messed up, there wouldn’t be any Black player right now in the Major League.”<sup>17</sup> Mason thus believed that Robinson was the right man while still implying that he may not have been the best player. The idea that Robinson had been the right man to integrate Major League Baseball because of his mindset and experience off the field was widely shared by former Negro League players

during the 1980s and 1990s. Hubert Simmons, a starting pitcher for the Baltimore Elite Giants during their final season in the Negro American League in 1950, recounted:

I felt it [Jackie Robinson breaking the color barrier] was a good thing for anybody, for Robinson, for any other ball player, but my feelings was that there was a lot of players that didn't like that. They felt that somebody else should have been first. Robinson, as I said, was perfect for the job and then he acquired a lot of skills while he was in the farm club, carried himself the way he should have. There wasn't any fights and they called him names, but they picked the right man for what he did he was picked because he had the experience and he had participated in sports that required multi-race players.<sup>18</sup>

However, despite their acceptance of Robinson, their belief that he had been the right person to integrate professional baseball was still mostly based on his experience playing integrated sports in college and being a lieutenant in the army, not on their opinions about his talents as a player. Of course, halfway through the 1950s, Robinson had amassed a number of baseball accolades - 1947 Rookie of the Year, and 1949 National League MVP, among others - so by then it was hard to deny his suitability as the integrator of the Major Leagues based on his reputation as a player.<sup>19</sup> By the late twentieth century, Robinson had clearly proven he did not just have the right attitude to integrate baseball, but that he was also an outstanding player. The fact that he had proven himself makes it all the more interesting that former Negro League players still primarily praised him for his behavior and not his ability in their interviews.

Yet, even though opposition towards Robinson had ebbed in the Negro Leagues by the end of the twentieth century, many Negro League players were still ambiguous about the desegregation of organized baseball. Many believed that integration actually cost many African American athletes, managers, and front office personnel their jobs. Ernest Burke played as both a pitcher and position player for the Baltimore Elite Giants in 1947 and 1948, the immediate years after the desegregation of Major League Baseball. Burke even spent some time in the Minor Leagues. However, like many other Black athletes at the time, he never stepped onto a Major League diamond as a player.<sup>20</sup> Burke remembered that "a phrase was made, ah when Jackie Robinson broke the, color barrier, says it was a damn shame for five hundred or, or eight hundred people to lose their job over one man."<sup>21</sup> Therefore, Burke's memory of the desegregation of the Major Leagues was not positive. In Burke's memory, the desegregation of baseball cost African Americans more than they had gained by it. The statement that hundreds of people lost their jobs because of one man is exaggerated; of course, other African American players joined Jackie Robinson in the Major Leagues and Robinson's debut had a significant symbolic value. Yet, it is correct in the sense that most African American players did not get a fair chance in organized baseball, and therefore, desegregation came at a high cost to some of them.

Many former players also remembered that equal opportunities for African Americans in Major League organizations were still a long way off after desegregation. Neal Henderson, who played in the outfield for Kansas City from 1949 to 1953, remembered most players signed by Major League organizations were never called up, regardless of how good

they were: “A lot of us, if they’d have give us a chance, we could’ve maybe been a Willie Mays or a Jackie Robinson or anybody, but they just swept us under the carpet and forgot about us.”<sup>22</sup> Similar sentiments were repeated by former Negro Leagues player Jesse Mitchell, who had started playing with the Birmingham Black Barons in 1954 after being traded there from the Louisville Clippers. His tenure in Birmingham was very successful, earning him four consecutive All-Star Game selections between 1955 and 1959.<sup>23</sup> Mitchell recalled that full integration and equal opportunities were still a long way off through his personal experience. “I had all the tools [to make it to the Majors],” Mitchell continued, “even the manager was highly, but like he said, it was the front office that had you know, had everything to do with it.”<sup>24</sup> Mitchell’s skills were good enough to get him to the Majors, as confirmed by his manager, yet he was held back by the management. Fellow Black Baron player Benjamin Givens shared Mitchell’s memory of unequal opportunity: “We had a lot of good players that, I feel like, should have went up, should have got signed, but they didn’t. (...) Back then, there was a lot of talent that didn’t get the chance to go anywhere.”<sup>25</sup> In these cases, African American players still did not get the same chances as white players in Major League Baseball. The Negro Leagues thus remained relevant for many professional Black baseball players.

In the last two decades of the twentieth century, disillusionment with integration was a common feeling for Negro League players looking back on their playing days. They believed that there were many more Black baseball players who should have made it to the Majors. Some felt they themselves should have made it, while others knew former teammates they believed possessed the right qualities to be in Major League Baseball. Whether this is true is irrelevant. What is relevant is how these players felt about their chances looking back on the 1950s. This reveals a major disappointment with how integration turned out for professional Black baseball players. As the Black press was busy applauding Jackie Robinson and the other Black players that followed him to Major League Baseball for their success, there were many formidable players who never received mentions in their reports.<sup>26</sup> According to former Negro League players, this happened mostly because full integration did not follow Jackie Robinson’s desegregation of baseball. In the end, they felt that just a few high-profile players got a chance in Major League Baseball, while there were many more who were good enough. Because the desegregation of Major League Baseball did hurt the viability of the Negro Leagues as an economic enterprise, these players had nowhere to go. Not allowed to participate in the desegregated institutions and forced out of their own segregated institutions, they fell through the cracks of integration.

Following this analysis, the question arises if the failure of integration in Major League Baseball was inevitable or if more could have been done to help African American players gain access to it. In their study of affirmative action in the desegregation of the Brooklyn Dodgers, scholars Anthony Pratkanis and Marlene Turner identified nine principles that had been crucial in successfully integrating the Brooklyn Dodgers that could have also been applied to other Major League teams. The first four principles dealt with creating the right atmosphere for successful affirmative action. The first principle was creating an environment in which integration felt inevitable. When a group of Dodger players signed a petition stating they would not play with Robinson, the Dodger front office made it clear that Robinson would

join the Dodgers regardless of their petition. So, if they did not want to play with him, they would be the ones to depart the club. In the end, faced with the inevitability of Robinson's arrival, the attitude of the team changed. The second principle was the establishment of equal status with a superordinate goal. The fact that those opposed to Robinson's arrival had to work together with him to win games and fight for a World Series championship changed their attitude. They tried to help him become a better player, and in doing so, built a strong relationship. The third principle was puncturing the norm of prejudice. Before the integration of the Dodgers, segregation and racism were the norm. These norms need to be changed. In the case of Robinson, teammate Harrold 'Pee Wee' Reese helped puncture these norms. Reese, a Kentucky-born shortstop, openly showed his support for Robinson on and off the field, thereby rupturing the norm of racism. The fourth principle was the practice of nonviolent resistance. The newcomer in a previously segregated environment had to refrain from answering violence with violence. Rather, the newcomer had to rise above the occasion and show that he was the better person. For Robinson, this led to his famous interaction with Branch Rickey before signing with the Dodgers: "‘Mr. Rickey, do you want a Negro who's afraid to fight back?’ Rickey's answer, ‘I want a ballplayer with guts enough not to fight back.’"<sup>27</sup>

The next set of principles dealt with how to get opponents of integration to accept integration and affirmative action. The fifth principle was to create empathy. Pratkanis and Turner identified the Dodgers' first series against Philadelphia as a pivotal moment in the acceptance of Robinson by other Dodgers. The Philadelphia bench continuously hurled racial insults at Robinson. Robinson's teammates experienced for the first time what Robinson went through on a daily basis which made them sympathize with him. The first to defend him were the ones who, just two months before, had started a petition against him. The sixth principle was to individuate the newcomer. This meant that people had to know Jackie Robinson as Jackie Robinson and not as a Black ballplayer. Rickey called on his friends in the media to portray Robinson as an individual rather than a Black ballplayer. The seventh principle was to offer forgiveness and redemption. Meaning that those who opposed the arrival of Robinson had a chance to redeem themselves. No matter how fierce their opposition was, once they changed their minds, they were allowed back on the team. This principle of forgiveness meant that those who opposed integration could redeem themselves and return as supporters of integration. Rather than being made outsiders who harden in their opposition. The eighth principle was to undo the perception of preferential selection. When Robinson joined the Dodgers, his adversaries argued that his race was the only reason he was selected. Rickey deconstructed this by emphasizing Robinson's ability and his contribution to the team. But also by assigning Robinson to the Dodgers' Minor League affiliate. After Robinson dominated the league, this became an argument to show that Robinson was ready for the majors. The ninth and final principle was to identify and remove institutional barriers. On the road, the Dodgers often traveled through areas where segregation was prevalent. To prevent this from becoming an issue in Robinson's integration into the team, he only took the team to places where they could remain together.<sup>28</sup>

This analysis of the Brooklyn Dodgers shows that active implementation of integration - through affirmative action - might have helped African Americans in claiming their position

in Major League Baseball. Integration is not achieved only by eliminating barriers; it requires a deeper transformation of morals. Had Major League Baseball implemented a leaguewide affirmative action policy, Black players would have found an easier path to the Major Leagues and it would have made integration more successful. It also would have meant that former Negro League players might have looked back on the integration of baseball as a success, rather than a development they could not participate in. However, as we all know, Major League Baseball did no such thing. This meant that the memories of African American players looking back on the 1950s corroborate Adam Fairclough's argument that African Americans were unable to reap the benefits of integration, because they could not fully participate in integrated institutions.

The integration of baseball can be seen as a case study for the integration of other areas of society. It shows what happens when integration is implemented on the terms of the dominant group in society. Only the absolute best were allowed to participate, and they still had to endure horrible taunts and insults. For the ones that were just below the absolute best, there was no place. They hit glass ceilings, no matter how their abilities matched up against their white teammates. This, of course, is not to say that integration is always negative. However, integration should happen in consultation with the group that gets integrated. Otherwise, they miss out on full participation while also losing their own institutions. That the integration of baseball turned out this way is unfortunate since the Dodgers had given the correct example by successfully applying affirmative action. Yet, since the rest of the Major League did not follow, integration of the League never really became a widespread success.

The central argument of this paper is that former Negro League players looked back on the integration of baseball with mixed feelings and that there was an alternative approach to integration available that could have played out in a more favorable manner for Black players. Former Negro League players felt that, in general, Black players did not receive the same opportunities and treatment as white players, despite the desegregation of Major League Baseball. A leaguewide implementation of affirmative action, similar to that of the Dodgers, might have prevented this failure. However, it is never too late to try and right your wrongs. Major League Baseball could make an effort to revive the interest of America's Black community in their sport. Even if this does not happen, this study of the integration of baseball should encourage a dialogue between dominant and subaltern communities and groups on what is necessary for opportunities to be truly equal. Without such a dialogue, the legacy of Jackie Robinson will not be done justice.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Roscoe McGowen, "Double by Reiser Beats Boston, 5-3," *New York Times*, April 16, 1947, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1947/04/16/87737216.html?pageNumber=32>.

<sup>2</sup> Bill Kriwin, *Out of the Shadows: African American Baseball from the Cuban Giants to Jackie Robinson* (University of Nebraska Press, 2005), vii.

<sup>3</sup> "Jackie Robinson Day," Major League Baseball, accessed September 7, 2021, <https://www.mlb.com/mlb-community/jackie-robinson-day>.

<sup>4</sup> Kenneth L. Shropshire, "Where Have You Gone, Jackie Robinson? Integration in America in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," *South Texas Law Review* 38.4 (1997), 1043.

<sup>5</sup> Leslie A. Heaphy, *The Negro Leagues, 1869-1960* (McFarland & Company, 2003), 201.

<sup>6</sup> David C. Ogden, "Baseball and Blacks: A Loss of Affinity, a Loss of Community," in *Baseball and American Culture: Across the Diamond*, ed. Frank Hoffmann, Edward J. Rielly, and Martin J. Manning (Taylor & Francis Group, 2003), 81-90; Gerald Early, "Why Baseball Was the Black National Pastime," in *Basketball Jones*, ed. Todd Boyd and Kenneth L. Shropshire (New York University Press, 2000), 27-50.

<sup>7</sup> Adam Fairclough, *A Class of Their Own: Black Teachers in the Segregated South* (Harvard University Press, 2007), 396-397.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 397.

<sup>9</sup> Neil Lanctot, *Negro League Baseball: The Rise and Ruin of a Black Institution* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 393-394.

<sup>10</sup> Heaphy, 224.

<sup>11</sup> Heaphy, 226.

<sup>12</sup> Carroll, 4.

<sup>13</sup> The first database is the Oral Histories database from the Birmingham Public Library. The interviews used for this thesis are found by using the search term "Negro Leagues" in the Oral Histories database. The second database is the Negro League Oral History Collection from the University of Baltimore. The interview with Henry Bow Mason is published in the Oral History Collection of the Society for American Baseball Research. Neal Henderson's interview is published in *The Negro Leagues Revisited: Conversations with 66 More Baseball Heroes*, by Brent Kelley.

<sup>14</sup> Robert D. Bullard, *In Search of the New South: The Black Urban Experience in the 1970s and 1980s* (University of Alabama Press, 1989), 164.

<sup>15</sup> Brian Carroll, *When to Stop the Cheering? The Black Press, The Black Community, and the Integration of Professional Baseball* (Routledge, 2006), 4; Samuel Edward Gale, "A Bitter Partnership: The Black Press' Contentious Relationship with the Negro Leagues in the Struggle to Integrate Major League Baseball," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 33.16 (2016), 1885-1903.

<sup>16</sup> "Henry Mason," Negro League Baseball Museum, accessed May 20, 2021, <https://nlbemuseum.com/history/players/mason.html>.

<sup>17</sup> Henry Bow Mason, interview by Paul Motyka, *SABR Oral History Collection*, November 3, 2001, <https://orallhistory.sabr.org/interviews/mason-henry-bow-2001/>.

<sup>18</sup> "Interview with Hubert V. Simmons," December 12, 1998," Baltimore Regional Studies Archives, University of Baltimore Special Collections and Archives, 13, [http://archives.ubalt.edu/nloh/pdfs/R0089\\_NLOH\\_B01\\_F007\\_Simmons\\_Hubert.pdf](http://archives.ubalt.edu/nloh/pdfs/R0089_NLOH_B01_F007_Simmons_Hubert.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> David Naze, *Reclaiming 42: Public Memory and the Reframing of Jackie Robinson's Radical Legacy* (University of Nebraska Press, 2019), 116.

<sup>20</sup> "Ernest Burke," Negro League Baseball Museum, accessed September 14, 2021, <https://nlbemuseum.com/history/players/burke.html>.

<sup>21</sup> "Interview with Ernest Burke," November 24, 1998, Baltimore Regional Studies Archives, University of Baltimore Special Collections and Archives, 6, [http://archives.ubalt.edu/nloh/pdfs/R0089\\_NLOH\\_B01\\_F001\\_Burke\\_Ernest.pdf](http://archives.ubalt.edu/nloh/pdfs/R0089_NLOH_B01_F001_Burke_Ernest.pdf).

<sup>22</sup> Brent Kelley, "Neal 'Bobo' Henderson," in *The Negro Leagues Revisited* (McFarland & Company, 2015), 263.

<sup>23</sup> Jesse Mitchell, interview by Ben Cook, June 16, 1995, MP3 audio, Birmingham Black Barons Oral History Collection, Birmingham Public Library, <https://cdm16044.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15099coll2/id/12>; "Jesse Mitchell," Negro League Baseball Museum, accessed May 20, 2021, <https://nlbemuseum.com/history/players/mitchellj.html>.

<sup>24</sup> "Jesse Mitchell interview."

<sup>25</sup> Benjamin Givens, interview by Ben Cook, July 7, 1995, Birmingham Black Barons Oral History Collection, Oral Histories, Birmingham Public Library, <https://cdm16044.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15099coll2/id/13>.

<sup>26</sup> Carrol, 4.

<sup>27</sup> Anthony R. Pratkanis and Marlene E. Turner, "Nine Principles of Successful Affirmative Action: Mr. Branch Rickey, Mr. Jackie Robinson, and the Integration of Baseball," in *Out of the Shadows: African American Baseball from the Cuban Giants to Jackie Robinson*, ed. Bill Kirwin (University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 204.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 194-222.

## From Underdog to Hot Dog: Tracing the Name Origins of an Edible American Icon

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“Who invented the hot dog?” an anonymous writer asked *The Saturday Evening Newspaper* in 1938. “The late Harry Mozely Stevens, caterer at the New York Polo Grounds, probably about 1900,” was the answer provided by the journalist Frederick J. Haskin. The term ‘hot dog’, however, was coined by “the late T.A. Dorgon (Tad), noted sports cartoonist,” Haskin continued. He concluded: “The name was probably suggested by the popular belief that wienies were made of dog meat.”<sup>1</sup> Despite the apparent decidedness of Haskin’s response, the reality of the hot dog’s origins is much more ambiguous. As it turns out, it remains unknown to this day who exactly invented one of America’s favorite snacks. Perhaps it is also the wrong question to ask. Why wonder about the origins of the hot dog in the first place? And how did the hot dog become so significant in American culture that this question is even asked at all?

Regarded as a uniquely American delicacy, the origin of the hot dog has amused and occupied Americans ever since its rise to popularity in the early twentieth century. Its strange name in particular spurs the imagination, because what is a ‘hot’ ‘dog’ really? At the heart of such an inquiry lies a certain type of anxiety mixed with a dubious delight for what macabre or bizarre truth one might uncover about American culture. The spicy last detail Haskin shared in his account – the notion that the ‘dog’ in ‘hot dog’ refers to actual dog meat – illustrates this point. Riddled with spurious tales and prone to cheesy puns, the hot dog’s rise to fame would transform it from a modest dish into a national icon with an unclear mythical past.

Before the term hot dog came into vogue, there were only the wienerworst and the frankfurter. These predecessors of the hot dog traveled to the United States with German and Central European immigrants in the late nineteenth century. The German origin of these names is thus unsurprising, with wienerworst, also known as wienerwurst or simply wiener, literally translating to Viennese [Wien-er] sausage [wurst]. Frankfurter, likewise, refers to its place of origin: Frankfurt, Germany. Alternatives like the word *kielbasa* for the Polish variant never took off, which is likely due to the popularity of the Viennese-style sausage and the prevalence of German sausage manufacturers like Oscar Mayer.<sup>2</sup> The words wienerworst and frankfurter started to enter American English in the late 1870s, and the first written record of these terms came in 1875 and 1877 respectively.<sup>3</sup> Within ten years the rivaling term hot dog would make its entrance. In 1884, *the Indiana Evansville Daily Courier* printed the following sentence: “Even the innocent ‘wienerworst’ man will be barred from dispensing hot dog on



the street corner.”<sup>4</sup> Soon, this new name began to replace “wiener” and “frankfurter” as the most popular word to refer to sausage meat in a bun.<sup>5</sup>

The new, fully English compound for this type of sausage did not take away any of the skepticism that people felt because it was sold mainly on the streets. If anything, the name ‘hot dog’ might have made the sausage appear even more suspicious. That most could agree on the tastiness of the hot dog is evidenced by phrases like “hot dog!” or “hot diggity dog” existing as somewhat unrefined expressions of delight since 1896.<sup>6</sup> The dish itself nonetheless maintained the reputation of a vulgarity. This remarkable paradox is directly portrayed in a 1912 edition of the American culinary magazine *Table Talk*. A son asks his mother if they “are going to have “hot dog” for supper.” Her reply: “Yes, Dick, but please don’t say “hot dog” at the table, it makes me sick.”<sup>7</sup> Pondering the implications of this strange exchange may lead us to Haskin’s suggestion. Clearly, the sausage bun’s new name had created a significant uneasiness about the possible origin of its meat.

An earlier example that plays with this macabre dual implication of the name hot dog is the short 1904 comedy film *The Dog Factory*.<sup>8</sup> The gag of the piece is simple: two men control a machine called the ‘patent dog transformer,’ which transforms living dogs into sausages. The machine also does the reverse: throw in some sausage and a jovial canine jumps out the other side. Several strings of sausages hang on the factory’s sterile white walls, each accompanied by bold black letters displaying the dog breed the meat originates from: ‘pointer’, ‘setter’, and ‘terrier’ are a few examples. This transformation process is endlessly repeatable, allowing customers to turn their pets into sausages, and their sausages into pets indefinitely. The absurdity of this set-up culminates when a lady enters the scene and asks for a dachshund. One of the workmen transforms a dachshund sausage into a living breathing dachshund for her. Displeased by the creature’s unfriendly demeanor, however, she requests a different breed. The unfortunate dachshund is subsequently returned to its former sausage form and in its place a terrier sausage is used to create a fluffy terrier pup, which leaves the lady satisfied. The advertising sign “Dogs made while you wait” in the upper left of the frame emphasizes the irony that drives the comedy of the movie. This central joke rests on the apparent cruel truth that in enjoying the popular hot dog, one is in fact enjoying the meat of man’s best friend.<sup>9</sup>

Because of the longstanding special and beloved status of the dog within American culture, the practice of eating its meat has been a longstanding taboo, only tolerated during periods of extreme famine.<sup>10</sup> That such practices were indeed exceptional is illustrated by a 1904 news article from *The New York Times* about a group of desperate, famished miners. The piece described how, faced with a shortage of food supplies, these Alaskan miners were forced to kill “some dogs (...) to save them from dying of starvation.”<sup>11</sup> It continued: “Later meat became so scarce that dogs and horses were killed for food pending the arrival of supplies.” Notice how the article stressed the fact that the miners only chose to eat dog when they truly had no other choice. Only the threat of death justified the consumption of dog meat and even then, it was alarming enough to warrant a separate news article. Actual hot dog meat traditionally consists of either pork or beef and sometimes poultry.<sup>12</sup> Yet, the perversity of a

supposedly macabre truth hidden in the name of the increasingly popular dish itself, as implied in *The Dog Factory*, was too alluring not to explore.

The hot dog's early connection to one of America's world-famous movie studios underlines its growing significance in popular culture. Walt Disney's Mickey Mouse would make cinematic history in the *The Karnival Kid* (1929) as the first talking cartoon character ever.<sup>13</sup> Employed as a hot dog vender at a fair in the short, Mickey's first words are "Hot dog! Hot dog!" tying the hot dog to the Walt Disney legacy. What is perhaps more remarkable, however, is how hot dogs are portrayed in the short. Similar to *The Dog Factory*, the cartoon uses the dual meaning of the word 'dog' as a running gag, but this time the sausages themselves are alive, effectively acting like real dogs. They bark, scratch their non-existent ears and, most disturbingly, follow all of Mickey's commands. In an effort to woo his girlfriend Minnie, Mickey orders one of his dogs to jump into the mustard jar and wrap itself in a bread bun. When Minnie tries to take a bite, the dog cries out in pain and runs away. Mickey finally catches it, reprimanding the dog by giving it a spanking, followed by the dog biting Mickey's finger.

Whether cute or unsettling, the duality of the word "dog" in *The Karnival Kid* has less to do with a dark revelation of the possible origin of hot dog meat and more with playing off a cheesy pun. Even so, the implication is still there in the connection between dog as sausage and dog as living animal. However, by playing up the purely comical aspect of dog's dual meaning and not portraying a transformation of a real-life dog into food, the macabre element is lost. That disturbing side is still there, but it is unintentional. This purely funny take on the dog-sausage-canine pun still has a place in contemporary culture as well. One present-day incarnation of the dog-sausage-canine pun is Pluto's Dog House at Disneyland California where Pluto, Mickey's pet dog, supposedly serves up "premium hot dogs."<sup>14</sup> Outside of the Disney imperium one can find the "Casual Canine Hot Diggity Dog with Mustard Costume for Dogs", an item allowing dog owners to dress up their pet dog as a sausage dog in a bun, complete with a yellow mustard swirl.<sup>15</sup> The pet and the sausage are completely merged in this scenario and considered to be one entity, discouraging the association between hot dogs and actual dog meat.

The "dog" in hot dog also led to the creation of a hot dog pun not involving sausages or meat, but astrology. As an anonymous contributor to *The Goodland Republic* stated in August of 1903: "A Writer claims the dog star Sirius, causes the heat. A case of "hot dog" probably - but we hope the warm little rascal never gets to chasing his tail. It's hot enough now. This is Serius."<sup>16</sup> Alluding to an apparent heat wave and not afraid to pun, the writer connected the star Sirius - also known as the dog star - to the 'dog' in hot dog. Simultaneously, the "hot" in hot dog is used to allude to the warm weather, while the phrase 'hot dog' itself is used to mean something to the effect of 'bullocks' or rubbish. This last connotation is interesting, as it is not included in the Oxford English Dictionary's entry on hot dog, indicating that it is quite a rare usage of the word.<sup>17</sup> It showcases how Americans enthusiastically explored and seized on the fluidity of meaning encapsulated in the words 'hot' and 'dog'. This way, completely new images, meanings, and associations could emerge, regardless of whether they stuck around or not.

It was not just the word ‘dog’ that led to scrutiny, the fact that it was a ‘hot’ dog was also cause for suspicion. In a semi-serious piece from 1921 in *The Washington Times*, a group of anonymous writers declared that “it may be necessary to legislate (...) the well-known ‘hot dog.’”<sup>18</sup> Supposedly written against the possible prohibition of “acts of cruelty against animals” in England, the authors argued that “if they are going to protect the raw oyster from going alive into the human stomach, they should protect the human stomach against the hot dog.”<sup>19</sup> According to the source, “government scientists” had proved after all that the “the dog is hot because the packers fill him with imported Spanish pepper.”<sup>20</sup> Spanish peppers are neither a health risk nor a required ingredient of any type of hot dog recipe. The writers were right about one thing, however, but not in the way they thought. The hot dog has indeed been proven to be a health hazard, but mainly because of the processed red meat that is considered to be carcinogenic nowadays.<sup>21</sup> As irony would have it, the anti-animal welfare writers were right that “nobody is interested in what happens to mankind” when it comes to the flesh used for hot dogs.<sup>22</sup>

Another early health critic arguing against the hot dog was Harvard University president Charles William Eliot, who in 1903 completely banned the dish from campus. In a *New-York Tribune* piece from the same year titled “‘Hot Dog’ Banished From Harvard,” Eliot’s reasoning for barring the snack is cited as his belief that the hot dog was “conducive to dyspepsia.”<sup>23</sup> Curiously, the author of this article used a somewhat apprehensive tone when using the term hot dog, as it only appeared in air quotes. Moreover, the author seemed to suggest that something else might, in fact, be implied with the novel name for the student snack. The text continued: “the frankfurter, which with the mug of hot coffee and a ‘plaster of mustard’, has become dear to the student heart under *the suggestive name* of ‘hot dog.’”<sup>24</sup> Why exactly the author believed ‘hot dog’ to have a suggestive undertone remained a mystery, however.

At first glance, “suggestive” could imply the possibly unhealthy and lurid contents of its meat as coming from dogs. Yet, there is another, more likely explanation. The term hot dog had another similarly playful definition, as it could also refer to a “flashy, ostentatiously successful person,” or a “show-off.”<sup>25</sup> In its early use, this meaning of the phrase was mostly used in the context of student life. In *Some Famous American Schools* (1903), for instance, it is explained that hot dog can refer to a “boy who, while doing something out of the ordinary way, however excellently, conveys the impression that there is something of the ‘swelled head’ about it.”<sup>26</sup> This type of hot dog, as smart or accomplished they may be, also has something annoying to them. Their supposed youthful success lead to a sense of irritable pretension. This definition evokes an image of Harvard as an institution full of intelligent hot dogs, who are also preoccupied with eating the sausage alongside their coffee and mustard.

In addition to describing a flamboyant but astute person as a ‘hot dog,’ the term slowly became associated with showy but gifted athletes around the 1960s, especially baseball players.<sup>27</sup> This shift may not come as a surprise, because there already was a strong association between the hot dog as food and the sport of baseball. Ever since the turn of the twentieth century, it had been one of most the popular snacks at baseball stadiums.<sup>28</sup> Exemplifying the wonderful flexibility of language, the athletic ‘hot dog’ spawned a new English verb: to hot

dog. Like its counterpart noun, this verb phrase means “to show off” or “to perform with ostentatious skill,” and it usually refers to sportspeople.<sup>29</sup> The merging of the word hot dog with the showiness of American sport events might seem unsurprising considering the hot dog’s present status as something of an informal national emblem. Yet, it might be here that the first strong associations between the hot dog and a sense of Americanness can be found.

Despite the constant cultural uneasiness surrounding the term hot dog in the first half of the twentieth century, a very specific moment in history would signify its true acceptance as a part of American culture. “KING TRIES HOT DOG AND ASKS FOR MORE,” a flashy header in *The New York Times* from June 11, 1939 read. King George VI of the United Kingdom and his wife Queen Elizabeth had come to visit President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and, on that occasion, attended “a typical Roosevelt picnic party” at Hyde Park, New York.<sup>30</sup> The novelty of a British King eating “his first hot dog” should not be underestimated. It was in a sense a symbolic clash between the most prestigious entity of the ‘old world’ and one of the lowest, most vulgar contributions of the ‘new world’. What may have helped the hot dog’s case is that “practically all of the richest and therefore (...) the very best Americans eat hot dogs,” as a writer from the *Philadelphia Inquirer* suggested. The idea “that the dog is vulgar” had thus disappeared. In 1939, American “aristocracy” had already embraced the hot dog, “the name by which it is now known to all clean-minded, right-thinking Americans.”<sup>31</sup> This shift made it easier for the British King and Queen to embrace it as well, which in turn cemented the status of the hot dog in American culture.

The hot dog had become firmly accepted as a new form of Americana by the 1940s. Its status as uniquely American became a source for modest national pride, although its former vulgar reputation was never completely forgotten. In the 1954 film *Sabrina*, the hot dog’s ambiguous status was again invoked. When the capitalist Linus Larrabee is confronted by his angry brother, whom he tries to force into a profitable arranged marriage, he exclaims: “You make it sound so vulgar David, as if the son of the hot dog dynasty was being offered in marriage to the daughter of the mustard king.”<sup>32</sup> Alluding to the diplomatic marriages of European monarchs and nobles, the standing of American nobility is based on cheap mass products like the hot dog.

As the hot dog became an increasingly popular word, its predecessors got a less favorable treatment. Whereas the hot dog inspired a hit song by Perry Como called “Hot Diggity Dog Ziggity Boom” in 1956, wiener had fallen from grace. By 1970, as stated in the University of South Dakota’s glossary *Common Slang*, it was commonly understood as a word for “a person disliked by the speaker.”<sup>33</sup> Why the hot dog could change its image for the better and the wiener got the short end of the stick is hard to say. Perhaps the wiener’s other connotation as a euphemism for penis had something to do with it, degrading the term’s reputation.<sup>34</sup>

In the meantime, the hot dog’s rise to national fame continued steadily. In 1999 both PBS and the Food Network released documentaries about the history of this “American gastronomical icon,” which was at this point considered “almost synonymous with American culture itself.”<sup>35</sup> Near the end of *A Hot Dog Program*, a customer at a hot dog stand is asked for his opinion on the dish. “I think, like, the hot dog is part of the fabric of America!” he

answers with a smile, a fresh hot dog in hand. The documentary's voice-over concludes: "The closest we'll maybe ever get to a national dish."<sup>36</sup>

In the end, to respond to the reader's question posed earlier on, why does it matter who invented the hot dog? As the hot dog is both irresistibly tasty and unapologetically American, the country's cultural fixation with the dish reveals both fascination and concern for its own culture. On the one hand, the dish has been regarded as a purely lower-class symbol, believed to signify the depth of American vulgarity, classlessness, and amorality. On the other hand, the hot dog has also been seen as a well-beloved international icon, whose simplicity and widespread appeal embodies the best that America has to offer. The hot dog, as a symbol, represents both notions at the same time. As with the supposed dark truth hidden in the word 'dog,' a fear remains that the cultural appeal of the hot dog might also turn out to be deceitful. Ultimately, the hot dog matters because it can give a much-needed glimpse into the inner workings of American culture.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Frederick J. Haskin, "Wilkes-Barre Times Leader," *The Saturday Evening Newspaper*, July 16, 1938.

<sup>2</sup> Bruce Kraig, *Hot Dog: A Global History* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2009), 10; Bruce Kraig, "Man Eats Dogs: The Hot Dog Stands of Chicago," *Gastronomica* 5.1 (Winter 2005): 57-8; "frankfurter, n.," "kielbasa, n.," "wienerwurst, n." *OED Online*, September 2020, Oxford University Press.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> "Hot dog, n, adj, int." *OED Online*. The sentence in *Indiana Evansville Daily Courier* is the first mention of the word "hot dog" recorded by the Oxford English Dictionary. If this is also the first ever mention of the word "hot dog" in print in general is unfortunately unknown.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> "Hot diggity dog, int." *OED Online*.

<sup>7</sup> *Table Talk*, April 1912 via "Hot dog, n, adj, int." *OED Online*.

<sup>8</sup> Edwin S. Porter, Camera, Inc Thomas A. Edison, and Paper Print Collection, *Dog Factory*, United States: Edison Manufacturing Co, 1904, video, <https://www.loc.gov/item/96519547/>.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* Edard A. Torpoco, "Why We Eat What We Eat: Explanations for Human Food Preferences and Implications for Government Regulation," in *Food and Drug Law* (January 25th, 1997): IIIB.

<sup>11</sup> "Miners Eat Horses and Dogs. Food Very Scarce on Tanana Rivers - Supplies En Route from Dawson," *The New York Times*, May 27, 1904.

<sup>12</sup> Kraig, *Hot Dog*, 9-10.

<sup>13</sup> The first animation to feature a character making sound was Walt Disney's *Steamboat Willie* (1928). In this short Mickey Mouse whistles. J.B., Kaufman and David Gerstein, *Walt Disney's Mickey Mouse: The Ultimate History*, (Cologne: Taschen, 2018), 40.

<sup>14</sup> "Pluto's Dog House," Disney, <https://disneyland.disney.go.com/dining/disneyland/plutos-dog-house/>.

<sup>15</sup> "Casual Canine Hot Diggity Dog with Mustard Costume for Dogs, 12" Small," Amazon.com, <https://www.amazon.com/Casual-Canine-Diggity-Mustard-12/dp/B000AS1OES>.

<sup>16</sup> Cupola Sketches, *The Goodland Republic*, 14 August 1903, 2

<sup>17</sup> "hot dog, n, adj, int."

<sup>18</sup> No Title, *The Washington Times*, November 26, 1921, 16.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> "Cancer: Carcinogenicity of the Consumption of Red Meat and Processed Meat," The World Health Organization, October 26, 2015, <https://www.who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/cancer-carcinogenicity-of-the-consumption-of-red-meat-and-processed-meat>; Kraig, *Hot Dog*, 89-90.

<sup>22</sup> No Title, *The Washington Times*, 16.

<sup>23</sup> "'Hot Dog' Banished From Harvard: President Eliot Thinks the Night Luncheon Brings of Dyspepsia," *New-York Tribune*, December 2, 1903.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* Emphasis mine.

<sup>25</sup> “Hot dog, n, adj, int”

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Kraig, *Hot Dog*, 24.

<sup>29</sup> “Hot dog, v.”

<sup>30</sup> Felix Jr. Belair, “King Tries Hot Dog: And Asks for More,” *The New York Times*, June 11, 1939.

<sup>31</sup> “The Origin of the Hot Dog,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, June 17, 1939.

<sup>32</sup> Billy Wilder, Paramount Pictures, *Sabrina*, 1954.

<sup>33</sup> University of South Dakota, *Current Slang*, 1970, 26.

<sup>34</sup> “wiener, n.”

<sup>35</sup> *America Eats: History on a Bun*, The Food Network, 1999.

<sup>36</sup> *A Hot Dog Program*, 1999, PBS Food.

## Book Review

*Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora*

Stephanie E. Smallwood (Harvard University Press, 2007)

Sophie van den Bosch | Leiden University

*This book review was written for the course Deep Rivers in the MA program in North American Studies*

Through a compelling narrative, Stephanie E. Smallwood's *Saltwater Slavery* (2007) provides an in-depth analysis of the transatlantic slave trade, tracing the involuntary passage of around 300,000 captives from the African Gold Coast to the American colonies.<sup>1</sup> In this historical account, Smallwood goes beyond the conventional quantitative representation of the slave trade to give those enslaved a more rightful and human position in American social history.<sup>2</sup> Aiming to understand the slave experience, she argues that the forced one-way route of the transatlantic slave trade and the "traumatic echo of commodification" completely impacted the Africans' identity, life, and later, the African diaspora in the Americas.<sup>3</sup>

The book's structure follows that one-way route by presenting numerical facts and geographical information as well as by sketching the environment and inserting African histories and traditions. Exemplary is the analysis of traditions and rituals regarding death. Without performing such rituals, death at sea meant "an unfulfilled journey to the grave."<sup>4</sup> Apart from being a burden for the surviving slaves – the so-called "saltwater slaves" – to live with, it also meant that even "African dead were enslaved and commodified, trapped in a time-space regime in which they were unable fully to die."<sup>5</sup> The chronological structure underscores the argument, as it makes clear there is no point of return for the captives.

The attention to African (societal) traditions and spirituality adds a different outlook to a typically Eurocentric history. Additionally, Smallwood offers a new perspective by stepping away from quantitative discussions and focusing on the human experience instead. Slavery was not just an economic affair. Slavery involved humans, with severe consequences for their personhoods and identities, as Smallwood shows with her analysis of the slave market. The unique set of documents, from formal accounts to personal narratives and correspondence, in combination with her engaging writing style, makes Smallwood's work an important contribution to the historiography of transatlantic slavery.

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**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Stephanie E. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-7.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

## Book Review

### *The Battle of the Breton Woods: John Maynard Keynes, Harry Dexter White, and the Making of a New World Order*

**Benn Steil (Princeton University Press, 2013)**

**Adriana Dancu** | University of Groningen

*This book review was written for the course Global USA: Business, Work, and Wealth in the BA program in American Studies*

In *The Battle of Bretton Woods* (2013), American economist Benn Steil analyzes the events surrounding the Bretton Woods Agreement, which put in place a system of monetary management that established the rules for commercial and financial relations. He focuses on the American technocrat Harry Dexter White and the British economist John Maynard Keynes, who represented two global powers (the US and Britain), who would ultimately put the basis for the agreement.

Steil compellingly shows how the blueprint for the postwar economic order was drawn and how China has challenged this order. At the same time, his scope is limited: while Steil glorifies the political power of the United States, he ignores that of most other nations. The latter are wrongfully characterized as passive observers, with no real engagement in the negotiations. In his minutes of the Closing Plenary Session, US Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau had originally depicted the involvement of the other nations at the conference by including the statements of other nations on the Bretton Woods Agreement, which is neglected in Steil's work.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Eric Helleiner's book *Forgotten Foundations of Bretton Woods* (2014) describes the role other nations had in shaping the new economic system, focusing especially on the deep involvement of Latin American countries.<sup>2</sup>

The challenge that China has posed to the Bretton Woods Agreement, as can be deduced from Steil's book, was its creation of the 1976 Beijing Consensus in response to Bretton Woods. Through this Consensus – a set of economic and political policies created to offer more leverage to government interference in the economy and oppose neoliberalism – China argued that its economic growth peaked, therefore implying that neoliberalism was not the only way towards economic development, which might influence other nations to do away with capitalism too. This new economic system created a new world order – institutionalized through international institutions, such as the IMF and the World Bank – of which the normative framework persists today. Therefore, despite its limited presentation of the Agreement process, *The Battle of Bretton Woods* is a worthy guide to better understand the events that shaped and continue to shape global economic developments.

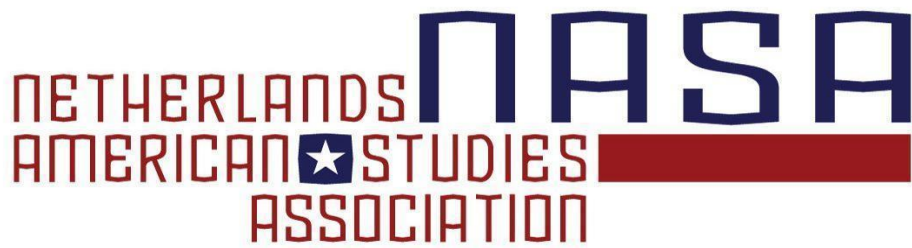
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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> "Minutes of the Closing Plenary Session," Bretton Woods Conference, July 22, 1944.

<sup>2</sup> Eric Helleiner, *Forgotten Foundations of Bretton Woods: International Development and the Making of the Postwar Order* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2014), 258.





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