The Chicago Style

Loyola University Chicago's Undergraduate History Journal

Edited by LUC History Students

2026

The Chicago Style

Undergraduate History Journal

Loyola University Chicago

Department of History

2025-2026

Table of Contents

Letter from the Chief Editor

Grace Loren Kubek | Phi Alpha Theta, Chi Mu Chapter President 2025-2026

Thank you all so much for taking the time to peruse *The Chicago Style,* Loyola University Chicago's very own undergraduate history journal! So many people have put immense time and effort into this project, and I am so excited to present it to you all.

This journal is a platform for undergraduate students to share the original historical research they have been working on in their time at Loyola. We want to ensure that the hours upon hours that students spend on these projects is recognized and applauded! You are about to encounter a vast range of themes, methods, and geographic locations in the following pages. There is so much to learn within this journal, and so many incredible stories to experience.

Amidst efforts to expunge legitimate history in favor of false fabrications, it is more important than ever that we encourage new generations of historians to think critically about, thoroughly research, and effectively share history. History must be told in all of its complexity, which is no easy task. It is, however, an absolutely necessary one.
We hope that you see such efforts reflected in this journal.

This journal would not have been possible without our authors and our board of editors. I greatly appreciate all the work you put into editing these papers. I also want to emphasize that none of this work would have been possible without the teaching and support of our amazing history professors. Thank you so much for your time and dedication in guiding us through the research process, teaching us the material, and helping us produce work that we are proud of.

Special thanks to PAT Faculty Supervisor Dr. Leslie Dossey, History Department Chair Dr. Bradford Hunt, Undergraduate Program Director Dr. Kelly O'Connor, Programming Chair Dr. Tikia Hamilton, and Administrative Assistant David Hays for their support on this and many other PAT projects. We are so grateful for all you do for PAT, and for the history department as a whole.

Thank you for taking the time to read this journal and explore the work of these amazing students. Once you reach the end, I implore you to keep learning, exploring, and thinking critically about history.

With much gratitude,
Grace Loren Kubek

Contributors

Editor in Chief
Grace Loren Kubek

Editors
Beatrice Craig
Lauren Ford
Anna Hanson
Taylor Holland
Maggie McCart
Olivia Pate
Kennedy Spencer
Sadie Walden
Sofia Wardzala

Authors
Beatrice Craig
Grace Kubek
Claudia Breed
Josephine Jurasas
Abigail Lawton
Kennedy Spencer
Kylie Gaides Bevan
Sadie Walden
Liam Wilson
David Bolotin
Sofia Wardzala
Kieran Kelly
Victoria Prom
Tylor Serpico

Faculty Advisor
Dr. Leslie Dossey

Thank you all so much!

Arts and Literature

“My Poem is life, and it can grow”: A Historical and Literary Analysis of the Poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks

By: Beatrice Craig

As the migration patterns of African Americans during the 20th century sent millions to metropolitan areas, the ensuant blossom of Black art became known as the “Negro Renaissance.”[1] Though the concept of the “Harlem Renaissance” would become much more popular to describe this literary outpour, the movement occurred throughout the country as African Americans sought to define themselves in the aftermath of massive relocation during the Great Migration. Writers of the renaissance not only aimed to capture the violence and discrimination they faced but to also celebrate Black culture and community. Though some of its participants would consider it a failed movement that abruptly fizzled out into oblivion,[2] many contemporary thinkers contend that the movement was indeed a topical and successful articulation of African American identity and intellectualism.[3] This reimagining of the “Negro Renaissance” importantly centered its writers and poetry in the historical context of the movement’s emergence.

Because of her investment in capturing Black identity as it existed in 1950s Chicago, a primary destination for families migrating North, Gwendolyn Brooks became one of the most important writers of this “Negro Renaissance.” Her works were representative of the larger modernist impetus of the renaissance: to imagine the simultaneous joy and suffocation of Black life in the city, which Brooks captured so well because she shared those experiences. As she once wrote, “poetry is life distilled.” Upon Brooks’s death in 2000, an announcement published by the

[1] Ernest Julius Mithcell. “‘Black Renaissance’: A Brief History of the Concept.” 2010
[2] Langston Hughes, “Harlem Renaissance,” in *The Big Sea*, 1940
[3] Houston A. Baker. “Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance.” 1987.

Baltimore Sun remembered her poetic style as the "study of the flower crannied in the wall," which "illuminated the sweet joys and bitter struggles of African Americans' daily life."[4] Though she experimented with form, she persistently wrote with a rhythmic cadence that embodied the force of her poetic voice. However, some decades into her professional career, her artistic vision underwent a distinct shift that coincided with the broader radicalization of the Black Freedom Movement in America. Though she always wrote with a self-awareness and social consciousness, paying dues to the complex and dualistic lives of her community, it wasn't until later in her career that she developed a true "Black consciousness."[5] In an interview with editor Ida Lewis in 1971, Brooks attributed this awakening to the Second Black Writers' Conference at Fisk University in 1967. There, she "found what has stimulated my life these last three years: young people, full of a new spirit. They seemed stronger and taller, really ready to take on the challenges."[6] This spirit infuses Brooks's later work. In this essay, I aim to explicate the deeply historical nature of Gwendolyn Brooks's poetry. My intention is not to track her personal growth as a poet; rather this essay contends that her work parallels the broader maturation of the Black Freedom Movement as activists began to advocate for a particular articulation of a sociopolitical Black consciousness by the late 1960s. Though her work would eventually assume a more explicitly political tone, the entire body of her ork speaks to fundamental truths about Black life throughout the 20th century, with a particular emphasis on urban development and housing rights in Chicago's South Side.

Living in the South Side of Chicago throughout her life—from 63rd to S. Evans and S. Champlain—Gwendolyn Brooks experienced first-hand the hopes and disillusionments of

---

[4] "Gwendolyn Brooks Dead at 83." *The Sun*, 2000.
[5] See Steve Biko, *I Write What I Like*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).
[6] Gwendolyn Brooks, interview by Ida Lewis, *Report from Part One*, 167.

African American life in Chicago, a city painted as the promise land throughout the Great Migration. In a 1967 interview, she spoke on the way the human environment of Bronzeville "nourished" her poetic voice. Living in the Grand Boulevard community area, "there was a good deal of life in the raw all about me. You might feel that this would be disturbing, but it was not. It contributed to my writing progress. I wrote about what I saw and heard in the street. I lived in a small second-floor apartment at the corner, and I could look first on one side and then on the other. There was my material."[7] The community would further cultivate her writing with the dedication of the South Side Community Art Center by first lady Eleanor Roosevelt in 1941.[8] Here, Brooks would encounter Inez Cunningham, a reader for *Poetry* magazine who organized and led a poetry-writing group. When Brooks submitted her first manuscript for publishing, containing many of the poems she finalized in Cunningham's group,[9] little did she know that it would enter the hands of the prolific Chicago writer Richard Wright. Though he offered minor suggestions—all of which she would ultimately reject—he lauded the draft and the promise of this young writer:

> She easily catches the pathos of petty destinies; the whimper of the wounded; the tiny incidents that plague the lives of the desperately poor, and the problem of color prejudice among Negroes. … Only one who has actually lived and suffered in a kitchenette could render the feeling of lonely frustration as well as she does. … Miss Brooks is real and so are her poems.[10]

With this high recommendation, Brooks's first book of poetry, *A Street in Bronzeville*, was published by Harper & Brothers in 1945, when she was just 28 years old. Though her later work is generally considered more "sophisticated," it is the authenticity and investment in capturing

---

[7] Gwendolyn Brooks, interview by Paul M. Angle, *Report from Part One*, 133.
[8] Sherry Tierney, *ReZoning Chicago's Modernisms*, 22.
[9] Gwendolyn Brooks, interview by Paul M. Angle, *Report from Part One*, 139.
[10] Henry S. Canby, "Frost? Williams? No, Gwendolyn Brooks," The Pulitzer files, Pulitzer Prizes, https://www.pulitzer.org/article/frost-williams-no-gwendolyn-brooks.

the "pain…and the spirits of black life"[11] acclaimed by Wright that established *Bronzeville* as a culturally and historically significant text.

While she speaks to the universal pangs of racial prejudice in *Bronzeville*, the collection is distinctly Chicagoan, as exemplified by the title. "Bronzeville" refers to the historic "Black Belt" of Chicago, a district spanning from the Near South Side to Washington Park, latitudinally bound by Fuller Park and Lake Michigan. After the first wave of the Great Migration in 1917, the African American population in the city jumped from 2% of the total to 33% by 1970.[12] Though factors like WWII slowed the migration patterns, America's Black population would, throughout the 20th century, continue to seek refuge in the promise of Northern equality. As one 1917 *Chicago Defender* article urged, "Cast the yoke from around your neck. See the light, when you have crossed the Ohio River, breathe the fresh air and say, 'Why didn't I come before.'"[13] What they found instead was a people just as reactionary to the increasing Black population, causing riots to explode throughout the city.[14] This violence eventually served as justification for discriminatory housing practices, such as the "redlining" codified by the Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC) under the 1930s New Deal. Denied housing in white neighborhoods and refused loans on account of their race, African Americans were ultimately forced into the roughly 30 blocks that encompassed the "Black Belt."[15] Though policy makers and the white middle-class insisted that "if immigrants from Europe could rise from the ghetto, so could

---

[11] Don L. Lee, preface to *Report from Part One*.
[12] James Grossman, "Great Migration," Encyclopedia of Chicago. http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/545.html#:~:text=Chicago%20attracted%20slightly%20more%20than,1970%2C%20they%20were%2033%20percent.
[13] Negro in Illinois - Manuscript [2 folders], n.d., Box: 41b, Folder: 1863d-e. Jack Conroy papers, Midwest-MS-Conroy. The Newberry Library - Modern Manuscripts and Archives.
[14] Most importantly, the Race Riots of 1919.
[15] "Map: Distribution of Negroes in Chicago by wards, 1922" Negros in the City lantern slides, Society of Collectors, Newberry Library Archives and Special Collections.

today's Negroes,"[16] African Americans endured uniquely racialized treatment that stifled them from achieving the same significant economic freedom as their European predecessors.

In *Bronzeville*, the question "what happens to a dream deferred?"[17] echoes throughout as Brooks examines this constriction of Black life to Chicago's South Side. In a culture that often flattens African Americans to stereotypes, Brooks allows her characters a sense of interiority that enlivens them, therefore rejecting popular culture's criminalization or victimization of Black Americans. However, despite this interiority, her characters are often unable to reach their full capacity, hampered by circumstance. This is especially true for the women and girls of the collection. In "Sadie and Maud,"[18] we are presented the two options young women must invariably choose between—education or domesticity: "Sadie bore two babies / Under her maiden name. / Maud and Ma and Papa / Nearly died of shame. / Every one but Sadie / Nearly died of shame. / … Maud, who went to college / Is a thin brown mouse. / She is living all alone / In this old house." Maud's choice to attend university, something only 2% of Black women had achieved by 1940,[19] provides her economic independence; however, this choice leaves her "thin" and "all alone." For Sadie, despite her own satisfaction with her decisions, everyone is ashamed of her. This juxtaposition of the characters offers a desolate perspective on the choices available to young Black women: if economic stability does not guarantee happiness, but domesticity brings about shame, how does one succeed?

"Queen of the Blues"[20] poses a similar question as Mame, the titular jazz Queen, performs for the club. However, her dazzle is punctured by loss and defeat, which transposes into

---

[16] Report for the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, 2016 ed, x.
[17] Langston Hughes, "Harlem."
[18] Gwendolyn Brooks, *A Street In Bronzeville*, 14.
[19] Anne McDaniel, Thomas A DiPrete, et al. "The Black Gender Gap in Educational Attainment: Historical Trends and Racial Comparisons," 892.
[20] Gwendolyn Brooks, *A Street In Bronzeville*, 40-1.

the poem's refrain: "Mame was singing / At the Midnight Club / And the place was red / With blues. / She could shake her body / Across the floor. / For what did she have to lose?" For what did she have to lose—this is the question that permeates the text as we are introduced to all that Mame has already lost; her mother has passed, her father is absent, she has no sibling, nor child, nor lover. With no one to love her, Mame attempts to justify to herself the sexual exploitation she endures as the Queen of the Midnight Club. However, as the M.C. blares into the microphone, fawning over her body, Mame realizes:

> Men don't tip their
> Hats to me.
> They pinch my arms
> And they slap my thighs,
> But when has a man
> Tipped his hat to me?

Though this "thought ran through her / Like a fire," the poem ultimately offers her no reprieve as it concludes on the reality of the disrespect she endures throughout life.

Also victim to employment exploitation is "Hattie Scott,"[21] a domestic worker like 60% of working Black women in 1940.[22] Though domestic work was among the best paid employment opportunities in urban areas, her life is controlled by the demands of her employer: "off until the time when the sun comes back. / Then it's wearily back for me." Despite the compensation and security provided by domestic service, Hattie enjoys little autonomy in her life, condemned to ceaseless menial tasks. Much like Mame in "Queen of the Blues," Hattie attempts to refine her sense of femininity by frequenting the hairdresser. "Gimme an upsweep, Minnie, / With humpteen baby curls, / 'Bout time I got some glamour. / I'll show them girls / …

---

[21] Gwendolyn Brooks, *A Street In Bronzeville*, 33, 35-6

[22] James S. Cunningham and Nadja Zalokar. "The Economic Progress of Black Women," 540.

Wait'll they see my upsweep," she imagines. And yet, this fantasy is immediately undermined as Hattie imagines her funeral:

> No Lodge with banners flappin'
> Will follow after me.
> But one lone little short man
> Dressed all shabbily.
>
> He'll have his buck-a-dozen,
> He'll lay them on with care.
> And the angels will be watchin',
> And kiss him sweetly there.
>
> Then off he'll take his mournin' black,
> And wipe his tears away.
> And the girls, they will be waitin'.
> There's nothin' more to say.[23]

Despite her attempts to cultivate her autonomy and luxuriate where she can, Hattie sees the inevitability of her failure, punctuated by this final abandonment at her funeral.

Men in *Bronzeville* also enjoy little economic or personal freedom as they attempt to realize their desires. One of the collection's most anthologized poems, "Sunday of Satin Legs Smith,"[24] follows the Sisyphean life of a zoot suiter as he attempts to realize his dreams of fulfillment and admiration. Though he fortifies himself with "his lotion, lavender and oil"—after all, "life must be aromatic"—and his "wonder-suits in yellow and in wine…with shoulder padding that is wide / and cocky and determined his pride," the poem renders this a façade. Underneath this satin armor festers "his desertedness, his intricate fear, the / Postponed

---

[23] Gwendolyn Brooks, *A Street In Bronzeville*, 36
[24] Gwendolyn Brooks, *A Street In Bronzeville*, 24-30

resentments and the prim precautions." When he parades the streets, attempting to become the cultured, prosperous man he imagines himself to be, "[t]he pasts of his ancestors lean against / Him. Crowd him. Fog out his identity."[25] Though he pursues opulence, making himself feel better by making himself look better, he cannot escape the legacy of racism which defines him and his surroundings.

In "Gay Chaps at the Bar,"[26] Brooks chronicles the disillusionment of Black soldiers who are precluded from the rewards of patriotism conferred to their white counterparts. Drawing from letters she personally received from Black soldiers in WWI, Brooks depicts the discrimination these Black troops faced: "when the Negroes came [the white troops] were perplexed. / These Negroes looked like men." Images of Blackness as corrupt, violent, and inferior pervaded the white imagination, such that even when they make the same sacrifice for their country, these men were identified by their racial identity rather than their patriotism. Though the soldiers persist to "remark on patriotism, sing, / Salute the flag, thrill heavily," "inward grows a soberness, an awe, / A fear, a deepening hollow through the cold, / For even if we come out standing up / How shall we smile." As W.E.B. DuBois captured in a 1919 essay, "We *return*. / We *return from fighting*. / We *return fighting*."[27] Recruitment posters from WWI sold a promise of reciprocity,[28] that if you serve for your country, your country will in turn serve you; this assurance never manifested. Instead, just months after DuBois published this piece, Chicago exploded into a period of racial violence and white supremacist terrorism, the Red Summer of 1919. This is the manifestation of DuBois's refrain "We return fighting"—there is no respite, even on home territory.

---

[25] Gwendolyn Brooks, *A Street In Bronzeville*, 24-29
[26] Gwendolyn Brooks, *A Street In Bronzeville*, 52
[27] W.E.B. DuBois "Returning Soldiers (1919)," 91.
[28] E.G. Renesch, Colored Man Is No Slacker, 1918.

Despite their attempts to realize their dreams, the characters of *Bronzeville* remain suffocated by the racism embedded in the formation of their community. In an essay on the politics of space in "Segregation Narratives," educator GerShun Avilez argues, "the way that the Black body is housed in these mid-20th-century segregation narratives becomes a representation of how they are 'housed' in the body politic: estrangement in one parallels disenfranchisement in the other."[29] Which is to say, even in private domestic spaces, these characters are unable to escape the reach of disenfranchisement. Nonetheless, underpinning the "Blues" of *Bronzeville* is a simmering frustration, a nascent strength, and a persistence. Rather than focusing on mere estrangement and disenfranchisement, Brooks privileges the internal lives of individuals who are otherwise distilled into stereotypes in the white imagination. This is especially important for her Black female characters who, as scholar Gary Smith contends, were often romanticized even in Harlem Renaissance poetry, despite its realist themes.[30] Although the movement's intention was to celebrate Black virtues and foster pride, this trend inadvertently cleansed or fictionalized these women who were already constrained by the confluence of race and gender stereotypes in popular culture. By investigating the internal lives of these women and acknowledging their dreams, Brooks avoids further sentimentalization. However, despite this attentive investment in Black life, critics argue that these early texts lack the full political force that her writing would later achieve. Brooks herself acknowledged a restraint in these early works, proclaiming in a 1967 interview that she might still have been "trying to prove something as I [wrote]."[31] Nonetheless, *Bronzeville* remains an important and historical expression of Black Chicago life that rejects perpetuating inhabitants of the South Side to the white gaze.

[29] GerShun Avilez, "Housing the Black Body," 146.
[30] Gary Smith, "Mythologies of Black Women," 38.
[31] Gwendolyn Brooks, interview by Paul M. Angle, *Report from Part One*, 158.

Brooks would continue to explore this theme of "what happens to a dream deferred" throughout her works. However, her later works more explicitly condemn the forces that sustain racial segregation while also rejecting narratives of African Americans' inferiority. Brooks's 1968 collection *In the Mecca* is one of the first articulations of this. As she contemplated in a 1969 interview, "I started out talking about Bronzeville, but 'Bronzeville's' almost meaningless by now, I suppose, since Bronzeville has spread and spread and spread all over…but almost nobody talks about Bronzeville."[32] Though Brooks had lived in Bronzeville since her family moved to Chicago in her childhood, the community serving as the site and inspiration for her writing, her sense of its decay taps into a broader awareness of the deliberate destruction of the architecture of the neighborhood after decades of disinvestment in Black lives. Even after the passage of the Fair Housing Act of 1968, equitable change failed to manifest itself in Chicago as the legacy of redlining perpetuated tactics that exploited Black homeowners and privileged white. When Black families immigrated to white neighborhoods, the HOLC devalued the property value of the neighborhood, downgrading the neighborhoods for this 'racial pollution.' This practice fostered within whites a fear of "Negro invasion." Realtors exploited this fear in practices like "blockbusting," where they used threats of "Negro invasion" to scare white homeowners out of their neighborhoods and then mark up the price of the homes on average 84% to Black families.[33] The ensuant "White Flight," in which white families fled diverse metropolitan areas to the suburbs, further exacerbated wealth inequality between the races.[34] Even when African Americans emigrated into already Black neighborhoods, racial inequality persisted, as they would still have to endure the strains of living in a divested neighborhood.

---

[32] Gwendolyn Brooks, interview by George Stavros, *Report from Part One*, 160
[33] "The Plunder of Black Wealth in Chicago," The Samuel DuBois Cook Center on Social Equity, 2019.
[34] "White Flight," *Chicago Tribune*, 1978

Though slums existed within the white imagination as a natural consequence of Black migration, this history reveals that racial ghettoes were in fact consequences of disinvestment, racist housing practices, and fear mongering. Nonetheless, the existence of slums continued to serve as justification in themselves to raze Black neighborhoods and make way for white developments.

The apartment complex that inspired Brooks's 1968 *In the Mecca* embodied this reality. In "Chicago's Mecca Flat Blues," scholar Daniel Bluestone explores the "[t]he Mecca's extraordinary twentieth-century history" in which, "over time, race intersected with urban space to alter the history and fragment public perceptions of the Mecca. These changing perceptions stood at the center of a decade-long preservation struggle."[35] When the Mecca was constructed in 1891, its ornate Romanesque design spanned 234 feet along State Street and 266 feet west along Thirty-fourth Street to Dearborn, astonishing architectures and urban planners. With its 98 apartments, atria, and courtyards suffused with natural light, the Mecca and its accommodations served as a refuge from the cramped city. This deviated from the prevailing notions of Chicago School aesthetics by promising luxury and space in a city becoming increasingly cramped due to industrialization and population booms. Though the Mecca's builders initially anticipated a middle-class residency given the flats' curb appeal, a national depression prevented this from happening, resulting in the building's largely blue-collar residency by 1909. What did manifest was that "all of the Mecca's residents were white." However, this would change in the late 1910s due to the millions emigrating to Chicago along with the Great Migration. Because Mecca was in Bronzeville, it was forced to accommodate the increasing Black population, until eventually, the Mecca became almost all Black.

[35] Daniel Bluestone, "Chicago's Mecca Flat Blues," 382.

This population shift occurred to the chagrin of the newly founded Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT) that had begun to show interest in the Mecca's property for its campus. The devastation of the 1919 race riots, which further exacerbated racial tension in housing and urban planning in Chicago, facilitated the transferal of the Mecca to the ownership of IIT. Though the Institute sought to expediate its plans, the number of residents in the Mecca prevented them from immediate demolishment. However, leaders of IIT believed that the flats had been "beset by the increasing deterioration of the neighborhood" and needed to be cleared of its "blight," which is to say, its Black population. As Bluestone explained, the racial composition of the area and the building itself conflicted with IIT's conceptions of modernity and progress. Thus, in order to advance their clearing project, this Institute systematically allowed the courtyards to decay, until 1952, when they were officially allowed to demolish the Mecca. In the words of IIT's president in 1954, "[The Illinois Institute of Technology] will be the successor to another building…which we demolished…*because it did not fit the needs of our Industrial Era*, the once-famous Mecca Apartments" [emphasis added].[36] Embedded in this is a rhetoric of urban decay and racial blight that allowed the institute to shirk responsibility.

Though Brooks began her collection on the flats in the 1950s, she didn't complete it until 1968, the year succeeding her self-proclaimed awakening. In an interview, she described her intention to "present a large variety of personalities against a mosaic of daily affairs, recognizing that even the *grimmest* of these is likely to have a streak or two streaks of sun."[37] Much like in *A Street in Bronzeville, In the Mecca* humanizes individuals flattened by stereotypes of Blackness. However, *Mecca* seems to more explicitly critique the forces that perpetuated disinvestment and prompted the neighborhood's decline, thus offering a corrective to the historical memory that

---

[36] John T. Rettaliata, "Better Buildings Better Industrial Design," 1954.
[37] Gwendolyn Brooks, interview by George Stavros, *Report from Part One*, 160.

blamed inhabitants—rather than proprietors—for urban decay. Brooks includes in the epigraph a quotation from the 1950 *Harper's* magazine article written by John Bartlow Martin which popularized imagery of the Mecca as a once magnificent building left to ruin: "a great gray hulk of brick, four stories high, topped by an ungainly smokestack, ancient and enormous… The dirt courtyard is littered with newspapers and tin cans, milk cartons and broken glass…"[38] In his piece, he perpetuated racist narratives of urban blight, assigning responsibility to its Black populus. Opening *Mecca* in this way signals to the reader the counter memory work Brooks was engaging with by imagining the "mosaic of daily affairs" that persists in these spaces, despite society's attempt to pathologize them. Moreover, as the central conflict unfolds, we come to see how the architecture and imagined legacy of the Mecca looms over its inhabitants. Though the inhabitants each appeal to authorities—like "the Law" and God—for refuge, they are left to suffer the consequences of racist housing practices and neglect alone.

In the introduction, the omniscient narrator immediately positions the architecture of the Mecca as life-denying. "Sit where the light corrupts your face," it instructs, "Mies Van der Rohe retires from grace. / And the fair fables fall."[39] Invoking the building's architect reminds the audience of the architectural legacy of the building, of Van der Rohe's hopes for designing a modernist utopia that became undermined once the building's developers began to treat its residents as "blight." As a result, the abundant natural light that was once a luxury of the building is here reoriented as proof of the building's corruption. When Mrs. Sallie Smith arrives home, she "ascends the sick and influential stair,"[40] suggesting that the infection is sewn into its very foundation. Further, when the Mecca was originally designed in 1891, the size of the flats

---

[38] Gwendolyn Brooks, *In the Mecca*, ii.
[39] Gwendolyn Brooks, *In the Mecca*, 5.
[40] Gwendolyn Brooks, *In the Mecca*, 5.

astonished the press—one reporter commenting on how “each floor covered nearly one and a half acres.”[41] If the size once served as evidence of the Mecca’s magnificence, when Mrs. Sallie Smith’s daughter Pepita goes missing, the labyrinthine floorplan only facilitates her paranoia. The Mecca itself initially responds to her grief; Mrs. Smith goes

> Knock-knocking down the martyred halls …
> Doors behind whose yelling oak or pine
> Many flowers start, choke, reach up,
> Want help, get it, do not get it,
> Rally, bloom, or die on the wasting vine.[42]

The Mecca’s own inability to help seems to symbolize the systemic powerlessness of the inhabitants, particularly in the face of a missing girl.

The inhabitants are equally powerless to assist Mrs. Sadie in this moment of need, a chorus of “Ain’ seen er”[43] confronting the mother as she knocks on door after door. That no one has seen her is surprising given the sheer number of neighbors Mrs. Smith has; as the Black Belt population became further concentrated as African Americans were denied housing in predominantly white areas of Chicago, the Mecca by the early 1940s accommodated more than a thousand Black residents, far exceeding the number the building was designed to sustain.[44] However, as Daniela Kukrechtová wrote for the A*frican American Review*, “[s]everely cramped by both the physical conditions of their surrounds and the vicissitudes of the discourse on urban decline, the residents of the Mecca are prohibited from developing ‘public trust’ and have to rely on the concept of ‘private togetherness’ in order to survive.”[45] Thus, despite the “wide-flung

---

[41] Daniel Bluestone, “Chicago’s Mecca Flat Blues,” 383.
[42] Gwendolyn Brooks, *In the Mecca*, 15.
[43] Gwendolyn Brooks, *In the Mecca*, 14.
[44] Daniel Bluestone, “Chicago’s Mecca Flat Blues,” 394.
[45] Daniela Kukrechtová, “The Death and Life of a Chicago Edifice,” 459.

door" of room 215, each of the inhabitants seems consumed by their own personal quests for relief. When no one reports seeing Pepita, Mrs. Smith's imagination runs wild:

> [Pepita] will be brought by neighbor.
> Kind neighbor. …
> Suddenly
> everyone in the world is Mean. ...
> What
> cold poison could spew, what stench commit
> upon a little girl, a little lost girl,
> lone and languid in the world, wanting
> her ma.[46]

Though Mrs. Smith becomes immediately suspicious of her neighbors, it is not because of some proliferating criminality within the Mecca, as was often advertised in the white press[47]; instead, it is the hysteria of a mother with a missing child. This fragmentation of the potential community reflects the "private togetherness" suggested by Kukrechtová.

Despite the collectivity of their struggle, many of the inhabitants are preoccupied with their own anxieties, appealing to the various forms of authority they need for relief. Many supplicate to higher powers, speaking to the spirituality suggested by the building's Islamic name: "Their Lord was their shepherd," and yet, "Their gaunt / souls were not restored, their souls were banished. / In the shadow valley / they feared the evil, whether with or without God. / They were comforted by no Rod, / no Staff, but flayed by, O besieged by, shot a-plenty."[48] Here, though they appeal to a higher power to relieve them from their fears, they find no comfort. The same goes for Yvonne, whose God is love; Briggs, whose God is the gang; and Alfred, whose

[46] Gwendolyn Brooks, *In the Mecca*, 18.
[47] Edward E. Kuglin, "Mecca Building Scandal Denied," *The Chicago Defender*, 1914.
[48] Gwendolyn Brooks, *In the Mecca*, 16.

God is “to create! To create!” Mrs. Smith on the other hand appeals to the Law to find her Pepita. However, when the Law arrives, it “does not quickly go / to fetch a Female of the Negro Race. / A lariat of questions / The mother screams and wants her baby. Wants her baby, / and wants her baby wants her baby.”[49] The concluding anaphora exemplifies Mrs. Smith’s fear; and yet, the Law refuses to act with haste. Where God’s refusal to comfort the Meccans symbolizes the inhabitants’ feelings of abandonment, the Law’s refusal to respond to Mrs. Smith signals a more institutional neglect. Their ineffectuality renders their presence as invasive, rather than protective, mirroring the way the white media’s gaze invades the Mecca and imposes its narratives of urban blight.

As the Law “trots about the Mecca” and “pounds on a dozen doors,” Alfred, the Mecca’s poet, “has not seen Pepita Smith. / But he (who might have been an architect) / can speak of Mecca: firm arms surround / disorders, bruising ruses and small hells, / small semiheavens: hug barbarous rhetoric / built of buss, coma and petite pell-mells.”[50] In this critique of the inner life of the Mecca, situated by his own failure to be “who [he] might have been,” Alfred points to the ways its architecture and environment develops mistrust and fear and violence. Though he acknowledges how society manufactured the Meccans’ collapse, he points to Black consciousness as the cure. “No,” he has not seen Pepita Smith, but he

> Believes in beauty.
> But believes that blackness is among the fit filters
> …
> Needs ‘negritude.’
> Senghor (in Europe rootless and lonely) sings in art-lines
> of Black Woman

---

[49] Gwendolyn Brooks, *In the Mecca*, 19.
[50] Gwendolyn Brooks, *In the Mecca*, 19-20.

…
Listens
to the rich pound in and beneath the black feet of Africa.
…
Don Lee wants
Not a various America.
Don Lee wants
A new nation
Under nothing
… wants
New art and anthem; will
Want a new music screaming in the sun.[51]

In a direct turn toward the expanding Black Power movement of the late 1960s, Alfred taps into the political consciousness of Don Lee, now Haki Madhubuti, who calls for a cultural autonomy for Blacks, untethered to the destruction of Black life embedded in American institutions like the Law. Though Alfred ruminates on his own Black consciousness, he does not engage in the active resistance required to make manifest the national Black identity proposed by Madhubuti, even at the level of saving this little girl. Instead, he leans on the balcony, listening for the "something, something in Mecca" that "continues to call." This passivity does not save Pepita, who the narrator reveals is lying dead, "in dust with roaches," beneath a cot.[52]

Though none of the characters can rise above the intentional suffocation of life in the Mecca, they do display a nascent political consciousness that points to the possibility of liberation in a way *A Street in Bronzeville*'s characters never did. This is further explored in the second section of the collection, titled *After Mecca*, which contains a selection of short poems

---

[51] Gwendolyn Brooks, *In the Mecca*, 21-22.
[52] Gwendolyn Brooks, *In the Mecca*, 31.

dedicated or responding to prominent Black figures or monuments of the expanding Black Power movement. Where some critics condemned Brooks for appealing to a white audience in her earlier works, including *Bronzeville* and *Annie Allen,*[53] this section is overtly directed at a Black audience. "Medgar Evers" and "Malcolm X" appear side-by-side, both preeminent African American activists murdered for their political prominence. In "The Wall,"[54] Brooks celebrates the unveiling of the Organization of Black American Culture's mural, "The Wall of Respect," designed to commemorate Black creatives in South Side Chicago. Brooks includes in the epigraph of "The Wall" an excerpt from an *Ebony Magazine* piece on the mural: "The side wall of a typical slum building on the corner of 43rd and Langley became a mural communicating black dignity." Where the Mecca was subjected to the white gaze, left to decay, and then razed for the erection of a white institution, the once-slum building in "the Wall" was transformed into a site of Black art and pride. As the poem declares, "[a]n emphasis is paroled. / The old decapitations are revised, / the dispossessions beakless. // And we sing." By including the reformation of sites once wrecked by mythologies of urban blight, Brooks imagines an alternative for the legacy of the Mecca, again rejecting narratives that pathologizes its residents.

This transformative pride and decisiveness culminate in the book's concluding poems, the first and second "Sermon on the Warpland." These poems contain an insistence in the realization of Black autonomy. The first sermon concludes, "Build with lithe love. With love like lion-eyes. / With love like morningrise. / With love like black, our black— / luminously indiscreet; / complete; continuous." Here, Brooks positions a radical Black love as the only way to rebuild. "The Second Sermon" continues this life-affirming call for love:

This is the urgency: Live!

---

[53] Don L. Lee, preface to *Report from Part One*, 17.
[54] Gwendolyn Brooks, *In the Mecca*, 40-2.

> and have your blooming in the noise of the whirlwind.
> …
> Not the easy man, who rides above them all,
> not the jumbo brigand,
> not the pet bird of poets, that sweetest sonnet,
> shall straddle the whirlwind.
> Nevertheless, live.
> …
> what must our Season be, which starts from Fear?
> Live and go out.
> Define and
> medicate the whirlwind.
> …
> It is lonesome, yes. For we are the last of the loud.
> Nevertheless live.[55]

Despite the loneliness, despite the fear, despite the opposition, you must live. This force with which *In the Mecca* ends was yet unmatched in her previous works. As Brooks concludes in the autobiographical section of *Report from Part One*,

> I—who have "gone the gamut" from an almost angry rejection of my dark skin by some of my brainwashed brothers and sisters to a surprised queenhood in the new black sun—am qualified to enter at least the kindergarten of a new consciousness now. New consciousness and trudge-toward-progress. I have hopes for myself.[56]

Thus marks a considerable trajectory toward the insistent political consciousness for which Brooks is now so acclaimed.

Though her having "gone the gamut" was largely driven by her personal associations with both budding and established activists alike, her transformation indicates a larger shift in the

---

[55] Gwendolyn Brooks, *In the Mecca*, 51-54.
[56] Gwendolyn Brooks, *Report from Part One*, 86.

political landscape of America amidst the upsurge of counterculture movements in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Though non-violent direct action was the modus operandi of the Civil Rights Movement of the '50s, an impatience bubbled up in groups like SNCC and CORE who became increasingly fed up with always making compromises, always being told to "wait."[57] The Black Power Movement emerged as a response to this anger, articulating this "disillusionment and alienation from white America and independence, race pride, and self-respect, or 'black consciousness.'"[58] Invigorated by leaders like Malcolm X and the Black Panther Party's Chicago Chairman Fred Hampton, the Civil Rights Movement would operate with a new sense of urgency. With Chicago experiencing a particular surge of police violence, urban rebellions exploded throughout the city. After an uprising in Chicago's West Side in 1965, a subscriber wrote to the *Chicago Defender*, "Would it not be more profitable if our Negro leaders would spend more time to urbanize and educate their followers to the civilized way of law and order, so they will be accepted in any neighborhood like the Japanese, Chinese, and other races? Instead of urging them to disobey the police and break laws?"[59] This fundamental misunderstanding of not just the Black Power movement but of the motivation for riots was not scarce in the media. People like Mayor Daley would only exacerbate this misunderstanding with his racist characterization of rioters and "shoot-to-kill" orders. Yet, as King captured in a speech, "as long as America postpones justice, we stand in the position of having these recurrences of violence and riots over and over again."[60] He was right.

---

[57] See Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter From Birmingham Jail," 1963. https://www.csuchico.edu/iege/_assets/documents/susi-letter-from-birmingham-jail.pdf.
[58] Report for the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, 2016 ed, 232.
[59] Gustave Andarb, "Doesn't Understand Reason for Rioting," *The Chicago Defender*, 1965.
[60] Martin Luther King Jr. To Bishop C. C. J. Carpenter, et al., "Letter from Birmingham Jail," 16 April 1963, Box 6623, Folder 4, The University of Alabama Libraries Special Collections, http://purl.lib.ua.edu/181702.

Brooks's three-part collection *Riot* was published in the wake of the devastating 1968 King Assassination riots. Though the first part was commissioned by Haki Madhubuti (then Don L. Lee), the entire collection was published with Broadside Press, marking a deviation from her other texts which were published by the largely white Harper & Row. Broadside, on the other hand, was established by Dudley Randall in 1965 because he believed "the vigor and beauty of our Black poets should be better known and should have an outlet."[61] *Riot* was thus dedicated to Randall, "a giant of our time." The publishing context of the collection itself speaks to Brooks's growing commitment to realizing a Black national identity, to directing her works to a specifically Black audience.

The titular first part of the collection begins with an epigraph from King: "A riot is the language of the unheard." As the subscriber to the *Defender* expressed, many white people saw the 1960s riots as an expression of Black criminality, rather than understanding the long context in which these riots occurred. As the Kerner commission, responsible for conducting research for President Johnson's *Report on Civil Disorders*, expressed, "the events of the summer of 1967 are in large part the culmination of 300 years of racial prejudice."[62] It thus follows that the poem features 15th century Italian explorer, John Cabot, as the poem's mouthpiece. In so doing, Brooks exposes the long history of racial prejudice, the kind that served to justify imperialism and colonialism, setting the legacy for racism today.

> John Cabot, out of Wilma, once a Wycliffe
> All whitebluerose below his golden hair,
> Wrapped richly in right linen and right wool
> Almost forgot …

---

[61] "Broadside Press: Poetry to the People." Searchable Museum. National Museum of African American History and Culture.

[62] Report for the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, 2016 ed, 95.

> The scripture at the Richard Gray
> …
> Because the Negroes were coming down the street.
> Gross. Gross. "*Que tu es grossier!*" John Cabot
> Itched instantly beneath the nourished white that told his story of glory to the World.
> "Don't let It touch me! the blackness! Lord!" …
> But, in a thrilling announcement, on It drove
> And breathed on him: and touched him. In that
> Breath
> The fume of pig food, chitterling and cheap chili,
> Malign, mocked him …
> John Cabot … cried "Lord!
> Forgive these nigguhs that know not what
> They do."[63]

Cabot in the poem is distinctly aware of his own whiteness, a whiteness that is directly opposed to the Blackness spilling down the street, threatening to 'pollute' his perfection. The superiority in his language echoes whites' reactions to the riots of the 1960s, as exemplified by the letter to the editor published in the *Defender*. Rather than understanding his own culpability in fortifying the system of social control that leads to violence, he deflects blame onto the victims and frames their rioting as wanton and infectious. By placing this rhetoric in the context of this particular collection, bolstered by the words of Martin Luther King, Brooks re-contextualizes the history of the riot within the broader legacy of colonialism and exploitation of Black bodies.

Much like the first and second iterations from *Bronzeville*, the "Third Sermon on the Warpland" continues Brooks's appeal to her Black audience to unify and collectively rally. Analogizing the Black Freedom Movement to the tenacity of the phoenix, the bird which

[63] Gwendolyn Brooks, *Riot*, 9-10.

"consumed itself in fire, rising renewed from the ashes," Brooks aligns herself with the radical sentiment that violence is sometimes necessary to enact social change:

> The earth is a beautiful place.
> Watermirrors and things to be reflected.
> Goldenrod across the little lagoon.
> …
> Fire.
> That is their way of lighting candles in the
> darkness.
> …
> These candles curse—
> Inverting the deeps of darkness.
> …
> Lies are told and legends made.
> Phoenix rises unafraid.[64]

Describing the riots in terms of the phoenix's fire, in terms of light and resilience, Brooks legitimizes the movement by exposing its logic, rejecting the insistence that riots are meaningless. Using figures of a Black and White Philosophers, Brooks directly examines the discourse surrounding the future of the "race problem." The Black Philosopher insists that rioting is the result of white complacency: "Our chains are in the keep of the Keeper in a labeled cabinet on the second shelf by the cookies, sonatas, the arabesques…"[65] In other words, despite emancipation, Black Americans remain enslaved by the chains of institutions like "the Law." Yet, the White Philosopher warns against social discord: "It is better to light one candle than

64 Gwendolyn Brooks, *Riot*, 11.
65 Gwendolyn Brooks, *Riot*, 11.

curse the darkness."[66] This rhetoric is reminiscent of the clergymen to whom Dr. King addressed his famous "Letter From Birmingham Jail":

> For years now I have heard the word "wait." … I guess it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say "wait." … There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over…I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience.[67]

King's words subvert the narrative that riots are wanton and instead reorients them as physical manifestations of the need for genuine social change after years of disregard. However, despite the seeming infinitude of the riot's flames, soon "the dust, as they say settled." The phoenix, once resplendent and incarnadine, is now mere ashes. Yet, as the epigraph signals, after the ashes comes renewal.

Riot's concluding poem, "An Aspect of Love: Alive in the Ice and Fire," addresses this renewal. The poem is suffused with beauty and love, contrasting the ire formulated by John Cabot and the complacency of the White Philosopher, transforming the text into one that is decidedly hopeful. Mirroring the language of the phoenix, she writes,

> It is the morning of our love
> … You rise. Although
> genial, you are in yourself again.
> I observe
> your direct and respectable stride.
> You are direct and self-accepting as a lion
> in African velvet. You are level, lean,
> remote.
> …
> On the street we smile.

[66] Gwendolyn Brooks, *Riot*, 15.
[67] Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter From Birmingham Jail," 1963. https://www.csuchico.edu/iege/_assets/documents/susi-letter-from-birmingham-jail.pdf

> We go
> in different directions
> down the imperturbable street.[68]

Stereotypes of rioters as uneducated and combative circulated in the aftermath of the riots. This poem destabilizes those assumptions by promoting an image of a rioter as collected and self-accepting, smiling and consumed with joy. Despite the persistence of violence enacted upon Black bodies by the state and the intensity of the riots in response, there remains a hope and inspiration that Brooks captures in this poem. As one reviewer assessed, "She recognizes the usefulness of violence, the necessity for it; but she also somewhere believes, to quote the third sermon's opening line, that 'The earth is a beautiful place' — she won't have it destroyed."[69] Concluding a collection that is ostensibly about violence on this image centers the prospering Black Liberation Movement on joy. While violence and destruction are sometimes inevitable, this frustration and impatience serves not to demolish but to rebuild.

In this essay, I aimed to show that while her post-1967 works displayed a particular symbiosis with emerging concepts of Black militancy, her entire career was suffused with a resistance to the dominant culture that asserted that being Black was deviant. What her work expresses is "that life is not always nice or proper or normal or happy or smooth or even-edged," but that beauty and joy prevail. With the forces of the Great Migration setting in behind her, Gwendolyn Brooks captured the particular pains of African American life in Chicago in *A Street in Bronzeville*. Where writers like Richard Wright, who had a complicated and largely antagonistic relationship with the city, lauded her ability to capture the experience of the Black Chicagoan, others felt her writing lacked the force by which it would later come to be defined.

---

[68] Gwendolyn Brooks, *Riot*, 22.
[69] Carl Philips, "Brooks's Prosody," 2017.

Just five years later, she won the Pulitzer Prize; however, as Madhubuti points out, “After winning the Pulitzer, she *now belonged to everybody* and in the eyes of white poetry lovers and white book promoters the publicity was to read ‘she is a poet who happens to be black’; in other words, we can’t completely forget her ‘negroness,’ so let’s make it secondary.”[70] This appropriation of her poetic voice by the white literati would, for Black critics, symbolize Brooks’s undeveloped identity. However, by the time she published her second major collection *In the Mecca*, her radicalization had begun, reflecting in her direct critique of the mechanisms of urban development for its suppression of Black life. This collection also deviates from her previous works because rather than merely capturing the pains of Chicago segregation, she begins to celebrate the artistic and political momentum of the Black Freedom Movement, paying credence to leaders like Malcolm X and monuments like the Chicago Wall of Respect. This radicalization blossoms in full force in her short collection *Riot!* where she condemns the complacency of whites yet imagines a world that is beautiful and collective, not destructive.

[70] Don L. Lee, preface to *Report from Part One*, 16-17.

Bibliography

Andarb, Gustave. "Doesn't Understand Reason for Rioting." *The Chicago Defender (National Edition) (1921-1967),* Aug 28, 1965. https://flagship.luc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/doesnt-understand-reason-rioting/docview/493084610/se-2.

Avilez, GerShun. "Housing the Black Body: Value, Domestic Space, and Segregation Narratives." African American Review 42, no. 1 (2008): 135–47. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40301309.

Baker, Houston A. "Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance." *American Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (1987): 84–97. https://doi.org/10.2307/2712631.

Biko, Steve. *I Write What I Like*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.

Bluestone, Daniel. "Chicago's Mecca Flat Blues." *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 57, no. 4 (1998): 382–403. https://doi.org/10.2307/991458.

"Broadside Press: Poetry to the People." Searchable Museum. National Museum of African American History and Culture. https://www.searchablemuseum.com/broadside-press-poetry-to-the-people/.

Brooks, Gwendolyn. *A Street In Bronzeville.* New York: Harper&Brothers, 1945.

Brooks, Gwendolyn. *In the Mecca*. New York: Harper&Row, 1968.

Brooks, Gwendolyn. *Report from Part One* (1st ed). Detroit: Broadside Press, 1972.

Brooks, Gwendolyn. *Riot*. Detroit: Broadside Press, 1970.

Brooks, Gwendolyn "March 28, 1969, in Madison, Wisconsin." Interview by George Stavros for Contemporary Literature. *Report from Part One*. Detroit: Broadside Press, 1972, pages 160-170.

Brooks, Gwendolyn. "Spring, 1971, in my home." By Ida Lewis for Essence Magazine. *Report from Part One*. Detroit: Broadside Press, 1972.

Brooks, Gwendolyn. "Summer 1967, in my home." Interview by Paul M. Angle for the Illinois Bell. *Report from Part One*. Detroit: Broadside Press, 1972.

Canby, Henry S. "Frost? Williams? No, Gwendolyn Brooks," The Pulitzer files, Pulitzer Prizes, https://www.pulitzer.org/article/frost-williams-no-gwendolyn-brooks.

Cunningham, James S., and Nadja Zalokar. "The Economic Progress of Black Women, 1940-1980: Occupational Distribution and Relative Wages." *ILR Review* 45, no. 3 (1992): 540–55. https://doi.org/10.2307/2524277.

DuBois, W.E.B. "Returning Soldiers (1919)." In *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892-1938*, edited by Henry Louis Gates and Gene Andrew Jarrett, 85–91. Princeton University Press, 2007. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1j6675s.15.

Grossman, James. "Great Migration," Encyclopedia of Chicago. http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/545.html#:~:text=Chicago%20attracted%20slightly%20more%20than,1970%2C%20they%20were%2033%20percent.

"Gwendolyn Brooks Dead at 83: First African-American to Win Pulitzer Gave Voice to Everyday Struggles.: [FINAL Edition]." *The Sun,* Dec 08, 2000. https://flagship.luc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/gwendolyn-brooks-dead-at-83-first-african/docview/406468041/se-2.

Hughes, Langston. "Harlem Renaissance," in *The Big Sea*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1940.

King Jr., Martin Luther, "Letter From Birmingham Jail," 16 April 1963, Box 6623, Folder 4, The University of Alabama Libraries Special Collections, http://purl.lib.ua.edu/181702.

Kuglin, Edward E. "Mecca Building Scandal Denied by Managers: MECCA BUILDING SLANDER DENIED BY EDW.E.KUGLIN AND LOUIS BERNSTEIN Issue Statement Defending Afro-American Tenants Against the Sensational Stories Published in the Saturday Evening Telegraph" *The Chicago Defender (Big Weekend Edition) (1905-1966),* Mar 28, 1914. https://flagship.luc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/mecca-building-scandal-denied-managers/docview/493258964/se-2.

Kukrechtová, Daniela. "The Death and Life of a Chicago Edifice: Gwendolyn Brooks's 'In the Mecca.'" *African American Review* 43, no. 2/3 (2009): 457–72. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41328621.

Langston Hughes, "Harlem" from *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes*, 2002. The Poetry Foundation, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46548/harlem.

Lee, Don L. Preface to *Report from Part One*, 15-35. Detroit: Broadside Press, 1972.

"Map: Distribution of Negroes in Chicago by wards, 1922?" Methodist Episcopal Church Committee on Conservation and Advance. Negro in the City lantern slides, Society of Collectors, Newberry Library Archives and Special Collections. https://collections.newberry.org/asset-management/2KXJ8ZSUZ80UH?WS=SearchResults&Flat=FP&FR_=1&W=1440&H=. 54, 29 Jan 2025.

McDaniel, Anne, and DiPrete, Thomas, and Buchmann, Claudia, and Shwed, Uri. "The Black Gender Gap in Educational Attainment: Historical Trends and Racial Comparisons," *Population Association of America* (2011). DOI:10.1007/s13524-011-0037-0, https://journalistsresource.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/fulltext.pdf.

Mitchell, Ernest Julius. "'Black Renaissance': A Brief History of the Concept." *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 55, no. 4 (2010): 641–65. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41158720.

The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, The National Advisory Commission on Civil, Herausgebendes Organ United States. National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, and Julian Zelizer. *The Kerner Report*. 2016 edition. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400880805.

Negro in Illinois - Manuscript [2 folders], n.d., Box: 41b, Folder: 1863d-e. Jack Conroy papers, Midwest-MS-Conroy. The Newberry Library - Modern Manuscripts and Archives.

Philips, Carl. “Brooks’s Prosody: Three Sermons on the Warpland.” Poetry Foundation, May 30, 2017. https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/141970/brookss-prosody-three-sermons-on-the-warpland.

“The Plunder of Black Wealth in Chicago: New Findings on the Lasting Toll of Predatory Housing Contracts.” The Samuel DuBois Cook Center on Social Equity, May 2019. https://socialequity.duke.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Plunder-of-Black-Wealth-in-Chicago.pdf.

Renesch, E. G. , Born 1879, Artist. Colored Man Is No Slacker. United States, 1918. [Chicago, IL: Publisher not identified] Photograph. https://www.loc.gov/item/2018645256/.

Rettaliata, John T. “Better Buildings Better Industrial Design and Better Cities: How Illinois Institute of Technology Proposes to Help Up-Date the Physical Patterns of Our Time” (address, The Chicago Club, Chicago, IL, June 4, 1954).

Smith, Gary. “Gwendolyn Brooks’s A Street in Bronzeville, the Harlem Renaissance and the Mythologies of Black Women.” *MELUS* 10, no. 3 (1983): 33–46. https://doi.org/10.2307/467440.

Tierney, Sherry. *ReZoning Chicago’s Modernisms: Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Remnant Koolhaas, the IIT Campus and its Bronzeville Prehistory (1914-2003)*. California: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2011.

“White Flight: Suburb-City Class Split Feared in Chicago Area.” *Chicago Tribune (1963-1996),* Oct 05, 1978. https://flagship.luc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/white-flight/docview/171883897/se-2

Casting Aside the Caricature: The Overlooked Importance of A'Lelia Walker

By: Grace Loren Kubek

On 136th Street, New York City, amid the Harlem Renaissance, a townhouse party bursts at the seams with all sorts of guests. The biggest names of the Renaissance, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Countee Cullen, party alongside working-class Harlemites and night performers, such as Mabel Hampton. In one room of this elaborately decorated home, a quartet performs their latest arrangement. In another, poets and artists discuss their work. At the center of it all is A'Lelia Walker, the sponsor of the night's events. Clad in a bejeweled turban, A'Lelia spreads the wealth of the Madam Walker Manufacturing Company among her guests. She spends her fortune creating a space that everyone in Harlem can enjoy for the night. A'Lelia's creation of these joyful and inclusive spaces is extremely significant, as are her other contributions to her family business and community. Her significance, however, often goes understudied in favor of an elaborate and opulent caricature. A'Lelia Walker possesses much more substance than past scholarship has given her credit for. She represents a departure from the social mores that stifled many of her black female counterparts. Her parties and contributions to the Madam Walker Company provided equalizing, open, and exciting spaces for people in her community, and had an important impact that should not go unnoticed.

Harlem, New York became the epicenter of black cultural production from the 1920s-1930s, largely due to the high concentration of black southern migrants.[1] As a result of the Great Migration, black art, literature, music, and community thrived. This cultural flourishing, however, did not eliminate racist stereotypes and assumptions, especially those of black women's natural sexual promiscuity. In order to combat such negative images of black

---

[1] Cheryl A. Wall, *Women of the Harlem Renaissance,* (Indiana University Press, 1995), 1.

womanhood, black women created a culture of dissemblance, in which they "shielded the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressors."[2] This culture of dissemblance especially took root among the middle class, and promoted an image of Victorian womanhood. Maintaining this image of respectability, they believed, would increase opportunities for black women, and all black Americans.[3] This idea of racial uplift became the primary way for middle- and upper-class black women to contribute meaningfully to their society. They had to take on "secrecy, thus achieving a self-imposed invisibility."[4] A'Lelia Walker, however, was anything but invisible. Her deviations from these restrictive ideals show her significance as a historical figure, and reflect the importance of studying black women's history with more consideration.

Past historians have failed to study A'Lelia Walker with the frameworks of dissemblance and politics of respectability in mind. Thus, they completely overlook the significance of her resistance to restrictive images of black womanhood. Historians often focus on A'Lelia's shortcomings compared to her mother, Madam C.J. Walker, or paint her as a flippant heiress. In doing so, past study has reduced A'Lelia to a shallow caricature who merely "spent the Renaissance playing bridge."[5] Such unthoughtful assessments of A'Lelia's impact overlook her entrepreneurship, contributions to her community, and the importance of her public image. Black women's scholarship pushes for a holistic study of black female historical figures. The lack of holistic consideration in past studies of A'Lelia Walker represents a gap in the historical understanding of black women's resistance. A complete study of A'Lelia Walker must include

---

[2] Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West," *The University of Chicago Press* 14, no. 4 (1989): 912, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3174692.
[3] Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "African American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race," *Signs* 17, no. 2 (1992): 266, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3174464.
[4] Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women," 915.
[5] David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem was in Vogue* (Penguin, 1981), 166.

her triumphs, contributions, and the important historical impacts of her deviations. Only through such considerations can a complete historical picture come into being.

A'Lelia Walker was born in Vicksburg Mississippi in 1885 to Sarah Breedlove (who would later change her name to Madam Walker) and Moses McWilliams.[6] When Madam Walker moved to the North and began the hair-care company that would make her a millionaire, A'Lelia was right beside her. Far from being born into wealth, A'Lelia actively contributed to the progress of the Madam Walker Manufacturing Company. In 1908, A'Lelia took charge of the company's New York market and ran a parlor located in Harlem.[7] As the Harlem Renaissance erupted, A'Lelia Walker became an active part of the cultural movement. Her various New York homes became entertainment epicenters, and A'Lelia earned the title "the joy-goddess of Harlem."[8] Due to her work with the Madam Walker Company and her involvement in the Harlem cultural scene, A'Lelia had an extremely diverse network. Freeman B. Ransom, the attorney and business manager for the Madam Walker Company, was an important part of her entrepreneurial world. Often using Ransom as a resource and confidant, A'Lelia's letters to Ransom are very illuminating and informative. Artists such as Langston Hughes, who spoke highly of A'Lelia in his autobiography, made up A'Lelia's Harlem network. The spaces she provided often brought Harlem artists together, and provided an important space for their art to thrive. The sheer amount of condolence letters regarding A'Lelia's death shows how far her network reached. Though her most personal connections may have been through the Madam Walker Company, or among the artists in Harlem, A'Lelia's impact reached people far and wide.

---

[6] A'Lelia Bundles, *On Her Own Ground: The Life and Times of Madam C.J. Walker* (Scribner, 2002), 41.
[7] Bundles, *On Her Own Ground,* 98.
[8] Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea* (Thunder's Mouth Press, 1986), 245.

Though many historians paint her as nothing more than the heiress of the Madam Walker Company, A'Lelia played an active role as the company grew, and took over as head of the company after her mother's death. Importantly, A'Lelia was over twenty years old when her mother's company launched.[9] Descriptions of the work she did in the early days of the company, such as working as a stylist in the parlors, cooking the product in the evening, packaging orders, and creating advertisements, clearly refutes any notion that A'Lelia simply came into wealth.[10] This points to a fact that some historians have been unable to comprehend: just because A'Lelia appreciated wealth and opulence, this does not mean she did not appreciate the value of hard work. Though she was not the best businesswoman by her own admission, she had a clear desire to prove herself as an asset to the company. She implored Ransom at one point to dissuade Madam Walker from taking over the mail order business, expressing a desire to "have enough independence t [sic.] settle my own bills."[11] Her desire for independence greatly contradicts the image projected onto her by past historians, and reveals the drive she had from a young age to do meaningful work. A'Lelia also made important contributions in advertising and marketing for the Madam Walker Company. Whereas Madam Walker focused advertising on respectability and the idea of hard work, A'Lelia "confidently embraced the language of consumption," emphasizing glamor and black beauty rather than the idea of hard work and overcoming a difficult past.[12] A'Lelia's understanding of consumption trends comes through in her letters to Ransom regarding the company's advertising. She expressed dissatisfaction with an ad in the

---

[9] Kate Dossett, "'I Try To Live Somewhat in Keeping With My Reputation as a Wealthy Woman': A'Lelia Walker and the Madam C.J. Walker Manufacturing Company," *Journal of Women's History* 21, no. 2 (2009): 92, https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/1/article/266074.
[10] Bundles, *On Her Own Ground,* 90.
[11] Robinson to Freeman B. Ransom, October 20, 1916, Madam C.J. Walker Collection, Box 4, Folder 8, Indiana Historical Society, https://images.indianahistory.org/digital/collection/m0399/id/4327/rec/107.
[12] Dossett, "'I Try To Live Somewhat in Keeping With My Reputation as a Wealthy Woman,'" 94-95.

Chicago paper about the Walker company's new grower "because who wants their hair to grow now… I do think that this is one of the reasons why our business has fallen off… now they do not want their hair to Grow. they are too busy having it all cut off."[13] Though A'Lelia may not have had her mother's head for the business, she clearly had an understanding of popular trends in style. She shows an awareness of what is best for the company in terms of advertising, recognizing a primary reason that the company's sales are decreasing. A'Lelia had a significant impact through her entrepreneurial pursuits, an impact felt by working-class black women who worked for the company.

A'Lelia's job creation for black women shows her significance beyond past historical representations, and illustrates a form of uplifting black women outside of the constraints of respectability politics. A condolence letter from P. Erlyne Osborne Whitely expresses profound loss at A'Lelia's passing, labeling A'Lelia as her "benefactor" as "it was she who gave me the opportunity to be connected with this wonderful company."[14] The creation of jobs for black women outside of domestic work was no small feat after the Great Migration. Many black women who came to the North during the Great Migration ended up in the same domestic jobs they worked in the South, and made less than their white counterparts.[15] The fact that A'Lelia connected Whitely to the Madam Walker Company, giving her a job outside of this segregated domestic work sphere, shows the role A'Lelia played as a true benefactress for many black women during her time. A'Lelia understood the importance of providing women with secure employment. She changed her will in 1929 to ensure that her granddaughter would receive

[13] Walker to Freeman B. Ransom, November 27, 1928, Madam C.J. Walker Collection, Box 4, Folder 22, Indiana Historical Society, https://images.indianahistory.org/digital/collection/m0399/id/4969/rec/558.
[14] Whitely to Freeman B. Ransom, August 21, 1931, Madam C.J. Walker Collection, Box 5, Folder 20, Indiana Historical Society, https://images.indianahistory.org/digital/collection/m0399/id/5664/rec/642.
[15] Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women," 913.

shares of the company should A'Lelia and her daughter, Mae Walker, pass away. She also wanted Ransom to specify that his own shares would go to his daughter. A'Lelia explicitly stated "I want women to have first choice of this business," showing a clear recognition of a good job's importance in women's lives.[16] Through her focus on women's employment, A'Lelia used her platform and privilege to actively uplift fellow black women in a way that did not center respectable behavior.

A'Lelia's active protection of her platform and reputation speaks to a capacity for self-advocacy on a public and visible level. Her letters to Freeman B. Ransom reveal her methods of public confrontation as a means of maintaining her reputation. In 1917, rumors spread that police had raided A'Lelia's home, as well as the home of a black woman who allegedly solicited young white girls for sexual intercourse. Upon hearing that people spread rumors associating her with similar activity, she hired a detective "to try to make an example of them."[17] Not only did A'Lelia actively attempt to disprove these rumors, but she expressed a desire to publicly expose the rumor-spreaders as a means of clearing her name. Her pursuit of a public example certainly disproves any idea that A'Lelia would fly under the radar to any extent for the purpose of respectability. Instead, she used her platform and influence to publicly pursue justice. She took a similar approach when misinformation and rumors circulated in 1924. Rather than letting the incident blow over, A'Lelia told Ransom "I marched myself around to the office today to get them told about it… I am going to see Mr. George Harris and give him a piece of my mind. He

[16] Walker to Freeman B. Ransom, 1929, Madam C.J. Walker Collection, Box 4, Folder Folder 27, Indiana Historical Society, https://images.indianahistory.org/digital/collection/m0399/id/5157/rec/560.
[17] Robinson to Freeman B. Ransom, April 23, 1917, Madam C.J. Walker Collection, Box 4, Folder 9, Indiana Historical Society, https://images.indianahistory.org/digital/collection/m0399/id/4340/rec/122.

is going to cut that right out."[18] A'Lelia's ability to gain an audience with New York newsrooms and contributors points to her status as a wealthy woman. She used this platform to staunchly defend her name and reputation, taking agency over her public perception and directly confronting threats to her name. Rather than retreating to a space of "self-imposed invisibility" as many women of dissemblance had to practice in order to survive, A'Lelia used her platform to pursue direct and sometimes public change.[19]

A'Lelia's flare for unique fashion also shows a refusal to adhere to any form of invisibility. A comparison of A'Lelia Walker to her mother, in this case, is an effective way to see how A'Lelia actively broke expectations of respectability in her public image. Figure 1 shows perhaps the most famous image of Madam C.J. Walker. Her pressed and pinned hair, delicate jewelry, plain white dress, and downward gaze encapsulate the perfect image of Victorian womanhood.[20] Like a good, respectable woman, this image of Madam Walker is delicate, feminine, and put together. Photographs of A'Lelia differ greatly from her mother's Victorian image. In Figure 2, A'Lelia dons a bejeweled turban, pants, and tall black boots. She looks right into the camera, smiling with her teeth, a contrast to her mother's demure gaze.[21] A'Lelia's pants represent a significant subversion of gender roles. Mabel Hampton, who was on the Harlem scene around the same time as A'Lelia, remembers that even at all-female parties, very few women wore slacks due to social stigmas.[22] Considering the negative "linkage of black women's color and physical features with masculinity," wearing masculine-associated clothing

---

[18] Walker to Freeman B. Ransom, February 28, 1924, Madam C.J. Walker Collection, Box 4, Folder 12, Indiana Historical Society, https://images.indianahistory.org/digital/collection/m0399/id/4522/rec/400.
[19] Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women," 915.
[20] Addison N. Scurlock, *Photograph of Madam C.J. Walker,* 1912, photograph, Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, https://collections.si.edu/search/record/ark:/65665/fd56c3eabb0d7ff4fa5ad7ab790794fe5e7.
[21] *A'Lelia Walker Robinson,* 1926, in David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem was in Vogue* (Penguin, 1981), 282.
[22] Cheryl Hicks, "a rather bright and good-looking colored girl," in *Talk with You Like a Woman* (University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 220.

represents a vast departure from the politics of respectability and the notion of racial uplift.[23] A'Lelia clearly wore what she deemed acceptable, setting important fashion trends that went against restrictive images dictated by racial uplift. A'Lelia's turban is an obvious departure from her mother's pressed hair. Langston Hughes affectionately recounts A'Lelia's turbans, remembering her as "a gorgeous dark Amazon, in a silver turban."[24] A'Lelia shed Victorian expectations in her public appearance, sticking out rather than assimilating into what her culture considered respectable.

A'Lelia's interior decorating similarly shows her refusal to put respectability over extravagance. On the one hand, her elaborate decorations and interior design served to upkeep her reputation as a wealthy woman. Despite Ransom's advice to cut down on decorating expenses at her Irvington estate, A'Lelia insisted that "too many people visit Irvington with a discriminating taste and my mother surely would not have left it that way had she lived."[25] A'Lelia's elaborate designs served partly to uphold a sense of respectability created by her mother. The beauty of her spaces was important to A'Lelia on a personal level, as she admits she enjoys beauty, but also served the purpose of maintaining appearances and reputation. A'Lelia's interior decorating, however, was not confined to her own estates and homes. She also took charge of decorating the Harlem hair parlor. Ransom disapproved of A'Lelia's spending on this parlor, insisting "it is a waste of money to make these parlors more elaborate. Colored people simply do not take to them any better… I think they appreciate them less. The main thing is a neat place with conveniences."[26] Ransom's vision, steeped in the viewpoint of a business

---

[23] Hicks, "a rather bright and good-looking colored girl," 225.
[24] Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 245.
[25] Walker to Freeman B. Ransom, February 28, 1925, Madam C.J. Walker Collection, Box 4, Folder 13, Indiana Historical Society, https://images.indianahistory.org/digital/collection/m0399/id/4457/rec/435.
[26] Ransom to A'Lelia Walker, February 20, 1930, Madam C.J. Walker Collection, Box 4, Folder Indiana Historical Society, https://images.indianahistory.org/digital/collection/m0399/id/4995/rec/581.

manager, puts convenience over beauty. A'Lelia, however, sought to give black women a beautiful and comfortable space, different from Ransom's vision, but no less important. Though A'Lelia spent quite a bit of money, Madam C.J. Walker later wrote to Ransom that A'Lelia's design "'beats anything I have seen anywhere even in the best hair parlors of the whites.'"[27] A'Lelia's parlor design shows a sense of care for her community. She attempts to give black women a space previously denied to them due to racism and segregation, delivering something even better than those white parlors. While past historians may read A'Lelia's spending on the parlor as irresponsible and entirely in her own interest, the historical context that kept black women out of such spaces shows the importance of A'Lelia's design. She may have spent an extravagant sum, but she created a community space of beauty and comfort.

Public perception of A'Lelia clearly reflects this community-oriented image. A'Lelia received many letters, ranging widely in topic and status of sender, asking for her support or aid. One letter from seventeen-year-old Joan Dawson asks A'Lelia to take charge of her so that she might attend business school.[28] It is telling that Dawson, a teenager from Montgomery Alabama, would know A'Lelia's reputation as a wealthy businesswoman and have hope of an affirmative answer from A'Lelia. Though there is no evidence that A'Lelia reached out to this young girl, the fact that she kept the letter among her other correspondence shows an awareness of such notes. She did, however, potentially address the concerns of Peter Shields, an imprisoned man asking A'Lelia to help him sell the jewelry and bags he made in prison so that he might better himself.[29] In a letter from the following year, A'Lelia encloses a letter from a "poor prisoner,"

---

[27] Bundles, *On Her Own Ground*, 169.
[28] Dawson to A'Lelia Walker, June 3, 1924, Madam C.J. Walker Collection, Box 4, Folder 28, Indiana Historical Society, https://images.indianahistory.org/digital/collection/m0399/id/5270/rec/418.
[29] Shields to A'Lelia Walker, April 9, 1924, Madam C.J. Walker Collection, Box 4, Folder 28, Indiana Historical Society, https://images.indianahistory.org/digital/collection/m0399/id/5282/rec/407.

telling Ransom she does not see where he would be useful in the company, but "maybe you could help him get a job."[30] Even if this does not refer to Peter Shield's letter, it shows that A'Lelia felt sympathy toward prisoners, even connecting them with her business manager so they might find future work. Perhaps not the most effective or direct method of helping prisoners, A'Lelia nonetheless displays an awareness of such letters from ordinary citizens.

A'Lelia also received letters from higher-up members of her community asking for her help on matters of racial progress. For example, Myrtle Thompson reached out to A'Lelia so that she could be included in Thompson's new book "of our people who are now doing 'things worth while.'" Thompson considers A'Lelia worthy to stand alongside figures such as Hallie Quinn Brown and Mary Talbert, and specifies that the only people she reached out to are those "who have made or are making a mark of progress in life."[31] Thompson's belief that A'Lelia fell into this category in 1924 shows that A'Lelia's parties and extravagance did not detract from her perception as an important black woman. Modern historians can take a lesson from Thompson's letter, acknowledging A'Lelia's importance and impact as much as they emphasize her parties and opulence.

An analysis of A'Lelia Walker, however, would be incomplete without mention of her parties and support of the arts during the Harlem Renaissance. A'Lelia made important contributions to Harlem's cultural boom. A'Lelia financially supported J. Robinson Johnson's Harlem Music Settlement School, "opened her home for movie shoots, theatrical rehearsals, and art exhibitions," and hired performers for her elaborate parties.[32] A'Lelia sought to create a space

---

[30] Walker to Freeman B. Ransom, October 22, 1925, Madam C.J. Walker Collection, Box 4, Folder 13,Indiana Historical Society, https://images.indianahistory.org/digital/collection/m0399/id/4447/rec/441.
[31] Thompson to A'Lelia Walker, March 15, 1924, Madam C.J. Walker Collection, Box 4, Folder, Indiana Historical Society, https://images.indianahistory.org/digital/collection/m0399/id/5275/rec/404.
[32] Bundles, *On Her Own Ground,* 111.

for aspiring black artists to share their ideas and find a sense of community, and created the Dark Tower in order to fulfill this goal. The Dark Tower was ultimately a failure, especially due to the fee artists had to pay to join.[33] A'Lelia's status as a wealthy heiress did somewhat blind her to the capacity of striving artists to pay for a club membership to the Dark Tower. The logic, as she explains it to Ransom, however, shows that her intention was not to create an elitist environment. A'Lelia pointed out to Ransom that the Dark Tower charged less than many nightclubs artists would have visited, where they would have paid three dollars for admission and a ginger ale. Through this logic, she reasons, "they should be able to pay a little less in a respectable place."[34] Considering that Harlem nightclubs such as The Cotton Club were segregated and extremely elitist, A'Lelia's proposition that her artist's club be slightly cheaper and non-exclusive points to an important trend in A'Lelia's event organizing. Despite her wealthy and privileged status, A'Lelia was never picky about who attended her parties.

A'Lelia created an equalizing space with her parties and gatherings at a time when segregation ran rampant, even in Harlem. Langston Hughes, for example, recalls the discomfort he felt when white people would come to Harlem to look at black people "like amusing animals in a zoo," citing the Cotton Club as one example.[35] A'Lelia's parties did not take on this elitist and segregationist tone. One night, for example, a Scandinavian prince showed up at one of A'Lelia's parties. The prince sent for A'Lelia as the party was too full for him to join. Rather than kicking someone out to allow the European royal into her party, A'Lelia simply sent a bottle of champagne to his car.[36] Hughes compares A'Lelia's parties to others held by wealthy

---

[33] Bundles, *On Her Own Ground,* 287.
[34] Walker to Freeman B. Ransom, November 10, 1927, Madam C.J. Walker Collection, Box4, Folder 19, Indiana Historical Society, https://images.indianahistory.org/digital/collection/m0399/id/4832/rec/515.
[35] Hughes, *The Big Sea,* 225.
[36] Hughes, *The Big Sea,* 245.

black women during the Renaissance. A'Lelia, he recalls "made no pretense at being intellectual or exclusive… and a good time was had by all."[37] At A'Lelia's parties, working-class Harlem dancers such as the openly lesbian Mabel Hampton and poets like Hughes could mingle alongside black bankers and white royals, with no intentional distinction made between the two. Mabel Hampton looked back on her time in the Harlem Renaissance, including the time spent at one of A'Lelia's parties, in a 1981 oral history. She specifically remembers what she wore: a grey dress and a white fur coat, which she subsequently removed as "nobody had clothes on but me."[38] As is clear from A'Lelia's affinity for fashion, clothing was an important indicator of status and wealth. In a room where everyone has shed those outer layers to wear only their undergarments, this artificial symbol of unequal wealth disappears. Hampton's memory of the party points to A'Lelia's ability to create an equalizing space with her parties, as well as a safe space for queer women.

A'Lelia's acceptance and protection of queer women during the Harlem Renaissance was no small act due to the hostility toward subversive sexual practices among some Harlemites. Though this influence has been painted as "subtle," the fact that A'Lelia's guests "learned to guard their tongues if they desired A'Lelia's good will" holds extreme significance.[39] Far from a "subtle" influence, A'Lelia's acceptance created an incredibly important space for queer women who faced constant persecution on the streets. Mabel Hampton remembers that "the gay then was you had to be behind covers," but A'Lelia created a space where no one gave a second thought about whether queer expression was okay.[40] Hampton says of A'Lelia's parties, "there

---

[37] Hughes, *The Big Sea,* 244.
[38] Hampton, Mabel. "Mabel's Parties / Mabel Hampton, 1881 (Tape 1)," interview by Joan Nestle. *Lesbian Herstory Archives Audio Visual Collections,* Lesbian Herstory Archives, January 18, 1981, http://herstories.prattinfoschool.nyc/omeka/items/show/74, 00:21:40.
[39] Lewis, *When Harlem was in Vogue,* 168.
[40] Hampton, interview, 00:05:50.

was men and women, women and women, and men and men," and nobody batted an eye.[41] From Mabel Hampton's memory of the time, this acceptance was not the norm, especially in working-class communities. Hampton recalls masking her lesbian identity "in order to avoid both the police and other black Harlemites," showing the value of A'Lelia's safe space.[42] A'Lelia used her privilege to create an environment where people like Hampton could authentically express themselves and enjoy time with the people they loved, regardless of the social acceptance of that love.

Langston Hughes recounts the death and funeral of A'Lelia Walker, structuring his autobiography so that the end of A'Lelia's life coincides with "the end of the gay times of the New Negro era in Harlem."[43] A'Lelia's death, however, did not coincide with the end of her impact. In his poetic tribute to A'Lelia, Hughes encourages "all who love laughter / and joy and light, / Let your prayers be as roses / For this queen of the night."[44] A'Lelia's legacy rests in the joy and light she brought to her community. A'Lelia resisted any restrictive notion of how she should exist as an influential black woman. She represents a departure from the politics of respectability and culture of dissemblance, and allowed other black women a space away from such restrictive practices. A'Lelia's life and work deserve a deeper analysis than past historians have given her. Through a more holistic examination of A'Lelia and other black female historical figures, a complete and inclusive picture of black women's resistance and power is achievable.

---

[41] Hampton, interview, 00:25:10.
[42] Hicks, "a rather bright and good-looking colored girl," 220.
[43] Hughes, *The Big Sea,* 247.
[44] Langston Hughes, "For A'Lelia," Langston Hughes Papers, James Weldon Johnson Collection in the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Box 377, Folder 6400, https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/2002853.

Appendix

Figure 1: Addison N. Scurlock, *Photograph of Madam C.J. Walker,* 1912, photograph, Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, https://collections.si.edu/search/record/ark:/65665/fd56c3eabb0d7ff4fa5ad7ab790794fe5e7.

Figure 2: *A'Lelia Walker Robinson,* 1926, in David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem was in Vogue* (Penguin, 1981), 282.

Bibliography

Bundles, A'Lelia. *On Her Own Ground: The Life and Times of Madam C.J. Walker.* Scribner, 2002.

Dossett, Kate. "'I Try To Live Somewhat in Keeping With My Reputation as a Wealthy Woman': A'Lelia Walker and the Madam C.J. Walker Manufacturing Company."*Journal of Women's History* 21, no. 2 (2009): 90-114. https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/1/article/266074.

Hampton, Mabel. "Mabel's Parties / Mabel Hampton, 1881 (Tape 1)." Interview by Joan Nestle. Lesbian Herstory Archives Audio Visual Collections, Lesbian Herstory Archives. January 18, 1981. http://herstories.prattinfoschool.nyc/omeka/items/show/74.

Hicks, Cheryl. "a rather bright and good-looking colored girl." In *Talk with You Like a Woman.* Penguin, 1981.

Higginbotham, Evelyn Brooks. "African American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race." *Signs* 17, no. 2 (1992): 251-274. https://www.jstor.org/stable/3174464

Hine, Darlene Clark. "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West." *The University of Chicago Press* 14, no. 4 (1989): 912-920. https://www.jstor.org/stable/3174692.

Hughes, Langston. "For A'Lelia." Langston Hughes Papers, James Weldon Johnson Collection. In the Yale Collection of American Literature. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Box 377, Folder 6400. https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/2002853.

Hughes, Langston. *The Big Sea.* Thunder's Mouth Press, 1986.

Lewis, David Levering. *When Harlem was in Vogue.* Penguin, 1981.

Wall, Cheryl A. *Women of the Harlem Renaissance.* Indiana University Press, 1995.

Letters Referenced:

A'Lelia Walker to Freeman B. Ransom, February 28, 1924. Madam C.J. Walker Collection, Box 4, Folder 12, Indiana Historical Society. https://images.indianahistory.org/digital/collection/m0399/id/4522/rec/400.

A'Lelia Walker to Freeman B. Ransom, February 28, 1925. Madam C.J. Walker Collection, Box 4, Folder 13, Indiana Historical Society. https://images.indianahistory.org/digital/collection/m0399/id/4457/rec/435.

A'Lelia Walker to Freeman B. Ransom, October 22, 1925. Madam C.J. Walker Collection, Box 4, Folder 13,Indiana Historical Society. https://images.indianahistory.org/digital/collection/m0399/id/4447/rec/441.

A'Lelia Walker to Freeman B. Ransom, November 10, 1927. Madam C.J. Walker Collection, Box 4, Folder 19, Indiana Historical Society. https://images.indianahistory.org/digital/collection/m0399/id/4832/rec/515.

A'Lelia Walker to Freeman B. Ransom, November 27, 1928. Madam C.J. Walker Collection, Box 4, Folder 22, Indiana Historical Society. https://images.indianahistory.org/digital/collection/m0399/id/4969/rec/558.

A'Lelia Walker to Freeman B. Ransom, 1929. Madam C.J. Walker Collection, Box 4, Folder

27, Indiana Historical Society. https://images.indianahistory.org/digital/collection/m0399/id/5157/rec/560.

Joan Dawson to A'Lelia Walker, June 3, 1924. Madam C.J. Walker Collection, Box 4, Folder 28, Indiana Historical Society. https://images.indianahistory.org/digital/collection/m0399/id/5270/rec/418.

Freeman B. Ransom to A'Lelia Walker, February 20, 1930. Madam C.J. Walker Collection, Box 4, Folder 23, Indiana Historical Society. https://images.indianahistory.org/digital/collection/m0399/id/4995/rec/581.

Lelia Robinson to Freeman B. Ransom, October 20, 1916. Madam C.J. Walker Collection, Box 4, Folder 8, Indiana Historical Society. https://images.indianahistory.org/digital/collection/m0399/id/4327/rec/107.

Lelia Robinson to Freeman B. Ransom, April 23, 1917. Madam C.J. Walker Collection, Box 4, Folder 9, Indiana Historical Society. https://images.indianahistory.org/digital/collection/m0399/id/4340/rec/122.

Myrtle Thompson to A'Lelia Walker, March 15, 1924. Madam C.J. Walker Collection, Box 4, Folder 28, Indiana Historical Society. https://images.indianahistory.org/digital/collection/m0399/id/5275/rec/404.

P. Erlyne Osborne Whitely to Freeman B. Ransom, August 21, 1931. Madam C.J. Walker Collection, Box 5, Folder 20, Indiana Historical Society. https://images.indianahistory.org/digital/collection/m0399/id/5664/rec/642.

Peter Shields to A'Lelia Walker, April 9, 1924. Madam C.J. Walker Collection, Box 4, Folder 28, Indiana Historical Society. https://images.indianahistory.org/digital/collection/m0399/id/5282/rec/407

Chronicling Film Portrayals of The Rape of Nanjing: The Metamorphosis of a Tragedy's International and Domestic Legacy

By: Claudia Breed

The release of Iris Chang's book *The Rape of Nanking* in 1997 forever disrupted the narrative of the tragedy both internationally and domestically. Initially, "The Rape of Nanking did not penetrate the world consciousness in the same manner as the Holocaust or Hiroshima because the victims themselves had remained silent."[1] The legacy of the massacre was at first one of shame, then a rallying cry for Chinese nationalism, but it did not make waves on an international level until decades after the incident had transpired. A shift occurred away from nationalistic narratives to an emphasis on the heroism of international figures highlighted in Chang's research. This transformation is evidenced in film portrayals of the Nanjing Massacre over the course of the near century between the initial tragedy and the present day.

The Japanese invaded the Chinese capital in December 1937. The imperial army carried out mass rape, torture, and execution of the citizens of Nanjing. While conducting these atrocities, the Japanese manufactured a narrative of peaceful takeover and justified retaliation against barbarous Chinese citizens. Even now, it is difficult to definitively calculate the number of victims due to the "dearth of documentation. Unlike the Germans, the Japanese did not keep meticulous records of their atrocities."[2] Without official records, it becomes almost impossible to create a full-bodied account of the tragedy. Thus, in the months following the invasion, the Japanese attempted to take complete control of the narrative, offering their countrymen a manicured account of the incident. Released in 1938, a Japanese propaganda film, simply titled

---

[1] Iris Chang, *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II* (Basic Books, 1997), 23.

[2] Diana Lary, *Documents on the Rape of Nanking*, by Timothy Brook. *War in History* 8, no. 3 (2001): 367–68. http://www.jstor.org/stable/26013961.

Nanjing, showed contemporary footage of the war and was meticulously staged to glorify the Japanese army. On the surface, the film seems to be informative in intent, laying out battle maps of the city as well as discussing the methodology of their invasion. However, the preface to the footage hints at its inauthenticity by admitting proudly that the "movie was completed by coaching and support of the department of War, the Navy, and officers in the local headquarters."[3] The footage, though genuinely taken in the warzone, followed the desires of the Japanese government to justify their actions and illustrate the Chinese citizens as submissive to their will. An emphasis on the magnanimous actions of Japanese soldiers covered up any discussions of excessive cruelty. The documentary features a clip of Japanese soldiers offering Chinese prisoners of war cigarettes, even going as far as lighting one for a POW. The narration praises the "warm service" of the Japanese infantrymen.[4] The Japanese recognized the important role film played in controlling the narrative of an event and capitalized on their exclusive ability to disseminate information about the tragedy while the city was under their brutal command.

Figure 1. The flag of the United Kingdom in tatters. *Nanjing,* produced by Matsuzaki Keiji (1938, Toho Cultural Cinema Department), 0:35:36.

[3] *Nanjing*, produced by Matsuzaki Keiji (1938, Toho Cultural Cinema Department), 0:06:33 - 0:06:35, Streaming on YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FJv7J8y2bvk.
[4] *Nanjing*, 0:15:40 - 0:15:46

The documentary is overwhelmingly concerned with the Japanese presence in Nanjing and hardly mentions the international involvement in the city, save for choice shots such as Fig. 1. The image of a torn flag emphasizes the battle prowess of the Japanese Empire and the failures of other nations to stop their conquest. Unlike later portrayals of the incident, there is very little mention of the Nanjing Safety Zone and the key foreign individuals who maintained it. In a shot that lasts less than a minute, the narrator mentions the existence of the "international institute, organized by 22 foreigners, that is the refugee safety zone which was managed by those foreigners."[5] No foreigners are mentioned by name, nor are they valorized for the initiatives that saved the lives of thousands of Nanjing natives. Instead, the Japanese falsify their reaction to the establishment of the safety zone and center their actions as heroic. Rather than discuss the unjustified invasion of a space that was meant to be an official sanctuary, the documentary claims the nonviolent foreigners "hid weapons and bullets. After we cleared those dangerous remnants resolutely the real refugees were felt safe in peace."[6] The Japanese portray themselves as simultaneously dominant in battle and overwhelmingly generous to the population they conquered.

The decades following the massacre were filled with shame as China desperately attempted to rebuild itself, all while under the pressure of simmering political tensions between the Communist and Nationalist forces. Unfortunately, "the last Japanese would not be routed from Chinese soil until the end of World War II in 1945," and even then, recovery from the massive trauma was not simple for the people of China.[7] Though the incident weighed heavily on the minds of the people, the first Chinese film to portray the events of 1937 would not be

---

[5] *Nanjing*, 0:36:17 - 0:36:26.
[6] *Nanjing*, 0:36:29 - 0:36:41.
[7] Chang, *The Rape of Nanking*, 14.

released until 1987, five decades after the Japanese first broke into the former Chinese capital. *Massacre in Nanjing* follows Dr. Zhan as he witnesses the extreme violence committed by the Japanese and his heroic actions in the face of depravity. The film centers on Dr. Zhan's bravery as a message of nationalist perseverance. Amanda Weiss reflects on the heavily politicized legacy of Nanjing, particularly in light of the release of "revisionist Japanese textbooks" in 1982 and Japanese Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone's "official visit to Yasukuni Shrine, a Japanese shrine controversial for commemorating convicted war criminals," in 1985.[8] For the Chinese public, it was more important than ever to reclaim the incident as a genesis for nationalist heroism and pride. Though the primary focus of *Massacre in Nanjing* is patriotism, the film highlights international presence through the character of Katy, the white female love interest of Dr. Zhan. Her presence evidences the increasingly international attitudes of China, as she "is central to revealing the evidence of the massacre," however, Katy is auxiliary to Dr. Zhan and relies on his heroism to empower her own.[9] The actress who plays Katy speaks Mandarin and is a Chinese national, effectively portraying a Western character as assimilating into Chinese culture. Other aspects of the film mention international involvement, but do not dwell on its significance. On his journey to collect evidence of the atrocities, Dr. Zhan encountered Catholic symbolism as well as the Safety Zone that has become emblematic of Nanjing's perseverance. Similar to the Japanese propaganda film *Nanjing*, Westerners do not take center stage and are not highlighted by name or specific heroic actions.

Nine years after *Massacre in Nanjing*, Iris Chang introduced her seminal work, *The Rape of Nanking*, to the world. The book quickly became a bestseller, garnering international interest

---

[8] Amada Weiss, "Contested Images of Rape: The Nanjing Massacre in Chinese and Japanese Films," *Signs*, vol. 41, no. 2 (2016): 439, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26552821.
[9] Weiss, "Contested Images of Rape," 440.

in the tragedy. Her research uncovered previously overlooked aspects of the massacre, and she "unearthed thousands of pages of diaries that [John Rabe] and other Nazis kept during the Rape."[10] In discussions of the massacre after the release of her research, John Rabe is one of the most prominent historical figures. Notoriously, Chang refers to him as "the Oskar Schindler of China." The writings she uncovered painted a complete picture of the tragedy, one that was previously underappreciated due to a shortage of contemporaneous evidence, due to the Japanese government's efforts. Though historically significant, Chang faced criticism for her treatment of the disaster and comparison of what occurred in Nanjing to the Holocaust. Her streamlined focus on the International Safety Zone, in part explained by discoveries like John Rabe's diary, was dismissed as a "half-baked history" by some academics in the community.[11] This focus on the international community of Nanjing created a new perspective from which to observe the tragedy, through the lens of a foreigner's duty in a global conflict. Iris Chang is also credited with the discovery of Minnie Vautrin's writings, the woman who is known as the "living goddess of Nanking." Born and raised in Illinois, Vautrin was sent to Nanjing as a missionary, eventually becoming the president of a women's college. During the war, she transformed the campus into a camp for women and children. Vautrin's work was paramount in shifting the conversation surrounding Nanjing toward the issue of women's rights. A Chinese witness to Vautrin's war efforts described her as "fighting for the cause of protecting Chinese women with courage and determination from beginning to end."[12] The sexual crimes against women are a focal point of the discussion surrounding the tragedy, thanks in part to Chang's writing. Chang

---

[10] Chang, *The Rape of Nanking*, 129.
[11] Frank Jacob, "Banzai! And the Others Die—Collective Violence in the Rape of Nanking." In *Global Lynching and Collective Violence: Volume 1: Asia, Africa, and the Middle East,* edited by Michael J. Pfeifer (2017): 80, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/j.ctt1m3p10s.7.
[12] Chang, *The Rape of Nanking*, 163.

was deeply concerned with the misogynistic aspects of the violence, yet film portrayals historically fail to observe the brutality against women as anything more than a device to facilitate male heroism.

Despite the controversies, Chang's work struck a chord internationally, and her influence is evident in the shift in Chinese cinema. Unlike *Massacre in Nanjing*, which disseminated an unabashedly nationalistic message, *The Flowers of War* embraces white heroism above all else. The 2011 film was inspired by a novel of the same name by Geling Yan, who drew inspiration from Iris Chang's writing in turn. Chang's influence is credited with "the turn toward male Westerners as savior figures—with Chinese women as silent victims or romantic objects of the Western hero's affections,"[13] She codified white historical figures like John Rabe, Minnie Vautrin, and Robert Wilson into almost legendary heroes. The Chinese civilian becomes passive, while the bravery of the white man makes him into the rugged protagonist of a Chinese story. Despite the Chinese roots of the film, as well as the Chinese director, Zhang Yimou, *The Flowers of War*'s fictional account of the Rape credits a white character, John Miller, with the salvation of the city's most marginalized: young virgin girls. In valorizing the fictional white hero, the film condones the continued tethering of the salvation of Nanjing to the actions of the foreigners in the warzone. When John Miller first arrives, he is a scoundrel; he is motivated only by the money the church owes him for the burial of their priest and has no concern for the safety of the schoolgirls who seek refuge within its walls. Slowly, he buries his old habits and begins to care for the ragtag group of individuals who would have him use his race as a shield against the Japanese. It takes the Japanese physically invading the church and attempting to rape the young schoolgirls, killing some in the process, for John to don the dead priest's vestments and beg of

[13] Weiss, "Contested Images of Rape," 444.

the Japanese commander, "Please, don't hurt the children anymore."[14] The previously dishonorable mortician now stands out in comparison to both sides of the war. He is a paragon of righteousness in front of the Japanese commander, defending the innocent in the crisp garments of the dead priest. In front of the disheveled and helpless schoolgirls, he appears to be a savior, firm and steadfast in his defense of their honor. The Japanese are cruel and barbaric, while the Chinese, chiefly Chinese women, are passive and in need of saving. The white man exists as a mediator between the two.

Fig. 2. John Miller, played by Christian Bale, stands off against a Japanese soldier as the girls of the convent cower behind him. *The Flowers of War,* directed by Zhang Yimou. (2011, Edko Films), 0:44:11.

A group of prostitutes also seeks John's protection, to which he obliges due to his salacious attraction to one in particular, Yu Mo. The two eventually develop a genuine romantic connection, and the white hero is able to reveal the sincerity within the mysterious and corrupted prostitute, thereby saving her physically and redeeming her soul. She admits to him she turned to

[14] *The Flowers of War*, directed by Zhang Yimou. (2011, Edko Films), 0:53:18 - 0:53:26.

prostitution partly because she "was raped by [her] stepfather at thirteen years old."[15] This scene plays out like a confession, not only because John dresses as a priest to fool the invaders, but because as a white man he is set up to appear morally superior to the Japanese. This superiority manifests as a paternalistic relationship when John is compared to the women and girls he is protecting. Regardless of their ages, he treats both the prostitutes and the schoolgirls as fragile, shielding them from the violent realities of their situation. Two of the prostitutes leave the protection of the church and are caught by Japanese soldiers. The women are tortured relentlessly, raped, and their dead bodies are left in excruciatingly inhumane positions. John sees this scene, yet when he returns to the church, he lies to Yu Mo and her friends, claiming, "It was a stray bullet."[16] The fragility assumed of the women also extends, albeit more naturally, to the convent girls. The Japanese commander demands that they all attend to his officers at a celebratory feast. John is not ignorant of his meaning; the officers are plotting to sexually abuse the young girls. Once again, he pulls the wool over their eyes with a paternalistic lie, stating that the Japanese "men are gentlemen…it's a party. There's nice things at parties."[17] The weakness of the Chinese women serves to emphasize the intelligence and strength of the white protagonist. John now carries the burden of shielding the women under his care, both physically and mentally. The paternalistic treatment prevents the development of agency for the girls and prostitutes alike, illustrating them as homogenous groups under a white man's protection.

The most contemporary film about the tragedy follows the trends full circle, returning to the patriotic outlook of earlier movies about the Rape of Nanjing. *Dead to Rights,* released in 2025, follows Ah Chang, a postman, as he pretends to be a photo developer's apprentice to

[15] *The Flowers of War*, Zhang, 1:35:32 - 1:35:43.
[16] *The Flowers of War*, Zhang, 1:23:16 - 1:23:21.
[17] *The Flowers of War*, Zhang, 1:32:56 - 1:33:14.

secure his safety from the Japanese. Under pressure from army photographer Hideo Ito, he develops Japanese photographs of the ongoing human rights crisis in the city of Nanjing. The movie also follows the real film developer and his family as they hide beneath the floorboards of their own home, a Chinese interpreter for the Japanese army who is deemed a traitor, his opera singer mistress, and a policeman called up to the Chinese army with a thirst for revenge. All of these characters have been subject to intolerable cruelty, and yet they agree to resist the imperial forces despite the risk of torture or worse. The group devises a daring plan to switch Ito's documentation of Japanese war crimes with old negatives and sew the evidence into the lining of their clothes. Without knowing if any of them will survive, they decide "whoever gets a travel pass takes the negatives out" to distribute them to the broader public.[18]

Fig. 3. Hideo Ito's photos during development by Ah Chang. *Dead to Rights,* directed by Shen Ao. (2025, China Film Group), 0:50:21.

The resistance developed by the Chinese characters is independent of any foreign involvement. Unlike *The Flowers of War*, the Chinese characters are not initially passive in their suffering; instead, they choose to take agency of their freedom and risk death to escape the

[18] *Dead to Rights,* directed by Shen Ao. (2025, China Film Group), 2:01:47 - 2:02:09.

oppressive colonial rule leveling the city they hold dear. The symbolism of the red film development room becoming the foundation of the Chinese resistance is potent. Red has a long-standing association with luck, as well as a connection to Chinese national pride. Bathing scenes of revolution in the representative color of China holds a direct nationalistic connotation. The treatment of foreign characters is opposite to that in previous films. Various scenes illustrate the impotence of foreign characters to prevent the violence from occurring. There is no strong white male figure leading the story; instead, the white characters serve to emphasize the barbarism of the Japanese. The Japanese invade the International Safety Zone hospital while Ah Chang is there recovering from injuries inflicted in an encounter with a soldier. A woman, assumed to be Minnie Vautrin, stands up to the aggressors, stating, "Stop! This is a hospital—you can't come in here."[19] Her commands have no sway in the eyes of the bloodthirsty Japanese soldiers, one of whom promptly slaps her across the face. Unlike the prowess of John Miller acting as a sole protector, the white characters have no power even when shrouded by the institutions they established to provide aid. The failures of the white characters act as a foil to the efforts of Ah Chang and the other resisting civilians. *Dead to Rights* attempts to reverse the narrative of the passive Chinese citizen, turning it on its head to state that China must rely on itself for salvation.

The release of *The Rape of Nanking* prompted international discussion of foreign involvement during the Japanese occupation. However, the trend in film portrayals of the tragedy has since reversed, resembling the nationalism of pre-Iris Chang narratives. In 2025, China has become increasingly concerned with domestic issues and, as a result, has cultivated more nationalistic attitudes. Economically, Xi Jinping has a desire "to make the country more self-

---

[19] *Dead to Rights*, Shen, 0:57:02 - 0:57:11.

reliant and reduce its dependence on foreign markets."[20] Even China's foreign policy follows a more "security-driven and ideology-centric model, focusing on national security."[21] Long gone are the days of glorifying foreign individuals over domestic heroes. Film portrayals of the Nanjing massacre have always followed contemporaneous political attitudes and have been tailored to push forward the responding ideologies. *Nanjing* (1938) was created with the express intention of promoting the Japanese army and countering criticisms of its unnecessary cruelty. *Massacre in Nanjing* responded to perceived Japanese disrespect of the legacy of Nanjing with forceful patriotism. Iris Chang's book offered a new perspective driven by historical discoveries and, in turn, roused conversation about foreign involvement in the occupation. The increased foreign interest in the massacre prompted the creation of *The Flowers of War,* which stages a white savior narrative. Since Iris Chang's book aroused global interest, the legacy of the tragedy ceased to belong to domestic Chinese voices, but changing political tides have reversed this trend.

[20] Bart Dessin, "Come and (Re)Discover China: Staunchly Patriotic, Sincerely Religious, and Eager to Further Engage with the World," Egmont Policy Brief 371 (2025): 2, http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep68543.
[21] Dessin, "Come and (Re)Discover China," 2.

Bibliography

Chang, Iris. The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II. Basic Books, 1997.

Dead to Rights. Directed by Shen Ao. China Film Group, 2025.

Dessein, Bart. “Come and (Re)Discover China: Staunchly Patriotic, Sincerely Religious, and Eager to Further Engage with the World.” Egmont Institute, 2025. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep68543.

Jacob, Frank. “Banzai! And the Others Die—Collective Violence in the Rape of Nanking.” In *Global Lynching and Collective Violence: Volume 1: Asia, Africa, and the Middle East*, edited by Michael J. Pfeifer. University of Illinois Press, 2017. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/j.ctt1m3p10s.7.

Lary, Diana. “Documents on the Rape of Nanking.” *War in History* 8, no. 3 (2001): 367–68. http://www.jstor.org/stable/26013961.

Massacre in Nanjing. Directed by Luo Guanqun. Fujian Film Studio and Nanjing Film Studio, 1987.

Nanjing. Produced by Matsuzaki Keiji. Toho Cultural Cinema Department, 1938. Streaming on YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FJv7J8y2bvk.

The Flowers of War. Directed by Zhang Yimou, Edko Films, 2011.

Weiss, Amanda. “Contested Images of Rape: The Nanjing Massacre in Chinese and Japanese Films.” *Signs* 41, no. 2 (2016): 433–56. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26552821.

Tropicalia: Music and Visual Culture at the Forefront of Brazilian Conceptualism

By: Josephine Jurasas

The Tropicalia movement demonstrates fascinating new modes of communication during the Brazilian conceptual movement in the 1960s. Linguistics, irony, and pop culture not only influenced the spread of conceptual art but became an essential part of it. Helio Oiticica's 1966-7 interactive installation, *Tropicália, Penetrables PN 2 'Purity is a myth' and PN 3 'Imagetical',* commands the Topicalia movement's values, aesthetics, and techniques for communication through a time of authoritarianism in Brazil. This installation and Oiticica's framework inspired the name for an emerging music genre to find a name for their new sound in Brazilian popular music and culture. This connection coined the 1968 album *Tropicalia*, featuring a psychedelic pop song "Panis et Circenses" by the Brazilian trio Os Mutantes. These artworks, one music and the other visual, equally transmit invigorating and necessary methods of communication of Brazilian Conceptual art in the Tropicalia movement. Together, Oiticica and Os Mutantes expressed a generation and challenged authority through their art and music in the 1960s.

Authoritarianism in Brazil intensified dramatically during the 1960s, reshaping political life and cultural expression within just one decade. In 1968, the authoritarian government suspended habeas corpus, which allowed for the arrest of anyone without due process.[1] This totalitarianism censored the press and the arts, while granting the regime the sweeping power to arrest, exile, and silence any dissent. This climate of repression directly impacted artists and musicians, who were targeted at the hands of the regime. In response, movements like Tropicalia developed experimental forms of communication that resisted authoritarian control. Blending popular culture with conceptual frameworks, these artists exposed the tyranny of the

[1] Tate. "The Story of Hélio Oiticica and the Tropicália Movement." Tate.

regime and asserted creative freedom.

The unique form of Brazilian conceptualism that emerged throughout authoritarianism in the 1960s and 70s evolved around mobilizing social movements and nation-building. From this, the Tropicalia movement was born, which is a distinct blend of music and visual arts. The interplay between music and art in the Tropicalia movement strengthened artists' messages and embodied conceptual art ideas, such as incorporating language in art, performance as a medium, and using irony to critique national issues. Tropicalia is part of the broader Brazilian Conceptualism movement, which was distinguished by countering "hegemonic vocabularies" of European and American domination of the art movement.[2] Latin American countries were put in a box, and often dismissed as "primitives, making naïve art as the mythical other."[3] Brazilian Conceptualism counters these claims and produces new modes of art and communication to reflect their voice and avoid the binaries within Euro/American Conceptualism.

Artists like Gilberto Gil and Caetano Veloso worked alongside Oiticica and Os Mutantes to express this form of Brazilian Conceptualism. Latin American artists employed a "use of communication and information theories to investigate the mechanisms through which meanings are conveyed to audiences."[4] The audience is a central focus in Oiticica's and Os Mutantes' work. They receive and equally employ the theories presented through new mechanisms by their interactions with an installation or song. This relationship makes the essential roles of linguistics, pop culture, and irony shine in the Tropicalia movement. New productions of social phenomena, paired with authoritarianism looming over the nation, place people's everyday lives

[2] López, Miguel A. "How Do We Know What Latin American Conceptualism Looks Like?" *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry* 23, no. 1 (2019).
[3] De Ávila Duarte, Miguel. "Of Adversity We Live: Hélio Oiticica, Decolonized Avant-Garde and Global Art." *AM Journal of Art and Media Studies*, no. 26 (October 15, 2021): 4.
[4] Ramírez, Mari. *Tactics for Thriving on Adversity: Conceptualism in Latin America, 1960–1980*, 1999. 56.

and interactions with visual and pop culture as a moving part of the Tropicalia movement.

Oiticica created an interactive installation titled *Tropicalia, Penetrables PN 2 'Purity is a myth' and PN 3 'Imagetical',* in 1966, to critique the idea that Brazil is a tropical paradise. The framework and mechanism of the movement are expressed in the immersive play, constantly shaping the artwork into new meanings. Before a visitor enters, they take off their shoes to feel the sand on their feet as they weave through a recreation of an urban labyrinth set in Brazil. The colorful hues of the intimate buildings, along with the birds chirping, make it seem like a paradise, but the meaning is not lost. The viewers are in the favela, notorious as the poorest and most dangerous areas of cities like Rio. The parallels between paradise and the harsh realities of life and class disparity play out as museum visitors confront these circumstances.

Engaging with people was at the forefront of Oiticica's mind when producing this work. People take their shoes off, weave through hanging textiles as they enter into cramped "prenetrebles" of the makeshift favela, and gather as a community in an artwork that brings people together. Through this visual program, the audience's participation exemplifies the notion within Brazilian Conceptualism that modes of communication are, in fact, the art. As people realized there was a "sandpit in their local art gallery," they transformed the image presented by Oiticica.[5] The artwork begins as a map of Rio and Oiticica's imagination, and human interaction uses time and purposeless play as a mechanism to evolve the artwork.[6] These constantly evolving elements spread the Tropicalia movement through new ways, not contained to a market, museum, or nation. This is the precise challenge that Brazilian Conceptualism presents when critiquing the binaries of European and American art within an increasingly authoritarian regime.

The roles of the audience, the subjects who interpret and interact with the theories of

[5] Tate. "The Story of Hélio Oiticica and the Tropicália Movement."
[6] Tate. "The Story of Hélio Oiticica and the Tropicália Movement."

Tropicalia, fuel pop culture and center music as much as visual culture in the 1960s. The 20th century gave musicians a platform and influence unlike ever before, truly becoming "the century of song."[7] With this outreach and expression, musicians spread messages through pop culture with their tool of the radio. With the radio as their medium, and pop culture as an activating force in their art, musicians in Tropicalia forged a bridge between musical and visual culture. The experimental psychedelic song, "Panis et Circenses" by Os Mutantes is a composition that lyrically, sonically, and socially echoes Oiticica's *Tropicalia* installation. The song begins with a symphonic horn opening, which quickly morphs into a distorted take on the melody, slowing down a bit and adding reverb, then tambourine, and bells. This rhythm is an enchanting layer under the lyrics of the song. Representing irony and linguistic mechanisms, the lyrics critique the bourgeois distracted from the realities of the world at their fancy dinner party. They sing, "São ocupadas em nascer e morrer"[8] The people at the dinner party are too distracted to see the horrors outside, as the singer describes her plot to kill her lover on the main street of the city. "Para matar o meu amor," she sings.[9]

Similarly, the irony employed by Oiticica centers on the individuals and stories of the favelas that were being silenced by the authoritarian regime and the illusion of Brazil as a tropical paradise. While people were having fun interacting with this intriguing new exhibit, Oiticica could keep the values and demands of Tropicalia at the center of a conversation. As the lyrics of "Panis et Circenses" highlight the irony of the bourgeois distraction of a dinner party to the violence in the street below, the illusion of Brazilian paradise aligns in Oiticia's work. Both the artist and musicians draw attention to the unspoken narratives hiding behind censorship,

---

[7] Burnett, Henry. "Ten (Anti-) Theses for a Brazilian Popular Musical Aesthetic." *AM Journal of Art and Media Studies*, no. 26 (October 15, 2021): 1.
[8] Os Mutantes. *Panis et Circenses*. Universal Music Ltda, 1968.
[9] Os Mutantes. *Panis et Circenses*.

exoticism, and disparities in Brazil. Os Mutantes break through this illusion and barrier at the end of their song, as they flip, reverse, and distort the audio of a dinner party with the overlapping melodies and instruments that fade out with an exciting crescendo. The song creates a groove that hip young people in the 1960s could dance to, but their demanding experimental ending reminds the audience not to groove too much and to stop and think about the true meaning behind the song. Oiticica executes this sentiment as well, as families and friends gather for a seemingly tropical playground, but are presented with the realities and homes of people in the favelas.

Tropicalia was created, spread, and thrived through the new modes of Brazilian Conceptual art, especially demonstrated through the connection between music and art. Visual art movements are naturally accompanied by musical and linguistic counterparts. Each artistic expression elevates the other and offers a delightful and exciting array of media that converge to create something that transcends binaries and moves generations. In the words of the prominent Brazilian musician, Caetano Veloso, Oiticia's *Tropicália, Penetrables PN 2 'Purity is a myth' and PN 3 'Imagetical',* was "a visual expression of our feelings."[10] Musicians and artists are a team that work together to push the values, demands, and aesthetics of the Tropicalia movement.

Oiticia and Os Mutantes' music and artworks stand as a defining example of how Brazilian Conceptualism transforms modes of communication under authoritarian rule. Art and music formed the Tropicalia movement together, both employing linguistics, irony, and pop culture to engage with an audience to create a meaningful and necessary mode of communication. This culmination defied barriers set by European and American forms of

---

[10] Tate. "The Story of Hélio Oiticica and the Tropicália Movement."

Conceptualism that dominated the art space, and artists like Oiticica and Os Mutantes developed the aesthetics and tools to express new forms of art even throughout an authoritarian regime. Oiticica's immersive *Tropicalia* installation and Os Mutantes' groovy yet subversive song “Panis et Circenses” give participants the opportunity to confront realities and expose the social and class disparities through sound, play, color, and community. By centering the audience as an essential co-producer of meaning, Tropicalia asserted that communication itself could function as art and resistance. The similar methods and execution of Tropicalia principles presented through music and art demonstrate how creativity can mobilize and even flourish during a time of authoritarian control.

Bibliography

Burnett, Henry. “Ten (Anti-) Theses for a Brazilian Popular Musical Aesthetic.” *AM Journal of Art and Media Studies*, no. 26 (October 15, 2021): 53–61. https://doi.org/10.25038/am.v0i26.469.

De Ávila Duarte, Miguel. “Of Adversity We Live: Hélio Oiticica, Decolonized Avant-Garde and Global Art.” *AM Journal of Art and Media Studies*, no. 26 (October 15, 2021): 41–52. https://doi.org/10.25038/am.v0i26.468.

López, Miguel A. “How Do We Know What Latin American Conceptualism Looks Like?” *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry* 23, no. 1 (2019). https://www.afterall.org/articles/how-do-we-know-what-latin-american-conceptualism-lo oks-like/.

Ramírez, Mari. *Tactics for Thriving on Adversity: Conceptualism in Latin America, 1960–1980*, 1999.

Os Mutantes. *Panis et Circenses*. Universal Music Ltda, 1968.

Tate. “The Story of Hélio Oiticica and the Tropicália Movement.” Tate. Accessed December 7, 2025. https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/helio-oiticica-7730/story-helio-oiticica-and-tropicalia movement.

Medieval Women

Eleanor of Aquitaine

By: Abigail Lawton

Developing a comprehensive understanding of Eleanor of Aquitaine has proven extremely difficult for scholars given her unique story and the misrepresentations recorded by chroniclers of her time. She has been described as "well-known yet ultimately unknowable,"[1] indicating her status as a remarkable figure in the Middle Ages, yet unfortunately one that remains fuzzy. Many of Eleanor's contemporaries discredited her and her influence due to scandals throughout her life—such as her supposed affairs with her uncle, Raymond of Antioch, and with Geoffrey of Anjou—which would continue to taint her reputation in literature and media even into the twentieth century.[2] However, chroniclers also often discounted her simply for the fact that she was a woman and therefore was only viewed as overly emotional and subject to the will of her male counterparts. This is certainly not true and brings into question the understanding of medieval emotion and how it is very useful in conceptualizing women from this time. Barbara H. Rosenwein discusses the importance of validating emotions in historical analysis and using context to determine their communicative influence,[3] which is vital when looking at Eleanor as a queen; her political role can be seen by historians simply from the events of her lifetime, but her writing is where one really starts to see her different roles and how she utilized emotion to have an active and effective part in politics. When specifically looking at the letters Eleanor wrote to Pope Celestine III after her son Richard I's capture, methodologies must not delegitimize emotion so as to grasp how important it was for queens in their efforts to

---

[1] Theresa Earenfight, *Queenship in Medieval Europe* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 137.
[2] Gabrielle Storey, "(Mis)Representing Queens: The Untold Lives of the Empress Matilda and Eleanor of Aquitaine," *Parergon* 39, no. 1 (2022), pp. 192-204.
[3] Barbara H. Rosenwein, "Thinking Historically about Medieval Emotions," *History Compass* 8, no. 8 (August 4, 2010), 836.

influence and persuade.[4] Eleanor of Aquitaine *was* rational and *was* powerful, both for her individual motives and on a maternal level. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate how Eleanor of Aquitaine's roles as regent queen and queen-mother were utilized effectively to exert political power—particularly during her time in England—and that her writing demonstrates how female emotion was extremely useful and not something of "excess"[5] that was endured.

Emotion is a critical part of the human experience, yet it is often considered to be in opposition to rationality. This association is most commonly attached to feminine emotion and women in general, which greatly harms female agency and expression, particularly in the years and societies where women have been viewed as generally inferior. Even traits have been gendered, with those that are apparently "masculine"—such as "mind, culture, and rationality"—seen as superior to "body, nature, and irrationality," which are "considered 'feminine' traits."[6] Because of these viewpoints, scholars have repeatedly discounted emotions as possible motives for various actions. Recent works in philosophy and history have been pushing for "a recognition of the important role emotions play in knowledge processes"[7] to generate new perspectives within these fields and beyond. This can create new and more nuanced views on historical events, figures, and literature, hopefully providing a deeper understanding of women of the past.

Historian Barbara Rosenwein has written about different ways of viewing and interpreting emotion in medieval times. The first model presents emotions as social signals and comments on the previously popular idea that "emotions were 'performed.'"[8] This notion and the

[4] Linda E. Mitchell, "Give Me Back My Son!': Eleanor of Aquitaine, Emotion Talk, and the Gendering of Political Rhetoric," *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 44, no. 2 (2018), 1.
[5] Mitchell, "Give Me Back My Son!," 1.
[6] Valentina Bortolami, "The Diagnostic Role of Emotions in Feminist Philosophy," *Frontiers in Psychology* 16 (August 12, 2025), 2.
[7] Bortolami, "The Diagnostic Role," 2.
[8] Rosenwein, "Thinking Historically about Medieval Emotions," 830.

idea that the ritualization of emotion can "deprive emotion of any inner meaning,"[9] essentially negate the feelings of the individual who is actually expressing them. In societies and classes that may have tended to be extravagant and lavish, emotions certainly ran high and became parts of their characteristics. Nevertheless, this does not mean the emotions were not indeed experienced, and thus they remain of great importance in understanding the context of medieval society. Rosenwein points to Stephen D. White's statement that there are certainly "emotional dimensions of both medieval politics and medieval law,"[10] which is particularly applicable to Eleanor's story. Eleanor of Aquitaine's grandfather, William IX of Aquitaine, was likely a major origin of the troubadour culture that would later follow Eleanor to the English court and beyond. This court became vivacious, and she often encouraged this art form, which unfortunately resulted in many novels and studies about Eleanor hyper fixating on courtly romance and scandal.[11] A community like this is likely to exemplify high emotions, yet it still functioned and was revered, as was the seemingly passionate Eleanor. Rosenwein's second model, looking at emotional communities, takes into account how interconnected emotions are and that they can—and were—stressed to achieve a gain. Political agendas often employed emotion while still representing the state of the individual or institution[12]; this was absolutely the case for Eleanor. Rosenwein states that "emotions are self-interested, directly connected to the values and goals of the person who feels them,"[13] which is evident in Eleanor's works, specifically her letters to Pope Celestine III throughout 1193; those letters had a very specific political motive but also demonstrated a mother's anguish and desire to see her son again. Rosenwein's conclusion

---

[9] Rosenwein, "Thinking Historically about Medieval Emotions," 830.
[10] Rosenwein, "Thinking Historically about Medieval Emotions," 831.
[11] Ralph V. Turner, *Eleanor of Aquitaine: Queen of France, Queen of England* (Yale University Press, 2009), 32.
[12] Rosenwein, "Thinking Historically about Medieval Emotions," 832.
[13] Rosenwein, "Thinking Historically about Medieval Emotions," 832.

ultimately says that, to better understand and respect medieval emotion, one must truly look at the texts that display them, searching for any political or personal motive.[14] Whether the author is using emotion to portray their personal feelings or another's is very important, as well as the context in which expression is needed. Because emotion pulls at humans on a deep level, connecting individuals and creating bonds, it can be manipulated and exaggerated. For this paper, it was imperative to distinguish between the articulations of emotion by the chroniclers of Eleanor's time and those within her own writings that present her goals and personality.

Another scholar, Theresa Earenfight, provides a useful overview of medieval queens and women, which has contributed to the expanding feminist outlooks on history. She comments on how accounts of women from medieval times have been very limited in comparison to those of men and that even scholarship for many years would not view female figures as suitable for individual study.[15] The female agency of the Middle Ages was assumed to be limited, and modern scholarship has continued to reflect these inequalities for a long time. She mentioned that "books on queens were romantic representations that emphasized the emotional life of a queen,"[16] rather than highlighting their power and influence; again, emotion is used as an excuse to undermine instead of as a way of better conceptualizing historical figures. Queens were often also characterized primarily by the men in their life, whether that is their father, husband, sons, etc. Alliance and expansion were some of the most significant reasons for royal marriages, resulting in queens holding power through what they would essentially be bringing to the table—though even inheritance was often viewed as being passed through the father of the queen. Despite the commonly male-centric depiction of monarchy, queens did still hold power in the

[14] Rosenwein, "Thinking Historically about Medieval Emotions," 834.
[15] Theresa Earenfight, *Queenship in Medieval Europe* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 4.
[16] Earenfight, *Queenship in Medieval Europe*, 4.

unity and symbolism of a royal marriage.[17] Both partners played a role in how the other was viewed, and seeing that medieval queens typically "were international ambassadors,"[18] this was very important. The main roles for queens, however, were that of a wife and mother, securing the strength and continuation of a monarchy. Additionally, in the twelfth century, women all across French and English lands had the most political power "most often through their roles as wives and mother."[19] Queens could exercise power in these roles and sometimes even govern individually, being described as "female king" exercising "kingly power," but very rarely was a queen completely autonomous and characterized as "empress" or "regnant queen."[20] These roles both have men at their foundations, but feminine influence and emotion were still utilized by these queens, often in the political landscape.[21]

The medieval queen's role as a wife is inherently political—even though she would have often been portrayed as without involvement in that area of life—due to the fact that "monarchy was first and foremost a political institution."[22] The unity of a king and queen was a political message of strength in itself and was meant to be upheld in any and every circumstance. However, a letter from Peter of Blois to Eleanor of Aquitaine states, "A woman who is not under the headship of the husband violates the condition of nature, the mandate of the Apostle, and the law of Scripture,"[23] which shows the societal perception of the boundaries of a wife's role. Eleanor's role in England broke these conceived boundaries, as Henry II trusted her immensely in caring for England when he was away at the beginning of his reign and extended great power

---

[17] Earenfight, *Queenship in Medieval Europe*, 7.
[18] Earenfight, *Queenship in Medieval Europe*, 28.
[19] Turner, *Eleanor of Aquitaine*, 15.
[20] Earenfight, *Queenship in Medieval Europe*, 6.
[21] Earenfight, *Queenship in Medieval Europe*, 16.
[22] Earenfight, *Queenship in Medieval Europe*, 16.
[23] Paul Halsall, ed., "Peter of Blois: Letter 154 to Queen Eleanor, 1173," translated by M. Markowski, Internet History Sourcebooks: Medieval Sourcebook (Fordham University, 1997), https://history.hanover.edu/courses/excerpts/344blois.html, accessed 02 December 2025.

to her as regent;[24] this would later subside, however, and likely became a powerful grievance Eleanor had toward her second husband. An interesting form of influence that queens also had over their husbands was intercession, which may have been staged to the public; these acts "conveyed to everyone…that the queen possesses and could use her influence over her husband."[25] Other forms of "matrimonial diplomacy"[26] and social connections were all ways that these queens could hold power in their kingdoms, even though it may be quiet. Such power as regent queen, intercession, diplomacy, and social interaction all utilized the feminine emotions that were dramatized by medieval chroniclers but ultimately demonstrate the importance of women harnessing the skills that may have been lost to men under societal norms.

The queen-mother was, perhaps, the most substantial role of a medieval queen. Bearing an heir was seen as "the guarantor of the realm's survival and integrity"[27] and, in some cases, the maintenance of a king's ego. The separation of Eleanor of Aquitaine and Louis VII, publicly announced as due to the true grounds of consanguinity, was primarily because of the lack of a son from Eleanor. This was extremely important to Louis who had "lineage and posterity on his mind,"[28] perhaps more than rumors surrounding Eleanor and the stark differences between the couple. Eleanor exemplifies both the strengths and weaknesses in the argument that the motherly role produces a queen's power, as she exercised power in England *before* having sons and also had considerable power *through* her sons later on. In the Middle Ages, "there was a positive value of marriage and motherhood" that allowed queens certain political influences due to

---

[24] Turner, *Eleanor of Aquitaine*, 150.
[25] Earenfight, *Queenship in Medieval Europe*, 12.
[26] Jane Martindale, "Eleanor of Aquitaine and a 'Queenly Court'?," in *Eleanor of Aquitaine: Lord and Lady*, ed. Bonnie Wheeler and John Carmi Parsons (2002; repr., Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 432.
[27] Theresa Earenfight, "Where Do We Go from Here? Some Thoughts on Power and Gender in the Middle Ages," *Medieval Feminist Forum: A Journal of Gender and Sexuality* 51, no. 2 (2016), 118.
[28] Turner, *Eleanor of Aquitaine*, 138.

"models of motherhood such as St. Elizabeth and Old Testament matriarchs Sarah and Hanna."[29] Following this trend, Eleanor was able to have significant influence under Richard I's reign and through the weight of her motherly bond with him. However, there were also women and queens without children who had considerable power, such as Mary Tudor.[30] Before Eleanor had sons, she still had the confidence of Henry II as regent and issued charters and writs throughout her life. In Eleanor's case there is even the factor that "too many sons created tensions" with opposing ambitions to their father.[31] Ultimately, the importance of a queen's role as mother and caretaker of her children remained constant in these nuances, as well as the power that came from that bond. Eleanor's two roles as wife and mother, or as regent queen and queen-mother, are primarily where historians find the most of her agency. Her time with Henry II and during the life of their son Richard I in particular, see the greatest amount of her writings as well. Even though these roles are attached to men, Eleanor's ability to utilize emotional rhetoric within these spaces to exercise agency makes her a perfect candidate for exploring a feminist approach to historical analysis.

Fully understanding Eleanor of Aquitaine is difficult primarily because of the lack of concrete information about her long life. With chroniclers unreliable with their dramatized accounts and their "little attempt at accuracy,"[32] as well as very little being tracked before her marriage to Louis VII, it is difficult to grasp the full idea of what her personality and inner motivations were. What historians know is that rumors of infidelity followed Eleanor everywhere and had an influence on the romantic literature produced in her time. Modern mentions of her in the media have also been impacted, as they often portray her as overtaken by

[29] Earenfight, "Where Do We Go from Here," 118-119.
[30] Earenfight, "Where Do We Go from Here," 119.
[31] Earenfight, *Queenship in Medieval Europe*, 7.
[32] Turner, *Eleanor of Aquitaine*, 10.

love and passion. Other issues arise as some studies manipulate Eleanor's story "to fit a particular stereotype"[33] instead of striving for authenticity. Neutrality is scarce in scholarship surrounding Eleanor of Aquitaine, which makes her pieces of writing so important.[34] What is also interesting about scholarship surrounding her, is that there is—at least prior to 1970—little effort of biographers "to use the material contained in the documents which survive"[35] in their work. This could be because there was no considerable collection of Eleanor's documents and, unfortunately, there has been speculation on the validity of her writing, particularly her letters to Pope Celestine III. This is seen in a 1906 article by Beatrice A Lees that "systematically dismantles any arguments she has evidently heard in favor of the letters' authenticity," arguing they were crafted by Peter of Blois.[36] Lees's claims are largely based on a lack of historical sources about Eleanor writing these letters, which would most likely have come from chronicles, and so this gap "probably has more to do with what the…chroniclers chose to include...than with proving the letters to be false."[37] Additionally, when reading these letters, it seems unlikely that such powerful, raw emotion would not have come directly from Eleanor. H. G. Richardson discusses her chancellors that would aid her in writing but eventually concludes that "they have their importance only in so far as they enable us to reconstruct the manner in which charters and letters were written for a royal lady."[38] He highlights her individual agency and notes that she maintained "the style of success of Aquitaine and countess of Poitou" as well as "the style of

[33] Storey, "(Mis)Representing Queens," 194.
[34] Earenfight, *Queenship in Medieval Europe*, 137.
[35] Donna Mildred Gordon, *A Translation of the Letters and Charters of Eleanor of Aquitaine* (Toronto: University of Alberta, 1970), iix. Commentary by Gordon.
[36] Mitchell, "Give Me Back My Son!," 10.
[37] Mitchell, "Give Me Back My Son!," 10.
[38] H. G. Richardson, "The Letters and Charters of Eleanor of Aquitaine," *The English Historical Review* 74, no. 291 (1959), 197.

queen of England"[39] in her charters until her death, showing her autonomy and the lasting influence that Poitiers and Aquitaine have on her.

One scholar who provides a substantial account of Eleanor's background and the court she grew up in is Ralph V. Turner. He argues that Eleanor was likely to have been impacted significantly by stories of her ancestors that were being told all around her in this court. She would have heard about "earlier duchesses of Aquitaine who had sought and sometimes succeeded in grasping power,"[40] who could easily have served as motivations for later aspirations. Roman influence on the province also remained and influenced certain customs, which "guaranteed women greater freedom than those in northern Europe enjoyed."[41] Growing up around this may have planted a seed of ambition in Eleanor that would later be stunted by the more repressive English and French courts, "where religious teachings demanding women's deference toward males bore greater weight."[42] Additionally, some of her female ancestors "confronted and abandoned ineffectual or adulterous husbands,"[43] displaying a unique forwardness and show of feminine power within her bloodline. Beyond these emotional connections she likely had to her family, she also developed a particular love for Poitou, where she spent the majority of her time. Poitou was "the heartland and base for ducal power,"[44] meaning Eleanor grew up around decision-makers and her notable grandfather, Duke William IX. William's court was "a center of public authority,"[45] making it all the more likely that young Eleanor interacting with and watching all of these different people had a profound impact on her and her desires. An education in this environment would have made her more adept at

[39] Richardson, "The Letters and Charters of Eleanor," 199.
[40] Turner, *Eleanor of Aquitaine*, 11.
[41] Turner, *Eleanor of Aquitaine*, 11.
[42] Turner, *Eleanor of Aquitaine*, 28.
[43] Turner, *Eleanor of Aquitaine*, 15.
[44] Turner, *Eleanor of Aquitaine*, 13.
[45] Turner, *Eleanor of Aquitaine*, 23.

understanding politics and methods of persuasion as well, which could be a factor in her productive involvement in the political activities in the English court. Furthermore, the court that Eleanor became greatly acquainted with in her youth "was the household of the Carolingian monarchs that the aristocracy adopted throughout the former Frankish kingdoms"[46] and was later very much mirrored in the households of both her husbands. This familiarity may have been quite helpful in developing important social connections, contributing to her ability to accumulate a vast amount of support across Aquitaine and England.[47] Overall, the environment that Eleanor of Aquitaine grew up in—where education was greatly valued, she was surrounded by political ambition, and she heard stories of powerful women—is likely to have motivated her behavior and goals, shaping her into the uniquely influential queen that she was.

Eleanor's story typically begins with her marriage to Louis VII in 1137, becoming queen of France later that year when he was crowned. Both of Eleanor's husbands greatly sought the large territory of Aquitaine, with Louis continuously taking on the "title of 'King of the French and Duke of the Aquitanians.'"[48] While power certainly came from her inheritance, Eleanor did not have near the same influence in France that she would have in England. Perhaps this is evidence supporting the notion that motherhood provided the most agency for medieval queens, as Eleanor did not have any sons with Louis, but it could also be due to the fact that she was just fifteen years old when she was married. However, across the fifteen years of marriage to Louis, Eleanor did issue various charters, such as one in 1146 that abolished specific "legal practices of the royal officers concerning the men of the abbey of la Trinité de Vendôme,"[49] showing that she had some political influence in the region. This charter was approved before Louis and Eleanor

[46] Turner, *Eleanor of Aquitaine*, 21.
[47] Mitchell, "Give Me Back My Son!," 11-5.
[48] Earenfight, *Queenship in Medieval Europe*, 138.
[49] Gordon, *A Translation of the Letters*, xxiv. Commentary by Gordon.

went on the second crusade in 1147, which proved to be "a military disaster and a personal crisis" that seriously hurt their already unstable relationship.[50] During the last few years of their marriage, they attempted to reconcile, but ultimately "personal desires and dynastic need for a son" pushed Louis to seek separation in 1152, "pleading consanguinity."[51] Not much is written about Eleanor's time in France, and much of it is tainted by the chroniclers who "essentially constructed [her life] out of rumors…of her alleged sexual indiscretions with her uncle Prince Raymond,"[52] making this time in her life—while still remarkable as her first time being queen—less evident of her emotional drives for power.

The focal point of Eleanor of Aquitaine's life for scholars is mostly her time in the English court. Very shortly after her annulment with Louis VII, she married Henry II in 1152, "Duke of Normandy and Count of Anjou," despite him actually being more closely related to her than Louis.[53] In this marriage, she was clearly the older, more experienced figure that perhaps welcomed the new court in "contrast with the drabness of the Capetian court that she had left behind."[54] Because of this, it makes sense that Henry would name Eleanor regent queen in confidence, especially as she brought about a particular stability and strength "after years of weak rule under Stephen of Blois."[55] Her substantial power is reflected in the conviction of John of Salibsury who viewed "the queen's power equal to her husband's,"[56] which is an extremely meaningful statement. Her marriage to Henry also meant that "the English domain in France more than doubled" due to Eleanor's inheritance, placing an immense inherent value in her that

[50] Earenfight, *Queenship in Medieval Europe*, 138.
[51] Earenfight, *Queenship in Medieval Europe*, 138.
[52] Martindale, "Eleanor of Aquitaine," 425.
[53] Turner, *Eleanor of Aquitaine*, 139.
[54] Turner, *Eleanor of Aquitaine*, 155.
[55] Turner, *Eleanor of Aquitaine*, 150.
[56] Turner, *Eleanor of Aquitaine*, 152.

Louis hated to lose.[57] At this point in time, Eleanor's writing becomes key for analyzing the breadth of her influence, particularly looking at charters and writs that carried out commands. She took on a firm tone, displaying the strength in her conviction, resembling that of the Anglo-Norman kings.[58] Her expression in these forms reveals how she interacted with those in the court and those under her command, seeing that emotion signals internal connections, thus supporting the notion that she garnered respect—and through that, power—from them.[59]

Donna Mildred Gordan's collection of Eleanor's documents allows for a much more streamlined and clear look at Eleanor's emotional rhetoric. Gordan also illuminates interesting patterns that attest to Eleanor's agency, such as noting that the majority of the documents were structured in a way that indicated she outranked the recipient, since her name was placed first in said documents.[60] Additionally, Eleanor maintained "the titles of queen of England, duchess of Normandy, and countess of Anjou" even after Henry's death in 1189,[61] showing her continued power outside of her husband. What becomes evident when looking at her writing is that she definitely has deep emotional connections and loyalty with individuals and places in her life; however, she continues to exercise power in ways she believes are fit. Just after her marriage to Henry II in 1152, for example, Eleanor issued one of her many charters that mentions her husband and sons, but with quite an intimate tone:

> Be it known to all sons of Holy Mother Church, both in the present as well as in the future, that I Eleanor, by the grace of God countess of Poitou, after I was separated from my lord Louis, that is to say, the most serene king of the Franks, for seasons of consanguinity, and

---

[57] Earenfight, *Queenship in Medieval Europe*, 130-1.
[58] Turner, *Eleanor of Aquitaine*,154.
[59] Bortolami, "The Diagnostic Role," 7.
[60] Gordon, *A Translation of the Letters*, x. Commentary by Gordon.
[61] Gordon, *A Translation of the Letters*, xi. Commentary by Gordon.

> joined in matrimony to my lord Henry, most noble count of Anjou, touched by divine inspiration I desired to visit the congregation of the holy virgins at Frontevrault, and what I had in mind, assisted by the grace of God, I accomplished. Then I came, led by God, to Frontevrault, and went in to the chapter of the aforesaid virgins, and there, my heart having been moved, I commended, conceded and confirmed everything my father and my ancestors had given to the church of Frontevrault…[62]

This piece reflects Eleanor's relationships in a powerful way, both with her husbands and with her ancestors. It is interesting to note the adjectives "serene" and "noble" attached to Louis and Henry, respectively; even with the grave differences between Eleanor and Louis, it seems here that there remains affection for him, and even just the word "serene" seems to hold greater importance than "noble." Additionally, describing how deeply she was moved in this situation demonstrates her spirituality and emotional connection to the abbey of Frontevrault—or Fontevraud—that continues to hold importance to her throughout her life.[63] When Eleanor first attempts to retire from the political sphere, she actually "settled not in Poitiers, but at Fontevraud," likely appealing to her as "a mixed-house where the resident monks were subject to powerful abbess" and as a place "that traditionally had attracted aristocratic ladies, including women of her late husband's family."[64] This piece is very personal and shows her devotion to what she holds close to her, which attests to her continuous efforts to protect and aid her sons and England as she believes is fit, even when it is threatened by those she loves. This includes the complicated time of her sons' rebellion and their own internal feuds, resulting in Eleanor's

[62] Eleanor, letter no. 7 in Gordon, *A Translation of the Letters*, 11.
[63] Richardson, "The Letters and Charters of Eleanor," 199.
[64] Turner, *Eleanor of Aquitaine*, 275-6.

imprisonment at the hands of Henry; yet still, after everything, there remained a "strong sense of family solidarity with Henry and the Plantagenet empire…for through her sons it was as much an Aquitanian empire heir to the ambitions of her own ducal ancestors."[65] It is clear here that her legacy is as strong as her actions during her life and that her emotional role as regent queen and queen-mother is a major part of that.

Eleanor of Aquitaine's story is filled with scandal, much of it unfounded, but her relationships with her sons, Richard I in particular, may be the reason for the most rebellious act of her life: siding with her sons against Henry II. There are likely many factors that led to Eleanor's decision, but what most typically focus on is the assumption that this came from a mere "thirst for revenge against Henry" without searching for the truth and "never taking into account larger political considerations."[66] Someone educated and extremely well versed in political matters would likely not take this path unless it went far beyond revenge, and the arguments that are based on this lack consideration about the way emotions have "political and moral significance."[67] Both her individual agency and influence through her sons are at play here, as Eleanor was likely also interested in securing her own power as Henry becomes less and less willing to give up his own to his sons. Ultimately, this decision had major repercussions for her and England, as she was imprisoned for 16 years and her sons continued to fight back against their father until finally, in 1189, Henry II died and Richard I was crowned king of England.

It is fairly obvious from scholarship and even Eleanor's own writing that Richard I was her favorite son, making their relationship particularly interesting and absorbing a good deal of her time and energy, considering the lengths she went to to get him released from his

---

[65] Turner, *Eleanor of Aquitaine*, 294.
[66] Turner, *Eleanor of Aquitaine*, 217.
[67] Rosenwein, "Thinking Historically about Medieval Emotions," 834.

imprisonment from 1192 to 1194. Evidence of this close relationship is found as Richard immediately orders the release of Eleanor and the restoration of her authority in Aquitaine after he is crowned.[68] In fact, part of the feud between the sons and the father goes beyond Eleanor's "desire to preserve her own authority in Aquitaine" and has more to do with protecting "Richard's right of succession."[69] Throughout her life, she works hard to help her sons "in securing their inheritances and preserving their possession,"[70] demonstrating her powerful maternal motivations. Nevertheless, this seemed to extend to Richard more than her other sons, especially as she is repeatedly mentioned specifically in her charters: "I made this gift and alms for the good of the soul of my lord the king and for the good of my souls and of my son Richard and my other sons and my daughters and my predecessors."[71] By singling him out, she puts great importance on him and his role to her; that this charter is in reference to Fontevrault again adds more emotional connection to this distinction. Additionally, in 1199, shortly after Richard's death, Eleanor issued a charter in support of those who helped the most with his funeral which described Richard as "our most cherished son the king."[72] Eleanor supported Richard immensely throughout his reign, to the extent that "it is unlikely that any king ever received more valuable assistance from his mother," alluding to the fact that they spent much time together and worked very closely on political affairs.[73] Respect for the queen-mother and her past influence made it relatively easy for Eleanor to return to the role of regent after Richard's capture in 1192 on his way back from crusade, and she fought whole-heartedly to maintain the stability of England and to find a way to bring her son home from Germany.[74]

---

[68] Turner, *Eleanor of Aquitaine*, 140.
[69] Turner, *Eleanor of Aquitaine*, 217.
[70] Turner, *Eleanor of Aquitaine*, 256.
[71] Gordon, *A Translation of the Letters*, 41.
[72] Gordon, *A Translation of the Letters*, 78.
[73] Turner, *Eleanor of Aquitaine*, 258.
[74] Turner, *Eleanor of Aquitaine*, 140.

Perhaps the most powerful pieces of Eleanor's writing that have been collected are the emotional and intimate letters that she sent to Pope Celestine III, attempting to persuade him to use his considerable influence to bring Richard I home. In these letters, she employs two of what are viewed as perhaps the most effective emotions: anger and sorrow. Anger, specifically, has been utilized as a political tool throughout history, and sorrow is the main categorization of emotions most "associated with the heart," therefore calculated to inspire the greatest response.[75] The term "royal wrath" has even been used to describe this political use of anger in medieval texts, once again substantiating the idea that emotions were not merely excessive but were instead important tools that were very reflective of an individual or group.[76] Ultimately, the letters fiercely employ the two forms of power discussed: as regent queen who wants her king back for the sake of England and as the queen-mother who fears deeply for her son.

The first letter is more political than the second, urging Celestine to help bring the king back and not to fear those opposed. She expresses fear of "the fall of the kingdom" in Richard's absence, begging Celestine to "let judgment come forth, let your eyes see equity."[77] A major theme in this letter and the others is Eleanor's condemnation of Celestine for his lack of interference in the imprisonment of Richard. She states, "If the Roman church, with clasped hands, is silent to so many injuries of Christ, let God rise up and judge our cause and look on the face of his anointed,"[78] calling Celestine's legitimacy into question for letting these "injuries" occur. This is a powerful statement to make, and she even continues with words that could certainly be considered a threat: "Therefore if you do not wish injury to yourself or the Roman

---

[75] Rosenwein, "Thinking Historically about Medieval Emotions," 831-2.
[76] Mitchell, "Give Me Back My Son!," 3.
[77] Eleanor, A letter to Celestine II, pope (1193) no. 1 in Joan Ferrante, ed., "Eleanor of Aquitaine," Epistolae | Medieval Women's Latin (Columbia University Libraries, 2014), https://epistolae.ctl.columbia.edu/woman/24.html.
[78] Eleanor, A letter to Celestine II, pope (1193) no. 1 in Ferrante, "Eleanor of Aquitaine."

church, you should not hide the shame to Peter nor the injury to Christ."[79] The fact that Eleanor is willing to make this statement, whether it is meant as a threat from her or a warning of the defiance of duty, greatly demonstrates her strength and motivation, in turn also emphasizing the importance of the involvement of her emotions. Her love for Richard is very evident in these letters and she admits that "the power of grief makes the words more harsh,"[80] yet without apologizing for her firmness. In this letter, she implores Celestine not to let "human fear destroy the spirit of liberty" in him, as "it is more acceptable to fall into the hands of men than to abandon the law of God."[81] Eleanor directly points to the fact that Celestine should not be unwilling to step in due to human fear, as he is meant to represent the agency of God, and thus his inaction is causing him to lose her and the public's respect. One of her final sentiments emphasizes how dangerous it could be to him for those in power, like Eleanor, to maintain "the memory of your present sloth"[82] for future instances. This letter, describing a mother's anguish and the political ramifications of Celestine's passivity, is a powerful example of Eleanor's moving and passionate writing.

Eleanor's second letter to the pope utilizes more of "the grieving mother" role that is "associated inevitably with the grieving Virgin Mary."[83] In this text, Eleanor's pain is nearly palpable, with grief accentuated by her presentation of herself as growing wearily old: "I am indeed weakened, and old age, hastened by sorrows, announces the scarcity of my days to me."[84] She even describes herself as "dust and ashes,"[85] which emphasizes her attempt to draw pity from Celestine. Tension builds in the letter as she relates the injustice to her son to the violations

---

[79] Eleanor, A letter to Celestine II, pope (1193) no. 1 in Ferrante, "Eleanor of Aquitaine."
[80] Eleanor, A letter to Celestine II, pope (1193) no. 1 in Ferrante, "Eleanor of Aquitaine."
[81] Eleanor, A letter to Celestine II, pope (1193) no. 1 in Ferrante, "Eleanor of Aquitaine."
[82] Eleanor, A letter to Celestine II, pope (1193) no. 1 in Ferrante, "Eleanor of Aquitaine."
[83] Mitchell, "Give Me Back My Son!," 5.
[84] Eleanor, A letter to Celestine II, pope (1193) no. 2 in Ferrante, "Eleanor of Aquitaine."
[85] Eleanor, A letter to Celestine II, pope (1193) no. 2 in Ferrante, "Eleanor of Aquitaine."

of Judas and calls Henry VI, who holds Richard captive, a tyrant. In this work, rage and sorrow mingle and produce a powerful tone that was integral to Eleanor's work to free her son. She repeats her conviction that, "by consent to malice,"[86] Celestine is abandoning his duties as pope. She describes the great power he has, asking to "kill the impious with the spirit of your lips,"[87] and by continuing to refuse, he holds a direct part in the continuation of her immense sadness. Furthermore, Eleanor insinuates that, because of his resignation in the face of Richard's imprisonment, "the loyalty she, her husband Henry II, and her son the king always gave Celestine was misplaced"[88]; this is yet another way that Eleanor is able to convey the consequences the pope may face if he does not provide help. The tone of the end of the letter moves back toward one of grief and hopelessness, focusing back on the fact that she is truly in pain over the unknown state of her son, stating, "But what I grieve for is closer to me and more intolerable; the tyrant crucifies my son."[89]

The final letter has some of the harshest phrases, as "Eleanor abandons any overtly diplomatic language"[90] as desperation and misery resulting from a year without change take over her state. She now presents herself in a deathly manner, referencing Psalm 102 (Vulgate 101), "I am wasted away by sorrow, my bone clings to the consumed flesh of my skin"[91]; this disturbing imagery captures Eleanor's mindset brilliantly and creates a captivating entrance into her message to the pope. She then describes her body as "already dead"[92] and wishing to no longer have to carry the weight of watching her people wither away alongside her. As she reflects upon the death of two of her children, she portrays the pain of being "tormented by the memory of the

---

[86] Eleanor, A letter to Celestine II, pope (1193) no. 2 in Ferrante, "Eleanor of Aquitaine."
[87] Eleanor, A letter to Celestine II, pope (1193) no. 2 in Ferrante, "Eleanor of Aquitaine."
[88] Mitchell, "Give Me Back My Son!," 6.
[89] Eleanor, A letter to Celestine II, pope (1193) no. 2 in Ferrante, "Eleanor of Aquitaine."
[90] Mitchell, "Give Me Back My Son!," 6.
[91] Eleanor, A letter to Celestine II, pope (1193) no. 3 in Ferrante, "Eleanor of Aquitaine."
[92] Eleanor, A letter to Celestine II, pope (1193) no. 3 in Ferrante, "Eleanor of Aquitaine."

dead"[93] and punished by two of her living sons' fates: John, harming the nation, and Richard, unable to return to it. This takes an even darker tone as Eleanor directly asserts that she wishes to die "fully" considering that, in her current state, she dies "incessantly" anyway.[94] She follows this with the shocking statement, "Happy those who are blessedly aborted before they can experience the mockery of life,"[95] descending into complete depression and truly conveying the pain that she insists Celestine is unwilling to end. These powerful words present strong emotion that some may deem as 'excess,' but this would disregard the fact that Eleanor is truly feeling this loss and is still fighting for her son. As the letter continues, she admits that she still has vast responsibilities, and even though she may no longer desire this role, she must remain as regent queen: "If I go, deserting my son's kingdom, that is laid waste on all sides with grave hostility, it will be deprived of all counsel and comfort in my absence."[96] Her belief in Richard's rule is so strong that she continues to fight for England, even against her other son John who "depletes his kingdom with iron and lays it waste with fire."[97] In churning anger, Eleanor asks Celestine, "Is your power from God or from men?"; this is another cry for help from the man who is supposed to have great influence yet remains inactive, emphasized by the forceful phrase, "Give my son back to me, man of God, if you are a man of God and not a man of blood."[98] The notion that Celestine may not in fact be a man of God undermines his legitimacy once again, showing how this plea is also meant to be a political motivator for him. Eleanor continues to admonish Celestine for allowing "the scourges of the powerful that should be detested"[99] to be accepted and go unpunished, and ultimately, she returns to dwelling in her grief. Even if these letters were

[93] Eleanor, A letter to Celestine II, pope (1193) no. 3 in Ferrante, "Eleanor of Aquitaine."
[94] Eleanor, A letter to Celestine II, pope (1193) no. 3 in Ferrante, "Eleanor of Aquitaine."
[95] Eleanor, A letter to Celestine II, pope (1193) no. 3 in Ferrante, "Eleanor of Aquitaine."
[96] Eleanor, A letter to Celestine II, pope (1193) no. 3 in Ferrante, "Eleanor of Aquitaine."
[97] Eleanor, A letter to Celestine II, pope (1193) no. 3 in Ferrante, "Eleanor of Aquitaine."
[98] Eleanor, A letter to Celestine II, pope (1193) no. 3 in Ferrante, "Eleanor of Aquitaine."
[99] Eleanor, A letter to Celestine II, pope (1193) no. 3 in Ferrante, "Eleanor of Aquitaine."

written by Peter of Blois, as Beatrice A Lee argues,[100] they truly depict Eleanor's emotional state and her extensive efforts to exercise her power as best she could; by presenting her feelings through moving and intimate rhetoric, she turns genuine emotion into a powerful political tool. Despite Celestine still seemingly unwilling to heed her request, Eleanor's work undoubtedly had "important political ramifications and set up precedents for papal engagement for future monarchs."[101]

Eleanor of Aquitaine's power in her roles as regent queen and queen-mother are fascinating lenses to use for looking at how emotion could be used to achieve goals in the Middle Ages. While emotion was often written off as excessive and gendered in a way that stripped much of its authenticity, it remained a prominent tool in the political scene. Anger and sorrow were used in particular, and Eleanor's own writing depicts how these emotions could be so moving and create a sense of intimacy with words. She exercised power in many ways, especially during her time in England, showing that her use of what was seen as feminine emotion produced substantial influence and connections. Chroniclers and much scholarship reflect the more skeptical view of her and present her as romanticized and drenched in scandal, but the new collections of her charters, writs, and letters greatly contradict this. One can clearly see Eleanor's strength and conviction in her works, which inevitably translated into a grand and stunning legacy. To this day, Eleanor of Aquitaine remains greatly revered for her positions as queen of France and queen of England, as well as for the unique amount of power she created for herself in a very male-centric time.

[100] Mitchell, "Give Me Back My Son!,"10.
[101] Mitchell, "Give Me Back My Son!," 14.

Bibliography

Ferrante, Joan, ed. "Eleanor of Aquitaine." Epistolae | Medieval Women's Latin Letters, Columbia University Libraries, 2014. https://epistolae.ctl.columbia.edu/woman/24.html.

Gordon, Donna Mildred. *A Translation of the Letters and Charters of Eleanor of Aquitaine.* Toronto: University of Alberta, 1970. Accessed 02 December 2025.

Halsall, Paul, ed. "Peter of Blois: Letter 154 to Queen Eleanor, 1173." Internet History Sourcebooks: Medieval Sourcebook. Translated by M. Markowski, Fordham University, 1997. https://history.hanover.edu/courses/excerpts/344blois.html. Accessed 02 December 2025.

Bortolami, Valentina. "The Diagnostic Role of Emotions in Feminist Philosophy." *Frontiers in Psychology* 16 (August 12, 2025). https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1622438. Accessed 02 December 2025.

Earenfight, Theresa. *Queenship in Medieval Europe*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

———. "Where Do We Go from Here? Some Thoughts on Power and Gender in the Middle Ages." *Medieval Feminist Forum: A Journal of Gender and Sexuality* 51, no. 2 (2016): 116–31.

Martindale, Jane. "Eleanor of Aquitaine and a 'Queenly Court'?" In *Eleanor of Aquitaine: Lord and Lady*, edited by Bonnie Wheeler and John Carmi Parsons, 423–35. 2002. Reprint, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

Mitchell, Linda E. "Give Me Back My Son!': Eleanor of Aquitaine, Emotion Talk, and the Gendering of Political Rhetoric." *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 44, no. 2 (2018).

Richardson, H. G. "The Letters and Charters of Eleanor of Aquitaine." *The English Historical Review* 74, no. 291 (1959): 193–213.

Rosenwein, Barbara H. "Thinking Historically about Medieval Emotions." *History Compass* 8, no. 8 (August 4, 2010). https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1478-0542.2010.00702.x. Accessed 01 December 2025.

Storey, Gabrielle. "(Mis)Representing Queens: The Untold Lives of the Empress Matilda and Eleanor of Aquitaine." *Parergon* 39, no. 1 (2022). https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/pgn.2022.0009. Accessed 01 December 2025.

Turner, Ralph V. *Eleanor of Aquitaine: Queen of France, Queen of England*. Yale University Press, 2009.

Medieval Women's Experiences Regarding the Sanctity of Suffering in Childbirth

By: Kennedy Spencer

Around the twelfth to fourteenth centuries, medieval perspectives surrounding suffering were deeply intertwined with spiritual redemptions, and very few experiences embodied this more intensely than childbirth. Medieval theologians often drew parallels between the physical and mental agony of childbirth and the Passion of Christ, each viewed as sacred forms of bodily sacrifice for the sake of a new life, where one is physical and the other is spiritual. Figures like Christina the Astonishing and ascetic women discussed in Caroline W. Bynum's *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, among other historical interpretations from other authors, illustrate how medieval women embraced suffering because it provided a tangible religious symbolism for them, strengthening their faith and devotion to Christ. Medieval perspectives regarding the sanctity of suffering include historical accounts and analyses, themes surrounding St. Christina the Astonishing, *imitatio Christi*, childbirth, and bodily sacrifice. This paper intends to explore women's place in medieval theology and the view of physical suffering as redemptive. Childbirth is a form of suffering that medieval theologians and historians today compare to the events of Christ's passion and crucifixion. By analyzing the experiences of women's attempts to be like Christ—seen in Caroline Bynum's book *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* and Thomas de Cantimpré's Vita about St. Christina the Astonishing's suffering after taking on the pain of people in Purgatory and having an immortal soul in a mortal body—it is clear that the suffering of childbirth and ascetic religious practices were seen as acts of spiritual devotion believed to elevate the human body as a vessel for divine salvation and redemption.

Thomas de Cantimpré's *Vita de Christina Mirablilis* (*The Life of Christina the Astonishing*) offers a medieval account of spiritual and physical suffering of women during this time period, while also offering more information and examples of *imitatio Christi* and divine intervention. This is a primary source that describes the religious experiences of Christina the Astonishing from the age of 21 when she seemingly passed away from starvation, and her body ascended similarly as Christ did at her funeral. While in purgatory, she was able to meet physically with Christ and decided to take on the suffering and pain of the souls in order to free them and allow for their ascension to heaven. De Cantimpré's main objective of this text is to highlight Christina the Astonishing's miraculous journey through her faith and piety. To understand the implications of her faith journey, one must know how she died and why Christina went through the suffering that de Cantimpré talks about. She died as a result of not eating, and after her ascension at her funeral, she claimed to have seen heaven, hell, and purgatory, where she was granted the divine gift of being a vessel of salvation. She also was an ascetic, where she rejected earthly comforts entirely, living a life of poverty and self-denial, denying herself essentials to survive such as food, sleep, and human interaction.[1] She also subjected herself to severe physical torment, such as beating her chest, provoking dogs to attack her, hanging in gallows, and throwing herself into icy rivers, all of which resulted in no injuries. "In the winter she would stand upright beneath the wheel of a watermill so that the water flowing through it ran over her head and limbs."[2] This immediately tied into her mystical abilities, where after her return to earth, she remained unharmed after such violent things were done to her body. Christina also believed that her suffering served a multifaceted purpose which aided in the salvation of other souls. She was seen as a personification of divine mercy, such as

[1] Thomas de Cantimpre, "The Life of Christina the Astonishing," in *Thomas of Cantimpré: The Collected Saints' Lives: Abbot John of Cantimpré, Christina the Astonishing, Margaret of Ypres, and Lutgard of Aywières*, trans. Margot King and Barbara Newman (Brepols, 2007), 130.

[2] Thomas de Cantimpre, "The Life of Christina the Astonishing," 134.

Christ did when he lived on Earth. After her journey through the afterlife, she found herself absolutely disgusted with the smell of bodies who had sinned in the church.

The main purpose of *Vita Christinae* was to go along with the growing trend of hagiographies that described women, such as Hadewijch and Hildegard of Bingen, going through all-encompassing religious episodes. The one part of Christina's *Vita* that stands out from others is that she died and came back to life because of Christ. This ties into the phenomena of *imitatio Christi*, a medieval religious phenomenon where one is striving to replicate Christ's life, especially his physical suffering and sacrifice. Both Christina and Christ had a chance to have a face-to-face interaction with God and were able to come back to Earth. "The next day it was borne to the church, while her Requiem Mass was being said, suddenly the body stirred in the coffin and rose up and, like a bird, immediately ascended to the rafters of the Church."[3] During her funeral mass, her body ascended to the Church's ceiling, which brings in the themes of both divine intervention and resurrection, which have underlying links to Christ's experience while he was on earth. When she died the first time, the angels took her to Purgatory. After she saw the horrors and suffering that the souls were experiencing, she was willing to take on their pain and suffering when she went back to Earth so they could be freed to heaven, all of which can be easily connected to and compared with Christ's passion for humanity and willingness to suffer on the behalf of others. "At once the Lord answered my desire and said 'Certainly, my dearest you will be with me here, but I now offer you two choices, either to remain with me now or return to the body and undergo there the punishment of an immortal soul in a mortal body without damage to it, and by these your sufferings I will deliver all those souls on whom you had compassion in that place of purgatory.'"[4] This was a pivotal moment in

[3] Thomas de Cantimpre, "The Life of Christina the Astonishing," 130.
[4] Thomas de Cantimpre, "The Life of Christina the Astonishing," 130.

Christina's religious journey, where she was then given the choice to either stay with God or go back down to earth and live among man with an immortal soul, while also enduring physical and mental suffering for the salvation of other souls who were in purgatory. Her willingness of self-sacrifice reflects the sacrificial nature of Christ's mission, a mission of which Christina lived out the rest of her days.

Hagiographies like these provide first-hand accounts and perspectives of what it was like experiencing these events by writing down what these women are saying or people who have seen what happened to these women. In Christina's *Vita*, Thomas de Cantimpré goes to Thomas, Abbot of Sint-Truiden, and gets a first-hand account of what he says Christina does during her religious raptures. "Immediately she threw herself before the altar as if she were a sack filled with dry bones. Then, wailing bitterly, she began to beat her breasts and her body most often and said, 'O miserable and wretched body! How long will you torment me, miserable as I am?'"[5] Her self-inflicted, physically violent, manic episodes proved to be something that was uncommon among the public, so with Thomas's efforts to gain an outside perspective from someone who had experienced Christina's episodes firsthand was important, and it also offers a look into what the religious thought of her as a historian. Her willful suffering made her believe that she was under a divine command, often thinking that she was a mediator between man and God. "Yet her torture were no less painful if a guilty man denied her what she had requested. Once it happened that she snatched away with force something that a wicked man had denied her and said: 'Although you do not wish it, yet later you will not grieve that it has been taken away. What does not profit you now will profit then.'"[6] If a man rejected her request to take on his pain, she would experience the pain from his rejection physically, aligning with the

[5] Thomas de Cantimpre, "The Life of Christina the Astonishing," 150.
[6] Thomas de Cantimpre, "The Life of Christina the Astonishing," 141.

perception that God experiences pain when one rejects His will and guidance. Due to her immortal soul being placed into a mortal body, the pain that she experienced in this moment captures her urgency and willingness to continue the salvation of others as Christ had done in his life.

In this document, there are also common themes surrounding food, in addition to divine intervention. Women during this time were thought to have a spiritual relationship to food, both literally and figuratively, with a relation to Christ's religious significance to food. Women were literally thought to have a link to food and nourishment because of what their bodies are equipped to do, which is to grow another human being inside them, and once the baby is born, they are fed milk through a woman's breast, which is made in a specific way for the baby. Women are figuratively related to the religious significance of food for that same reason before—because they are able to give life and nourishment to other human beings through their bodies. Christ's religious significance to food is through the existence of the Eucharist, where he gives life and nourishment through faith and the soul, which can lead to eternal life in Heaven. This can be seen through Christina's experience after she was forcibly taken by her friend, escaped, and ran to isolation in the desert. "Even when she needed food (for despite the extreme subtlety of her body, she could not live without food), and she was tortured by a most grievous hunger, by no means did she wish to return home, but she desired to remain alone with God in her hiding place in the desert . . . When she turned her eyes to herself, she immediately saw the dry paps of her virginal breasts were dripping sweet milk against the very law of nature."[7] Despite being in intense hunger, Christina remained isolated in the desert, where she preferred spiritual ascetic communion over satisfying her bodily needs. In response, God blessed her with

[7] Thomas de Cantimpre, "The Life of Christina the Astonishing," 132.

the gift of milk from her breasts, which was not physically possible due to her being a virgin, emphasizing that her complete submission to God led to an intervention from Him. The relevance of this document to my overarching questions allows me to further gather perspectives and information of how women were treated during a full body episode of suffering. In regards to the content material of Christina the Astonishing's V*ita*, she is described to be going through spiritual episodes that involve pain and suffering throughout her entire body, starting with her initial death while living in a convent of nuns. *Imitatio Christi* is an essential theme to my research paper, since I am discussing the relationship between the sanctity of suffering within Christ's experience and the painful bodily event of childbirth.

Suffering was viewed as redemption in medieval Christian perspectives. In regards to medieval perspectives of childbirth and suffering, they often compared the pain of childbirth to Christ's Passion and death. Just as Christ's suffering is seen as the birth of the Church, the labor pains that occur in childbirth were seen by medieval scholars as participating in God's sacrificial work. Christina the Astonishing's choice to endure physical torment was a way to release souls from Purgatory and admit them into Heaven. Medieval Christians and Christian scholars saw physical suffering as a way to imitate Christ, relating to the medieval phenomenon of *imiatio Christi*. Both Christ and Christina's suffering emphasizes the human body's sanctity and as an instrument of spiritual salvation. Medieval theologians believed that Christ's crucified body is consecrated as an ultimate symbol of divine sacrifice. Christina the Astonishing and other mystics viewed their pain as a continuation of Christ's work on Earth.

In this paper, I will go into further detail and analysis of the thesis in *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* by Caroline W. Bynum, while also exploring a parallel found within the sanctity of suffering, which is reflected through medieval perspectives surrounding childbirth and the

Passion of Jesus Christ. In Bynum's thesis, she describes how medieval women used food and the practice of fasting to express their spirituality and penance to God. In chapter 7 of *Holy Feast and Holy Fast,* Bynum explains how religious women during the Middle Ages would use fasting as a way to express their spirituality and relate to Christ's suffering, and she explores the theological context that connected women to religious traditions, while society viewed their bodies as merely physical and emotional. Bynum says that if a woman was withdrawn from the world or saw herself as a servant of the poor, she saw her own suffering and hunger as a way to gain a greater connection with Christ, and they were gifted with a divine power from God as a reward. It can also be attributed to the existing medieval beliefs that suffering is redemptive, and regarding how much you suffered during your life on Earth, you will gain eternal life in heaven. "Whether a woman was withdrawn from the world or living in it, whether she saw herself as a contemplative or as a servant of the poor, she tended both to reject food and to see it as a powerful symbol of union. Girls and women who fasted hungered for the eucharist and received, along with it, visions and supernatural signs that bestowed power upon them."[8] Bynum argues in chapter 7 that women in medieval Europe believed that they could experience a closer and personal connection with Christ by experiencing physical suffering through fasting, by intentionally weakening or self-harming their bodies, which goes back to the previous statement regarding pain as redemptive. "Women's charismatic, prophetic role was an alternative to, and therefore a critique of and a substitute for, the characteristic male form of religious authority: the authority of office."[9] Through different practices, pain symbolized an ability to connect to Christ's redemptive suffering, which granted women a sense of spiritual authority. Women's

---

[8] Caroline Walker Baynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (University of California Press, 1987), 277.
[9] Baynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast,* 233.

alternative spiritual practices were stark alternatives to common forms of spiritual authority such as charity and giving to the poor, offering them a special and unique experience of divine purpose. It also sparked an ideal called *imitatio Christi*, which is the aim to live as Christ did by focusing solely on his sacrifice, where they were able to literally embody their faith during a time where women were excluded from leadership within the Church.

This paper will both build and challenge Bynum's thesis of women's use of fasting to practice penance and offer devotion through suffering as Christ did by analyzing Bynum's thesis and applying a perspective that connects the pain and suffering of childbirth on a woman's social and religious status to Christ's passion. It will deepen Bynum's thesis by showing medieval women's experience of *holy suffering*, which can encompass both voluntary and involuntary forms of it, while offering a spiritual parallel of Christ's passion. It will also consider how mothers who were able to survive childbirth could be seen as divine recipients of God's grace, similarly to Christina the Astonishing, who voluntarily endured an extreme amount of suffering throughout her life by choosing to live a life of poverty and isolating herself from other people as stated earlier. This paper will challenge Bynum's thesis, arguing that suffering in motherhood carries a similar spiritual weight to the practice of fasting and self-restriction that Bynum talks about in her book. I see myself in this conversation as someone from the 21st century that has a better understanding of childbirth because of the advancements of modern medicine. In bringing these sources together, this essay attempts to make a cohesive argument regarding the connection between the sanctity of suffering in its connection with Christ and the suffering of childbirth. In modern medicine today, especially within the specialized field of Obstetrics and Gynecology, there is a connection between language and the Passion of Christ. The word excruciating comes from the word crucifixion, because of the placement of the nails on his hands. The nails were placed on the medial nerve of his hand, where if that nerve is injured, it causes excruciating pain, which is what the pain is described as in the bodily event of childbirth. I think it is important because it is not discussed often in the greater terms of medieval and Christian history, and how alluding to women and their involvement in the *imitatio Christi* phenomenon does not bring in the full scope of womanhood, which includes the pain and suffering of childbirth.

The nuanced perspective of this topic is not widely discussed or talked about often in academia, and I would like to hopefully open the doors within the conversation to discuss how there is a connection between the pain and suffering that Jesus Christ experienced during his crucifixion and the pain and suffering that is associated with the bodily event of childbirth, which is a historically feminized experience. From what I have seen, I have had several setbacks when looking for a vast amount of sources for my topic, specifically connecting the pain/suffering of childbirth and Christ's passion, presumably because it is not widely talked about nor considered when talking about both topics. I think that it is important to research because it involves both Christ and women, both of whom have been talked about immensely in historical writings during the Middle Ages. Women have been seen as a vessel for life and nourishment of the body, which is something that is both needed to create and sustain life for it to continue to develop, while Christ is a vessel for eternal life and nourishment of the soul, stimulating the spiritual life of Christ's followers. I think that it is imperative to consider both aspects in order to understand the connection of suffering of the two topics, because they are not widely talked about, yet they are very similar when discussing certain aspects. Some major points that historians have agreed on is that there is a connection between women and Christ, where women are equipped to grow another human being inside of them, giving nutrients from their own bodies to their babies to ensure their survival. In regards to how Christ nourishes his followers, Christ nourishes the soul through guiding people with faith, miracles, and divine intervention. Bynum has emphasized the perspectives of different hagiographers venerating and worshipping women because of how they were Christ-like. In Bynum's historical expertise and perspective, women were seen as both a body and as food, which is similar to how in modern times Catholics use bread and wine to symbolize the body and blood of Christ, while medieval Catholics believed that bread and wine were Christ's body and blood. In chapter 9 of Bynum's *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, she explores the connection between women, food, and medieval religious culture, arguing that medieval women identified with bodily symbols where they would use food and fasting to evolve their spirituality, and to navigate their place in both the religious and social hierarchies. Women during this time engaged with the idea of food in ways that were able to reflect self-restriction/self-sacrifice and an intimate connection with Christ.

My sources offer both historical and a feminist perspective of the connection between the pain and suffering of childbirth and the Passion of Christ. Allison Adair Alberts will allow me to analyze the experiences of physical pain during childbirth, which were spiritually reinterpreted by medieval women in the context of *imitatio Christi* and their devotion to the Virgin Mary. In

Spiritual Suffering and Physical Protection in Childbirth in the South English Legendary Lives of Saint Margaret, Albert discusses about how the pain of the Crucifixion of Christ is similar to the torture of childbirth: "The saint's redefinition of the torn and intact body is made possible through the crucifixion, as Christ's wounds on the cross are integral to understanding salvation through suffering. When Christ's side is pierced, his wound yields the water and blood of the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist. From this wound, the church is born."[10] She says that Margaret's testimony talks about the effect that pain has on the body, while also incorporating the connection to the pain that Christ experienced and medical texts during the time expressed concern for the discomfort pregnant and postpartum women were experiencing. Diana Neal's work will allow me to answer the question regarding how medieval theological concepts of *imitatio Christi* influenced women's perceptions of childbirth as a form of sanctified suffering. In *Women, Religion and the Significance of Suffering in Medieval Thinking*, Neal discusses about how in medieval Christianity, women were denied the ability to use their voice and express rational thought, and that the imitation of the physical suffering of Christ was a way to connect with Him on a more intimate level that men could not. "In medieval Christianity, if women were deprived of a voice and of the tools of rational thought, they nevertheless reflected the situation and propensity to 'feel,' when male intellectuals felt constrained to think at the expense of feeling. Thus women were able to imitate the physical sufferings of their Saviour more palpably and naturally than their ecclesiastical brothers."[11] Women are able to imitate the physical sufferings of Christ because they are equipped with the ability to give life to another human being, such as Christ is able to give life to a human being spiritually. Women also go through

physical and mentally agonizing bodily function to give life to another human being, such as Christ went through a physically and mentally agonizing death to give eternal life to all that follow him. This is a different approach that most of my historians have not used, because Neal talks about the difference between women's spiritual experiences and how it has a personal

---

[10] Allison Adair Alberts, "Spiritual Suffering and Physical Protection in Childbirth in the South English Legendary Lives of Saint Margaret," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 46, no.2 (2016): 297.
[11] Diana Neal, "Women, Religion and the Significance of Suffering in Medieval Thinking," *Feminist Theology* 3, no.7 (1994): 40.

relationship to Christ's Passion and death on the Cross, which are considered gifts. These gifts that women had, unlike men, offered a unique experience of having a similar kind of pain that Christ also experienced, which Neal says allowed women to have a secretive and women-only relationship with Christ that men were not granted. In Sharmain van Blommestein's book, *Medieval Redemptive Suffering: Female Mystical Expressions of Pain and Pleasure and Medieval Society's Influence on Mystical Spirituality*, I will find theological parallels could be drawn between the sacrificial nature of Christ's Passion and the perceived sacrificial aspect of childbirth pain in the spiritual lives of medieval women. My answer to that will be that pain was viewed as a reward in heaven that was influenced by the intensity of the worship of God that one had done in Medieval perspectives. "Also, at the core of this affective spirituality, medieval female mystics centered around the practice of *imitatio Christi*, which focused on the body and suffering via Christ's suffering. Therefore, religious believers, and specifically for this paper, medieval female mystics, found spiritual benefits from voluntarily administering physical pain through emotional and corporeal suffering via the Passion of Christ."[12] In the viewpoint of mystics during this time, suffering was the ultimate reward for their piety to their religion, which resulted in them experiencing pain and suffering that was similar to Christ's pain and suffering during his crucifixion.

There are many perspectives about physical pain, and pain in childbirth specifically has been spiritually reinterpreted by medieval women in the context of *imitatio Christi* and their devotion to the Virgin Mary. *Spiritual Suffering and Physical Protection in Childbirth in the South English Legendary Lives of Saint Margaret* by Allison Adair Alberts and *Holy Feast and*

---

[12] Sharmain van Blommestein, "Medieval Redemptive Suffering: Female Mystical Expressions of Pain and Pleasure and Medieval Society's Influence on Mystical Spirituality," *The International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society* (2014):40.

Holy Fast The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women by Caroline Bynum are perfect sources to analyze these perspectives. *Spiritual Suffering and Physical Protection in Childbirth in the South English Legendary Lives of Saint Margaret* is a source by Alberts that describes the medieval perspective of the pain that is experienced during childbirth. The article starts off with an explanation that the pain that Jesus experienced during his crucifixion and Mary's pain watching him suffer is considered to be one of the greatest pains that can ever be experienced. "Voragine explains how the pain of the Crucifixion 'is similar to torture, childbirth pangs, and the pain of those weeping for [the death of] an only child. These are the greatest pains one can find.' In this case, the Virgin Mary's suffering at the Crucifixion is of the greatest kind, but her pain—along with the suffering of Christ—is made intelligible by reference to the next most terrible suffering: childbirth."[13] This is so important in the medieval era because familiar experiences were used to explain spiritual ideas and occurrences—with childbirth being a common and intense experience, it was easy to compare it to Jesus's Passion to help people understand the depth of his sacrifice. By holding childbirth to such a high standard, medieval medical practices sought to provide both spiritual and physical support for women both antepartum and postpartum. "Medical texts address the discomfort of pregnant and postpartum women in a proliferation of relics, balms, and recipes for concoctions intended to alleviate pain and discomfort, a genre that demonstrates a widespread concern for the expectant mother."[14] Medical texts showed a strong interest in easing the physical pain and discomfort for women during pregnancy and childbirth, including practices such as making balms, recipes, and other treatment, which can show a different side of what we commonly see from a solely patriarchal society that existed in the medieval era. Religious significance was also a major element in

[13] Alberts, "Spiritual Suffering and Physical Protection," 289.
[14] Alberts, "Spiritual Suffering and Physical Protection," 305.

childbirth as well, which were given to women who were fearful of the unknown or of complications that commonly resulted in their deaths. They were given birth girdles which were inscribed and placed across their bellies and used for protection against evil spirits that were attempting to harm either the mother or the child. Charms and prayers were written in order to be eaten, specifically on butter or cheese, which blended both spiritual and physical needs. "Inscribed birth girdles could be placed across the woman's belly, while other charms or prayers called for writing the text in a consumable substance, such as butter or cheese, so that the amulet could be physically consumed. Sometimes, it was enough to hold a life of the saint near the pregnant woman. For example, there exists one foldable manuscript of Margaret's life that could have been worn with a ribbon or kept nearby."[15] Saintly texts were kept close to pregnant women during labor, especially the ones of Saint Margaret who is a patron saint of childbirth.

This is also a profound intersection of both medicine and spirituality, and also an example of food having a connection to religious practice, as Caroline Bynum researches in her work. *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* by Caroline Bynum provides historical evidence within the relationship between food, suffering, and women's religious penance. Food related behavior was central to women's religious and societal focus. Food was a main resource that women were able to control for themselves and their families, which influenced their relationships and social dynamics. By choosing what they were consuming, they were able to control their energy and physical health or use it as a tool to fast to purify their bodies or to align themselves with ascetic practices. It was also a tool to control their fertility, because certain foods and diets were believed to either help or inhibit fertility, which gave them control over the size of their families and as an act of resistance against their spouses. "Food related behavior was central to women

[15] Alberts, "Spiritual Suffering and Physical Protection," 306.

socially and religiously not only because food was a resource women controlled but also because by means of food women controlled themselves and their world. Bodily functions, sensations, fertility, and sexuality; husbands, mothers, fathers, and children; religious superiors and confessors; God in his majesty and the boundaries of one's own 'self'—all could be manipulated by abstaining from and bestowing food. In order to understand this, we must look closely at women's fasting and feeding behavior."[16] Fasting was a religious practice as a way to demonstrate their religious piety and devotion to Christ, and by being able to deny themselves food, they were able to live as said in religious texts that always discussed the denial of physical needs or desires. Many women also sought to imitate saints and Christ, such as Saint Catherine of Siena and Saint Clare of Assisi, two women who denied themselves food, money, and shelter to further their connection with God and the divine. Fasting as a whole is connected to the Eucharist, and in women's perspectives, it emphasizes the spiritual nourishment of food. "Such fasting can be understood only if we understand the late medieval notion of *imitatio Christi* as fusion with the suffering physicality of Christ, and late medieval notions of the female as flesh."[17] The emphasis of Christ's humanity allowed women to relate to him through their own bodily experiences— hunger, childbirth, and illness. For society, there were existing cultural notions of both femininity and flesh, where women were associated with the body and physicality while men were associated with the soul and reason. Women's practice of fasting was a symbol for their rejection of their worldly desires, which included the needs of their body, elevating them spiritually and strengthening their faith journeys.

[16] Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast,* 194.
[17] Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast,* 207.

There are several theological parallels that could be drawn between the sacrificial nature of Christ's Passion and the perceived sacrificial aspect of birthing pains in the spiritual lives of medieval women. *Women, Religion, and the Significance of Suffering in Medieval Thinking* by Diana Neal, *Spiritual Suffering and Physical Protection in Childbirth in the South English Legendary Lives of Saint Margaret* by Allison Adair Alberts, and *Medieval Redemptive Suffering: Female Mystical Expressions of Pain and Pleasure and Medieval Society's Influence on Mystical Spirituality* by Sharmain van Blommestein are sufficient sources to find the relation of Christ's sacrifice and childbirth. *Significance of Suffering in Medieval Thinking* by Diana Neal provides an analysis of medieval thinking of patristic Christianity and the female body. Early Christian theology often discussed the body, specifically the female body, as a tool to understand and explain spiritual ideals, with the female body becoming a symbol in theological discourse about purity, sin, salvation, and humanity. The female body was seen as a vessel that was full of potential, such as giving life, which mirrors divine creation; and Mary, who is the mother of God, therefore elevating the views and perspectives of the female body, contradicts Church leaders' views of women, their bodies, and their sexuality. While the body was considered a powerful symbol, it was also believed to be a site of corruption and weakness, especially the female body. These perceived differences between men and women and their approach to spirituality and devotion highlights a key aspect of medieval Christian thought. To put it short, women's voices and opinions were completely disregarded and ignored. They were largely excluded from formal education and theological discussions, which alienated and mystified their religious experiences, which focused on the physical rather than the intellectual. "In medieval Christianity, if women were deprived of a voice and of the tools of rational thought, they nevertheless reflected the situation and propensity to 'feel,' when male intellectuals felt constrained to think at the expense of feeling. Thus women were able to imitate the physical sufferings of their Saviour more palpably and naturally than their ecclesiastical brothers."[18] There is an emphasis on physical suffering, where women's devotion centered around imitating Christ's Passion, through practices such as fasting and extreme forms of ascetics. Men's devotion is significantly different as clergymen focused on doctrine and theological reasoning, which prioritized abstract thought and concepts rather than emotional and physical expressions of faith.

A section in *Spiritual Suffering and Physical Protection in Childbirth in the South English Legendary Lives of Saint Margaret* by Allison Adair Alberts provides us with a deeper analysis of Saint Margaret and her important role in the sanctification of events such as childbirth. St. Margaret's narrative ties the transformative power of Christ's crucifixion and bodily suffering. Margaret reinterprets the language that is used to describe her pain, reframing her wounds as a participation in God's divine grace and Christ's Passion. She, like St. Christina, sees her pain as redemptive, and that it elevates her spiritually and aligns herself fully with God's grace. "Margaret's testimony to the ennobling effect of pain is evident in the way she shifts the language of bodily rupture and integrity used by those around her to describe her suffering. The saint's redefinition of the torn and intact body is made possible through the crucifixion, as Christ's wounds on the cross are integral to understanding salvation through suffering. When Christ's side is pierced, his wound yields the water and blood of the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist. From this wound, the church is born."[19] In Margaret's words, Christ's wounds that were inflicted on him during his crucifixion symbolizes humanity's

[18] Neal, "Women, Religion and the Significance of Suffering," 65.
[19] Alberts, "Spiritual Suffering and Physical Protection," 297.

salvation, and her own wounds on her body transforms her body into a vessel of spiritual purity—meaning that her suffering purifies her soul, which will ultimately yield in her eternal salvation. Margaret's testimony redefines suffering as redemptive, further upholding the argument in this time period that pain was considered essential for the spiritual and physical cleansing of the human being, and it also has the religious implications of Christ's own wound. Christ's body was pierced, spilling what is believed to be both water and blood, similar to when a woman is in labor and the amniotic sac ruptures. Due to the perspectives of religion and childbirth in the medieval ages, it can be seen that women are able to mirror the wounds that Christ suffered from. The discussion and emphasis on glorifying pain is not only seen through the testimonies of theological figures, but also in medieval medical texts. Pain during labor was thought to be an essential part of childbirth, and that it was something that needed to happen to make sure that the body was functioning the correct way. "Yet medical texts are nearly silent on the subject of alleviating pain during labor. Esther Cohen suggests that this is neither due to 'medical or masculine callousness,' nor to Eve's curse, but instead, she explains, 'The scholarly medical tradition considered uterine contractions and the resultant pain as one and the same. Consequently, easing the pain would slow the contractions and endanger the entire birth.'"[20] They rarely addressed strategies that reduced labor pains, which is contradictory considering their veneration of childbirth as a holy physical and emotional experience. It is believed that pain is a necessary component of birth, coming to the conclusion that by easing contraction pain it would put both the mother and child at risk. There is also a belief here that the body is a site of spiritual participation, meaning that if you were to ease the pain of the mother, it could endanger the act of creation, which was believed to happen only through experiencing pain. The lack of

[20] Alberts, "Spiritual Suffering and Physical Protection," 305.

understanding and attention that Esther Cohen points out highlights the importance of other types of care that were used, such as midwifery, which supported women throughout their pregnancy.

In *Medieval Redemptive Suffering: Female Mystical Expressions of Pain and Pleasure and Medieval Society's Influence on Mystical Spirituality*, Sharmain van Blommestein discusses expressions of pain and how pain is viewed in medieval mystic perspectives. Van Blommestein explores the intersection that medieval Christians made between pain, suffering, and spiritual devotion. She also highlights how religious ideas were formed by cultural views of secular marriage and relationships. Similarly to the other sources, pain was viewed as a path to spiritual reward. Medieval Christians believed that pain was thought to correspond to a reward that one would receive from God, which then would strengthen the "marriage" between Christ and his believer. "For them, pain represented a reward in heaven that is measured by the intensity of the suffering and violence of their worship; pain reinforces the marriage bond between Christ and the believer."[21] Van Blommestein believes that it is significant that spiritual marriage is grounded, viewed, and practiced as a husband and wife relationship, which could have some underlying occurrences that have to do with violence and pain that were possibly present in cultural attitudes about love. The connection between pain and love is a central theme in van Blommestein's work here, where in medieval perspectives, pain was viewed as a physical way to express both love and commitment, as Christ did. Pain being a reward in heaven demonstrates the true feelings in the context of childbirth which was an act of spiritual participation and physical suffering. Pain was seen as a way to achieve spiritual closeness to Christ, which aligned with the spiritual perspectives that women's suffering was redemptive, giving them a

[21] Blommestein, "Medieval Redemptive Suffering," 39.

unique and important role in the divine order and the Church, where they are able to elevate their bodily suffering to form a divine relationship and instill their spiritual authority.

In conclusion, the connection between women's suffering, spirituality, and the body in medieval Christianity has an interesting and unique relationship to childbirth and the Passion of Christ. Pain and suffering were not only viewed as aspects of the female experience, but they were also considered to be opportunities for spiritual purification, a participation in God's divine grace, and redemption. *Imitatio Christi* and the female body were seen as naturally attuned to each other and the physical aspects of spirituality, especially when one is discussing childbirth and the pain that Christ experienced during his Passion. Figures such as St. Margaret and St. Christina the Astonishing exemplified how pain is able to be reinterpreted as redemptive, which transformed the narrative of the female body being weak and sinful to a site of divine power. Another view and aspect of this relationship is the medical and religious views on pain. Medieval medical texts avoided talking about possible remedies for labor pains, because it was believed that it would take away from the divine experience that women were going through as they were bringing a new life into the world. Building on Caroline Bynum's theories surrounding women's willingness to suffer through not eating and self-mutilation can open a door to connecting the painful experience of childbirth and Christ's Passion to the pain that is experienced through *inedia* and malnourishment. The medieval understanding of childbirth reflects a unique intersection of medical, spiritual and mystical beliefs that place women on a well-deserved pedestal and grants them the credit of the pivotal role they have played in the divine order of both creation and redemption.

Bibliography

Alberts, Allison Adair. "Spiritual Suffering and Physical Protection in Childbirth in the South English Legendary Lives of Saint Margaret." *The Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 46, no. 2 (2016): 289–314. https://doi.org/10.1215/10829636-3491810.

Bynum, Caroline Walker. *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*. 1st ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987: 219-284, 260276. https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520908789.

De Cantimpré, Thomas. "The Life of Christina the Astonishing." In *Thomas of Cantimpré: The Collected Saints' Lives*, translated by Margot King and Barbara Newman. Brepols Publishing, 2007.

Neal, Diana. "Women, Religion and the Significance of Suffering in Medieval Thinking." *Feminist Theology* 3, no. 7 (1994): 62–72. https://doi.org/10.1177/096673509400000707.

Van Blommestein, Sharmain. "Medieval Redemptive Suffering: Female Mystical Expressions of Pain and Pleasure and Medieval Society's Influence on Mystical Spirituality." *The International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society* 4, no. 2 (2014): 39–53. https://doi.org/10.18848/2154-8633/CGP/v04i02/51089.

Sustenance and Sickness

A Challenge to Jared Diamond on the Shift from Hunter-Gatherer Lifestyles to Agricultural Lifestyles with a Focus on Morocco

By: Kylie Gaides Bevan

In 1987, Jared Diamond, an American scientist and historian, made a name for himself by publishing a short article called "The Worst Mistake in the History of the Human Race."" Diamond's main argument was that the shift to agricultural lifestyles was a grave mistake, despite the importance of agriculture to shaping the current world today. Diamond stated that this revolution only made humanity more miserable, focusing on malnutrition, and social and gender inequalities, as well as the introduction of diseases that livestock carried.[1] While agriculture brought about the ability to support larger settlements and population growth, it also brought about a lower quality of life, compared to that of the hunter-gatherer lifestyle. Jared Diamond's piece received relatively positive reception from the public, and is still discussed today due to the groundbreaking nature of his thesis. It was also able to set the stage for his later works, most notably that of his book, "*Guns, Germs, and Steel*."

Yet this essay focuses on whether the shift to agriculture was truly as destructive and novel as Jared Diamond presents it. The answer to this question is not as clear as it may seem. Recent archaeological evidence such as dental records from the Cave of the Pigeons, Morocco, (estimated to be from 15,077 cal B.P. and 13,892 cal B.P) shows that the very same tooth decay Diamond cites in his work, was also present long before the emergence of agricultural settlements.[2] This tooth decay was caused by consuming plenty of starchy plant foods, found amongst the very same remains excavated from Taforalt (Cave of the Pigeons). Due to evidence from late Pleistocene sites such as this, some of Diamond's claims about the emergence of

---

[1] Jared Diamond, "The Worst Mistake in the History of the Human Race," *Discover Magazine*, May 1987. 2.
[2] Louise T. Humphrey et al., "Earliest Evidence for Caries and Exploitation of Starchy Plant Foods in Pleistocene Hunter-Gatherers from Morocco," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 111, no. 3 (2014): 954–59.

agriculture may begin to unravel as this paper continues. On the other hand, burial remains excavated from ~14,500 cal B.P. at the Cave of the Pigeons in Morocco indicate that funerary treatment of infants and women was similar to that of the adults within this community.[3] This could point towards a more inclusive social status within the larger group, which would align with Diamond's claims about relatively egalitarian hunter-gatherer societies followed by social inequality during the Neolithic period.[4] While Diamond is not outright wrong within his work, it seems as though the new archaeological findings from the Cave of the Pigeons and various other archaeological sites along the Mediterranean, are pointing towards some of the very same agricultural effects of worsening diet being present in late Pleistocene hunter-gathering societies. Furthermore, Jared Diamond's characterization of the shift to agricultural lifestyles as a major error in humanity both relies too much on geographical factors and selective comparisons of evidence, and an overly rigid distinction between agriculture and hunting-gathering.

Diamond's Argument about the Impact of Farming

Jared Diamond famously argues that rather than being a step forward for humanity, the emergence of agriculture introduced many problems such as class inequality, disparities within gendered roles, and an overall decline in health. More recent scholars have carried on these ideas, showing that even his earliest works continue to be influential in the anthropological and historical scenes today.[5] Diamond uses three specific reasons to explain his conclusions on agriculture being detrimental to health. First, he states that "hunter-gatherers enjoyed a varied diet, while early farmers obtained most of their food from one or a few starchy crops."[6] Diamond

---

[3] Louise T. Humphrey et al., "Infant Funerary Behavior and Kinship in Pleistocene Hunter-Gatherers from Morocco," *Journal of Human Evolution* 135 (2019). 2.
[4] Diamond, "The Worst Mistake." 1.
[5] Clark Spencer Larsen, "The Agricultural Revolution as Environmental Catastrophe: Implications for Health and Lifestyle in the Holocene," *Quaternary International* 150, no. 1 (2006): 12.
[6] Diamond, "The Worst Mistake." 7.

explains how the emergence of farming practices reduced varied diets in humans, causing poorer nutrition and more 'cheap' and easy calories.[7] Evidence is provided for more modern diets, and the heavy reliance on wheat, rice, and corn, all crops that are high in carbohydrates and do not provide all necessary nutrients, as well as skeletal and dental detriments that may have been due to an overreliance on starchy foods.[8] Within this, Diamond is claiming that humans have become too reliant on high carbohydrate food groups, to the detriment of their health as other necessary nutrients and vitamins are forgotten. While Diamond provides not much further within this article on other food groups utilized by humans, he does touch on the changes in the nutrition of meat as well.

Secondly, Diamond claims that "the mere fact that agriculture encouraged people to clump together in crowded societies, many of which then carried on trade with other societies, led to the spread of parasites and infectious disease."[9] The concentration of human societies ultimately led to more hardships, due to increased presence and exposure to diseases, as well as parasites, from domesticated farm animals and various other humans who may have moved through the area for trade. Further concentration of groups heightened exposure to a number of sicknesses, causing further suffering for humans in agricultural settlements who lived in closer proximity to one another. Diamond argues that epidemics were unable to hold when groups were more scattered and nomadic, compared to post-agricultural cities in which measles and the bubonic plague appeared.[10] There is no evidence provided on how disease spread among huntergatherer populations, though, and no ratios are provided in comparison of populations of huntergatherers to agricultural communities.

---

[7] Diamond, "The Worst Mistake." 7.
[8] Diamond, "The Worst Mistake." 7.
[9] Diamond, "The Worst Mistake." 7.
[10] Diamond, "The Worst Mistake." 7.

Third, with the rise of agricultural and settlements, class and gender divisions also took hold. Diamond states that "farming helped bring another curse upon humanity: deep class divisions."[11] Diamond argues that due to hunter-gatherers having no stores of food, due to their more nomadic lifestyles, they were forced to live off what the land provided each day. There were no concentrated food sources readily available for hunter-gatherers, meaning that the group obtained what they needed for their day, and continued. In contrast to this, Diamond says that "there can be no kings, no class of social parasites who grow fat on food seized from others, only in a farming population could a healthy, non-producing elite set itself above the disease-ridden masses."[12] Higher status individuals who possessed more were healthier, and better equipped in life. Diamond presents evidence for his claim from skeletons excavated from the Greek tombs at Mycenae in 1500 B.C., which were able to point towards royals having a better diet than commoners, due to being "two to three inches taller" and having "better teeth" as they only had one cavity, instead of the normal six cavities or missing teeth that commoners within that society possessed.[13] Altogether, access to more food groups, and less labor, allowed for an elite to possess better health than that of laborers, and thus more divisions were created from stores of food from agriculture.

Similar to the emergence of class divisions, gender inequalities also began to appear amongst the emergence of labor and agriculture. Diamond claims that farming was what encouraged these inequalities to form, as "farming women tended to have more frequent pregnancies than their hunter-gatherer counterparts—with consequent drains on their health."[14] With a more stable, and settled, lifestyle, women were expected to have more children in order to

---

[11] Diamond, "The Worst Mistake." 7.
[12] Diamond, "The Worst Mistake." 8.
[13] Diamond, "The Worst Mistake." 8.
[14] Diamond, "The Worst Mistake." 8.

help in the agricultural work process. Hunter-gatherers, by comparison, were nomadic and could not care for too many young at a time, leaving women whose longer period of nursing inhibited ovulation, freer from less consistent pregnancies. Diamond takes an example from excavations of Chilean mummies, stating that "more women than men had bone lesions from infectious disease."[15] This specifically could suggest that women were more exposed to these diseases, perhaps due to the malnutrition agriculture provided, coupled with the more domestic responsibilities placed upon them. Any nutritional deficiencies from the numerous pregnancies expected of women during this time could have also contributed to further risk of diseases.

In a final point on Diamond, through his research, Diamond finds supposed evidence of dental deficiencies, detailing how those who lived off of lower-class farming diets from the development of agriculture generally developed more cavities or missing teeth.[16] In comparison to the farming diets of the lower-class agricultural farmers, the so-called "social parasites who grew fat on food seized from others" remained an example of the development of a social hierarchy, as well as provided a comparison on how better diet affected dental health.[17] Diamond details how those who were not producers, and instead were a part of a more elite group within society were able to evade poor dental health, with "on the average, one instead of six cavities or missing teeth" in evaluating Greek tombs at Mycenae in 1500 B.C..[18] Thus, demonstrating how the lesser agricultural diet utilized by the masses on average caused many more cavities and dental defects, compared to those who enjoyed a higher tier of status due to the emergence of agriculture.

[15] Diamond, "The Worst Mistake." 9.
[16] Diamond, "The Worst Mistake." 8.
[17] Diamond, "The Worst Mistake." 8.
[18] Diamond, "The Worst Mistake." 8.

Many more recent scholars agree with Diamond on the destructive nature of agriculture on humans. The emergence of agriculture is associated with a drop in the quality of diet amongst human groups. Anthropologist Clark Larsen states that "Although agriculture provided the economic basis for the rise of states and development of civilizations, the change in diet and acquisition of food resulted in a decline in quality of life for most human populations in the last 10,000 years."[19] This loss in quality of life for human groups is brought about by the changes in diet, and more reduced food groups available. Larsen also touches on the environmental degradation that agriculture caused, but this is not an emphasis of Diamond's.

A general agreement exists with Diamond's claims on the destructive effects of agriculture on humans. Alison Macintosh touches on how more intense agriculture is associated with declining mobility and bone strength,[20] and Elizabeth Parkinson states that the reallocation of energy (due to agricultural practices) turned to immune function and reproductive ability, rather than biological functions of growth and maintenance, which could point towards the decreased height between genders.[21] Within these two scholarly works, it is notable that with the turn of agriculture, the human body faced immense physical challenges in harder labor, and the consequences suffered due to this, but also with internal bodily challenges through fighting off diseases with increased immune support, as well as more bodily emphases placed on reproduction and continuing to expand the population.

---

[19] Clark Spencer Larsen, "The Agricultural Revolution as Environmental Catastrophe: Implications for Health and Lifestyle in the Holocene," Quaternary International 150, no. 1 (2006): 12.
[20] Alison A. Macintosh, Ron Pinhasi, and Jay T. Stock, "Prehistoric Women's Manual Labour Exceeded That of Athletes through the First 6,000 Years of Farming in Central Europe," *Science Advances* 3, no. 11 (2017). 1.
[21] Elizabeth W. Parkinson, Sam Payne, Efthymia Nikita, and Jay T. Stock, "Multiproxy Bioarchaeological Data Reveals Interplay between Growth, Diet and Population Dynamics across the Transition to Farming in the Central Mediterranean," *Scientific Reports* 13 (2023). 2.

Various other scholars, such as Alba Masclans and Paul Seabright, also agree with Diamond's claims about increasing hierarchy and gender inequality. Specifically, Masclans focuses on the increased sexual divisions in labor, stating that "the roots of gender inequalities are found, in part, in the roles carried out by females during the demographic and technological changes of Neolithization."[22] Masclans, in their work, finds that amongst central European archeological sites, there is a prevalence for men to be found buried with grave goods related to hunting or violence, while women were found to possess little to no grave goods.[23] Even further, Masclans finds that men possess a higher protein intake than that of women in the area, pointing towards large amounts of sexual dimorphism.[24] Through this, the actions demonstrated by varied genders amongst the emergence of agriculture have shaped how women continued to be perceived throughout the Neolithic Revolution, and how their roles became less dynamic as symbolic systems continued to persist. Seabright, offers insights on the hierarchical processes of agricultural societies compared to that of hunter-gathering societies. Seabright claims that hunter-gatherer foraging techniques majorly encouraged egalitarianism, while agricultural societies "put slaves or simply very poor laborers to work tilling fields or building monuments."[25] Through this, it is discernible that with the storage of resources from agriculture, and the increased hierarchical presence it caused, tiers in society took shape, while hunter-gathering had stayed more egalitarian in nature. Seabright also touches on the "infeasibility of coercion" in small-scale gathering societies, compared to "substantial organized coercion" that

---

[22] Alba Masclans, Caroline Hamon, Christian Jeunesse, and Penny Bickle, "A Sexual Division of Labour at the Start of Agriculture? A Multi-Proxy Comparison through Grave-Good Stone-Tool Technological and Use-Wear Analysis," *PLOS ONE* 16, no. 4 (2021). 33.
[23] Masclans et al., "A Sexual Division of Labour," 33.
[24] Masclans et al., "A Sexual Division of Labour," 33.
[25] Paul Seabright, "The Birth of Hierarchy," in *Cooperation and Its Evolution* (2013): 109.

agricultural states demonstrated.[26] The hierarchy of societies due to stored resources from the emergence of agricultural practices encouraged divisions to continue to run deeper, as divisions between classes grew larger as time progressed. Coercion from the elites persisted, causing even more hardships and divisions between the elite and the laborers, which Diamond touches on as well.

While Diamond's argument seems legitimate in theory, recent archaeological work has also discovered hunter-gathering groups with some of the dietary and dental issues associated with agriculture. Louise Humphrey, in her work at the site of Taforalt, has led key discoveries to be made on that of dental caries, and their prominence amongst the hunter-gathering site during the late Pleistocene due to an incredibly starch-focused diet.[27] Similarly, analyzations on stature between men and women, and their comparison across a multitude of various other late Paleolithic sites, point towards a more equal, less stressful lifestyle shared between the genders. In comparison, regions such as central Europe experienced higher levels of stress, which may have ultimately caused gendered inequalities to occur.[28] Altogether, while Diamond presents a well-rounded and factual argument, many pieces of evidence, predating his own findings, seek to effectively override his claims.

Starchy Foods and Proto-Agriculture

The Cave of the Pigeons (also referred to as Taforalt, or Grotte des Pigeons depending on the scholar) is in Northern Morocco and preserves "a deep sequence of Later Stone Age (LSA) deposits between 22,093 and 21,420 cal BP and 12,698-12,548 cal BP."[29] The Grey Series

---

[26] Seabright, "The Birth of Hierarchy," 109.

[27] Louise T. Humphrey et al., "Earliest Evidence for Caries and Exploitation of Starchy Plant Foods in Pleistocene Hunter-Gatherers from Morocco," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 111, no. 3 (2014): 954–59.

[28] Samantha L. Cox et al., "Socio-Cultural Practices May Have Affected Sex Differences in Stature in Early Neolithic Europe," *Nature Human Behaviour* 8, no. 2 (2024): 243–55.

[29] Humphrey et al., "Infant Funerary Behavior and Kinship," 1.

deposits from the later of these periods point towards an increased presence of the population in the area, possibly even pointing towards a settlement, which would be incredibly early for a nonnomadic culture to exist: as the excavators note, "the pathways to sedentism in this region may have differed from those observed elsewhere."[30] The climate was rather mesic and had moderate moisture compared to previous periods, and later, evidenced by increased vegetation such as oak trees at 14,000 and 12,000 cal BP. C4 grasses and other useful trees, including acorns and pine nuts, made their appearance around the site as well.[31] Due to the inhabitants having demonstrated a reliance on these starchy foods (especially that of acorns), this site may have exemplified an early type of agroforestry, noted from the disturbances in the soil of the Grey Series deposits.

Both isotopic and archaeological evidence from the site of the cave of the Pigeons point towards Late Stone Age (pre-agriculture) hunter-gatherers as having already begun engaging in intensive plant use and environmental modifications, before the beginning of agriculture and domestication, posing the question about what truly constitutes agricultural practice. The site's occupants are noted to have had "diets that included reasonable amounts of animal protein but not marine foods,"[32] which points towards it being more of an inland area than anything near the coast. Even though they consumed some animal proteins, they had an incredibly cariogenic diet at play, which caused "oral microbiota [to predate] the onset of the Neolithic in Northwest

---

30 Isabelle De Groote and Louise T. Humphrey, "The Human Skeletal Remains: A Physical Anthropological Assessment," in *Cemeteries and Sedentism in the Later Stone Age of NW Africa: Excavations at Grotte des Pigeons, Taforalt, Morocco*, ed. R. Nicholas E. Barton, Abdeljalil Bouzouggar, Simon N. Collcutt, and Louise T. Humphrey, 489. Heidelberg: Propylaeum, 2020.

31 Julia A. Lee-Thorp et al., "Isotope Ecology of the Sector 10 Burials," in *Cemeteries and Sedentism in the Later Stone Age of NW Africa: Excavations at Grotte des Pigeons, Taforalt, Morocco*, ed. R. Nicholas E. Barton, Abdeljalil Bouzouggar, Simon N. Collcutt, and Louise T. Humphrey (Heidelberg: Propylaeum, 2020), 495.

32 Lee-Thorp et al., "Isotope Ecology of the Sector 10 Burials," 495.

Africa."[33] Meaning that this human group possessed a more representative diet of the starchy, carbohydrate focused diets of agricultural communities, rather than a regular hunter-gathering society. The Desert zones to the South of the site included both "C4 grasses and sedges, especially during the Late Pleistocene/Early Holocene 'greening' episode driven by increased monsoonal precipitation."[34] The increased reliance on acorns may have emerged due to the sudden growth of oaks during environmentally mesic times in which the oaks flourished, as noted above. This may point towards the cause of the unique lifestyles residents of the Cave of the Pigeons enjoyed, as the environment was more reminiscent of later agricultural communities through a wet climate, which was better for the trees and diet they utilized.

Species	Common name	Nutritional value (g/100g)			Ripening season
		Carbohydrates	Lipids	Protein	
Avena sp.	wild oat	55.0	8.0	20.0	late spring-summer
Juniperus phoenicea	juniper	18.0	4.0	5.0	autumn
Lens cf. *nigricans*, *Lathyrus* sp., *Vicia* sp.	wild legume	58.0	2.0	26.0	late spring-summer
Pinus pinaster	pine nut	5.0	51.1	33.2	autumn
Pistacia terebinthus	terebinth pistachio	5.0	61.0	4.0	autumn
Quercus ilex	acorn	53.0	10.5	3.0	autumn
Sambucus nigra/ebulus	elderberry	55.0	1.0	7.0	autumn

Tab. 6.4 Nutritional value and ripening season of the most common plants identified in Sector 8. – (Data assembled from published sources: Debussche et al. 1987; Fennane et al. 1999; 2007; 2014; Sosulski/Sosulski 1985).

Jacob Morales, "Other Charred Plant Macro-Remains (Seeds, Fruits, etc.)"[35]

Charred plant remains have been discovered among the Cave of the Pigeons site, "dated between approximately 21,000 and 12,600 cal BP."[36] Within these found foods, the chart below details food type, as well as nutritional values and seasons that these foods could be used during.

---

[33] Isabelle De Groote and Louise T. Humphrey, "The Human Skeletal Remains: A Physical Anthropological Assessment," in *Cemeteries and Sedentism in the Later Stone Age of NW Africa: Excavations at Grotte des Pigeons, Taforalt, Morocco*, ed. R. Nicholas E. Barton, Abdeljalil Bouzouggar, Simon N. Collcutt, and Louise T. Humphrey, 489. Heidelberg: Propylaeum, 2020.

[34] Lee-Thorp et al., "Isotope Ecology of the Sector 10 Burials," 492.

[35] Jacob Morales, "Other Charred Plant Macro-Remains (Seeds, Fruits, etc.)," in *Cemeteries and Sedentism in the Later Stone Age of NW Africa: Excavations at Grotte des Pigeons, Taforalt, Morocco*, ed. R. Nicholas E. Barton, Abdeljalil Bouzouggar, Simon N. Collcutt, and Louise T. Humphrey (Heidelberg: Propylaeum, 2020), 184.

[36] Morales, "Other Charred Plant Macro-Remains," 171.

There is a notable preference for high carbohydrate foods, including wild oats, wild legumes, acorns, and elderberries, all with carbohydrate values over 50g/100g. These high carbohydrate foods seem to be most common at the site, especially amongst the Grey Series deposits that detail the lives of residents of the Cave of the Pigeons during the late Pleistocene.[37] Specifically, Louise Humphrey details that the inhabitants participated in systematic harvesting of plant foods, including wild plants, acorns, and pine nuts, as well as edible land snails.[38] Jacob Morales finds that a broad range of consumables were found at the site, such as carbohydrates, including wild legumes, wild grasses, and acorns, fats such as Terebinth pistachio and pine nut, and proteins including pine nuts and wild legumes.[39] Sweet acorns were an especially important source of calories,[40] as they were for "around the northern hemisphere, both for hunter-gatherer and farmer populations."[41] Zineb Moubtahij states this in his findings on this site, as "isotopic evidence of pronounced plant reliance among Late Stone Age hunter-gatherers from North Africa (15,000-13,000 cal BP), predating the advent of agriculture by several millennia."[42]

While it is argued that agriculture only emerged during the Holocene as part of the Neolithic Revolution, this may not be the only case. Amongst the North African archaeological sites of Taforalt (as well as other North African sites such as Afalou Bou Rhummel), findings suggest that early agricultural practices had already begun to emerge. Noted from disturbances

---

[37] Morales, "Other Charred Plant Macro-Remains," 183.
[38] Humphrey et al., "Infant Funerary Behavior and Kinship," 1.
[39] Morales, "Other Charred Plant Macro-Remains," 183.
[40] Lee-Thorp et al., "Isotope Ecology of the Sector 10 Burials," 492.
[41] Jacob Morales, "Other Charred Plant Macro-Remains (Seeds, Fruits, etc.)," in *Cemeteries and Sedentism in the Later Stone Age of NW Africa: Excavations at Grotte des Pigeons, Taforalt, Morocco*, ed. R. Nicholas E. Barton, Abdeljalil Bouzouggar, Simon N. Collcutt, and Louise T. Humphrey (Heidelberg: Propylaeum, 2020), 178.
[42] Zineb Moubtahij et al., "Isotopic Evidence of High Reliance on Plant Food among Later Stone Age HunterGatherers at Taforalt, Morocco," *Nature Ecology & Evolution* 8, no. 5 (2024): 1035–45.

found in the Grey Series soil deposits at Taforalt, a type of agroforestry may have been utilized.[43] The C4 grasses and acorn-producing oak trees that made their appearance around the site, though an intentional manipulation of the soil in aiding the growth of these plants was observed within the Grey Series deposits.[44] Due to the semi-unique nature of the cave of Taforalt, and the generally good climate residents enjoyed, there was much more of an emphasis on the consumption of plants, though site residents enjoyed a generally varied diet as well.[45] The sheer abundance of consumable plants allowed for an increased presence of residents of Taforalt to remain in the area, allowing consistent use and manipulation of the surrounding landscapes to persist as well.

The reliance that Taforalt residents had on carbohydrates and lipids proved to be less than stellar with regards to their dental hygiene. It was found that the high caries prevalence observed amongst residents was most likely due to the reliance on carbohydrates, "since frequent consumption of fermentable carbohydrates is a key factor in the initiation and progression of this disease."[46] Evidence from archaeological dental examinations, such as caries, are able to challenge Diamond's claim on poor dental hygiene being exclusive to early farming communities. A high prevalence of caries in Pleistocene hunter-gatherers from North Africa was linked to their abnormally starchy diets, which consisted of highly cariogenic wild plant foods like the acorns.[47] This evidence continues to predate other populations with high caries, and the Cave of the Pigeons continues to predate the first signs of food production by several thousand years, which Diamond fails to account for in his works.

[43] Lee-Thorp et al., "Isotope Ecology of the Sector 10 Burials," 495.
[44] Lee-Thorp et al., "Isotope Ecology of the Sector 10 Burials," 495.
[45] Moubtahij et al., "Isotopic Evidence," 1035.
[46] Morales, "Other Charred Plant Macro-Remains," 184.
[47] Humphrey et al., "Earliest Evidence for Caries,."". 954–59.

The poor oral health observed of residents at the Cave of the Pigeons was likely due to their unusually high reliance on "carbohydrate-rich wild plant foods, such as acorn and pine seeds."[48] As Isabelle De Groote and Louise Humphrey note, "the overall results for Taforalt show high oral pathologies in the individuals from Taforalt exceeding those observed in many food producing populations."[49] Between 14,000 and 12,000 BP, various scattered evergreen oaks were present, as well *Ranunculus*, largely due to a more favorable climate.[50] This increased availability of wild plant foods among the residents of the Cave of the Pigeons diet, caused an early shift towards a disease-associated oral microbiota.[51] Humphrey claims in their work that "this research challenges commonly held assumptions that high rates of caries are indicative of agricultural societies."[52] Though Jared Diamond poses the emergence of agriculture as a stark shift, evidence from Northern Morocco effectively challenges this narrative as it shows a more gradual adoption of the practice of cultivation and reliance on a fewer species of wild plants.

In addition to soil manipulation to aid tree growth, the inhabitants engaged in complex food processing reminiscent of agricultural communities. Morales states that "it is possible that an extensive use of fire to process plants during the GS resulted in a rise in the net energy value of this food source."[53] The residents may have chosen these high carb, high fat foods in order to combat with seasonal selectivity, as many of the excavated remains were only ripe in the autumn season. Similarly, through the suggestion of the use of fire, this could point towards an even more incredibly complex society, one enacted through technological advancement, further

---

[48] De Groote and Humphrey, "The Human Skeletal Remains," 489.
[49] De Groote and Humphrey, "The Human Skeletal Remains," 489.
[50] Neil Roberts et al., "Stable Isotope Records of Late Quaternary Climate and Hydrology from Mediterranean Lakes: The ISOMED Synthesis," *Quaternary Science Reviews* 27, no. 25-26 (2008): 70.
[51] Humphrey et al., "Earliest Evidence for Caries,."". 954–59.
[52] Humphrey et al., "Earliest Evidence for Caries," 954-59.
[53] Morales, "Other Charred Plant Macro-Remains," 183.

pointing towards the shift towards cultivation in agriculture. De Groote also claims that the possible use of grindstones "may have further contributed to the elevated caries rates."[54]

As for this shift to proto-agricultural practices, the archaeological site of Afalou Bou Rhummel in Algeria demonstrates incredibly similar findings to the Cave of the Pigeons. The Iberomaurusian inhabitants of Afalou had genetic affinities with those of the Cave of the Pigeons.[55] The pit cave of Afalou Bou Rhummel, located in the Beni-Segoual caves of Algeria, was used for general refuse, and between the two North African archeological sites (of Afalou Bou Rhummel and Taforalt), findings suggest that proto-agricultural practices had already begun to emerge.[56] While Taforalt when through early uses of agroforestry, Afalou Bou Rhummel is thought by some scholars to have engaged in a very early form of animal husbandry. This included the breeding and culling herds of Barbary sheep, noted by the contribution of major faunal remains to the site.[57] Even further afield, the Zagros mountains of western Iran have displayed archaeological goat remains, demonstrating a very early form of domestication there too.[58] This emergence of early animal husbandry points towards agriculture being a more gradual, regionally focused shift, rather than a mass worldwide event. Agricultural practices were adopted based on need, with late hunter-gatherer groups practicing these informal agricultural techniques as well.

Overall, these excavations of the late Pleistocene Iberomaurusian sites bring into question some of Diamond's arguments about the distinctiveness of the Neolithic Revolution, as opposed

---

[54] De Groote and Humphrey, "The Human Skeletal Remains," 489.

[55] Rym Kefi et al., "On the Origin of Iberomaurusians: New Data Based on Ancient Mitochondrial DNA and Phylogenetic Analysis of Afalou and Taforalt Populations," *Mitochondrial DNA Part A* 29, no. 1 (2018): 147–57.

[56] Joan Dorothea Merriman, *Fossil Children: An Exploration of Developmental Patterns Found in Subadult Skeletons from Epipaleolithic North Africa* (PhD diss., State University of New York at Binghamton, 2003), 37.

[57] Merriman, *Fossil Children*, 38.

[58] Merriman, *Fossil Children*, 38.

to hunter-gathering ways of life. Intensive utilization of starchy plants seems to predate agriculture across some regions, and there are hints of a shift to a more sedentary lifestyle as well, at the Cave of the Pigeons.[59] Sophisticated techniques for processing and possibly promoting the growth of trees and animals have been discerned within the archaeological findings. The excavation team from the Cave of the Pigeons has related this to the phenomenon known as the "Broad Spectrum Revolution" in the late Pleistocene, when people across other regions as well, for example in the eastern Mediterranean, began to exploit the lower ranked resources such as plants and in specializing some certain animals.[60] They also began to live in more permanent settlements and left behind more complex stone assemblages thousands of years before the beginning of agriculture.[61] Altogether, this is able to effectively reshape the notion that agriculture was such a stark shift in human populations. Instead, the lifestyle-based shifts made amongst various hunter-gathering groups effectively predated the formation of agriculture.

Gender Inequalities

These societies from as early as the Late Stone Age are able to reveal that gender roles and varied social hierarchies were rooted in cultural practices, exemplified by funerary excavations reflecting hierarchal privileges and gendered inequalities. Stature also played a role, as women and men's heights greatly varied across locations, and by cultures of human groups. Recent work at the Neolithic site of Çatal Höyük has also suggested that not all agricultural societies were worse for women.

Funerary treatment, as well, was indicative of social status within the Cave of the Pigeons. These treatments essentially mirror cultural beliefs and attitudes towards the deceased

---

[59] Humphrey et al., "Infant Funerary Behavior and Kinship," 1.
[60] R. Nicholas E. Barton et al., "The Iberomaurusian Prelude to Farming in Morocco," *Revolutions* (2021): 122.
[61] Barton et al., "Iberomaurusian Prelude," 122.

or the group they represent. Humphrey reports on burial findings of six infants, from the Later Stone Age at Grotte des Pigeons in Morocco dating to ~14,500 cal BP.[62] This funerary treatment of infants was comparable to the treatment of various adults (male and female) within the community, which could point towards an inclusive social status amongst the group, or more egalitarian values. This could also provide further evidence that is indicative of a more sedentary society, as the deceased were buried and reburied over time. The Cave of the Pigeons also had a focused symbolic nature on funerary treatment, as ideas of secondary burials persisted, and the most common burial model seems to be a grave that contains remains from both primary and secondary burials.[63] Valentina Mariotti's study suggests that "the Taforalt necropolis is a group of primary and secondary burials" and that "the presence of incomplete skeletons at different sites suggests that the intentional removal of bones from primary burials was a common practice."[64] These findings are able to point towards a larger symbolic nature of burials among the Cave of the Pigeons, inclusive of all genders and ages. There were complex "rituals involving treatment of the cadaver and bones" practiced at Taforalt, and "it is possible that the Taforalt cave was a special, perhaps sacred place for the celebration of particular ceremonies or more occasional social or religious events."[65] All in all, this points towards the Cave of the Pigeons having an incredibly strong group identity, one that took into account all of its members across both ages and genders.

Further, it is notable that the residents of Taforalt used fire in processing their plants which ultimately aided in both a greater net energy for the overall food source, as well as

---

[62] Humphrey et al., "Infant Funerary Behavior and Kinship," 1.
[63] Valentina Mariotti et al., "Funerary Practices of the Iberomaurusian Population of Taforalt (Tafoughalt; Morocco, 11–12,000 BP): New Hypotheses Based on a Grave-by-Grave Skeletal Inventory and Evidence of Deliberate Human Modification of the Remains," *Journal of Human Evolution* 56, no. 4 (2009): 346.
[64] Mariotti et al., "Funerary Practices of the Iberomaurusian Population," 352.
[65] Mariotti et al., "Funerary Practices of the Iberomaurusian Population," 352.

increased digestibility and reduced costs of digestion of the foods.[66] While the thermal processing of these plants proved useful in aiding digestion and increased energy, it continues to point towards a deeper understanding of cultivation of foods, and an early understanding of agricultural practices.

The stature of the skeletons excavated at the Cave of the Pigeons also suggests relative equality between the men and women. Using the Raxter et al. Formula, "males were on average 171.1 cm and females 162.2 cm."[67] The difference in average heights between genders is on average 4.3 inches apart, notably a smaller difference for this particular area, and compared to current gender averages today. Across other areas, comparisons were made.

Area:	Male Height Average:	Female Height Average:
Jebel Sahaba (Sudan)	176.9 cm	167.5 cm
Grimaldi Caves (Monaco)	179.5 cm	158.0 cm
Moravian sites	175.9 cm	159.7 cm
Southern Europe (Late Upper Paleolithic)	165.3 cm	152.4 cm
Central Europe	166.1 cm	154.6 cm
Taforalt (Morocco)	**171.1 cm**	**162.2 cm**
Afalou Bou Rhummel (Algeria)	**177.7 cm**	**168.0 cm**

(Chart created by Kylie Bevan, with data from (De Groote, 2020, 483-484)[68] and Chamla, M.-C., 1985).[69]

[66] Morales, "Other Charred Plant Macro-Remains," 183-184.
[67] De Groote and Humphrey, "The Human Skeletal Remains," 483–84.
[68] De Groote and Humphrey, "The Human Skeletal Remains," 483–84.
[69] Chamla, M.-C., J. Dastugue, and S. Hachi. "Afalou-Bou-Rhummel." *Encyclopédie berbère* 2 (1985): 182–192.

These differences in stature show that individuals residing in Taforalt were, on average, comparable to other Late Stone Age and Upper Paleolithic populations.[70] The women of Taforalt, though Sudan and Algeria are comparable, were notably tall compared to most other samples, pointing towards a more equal lifestyle lived across the genders. The male heights recorded are of mid-range comparison, leaving the stature differences between sexes fairly small at Taforalt. Within this, it can be noticed that tall statures were more common in Africa and Northern Africa. In comparison, stature was reduced within the Middle East and European populations. This is further observed in the chart above with shorter female stature amongst Monaco, Southern, and Central Europe as well. From this, Upper Paleolithic populations were generally tall, with North African sites being among the tallest analyzed. There is strong sexual dimorphism found amongst all the sites, with only Taforalt and Afalou Bou Rhummel demonstrating the smallest gap of differences across genders. Notably, male stature averages taken from central and southern Europe also happen to be among the shortest of the collection. Subsequently, female average stature taken from these sites is also among the shortest, though possesses less of a difference compared to the greater sample, than male stature compared to the sample. These findings are consistent with other scholarly notions that height differences appear more from culture and gendered roles, than through actions specific to agriculture.

Samantha Cox has recently argued that male to female dimorphism may reflect cultural practice and reactions to stress rather than simply agriculture versus hunting-gathering. Cox notes that the "biological effects of sex-specific inequities can be linked to cultural influences at least as early as 7,000 years ago, and culture, more than environment or genetics, drove height

[70] De Groote and Humphrey, "The Human Skeletal Remains," 483–84.

disparities in Early Neolithic Europe."[71] Cox found that differences between male and female heights were much larger in Central Europe than Southern Europe during the early Neolithic. She ultimately relates this to male reactions to stress. Similarly, the sexual dimorphism ratio during the Neolithic is within the range of modern-day humans, which is commonly observed when genders undergo similar burdens of stress.[72] This could be due to males being more sensitive to environmental pressures, which in turn decreases their heights.[73] In contrast, females are "biologically buffered" and their stature continues to remain consistent in response to outside pressures.[74] While both sexes may have experienced stresses in similar ways, females were somehow more equipped to handle it then males, resulting in an overall decrease in height for men. Cox assumes that while southern and central European populations are under stress, cultural differences allowed males to gain more resources in central Europe. This was at the expense of central European women, compared to that of females in southern Europe. These results from Cox's work are consistent with other models, where femur length differences are "relatively low in the Mediterranean caused by female buffering to environmental stress and less cultural male preference, and high dimorphism in Northern Central Europe caused by the interaction of relatively high environmental stress and strong cultural male preference."[75] While genders were treated more equally along the Mediterranean, Northern Central Europe favored males, causing high dimorphisms to appear. This goes hand-in-hand with evaluations on how culture can affect roles in society.

---

[71] Samantha L. Cox et al., "Socio-Cultural Practices May Have Affected Sex Differences in Stature in Early Neolithic Europe," *Nature Human Behaviour* 8, no. 2 (2024): 243.
[72] Cox et al., "Socio-Cultural Practices," 250.
[73] Cox et al., "Socio-Cultural Practices," 250.
[74] Cox et al., "Socio-Cultural Practices," 250.
[75] Cox et al., "Socio-Cultural Practices," 250.

Environmental stress in the North may have played a part as well, as at the beginning of the Neolithic in Europe, "the expansion of agriculture is thought to have been largely limited by poor soils and climate."[76] Due to this, increased stress is not so surprising, since agricultural practices appear to have been much more challenging due to difficult climates and lower quality food. While diet affects dimorphism, "the isotopic signatures of males and females in the North Central and South Central regions are very similar,"[77] which proves that a lower quality diet alone is not what caused the shorter stature for females in Northern Europe. Still, Northern Europe's dimorphic differences are noted to be extreme compared to modern global populations. There is in fact a significant relationship that can be observed from "linear enamel hypoplasia (LEH) and shorter femora, suggesting that LEH may reflect an underlying variable in childhood that also affects stature."".[78] Expanding on this, females are found to be more affected by LEH, and females with LEH possess shorter femurs than those who do not, though such an evaluation is not the case for males. Cox hypothesizes "that the relationship between LEH and femur length is driven by females" as it seems as though females are the only ones affected by varied femoral lengths based on possession of LEH.[79] For whatever reason, the greater sexual dimorphism in central Europe in our late Pleistocene examples above were also evident in the early Neolithic. Agriculture was not what brought about the varied differences in heights between genders.

Within central Europe, there appears to be a sex-based division of labor during the early emergence of agriculture. Alba Masclans examines grave goods, and how different tools, or the appearance of any tools at all, demonstrates the skills and work that the person has completed throughout their life. Grave goods found buried with male skeletons were evaluated to be

---

[76] Cox et al., "Socio-Cultural Practices," 249.
[77] Cox et al., "Socio-Cultural Practices," 249.
[78] Cox et al., "Socio-Cultural Practices," 248.
[79] Cox et al., "Socio-Cultural Practices," 248.

heavier, pointing towards use within woodworking, butchery, and hunting.[80] These heavy tools were noted to be found almost exclusively in male graves, compared to female graves containing little to no grave goods, with only small and lighter tools noted amongst female skeletons.[81] Through this, it is observable that men completed the more tool-heavy tasks, while women worked in softer roles. Masclans also finds that crucial isotope data in measuring animal protein intake levels amongst skeletons across the sexes points towards greater sexual dimorphism in the Neolithic as well. Men are found to possess higher values of protein, and women consistently fall into lower clusters of animal protein consumption.[82] As Masclans' work is focused on European sites, this could ultimately explain why women demonstrated such a significant difference in stature to men across the area, due to the lower consumption of protein. With the consistent association of tools buried with men, and use wear of teeth noted from potential basket weaving women, there is a notable regionally variable sexual division of labor observed.[83] The emergence of gendered roles in human societies is one of the foundations for gender inequalities to take hold in early European farming societies.[84]

Çatal Höyük, located in modern-day Turkey, examines how height can be culturally dependent, following how gendered roles in society shape how sexes are treated. At Çatal Höyük, Angel notes in the seventh millennium BC that there "was a major health achievement to increase the adult female life span from 28—up to 30."[85] This furthers the belief that height is more representative of a group's culture, rather than their gendered practices overall, as

---

[80] Masclans et al., "Sexual Division of Labour," 33.
[81] Masclans et al., "Sexual Division of Labour," 33.
[82] Masclans et al., "Sexual Division of Labour," 33.
[83] Masclans et al., "Sexual Division of Labour," 33.
[84] Masclans et al., "Sexual Division of Labour," 33.
[85] J. Lawrence Angel, "Early Neolithic Skeletons from Çatal Hüyük: Demography and Pathology," *Anatolian Studies* 21 (1971): 96.

Mediterranean, and North African sites demonstrate the lowest levels of sexual dimorphism in stature. For context, the site of Çatal Höyük "aimed at protection of women," and had a "high valuation of women, fertility, and life."[86] Rather than emerging from agricultural practices, it seems as though gendered roles come about more from culture, and group dynamics, above all else. In comparison to the site of Taforalt, it seems as though the site was more matriarchal than Taforalt's egalitarian nature, pointing towards egalitarianism continuing longer in the Mediterranean regions.

The most notable takeaways of this are that the individual archaeological sites of Taforalt and Afalou Bou Rhummel are relatively egalitarian within their positions on women, as indicated by their burial practices and generally low rate of sexual dimorphism. In comparing these findings to other late Pleistocene sites, it is evident that North African and African populations may have maintained much lower rates of sexual dimorphism than European populations, especially that of central Europeans.[87] This is consistent with recent work by Samantha Cox, Alba Masclans, and Lousie Humphrey, who all demonstrate in their work that sexual dimorphism may be a byproduct of reactions to stress, above all else. While the blame for this change could easily be credited to the formation of agriculture, it is apparent that this is not the only case. Group reactions to stress across human populations forced some societies to remain egalitarian, leading to lower rates of sexual dimorphism, while other human groups, especially in central Europe, embraced a more patriarchal approach. Reactions to stress through individual societal culture enabled sexual dimorphism to form alongside the Neolithic Revolution and formation of agriculture.

[86] Angel, "Early Neolithic Skeletons from Çatal Hüyük," 96.
[87] Cox et al., "Socio-Cultural Practices," 243.

Conclusion

To tie this all together, both the formation of agriculture and its connection to a decline in human health and equality was not as simple as Jared Diamond claims it was. With a greater reliance on plants during the Late Stone Age,[88] and evidence for basic harvesting practices,[89] it seems as though the late years of the Pleistocene underwent an agricultural-like shift, as climates changed and settlements came about. However, these people seem relatively healthy and not so unequal. There are also some contradictions in early Neolithic data,[90] which perhaps points to regional differences in gender inequalities in cultures manifesting human misery in times of stress. Through this, varying societal culture and group reactions to stress may be to blame for the higher levels of sexual dimorphism in some areas, rather than merely the shift to agriculture. In terms of relevancy to current matters, it is essential to understand a broader context on how agriculture truly affected human populations, as Diamond's persistent narrative has shaped anthropological arguments across the globe, and become somewhat of a household name recognizable in modern times. While the claim that agriculture was the "worst mistake in human history,"[91] it is not comparable to modern times due to the immense amount of time that has passed within these practices. In both the late Pleistocene and early Holocene, these prehistoric communities rapidly expanded, filling the limits of their environmental offerings, and needing to make changes to their systems of sustenance.[92] Intergroup competition was generated, through both increasing populations to support and a more hospitable climate. Through the settlement and basic cultivation of lands, and semi-manipulation of soils, not yet veering on the side of

---

[88] Moubtahij et al., "Isotopic Evidence," 1035.
[89] Humphrey et al., "Infant Funerary Behavior and Kinship," 1.
[90] Cox et al., "Socio-Cultural Practices," 243–55.
[91] Diamond, "The Worst Mistake." 1.
[92] Peter J. Richerson, Robert Boyd, and Robert L. Bettinger, "Was Agriculture Impossible during the Pleistocene but Mandatory during the Holocene? A Climate Change Hypothesis," *American Antiquity* 66, no. 3 (2001): 387–411.

domestication, it is possible that basic agricultural practices may have existed prior to the Neolithic Revolution. Altogether, the idea of agriculture is a gray area, as it came about out of necessity, and continues due to the very same necessity in which it was formed under – supporting the population. Agriculture is not a singular mistake, but a cultural choice societies make in reacting to the stress of changing subsistence patterns. While some societies chose to remain relatively egalitarian, some ultimately did not as well.

Bibliography

Primary Sources:

Angel, J. Lawrence. "Early Neolithic skeletons from Çatal Hüyük: demography and pathology." *Anatolian Studies* 21 (1971): 77-98.

Barton, Nicholas, Abdeljalil Bouzouggar, Simon N. Collcutt, and Louise Humphrey, eds. *Cemeteries and Sedentism in the Later Stone Age of NW Africa: Excavations at Grotte Des Pigeons, Taforalt, Morocco*. Vol. 147 of *Monographien*. Mainz: RömischGermanisches Zentralmuseum; Schnell & Steiner, 2019.

Barton, R. Nicholas E., Martin G. Bell, Abdeljalil Bouzouggar, Isabelle De Groote, Joshua T. Hogue, Louise T. Humphrey, Jacob Morales, Victoria T. Taylor, and Elaine Turner. "The Iberomaurusian Prelude to Farming in Morocco." *Revolutions (*2021): 121-133.

Chamla, M.-C., J. Dastugue, and S. Hachi. "Afalou-Bou-Rhummel." *Encyclopédie berbère* 2 (1985): 182–192. https://doi.org/10.4000/encyclopedieberbere.880.

De Groote, Isabelle, and Louise T. Humphrey. "The Human Skeletal Remains: A Physical Anthropological Assessment." In *Cemeteries and Sedentism in the Later Stone Age of NW Africa: Excavations at Grotte des Pigeons, Taforalt, Morocco*, edited by R. Nicholas E. Barton, Abdeljalil Bouzouggar, Simon N. Collcutt, and Louise T. Humphrey, 483–89.

Humphrey, Louise T., Alison Freyne, Marieke van de Loosdrecht, Joshua T. Hogue, Elaine Turner, Nick Barton, and Abdeljalil Bouzouggar. 2019. "Infant Funerary Behavior and Kinship in Pleistocene Hunter-Gatherers from Morocco." *Journal of Human Evolution* 135: 102637. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhevol.2019.07.001.

Humphrey, Louise T., Isabelle De Groote, Jacob Morales, Nick Barton, Simon Collcutt, Christopher Bronk Ramsey, and Abdeljalil Bouzouggar. "Earliest evidence for caries and exploitation of starchy plant foods in Pleistocene hunter-gatherers from Morocco." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 111, no. 3 (2014): 954-959.

Kefi, Rym, Meriem Hechmi, Chokri Naouali, Haifa Jmel, Sana Hsouna, Eric Bouzaid, Sonia Abdelhak, Eliane Beraud-Colomb, and Alain Stevanovitch. "On the origin of Iberomaurusians: new data based on ancient mitochondrial DNA and phylogenetic analysis of Afalou and Taforalt populations." *Mitochondrial dna Part A* 29, no. 1 (2018): 147-157.

Lee-Thorp, Julia A., Angela Vaughan, Peter Ditchfield, and Louise T. Humphrey. 2020. "Isotope Ecology of the Sector 10 Burials." In *Cemeteries and Sedentism in the Later Stone Age of NW Africa: Excavations at Grotte des Pigeons, Taforalt, Morocco*, edited by R. Nicholas E. Barton, Abdeljalil Bouzouggar, Simon N. Collcutt, and Louise T. Humphrey, 491-496. Heidelberg: Propylaeum.

Mariotti, Valentina, Bruno Bonfiglioli, Fiorenza Facchini, Sylvain Condemi, and Maria Giovanna Belcastro. "Funerary Practices of the Iberomaurusian Population of Taforalt (Tafoughalt; Morocco, 11–12,000 BP): New Hypotheses Based on a Grave-by-Grave Skeletal Inventory and Evidence of Deliberate Human Modification of the Remains." *Journal of Human Evolution* 56, no. 4 (2009): 340–54.

Merriman, Joan Dorothea. *Fossil children: An exploration of developmental patterns found in subadult skeletons from epipaleolithic North Africa*. State University of New York at Binghamton, 2003.

Morales, Jacob. “Other Charred Plant Macro-Remains (Seeds, Fruits, etc.).” In *Cemeteries and Sedentism in the Later Stone Age of NW Africa: Excavations at Grotte des Pigeons, Taforalt, Morocco*, edited by R. Nicholas E. Barton, Abdeljalil Bouzouggar, Simon N. Collcutt, and Louise T. Humphrey, 171–87. Heidelberg: Propylaeum, 2020.

Moubtahij, Zineb, Jeremy McCormack, Nicolas Bourgon, Manuel Trost, Virginie Sinet-Mathiot, Benjamin T. Fuller, Geoff M. Smith, et al. “Isotopic Evidence of High Reliance on Plant Food among Later Stone Age Hunter-Gatherers at Taforalt, Morocco.” *Nature Ecology & Evolution* 8, no. 5 (2024): 1035-1045.

Secondary Sources:

Cox, Samantha L., Nicole Nicklisch, Michael Francken, Joachim Wahl, Harald Meller, Wolfgang Haak, Kurt W. Alt, Eva Rosenstock, and Iain Mathieson. "Socio-cultural practices may have affected sex differences in stature in Early Neolithic Europe." *Nature Human Behaviour* 8, no. 2 (2024): 243-255.

Diamond, Jared. “The Worst Mistake in the History of the Human Race.” *Discover*, May 1987.

Larsen, Clark Spencer. "The Agricultural Revolution as Environmental Catastrophe: Implications for Health and Lifestyle in the Holocene." *Quaternary International* 150, no. 1 (2006): 12-20.

Macintosh, Alison A., Ron Pinhasi, and Jay T. Stock. “Prehistoric Women’s Manual Labour Exceeded That of Athletes through the First 6,000 Years of Farming in Central Europe.” *Science Advances* 3, no. 11 (2017)

Masclans, Alba, Caroline Hamon, Christian Jeunesse, and Penny Bickle. “A Sexual Division of Labour at the Start of Agriculture? A Multi-Proxy Comparison through Grave-Good Stone-Tool Technological and Use-Wear Analysis.” *PLOS ONE* 16, no. 4 (2021)

Parkinson, Elizabeth W., Sam Payne, Efthymia Nikita, and Jay T. Stock. “Multiproxy Bioarchaeological Data Reveals Interplay between Growth, Diet and Population Dynamics across the Transition to Farming in the Central Mediterranean.” *Scientific Reports* 13 (2023)

Richerson, Peter J., Robert Boyd, and Robert L. Bettinger. "Was Agriculture Impossible during the Pleistocene but Mandatory during the Holocene? A Climate Change Hypothesis." *American antiquity* 66, no. 3 (2001): 387-411.

Seabright, Paul. "The Birth of Hierarchy." *Cooperation and Its Evolution* (2013): 109-116.

The Other Ingredient: How Disease Influenced Culinary Behavior in British Colonial West Africa

By: Sadie M. Walden

Academic discussions on culinary practices and cookery have traditionally centered around their relationship to culture. After all, a social group's culture can often shape what its members consume and value. For example, the popularity of plantains in parts of Tanzania has frequently been interpreted through a cultural lens, particularly the role of chiefs who banned the cutting of "bunches and even leaves of young plantain plants" to promote cultivation. By framing plantains as "a symbol of prosperity of the community," these practices linked agricultural regulation with social meaning, illustrating how cultural authority shaped food production and dietary patterns.[1] In this view, culture is often treated as the primary driving force behind how individuals and societies choose, prepare, and consume their food. While this cultural lens has provided valuable insights, it may overlook other influential factors that shape dietary behaviors. One such factor is the historical prevalence of gastrointestinal infections in a region. Beyond the basic human aversion to the sight of mold or the stench of rotten food, the widespread occurrence of diseases such as dysentery and intestinal parasites may have played a significant role in determining national and societal traditions of culinary behaviors. These adaptations may include the rejection of particular ingredients, the adoption of certain preparation techniques, and, potentially, the integration of religious practices aimed at the prevention of illness. These behaviors could have emerged not solely from cultural preference, but rather as evolutionary responses to the threat of disease. According to T.S. Eliot, "to understand a culture is to

[1] Ally Z. Lyana and Manimbulu Nlooto, Review of Culture and Food Habits in Tanzania and Democratic Republic of Congo, Journal of Human Ecology (2014): 9–21.

understand a people… culture is not merely the sum of several activities, but a way of life."[2] This research seeks to prove that food culture evolves, not as "a way of life," but as a way of survival learned from history and behavioral adaptations.

This paper explores the extent to which gastrointestinal infections influenced culinary practices in West Africa between 1850 and 1960, during the Scramble for Africa and British colonial rule. The region provides an excellent case study due to its diverse food traditions and high rates of exposure to food and waterborne diseases. Utilizing sources such as British national health statistics, historical cookbooks, anthropological journals from missionaries residing in the region, and academic literature, this research aims to address to what degree foodborne bacteria have shaped culinary patterns, and whether these behavioral reactions can be seen as equally influential as cultural motivations. In addition to promoting this argument, the paper will address the incorrect assumptions made by English colonizers regarding the health of the West African diet, highlighting how colonial interference helped create a malnutrition epidemic. In pursuing this, the paper investigates several key questions: What specific ingredients or food items were avoided in West African communities during British colonial rule? How did the colonization of West Africa influence culinary practices? How did British colonial literature describe the relationship between diet and disease in African populations, and how does the language used differ from the medical language employed today? What religions were practiced by the West African populations between 1850 and 1960, and how did this impact these populations' diets? Were certain food preparation rituals or taboos in African religions explicitly linked to ideas of bodily or spiritual purity? Ultimately, the research aims to broaden the scope of how food

[2] Ann Allen, "Food and Culture: Continuity and Change in the Yoruba of West Africa and Their Diasporas." In *Odysseys of Plates and Palates: Food, Society and Sociality*, ed. Simeon S. Magliveras and Catherine Gallin, 75–89, (Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2014), 2.

traditions are understood by offering a more comprehensive explanation for the variations found in culinary behaviors.

To understand how these culinary adaptations developed in practice, it is necessary to situate West African foodways within the broader political and economic transformations brought about by British colonial rule in Sub-Saharan Africa. West Africa, which consists of countries like Nigeria, Ghana, Guinea, Cameroon, Senegal, and Sierra Leone, began to be colonized by Britain as early as 1807 with the establishment of settlements in Sierra Leone and continued until the 1960s.[3] British rule took the form of indirect rule, in which European influence was "brought to bear indirectly, though his chiefs."[4] In Northern Nigeria, the Native Authority consisted of two tiers of officials: the first was the British Administration, and the lower tier comprised the assigned Nigerian officeholders. While indirect implies little interference from the colonizing force, European influence acted as an invasive species on West African culture and dietary habits. As Europeans flooded the African continent seeking status and wealth, population growth contributed to a food crisis, leading to an increase in food imports and a decrease in local agricultural practices, especially in urban areas within Sub-Saharan Africa.[5] Population growth and economic imperialism were not the only sources of change in the West African diet.

Acculturation was additionally perpetuated through ideas of Western civilizing missions and the exaggerated belief in the malnutrition epidemic within West Africa. Described as "beastly" by ethnographer Mary Kingsley[6] and "nutritively poor and deficient in varying

[3] Harry Johnston, *A History of the Colonization of Africa by Alien Races*, (Cambridge University Press, 1899), 106.
[4] Andrew E. Barnes, *Making Headway: The Introduction of Western Civilization in Colonial Northern Nigeria*, (University of Rochester Press, 2009), 50-52.
[5] Arthur A. Hansen, and Della E. McMillan, *Food in Sub-Saharan Africa*. (L. Rienner), 156-166.
[6] Mary Henrietta Kingsley, *West African Studies*, (Cambridge University Press, 2010, First Published 1899), 42.

degrees"[7] in other literature, the European perception of West African food contained condescension and obvious elements of Eurocentrism. Belief in malnutrition in West African populations worked to justify this superiority, creating British initiatives to alter the food habits of colonized West Africans. Nutrition became a political tool, wielded by Eurocentrists and British politicians to reinsert colonial control and protect "the physical capital of the colonised."[8] Through publications like *Nutrition in the Colonial Empire*,[9] Britain framed malnutrition, not as a repercussion of colonialism, but as an inherent consequence of the West African diet, and in doing so, "devalued [indigenous knowledge] and replaced [it with] biomedical frameworks that exalted scientific understandings of illness."[10] From this period of "discovery of colonial malnutrition" in the 1930s, the "meatification" of West African food habits emerged, along with other European food customs.[11]

British colonial engagement with West African diets was shaped not only by concern for health, but by a broader ideological commitment to European nutritional science that positioned African foodways as inherently deficient. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, British medical officials increasingly emphasized protein intake, particularly through meat, dairy, and animal fats, as the cornerstone of bodily strength, productivity, and moral vitality.[12] This fixation reflected contemporary European nutritional theories that equated progress and civilization with animal protein consumption, a framework that was then projected onto colonial populations. As a result, West African diets, which relied heavily on starches,

---

[7] Oluwaṣeun Otọsedẹ Williams, "A 'Meat-Hungry' People: Nutrition Science and the Colonial Discovery of Animal-Protein Malnutrition in Nigeria," *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, (March 2025): 1–18.
[8] John Nott, "'No One May Starve in the British Empire': Kwashiorkor, Protein and the Politics of Nutrition between Britain and Africa." *Social History of Medicine* 34, no. 2, (2019): 559.
[9] "Nutrition in the Colonial Empire," *The British Medical Journal* 2, no. 4100, (1939): 294–96.
[10] Nott, "No One May Starve in the British Empire," 573.
[11] Williams, "A 'Meat-Hungry' People," 221.
[12] Williams, "A 'Meat-Hungry' People," 3–6.

legumes, palm oil, vegetables, and modest quantities of meat or fish, were interpreted through a lens of lack rather than adaptation.[13] Malnutrition discourse thus functioned less as an objective assessment of dietary health and more as a political tool that justified colonial intervention. British medical literature frequently framed malnutrition as an intrinsic flaw of African diets rather than as a consequence of colonial disruption, economic extraction, or ecological constraint.[14] By attributing illness and weakness to indigenous food habits, colonial administrators positioned themselves as necessary arbiters of dietary "improvement," reinforcing paternalistic governance under the guise of scientific authority. Nutrition became a mechanism of control, allowing colonial officials to intervene in agricultural production, domestic cooking practices, and infant feeding practices while deflecting responsibility for the food insecurity produced by colonial labor systems and market restructuring.

European misconceptions that West African foods were unhealthy and prone to causing disease—an assumption this paper disputes—led to substantial alterations in cookbooks and culinary literature during the peak of British colonization. During the last period of British colonization in Ghana in 1957, a journalist associated with the popular London *Once a Week* magazine characterized this West African country's typical meal as consisting of "oysters and sand-crabs done in palm oil, with balls of foofoo, a kind of hasty pudding made from boiled plantains … some young chickens … stuffed and done whole … [and] roasted kanku, done up in plantain leaves."[15] This depiction of a meal illustrates the West African region's reliance on plantains, palm oil, fried or smoked seafood, and kankua, a dish made from cornmeal. Yet, the meals articulated in *Practical West African Cookery*, published in 1910, post-colonization, stand

[13] Williams, "A 'Meat-Hungry' People," 8-10.
[14] Nott, "No One May Starve in the British Empire," 559-563.
[15] Samuel Lucas, ed, "In Fanti Land" *Once a Week*, (July 5, 1873): 224.

in stark contrast to the aforementioned meal, where, in an effort to "encourage the utilisation of rice, macaroni, eggs, and especially fresh vegetables," the listed dishes include foods generally avoided by West Africans for fear of disease or cultural objections. For lunch, the cookery suggests a meal comprised of "[m]acaroni and cheese. Stuffed tomatoes or eggplant. [And a] [p]aw paw tart," and, for dinner, "[t]omato soup, Poulet Menagére and French beans. Plums or figs with custard. [And] [c]heesy biscuits." If hosting an elevated event, the cookery recommends dishes like "[c]old duck or guinea fowl with salad" or [c]old pigeon pie or cold tongue with salad."[16] Each of these proposed dishes features foods that could not be observed in pre-colonial West African cookbooks. From cheese and cold meats to fresh vegetables and salads, each of these advised changes to the population's diets poses new risks of dysentery and food-borne illnesses. In this way, the colonial push for "improved" diets ironically endangered West African populations by encouraging foods more likely to cause the very infections Europeans attributed to indigenous cuisines and West Africans were consciously and unconsciously fighting against.

This research adopts an interdisciplinary methodology drawn from established approaches to food habit scholarship, particularly those outlined in *Food Habit Research: A Review of Approaches and Methods*,[17] including environmentalism, cultural ecology, regionalism, culture-history, and functionalism. While these frameworks collectively inform the analysis, this study primarily emphasizes an environmentalist approach by examining how ecological conditions and disease environments shaped dietary behavior, while blending elements of regionalism through its focused attention on West Africa under British colonial rule.

[16] G. Ruxton and S. Leith-Ross, *Practical West African Cookery*, (1910): 33-34.
[17] Louis E. Grivetti and Rose Marie Pangborn, Review of *Food Habit Research: A Review of Approaches and Methods*. *Journal of Nutrition Education* 5, no. 3 (July 1973): 1.

Rather than treating food habits as static cultural expressions, this methodology situates culinary practices within specific epidemiological and environmental constraints, allowing dietary choices, preparation techniques, and taboos to be analyzed as adaptive responses to persistent gastrointestinal risk. At the same time, this paper acknowledges several important limitations. The analysis is not intended to represent all of West Africa, a region encompassing immense cultural, ecological, and linguistic diversity that cannot be comprehensively addressed within a single study. Instead, the focus remains on territories colonized by Britain between 1850 and 1960, which necessarily excludes regions such as Ethiopia and Liberia that experienced different colonial trajectories or none at all. Additionally, the primary sources utilized, including colonial health reports produced by British administrators and ethnographic or missionary accounts authored by European observers, were often generated for purposes of surveillance, governance, or conversion and frequently employ language that casts African communities in negative or stigmatizing terms. One such source is the work of Mary Henrietta Kingsley, a British traveler and writer whose late-nineteenth-century expeditions in West and Central Africa produced detailed descriptions of local foodways, religious practices, and daily life.[18] While Kingsley's *West African Studies* offers valuable observational insight into indigenous culinary practices, her interpretations are shaped by Eurocentric assumptions about sanitation, health, and cultural hierarchy that reflect the intellectual climate of British imperialism. These sources are therefore read critically, not as neutral descriptions of African foodways, but as texts shaped by colonial power dynamics, emphasizing indigenous knowledge systems while critically examining the colonial contexts in which much of the historical evidence was recorded and preserved.

[18] "Mary Henrietta Kingsley: Biography & Facts," *Encyclopædia Britannica* (2019).

To further clarify the framework of this study, several key terms require definition. The concept of "food habit" refers to the patterned ways in which societies select, prepare, serve, and consume the foods available to them, encompassing practices that directly affect nutrition and food security.[19] In this paper, food habits are treated not as fixed cultural expressions but as adaptive systems shaped by historical experience, environmental constraints, and health risk. This framing is especially relevant to West Africa, where constant exposure to gastrointestinal disease required sustained attention to what foods were eaten and how they were prepared. Central to this analysis is the classification of humans as omnivores. Whereas a specialized eater, like the koala, extracts all of the necessary nutrients to support itself through a singular source, the eucalyptus tree, the omnivore must consume a variety of foods to gain all of the nutrients required for its existence. This dietary openness creates an inherent vulnerability and emphasizes the need to balance "neophilia," the impulse to seek new foods, against "neophobia," the instinct to avoid potentially harmful ones. As Michael Pollan argues in *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, taste, tradition, and learned caution function as safeguards that help omnivores navigate this risk.[20] Within West African contexts, this tension helps explain the persistence of extensive cooking practices, food taboos, and sensory evaluation as mechanisms for minimizing exposure to spoiled or contaminated foods. Finally, "culture" is defined as an "integrated system of learned behaviour patterns which are characteristic of the members of a society, and which are not a result of biological inheritance."[21] While culture remains essential to understanding food practices, this study treats it as the medium through which historically effective responses to disease and ecological constraint were preserved, rather than as the sole origin of dietary

[19] P. Richards, *Eating Culture*, (University of Mexico Press, 2007).
[20] Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*, (Penguin Books, 2006).
[21] Lyana and Nlooto, Review of *Culture and Food Habits,* 9–21.

behavior. Together, these terms provide a conceptual foundation for interpreting West African foodways as adaptive strategies shaped by the interaction of biology, environment, and historical experience.

To better understand how West African diets developed as a method of protection against disease, it is essential to grasp the concept and prevalence of gastrointestinal diseases in West Africa. European concerns about disease in West Africa were grounded in material realities shaped by environmental conditions, patterns of settlement, and colonial infrastructure. Gastrointestinal illness was particularly widespread due to the interaction of contaminated water sources, seasonal rainfall, and increasing urban density. Pathogens such as *E. coli*, cholera, and intestinal parasites thrived in environments where access to clean water was limited and sanitation infrastructure was uneven or nonexistent.[22] Seasonal rains further intensified these risks by flooding latrines, washing waste into rivers and wells, and accelerating food spoilage, particularly during periods of heat and humidity. Colonial reports linked spikes in gastrointestinal illness to rainy seasons, underscoring how environmental rhythms shaped disease exposure on a predictable annual cycle.[23]

Urbanization under British colonial rule magnified these dangers. As colonial administrations expanded ports, railways, and administrative centers, populations became increasingly concentrated in towns and cities that lacked adequate sanitation systems. Colonial health reports consistently described urban centers as sites of extreme contamination, attributing high mortality rates to overcrowding and unsanitary living conditions.[24] While these accounts

---

[22] Ramnik J. Xavier and Harry J Thomas, "Gastrointestinal Diseases," *Hunter's Tropical Medicine and Emerging Infectious Disease*, (2013): 18-27.
[23] Great Britain, Colonial Office, *Annual Reports On the Colonies, Nigeria, [1897-98-1938],* (Library of Congress Photoduplication Service for Andronicus Pub. Co., 1971), 78-82.
[24] Great Britain, Colonial Office, *Annual Reports On the Colonies, Nigeria,* 80.

often framed African urban environments as inherently unhygienic, they still reveal how colonial economic restructuring intensified disease exposure by concentrating people, waste, and food markets in close proximity. Rural populations, by contrast, experienced different patterns of exposure. While they were not immune to gastrointestinal disease, lower population density, greater reliance on local water sources, and reduced dependence on centralized markets altered both the frequency and pathways of infection.[25] These differences between the rural and urban areas help explain regional variation in food practices, preservation techniques, and reliance on market foods versus home-prepared meals.

Children were disproportionately affected by gastrointestinal disease, a pattern that shaped dietary behavior at the household level. Colonial medical records repeatedly identified digestive illness as a leading cause of infant and child mortality, with some reports estimating mortality rates of up to fifty percent among children in certain regions.[26] Young children were especially vulnerable due to underdeveloped immune systems, exposure through weaning foods, and frequent contact with contaminated water. Modern epidemiological research confirms the persistence of this pattern, noting that, as of 2011, 1.87 million African children died from gastrointestinal disease by age five, with cholera listed as an ongoing public health emergency by the World Health Organization as of 2025.[27] This historical continuity suggests that caregivers were acutely aware, through experience rather than formal medical knowledge, of the dangers posed by certain foods, preparation methods, and feeding practices. Such awareness likely informed cautious approaches to weaning, prolonged reliance on cooked or mashed foods, and the avoidance of items perceived as difficult to digest or prone to spoilage. Importantly, West

[25] Maryinez Lyons, *Diseases of Sub-Saharan Africa since 1860*, (Cambridge University Press, 1993): 298–305.
[26] Great Britain, Colonial Office, *Annual Reports On the Colonies, Nigeria,* 80.
[27] Stephanie M. Fletcher, Damien Stark, and John Ellis, “Prevalence of Gastrointestinal Pathogens in Sub-Saharan Africa: Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis,” *Journal of Public Health in Africa* 2, no. 2 (2011): 30.

African communities did not require biomedical frameworks to recognize these dangers. Knowledge about gastrointestinal illness was accumulated through pattern recognition, oral transmission, and embodied experience. Repeated associations between particular foods, preparation methods, or environmental conditions and subsequent illness allowed individuals and communities to identify risk over time. If the consumption of certain raw foods, unboiled water, or prematurely harvested crops consistently resulted in sickness, those items became associated with danger and were gradually avoided.

In light of the severe gastrointestinal risks West Africans faced, dietary patterns developed not merely from cultural preference but from a conscious and subconscious effort to navigate the dangers inherent in an omnivorous diet. As was mentioned earlier within this paper, a species classification as a specialized eater or an omnivore significantly influences that species' likelihood of contracting gastrointestinal diseases or being poisoned; thus, humans and other omnivores are constantly vacillating between neophobia and neophilia.[28] Taste functions as the safeguard between these impulses, protecting the omnivore from harm, signaling when a food is nutrient-rich, and supporting metabolic processes. In many ways, taste operates unconsciously, helping the omnivore determine what is "acceptable" and "unacceptable." As an NIH publication on human taste explains, "flavors associated with calories and nutrients … can become more pleasurable, whereas poisoning … will cause flavors to be aversive."[29] If taste is an unconscious evolutionary adaptation for safer ingestion, then culture can be understood as the conscious decision to consume particular foods. In this way, the choices societies make about what to eat—

[28] Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, 288-291.
[29] Paul A.S. Breslin, "An Evolutionary Perspective on Food and Human Taste," *Current Biology* 23, no. 9 (May 2013): 4-6.

and what to avoid—are shaped not only by biology but also by historical experiences and collective responses to disease.

In addition to these reactions to disease, religious beliefs and spiritual frameworks in Sub-Saharan Africa played a significant role in shaping dietary practices, frequently reinforcing adaptations developed in response to persistent gastrointestinal disease. Rather than functioning solely as systems of belief, religious norms structured everyday decisions about what foods could be consumed, when they could be eaten, and how they should be prepared, embedding concerns about bodily purity, contamination, and health within spiritual life. In Northern Nigeria, where Islam was widely practiced, dietary regulations emphasized cleanliness and careful preparation, principles that closely aligned with minimizing exposure to spoiled or contaminated foods in tropical environments. Among the Yoruba, where the majority of the population identified as either Christian or Muslim while continuing to engage with traditional religious practices, food occupied a central place in spiritual and communal life. The belief that deities were sustained through human attention manifested in ritual food offerings, and the sharing of food with divinities functioned as both a religious obligation and a marker of social belonging.[30] These practices did not operate in opposition to health concerns; instead, they preserved and normalized food habits that reduced digestive risk while reinforcing spiritual and social order.

Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger* provides a critical framework for understanding how religious food rules functioned simultaneously as symbolic systems and practical responses to bodily vulnerability. Douglas argues that "dirt is essentially disorder," emphasizing that what societies label as unclean is not objectively filthy but operates as a disruption to an established system. In this sense, practices of purification are not merely defensive reactions to disease but

[30] Allen, "Food and Culture: Continuity and Change" 3-6.

"a positive effort to organise the environment," imposing order on what would otherwise be perceived as threatening ambiguity.[31] Applied to West African dietary practices, religious food taboos can be understood as tools that marked certain foods as dangerous not simply because they caused illness, but because they violated culturally meaningful boundaries between purity and pollution, safety and risk. In parts of Cameroon, for example, religious prohibitions framed certain foods, particularly pork, as threats to fertility and innocence, with impurity understood as something transferable from animal to consumer.[32] Douglas's observation that pollution beliefs assign danger to substances that violate established boundaries helps explain why certain animals were viewed as both physically and spiritually dangerous, a logic that closely parallels modern understandings of zoonotic disease and foodborne contamination.

Crucially, Douglas cautions against reducing religious taboos to crude hygiene alone. While she acknowledges that ritual avoidance often coincides with practical health benefits, she warns that treating these practices as mere primitive hygiene strips them of their social and symbolic meaning. Instead, pollution rules operate at multiple levels, simultaneously expressing moral order, social hierarchy, and bodily protection.[33] These functions are evident in West African food systems, where religiously grounded taboos incorporated practical knowledge about digestion, spoilage, and contamination within moral frameworks that ensured their communication across generations. At the same time, Douglas's theory allows space for variation and contradiction. In the Karamoja sub-region, the ritual consumption of animal blood and raw milk, foods that pose clear gastrointestinal risks, was associated with vitality, strength, and religious meaning, demonstrating that purity systems do not universally prioritize biological

---

[31] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, (Routledge, 1966): 35-36.
[32] Forka Eypey Mathew Fomine, "Food Taboos in Precolonial and Contemporary Cameroon: A Historical Perspective," *Gastronomica* 9, no. 4, (2009): 44-49.
[33] Douglas, *Purity and Danger,* 30-31.

safety.[34] As Douglas notes, rules of purity are context-dependent and relational, meaning, what is dangerous in one system may be sacred in another.[35] Taken together, these examples support the idea that religious food rules are not arbitrary superstition but culturally embedded systems for managing disorder, risk, and bodily vulnerability. In West Africa, religion functioned as a powerful mechanism through which health-driven dietary adaptations were moralized, stabilized, and integrated into everyday life.

The selection of foods in West Africa reflects a complex relationship between cultural preference and practical responses to digestive health concerns, with choices often favoring ingredients and preparation methods that minimize the risk of gastrointestinal illness. As Breslin argues in the previously mentioned "An Evolutionary Perspective on Food and Human Taste*,"* humans have developed a preference for glutamate, ribonucleotides, and umami flavors, an evolutionary adaptation that likely served as a marker for easily digested protein, particularly in cooked or slightly aged meat.[36] The emphasis on "developed" highlights the unconscious adaptations that guided early humans toward safer, more digestible foods, a logic echoed in many West African culinary traditions. Within her study of Yoruba cuisine, Ann Allen conveys that the staple dishes, such as fufu (also spelled foofoo)—made from cassava, maize, yams, or plantains—are prepared through boiling, steaming, baking, or frying, methods well-suited to neutralizing pathogens and aiding digestion. Breakfasts of mangoes, stewed soybeans, or dodo (fried plantains) similarly reflect a reliance on foods that were both familiar and physiologically safe.[37] In Tanzania, a Sub-Saharan country with similar dietary customs to West Africa, meals

---

[34] Solomon Olum et al, "The Relationship between Cultural Norms and Food Security in the Karamoja Sub-Region of Uganda," *Journal of Food and Nutrition Research* 5, no. 6 (August 2017): 433.
[35] Douglas, *Purity and Danger,* 14-15.
[36] Breslin, "An Evolutionary Perspective on Food and Human Taste," 8.
[37] Allen, "Food and Culture: Continuity and Change" 3.

such as uji porridge in the morning and ugali served with meat stews or cooked vegetables for lunch or dinner likewise prioritize cooked, starch-based staples that provide caloric stability while reducing the risk of contamination.[38] Historical accounts make clear that these choices were not only cultural but also rooted in health knowledge. In *West African Studies*, Mary Kingsley observes that certain "pagan customs are of a sanitary character," particularly the yam customs practiced in several West African communities. The annual Yam Festival, which prohibited the consumption of new yams until ceremonial offerings were completed, functioned as both a spiritual ritual and a health safeguard. As Kingsley noted, unripe yams were considered "unwholesome," and Europeans who ignored these conventions often suffered severe dysentery and fever from consuming yams dug up prematurely.[39] Local communities, by contrast, avoided new yams until they were seasonally safe, demonstrating an embodied understanding of toxicity and digestion woven into ritual practice.

Regional dietary staples further illustrate how food choices are aligned with digestive safety. As Oluwaseun Williams documents, southern Nigerian diets centered on yams, cassava, maize, palm oil, greens, pepper, dried fish, and modest amounts of meat, while northern diets relied on millets, guinea-corn, cassava, beans, and groundnut oil—foods that were storable, resilient against spoilage, and digestively reliable.[40] Conversely, foods considered dangerous were consciously rejected. *Nutrition in the Colonial Empire* notes an aversion to milk among many Sub-Saharan populations, not as a matter of taste but out of recognition that, under tropical conditions, fresh whole milk was "one of the most dangerous" items to consume due to

---

[38] Lyana and Manimbulu, *Culture and Food Habits in Tanzania and Democratic Republic of Congo*, 12.
[39] Kingsley, *West African Studie,* 175-182, 450.
[40] Williams, "A 'Meat-Hungry' People: Nutrition Science and the Colonial Discovery of Animal-Protein Malnutrition in Nigeria," 213.

contamination and rapid spoilage.[41] These examples reveal that West African food habits cannot be understood solely through cultural symbolism or colonial descriptions of preference. They were shaped, often quite precisely, by an inherited awareness of digestive vulnerability, disease, and the necessity of choosing foods and preparation methods that preserved health in environments where gastrointestinal illness posed a consistent threat.

Food preparation practices in West Africa, particularly during colonial rule, reveal how culinary techniques, gendered responsibilities, and the use of antimicrobial ingredients evolved not only from cultural traditions but also as strategic responses to the persistent threat of foodborne illness. Adhering to a global trend of gendered responsibilities, food preparation in West Africa was predominantly managed by women. A woman's role in the kitchen was deeply intertwined with fertility, nourishment, and community well-being.[42] An article discussing the gendering of cuisine in Africa similarly argues that "food … is a feminine function par excellence, tightly linked with fertility, as it is another way of giving life," underscoring how women's culinary labor carried both symbolic and sanitary significance.[43] Because women oversaw the sourcing, preservation, and cooking of meals, they played a central role in preventing gastrointestinal disease in environments where spoilage and contamination were constant dangers.

Cooking itself served as the most important safeguard against disease. As John Smith observed in his travels in the Guinea region, "boiling is the culinary process usually adopted in cooking everything," a technique that reliably eliminates pathogens in both water and food.[44]

---

[41] "Nutrition in the Colonial Empire," 294.
[42] Allen, "Food and Culture: Continuity and Change in the Yoruba of West Africa and Their Diasporas," 4.
[43] Igor Cusack, "Pots, Pens and 'Eating out the Body': Cuisine and the Gendering of African Nations," *Nations and Nationalism* 9, no. 2, (2003): 277–96.
[44] J.M.A. Smith, *Trade and Travels in the Gulph of Guinea, Western Africa*, (1851): 135-136.

Other texts reinforce the centrality of heat-based preparation. An anthropologist's study of Yoruba cooking outlines five principal techniques: boiling or steaming, frying in deep oil, toasting near the fire, roasting in the fire, and baking in hot ashes, each of which relies on high temperatures to render food both palatable and safe. Across the region, staple foods such as flours, starches, porridges, vegetables, fritters, and stews were consistently boiled, mashed, steamed, toasted, fried, or roasted, indicating a broad culinary pattern oriented toward minimizing the risk of infection.[45]

The strategic use of spices further illustrates how food preparation served as disease prevention. Research on the antimicrobial functions of spices shows that in several African countries, including Nigeria and Ethiopia, every meat-based recipe studied contained at least one spice with antibacterial properties. Commonly used ingredients such as basil, garlic, nutmeg, sage, and sesame not only enhanced flavor but also inhibited bacterial growth, especially in hot climates lacking reliable refrigeration (as can be observed in the chart below).[46]

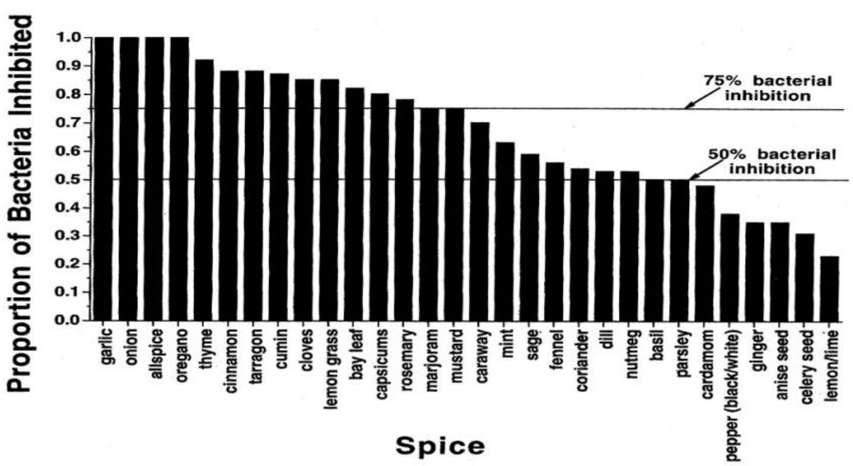


FIGURE 6. ANTIMICROBIAL PROPERTIES (INHIBITION OF GROWTH OR KILLING) OF 30 SPICES FOR WHICH APPROPRIATE DATA WERE AVAILABLE (SEE APPENDIX A), ARRAYED FROM GREATEST TO LEAST INHIBITION.

All spices inhibit some species of food-spoilage bacteria they have been tested on, and about half inhibit ≥75% of bacteria.

---

[45] William Bascom, "Yoruba Cooking." *Africa* 21, no. 2 (1951): 129-134.

[46] Jennifer Billing, and Paul W Sherman, "Antimicrobial Functions of Spices: Why Some Like It Hot." *The Quarterly Review of Biology* 73, no. 1: 3–49, (1998): 7-20.

Nigerian cookbooks emphasize similar patterns as Nigerian foods are often characterized by their "oiliness and hotness," with red pepper incorporated into stews in ways that retain its nutrients while contributing to microbial safety.[47] Even ceremonial uses of spices and seasonings reflected a recognition of their preservative qualities. Among the Yoruba, ginger appears in rituals promoting good health, while salt plays a central role in naming ceremonies, where elders declare, "[t]his is salt. It preserves and sweetens. May you be preserved in your lives so that you live long and see your children's children."[48] Such practices reveal how seasoning was understood simultaneously as a cultural symbol and a material agent of preservation. These methods of preparation, from gendered food labor to boiling, preserving, and seasoning food, demonstrate that West African cuisine developed through an intimate understanding of how to protect the body from disease. Food was not simply cooked to taste good or to uphold cultural traditions; it was cooked to ensure survival.

As the final component of this analysis, practices surrounding the consumption of food in West Africa, such as handwashing rituals, the use of specific hands for eating, and the sensory evaluation of meals, further illustrate how everyday dining behaviors were shaped not only by cultural etiquette but also by long-standing efforts to reduce exposure to foodborne illness. In many West African societies, eating practices were governed by clearly defined rules distinguishing cleanliness from contamination. The use of the right hand for greeting and eating, contrasted with the left hand's association with ablution and waste, established a bodily hierarchy that limited the transfer of pathogens during meals. This distinction was reinforced through ritual handwashing before eating, a practice that functioned as both a social norm and a practical

---

[47] H. O. Anthonio and M. Isoun, *Nigerian Cookbook*, (London, Macmillan, 1982).
[48] Allen, "Food and Culture: Continuity and Change," 3.

sanitary measure. Among the Yoruba, the presence of a water bowl at the table for washing hands before and after meals further institutionalized hygiene within everyday consumption, transforming disease prevention into an expected component of communal dining rather than an explicit medical intervention.[49]

Sensory evaluation of food similarly reflects an embodied awareness of gastrointestinal risk. In several Sub-Saharan communities, smelling food before eating functioned as a precautionary practice, allowing diners to assess spoilage or contamination through olfactory cues. While accounts from Tanzania, a country in Sub-Saharan Africa, suggest that overtly smelling food at the table could be interpreted as an insult, implying distrust of the host, this reaction itself indicates that sensory evaluation was common enough elsewhere to require social regulation.[50] The physiological basis for this practice is well documented: appetizing smells stimulate saliva production and digestion, while foul or unfamiliar odors trigger nausea and aversion, serving as protective mechanisms against ingestion of harmful substances.[51] In environments where refrigeration was unavailable and foodborne illnesses were common, reliance on smell provided an additional safeguard, enabling individuals to make rapid judgments about food safety even after preparation was complete. When taken with the consideration of humans' omnivorous practices, these consumption practices take on added significance. As omnivores, humans must consume a wide range of foods to meet nutritional needs, a dietary flexibility that simultaneously increases vulnerability to poisoning and infection. Selection and preparation reduce some of this risk, but consumption represents the final checkpoint before

---

[49] Allen, "Food and Culture: Continuity and Change," 5.
[50] Vinola Vincent Munyon, "Customs & Cuisine of Tanzania" *Together Women Rise*, n.d. https://togetherwomenrise.org/customsandcuisine/customs-cuisine-of-tanzania-maji-safi-group/.
[51] Thomas Brandt and Doreen Huppert, "The Mysterious Sense of Smell: Evolution, Historical Perspectives, and Neurological Disorders," *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 19, (June 2025): 8.

potentially dangerous substances enter the body. Hand-use rules, handwashing, and sensory evaluation thus functioned as the last line of defense against contamination, reinforcing the broader adaptive system that structured West African foodways. These practices demonstrate that disease avoidance did not end once food was cooked; it extended into the embodied act of eating itself. By situating consumption within this continuum—from ingredient choice to preparation to ingestion—West African culinary systems emerge as cohesive strategies designed to manage omnivorous risk and protect health in disease-prone environments.

This research has argued that the culinary practices of West Africa between 1850 and 1960 cannot be fully understood through a cultural frame alone. Instead, they must be situated within the historical, environmental, and epidemiological conditions that shaped daily survival. By establishing the pervasive threat of gastrointestinal disease, and the disruptions introduced by British colonial rule, this study reframes West African food traditions as adaptive systems, crafted through centuries of intuitive knowledge about illness, contamination, and the limits of the tropical environment. Cooking techniques, ingredient choices, taboos, and even ritual practices emerge not as arbitrary cultural preferences but as strategies honed to protect communities from the harmful pathogens that defined everyday life. When examined alongside colonial health reports, missionary accounts, anthropological studies, and cookbooks from both African and European sources, these patterns reveal a profound gap between indigenous dietary logics and colonial interpretations of them. British authorities frequently viewed West African foodways as nutritionally inadequate or unsanitary, drawing on Eurocentric assumptions rather than the realities of tropical disease ecology. In doing so, colonial administrations not only misunderstood the protective logic embedded in West African cuisines but also imposed new dietary expectations, such as increased consumption of dairy, raw vegetables, and cold meats, that heightened rather than reduced the risks of dysentery and bacterial infection. The resulting transformation of local diets, paired with colonial economic reshaping of agriculture and food imports, helped produce the very malnutrition crisis Europeans believed they were diagnosing. Recognizing West African culinary practices as historically informed responses to gastrointestinal disease helps challenge simplistic cultural explanations and repositions food traditions as dynamic, evidence-based adaptations.

Several avenues for further research remain essential to deepening and refining the arguments presented in this study. One particularly important direction involves a more focused examination of how these culinary adaptations shaped the diets of infants and young children, who have historically been the population most vulnerable to gastrointestinal illness. Closer attention to weaning foods, breastfeeding practices, maternal food taboos, and early childhood feeding rituals could reveal how knowledge about disease risk was communicated and embedded in caregiving practices. Because infant mortality rates were closely tied to digestive illness in both precolonial and colonial West Africa, studying how caregivers adapted diets for young children would provide critical insight into how culinary systems functioned as protective mechanisms at the most vulnerable stages of life.

Comparative research across regions with markedly different pathogen environments also offers significant potential for expanding this framework. Examining societies that developed culinary traditions under relatively low gastrointestinal disease pressure, such as Japan or Norway, could help isolate the role of environmental exposure from that of cultural identity in shaping food habits. Such cross-regional comparisons may clarify whether practices like the consumption of raw foods, the centrality of fermentation, or the avoidance of fresh dairy products emerge primarily from cultural preference or from ecological necessity. By situating

West African foodways alongside global cases with differing disease ecologies, future scholarship could better assess the extent to which dietary norms are adaptive responses to pathogen risk rather than expressions of symbolic tradition alone.

Finally, this research could be broadened by examining how other diseases with different modes of transmission influenced dietary behavior. While this paper focuses primarily on gastrointestinal illness due to its direct relationship with food and water, diseases such as malaria, which are vector-borne (mosquitoes) rather than foodborne, may have shaped diet indirectly through their effects on labor capacity, nutritional needs, and seasonal food availability. Exploring how communities adjusted their diets during periods of high disease burden could further illuminate the complex interplay between illness, environment, and food systems. Together, these avenues of inquiry suggest that understanding food traditions through the lens of disease history remains a fertile area for interdisciplinary research, one that has the potential to reshape how culinary practices are interpreted across historical and cultural contexts.

Ultimately, reframing West African foodways through the lens of disease history deepens our understanding of how culinary systems develop over time. Food traditions emerge not only from symbolic meaning or aesthetic taste, but from sustained efforts to survive, adapt, and maintain health within specific ecological and epidemiological conditions. In West Africa, where exposure to gastrointestinal disease was a persistent feature of daily life, choices about ingredients, preparation, religious regulation, and consumption reflected practical knowledge about contamination, digestion, and bodily vulnerability. When viewed in this context, West African cuisine represents more than cultural expression. It functions as an archive of historical experience, preserving generations of accumulated responses to illness and environmental risk. Taste, ritual, and technique intersected with biological necessity, producing food systems that balanced nourishment with protection. Recognizing these adaptive foundations challenges colonial interpretations that framed African diets as deficient or unsanitary and instead highlights the resilience, ingenuity, and evidence-based logic embedded within West African culinary traditions. By situating food practices within their historical disease environment, this study offers a more careful and informed perspective on the region's culinary heritage and the conditions that shaped it.

Bibliography

Primary Bibliography

Bascom, William. "Yoruba Cooking." *Africa* 21, no. 2 (1951): 125–37. https://doi.org/10.2307/1156465.

Crowther, Samuel Ajayi, and Macgregor Laird. *Journal of an Expedition up the Niger and Tshadda Rivers, Undertaken by Macgregor Laird, in Connection with the British Government, in 1854 by Samuel Crowther. With Map and App*. London: Church Missionary House, 1855.

Great Britain. Colonial Office. *Annual Reports On the Colonies, Nigeria, [1897-98-1938].* [Washington: Library of Congress Photoduplication Service for] Andronicus Pub. Co., 1971.

Great Britain. Foreign and Commonwealth Office, issuing body. *Nigeria and Cameroon under Colonial Rule, in Government Reports, 1887-1962.* East Ardsley, Wakefield, West Yorkshire, United Kingdom: Microform Academic Publishers, 2016.

Higham, M. *Household Cookery for South Africa*. Cape Town (South Africa): Central News Agency. 1950.

Kingsley, Mary Henrietta, *West African Studies*, Cambridge University Press, 2010. https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511701375.

Kingsley, Mary, *Travels in West Africa, Congo Français, Corisco and Cameroons*. MacMillan & Co., 1897.

Lucas, Samuel, ed. "In Fanti Land." *Once a Week*, Swarting & Co. Printers, July 5, 1873.

Mars, J A, and E M Tooleyo, *The Kudeti Book of Yoruba Cookery*. CSS Limited. 1961.

"Nutrition in the Colonial Empire." 1939. *The British Medical Journal* 2, no. 4100: 294–96. https://doi.org/10.2307/20304393.

Ruxton, G, and S. Leith-Ross, *Practical West African Cookery*. J.W. Moore, 1915.

Smith, J., Simpkin, Marshall & Co., 1851. *Trade and Travels in the Gulph of Guinea, Western Africa*.

Secondary Bibliography

Abdallah, Muhammad Salihu, Muskhazli Mustafa, Meenakshii A/P Nallappan, Rusea Go, and Rusea Go. " NIGERIA". *African Journal of Traditional, Complementary and Alternative Medicines* 17, no. 1 (2020): 21–32. https://journals.athmsi.org/index.php/ajtcam/article/view/5659.

Allen, Ann.. "Food and Culture: Continuity and Change in the Yoruba of West Africa and Their Diasporas." In *Odysseys of Plates and Palates: Food, Society and Sociality*, ed. Simeon S. Magliveras; vol. ed. Catherine Gallin, 75–89. Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2014.

Anthonio, H. O, and Isoun, M. *Nigerian Cookbook*, Macmillan. 1982.

Barnes, Andrew E. *Making Headway: The Introduction of Western Civilization in Colonial Northern Nigeria*, University of Rochester Press, 2009.

Billing, Jennifer, and Paul W Sherman, "Antimicrobial Functions of Spices: Why Some Like It

Hot." *The Quarterly Review of Biology* 73, no. 1 (1998): 3–49. https://doi.org/10.2307/3036683.

Brandt, Thomas, and Doreen Huppert, "The Mysterious Sense of Smell: Evolution, Historical Perspectives, and Neurological Disorders." *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 19, (2025)). https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2025.1588935.

Breslin, Paul A.S. "An Evolutionary Perspective on Food and Human Taste." *Current Biology* 23, no. 9 (2013): R409–18. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2013.04.010.

Cordova, Jessica, Review of *Mortality and Meals: The Black Death's Impact on Diet in England*. (Undergraduate Thesis, University of Washington Tacoma, 2019). https://digitalcommons.tacoma.uw.edu/history_theses/36.

Curtin, Philip D. *Disease and Empire: The Health of European Troops in the Conquest of Africa*. Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Cusack, Igor. "Pots, Pens and 'Eating out the Body': Cuisine and the Gendering of African Nations*." *Nations and Nationalism* 9, no. 2 (2003): 277–96. https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-8219.t01-1-00086.

Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. Routledge, 1966.

Echenberg, Myron. *Africa in the Time of Cholera : A History of Pandemics from 1817 to the Present*. Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Ehlert, Judith, and Nora Katharina Faltmann, eds. *Food Anxiety in Globalising Vietnam*. 1st ed. Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

Fletcher, Stephanie M., Damien Stark, and John Ellis. "Prevalence of Gastrointestinal Pathogens in Sub-Saharan Africa: Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis." *Journal of Public Health in Africa* 2, no. 2 (2011): 30. https://doi.org/10.4081/jphia.2011.e30.

Fomine, Forka Eypey Mathew. "Food Taboos in Precolonial and Contemporary Cameroon: A Historical Perspective." *Gastronomica* 9, no. 4 (2009): 43–52. https://doi.org/10.1525/gfc.2009.9.4.43.

Giles-Vernick, Tamara, and James L. A. Webb, eds. *Global Health in Africa : Historical Perspectives on Disease Control*. Ohio University Press, 2013.

Goody, Jack. *Food Consumption in Global Perspective : Essays in the Anthropology of Food in Honour of Jack Goody*. Edited by Jakob Klein and Anne Murcott. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

Grivetti, Louis E. , and Rose Marie Pangborn. Review of *Food Habit Research: A Review of Approaches and Methods*. *Journal of Nutrition Education* 5, no. 3 (1973): 1. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0022-3182(73)80088-3.

Hansen, Arthur A., and Della E. McMillan. *Food in Sub-Saharan Africa*. L. Rienner, 1986.

Johnston, Harry. *A History of the Colonization of Africa by Alien Races*, Cambridge University Press, 1899.

Katz, Solomon H., and William Woys Weaver. *Encyclopedia of Food and Culture*. Scribner, 2003.

Kiple, Kenneth F., and Kriemhild Coneè. Ornelas, eds. *The Cambridge World History of Food*. Cambridge University Press, 2000.

K.K, Khamarunnisa. "Acculturation Through Colonialism: Exchange of Food Habits in Malabar." *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 77 (2016): 727–34. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26552702.

Koo, Linda C, "The Use of Food to Treat and Prevent Disease in Chinese Culture." *Social Science & Medicine* 18, no. 9 (1984): 757–66. https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-9536(84)90102-3.

Lyana, Ally Z., and Nlooto Manimbulu, Review of *Culture and Food Habits in Tanzania and Democratic Republic of Congo*. *Journal of Human Ecology* 48, no. 1 (2014): 9–21.

Lyons, Maryinez, "Diseases of Sub-Saharan Africa since 1860." *Cambridge University Press EBooks*, (1993), 298–305. https://doi.org/10.1017/chol9780521332866.035.

Macbeth, Helen, and Jeremy MacClancy, eds. *Researching Food Habits: Methods and Problems*. 1st ed. Berghahn Books, 2004.

"Mary Henrietta Kingsley | Biography & Facts." 2019. In *Encyclopædia Britannica*. https://www.britannica.com/biography/Mary-Henrietta-Kingsley.

Meyer-Rochow, Victor Benno, "Food Taboos: Their Origins and Purposes." *Journal of Ethnobiology and Ethnomedicine* 5, no. 1 (2009). https://doi.org/10.1186/1746-4269-5-18.

Nott, John. "'No One May Starve in the British Empire': Kwashiorkor, Protein and the Politics of Nutrition between Britain and Africa." *Social History of Medicine* 34, no. 2 (2019). https://doi.org/10.1093/shm/hkz107.

Olum, Solomon, Ipolto Okello-Uma, Gaston A. Tumuhimbise, David Taylor, and Duncan Ongeng. "The Relationship between Cultural Norms and Food Security in the Karamoja Sub-Region of Uganda." *Journal of Food and Nutrition Research* 5, no. 6 (2017): 427–35. https://doi.org/10.12691/jfnr-5-6-10.

Pollan, Michael. *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*. Penguin Books, 2006.

Richards, P. *Eating Culture*. University of Mexico Press, 2007.

Sokoh, Ozoz, and James Ransom. *Chop Chop : Cooking the Food of Nigeria*. Artisan, an imprint of Workman Publishing Co., Inc., 2025.

Ventura, Marne. *Foods from Nigeria*, The Child's World, 2024.

Vincent Munyon, Vinola, "Customs & Cuisine of Tanzania" *Together Women Rise*, n.d. https://togetherwomenrise.org/customsandcuisine/customs-cuisine-of-tanzania-maji-safigroup/.

Webb, Lois Sinaiko, Lindsay Grace Roten, and Carole Lisa Albyn. *The Multicultural Cookbook for Students*. Updated and rev, Greenwood Press, 2009.

Williams, Oluwaṣeun Otọsed, "A 'Meat-Hungry' People: Nutrition Science and the Colonial Discovery of Animal-Protein Malnutrition in Nigeria." *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, March (2025), 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/13696815.2025.2474925.

Xavier, Ramnik J, and Harry J Thomas. "Gastrointestinal Diseases." *Hunter's Tropical Medicine and Emerging Infectious Disease*, W. B. Saunders, 2013.

Building the U.S.

Infrastructure and Urban Planning

Bonding, Spending, and Collapsing: American Railroading in the Early 20th Century

By: Liam Wilson

By the turn of the 20th century, the American railroad industry had created the largest network of rails on Earth. Titans of the sector - "Class I" railroads - were numerous, rich, and expanding ever further their web of lines in tight boom cycles of construction. Yet, by the middle of the 1920s, many of these same railroads were in such dire financial straits that only billions of dollars of capital bailout could have kept the industry steadily afloat. By the 1960s and 70s, the degradation of the rail network reached its peak, with companies across the board declaring bankruptcy, lines across the continent going defunct, and vital services being permanently shuttered. Common perception of this collapse ranges from blaming the role of government overregulation in choking railroads[1] to blaming the industry itself for failing to maintain steady finances and adapt to changing times.[2] This paper argues the financial practices of these railroads in the 1910s and 1920s was responsible for making the period one of the turning points in American railroading history, and that the period marked the beginning of the slow decline into

[1] Most notably, this is the stance of Albro Martin, but this also includes authors such as Edward Altman and Stanley Berge; Albro Martin, *Enterprise Denied: Origins of the Decline of American Railroads, 1897–1917* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971); Edward I. Altman, "Railroad Bankruptcy Propensity," *The Journal of Finance* 26, no. 2 (1971), https://doi.org/10.2307/2326049; Edward I. Altman, "Predicting Railroad Bankruptcies in America," *The Bell Journal of Economics and Management Science* 4, no. 1 (1973), https://doi.org/10.2307/3003144; Stanley Berge, "Why Kill the Passenger Train?" *Journal of Marketing* 28, no. 1 (1964), https://doi.org/10.2307/1249218.

[2] Proponents of this line of thinking include Gregory Thompson, who attacked the railroads from an angle of poor accounting; J.C.D. Roberts, who performed a social analysis of the impact of the robber baron attitudes of the industry; and Joseph Mason and Daniel Schiffman, who analyzed the negative impacts of the ways in which railroads managed financial distress; Gregory L. Thompson, "Misused Product Costing in the American Railroad Industry: Southern Pacific Passenger Service between the Wars," *The Business History Review* 63, no. (1989), https://doi.org/10.2307/3116039; J. C. D. Roberts, "Discursive Destabilisation of Socio-Technical Regimes: Negative Storylines and the Discursive Vulnerability of Historical American Railroads," *Energy Research & Social Science* 31 (2017), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2017.05.031; Joseph R. Mason and Daniel A. Schiffman, "Too-Big-To-Fail, Government Bailouts, and Managerial Incentives: The Case of Reconstruction Finance Corporation Assistance to the Railroad Industry During the Great Depression" (Working Paper, October 15, 2002), 12, SSRN 1337203, https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1337203.

obsolescence faced by the industry. Early financial troubles should be considered a long-standing weakness that contributed to the eventual collapse of the industry, hindering its ability to compete with newer modes of transportation in the form of the automobile and airplane.

A major Class I railroad and a road famous equally for its breadth of service and innovation on the tracks, the Milwaukee Road serves as a prime example of the problems plaguing the entire railroad industry in the first quarter of the 20th century. The company, which lasted in actuality from 1847 up until the 1980s, experienced no fewer than three bankruptcies over the course of its lifetime.[3] The first of these, in 1925, followed a period of immense and rapid expansion including the construction of new Western-facing lines from 1906 to 1909 and the electrification of its entire intercity grid starting in 1915. These projects consumed an immense amount of capital which necessitated a mass repayment that, alongside myriad extenuating factors, ultimately led to the collapse of the company’s finances. Beside financial strain, the Road had perpetrated mass-scale financial fraud. The Road defrauded investors and violated state law with the creation and expansion of its subsidiary Puget Sound Railway Company, the consequences of which could only be revealed in times of instability, and it engaged in other patterns of fraud that resulted in great harm to the company itself. The Road was forced by its overwhelming debt to declare bankruptcy in 1925, and its subsequent reorganization and continuance of service was shortly thereafter met by a second bankruptcy in 1935. These patterns underline the necessity of analyzing the initial waves of financial instability that characterized the 1920s as a core component of the slow degradation of the industry that culminated in the ‘60s and ‘70s.

[3] The Milwaukee Road went bankrupt in 1925, 1935, and 1977. It operated under receivership and trusteeship respectively from 1925-1928, 1935-1945, and 1977-1985, after which it was sold.

The Milwaukee Road was born and incorporated as the Milwaukee & Waukesha Railway Company in 1847. Its first line, not opened until 1850 (and not until after the company had changed its name to the Milwaukee & Mississippi Railway Company), stretched mere miles from the growing city of Milwaukee, already the largest city in Wisconsin territory, to its nearby satellite Wauwatosa.[4] Not long after, the burgeoning Midwestern railway would achieve its founding goal of linking Lake Michigan with the Mississippi river, routing through Madison and several other up-and-coming Wisconsin towns. Soon, the railway would reach even past that to St. Paul.[5] It would not be until 1873-4 that the company finally connected itself to the metropolis of Chicago, though, and only after that did the Milwaukee Road truly come into being.[6] The Road then exploded across the Midwest - expanding further into Wisconsin, Illinois, and Minnesota, and treading new ground in Iowa, Missouri, Michigan, and even North and South Dakota. The Road heavily consolidated its operations through acquisition of smaller, local railroads; a trend that, as will be shown, was common to the industry and that lasted until the Road's first bankruptcy.[7] This was a tactic that facilitated the Road's rapid expansion into new areas, and one that was explicitly intended to keep it competitive with other major railways, including the Great Northern and Northern Pacific Railway companies - two companies that will be important for defining the Road's next moves after the turn of the 20th century. [8]

The Midwest, since the latter half of the 19th century, had been an incredibly overbuilt region. Cheap land provided an easy incentive to motivate railway companies to provide service to growing industrial areas from Cleveland to Fargo. The ease of construction in these areas

---

[4] Jim Scribbins, *Milwaukee Road Remembered* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 10.
[5] Scribbins, *Milwaukee Road Remembered*, 10-11.
[6] Scribbins, *Milwaukee Road Remembered*, 12.
[7] Scribbins, *Milwaukee Road Remembered*, 10-16.
[8] Scribbins, *Milwaukee Road Remembered*, 13.

created a long-term trap for railway companies, though, as the introduction of more and more operating lines created fierce competition that regularly purged underperforming railroads, facilitating their incorporation into Class I giants. Acquiring lines gave the Road opportunities to build out economies of scale that could undercut the region's dominant names. This strategy clearly proved lucrative for the Road, as evidenced by its rapid expansion, and it cemented into the company's leadership a do-or-die attitude, whereby anything less than constant growth meant becoming vulnerable and losing out. In 1909, then-president A.J. Earling, by all accounts a self-made man who had built his life from the Road's tracks,[9] spearheaded what would become for the Road a terminal symbol of its commitment to an expansionist ideology: a line connecting its far-flung Fargo branch with the Seattle-Tacoma area on the West Coast.

The early construction of the line occurred under a shroud of mystery, as the Road's infrequent and tight-lipped reports held back substantial information as to the goings-on of constructions across the continent.[10] Yet, the project captivated public attention, especially that of investors. The project, which the Road initially estimated would cost between $45,000,000 and $60,000,000, relied extensively on public investing support. The then-solid finances of the Road inspired confidence in investors, as did some of Earling's public statements,[11] but another mode of investor securement for the Road came from Earling's relationships with America's wealthiest magnates. Earling communicated closely with representatives of John D. Rockefeller, for example, who reported back to the titan of industry that Earling was "a distinctly high-class man [...] one entirely trustworthy."[12] This private correspondence with national industry representatives proved the Road's status amongst the largest railroads of the time, but equally so

---

[9] "Albert J. Earling, Former C., M. & St. P. Head, Dead," *The New York Times*, November 11, 1925.
[10] "The Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul," *Railway Age*, September 30, 1907.
[11] "Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul," *Railway Age*.
[12] H. E. Cooper, "Confidential Letter, re: Analysis of Milwaukee Road" to John D. Rockefeller, November 6,

did it prove that the Road was an adept follower of industry mindsets that, at times, were horribly outmoded. Nevertheless, it secured for Earling and the Road a consistent stream of funding.

The Puget Sound extension had opened to immense satisfaction in 1909, featuring in newspapers across the nation, though to no more fanfare than was necessary as a testament to Earling's business-first attitude.[13] Earling and the Road's directors had made it clear that this transcontinental accomplishment was of a markedly unique strategic importance to the company, as with its construction and the trail of the line they had bucked their past tendency to fixate on carving a market from overbuilt regions already well-serviced by established railroads. While the Puget Sound itself was already serviced by the aforementioned Great Northern and Northern Pacific Railway companies, the Road's service operated through "frontier country -" new land, ready to be built upon, where the Road could run a monopolistic service.[14] This set the Road apart, but also brought immense costs: the route to Seattle was tricky, requiring incredibly complex, time-consuming, and expensive work to be done.[15] While the construction was completed in record time (as the extension began construction only 3 years prior in 1906) the Road's initial estimates for the cost of the project had been wildly surpassed, and the actual cost of the line was nearly $240,000,000 - a 300% increase in cost from a high estimate of $60,000,000.[16] This created difficulties in determining how to finance the project that the Road could not easily solve. While an initial issuance of $100,000,000 of capital stock in 1906 got the

[13] Elliott Flower, "Opening Up the Northwest: A record in Railroad Building by the Latest Line to the Pacific Coast," *Putnam's Magazine*, July 1909, 387, 396.
[14] Flower, "Opening Up the Northwest," 392-95.
[15] "A Remarkable Piece of Railway Construction," American Industry, September 15, 1909.
[16] Liam Wilson, "Collection of Figures from Milwaukee Road Financial Records" (Microsoft Excel file, 2025), compiled from Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Paul Railway Company Annual Reports.

Puget Sound company off the ground, the rest of the extension had to be secured against $123,000,000 of bonded debt.[17]

Investor uncertainty in the Road's plans drove it to take on that bonded debt, and uncertainty in the industry at large had driven a similar change in the common financing modes by the mid-1910s. The cost of the expansion, and the harsh reality that it would take a great deal of time for the Road to gather orders and extract profit from the frontier country through which the extension was built resulted in a downturn of investor optimism surrounding the expansion. This coincided with a brief downturn in the whole industry which had significant ramifications far down the line - investor uneasiness eventually drove railways to cease issuance of capital stock altogether in favor of bonded debt. What had in 1906 been a proud turn away from bonded debt toward safer, more reassuring methods of financing[18] had reversed course sharply back toward non-viability of capital stock by 1915;[19] that year, the Road also had failed to meet its 5% dividend, further discouraging investors.[20]

Even still the Road could not stop spending money, now increasingly money that it did not have, and the Road continued its impressive engineering feats. Still under the presidency of Earling, the Road began electrification of the Puget Sound company only shortly after construction of the line had finished. This project, intended to mitigate operational issues over the rough Northern terrain the line cut through, would last from 1909 until 1928 and helped balloon the Road's overall mortgage debt to $460,000,000 by 1913, a figure that stayed steady until 1919.[21] Yet, even still, the Road would not stop spending money. In 1922, H.E. Byram, who

[17] "Puget Sound Pays Dividend," *New York Times*, February 25, 1911.
[18] "Funds for the St. Paul's Extension," *Railway World*, December 21, 1906
[19] "Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul," *Financial World*, July 3, 1915.
[20] "The Wisdom of the Puget Sound Extension," *Railway Age*, October 10, 1915.
[21] Wilson, "Collection of Figures."

had continued the legacy of Earling as President since 1917, sank the Road back into its old patterns of acquisition, and took a thousand-year lease of the Chicago & Terre Haute Railway, simultaneously assuming operation of the Chicago & Gary. This, too, was financed with funded debt that Byram had been taking ever since the Road re-entered private hands following nationalization from 1917-1920; Byram was responsible for the assumption of a further $110,000,000 of funded debt from 1920-1924.[22] In March 1925, the Road was unable to keep up with its debt, and declared bankruptcy.[23]

According to historian Albro Martin, the fault for the decline of the industry, and by extension the Road, lies in the Federal government's hands. The argument against the government in the matter of the railroads centers around the creation of the Federal railroad management agency, the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC),[24] and how the Commission gradually overregulated railroads to the point where they could no longer reasonably compete with each other. At the same time, Albro argues the ICC prevented railroads from engaging in business practices that have already been outlined, including the consolidation of defunct lines. Not only that, but also the ICC enforced upon railroads continuations of service in lines that were unprofitable or otherwise unfit for business as a necessity of public good, forcing railroads to shoulder the burden of a transportation-based government welfare drive. This came together with intense rate-setting, which prevented railroads from increasing fares either to account for the unprofitability of certain lines or to compensate for lack of ridership depressing revenues.[25] Other arguments, including that of transportation expert Stanley Berge, allege that the ICC's

---

[22] Wilson, "Collection of Figures."

[23] Incidentally, A.J. Earling died just a few months after the Road declared bankruptcy, on Nov 10, 1925. His obituary made mention of him as the "moving spirit" of the Puget Sound extension, his final legacy.

[24] The ICC was dissolved in 1995, and its responsibilities were transferred to the newly created Surface Transportation Board.

[25] Martin, *Enterprise Denied*.; Altman, "Railroad Bankruptcy Propensity," 333-45.

accounting rules harmed railroads' books; according to Berge's reasoning, "obsolete" accounting overheads caused an appearance of depressed passenger revenues in the early century, which only compounded over time. So, the ICC damaged financial perception of passenger transit, negatively motivating railroads and leading to great financial (and public) harm.[26]

While there certainly is some truth to these arguments, a deeper investigation of the actual authority of the ICC over industry practices reveals a complicated relationship between Federal intervention and industry subversion. The ICC's greatest strength in regulation lay in its ability to mandate the continuous operation of lines, and to prevent hostile or reactionary rate-setting from railways. While it is objectively true that this meant railroads were responsible for the upkeep of lines, it is equally true that the overbuilding of the American Midwest was entirely the fault of railroads competing in the area without foresight for the consequences that overbuilding would bring - the government did not compel this act. Furthermore, industry consolidation ensured that these unprofitable lines would always have a home in some larger, more opportunistic railway; being forced to upkeep unprofitable lines did not discourage industry titans from acquiring these lines and using them as financial leverage, as will be discussed in the case of the Milwaukee Road and the Terre Haute. To that end, the ICC did not largely prevent industry consolidation in any meaningful way, as might be argued. Railroads did have to go through a sometimes byzantine process of approval for high profile mergers, but even by the early 1900s the industry was heavily consolidated into the hands of just a few railroads, such as the Union Pacific, or even just a few men. Edward H. Harriman, owner of the aforementioned Union Pacific, controlled or had a managerial interest in a third of the nation's total railroad

[26] Stanley Berge, "Why Kill the Passenger Train?," *Journal of Marketing* 28, no. 1 (1964): 1–6, https://doi.org/10.2307/1249218.

mileage by 1906.[27] Just as well, railroads were not fully prevented from engaging in reasonable competition with their rate cuts, only from raising rates and fares to an undue amount. It should be noted the Road actually lowered its rates in 1921 in response to competition from the Panama Canal to good effect.[28] Railroads also were permitted to negotiate beneficial terms of operation amongst themselves, a strong-arm practice of industry that the ICC did not explicitly forbid or prevent.[29]

As for accounting practices, the ICC had an initially incredibly positive effect on the industry at large, as it enforced consistent accounting practices. Consistency meant transparency for investors, which from the ICC's creation in 1887 until the mid-1910s (when capital stock was not commonly issued) was crucial for ensuring investors could safely determine expected outcomes for railways, and therefore wisely invest their money. At the same time, though, the ICC allowed accounting tricks to slip through the cracks, oftentimes on an industry-wide scale. Business historian Gregory Thompson laid out how railroads in the early 20th century consistently misreported operating expenses vis-à-vis incorrect calculation of depreciation expense, thereby inflating operating incomes.[30] According to Thompson, this accounting pattern was pervasive to the point of totally undermining the validity of depreciation reporting in the industry, especially as railroads expanded and changed methods of operation that exacerbated the issue.[31] Other findings from historians Daniel Schiffman and Joseph Mason illustrate patterns of encouraged disrepair in railroads, where times of hardship were met by industry leaders with deference of maintenance with the result of severe consequences, tying in as well to increased

---

[27] "Harriman Agrees to Railway Truce," *The New York Times*, December 2, 1908; W. N. Leonard, "The Decline of Railroad Consolidation," *The Journal of Economic History* 9, no. 1 (1949): 2, http://www.jstor.org/stable/2113718.
[28] "Rate Cuts Resulting from Panama Canal," *The New York Times,* November 23, 1921.
[29] "Harriman Agrees to Railway Truce."
[30] Thompson, "Misused Product Costing," 510-54 https://doi.org/10.2307/3116039.
[31] Thompson, "Misused Product Costing," 523.

equipment value depreciation. In some cases, including for the Milwaukee Road, the ICC failed to materially punish overstatement of income by millions of dollars, even though such reporting was obviously fraudulent. Despite the limited efforts of the ICC where they did intervene, the railroad industry's methods created a long-term irrecoverable position for railways. While a string of boom cycles inflated perception and kept the industry afloat for some time, this position proved devastating by the time of the Great Depression.[32]

The industry was rife with irresponsible management and reckless, even dangerous, financial practices, including an overreliance on funded debt as capital stock investors fled the industry and frequent engagement in leveraged buyouts of smaller, defunct roads saddled with heavy liabilities. In the case of the Milwaukee Road, these common practices overlapped with a period of financial uncertainty; this overlap ultimately spelled doom for the railway, as it failed to manifest meaningful revenues while sinking deeper into debt. Far from innocent, the Road also engaged in fraudulent patterns of business - circumventing state laws to promote expansion, cooking financial books to bolster an appearance of stability, and even engaging in corporate conspiracy up to the very end, including through a friendly receivership. The ICC failed to prevent any of these reckless practices despite its usual antagonistic position in the financial history of the railroads. The ICC also failed to sufficiently discourage or punish fraudulent activities, actually enabling these poor practices as well as other destructive behaviors.

The heart of the Road's financial difficulties was that it needed to rely on bonded debt to finance its massive projects, especially the Puget Sound extension. By 1909, the company had all

[32] Ernest Ritson Dewsnup, "Recent Financial Investigations by the Interstate Commerce Commission," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 63, no. 1 (January 1916): 207-08; Mason and Schiffman, "Too-Big-To-Fail," 802-25.

but capped its stock issuance (see figure 1 below).[33] A period of stagnant revenues in the industry had created skepticism over the viability of railroads as vessels for safe investment. As investors saw diminishing returns on dividends and stock prices, the Road ceased new issuance of stock and switched its primary mode of financing to issuance of bonded debt.

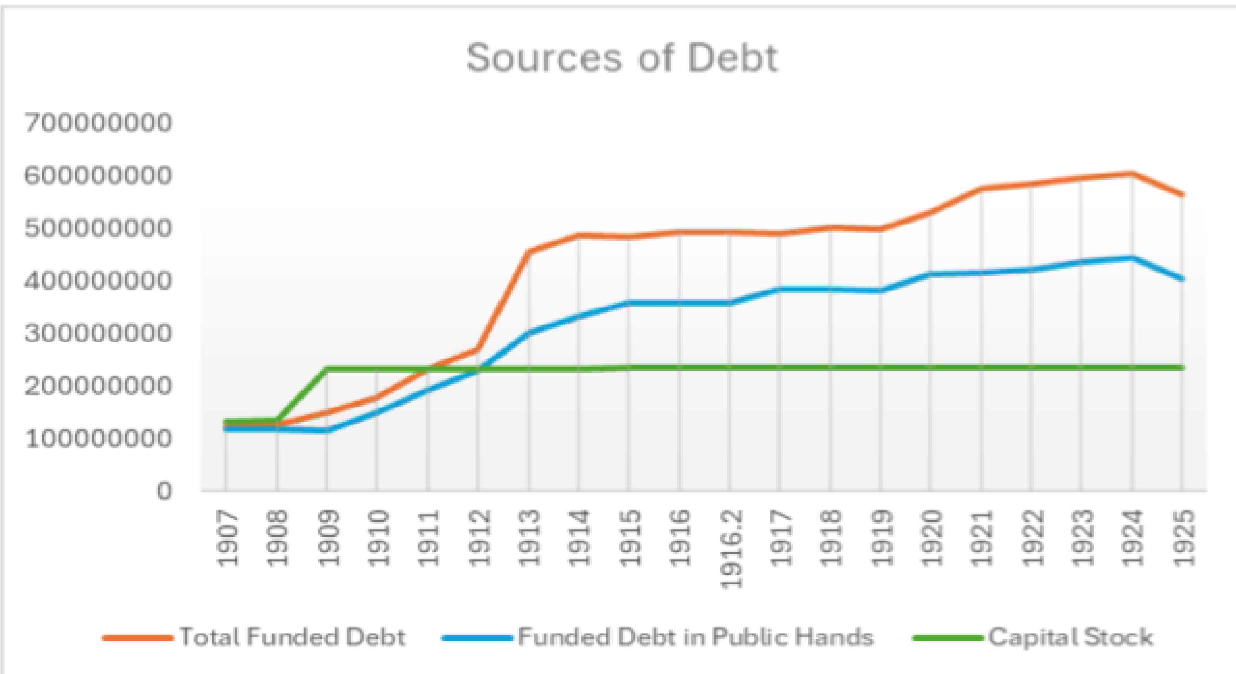


Figure 1. Sources of Debt of the Milwaukee Road, 1907-1925. Each datum represents the total amount of a particular mode of debt for a given year. In all graphs, 1916.2, an oddity resulting from the company's switch to standard accounting dates (year ending Dec 31) from their traditional dates (year ending Jun 31). This created a half year that is represented in this dataset as a full year for communicative clarity. Compiled from the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific Railroad Company.

The Road had as much funded debt as capital stock by 1911, and only one year later its total funded debt had surpassed its lifetime capital stock issuance by around $36,000,000 dollars, or over 15%.[34] By 1924, funded debt amounted to 259% of capital stock.[35] Figure 1 depicts this

[33] The total capital stock issuance was not entirely static, but rose from $232,623,100 in 1909 to $233,379,384 by 1925, an increase of only $750,000 or 0.3%. Wilson, "Collection of Figures."
[34] Wilson, "Collection of Figures."
[35] Wilson, "Collection of Figures."

dramatic increase in total funded debt in 1913, that year being a summary of a more gradual process of assumption of bonded debt by the Road's Puget Sound railway company, which was incorporated directly into the Road's books from what had been up to that point a technically independent subsidiary position. Understanding the reasons behind this development in the Road's finances must come from an appreciation of the specifics behind the methods of financing available to it.

For investors, stocks were riskier than bonds but provided more return on investment if any given company could manifest substantial operating and net incomes. This also served to make stocks significantly less draining for issuing companies, as companies would only have to pay dividends during times of profit.[36] Bonds, on the other hand, were a far safer investment, since they were guaranteed an (albeit lower) return on their investment. Yet, the deal was far worse for issuing companies - they were forced to repay interest on their bonds at all times, usually twice a year,[37] until the debt had matured. Bond maturation typically occurred over a span of decades and, when it was time for bonds to be repaid, the financial situation of any given railroad could be wildly different from the circumstances under which bonds were issued. As a result, railroads often came up short on interest payments during this maturation process.[38] The distinction between stocks and bonds is crucial for defining how railroads acquired financial

---

[36] Stock prices would fall if dividends could not be met, but even this is not as inherently damaging to a company as the risk posed by bonded debt.
[37] Wilson, "Collection of Figures."
[38] Craig Foltin, Dale L. Flesher, and Gary J. Previts, "The Downfall of a Railroad Empire and Its Impact on Leveraged Financing, Accounting, Business and Regulation: 1929–1936," *Accounting History* 30, no. 3 (2025): 460–96, https://doi.org/10.1177/10323732251357041. In the Milwaukee Road, interest accrued began outpacing interest paid in 1921. It should be noted this also occurred from 1907-1909, though the far smaller amounts of funded debt during that period make it significantly less concerning, especially also considering that capital stock was the primary mode of financing up until this point.

capital in the early decades of the 20th century;[39] stocks had originally been the primary mode of fundraising for railroads by 1900, but a sharp decline in confidence following a period of financial instability necessitated the reliance of railroads on bond issuance.[40]

As outlined, by 1910 investors were unwilling to assume the increased risk of investment even in Class I railroads; the resulting transition away from stocks as a mode of acquiring capital these companies eliminated what was previously the most common and, in many ways, the safest and most reliable method of fundraising; figure 2 clearly outlines the absence of new capital stock issuance since 1909 by the Road.

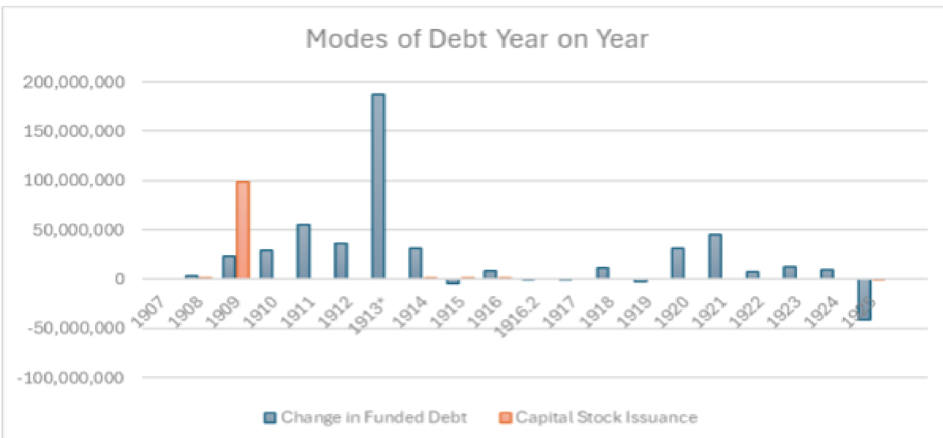


Figure 2. The Milwaukee Road's Modes of Debt Issuance Year on Year, 1907-1925. Each datum represents the new amount of a particular mode of debt for a given year. Compiled from the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific Railroad Company.

As a result, the (similarly depicted) mass issuance of railroad bonds created a situation whereby railroad fundraising, to soothe investor fears, involved a caveat that failure to secure future

[39] Herbert E. Dougall and Loring C. Farwell, "A Review of Railroad Financing, 1920-1938: I. Volume and Cost of Railroad Capital," *The Journal of Land & Public Utility Economics* 16, no. 2 (1940): 207–13, https://doi.org/10.2307/3158543; Herbert E. Dougall and Loring C. Farwell, "A Review of Railroad Financing, 1920-1938: II. Types and Methods of Financing," *The Journal of Land & Public Utility Economics* 16, no. 3 (1940): 306–17, https://doi.org/10.2307/3158249; Loring C. Farwell, "A Review of Railroad Financing, 1920-1938: III. Funds for Capital Purposes," *The Journal of Land & Public Utility Economics* 16, no. 4 (1940): 443–54, https://doi.org/10.2307/3158200.

[40] Dougall and Farwell, "Review of Railroad Financing," 207–10. Specifically, this is seen in the Milwaukee Road following a period of stagnant operating revenue from 1907-1912 (only changing due to the acquisition of the Puget Sound). Wilson, "Collection of Figures."

growth did not impede repayment on investment. Instead, financial slowdowns in a railroad heavily reliant on bonded debt obliged the company to devote more and more of its resources to those guaranteed repayments, to the point of bankruptcy if necessary. This is critical to remember in continuing discussion of the Road's financial practices, particularly with regards to its expansion and acquisition behaviors. As will be discussed, this funded debt financed many projects that were significant in scope and promised dubious returns, as well as acquisitions that increased the debt load of the Road. Just because bonded debt was safer for investors did not make it easy for railroads to issue, too, and issuance of bonded debt was regulated not only by informal best practices surrounding debt capitalization but also on occasion by actual written law.[41] Washington state law, for example, forbade the issuance of funded debt more than twice the amount of issued capital stock. The Milwaukee Road appeared to have met this requirement when it incorporated the Puget Sound - it has already been detailed that it issued $100,000,000 of capital stock, alongside $123,000,000 of bonded debt, to fund its subsidiary. In fact, an ICC audit of the company in 1916 found that the issuance of $100 million of capital stock was a mere accounting ploy to mask that $200 million of bonded debt had already been issued; the Road functionally paid itself, to inflate its capital stock numbers.[42] Clearly, Earling and the Road's board of directors were unafraid of explicit fraud in service of a financial boost to their company. However, that audit only underscored the ICC's utter toothlessness, as the organization was wholly unable to prevent the Road from affecting a true alteration to its course. Earling, while he did not continue as president in 1917, was promoted to the board of directors; not even company

[41] Generally, railroads (and all companies in general at this time) made an effort to keep the amount of funded debt they assumed lower than their total asset balance.
[42] Dewsnup, "Recent Financial Investigations," 208.

management was affected. This fraudulent debt issuance cemented the Road's eventual repayment obligations, though, and those obligations would come due fast.

For the Road, quick maturation of funded debt became an issue as early as 1917, as during that year operating expenses drastically rose which contributed to a sharp decline in operating and net incomes, depicted in figures 3 and 4 below, respectively.

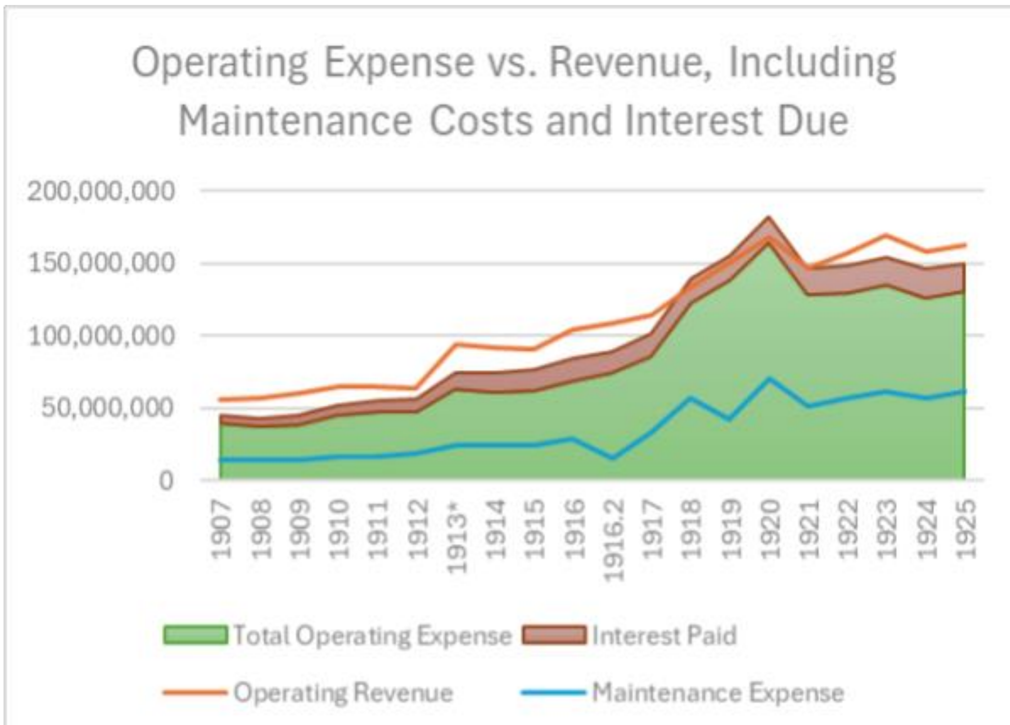


Figure 3. The Milwaukee Road's Operating Expense versus Revenue, Including Maintenance costs and Interest Due, 1907-1925. This graph does not reflect interest actually paid, which could be greater than interest due until the period 1920-1924, where interest due outpaced interest paid; see figure 5. This graph also does not include other deductions, as discussed in the text. Compiled from the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific Railroad Company.

Figure 4. The Milwaukee Road's Net Income Over Time, 1907-1925. Compiled from the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific Railroad Company.

This was the result of an increase in operational strain, as the industry as a whole responded to increased demand for transit of industrial goods to support the wartime economies of Europe. A decrease in revenues and an increase in expenses crashed operating income, and that year created the thinnest gap between operating income and interest accrued since 1907, depicted further below in figure 5.

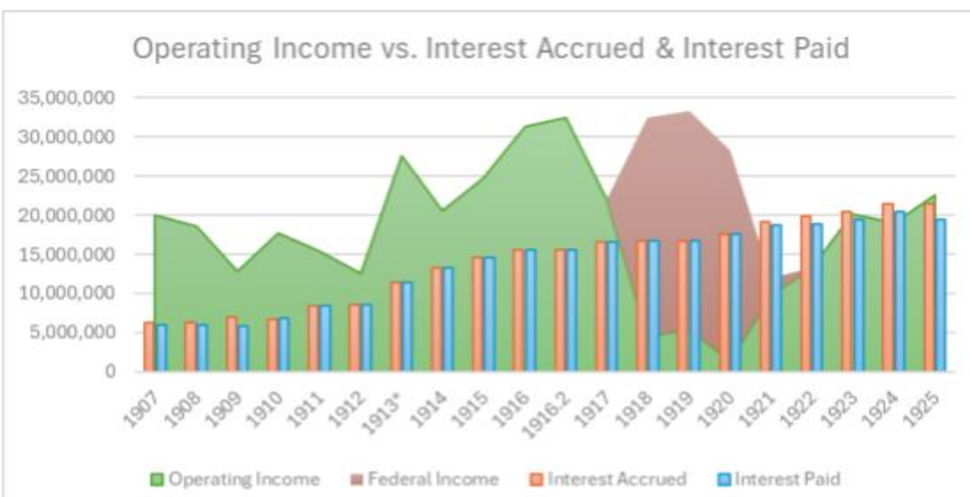


Figure 5. The Milwaukee Road's Operating Income versus Interest Accrued and Interest Paid 1907-1925, including supplementary federal income for the years 1917-1921. 1916.2 reflects a half-year for the company, where its accounting practices were changed to reflect national standards. The Road switched from an accounting year ending in June to an accounting year ending in December. Compiled from the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific Railroad Company.

This resulted in by far the lowest net income since the same time. American railroad infrastructure was heavily strained by wartime demand, largely due to inefficient management by the railroads themselves,[43] and this was a primary contributor to operating expenses outpacing operating revenue despite the potential for increased profit on moved goods. Regardless, the looming financial crisis was kicked down the road by President Wilson's nationalization of the Railroads on December 28, 1917. Wilson's move improved network conditions generally,[44] and for the Road substantial federal compensation for use of services, seen as an additional shaded area in figure 5, elevated operating incomes and led to a brief period of low but stable operating incomes that enabled the Road's net income to outpace its interest obligations for a while longer.[45]

Following nationalization, the Road also utilized US-favorable-interest loans for financing. These loans were identical to bonds in all but name, except that they ran at higher interest rates - a flat 6%, as opposed to the lower rates on general mortgages that floated around 4% but could be found in the Road as low as 3.5%.[46] These notes also matured exceptionally quickly compared to the general mortgages of which the company held hundreds of millions of dollars worth. One "U.S. Government Note," for instance, was taken out by the Milwaukee Road in 1922 worth $10,000,000, but it matured as soon as 1930. This amounted to a yearly accrual of $600,000 of interest, a remarkable sum for what was one of the Road's smaller loans.[47] At the same time, these loans saw frequent renegotiation or reissuance, indicative of their nature as

---

[43] William J. Cunningham, "Transportation: Part 1—Railways," in *Recent Economic Changes in the United States*, Vols. 1–2, ed. Committee on Recent Economic Changes of the President's Conference on Unemployment (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1929), 256-257, accessed October 25, 2025.
[44] Cunningham, "Transportation: Part 1—Railways," 257-258.
[45] Wilson, "Collection of Figures."
[46] Wilson, "Collection of Figures."
[47] Wilson, "Collection of Figures."

supportive loans that inherently did not carry the same weight as issuing public debt, insofar as the government could be a more lenient creditor to businesses. Furthermore, these loans were by no means coercive or mandatory, and, in fact, seem to have served a similar purpose to a guaranty period from the U.S. government. The government's guaranty, negotiated between the industry and the controller of then-nationalized railroads William McAdoo, ensured that the Road's operating income would not fall below an agreed-upon yet variable amount; the Road was kept to around 27 to 33 million dollars of operating income for the years the guaranty was in effect. The first of these guaranty payments totaled around $14,000,000, which the Road immediately spent over half of on interest payments, including in service of the large sums of U.S. government loans they had taken.[48] Once McAdoo's support through the Railroad administration ended in majority, the Road was still entitled to a small benefit, though this was not anywhere near as substantial as the guaranty. Afterward, the Road's President Byram drove substantial use of government loans to functionally replace the company's issuance of traditional bonded debt, which had been halted for some time; recall figure 1.

Despite continuing aid from the U.S. government post-nationalization, the Road utterly failed to capitalize on its government benefits and continued mismanaging its portfolio. The Road made the purchase of the Chicago, Terre Haute & Southeastern Railway in 1922, and began operation of the Chicago, Milwaukee, & Gary Railway at the same time. The Terre Haute for its part was straddled by its own funded debt, totaling $900,000 at the time of acquisition.[49] While specific reasons for the acquisition lie within the mind of President Byram and the board of directors, the public argument laid forth was that the Terre Haute provided the Road ample

---

[48] The other half was spent on wage increases, as per a negotiation from the national railway labor board. Wilson, "Collection of Figures."

[49] Wilson, "Collection of Figures."

access to Southern Indiana's coal fields.[50] Actually, it was most likely intended to shore up the Road's asset portfolio and total operating revenue against a tide of upcoming interest; the Road, by this point, operated a heavy mix of electric, diesel, and coal trains, and the company's claim that an entire railroad was needed to fulfill its demand for coal is questionable, despite its legal team's best efforts to justify the purchase in that way. As a mode of asset boosting, the acquisition served to provide a justification for taking on further increased amounts of bonded debt, and especially inflated the Road's general account to maintain a specific ratio of assets to bonded debt. Notably, the purchase was made following the Road's worst year on record; in 1921, the Road reported an $11,000,000 net deficit. This mass accrual of funded debt, both in U.S. government-favorable loans and the Terre Haute's liabilities, meant the Road was unable to prevent the oncoming tide of interest accrual, even despite rising incomes. Recall figure 5, which shows that each year from 1921 to 1924 saw both the Road unable to fully pay back the interest that came due on its loans as well as the Road's interest payments outstripping its final operating income. Rising interest payments directly created the conditions that finally resulted in bankruptcy in 1925.

Despite the rapid increase in interest accrual being the final cause for the financial crisis of the Road, underlying factors deserve as much attention. For the Road, this meant an unsteady trajectory of operating revenues driven especially by declining patterns of passenger ridership. Railroads at this time were subject to long droughts of slowly-declining ridership across entire regions of the country, and the Milwaukee Road suffered a gradual decline in passenger ridership from 1920 onward, clearly visible in figure 6.

---

[50] "Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Investigation," *Railway Age* 82, no. 8 (February 1927): 489.

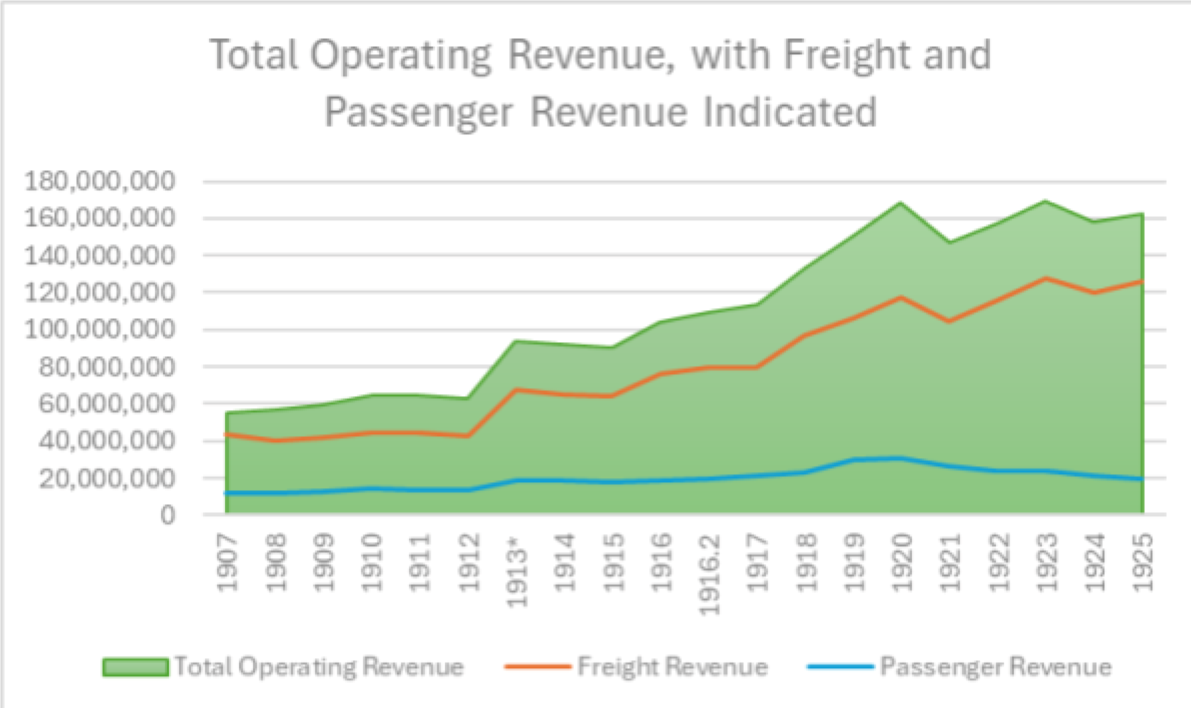


Figure 6. The Milwaukee Road's Total Operating Revenue, with Freight and Passenger Revenue Indicated, 1907-1925. See Figure 7 for details. Compiled from the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific Railroad Company.

Figure 7. The Milwaukee Road's Total Operating Revenue, with Freight and Passenger Revenue Measured, 1907-1925. The Road initially included incidentals (including on-train passenger services) in the same category as Passenger Revenue, but later switched these revenue streams to their own category. An increasing difference between Freight + Passenger Revenues and Total Operating Revenue is the result of the Road's transportation of uniquely classified goods, including milk and freight. Compiled from the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific Railroad Company.

Figure 7 shows that apart from freight revenue, which served as the “baseline” revenue stream for many railroads, passenger fares took the role of filling the majority of the remainder of necessary revenue, alongside incidentals and other goods transportation as a minority.[51] So, when fare revenue was light, it was a good indication that a railroad would have to mothball tracks or engines, limit service times (but not cut service altogether, per government requirements), and brace for an upcoming period of austerity. The Milwaukee Road exhibited these behaviors after 1920, where maintenance expenses stagnated despite the nominal continuation of maintenance-intensive projects, including the electrification of the Road’s network and the upkeep of its aging inventory of locomotives. Periods of austerity were not abnormal, however, as ridership numbers were subject to heavy fluctuation in even the best decades for the industry. Railroads often went through miniaturized boom-bust cycles, where periods of high ridership (and associated revenue) led to buying sprees, service expansions, and construction, and were then shortly followed by periods of cutting-back.[52] This specific decline in the Road’s ridership over the 1920s was tempered by steadily increasing freight revenue, as best seen in figure 6, as well as the aforementioned reduction in operating expenses stemming from deferred maintenance. In fact, from 1921-1925 operating revenue did outpace operating expenses.[53] This was also achieved due to an austere measure of cost-cutting in overall transportation expenses shown in figure 8, which included continuously cutting back on ever-rising labor costs, to whatever degree possible. Unfortunately for the Road, operating expenses alone did not represent the full extent of deductions to be accounted for. The Road paid nearly a

[51] Incidentals commonly resulted from passenger traffic, and could include restaurant service, baggage fees, &c. Other sources of revenue for the Road included equipment rentals, storage rentals, demurrage fees, mail transportation, and even milk transportation. Mail and milk transportation together provided ~$4,700,000 of revenue in 1922 (around $3 million of which was mail), nearly 3% of all operating revenue that year. Wilson, "Collection of Figures."
[52] Mason and Schiffman, "Too-Big-To-Fail," 805-812.
[53] Wilson, "Collection of Figures."

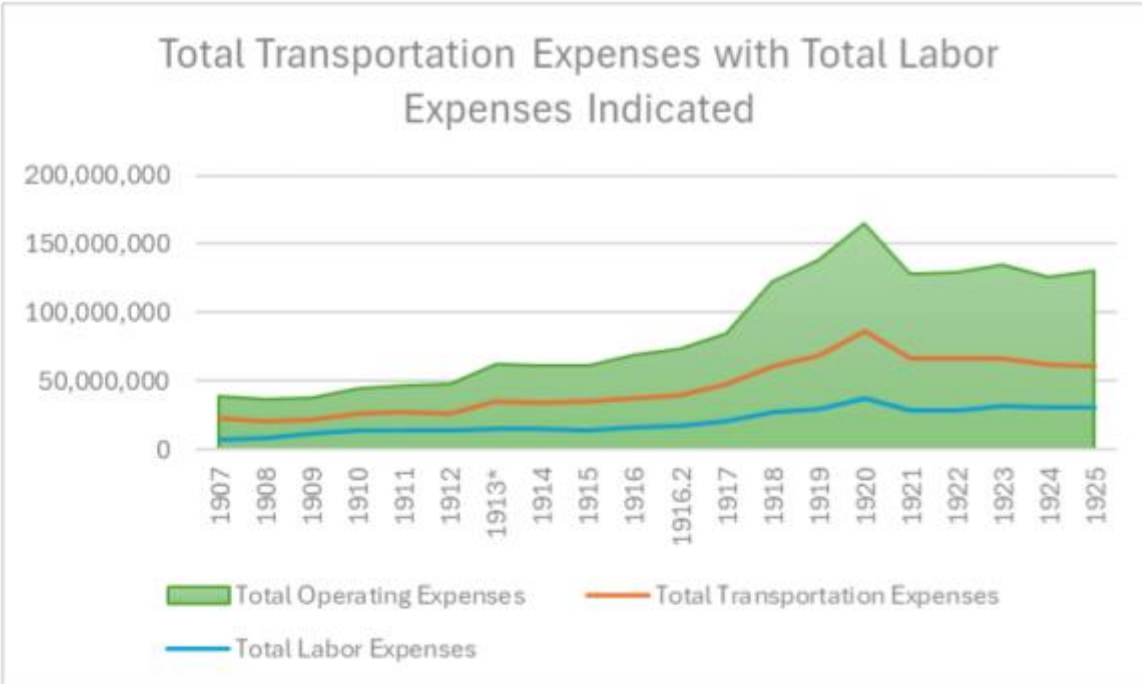


Figure 8. The Milwaukee Road's Total Transportation Expenses with Total Labor Expenses Indicated. Operating Expenses not linked to Transportation Expenses include depreciation calculation, maintenance, switching, leasing, and other rental costs, &c. Compiled from the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific Railroad Company.

million dollars annually in rental fees for leased rails each year,[54] kept a tab on "miscellaneous" further expenses,[55] was obliged to deduct tax accruals from its operating income,[56] and of course paid into a growing heap of interest on its bonded debt. This resulted in a net income over time that showed only minor deficits during the period leading up to bankruptcy after 1921, compared to the extent of net incomes in the decade prior (recall figure 4). It is highly likely that, had

[54] Leasing fees were paid mostly to Union Pacific, given the Road's extensive use of their rails in the Chicago area. This figure also includes around $70,000 of expenses annually from 1921-1925 that are marked as "other" leases.
[55] Miscellaneous costs were highly variable over the same period, ranging from ~$560,000 to ~$800,000. [56] Tax accrual represented by far the greatest portion of further deductions over the same period, ranging from $8,600,000 to $9,700,000.
[56] Tax accrual represented by far the greatest portion of further deductions over the same period, ranging from $8,600,000 to $9,700,000.

passenger revenue not experienced such a major decline since its 1920 height, the Milwaukee Road would not have immediately gone bankrupt, if at all.

In reality, between excessive funded debt creating an interest spiral, poor reinvestment of government loans and relief, and declining passenger revenues, there was no way out for the Road. Financial choices made earlier in the century, beginning with the construction of the Puget Sound extension, had provided the nucleation site upon which the many financial woes of the Road came to grow, with no concerted effort made at mitigation or prevention of financial crisis until it was simply too late. The looming crisis evident in the Road's financial books by 1917 had been staved off by nationalization; a guaranteed income stream from the Federal government until 1921 ensured that the Road's upper suite could afford to continue their past patterns of practice. Between 1921 and 1922, though, the financial hole that had been filled by the government's coffers had opened wide. President Byram had attempted to continue the Road's past pursuit of expansionism, but a drastically different set of circumstances meant little could be done to expand except leverage defunct railroads against further debt - perhaps a tactic Byram learned from his contemporaries in the Nickel Plate Road.[57] The Milwaukee Road, with unsteady revenues, entered a pattern of boosting its asset portfolio to justify taking on further debt, which it used to cover its obligations and expenses. Further debt meant further obligations, though, and the Road trapped itself in a vicious cycle - a cycle it could escape only through bankruptcy. The Milwaukee, Chicago and St. Paul Railway declared bankruptcy in 1925, bonded to the tune of 600 million dollars and with a fresh 21 million dollars in interest payments coming due each year.

---

[57] Craig Foltin, Dale L. Flesher, and Gary J. Previts, "The Downfall of a Railroad Empire and Its Impact on Leveraged Financing, Accounting, Business and Regulation: 1929–1936," *Accounting History* 30, no. 3 (2025): 460–96, https://doi.org/10.1177/10323732251357041.

However, bankruptcy was not the end for the Milwaukee Road. As with most railroads in the industry, the Road was placed into a federal receivership. The receivership, a special relationship whereby the railroad is placed under supervision of a judge until it can prove fiscal solvency, provides bankrupt railways a way out of crippling financial obligations that would otherwise necessitate liquidation. During a receivership, a railway's legal debtors may be discouraged from pursuing their rights to a return on their loan. That is, purchase of bonds involved a different set of expectations on behalf of stakeholders, whereby they were legally entitled to a return on their investment regardless of the financial state of the company. While debtors were legally entitled to pursue that return against a company operating under receivership, they were discouraged to do so. The receivership of the Milwaukee Road ended without a major liquidation of the company's assets,[58] and was perceived as particularly successful, even "spectacular," improving operating incomes almost twofold.[59] Yet, despite a three year period of recovery, the Road made only shallow improvements, maintaining over 80% of its funded debt. A full year after resuming normal operations, the Road's financials had settled into the same pattern as before the receivership: insufficient revenue to cover more than basic operating expenses, leaving insufficient operating income for interest payments.[60] Only seven years after, in 1935, the Road fell back into bankruptcy and re-entered receivership. While the effects of the Great Depression on the industry should not be understated (in the Road's region, operating revenues fell over 50% by 1932),[61] by 1935 the Road had begun lagging behind in terms of regional recovery, demonstrating poor long-term outcomes from its first receivership.

---

[58] Wilson, "Collection of Figures."
[59] "The Milwaukee Holds Its Gains," *Railway Age*, November 16, 1929, https://milwaukeeroadarchives.com/Bankruptcy/1925/TheMilwaukeeHoldsItsGainsRailwayAge11161929.pdf.
[60] Wilson, "Collection of Figures."
[61] Wilson, "Collection of Figures."

This second bankruptcy was far more tumultuous than the first, and the Road operated under trusteeship (in the Road's case this functioned as a restructuring variation of a receivership, instead of a liquidating one) until 1945. This trusteeship had more positive and longer-lasting impacts on the Road, which would not relapse into bankruptcy until its final demise.

Part of the reason behind the ineffectiveness of the first receivership was down to it being affected by a general corporate conspiracy, or graft as it were, which plagued the entire circumstance of the Road's bankruptcy. To begin with, the Road's officers went out of their way to achieve a friendly receivership that would be beneficial to its aims of "recovery," employing certain industry representatives, namely the Binkley Coal Company, to petition for such. This was done on account of their being "the only creditor which had a large enough amount [of debt owed to them, who met necessary requirements to sign a receivership], and whose members were known by officers of the [Road]," thus making them the ideal (and only) candidates.[62] Why this would have been beneficial to the Road, when ostensibly receiverships were managed by an impartial judge, is down to specifics of how the process was actually carried out.[63] The theory of the receivership was all good and well, but it was just one thing; the reality of a receivership was that any potential foreclosure on railroad assets that would provide repayment to the Road's creditors could be functionally rigged so as to be organized completely by the party the bankrupt road entered receivership for.[64] In the Road's case, that essentially meant that the Road making use of corporate director or officer contacts in Binkley Coal to petition for receivership provided

[62] "St. Paul Investigation," 489.
[63] Or, how it was carried out before it was reformed by the Federal government during the Great Depression. Notably, the Road's second receivership in 1935 was a proper reorganization, and the outcomes of that receivership were much longer-lasting and far more beneficial for the Road.
[64] This is only a loose explanation. Walter A. Staub, "Some Realistic Reflections on Some Aspects of Corporate Reorganization," *Virginia Law Review* 19, no. 6 (April 1933): 541-70.

for a friendly committee that set terms to the presiding judge in such a way as to organize favorable outcomes.

The Road had conspired to achieve favorable outcomes in its receivership, but that is not all - the Road's officers had been closely conspiring with other industry representatives for decades. A. J. Earling's honesty had clearly ingratiated him to Rockefeller, to give just one name, as the Rockefellers (specifically, John's brother William and William's son Percy) maintained a steady interest in the Road's board of directors, wherein the extent of their control over their company was largely hidden until the ICC's bankruptcy investigations.[65] Corporate involvement between major figures of industry may not on its own have been surprising or egregious, as after all these figures closely overlapped in business concerns; rather, what contributed to pressure on the Road's finances was how these connections enriched the officers of the Road and representatives of these other controlling interests.[66] The Rockefellers, for instance, made use of a mining company in which they had a controlling interest to sell their own copper to then-President Earling which was used in the Road's electrification. In the same way, the Rockefellers were able to sell excess amounts of their own power to the Road, again through Earling, at inflated prices. In some cases the Road paid for power it did not even use.[67] President Byram's purchase of the Terre Haute and Gary railways garnered equal skepticism, for the reason that both properties were suspiciously worthless. No matter whether this can be explained away by "access to coal fields," potential for asset-shoring the acquisitions all around raised eyebrows,

[65] John T. Flynn, *Graft in Business* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1931), 121-122.
[66] This also includes members of the Armours family carried by Philip Armour and his son J. Ogden, the George Smith interests carried by Peter Geddes, his son Donald, and another member of the family George Mason, and the Harkness family interests carried by E.S. Harkness. All of these interests significantly controlled the board of directors, and communicated closely with the presidents of the Road. Flynn, *Graft in Business*, 121-124.
[67] Flynn, *Graft in Business*, 125-138.

and fostered allegations of yet more conspiratorial enrichment.[68] So, the Road as a company, already strained from an overreliance on debt, suffering from inconsistent and even declining revenues, was also abused by its officers, presidents, and directors as a financial vessel for self-betterment, whereby they drained millions from the company.

What happened to the Milwaukee Road - what was inflicted upon the Milwaukee Road by its owners and controllers - was by no means a unique phenomenon, and certainly not for its contemporaries. Fraud was the common mode of business, risk was the expectation, and damage was only so damaging as long as it could not be covered up by layers upon layers of cleanly washed, meticulously stacked money. The Road's peers - from the Nickel Plate Road, itself a victim of continuous expansion through leveraged buyouts,[69] to the Rock Island Railway, another overstretched, board of director-mentality driven fatality of business[70] - equally struggled with the harshness of pure profit extraction exercised by their robber baron controllers. It should be no wonder, then, that public perception of the industry was so closely linked to public hatred of the industry's masters, a perception that only further dug the grave of the industry as alternate modes of transit became available.[71]

Today, the American passenger rail industry is almost exclusively the domain of one singular Class I passenger railroad: Amtrak. Amtrak runs a skeletal network compared to the world-class, fractal-esque density seen in America during the 1920s, and runs only a fraction as many passengers each year, despite the growth of the country as a whole. However, recent trends in public opinion show an upsurge both in commutation by rail and intercity travel by rail

[68] Flynn, *Graft in Business*, 144-150.
[69] Foltin, Flesher, and Previts, "Downfall of a Railroad Empire."
[70] H. Roger Grant, *A Mighty Fine Road: The Story of the Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific Railroad* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014).
[71] Roberts, "Discursive Destabilisation," 86-99.

nationwide that point to the beginning of a long-awaited boom cycle for the industry. Passenger rail network construction has resumed in areas of the country like Florida and New Mexico under the guidance of Brightline, an appetite for international-standard high speed rail has gripped the East and West coasts, and rail is being seen once more as a viable alternative to air and automobile travel. For the first time in decades, there is cause for real optimism about American railroading. Still, it is critical to step back and chart the course of the industry. The fundamental business model of railways has not significantly changed since their advent, and remembering the causes of the decline of the industry to begin with is vital for preventing a second decline. Understanding the financial responsibilities of these ostensibly private companies is the core to this prevention, then - as time has shown, the mismanagement of railroads and the permission of poor financial practices marked the decline of the industry even at a time when it was the strongest in the nation, the economic engine of the continent.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

"Albert J. Earling, Former C., M. & St. P. Head, Dead." *New York Times*, November 11, 1925.

Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Paul Railway Company. *Annual Reports (1907–1925).* Digitized by Milwaukee Road Archives. Accessed October 16, 2025. https://milwaukeeroadarchives.com/AnnualReports/MilwaukeeRoadAnnualReports.ht m.

"Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul." *Financial World*, July 3, 1915.

"Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul, The." *Railway Age*, September 30, 1907.

Cooper, H. E. Letter to John D. Rockefeller. November 6, 1908. "Confidential Letter, re: Analysis of Milwaukee Road." Milwaukee Road Archive. https://milwaukeeroadarchives.com/Chicago,%20Milwaukee%20&%20St.%20Paul/CooperMemo.pdf.

Flower, Elliott. "Opening Up the Northwest: A record in Railroad Building by the Latest Line to the Pacific Coast." *Putnam's Magazine*, July 1909, 387–396.

"Funds for the St. Paul's Extension." *Railway World*, December 21, 1906.

"Harriman Agrees to Railway Truce," *The New York Times*, December 2, 1908.

"Milwaukee Holds Its Gains, The." *Railway Age*, November 16, 1929. https://milwaukeeroadarchives.com/Bankruptcy/1925/TheMilwaukeeHoldsItsGainsRailwayAge11161929.pdf.

"Puget Sound Pays Dividend." *New York Times*, February 25, 1911.

"Rate Cuts Resulting from Panama Canal," *The New York Times,* November 23, 1921.

"Remarkable Piece of Railway Construction, A." *American Industry*, September 15, 1909.

Wilson, Liam. "Collection of Figures from Milwaukee Road Financial Records." Microsoft Excel file, 2025. Compiled from Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Paul Railway Company Annual Reports.

"Wisdom of the Puget Sound Extension, The." *Railway Age*, October 10, 1915.

Secondary Sources

Altman, Edward I. “Predicting Railroad Bankruptcies in America.” *The Bell Journal of Economics and Management Science* 4, no. 1 (1973): 184–211. https://doi.org/10.2307/3003144.

Altman, Edward I. “Railroad Bankruptcy Propensity.” *The Journal of Finance* 26, no. 2 (1971): 333–45. https://doi.org/10.2307/2326049.

Berge, Stanley. “Why Kill the Passenger Train?” *Journal of Marketing* 28, no. 1 (1964): 1–6. https://doi.org/10.2307/1249218.

Cunningham, William J. 1929. “Transportation: Part 1—Railways.” In Recent Economic Changes in the United States, Vols. 1–2, edited by Committee on Recent Economic Changes of the President’s Conference on Unemployment, 255–308. New York: McGraw-Hill. Accessed October 25, 2025.

Dougall, Herbert E., and Loring C. Farwell. "A Review of Railroad Financing, 1920-1938: I. Volume and Cost of Railroad Capital." *The Journal of Land & Public Utility Economics* 16, no. 2 (1940): 207–13. https://doi.org/10.2307/3158543.

Dougall, Herbert E., and Loring C. Farwell. "A Review of Railroad Financing, 1920-1938: II. Types and Methods of Financing." *The Journal of Land & Public Utility Economics* 16, no. 3 (1940): 306–17. https://doi.org/10.2307/3158249.

Farwell, Loring C. "A Review of Railroad Financing, 1920-1938: III. Funds for Capital Purposes." *The Journal of Land & Public Utility Economics* 16, no. 4 (1940): 443–54. https://doi.org/10.2307/3158200.

Flynn, John T. *Graft in Business*. New York: Vanguard Press, 1931.

Foltin, Craig, Dale L. Flesher, and Gary J. Previts. "The Downfall of a Railroad Empire and Its Impact on Leveraged Financing, Accounting, Business and Regulation: 1929–1936." *Accounting History* 30, no. 3 (2025): 460–96. https://doi.org/10.1177/10323732251357041.

Grant, H. Roger, *A Mighty Fine Road: The Story of the Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific Railroad* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014),

Leonard, W. N. "The Decline of Railroad Consolidation." *The Journal of Economic History* 9, no. 1 (1949): 1–24. http://www.jstor.org/stable/2113718.

Martin, Albro *Enterprise Denied: Origins of the Decline of American Railroads, 1897–1917*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1971.

Mason, Joseph R., and Daniel A. Schiffman. "Too-Big-To-Fail, Government Bailouts, and Managerial Incentives: The Case of Reconstruction Finance Corporation Assistance to the Railroad Industry During the Great Depression." Working Paper, October 15, 2002. SSRN 1337203. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1337203.

Roberts, J.C.D. "Discursive Destabilisation of Socio-Technical Regimes: Negative Storylines and the Discursive Vulnerability of Historical American Railroads." *Energy Research & Social Science* 31 (2017): 86–99. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2017.05.031.

Schiffman, Daniel A. "Shattered Rails, Ruined Credit: Financial Fragility and Railroad Operations in the Great Depression." *The Journal of Economic History* 63, no. 3 (2003): 802–25. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3132308.

Scribbins, Jim. *Milwaukee Road Remembered*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

Staub, Walter A., "Some Realistic Reflections on Some Aspects of Corporate Reorganization," *Virginia Law Review* 19, no. 6 (April 1933): 707–24.

Thompson, Gregory L. "Misused Product Costing in the American Railroad Industry: Southern Pacific Passenger Service between the Wars." *The Business History Review* 63, no. 3 (1989): 510–54. https://doi.org/10.2307/3116039.

Lincoln Park: Urban Renewal and Gentrification in Chicago

By: David Bolotin

By the time Americans returned home from World War II in the late 1940s, the United States was a changing world. Chicago and its landscape rapidly transformed in the years post-WWII. Following the return of veterans from the war, the U.S. underwent a massive baby-boom. [1] Given an ever-growing population, questions began to arise of where Americans could house the future population. The city became increasingly crowded, and the need for housing rose higher and higher. Much to the dismay of many middle- and upper-class white Americans, the ethnic landscapes of cities, like Chicago, were also changing. In the decades prior, Chicago witnessed the Great Migration, a period of large-scale migration of Black people from the South to the North of the United States. The Black population in Chicago only continued to increase in the years after WWII. By 1960, 22.9 percent of Chicago's population was Black, a 65.1 percent increase since 1950.[2] While cities contained deteriorating housing and a shifting population, the suburbs offered an alternative. Spacious and bolstering the ideals of post-WWII America, the suburb began to rise as middle- and upper-class white Chicagoans fled the city.[3]

Within Chicago, suburbanization was an especially prevalent issue. As people fled from the heart of Chicago's inner city, Chicago began to mark the effects. Housing in the city was declining; in the postwar period, 242,000 units were located within a 23 square mile blighted area documented by the Chicago Plan Commission.[4] To counter suburbanization, both the federal and state government tried to fight the presence of slums. In the eyes of legislators, slum

[1] Arnold Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago 1940-1960* (University of Chicago Press, 1998), 3.
[2] Evelyn Kitagawa and Karl Tauber, *Local Community Fact Book: Chicago Metropolitan Area, 1960* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 2.
[3] Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto*, 28.
[4] Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto,* 22.

clearance, the demolition of blighted and slum areas, led to improvements in the inner city.[5] Slum clearance could not only protect financial districts in the inner city of Chicago such as The Loop but could also lure more people back into the abandoned neighborhoods of the inner city, a process that came to be known as urban renewal.

In 1941, the Illinois government passed the Neighborhood Redevelopment Corporation Act which established conservation areas in which at least fifty percent of the area's residential buildings had an average age of thirty-five years or longer. According to the law, conservation areas were inherently at a risk of becoming a "Slum and Blighted area" due to deterioration, overcrowding, and dilapidation.[6] The 1941 act laid out the foundation for urban renewal, but it was not until six years later when lawmakers laid out the true framework of slum clearance in the Blighted Areas Redevelopment Act of 1947.

The Blighted Areas Redevelopment Act was a pivotal stage of Chicago's history with urban renewal. The act further acknowledged the presence of slums within the urban communities of Illinois, solidifying these blighted areas as an urban evil that contributed to the "spread of disease, crime, infant mortality and juvenile delinquency" in the state.[7] While the presence of blighted areas was a known fact, prior to the passage of this law, the government hardly had a way to fight the deteriorating urban landscape. The Blighted Areas Redevelopment Act of 1947 solved the lack of legislative tools, which turned redevelopment projects into the private sector, away from the Chicago Housing Association which had a nondiscriminatory

[5] Daniel K. Hertz, *The Battle of Lincoln Park: Urban Renewal and Gentrification in Chicago* (Arcadia Publishing, 2018), 39.
[6] *Neighborhood Redevelopment Corporation Law*, 315 ILCS 20 (1941).
[7] *Blighted Areas Redevelopment Act of 1947*, 315 ILCS 5 (1947).

tenant selection policy.[8] The legislation was a turning point as it allowed for rebuilding of slum and blighted areas through a mix of government power via eminent domain and private funding.

Although suburbanization was an issue, urban renewal came with its own set of problems. Urban renewal in Chicago was designed to protect real estate and capital investment in Chicago's Loop. The movement was pushed by key figures such as Milton C. Mumford, the assistant vice-president of the Marshal Field Company and Holman D. Pettibone, the president of the Chicago Title and Trust Company.[9] Urban decay in the city put burdens onto businesses, which made the protection of these areas a key motivation of urban renewal. Acquiring enough land to make a dent in blighted areas raised many challenges as proposed projects were often ambitious. Redeveloping housing units required residents to temporarily move while construction took place, but often this displacement was more than temporary. Holman Pettibone–a Republican who served as a negotiator and counselor to Democratic Mayor Martin H. Kennelly and Republican Governor Dwight H. Green, legislators who worked to pass the Redevelopment and Relocation Acts of 1948–said that it was "immoral to undertake a slum clearance and redevelopment program without a clearly defined method for the handling of displaced families."[10] Nevertheless, slum clearance permanently displaced many residents and plans to handle displacement fell through.

Following the passing of the key 1947 legislation, the federal government began to take on their own policies on urban renewal. The Housing Act of 1949, aimed to supply adequate housing for all Americans by providing the federal government with its own set of powers.[11] The Housing Act of 1949 allowed cities to redevelop slum areas using federal funds to pay for two-

---

[8] Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto,* 110.
[9] Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto,* 100-102.
[10] Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto,* 103.
[11] *Housing Act of 1954*, Pub. L. No. 83-560, 68 Stat. 590 (1954).

thirds of the cost, which gave cities like Chicago more funding to take on blight. The Housing Act of 1949 was only expanded further in the mid-1950s, which saw the passing of the Urban Community Conservation Act of 1953 by the Illinois government and the national Housing Act of 1954. The Urban Community Conservation Act of 1953 established that municipalities had the "power to provide for the creation of a Conservation Board" which could purchase property for the purpose of preserving conservation areas.[12] The Urban Community Conservation Act gave rise to local power in Chicago as conservation areas began to receive the federal funding outlined by the Housing Act of 1949 and expanded by President Dwight D. Eisenhower's Housing Act of 1954 which established the Urban Renewal Fund.[13]

Nowhere was this more seen than in Lincoln Park, a neighborhood north of Chicago's Loop (see fig. 1). Throughout the mid-twentieth century, Lincoln Park went through extensive urban renewal programs to try and fight slums. Consequently, many groups emerged in an attempt to fight the effects of slum clearance in Lincoln Park, seeing the new developments of real estate as coming at the expense of low- and middle-class residents that made up the neighborhood since the start of the twentieth century. Yet, in mid-twentieth century Lincoln Park, while groups like the Lincoln Park Conservation Association and the Young Lords tried to prevent the displacement of low-income families that occurred under urban renewal, both groups failed to stop gentrification and ultimately fostered the same urban renewal they tried to prevent in their fight against blight.

---

[12] *Urban Community Conservation Act*, 315 ILCS 25 (1953).
[13] *Housing Act of 1954*, Pub. L. No. 83-560, 68 Stat. 590 (1954).

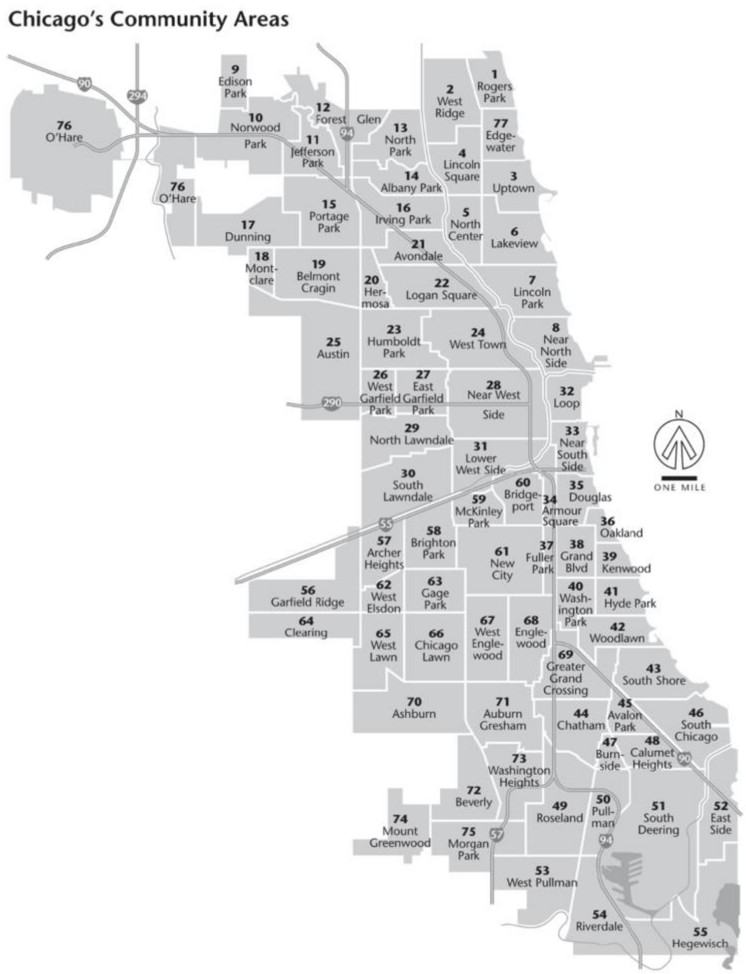


Figure 1. A map showing the neighborhoods in Chicago, including Lincoln Park (area 7). Map by Encyclopedia of Chicago, 2004.
http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/1760.html

Since the nineteenth century, Lincoln Park was historically a predominately German and Irish neighborhood; however, in the decades after World War I, Lincoln Park saw a new labor force of Italians, Poles, and other Eastern Europeans in factories along the north branch of the Chicago river.[14] Many Italian immigrants settled on the intersection of W. Webster St. and N. Sheffield St., near the area surrounding DePaul University.[15] Along with these post-war waves of

[14] Kitagawa and Tauber, *Local Community Fact Book: Chicago Metropolitan Area, 1960,* 28.
[15] Chicago Fact Book Consortium, *Local Community Fact Book: Chicago Metropolitan Area, 1990* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 1995), 54.

immigrants came a set of young rehabbers who purchased deteriorating buildings that were subdivided during the financial and housing crisis of the Great Depression and turned them into large single-family units. These rehabbers fought the early signs of blight in Lincoln Park in their own way. As opposed to the massive government control that came to dominate later, these middle-class rehabbers wanted Lincoln Park's own community to be the ones in control.[16]

More immigrants flooded the neighborhood throughout the mid-twentieth century, but the population also rose significantly from the post-WWII baby-boom. By 1950, baby-boomer fertility rates led to an all-time high for the population of Lincoln Park, reaching a total population of roughly 102,000 inhabitants.[17] Lincoln Park was without a doubt overcrowded.

A decade later, the first high rise buildings went up. While only 10 new housing units were built in Lincoln Park throughout the 1940s, the conversion of existing buildings to create more rooms had increased the number of housing units by over 4,000.[18] Overcrowding in Lincoln Park posed a major threat; though, overcrowding was far from the only issue.

Blight was quickly taking over Lincoln Park. By 1940, 10 percent of all residential structures were either in need of major repairs or unfit for use.[19] The presence of blight and slum areas threatened the state of Lincoln Park, leading to declining property conditions in the neighborhood.

Although rehabbers tried to improve the state of Lincoln Park, finding enough funding was difficult. Despite a majority white population in Lincoln Park at the time, the entire neighborhood was redlined or cut off from home loans that could fund the necessary renovations.

---

[16] Hertz, *The Battle of Lincoln Park*, 42-45.
[17] Kitagawa and Tauber, *Local Community Fact Book: Chicago Metropolitan Area, 1960,* 29.
[18] Chicago Fact Book Consortium, *Local Community Fact Book: Chicago Metropolitan Area, 1980* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 1984), 18.
[19] Chicago Fact Book Consortium, *Local Community Fact Book: Chicago Metropolitan Area, 1980,* 18.

The Home Owners' Loan Corporation, a New Deal agency, had outright labelled areas of Lincoln Park as too hazardous to receive loans.[20] One of these areas was the Old Town Triangle, located in the south-east side of Lincoln Park (see fig. 2). To receive funding, Lincoln Park had to look for a new source of revenue. In 1954, the Lincoln Park Conservation Association (LPCA) was formed. The LPCA umbrella group merged out of existing Old Town Triangle and Mid-North associations in Lincoln Park to establish a board that could advocate for funds established under Illinois' Urban Community Conservation Act of 1953.

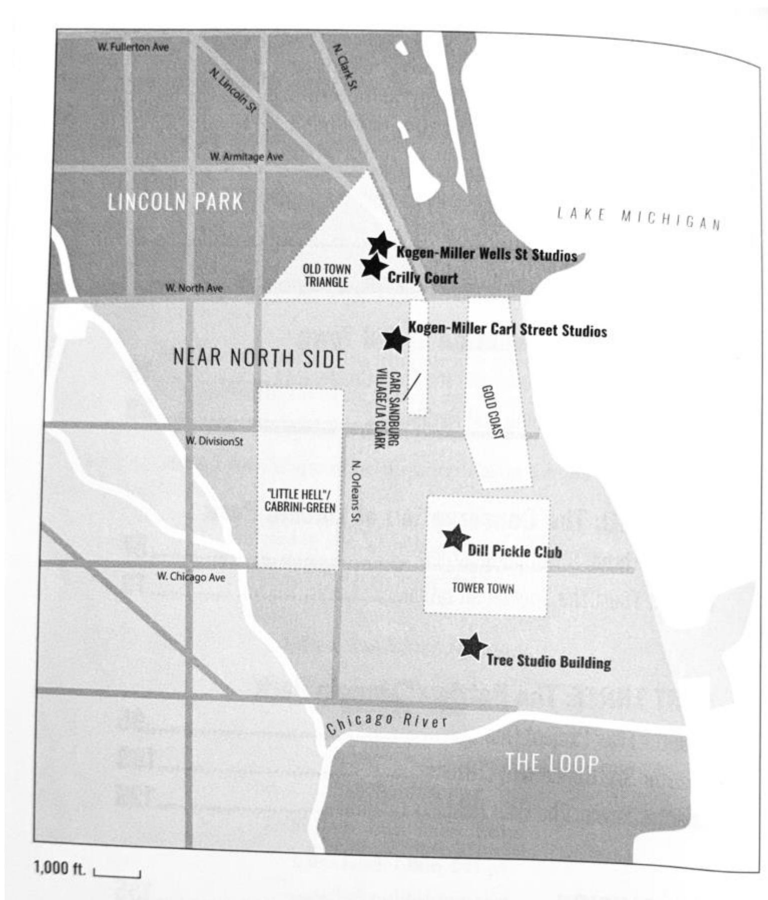


Figure 2. *Chicago's North Side, Early to Mid 20th Century* in Daniel K. Hertz, *The Battle of Lincoln Park: Urban Renewal and Gentrification in Chicago* (Arcadia Publishing, 2018), 6.

[20] Hertz, *The Battle of Lincoln Park,* 47.

The LPCA, much like the prior rehabbers, believed that Lincoln Park's community could restore their own neighborhood. In its initial days, the group heavily advocated against slum clearance and urban renewal.[21] While slum clearance could lead to improvements in Lincoln Park after redevelopment, slum clearance also often displaced residents. The LPCA fought for Lincoln Park's own community to restore and rehabilitate the neighborhood instead of the total demolition and rebuilding of the neighborhood common to slum clearance. Under the LPCA, Lincoln Park was officially designated as a conservation area in 1956, allowing Lincoln Park to receive federal funding from the federal Housing Act of 1954.[22] The Housing Act of 1954 solved the issue of financing that rehabbers faced when trying to improve the neighborhood. On top of wanting to maintain community involvement in improving the neighborhood, a key focus of the LPCA was maintaining the economic diversity of the neighborhood.[23] Lincoln Park was unique. The neighborhood contained families of all social classes, reflecting both its closeness to financial districts like the Loop and to other blighted areas. Slum clearance prevented this dream from coming true.

Despite efforts by the LPCA, throughout the 1950s, Lincoln Park's population steadily declined. By the start of the 1960s, Lincoln Park's total population had decreased by 13,560[24] though the net out-migration reached more than 22,000 people, having been obscured by the baby-boom fertility rates of the post-war period.[25] Lincoln Park's diverse economic background started to weaken as the upper class left.

---

[21] William R. Waters, "Lincoln Park: Past and Present," *The Alethia,* February 25, 1970. https://digicol.lib.depaul.edu/digital/collection/p16106coll4/id/412/rec/15.
[22] Jim Krokar and Tony Hawk, "LPCA: Poor Folk Need Not Apply," *The Alethia,* February 21st, 1969. https://digicol.lib.depaul.edu/digital/collection/p16106coll4/id/292/rec/20.
[23] Hertz, *The Battle of Lincoln Park*, 50.
[24] Chicago Fact Book Consortium, *Local Community Fact Book: Chicago Metropolitan Area, 1980*, 19.
[25] Chicago Fact Book Consortium, *Local Community Fact Book: Chicago Metropolitan Area, 1980*, 18.

The ethnic diversity of Lincoln Park too began to mark a notable change. Although Lincoln Park remained both racially and ethnically divided in most of the neighborhood aside from a few racially-integrated streets, by 1960, a new wave of immigrants arrived to the rest of the neighborhood.[26] Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, numerous Puerto Ricans arrived to Lincoln Park, many having been displaced by slum clearance policies in other parts of Chicago. Roughly 900 Puerto Rican families were displaced from La Clark alone in order to make room for Carl Sandburg Village, many of whom came to Lincoln Park.[27] Although in 1960, 19.6 percent of Lincoln Park was German, 13 percent was Italian, and 7.2 percent was Polish[28] (the three largest groups of foreign stock reported), a sizable group of Puerto Ricans settled in the south-central part of the neighborhood.[29] Lincoln Park became the neighborhood with the 5th highest Puerto Rican population out of the 76 neighborhoods of the time.[30]

While the demographics of the neighborhood changed, the state of housing did not. In 1960, 23.1 percent of housing units in Lincoln Park remained in a substandard condition.[31] Furthermore, another 10.5 percent of housing units were overcrowded.[32] If the LPCA wanted to end blight in Lincoln Park, they had to get even more ambitious.

In 1962, the Department of Urban Renewal (DUR) was established in Chicago to facilitate slum clearance and the redevelopment of blighted areas in Chicago. Along with them, the Lincoln Park Conservation Community Council (LPCCC) was formed, a group whose members were appointed by the Mayor and served as a link between the LPCA and the

---

[26] Johanna Fernandez, *The Young Lords: A Radical History* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 15.
[27] Fernandez, *The Young Lords,* 14.
[28] Kitagawa and Tauber, *Local Community Fact Book: Chicago Metropolitan Area, 1960,* 29.
[29] Kitagawa and Tauber, *Local Community Fact Book: Chicago Metropolitan Area, 1960,* 28.
[30] Kitagawa and Tauber, *Local Community Fact Book: Chicago Metropolitan Area, 1960,* 246.
[31] Kitagawa and Tauber, *Local Community Fact Book: Chicago Metropolitan Area, 1960,* 29.
[32] City of Chicago - Housing, Urban Renewal, Race Relations, 1964 (Folder 204), Lea Demarest Taylor papers, https://n2t.net/ark:/81984/d3x921n6v.

government. Together, the three groups worked closely to develop the General Neighborhood Renewal Plan (GNRP) throughout the 1960s.

Working to build an urban renewal project in Lincoln Park marked a significant change in LPCA's stance on fighting blight in Lincoln Park. The LPCA had started off vehemently against the idea of urban renewal; however, as the group witnessed how trying to fight blight without government support failed, the LPCA believed that it was better to at least have a voice. Under their eyes, urban renewal without their input was significantly worse than urban renewal with their input. The repercussions of urban renewal did not escape the minds of the LPCA, who stated continued dedication to fighting displacement that could occur as a result.[33] However, the GNRP was formed with little community feedback, despite what the three groups each stated. While the DUR wrote that urban renewal planning "must relate neighborhood needs to the broader goals and policies" of Chicago and "planners consider the wishes of the people who live in an area," the needs of Lincoln Park's residents were largely neglected.[34]

The DUR held public community meetings to gain information for the GNRP, displaying proposed plans on signs in the neighborhood.[35] Most of the neighborhood was being turned into low- and medium-density residential areas; many other areas were developed into public schools and parks.[36] By 1963, the GNRP for Lincoln Park was approved. The first project, promptly titled Project One, was one of the most controversial urban renewal programs for Lincoln Park.

---

[33] Hertz, *The Battle of Lincoln Park,* 85.
[34] Urban Renewal, 1968 (Folder IV-1126), Chicago Urban League records, https://n2t.net/ark:/81984/d3g15tm7r.
[35] Urban Renewal, 1968 (Folder IV-1126).
[36] Department of Urban Renewal, *Department of Urban Renewal Signs and Maps at the Old Town Art Fair, 1962,* Chicago Public Library, https://cdm16818.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/CPLDURphoto /id/9219/.

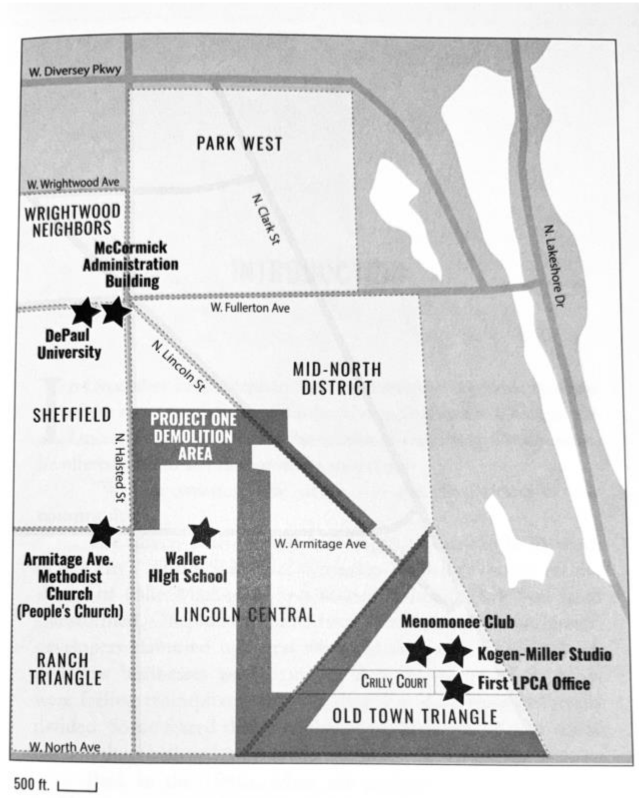


Figure 3. *Neighborhood Associations Affiliated with the Lincoln Park Conservation Association* in Daniel K. Hertz, *The Battle of Lincoln Park: Urban Renewal and Gentrification in Chicago* (Arcadia Publishing, 2018), 7.

Project One was an urban renewal project focused on redeveloping near the Old Town Triangle (see fig. 3), housing an estimated population of 19,000.[37] In 1964, the DUR completed its preliminary plan on the 266 acre area.[38] Project One was certainly ambitious. Project One was one the most consequential urban renewal programs that Lincoln Park had seen at the time, far exceeding the work of the rehabbers and even the LPCA. The urban renewal project proposed to upgrade nearly all substandard housing in Lincoln Park.[39] To achieve this, Project One required

[37] City of Chicago - Housing, Urban Renewal, Race Relations, 1963 (Folder 203), Lea Demarest Taylor papers, https://n2t.net/ark:/81984/d31z41x0s.
[38] Urban Renewal, 1968 (Folder IV-1126), Chicago Urban League records, https://n2t.net/ark:/81984/d3g15tm7r.
[39] City of Chicago - Housing, Urban Renewal, Race Relations, 1964 (Folder 204), Lea Demarest Taylor papers, https://n2t.net/ark:/81984/d3x921n6v.

an initial $9,588,739 of federal funds to be requested by the DUR. In total, the DUR received $15,792,114 in federal funding.[40]

In order to redevelop Lincoln Park, Project One took demolition to another level. The first building to go was the St. Joseph's Hospital building on the intersection of W. Dickens and N. Burling St., the location of Oz Park in the modern day, but it was far from the last.[41] By the time the project was over, 1,100 housing units were destroyed.[42]

Despite the proposal of the Demonstration Cities and Metropolitan Development Act of 1966, which required cities to have outlined plans for the relocation of people displaced by urban renewal programs,[43] roughly 1,180 families were displaced from Project One alone, many of whom never got support.[44] Most of the housing units demolished under Project One belonged to low-income families who were forced to relocate to new areas.

Demolition was not the only factor contributing to displacement. While 1,180 families were displaced directly from destruction, 3 to 4 times as many families were displaced either by institutional takeover of housing by institutions such as DePaul or by being priced out of the neighborhood from the increases in rent costs that occurred as a result of redevelopment.[45] The LPCA worked with businesses in the area to try and stabilize the population of Lincoln Park in exchange for improving blighted buildings. In fact, DePaul University, a prominent university in

---

[40] City of Chicago - Housing, Urban Renewal, Race Relations, 1964 (Folder 204), Lea Demarest Taylor papers, https://n2t.net/ark:/81984/d3x921n6v.
[41] Department of Urban Renewal, *Site clearance, before demolition of St. Joseph's Hospital building at Dickens and Burling Street; first building to be demolished in the Department of Urban Renewal's Lincoln Park Project #1,* Chicago Public Library, https://cdm16818.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/ CPLDURphoto/id/1102/rec/77.
[42] Young Lords, "McCormick Take-Over," *Y.L.O.* vol 1, no. 2. (May 1969): 4, https://digicol.lib.depaul.edu/digital/collection/younglords/id/16/rec/7.
[43] *Demonstration Cities and Metropolitan Development Act of 1966*, Pub. L. No. 89-754, 80 Stat. 1255 (1966).
[44] Young Lords, "McCormick Take-Over, 4.
[45] Young Lords, "McCormick Take-Over, 4.

Lincoln Park, expanded its campus by working with the LPCA to foster urban renewal.[46] DePaul's Uptown campus was renamed to its Lincoln Park campus to enjoy benefits from the LPCA.[47] These factors all contributed to displacement of the residents of Lincoln Park.[48] While urban renewal plans were meant to take the community into account, the fight against blighted areas came at the expense of the very community that was being protected.

As prices increased, realtors evicted the poor tenants who had previously lived there, making surface repairs so that the buildings could be rented out to the middle class at inflated rates. Some apartments' rent "shot up from $75 per month to $250 per month."[49]

Promises by the LPCA to protect the community from displacement had fallen through and limited support existed outside of the group. Poorer Lincoln Park residents were systematically denied from seeking loans; only the Lincoln Park Federal Savings bank even considered giving out loans to the lower-class residents.[50] The very issues the LPCA had sought to fight were inflicted back onto the community by the LPCA. Their original message was lost.

Historically, while the displacement of families was acknowledged as an issue that needed to be taken into account during slum clearance, many families never got the help that they were promised. On top of that, improvements to the neighborhood led to increased property values in Lincoln Park, pushing lower-income families out.

---

[46] Bob Overend, "Lincoln Park Renewal Aids DePaul," *DePaulia*, May 8th, 1964. https://digicol.lib.depaul.edu/digital/collection/p16106coll4/id/1877/rec/2.
[47] Overend, "Lincoln Park Renewal Aids DePaul."
[48] Young Lords, "Students Confront DePaul," *Y.L.O.* vol 1, no. 1. (March 1969): 4, https://digicol.lib.depaul.edu/digital/collection/younglords/id/4/rec/6.
[49] Jim Krokar and Tony Hawk, "LPCA: Poor Folk Need Not Apply," *The Alethia,* February 21st, 1969. https://digicol.lib.depaul.edu/digital/collection/p16106coll4/id/292/rec/20.
[50] Krokar and Hawk, "LPCA: Poor Folk Need Not Apply."

In part, this was because of the lack of community involvement. The LPCCC was not diverse, neither were the people who came to its meetings. The members voting to bring urban renewal were mostly all white and upper-class; however, soon that changed.

Project One did not come without protest. Many of the Puerto Ricans who moved into Lincoln Park were amongst the families displaced under the program. One of the notable Puerto Rican residents of Lincoln Park was Cha-Cha Jimenez. When Puerto Ricans moved into Lincoln Park, racial tensions rose in the neighborhood. Many white gangs, often Italian gangs, targeted Puerto Rican people in Lincoln Park. In 1954, an Italian firebombing of a Puerto Rican bar sparked a week of violent racial clashes in the neighborhood.[51] Rising racial tensions led to the establishment of the Young Lords gang in 1959, a Puerto Rican gang formed out of self-defense against white gangs in Lincoln Park.[52] Cha-Cha was a member of this gang since eleven; though, he rose through the ranks until he eventually became the leader.

Nevertheless, while the Young Lords was founded as a gang, it did not stay that way. While serving time in prison for a drug charge in the Spring of 1968, Cha-Cha, isolated in solitary confinement, began to read some of the works of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. Martin Luther King Jr's assisnation was still fresh during Cha-Cha's imprisonment.[53] Cha-Cha's time in prison marked a period of internal battle in his life as he reflected on the injustices going on around him. By August, when he finally left prison, he was convinced that he had to speak up against Urban Renewal efforts. Cha-Cha was no stranger to urban renewal; his own family was amongst the 900 Puerto Ricans displaced by the Carl Sandburg Village.[54] When he left prison, he

---

[51] Fernandez, *The Young Lords,* 12.
[52] Conspiracy trial of the Chicago Eight, 1969 (Folder 3), Black History Collection, https://digital.library.uic.edu/view/ark:/81984/d3b56db9p.
[53] Hertz, *The Battle of Lincoln Park,* 126.
[54] Fernandez, *The Young Lords*, 14.

decided to reshape the street gang into a political party similar to the Black Panther Party, forming the Young Lords Organization (YLO) which incorporated the Lordettes, a female branch of the Young Lords. To build unity amongst the Lincoln Park community, the YLO opened up for Black, white, and other Latin ethnic groups in 1968.[55] The YLO realized that the real enemies were not each other or other gangs, rather, as Cosmo, the YLO's field marshal stated: "it wasn't no good fightin' each other…what we were doing as a gang had to be against the capitalist institutions that [were] oppressing us."[56]

The YLO saw the actions of the LPCA and believed that a new approach was needed to fight urban renewal. One of their first acts of protest was demonstrating against three real estate companies who increased rent and tax rates for predominantly Latino low-income families: Bissell Realty, Crown Realty, and Romano Realty.[57] In January 1969, the YLO attended a meeting about new urban renewal plans. The DUR was beginning to work on their next project– or rather phase. Phase Two was the next attempt at Project One, its plan was shown off at the very same meeting the YLO decided to attend. When members of the YLO looked at the model of the Phase Two plans, they noticed something striking. Many of the YLO member's own homes were going to be demolished, causing outrage amongst the members.[58] The group trashed the meeting. They flipped the table with the model, throwing chairs across the DUR office. The protest was the first direct act of violence in protest of urban renewal, marking a significant moment in Lincoln Park's history with gentrification.

---

[55] Conspiracy trial of the Chicago Eight, 1969 (Folder 3), Black History Collection, https://digital.library.uic.edu/view/ark:/81984/d3b56db9p.
[56] Edward Michael Keating Sr., "From Rumble to Revolution: The Young Lords," *Ramparts* vol. 9, no. 4. (October 1970): 3-9, https://digicol.lib.depaul.edu/digital/collection/younglords/id/128/rec/1.
[57] "Police Harassment of Young Lords Reported," *The Alethia,* February 21st, 1969. https://digicol.lib.depaul.edu/digital/collection/p16106coll4/id/297/rec/6.
[58] Hertz, *The Battle of Lincoln Park*, 128-129.

While Cha-Cha and the YLO's violent tactics may have scared some off from supporting the Young Lords, it certainly brought the issue of urban renewal into the eyes of others. Coleman, one of Cha-Cha's closest advisors, acknowledged that Cha-Cha's tactics "woke a lot of [people] to what urban renewal was doing."[59]

The YLO fled before police arrived to the scene, but the Young Lords and especially Cha-Cha was harassed by police in the months following. Around 350 residents showed up to a police station on February 11th of 1969 to protest the police harassment of the Young Lords.[60] The Young Lords were starting to get noticed not just by the DUR but by the Lincoln Park community itself. By March, the Young Lords began to publish their newspaper the *YLO*.

Tensions rose amongst the Young Lords, the LPCA, and the LPCCC. Urban renewal programs led in Lincoln Park cleared 1200 housing units. Despite 57 percent of the demolished units housing low-income residents, the lost units were not only replaced by a measly 980 units but only a third of them were even used to house the poor.[61] On February 20th, 1969, Felix Silva, the only Latino member of the LPCCC at the time, resigned. In his statement of resignation, Silva wrote that "there are great suspicions among the poor that they are being used…I cannot in conscience, be a part of what my people feel to be a conspiracy against them."[62] To Lincoln Park residents, it felt like the organizations built to support them were merely doing the opposite.

The day Cha-Cha became a "real revolutionary" was May 4th, 1969.[63] During a birthday celebration of Young Lords founder Orlando Davilla, James Lamb, an off-duty police officer

---

[59] Les Bridges, "Cha-Cha Jimenez: The Gang Leader on the Lam is now the Politician on the Stump," *Reader* vol. 4, no. 18. (February 1975): 1-2, https://digicol.lib.depaul.edu/digital/collection/younglords/id/169/rec/4.
[60] Concerned Citizens, "Lincoln Park Residents Liberate Police Station," *Lincoln Park Press* vol 2, no. 2. (March 1969): 1-6, https://digicol.lib.depaul.edu/digital/collection/younglords/id/113/rec/3.
[61] William R. Waters, "Lincoln Park: Past and Present," *The Alethia,* February 25, 1970. https://digicol.lib.depaul.edu/digital/collection/p16106coll4/id/412/rec/15.
[62] Concerned Citizens, "Latino Resigns from C.C.C.," *Lincoln Park Press* vol 2, no. 2. (March 1969): 2, https://digicol.lib.depaul.edu/digital/collection/younglords/id/110/rec/3.
[63] Keating Sr., "From Rumble to Revolution," 3-9.

pulled out his gun and shot Manuel Ramos in an altercation sparked by a noise complaint.[64] The shooting of Ramos infuriated Cha-Cha, sparking the YLO to take further action against urban renewal. A little over a week later, the Young Lords took over an administration building in the McCormick Theological Seminary for 5 days.[65] They came with a list of demands: the establishment of a Puerto Rican cultural center, $25,000 to set up a legal bureau, $601,000 for low-income housing, and for McCormick apartments to prioritize poor and working-class renters within the neighborhood.[66] The Young Lords barricaded themselves in the McCormick offices. "No warrant to leave, no piece of paper" was going to evict them until they got what they wanted.[67] In fact, no paper did make them leave. Rather, a phone call by the board of McCormick convinced them to vacate. After just five days, the board met their demands; the decision was a relatively quick turnaround given the Board's original statements indicating that it would be impossible to set up the YLO's demands without two weeks' notice.[68] Though, in the long run, this win did little to make a dent in the issues Lincoln Park was facing.

In just a month, the YLO staged their next large-scale protest–the takeover of the Armitage Methodist Church.[69] Early into 1969, church members were discussing selling the church, leading to the YLO requesting to rent out the space in March; however, on June 8th, the church announced that it would not sell or rent out the space. During a four-day sit-in, the YLO took over the church and set up a dayscare, free breakfast program for children, and a free health clinic, repainting the basement and making colorful murals. Although the police arrived to shut

---

[64] Conspiracy trial of the Chicago Eight, 1969 (Folder 3), Black History Collection, https://digital.library.uic.edu/view/ark:/81984/d3b56db9p.
[65] Conspiracy trial of the Chicago Eight, 1969.
[66] Young Lords, "McCormick Take-Over," 4.
[67] Young Lords, "McCormick Take-Over," 4.
[68] Young Lords, "McCormick Take-Over," 4.
[69] Chicago Sun-Times, *Members of the Young Lords Gang State a Sit-In at Armitage Avenue Methodist Church,* Chicago History Museum, https://images.chicagohistory.org/search/?searchQuery= ST-40001941-0023.

down the demonstration, the Rev. Bruce Johnson called the police off.[70] Following the protest, the church worked with the group to find another office space to rent, but when nothing was found, the church turned around their decision and determined that it would rent out the space.

The summer sparked even more protest amongst the Young Lords. Instead of building low-income housing, the LPCA planned to use funds to construct a $9 per game private tennis club in the heart of Lincoln Park's Puerto Rican enclave.[71] The proposal led to a violent clash between residents and LPCA council members. The Young Lords led hundreds of Puerto Ricans in protest of the tennis club.[72]

In an Urban Renewal meeting, the LPCCC proposed a housing project for middle-income families, only setting aside 15 percent of the budget for low-income housing. The Young Lords took over the meeting, discussing the displacement of residents. Despite efforts, the DUR approved the proposal, leading to opposition from 500 people. The next meeting in August had 100 uniformed officers.[73] Soon after, the alderman's office was firebombed. The YLO denied any involvement. A few tense days later, the Rev. Bruce Johnson who was a staunch supporter of the Young Lord's protests was found stabbed repeatedly to death with his wife.[74]

By the end of the year, all of the tensions between the Young Lords, the LPCCC, and the LPCA culminated in Stephen Shamberg, the president of LPCA resigning. His dramatic resignation letter argued that urban renewal was both a blessing and a curse. While Lincoln Park's once blighted areas became safer and more attractive, many low- and middle-income

---

[70] Hertz, *The Battle of Lincoln Park*, 135.
[71] Larry Link, "Urban Renewal: A Hindrance to Neighborhood Spirit," *The Alethia,* August 17th, 1969. https://digicol.lib.depaul.edu/digital/collection/p16106coll4/id/344/rec/28.
[72] Keating Sr., "From Rumble to Revolution," 3-9.
[73] Hertz, *The Battle of Lincoln Park*, 139.
[74] Conspiracy trial of the Chicago Eight, 1969 (Folder 3), Black History Collection, https://digital.library.uic.edu/view/ark:/81984/d3b56db9p.

families were displaced. The most jarring words were near the end of the letter though; according to Shamberg, the LPCA was "assisting in the destruction of [its] community."[75]

In a final protest, the Poor People's Coalition (PPC), an umbrella group that consisted of the Young Lords, submitted a bid to build 70 apartments using the $601,000 earned from the McCormick takeover.[76] Forty percent of these apartments were designated for low-income residents, the maximum allowed by federal regulations. The PPC submitted this proposal with designs for a building by architect Howard Alan. The bid was an attempt to get directly involved in the future of Lincoln Park and its redevelopment. Much to the dismay of the YLO, Lyle Mayer (former chair of the LPCCC) collected a 1,000 person petition against the PPC on behalf of the LPCA. Mayer viewed the YLO as radicals; giving in to their proposal would not be a good idea for the future. Nevertheless, the Rev. T. J. Wangler, a council member, recommended the PPC project to the DUR. The PPC bid directly competed with another proposal, the Hartford Construction.[77] Thus, the LPCCC voted on the two bills, voting 11-2 in favor of the PPC's bid

Despite the vote, the DUR had the final say over the matter. A few weeks before the scheduled DUR vote on the bids, the department circumvented the voting process altogether and announced that it was moving forward with the Hartford Construction. The decision caused an uproar. In the DUR's February meeting, 300 people angrily protested in the City Hall chambers, with one man even jumping on stage to allegedly get a microphone.[78] Fifteen protestors were arrested. Seven members of the LPCCC threatened to resign if the decision was not reversed.[79] While official statements indicated that the decision was made due to the designs, some believed

---

[75] LPCA, "Shamberg Resigns LPCA Presidency: Issues Statement to Membership," *Lincoln Park Conservation Association News*, December, 1969, https://digicol.lib.depaul.edu/digital/api/collection/ lpnc6/id/1050/download.
[76] Hertz, *The Battle of Lincoln Park,* 142-149.
[77] Keating Sr., "From Rumble to Revolution," 3-9.
[78] Department of Urban Renewal, *Board Meeting, Department of Urban Renewal Lincoln Park Area,* Chicago Public Library, https://cdm16818.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/CPLDURphoto/ id/14595/rec/15.
[79] Hertz, *The Battle of Lincoln Park,* 147-148.

that the DUR's decision was made due to bitter opposition against the Young Lord's violent and disruptive stunts or fear that giving into their proposal would spark further demands.[80] It was more than a rejection of the Young Lords: it was a dismissal of their cause.

With this final act, it became clear that the protests were not working. Cha-Cha left Chicago in December of 1970, coming back in 1972 to unsuccessfully run as alderman of the nearby Lakeview region.[81] The Chicago branch of the YLO shifted into more healthcare focused battles as time went on, and a new branch of the Young Lords emerged in New York.[82]

The LPCA was damaged after public outrage against the group. What once was a pillar of the community, fighting urban renewal, was now a group denounced by many former leaders.[83] Patricia Devine, an ally of Cha-Cha and member of the Concerned Citizens of Lincoln Park claimed that the LPCA was never the enemy, rather they were "just the puppet of the enemy."[84] Devine's statement could not be any more true; the LPCA started off with good intentions. Even joining the LPCCC and DUR to develop the GNRP had its benefits on paper, but slowly the group lost touch. Peter Bauer, a member of the LPCCC believed that supporters of urban renewal were "not white racists and enemies of the poor…the LPCA favored the conservation of diversity…it supported fair housing."[85] Following the backlash, Lewis W. Hill, chairman and commissioner of the DUR argued that Lincoln Park reflected a neighborhood where "economic groups can live side by side," the goal was always "not depopulation, but development."[86]

---

[80] William R. Waters, "Lincoln Park: Past and Present," *The Alethia,* February 25, 1970. https://digicol.lib.depaul.edu/digital/collection/p16106coll4/id/412/rec/15.
[81] Hertz, *The Battle of Lincoln Park*, 150.
[82] Fernandez, *The Young Lords,* 87.
[83] Concerned Citizens, "History of Concerned Citizens," *Lincoln Park Press* vol 2, no. 2. (March 1969): 5, https://digicol.lib.depaul.edu/digital/collection/younglords/id/113/rec/3.
[84] Krokar and Hawk, "LPCA: Poor Folk Need Not Apply."
[85] Link, "Urban Renewal."
[86] Jeanne Barry, "The Lincoln Park Story: The University and Community" *DePaul Magazine April 1971*, April, 1971, https://cdm16106.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/depaulmag/id/2944/rec/1.

Despite the LPCA's protests though, in the same moment of the LPCA's advocacy for low cost housing, building after building was demolished and family after family were displaced.

Looking back at the history of urban renewal in Lincoln Park, it is clear that the community was at the heart of the LPCA's initial movement and in some ways, they never lost that. One of the key projects of LPCA in its final years was helping to establish the Lincoln Park Common Pantry, a food pantry that provided free groceries to the lower-class residents of the neighborhood.[87] However, while the LPCA's original work in designating Lincoln Park as a conservation area was meant to help Lincoln Park receive the necessary funds to improve blighted areas, it ended up accelerating the gentrification and displacement that the LPCA tried to prevent. The contrast between the LPCA of the 1950s and the LPCA of the 1970s emphasizes the failure of the LPCA to maintain Lincoln Park's economic and racial diversity.

The Young Lords similarly failed. While the Young Lords saw that fighting urban renewal by the rules and legislature was failing, their violent tactics backfired too. The PPC's proposal, which could have made a notable difference in Lincoln Park's character, at least for the time being, was rejected nonetheless. Both the Young Lords and the LPCA were two sides of the same coin. Both failed to prevent urban renewal and even, intentionally or not, caused it. The LPCA went from an anti-urban renewal organization towards directly implementing it in Lincoln Park. The Young Lords went from fighting urban renewal with violence to also getting involved with the legislature, only to get their proposal with the PPC rejected because of their prior history of violence. Much like the LPCA, the Young Lords failed to take control from either outside or inside of the system.

---

[87] Jeanne Barry, "The Uncommon Common Pantry," *DePaul Magazine Winter 1970*, January, 1970, https://cdm16106.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/depaulmag/id/729/rec/9.

Both groups were ultimately fruitless in their efforts. In 1980, the Puerto Rican population of Lincoln Park was 2,117[88] but by 1990 it was only 1,263.[89] Similarly, the Black population in Lincoln Park decreased by 24 percent throughout 1980-1990.[90] Lincoln Park, despite the efforts of both groups, became gentrified.

[88] Chicago Fact Book Consortium, *Local Community Fact Book: Chicago Metropolitan Area, 1980*, 361.
[89] Chicago Fact Book Consortium, *Local Community Fact Book: Chicago Metropolitan Area, 1980*, 378.
[90] Chicago Fact Book Consortium, *Local Community Fact Book: Chicago Metropolitan Area, 1990*, 352.

Bibliography

Black History Collection. UIC Library Digital Collections, UIC, Chicago. https://digital.library.uic.edu/browse/collection/23.

Chicago Fact Book Consortium. *Local Community Fact Book: Chicago Metropolitan Area, 1980*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 1984.

Chicago Fact Book Consortium. *Local Community Fact Book: Chicago Metropolitan Area, 1990*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 1995.

Chicago Sun-Times Prints and Photographs. Chicago History Museum Images, Chicago History Museum, Chicago. https://images.chicagohistory.org/chicago-sun-times-collection/.

Chicago Urban League Records Collection. UIC Library Digital Collections, UIC, Chicago. https://digital.library.uic.edu/browse/collection/33.

Compilation of the Social Security Laws. 45 U.S.C. § 106 (2012 rev. comp.). https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/COMPS-10349/pdf/COMPS-10349.pdf.

Demonstration Cities and Metropolitan Development Act of 1966. *Public Law* 89-754. 80 Stat. 1255 (November 3, 1966). https://www.congress.gov/89/statute/STATUTE-80/STATUTE-80-Pg1255.pdf.

Department of Urban Renewal Photographic Negatives. Chicago Department of Urban Renewal Records: Photographic Negatives Digital Collection, Chicago Public Library, Chicago. https://cdm16818.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/CPLDUR.

DePaul University Student Newspapers Collection. Special Collections and Archives, DePaul, Chicago. https://digicol.lib.depaul.edu/digital/collection/p16106coll4/.

Digital Scholarship Lab, "Renewing Inequality," *American Panorama*, ed. Robert K. Nelson and Edward L. Ayers, accessed October 12th, 2025. https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/renewal/#view=0/0/1&viz=cartogram.

Encyclopedia of Chicago. "Chicago's Community Areas," *Newberry Library*, 2004. http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/1760.html.

Fernandez, Johanna. *The Young Lords: A Radical History*. The University of North Carolina Press, 2020.

Hertz, Daniel K. *The Battle of Lincoln Park: Urban Renewal and Gentrification in Chicago*. Arcadia Publishing, 2018.

Hirsch, Arnold. *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago 1940-1960*. University of Chicago Press, 1998.

Housing Act Amendments of 1954. *Public Law* 83-560. 68 Stat. 590 (August 2, 1954). https://www.congress.gov/83/statute/STATUTE-68/STATUTE-68-Pg590.pdf.

Kitagawa, Evelyn and Karl Tauber, eds. *Local Community Fact Book: Chicago Metropolitan Area, 1960*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963.

Lea Demarest Taylor Papers. UIC Library Digital Collections, UIC, Chicago. https://digital.library.uic.edu/browse/collection/136.

Library of Congress. "1968: The Young Lord's Organization/Party" Accessed September 20, 2025. https://guides.loc.gov/latinx-civil-rights/young-lords-organization.

Neighborhood Redevelopment Corporation Law. 315 ILCS 20. Illinois General Assembly. https://ilga.gov/Legislation/ILCS/Articles?ActID=1446&ChapterID=3.

Urban Community Conservation Act. 315 ILCS 25. Illinois General Assembly. https://www.ilga.gov/Legislation/ILCS/Articles?ActID=1447&ChapterID=30.

Young Lords Newspaper Collection. Special Collections and Archives, DePaul, Chicago. https://digicol.lib.depaul.edu/digital/collection/younglords.

History In Action

Growing Community: Luxembourgers in Edgewater

By: Kieran Kelly, Victoria Prom, Tylor Serpico, Sadie Walden, and Sofia Wardzala

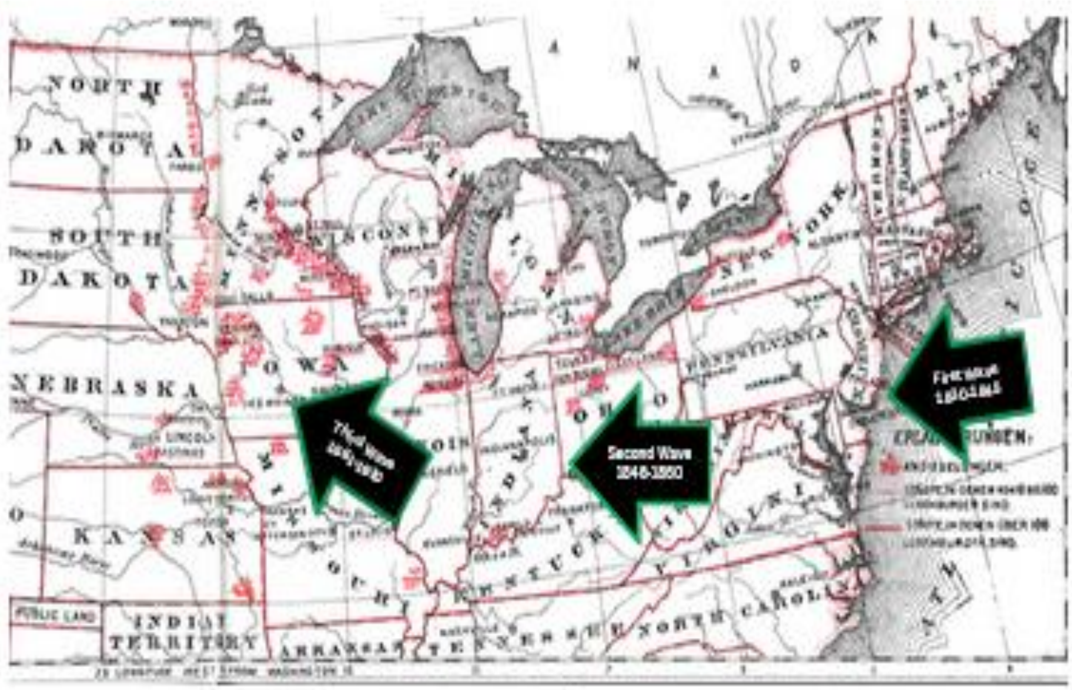
Sofia Wardzala and Tylor Serpico: Introduction

In the spring of 2025, students in Loyola University Chicago's History Department (Kieran Kelly, Victoria Prom, Tylor Serpico, Sadie Walden, and Sofia Wardzala) working with Dr. Bradford Hunt worked with various community partners to create an exhibit for display in the Edgewater Historical Society chronicling the impact of immigrants from Luxembourg on Chicago's Edgewater neighborhood. Working with Dr. Hunt, we explored our topic through archival searches, genealogical research, and oral history.

From this project's inception, a main goal of the group spanning our varied areas of individual focus was to situate our approach to the historical materials we interacted with, methods, and as an extension the ultimate products of our research toward framing and contributing to what is still an ongoing story of international migration, identity formation, and cultural evolution within Chicago and the United States. This mindset, as opposed to one which simply sought to state historical facts alone, played particularly well to our subject and its characteristically community-driven focus. Rather than frame Luxembourgish migration to Chicago as confined to an abstract or inaccessible past, we wanted to outline a story rooted in a sound contextualization of the factors which spurred its inception, chart its development over time, and highlight the ways in which the Luxembourgish-American community has and continues to leave a lasting impression on our historical consciousness into the modern day.

Tylor Serpico: Historical contextualization, migration, and farming

Contextualization proved particularly poignant in my own areas of focus, as I explored what the actual processes of international migration were like for Luxembourgers, what drew them to Chicago, as well as their early contributions to the city's larger development in occupying and innovating within the niche of commercial agriculture. To do this, I first looked toward the political and economic environment of 19^{th} century Luxembourg at the time as potential areas of pressure to incite what eventually grew to be the considerably large emigration of one sixth of its population to the United States from 1835 to 1914. Here I uncovered a series of motivating factors related to their home country's position within the central European theatre at the time, including things like forced cessation of land to its neighboring countries, its slow development of infrastructural advancements, and lack of economic diversity beyond tenant farming which generated sweeping instability among its populus. Being armed with this information, we as a group were able to better understand the desires and attitude of these migrants as they searched for new opportunities in the United States, and by extension the means through which they would seek to do so. It is no wonder that factors such as similarities in climate and growing conditions, and plentiful amounts of cheap land drew these new Luxembourg-Americans from their primarily urban and East-Coast ports of arrival to Chicago as an emerging foothold in the west. Here they would go on to transform both the city's literal and figurative landscape - draining the formerly silty boglands of the north side to clear the way for the construction of productive farms that played a key role in supporting its steadily growing population.

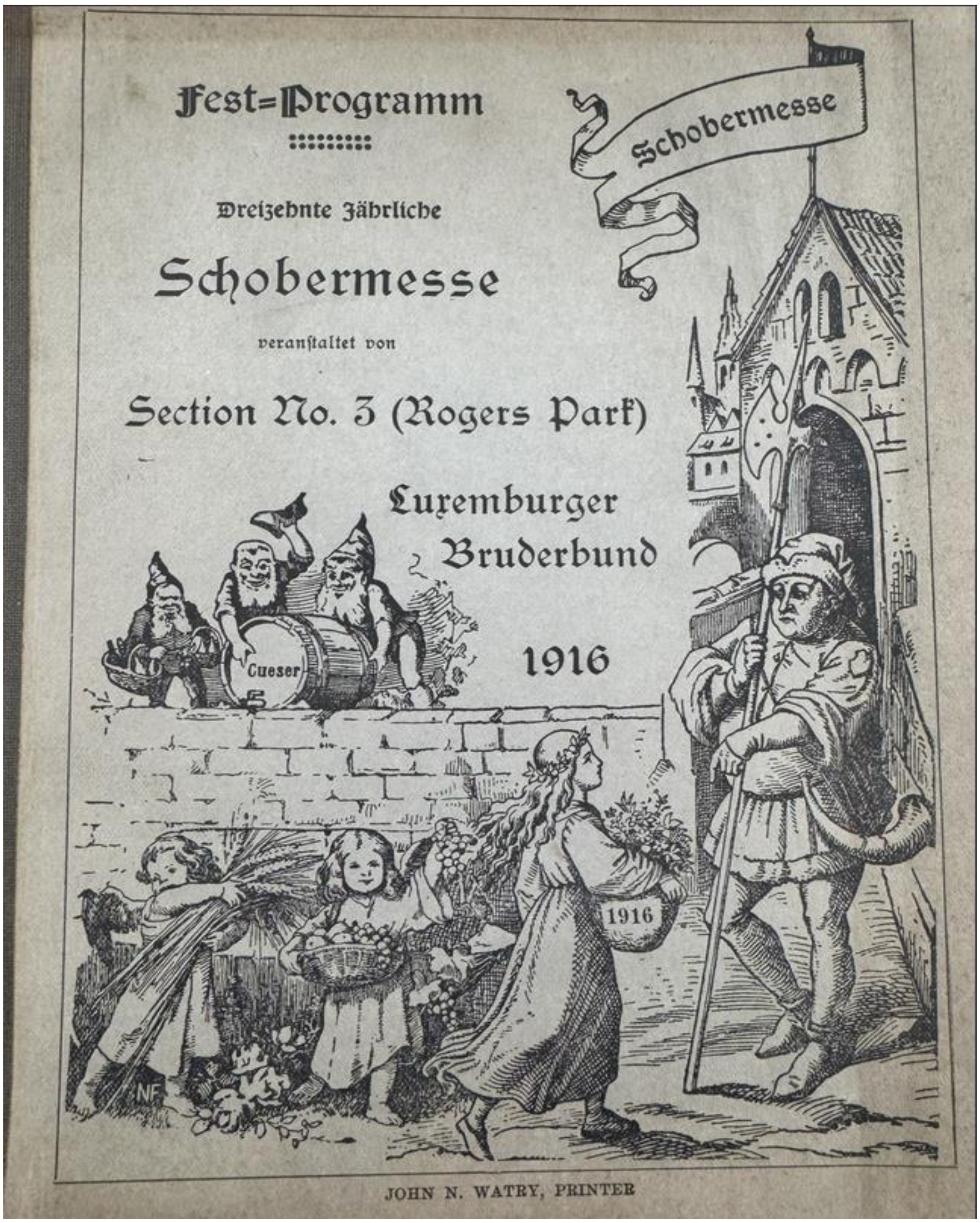


Luxembourger migration patterns in the U.S. (Nicholas Gonner, *Luxembourgers in the New World*, 1889)

Sofia Wardzala: Trip to Sulzer Regional Library Archive

Over the course of our research, we were able to visit the archives at Sulzer Regional Library in Chicago. Sulzer is a branch of the Chicago Public Library in Lincoln Square, but it also holds archival material including the Northside Neighborhood History Collection. We were interested in community groups created by Luxembourger immigrants and we found some of our most compelling sources about them in that collection. The Luxembourg Brotherhood of America put on a yearly festival called Schobermesse and the program booklets from those events provided a fascinating look at how the group’s identity changed over time. The poems, images, and advertisements in the programs told a story of continuity amidst change. Even the languages of the booklets (Luxembourgish, German, French, and English) demonstrated the reactions of Luxembourgers to the shifting global and local political currents of their time. For example, the programs were published in a mix of German, Luxembourgish, and English until

1917, when the U.S. entered World War I. This transition signaled not only a break from the cultural connections with Germany but also an effort by second and third generation Luxembourg-Americans to align more closely with their American identity.



1916 Section 3 *Schobermesse* Program Cover (Sulzer Library, Box 44, Folder 7)

Kieran Kelly: Maps and City Development

A major part of our project that I focused on was maps. Maps can tell you a lot about the history of an area and what exactly was valued during the time: geography really factors into how a certain place is utilized by people. In the case of Luxembourgish migration to Edgewater, it was interesting to see how the Edgewater neighborhood evolved from the late 19th century to today. Greenhouses played a huge part for the settlers and their community: and as a result, greenhouses make a large footprint on the maps of this time. A particular kind of map, known as Sanborn maps, were created during the late 1800s and early 1900s as a way to document communities for purposes of fire insurance. These maps would often denote property owners, businesses, and the materials that buildings were constructed of. The Chicago Public Library has a dazzling array of Sanborn maps free to the public in their digital collection. I was able to take these maps (specifically those from 1905), locate greenhouses in the greater Edgewater community, and plot them on a map of present-day Chicago, giving us a greater understanding of not just the size of the buildings themselves, but their prevalence in this part of what is now Chicago's north side. Additionally, the Sanborn maps allowed us to see that greenhouse ownership was not restricted to Luxembourgish immigrants: instead, many immigrants built these structures. Additionally, the lack of Sanborn map coverage in the present-day Rogers Park and West Ridge communities show another interesting aspect of maps: they implicitly state what and what isn't important to those of that time: although these communities had buildings and potentially greenhouses, fire insurance maps chose not to cover these areas- one can only assume, because they deemed them of little significance or value.

Sanborn map of Reinberg greenhouses, near the intersection of Foster and Damen Avenues (formerly Robey Street). (Sanborn map, 1905, volume 17, maps 50 and 51, Chicago Public Library)

Foster (Hwy 41) and Damen Avenues today: The street grid is intact, but all traces of greenhouses are gone. (Google Maps)

Present-day map near Devon Avenue and Ridge Boulevard, with 1905 greenhouse locations overlayed in yellow. Today, this area includes Loyola's Hoyne Field, while St. Henry's Church is at the upper right. (Google Maps)

Sanborn Map, 1905, Volume 17, covering Edgewater, Uptown, and Bowmanville. (Chicago Public Library)

Sections from our exhibit detailing Kieran's work with Sanborn maps

Victoria Prom: St. Gregory Church

My experience with Chicago's Luxembourgish churches began a year before this internship through another engaged learning opportunity. In the spring of 2024, I took part in the HIST 375 Digital History course with Professor Christopher Cantewell. This class collaborated with the Renew My Church project to document the history of the newly formed Mary Mother of God parish, comprising St. Gregory, St. Ita, and St. Thomas, as they worked to combat declining attendance rates. During this experience, I learned how to conduct an oral interview, configure a digital exhibit, and navigate church archives, all skills that I would carry over to this project.

While researching potential investigative topics for *Growing Community: Luxembourgers in Edgewater*, our team stumbled upon a potential historical Luxembourgish connection to St. Gregory's Parish. To investigate this connection further, we made an in-person trip to St. Gregory's church and archives. We began our excursion with a tour of the facility. This allowed us to view how the church had grown into the modern era and how it had adapted to the shifting needs of the community. We discovered that while Luxembourgers had originally commissioned the church, it now has an ethnically mixed population. After the tour, we were guided to the church's archives, which consisted of a small room with a few shelves and filing cabinets containing information. We learned that this archive had been reorganized by Loyola students, highlighting how Loyola's engaged learning opportunities allow for a multitude of communal restoration and engagement opportunities.

In the church research, we had limited access to research materials, which is indicative of further barriers in our research regarding other subjects, such as the inclusion of prominent women. While the selection of materials was constrained, we found the church's 1954 jubilee book, *The Saint Gregory Story*, which provided an insight into not only the founding of St. Gregory, but also how the church's ideology evolved as it established itself within the community. The jubilee book highlights how the church's Luxembourgish founders utilized community resources, such as mutual aid, and a centralized belief in communal support to create a strong foundation that would allow the church to survive many trials and tribulations.

Another process I oversaw was the creation of the exhibition template. I volunteered to create the template because of my previous experience creating digital exhibits. My initial design for the exhibit focused primarily on the growth aspect of the project, featuring heavy floral details for the cover page and a simplified green border for the rest of the project. After completing the initial draft, we consulted a graduate student at Loyola to help fine-tune our design. They recommended that we simplify the cover to highlight our title and key imagery, align our text to help with readability, and vary our paragraph and image patterns to break up the text and keep people engaged. Having professionals review our work helped us strengthen our project by providing outside insight we may never have considered.

Sadie Walden: Outside of the Archives, Into Other Forms of Research

Alongside my peers, I had the opportunity to explore a series of historically significant sites that traced the stories of Luxembourgers in Chicago. Our early investigations led us beyond sifting through archival materials, into places that stood the test of time and would help to inform our research. One such visit took us to a Luxembourger-owned greenhouse, a family business layered with generational narratives that illuminated the broader story of migration from Luxembourg to the Americas. Before the visit, our team brainstormed themes we hoped to explore and questions that might help us uncover deeper insights into the connections between heritage, place, and identity. During the tour, we made it our goal to ask thoughtful questions with the hope that each one would be a potential thread leading us toward a more focused and meaningful research direction. By the end of the visit, with some questions answered and many new ones emerging, we began to refine our research scope and define the stories we wanted to tell.

This trip to the greenhouse coincided with a visit to the Edgewater Historical Society, whose president inspired our research topic, and our collaboration granted us significant leads and contacts. His enthusiasm for our project, and his own family's migration story from

Luxembourg became a source of both inspiration and invaluable information. As we continued working with John Holden, it became clear that he was not only a guide but also a primary source in his own right. This realization led us to record an oral history, capturing his memories and family narratives in his own voice. I conducted the interview, while my colleague, Victoria Prom, handled the filming and guided the procedural aspects of the interview. To prepare, we drew upon Victoria's prior experience with oral history work, consulting her detailed notes on interview technique and ethical procedure. We then coordinated logistics such as consent forms, interview locations, and scheduling, then carefully crafted a set of open-ended questions designed to encourage a natural, conversational exchange. What emerged from this experience was more than a single narrative. Incorporating Holden's story gave our project a human dimension that transformed abstract data into lived experience. As we learned, audiences often connect more deeply with research when they can see themselves reflected in individual stories. To achieve this balance, I believe researchers should consider pairing broader quantitative and qualitative findings with personal, human-centered narratives. This approach not only strengthens the impact of the research but also honors the real lives behind the data. Ultimately, this experience reminded us that research is not confined to archives or statistics; it lives in the stories, voices, and memories of those who came before us.

Sofia Wardzala: Presenting our Research[1]

One of the most exciting parts of our project was presenting our work. Aside from the exhibit itself, we had the opportunity to speak to different audiences about our process and conclusions. Over the summer, Tylor and I traveled with Dr. Hunt to the Luxembourg American Cultural Society in Belgium, WI to speak in front of their Members Meeting. Assembling the

---

[1] To view the posters created for the exhibit, utilize this link: https://canva.link/t131mc10nxtj2xc.

information from our research into a presentation rather than a poster in an exhibit and tailoring it to our audience was exciting, and it was wonderful to meet so many people who were interested in this history. Some event attendees were from Luxembourg and it was especially interesting to hear their thoughts on our work and their ideas for how we might expand it. We presented again at the beginning of the fall semester when Loyola hosted a tour group of high school students visiting from Luxembourg. Again, we were able to not only share our work with them, but learn from them about their experiences in modern-day Luxembourg.

Credits and Thanks

Edgewater Historical Society:

John Holden, Marcia Holland, Felice LeClere, and Dona Vitale

Luxembourg American Cultural Society, Roots and Leaves:

Marc Zimer

Luxembourg Brotherhood of America:

Diane Krier-Morrow

And thanks to those who opened their doors for our research:

Jim Leider and Lizi Leider, Leider Greenhouses and Garden Center, Buffalo Grove, IL

Julie Hanson and Allyson Smalley, Sulzer Branch, Chicago Public Library

Thank You!

To everyone who contributed an article and to all of our amazing editors, thank you so much for your work on this journal.

Thank you to all of our readers for taking the time to explore these students’ amazing work.

And of course, a huge thank you to all of our incredible history profressors, who make it possible for us to explore, write about, and learn from history.